CHAPTER XIII

You may have remarked that, hitherto, Mr King had displayed—so far as the course of this narrative is concerned—no very remarkable gift for solving mysteries. To tell the truth, however, the question of Miss White's parentage—to her so absorbing—never interested him in the least. He had found Miss White simply adorable. What did the rest matter? So that the rebuffs he had received at the hands of Miss Gibson were due to the mere perfunctory performance of a promise he had made to the younger lady.

So that when engaged upon a totally
different inquiry, he had alighted upon the
discovery that Miss White was unquestionably not Miss White, but the daughter and
sole heiress of a very rich man, it came as an unwelcome surprise.

As for Mr Blake's statements, he had accepted them as being substantially cor-
rect, and the sole object of his visit to Paris was to put the corroboration he expected
to find ready at hand into such legal form as might suffice for Mr Blake's needs.

Now he was confronted by a new and startling problem. He had been officially
informed that no persons answering to the runaways' description had perished in the
Paris fire. He further learned that no such couple had been staying at the Hôtel du
Prince Albert on that date. There was no proof that the pair had been in Paris at all.

On the other hand—it was true beyond any doubt or peradventure—that Mr Felix
MISS WHITE OF MAYFAIR

Featherstone, at the invitation of Mrs Bruce, visited her at 99, Curzon Street, on the evening of Sunday, the 22nd of May, 1887, since which time neither had been seen either dead or alive.

Hence, as I say, a new and startling problem, complicated, perhaps, by the death of Mr Bruce, had suddenly arisen—a problem the solution of which promised to test Mr King’s abilities to their extremest capacity. This was just the stimulus to action he needed, and he was fired with the possibilities of a brilliant success.

"Tell you what, Tommy," said he, over his demi-tasse, "I am going to chuck the whole business for to-night. We shall return to London in the morning, and then to it, hammer and tongs. But a little round of sane and decorous amusement to-night will do neither of us any harm, eh?"

"I know it won’t injure me very much,"
said Mr Toshington. "I feel like having a deuce of a fling. Of all the darned nasty, depressing days, and in Paris, too."

"Quite true, Tommy. It's all my fault, I know."

"That beastly Morgue, and pictures of dead bodies burned to a cinder, and——"

"Yes, yes. Drop it, for goodness' sake. There, have a cigar. What do you say to half an hour at the Café de la Paix, and then the Red Mill, or Montmartre."

"We'll sample both," said Tommy T., with sublime impartiality, as he lighted his cigar. "Anything to cure the 'jumps.' I've had 'em bad all day."

"Very well, then; come along."

They spent a very enjoyable and rational evening together. From start to finish the Featherstone affair was never once mentioned.

The next day they returned to London,
and then Mr King set to work in dead earnest to get to the heart of the mystery. It was slow work at first. Obviously, with a dead man lying unburied in the house, he could not for the present repeat his visit to 99, Curzon Street. As for Miss White, her silence was, under the circumstances, quite explicable.

What surprised him, however, in view of the reference to "foul play" in the Pall Mall paragraph, was that, beyond an inch or so of obituary notice in the Times, no further mention of Mr Bruce's death had been made in the Press. Indeed, that set him a-thinking, with the result that on the second evening after his return he ventured on a curious experiment. It was raining in torrents—a lucky circumstance—for, dressed in a shabby waterproof, with a tweed cap well pulled over his eyes, and a briarwood pipe in his mouth,
he made his way into a private bar of "The George" in the mews backing upon Curzon Street. Nobody took any notice of him, so he ordered "half a pint of six," and seated himself upon a wooden bench behind a long deal table, and leisurely refilled his pipe.

"And when is the funeral at 99 to be, George?" said a frowsy-looking man beside him.

"Friday, two o'clock, at Ighgate," said his companion, a little man in rusty black.

"I never seen him meself, but they tell me he was a rum sort of old beggar."

"So I 'eard, too; a bit balmy, from all accounts."

"Appleplexy, wasn't it?"

"So I 'eard, and it ain't for me to say no to it. But it's just like this here, William. I helps to lay him out, and to myself I says, says I, I've seen 'em wot
have died of all sorts of diseases, but if this be appleplexy, Lord keep me from it! His face was that swollen, and he’d clawed his neck something awful.”

“Sort of choked like, I suppose?”

“That’s it—no other word for it, William—choked. That’s the remark I made to meself at the time. He looks as if he’d been choked, I says.”

“He couldn’t a-been, I suppose, George?”

The little man in rusty black faced about quickly.

