Miss White of Mayfair

CHAPTER I

She stood before a long mirror, and, with deliberation, surveyed herself, inch by inch, as it were, from head to foot.

What she saw in the glass amply justified the approving nod she gave to it at last. A girl of nineteen, straight-limbed and as upright as a dart, with fine shoulders, a shapely neck, and a face framed prodigally in hair as black as night—which even the eyes of a misogynist might have dwelt upon with interest. For it was a face not so beautiful, perhaps, as striking. An alert intelligence dwelt in the large, dark,
luminous eyes which further accentuated the almost excessive pallor of the skin. Decision was writ large in the firm lines of a red, full-lipped mouth and prominent chin—such as Rossetti was prone to limn. It was, in short, a face full of comely strength; such a face as, once seen, would, of surety, long haunt the memory of the average man.

"Yes," said she, nodding to herself again, "I see what you are, Miss Eleanor White. You are not destitute of certain good points. You would make a fairly successful appeal to an uncritical eye. Your general appearance is soothing to one's vanity. You look, too, as though you might go out in the world and do things without fear or trembling and that, for the thousandth time, brings me to the question—who are you? Frankly, you don't know, and guesswork is worse than useless. You must gird up your loins and go to this young barrister. To
be sure, you have never met him but once, and he may think you bold; but boldness usually leads to results. He is monstrously clever, and he is amiable, I am sure. He cannot refuse to listen to you, at all events, and, who knows, he may in the end consent to help you to solve this horrid mystery;” and, turning away from the mirror with an impetuous gesture, she added, “I’ll do it, and this very afternoon, too!

Half an hour later Miss Eleanor White might have been seen on the top of a Finchley ’bus, bent Strand-ward, on a truly heroic business.

Percy King, barrister, of Pump Court, Middle Temple, had achieved some notable successes of late, and great things were now predicted of him. A recent case at the Old Bailey in which, in the teeth of the most damning testimony, he had secured the.
acquittal of a man on the capital charge, had caused his fame to be trumpeted far and wide. This forensic victory was not the result of mere eloquence, which would have been of little avail in this instance, but of the formulation of a most ingenious theory, which proved triumphant all along the line. This was a great feather in the cap of a young man not yet turned thirty, and the immediate result was the purchase of a larger office table for the accommodation of the briefs that now fairly rained in upon him.

Upon this instant July afternoon, however, as he sat in his stuffy chambers in Pump Court, he was in a ruminative mood, and had no stomach for work. For once his mental equilibrium had been disturbed by a fair vision which he made not the slightest effort to efface from his memory. Rather did he dwell upon it, and with
avidity recall every incident of that delightf ul afternoon, when, at a recent garden party, he made "the casual acquaintance of " a witch in book muslin," as it was his fancy to put it. He was wondering for the fiftieth time how he could compass another meeting when his office boy entered the room.

" A lady outside wishes to see you, sir."

" What name?"

" Miss White, sir."

" Oh!" said he, with a little gasp, " just so. Show her in at once, William."

He smoothed down his hair, and adjusted his neck-tie, and was just becoming conscious that his forehead was now freely beading with perspiration, when the door opened again, and, bounding to his feet, he advanced with an extended and trembling hand to greet his fair visitor.

" This is, indeed, an unexpected pleasure, Miss White," said he.

"Oh, indeed;" and he placed a chair for her. "Pray be seated, Miss White, and are you then——"

"A creature of impulse? Well, at times, yes. You will think so, I am sure, when I tell you the object of my visit." Then, with a quick glance about the room, she added, "By the way, have you many lady callers here, Mr King?"

"Well—er—not as a rule. You see——"

For the first time then a look of troubled doubt came into her face, and she made a movement as if to rise.

"Oh! perhaps I shouldn't have come," she said. "I'm so sorry."

"Why should you be sorry?" he asked, with a smile of reassurance.

"I don't know. You see, it is just this. After we met at the garden party the other
day, I heard so much about you and your wonderful cleverness in finding out things that I got your address, and thought—but oh! if I have made a mistake—"

"Mistake!" said he, greatly puzzled. "Why a mistake? Your visit, I assure you, is a delightful variation from the usual routine here. Do you wish my advice upon—"

"Yes, yes," she said, eagerly, "that is just it—your advice. I have been worried for years by a mystery, and I thought you might be able to solve it for me. I want to know who I am."

He stared at her in blank amazement.

"Who you are?" he repeated.

"Precisely. It seems an odd request, I dare say. It is customary, I know, for one to be in a position to answer such an elementary question as that; but frankly, I am not. I have not the remotest idea as
to who I am, where I was born, and who my father and mother were. It is a hateful mystery, and I want to have done with it. I must know. It is my duty to know, and I was wondering if you could help me. Can you—will you help me, Mr King?"

