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## [The Kingom of the Blind](#)

### [E. Phillips Oppenheim](#)

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#### Chapter 14

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Monsieur Guillot was a man of emotional temperament. For more than an hour after Granet had left him, he paced up and down his little room, stood before the high windows which overlooked the Thames, raised his hands above his head and gazed with flashing eyes into the future--such a future! All his life he had been a schemer, his eyes turned towards the big things, yet with himself always occupying the one glorified place in the centre of the arena. He was, in one sense of the word, a patriot, but it was the meanest and smallest sense. There was no great France for him in which his was not the commanding figure. In every dream of that wonderful future, of a more splendid and triumphant France, he saw himself on the pinnacle of fame, himself acclaimed by millions the strong great man, the liberator. France outside himself lived only as a phantasy. And now at last his chance had come. The minutes passed unnoticed as he built his way up into the future. He was shrewd and calculating, he took note of the pitfalls he must avoid. One by one he decided upon the men whom gradually and cautiously he would draw into his confidence. Finally he saw the whole scheme complete, the bomb-shell thrown, France hysterically casting laurels upon the man who had brought her unexpected peace.

The door-bell rang. He answered it a little impatiently. A slim, fashionably dressed young Frenchman stood there, whose face was vaguely familiar to him.

"Monsieur Guillot?" the newcomer inquired politely.

Guillot bowed. The young man handed him a card.

"I am the Baron D'Evignon," he announced, "second secretary at the Embassy here."

Monsieur Guillot held the card and looked at his visitor. He was very puzzled. Some dim sense of foreboding was beginning to steal in upon him.

"Be so kind as to come in, Monsieur le Baron," he invited. "Will you not be seated and explain to me to what I am indebted for this honour? You do not, by any chance, mistake me for another? I am Monsieur Guillot, lately, alas! Of Lille."

The Baron smiled ever so slightly as he waved away the chair.

"There is no mistake, Monsieur Guillot," he said. "I come to you with a message from my Chief. He would be greatly honoured if you would accompany me to the Embassy. He wishes a few minutes' conversation with you."

"With me?" Monsieur Guillot echoed incredulously. "But there is some mistake."

"No mistake, I assure you," the young man insisted.

Monsieur Guillot drew back a little into the room.

"But what have I to do with the Ambassador, or with diplomatic matters of any sort?" he protested. "I am here on business, to see what can be saved from the wreck of my affairs. Monsieur the Ambassador is mistaking me for another."

The Baron shook his head.

"There is no mistake, my dear sir," he insisted. "We all recognise," he added, with a bow, "the necessities which force the most famous of us to live sometimes in the shadow of anonymity. If the Chief could find little to say to Monsieur Guillot of Lille, he will, I am sure, be very interested in a short conversation with Monsieur Henri Pailleton."

There was a brief, tense silence. The man who had called him self Guillot was transformed. The dreams which had uplifted him a few minutes ago, had passed. He was living very much in the present--an ugly and foreboding present. The veins stood out upon his forehead and upon the back of his hands, his teeth gleamed underneath his coarse, white moustache. Then he recovered himself.

"There is some mistake," he said, "but I will come."

In silence they left the hotel and drove to the Embassy, in silence the young man ushered his charge into the large, pleasant apartment on the ground floor of the Embassy, where the ambassador was giving instructions to two of his secretaries. He dismissed them with a little wave of his hand and bowed politely to his visitor. There was no longer any pretext on the part of Monsieur Guillot. He recognised its complete futility.

"Monsieur Pailleton," the ambassador began, "will you take a seat? It is very kind of you to obey so quickly my summons."

"I had no idea," the latter remarked, "that my presence in England was known. I am here on private business."

The ambassador bowed suavely.

"Precisely, my friend! You see, I use the epithet 'my friend' because at a time like this all Frenchmen must forget their differences and work together for the good and honour of their country. Is it not so, monsieur?"

"That is indeed true," Monsieur Pailleton admitted slowly. "We may work in different ways but we work towards the same end."

