CHAPTER IX

Mr King's ruminations were of a complex character as he lay awake until nearly cock-crow on the night of his interview with Mr Blake. It is probable that in the ordinary course he would have declined at once the latter's suggestion that he should interest himself in the fate of his cousin, Felix Featherstone. Had he not business enough in hand already and to spare, thought he. But the contingency, however remote, that Miss White's interests might be affected by the inquiry the American was determined to set on foot was a stimulus he found it impossible to
ignore, or even banish for one moment from his mind.

The Long Vacation, he reflected, was near at hand. Several unimportant briefs he might in charity hand over to less fortunate juniors of his acquaintance. Even the great criminal case he had in hand might, upon some plea or other, be postponed until the next sessions. Moreover, the proposition appealed to him very strongly. It was rife with possibilities. There was an element of romance in it, too, that was a fascination in itself. Besides, from a monetary point of view he was the gainer, not the loser, for his remuneration rested entirely with himself. After all, he had given his promise to Mr Blake, and that was the end of it.

There was now but one debatable point left in his reflections. Should he, following the usual method, engage the services
of a firm of solicitors to assist him in his investigations, or score off his own bat? It was, in a sense, a private commission, and quite out of the beaten course of procedure. Besides, it was a business of a delicate nature, and the fewer investigators the better. That decided it, and a further resolve he also took, that for the present at least, and until he learned, in the course of the inquiry, whether it affected Miss White's interests in any way, directly or otherwise, he would not broach the subject to that very charming young lady. Then he remembered his appointment with Mr Blake at ten o'clock, and, dismissing the whole subject from his mind, slept, at last, the sleep of the just.

Punctually to the minute—as is the wont of the average American citizen—Mr Blake put in an appearance at Mr King's chambers in Pump Court.
“Mr Blake,” said the latter, when the preliminary greetings were over, “I have slept upon this thing, and have formulated a course of action. I may add, for your information, however, that in order to devote my whole attention to this inquiry, I have been compelled to put other important business aside.”

Mr Blake at once interrupted him.

“I quite understand that, Mr King, and you equally understand, or rather you will recall, what I said to you in parting last evening—that money is of no consideration in this matter, and that you will be amply recouped for whatever loss you may sustain by neglecting other business; and it is my wish and purpose, before proceeding any further, to write you out a preliminary cheque for £500.” And with this he whipped out a cheque-book from his pocket.
"The amount is excessive," pleaded Mr King.

"Not at all," said Mr Blake, reaching across the table for pen and ink, "for the case is an urgent one, and time is worth about a dollar a minute to me just now."

He wrote the cheque, and passed it over to Mr King; then referring to his pocket-book, he said—

"Here is the last letter I received from my cousin. It is the one I spoke to you about last night. You had better read it over carefully yourself, and see if I omitted anything that may serve as a further clue."

Mr King read the letter over twice, with critical deliberation.

"I only notice one thing," he said, looking up at last, "and it strikes me as somewhat peculiar. He says here," and he referred to the letter again, 'Madly in love as I am, and sympathetic as she is,
I do not seem to make any appreciable headway with her. There is, yet undissolved, a certain amount of ice in her moral texture. She still discourses to me of the sanctity of marriage vows. However, I do not despair of bringing her to the completed melting mood in the end, and then, anything may happen. So be prepared for surprises.'”

“'Yes, well,” said Mr Blake, “what other construction can you put upon it than that the melting mood arrived in due season? Felix’s persistency was crowned in the end with success, and the pair bolted to Paris. Nothing, to me, seems clearer than that.”

“From a surface point of view, and, judging only by the data you have given me, such a deduction is not only logical, but irresistibly so. It still remains to be proved whether your data are absolutely correct or not.”
"Oh!" said Mr Blake, reflectively stroking his chin; "well, of course, there you are! I hastily accepted as true what has not yet been conclusively proved to be true. I quite follow you there; but I certainly do not follow you in thinking there is anything peculiar in Felix's allusion to the woman's initial scruples. Still, I am not going to argue the matter. It is now in your hands. You have all the necessary particulars."

"Except one," said Mr King. "The name of the hotel in Paris to which they were traced?"

"Ah! just so. Well, it was a small hotel called the Hotel du Prince Albert, in the Rue St Hyacinthe, a quiet street near the Church of St Roche. Their motive in going to an out-of-the-way place like that was to avoid observation, of course."

"Oh, certainly," said Mr King, making
a careful note of the address. "Yes; well," he added, "that is all I require for the present, Mr Blake."

"Then I will leave you," said the latter, rising and looking at his watch. "I have another appointment, and shall be just in time to keep it. You will always find me at the Hotel Cecil, you know. Good-day, Mr King."

Mr King, once more alone, folded up the cheque and shoved it casually into his waistcoat pocket, meantime wondering upon whom, among many needy friends in the various Inns of Court, he could bestow superfluous briefs. He jotted down a number of names upon a slip of paper, deleted a few, then set himself down to write to the selected ones. This done, he rang for the office-boy, gave him certain instructions, and a few minutes later took a cab westward.
His destination was the Langham Hotel. There he made inquiries to which he received nothing but head-shakings.

