CHAPTER V

His was a noisy and peremptory knock. The door was almost immediately opened, and the "Ogre" with arms akimbo, confronted him.

"Well, upon my word," said she. "You again?"

"Yes; but please don't snap at me like that; it makes me nervous. I have returned to have a few minutes' further conversation with Miss Gibson."

"That you cannot, then," was the tart rejoinder.

"May I be permitted to ask why?"

"Because she has gone out, that's
why, and good enough reason it is, too."

He laughed mockingly.

"Oh! a most excellent reason, indeed."

"Then what are you laughing at? Do you believe me, or don't you? Not that I care very much either way. For two pins, I would slam the door in your face for your impudence."

"Well," said he, still laughing, "I haven't any pins about me, and I am not quite ready yet to have the door slammed in my face, either. Of course, I believe you, for I saw her myself about half an hour ago in a splendid carriage, driving in the direction of London. She looked twenty years younger, to be sure, but, then, people can make up in these days so as to appear to be of any age. Naturally, therefore, I did not expect to find her in."
"Then what on earth brought you back again?" was the shrill rejoinder.

"Well, just to make doubly sure that my suspicions were correct, that is all. I am more than satisfied. I have wasted no time. Ha! ha! not a bit of it."

"You must be daft, young man," came the contemptuous retort, as the old woman looked him up and down in undisguised amazement. "What do you mean by your suspicions, and this cock-and-bull story of a splendid carriage, with Miss Gibson sitting in it, looking twenty years younger, and driving away to London? There has been no grand carriage here, and not ten minutes ago I saw her walk out of this very door with a letter in her hand, to post herself, I dare say. The wonder is you didn't meet her on the way. I needn't then have wasted my time standing here, talking nonsense with as silly a young
fool as I have met this many a long day."

Her words irritated him, and he turned hotly upon her.

"Come, come," said he, "no high horses for me. You are well paid, I dare say, to keep up this deception, and you do it very well, I admit that. But, then, I chance to know that no Miss Gibson lives here, or ever has lived here."

"Pray, then, who does live here?" The voice came from behind. He turned sharply, and found himself face to face with Miss Gibson herself.

For a moment he was too flabbergasted to speak, and the "Ogre" took up the parable.

"Oh, m'm! he silliest things this young man has been saying to me, about your not living here at all, which you heard yourself, m'm, and how he saw you, looking twenty
years younger, driving in a splendid carriage to London, and the Lord knows what other rubbish. I was getting sickened with it all, and glad enough I am you've come back just in the thick of it, so I can get to my work again."

"Yes," said Miss Gibson, "you had better go back to your work, Rebecca. And as for you, Mr King," she added, with quiet dignity, "perhaps you will be good enough to step inside and explain the meaning of this extraordinary behaviour?"

Greatly confused, he followed her without a word into the little drawing-room. She closed the door, and motioned to him to be seated. Then she turned a very stern face in his direction, and said, simply—

"Now, sir."

"Well," he began, in a somewhat shame-faced manner, "it seems plain enough that
I have been deceived—that I have purchased half-a-crown's worth of false information."

"About me?"

"About you, yes. You invite frankness——"

"I insist upon frankness, Mr King," said she.

"Very good," he returned. "I am more and more convinced that you were amply justified in saying that my methods were crude. Hitherto they have been deplorably so. But I have now done with all disguises, and I propose to be as frank and open as the day with you. May I expect the same from you in return?"

"You irritate me, Mr King," she said, with a sudden asperity. "You have no cause to doubt my good faith, and you seem to have already forgotten that
you have been guilty of a breach of good manners, for which I still await explanation.”

“Quite so. I beg your pardon,” said he.
“I will come straight to the point. After leaving you this afternoon I lunched at ‘The Salisbury Arms’. As I was coming away a carriage and pair drove by. The sole occupant of the carriage was a Miss Bruce of Curzon Street, Mayfair, who greatly resembles you. I made inquiries, and ascertained that Miss Bruce was a frequent visitor here. Further inquiries elicited the statement that Miss Bruce, of Curzon Street, and Miss Gibson, of Rose Cottage, were one and the same person.”

“And for this precious piece of information you paid the lordly sum of half-a-crown,” said she, her hard-set features suddenly giving way to an amused smile.
"I was certainly guilty of that extravagance," he replied, smiling grimly in return.

"And then," she pursued, "having seen this remarkable woman drive away in the direction of London, you hustled back at once to my little cottage here fired with honest indignation, and bent upon exposing the imposture so grossly put upon you. What a clever man you are, Mr King! The Press has done you but scant justice after all, I fear. May I be so bold as to ask whether, in your honest opinion, I am the same woman whom, in the interest of Miss White, you interviewed an hour or so ago?"

"Why, certainly."

"You are convinced that you are now talking to me, and not to Miss Bruce, of Curzon Street?"

"Oh! quite so," said he, with a dis-
quieting sense that she was once again the mistress of the situation.

