

THE BEAUTIFUL WHITE DEVIL

BY GUY BOOTHBY

Author of "A Bid for Fortune," "Dr. Nikola," "The Marriage of Esther," Etc. Copyright 1898, by D. Appleton & Company.

CHAPTER I

HOW I CAME TO HEAR OF THE BEAUTIFUL WHITE DEVIL.

The night was sweltering hot, even for Hongkong. "Hello! Who's this?" said Peckle. "Paddy, by all that's human. Watchman, what of the night? Why this indecent haste?"

The newcomer was a short, podgy man, with a clean shaven, red face, white teeth, very prominent eyes, large ears and almost marmalade colored hair. "Paddy is suffering from a bad attack of suppressed information," said Benwell, who had been examining him critically. "Better prescribe for him, De Normanville. Ah, I forgot you don't know one another. Let me introduce you—Mr. Horace Venderbrun, Mr. De Normanville. Now you're acquaintances as they say in the farces."

"Out with it, Paddy," continued Peckle, digging him in the ribs with the butt of his cue. "If you don't tell us soon, we shall be sorrowfully compelled to postpone our engagements to-morrow in order to witness your interment in the Happy Valley."

"Well, in the first place," began Mr. Venderbrun, "you must know that the Oodnadatta—"

"Well—well, skipper—Perkins, martinet and testotaller; chief officer, Bradburn; otherwise the China sea liar! What about her? She sailed this evening for Shanghai?"

"With a million and a half of specie aboard. Don't forget that. Went ashore in the Ly-ee-moon pass at 7 o'clock. Surrounded by junkies instantly. Skipper dispatched third officer in launch full steam for assistance. Gunboat went down posthaste, and like most gunboats, arrived too late to be of any use. Apologies, Peckle, old man! Skipper and ten men shot, chief officer dirked, first saloon passengers of importance cleaned of their valuables and locked up in their own berths. The bullion room was then rifled, and every red cent of the money is gone—goodness knows where. Now, what d'you think of that for news?"

"My gracious!" "What junks were they?" "Nobody knows." "The Ly-ee-moon pass too! Right under our very noses. Crime! Won't there be a row?"

"The Beautiful White Devil again, I suppose?" "Looks like it, don't it? Peckle, my boy, from this hour forward the papers will take it up, and—well, if I know anything of newspapers, they'll drop it on to you gunboat fellows pretty hot."

"If I were the British navy, I'd be dashed if I'd be beaten by a woman." "I thought it was time to interfere."

"Will somebody take pity on a poor barbarian and condescend to explain?" I said. "Since I've been in the east I've heard nothing but Beautiful White Devil, Beautiful White Devil, Beautiful White Devil. Tiffin at government house, Colombo—Beautiful White Devil; club chow, Yokohama—Beautiful White Devil; flagship, Nagasaki—Beautiful White Devil, and now here. All Beautiful White Devil, and every yarn differing from its predecessors by miles. I can tell you I'm beginning to feel very much out of it."

Each of the four men started in to explain. I held up my hand in entreaty. "As you are strong, be merciful," I cried. "Not all at once."

One of the silent footed China boys brought me a match for my cigar and held it until I had obtained a light. Then, throwing myself back in the long cane chair, I made them work their wicked wills.

"Let Paddy tell," said Peckle. "He boasts the most prolific imagination. Go on, old man, and don't spare him." Venderbrun pulled himself together, signed for silence and, having done so, began theatrically: "Who is the Beautiful White Devil? Mystery. Where did she first hail from? Mystery. What is her name—I mean her real name, not the picturesque Chinese cognomen? Mystery. As far as can be ascertained she made her first appearance in eastern waters in Rangun July 24, 18—, Got hold of some native prince blowing the family treasure and blackmailed him out of \$500,000. A man would never have come out of the business alive, but she did, and, what is more, with the money to boot. Three months later the Vectis Queen went ashore, when 48 hours out of Singapore, junks sprang up out of nowhere, boarded her in spite of stubborn resistance on the part of the ship's company, looted her bullion room of \$50,000 and her passengers of \$3,000 more."

