CHAPTER IV

If one were to devote one's mental energies to speculation as to what is going on behind the noncommittal fronts of any row of houses in any great city the imaginative mind might be led far.

Bricks, mortar, windows, doors, steps which lead up to the threshold, are what are to be seen from the outside. Nothing particular may be transpiring within the walls, or tragedies, crimes, hideous suffering may be enclosed. The conclusion is obvious to banality--but as suggestive as banal--so suggestive in fact that the hyper-sensitive and too imaginative had better, for their own comfort's sake, leave the matter alone. In most cases the existing conditions would not be altered even if one knocked at the door and insisted on entering with drawn sword in the form of attendant policeman The outside of the slice of a house in which Feather lived was still rather fresh from its last decorative touching up. It had been painted cream colour and had white and windows and green window boxes with variegated vinca vines trailing from them and pink geraniums, dark blue lobelia and ferns filling the earth stuffed in by the florist who provided such adornments. Passers-by frequently glanced at it and thought it a nice little house whose amusing diminutiveness was a sort of attraction. It was rather like a new doll's house.

No one glancing at it in passing at the closing of this particular

day had reason to suspect that any unaccustomed event was taking place behind the cream-coloured front. The front door "brasses" had been polished, the window-boxes watered and no cries for aid issued from the rooms behind them. The house was indeed quiet both inside and out. Inside it was indeed even quieter than usual. The servants' preparation for departure had been made gradually and undisturbedly. There had been exhaustive quiet discussion of the subject each night for weeks, even before Robert Gareth-Lawless' illness. The smart young footman Edward who had means of gaining practical information had constituted himself a sort of private detective. He had in time learned all that was to be learned. This, it had made itself clear to him on investigation, was not one of those cases when to wait for evolutionary family events might be the part of discretion. There were no prospects ahead--none at all. Matters would only get worse and the whole thing would end in everybody not only losing their unpaid back wages but having to walk out into the street through the door of a disgraced household whose owners would be turned out into the street also when their belongings were sold over their heads. Better get out before everything went to pieces and there were unpleasantnesses. There would be unpleasantnesses because there was no denying that the trades-people had been played tricks with. Mrs. Gareth-Lawless was only one of a lot of pretty daughters whose father was a poor country doctor in Jersey. He had had "a stroke" himself and his widow would have nothing to live on when he died. That was what Mrs. Lawless had to look to. As to Lord Lawdor Edward had learned

from those who DID know that he had never approved of his nephew and that he'd said he was a fool for marrying and had absolutely refused to have anything to do with him. He had six boys and a girl now and big estates weren't what they had been, everyone knew. There was only one thing left for Cook and Edward and Emma and Louisa to do and that was to "get out" without any talk or argument.

"She's not one that won't find someone to look after her," ended Edward. "Somebody or other will take her up because they'll be sorry for her. But us lot aren't widows and orphans. No one's going to be sorry for us or care a hang what we've been let in for. The longer we stay, the longer we won't be paid." He was not a particularly depraved or cynical young footman but he laughed a little at the end of his speech. "There's the Marquis," he added. "He's been running in and out long enough to make a good bit of talk. Now's his time to turn up."

After she had taken her cup of tea without cream Feather had fallen asleep in reaction from her excited agitation. It was in accord with the inevitable trend of her being that even before her eyes closed she had ceased to believe that the servants were really going to leave the house. It seemed too ridiculous a thing to happen. She was possessed of no logic which could lead her to a realization of the indubitable fact that there was no reason why servants who could neither be paid nor provided with food should

remain in a place. The mild stimulation of the tea also gave rise to the happy thought that she would not give them any references if they "behaved badly". It did not present itself to her that references from a house of cards which had ignominiously fallen to pieces and which henceforth would represent only shady failure, would be of no use. So she fell asleep.

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When she awakened the lights were lighted in the streets and one directly across the way threw its reflection into her bedroom. It lit up the little table near which she had sat and the first thing she saw was the pile of small account books. The next was that the light which revealed them also fell brightly on the glass knob of the door which led into Robert's room.

