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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The White Goddess**

An Encounter

Written by Simon Gough

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1953

## GRAND-UNCLE ROBERT

My ears began to ache. The lower we descended, the more they ached. I swallowed hard, then held my nose and pursed my lips and blew through my ears, as Sonja had told me to do. The pain grew worse. I could no longer look out of the window, although I wanted to so badly, but sat pressed into the back of my seat staring straight ahead, my hands clasped to my ears in an effort to soften the pain.

Sonja came back, recognised my problem at once, and took a boiled sweet from a pocket so immaculate that there seemed no room for one inside it. ‘Suck that, Simon – it should help. It’s only the cabin pressure. You’ll be fine once we land,’ she smiled reassuringly as she strapped me into my seat, and then strapped herself into the one opposite.

The plane, from being a magical cocoon slipping through space, became clumsy and hesitant, rocking from side to side, rising and falling as if it couldn’t make up its mind what to do. The engines throttled back, increasing the terrible din in my ears. We didn’t belong on Earth—

‘Is your mother meeting you?’

The question came as such a shock that I almost forgot the pain. Of course she would! Unless she had asthma or bronchitis or something, I’d see her in a few minutes – oh, God, please make the pain go away so that she needn’t know. She’d make a fuss, get tired, cross—

Sonja touched my arm and pointed through the window.

I gasped. Only feet away, rushing past me, was a windmill – then another, and another, faster and faster, strange white windmills

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with little canvas sails stretched over frames on the ends of long poles, motionless in the breathless sunlight—

A jolt and screech of wheels bouncing onto the runway, then another, the turbines roaring, my ears bellowing back, the aircraft braking and braking until I felt as though I were being dragged through my seat backwards – then suddenly released as the engines relaxed at last and we began to taxi, bouncing and bumping over what looked like endlessly repaired tarmac.

Sonja ruffled my hair and smiled at me. ‘I’ll let everyone else off first, so you can get used to normal pressure again.’ She glanced out of the window. ‘Is your mother here? Can you see her?’

I looked out at the shacks and prefabs of the tiny aerodrome. It had obviously been raining hard; a small group of people was waiting on the tarmac, standing knee deep in shimmering water – which began to vanish as we approached – a mirage! The biggest I’d ever seen—

In the front of the group were two soldiers in green uniforms with rifles slung over their shoulders, wearing the oddest shiny black hats with the brims turned up at the back, as though they’d been leaning against walls all their lives. Between them, a small man in a suit and dark glasses was sitting at a desk.

And then I saw her, as I’d never seen her before: even more frightening, with a scarf tied under her chin, a straw hat clutched to the top of her head, her blood-red lips fixed in a smile made all the more sinister by a pair of gleaming, expressionless dark glasses. With her other hand she was waving at the aeroplane as we turned broadside on to the knot of people and came to a halt.

And then she seemed to actually see me, her smile becoming suddenly real, her waving frantic, and I let out a gasp of relief which I must have held in since I first saw her. She was happy! I waved back.

The noise of the engines died away, and the other passengers began to rise to their feet, talking excitedly into the sudden silence

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as they pulled small bags from the string racks above their heads. The door of the fuselage was opened and daylight and a hot draught

suddenly filled the compartment.

I pulled back out of sight, so that my mother could let go of me, although I went on watching her from the shadows. She was talking to the people on either side of her, to a man in a flat black Spanish hat who dwarfed everyone else, and a lady with dark hair chopped off short against her neck, clutching a shiny white handbag. The man seemed somehow familiar as he looked around impatiently, exchanging the odd word with other people in the welcoming group. His pale linen suit was creased and shapeless, but he wore a colourful waistcoat and a red handkerchief round his neck. All at once he raised his hat to a lady who had just reached the bottom of the gangway, and I could see his face properly. His hair was greying and curly, his nose like a Roman emperor's – perhaps this was Great□Uncle Robert... *yes!* He looked just like Great□Uncle John and Great□Uncle Charles, but bigger – *more—*

'*Simon—?*' Sonja was gesturing to me from the end of the almost empty aisle where the Captain and crew were waiting in line to say goodbye to the passengers. I hurried towards them, apologising, shaking hands, until I got to Sonja, whose hand I shook very firmly. 'Thank you very much! It was amazing! I do hope...'