"Then," she continued, "let us come at once to a clear and final understanding in this matter. My patience with you is well-nigh exhausted. I am not in the habit of being badgered by strangers in my own house. It would meet the merits of the case if I were to show you to the door at once; but this much for your further information I will add. Within a moment or two of your departure the postman brought me a letter. It came from a certain Doris Bruce, of 99, Curzon Street, the lady doubtless to whom you have just referred. Should your surmises be correct, it is not for me, at least, to enter into the reasons which brought her to Barnet today. I have but to do with the letter"—which she now produced from her pocket and extended to Mr King. "Open and
read it," she added, as he merely glanced at the superscription on the envelope.

He did so, and this is what he read:—

"DEAR MADAM,—Upon the strength of certain recommendations I yesterday engaged as companion Miss White of 'The Hollies,' Church End, Finchley. It is her wish that I should write and acquaint you with this fact, and ask if you—as her only relative, as she informs me—have any objection to her assuming such a position in my service. You will quite understand that I am not writing to obtain further credentials on her behalf—they are quite satisfactory, as they stand—but simply in compliance with her wish to do nothing without your knowledge and consent. The favour of an early reply will greatly oblige.—Yours truly,

"DORIS BRUCE."
"Just so," said he, as he returned the letter to her. "I knew of this yesterday."

"Indeed!" said she. "And carefully abstained from mentioning the fact to me to-day."

"For no reason in particular, I most earnestly assure you," he replied. "It simply did not occur to me, that is all."

"Very well," said she, "let it stand at that. Now, may I ask if you are at all familiar with the handwriting of this letter?"

He at once saw the drift of the query, and, with a sudden remembrance of Miss Gibson's peculiar caligraphy, said at once—

"No, Miss Gibson. I have never seen it before."

"Ah!" said she. "We are getting on at last. Well, this letter I answered at once, giving my full sanction to the proposal, and there and then went out and posted
it myself. On my return, I found you on my doorstep most strenuously denying that I lived or ever had lived in my very own house. No, no, I want no further explanation or apology. You have been exceedingly rude to-day, all through your misdirected zeal on behalf of Miss White. If you persist in encouraging her to fathom a mystery which, for sufficiently good reasons, ought to remain a mystery—if mystery, after all, be the proper term for it—you will only succeed in making yourself supremely ridiculous and uncomfortable in the end. Once more, I beg of you to take an old woman's advice, and have done with it. These are serious words, and, in any case, are my final ones upon the subject. You will probably never see me again, for now that Eleanor is launched upon a career of her own I am thinking of going abroad, and—but I have said quite
enough. Good-bye, Mr King. In spite of all that has been said and done here to-day, I have nothing but good wishes for you. Good-bye." And before the astonished man could realize the full meaning of her words, he found himself out on the dusty road again, and, he was fain to admit to himself, no wiser than before.

"Well, I'm dashed!" said he. "Of all the quiet take-downs! There is not an ounce of conceit left in me, and half an hour ago I was fairly bursting with it. Shall I take her advice, and drop the whole business? There is some mystery at the bottom of it all; she frankly admitted as much. But is it worth my while to attempt to solve it? And what have I to do with unprofessional mysteries, anyhow? Just to humour the whim of a pretty girl, too. No, I'll be hanged if I bother my head any more about it."
And firm in that resolution he retraced his steps in the direction of the station, and soon was on his way back to London town.

Meanwhile, after a tearful leave-taking at "The Hollies"—which need not be dwelt upon in these pages—a four-wheeled cab, containing Miss White and her small belongings, had driven up to No. 99, Curzon Street, Mayfair.
CHAPTER VI

That the coming of Miss White was expected became speedily manifest. The massive door seemed to open wide of its own accord as she mounted the steps. The polite footman of the previous day was now almost obsequious.

Miss Bruce was out, he at once explained, but she had left instructions that Miss White was to receive every attention upon her arrival. Indeed, Parkyns, Miss Bruce's maid, was now waiting, as he indicated by a gesture, at the head of the staircase, to show Miss White to her own private apartment. Her luggage would
follow in the course of a minute or two.

Miss White was not the sort of girl to be easily thrown from her mental balance, and, though she wondered greatly at this somewhat ceremonious reception of her unimportant self, there was nothing in her outer presentment to indicate the feeling as she tripped up the broad staircase.

Parkyns, a comely young woman, rosy-cheeked and buxom, received her with a smile.

"This way, Miss White," said she, "this way;" and straightway led her into a dainty little bedroom, upholstered and curtained in pink and white.

"This is your room, miss," said Parkyns, "and a very pleasant room it is. The door here"—and she opened it—"leads into Miss Bruce's boudoir, and her bedroom is on the other side. So, you see,
you will be together like, and very comfortable."

To any young lady who had had previous experience as a "lady companion" this would have appeared very strange language, but Miss White accepted it simply and frankly as a mere matter of course, and even surveyed the appointments of the boudoir with a critical eye.

"That picture, Parkyns," said she, "is hung a little bit too low. Still, take it all in all, it is a very charming room."