"Why, certainly," said he, more and more astonished. "Nothing would give me greater pleasure. But, I confess, yours is an amazing—I—er—mean, an unusual request, and I am—er—so absolutely in the dark at present as to the grounds upon which you base such a curious belief, that without your entire confidence—I—er—"

"Oh, you shall have that. Certainly, certainly. How else could I hope for your advice? I will tell you all I know about myself up to this very moment. I have no cause for keeping a single thing back. Shall I begin at once?"

"If you please, Miss White." And he
at once assumed the attitude of an attentive listener.

"Well, I will be as concise as possible, since I can remember anything I have lived with a very excellent, indeed lovable, couple—a Mr and Mrs Maitland, who live in a quiet way in a charming old house in Finchley. He is secretary to some learned society, needless to specify, and she is a well-known contributor to various periodicals—and is a highly accomplished woman. They are both greatly respected in the neighbourhood. That they have both done their whole duty toward me—for a consideration received from some mysterious quarter—I freely concede; but 'all the king's horses and all the king's men' could never drag from them the secret I am now bent upon unravelling.

"In a moderate way I have never wanted for anything. Childless themselves,
no father or mother could possibly have taken a keener interest in my welfare than they have done. Every reasonable wish or whim has always been gratified. For then I have nothing but unbounded gratitude, love, and respect. Let that be distinctly understood, Mr King."

He nodded his appreciation of that point, and she continued:—

"I was carefully educated; first at home, then at a select boarding-school in a Western suburb. I spent a year at a pension des demoiselles in Paris, and another year at a similar institution in Germany—this was at Dresden—and it is now proposed, I believe, that I shall qualify myself for taking a degree at the London University. You will perceive by this, Mr King, that, for some reason or other, my education has been most sedulously looked after."

Again he nodded assent.
"Now," she continued, "there has been too much method in all this to attribute it to mere chance. There has been a guiding hand and a controlling will throughout, you must concede that."

"It is apparent on the very face of it," said he.

"Precisely; but where is this going to end, and what is the nature of the motive; for motive there must be on the part of this mysterious man or woman who, for some inscrutable reason, is thus attempting to shape my destiny?"

"That, of course, is a part of the puzzle which you wish me to solve," said he, with a smile.

"Exactly," and she smiled a very gracious smile in return. "And now I come to what I consider a very suspicious circumstance. I have a relative, or, at least, one who claims to be such."
MISS WHITE OF MAYFAIR

His eyebrows went up with surprise at this. "Why," said he, "should the possession of a relative be a suspicious circumstance? I have several myself, including a father, and——"

"Just so; but this is a distant cousin, or something of that kind, who affects to take an interest in me, but won't explain things."

"For what reason? Does he assign any?"

"It is not a he, but an old maid, and her name is Letitia Gibson, and she lives in a sweet little cottage at Barnet, with a she-ogre of a servant, but is a dear old thing herself, with funny little curls dangling about her ears, and she could tell me a lot, I verily believe, but she won't. At least, she says she cannot."

He laughed.

"She, then," said he, "is the suspicious circumstance?"
"Exactly."
"Because she won't tell you a lot?"
"It practically comes to that."
"Do you see her often?"
"Once every three months."
"Since when?"
"Since I can remember."
"Does she ever call on you?"
"Sometimes—yes. At rare intervals, however."
"The Maitlands know her, then?"
"Oh, yes."
"H'm!"
"Why h'm? I see you think she does know a lot, then?"
"I can conceive it to be possible. Has she any means?"
"Only a small annuity, I believe. She makes me trivial presents at times—gloves, and chocolates and things."
Mr King stroked his chin reflectively for a moment; then—

"Would you mind giving me her address?" said he.

"Not at all," she replied. "I will do so with great pleasure if you will kindly give me a slip of paper."

He did so. She wrote upon it the name and address, and handed it to him.

"Thanks. Do you object to my making discreet inquiries in that quarter?"

"Not in the least. It is better, however, that they should be discreet."

"That," said he, "is why I used the word; and I need not assure you, Miss White, that if in my small way I can be of service to you, it will afford me extreme pleasure. I may also add——"

At this point interruption came in the guise of the office boy.
“Mr Johnson is here, and wants to see you very particular, sir.”

She at once arose.

“Oh, then I won’t detain you a moment longer; but you were going to say something further. I am rather curious to know what. Do you mind?”

He smiled, and turning to the boy said: “Tell Mr Johnson I will see him in a minute or two,” and when they were alone again, he added, “what was I going to say, Miss White? Oh, only that I was jolly pleased to make your acquaintance at the garden-party the other day, and—oh, yes—of course—to remind you that you have quite forgotten to give me your address.”

“Dear me!” said she, as a rosy flush suddenly sped to her cheeks; “why, so I have. How careless of me, to be sure! I haven’t a card, but ‘The Hollies,’ Church End, Finchley, will always find.
me.” With that she extended her hand quite frankly. “You must not keep your friend Mr Johnson waiting. Good-bye! Mr King.”