She threw me the most perfect smile. 'So do I. Goodbye, Simon.' I stepped unsuspectingly out of the plane and onto the gangway— The heat hit me with such a blow that it sucked the air from my

lungs and I had to cling to the rail for a moment, stunned, trying to shade my eyes from the dazzling sun.

By the time I got to the foot of the steps, the pain had grown again in my ears as I was gathered into my mother's embrace, into her dark, familiar scent of perfume and illness. 'Darling, I was so frightened—'

Still dazed by heat and strangeness, I was told to show my passport to the man seated at the desk, who stamped my visa violently and

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gave it back, just as I was introduced to my great□aunt Beryl, who

didn't look like a great-aunt at all, but appeared to be about the same age as my mother. She looked down at me with enthusiastic curiosity. 'Just call me Beryl, it's so much easier—'

'And you remember your great-uncle—'

'*Grand*-uncle!' he protested at once, grasping my by the shoulders and leaning down to give me a stubbly kiss on both cheeks. '*Great* is for steamships and railway lines, don't you think? *Grand* is for fathers and uncles – and Russian dukes, of course! You probably don't remember, but we last met in your pram—'

'Oh, *Robert!*' exclaimed Beryl. 'He doesn't want to be reminded of his dratted *pram!*'

'Nonsense! Queen Anne kissed me in mine—' He fixed me with his startling blue eyes. 'Not literally, of course, but in direct line, if you see what I mean – you must read my autobiography one day. I only wish I'd met you before, so I could have put you in it. I say, you look awfully hot. Did you fly too close to the sun?' He laughed and poked me in the ribs. 'Who am I talking about?'

'Icarus, sir,' I said at once, grinning up at his surprise. School had its uses after all. 'But I think they got the story wrong,' I went on intrepidly, in spite of my mother's sudden frown. 'The wax couldn't have melted, because the higher you go, the colder it gets – the pilot said so—'

'Bravo!' he exclaimed, thumping me on the back. 'I say, I do believe we're going to get on! But don't call me "sir" – you're *family* – so you can call me Robert, if you like, or Uncle Robert, or grand-uncle – take your pick. Now let's get your jacket and tie off – we're very informal here, and all this looks horribly like school uniform to me. Chuck it all away!' He made a curious gesture over my head, then threw whatever he'd found invisibly over his right shoulder. '*Ego te absolvo,*' he intoned, 'I hereby declare you to be purged of the sin of wearing school clothes on holiday!'

‘Well, *that’s* all right, then,’ said Beryl in a matter-of-fact sort of voice as she and my mother gathered up the layers of my peeled-off clothes – my mother with slight murmurings of impatience. But I was still squinting up and smiling into the face of my grand-uncle as I undressed, into the face of this magician who was reading my thoughts as they occurred to me. It was wonderful to be understood without having to explain oneself.

‘Shoes and socks?’ he suggested, his face alive with wide-eyed daring. ‘No, on second thoughts, the porters spit on the tarmac – wait till we get to the car.’ He led the way to a dusty Land Rover standing, like himself, head and shoulders above the crowd of cars next to the control tower. He turned back to me, eyebrows raised in surprise. ‘My friend Ricardo Sicré lent us this, just to come and get you!’ And again he forged on ahead of us.

My eyes widened with every step he took. At the bottom of his trousers he was wearing not shoes, but black slippers on his bare feet. ‘Why’s he wearing slippers?’ I whispered urgently to my mother, who ‘*Sssh’d*’ me as Beryl burst out laughing.