"But what reason have you for connecting the Beautiful White Devil with that affair?" "White yacht hanging about all the time. Known to be hers. Signals passed between them, and when the money was secured it was straightway carried on board her."

"All right. Go on."

"Quite quiet for three months. Then the sultan of Surabaja chanced to make the acquaintance in Batavia of an extraordinarily beautiful woman. They went about a good deal together, after which she lured him on board a steam yacht in Tanjung Priok, presumably to say goodby. Having done so, she coaxed him below, sailing off with him there and then kept him under lock and key until he had paid a ransom of over 400,000 guilders, when he was put ashore

again. Two months later Vesey—you know Vesey—of Johore street, probably the richest man in Hongkong, met a woman staying at this very hotel. She pretended to be just out from home and no end innocent.

"Well, Vesey was so awfully smitten that he wanted to marry her—had as all that. She took him in hand and one day got him to take her for a cruise in his yacht. Of course he jumped at the chance, and off they sailed. Out at sea they were met by a white schooner. I believe Vesey was in the middle of protesting his undying love, and all that sort of thing, you know, when my lady clapped a revolver to his head and bade him leave to. A boat put off from the stranger, and both lady and friend boarded her. The long and the short of it was, when Vesey was released he had signed a check for \$50,000, and, by Jove, the money was paid on the nail! Chinese government had a score against her for abducting a mandarin of the gold button. They tried to catch her, but failed. English cruiser went after her for two days and lost her near Formosa. Silence again for three months, then new governor and wife, Sir Prendergast Prendergast, were coming out here on the Oloocmo. Her ladyship, who, you know, was mixed up in that Belleville business, had her famous diamonds with her—said to be worth \$30,000. There was also \$50,000 in gold going up to Shanghai. It is supposed that the purser must have been bribed and in the business. At any rate when they arrived at Hongkong both bullion, diamonds and purser were mysteriously missing. Couldn't find a trace of 'em high or low. Whether they went overboard in a fog, whether they were still stowed away on board, nobody ever knew. They were gone; that was enough. The governor was furious and worried the admiralty so with dispatches that two cruisers were sent off with instructions to look for her. They potted about and at last sighted and chased her to the Philippines, where they lost her in a fog. Those are the principal counts against her, I believe. Rum story, ain't it?"

"Extraordinary! Has anybody ever seen her?" "I should just think so; sultan of Surabaja, Vesey, native prince and all the people staying at this house when she was here."

"What description do they give of her?" "Quite a young woman—eight and twenty at most, tall and willowy; beautiful features, clear cut as a cameo; exquisite complexion and rippling golden hair, a voice like a flute, figure like Venus and eyes that look through yours into the uttermost depths of your soul."

"And isn't she worth being enthusiastic about? By Jove! I'd like to know her history."

"And do you mean to tell me that with the English, American, French, German, Chinese and Japanese fleets patrolling these waters it's impossible to catch her?" "Quite—up to the present. Look at the facts of the case. She's here today and gone tomorrow. White yacht seen near Singapore today—copper colored off Macassar on Thursday—black with white ports near Shanghai the week following. The police and the poor old admiral are turning gray under the strain."

"By Jove! I'd like to see her." "Don't say that or you will. Nobody ever knows where she'll turn up next. It is certain that she has agents everywhere and that she's in league with half the junk pirates along the coast. Glad I'm not a man worth abducting."

"But in spite of what you say I can hardly believe that it's possible for a woman to carry on such a trade. It's like a romance."

"It's not like it; it is a romance, and a pretty unpleasant one too. Sultan of Surabaja and poor old Vesey were glad enough to see the final chapter of it, I can assure you. You should just hear the latter's description of the yacht and its appointments. He used to make us creep when he told us how this woman would sit on deck, looking him through and through out of her half closed eyes till he began to feel as if he'd have to get up and scream or sit where he was and go mad. He saw two or three things on board that boat that he says he'll never forget, and I gathered that he doesn't want any more excursions in the lady's company."

"He must be a man without imagination."

"He's a man blessed with good sound common sense. That's what he is."

"It seems incredible that she should have escaped so long."