She turned her eyes away quickly with a nervous shudder. She had a horror of the nearness of Rob's room. If there had been another part of the house in which she could have slept she would have fled to it as soon as he was taken ill. But the house was too small to have "parts". The tiny drawing-rooms piled themselves on top of the dining-room, the "master's bedrooms" on top of the drawing-rooms, and the nurseries and attics where Robin and the servants slept one on the other at the top of the house. So she had been obliged to stay and endure everything. Rob's cramped quarters had always been full of smart boots and the smell of cigars and men's clothes.

He had moved about a good deal and had whistled and laughed and sworn and grumbled. They had neither of them had bad tempers so that they had not quarrelled with each other. They had talked through the open door when they were dressing and they had invented clever tricks which helped them to get out of money scrapes and they had gossiped and made fun of people. And now the door was locked and the room was a sort of horror. She could never think of it without seeing the stiff hard figure on the bed, the straight close line of the mouth and the white hard nose sharpened and narrowed as Rob's had never been. Somehow she particularly could not bear the recollection of the sharp unnatural modeling of the hard, white nose. She could not BEAR it! She found herself recalling it the moment she saw the light on the door handle and she got up to move about and try to forget it.

It was then that she went to the window and looked down into the street, probably attracted by some slight noise though she was not exactly aware that she had heard anything.

She must have heard something however. Two four-wheeled cabs were standing at the front door and the cabman assisted by Edward were putting trunks on top of them. They were servants' trunks and Cook was already inside the first cab which was filled with paper parcels and odds and ends. Even as her mistress watched Emma got in carrying a sedate band-box. She was the house-parlourmaid and a sedate person. The first cab drove away as soon as its door was

closed and the cabman mounted to his seat. Louisa looking wholly unprofessional without her nurse's cap and apron and wearing a tailor-made navy blue costume and a hat with a wing in it, entered the second cab followed by Edward intensely suggesting private life and possible connection with a Bank. The second cab followed the first and Feather having lost her breath looked after them as they turned the corner of the street.

When they were quite out of sight she turned back into the room. The colour had left her skin, and her eyes were so wide stretched and her face so drawn and pinched with abject terror that her prettiness itself had left her.

"They've gone--all of them!" she gasped. She stopped a moment, her chest rising and falling. Then she added even more breathlessly, "There's no one left in the house. It's--empty!"

This was what was going on behind the cream-coloured front, the white windows and green flower-boxes of the slice of a house as motors and carriages passed it that evening on their way to dinner parties and theatres, and later as the policeman walked up and down slowly upon his beat.

Inside a dim light in the small hall showed a remote corner where on a peg above a decorative seat hung a man's hat of the highest gloss and latest form; and on the next peg a smart evening overcoat.

They had belonged to Robert Gareth-Lawless who was dead and needed such things no more. The same dim light showed the steep narrowness of the white-railed staircase mounting into gruesome little corners of shadows, while the miniature drawing-rooms illumined only from the street seemed to await an explanation of dimness and chairs unfilled, combined with unnatural silence.

It would have been the silence of the tomb but that it was now and then broken by something like a half smothered shriek followed by a sort of moaning which made their way through the ceiling from the room above.

Feather had at first run up and down the room like a frightened cat as she had done in the afternoon. Afterwards she had had something like hysterics, falling face downward upon the carpet and clutching her hair until it fell down. She was not a person to be judged--she was one of the unexplained incidents of existence. The hour has passed when the clearly moral can sum up the responsibilities of a creature born apparently without brain, or soul or courage. Those who aspire to such morals as are expressed by fairness--mere fairness--are much given to hesitation. Courage had never been demanded of Feather so far. She had none whatever and now she only felt panic and resentment. She had no time to be pathetic about Robert, being too much occupied with herself. Robert was dead--she was alive--here--in an empty house with no money and no servants. She suddenly and rather awfully realized

that she did not know a single person whom it would not be frantic to expect anything from.

