

The Zeppelin's Passenger

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Chapter 1

"Never heard a sound," the younger of the afternoon callers admitted, getting rid of his empty cup and leaning forward in his low chair. "No more tea, thank you, Miss Fairclough. Done splendidly, thanks. No, I went to bed last night soon after eleven - the Colonel had been route marching us all off our legs - and I never awoke until reveille this morning. Sleep of the just, and all that sort of thing, but a jolly sell, all the same! You hear anything of it, sir?" he asked, turning to his companion, who was seated a few feet away.

Captain Griffiths shook his head. He was a man considerably older than his questioner, with long, nervous face, and thick black hair streaked with grey. His fingers were bony, his complexion, for a soldier, curiously sallow, and notwithstanding his height, which was considerable, he was awkward, at times almost uncouth. His voice was hard and unsympathetic, and his contributions to the tea-table talk had been almost negligible.

"I was up until two o'clock, as it happened," he replied, "but I knew nothing about the matter until it was brought to my notice officially."

Helen Fairclough, who was doing the honours for Lady Cranston, her absent hostess, assumed the slight air of superiority to which the circumstances of the case entitled her.

"I heard it distinctly," she declared; "in fact it woke me up. I hung out of the window, and I could hear the engine just as plainly as though it were over the golf links."

The young subaltern sighed.

"Rotten luck I have with these things," he confided. "That's three times they've been over, and I've neither heard nor seen one. This time they say that it had the narrowest shave on earth of coming down. Of course, you've heard of the observation car found on Dutchman's Common this morning?"

The girl assented.

"Did you see it?" she enquired.

"Not a chance," was the gloomy reply. "It was put on two covered trucks and sent up to London by the first train. Captain Griffiths can tell you what it was like, I dare say. You were down there, weren't you, sir?"

"I superintended its removal," the latter informed them. "It was a very uninteresting affair."

"Any bombs in it?" Helen asked.

"Not a sign of one. Just a hard seat, two sets of field-glasses and a telephone. It seems to have got caught in some trees and been dragged off."

"How exciting!" the girl murmured. "I suppose there wasn't any one in it?"

Griffiths shook his head.

"I believe," he explained, "that these observation cars, although they are attached to most of the Zeppelins, are seldom used in night raids."

"I should like to have seen it, all the same," Helen confessed.

"You would have been disappointed," her informant assured her. "By-the-by," he added, a little awkwardly, "are you not expecting Lady Cranston back this evening?"

"I am expecting her every moment. The car has gone down to the station to meet her."

Captain Griffiths appeared to receive the news with a certain undemonstrative satisfaction. He leaned back in his chair with the air of one who is content to wait.

"Have you heard, Miss Fairclough," his younger companion enquired, a little diffidently, "whether Lady Cranston had any luck in town?"

Helen Fairclough looked away. There was a slight mist before her eyes.

"I had a letter this morning," she replied. "She seems to have heard nothing at all encouraging so far."

"And you haven't heard from Major Felstead himself, I suppose?"

The girl shook her head.

"Not a line," she sighed. "It's two months now since we last had a letter."

"Jolly bad luck to get nipped just as he was doing so well," the young man observed sympathetically.

"It all seems very cruel," Helen agreed. "He wasn't really fit to go back, but the Board passed him because they were so short of officers and he kept worrying them. He was so afraid he'd get moved to another battalion. Then he was taken prisoner in that horrible Pervais affair, and sent to the worst camp in Germany. Since then, of course, Philippa and I have had a wretched time, worrying."

"Major Felstead is Lady Cranston's only brother, is he not?" Griffiths enquired.

"And my only fiancé," she replied, with a little grimace. "However, don't let us talk about our troubles any more," she continued, with an effort at a lighter tone. "You'll find some cigarettes on that table, Mr. Harrison. I can't think where Nora is. I expect she has persuaded some one to take her out trophy-hunting to Dutchman's Common."

"The road all the way is like a circus," the young soldier observed, "and there isn't a thing to be seen when you get there. The naval airmen were all over the place at daybreak, and Captain Griffiths wasn't far behind them. You didn't leave much for the sightseers, sir," he concluded, turning to his neighbour.

"As Commandant of the place," Captain Griffiths replied, "I naturally had to have the Common searched. With the exception of the observation car, however, I think that I am betraying no confidences in telling you that we discovered nothing of interest."