Peckle took up his cue again. "Hear, hear, to that. And now, Benwell, my boy, if you don't want to go to sleep in that chair turn out and finish the drubbing you've begun. I must be getting aboard directly."

Benwell rose and went round the table to where his ball lay under the cushion. The imperturbable marker called the score as if there had been no pause in the game, and the match was once more getting under way when the swing doors opened and an elderly man entered the room. He was dressed in white from top to toe, carried a big umbrella and wore a broad brimmed solar topee upon his head. Once inside he paused as if irresolute, and then, looking round on its occupants, said politely:

"Forgive my intrusion, but can you

tell me where I can find a gentleman named De Normanville?"

"I am that person," I said, rising from my chair. "I hope you will not think me rude," he continued, "but if you could allow me the honor of five minutes' conversation with you I should be obliged."

"With pleasure." I crossed the room to where he stood and signed him to a seat near the door. "Pardon me," he said, "but the business about which I desire to consult you is of a highly important and confidential nature. Is there any room in the hotel where we can be alone?"

"Only my bedroom, I'm afraid," I answered. "We shall be quite free from interruption there."

"That will do excellently. Let us go to it." Arriving at my room, I lit a candle and pushed a chair forward for him. Having done so, I took up my position beside the open window. Down in the street below I could hear the subdued voices of the passersby, the rattle of rickshaws and the chafing of sampans alongside the wharf. I remember, too, that the moon was just rising over the mainland, and to show how unimportant things become engraved upon the memory I recollect that it struck me as being more like the yolk of a hard boiled egg than ever I remembered to have thought it before. Suddenly I remembered the laws of hospitality.

"Before we begin business may I offer you some refreshment?" I asked. "B. and S.? Whisky?" "I am obliged to you," he answered. "I think I will take a little whisky, thank you."

I put my head out of the door. A servant was passing. "Boy, bring two whisky pegs." Then returning to my guest, I said: "Do you smoke? I think I can give you a good cigar."

He took one from the box and lit it, puffing the smoke luxuriously through his nose. "You are a stranger in Hongkong, I believe, Dr. De Normanville?" he began.

"Not only in Hongkong, but you might say in the east generally," I answered. "I am out on a tour to study Asiatic diseases for a book I am writing."

"You have achieved considerable success in your profession, I believe. We have even heard of you out here."

I modestly held my tongue. But so pitiful is the vanity of man that from this time forward I began to look upon my companion with a more friendly air than I had hitherto shown him. "Now forgive my impertinence," he continued, "but how long do you contemplate remaining in the east?"

"It is very uncertain," I replied, "but I almost fancy another six weeks will find me upon a P. and O. boat homeward bound."

"And in that six weeks will your time be very importantly occupied?" "I cannot say, but I should rather think not. So far as I can tell at present my work is accomplished."

"And now will you let me come to business? To put it bluntly, have you any objection to earning \$1,000?" "Not the very least," I answered, with a laugh. "What man would have, provided, of course, I can earn it in a legitimate manner?"

"You have bestowed considerable attention upon the treatment of smallpox, I believe?" "I have had sole charge of two small-pox hospitals, if that's what you mean."

"Ah, then our informant was right! Well, this business, in which \$1,000 is to be earned, has to do with an outbreak of that disease."

"And you wish me to take charge of it?" "That is exactly what I am commissioned to negotiate."

"Where is the place?" "I cannot tell you."

"Not tell me? That's rather strange, is it not?" "It is all very strange. But with your permission I will explain myself more clearly."

I nodded. "It is altogether an extraordinary business. But, on the other hand, the

pay is equally extraordinary. I am commissioned to find a doctor who will undertake the combating of an outbreak of smallpox on the following terms and conditions: The remuneration shall be \$1,000; the doctor shall give his word of honor not to divulge the business to any living soul; he shall set off at once to the affected spot, and he shall still further pledge himself to reveal nothing of what he may have heard or seen when he returns here again. Is that clear to you?"

"Perfectly. But it's a most extraordinary proposition."

"I grant you it is. But it is a chance that few men would care to let slip."

"At once, without delay; say 12 o'clock tonight."

