

# The Kingdom of the Blind

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## Chapter 1

Lady Anselman stood in the centre of the lounge at the Ritz Hotel and with a delicately-poised forefinger counted her guests. There was the great French actress who had every charm but youth, chatting vivaciously with a tall, pale-faced man whose French seemed to be as perfect as his attitude was correct. The popular wife of a great actor was discussing her husband's latest play with a Cabinet Minister who had the air of a school-boy present at an illicit feast. A very beautiful young woman, tall and fair, with grey-blue eyes and a wealth of golden, almost yellow hair, was talking to a famous musician. A little further in the background, a young man in the uniform of a naval lieutenant was exchanging what seemed to be rather impressive chaff with a petite but exceedingly good-looking girl. Lady Anselman counted them twice, glanced at the clock and frowned.

"I can't remember whom we are waiting for!" she exclaimed a little helplessly to the remaining guest, a somewhat tired-looking publisher who stood by her side. "I am one short. I dare say it will come to me in a minute. You know every one, I suppose, Mr. Daniell?"

The publisher shook his head.

"I have met Lord Romsey and also Madame Selarne," he observed. "For the rest, I was just thinking what a stranger I felt."

"The man who talks French so well," Lady Anselman told him, dropping her voice a little, "is Surgeon-Major Thomson. He is inspector of hospitals at the front, or something of the sort. The tall, fair girl--isn't she pretty!--is Geraldine Conyers, daughter of Admiral Sir Seymour Conyers. That's her brother, the sailor over there, talking to Olive Moreton; their engagement was announced last week. Lady Patrick of course you know, and Signor Scobel, and Adelaide Cunningham--you do know her, don't you, Mr. Daniell? She is my dearest friend. How many do you make that?"

The publisher counted them carefully.

"Eleven including ourselves," he announced.

"And we should be twelve," Lady Anselman sighed. "Of course!" she added, her face suddenly brightening. "What an idiot I am! It's Ronnie we are waiting for. One can't be cross with him, poor fellow. He can only just get about."

The fair girl, who had overheard, leaned across. The shade of newly awakened interest in her face, and the curve of her lips as she spoke, added to her charm. A gleam of sunlight flashed upon the yellow-gold of her plainly coiled hair.

"Is it your nephew, Captain Ronald Granet, who is coming?" she asked a little eagerly.

Lady Anselman nodded.

"He only came home last Tuesday with dispatches from the front," she said. "This is his first day out." "Ah! but he is wounded, perhaps?" Madame Selarne inquired solicitously.

"In the left arm and the right leg," Lady Anselman assented. "I believe that he has seen some terrible fighting, and we are very proud of his D. S. O. The only trouble is that he is like all the others--he will tell us nothing.

"He shows excellent judgment," Lord Romsey observed.

Lady Anselman glanced at her august guest a little querulously.

"That is the principle you go on, nowadays, isn't it?" she remarked. "I am not sure that you are wise. When one is told nothing, one fears the worst, and when time after time the news of these small disasters reaches us piecemeal, about three weeks late, we never get rid of our forebodings, even when you tell us about victories. . . . Ah! Here he comes at last," she added, holding out both her hands to the young man who was making his somewhat difficult way towards them. "Ronnie, you are a few minutes late but we're not in the least cross with you. Do you know that you are looking better already? Come and tell me whom you don't know of my guests and I'll introduce you."

The young man, leaning upon his stick, greeted his aunt and murmured a word of apology. He was very fair, and with a slight, reddish moustache and the remains of freckles upon his face. His grey eyes were a little sunken, and there were lines about his mouth which one might have guessed had been brought out recently by pain or suffering of some sort. His left arm reclined uselessly in a black silk sling. He glanced around the little assembly.

"First of all," he said, bowing to the French actress and raising her fingers to his lips, "there is no one who does not know Madame Selarne. Lady Patrick, we have met before, haven't we? I am going to see your husband in his new play the first night I am allowed out. Mr. Daniell I have met, and Lord Romsey may perhaps do me the honour of remembering me," he added, shaking hands with the Cabinet Minister.

He turned to face Geraldine Conyers, who had been watching him with interest. Lady Anselman at once introduced them.

"I know that you haven't met Miss Conyers because she has been asking about you. This is my nephew Ronnie, Geraldine. I hope that you will be friends."

The girl murmured something inaudible as she shook hands. The young soldier looked at her for a moment. His manner became almost serious.

"I hope so, too," he said quietly.

"Olive, come and make friends with my nephew if you can spare a moment from your young man," Lady Anselman continued. "Captain Granet--Miss Olive Moreton. And this is Geraldine's brother--Lieutenant Conyers."

The two men shook hands pleasantly. Lady Anselman glanced at the clock and turned briskly towards the corridor.

"And now, I think," she announced, "luncheon."

As she moved forward, she was suddenly conscious of the man who had been talking to Madame Selarne. He had drawn a little on one side and he was watching the young soldier with a curious intentness. She turned back to her nephew and touched him on the arm.