"Do you suppose that the Zeppelin was in difficulties, as she was flying so low?" Helen enquired.

"It is a perfectly reasonable hypothesis," the Commandant assented. "Two patrol boats were sent out early this morning, in search of her. An old man whom I saw at Waburne declares that she passed like a long, black cloud, just over his head, and that he was almost deafened by the noise of the engines. Personally, I cannot believe that they would come down so low unless she was in some trouble."

The door of the comfortable library in which they were seated was suddenly thrown open. An exceedingly alert-looking young lady, very much befreckled, and as yet unemancipated from the long plaits of the schoolroom, came in like a whirlwind. In her hand she carried a man's Homburg hat, which she waved aloft in triumph.

"Come in, Arthur," she shouted to a young subaltern who was hovering in the background. "Look what I've got, Helen! A trophy! Just look, Mr. Harrison and Captain Griffiths! I found it in a bush, not twenty yards from where the observation car came down."

Helen turned the hat around in amused bewilderment.

"But, my dear child," she exclaimed, "this is nothing but an ordinary hat! People who travel in Zeppelins don't wear things like that. How do you do, Mr. Somerfield?" she added, smiling at the young man who had followed Nora into the room.

"Don't they!" the latter retorted, with an air of superior knowledge. "Just look here!"

She turned down the lining and showed it to them. "What do you make of that?" she asked triumphantly.

Helen gazed at the gold-printed letters a little incredulously.

"Read it out," Nora insisted.

Helen obeyed:

"Schmidt,
Berlin,
Unter den Linden, 127."

"That sounds German," she admitted.

"It's a trophy, all right," Nora declared. "One of the crew probably the Commander - must have come on board in a hurry and changed into uniform after they had started."

"It is my painful duty, Miss Nora," Harrison announced solemnly, "to inform you, on behalf of Captain Griffiths, that all articles of whatsoever description, found in the vicinity of Dutchman's Common, which might possibly have belonged to any one in the Zeppelin, must be sent at once to the War Office."

"Rubbish!" Nora scoffed. "The War Office aren't going to have my hat."

"Duty," the young man began -

"You can go back to the Depot and do your duty, then, Mr. Harrison," Nora interrupted, "but you're not going to have my hat. I'd throw it into the fire sooner than give it up."

"Military regulations must be obeyed, Miss Nora," Captain Griffiths ventured thoughtfully.

"Nothing so important as hats," Harrison put in. "You see they fit - somebody."

The girl's gesture was irreverent but convincing. "I'd listen to anything Captain Griffiths had to say," she declared, "but you boys who are learning to be soldiers are simply eaten up with conceit. There's nothing in your textbook about hats. If you're going to make yourselves disagreeable about this, I shall simply ignore the regiment."

The two young men fell into attitudes of mock dismay. Nora took a chocolate from a box.

"Be merciful, Miss Nora!" Harrison pleaded tearfully.

"Don't break the regiment up altogether," Somerfield begged, with a little catch in his voice.

"All very well for you two to be funny," Nora went on, revisiting the chocolate box, "but you've heard about the Seaforths corning, haven't you? I adore kilts, and so does Helen; don't you, Helen?"

"Every woman does," Helen admitted, smiling. "I suppose the child really can keep the hat, can't she?" she added, turning to the Commandant.

"Officially the matter is outside my cognizance," he declared. "I shall have nothing to say."

The two young men exchanged glances.

"A hat," Somerfield ruminated, "especially a Homburg hat, is scarcely an appurtenance of warfare."

His brother officer stood for a moment looking gravely at the object in question. Then he winked at Somerfield and sighed.

"I shall take the whole responsibility," he decided magnanimously, "of saying nothing about the matter. We can't afford to quarrel with Miss Nora, can we, Somerfield?"

"Not on your life," that young man agreed.

"Sensible boys!" Nora pronounced graciously.

"Thank you very much, Captain Griffiths, for not encouraging them in their folly. You can take me as far as the post-office when you go, Arthur," she continued, turning to the fortunate possessor of the side-car, "and we'll have some golf to-morrow afternoon, if you like."

"Won't Mr. Somerfield have some tea?" Helen invited.