"Oh, indeed it is," said Parkyns. "Just what I said meself first time I saw it. But wouldn't you like to look over the house a bit? Miss Bruce said I was to show you, if you wanted to."

"Why, of course," said Miss White, unpinning her hat and throwing it upon a chair. "I should very much like to look over the house."
“This is the droring-room,” said Parkyns, a moment later. “It seems a bit stuffy-like, don’t you think, miss?”

Miss White gave one sweeping and comprehensive glance about the room. It was of imposing proportions. An immense crystal chandelier was suspended from a painted ceiling, whereon a group of Olympian deities, both male and female, disported themselves right merrily. The panelled walls were similarly decorated. The gilt furniture, upholstered in faded tapestry, the Aubusson carpet, the Louis Seize console tables and cabinets, with Sèvres ornaments, the ormolu clock, with china plaques, upon the mantelpiece, the heavy curtains of yellow brocade hanging before gilded sashes reaching to the floor, with their chiselled spagnolettes, all were of a piece. The room might have been transplanted as it stood from the Faubourg
St Germain. But there was an air of desolation and desuetude over it all.

"It is stuffy," said Miss White. "Why don't they push the curtains back, and throw the windows open wide?"

"Lor' bless you, don't ask me," said Parkyns. "This is a home of mist'ry—this house is. You'll find out soon enough, and then judge for yourself. Come and look at the dining-room now, and if that won't give you the creeps I don't know what will."

With that she led the way down the staircase to the entrance hall, and opened a door on the right.

"Step inside, miss," said Parkyns. "A chamber of 'orrers, I call it; and this is where you will have to take your meals along with Miss Bruce and the governor; and just you wait until you see 'im, miss."
"Is he so very dreadful, then? What is he like?"

"I couldn't tell you what he is like, miss. Words wouldn't run to it. You just wait and see for yourself. And now what do you think of this for a place to eat in, anyhow?"

Miss White looked about her in wonder and dismay. The room itself was sombre enough, in all conscience, and in striking contrast to the somewhat flamboyant apartment she had just quitted. Walls and ceiling alike were panelled in old oak. The uncarpeted floor was of the same material, the furniture almost ecclesiastical in its severity, the window hangings funereal, and the whole colour scheme of the apartment would have been depressing enough of itself had not the trickiness of it "leaped to the eyes" at once. For this sombre background had been cunningly devised to throw into greater relief a group
of pictorial horrors upon the walls. A naked St Sebastian pierced by arrows; St Lawrence stretched upon a gridiron with the leaping flames beneath him; St Peter, head downwards upon the cross, and half a dozen other lurid examples of the gentle art of martyrdom.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Miss White.

"Ain't it awful?" returned Parkyns.

"Why I stay in such a place as this I don't know; upon me word I don't."

"But Miss Bruce? She surely——"

"Ah! there you are, miss. She's all right. A nicer lady never breathed, and but for her I'd a took me hook the very first day I set foot in the house, indeed I would. But the master—oh, Lord!"

"Why can't you tell me what he is like? Surely you can give me some sort of an impression?"

"Well, miss, I can and I can't. He ain't
so very terrible to look at, but it's his manner is so strange. He never speaks to any of us, except the butler, and he's another mist'ry, he is, does just as he likes in the house, and the master acts as though he was afraid of him. I can't make it out at all though, when it comes to that, he seems frightened at everything. He jumps if anybody speaks to him casual-like, and does such funny things, and never goes out of the house, and never has anybody here, and, upon me word, I believe he's off his head, indeed I do. Lord! here's the butler himself."

A tall, thin, hawk-eyed, hawk-nosed, and clean-shaven man had sprung suddenly from nowhere, as it seemed to Miss White. At sight of her, however, he stared open-mouthed, as at a ghost.

"This is Miss White, Simpson; Miss Bruce's new companion," said Parkyns.
“Oh! ah! indeed,” replied the butler, and with another half-frightened look at Miss White he left the room.

“Why, whatever is the matter with him, miss?” said Parkyns. “He seemed to have quite a turn like when he saw you.”

“Oh, I am sure I don’t know and don’t care,” said Miss White. “I’ve had quite enough of this room. Have you any others to show me?”

“Oh yes—the library. Miss Bruce told me particularly to show you the library. A nice room that is. This way, across the hall at the back. No ’anky-panky in there. ’Eaps of beautiful books up to the very ceiling,” and she threw the door open and stood aside for Miss White to enter.

It was, indeed, a fine spacious room, apparently built out at the back of the main building, for it was practically ceiled with
stained glass, through which the shafts of a westering sun struggled brokenly through in strange kaleidoscopic patterns upon tier upon tier of sumptuously-bound books in mahogany cases, reaching from floor to cornice. There were no windows, and but the solitary door by which she had entered. Indeed, she found herself pleasantly immured within four solid walls of books, and, turning to Parkyns, said—

"This is charming. I don't care to make any further explorations to-day. When do you expect Miss Bruce back?"