"It is nearly 11 now." "That will leave an hour. Come, Dr. De Normanville, are you prepared to undertake it?"

"I don't really know what to say. There is so much mystery about it."

"Unfortunately that is necessary." I paced the room in anxious thought, hardly knowing what answer to give. Should I accept or should I decline the offer? The \$1,000 was a temptation, and yet, supposing there were some treachery lurking behind it that, in my innocence of the east, I could not fathom—what then? Moreover, the adventurous side of the affair, I must own, appealed to me strongly. I was young, and there was something supremely fascinating about the compliment and the mystery that enshrouded it.

"Look here," I said at length. "Pay me half the money down before I start as a guarantee of good faith and I'm your man."

"Very good. I will even meet you there." He put his hand inside his coat and drew out a pocketbook. From this he took five \$100 Bank of England notes and gave them to me.

"There, you have half the money." "Thank you. Really, I must beg your pardon for almost doubting you, but—" "Pray say no more. You understand the conditions thoroughly. You are not to divulge a detail of the errand to any living soul now or when you return."

"I will give you my word I will not." "Then that is settled. I am much obliged to you. Can you arrange to meet me on the wharf exactly at midnight?"

"Certainly. I will be there without fail. And now tell me something of the outbreak itself. Is it very severe?" "Very. There have already been nearly 100 cases, out of which quite 50 have proved fatal. Your position will be no sinecure. You will have your work cut out for you."

"So it would appear. Now, if you will excuse me, I will go out and endeavor to obtain some lymph. We shall need all we can get."

"You need not put yourself to so much trouble. That has been attended to. To prevent any suspicion arising from your asking for such a thing, we have laid in a stock of everything you can possibly need."

"Very well, then. I will meet you on the wharf." "On the wharf at 12 o'clock precisely. For the present adieu."

He shook me by the hand, picked up his hat and umbrella and disappeared down the staircase, while I returned to my room to pack.

CHAPTER II

AN EVENTFUL VOYAGE.

The last stroke of 12 was just booming out on the muggy night when I stepped on to the landing stage to await my mysterious employer. The hotel servant who had carried my bag put it down and, having received his gratuity, left me.

Suddenly the patter of naked feet behind me caught my ear. A Chinese chair borne by two stalwart bearers was approaching. Very naturally I settled it in my own mind that it contained the man whom I was to meet and turned to receive him. But when the conveyance was set down it was not the respectable Englishman I had seen before who stepped out of it, but a portly Chinaman of considerable rank and dignity. He was gorgeously clad in figured silk. His pigtail reached half way to his heels and was adorned with much ornamentation, and I noticed that he wore large tortoise shell spectacles which, while they completely hid his eyes, gave a curious effect to his otherwise not unhandsome countenance. Having descended from his equipage, he dismissed his bearers and began to stomp solemnly up and down the landing stage, drawing closer and closer to me at every turn. Presently he summoned up courage enough to accost me. To my surprise he said:

"What for you come here one piece look see?"

Not being an adept at pigeon English, I simply answered: "I'm afraid I don't understand you."

"What for you come here look see?" "I'm waiting for a friend."

"Your friend allee same Englishman?" "Yes, I believe he's an Englishman."

"You go way look see chop chop?" "You'll excuse me, but that's my own affair, I think."

"Allee same smallpeepoxee, I think." "You may think what you please."

"S'posing you say smallpeepoxee, allee same one piece thousand pound?" "I'm afraid I can't continue this conversation. Good evening."

I turned on my heel and was about to leave him when he stopped me by saying in excellent English: "Thank you, Dr. De Normanville. I'm quite satisfied."

"Good gracious! What's all this?" "Why, it means that I have been trying you; that's all. Forgive the deception, but the importance of our mission must be my excuse. Now we must be going. Here is the boat."

As he spoke a large sampan shot out from among its companions and came swiftly toward the wharf.

"Two cautions before we embark—the first, remember that I am a Chinaman and speak only pigeon English; the second, if you are armed, be careful of your revolver. The men who work the junk we are going down to meet are not to be trusted, hence my disguise."