With that she was up and away, leaving him to a very mixed set of reflections.
CHAPTER II

A great surprise lay in wait for Miss White when she returned to "The Hollies" an hour or so later. As she loitered a moment or two among the flower-beds of a delightful old-fashioned garden a servant came out to her.

"If you please, Miss Eleanor," said she, "you are wanted in the drawing-room. Mrs Maitland is getting terrible anxious and fidgety about your staying away so long, for a gentleman has been waiting to see you for nearly an hour."

Miss White was plainly astonished.

"To see me, Mary? Are you sure?"
"Oh yes, miss. I was told to come out and tell you."

"What sort of a gentleman is he?"

"Oh! nothing much to speak of. An oldish gent with a bald head and gold spectacles, and very affable. Might be a parson, or a doctor, or something of that sort. Nothing to be frightened of, miss. You mustn't think that."

"Frightened, Mary! What an idea! I was a little surprised at first, that was all."

"Of course you were, I dare say. It wouldn't be you to be frightened, at anybody, so to speak."

"I trust not," said Miss White, as without further ado she entered the house and walked straight into the drawing-room.

A benevolent-looking and spectacled old gentleman, dressed all in broadcloth, rose
at once from his chair; but, curiously enough, what at once arrested her attention was a look of mingled embarrassment and alarm upon the face of Mrs Maitland, who seemed a sweet and gentle little creature, with pink cheeks and soft dove's eyes, and what normally would have been a veritable rosebud of a mouth. But there was now a perceptible quiver on the lips as she spoke.

"I am so glad you have come, my dear," said she, "for this gentleman—Mr Benwell—has been waiting for nearly an hour to see you. The nature of his communication will come to you, as it has to me, as a great surprise, and I hope you will be able to take it more philosophically than, for the moment, I am able to do. I will leave you together for a while."

Miss White laid at once a detaining hand upon her arm.
"Don't go," said she. "Why should you go?"

"Why, indeed?" interposed Mr Benwell, with a reassuring smile. "Mrs Maitland and I have been friends for many years, and she knows that I would not for the world unnecessarily afflict her. Indeed, her distress at the prospect of losing you is not at all justified. Many opportunities of meeting again will occur."

"That is not my grievance," said Mrs Maitland, as she reseated herself. "It is having this thing suddenly sprung upon me—upon us—without a moment's warning."

"What thing?" said Miss White, every nerve in her body now tingling with excited curiosity. "How and in what way are you to lose me? I do not understand. What has happened? And who, pray, is this gentleman? Is he in any way connected
with the mystery of my existence? Can he tell me who I am, who brought me here, and why I am here? Surely it is high time that I knew these things, whatever else of an extraordinary nature may now be in store for me?"

Mr Benwell’s smile was benignity itself, as, after exchanging a glance with Mrs Maitland, he replied—

"I am a solicitor, to begin with, Miss White; and, for a good many years I have acted as a sort of trustee or guardian for you. You were a very small creature indeed when this responsibility was imposed upon me."

"Imposed upon you?" The query came quick and sharp.

"Well, no. I should not have used such a term," said he. "I mean it is many years since I assumed, in a professional capacity, that responsibility, which I have fulfilled
to the very best of my ability. Certain sums were placed at my disposal, and my instructions were, first of all, to provide for you a suitable home."

"Then it was you who brought me here?"

"I was instrumental in doing so. Yes. I am an old friend of Mr Maitland's."

"A very dear friend, indeed," interposed Mrs Maitland, with sudden warmth, "and I dare say it was a very mercenary proceeding on our part; but we were childless, and, at that time, in dire straits, and the proposition made to us seemed a God-send, and a God-send you have truly been to us, my dear Eleanor. We loved you from the very first. We have always loved you very dearly; and it will be a wrench indeed to lose you after all these long years."

The girl seemed quite insensible to this outburst of genuine emotion, for she turned
coldly to the solicitor again, and said, "There has been a certain method in the form and manner of my education. Was this in accordance with the instructions to which you have just referred?"

"Quite so," he answered.

"And to what end was I thus carefully educated?"

"That you might earn your own living."

"When the funds placed at your disposal were exhausted?"

"Precisely."

"And they are now exhausted?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"I begin to see things a little more clearly now. Who supplied you with these funds?"

"A client whose name I cannot reveal."

"A professional secret?"

"A professional secret. Yes."

She reflected a moment, with her hand
to her lips; then looked up again to the solicitor.

"Is my name really White?" she asked.
"I was so assured."
"Do you know for a certainty?"
"I do not."
"Have I a parent living?"
"I don't think so. That is really my firm belief, Miss White."
"You will admit, I am sure, that there is a good deal of mystery in all this?"
"I admit it frankly."
"Are you a friend or an enemy of mine, Mr Benwell? Bluntly—yes or no?"
"A friend; most emphatically a friend," said he, in a tone that at once carried conviction with it.