"Well," she said, "pretty soon, miss. But as she has gone out shopping, you know what 'pretty soon' generally means. She is sure, though, to be back in time to dress for dinner, say, in an hour from now."

"Very well; I will remain here until she comes, and amuse myself with a book"—saying which Miss White leisurely selected
a volume from the crowded shelves, buried herself in the capacious depths of an easy-chair, and shortly became engrossed in the work before her.

She had been reading for, perhaps, half an hour, when she suddenly became conscious of a human presence in the room. She glanced over the edge of her book, and saw a strange, weird, masculine figure—long-limbed and cadaverous—go slinking rapidly and noiselessly by, without looking either to the right or left of him. Her heart fairly stood still, as the uncanny apparition walked straight to the farther end of the room, paused for a second in front of a centre bookcase, which suddenly appeared to revolve as upon pivots. Then, to her amazement, she saw the tall figure glide through the opening and suddenly sink out of sight. At the same instant the bookcase swung noiselessly back into its
place again, and the room was as before.

It had all passed so quickly, so silently, that at first she rubbed her eyes with astonishment. Had she been dreaming? Oh no, her eyes had seen what they had seen, and her brain becoming quickly astir with curiosity, she leaped from her chair, hastily crossed the room, and was busily examining the mysterious bookcase when she heard a loud "Ahem!" behind her. She started like a guilty thing, faced about, and found the footman standing just inside the door.

"Miss Bruce has returned," said he, "and would like to see you at once in her boudoir."

Miss Bruce greeted her effusively as she entered.

"I am so sorry to have kept you waiting," said she; "but you know what shopping
means. It is such tedious and tiresome work. I hope you like your room.”

“Oh, it is quite charming,” said Miss White, still big-eyed with wonder at the scene she had just witnessed; “one could not help liking it.”

“And has Parkyns shown you over the house? I told her to do so.”

“Yes, or at least she has taken me into a few of the rooms. I like the library very much.”

“Ah! I thought you would. And the dining-room?”

“Oh! that is simply horrid. Those pictures, Miss Bruce, those awful pictures!”

“Yes, they are too shocking for words, my dear. My brother is so eccentric, not to say morbid, in his tastes. But don’t let them destroy your appetite. They are but painted canvases, after all. You will
become accustomed to them after a while, as I have done."

Miss White shook her head incredulously. "I don't think so," said she. "Your brother must, indeed, have morbid tastes, as you say. What is he like, Miss Bruce? I am not easily frightened, but——"

"Oh," she replied, with a laugh that was obviously forced, "he is a gentle enough creature. You will meet him at dinner, and can study him at your leisure. Probably he will be so self-absorbed that he will not even be aware of your presence at the table. And now to change the subject. I have brought home a dress I wish you particularly to wear this evening. A number of other costumes will follow to-morrow. We shall be going out a good deal together, I dare say, and this addition to your wardrobe will not come amiss. Please do not look so astonished, Miss
White. I have fancies, as well as my brother, but mine are healthy ones, thank God! and if you wish to please me you must put up with my little whims without demur. Now, run in to your room, like a good girl, you will find the dress there, and make yourself look as nice as possible."

Full of new wonderment, Miss White at once obeyed. This was in very truth a home of mystery, as Parkyns had said. As she closed the door behind her, her delighted eyes fell upon the bed, upon which was spread a ravishing confection of corn-coloured silk, daintily trimmed with black and gossamer-like Spanish point. Her heart went pit-a-pat at sight of so much loveliness, and within five minutes she was inside the wondrous thing. Marvellous to relate, it fitted her to a nicety. Surely there was magic in all this. She surveyed herself in the glass with a look of triumph.
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She was more than lovely; she was superb. Heedless now of the meaning of it all, she cast off the bewitching thing tenderly, while with hot haste she completed an elaborate toilette. To her magnificent hair she gave unwonted attention; and when fully attired at last, she stepped into the adjoining boudoir, Miss Bruce, already dressed, gave a start of pleased surprise.

"My dear Miss White," said she, "you look like a young queen;" and to herself she added, "the resemblance is wonderful —wonderful."

"I wonder," said the delighted girl, "what the good people at 'The Hollies' would say to see me in such a gown as this."

"They would be pleased, I am sure."

"And as for poor Miss Gibson, she, I know, would fall down dead in a fit." And Miss White laughed at the thought.

"Oh!" said Miss Bruce, "speaking of
Miss Gibson, I have just received a letter from her, in which she heartily approves of the step you have taken, and states that she is now going abroad for an indefinite period. She sends her love to you, and—but there goes the dinner-gong. I will show you her letter later on. Come!"

They descended the stairs together, in silence, and entered the dining-room. Though still broad daylight, the window curtains had been closely drawn, and wax candles burned in tall silver candelabra upon the dinner-table. The butler stood by the sideboard, and stared in open-mouthed wonder at this strange and lovely apparition in corn-coloured silk. Miss Bruce took her seat at one end of the table, placing Miss White on the left, with her back to the most repellent of the pictorial horrors on the walls.

