

THE LEE-HODGINS CO., LIMITED

BY FRED M. WHITE

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CHAPTER I.

RALPH KINGSMILL drew a deep breath as he looked around. It seemed life had suddenly brought him all that man could desire. His waking dream had been picturing this never hoping to see it realized. And now it had all come to him in unexpected fashion. A week before and what had he been? A poor, struggling author, with one or two minor successes to his credit, burning with unattained ambition, strong at one moment, lamentably weak the next; in short, a brilliantly clever man, cursed with the temperamental faults that usually go with the artistic faculty. He had had his debts and his dissolute companions, he had known a full pocket and a purse so lean that starvation had stared him in the face. The sordid side was the more painful, agonizing, because Ralph had known the luxury of a refined home and was an old public school boy.

More than once he had fallen very low indeed—in moments of despair nothing seemed to matter. But he could not quite crush self-respect and the feeling that he was born to better things. Nor had he ever crossed the borderland from which no traveler can return unscathed. He was wildly, even hysterically, glad of it when he had realized what the wand of fortune had done for him.

He stood up in the pride of his six feet of splendid manhood, his passionate brown eyes bedewed with moisture. The spirit of the athlete still burned within him. And here—almost incredible though it was—was the chance that he had dreamed of.

He might wake presently and find he had been dreaming. But the fine old house was real enough; so were the Elizabethan furniture, the pictures and the plate, the glorious gardens and the park with the historic oaks beyond. And all this was Ralph's, with a good eight thousand pounds a year to dress the part.

How had it all come about? Well, the thing was simple. Ralph had been a student of a literary misanthrope, who knew nobody and boasted that he had not a single relation in the world. He sneered at everything sentimental, and yet his very loneliness was the outcome of an unrequited attachment years before. And one day there came in his way a short poem of Ralph's which touched a hidden chord in the miser's heart. Ralph had written it from his heart after some mad dissipation. But the owner of Abbey Close did not know it, and thought he recognized a kindred spirit. It would be fine to leave all his money and property to the writer of that poem. The thing was done. Doubtless it would have been done again in a fortnight, had not a sharp attack of pneumonia cut Mr. Ripley off, and Ralph, to his astonishment, found himself in possession of the Close. Strange things had happened before to-day.

So here it was all for Ralph to do as he liked with it. At that particular moment no selfish thoughts were occupying his attention. He was thinking of End Chatterer. End's father, Sir Charles Charteris, End's father, should be situated not four miles from Abbey Close, and Ralph had met her ever since the night when he had met the girl at a reception in Grosvenor Square. Pretty low as he had fallen, there were times when Ralph accepted the invitations of his father's old friends and was tempted to "revisit the pale glances of the night." How well he recalled the glorious July night.

And End? Well, Ralph was handsome, and as to his brilliant intellect there could be no doubt. The girl had met him many times, when End's lovely face would flash and mantle, and there was something in her blue eyes that told Ralph a tender story. But he had never spoken; he was too proud for that.

Now everything was changed. He had hoped to tell End of his good fortune, but others had been before him, and she had written him a little note of congratulation. Could she come and advise him as to the ordering of his new house? And so End was coming; coming alone, too, for one of her charms was her easy unconventionality. She would be here in a few moments, the sunshine of her presence would fill the room.

An old fellow student of mine. I had the telegram a little time ago. If I am late, do not wait for me." Ralph looked relieved. Perhaps Barca noticed the expression for she smiled slightly. Just for a moment his brown eyes flashed like electric points of flame. Ralph wondered why he had asked this keen-witted, hair little man of the world at the very time when he most desired to be alone?

"Very good," he said. "If you are late I will see that some dinner is kept for you." Barca departed whistling, but when alone he laughed quietly and his eyes flashed again. There was a snarl on his lips, a greedy, cautious look on his face. Once more he smiled as he saw the solitary figure of a horseman coming along the drive.