“Wot jer mean, William? It was appleplexy wot killed him. I told yer so. Another ’arf pint with me, ’William, and then I’m orf.”

Mr King made a mental note of this curious conversation, knocked the ashes out of his pipe, finished his tankard, and slouched out into the rain again.

Here, to his thinking, was fairly reason-
able evidence from a source beyond suspicion, that Mr Bruce had died a violent death; and thus the hint in the *Pall Mall Gazette* seemed amply justified. And yet the funeral was fixed for Friday. Obviously no official inquiries had been made, or were about to be made—and for what reason?

Number 99, Curzon Street, was, indeed, a house of mystery, in which "strange happenings," as Miss White had succinctly put it, could be hushed up in a way that, to the legal mind, seemed wholly extraordinary, and inexplicable. Hence this strangely sudden illness of Miss White began to alarm him. A few days before she had been in the pink of condition. How came it about that within a comparatively few hours of her sending him such an urgent telegram he had been denied admittance on the plea that she was now
seriously ill in bed, and unable to receive him. That Miss Bruce was "not at home" to casual callers was comprehensible enough, under the circumstances. But why, unless actively involved in what now began to assume the guise of a tragedy, should Miss White suddenly become inaccessible?

"Things wear an ugly look," he repeated to himself a dozen times, as he strode down Piccadilly, regardless of the pelting rain. Was she in need of his assistance, he wondered; and the idea tormented him sorely. For how was it possible for him, under any pretext so ever, to obtain admission to that grim house in Curzon Street? He could not intrude upon what might or might not be Miss Bruce's private grief. Death interdicted him upon the threshold, and he must needs wait with such patience as in him lay until after the funeral before making any further move.
He suddenly looked up and took his bearings. He had arrived at the Circus, he found, and after a moment's hesitation he crossed over in the direction of the Pavilion, and was hurrying on towards Leicester Square when he heard a shrill voice calling after him—

"Hi! Rex, Rex, old man!"

He turned and saw Tommy Toshington come panting up.

"Saw you across the road and shouted, but a lot of beastly cabs got in the way; afraid at first I had missed you. Whew! all out of breath, old man. Blake is in town and in a deuce of a state, after what I told him about our visit to Paris. Wants to see you at once—been down to your place twice. By the way, you seem to be in great demand to-night. Other people wanting to see you, too. Porter at the Temple gate—hearty old cock—has got some important
message for you. But you’d better see Blake first. I expect he’s waiting at the Cecil on the chance of your turning up.” Here Mr Toshington came to a full stop.

“Nothing else, Tommy?”

“No. I’ve got the whole lot off my chest. Shall we take a cab? No, you are too wet; you would drown me out. Where the deuce have you been with that dashed solemn mug of yours? Come on. It is not raining now. We can do it in ten minutes.” And he linked his arm in Mr King’s, and the pair crossed the square in the direction of Green Street.

“What did you say to Mr Blake that he is so upset?” asked Mr King, after a suitable interval for reflection.

“What did I say to him? Why, I told him everything that happened in Paris, of course.”
"Very good of you, I am sure. When I undertake another inquiry, I'll go alone."

"Why, dash it all! You don't mean to say that——"

"Your tongue runs away with your discretion? Yes; it always did, and always will. I've half a mind to throw up the job."

"Oh, Lord! don't do that! I'm so sorry—I really didn't mean——"

"No; you sort of chaps nèver do mean to do anything out of the way. Why the devil couldn't you have held your peace? Why tell him at all that you had been to Paris with me?"

Mr Toshington by this time was quite chapfallen.

"Look here, old Rex," said he; "you mustn't sit down on me like that, you know. It makes me feel bad, it hurts—upon my word, it does."
Mr King laughed.

"Don't take it too much to heart, Tommy," said he. "You will learn a thing or two some of these days. I'm not cross, exactly, but like to manage things my own way. I hope to goodness Blake is not waiting for me. I don't care particularly to meet him to-night. I'm a bit worried and upset. Did the porter at the Temple say what he wanted to see me about?"

"No; but I imagine it was something very important."

"Oh, well! here we are at the Cecil. If Blake is out I shall not wait."

Mr Blake was out. So Mr King shook hands with his friend Toshington, called a hansom, and drove straightway to the Temple.

"Well, Johnston," he said to the porter at the gate; "I hear you have some message for me."
Sir. 'A young lady has been here, dreadful way.'

Her heart began to thump against her breast. "White?" he asked.