For a moment the chair at the head of
the table remained unoccupied, then a door at the farther end of the room opened, and a tall figure in evening dress glided, rather than walked across to the table, and took the vacant seat.

He was a cadaverous, clean-shaven, hollow-cheeked man, with shaggy iron-grey hair and jet-black eyes, set well back in their sockets, and just visible beneath heavy, drooping eyelids. In him Miss White instantly recognised the man who had so mysteriously entered, and disappeared from the library an hour before. She had anticipated this from the first, and for her he now possessed a deadly fascination.

As Miss Bruce had predicted, he took no notice of Miss White, however, and leisurely unfolded his napkin as the soup was placed before him by the butler. Then, suddenly, the presence of a third person seemed to dawn upon him, and he felt for
an eyeglass that was dangling at the end of a black ribbon from his neck, carefully adjusted it, and turned it in the direction of Miss White. Then an extraordinary thing happened. His jaw dropped, and his eyes flamed with a sudden terror from their cavernous depths.

"Mother of God!" he exclaimed; "who is this woman?"

"Merely Miss White, my new companion, of whom I spoke yesterday," said Miss Bruce, in a strangely agitated voice.

"It is a lie!" he said, leaping to his feet. "Have I not eyes—can I not see?" and, turning fiercely upon Miss White, he shouted; "tell me, are you Eleanor, or are you not?"

"Of course, I am Eleanor," said the now thoroughly affrighted girl.

"You hear, Doris, she admits it. It is her voice—she is wearing the same dress as
when—what devil’s work is this? I thought—I was sure she was—"

"He suddenly clutched wildly at his neck-tie, uttered a few inarticulate sounds, reeled, and, but for the interposing arms of the butler, would have fallen like a log to the floor.
CHAPTER VII

Upon his return to the Middle Temple that same afternoon, Mr King found a letter lying upon his table.

"The gentleman wrote it here himself," the office boy explained. "He called three times to see you, sir, and seemed a bit anxious like."

"Oh, indeed!" said Mr King, breaking open the envelope. It was a hasty scrawl, and read:

"Dear Old Rex,—Back again, and have been all the afternoon trying to dig you out. I am stopping at the Cecil, and have a very decent sort of an American
with me (we crossed together) who wants a little legal advice. I know that you are quite capable of giving him any amount of good legal advice, and as I want to see my old pal Rex again, I thought it would make a happy and judicious blending of business and pleasure if you could see your way to turning up at the Cecil to dinner at seven. Don’t take the trouble to dress; we shall not. Afterwards, over a good cigar in the smoking room, my friend (whose name, by the way, is Blake—Rufus C. Blake) will unfold to you a curious story. He has plenty of money, and it may be worth your while to take up his little matter, especially as I think it would be quite in your line.

“Don’t fail to come—That’s a good fellow.—Yours ever, Tommy T.”

“Good old Tommy Toshington again, as I live,” said Mr King. “Why, of course,
the last I heard of him he was shooting grizzly bears and things out in the Rocky Mountains. And so he has picked up some wild American who is in need of legal advice, has he? It is just like Tommy to bring him straight to me. Oh! yes. I will go up to the Cecil, of course. Seven o'clock eh!" and he looked at his watch. "Good, I can manage that very nicely."

So it befell that upon the stroke of seven, in the vestibule of the Hotel Cecil, he found himself shaking hands right heartily once more with his old college chum Tommy Toshington, a blond and breezy young fellow of about his own age. This done—

"And now permit me," said the latter, "to introduce my friend Mr Rufus C. Blake of Boston."

A very presentable and well-groomed man of about fifty, was Mr Blake. Beyond
a certain alertness both in manner and in speech, and perhaps, too, in the formal cut of his closely-trimmed moustache—there was little about him to indicate his nationality. Moreover, there was not a single diamond visible anywhere on his person, and no miniature "Stars and Stripes" peeped from his breast coat pocket, and Mr King spoke but the simple truth when he said that he was greatly pleased to make Mr Blake's acquaintance.

"The pleasure, then, is reciprocal, I can assure you," said the latter. "I have been looking forward to this meeting with the keenest pleasure, for Mr Toshington, here, has spoken of you in terms which——"

"Were doubtless greatly exaggerated," interposed Mr Toshington. "It suffices that you two chaps now know one another, so cut the cackle until after dinner," and he led the way to the dining-room.
An hour or so later, when cigars were lighted, in a cosy corner of the smoking-room, Mr Toshington spoke again.

"Now, Mr Blake," said he, "to business. Dear old Rex, as we always called him at Oxford, has a very pretty gift, as I told you, of seeing through things, and he may be of great service to you. In any case, your little story will interest him, I am sure."

