

Fred M. White



*The Blue
Daffodil*

Fred M. White

The Blue Daffodil



Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338100139

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[CHAPTER I.](#)

[CHAPTER II.](#)

[CHAPTER III.](#)

[CHAPTER IV.](#)

[CHAPTER V.](#)

[CHAPTER VI.](#)

[CHAPTER VII.](#)

[CHAPTER VIII.](#)

[CHAPTER IX.](#)

[CHAPTER X.](#)

[CHAPTER XI.](#)

[CHAPTER XII.](#)

[CHAPTER XIII.](#)

[CHAPTER XIV.](#)

[CHAPTER XV.](#)

[CHAPTER XVI.](#)

[CHAPTER XVII.](#)

[CHAPTER XVIII.](#)

[CHAPTER XIX.](#)

[CHAPTER XX.](#)

[CHAPTER XXI.](#)

[CHAPTER XXII.](#)

[CHAPTER XXIII.](#)

[CHAPTER XXIV.](#)

[CHAPTER XXV.](#)

[CHAPTER XXVI.](#)

THE END

CHAPTER I.

Table of Contents

JOHN GARNSTONE, generally known as Professor Garnstone, sat at a table in his more or less armoured quarters contemplating an array of gold and silver treasures that might have formed what was once known as a king's ransom. Gold plate, silver plate worth ten times its weight in the more precious metal, gems of price, each of them with a history, such a collection as no museum or collection in Europe could boast.

For Garnstone was by far the most noted judge of such things in his generation. He bought and sold and valued as he had done for the last 40 years; he had been the welcome guest of princes and magnates, for his judgment was unerring and his word was undisputed in the sale rooms of London and Paris. His own collection was rumoured to be unequalled, and his present wealth was estimated at a million.

An old man, this John Garnstone. Tall and thin and spare with a fine head crowned with a mass of silver hair, an imposing old man, rather hard of feature and reserved in manner as if he were the recipient of secrets—as doubtless he was. A man apparently without friends, outside his business, unless one counted his secretary, Vera Zaroff and Captain Ronald Brentford, late of the Indian Army, and now a professional hunter of rare flora on behalf of his employer. For, outside his business, Garnstone had one mastering passion—the propagation and cross fertilization of flowers. He was prepared to go to any length to obtain the rare. His

one great ambition was to give the world a blue daffodil. It was Brentford's main business to discover this or something like a bulb from which the perfect flower might be bred.

From somewhere in the Caucasus slopes leading up from the Black Sea, Brentford had discovered a pale simulacrum of the flower, and this bulb had formed the basis of Garnstone's excursions into Mendelism. At the moment he seemed to be on the verge of success. In his roof conservatory was a solitary bulb in a pot already showing leaf, and when this bloomed, Garnstone was convinced that he would have reached his desideratum at last. Three weeks more, and then——

It was in a strange quarter of Town in which Garnstone had, so to speak, pitched his camp. He had purchased a more or less derelict block of offices which had long been in Chancery, and on the top storey he had dug himself in. In the basement lived the caretaker with the ground floor let as a warehouse, above that a whole floor was vacant and over that a suite of rooms, where Garnstone lived and had his being. For the most part he used a sort of office-library with a bedroom leading out of it. There was a large dining-room, and on the far side of that the bedroom occupied by Vera Zaroff, the lady secretary. As for meals, they were all taken out—even breakfast—and whatever house work was required was part of the duties of one, Isaac Gunter, the bachelor caretaker, who lived in the basement.

Garnstone was taking no risks so far as burglars were concerned. It was common knowledge that besides his own many priceless treasures he frequently held in temporary possession historic valuables on behalf of royal and other

clients. The very latest thing in the way of safes was not entirely satisfactory, so that Garnstone had caused a door of steel and reinforced concrete to be built into the entrance to the upper floor, the master-key of which he alone held.

Above this city fortress was the flat lead-covered roof given over almost entirely to the great conservatory where the flowers flourished despite London fog and mist since the roof caught all the sunshine and looked over the river without much intervening obstruction.

The sun was shining into the flat that early autumn morning as Garnstone sat at his big desk going over his treasures. He placed them presently on a large Queen Anne salver, and locked them securely away. He touched a bell on his desk.