Sir, that's the name she gave me. Said you would know. Quite a young one, sir. She said the business was most important, and you were to come at once here at the hotel just opposite the British Museum, where she is stopping for a day two, sir.'
As she lay huddled under the bed-cloths, quaking with fear, on that terrible night, Miss White felt that she had succeeded in putting her hands upon a mystery of direst description; and she then and there resolved that God willing, she would escape from the accursed house on the morrow. For sleep was impossible. Every想去, she woke within her bed, and "jumping," she woke. The woman distraught. It was true; the terror had passed, but she could see through the medium of the moonlight, the two locked doors, and in a blear, her eyes the cross, the King's thing, the "Miss" not. Yes, she not.
doors, and knew that nothing could enter her room unperceived. So with tense and strained eyeballs, she watched and waited for the possible coming of she scarcely knew what.

She was conscious, too, of a continual choking sensation in her throat. Her neck felt bruised and sore to the touch. Again and again in her excited fancy she saw that grisly shape leaping with outstretched talons upon her, and she turned icy cold at the thought that, but for the miraculous coming of Mr Bruce, all earthly things for her would have been at an end for ever.

The cold, grey, reassuring dawn came at last, and with it a sense of security that caused her to close her eyes with a feeling of grateful relief. The tremendous tension of the night slowly relaxed, and at last she slept.

At nine she was awakened by the coming
of Parkyns, who brought her a cup of tea. The girl was greatly agitated.

"Oh, Miss White," said she, "I'm nearly frightened out of my blessed life. Please don't say anything to Miss Bruce, but I'm going to pack my box, and out of this house I go, wages or no wages. Stand it no longer I really couldn't. No—not for a hundred pounds I couldn't."

Miss White was at once alert for information.

"Why, Parkyns? What has happened now?"

"Oh! It's the master again. But he is dead this time. Ain't it awful?"

"Mr Bruce dead!" gasped Miss White, at once gripping the situation.

"So they tell me, miss. Got out of his room in the night, and was found dead somewhere in the house—I don't justly know where—nobody knows but Simpson.
MISS WHITE OF MAYFAIR

It's always Simpson what knows, and he looks like a corpse himself this morning. It's my belief—goodness gracious, miss, whatever is the matter with your neck?"

For a moment Miss White had forgotten, and was annoyed with herself.

"Nothing, Parkyns. What do you mean?" she replied.

"Why, it's all black spots, as if you'd dipped your fingers in ink, and then made a spring at your own throat, like. And your neck is that swelled up! Oh, my! whatever is it? 'Ere! let me bring you a 'and-glass, and see for yourself?"

What should she say? What course pursue under circumstances such as these? Her mental processes were rapid, however, and when Parkyns held up the glass, and she saw in it what turned her sick and cold, black and purple stains upon her fair
white neck, with cords and tissues swollen and red, she gave a start of horror.

"Oh, Parkyns! You must keep this from Miss Bruce. You must not let her see me. You must help me to escape from the house. Oh, dear! what a misfortune!"

Parkyns gazed at her, open-mouthed with astonishment.

"Why—whatever is it, miss?"

"Don't ask me, Parkyns. I couldn't—I daren't—tell you. There is a lace scarf in the drawer yonder. Give me that?"

Parkyns obeyed, still full of wonder.

"Wrap it round my neck, so as to hide every sign of discolouration. That's it! Be sure that not a mark shows. Give me the glass. Capital! I have merely a sore throat, now, Parkyns, you understand?"

"Quite right, miss. I twig."

"And you will tell Miss Bruce, if she inquires after me, that I am not at all
well, and don't wish to be disturbed? On no account let her know that I have heard of Mr Bruce's death. I have my reasons for that, Parkyns. I shall get up at once and dress, and when the coast is quite clear; and you think I can slip away without being observed, come and let me know. The quicker the better. You will do this for me, won't you, Parkyns?"

"Indeed I will, miss." And as the door closed softly behind her, Miss White sprang from her bed, and turned the key in the lock. Then she paused for one instant, irresolute.

"Am I doing the right thing?" she asked herself. "Is there a better way? Is there any other way? No, no. My instincts tell me that I can trust him, above all others. He is good, he is honest, he is clever, and—he likes me. I'll go straight to the Temple, and tell him everything."
With that she dressed hastily and completely, even to her hat. A re-adjustment of the lace about her throat, together with the aid of a feather boa, rendered her hateful secret quite secure from prying eyes. She looked at herself in the glass. Her face was somewhat haggard and drawn, but in other respects she was presentable enough. Then she filled a small hand-bag with what might prove useful in her flight, and awaited the return of Parkyns.

It seemed an unconscionable time of waiting, but a tap came at the door at last, and Parkyns entered.

