

Fred M. White

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THE END

I. — THE LADY IN LAVENDER

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It was luncheon time at the Metropolitan Hotel, Brighton, and the great dining-room was comfortably filled with guests and casual visitors as Hilton Blythe strolled casually into the room with the intention of seeking one of his favourite window seats. He glanced casually round as if in search of some passing acquaintance before his keen eye picked out the little lady in lavender seated in an angle facing the King's Road with a companion. The most accomplished and daring card-sharper and swindler in Europe paused for a moment as if he had been struck by a bullet, but only for the fraction of a second, and then he was himself again.

A waiter crept up ingratiatingly, for they all knew Blythe there. His character mattered nothing to them, they appreciated his generous nature and the splendour of his largesse in the matter of tips. And your waiter knows a gentleman instinctively, and Hilton Blythe was most emphatically that so far as birth and breeding were concerned. Blythe was an assumed name, of course, but from what noble house the man really came was known only to a few, and they for the sake of their class never told. There were some of them who acknowledged him still, and occasionally helped him when times were bad, but, for the most part, Blythe went his own way and lived at the best hotels at home and abroad, for he was one of the type of men that everybody likes, despite his record, and he never

by any chance brought scandal upon any caravanserai in which he might happen for the moment to be housed. It was high game he aimed at, and his reputation for audacity and courage was a by-word in the dark places of the world. For the rest, he looked exceedingly youthful for his forty-five years without a grey hair on his head, or in his carefully trained moustache, and there was no better dressed man in London.

He prided himself upon the fact that nothing shook him, but he had been shaken to his very marrow as his eye fell upon the lady in lavender seated in the angle of the window with her companion whom Blythe knew to be Roy Harley, a young man of family who had quite lately come into an unexpected fortune. It was Blythe's business to know these things, but any predatory ideas, so far as Harley was concerned, had no place in Blythe's mind.

Behind his eyeglass and that bland superiority of his, he was studying the lady in lavender intently. He saw a slight, fair girl, with grey-green eyes, and a suggestion of birth and breeding on that perfectly cut face of hers, he saw a little mouth, red and kissable enough, but well-moulded and determined, and he could see, in those expressive eyes, the fact that the girl's companion was more than a passing pleasure to her.

"My God," he murmured to himself. "So that's what the child has grown into. Fancy three years making all that difference. And yet she is exactly what I pictured she would become. If——"

Blythe turned, suddenly conscious of the fact that the waiter was standing by his side. He was the easy and

assured man of the world again, with a definite object before him.

"Ah, Walters," he said, in his genial way. "Give me a corner seat, will you. Over there, in the window."

"Very sorry, sir," the waiter said. "That table is engaged. But I dare say——"

Blythe slipped his hand significantly into his waistcoat pocket, and the waiter smiled. There was not a waiter in the Metropolitan who was not ready to do anything that Blythe asked, and a moment or two later he was seated at the little table in the window close by the lady in lavender and her companion, and in a position to hear every word that passed.

"Well, weren't you astonished to see me?" Harley asked. "And now, what have you been doing all this long time? And what do you mean by running away from Scotland in all that hurry?"

The girl laughed happily.

"I thought it was you who ran away," she said.

"Well, perhaps I did, my dear Nettie," Harley said. "But there, it is wonderful what a change three months will bring about. When we were staying together at Markham's place, you and I and Prest, because the others didn't count, I was a poor man with nothing but my pay in the Guards to live upon. But it's all different now, as I explained to you. Oh I wasn't blind, Nettie, I know that Walter Prest was just as much in love with you as I was, and I know how unhappy you were with that old aunt of yours. Oh, Lady Rachel is a fair terror. And, because I knew that you liked Prest, and that he was a rich man, I thought it best. Oh, well, my dear, you

know what I mean. But things have changed now. I never expected that crabbed old godfather of mine to leave me a bob, whereas he left me everything. And here am I down here with my own yacht at Shorehaven, and, by the grace of God I run up against you on the front this morning. Could the fates be any kinder to a man? But never mind about me, what have you been doing, and why are you hiding yourself down here? I went over to Littlehampton and actually bearded the formidable Aunt Rachel in her den."