Into the room came Vera Zaroff, a slim creature moving with the easy grace of a deer. Young and beautiful, her dark loveliness was enhanced by the fact that her hair, which grew naturally, was white as frosted silver. And so it had been since her 15th year, when she lost both her parents abroad.

This last member of an aristocratic family had reached London almost penniless, and there had found Garnstone, whom she had known as a child since he once visited her ancestral home with a view to arranging and valuing the immense family treasures. All these had afterwards been lost during the misfortunes that had broken her father's heart.

Despite his reserve and natural coldness, Garnstone had a warm corner in his heart for Vera. Moreover she had proved her worth as a secretary. Now she was more or less

in his confidence, and more like a daughter than a paid servant.

"Good morning," she said in her perfect English. "I did not hear you come in last night, and began to fear——"

"I was detained by the Duke of Middlesex," Garnstone explained. "Also I heard a rumour that Brentford had returned from Brazil. Has he written by any chance?"

A warm wave of colour stained Vera's cheek.

"There is nothing in this morning's correspondence," Vera said, "but then he never writes when he is on his way home. It will be very nice to see him again."

Calmly as she spoke Vera could not keep out of her voice a little thrill which was not lost on her employer. He smiled like some benevolent old aristocrat though who he was and whence he came none could as much as guess.

As Vera stooped to hide a certain confusion, her eye fell on some glittering object on the floor. She bent to pick it up, and a cry of admiration broke from her lips at the sight of the little gold box in her hand.

A snuff-box evidently made in some remote period, on the lid of it a miniature exquisitely painted of some Court beauty, the face surrounded with brilliants. The background was red and black enamel, with a monogram inserted in rubies.

"What a lovely thing," Vera cried. "And what a lovely face! Strange, yet oddly familiar. If——"

An instant later the box was snatched from her hand with a force which was almost painful. Vera started back at the changed expression on Garnstone's face. The bland benevolence was no longer there, the mouth was drawn in a

hard line of cunning and rage—such an expression as Vera had never seen before. It was only for an instant, but the impression on Vera's mind was clear and vivid.

"A sacred memory," Garnstone murmured with a return of his normal manner. "Most careless of me. It must have fallen from the table when I was examining some objects of art just now. I will return it to the safe."

For a moment the incident passed. But Vera was to recall it in dramatic circumstances before long.

Then there were letters to be written to clients all over the world, catalogues to mark until the hour for tea arrived. This appeared through the medium of Gunter, the caretaker, a man who might have been earlier in his career either a prize-fighter or a burglar of the Bill Sikes school. The front door of the fortress was unlocked to admit him, and on his heels came a youngish-looking man at the sight of whom Vera flushed and her hands trembled ever so slightly.

"Ronald," she whispered, but the new-comer caught the word and the tender light behind his smile was more eloquent than any word would have been.

"Vera, I kiss your hand," Ronald Brentford cried. "So good to be back home once more. I trust I see you well, sir. And the Blue Daffodil? Has that burgeoned yet?"

"I hope that you are back in time to see its birth, my young friend," Garnstone smiled. "There is a bursting bulb in the conservatory—but I must not anticipate. Sit down and relate your adventures over a cup of tea."

"I am afraid there is little to tell," Ronald said. "It seems to me that the Brazilian forests are played out so far as new flora is concerned. That is unless you are prepared to fit out

a full-dress expedition to explore lands where no single hunter dare venture alone. At my hotel I have a few new orchids of no striking beauty and little use. I worked my way back through Asia Minor and once more visited the slopes of the Caucasus hoping to find some further development of the Blue Daffodil without effect."

"Were you near Batoum?" Vera asked. "You remember that we had a summer palace there in the old days; at least Mr. Garnstone does. A lovely place on the Black Sea."

"Of course I remember it well, Vera," Garnstone said, with a wave of his hand. "Some of my happiest days were spent there with your father and mother."

"I saw it," Brentford explained. "My passport allowed me to go anywhere. The Zaroff Palace is now a sort of residential barracks for the ironstone workers, and the once fine park is a crater from which the ironstone is raised. I seem to remember that the Caucasian Blue Daffodil formed part of your coat of arms, Vera."