"It's all right, miss. Lor'! you have dressed quickly. I told Miss Bruce what you said (and she do look shocking ill and bad, indeed she do). 'I'm sorry Miss White is ill,' she says, 'but it's just as well she don't know the awful news just yet; it would only upset her, poor girl. So let her keep
quiet, and don’t disturb her, Parkyns, on no account, don’t.’ All very kind and nice she put it. But now she has gone upstairs to the master’s room, and the doctor is there, and Simpson, and there isn’t a soul about, and you can slip away beautiful.”

Miss White thanked the honest girl with effusion, and within the next two minutes the door of 99, Curzon Street, had closed behind her.

She drove at once to the Middle Temple, and learned that Mr King was out, and would not return until late in the afternoon. This was disappointment number one. She left her name, and said she would call again at six.

Then for seven mortal hours she killed time, after a melancholy fashion, wondering meanwhile if Mr King had received her telegram of the day before. Punctually at six she returned to Pump Court, where
a fairly penitent office-boy ruefully confessed that he had forgotten to deliver her message, and that Mr King had now gone to Paris on business for a day or two.

"A day or two!"

Here was an awkward and wholly unlooked-for situation. How was it to be faced? What was she to do in the interval of waiting? The thought of returning to Curzon Street was intolerable. There, to be sure, was her old home at Finchley, and an assured welcome at the end of the journey. But she shrank from the explanations she must needs make in that quarter. It was a cruel dilemma. Shelter for the night she must obtain somewhere—but where? Hotels there were on every hand, and in her purse were several gold pieces. But she was conscious of possessing but a small hand-bag in the shape of luggage, and, after all, she was only a girl
of nineteen, though quite old and acute enough to have learned that the world is suspicious, as well as censorious.

While she was ruminating upon these unpleasant facts on her way out of the Temple, she suddenly espied a ruddy and benevolent-looking man standing in the open door of the porter's lodge. She stepped up to him at once. This was her impulsive way of doing things.

"You know Mr Percy King, of course?" said she.

"Why, yes, of course," said he.

"Well, I am just in this predicament," she pursued; "I have come up to town to see him on particular business, and find that he has gone to Paris for a day or two. I would prefer to remain in town until he returns. But I am a stranger here, and do not know where to go. I am afraid of the big hotels, and should like to know of some
quiet place where ladies are received without question. As you know Mr King, and look like a good-natured man, perhaps you might assist me to find what I want."

The porter was pleased and flattered. Moreover, the lady was young and passing fair.

"Why, certainly, miss," said he. "Lor' bless you, yes. Now let me think a minute." 'And he stroked his cheek reflectively for a time. Then he counted his fingers slowly, one by one, shaking his head at each until he came to his right-hand thumb, when he brightened.

"I've got it, miss; a place where lots of American ladies go, I'm told. Just opposite the British 'Museum." And he mentioned the name.

"An hotel, 'then?"

"Yes, miss, one of the temperance ones. You don't mind that, I dare say."
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She smiled, and rewarded his courtesy by a coin of the realm. Within a quarter of an hour she was comfortably installed in a cozy room overlooking the great Museum. She had been careful to explain that her visit to London was of a legal nature, and that she had been recommended to the present house by a high official of the Middle Temple. If this was not quite ingenious, it at least procured for her instant welcome and consideration.

She dined perfunctorily, and retired early. She slept fairly well.

The next day she spent mostly in the British Museum, and, strange to say, despite her recent experience, the weird contents of the mummy rooms held her in a sort of thrall. She paid but one visit to the Middle Temple.

At ten o'clock the following morning she read at his chambers a telegram from
Mr King, saying that he was *en route* for London. Nothing more; no date of arrival specified. Miss White was on tenterhooks the livelong day. One would have thought him to be the dearest one on earth to her, such was her impatience for his coming. The porter in the lodge became almost fatherly in the interest he took in the matter. He had begun to have an idea or two. Probably Mr King would not be at all displeased at what he had done for the young lady. That was something well worth taking into consideration, perhaps.

The hours passed on. Night closed in. Heavy rain began to fall. Miss White became very miserable and dejected. She had abandoned all hope of seeing him until the morrow, when a tap came at the door, and the message came.