"Eighteen years ago! Many thousand guests had come and gone since then," but yielding to Mr King's insistence, the manager consented to make instant inquiries. This, however, took an unconscionable time, and, in the interval, Mr King strolled as far as Curzon Street and carefully surveyed every window in No. 99, hoping for a glimpse of "The White Girl."

"No good," said he. "I've drawn a blank. I've half a notion, though, to go and ring the bell, and ask to see her on some pretext or another, mais, à quoi bon? Dash it all, old man, chuck it! Your—well—let us call it admiration for that girl will angle up your business instincts, and you may come a cropper in consequence."
Still, after all, it is an incentive, and let it rest at that."

So back he went to the Langham, where a dusty ledger was in wait for him, and from this he gathered that one Felix Featherstone had quitted the hotel, quite unceremoniously, on the 22nd of May, 1887, leaving an unpaid bill behind him, and considerable luggage, which might, or might not be still on the premises.

Mr King said at once that the bill would be liquidated upon production of the luggage in question, and ordered lunch pending inquiries.

Diligent search was made in the store-rooms, and at last several trunks, a portmanteau, and dressing-case, were unearthed. They each and all bore the initials "F.F.," in staring white letters.

The manager seemed surprised. "He must have been a very good customer,"
said he, "or those goods would have been impounded long ago. You see, I am but a recent comer here."

Mr King made no comment on this. He merely wrote out a cheque for the unpaid account, and directed the luggage to be sent to his chambers in the Middle Temple.

"Strange thing," he said, on his way out, "that Mr Blake knew nothing of this. The contents of those boxes may throw any amount of light upon the mystery. In any case there is a small asset or two to set against the £500 cheque."

He walked about aimlessly for a time. Then he was seized with a sudden inspiration.

"Yes," said he, "I'll go up to Barnet again, and chance it."

Arrived at Barnet an hour later he went at once to "The Salisbury Arms," and asked for "Boots."
Presently "Boots" turned up, with a puzzled face.

"What did you mean by telling me fairy tales the other day?" asked Mr King, in his very sternest manner.

"I didn't tell you no fairy tales, sir," retorted "Boots," with an injured air. "About the lady in the kerridge, do you mean, sir?"

"About the lady in the carriage. Yes."

"Lor' lummy, sir! that was right enough. I think she must have spotted you a-talking with me, for I 'eared as how she turned back at the next corner, and so to the cottage again. There is a lane at the back of that cottage, sir."

"Oh, indeed!"

"Yes. With an entrance into the rear garden, sir."

"Come, no nonsense with me, my man."

"There's no blighted nonsense about
it, sir. I simply know what I know, and what I told you. Take it or leave it; it's nothink to me. I'll tell you this, though, straight. No good of going up to the cottage again."

"Why not?"

"Because the goods was took away by a big van yesterday, and there's a board up in the garden, 'To let.' I'm telling no lies, sir. Go and see for yourself, if you like. I only thought I would save you the trouble, that's all."

"See here, old chap," said Mr King, looking him steadily in the eyes, "do you really believe those two women are one and the same?"

"Believe it! Blimy, I know it. There's no good in torking all day about it. I tell you I know it. There!"

"All right; don't lose your temper. There's five bob for you. I only wanted
to make sure, that was all. Good-bye," and Mr King turned on his heel and walked back to the station.

"I've been badly done," said he, "and no Barnet again for me."

When he arrived at Pump Court, a telegram was awaiting him. It simply read—

"Strange happenings here. I must see you; but how am I to manage?—White."
CHAPTER X

What had happened?" Miss White wondered. Startled by the almost vehement insistence of Miss Bruce, she had retired, without a word of reply, to her room and to bed. Sleep came but fitfully, however, to her pillow that night, and in the long intervals of waking, as she turned over in her mind the extraordinary incidents of the day, she felt that, despite her promise, she must at once fly from a house so full of mystery ere worse befell her.

At nine o'clock Parkyns brought her a cup of tea, and was at once plied with questions.
What did she know? What had she heard? Had anything dreadful occurred in the night? Parkyns merely stared for a time, and then began to ask questions in turn. What had put such strange fancies into Miss White’s head, she wanted particularly to know. Nothing out of the common had happened, so far as she had heard. What made her think there had? Somebody had said that Mr Bruce had been taken ill in the night, and a doctor had been sent for. What was there extraordinary about that? It was always occurring. To be sure, Miss Bruce had a bad headache, but was it to be wondered at, robbed of half her night’s rest, probably through looking after him.

Thus Parkyns. And in the face of so much palpable ignorance Miss White wisely held her peace. Miss Bruce would feel compelled to make an explanation of some
kind, and that must determine her further course of action.

