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

[E. Phillips Oppenheim](#)

This Book:

[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 35

About three o'clock the next morning Thomson was awakened by a light touch upon his shoulder. He sprang up from the couch upon which he had thrown himself. Ambrose was standing over him. He was still in his room at the War Office, and fully dressed.

"Mr. Gordon Jones has rung up from Downing Street, sir," he announced. "He is with the Prime Minister. They want to know if you could step across."

"I'll go at once," Thomson agreed,--"just sponge my eyes and have a brush up. Nothing else fresh, Ambrose?"

"Nothing at all sir," the young man replied. "All the newspapers in London have rung up but of course we have not answered any of them. You'll be careful outside, please? There isn't a single light anywhere, and the streets are like pitch. A man tried to use an electric torch on the other side of the way just now, and they shot him. There's a double line of sentries all round from Whitehall corner."

"No flares this time, eh?" Thomson muttered. "All right, Ambrose, I think I can feel my way there."

He descended into the street but for a few moments he found himself hopelessly lost at sea. So far as he could see there was no light nor any glimmer of one. He reached the corner of the street like a blind man, by tapping the kerbstone with his cane. Arrived here, he stood for a moment in the middle of the road, bareheaded. There was not a breath of wind anywhere. He made his way carefully down towards Downing Street, meeting few people, and still obliged to grope rather than walk. Along Downing Street he made his way by the railings and rang the bell at last at the Premier's house. He was shown at once into the council room. The four or five men who were seated around a table, and who looked up at his entrance, bore every one of them, household names. The Premier held out his hand.

"Good evening, Major Thomson," he began. "Please sit down and join us for a moment."

Thomson was a little surprised at the gathering.

"You'll forgive my suggesting that this is likely to be a marked spot to-night," he said.

The Premier smiled.

"Well, you could scarcely expect us to hide, could you, Major Thomson?" he remarked. "In any case, there is not one of us who is not prepared to share what the other citizens of London have to face. The country for the women and children, if you please. We gather, sir, that it is chiefly through you that we are in the fortunate position of being prepared to-night."

"It was through my action in a matter which I understand has been subjected to a great deal of criticism," Thomson replied.

"I admit it frankly," the statesman acknowledged. "That particular matter, the matter of your censorship of a certain letter, has been the subject of a grave and earnest conference here between us all. We decided to send for you. We telephoned first of all to the Chief but he told us that you were entirely head of your department and responsible to no one, that you had been--forgive me--a brilliant success, and that it was his intention to interfere in no possible way with any course you chose to take. I may say that he intimated as much to me when I went to him, simply furious because you had removed a certain person from the list of those whose correspondence is free from censorship."

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?" Thomson asked.

"Listen to us while we put a matter to you from a common-sense point of view," Mr. Gordon Jones begged. "You see who we are. We are those upon whose shoulders rests chiefly the task of ruling this country. I want to tell you that we have come to a unanimous decision. We say nothing about the moral or the actual guilt of Sir Alfred Anselman. How far he may have been concerned in plotting with our country's enemies is a matter which we may know in the future, but for the present--well, let's make a simple matter of it--we want him left alone."

"You wish him to continue in his present high position?" Thomson said slowly,--"a man who is convicted of having treasonable correspondence with our enemy?"

"We wish him left alone," Mr. Gordon Jones continued earnestly, "not for his own sake but for ours. When the time comes, later on, it may be possible for us to deal with him. To-day, no words of mine could explain to you his exact utility. He has a finger upon the money-markets of the world. He has wealth, great wealth, and commands great wealth in every city. Frankly, this man as an open enemy today could bring more harm upon us than if any neutral Power you could name were to join the Triple Alliance. Remember, too, Major Thomson, that there may be advantages to us in this waiting attitude. Since your warning, his letters can be admitted to censorship. You have the control of a great staff of military detectives; the resources of Scotland Yard, too, are at your service. Have him watched day and night, his letters opened, his every movement followed, but don't provoke him to open enmity. We don't want him in the Tower. The scandal and the shock of it would do us enormous harm, apart from the terrible financial panic which would ensue. We will see to it that he does no further mischief than he may already have done. We make an appeal to you, all of us here to-night. Be guided entirely by us in this matter. You have rendered the country great service by your discovery. Render it a greater one, Major Thomson, by keeping that discovery secret."