"Then tell me who Miss Gibson is, and why she takes such an apparent interest in me. Is she really a relative of mine, or is she not?"
Mr Benwell seemed somewhat taken aback, it may be, by the suddenness of the question, for he hesitated a moment before answering.

"Well," he said at last, "I cannot positively answer the question, and I ought to content myself with that reply; but I really do take a very great interest in your welfare, my dear girl, and I will go so far as to say this, whether she be a relative or not, I am well aware of her feelings towards you, and I honestly believe that she knows vastly more about you than I do. That, I may add, is a hint for private consumption only."

"Oh, quite so," she said, in a less frigid tone. "The hint is a very valuable one to me, and I thank you exceedingly; and now we come to the object of your present visit, Mr Benwell. I am to leave 'The Hollies,' it would appear, through the
exhaustion of supplies. What am I to do next?"

Mr Benwell had instant recourse to his pocket-book, whence he produced a letter which he passed over to her. She glanced at the superscription, and read:—

"Miss Doris Bruce,
99, Curzon Street,
Mayfair.

Introducing Miss White."

"That," continued the solicitor, "is addressed to a client of mine, who is seeking the services of a lady companion and secretary. I took the liberty of mentioning your name and qualifications, and have made an appointment for you at 1.30 p.m. to-morrow. It will be an excellent opening, and, for a number of reasons, I would strongly urge its acceptance upon you."

There was a certain something in his
manner that caused her to look straight into his eyes for a moment. Then said she—-

"I will accept your advice, for I believe it to be the counsel of a well-wisher."

"It truly is," he replied.

"Have you any objection to my calling upon Miss Gibson this afternoon, and acquainting her with the strange turn in my affairs?"

"None whatever," said he, seemingly a little surprised at the question. "Why should I have? Go to her by all means; only you must not let her persuade you to change your mind."

"I have promised," said she, simply. "I never break a promise."

"Very well, then," said he, rising with a very palpable sense of relief from his chair; "that then is clearly understood. You will hear further from me shortly."
For instance, there is a small sum still standing to your credit, and a few other details of settlement—mere details.” And with that he shook hands with the two ladies, and bowed himself out of the room.

Then, in a certain revulsion of feeling, Miss White, the impulsive creature, suddenly threw her arms about Mrs Maitland, and sobbing on her shoulder, said that no one else on earth was so dear to her or ever could be so dear to her; but, heart-breaking as the situation was, she supposed it must be resolutely faced. To all of which Mrs Maitland made sympathetic rejoinders. Then Miss White flicked aside the tear-drops, and a quarter of an hour later was speeding on her way by train to Barnet.

Hers was now a grim determination to “have it out,” with Miss Gibson. She had been greatly impressed by the solicitor's
words—coinciding, as they did, with a settled conviction of her own. Yes; of a surety Miss Gibson knew everything, and have it out of her she must, and would. Fully absorbed in these reflections, she had passed down the High Street, and was nearing Hadley Church, hard by which Miss Gibson’s modest cottage stood, when a gentleman stopped directly in front of her and lifted his hat. She looked up and found herself face to face with Mr Percy King.

“Well! Of all the surprises!” she began, when he cut in with—

“Quite mutual, I assure you. You see, having quickly got rid of Johnson, and my head being so full of what you had told me, I jumped into a hansom, drove to King’s Cross, took train for Barnet, and here I am. I have just left Miss Gibson’s cottage.”

“Whither my own steps are now bent,”
said she. "But you promised to be very discreet. You have broken your word."

"Not at all. I had thought it all out, and would have been discretion itself, only unfortunately——"

"She was not at home?"

"Precisely."

"Whom did you see?"

"A holy terror of an old woman. You, I believe, called her a female ogre!"

"Quite right; that was Rebecca. And she said——?"

"That Miss Gibson had gone up to London, and would not return until evening."

"H'm! What a nuisance! I wanted to see her very particularly. I must go back now."

"So must I," said he. "Better go together, hadn't we?"

"By all means. Something very strange
has happened this afternoon, and I want to tell you all about it.”

They walked very slowly together to the station, and he accompanied her in the train as far as Church End. Just before parting he said—

“Yes. They are very wealthy people, though her brother has the reputation of having a very big bee in his bonnet. Half the house is a museum of Egyptian antiquities, I believe. But mummies and things won’t trouble you much, I dare say. Tell you what, if you don’t mind I’ll meet you at King’s Cross at one o’clock tomorrow, and drive you down to Curzon Street.” And after a moment’s hesitation on her part it was so arranged.

Punctually at one on the morrow he met her on the platform at King’s Cross, and a few minutes later they were faring merrily
in a hansom towards the West End. As they turned at last into Curzon Street a splendid carriage and pair went dashing by. Reclining upon the silken cushions was a beautiful and elegantly-dressed lady. At sight of her Miss White gave a convulsive gasp, and clutched his arm.

"Good heavens!" said she, "did you see the lady who has just passed?"

"Yes—of course. Why? What is the matter? Are you ill?"