When they met, at last, in the boudoir, Miss Bruce looked very haggard and worn, and the younger woman did not fail to notice a subtle change in her attitude towards herself. It was not an unfriendly attitude, by any means, only there was a certain constraint and uneasiness in her manner that at once compelled attention. She was the first to speak. Said she—

"I am afraid that I was very rude and abrupt to you last night. But I had been terribly upset, and scarcely knew what I was saying at the time. The truth is, my brother suddenly developed symptoms of a complete mental breakdown. He was very violent, and said things that nearly paralysed me with terror. I need not dwell upon it. You can quite understand. You will not meet him again. Precautions will
be taken against that. For a time, at least, we shall take our meals here. In the course of a few days, perhaps, we shall go to Paris together. I feel the need of your society now more than ever. My dear girl, you quite understand the situation now?"

"Oh, quite," said Miss White, with certain mental reservations. "What a shocking thing! He will be put under restraint, I suppose? I should be afraid to remain here otherwise, as he has taken a great aversion to me, I am sure."

"No, no, not that exactly. It is fear more than anything else."

"But what have I done to cause him fear?"

"Nothing, child, nothing. Some mad fancy of his, that is all. As I have already assured you, adequate precautions have been taken. You will not meet him again. And now, are you satisfied?"
“Perfectly,” said Miss White, with emphasis.

Miss Bruce brightened at once.

“That is better. Ah!” she added, as a knock came at the door, “there is our breakfast. Now for cheerful faces. Excepting Simpson, the servants know nothing of what has happened. It is better that it should be so, for the present, at least.”

An hour later they went out for a long drive. To Miss White the experience was a novel and exhilarating one. All the dismal forebodings of the night were put to instantaneous rout. Safe under the wing of the now self-possessed and elegant Miss Bruce, why should she trouble her little head about the strange doings of a venerable lunatic? It was Miss Bruce’s affair, not hers. She looked up at the coachman and footman in livery, felt the smooth and noiseless gliding of wheels
beneath her, the soft luxuriousness of the cushions, and admitted that this was good beyond compare. Miss Bruce had uttered a single word of command, and all this luxury was instantly at her service. It was she, after all, who reigned supreme at the great house in Curzon Street—this great lady who almost begged an anonymous young lady to be her friend. What had she, Miss White, been thinking about, to indulge in dismal misgivings as to the present fitness of things? To the winds with them now, and she nestled down in the soft silken cushions, and began to dream golden dreams.

The height of beatitude was reached, however, when, later on, visits were paid to certain famous modistes, hard by New Bond Street, and wonderful confections were displayed before her wondering eyes, and she was asked in a casual way by
Miss Bruce to pick and choose from what pleased her most. Then, too, there were other visits, of no less startling a nature, to other shops of high degree, "until Miss White became fairly dizzy with wonderment at it all.

At last they went to the Carlton for lunch, and there she was suddenly brought to earth again. Miss Bruce had stopped a moment at a table to speak to a couple of ladies of her acquaintance, when Miss White suddenly heard a gentleman close behind her exclaim—

"Good heavens, Tom! Look at this splendid creature, standing here. It can't be possible, of course, for she was burned in that Paris Opéra Comique flare-up years ago. But did you ever see such a resemblance?"

"Great Scot! Yes," came the reply. "The Bruce woman, you mean, who ran away with——"
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Miss White faced abruptly about, only to perceive two middle-aged gentlemen, with eyes now fixed intently, not upon her, but upon their respective plates.

"Come along, dear," said Miss Bruce, at this instant, and under the guidance of the maître d’hôtel Miss White was quickly out of earshot of further comment. She prudently held her peace, though what she had heard caused her "furiously to think," as the French locution has it. The two gentlemen may not, after all, have referred to her. There were many other ladies in the room; but, taken in conjunction with Mr Bruce’s extraordinary emotion upon seeing her the evening before, there was certainly a something in it, she felt, and that something quite enough to justify serious reflection.

However, her face gave no token of serious reflections as she babbled merrily
of nothing in particular throughout the luncheon hour. But when this ended, they drove to the neighbouring Civil Stores in the Haymarket, and while Miss Bruce was busy with her purchases there, Miss White slipped furtively away and hastily sent off to Mr King the telegram of which mention has already been made in these pages.

Let that stand as a fair indication of the thoughts then uppermost in Miss White’s mind. It is unnecessary to dwell else than cursorily upon the remaining events of that, in some respects, memorable day.

They dined together in Miss Bruce’s boudoir. Afterwards, they went to Her Majesty’s Theatre. By midnight they were both in bed.

But not in Miss White’s case to sleep. She found herself in a state of utter bewilderment. The day had been prolific in pleasant surprises. That, of course, was
something to give thanks for; but these very surprises were of a nature quite inexplicable, except upon a theory she scarcely dared, as yet, to follow up, or give but a half-hearted credence to.

Yet one thing had become as clear as daylight. She was no "companion" in a mere conventional sense, to Miss Bruce. The costly gifts she had received at her hands that very afternoon utterly negatived such an absurd contention; though it was quite characteristic of Miss White that she had accepted these costly gifts without question or any outward sign of surprise.

Still, here she found herself, in a maze of purely wild conjecture, and at last, sitting up in bed, she made a desperate effort to formulate these wild conjectures, and this was the result:—

"First," said she, "Miss Bruce takes an extraordinary amount of interest in me,
a presumable stranger, and that in itself is, I shall not say suspicious, but strange.

