

CHAPTER III

Two or three decades earlier the prevailing sentiment would have been that "poor little Mrs. Gareth-Lawless" and her situation were pathetic. Her acquaintances would sympathetically have discussed her helplessness and absolute lack of all resource. So very pretty, so young, the mother of a dear little girl--left with no income! How very sad! What COULD she do? The elect would have paid her visits and sitting in her darkened drawing-room earnestly besought her to trust to her Maker and suggested "the Scriptures" as suitable reading. Some of them--rare and strange souls even in their time--would have known what they meant and meant what they said in a way they had as yet only the power to express through the medium of a certain shibboleth, the rest would have used the same forms merely because shibboleth is easy and always safe and creditable.

But to Feather's immediate circle a multiplicity of engagements, fevers of eagerness in the attainment of pleasures and ambitions, anxieties, small and large terrors, and a whirl of days left no time for the regarding of pathetic aspects. The tiny house up whose staircase--tucked against a wall--one had seemed to have the effect of crowding even when one went alone to make a call, suddenly ceased to represent hilarious little parties which were as entertaining as they were up to date and noisy. The most daring things London gossiped about had been said and done and worn there. Novel social ventures had been tried--dancing and songs which seemed almost

startling at first--but which were gradually being generally adopted. There had always been a great deal of laughing and talking of nonsense and the bandying of jokes and catch phrases. And Feather fluttering about and saying delicious, silly things at which her hearers shouted with glee. Such a place could not suddenly become pathetic. It seemed almost indecent for Robert Gareth-Lawless to have dragged Death nakedly into their midst--to have died in his bed in one of the little bedrooms, to have been put in his coffin and carried down the stairs scraping the wall, and sent away in a hearse. Nobody could bear to think of it.

Feather could bear it less than anybody else. It seemed incredible that such a trick could have been played her. She shut herself up in her stuffy little bedroom with its shrimp pink frills and draperies and cried lamentably. At first she cried as a child might who was suddenly snatched away in the midst of a party. Then she began to cry because she was frightened. Numbers of cards "with sympathy" had been left at the front door during the first week after the funeral, they had accumulated in a pile on the salver but very few people had really come to see her and while she knew they had the excuse of her recent bereavement she felt that it made the house ghastly. It had never been silent and empty. Things had always been going on and now there was actually not a sound to be heard--no one going up and down stairs--Rob's room cleared of all his belongings and left orderly and empty--the drawing-room like a gay little tomb without an occupant. How long WOULD it be before

it would be full of people again--how long must she wait before she could decently invite anyone?--It was really at this point that fright seized upon her. Her brain was not given to activities of reasoning and followed no thought far. She had not begun to ask herself questions as to ways and means. Rob had been winning at cards and had borrowed some money from a new acquaintance so no immediate abyss had yawned at her feet. But when the thought of future festivities rose before her a sudden check made her involuntarily clutch at her throat. She had no money at all, bills were piled everywhere, perhaps now Robert was dead none of the shops would give her credit. She remembered hearing Rob come into the house swearing only the day before he was taken ill and it had been because he had met on the door-step a collector of the rent which was long over-due and must be paid. She had no money to pay it, none to pay the servants' wages, none to pay the household bills, none to pay for the monthly hire of the brougham! Would they turn her into the street--would the servants go away--would she be left without even a carriage? What could she do about clothes! She could not wear anything but mourning now and by the time she was out of mourning her old clothes would have gone out of fashion. The morning on which this aspect of things occurred to her, she was so terrified that she began to run up and down the room like a frightened little cat seeing no escape from the trap it is caught in.

"It's awful--it's awful--it's awful!" broke out between her sobs.

"What can I do? I can't do anything! There's nothing to do! It's awful--it's awful--it's awful!" She ended by throwing herself on the bed crying until she was exhausted. She had no mental resources which would suggest to her that there was anything but crying to be done. She had cried very little in her life previously because even in her days of limitation she had been able to get more or less what she wanted--though of course it had generally been less. And crying made one's nose and eyes red. On this occasion she actually forgot her nose and eyes and cried until she scarcely knew herself when she got up and looked in the glass.

