CHAPTER VI

If he had meant to speak he changed his mind after his first sight of her. He merely came in and closed the door behind him. Curious experiences with which life had provided him had added finish to an innate aptness of observation, and a fine readiness in action.

If she had been of another type he would have saved both her and himself a scene and steered ably through the difficulties of the situation towards a point where they could have met upon a normal plane. A very pretty woman with whose affairs one has nothing whatever to do, and whose pretty home has been the perfection of modern smartness of custom, suddenly opening her front door in the unexplained absence of a footman and confronting a visitor, plainly upon the verge of hysteria, suggests the necessity of promptness.

But Feather gave him not a breath's space. She was in fact not merely on the verge of her hysteria. She had gone farther. And here he was. Oh, here he was! She fell down upon her knees and actually clasped his immaculateness.

"Oh, Lord Coombe! Lord Coombe! Lord Coombe!" She said it three times because he presented to her but the one idea.

He did not drag himself away from her embrace but he distinctly removed himself from it.

"You must not fall upon your knees, Mrs. Lawless," he said. "Shall we go into the drawing-room?"

"I--was writing to you. I am starving--but it seemed too silly when I wrote it. And it's true!" Her broken words were as senseless in their sound as she had thought them when she saw them written.

"Will you come up into the drawing-room and tell me exactly what you mean," he said and he made her release him and stand upon her feet.

As the years had passed he had detached himself from so many weaknesses and their sequelae of emotion that he had felt himself a safely unreachable person. He was not young and he knew enough of the disagreeableness of consequences to be adroit in keeping out of the way of apparently harmless things which might be annoying. Yet as he followed Mrs. Gareth-Lawless and watched her stumbling up the stairs like a punished child he was aware that he was abnormally in danger of pitying her as he did not wish to pity people. The pity was also something apart from the feeling that it was hideous that a creature so lovely, so shallow and so fragile should have been caught in the great wheels of Life.

He knew what he had come to talk to her about but he had really no clear idea of what her circumstances actually were. Most people had of course guessed that her husband had been living on the edge of his resources and was accustomed to debt and duns, but a lovely being greeting you by clasping your knees and talking about "starving"--in this particular street in Mayfair, led one to ask oneself what one was walking into. Feather herself had not known, in fact neither had any other human being known, that there was a special reason why he had drifted into seeming rather to allow her about--why he had finally been counted among the frequenters of the narrow house--and why he had seemed to watch her a good deal sometimes with an expression of serious interest--sometimes with an air of irritation, and sometimes with no expression at all. But there existed this reason and this it was and this alone which had caused him to appear upon her threshold and it had also been the power which had prevented his disengaging himself with more incisive finality when he found himself ridiculously clasped about the knees as one who played the part of an obdurate parent in a melodrama.

Once in the familiar surroundings of her drawing-room her ash-gold blondness and her black gauzy frock heightened all her effects so extraordinarily that he frankly admitted to himself that she possessed assets which would have modified most things to most men.

As for Feather, when she herself beheld him against the background of the same intimate aspects, the effect of the sound of his voice, the manner in which he sat down in a chair and a certain remotely dim hint in the hue of his clothes and an almost concealed note of some touch of colour which scarcely seemed to belong to anything worn--were so reminiscent of the days which now seemed past forever that she began to cry again.

He received this with discreet lack of melodrama of tone.

"You mustn't do that, Mrs. Lawless," he said, "or I shall burst into tears myself. I am a sensitive creature."

"Oh, DO say 'Feather' instead of Mrs. Lawless," she implored. "Sometimes you said 'Feather'."

"I will say it now," he answered, "if you will not weep. It is an adorable name."

"I feel as if I should never hear it again," she shuddered, trying to dry her eyes. "It is all over!"

"What is all over?"

"This--!" turning a hopeless gaze upon the two tiny rooms crowded with knick-knacks and nonsense. "The parties and the fun--and

everything in the world! I have only had some biscuits and raisins to eat today--and the landlord is going to turn me out."

It seemed almost too preposterous to quite credit that she was uttering naked truth.--And yet--! After a second's gaze at her be repeated what he had said below stairs.

"Will you tell me exactly what you mean?"

Then he sat still and listened while she poured it all forth. And as he listened he realized that it was the mere every day fact that they were sitting in the slice of a house with the cream-coloured front and the great lady in her mansion on one side and the millionaire and his splendours on the other, which peculiarly added to a certain hint of gruesomeness in the situation.

