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

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## Chapter 17

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Lady Anselman stood once more in the foyer of the Ritz Hotel and counted her guests. It was a smaller party this time, and in its way a less distinguished one. There were a couple of officers, friends of Granet's, back from the Front on leave; Lady Conyers, with Geraldine and Olive; Granet himself; and a tall, dark girl with pallid complexion and brilliant eyes, who had come with Lady Anselman and who was standing now by her side.

"I suppose you know everybody, my dear?" Lady Anselman asked her genially.

The girl shook her head a little disconsolately.

"We are so little in London, Lady Anselman," she murmured. "You know how difficult father is, and just now he is worse than ever. In fact, if he weren't so hard at work I don't believe he'd have let me come even now."

"These scientific men," Lady Anselman declared, "are great boons to the country, but as parent I am afraid they are just a little thoughtless. Major Harrison and Colonel Grey, let me present you to my young charge--for the day only, unfortunately--Miss Worth. Now, Ronnie, if you can be persuaded to let Miss Conyers have a moment's peace perhaps you will show us the way in to lunch."

Granet promptly abandoned his whispered conversation with Geraldine. The little company moved in and took their places at the round table which was usually reserved for Lady Anselman on Tuesdays.

"Some people," the latter remarked, as she seated herself, "find fault with me for going on with my luncheons this season. Even Alfred won't come except now and then. Personally, I have very strong views about it. I think we all ought to keep on doing just the same as usual--to a certain extent, of course. There is no reason why we should bring the hotel proprietors and shopkeepers to the brink of ruin because we are all feeling more or less miserable."

"Quite right," her neighbour, Colonel Grey, assented. "I am sure it wouldn't do us any good out there to feel that you were all sitting in sackcloth and ashes. Besides, think how pleasant this is to come home to," he added, looking around the little table. "Jove! What a good-looking girl Miss Conyers is!"

Lady Anselman nodded and lowered her voice a little.

"She has just broken her engagement to Surgeon-Major Thomson. I wonder whether you know him?"

"Inspector of Field Hospitals or something, isn't he?" the other remarked carelessly. "I came across him once at Boulogne. Rather a dull sort of fellow he seemed.

Lady Anselman sighed.

"I am afraid Geraldine found him so," she agreed. "Her mother is very disappointed. I can't help thinking myself, though, that a girl with her appearance ought to do better."

The Colonel reflected for a moment.

"Seems to me I've heard something about Thomson somewhere," he said, half to himself. "By-the-bye, who is the pale girl with the wonderful eyes, to whom your nephew is making himself so agreeable?"

"That is Isabel Worth," Lady Anselman replied. "She is the daughter of Sir Meyville Worth, the great scientist. I am afraid she has rather a dull time, poor girl. Her father lives in an out-of-the-way village of Norfolk, spends all his time trying to discover things, and forgets that he has a daughter at all. She has been in London for a few days with an aunt, but I don't believe that the old lady is able to do much for her."

"Ronnie seems to be making the running all right," her neighbour observed.

"I asked him specially to look after her," Lady Anselman confided, "and Ronnie is always such a dear at doing what he is told."

Major Harrison leaned across the table towards them.

"Didn't I hear you mention Thomson's name just now?" he inquired. "I saw him the other day in Boulogne. Awful swell he was about something, too. A destroyer brought him across, and a Government motor-car was waiting at the quay to rush him up to the Front. We all thought at Boulogne that royalty was coming, at least."

There was a slight frown on Granet's forehead. He glanced half unconsciously towards Geraldine.

"Mysterious sort of fellow, Thomson," Major Harrison continued, in blissful ignorance of the peculiar significance of his words. "You see him in Paris one day, you hear of him at the furthestmost point of the French lines immediately afterwards, he reports at headquarters within a few hours, and you meet him slipping out of a back door of the War Office, a day or two later."

"Inspector of Field Hospitals is a post which I think must have been created for him," Colonel Grey remarked. "He's an impenetrable sort of chap."

"Was Major Thomson going or returning from France when you saw him last?" Geraldine asked, looking across the table.

"Coming back. When we left Boulogne, the destroyer which brought him over was waiting in the harbour. It passed us in mid-Channel, doing about thirty knots to our

eighteen. Prince Cyril was rather sick. He was bringing dispatches but no one seemed to have thought of providing a destroyer for him."