She rang the bell for her maid and sat down to wait her coming. Tonson should bring her a cup of beef tea.

"It's time for lunch," she thought. "I'm faint with crying. And she shall bathe my eyes with rose-water."

It was not Tonson's custom to keep her mistress waiting but today she was not prompt. Feather rang a second time and an impatient third and then sat in her chair and waited until she began to feel as she felt always in these dreadful days the dead silence of the house. It was the thing which most struck terror to her soul--that horrid stillness. The servants whose place was in the basement were too much closed in their gloomy little quarters to have made themselves heard upstairs even if they had been inclined to. During the last few weeks feather had even found herself wishing

that they were less well trained and would make a little noise--do anything to break the silence.

The room she sat in--Rob's awful little room adjoining--which was awful because of what she had seen for a moment lying stiff and hard on the bed before she was taken away in hysterics--were dread enclosures of utter silence. The whole house was dumb--the very street had no sound in it. She could not endure it. How dare Tonson? She sprang up and rang the bell again and again until its sound came back to her pealing through the place.

Then she waited again. It seemed to her that five minutes passed before she heard the smart young footman mounting the stairs slowly. She did not wait for his knock upon the door but opened it herself.

"How dare Tonson!" she began. "I have rung four or five times! How dare she!"

The smart young footman's manner had been formed in a good school. It was attentive, impersonal.

"I don't know, ma'am," he answered.

"What do you mean? What does SHE mean? Where is she?" Feather felt almost breathless before his unperturbed good style.

"I don't know, ma'am," he answered as before. Then with the same unbiassed bearing added, "None of us know. She has gone away."

Feather clutched the door handle because she felt herself swaying.

"Away! Away!" the words were a faint gasp.

"She packed her trunk yesterday and carried it away with her on a four-wheeler. About an hour ago, ma'am." Feather dropped her hand from the knob of the door and trailed back to the chair she had left, sinking into it helplessly.

"Who--who will dress me?" she half wailed.

"I don't know, ma'am," replied the young footman, his excellent manner presuming no suggestion or opinion whatever. He added however, "Cook, ma'am, wishes to speak to you."

"Tell her to come to me here," Feather said. "And I--I want a cup of beef tea."

"Yes, ma'am," with entire respect. And the door closed quietly behind him.

It was not long before it was opened again. "Cook" had knocked and Feather had told her to come in. Most cooks are stout, but this

one was not. She was a thin, tall woman with square shoulders and a square face somewhat reddened by constant proximity to fires. She had been trained at a cooking school. She carried a pile of small account books but she brought nothing else.

"I wanted some beef tea, Cook," said Feather protestingly.

"There is no beef tea, ma'am," said Cook. "There is neither beef, nor stock, nor Liebig in the house."

"Why--why not?" stammered Feather and she stammered because even her lack of perception saw something in the woman's face which was new to her. It was a sort of finality.

She held out the pile of small books.

"Here are the books, ma'am," was her explanation. "Perhaps as you don't like to be troubled with such things, you don't know how far behind they are. Nothing has been paid for months. It's been an every-day fight to get the things that was wanted. It's not an agreeable thing for a cook to have to struggle and plead. I've had to do it because I had my reputation to think of and I couldn't send up rubbish when there was company."

Feather felt herself growing pale as she sat and stared at her.

Cook drew near and laid one little book after another on the small

table near her.

"That's the butcher's book," she said. "He's sent nothing in for three days. We've been living on leavings. He's sent his last, he says and he means it. This is the baker's. He's not been for a week. I made up rolls because I had some flour left. It's done now--and HE'S done. This is groceries and Mercom & Fees wrote to Mr. Gareth-Lawless when the last month's supply came, that it would BE the last until payment was made. This is wines--and coal and wood--and laundry--and milk. And here is wages, ma'am, which CAN'T go on any longer."