"And she told you she had washed her hands of me," Nettie laughed. "Roy, I couldn't stand it any longer. That aristocratic poverty fretted me horribly. And then again, I was always having my dead father's past thrown in my teeth. I have almost forgotten him, but whatever he was, I wish he were alive now, because I have the fondest memories of him."

The man at the next table stirred uneasily, and he looked out of the window, seeing nothing.

"But we need not go into that," Nettie went on. "I made up my mind to get my own living, so, for two months, I worked like a slave at typewriting and shorthand, and my teacher got me an secretarial job with a distinguished traveller and sportsman who was living down here. Did you ever hear of Mark Shute?"

The listener at the next table nearly jumped out of his chair. But the lovers noticed nothing.

"Now, that's a strange thing," Harley cried. "But I am more or less down here with Shute. We are going yachting together. Hasn't he got a bungalow at Shorehaven?"

"That's the man," Nettie said. "The Green Bungalow at Shorehaven belongs to him, and I go there most mornings whilst he dictates his book of travel to me. It's an easy job, because the rest of the day is my own, and I have most comfortable rooms in College Road, Kemp Town way, and I believe I am really happy for the first time in my life. I like my work, and it is nice to feel that I am earning my own living."

"Well, you won't be for long, anyway," Harley said boldly. "Come out on to the front, and let's have a long, delicious afternoon together. My word, won't Prest be surprised when I tell him that I have met you like this? I am not afraid of him now, Nettie."

"There never was any reason why you should be," Nettie whispered. "What a small world it is, Roy. Fancy you being a friend of Mr. Shute's."

"Yes, he's quite a good chap. And that reminds me, I am going over to his bungalow after dinner this evening with Prest, and a man called Andrew Macglendy for a game of poker. Prest asked me to get a pack or two of cards. He's off somewhere to-day and he tells me that there are no cards in the bungalow. I suppose there is some shop not far off where I could get a few packs."

"Oh, yes," Nettie said. "There is Weston's, in Castle Square, where I get all my paper from. We can call in there on the way back from our walk."

But still they lingered, and still Blythe sat there, apparently busy with his lunch, listening to every word that was said, and studying the girl in lavender from every angle. It seemed to him that he had got the whole story now, and

that he knew exactly how things stood. And the girl a few yards away turned ever and again in his direction, regarding approvingly the well-set-up handsome middle-aged man, and wondered who he was. Roy Harley could have told her, though he merely knew Blythe by name, as more or less a soldier of fortune who obtained his living by dubious means, though he had never been actually found out, and still moved in quite respectable society. Harley had only met him once or twice, and what he saw of the man he rather liked. He had been more or less warned against him, but then Harley had been poor for a man holding a commission in the Guards, and he had learnt his worldly wisdom in the hard school of poverty.

He was hardly conscious, however, just now that Blythe was near him. He had eyes only for the girl by his side, and, so far as the rest of the room was concerned, it might have been empty. And still they lingered there, as if loth to leave their intimate little table, and seek the sunshine of that warm October day outside on the famous front. But they rose presently, and made their way along the front in the direction of Kemp Town, and from thence through Sussex Square on to the East Brighton Golf Links. It would be quiet enough there, the day was warm and dry, and they had all the vast solitude of the Downs before them, except for a few enthusiastic golfers who saw them not at all. They sat down presently on the hillside looking toward Ovingdean, and there the rest of the world seemed to matter nothing.

"This has been a wonderful day," Harley said. "I never dreamt when I got up this morning that we should be lunching together. I have been trying to find you for over a

month. I wonder what our frigid old aunt would say if she knew that you were living within twenty miles of her."

"Oh, what does it matter?" Nettie laughed happily. "She would be very angry, of course, and she would be horrified to think that Frond was getting her own living."

"But not for long, as I told you just now," Harley said meaningly. "Look here, Nettie. You will have to chuck that job of yours, we'll go quietly off and get married, and tell all our friends afterwards."

"You have never asked me yet," Nettie laughed unsteadily.

Without more ado, Harley gathered her into his arms and kissed her squarely on the lips.

"Oh, what does it matter?" he asked. "What does anything matter, so long as there is a perfect understanding between us?"

And with that Nettie gave a smile of infinite content. Nothing in the world would stand between her and her happiness now.