It was not necessary to add colour and desperation to the story. Any effort Feather had made in that direction would only have detracted from the nakedness of its stark facts. They were quite enough in themselves in their normal inevitableness. Feather in her pale and totally undignified panic presented the whole thing with clearness which had--without being aided by her--an actual dramatic value. This in spite of her mental dartings to and from and dragging in of points and bits of scenes which were not connected with each other. Only a brain whose processes of inclusion and exclusion were final and rapid could have followed her. Coombe

watched her closely as she talked. No grief-stricken young widowed loneliness and heart-break were the background of her anguish. She was her own background and also her own foreground. The strength of the fine body laid prone on the bed of the room she held in horror, the white rigid face whose good looks had changed to something she could not bear to remember, had no pathos which was not concerned with the fact that Robert had amazingly and unnaturally failed her by dying and leaving her nothing but unpaid bills. This truth indeed made the situation more poignantly and finally squalid, as she brought forth one detail after another. There were bills which had been accumulating ever since they began their life in the narrow house, there had been trades-people who had been juggled with, promises made and supported by adroit tricks and cleverly invented misrepresentations and lies which neither of the pair had felt any compunctions about and had indeed laughed over. Coombe saw it all though he also saw that Feather did not know all she was telling him. He could realize the gradually increasing pressure and anger at tricks which betrayed themselves, and the gathering determination on the part of the creditors to end the matter in the only way in which it could be ended. It had come to this before Robert's illness, and Feather herself had heard of fierce interviews and had seen threatening letters, but she had not believed they could mean all they implied. Since things had been allowed to go on so long she felt that they would surely go on longer in the same way. There had been some serious threatening about the rent and the unpaid-for furniture. Robert's supporting idea had been that

he might perhaps "get something out of Lawdor who wouldn't enjoy being the relation of a fellow who was turned into the street!"

"He ought to have done something," Feather plained. "Robert would have been Lord Lawdor himself if his uncle had died before he had all those disgusting children."

She was not aware that Coombe frequently refrained from saying things to her--but occasionally allowed himself NOT to refrain. He did not refrain now from making a simple comment.

"But he is extremely robust and he has the children. Six stalwart boys and a stalwart girl. Family feeling has apparently gone out of fashion."

As she wandered on with her story he mentally felt himself actually dragged into the shrimp-pink bedroom and standing an onlooker when the footman outside the door "did not know" where Tonson had gone. For a moment he felt conscious of the presence of some scent which would have been sure to exhale itself from draperies and wardrobe. He saw Cook put the account books on the small table, he heard her, he also comprehended her. And Feather at the window breathlessly watching the two cabs with the servants' trunks on top, and the servants respectably unprofessional in attire and going away quietly without an unpractical compunction--he saw these also and comprehended knowing exactly why compunctions had no part in

latter-day domestic arrangements. Why should they?

When Feather reached the point where it became necessary to refer to Robin some fortunate memory of Alice's past warnings caused her to feel--quite suddenly--that certain details might be eliminated.

"She cried a little at first," she said, "but she fell asleep afterwards. I was glad she did because I was afraid to go to her in the dark."

"Was she in the dark?"

"I think so. Perhaps Louisa taught her to sleep without a light. There was none when I took her some condensed milk this morning. There was only c-con-d-densed milk to give her."

She shed tears and choked as she described her journey into the lower regions and the cockroaches scuttling away before her into their hiding-places.

"I MUST have a nurse! I MUST have one!" she almost sniffed. "Someone must change her clothes and give her a bath!"

"You can't?" Coombe said.

"I!" dropping her handkerchief. "How--how CAN I?"

"I don't know," he answered and picked up the handkerchief with an aloof grace of manner.

It was really Robin who was for Feather the breaking-point.

He thought she was in danger of flinging herself upon him again. She caught at his arm and her eyes of larkspur blue were actually wild.

"Don't you see where I am! How there is nothing and nobody--Don't you SEE?"

"Yes, I see," he answered. "You are quite right. There is nothing AND nobody. I have been to Lawdor myself."

"You have been to TALK to him?"

"Yesterday. That was my reason for coming here. He will not see you or be written to. He says he knows better to begin that sort of thing. It may be that family feeling has not the vogue it once had, but you may recall that your husband infuriated him years ago. Also England is a less certain quantity than it once was--and the man has a family. He will allow you a hundred a year but there he draws the line."