"Thank you very much, Miss Fairclough," the man replied; "we had tea some time ago at Watson's, where I found Miss Nora."

Nora suddenly held up her finger. "Isn't that the car?" she asked. "Why, it must be mummy, here already. Yes, I can hear her voice!"

Griffiths, who had moved eagerly towards the window, looked back.

"It is Lady Cranston," he announced solemnly.

Chapter 2

The woman who paused for a moment upon the threshold of the library, looking in upon the little company, was undeniably beautiful. She had masses of red-gold hair, a little disordered by her long railway journey, deep-set hazel eyes, a delicate, almost porcelain-like complexion, and a sensitive, delightfully shaped mouth. Her figure was small and dainty, and just at that moment she had an appearance of helplessness which was almost childlike. Nora, after a vigorous embrace, led her stepmother towards a chair.

"Come and sit by the fire, Mummy," she begged. "You look tired and cold."

Philippa exchanged a general salutation with her guests. She was still wearing her travelling coat, and her air of fatigue was unmistakable. Griffiths, who had not taken his eyes off her since her entrance, wheeled an easy-chair towards the hearth-rug, into which she sank with a murmured word of thanks.

"You'll have some tea, won't you, dear?" Helen enquired.

Philippa shook her head. Her eyes met her friend's for a moment - it was only a very brief glance, but the tragedy of some mutual sorrow seemed curiously revealed in that unspoken question and answer. The two young subalterns prepared to take their leave. Nora, kneeling down, stroked her stepmother's hand.

"No news at all, then?" Helen faltered.

"None," was the weary reply.

"Any amount of news here, Mummy," Nora intervened cheerfully, "and heaps of excitement. We had a Zeppelin over Dutchman's Common last night, and she lost her observation car. Mr. Somerfield took me up there this afternoon, and I found a German hat. No one else got a thing, and, would you believe it, those children over there tried to take it away from me."

Her stepmother smiled faintly.

"I expect you are keeping the hat, dear," she observed.

"I should say so!" Nora assented.

Philippa held out her hand to the two young men who had been waiting to take their leave.

"You must come and dine one night this week, both of you," she said. "My husband will be home by the later train this evening, and I'm sure he will be glad to have you."

"Very kind of you, Lady Cranston, we shall be delighted," Harrison declared.

"Rather!" his companion echoed.

Nora led them away, and Helen, with a word of excuse, followed them. Griffiths, who had also risen to his feet, came a little nearer to Philippa's chair.

"And you, too, of course, Captain Griffiths," she said, smiling pleasantly up at him. "Must you hurry away?"

"I will stay, if I may, until Miss Fairclough returns," he answered, resuming his seat.

"Do!" Philippa begged him. "I have had such a miserable time in town. You can't think how restful it is to be back here."

"I am afraid," he observed, "that your journey has not been successful."

Philippa shook her head.

"It has been completely unsuccessful," she sighed. "I have not been able to hear a word about my brother. I am so sorry for poor Helen, too. They were only engaged, you know, a few days before he left for the front this last time."

Captain Griffiths nodded sympathetically.

"I never met Major Felstead," he remarked, "but every one who has seems to like him very much. He was doing so well, too, up to that last unfortunate affair, wasn't he?"

"Dick is a dear," Philippa declared. "I never knew any one with so many friends. He would have been commanding his battalion now, if only he were free. His colonel wrote and told me so himself."

"I wish there were something I could do," Griffiths murmured, a little awkwardly. "It hurts me, Lady Cranston, to see you so upset."

She looked at him for a moment in faint surprise.

"Nobody can do anything," she bemoaned. "That is the unfortunate part of it all."

He rose to his feet and was immediately conscious, as he always was when he stood up, that there was a foot or two of his figure which he had no idea what to do with.

"You wouldn't feel like a ride to-morrow morning, Lady Cranston?" he asked, with a wistfulness which seemed somehow stifled in his rather unpleasant voice. She shook her head.

"Perhaps one morning later," she replied, a little vaguely. "I haven't any heart for anything just now."

He took a sombre but agitated leave of his hostess, and went out into the twilight, cursing his lack of ease, remembering the things which he had meant to say, and hating himself for having forgotten them. Philippa, to whom his departure had been, as it always was, a relief, was already leaning forward in her chair with her arm around Helen's neck.

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