‘Those aren’t *slippers*! They’re called alper garters. *Alpargatas* in Spanish. They have rope soles so that you don’t bruise your feet on the rocks. We’ll get you some. Now, I expect you’re thirsty—’ So they could *both* read my mind! ‘I thought we’d stop in Palma and have a cold drink and an ice cream. It’s quite a drive through the mountains to Deya, but it’ll be dark by then, and you can sleep if you like. I dare say your mother could do with a drink, too – eh, Diana?’

‘I should jolly well think I could!’ gasped my mother, and for some reason they both laughed.

On the way out of the aerodrome I became aware of the strangest thing: Beryl was driving. It wasn’t that I’d never been driven by a woman before, but the steering wheel was on the lady’s side, and

the sensation was... odd. Robert sat next to her, fidgeting but apparently

unaffected, lost in thought, his eyes staring inwardly around him, while my mother and I sat behind them both, her arm around me, asking all the questions that grown-ups ask and none of the questions that they don't but *should* if they were as clever as they made out. So I was ready for anything, and could let my eyes and my imagination run wild as I answered her on automatic pilot (or 'George', as Captain Andrews had called it when he'd invited me into the cockpit) – until she asked the one question I dreaded: 'Have you seen your father?'

'No. But he sent me ten shillings! He's making a film in Ireland with a ferret. I mean, he has a tame ferret in the film.' I reached into the inside pocket of my jacket which lay next to me. 'And he sent me a letter to give you—'

Instead of opening it, she took it quickly, almost secretly, unclipping her handbag, and stuffing it inside before she leaned towards me and pulled at my head. I thought she meant to kiss me, and gave her my cheek, but she pushed it away and whispered into my still raw ear. 'Did you bring me the money?'

'Yes!' I whispered, drawing back. 'I went to see Mr Hill at Drummond's, and he gave it to me in a sealed envelope. It's in my suitcase. He said I wasn't to put it in my pocket in case I was kidnapped!'

She squeezed me to her. 'Clever Mr Hill! He always knows the best wheeze. And did you bring your school report, darling?'

'Er – Audrey packed it, I'm sure—' which was perfectly truthful – but later I'd slipped it out of my case and flung it as far as I could under my mother's huge double bed. If I was lucky, she'd be ninety before she found it. Under the bed gave her asthma.

I stared past her, at the darkening blue of the Mediterranean with its playful fringe of white surf tickling the drowsy ochre sand. On the horizon, an enormous blood-orange sun was coming to rest on the rim of the sea, wobbling like a water-filled balloon before, to

my chagrin, it began to sink with the loss of all hands, including me. I'd always dreaded sunset and the onset of night.

The stifling heat clung on and on into the growing darkness.

*I was awfully thin! I was awfully hot! Did I have a headache? I looked pale—*

Again, Beryl said everything that I couldn't: 'Diana, stop *fussing*! He's perfectly all right, he just needs a good holiday. You won't recognise him after a month in Deya!'

Robert, huge in the gathering darkness, turned round in his seat and told her that his mother used to faint at the sight of him when he came home from Charterhouse. 'It takes an awful lot to kill an English schoolboy – I know people who've been trying for years!'

As we approached Palma the crescendo of new experiences seemed to grow and grow, to the point where I couldn't absorb any more. The jolting road, the din of the narrow streets, the neon lights, the heat which seemed to expand inside my throbbing ears, and my mother's constant, anxious stares. Unlike Beryl, she simply couldn't understand the hugeness of the meal I was trying to digest – a meal which was beginning to sicken me with its dark richness, its noise and smells and its sheer strangeness. And above all – the heaving icing on an increasingly blurred cake – the desperate need *not* to be sick, to be polite, to not let her down – for *my* sake.