"A hundred a year!" Feather breathed. From her delicate shoulders hung floating scarf-like sleeves of black transparency and she lifted one of them and held it out like a night moth's wing--"This cost forty pounds," she said, her voice quite faint and low. "A good nurse would cost forty! A cook--and a footman and a maid--and a coachman--and the brougham--I don't know how much they would cost. Oh-h!"

She drooped forward upon her sofa and laid face downward on a cushion--slim, exquisite in line, lost in despair.

The effect produced was that she gave herself into his hands. He felt as well as saw it and considered. She had no suggestion to offer, no reserve. There she was.

"It is an incredible sort of situation," he said in an even, low-pitched tone rather as if he were thinking aloud, "but it is baldly real. It is actually simple. In a street in Mayfair a woman and child might--" He hesitated a second and a wailed word came forth from the cushion.

"Starve!"

He moved slightly and continued.

"Since their bills have not been paid the trades-people will not

send in food. Servants will not stay in a house where they are not fed and receive no wages. No landlord will allow a tenant to occupy his property unless he pays rent. It may sound inhuman--but it is only human."

The cushion in which Feather's face was buried retained a faint scent of Robert's cigar smoke and the fragrance brought back to her things she had heard him say dispassionately about Lord Coombe as well as about other men. He had not been a puritanic or condemnatory person. She seemed to see herself groveling again on the floor of her bedroom and to feel the darkness and silence through which she had not dared to go to Robin.

Not another night like that! No! No!

"You must go to Jersey to your mother and father," Coombe said. "A hundred a year will help you there in your own home."

Then she sat upright and there was something in her lovely little countenance he had never seen before. It was actually determination.

"I have heard," she said, "of poor girls who were driven--by starvation to--to go on the streets. I--would go ANYWHERE before I would go back there."

"Anywhere!" he repeated, his own countenance expressing--or rather

refusing to express something as new as the thing he had seen in her own.

"Anywhere!" she cried and then she did what he had thought her on the verge of doing a few minutes earlier--she fell at his feet and embraced his knees. She clung to him, she sobbed, her pretty hair loosened itself and fell about her in wild but enchanting disorder.

"Oh, Lord Coombe! Oh, Lord Coombe! Oh, Lord Coombe!" she cried as she had cried in the hall.

He rose and endeavoured to disengage himself as he had done before. This time with less success because she would not let him go. He had the greatest possible objection to scenes.

"Mrs. Lawless--Feather--I beg you will get up," he said.

But she had reached the point of not caring what happened if she could keep him. He was a gentleman--he had everything in the world. What did it matter?

"I have no one but you and--and you always seemed to like me, I would do anything--ANYONE asked me, if they would take care of me. I have always liked you very much--and I did amuse you--didn't I? You liked to come here."

There was something poignant about her delicate distraught loveliness and, in the remoteness of his being, a shuddering knowledge that it was quite true that she would do anything for any man who would take care of her, produced an effect on him nothing else would have produced. Also a fantastic and finely ironic vision of Joseph and Potiphar's wife rose before him and the vision of himself as Joseph irked a certain complexness of his mentality. Poignant as the thing was in its modern way, it was also faintly ridiculous.

Then Robin awakened and shrieked again. The sound which had gained strength through long sleep and also through added discomfort quite rang through the house. What that sound added to the moment he himself would not have been able to explain until long afterwards. But it singularly and impellingly added.

"Listen!" panted Feather. "She has begun again. And there is no one to go to her."

"Get up, Mrs. Lawless," he said. "Do I understand that you are willing that I arrange this for you!"

He helped her to her feet.

"Do you mean--really!" she faltered. "Will you--will you--?"

Her uplifted eyes were like a young angel's brimming with crystal

drops which slipped--as a child's tears slip--down her cheeks. She clasped her hands in exquisite appeal. He stood for a moment quite still, his mind fled far away and he forgot where he was. And because of this the little simpleton's shallow discretion deserted her.

"If you were a--a marrying man--?" she said foolishly--almost in a whisper.

He recovered himself.

"I am not," with a finality which cut as cleanly as a surgical knife.

Something which was not the words was of a succinctness which filled her with new terror.

"I--I know!" she whimpered, "I only said if you were!"

"If I were--in this instance--it would make no difference." He saw the kind of slippery silliness he was dealing with and what it might transform itself into if allowed a loophole. "There must be no mistakes."

In her fright she saw him for a moment more distinctly than she had ever seen him before and hideous dread beset her lest she had

blundered fatally.

"There shall be none," she gasped. "I always knew. There shall be none at all."