"Ronnie," she said, "I don't know whether you have met Surgeon-Major Thomson in France? Major Thomson, this is my nephew, Captain Granet."

Granet turned at once and offered his hand to the other man. Only Geraldine Conyers, who was a young woman given to noticing things, and who had also reasons of her own for being interested, observed the rather peculiar scrutiny with which each regarded the other. Something which might almost have been a challenge seemed to pass from one to the other.

"I may not have met you personally," Granet admitted, "but if you are the Surgeon-Major Thomson who has been doing such great things with the Field Hospitals at the front, then like nearly every poor creak out there I owe you a peculiar debt of gratitude. You are the man I mean, aren't you?" the young soldier concluded cordially.

Major Thomson bowed, and a moment later they all made their way along the corridor, across the restaurant, searched for their names on the cards and took their places at the table which had been reserved for them. Lady Anselman glanced around with the scrutinising air of the professional hostess, to see that her guests were properly seated before she devoted herself to the Cabinet Minister. She had a word or two to say to nearly every one of them.

"I have put you next Miss Conyers, Ronnie," she remarked, "because we give all the good things to our men when they come home from the war. And I have put you next Olive, Ralph," she went on, turning to the sailor, "because I hear you are expecting to get your ship to-day or to-morrow, so you, too, have to be spoiled a little. As a general rule I don't approve of putting engaged people together, it concentrates conversation so. And, Lord Romsey," she added, turning to her neighbour, "please don't imagine for a moment that I am going to break my promise. We are going to talk about everything in the world except the war. I know quite well that if Ronnie has had any particularly thrilling experiences, he won't tell us about them, and I also know that your brain is packed full of secrets which

nothing in the world would induce you to divulge. We are going to try and persuade Madame to tell us about her new play," she concluded, smiling at the French actress, "and there are so many of my friends on the French stage whom I must hear about."

Lord Romsey commenced his luncheon with an air of relief. He was a man of little more than middle-age, powerfully built, inclined to be sombre, with features of a legal type, heavily jawed. "Always tactful, dear hostess," he murmured. "As a matter of fact, nothing but the circumstance that it was your invitation and that Madame Selarne was to be present, brought me here to-day. It is so hard to avoid speaking of the great things, and for a man in my position," he added, dropping his voice a little, "so difficult to say anything worth listening to about them, without at any rate the semblance of indiscretion."

"We all appreciate that," Lady Anselman assured him sympathetically. "Madame Selarne has promised to give us an outline of the new play which she is producing in Manchester."

"If that would interest you all," Madame Selarne assented, "it commences-so!"

For a time they nearly all listened in absorbed silence. Her gestures, the tricks of her voice, the uplifting of her eyebrows and shoulders-all helped to give life and colour to the little sketch she expounded. Only those at the remote end of the table ventured upon an independent conversation. Mrs. Cunningham, the woman whom her hostess had referred to as being her particular friend, and one who shared her passion for entertaining, chatted fitfully to her neighbour, Major Thomson. It was not until luncheon was more than half-way through that she realised the one-sidedness of their conversation. She studied him for a moment curiously. There was something very still and expressionless in his face, even though the sunshine from the broad high windows which overlooked the Park, was shining full upon him.

"Tell me about yourself!" she insisted suddenly. "I have been talking rubbish quite long enough. You have been out, haven't you?"

He assented gravely.

"I went with the first division. At that time I was in charge of a field hospital."

"And now?"

"I am Chief Inspector of Field Hospitals," he replied.

"You are home on leave?"

"Not exactly," he told her, a shade of stiffness in his manner. "I have to come over very often on details connected with the administration of my work."

"I should have known quite well that you were a surgeon," she observed.

"You are a physiognomist, then?"

"More or less," she admitted. "You see, I love people. I love having people around me. My friends find me a perfect nuisance, for I am always wanting to give parties. You have the still, cold face of a surgeon--and the hands, too," she added, glancing at them.

"You are very observant," he remarked laconically.

"I am also curious," she laughed, "as you are about to discover. Tell me why you are so interested in Ronnie Granet? You hadn't met him before, had you?"

Almost for the first time he turned and looked directly at his neighbour. She was a woman whose fair hair was turning grey, well-dressed, sprightly, agreeable. She had a humorous mouth and an understanding face.

"Captain Granet was a stranger to me," he assented. "One is naturally interested in soldiers, however."

"You must have met thousands like him," she remarked,--"good-looking, very British, keen sportsman, lots of pluck, just a little careless, hating to talk about himself and serious things. I have known him since he was a boy."

Major Thomson continued to be gravely interested.

"Granet!" he said to himself thoughtfully, "Do I know any of his people, I wonder?"

"You know some of his connections, of course," Mrs. Cunningham replied briskly. "Sir Alfred Anselman, for instance, his uncle."

"His father and mother?"