"Secondly, upon my first introduction to her brother, he goes off his head, as the schoolboys say, at the mere sight of me, and is now stark, staring mad. Assuredly there is something in that.

"Thirdly, when frightened out of my life, I want to leave the house, Miss Bruce almost implores me to remain with her; and not only that, but takes me out and spends several hundred pounds on me. What, too, am I to think of that?

"Fourthly, two strangers in a public restaurant break into ejaculations at the mere sight of me, and speak of a remarkable resemblance to a Mrs Bruce, who, it seems, ran away with somebody years ago, and perished in a fire at Paris. Who was this Mrs Bruce, and how comes it about that I bear such a resemblance to her?
“Fifthly, and lastly, there is a mystery in this house which, perhaps, I can put my finger upon. It is now two o’clock. Everybody is in bed by this time, and the lunatic is under lock and key. So here goes.”

With that Miss White leaped from her bed. A glorious full moon looked through the windows, quite unabashed at the sight of a fair young lady, in snowy nightgown, with a black mane sweeping down to her waist, and dark eyes aglow with feverish excitement. It flooded the hall and staircase with its radiance, as with bare, white feet she descended to the door of the library.

Within, the light was somewhat blurred and patchy in the stained-glass ceiling above. Still, everything in the room was clearly visible, and she made her way at once to the extraordinary bookcase which,
in her presence, had so quickly swallowed up a man.

Here was food for excitement, with a vengeance. But how was the trick accomplished? Mr Bruce had neither stooped nor reached up a hand. The case had turned, seemingly, of its own volition, as if making way for the master of the house, in accordance with domestic routine.

That was absurd, however, and Miss White, calculating the distance from the floor, ran her sensitive finger-tips over the polished mahogany, until—presto! they touched a something as fine as a hair-spring, and the beautiful mechanism was at once set in motion. The massive bookcase swung noiselessly round like a turnstile—and, through the opening, guided by a sudden flood of moonlight, she quickly glided; and, without noticing in her astonishment that the great bookcase had
swung silently back into its place again, she found herself at the head of a flight of half a dozen stone steps, leading down to a room peopled with grisly horrors. The room itself was long and lofty, with skylights of frosted glass overhead, through which the moon shone vividly. But out of nightmare she had never seen such a room as this.

A great black statue of Sekhat, the cat-goddess of the Egyptians, confronted her, with her whiskers bristling, as it seemed, and a baleful green light now gleaming from the dead eye-sockets. Ranged against the four walls were glass cases in which, elbow to elbow, stood a grisly array of mummy cases, with weird painted faces of the dead, of all sizes and colours, some hooded and cowled, some with great protruding ears, whence golden loops appeared to dangle; green faces, faces of yellow,
purple, red, or of burnished gold. And from every face flashed such terrible eyes, their whites of enormous size, and pupils black as jet, and all focussed upon her. Looking away in terror from these, she saw a frieze running round the room, upon which were painted hideous men, with birds’ heads, in brightest Venetian red; and to escape these she darted down the steps, only to encounter greater horrors.

There she found herself among a score or more of floor-cases, filled with recumbent mummies, swathed in brown cere-clothes, so tightly bound that every outline of the dead bodies within was made visible. Some were caked black in bitumen, others covered with a frivolous network of blue beads, which only added to the horror of toe-bones and phalanges thrust through broken bandages.

Then a terror as of death suddenly seized
her, and she fled in the direction of the steps, only to be stayed by something supremely awful.

A flash of electric light had suddenly come from the farther end of the room, and, glancing in that direction, she saw, creeping towards her, an ape-like creature—a hideous, vampire man—splay-footed, with gigantic ears thrust forward, and long arms like tentacles. At sight of her, his mouth opened wide in a grin, revealing long, yellow teeth, and with a succession of inarticulate squeaks, he made straight for her.

She bounded up the steps, and made a frenzied spring at the bookcase. It was now as solid as a rock. She pounded upon it in vain. And then she realized that she was a prisoner, and alone with this monster. She leaped to the floor again, just evading the clutches of a pair of vulture-like claws,
and then came a race for life or death in that accursed place. She flew from case to case, doubling back, and on again; round and round the room, as elusive to his grasp as a thing of light. Thus, for many minutes, until her strength failed, and the foul thing clutched her by the throat at last.

Then—ere his talons could press the bright young life out of her—she heard a yell, as from one possessed, saw a weird, white figure spring down the steps, and fall upon the mis-shapen monster, whose grip at her throat at once relaxed.

"Is not once enough, you devil?" he shrieked.

The voice was Mr Bruce's, and she fled for her life again, up the steps. The bookcase had nearly closed, but, thrusting her arm through the aperture, she stayed its further progress. She turned and looked back for
a single instant, and saw the two in death-grips upon the floor.

Then, as the bookcase clicked into its place again, she staggered through the library, up the broad staircase, and, leaping into bed, covered up her head, nearly mad with terror.
CHAPTER XI

Mr King read over Miss White’s telegram a second time.