"No, no; I am not ill; but that lady is Miss Gibson, that is all!"

"Great Scott!" said he, "and look! she has just stopped in front of No. 99."
CHAPTER III

Percy King at once stopped the cab. "There you are," said he; "she is getting out of the carriage. See, she is mounting the steps of No. 99, and the carriage is driving away."

"But," said she, in a tremor of excitement, "it is such an extraordinary thing. Are you sure the house is No. 99?"

"Count up for yourself. There is No. 113," said he. "It is absolutely certain that she has gone into No. 99. Are you equally sure that she really is Miss Gibson?"

"Of course I am. How can I possibly
be mistaken in a face I have seen hundreds of times?"

"That seems true enough. Still—"

"Still, what?"

"One is deceived occasionally. There are certain extraordinary resemblances which—"

"Quite so. However, it's useless to argue about it. I shall quickly know whether I am right or not."

"Perhaps so, perhaps not," said he, "your appointment, please remember, is with Miss Doris Bruce, and not with Miss Gibson."

"Of course I have not forgotten that," she replied, in a slight tone of irritation. "Only—well, we shall see what we shall see. There! A clock somewhere is striking the half-hour. I will get out here, and walk up to No. 99." And she pushed open one of the flap doors of the cab.
"Tell you what," said he, "suppose I drive about for half an hour, and meet you here at the corner again. I am dying with curiosity to know the result. Do you mind?"

She laughed.

"This is all very unconventional, is it not?" she asked.

"Very. But then, you see, I am now, in a sense, your legal adviser, and——"

"Possess privileges? Well, perhaps——" and before he could make a movement to assist her she had leaped from the cab. She paused one instant on the kerb, then looked up again. "Very well, then, in half an hour," and as she now turned a set and determined face in the direction of No. 99, she heard the cab roll away in the opposite direction.

She mounted the steps of No. 99, and rang vigorously. A footman quickly
answered the summons. She at once discovered that her coming was expected, for, without a word, she was shown into a reception room leading from the entrance hall.

Her suspense was of but a moment’s duration. The door suddenly opened, and she looked up in bewildered surprise at the smiling and comely presence now confronting her. She, indeed, recognised at once the lady she had just seen in the carriage. But how was it now possible for her to identify in this elegant woman the prim and precise old spinster of Barnet, with her gold pince-nez, her corkscrew curls of iron grey, and her little vanities, in the guise of pink ribbons and imitation lace? The idea seemed absurd. Still, at the first glance, there was an unmistakable, even extraordinary, facial resemblance between the two, which would have been apparent
to the most casual observer. The manifest difference in their ages, however, was something impossible to argue away, and Miss White, though wondering greatly, was compelled to admit that her first impressions had been at fault.

She was the first to speak. Quickly mastering her initial nervousness, she said—

"I have brought a letter of introduction from Mr Benwell to Miss Doris Bruce."

"I am Miss Bruce," said the other, with a genial smile, "and I take it that you are Miss White, of whom he speaks in terms of very high praise. Pray be seated, Miss White."

By way of reply, the latter calmly handed over Mr Benwell's letter, and seated herself, with all the aplomb in the world, in the nearest chair.

Miss Bruce glanced over the brief missive,
and her manner was very gracious and kindly as she said—

"I want a companion, a real companion, who is young, intelligent, and sympathetic. Your face proclaims the possession of the first qualification, Miss White, and I am assured by Mr Benwell, whose opinion I very highly value, that you are equally endowed with the others."

"Oh, well," returned Miss White, now perfectly at her ease, "I can't imagine how Mr Benwell comes to know so much about me, since I never set eyes on him until yesterday. Still, I am fairly intelligent, I suppose, and so far as education goes, I am suitably equipped, I dare say, for the position. But I really don't know whether I am sympathetic or not. I want to be—I try to be—and I think I would be, under favourable circumstances. But those circumstances have always been denied me."
MISS WHITE OF MAYFAIR

Did Mr Benwell explain to you that I was nobody in particular?"

Miss Bruce seemed somewhat disconcerted by the abruptness of the question.

"Well," said she, "he certainly hinted at something, which I felt to be quite immaterial."

"That I never knew my father and mother, perhaps?"

"It was to that effect. It did not concern me. It does not now concern me. My business at present is with Miss White—solely with Miss White, and her qualifications for the position I am pleased to offer her."

This was most graciously said; but, with a strange persistence characteristic of the girl, Miss White went on—

"It is awfully good and kind of you to say this. But, still, I think you ought to know everything. Did he tell you, for
instance, that I have one relative, a dear old thing, who lives at Barnet, and who knows all about me, I am sure? I don't think it can be anything very bad, else she never could have been so good and kind to me as she has always been. Never, never, could I get so much as a hint from her, though I have tried over and over again. Still, if you were to write—I will give you her address—the result might prove more satisfactory to both of us, especially as I should not care to take a step of this kind without her knowledge and consent."