"They are both dead. There is a large family place in Warwickshire, and a chateau, just now, I am afraid, in the hands of the Germans. It was somewhere quite close to the frontier. Lady Granet was an Alsatian. He was to have gone out with the polo team, you know, to America, but broke a rib just as they were making the selection. He played cricket for Middlesex once or twice, too and he was Captain of Oxford the year that they did so well."

"An Admirable Crichton," Major Thomson murmured.

"In sport, at any rate," his neighbour assented. "He has always been one of the most popular young men about town, but of course the women will spoil him now."

"Is it my fancy," he asked, "or was he not reported a prisoner?"

"He was missing twice, once for over a week," Mrs. Cunningham replied. "There are all sorts of stories as to how he got back to the lines. A perfect young dare-devil, I should think. I must talk to Mr. Daniell for a few minutes or he will never publish my reminiscences."

She leaned towards her neighbour on the other side and Major Thomson was able to resume the role of attentive observer, a role which seemed somehow his by destiny. He listened without apparent interest to the conversation between Geraldine Conyers and the young man whom they had been discussing.

"I think," Geraldine complained, "that you are rather overdoing your diplomatic reticence, Captain Granet. You haven't told me a single thing. Why, some of the Tommies I have been to see in the hospitals have been far more interesting than you."

He smiled.

"I can assure you," he protested, "it isn't my fault. You can't imagine how fed up one gets with things out there, and the newspapers can tell you ever so much more than we can. One soldier only sees a little bit of his own corner of the fight, you know."

"But can't you tell me some of your own personal experiences?" she persisted. "They are so much more interesting than what one reads in print."

"I never had any," he assured her. "Fearfully slow time we had for months."

"Of course, I don't believe a word you say," she declared, laughing.

"You're not taking me for a war correspondent, by any chance, are you?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Your language isn't sufficiently picturesque! Tell me, when are you going back?"

"As soon as I can pass the doctors-in a few days, I hope."

"You hope?" she repeated. "Do you really mean that, or do you say it because it is the proper thing to say?"

He appeared for the moment to somewhat resent her question.

"The fact that I hope to get back," he remarked coldly, "has nothing whatever to do with my liking my job when I get there. As a matter of fact, I hate it. At the same time, you can surely understand that there isn't any other place for a man of my age and profession."



"Of course not," she agreed softly. "I really am sorry that I bothered you. There is one thing I should like to know, though and that is how you managed to escape?"

He shook his head but his amiability seemed to have wholly returned. His eyes twinkled as he looked at her.

"There we're up against a solid wall of impossibility," he replied. "You see, some of our other chaps may try the dodge. I gave them the tip and I don't want to spoil their chances. By-the-bye, do you know the man two places down on your left?" he added dropping his voice a little. "Looks almost like a waxwork figure, doesn't he?"

"You mean Major Thomson? Yes, I know him," she assented, after a moment's hesitation. "He is very quiet to-day, but he is really most interesting."

Their hostess rose and beamed on them all from her end of the table.

"We have decided," she announced, "to take our coffee out in the lounge."

## Chapter 2

The little party trooped out of the restaurant and made their way to a corner of the lounge, where tables had already been prepared with coffee and liqueurs. Geraldine Conyers and Captain Granet, who had lingered behind, found a table to themselves. Lady Anselman laid her fingers upon Major Thomson's arm.

"Please talk for a few more minutes to Selarne," she begged. "Your French is such a relief to her."

He obeyed immediately, although his eyes strayed more than once towards the table at which Captain Granet and his companion were seated. Madame Selarne was in a gossipy mood and they found many mutual acquaintances.

"To speak a foreign language as you do," she told him, "is wonderful. Is it in French alone, monsieur, that you excel, or are you, perhaps, a great linguist?"

"I can scarcely call myself that," he replied, "but I do speak several other languages. In my younger days I travelled a good deal."

"German, perhaps, too?" she inquired with a little grimace.

"I was at a hospital in Berlin," he confessed.

Lady Anselman's party was suddenly increased by the advent of some acquaintances from an adjoining table, all of whom desired to be presented to Madame Selarne. Major Thomson, set at liberty, made his way at once towards the small table at which Captain Granet and Geraldine Conyers were seated. She welcomed him with a smile.

"Are you coming to have coffee with us?" she asked?

"If I may," he answered. "I shall have to be off in a few minutes."

A waiter paused before their table and offered a salver on which were several cups of coffee and liqueur glasses. Captain Granet leaned forward in his place and stretched out his hand to serve his companion. Before he could take the cup, however, the whole tray had slipped from the waiter's fingers, caught the corner of the table, and fallen with its contents on to the carpet. The waiter himself--a small, undersized person with black, startled eyes set at that moment in a fixed and unnatural stare--made one desperate effort to save himself and then fell backwards. Every one turned around, attracted by the noise of the falling cups and the sharp, half-stifled groan which broke from the man's lips. Captain Granet sprang to his feet.

"Good heavens! The fellow's in a fit!" he exclaimed.

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