"Well, I should hardly call it a blue flower," Vera said with a smile. "Rather a dirty mauve. And not much of a bloom either. Isn't it rather strange that you should have found the basic flower of Mr. Garnstone's ambition near my home?"

"Not at all," Garnstone interrupted. "Don't forget that I was on terms of intimate friendship with your family, Vera. It was the discovery of one of those mauve flowers close to your summer palace that first inspired me with the desire to perfect the Blue Daffodil. Cause and effect, my dear."

"Then within a month or so?" Ronald suggested.

"Somewhere about that, my boy. Meanwhile I have plenty of other work for you to do. A few days' holiday, and then

—"

"Doesn't Vera deserve one, too?" Brentford asked. "That is unless you have other views for her. I rather hoped I was to have the honour of taking her out to dine to-night."

"Why not?" Garnstone smiled. "I propose to dine here and do a little work, afterwards. Vera can have the key. I know I can trust it in her hands."

"I should love it," Vera murmured.



CHAPTER II.

Table of Contents

HERE was a great concession, and the lovers knew it. There were two keys to the fortress, one of which was a master, the other for the use of Vera when Garnstone was away, and she had need to leave the premises. And the way in which the keys were worked in the front door lock was known only to Garnstone and his trusted secretary. A certain gadget had to be manipulated first, and this, working automatically, was so ingeniously hidden that nobody who managed to steal the key could possibly find it or indeed be aware that it existed. Thieves had attempted to enter the old millionaire's stronghold, but with no success. In front of the building was a powerful standard lamp which was always turned on at night from inside Garnstone's library. Of this the police were aware and would act promptly in case the light failed. There was a side window to the building, but this led to a blind alley, also the side of the building lacked anything in the shape of water pipes, while such windows as had been there at one time were now bricked up so that the side of the house presented an entirely flat surface to any enterprising burglar who had an ambition to enter the fortress.

It was just after seven o'clock when Vera left the flat, carefully closing the door behind her. She heard the great steel bolts click into their places, and then adjusted the ingenious gadget on the outside. This could be manipulated from the inside by a master key in case of emergency. And in case Garnstone wanted to go out, he would inform Gunter

of the fact by house telephone and take that bodyguard with him which was a rigid rule where night excursions were concerned. That was if Garnstone was carrying valuables on his person.

Vera walked along in the direction of the Premium Hotel, where Ronald was to meet her, feeling that she had not a care in the world. She was happy and comfortable in her work; she was in the enjoyment of more money than she could spend seeing that she had no friends of either sex and therefore had no occasion to fritter her salary away on pleasures.

All the same there were times when she longed for some change from the monotony of the fortress. She knew that she would be well provided for when Garnstone was no more, as did Ronny Brentford himself. That Ronnie had fallen in love with her was a wonderful and delightful thing, but then Ronnie was so often on his travels, and Garnstone was not supposed to know that the young people had come to an understanding.

But had they really come to an understanding? Vera asked herself as she walked along. There was nothing on her left hand to prove the fact, but perhaps after to-night.

There was a delicate flush on her face and a sparkle in her eyes as she entered the lounge where Ronnie Brentford was eagerly awaiting her. And when she bared her head showing the mass of silver hair in striking contrast to her dark colouring, many admiring glances were turned in her direction. Not that she noticed these in the dazzle of lights, the flowers on the shaded tables and the life and movement about her.

But she did not fail to see the proud gleam in Ronnie's eyes as he escorted her to a table reserved in one corner of the room. There they took their seats, and now Vera had an opportunity to study the gay scene about her. As she did so all the colour drained from her cheeks, and for a moment it seemed to Brentford that she was on the point of fainting.

"What is the matter, darling?" he whispered.

It was the first time that term of endearment had passed his lips, and Vera thrilled to it. All the same, she indicated a dark, rather distinguished man with a black moustache and short beard, who was sitting at a nearby table in company with a pretty girl in red.

"That man there," Vera whispered. "Paul Manstar. At one time my father's secretary. He has changed little, but I recognise him. I was but a child at the time, but I shall never forget him."