"Mr King is waiting to see you in the reception room, miss."
All her native dignity disappeared. She bounded down the stairs, almost in a hysterical state. She opened the door. Mr King was standing alone by the fireplace. He gave a cry of delight. They met halfway. Perhaps in her nervous trepidation, she would have fallen else, but, true it was, she suddenly found herself enfolded in his arms.
CHAPTER XV

As is often the case, it had come about in the most natural and unpremeditated way—the old, old way, in short; and was not now to be gainsaid. It had been a case of love at first sight with them both; and circumstances had conspired in a most extraordinary manner to hasten the inevitable dénouement. He was the strong man to help her in her need—the sturdy rock to which she could cling in this her hour of dire distress. To him she was primarily a lovely woman who, with a single bound, had found her way to his heart—a woman, therefore, to be wooed and won,
if humanly possible, and lo! that notable achievement had, to all seeming, now accurately come to pass.

But at this instant joy was quickly merged in a feeling of wondering solicitude.

"How pale you are! How ill you look!" he said, leading her gently to an easy chair. "Why! you are trembling like a leaf. Eleanor, dear, what dreadful thing can have happened? I was nearly startled out of my senses when I was told you were here, and had been waiting for two days to see me. I received your telegram, and called at once at 99, Curzon Street, thinking it the better plan. There I was told you were ill, and could not see me. So I left my card for you, and came away. I was obliged to go to Paris the same evening on a strange errand, which I will explain to you further on. And now, tell me, dear,
why you are here instead of in Curzon Street.”

"Oh! I am so glad you have come," she replied, still panting with excitement, "so glad to have you near me once again. I feel so safe in your presence." And she took his hand tenderly in hers. "So safe now. I have dreadful things to tell you, dear, dear friend—awful things. They were merely strange and mystifying things when I sent you the telegram—but now! nobody knows what has happened but myself. Nobody else shall ever know but you, unless you will it otherwise. You ask me, why I am here. Look!" And disengaging her hand from his, she tore aside the protecting lace from her neck, and revealed what caused him to utter a cry of horror.

"Good God! Eleanor, who did this thing? Was it Bruce?"
“No; he lost his life in saving mine.”

“But I do not understand. He saved your life! From whom—from what?”

“Ah! yes—you may well ask from what! I do not know—I shall never care to know. It was neither man nor beast. And but for this—” and she touched her throat with her finger, “I should think it was all a hideous nightmare.”

Then Mr King recalled the words of the little undertaker’s man in rusty black at “The George.” He was silent for a moment; then said he—

“And did this thing—which was neither man nor beast—did it kill Mr Bruce?”

“I am sure of it.”

“It was murder, then?”

“What else?”

“Great Scott! Eleanor, you fairly take my breath away.”

“Ah! Do you wonder now that I fled
terror-stricken from Curzon Street, and am now here with you.” And her hand sought his again. “But all this is still a puzzle to you, of course.”

“I miss the context, most decidedly,” said he, smiling rather grimly.

“Then I will tell you everything that has happened since I set foot in 99, Curzon Street. It will astonish you.”

“I am quite prepared for that,” said he.

“And then, perhaps, you will be able to draw certain conclusions, as I have in a sense. Still, we shall come to that shortly.”

With that she related, as briefly as possible, though without missing one important point, what has been already set down in these columns.

Mr King sat as one spellbound throughout the course of her narrative. Many things suddenly became plain to him. Vague suspicions became certainties. It
was a gruesome story thus far, but he felt certain that worse was to come; and for the sake of this dear girl by his side he wished, for one thing, that he had never met Mr Blake of Boston. However, many disturbing things might be kept from her knowledge. But this much she ought to know. Said he—

"Do I wonder that you ran away from Curzon Street? Rather do I wonder that you remained twenty-four hours in such a place. But, fortunately, you will have a recompense for, to my mind, one thing comes out very distinct and clear. You came to me for the solution of a certain mystery. That mystery you have now solved for yourself."

She readily divined his meaning. But for a moment she hesitated.

"I don't quite follow you," she said.

"Think a moment," he replied. "Can
you not guess who it was who saved your life?"

"Mr Bruce, of course."

"And who was Mr Bruce?"

Again she paused. The answer trembled on her lips one instant. Then she hazarded it—

"My father?"

"Beyond the slightest doubt. Miss Bruce had some object—a friendly object, mind you—in bringing father and daughter together. That meeting has ended in a tragedy. But none the less you are now the heiress of the wealthy Mr Bruce, and it should behove me as a struggling young barrister to—to—"

"To what?" she asked, quickly bridling.

"Well, to keep, we will say, at a certain respectful distance, and—"

"Mr King," said she, drawing herself up with quiet dignity. "I should cease
to like you, if you so much as repeated that foolish remark. I believed, at least I hoped, that you had a better opinion of me."