"More strange happenings," said he. "Well, this must be looked into at once, and, as for managing an interview, I will save her further trouble by visiting Curzon Street myself to-morrow. Pretexts are always at the end of one’s tongue. And there is the chance, too, of meeting Miss Bruce. After two such sharp encounters with Miss Gibson I now feel quite capable of meeting Miss Bruce on something like equal terms. Who knows what may come of it. I wonder, too, if these ‘strange
happenings' have any bearing upon the Featherstone affair? Ah, well; we shall see.” And his thoughts drifted straightway into another channel.

On arriving at his chambers the following morning he found awaiting him such of the personal belongings of Mr Felix Featherstone as had been left at the Langham Hotel. Possessing carte blanche to deal with these as he thought fit, he proceeded with quiet deliberation to break open the locks, one by one, of the various packages, and carefully examined their contents. In the larger boxes he found nothing but clothes, of infinite variety, but throwing no light whatever upon the question in hand.

In a small Gladstone bag, however, full of odds and ends, he came upon something that made him "sit up" with amazement. This was nothing less than a cabinet
portrait of Miss White. He rubbed his eyes, and looked at it again. The costume was of another day, and reminiscent of the late eighties, but the face might have been photographed a week before, and the sitter none other than Miss White, of Curzon Street. He turned it over, and read on the back in a handwriting now quite familiar to him—

"An iceberg."

This was startling, indeed. For seventeen years this portrait had not seen the light of day. It was impossible to jump to but one conclusion, which the acute legal mind at once formulated in this wise:—

"This portrait, labelled 'An Iceberg', I find among Mr Featherstone's effects.

"In a letter written by him to Mr Blake seventeen years ago, he speaks of a lady whom 'he greatly admires as having 'a certain amount of ice in her moral texture.'
"That lady was Mrs Bruce, of Curzon Street; and the portrait would readily pass for that of Miss White, now of the same address.

"The conclusion being, that there is in reality no Miss White, but a second and younger Miss Bruce, who is in blissful unconsciousness of this stupendous fact. Whew! It is a staggerer."

It was such a "staggerer" indeed, that, suspending his quest, he remained for several moments in deep reflection.

What use, for instance, should he make of this knowledge, revealed to him as by a miracle? Obviously, it were better to keep it to himself for the present. This from a personal, mayhap selfish, point of view, for he had looked upon Miss White, the lady companion, and found her fair, and engrossingly attractive. Miss Bruce, the heiress to a vast property, however, was
in quite a different category of girls. Still, he had jumped to a very good conclusion. Assuming his contention to be correct in one sense—was she more than her mother’s child—was she legally an heiress after all? Why had she been brought up with absolutely no knowledge of her antecedents? There had been a great deal of method in this; and upon the part of whom? Had the eccentric Mr. Bruce taken any part at all in this? It was conceivable that in the case of a dishonoured home he should wish to meet with no reminder of blighted domestic joys. Yes, that was very conceivable, but then, why should she have been suddenly restored to her home in the guise of “a companion”? That seemed inexplicable.

Indeed, the whole business was so extraordinary that, to him, in the end, it seemed an act of prudence to “lie low” for a time and await developments — developments
which, reading between the lines of her telegram, had probably already begun. It was something, indeed, it was a great deal that he chanced to know what he knew, and could afford to lie low for a season. Yes, that would be, by far, the better policy, and with the heightened colour and quickened respiration of mental excitement, he resumed his quest.

He soon found another photograph—that of an exceedingly handsome young man, of a distinctly Transatlantic type, and seemingly about thirty years of age. Instinctively Mr King turned this over, and found written on the back in the same handwriting, simply this—

"A d——d fool."

"This is prodigious," said he, at the same time making a mental note that the portrait had been taken by Russell & Son, Baker Street. He placed the two pictures in his
coat pocket, and continued his search. There were a number of letters; among
them several from Mr Blake bearing the Boston post-mark. There were also a
dozen or more receipted bills, and at last a dainty little note. This was the greatest
trouvaille of all.

It was dated from 99, Curzon Street, May 21st, 1887.

"Dear Felix," it said, "in a weak
moment I am yielding to your persistence. You may come to-morrow evening, but
upon one condition—an inexorable one—it must be the last time. B. has been very
strange in his manner during the past few
days, and I am afraid that he knows of these
visits, so they really must end. You know
what a dislike he took to you at Cairo, and
goodness knows what construction he may
put upon your coming here so often. You
must go your ways, Felix, and I must bear my cross. There is no help for it. So, be very good and circumspect when you call. It might have been once; it never can be now. Let me continue to admire and respect my good friend, Felix, at a distance. There is no help for it—none—none.—Yours in sorrow, ELEANOR.”

“H’m,” said Mr King, “I must think this out,” and, lighting a cigarette, he paced the floor in deep reflection for a time.

“It is plain enough,” said he at last, “that the melting mood had set in with great severity when this letter was written. There was little of the iceberg left. Still, it is not the letter of an erring woman, but rather of one who, finding herself upon the brink of the abyss, recoils from the fatal plunge. She was conscious of her weakness; frankly admits it, and appeals to the
man's sense of honour to protect her from herself.