"But he can't hurt you," Ronnie pointed out.

"I know, I know," Vera murmured. "But the sight of him brings it all back. The man who owed us everything. And the man who stole thousands of pounds worth of treasures."

"I'll make it my business to learn something about him," Ronnie declared grimly, "but probably you will never see him again, darling."

Brentford's voice trailed off on the last endearing word, and once more Vera thrilled to it. She shook off her terror, and smiled into her companion's eyes. In a few moments the man with the black beard was forgotten.

"I shall have to stay in London and look after you I can see," Ronnie said. "You live too much alone with that old man. The mere fact that he is going to leave you a lot of

money some day is not everything. And 'some day' may be a long way off, sweetheart. Vera, can't you imagine why I asked you to come here with me to-night?"

"To—give me pleasure," Vera murmured.

"And both of us happiness, I hope," Ronnie said. "Vera, you must know that I love you. I have done so since the very first day we met. I am not so poor that we shall have to wait. I don't want you to desert the old man who has been so good to both of us, but the time must come when—but perhaps I am taking too much for granted. Still, if you think you can possibly care for me one of these days . . ."

Her dark eyes met his grey ones.

"I could ask no greater happiness," she said steadily. "What more could any girl wish for than a good man's love? Let me make a confession, my Ronnie. When you asked me to dine with you to-night I prayed for something like this. From the first it has always been you, Ronnie. Oh, it is lovely to feel that I am no longer in the world with nobody to confide in or seek out if I needed a haven of rest. Ronnie, you have lifted the one great shadow from my heart."

She paused, conscious that other eyes were watching her, and laughed with the sheer joy of life. What did it matter what they ate or drank? What did anything matter just then?

"Let's make the best of the shining hour," Ronnie cried gaily. "When we have finished here we will go on to some show and perhaps a dance. You have your pass-key so that it does not matter what time you get home. I shall see you as far as the fortress door anyway."

And Vera was content to leave it at that. But it was only when dinner was over and she and her lover were in a taxi on the way to the Coliseum that Vera experienced the full measure of her happiness. With Ronnie's arms about her and his lips on hers she drank the full contentment of life.

"We will keep our secret to ourselves darling," Ronald said as they sat in the darkness of the taxi. "Take this ring that I brought with me in case my love was returned, and wear it about your neck for the present. We don't want to upset the old man before it is necessary. Hold it to the light. Then tell me if my taste meets with your approval."

"Won't you put it on?" Vera asked.

"Of course," Ronald cried. "How stupid of me."

He slipped the diamond and platinum circle about the slender finger where it fitted to perfection.

"How lovely, and yet how simple," Vera murmured in a rapture of delight. "I should like to wear it always; I should like to flash it in the face of the world and say it was given me by the best man I know—the man I am going to marry. But perhaps you are right. Still Mr. Garnstone may choose to retire one of these days and then——"

"Never!" Ronald cried emphatically. "The fascination of his job will never grow less. The handling of historic gems and plate forms part of his life."

"Shared by the Blue Daffodil," Vera laughed. "Don't forget that, Ronnie."

"Which flower he thinks he has found," Brentford pointed out. "With that ambition satisfied, he will be all the more keen on his life's work. Moreover, he may not be quite as rich as we think he is. He spends recklessly doing research

work for other people, and merely takes his trade commission. Also he is fond of money. He pays neither of us too much, and Gunter, who has been with him all these years, never sees more than his few shillings a week. Nor dare he ask for a few shillings in advance."

It was with a sigh that at length the lovers parted at the entrance of the old building, and Brentford lingered on the pavement until he heard the clicking in the bolts of the steel door, so that he knew Vera to be safe inside.

Meanwhile Vera had closed the door behind her and satisfied herself that all was well. Doubtless Garnstone had long since retired, so that to all practical purposes Vera had the flat to herself. She would not seek her bedroom yet for sleep was far away. She would go into the library and read for a time.

Five minutes later a cry rang out a cry so loud that it might have been heard in the street. It reached the ears of Gunter in his bedroom, and brought him to his feet. Scrambling into his clothes he raced up the stairs. Then the cry again—-one word:

"Murder."