Finally we drew up on the corner of a wide, dimly lit avenue lined with palm trees, and got out of the Land Rover. Once my feet were on the ground again I began to feel less sick, and after a moment I felt all right enough to dutifully walk round to my mother's door. She'd taken the envelope I'd given her out of her handbag and was opening it just as I came up to her window. Some instinct made me wait in silence as she unfolded the sheet of paper and searched impatiently for enough light to read it by. But there were only a couple of lines of writing.

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'*Bah!*' she spat, and crushed the letter in her hand.

I opened the door to a face that was suddenly tired and ravaged. Quickly, she turned away from me, stuffing the letter and her despair back in her bag. I heard her take a high-pitched, stifled breath before suddenly turning to me again, a ghastly smile fixed on her face.

‘There!’ she whispered triumphantly – *all better!*

Grudgingly, I admired her. My father had obviously sent her no money.

‘This street is called the *Borné*,’ said Beryl. ‘Well, actually, it’s now called the Avenida Generalísimo Franco, but I wouldn’t worry about *that!* Nobody else does. It’s the main street of Palma, and *this—*’ as we turned the corner, ‘is the Bar Formentor. We come here whenever we’re in town. It’s our *meeting place—*’ I darted a quick look at my mother, but she seemed to have recovered herself, ‘so if you’re ever lost in Palma, you must ask for the Bar Formentor and tell them you belong to us. Don’t say Graves, though, say *Grah-vés*. Can you say that?’

‘*Grah-vés*,’ I said gravely. ‘From Deyà.’ ‘From Deyà. *Grah-vés* from Deyà.’ ‘Good! *Very* good. Now, the reason we come here isn’t because

it’s the smartest bar in Palma, but because it has the best ice cream!’ Which it did. And the best orange juice I’d tasted since my war ration vitamin C, though not quite as good, even though Robert said it was made with fresh oranges and couldn’t be better if it tried. The bar was certainly very smart, with its concealed neon lights and green leather upholstery, and the hundreds of extra things they brought to the table when all we’d asked for was ice cream and some drinks. The people sitting around us were equally smart, the men in double-breasted suits with macassar oil on their hair, the women with hard, expressionless faces under pale pink face powder, touching their jewellery in sudden jerks, as though afraid it might have been stolen while they talked.

Everyone kept staring

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at us, as smart people did, even though they went on with their conversations. I thought them quite rude until it dawned on me that I must look a bit odd, half undressed in a smart bar, and Robert in his

alper garters with no elastic in them. I shifted my chair a little to shield his feet from their gaze, and caught him watching me with an odd expression on his face. I smiled quickly and looked away. It was one of those private expressions which were too risky to work out. He must have looked away, too, because suddenly one of the men at another table caught his eye and they both leapt to their feet and began shouting at each other across the room, exchanging Spanish like machine gun fire, though Robert's accent was exactly the same as when he spoke English. I was pointed out—

'Stand up, darling, and smile!' came my mother's harsh whisper.

I stared at her in astonishment. 'But he's rude! He's arguing with Uncle Robert!'

Beryl choked on her drink. 'No! It's all right, they're *friends!* It's Joàn Miró, a local painter. They've been friends for years. He's pretending to be offended that Robert didn't recognise him. Robert's telling him that God cursed him by making him too tall, and that he doesn't notice anything under two meters high—' She started to laugh silently. 'It's just the *language* – Spanish always sounds as if people are having terrible fights, when all they're talking about is the weather. You'll soon pick it up—'

*'Stand up and smile when I tell you!'*

I stood up and turned towards them, but the conversation had passed me by, and I was ignored.

Once we'd finished our drinks and ice creams, Beryl took my mother off to the loo. As she walked away, my pain and nausea seemed to follow her, as though it was attached to her rather than to me.

My relief was short-lived, though, because when I turned back to my grand-uncle I realised, with sudden alarm, that we were alone together. I shot him a fleeting, wary look and saw that although

he appeared to be staring at me, in fact he was looking straight through

me, with such concentration that I turned round to see if something had happened in the street.

