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

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This Book:
[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 25

Geraldine welcomed her unexpected visitor that afternoon cordially enough but a little shyly.

"I thought that you were going to stay at Brancaster for a week," she remarked, as they shook hands.

"We meant to stay longer," Granet admitted, "but things went a little wrong. First of all there was this Zeppelin raid. Then my arm didn't go very well. Altogether our little excursion fizzled out and I came back last night."

"Did you see anything of the raid?" Geraldine inquired eagerly.

"Rather more than I wanted," he answered grimly. "I was motoring along the road at the time, and I had to attend a perfect court martial next day, with your friend Thomson in the chair. Can you tell me, Miss Conyers," he continued, watching her closely, "how it is that a medical major who is inspector of hospitals, should be sent down from the War Office to hold an inquiry upon that raid?"

"Was Hugh really there?" she asked in a puzzled manner.

"He was, and very officially," Granet replied. "If it weren't that I had conclusive evidence to prove what I was doing there, he seemed rather set on getting me into trouble."

"Hugh is always very fair," she said a little coldly.

"You can't solve my puzzle for me, then?" he persisted.

"What puzzle?"

"Why an inspector of hospitals should hold an inquiry upon a Zeppelin raid?"

"I'm afraid I cannot," she admitted. "Hugh certainly seems to have become a most mysterious person, but then, as you know, I haven't seen quite so much of him lately. Your change, Captain Granet, doesn't seem to have done you much good. Has your wound been troubling you?"

He rose abruptly and stood before her.

"Do you care whether my wound is troubling me or not?" he asked. "Do you care anything at all about me?"

There was a moment's silence.

"I care very much," she confessed.

He seemed suddenly a changed person. The lines which had certainly appeared in his face during the last few days, become more noticeable. He leaned towards her eagerly.

"Miss Conyers," he went on, "Geraldine, I want you to care--enough for the big things. Don't interrupt me, please. Listen to what I have to say. Somehow or other, the world has gone amiss with me lately. They won't have me back, my place has been filled up, I can't get any fighting. They've shelved me at the War Office; they talk about a home adjutancy. I can't stick it, I have lived amongst the big things too long. I'm sick of waiting about, doing nothing--sick to death. I want to get away. There's some work I could do in America. You understand?"

"Not in the least," Geraldine told him frankly.

"It's my fault," he declared. "The words all seem to be tumbling out anyhow and I don't know how to put them in the right order. Can't you see that I love you, Geraldine? I want you to be my wife, and I want to get right away as quickly as ever I can. Why not America? Why couldn't we be married this week and get away from everybody?"

She looked at him in sheer amazement, amazement tempered just a little with a sort of tremulous uncertainty.

"But, Captain Granet," she exclaimed, "you can't be serious! You couldn't possibly think of leaving England now."

"Why not?" he protested. "They won't let me fight again. I couldn't stand the miserable routine of home soldiering. I'd like to get away and forget it all."

"I am sure you are not in earnest," she said quietly. "No Englishman could feel like that."

"He could if he cared for you," Granet insisted. "I'm afraid of everything here, afraid that Thomson will come back and take you away, afraid of all sorts of hideous things happening during the next few months."

"You mustn't talk like this, please," she begged. "You know as well as I do that neither you nor I could turn our backs on England just now and be happy."

He opened his lips to speak but stopped short. It was obvious that she was deeply in earnest.

"And as for the other thing you spoke of," she continued, "please won't you do as I beg you and not refer to it again for the present? Perhaps," she added, "when the war is over we may speak of it, but just now everything is so confused. I, too, seem to have lost my bearings. . . .You know that I am going out to Boulogne in a few days with Lady Headley's hospital? Don't look so frightened. I am not an amateur nurse, I can assure you. I have all my certificates."

"To Boulogne?" he muttered. "You are going to leave London?"

She nodded.

"Major Thomson arranged it for me, a few days ago. We may meet there at any time," she added, smiling. "I am perfectly certain that the War Office will find you something abroad very soon."

For a moment that queer look of boyish strength which had first attracted her, reasserted itself. His teeth came together.

"Yes," he agreed, "there's work for me somewhere. I'll find it. Only--"

She checked him hurriedly.

"And I am quite sure," she interrupted, "that when you are yourself again you will agree with me. These are not the times for us to have any selfish thoughts, are they?"

"Until a few weeks ago," he told her, "I thought of nothing but the war and my work in it--until you came, that is."

She held out her hands to check him. Her eyes were eloquent.

"Please remember," she begged, "that it is too soon. I can't bear to have you talk to me like that. Afterwards--"

"There will be no afterwards for me!" he exclaimed bitterly.

A shade of surprise became mingled with her agitation.

"You mustn't talk like that," she protested, "you with your splendid courage and opportunities! Think what you have done already. England wants the best of her sons to-day. Can't you be content to give that and to wait? We have so much gratitude in our hearts, we weak women, for those who are fighting our battle."

Her words failed to inspire him. He took her hand and lifted her fingers deliberately to his lips.

"I was foolish," he groaned, "to think that you could feel as I do. Good-bye!"

Geraldine was alone when her mother came into the room a few minutes later. Lady Conyers was looking a little fluttered and anxious.

"Was that Captain Granet?" she asked.

Geraldine nodded. Lady Conyers anxiety deepened.

"Well?"

"I have sent him away," Geraldine said quietly, "until the end of the war."

Granet brought his car to a standstill outside the portals of that very august club in Pall Mall. The hall-porter took in his name and a few minutes his uncle joined him in the strangers' room.

"Back again so soon, Ronnie?"

Granet nodded.

"America's off," he announced shortly. "I thought I'd better let you know. It must be the whole thing now."

Sir Alfred was silent for a moment.

"Very well," he said at last, "only remember this, my boy--there must be no more risks. You've been sailing quite close enough to the wind."

"Did you call at the War Office?" Granet asked quickly.

His uncle assented.

"I did and I saw General Brice. He admitted in confidence that they weren't very keen about your rejoining. Nothing personal," he went on quickly, "nothing serious, that is to say. There is a sort of impression out there that you've brought them bad luck."

Granet shrugged his shoulders.

"Well," he said, "they know their own business best. What I am afraid of is being saddled with some rotten home duty."

"You need not be afraid of that any more, Ronnie," his uncle told him calmly.

Granet turned quickly around.

"Do you mean that they don't want to give me anything at all?" he demanded anxiously.

Sir Alfred shook his head.

"You are too impetuous, Ronnie. They're willing enough to give you a home command, but I have asked that it should be left over for a little time, so as to leave you free."

"You have something in your mind, then--something definite?"

Sir Alfred looked out of the window for a moment. Then he laid his hand upon his nephew's shoulder.

"I think I can promise you, Ronnie," he said seriously, "that before many days have passed you shall have all the occupation you want."