"I am truly sorry," said he, in some confusion. "I was only jesting."

"Is this a proper time for jesting?"

"No, certainly not. It was very stupid and inconsiderate of me. Will you forgive me?"

She extended her hand frankly as a gage of reconciliation, and at that moment a servant entered, and looked significantly at the clock.

Mr King gently squeezed the little hand that lay in his, and said at once in an altered tone—

"I must not detain you any longer. I did not think it was so late. I will communicate at once with Miss Bruce, and notify her that the case has been placed
in my hands. It will be a relief to her, perhaps. Meantime, if you can make it convenient to call at my chambers tomorrow, say, at ten o'clock—"

"Oh, certainly. At whatever time you wish," said she.

"Then we can go at greater length into this business."

"Quite so, Mr King."

"Good-night, Miss White."

"Good-night, Mr King. So kind of you to call at this late hour."

Mr King went straightway to the District Post Office in New Oxford Street, and sent off the following telegram:—

"Bruce, 99, Curzon Street, W.—Am sending this to relieve anxiety. Eleanor has thrown herself upon my protection. She is well, though greatly frightened and distressed. I must have serious interview
with you soon. Will Saturday suit your convenience?—King.”

This done, he strolled down in the direction of the Hotel Cecil.

There, in the smoking-room, he found Mr Blake, who sprang at once to his feet, and greeted him heartily.

“Ah! it’s you, Mr King,” said he; “the very man I wanted most to see.”

“So Toshington told me this evening, and I called with him, about nine. You were out.”

“Yes, unfortunately. Sit down. Have a cigar and a drink.” And he rang the bell. “It’s mighty good of you to look me up again, Mr King.”

“Not at all. Tommy told me you knew about our visit to Paris, and I can quite understand your desire to see me about it.”

“Why, sure. It seems Felix wasn’t
burned to death in that theatre fire, after all. Do you think there can be any doubt about it?"

"None whatever. Every victim was fully identified. Neither your cousin nor the lady perished in that fire, nor were they ever inside that hotel in the Rue St Hyacinthe."

"Then what became of them?"

"Ah!" and Mr King smiled grimly, "you have, indeed, given me a riddle to solve."

Mr Blake smoked his cigar reflectively for a moment.

"Yes," said he, "I guess I have. Think you can work it out?"

"I don't know. I hope so."

"So do I. It will save me a heap of bother. Got an idea?"

Mr King was silent for a time, as he lighted his cigar. From a strictly pro-
fessional point of view, he saw no present need for divulging what he had discovered in Felix Featherstone's luggage at the Langham Hotel.

"Well," said he at last, "I have a sort of theory, that is all. It may be worthless. So, perhaps, I had better say nothing for the present about it."

"All right. So long as you have really got an idea, that is good enough for me."

"Of course, should there be anything in it, I will let you know at once."

"Exactly. All I can say is that, from the present look-out, if you do succeed in fathoming the mystery, you are a mighty smart man."

Mr King laughed.

"That is as may be," said he. "Since I have undertaken the job, I will do my best, you may rely on that."
"I am sure of it," said Mr Blake; "and we'll leave it just there for the present."

"For the present—yes."

With that their conversation drifted into other channels, and at the end of half an hour or so, Mr King arose.

"Well, I must be off now. In case of need shall you be within call at any time, Mr Blake?"

"At any time," said he, rising in turn. "You may depend on that."

They shook hands, and then with an air of moody preoccupation, Mr King wended his way slowly homewards.
CHAPTER XVI

Punctually at ten the following morning, Miss White put in an appearance at Mr King’s chambers in Pump Court. There was a glad light in her eyes as she entered his private room, and when certain pleasant preliminaries were over, he said—

“I have been turning this gruesome matter over and over in my mind, surveying it from every possible aspect, and the more I ponder over it, the more perplexed I become. It is a matter of common knowledge that Mr Bruce was an eccentric man, with somewhat morbid tastes. Everybody knew that, somewhere in his house in
Curzon Street, there was a rare collection of Egyptian curios. So far, there is no mystery whatever about it. But why should he resort to the trickery of revolving bookcases in order to enter this curious sanctum himself, unless concealed there was some mystery which——?

"Which I discovered?" suggested Miss White.

"Exactly, which you discovered in the person of this vampire creature. What was it? Who was it? What was it doing there? Why did it fall upon you? And what did Mr Bruce mean by shouting, 'Is not once enough, you devil?'

Miss White shook her head.

"I only know what I saw, what I heard, and what I endured," said she. "It is not for me to explain the meaning of it."