Feather threw up her hands and quite wildly.

"Oh, go away!--go away!" she cried. "If Mr. Lawless were--"

"He isn't, ma'am," Cook interposed, not fiercely but in a way more terrifying than any ferocity could have been--a way which pointed steadily to the end of things. "As long as there's a gentleman in a house there's generally a sort of a prospect that things MAY be settled some way. At any rate there's someone to go and speak your mind to even if you have to give up your place. But when there's no gentleman and nothing--and nobody--respectable people with their livings to make have got to protect themselves."

The woman had no intention of being insolent. Her simple statement

that her employer's death had left "Nothing" and "Nobody" was prompted by no consciously ironic realization of the diaphanousness of Feather. As for the rest she had been professionally trained to take care of her interests as well as to cook and the ethics of the days of her grandmother when there had been servants with actual affections had not reached her.

"Oh! go away! Go AWA-AY!" Feather almost shrieked.

"I am going, ma'am. So are Edward and Emma and Louisa. It's no use waiting and giving the month's notice. We shouldn't save the month's wages and the trades-people wouldn't feed us. We can't stay here and starve. And it's a time of the year when places has to be looked for. You can't hold it against us, ma'am. It's better for you to have us out of the house tonight--which is when our boxes will be taken away."

Then was Feather seized with a panic. For the first time in her life she found herself facing mere common facts which rose before her like a solid wall of stone--not to be leapt, or crept under, or bored through, or slipped round. She was so overthrown and bewildered that she could not even think of any clever and rapidly constructed lie which would help her; indeed she was so aghast that she did not remember that there were such things as lies.

"Do you mean," she cried out, "that you are all going to LEAVE

the house--that there won't be any servants to wait on me--that there's nothing to eat or drink--that I shall have to stay here ALONE--and starve!"

"We should have to starve if we stayed," answered Cook simply. "And of course there are a few things left in the pantry and closets. And you might get in a woman by the day. You won't starve, ma'am. You've got your family in Jersey. We waited because we thought Mr. and Mrs. Darrel would be sure to come."

"My father is ill. I think he's dying. My mother could not leave him for a moment. Perhaps he's dead now," Feather wailed.

"You've got your London friends, ma'am--"

Feather literally beat her hands together.

"My friends! Can I go to people's houses and knock at their front door and tell them I haven't any servants or anything to eat! Can I do that? Can I?" And she said it as if she were going crazy.

The woman had said what she had come to say as spokeswoman for the rest. It had not been pleasant but she knew she had been quite within her rights and dealt with plain facts. But she did not enjoy the prospect of seeing her little fool of a mistress raving in hysterics.

"You mustn't let yourself go, ma'am," she said. "You'd better lie down a bit and try to get quiet." She hesitated a moment looking at the pretty ruin who had risen from her seat and stood trembling.

"It's not my place of course to--make suggestions," she said quietly. "But--had you ever thought of sending for Lord Coombe, ma'am?"

Feather actually found the torn film of her mind caught for a second by something which wore a form of reality. Cook saw that her tremor appeared to verge on steadying itself.

"Coombe," she faintly breathed as if to herself and not to Cook.

"Coombe."

"His lordship was very friendly with Mr. Lawless and he seemed fond of--coming to the house," was presented as a sort of added argument. "If you'll lie down I'll bring you a cup of tea, ma'am--though it can't be beef."

Feather staggered again to her bed and dropped flat upon it--flat as a slim little pancake in folds of thin black stuff which hung and floated.

"I can't bring you cream," said Cook as she went out of the room.

"Louisa has had nothing but condensed milk--since yesterday--to give Miss Robin."

"Oh-h!" groaned Feather, not in horror of the tea without cream though that was awful enough in its significance, but because this was the first time since the falling to pieces of her world that she had given a thought to the added calamity of Robin.