An hour we pursued our way down the harbor, passing a flotilla of junks, threaded a course between the blue and red funnel boats, and finally swept out into the clear space that stretches away from Port Victoria as far as Green Island.

For hours we seemed to be imprisoned in that stuffy little cabin. Like most sampans, the boat smelled abominably, and as we could only see the mechanical rowing of the women in the well forward and hear the occasional commands of the tiny boy steering aft our enjoyment may be placed on the debit side of the account without any fear of miscalculation.

At length my companion, who had not uttered a word since he stepped aboard, began to show signs of impatience. He rose from his seat and peered out into the night. Presently he appeared to be a little relieved in his mind, for he reassured himself with a muttered "Thank goodness," and gave himself up to a careful consideration of our position.

Through a slit in the tarpaulin I could just see that we were approaching a big junk, whose ample girth almost blocked the fairway. Her great, square cut stern loomed above us, and round it our cockswain steered us with a deftness extraordinary.

As we came alongside one of the women rowing drew in her oar and said a few words to my companion. In answer he stepped out of the shelter and called something in Chinese. A voice

from the junk replied, and the answer being evidently satisfactory we hitched on and prepared to change vessels. A rope was thrown to us, and when it had been made fast my guide signed to me to clamber aboard. I did so, and the next moment was on the junk's deck assisting him to a place beside me.

Two or three men were grouped about amidships watching us, and one—the owner or skipper of the boat, I presumed—entered upon a long winded conversation with my conductor. As they talked I heard the sampan push off and disappear astern. Then our crew fell to work. The great sails were hoisted, a hand went aft to the tiller and within five minutes we were waddling down the straits at a pace that might possibly have been four knots an hour. All this time my companion had not addressed me once. His whole attention seemed to be concentrated upon the work going on around him. He treated me with the contemptuous indifference generally shown by Chinamen toward barbarian Englishmen, and that I was wise enough not to resent.

By this time it was nearly 2 o'clock. The wind was every moment freshening and a brisk sea rising. The old tub began to pitch unpleasantly, and I found repeated occasion to thank my stars that I was a good sailor. Sharp dashes of spray broke over her decks at every plunge, soaking us to the skin and adding considerably to the unpleasantness of our position. Still, however, my companion did not speak, but I noticed that he watched the men about him with what struck me as increased attention.

Seeing that I had had no sleep at all that night it may not be a matter of much surprise that I presently began to nod. Stowing myself away in a sheltered corner, I was in the act of indulging in a nap when I felt a body fall heavily against me. It was my companion who had dropped asleep sitting up and had been dislodged by a sudden roll of the ship. He fell clean across me, his face against my ear. Next moment I knew that the catastrophe was intentional.

"Keep your eyes open," he whispered as he lay. "There is treachery aboard. We shall have trouble before long."

After that you may be sure I thought no more of sleep. Pulling myself together I slipped my hand into the pocket that had contained my revolver, only to find, to my horror and astonishment, that it was gone. My pocket had been picked since I had come aboard the junk.

My consternation may be better imagined than described, and as soon as I could find occasion I let my companion know of my misfortune.

"I gave your fair warning," he replied calmly. "Now we shall probably both lose our lives. However, what can't be cured must be endured, so pretend to be asleep and don't move whatever happens until you hear from me. That little pockmarked devil haranguing the others for'ard is Kwong Fung, the most notorious pirate along the whole length of the coast, and if we fall into his hands—well, there will not be two doubts as to what our fate will be."

He tumbled over on to his side with a grunt, while I shut my eyes and pretended to be asleep. It was growing cold, the wind was rising, and with it the sea. Already the stars in the east were paling perceptibly, and in another hour at most day would be born.

I could not take my eyes off the group seated for'ard on the deck for'ard. Their very backs held an awful fascination for me.

But, as it soon turned out, my interest in them was almost my undoing.

for had I not been so intent upon watching what was before me I should perhaps have heard the rustling of a human body outside the bulwarks against which I had seated myself. In that case I should have detected the figure that had crawled quietly over and was now stealing along the deck toward where I lay. In his hand he carried a thin cord at the end of which was a noose just capable of encircling my head.