"Certainly not, my dear girl. But there
is at least one person in that house who knows."

"Miss Bruce?"

"Possibly she may know something. But I was not referring to her, but to the butler, Simpson. Parkyns is quite right; he holds the key to the mystery."

"You will question him, then, of course?" said she.

He hesitated a moment; then—

"Yes," said he, "if—" and he paused and shook his head slowly

"If what?"

"If I dare."

"Are you afraid? Of what?"

"Of discoveries, perhaps." And he abruptly changed the subject. "Come," said he, "let us go to Somerset House, and make sure of one thing at least," and he reached for his hat.

They walked together, she in awed
silence, to Somerset House, and within a quarter of an hour he pointed out to her in a great tome an entry setting forth that, on the 17th of June, 1885, there was born, at 99, Curzon Street, a female child, daughter of John and Eleanor Bruce, residing at that address.

"I will get a certified copy of this. It will be your birthright," said he, "for you are that child."

"Ah!" said she, with a little complacent sigh. "It is well, perhaps, that I have ceased to be nobody in particular."

"You were everybody to me from the beginning," said he.

Her hand sought his, and a gentle pressure was her sole reply.

He was shortly in possession of the precious document, and together they returned to Pump Court.
A footman from Curzon Street sat awaiting his arrival, with a letter.

"Step into my room, Eleanor," said he. "I will join you in a moment." He held the door open for her to pass, and then opened the letter. In it was a note for ten pounds, and this is what he read:—

"Dear Mr King,—I am very grateful for your telegram. The sudden and mysterious disappearance of Eleanor caused me very great distress. I can readily guess the cause, but grieve that she avoided seeing me before leaving, as I think I could easily have persuaded her to remain. Coming, as it did, in conjunction with a domestic bereavement, I felt it very keenly. Still I am glad that she is well, and in such good hands. It were better now, perhaps, that she remained away until after the funeral
of my brother, which is fixed for Friday, as you are apparently aware.

"His death now releases me from certain obligations of silence respecting a matter most vital to Eleanor's interests, and I shall be extremely obliged if you can make it convenient to call here as soon after receiving this note as possible.

"I enclose bank-note, which pray be good enough to hand Eleanor for her present necessities.

"I am, with renewed thanks, yours faithfully,

DORIS BRUCE."

"Just sit down a moment," said Mr King to the bearer of the letter, "while I write a reply." With that he entered his private room, and closed the door behind him.

"It is a note from Miss Bruce," said he, handing it to Eleanor. "Read it, while I scribble off an answer."
“Well, what do you think of it?” he said, looking up, after an interval of a minute or two.

“That she is a dear, good soul; that she knows nothing of what actually happened, and that it was very wrong of me to steal away without a word, as I did. But, then, of course, I did not know what I know now.”

“There is no necessity for heart-searching, my dear girl,” said he, with a smile. “You acted upon very natural impulses, and have nothing whatever to reproach yourself with.”

“I shall try to think so,” she replied. “She was very kind to me, and now, sending this money too, is so thoughtful of her.”

“Why, it is yours,” he interposed. “Everything now is yours.”

“Oh! I keep forgetting. You will go and see her, of course?”

“Yes; I have written to say that I will”
shortly follow her messenger to Curzon Street."

"And you will explain things to her, and give her my love?"

"I will give her your love, but as for explaining things just yet—well, I don't know. You must leave that to my discretion."

"Certainly; that was agreed upon between us; and you will call to see me this evening?"

"As surely as the sun will set, my dearest girl."

Mr King, upon his arrival at 99, Curzon Street, was shown at once into the reception room. There he was almost immediately joined by Miss Bruce. He noticed that she looked very haggard and ill.

"It is very good of you to come so quickly, Mr King," said she, motioning him to a chair.
"Not at all," said he. "Sooner or later it had to come. And I trust that upon this occasion we have done with disguises, Miss Bruce. You obtained an easy victory over me at Barnet. Perhaps if I had been more in earnest myself at that time, my convictions would not have been so easily shaken. But circumstances have undergone a startling change since then, and I now have matters of very grave import indeed, to discuss with you."

"Let it be so," said she, with quiet dignity. "Further deceptions are not only useless, but undesirable, now. I had my own reasons for assuming a disguise. They were harmless, and, in my opinion, justifiable, reasons. You came to me a perfect stranger, and under false pretences at first, to pry into secrets I had jealously guarded for years, and for her own peace of mind, from a girl who was and is very dear to me."
“You mean the lady whom I have hitherto known as Miss White, but whom I now know to be Miss Eleanor Bruce, your niece, who was born in this very house, on the 17th of June, 1885.”