"Well," said Mr Blake, removing the cigar from his mouth, "it is a tangled-up sort of affair, and I don't know whether we can get to the bottom of it or not. I should be glad to do so, for there is a good bit of money hanging to it, and the thing must be either cleared up, or we must let it slide. You see, I want to find out whether a cousin of mine named Felix Featherstone is dead, or is knocking about the planet somewhere with another's man wife. If
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I can prove that he is dead it will mean £100,000 to me. If he isn't dead—well, then, irrespective of the other man's wife, he comes into the money. In the meantime, that bit of money is locked up, and is, so to speak, nobody's property."

"Through the stipulations of a will?" asked Mr King.

"Exactly; through the stipulations of a will made by our uncle, John Featherstone, of San Francisco, from whom we neither of us ever had any expectations whatever. As a matter of fact, we never knew that he had any money worth mentioning, to leave. His only near relatives were a trader, since dead, who was the father of the missing man, Felix Featherstone, and a sister, my mother, who is also dead. The situation is plain enough. You quite follow me, Mr King?"

"Oh, quite so," said Mr King, knocking
off the ash from the end of his cigar, "and had he died intestate, the missing man and yourself would have been the natural heirs to his estate?"

"Precisely. But he did make a will, you see, leaving us £100,000 each, with residue. But, for some reason, which I don't affect to understand, he had a conviction that Felix Featherstone, whom I believed to have been dead for nearly eighteen years, was still alive; and until I can absolutely prove that the man is dead that £100,000 is hung up, and of no use to anybody."

"Ah! just so," said Mr King. "The situation is an awkward one. May I ask to whom the £100,000 will revert in case your inquiries prove unsuccessful?"

"I really don't know, as no provision is made in the will drawn up by himself for such a contingency. I dare say," he added,
with a laugh, "that it would then pass in the customary way into the pockets of certain enterprising gentlemen of your profession."

"Oh! I dare say," said Mr King, laughing in turn. "But, of course, we must prevent that, if possible."

"And divert a bit of it in the direction of the Middle Temple, for instance," suggested Mr Toshington.

"That phase of the question is not under discussion. As usual, there is a little too much inconsequence in your methods, Mr Tommy T. And now, may I ask, Mr Blake, what reason you have had for believing this Felix Featherstone to be dead. Eighteen years is a very long time. That takes us back to the year 1886."

"Oh! so it does. I have, made a slight mistake; it was in 1887 that the Opéra Comique, in Paris, was burned, and it has
always been my impression that he perished on that occasion."

"Merely your impression?" said Mr King, in a tone of surprise.

"It was never a certainty; and that is a matter I want definitely cleared up. I received the impression through a number of circumstances clearly pointing in that direction. I pieced this and that together, and jumped to a conclusion which, upon the whole, appears to be a reasonable one, as I have never seen or heard from him since."

"May I inquire as to the nature of these circumstances?"

"I shall come to that presently. My cousin and I were on the best of terms, and during his journeyings abroad we corresponded at frequent intervals. He was always crossing backward and forward between the two countries, living now in
London, now in Paris, or some other European capital. During that period I was in constant touch with him. He was an extremely handsome young fellow, with a deuce of a penchant for the ladies, which, in the end, I fear, led to his undoing. That is a phase of the matter which I wish particularly to have cleared up, as it has an important bearing upon the other. The last letter I received from him was in May, 1887, and was dated from the Langham Hotel, in London. It was full of ravings about a certain beautiful lady he had met in Cairo the winter before, and had accidentally encountered again in London. It would appear that she was a married woman, unhappily mated to a man whom my cousin described as a 'lanky crackpot,' who found his sole delight in mummies and—"

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Mr King, starting bolt upright in his chair.
Mr Blake looked at him in surprise.
"Why, what's the matter?", he asked.
"I'm interested; that is all. What was the name of this 'crack-pot'?"
"Bruce."
"Lived in Curzon Street?"
"That is quite correct. You do seem interested now, that's a cold fact. Know the man?"
"Not personally. I've heard of him, though, as being a very eccentric man."
"Very rich, isn't he?"
"He has that reputation."
"Ever hear anything about his wife?"
"I wasn't aware he had one. He has a sister who lives with him."
"Yes. I know that," said Mr Blake. "A very nice woman. I met her once."
Mr King seemed more and more astonished. "The deuce you did," said he. "How did that come about?"
"Well, you see, not hearing anything from my cousin for nearly a year, I came over here to make inquiries, and interviewed her."

"Why, what could she tell you about your cousin?"

"Not much; only I ascertained that on the day that Felix left the Langham Hotel Mrs Bruce disappeared from her home in Curzon Street, and had not since been heard of. You follow me?"

"Good Lord, yes. And then?"

"Well, then, I made a few other discreet inquiries, and ascertained that a couple answering to their description had been traced to a certain hotel in Paris; that they had visited the Opéra Comique the night it was burned, and never returned. So that the natural supposition was——"

"That they had perished together. By Jove! this is indeed a strange story; and
it interests me very deeply," said Mr King, his every nerve now tingling with excitement. "By the way, in the course of your investigations, did you ascertain if there was a child?"