All at once he towered to his feet and began pacing restlessly up and down in front of the windows, staring unseeingly through them in the same way that he'd been staring at me. Then he suddenly turned back and smiled a courteous, sweet smile. 'I expect you're tired—'

'No, I'm all right – really!'

'It's odd, I was just thinking, watching you seeing things here for the first time – things that I first saw – what? – nearly a quarter of a century ago. The island's changed so much, you see, but because I live here I don't really notice. One gets used to anything, I suppose, if it just steals up on you. Even to unhappiness. Don't you find? The trick is to change your viewpoint, never to let yourself get stale. Or unhappy. Then even those things you're most used to appear beautiful again, and things you're frightened of become familiar, so they become less frightening. D'you follow?'

'Yes—' But to be spoken to as his equal had left me tongue□ tied. It was as if, somewhere among the foliage of his words was concealed a gate into an awareness to which I had no key as yet. Even when my mother returned, smiling now, I was still trying to reach into his world. Had he meant himself, or my mother? Or me?

Beryl must have defended me in the ladies, because when we left the Bar Formentor and went back to the Land Rover, it was my mother who climbed into the back and arranged the rugs and pillows for me before getting out and helping me in. 'I'm very proud of you,' she whispered, kissing me.

My great□ aunt was clearly someone to be reckoned with!

I got in and lay down on top of the blankets as we set off again. It was still too hot to pull them over me, and I couldn't sleep. The earth itself, this strange new earth, seemed to speak to me through the whining hum of the tyres and through the jolting and bumping

of a road that got worse with every mile we travelled. After a while, when we started to climb, I heard it even more clearly when Beryl double de-clutched at the approach to each bend. I might not understand a word of what the earth was saying yet, but I swore to myself, and to the earth, that I would somehow learn its language – and my grand-uncle’s.

Every now and then, at the beginning of the journey, my mother would look over the back of her seat to make sure I was asleep. By listening for her movements I could be ready for her, and close my eyes. I badly needed to be alone, to lie next to my other, older self and absorb, between us, the breathtaking events of the day which had sometimes threatened to drown me in the wake of their passing.

As we left the lights of Palma behind and drove into the darkness, I became aware of a growing brightness through the skylight in the roof: a rising moon surging up the sky, silent and remote, spilling silver light and coal-black shadows onto my face and clothes.

I sat up soundlessly, as ghostly as the light itself, and looked out through the side window.

Walls of rock enclosed us on either side. I lurched to my feet, stretching out my hands against the inside of the roof to steady myself, and looked up through the skylight. Far above, the rocks turned into crags, and then into silent mountain tops, so distant and yet so clear that I gasped in awe.

Beryl’s voice shouted back at me above the noise of the engine. ‘Are you all right, Simon?’

Guiltily, I turned and met her eyes in the driver’s mirror. ‘*Darling—*’ My mother’s shocked voice. ‘But it’s so beautiful—’ Beryl laughed, leaning forward and banging her forehead lightly

against the steering wheel, then shaking her head. In the moonlight I saw her teeth gleam in a smile as she repeated my words to Robert. His voice floated back to me. ‘Well, it is! He’s no fool—’

‘Darling, lie down, it’s dangerous,’ murmured my mother. 33

Still precariously clutching the roof, I looked down into her silver, bloodless face.

‘But it’s beautiful,’ I whispered fiercely, staring out again. But not as beautiful as before she’d spoken.

‘Lie down! You’re blocking Beryl’s view in the mirror.’

Clutching the seat on either side of me for balance, I lay back on my makeshift bed, stewing with resentment.

The air became cooler as we climbed. Pulling one of the rugs over me, I turned onto my side, drawing my knees into my chest, gradually becoming aware again of the droning chant of the earth speaking to me through the tyres, rumbling and echoing around the cab of the Land Rover, and thought I could at last make out the sound of the word

*home...*

I had come home...

Or was I simply grasping with one hand for what I’d just lost from the other?