"A pretty romance," he said to himself. "A pity to spoil it! And yet here is the opportunity of my lifetime. That dreamer has everything, I nothing. Well, well, Richard Barca is not going to starve whilst Ralph Kingsmill is wallowing in pleasure." The rider came slowly up to the house; a groom appeared from somewhere and took her horse. She made her way into the old paneled hall; her blue eyes took in the old pictures and the trophies, the piled up ferns and flowers. End was glad that Ralph loved flowers; it was another bond of sympathy between them. Ralph was standing at the drawing room door now with a tender smile on his face; End flushed a delicate pink in response.

For a long time Ralph held her hands in his. "This is all I wanted to make my pleasure," he said tenderly. "I was half afraid lest something should detain you at the last moment." "You will not think me dreadfully unconvivial," End said, with an unsteady laugh. "My father half promised to come, but business prevented him. Of course, I ought not to be here at all. How shocked some of our old friends would be! But curiosity was too strong for me, and—"

Ralph thrilled to his finger tips. Tender words rose to his lips. He talked indifferently enough as End lay back in the depths of an old beech chair and sipped her tea. But his eyes were full of fire, and every sympathy, and listened to all that Ralph had to say with a flush of pleasure on her dusky face. She seemed to feel exactly as he did. Ralph came over to her side and took her empty cup away. He could see the gleam of her pearls and teeth and catch the fragrance of her hair.

"What a wonderful gift of sympathy you have," he said at length. "It was the first thing I noticed in you the night we met in Grosvenor Square. You tell me a secret, End. I went there to get a meal. My fortunes were at their lowest ebb that night. I had no money in my pocket then the junior footman told me of a Chatterer over again. And then I met you. As I walked home I felt exactly as you did. I was almost afraid to see you. I was afraid that I should tell you the truth. And I feel that you have given me a new life."

The girl's golden head was bent for a moment; Ralph could see the rosy pink flush of her cheeks. Then she looked at the delicate creamy face was lifted to his glance. "I think so," End almost whispered. "I seemed to understand. And I admired you for your pride and reticence. Still, that is all over now." "I am not so sure," Ralph said with a deep thrill in his voice. "I don't know what I have done to deserve this good fortune, End. I meant to win it by my own unaided efforts. But I have failed. I have failed pretty low at times. But that is in the past and gone. In the future, my life is to be worthy. I am getting to love this place as one who possesses a soul in the love to the beautiful. But there is something lacking. My darling, will you come into my life and fill the void? I need not tell you that I love you—I am certain that you have known me for a long time."

"Why should I deny it?" End cried. "It seemed so hopeless at one time. I knew that so long as you were poor you would never speak. I will be more candid still and own that I—I pictured something like this as I rode here today. You will think me a little presumptuous, but I am not so. No, no," Ralph exclaimed. "There is no need for more. End, say you love me and will be my wife?" "I am not so sure," End said, with a deep thrill in his voice. "I don't know what I have done to deserve this good fortune, End. I meant to win it by my own unaided efforts. But I have failed. I have failed pretty low at times. But that is in the past and gone. In the future, my life is to be worthy. I am getting to love this place as one who possesses a soul in the love to the beautiful. But there is something lacking. My darling, will you come into my life and fill the void? I need not tell you that I love you—I am certain that you have known me for a long time."

as he would, he could not keep a little harshness out of his voice. "I had forgotten that your brother and Holt were friends. We were all at Eton together, as a matter of fact. I have met Holt recently. Where is he now?" There was anxiety in the question, but End did not seem to notice it. "How small the world really is!" she exclaimed. "Mr. Holt is staying with a friend near us and is dining with us to-night. He goes back to town by the last train. Can't I persuade you to come over tonight and meet him?" But Ralph shook his head. He was far more disturbed and uneasy than he would have cared for End to know. He had buried all the old ghosts, and yet here was one in his path, far away from the house that he had left forever.

"I don't think so, dearest," he said. "My first visit to your place must be for a formal visit to your father and tell him what has happened. Tomorrow afternoon, And if Sir Charles listens favorably to my suit, I may be asked to dinner afterwards."

"As if I had ever refused me anything!" End laughed. There was a wonderful tender happiness shining in her blue eyes. "If you like I will keep your room for you. I shall have to tell everybody as I go along. And I hope I shall never be jealous of you, Ralph. Where were your women love we have no half-way house. You know something of our family history."