"I will not make conditions with you," Thomson replied gravely. "I will say at once that I am perfectly willing to yield to your judgement in this matter. In return I ask something. I have more serious charges still to bring against Sir Alfred's nephew. Will you leave the matter of dealing with this young man in my hands?"

"With pleasure," the Premier agreed. "I think, gentlemen," he added, looking around the table, "that we need not detain Major Thomson any longer? We others have still a little business to finish."

It was all over in those few minutes and Thomson found himself in the street again. He guided his way by the railings into Whitehall. The blackness seemed to him to be no

less impenetrable. Looking fixedly eastward he seemed to some faint lightning in the sky. He heard the rumbling of carts in the road, the horses mostly being led by their drivers. Here and there, an odd taxicab which had escaped the police orders came along with one lamp lit, only to be stopped in a few yards and escorted to the edge of the pavement. All the way up Whitehall there was one long line of taxicabs, unable to ply for hire or find their way to the garages until daylight. The unusualness of it all was almost stimulating. At the top of the broad thoroughfare, Thomson turned to the left through the Pall Mall Arch and passed into St. James's Park. He strolled slowly along until he came to the thoroughfare to the left, leading down to the Admiralty. There he paused for a moment, and, turning around, listened intently. He was possessed of particularly keen hearing and it seemed to him as though from afar off he could hear the sound of a thousand muffled hammers beating upon an anvil; of a strange, methodical disturbance in the air. He grasped the railing with one hand and gazed upward with straining eyes. Just at that moment he saw distinctly what appeared to be a flash of lightning in the sky, followed by a report which sounded like a sharp clap of thunder. Then instinctively he covered his eyes with his hands. From a dozen places--one close at hand--a long, level stream of light seemed to shoot out towards the clouds. There was one of them which came from near the Carlton Hotel, which lit up the whole of the Pall Mall Arch with startling distinctness, gave him a sudden vision of the Admiralty roof, and, as he followed it up, brought a cry to his lips. Far away, beyond even the limits of the quivering line of light, there was something in the sky which seemed a little blacker than the cloud. Even while he looked at it, from the Admiralty roof came a lurid flash, the hiss and screech of a shell as it dashed upwards. And then the sleeping city seemed suddenly to awake and the night to become hideous. Not fifty yards away from him something fell in the Park, and all around him lumps of gravel and clods of earth fell in a shower. A great elm tree fell crashing into the railings close by his side. Then there was a deafening explosion, the thunder of falling masonry, and a house by the side of the arch broke suddenly into flames. A few moments later, a queer sight amongst all these untoward and unexpected happenings, a fire engine dashed under the arch, narrowly missing the broken fragments of brick and stone, swung around, and a dozen fire-hoses commenced to play upon the flaming building.

The darkness was over now, and the silence. There were houses on the other side of the river on fire, and scarcely a moment passed without the crash of a falling bomb. The air for a second or two was filled with piteous shrieks from somewhere towards Charing-Cross, shrieks drowned almost immediately by another tremendous explosion from further north. Every now and then, looking upwards in the line of the long searchlights, Thomson could distinctly see the shape of one of the circling airships. Once the light flashed downwards, and between him and Buckingham Palace he saw a great aeroplane coming head foremost down, heard it strike the ground with a tremendous crash, heard the long death cry, a cry which was more like a sob, of the men who perished with it. . . .