Nobody had money enough for themselves, however rich they were. The richer they were the more they needed. It was when this thought came to her that she clutched her hands in her hair. The pretty and smart women and agreeable more or less good looking men who had chattered and laughed and made love in her drawing-rooms were chattering, laughing and making love in other houses at this very moment--or they were at the theatre applauding some fashionable actor-manager. At this very moment--while she lay on the carpet in the dark and every little room in the house had horror shut inside its closed doors--particularly Robert's room which was so hideously close to her own, and where there seemed still to lie moveless on the bed, the stiff hard figure. It was when she recalled this that the unnatural silence of the drawing-rooms was intruded upon by the brief half-stifled hysteric shriek, and the moaning which made its way through the ceiling. She felt almost as if the door handle might turn and something stiff and cold try to come in.

So the hours went on behind the cream-coloured outer walls and the white windows and gay flower-boxes. And the street became more and more silent--so silent at last that when the policeman walked past on his beat his heavy regular footfall seemed loud and almost resounding.

To even vaguely put to herself any question involving would not have been within the scope of her mentality. Even when she began to realize that she was beginning to feel faint for want of food she did not dare to contemplate going downstairs to look for something to eat. What did she know about downstairs? She had never there and had paid no attention whatever to Louisa's complaints that the kitchen and Servants' Hall were small and dark and inconvenient and that cockroaches ran about. She had cheerfully accepted the simple philosophy that London servants were used to these things and if they did their work it did not really matter. But to go out of one's room in the horrible stillness and creep downstairs, having to turn up the gas as one went, and to face the basement steps and cockroaches scuttling away, would be even more impossible than to starve. She sat upon the floor, her hair tumbling about her shoulders and her thin black dress crushed.

"I'd give almost ANYTHING for a cup of coffee," she protested feebly. "And there's no USE in ringing the bell!"

Her mother ought to have come whether her father was ill or not. He wasn't dead. Robert was dead and her mother ought to have come so that whatever happened she would not be quite alone and SOMETHING could be done for her. It was probably this tender thought of her mother which brought back the recollection of her wedding day and a certain wedding present she had received. It was a pretty silver travelling flask and she remembered that it must be in her

dressing-bag now, and there was some cognac left in it. She got up and went to the place where the bag was kept. Cognac raised your spirits and made you go to sleep, and if she could sleep until morning the house would not be so frightening by daylight--and something might happen. The little flask was almost full. Neither she nor Robert had cared much about cognac. She poured some into a glass with water and drank it.

Because she was unaccustomed to stimulant it made her feel quite warm and in a few minutes she forgot that she had been hungry and realized that she was not so frightened. It was such a relief not to be terrified; it was as if a pain had stopped. She actually picked up one or two of the account books and glanced at the totals. If you couldn't pay bills you couldn't and nobody was put in prison for debt in these days. Besides she would not have been put in prison--Rob would--and Rob was dead. Something would happen--something.

As she began to arrange her hair for the night she remembered what Cook had said about Lord Coombe. She has cried until she did not look as lovely as usual, but after she had bathed her eyes with cold rose-water they began to seem only shadowy and faintly flushed. And her fine ash-gold hair was wonderful when it hung over each shoulder in wide, soft plaits. She might be a school-girl of fifteen. A delicate lacy night-gown was one of the most becoming things one wore. It was a pity one couldn't wear them to parties.

There was nothing the least indecent about them. Millicent Hardwicke had been photographed in one of hers and no one had suspected what it was. Yes; she would send a little note to Coombe. She knew Madame Helene had only let her have her beautiful mourning because--. The things she had created were quite unique--thin, gauzy, black, floating or clinging. She had been quite happy the morning she gave Helene her orders. Tomorrow when she had slept through the night and it was broad daylight again she would be able to think of things to say in her letter to Lord Coombe. She would have to be a little careful because he did not like things to bore him.--Death and widows might--a little--at first. She had heard him say once that he did not wish to regard himself in the light of a charitable institution. It wouldn't do to frighten him away. Perhaps if he continued coming to the house and seemed very intimate the trades-people might be managed.