“Your knowledge is very accurate, Mr King. The facts are as you state them. But there were certain grave circumstances

“With which I am perfectly familiar, Miss Bruce. Circumstances much graver, perhaps, than you have ever imagined.” He paused, and, as she made no answer, he went on—

“Let me recount these circumstances. I will begin with the meeting in Cairo between the mother of Eleanor and a certain American gentleman, named Felix Featherstone.”

Miss Bruce’s eyes were now full of undisguised astonishment. But she held her peace, and he continued—
"Some secret bond of sympathy, we will say, brought them into friendly relations, one with the other. Perhaps hers was an unhappy marriage?"

"It was," said Miss Bruce. "Let that at once be conceded."

He bowed, and continued—

"He met her afterwards in London, and the intimacy—the merely friendly intimacy between them—was renewed. He called here upon several occasions. His last visit was on Sunday, May 22nd, 1885. Is that correct?"

"Your knowledge is superior to mine, Mr King," said she. "I was not living here at the time; but I believe your statement to be substantially correct."

"Since which date," he went on, in an earnest, almost solemn tone, "no human eye has rested upon that hapless couple."

"No, no," she interposed quickly. "You
are wrong there. They eloped together that night, were traced to a certain hotel in Paris, and both perished miserably in the fire which destroyed the Opéra Comique, on the night of——"

"The Wednesday following."
She gave a start of surprise.
"Then you already know of this?"
"I have been so informed, but as for knowing it, that is quite another question," he answered. "You have proofs of it, of course?"

"Oh, certainly. At least, my brother had, and he showed them to me."
"Can you recall what they were?"
"Readily. One was a report from a private detective, who traced the runaways to Paris, and established beyond a doubt that they had perished in that terrible fire. But the most convincing evidence of all was an intercepted letter from this
Felix Featherstone, in answer to one of Mrs Bruce's, in which he warmly urged her to elope with him on that very Sunday evening. What is the natural inference?"

""Inferences are often very wicked and deceitful things, Miss Bruce," said he. "I assume you read those precious documents yourself, Miss Bruce?"

"Not once, but half a dozen times," said she.

"And were convinced, of course, that Nemesis had overtaken the errant couple?"

"What else could I think? What else can I now think, after a lapse of so many years? It is, of course, a foregone conclusion. But this permit me to say, I felt very sad and grieved over the fate of the poor thing. She was a sweet, lovable creature. It was an absurd marriage, destined to failure from the very first, and I was not at all surprised to learn what had
happened. Many a tear did I shed over her untimely fate.

"My brother at once sent for me. I expected to find him in a violent state of excitement. On the contrary, he was quite calm, and briefly stated the facts, adding that he should take no action in the matter. He had made a grievous mistake, that was all, and the sooner the scandal was hushed up the better. He begged me to come and live with him, making but two stipulations: that the subject should never again be broached between us, and that the child, little Eleanor, should be for ever removed from his sight.

"I agreed to both stipulations. Eleanor was a sweet child, and her years rendered possible the course I adopted. I acted for the best. You know the result. We need not enter into that. Upon a review of all the circumstances, I cannot see that what
I have done was in any sense amiss. It was my intention from the first that she should inherit my small property. But I always thought it possible that a rapprochement with her father might at some time be brought about. At last, the wound seemed healed, the occasion propitious, and I brought her here, with such disastrous results, as you know. However, she must come back to her old home. I do not know whether my brother made a will or not. If so, it will probably be in my favour, for I doubt if he remembered, until within a day or two, that a daughter of his ever existed. Still, that will not matter. Everything is practically hers. At least, I will see that it is so. One thing, however, I must ask. Does she know—have you told her anything about the fate of her mother?

"Not a single word," said he, earnestly.
“Eleanor has become very dear to me, and she has confessed to me that——”

“Yes,” said Miss Bruce, with a kindly smile. “I surmised as much. It is the same old story, I suppose.”

“The same old story, yes.”

“Well, I have naught to say against it. I liked you from the first, Mr King.”

“I cannot thank you too much for such kindly words,” said he, “for they render the painful task before me very much easier. For in our common love for Eleanor, one must keep, at all costs, the hideous truth from her.”

Miss Bruce started up with ashen lips.

“What—what do you mean by the hideous truth?” she exclaimed.

“I mean,” said he, solemnly, “that neither Eleanor’s ‘mother nor Mr Felix Featherstone perished in the Paris fire. They never left this house on that fatal Sunday night, seventeen years ago.”