A slight shadow crossed Ralph's face. There was more than one dark story in the family archives, and jealousy had been at the bottom of them. But he had a sign of that mad passion in the melting blue eyes that Ralph was looking down into. He shook off the sense of impending evil and kissed the smiling girl's lips again. "And now I must go," End said. "Do you mean to say that it is half-past six? I shall barely have time to get home before some of our old friends will be here. But curiosity was too strong for me, and—"

Ralph smiled at the impetuosity of the girl. He had not the feeling that she was a man who has been successful could afford to deal delicately with his ousted rival. It seemed hard to believe, though, that the man who had been a clerk in a bank, once been on friendly, not to say affectionate, terms with End. But then Stephen Holt had been a different man in those days. He had been a clerk in a bank, once been on friendly, not to say affectionate, terms with End. But then Stephen Holt had been a different man in those days. He had been a clerk in a bank, once been on friendly, not to say affectionate, terms with End. But then Stephen Holt had been a different man in those days.

Ralph threw his cigarette away and strode moodily to the door. He was ready to face any danger and had his nerves under perfect control. And yet there were one or two things that he could not get out of his mind. The girl's golden head was bent for a moment; Ralph could see the rosy pink flush of her cheeks. Then she looked at the delicate creamy face was lifted to his glance. "I think so," End almost whispered. "I seemed to understand. And I admired you for your pride and reticence. Still, that is all over now."

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ed clean white to the bones. The man was trembling from head to foot with passion. And yet his laugh was steady. "I am not so favored," he said. "And I have no time for the tender passions, I who have only myself to depend upon. What has the obscure doctor whose first recollection is the whitewashed wall of a foundling hospital, to do with love? It is not as if I had come into a lovely place like this. Upon my word, I envy you. I have made a study of the house. There are art treasures, tapestries, and the like, in a great store-room in the attic that would furnish the place twice over. And the grand old Persian carpets. Why, the one on the floor here is priceless."

Ralph agreed eagerly. He was grateful to Barca for changing the conversation. And in sooth, the dining room carpet was a marvelous affair, cream and gold and pallid blue, unfaded and unchanged after the lapse of three centuries. Ralph stood contemplating it long after Barca had pleaded fatigue and gone to bed. It was getting late now, and all the servants had retired. The long window looking to the lawn was not closed; the silken curtains lifted and fro in the breeze. Ralph got as far as the junction, and then he sat down to wait. He was in a glow of delight contemplating his new great happiness.

The past lay behind him, forgotten for the moment. The curtains before the window shook ominously, but Ralph took no heed. He did not hear footsteps on the gravel, and looked up in mild surprise as a man stepped and a man stepped into the room. A puff of wind closed the door gently but firmly, and the shaded lamps smoked to the last visitor you expected, the intruder said harshly.

He advanced to the centre of the room, a slim figure, with good-looking features marked by the traces of dissipation. The grey eyes were a little too close together, the lips under the close mouth too sensual. But the eyes were blazing and the man's whole frame quivered with impatient anger. "One question at a time," he said. "It is some time since we met. I should have thought after our last meeting that you would not have ventured to intrude upon me again. What do you mean by coming here in this fashion at this hour?"

The stranger laughed hoarsely. There was studied insolence in his manner. "One question at a time," he said. "It will be my turn presently. I left Charteris Park to go to town by the last train. I got as far as the junction, and then I left my carriage and came here by way of the fields. I should not have come at all had I not discovered something at dinner tonight. You are engaged to End Charteris?"

Ralph smiled at the impetuosity of the girl. He had not the feeling that she was a man who has been successful could afford to deal delicately with his ousted rival. It seemed hard to believe, though, that the man who had been a clerk in a bank, once been on friendly, not to say affectionate, terms with End. But then Stephen Holt had been a different man in those days. He had been a clerk in a bank, once been on friendly, not to say affectionate, terms with End. But then Stephen Holt had been a different man in those days.

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was an Eastern toy, but capable of being a dangerous weapon in a strong man's hands. "And if I refuse this preposterous offer," he said in a deep whisper. "Then I go to End and tell her everything. I give her those letters to read. I can't give her up; you do not know how I love her, Kingsmill. To me she is salvation itself. Once she sees those letters you are done for, and you know it."