"Do you know what you are asking me?" he inquired.

"Yes, yes--I'm not a girl, you know. I've been married. I won't go home. I can't starve or live in awful lodgings. SOMEBODY must save me!"

"Do you know what people will say?" his steady voice was slightly lower.

"It won't be said to me." Rather wildly. "Nobody minds--really."

He ceased altogether to look serious. He smiled with the light detached air his world was most familiar with.

"No--they don't really," he answered. "I had, however, a slight preference for knowing whether you would or not. You flatter me by intimating that you would not."

He knew that if he had held out an arm she would have fallen upon his breast and wept there, but he was not at the moment in the mood to hold out an arm. He merely touched hers with a light pressure.

"Let us sit down and talk it over," he suggested.

A hansom drove up to the door and stopped before he had time to seat himself. Hearing it he went to the window and saw a stout businesslike looking man get out, accompanied by an attendant. There followed a loud, authoritative ringing of the bell and an equally authoritative rap of the knocker. This repeated itself. Feather, who had run to the window and caught sight of the stout man, clutched his sleeve.

"It's the agent we took the house from. We always said we were out. It's either Carson or Bayle. I don't know which."

Coombe walked toward the staircase.

"You can't open the door!" she shrilled.

"He has doubtless come prepared to open it himself." he answered and proceeded at leisure down the narrow stairway.

The caller had come prepared. By the time Coombe stood in the hall a latchkey was put in the keyhole and, being turned, the door opened to let in Carson--or Bayle--who entered with an air of angered determination, followed by his young man.

The physical presence of the Head of the House of Coombe was always described as a subtly impressive one. Several centuries of rather careful breeding had resulted in his seeming to represent things by silent implication. A man who has never found the necessity of explaining or excusing himself inevitably presents a front wholly unsuggestive of uncertainty. The front Coombe presented merely awaited explanations from others.

Carson--or Bayle--had doubtless contemplated seeing a frightened servant trying to prepare a stammering obvious lie. He confronted a tall, thin man about whom--even if his clothes had been totally different--there could be no mistake. He stood awaiting an apology so evidently that Carson--or Bayle--began to stammer himself even before he had time to dismiss from his voice the suggestion of bluster. It would have irritated Coombe immensely if he had known that he--and a certain overcoat--had been once pointed out to the man at Sandown and that--in consequence of the overcoat--he vaguely recognized him.

"I--I beg pardon," he began.

"Quite so," said Coombe.

"Some tenants came to look at the house this morning. They had an order to view from us. They were sent away, my lord--and decline to come back. The rent has not been paid since the first half

year. There is no one now who can even PRETEND it's going to be paid. Some step had to be taken."

"Quite so," said Coombe. "Suppose you step into the dining-room."

He led the pair into the room and pointed to chairs, but neither the agent nor his attendant was calm enough to sit down.

Coombe merely stood and explained himself.

"I quite understand," he said. "You are entirely within your rights. Mrs. Gareth-Lawless is, naturally, not able to attend to business. For the present--as a friend of her late husband's--I will arrange matters for her. I am Lord Coombe. She does not wish to give up the house. Don't send any more possible tenants. Call at Coombe House in an hour and I will give you a cheque."

There were a few awkward apologetic moments and then the front door opened and shut, the hansom jingled away and Coombe returned to the drawing-room. Robin was still shrieking.

"She wants some more condensed milk," he said. "Don't be frightened. Go and give her some. I know an elderly woman who understands children. She was a nurse some years ago. I will send her here at once. Kindly give me the account books. My housekeeper will send you some servants. The trades-people will come for orders."

Feather was staring at him.

"W-will they?" she stammered. "W-will everything--?"

"Yes--everything," he answered. "Don't be frightened. Go upstairs and try to stop her. I must go now. I never heard a creature yell with such fury."

She turned away and went towards the second flight of stairs with a rather dazed air. She had passed through a rather tremendous crisis and she WAS dazed. He made her feel so. She had never understood him for a moment and she did not understand him now--but then she never did understand people and the whole situation was a new one to her. If she had not been driven to the wall she would have been quite as respectable as she knew how to be.

Coombe called a hansom and drove home, thinking of many things and looking even more than usually detached. He had remarked the facial expression of the short and stout man as he had got into his cab and he was turning over mentally his own exact knowledge of the views the business mind would have held and what the business countenance would have decently covered if he--Coombe--had explained in detail that he was so far--in this particular case--an entirely blameless character.