She felt much less helpless and when she was ready for bed she took a little more cognac. The flush had faded from her eye-lids and bloomed in delicious rose on her cheeks. As she crept between the cool sheets and nestled down on her pillow she had a delightful sense of increasing comfort--comfort. What a beautiful thing it was to go to sleep!

And then she was disturbed-started out of the divine doze stealing upon her-by a shrill prolonged wailing shriek!

It came from the Night Nursery and at the moment it seemed almost worse than anything which had occurred all through the day. It brought everything back so hideously. She had of course forgotten Robin again-and it was Robin! And Louisa had gone away with Edward. She had perhaps put the child to sleep discreetly before she went. And now she had wakened and was screaming. Feather had heard that she was a child with a temper but by fair means or foul Louisa had somehow managed to prevent her from being a nuisance.

The shrieks shocked her into sitting upright in bed. Their shrillness tearing through the utter soundlessness of the empty house brought back all her terrors and set her heart beating at a gallop.

"I--I WON'T!" she protested, fairly with chattering teeth. "I won't! I WON'T!"

She had never done anything for the child since its birth, she did not know how to do anything, she had not wanted to know. To reach her now she would be obliged to go out in the dark-the gas-jet she would have to light was actually close to the outer door of Robert's bedroom--THE room! If she did not die of panic while she was trying to light it she would have to make her way almost in the dark up the steep crooked little staircase which led to the nurseries. And the awful little creature's screams would be going on all the time making the blackness and dead silence of the house

below more filled with horror by contrast-more shut off and at the same time more likely to waken to some horror which was new.

"I-I couldn't-even if I wanted to!" she quaked. "I daren't! I daren't! I wouldn't do it--for A MILLION POUNDS?" And she flung herself down again shuddering and burrowing her head under the coverings and pillows she dragged over her ears to shut out the sounds.

The screams had taken on a more determined note and a fiercer shrillness which the still house heard well and made the most of, but they were so far deadened for Feather that she began beneath her soft barrier to protest pantingly.

"I shouldn't know what to do if I went. If no one goes near her she'll cry herself to sleep. It's--it's only temper. Oh-h! what a horrible wail! It--it sounds like a--a lost soul!"

But she did not stir from the bed. She burrowed deeper under the bed clothes and held the pillow closer to her ears.

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It did sound like a lost soul at times. What panic possesses a baby who cries in the darkness alone no one will ever know and one may perhaps give thanks to whatever gods there be that the baby

itself does not remember. What awful woe of sudden unprotectedness when life exists only through protection--what piteous panic in the midst of black unmercifulness, inarticulate sound howsoever wildly shrill can neither explain nor express.

Robin knew only Louisa, warmth, food, sleep and waking. Or if she knew more she was not yet aware that she did. She had reached the age when she generally slept through the night. She might not have disturbed her mother until daylight but Louisa had with forethought given her an infant sleeping potion. It had disagreed with and awakened her. She was uncomfortable and darkness enveloped her. A cry or so and Louisa would ordinarily have come to her sleepy, and rather out of temper, but knowing what to do. In this strange night the normal cry of warning and demand produced no result.

No one came. The discomfort continued--the blackness remained black. The cries became shrieks--but nothing followed; the shrieks developed into prolonged screams. No Louisa, no light, no milk. The blackness drew in closer and became a thing to be fought with wild little beating hands. Not a glimmer--not a rustle--not a sound! Then came the cries of the lost soul--alone--alone--in a black world of space in which there was not even another lost soul. And then the panics of which there have been no records and never will be, because if the panic stricken does not die in mysterious convulsions he or she grows away from the memory of a formless past--except that perhaps unexplained nightmares from

which one wakens quaking, with cold sweat, may vaguely repeat the long hidden thing.

What the child Robin knew in the dark perhaps the silent house which echoed her might curiously have known. But the shrieks wore themselves out at last and sobs came--awful little sobs shuddering through the tiny breast and shaking the baby body. A baby's sobs are unspeakable things--incredible things. Slower and slower Robin's came--with small deep gasps and chokings between--and when an uninfantile druglike sleep came, the bitter, hopeless, beaten little sobs went on.

But Feather's head was still burrowed under the soft protection of the pillow.