This was very artful on the part of Miss White. Like a cat watching a mouse, she had noted every change in the features of Miss Bruce as she uttered these words. She saw a something, but it was a very intangible something. If any trace of emotion had appeared in her face at all,
it was but a pleasurable and transitory one.

"If that is your wish, Miss White," she replied; "I will with pleasure write to this lady, simply stating that I desire to take you into my service, and asking if it meets with her approval. I shall certainly say nothing more. What inquiries I wished to make have been made. I am perfectly satisfied, and it now simply remains for you to say whether you personally are willing or not to accept the position I am prepared to offer you."

Miss White at once threw up the sponge. With the brightest of smiles, she said—

"What else can I do but accept? I cast all sorts of doubts upon my respectability—if I may use such a strong term—though I don't quite mean that either, but you will not hear of it. I should be glad if you would write to Miss Gibson, Rosé
Cottage, Hadley Common, Barnet, setting forth the circumstances; but, in any case, if it be your wish, I gratefully accept the offer. When shall you require my services?"

To an acute observer, Miss Bruce's smile would have seemed very much like a smile of triumphant satisfaction as she replied—"At once, to-morrow, if it will suit your convenience. And now as to terms—"

"Oh, pray, don't speak of them," said Miss White, with genuine earnestness. "It is all so strange and unexpected. I know nothing as yet of these things. I must leave it entirely to you."

"Very well, let it stand at that. And now, with regard to your duties. Frankly, I am very lonely in this great house. I want a bright and cheerful companion, such as I am sure you will prove to be. I live here with my brother, who is a very
eclectic man. He never goes into society. He never entertains. He is the slave to a hobby. To me it is a gruesome hobby. There are strange apartments in this house. They belong solely to him. In them he spends most of his time. They need not concern you. They do not concern me. You will meet him at dinner, but his will be a life apart from ours. You will drive with me in the Park; you will accompany me to the opera, to the theatre. We shall pay occasional visits to Paris and elsewhere. I will make your life as pleasant as possible. I have already taken a fancy to you. We shall be great friends, I am sure, when you know me better. You see that I am perfectly frank and open with you; you must be the same with me. Indeed, if I am any judge of character, you will be the same. Don't trouble yourself any longer about your origin. What does it matter? If
there is any mystery about it, let it remain a mystery. Who cares? I certainly do not, and surely there is nobody else——" 

There was an abrupt pause in this strange outburst of confidence, and a look of suspicion suddenly appeared in her eyes, as she added, "I saw you in a hansom cab as I passed by in my carriage."

Miss White's eyes opened wide with surprise at this.

"Well," said she, "and what of that?"

"You were not alone."

For some unaccountable reason, and greatly to her annoyance, Miss White felt hot blood suddenly tingling up to her very ears.

"No," said she. "I was with a gentleman."

"A friend, of course?"

"Not exactly. It was Mr Percy King, the clever barrister, whom you may
possibly know by reputation. I had been to him for advice.”

“About what?”

Miss White at once saw her opportunity. “About what you have just suggested I should dismiss from my mind—about the mystery of my birth and parentage. I asked him to solve that mystery for me.”

“And he said?”

“That he would do all that lay in his power to accomplish that end.”

“I see. And he knew the object of your visit here?”

“Oh yes; I told him all about it. Again, why not?”

Miss Bruce’s manner changed in an instant. “Pardon me,” she said. “I did not intend to be rude. But you have now absolutely convinced me on one point.”

“Which is——?”

“That you are as frank and as open as the...
day, and that henceforth I shall have respect, faith, and confidence in you. Still, I advise you once again to let that matter drop."

Greatly wondering, Miss White made a half promise to that effect, and shortly afterwards the momentous interview came to an end, it being agreed that she would take up her residence in her new capacity at No. 99, Curzon Street, on the morrow.

Percy King sat in the cab at the spot agreed upon, impatiently awaiting her return.

"Well?" said he, when she turned up at last.

"It was an absurd mistake," she replied. "It was not Miss Gibson after all, but Miss Doris Bruce. I have accepted her offer, and 99, Curzon Street, will be my address after to-morrow. I must get back to
Finchley at once. Do you mind driving me to King's Cross?"

"Do I mind?" he said, with a laugh, and the next moment they were up and away together.
CHAPTER IV

When Percy King, at nine o'clock on the following morning, entered his chambers in Pump Court, he found, among his letters, one bearing the Barnet post-mark.

"Hello!" said he. "What can this mean?" He thrust his finger through the flap of the envelope, and pulled forth a note. It was written in a curious, crabbed hand, with long up and down strokes, and it read thus:—

"Rose Cottage, Hadley Common.

"Sir,—I found your card upon my return from London this evening. I am at a loss to know what on earth brought you here,
but shall be pleased to ascertain if you can make it convenient to call again to-morrow at one.—Yours truly,

“LAVINIA GIBSON.”