"No one has ever doubted your patriotism, Monsieur Pailleton," the ambassador continued. "It is my privilege now to put it to the test. There is a little misunderstanding in Brazil, every particular concerning which, and the views of our Government, is contained in the little parcel of documents which you see upon this table. Put them in your

pocket, Monsieur Pailleton. I am going to ask you to serve your country by leaving for Liverpool this afternoon and for Brazil to-morrow on the steamship Hermes."

Monsieur Pailleton had been a little taken aback by the visit of the Baron. He sat now like a man temporarily stupefied. He was too amazed to find any sinister significance in this mission. He could only gasp. The ambassador's voice, as he continued talking smoothly, seemed to reach him from a long way off.

"It may be a little contrary to your wishes, my friend," the latter proceeded, "to find yourself so far from the throb of our great struggle, yet in these days we serve best who obey. It is the wish of those who stand for France that you should take that packet and board that steamer."

Monsieur Pailleton began in some measure to recover himself. He was still, however, bewildered.

"Monsieur," he protested, "I do not understand. This mission to Brazil of which you speak--it can have no great importance. Cannot it be entrusted to some other messenger?"

"Alas! No, my dear sir," was the uncompromising reply. "It is you--Monsieur Pailleton--whom the President desires to travel to Brazil."

The light was breaking in upon Pailleton. He clenched his fists.

"I am to be got out of the way!" he exclaimed. "The President fears me politically, he fears my following!"

The ambassador drew himself a little more upright, a stiff unbending figure. His words seemed suddenly to become charged with more weight.

"Monsieur Pailleton," he said, "the only thing that France fears is treachery!"

Pailleton gripped at the back of his chair. The room for a moment swam before his eyes.

"Is this an insult, Monsieur l'Ambassadeur?" he demanded.

"Take it as an insult if in your heart there is no shadow of treachery towards the France that is today, towards the cause of the Allies as it is to-day," was the stern answer.

"I refuse to accept this extraordinary mission," Pailleton declared, rising to his feet. "You can send whom you will to Brazil. I have greater affairs before me."

The ambassador shrugged his shoulders.

"I shall not press you," he said. "I shall only put before you the alternative. You are at this present moment upon French soil. If you refuse this mission which has been offered to you, I shall detain you here until I have the means of sending you under escort to France."

"Detain me? On what charge?" Pailleton exclaimed angrily.

"On the charge of treason," was the quiet reply. "I shall have you stripped and searched in this room. I shall have your luggage and your room searched at the Milan Hotel. And now, Monsieur Pailleton?"

Once more the man was bewildered. This time, however, it was bewilderment of a different sort. He thought for a moment steadfastly. Who was there who could have betrayed him?

"What is the nature of this document, monsieur, which you expect to find amongst my belongings?" he demanded.

"An authorised offer of peace from Germany to the French people," the ambassador answered slowly. "It is the second attempt which has been made. The first was torn into fragments before the face of the person who had the effrontery to present it. The second, Monsieur Pailleton, is in your possession. You may keep it if you will. In Brazil you will find it of little use."

Monsieur Pailleton folded his arms.

"I am a Frenchman," he proclaimed. "What I may do, I do for France."

"You refuse my mission, then?"

"I refuse it."

The ambassador struck a bell upon his table. One of his secretaries promptly appeared.

"Send Colonel Defarge to me at once," his chief ordered.

There was a brief pause. The ambassador was busy writing at his table. Pailleton, who was breathing heavily, said nothing. Presently an officer in French uniform entered.

"Monsieur le Colonel," the ambassador said, stretching out his hand towards Pailleton, "you will accept the charge of this man, whom you will consider under arrest. I take the full responsibility for this proceeding. You will conduct him to your rooms here and you will search him. Any document found in his possession you will bring to me. When you have finished, let me know and I will give you an authority to proceed to his apartments in the Milan Hotel. You understand?"

"Certainly, my chief."

The officer saluted and moved to Pailleton.

"You will come quietly, monsieur, is it not so?" he asked.

Pailleton waved him away. He turned to the ambassador.

"Monsieur," he decided, "I will go to Brazil."