Ralph rose to his feet. He was seeing red before his eyes now, lost in a tempest of whirling passions. The worm must be killed, this loathsome thing swept aside. Ralph seemed to feel that he had somebody by the coat collar, somebody who was crying out in alarm. Something on the shining surface of the dining-table, a third against white living flesh; then a red stream of spurring fluid lay like a swelling river on the carpet. . . .

And all in the twinkling of an eye. A red patch had blazed and burned before him. As to the rest, he could not speak definitely. He could feel the handle of the paper-knife in his grasp, a grasp so painful that the flesh of his palm was bruised. There was crimson on his right hand, dull glowing patches like carbuncles on the shining surface of the dining-table. On the carpet, Stephen Holt lay stretched at length, face downwards, his hands clung over his head. A great band of crimson stained the delicate cream and gold and blue of the priceless Persian carpet; there were specks of horrid red on the great bowl of tea roses on the table. All these minute details Ralph noticed with an astounding grasp of little things. As a writer he had always had an eye for details, but never was that faculty more keenly developed than now. Ralph wondered at his own calmness. As he stood there he could feel his heart beating with normal regularity.

He bent over the dreadful thing lying on the floor, the dull husk of what had been a palpitating human being a few moments before. Stephen Holt was dead. He was not the faintest pulsation; the hands were already turning to a clammy blue. The murderer had no delusion on that point. He was a murderer. He started as the thought came home to him. A cold-blooded, wilful and deliberate murderer. He had killed a man in self-defense. And he would not have even one single plea in self-defense. He could not drag End's name into this horrid business. He could only say that Stephen Holt had come to blackmail him. There were no signs of a struggle, no suggestion of a quarrel and murder. He had killed a man in self-defense. And he would not have even one single plea in self-defense. He could not drag End's name into this horrid business. He could only say that Stephen Holt had come to blackmail him. There were no signs of a struggle, no suggestion of a quarrel and murder. He had killed a man in self-defense. And he would not have even one single plea in self-defense. He could not drag End's name into this horrid business. He could only say that Stephen Holt had come to blackmail him.

Ralph would be taken to the place from which he had been taken by the use of the law. He was dead. Ralph had heard those dreaded words fall from the lips of the judge once, and had never forgotten the sound of them. He was dead. And now he would stand in the dock and hear another judge say the same thing to him! It seemed incredible. He seemed deplorable of the happiest men alive. It seemed deplorable that he should have everything and suffer like this for such a creature as Stephen Holt. He was better dead than alive; Ralph had done the State some service after all. And nobody knew that Holt had been there; he had crept into the house like a thief in the night. Nobody could know that he had come to Abbey Close; nobody had seen him leave

the railway train at the Junction. If he were missed, it might be assumed that he had fallen out of the carriage. By this time his portmanteau had reached the London terminus. Ralph was listening to the honied voice of temptation now. Nobody had been near to see the tragedy. The whole house was perfectly still. And now at the foot of the garden was a deep lake that would for ever hold its ghastly secret. It was only necessary to drag the body there and fill the pockets of the dead man with stones. . . .

Ralph bent over the prostrate figure. But he could not touch it. His impulse was to scream, the hysterical scream of a frightened woman. Besides, there was the hideous crimson pool on the carpet, which would have to be accounted for. That priceless carpet could not be changed or cleaned, or spirited away. There were the red spots on the tea roses, but they did not matter much.

No, that idea would have to be abandoned. Surely, there was some other way? What was the use of being a creative novelist if he could not devise a way out of a situation like this? The great idea of sensational fiction was to find the way of safety for the hero, and Ralph had cultivated this line with distinct success. But somehow in fiction the thing seemed different—then facts could be fitted to the situation, here the situation was inviolate. A score of schemes rushed through Ralph's mind.

Finally it came to him. He would do nothing; he would go to bed and leave the window open. It would be an easy matter to fill the pockets of the dead man with little art treasures, and leave him there to be found by the servants in the morning. The inference might be that there were two burglars, and that they had quarrelled. A poor story, but in the circumstances the best that Ralph could invent.