Suddenly I felt something touch my throat. I lifted my head, and at the same instant the truth dawned upon me. I was being strangled. How long a time elapsed between the cord's touching my neck and my losing consciousness I could not say, but brief as was the interval I can recollect seeing my companion half raise himself. Then came a flash, a loud report, a sudden singing in my ears, and I remember no more.

When I recovered my wits again, my companion was bending over me. "Thank God," he said piously. "I began to think the brute had done for you. Now pull yourself together as fast as you can, for there's going to be serious trouble."

I looked round me as well as I could. By my side lay the body of the man, with the cord still in his hand, and from the way in which one arm was stretched out and the other doubled under him I gathered that he was dead. Amidships the crew of the junk were assembled, listening to the excited oratory of the little pockmarked devil against whom my companion had warned me. He held in his hand a revolver—mine, I had no difficulty in guessing—and from the way in which he turned and pointed in our direction I understood that he was explaining to the others the necessity which existed for exterminating us without delay.

Under the bulwarks and a little to the left of where I sat was a stout iron bar some 2 feet 6 inches in length. I managed to secure it, and having done so felt a little easier in my mind. As I crawled back to my station another report greeted my ears, and at the same instant a bullet bedded itself in the woodwork within an inch of my left temple. "That's the introduction," said my imperturbable friend, with a grim smile. "Are you ready? He's got the only weapon among them and five more cartridges left in it. Keep by me and give no quarter, for, remember, if they win they'll show you none."

Bang! Another bullet whizzed past my ear. Bang! My companion gave a low whistle and then turned to me. "Grazed my forearm," he said calmly, and then, raising his pistol, shot the nearest of our assailants dead. The man gave a little cry, more like a sob, and with outspread arms fell on his face upon the deck. The next roll of the vessel carried him into the lee scuppers, where for some time he was heaved idly to and fro. Never in my life before had I seen anything so coolly deliberate as the way in which he was picked off. It was more like rabbit shooting than anything else.

"Two cartridges gone!" said my comrade. As he spoke a bullet tore up the deck at my feet, while another grazed my right shoulder. "Four. Keep steady; he's only two left. Look out then, for they'll rush us to a certainty. I wish I could get another shot at them first."

But this wish was not destined to be gratified. The scoundrels had had sufficient evidence of his skill as a marksman and, being prudent though precious villains, they had no desire to receive further proof of it. They therefore kept in shelter. Suddenly, without any warning, and with greater majesty than I ever remember to have observed in him before or since, the sun rose in the cloudless sky. Instantly with his coming light and color shot across the waters, the waves from being of a dull leaden hue became green and foam crested, and the great fiber sails of the junk from figuring as bears of double darkness, reaching up to the very clouds, took to themselves again their ordinary commonplace and florid appearance. Our course lay due east, and for this reason the sun shone directly in our faces, dazzling us, and for the moment preventing our seeing anything that might be occurring for'ard. I could tell that this was a matter of some concern to my companion, and certainly it was not to remain very long a matter of indifference to me. The sun had been above the sky line scarcely a matter of two minutes when another shot was fired from for'ard, and I fell with a cry to the deck. Next moment I had picked myself up again, and, feeling very sick and giddy, scrambled to my companion's side. He was as cool and apparently as unconcerned as ever. "The other was the prologue—this is going to be the play itself. Keep as close to me as you can and, above all things, fight to the death—accept no quarter and give none."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before we heard a scampering of bare feet upon the deck and a succession of shrill yells, and then the vessel, paying off a little on her course, showed us the ruffians climbing on to the raised poop upon which we stood. To my horror—for, strangely enough, in that moment of intense excitement I was capable of a second emotion—I saw that they were six in number, while a re-enforcement numbering three more waited upon the forecabin head to watch the turn of events. As the head of the first man appeared my companion raised his pistol and pulled the trigger. The bullet struck the poor wretch exactly on the bridge of the nose, making a clear round hole from which an instant later a jet of blood spurted forth. A second bullet carried another man to his account, and by this time the remaining four were upon us. Of what followed in that turmoil I



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