Mr Blake seemed surprised at the question.

"What child? Whose child? What has a child got to do with my cousin?"

"Oh! nothing, of course. It only occurred to me that Mrs Bruce might have had a child by the marriage."

"I doubt it. I never heard of any. And now," pursued Mr Blake, dismissing the subject as one of no possible importance to him, "you have the bald facts of the case before you. I accepted the evidence as fairly conclusive at the time; and as the years rolled round, and no further tidings of Felix ever came to hand, I dropped the whole thing from my mind, and should
never have reopened the question but for my uncle's will. Now, of course, I am bound to go into it again. I will do it as quietly as possible, so as not to revive a scandal, which, I think, was hushed up at the time; but there must be an exhaustive inquiry this time, Mr King, and it only remains for you to say if you will assist me in that inquiry."

"With all my heart and energy, Mr Blake," was the emphatic reply.

Then Tommy Toshington looked up and said, "Now that is settled, let us, for goodness' sake, have a Scotch and Polly over it."
CHAPTER VIII

Miss White's first dinner in Curzon Street threatened to come to an abrupt termination, even before she had so much as tasted her soup. Dismayed at the scene she had just witnessed, she hurriedly rose from the table, as Miss Bruce, with a white face, hastened to her brother's assistance.

The butler had placed him in an easy-chair.

"It's nothing very serious, m'm," said he; "he's had several attacks like this lately. He calls it vertigo, and says it comes from the liver, and is not worth mentioning. He'll be all right in a minute"
or two." And even as he spoke, Mr Bruce started up, and looked in a dazed sort of way about him.

"Are you better, John?" his sister asked. "What on earth upset you so? What strange fancy came into your head? You have nearly frightened the life out of this young lady here."

He passed his hand over his brow in a bewildered fashion, and lifted his eyes timidly, almost shamefacedly, in the direction of Miss White.

"Who did you say this lady was?" he asked.

"My new companion, Miss White. I told you all about her yesterday, don't you remember?"

He made a painful effort at reflection. Then said he—

"Of course, of course. Pray accept my apologies, Miss White. I am very sorry."
Pray be seated again.” And he rose and walked to his own chair at the head of the table. “I have strange fancies at times. I really must consult a doctor, Doris.”

“You certainly should do so, John,” she replied, in a kindly tone. “Such strange outbreaks, at your own table, too! It is a serious thing, John.”

“It is, it is. I am very sorry, for this young lady’s sake. But I was preoccupied when I came in to dinner, and I did not at once perceive the presence of a third party. Then, too, I imagined at first that ——” and he suddenly checked himself. “Yes, yes, I really must consult a doctor.” With that he relapsed into silence.

Miss White felt very ill at ease during the remainder of the dinner. A lugubrious business, in all conscience! A hundred times she wished herself back at “The Hollies” again. Clearly she seemed pre-
destined to live in an atmosphere of myst-
ery, which had suddenly thickened, and
at this rate would soon become intolerable.
Miss Bruce, too, seemed constrained and
fidgety. The butler came and went noise-
lessly, refilling Mr Bruce’s glass at frequent
intervals, and although the latter uttered
never a further word, Miss White was con-
scious that he was surveying her furtively
and unceasingly. She could almost feel,
as it were, his glance wandering over her
face, and taking in every little detail of the
dress she wore. When at times she glanced
in his direction, and intercepted a look, it
seemed full of mingled perplexity and
alarm. It was all very mysterious and
embarrassing, and it was a relief, indeed,
when the sombre repast came to an end
at last, and the gaunt figure at the head
of the table rose, bowed formally, and
slunk away as he had come. Then Miss
Bruce and her "companion" returned to the boudoir in silence.

The latter was the first to speak.

"Miss Bruce," said she, abruptly, "I am really afraid that I cannot stay with you any longer."

"You must not say that, my dear girl," was the reply. "I am genuinely distressed at what has happened, but you must not attach undue importance to it. I intimated that my brother was somewhat eccentric. He is, you can now easily perceive, in no sense companionable, and for that reason I have led a very lonely existence here. The thought of losing you now would be unendurable. Dismiss the whole unpleasant business from your mind. He is full of hallucinations, but they need not concern you. He knows you now. In the course of a day or two he will become accustomed to your presence at the table."
"No; I am sure not," said Miss White.
"What cause have you for thinking so?"
"The cause is obvious, Miss Bruce. The sight of my face nearly sent him into a fit. Why was that?"
"Goodness knows! I cannot answer for his vagaries, Miss White."
"Vagaries!—no, no. He recognised my face in an instant, and the sight of it terrified him. There is no getting away from the fact."
"His distorted imagination, perhaps."
"Pardon me, Miss Bruce, for my plain speaking. It is due to me that I should speak plainly. But there is no question in this of a distorted imagination. Why did he ask me if my name was Eleanor?"
"I do not know," said Miss Bruce, now obviously ill at ease. "He says and does such strange things."
"But in this instance he hit the nail
accurately on the head, for my name is Eleanor, as you are aware. Did he ever know another Eleanor, a woman resembling me, perhaps?"