Ralph was himself again by this time; he was even conscious of a certain indignation. He might have rung the bell and summoned the household to hear that he had killed a man in self-defense. But Ralph was as poor an actor as authors generally are, and shrank from the making of a scene. He would not have any acting; he would be himself. He would make up his mind to go through with it all now; nobody could know, he would marry End and live happily ever afterwards.

His mind was beginning to move more rapidly. To be quite safe he must get to bed. He extinguished the lights, purposely leaving open the window by which Holt had entered. He crept up the stairs and along the corridor. A slit of light from one of the doors attracted his attention. He could just see into Barca's room. The latter had removed his dress coat and vest and had assumed a workmanlike apron. A prettily shaded lamp was on a side table, and under it Barca was doing something mysterious with his hands. He appeared to be engrossed in his labors.

A sudden thought came to Ralph. He slipped quietly along to his room and took off his clothes. Then he slipped into his pyjamas and fumbled his hair. After that he walked down the lobby till he came to Barca's room. Without hesitation he flung open the door, rubbed his eyes, and yawned. "Not going to bed?" he exclaimed. "Very busy?"

"I thought you had not come upstairs yet," Barca suggested. "Been up a long time," Ralph replied. He was surprised to find how readily the lie came to his lips. "Fact is, I followed you up. I suppose I must have been asleep an hour when I thought I heard a voice downstairs. I came to investigate, and found your door open. Did you hear anything?" Barca replied quite gravely that he had heard nothing. He had just broken a test-tube, and perhaps that sound had disturbed Ralph. Barca appeared to be engrossed in his work, and did not once look at

his companion. Ralph was grateful for that. He had made up his mind what to do now, he could see it through to the end. He ought to have gone back to bed, but he feared the silence of the night. It would be broad daylight at four o'clock, but it would be three hours to that time. And to be tossing in the darkness with that stark body lying below was more than Ralph could bear.

"How long are you going to be over that experiment?" he asked. Barca shrugged his shoulders, but did not look up. "I can't say," he explained. "Perhaps an hour, perhaps all night. When once I am speaking of forgery and the like. Could you remove the writing on a cheque without destroying the water-mark?"

"Quite easily," Barca said in the same level tone of voice. "The murderer need not fear the tell-tale stain of blood with this in his possession. And it permeates. A few drops sprinkled on a packet of letters, for instance, would in a short time leave all the sheets blank. Your letters to Kate Lingens, for instance." The suggestion fairly startled Ralph. It so nearly touched the tragedy downstairs that he could feel the rapid beating of his heart. His guilty conscience asked him if Barca knew anything. But this was almost impossible; the remark was a mere coincidence. And Barca had not looked up; he was going on, talking the work with the same stolid, painstaking gravity.

"Those letters are destroyed," Ralph said coldly. "Kate told me so. And, in any case, she could gain nothing by keeping them." "Except for purposes of revenge," said Barca, meaningly. "In case you get engaged." Again there was the subtle suggestion that Barca knew something. There was a note of warning in his voice that Ralph could not wholly ignore. He would have liked to challenge the speaker, but Barca refused to look up. He gave Ralph the impression that he was merely talking for the sake of politeness.

"I am engaged," Ralph said, according to custom. "I am going to marry Miss End Charteris, of Charteris Park. If you think that I have anything to fear—"

"My dear fellow, I did not say so. I merely suggested the possibility of it. Revenge is sweet, especially to women," as Byron says. Knowing something of Barca's temper, I should say that your letters were by no means deficient of what another poet calls 'purple patches.' They might make a pretty wedding present for your bride. It would be by no means the first instance of the kind."

"In that case I should have to procure some of those 'purple patches' myself," Ralph laughed. The feeling that he could laugh startled him. "If you could spare enough—"

Barca smiled in his peculiar way, though he did not look Ralph quickly and squarely in the face as he generally did. As a rule, Barca's eyes were notes of interrogation, and when he met a stranger he flashed his dark glance over him like the rays of a searchlight, and from that moment appeared to know the other thoroughly. But now he was bending over his tubes as if he had no thought for anything else. It was some time before he spoke again. (To be continued.)

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