II. — THE GREEN BUNGALOW

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It was shortly after nine o'clock when Harley walked down the steps of the Metropolitan Hotel and made his way in the direction of Brunswick Square. There he stopped at No. 201, and rang the bell. In response, there appeared a manservant, correctly attired enough, but somewhat dark of skin, and speaking a soft accent that suggested vaguely South America. In answer to Harley's question he replied that Mr. Macglendy was at that moment in the drawing-room with the mistress of the house, and two other gentlemen, whom Harley placed in his mind as Prest, his friend and rival, and Mark Shute. Macglendy he did know, but found him to be a tall, rather handsome spare man, with a prominent nose of the Jewish type, and a splendid beard that flowed over his chest. He was a pleasant mannered man enough, shrewd and worldly, with a pronounced Scotch accent that seemed also grotesque with a man who carried a Semitic suggestion in every line and gesture of him. Mrs. Macglendy appeared to be absolutely pale and colourless, like a sort of frightened automaton that moved and spoke in a dream, and, quite evidently under the hypnotic influence of her husband. Her face was an absolute mask, and her manner exceedingly refined and polished, with a suggestion, every now and then, of one who, in her earlier days, had been *au fait* with the very best society. But after the first convulsive greeting she dropped back to her seat like a toy that has run down and spoke not another word until the others rose to go.

"Well, we had better be getting along, I think," Shute suggested. "By the way, Harley, I suppose you didn't forget to bring those cards along that I asked you for? I am afraid if you did, we shall be more or less in the cart."

"Oh, that's all right," Harley said. "I bought a couple of packs this afternoon, and they are in my pocket at the present moment. I am ready, if the rest of you are."

"And the car is at the door," Macglendy said.

They drove along the front presently, past Shoreham until they came at length to the road that leads down to the group of bungalows on the Shorehaven beach. Here the car was dismissed, with instructions to the chauffeur to return shortly after midnight, and the little party made their way over the shingle in the direction of a sort of bluff on the left side of the beach, where they could see the outline of a bungalow that stood a hundred yards or so apart from the other buildings. So far as Harley could see, there was behind the bungalow a sort of floating landing stage, locked in on either side by concrete bastions. The bungalow itself had been fashioned at some remote period out of a wreck, and indeed, in the uncertain moonlight, it looked very like a ship itself.

"Rum old place, isn't it?" Shute said, as he opened the door and switched on the lights. "I have taken it furnished for a year from an eccentric old mariner who made his money out of salving operations. This old wreck is one of the speculations, and he turned it into a living house. It's the ideal spot for man who has literary work to do, and that's why I took it. Every convenience you see, even to electric light and cooking. When I am rusticating, I can look after

myself and dispense with a servant. I have even got a landing stage here, with a floating raft—the very thing for your yacht, Harley. I have half a mind to go into the smuggling trade. I believe I could work it quite easily. What do you say, Harley, to joining up with that yacht of yours?"

Harley made some laughing reply, but he was too interested in the common sitting-room to the bungalow to take much heed of what his companions were saying. It was a quaint, odd-shaped room, with large portholes on either side, in fact, it was the exact reproduction of a large and comfortable ship's cabin, and, in a good many ways, it reminded Harley of his own quarters on the yacht that he had invested in directly he had come into his money.

"And a verra nice comfortable hermitage it is," Macglendy said, in that broad Scotch accent of his. "Mon, ye could write here all the year round and never a sound. That book of yours ought to make interesting reading."

"Well, I think it should," Shute murmured. "I have been knocking about the world for the last twenty years, and I flatter myself I have had more adventures than most men."

"Yes," Macglendy said. "A striking example of the rolling stone that does gather moss."

"Oh, I haven't done so badly," Shute said modestly. "Now then, gather round the table whilst I get the drinks out. By the way, Harley where are those cards?"

"I put them on the mantelpiece," Harley said. "There they are, just behind you. I suppose they are all right. They were the best I could get at Weston's, and I thought two packs would be enough. If you want any more——"

"Oh, that's all right," Shute said. "That will be all right for to-night. You'd better take them down and tear all the wrappings off."

As Shute spoke, he dived into a little cupboard by the side of the fireplace and produced a large tantalus with a syphon or two of soda, and some glasses. Harley rose, and taking the two packs of cards from the spot where he had placed them, broke the twine around them, and tore off the covers. Then he poured the two packs out on the table from their cases, and Macglendy picked them up and allowed them to sift through his fingers in a professional sort of way which would not have been lost on older men of the world than Harley, and his old friend and school chum Prest, who sat watching Harley with a smile on that handsome, somewhat stupid face of his. For Prest was a soldier first and last and all the time. A man of considerable means who had taken up the Army seriously, and, to him, the honour of his regiment was almost a fetish.