"It is possible. Everything is possible in this world."

"Just so. But do you know—have you ever heard of any such woman?"

"It is possible, I say, that he may have met such a person. There are chapters in his life of which I know nothing. It would seem, in any case, to be a plausible explanation of his strange conduct."

Miss White shook her head. It was plain that she was far from being satisfied with the answer.

"Why, too, should he have said, 'the same voice'?"

"A mere fancy, I suppose."

"And 'the same dress,' alluding to the
one I am now wearing. That, to me, seemed the strangest thing of all."

"I quite differ from you there," said Miss Bruce. "To me it is the clearest proof that throughout he was labouring under some strange delusion."

"I cannot bring myself to believe so," said Miss White, doggedly; "for during the whole of the dinner his eyes were more or less fixed on this dress. For him it seemed to exercise some deadly fascination. I don't understand it. There is an air of mystery about the whole thing that alarms me. And, if you will pardon my saying so, there is something uncanny, too, about this house. It has got on my nerves. You, personally, are very good and kind, and in this, too, there is a mystery, for at moments I cannot bring myself to believe that I am not really talking to that dear old soul, Miss Gibson."
"Of Barnet?"
"Of Barnet, yes."
For the first time during the interview Miss Bruce laughed—laughed quite heartily.
"Miss White," said she, "you are quite as bad as my brother with his hallucinations. Your brain seems full of morbid fancies to-night. This is not the terrible house you imagine it to be. It will be all the better, however, for your bright presence, and as for your leaving me because I chance to have rather a feeble-minded brother, that I will not listen to for one single second. So dismiss the idea, once and for all, from your mind. Never run counter to your interests, my dear girl, and your present interests all lie in the direction of remaining here with a good friend such as you will find me to be. Don't indulge in morbid fancies and wild
imaginations. Simply put your trust in me, and all will be well. Will you do so, Eleanor?"

Taken all aback by the only too apparent genuineness of this appeal, Miss White, for the moment at least, threw all her suspicions to the winds, and simply said—

"Miss Bruce, I will."

"Very well, then. Now go to the piano, and let me hear you play."

Miss White at once complied. She was an admirable musician, and an hour passed away very quickly. Miss Bruce was warmly congratulating her on her proficiency when a sudden knock came at the door, and the butler, with a white, scared face, entered the room.

"Can I speak to you privately, m'm, just for a minute?" said he.

"Why, certainly, Simpson," said she. "Please excuse me, Miss White." And with
that she stepped out into the corridor and closed the door behind her.

Within a moment or two she returned, in great agitation.

"I must leave you for a little while," said she. "Try and amuse yourself. There are plenty of books and periodicals lying about the room. If Parkyns comes in, tell her I shall have no need for her to-night." Saying which she once more left the room.

Greatly wondering what had happened, and with all her old fears crowding back upon her again, she picked up a book and endeavoured in vain to read. An hour passed. She threw down the book, and paced the floor, her brain in a whirl of excited fancies. What could have happened to keep Miss Bruce so long away? Twice she went out on the corridor and listened, but she heard no sound. The
stillness of death seemed to pervade the whole house. The minutes sped on. Again she essayed to read, but she saw only words—words without any significance or meaning to her. Suddenly the door-handle turned. The volume dropped to the floor, and she started to her feet, only to see Parkyns enter the room.

Still, even her coming was something. It broke the long tension of waiting. Perhaps she knew the cause of Miss Bruce’s protracted absence.

"Has anything happened in the house, Parkyns?" she asked.

"I fancy there has," she replied, "but I can’t justly make out what, meself. You see it was my night out, and I was a bit late, and hurried upstairs. Where is Miss Bruce?"

"That is what I should like to know. The butler came, all in a fright, for her an
hour and a half ago, and I’ve been alone here ever since. I am sure something dreadful must have happened.”

“Oh! I daresay it is the master again. He’s always upsetting the place. I’ve got sort of used to it—hardened like, though I do get the creeps sometimes. I wonder when she will come back. I feel a bit tired meself.”

“Oh! she told me you needn’t wait, as she wouldn’t require your services to-night.”

“Thank goodness! Then I’m off to bed. Take my tip, miss, and do the same. Don’t trouble your head about nothing in this house. Miss Bruce may not be back for hours. Don’t you wait. Besides, it may make her cross to find you up when she comes. Anyhow, I’m off. Good-night, miss.” And the door closed behind her.
Despite Parkyns' advice Miss White waited on. Another hour passed, and her eyelids were beginning to droop with weariness, when Miss Bruce, white, dishevelled, with wide-staring eyes full of horror, suddenly burst into the room.

"Oh! my God! my God! What is to be done now?" she exclaimed. Then, perceiving Miss White huddled up in an easy-chair, she added, almost piteously—

"Why are you here so late? Get to bed, child, get to bed, and leave me alone. Go! go!"