"Precisely; but is it not, at the same time, just the sort of letter to further inflame a man, who, finding the last barrier to be a flimsy thing of ethics, would throw all consideration of prudence and every qualm of conscience to the winds, determined only to beat down the last lingering show of resistance? How long could the wavering scruples of a woman withstand the impassioned appeals of a lover in such a militant mood? Fifteen minutes? Half an hour, perhaps; and then——. Dash it! it is but human nature after all. It is as plain as a pikestaff. The young gallant came, he saw, and conquered; and the twain bolted the same night. Bolted only to meet their doom in Paris? Well, the acts, so far as I know them, certainly appear to point in that direction. Still,
I have not been to Paris yet to make inquiries, and my visit there may lead to surprises. Who knows? And now for Curzon Street."

A swift hansom bowled him thither in less than no time. He dismissed the cab, tripped up the steps, and rang the bell. Almost immediately the door was opened by a footman. He seemed almost preternaturally grave.

"I have called," said Mr King, "to see Miss White. She resides here, I believe?"

"Miss White! Oh yes, sir. But she is ill, and——"

"Ill?"

"Yes, sir; ill in bed. Will you leave your card, sir?"

This was somewhat disconcerting. Still, Mr King was in a defiant mood.

"Well—er—yes, certainly," and he fumbled for his card-case; "but Miss
Bruce will do as well. Will you be good enough——"

"Miss Bruce is not at home to anybody to-day, sir."

"Oh, indeed!" Perhaps, though, if you were to take this card," and he produced it, "she might—er——"

"No use, sir. My orders are very positive."

"The deuce; oh, very well, then. Send the card up to Miss White instead, and say that I will call another day."

"Yes, sir."

The door closed, and Mr King slowly descended the steps, a much-perplexed man.

"A dashed funny business, this," said he. "The White girl ill; and Miss Bruce refuses to see anyone! What the—Well, "I'm— Hang it all; this is a facer!"
Somewhat crestfallen, he turned his footsteps again in the direction of Piccadilly, and, for a time, strolled about quite aimlessly. What on earth had happened at 99, Curzon Street that he should be denied admittance in this curt fashion, he reflected. Miss White ill in bed? A fine, healthy girl like that? Bosh! It was a case of pure funk on the part of Miss Bruce. There you had it! Mr Percy King was a dangerous man, to be kept at a distance. Oh yes, of course, he had made a mistake at Barnet. Admitted. He had quite given himself away at the outset. As opposed to Miss Bruce he had not a card to play with. Never mind, a new deal was imminent; and then let Miss Bruce look to her hand, and see how many trumps she could count upon.

"Oh yes," he added, in conclusion, "it is fair sport. She is a 'game 'un.' But
we must fight it out to a finish. She scores to-day, but to-morrow——” and he stopped and lighted a cigarette. “Yes—well, we shall see what turns up to-morrow. And now, I wonder if Blake is in. I must have this photograph of ‘A d—d fool’ identified as that of Felix Featherstone. Hi! Cabby!”

A hansom instantly pulled up at the kerb. “Drive me,” said he, “to the Hotel Cecil.”

In the vestibule he ran across Tommy Toshington.

“Mr Blake anywhere about?” asked Mr King.

“No. Gone to Brighton—Metropole—for a day or two. Easily found if you want him. But, I say, you’ve heard about it, I suppose. A bit rum, isn’t it?”

“What is rum?”

“Why, haven’t you seen the Pall Mall?”

“Certainly not.”
"Then get it. It will interest you, and Blake too, perhaps."

"Don't be so confoundedly mysterious. What do you mean?"

"Come outside, buy a Pall Mall, and read for yourself."

They went outside. Tommy Toshington at once secured a copy of the paper in question, turned over a page or two, and pointed to a paragraph midway down the column.

"There you are! Old Bruce—Curzon Street. Found dead—suspicious circumstances. Was he murdered or not? All that sort of thing. There you are."

A ray of illumination suddenly sped through Mr King's brain. He grasped the paper, and with avidity read a brief paragraph to the effect that Mr John Bruce, the well-known Egyptologist, had been found dead in his private museum, in
Curzon Street, under circumstances which led to a suspicion of foul play. That was all.

"H'm!" said Mr King. "Now I begin to understand things. Dash it all! I was wrong in my surmises, after all."
CHAPTER XII

"Tell you what, Tommy T.," said Mr King, after a few moments' serious cogitation, "your friend Blake is away. You are now killing time in London, instead of grizzly bears and things in the Rockies. What do you say to a day or two with me in Paris?"

"The king's wish to me is always a command," said Tommy T., bowing low. "I'll just pack up a tooth-brush, a night-shirt, and a collar or two, and then for Gay Paree with all my heart."