"After all," Lady Anselman murmured, "there is nothing very much more important than our hospitals."

The conversation drifted away from Thomson. Granet was making himself very agreeable indeed to Isabel Worth. There was a little more colour in her cheeks than at the commencement of luncheon, and her manner had become more animated.

"Tell me about the village where you live?" he inquired--"Market Burnham, isn't it?"

"When we first went there," she replied, "I thought that it was simply Paradise. That was four years ago, though, and I scarcely counted upon spending the winters there."

"You find it lovely, then?"

She shivered a little, half closing her eyes as though to shut out some unpleasant memory.

"The house," she explained, "is on a sort of tongue of land, with a tidal river on either side and the sea not fifty yards away from our drawing-room window. When there are high tides, we are simply cut off from the mainland altogether unless we go across on a farm cart."

"You mustn't draw too gloomy a picture of your home," Lady Anselman said. "I have seen it when it was simply heavenly."

"And I have seen it," the girl retorted, with a note of grimness in her tone, "when it was a great deal more like the other place--stillness that seems almost to stifle you, grey mists that choke your breath and blot out everything; nothing but the gurgling of a little water, and the sighing--the most melancholy sighing you ever heard--of the wind in our ragged elms. I am talking about the autumn and winter now, you must remember."

"It doesn't sound attractive," Granet admitted. "By-the-bye, which side of Norfolk are you? You are nowhere near Brancaster, I suppose?"

"We are within four miles of it," the girl replied quickly. "You don't ever come there, do you?"

Granet looked at her with uplifted eyebrows.

"This is really rather a coincidence!" he exclaimed. "I've never been to Brancaster in my life but I've promised one or two fellows to go down to the Dormy House there, to-morrow or the next day, and have a week's golf. Geoff Anselman is going, for one."

The girl was for a moment almost good-looking. Her eyes glowed, her tone was eloquently appealing.

"You'll come by and see us, won't you?" she begged.

"If I may, I'd be delighted," Granet promised heartily. "When are you going back?"

"To-morrow. You're quite sure that you'll come?"

"I shall come all right," Granet assured her. "I'm not so keen on golf as some of the fellows, and my arm's still a little dicky, but I'm fed up with London, and I'm not allowed even to come before the Board again for a fortnight, so I rather welcome the chance of getting right away. The links are good, I suppose?"

"Wonderful," Miss Worth agreed eagerly, "and I think the club-house is very comfortable. There are often some quite nice men staying there. If only father weren't so awfully peculiar, the place would be almost tolerable in the season. That reminds me," she went on, with a little sigh, "I must warn you about father. He's the most unsociable person that ever lived."

"I'm not shy," Granet laughed. "By-the-bye, pardon me, but isn't your father the Sir Meyville Worth who invents things? I'm not quite sure what sort of things," he added. "Perhaps you'd better post me up before I come?"

"I sha'n't tell you a thing," Isabel Worth declared. "Just now it's very much better for you to know nothing whatever about him. He has what I call the inventors' fidgets, for some reason or other. If a strange person comes near the place he simply loses his head."

"Perhaps I sha'n't be welcome, then?" Granet remarked disconsolately.

There was a flash in the girl's eyes as she answered him.

"I can assure you that you will, Captain Granet," she said. "If father chooses to behave like a bear, well, I'll try and make up for him."

She glanced at him impressively and Granet bowed. A few minutes later in obedience to Lady Anselman's signal, they all made their way into the lounge, where coffee was being served. Granet made his way to Geraldine's side but she received him a little coldly.

"I have been doing my aunt's behests," he explained. "My strict orders were to make myself agreeable to a young woman who lives in a sort of bluebeard's house, where no visitors are allowed and smiling is prohibited."

Geraldine looked across at Isabel Worth.

"I never met Miss Worth before," she said. "I believe her father is wonderfully clever. Did I hear you say that you were going out of town?"

Granet nodded.

"I am going away for a few days. I am going away," he added, dropping his voice, "ostensibly for a change of air. I have another reason for going."

He looked at her steadfastly and she forgot her vague misgivings of a few minutes ago. After all, his perceptions were right. It was better for him to leave London for a time.

"I hope the change will do you good," she said quietly. "I think, perhaps, you are right to go."