“By Jove!” said he, “the old party hits straight from the shoulder, and me-thinks I have put my foot into it. I promised the White girl to be discreet. This is discretion with a vengeance. Knowing what I know now, what the deuce can I say when I get there? I can’t confine myself to the weather, and the crops. *Ça serait une bétise.* Shall I back out of it, send her a wire saying that I have just contracted some deadly disease, and——. No, I can’t reconcile that with my ordinary methods. Funk, too, is a detestable word, and ought to be expunged from the dictionaries. Besides, why should I jib at a pleasant interview with a dear little old lady in
corkscrew ringlets, who, through mistaken information, I was led to believe, wished to let her cottage furnished for the season. Surely I can muster up courage enough for that. What is the time?” and he looked at his watch. “Nine o’clock. Three hours yet for a scramble through my work, and then up to Hadley on the tick of the clock.” He was about to refer to his papers when he suddenly threw himself back in his chair again. “By Jove!” said he, “how, I wonder, has this White girl got such a deuce of a sudden pull on one? Can’t shake it off; and the strangest part of it is, I don’t want to shake it off. Still, what do you see in her, old man? What is the attraction? Well, to begin with, there is no dashed nonsense about that girl; no pink and white bread and butter miss she, with whom you have to mind your P’s and Q’s every instant for fear she may faint
at a mere man's random remarks. That's what I like about her. Of course she is obsessed with this silly idea of digging a parent or two out of, I dare say, respectable obscurity. Why can't she let sleeping parents lie? But, upon my word, I believe that if I told her I had a red-hot clue that necessitated her going over to Paris, or any other spot on the map of Europe with me, she'd pack up like a shot, meet me at Charing Cross station, and think she was doing just an ordinary honest and meritorious sort of thing in accompanying me. No good, my boy; she is a dear, ripping sort of girl, and you have got it bad. That is the long and short of it. And now for three hours' hard work."

Straightway he fell, tooth and nail, upon a brief of many folios, and he never looked up again until the stroke of noon. Then he snatched up his hat, and made a bolt
for Fleet Street. A swift hansom soon whirled him to King's Cross, and with reasonable punctuality he found himself once more in front of Rose Cottage, hard by Hadley Church.

A quaint, low-browed old cottage it was, set well back from the road, with its red pantiles half smothered in purple clematis and Virginia creepers. The long fore-garden was riotous with hollyhock, and sunflower, and phlox and dahlias, and half a hundred other honest blooms, with a great impertinent monkey-tree sprawling midway. He walked down a weedy path leading to the doorway, lifted and let fall an old-fashioned knocker, and awaited results.

The "Ogre" put, in an instant appearance, but upon this occasion she did not seem much of an ogre after all; only a little woman, with ferrety eyes, in which
suspicion usually dwelt, as though she had long acted as Cerberus in a house subject to frequent incursions of bailiffs or importunate tradesmen. She now showed a solitary tooth in her upper jaw, which he was fain to accept as a smile of welcome, and, without a word, he was conducted into a little low-ceiled and oak-panelled room, now in semi-obscurity owing to the lozenged window being half overhung with creepers. Mr King, however, could not help observing the taste with which the little room was furnished; the Chippendale furniture, the rare old mezzotints and etchings upon the walls, the valuable china in a Sheraton cabinet, and many other tokens of refinement forcing themselves upon his critical attention.

"By Jove! the old girl knows a thing or two in the way of decoration," he said to himself as he was examining a rare bit of
Capo di Monte, when he heard a cough behind him.

He suddenly turned, and found himself facing an extremely pretty old lady, with her face half-encircled with curls of the early Victorian period, and looking rather stiff and starchy in an old brocade gown, evidently donned for the occasion.

"Mr King, I presume?" said she.

"Yes—er—exactly," said he, for an instant quite thrown off his balance. "That is my name—and—er—"

"Then you received my letter, of course?"

"Oh yes; of course. It came by the morning post."

"Then pray be seated, Mr King, and be good enough to explain the object of your visit. I was not at home yesterday when you called, and I felt quite nervous when I saw your card upon my return, for I have a sort of horror of legal gentlemen. Not in a
personal sense, sir,” she added, with the sweetest of smiles. “Oh, dear, no; but I have had a good deal of experience—involving not a little expense—with the law in my younger days, and the mere thought of a lawyer wishing to see me now gives me the creeps, so to speak. I hope your business with me is not anything very dreadful, Mr King.”

“Oh, dear, no,” said he; now wishing that he had stuck to his brief instead of coming north to ruffle the feathers of a dear old soul like this. “I am afraid that you are labouring under some misapprehension. Miss—er—Gibson, you see, I am on the look-out for a little furnished cottage in the suburbs, and I received an intimation that—”

“That this cottage was to let?”

“Well—I—er—was led to believe—”

“By whom?” and the old lady drew
herself up with quiet dignity, and fixed him with a steady glance that made him wonder once more why he had left Pump Court to make an ass of himself in these northern latitudes.