"Don't run away, Master Tommy; with the idea that I am on pleasure bent. I have
made one or two curious discoveries to-day; and, if it be true that old Bruce has really shuffled off his mortal thing-em-bob, then the sooner I bring this inquiry to a head the better. I am as sure as I am of anything in this world that Mr Felix Featherstone and Mrs Bruce bolted together from 99, Curzon Street, on the night of the 22nd of May, 1887, but whether they went to Paris or not, I am at present unable to say. That is yet to be proved, and is just what is now taking me there."

"But have you any definite clue?" asked Tommy T., in an altered tone.

"Only this;" and Mr King whipped out Mrs Bruce’s portrait from his pocket.

"You used to be a fairly hot-blooded youth, Tommy. Would you have bolted, other methods failing, with a woman like this?"

"Would I? Like a shot. Jove! is that the woman?"
"It is."

"What a ripper! Fancy a lovely creature like that being burnt to death! How on earth did you get hold of the photo?"

"A professional secret, Mr Toshington. And now look upon this"—and he showed him the portrait of the man—"what is your private opinion of that gaillard?"

"Opinion! Why, that he is a deuced handsome fellow. Is he the chap?"

Mr King nodded.

"The proprietor of a small hotel ought to remember those two faces, I take it," said he.

"Bless my soul, yes. You are a lucky beggar, Rex."

"Why?"

"To get things by the handle so quickly. I wish Blake were here."

"So don't I. I hope he will remain at Brighton until I have quite finished with
this job. By the way, come up with me to Baker Street.”

“What for?”

“I want to satisfy myself on a certain point.”

“What has Baker Street got to do with it?”

“Everything. Don’t argue. Jump into this hansom.”

“But I’m peckish. Can’t we have lunch—eon first?”

“No, sir. Jump in, I tell you.”

They drove to Russell & Sons, the Baker Street photographers, where Mr King produced the man’s portrait, and asked for particulars. Search through the books merely confirmed a conviction. The portrait was indubitably that of a Mr Felix Featherstone, residing at the time it was taken at the Langham Hotel.

Armed with this incontrovertible evi-
ence, Mr King now lent a kindly ear to Mr Toshington's renewed suggestion. Whereupon they lunched both wisely and well, but not at the Cecil. This done, Mr King returned to the Middle Temple, where he spent a busy afternoon, and just before nine o'clock the twain met again at Charing Cross Station. A few minutes later they were on their way to Paris.

It was piping hot when they arrived at the Gare du Nord on the following morning.

"Where shall we stop?" asked Mr Toshington. "At the Grand?"

"Certainly not," said Mr King, hailing a cab. "Cocher, drive to the Hôtel du Prince Albert, Rue St Hyacinthe."

The cabby reflected a moment.

"Bon," said he. He flicked his whip, and off they went down the interminable Rue Lafayette.

A man might spend a lifetime in Paris
without knowing the whereabouts of the Rue St Hyacinthe. Yet it is within pistol shot of the Tuileries Gardens; a short, narrow street hard by St-Roche. There are worse hostelries, too, in Paris than the little "Prince Albert," though Mr Toshington began to sniff at sight of it.

"Is it really necessary to stay here?" he asked.

"Yes. That is just what I came to Paris for. What else? you simpleton! Jump out," he added, as the cab pulled up at the entrance with a jerk.

Early as it was, a large double-bedded room was at once at their service.

"What I propose," said Mr King, "is an immediate 'wash-up,' then coffee, and afterwards a stroll in whatever direction you will. Later in the day, I shall make inquiries. But eighteen years is a deuce of a long time, and what will come of the
inquiries, goodness only knows, though the hotel books must reveal something."

An hour later, after ordering dinner at six, they were out upon the boulevards. They strolled down to the Place Boieldieu and surveyed the new Opéra Comique, but to little purpose. Beyond hearsay, Mr. King knew little or nothing of the hideous tragedy of 1887. Mr Toshington knew still less, and was frankly bored.

"No good messing about here," said he. "These stones, even if they could speak, were in their native quarry when the thing happened. Come on."

They returned at once to the boulevards.

"Tiresome work, killing time," remarked Mr King, after an interval of silence. "I know a man named Paul Becque on the staff of the Figaro. He could give me a few points—but look at the
time. It's so confoundedly early. If I only knew his private address."

"Why not inquire?" suggested Mr Toshington.

"Where?"

"Why, at the Figaro office, where else? I know the place." And he stopped and looked about him. There it is—just opposite."

"Good idea, Tommy," said Mr King, and, crossing the road, they were about to enter when Mr King found himself slapped heartily on the back, and quickly turning, found himself face to face with M. Paul Becque himself.

"Well, I'm ——; the very man I was looking for," said he.

"Good. Delighted to see you, old fellow. Come inside."

The two shook hands most cordially. Mr Toshington was introduced, and the
trio at once repaired to M. Becque's private room. After a suitable interval, Mr King mentioned the object of his visit.