"What are we going to play?" he asked.

"I don't care what it is," Harley said.

In his happy mood it was all the same to him. He was prepared for a long evening to play a game for which he cared practically nothing, and whatever game the others elected for he was quite willing to fall in with. One or two games were suggested and then they fell back by common consent upon poker.

"What about the stakes," Shute asked. "We are quite safe here from any interference on the part of the police, so I vote that for once in a way we have a real big gamble."

"Oh, don't make it verra high," Macglendy said. "I'm not so fond of your big stakes. Ah, no, I ken the value of money too well, and how hard it is to earn. But I'm thinking these young fellows with silvers spoons in their mouths will be wanting what they call a flutter, so, just for once in a way, I don't mind going as far as fifty pounds rises."

The others began to laugh, and Shute began to rally the Scotsman upon his caution, all of which was accepted in good part. Then they sat down to play in earnest, and for the best part of an hour hardly a word was spoken. Even Harley, careless and happy as he was, began to find himself under the fascination of the game.

And, from the very first, he won steadily. It seemed to him that he could do no wrong. The more he won, the more exuberant and reckless he became, whilst the others looked on with humorous comments, and the usual allusion to a beginner's luck. It was Prest who suffered more severely, for the Scotsman, in his cautious way, threw in his hand over and over again rather than take any unnecessary risks, and Prest was just about holding his own.

"Well, that's a most amazing thing," Prest exclaimed, as Harley called his hand for the fourth time, and laid two pairs on the table. "Talk about luck. Ah, there's one thing, my boy—don't forget that lucky in cards, unlucky in love."

It sounded almost a challenge, so that Harley looked up with a mocking smile in his eyes. He was laughing to himself to think that Prest would know all about that before long, so he gathered up his winnings, secure in his position, and the knowledge that he had honourably got the best of his old friend and rival.

"Yes, it is extraordinary how everything is going my way," he said. "I had a feeling when I sat down to-night that I was going to win. It seemed to me that everything was going my way, and I suppose that that is what made me reckless. I think it's what you Scottish people call fey, Mr. Macglendy."

"Och, aye," Macglendy said. "When the tide's with ye, nothing goes wrong. Ye could call the other man with nothing in your hand, and win even if you were holding four pieces of blotting paper. And if the luck's all out, then a straight flush is no more good to you than a sick headache. I've been through it myself."

Still the game went on, with occasional lapses for a cigarette or a visit to the tantalus, and still Harley won. It seemed impossible that he could do wrong. Then Macglendy dropped out for a hand or two, and stood watching the others. Suddenly a change came over his face, and, leaning over the table, he picked up a hand which had just been dealt by Harley to the other two.

"You'll excuse me," he said, in a harsh, husky voice. "It is verra unpleasant, but my duty is plain. These cards are marked."

Harley jumped to his feet as if something had shot him.

"Marked," he cried. "Marked. Two fresh packs of cards that I bought myself and opened in your presence. Mr. Macglendy, I am afraid I don't quite understand what you are saving."

"Aye, but I do," Macglendy said stolidly. "I am too old a hand at the game to be deceived. Look at this."

He took up a handful of the cards, and held them aslant so that the light caught the glaze on the backs. And on

every card there was a sort of pattern in dull, tiny spots as if the glaze had been removed by a touch of acid. There was not a single card in either pack that did not show one of these patterns. Very slowly the Scotsman dropped them one by one on the table, and then turned a cold, passionless eye upon Harley.

"You see what I mean," he said. "They are all marked. And what's more, one of the cards is missing. I think ye'll find that it is the ace of spades, and, moreover, I think Mr. Harley will find the ace of spades in his jacket pocket."

Boiling with rage and indignation, Harley plunged his hands into his jacket pockets. Then, to his own dazed amazement, he produced a square of pasteboard that fluttered from his nerveless fingers on to the table under the eyes of his companions.

"The ace of spades," he whispered hoarsely. "Gentlemen, I swear by my Maker that I never placed that card there."