Every moment the uproar became more deafening. From all sorts of unsuspected places and buildings came the lightning quiver of the guns, followed by the shrieking of the shells. Right on to the tops of the houses between where he was standing and the Carlton, another aeroplane fell, smashing the chimneys and the windows and hanging there like a gigantic black bat. There was not a soul anywhere near him, but by the occasional flashes of light Thomson could see soldiers and hurrying people in the Admiralty Square, and along the Strand he could hear the patter of footsteps upon the pavement. But he himself remained alone, a silent, spellbound, fascinated witness of this epic of slaughter and ruin.

Then came what seemed to him to be its culmination. High above his head he was suddenly conscious of a downward current of air. He looked up. The shouting voices, apparently from the falling clouds, voices unfamiliar and guttural, warned him of what was coming. The darkness which loomed over him, took shape. He turned and ran for his life. Only a little way above his head a storm of shrapnel now was streaming from the lowered guns of the Admiralty. Turning back to look, he saw, scarcely fifty yards above him, the falling of a huge Zeppelin. He felt himself just outside its range and paused, breathless. With a crash which seemed to split the air, the huge structure fell. The far end of it, all buckled up, rested against the back of the Admiralty. The other end was only a few yards from where Thomson stood, at the bottom of the steps leading up into Pall Mall. A dozen searchlights played upon it. Men suddenly appeared as though from underneath. Some of them stood for a moment and swayed like drunken men, others began to run. Round the corner from the Admiralty Square a little company of soldiers came with fixed bayonets. There was a shout. Two of the men ran on.

Thomson heard the crack of a rifle and saw one of them leap into the air and collapse. The other one staggered and fell on his knees. A dozen of them were there together with their hands stretched to the skies. Then Thomson was conscious that one of the oil-clad figures was coming in his direction, making for the steps, running with swift, stealthy gait. A flash of light gleamed upon the fugitive for a moment. He wore a hat like a helmet; only his face, blackened with grease, and his staring eyes, were visible. He came straight for Thomson, breathing heavily.

"Hands up!" Thomson cried.

The man aimed a furious blow at him. Thomson, who quite unconsciously had drawn a revolver from his pocket, shot him through the heart, watched him jump up and fall, a senseless, shapeless heap upon the bottom of the steps, and, with a queer instinct of bloodthirstiness, ran down the line of the wrecked Zeppelin, seeking for more victims. The soldiers were coming up in force now, however, and detachments of them were marching away their prisoners. Another company was stationed all around the huge craft, keeping guard. Thomson walked back once more towards the Admiralty. The sky was still lurid with the reflection of many fires but the roar of the guns had diminished, and for several minutes no bomb had been thrown. With the revolver in his hand still smoking, he ran into a man whom he knew slightly at the Admiralty.

"Thomson, by God!" the man exclaimed. "What are you doing with that revolver?"

"I don't know," he answered. "I've just shot one of those fellows from the Zeppelin. How are things going?"

"There are six Zeppelins down in different parts, and a couple of dozen aeroplanes," the other replied. "Woolwich is safe, and the Houses of Parliament and Whitehall. Heaps of reports to come in but I don't believe they've done much damage."

Thomson passed on. It was lighter now and the streets were thronged with people. He turned once more towards the Strand and stood for a moment in Trafalgar Square. One wing of the National Gallery was gone, and the Golden Cross Hotel was in flames. Leaning against the Union Club was another fallen aeroplane. Men and women were rushing everywhere in wild excitement. He made his way down to the War Office. It seemed queer to find men at work still in their rooms. He sent Ambrose for an orderly and received a message from headquarters.

"Damage to public buildings and property not yet estimated. All dockyards and arsenals safe, principal public buildings untouched. Only seventeen dead and forty injured reported up to five minutes ago. Great damage done to enemy fleet; remainder in full retreat, many badly damaged. Zeppelin just down in Essex, four aeroplanes between here and Romford."

Thomson threw down his revolver.

"Well," he muttered to himself, "perhaps London will believe now that we are at war!"