"Oh! certainly," said M. Becque. "I can tell you all about that." And he at once rang and ordered a file of the Figaro for 1887 to be brought into the room. "Ah! mon Dieu!" he continued, "I have cause to remember it, as if it were but yesterday. I was dining with a friend at the Café Anglais, just on the corner of the Rue Marivaux, at the time. It was quite early in the evening. 'Mignon' was the opera. The first act had barely begun when some scenery flared up, and began to drop, blazing, upon the stage. Then came a panic. The iron curtain refused to work, the corridors became congested with men and women fighting for their lives. Oh yes, the usual thing. It was terrible. We rushed out into the street,
and saw people at the upper windows—on the roof even—people shrieking and wringing their hands, and— Ah! I'd rather not recall the awful sight. There is the file.” And turning over the pages rapidly for a moment, he added, “I will just give you the bald facts. It was on May 25th, a Wednesday, number of victims eighty.”

“All recognised?” asked Mr King, eagerly.

“Nearly so. I will tell you in a moment.” And M. Becque glanced through succeeding numbers of the journal. “Yes,” said he, “with the exception of about half a dozen.”

“Were there any English among the victims?”

“Yes—five or six.”

“Recognised?”

“Every one—yes.”
"H'm!"

M. Becque seemed surprised.

"Why h'm?" said he.

Mr. King at once explained.

"Tiens! Quite a romance! But what I meant to say merely was that among the identified dead there were five or six English people, that was all."

"Oh, I see," said Mr. King. "There may have been others. Just so. Among the unidentified victims was there a woman?"

M. Becque again referred to the newspaper file.

"Three," said he.

"Ah! then, there is still a possibility."

"Without doubt, a strong possibility, if your facts are correct. I wish I could assist you further. The officials at the Morgue might be of some service. They have photographs, of course, jewellery,
and a lot of little things like that, which often lead to identification. But if this runaway couple were traced to the Hôtel du Prince Albert, why go farther? Were no inquiries made at the time?"

"Yes, oh yes," said Mr King.

"With what result?"

"That they both had perished in the fire."

"Then, pardon me, why, at this late day, do you reopen the question? To what purpose? Frankly, you amaze me."

Again Mr King explained.

M. Becque listened and shook his head. "Better accept it as a foregone conclusion," said he. "You are merely wasting your time, dear friend. Eighteen years! Peste! Give it up. One hundred thousand pounds is a lot of money, I know, but surely there must be a report of the investigation in existence somewhere. That ought to satisfy
the American authorities. Go back to London, and pursue your inquiries there. Paris is not the place at all."

Mr King was silent for a moment. Then said he—

"Yes; there a good deal of truth in what you say. But I want to satisfy myself on one or two points now that I have taken the matter up. Would you mind giving me a note to the people at the Morgue?"

"To the greffier? Certainly; I would, with pleasure, go with you myself, but, unfortunately, I am leaving for Orleans this morning—big official function—must be there—awfully sorry—would have been delighted to spend a few hours with you and your friend."

Meanwhile he had been scribbling a note.

"There you are. You will find the
greffier a very decent sort of fellow. I hope you will have some luck, but I greatly doubt it."

A few minutes later Mr King and his friend were swiftly faring in the direction of the Morgue. What happened there was briefly this. The greffier was courtesy itself. He produced photographs, duly numbered, of the victims already mentioned, and gruesome enough objects, too, they proved to be. Comparison with the portraits Mr King had brought with him was absolutely barren of result, however. Then he was stupefied, as, after placing the others aside, he held up a single photograph. It was the charred corpse of—something.

"It is a man," said the greffier. "The only body that was not finally identified."

"Any English among them?"

"No, monsieur; two Germans, man
and wife; two Frenchwomen from Toulouse, and a
Italian."

Mr King thanked the polite official upon leaving.

"Well, Tommy," said he, "I'm dashed if I
understand this."

"It is a fair knockdown, and no mistake," said
Tommy. "Let us drive to the nearest café. I want to
wash the taste of that beastly hole out of my mouth.
Faugh!"

A patriarchal garçon, with stooping shoulders, an
insinuating manner, and one upper tooth, waited upon
them at dinner that night at the Hôtel du Prince Albert.

"Been long here?" asked Mr King, casually.

"Yais, sare. Twainty-five year."

"Must have met a jolly lot of people during that
time."
“Yais, oh, yais! Plainty Ainglish.”

“I suppose so. Were you here when the Opéra Comique was burned.”

“Oh, yais. Two people from London that stop here, suppose burned. Go out to Opéra Comique, nevaire come back to pay bill; nozzing more heard.”

“What nonsense, Jean,” said a voice at his elbow.

Mr King looked up. It was the proprietor of the hotel who had spoken.

“If it is of any interest to you, sir,” he continued. “A German couple, returning from London, came here on the morning of the fire, went to the Opéra Comique after dinner, and never returned. A very sad business, sir. Their bodies were identified at the Morgue about ten days later by relatives from Munich, who paid my account, and removed the luggage.”
Mr King suddenly whipped out the two photographs from his pocket.

"That was not the couple, I suppose?"

"Oh, dear no," said the landlord, after the merest glance at the pictures, "not the slightest resemblance. It isn't likely I shall ever forget their faces."

Mr King's jaw fell.

"Tommy," he whispered. "An awful idea has just come into my head."

"What is that?"

"Never mind. It is my own idea at present, and it will keep."