"Well," said he, bent upon a bold stroke, since it was neck or nothing with him now, "I chanced to meet a young lady at a garden party lately—a Miss White—who, I believe, is a relative of yours."

She appeared encased in buckram now, and her inquiring glance suddenly hardened.

"I know a Miss White, who lives at Church End," said she, "and I take a certain amount of interest in her. In fact, she is, in a remote degree, related to me; but, sir, do you really mean to tell me that she—this Miss White—suggested to you that I wished to let this cottage?"

"Decidedly," said he to himself, "I have put my hoof into it this time." Then,
aloud: "Well—er—I got a sort of impression from her that—" and he came to a
sudden pause, for she had lifted a dainty little forefinger, and pointed it straight at
him.

"Mr King," said she, "your methods are very crude, and if it were not a very rude
thing to say I should express my doubts as to whether, in spite of what is printed on
your card, you really do belong to the legal profession."

He caught fire at this, and was about to make a hasty rejoinder, when she interposed with a still more forcible gesture.

"I mean no offence," said she, "but you must either be frank with me, or the
interview must come at once to an end. Plainly, now, what is the object of this
visit? You certainly do not take me for a fool."
Beaten down at all points, he at once took the bull by the horns.

"You are quite too much for me, Miss Gibson," he replied. "If I had had a few hours' previous acquaintance with you I doubt if I should have adopted such crude methods, as you so justly put it. They were not only crude, but idiotic. I candidly admit it. But now for the honest truth, and I know you will pull me up in an instant if I deviate a hair's breadth from it, and why on earth you are afraid of lawyers I can't for the life of me imagine. The bald truth is, this. I met, as I said, Miss White at a garden party recently, and—well, I admired her greatly. To my intense surprise, a few days later, she came to my chambers and made a certain statement."

"Which was?"

"That, as matters practically stood, she was nobody's child—which, as Euclid says,
is absurd—that she was determined to find out whose child she really was, and earnestly begged me to help her in that quest. Now, admiring Miss White, as I have just admitted to you, I at once consented to aid her if she would put me in possession of some tangible clue upon which I could work. She mentioned you at once, stating her honest belief that you alone could solve the mystery. There, you have it in a nutshell, Miss Gibson; and I really think, for the sake of the poor girl's peace of mind—"

"That will do, Mr King. I wish to hear nothing further. Your intentions are good enough, I dare say, and, though I freely forgive you, I wish you had not resorted to subterfuges unworthy of your high reputation and abilities."

"Then you will give me no information—no inkling, as to——"
“No! For her peace of mind—as you put it—it were better not. Let us understand each other at once. In spite of your foolish attempt to deceive me I can plainly see that you are a manly man, and an honest one. You admire Miss White. I do not blame you; there is much to admire in the girl, and though I can quite sympathise with her natural desire to know what, under ordinary circumstances, she ought to know, there are reasons in this case—and I trust you will consider this as a privileged communication—there are very serious reasons why you should, in her interest, cease at once to pursue these investigations further. I am speaking in all earnestness, Mr King, as I dearly love the girl, and it is solely on her behalf that I enjoin this reticence upon you.”

Mr King felt himself impaled upon the horns of a serious dilemma. He could not
for a moment doubt the genuineness of this appeal, but what would the White girl say to it, and how resist her counter appeal, further stimulated, as it would be, by this additional element of mystery?

He compounded matters in the end by thanking Miss Gibson for her frankness, and promising to bring such influence as he possessed to bear upon Miss White, though whether she would be amenable to his advice or not he was quite unable to say.

At last, with an uneasy sense of having been discomfited all along the line by a little old maid in ringlets, he turned his back on Rose Cottage, and eventually found his way to that good old hostelry, "The Salisbury Arms," where he dined heartily and well.

It was just on the stroke of three. He had lighted a cigar, and was standing at
the coach entrance to the inn, when a splendidly-appointed carriage and pair drove rapidly by. Both the equipage and its occupant, an elegantly-attired lady, he recognized in an instant. "Boots," of the inn, was standing beside him.

"Know that party?" asked King, in a casual way.

"Well, I do, and I don't," came the reply. "She's some swell from London wot comes up here sometimes to see an old party living down on Hadley Common."

"Oh! And what do you know about her?"

"Boots," finding a half-crown unexpectedly slipped into his hand, suddenly became communicative. He lowered his voice, and Mr King bent his head to listen.

"Ah! It's like that, is it," he said to himself a few minutes later, as he retraced his footsteps in the direction of Rose
Cottage. "Very cleverly played, indeed, Miss Gibson; though I was a fool not to have seen through the little trick at once. There is a deal more in this than I suspected. The White girl is right, after all. There is a desperate effort being made to cover up some sinister mystery, and it is a lucky thing I have got upon the track of it so soon."

By this time he stood once more before the cottage gate. He lifted the latch and entered the garden.

"And now," said he, "to expose the whole bag of tricks."