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[The Kingom of the Blind](#)

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

Chapter 21

At about half-past ten that evening, Granet suddenly threw down his cue in the middle of a game of billiards, and stood, for a moment, in a listening attitude.

"Jove, I believe that's an airship!" he exclaimed, and hurried out of the room.

They all followed him. He was standing just outside the French-windows of the sitting-room, upon the gravel walk, his head upturned, listening intently. There was scarcely a breath of wind, no moon nor any stars. Little clouds of grey mist hung about on the marshes, shutting out their view of the sea. The stillness was more than usually intense.

"Can't hear a thing," young Anselman muttered at last.

"It may have been fancy," Granet admitted.

"A motor-cycle going along the Huntstanton Road," Major Harrison suggested.

"It's a magnificent night for a raid," Dickens remarked glancing around.

"No chance of Zepps over here, I should say," Collins declared, a little didactically. "I was looking at your map at the golf club only this morning."

They all made their way back to the house. Granet, however, seemed still dissatisfied.

"I'm going to see that my car's all right," he told them. "I left it in the open shed."

He was absent for about twenty minutes. When he returned, they had finished the game of snooker pool without him and were all sitting on the lounge by the side of the billiard table, talking of the war. Granet listened for a few minutes and then said good-night a little abruptly. He lit his candle outside and went slowly to his room. Arrived there, he glanced at his watch and locked the door. It was half-past eleven. He changed his clothes quickly, put on some rubber-soled shoes and slipped a brandy flask and a revolver into his pocket. Then he sat down before his window with his watch in his hand. He was conscious of a certain foreboding from which he had never been able to escape since his arrival. In France and Belgium he had lived through fateful hours, carrying more than once his life in his hands. His risk to-night was an equal one but the exhilaration seemed lacking. This work in a country apparently at peace seemed somehow on a different level. If it were less dangerous, it was also less stimulating. In those few moments the soldier blood in him called for the turmoil of war, the panorama of life and death, the fierce, hot excitement of juggling with fate while the heavens themselves seemed raining death on every side. Here there was nothing but silence, the soft splash of the distant sea, the barking of a distant dog. The danger was vivid and actual but without the stimulus of that blood-red background. He glanced at his watch. It wanted still ten minutes to twelve. For a moment then he suffered his thoughts to go back to the new thing which had crept into his life. He was suddenly back in the Milan, he saw the backward turn of her head, the almost wistful look in her eyes as she made her little pronouncement. She had broken her engagement. Why? It was a battle, indeed, he was fighting with that still, cold antagonist, whom he half-despised and half-feared, the man concerning whose actual personality he had felt so many doubts. What if things should go wrong to-night, if the whole dramatic story should be handed over for the glory and wonder of the halfpenny press! He could fancy their headlines, imagine even their trenchant paragraphs. It was skating on the thinnest of ice--and for what? His fingers gripped the damp window-sill. He raised himself a little higher. His eyes fell upon his watch--still a minute or two to twelve. Slowly he stole to his door and listened. The place was silent. He made his way on tiptoe across the landing and entered Collins' room. The latter was seated before the wide-open window. He had blown out his candle and the room was in darkness. He half turned his head at Granet's entrance.

"Two minutes!" he exclaimed softly. "Granet, it will be to-night. Are you ready?"

"Absolutely!"

They stood by the open window in silence. Nothing had changed. It was not yet time for the singing of the earliest birds. The tiny village lay behind them, silent and asleep; in front, nothing but the marshes, uninhabited, lonely and quiet, the golf club-house empty and deserted. They stood and watched, their faces turned steadfastly in a certain direction. Gradually their eyes, growing accustomed to the dim and changing light, could pierce the black line above the grey where the sea came stealing up the sandy places with low murmurs, throwing with every wave longer arms into the land.

"Twelve o'clock!" Collins muttered.

Suddenly Granet's fingers dug into his shoulder. From out of that pall of velvet darkness which hung below the clouds, came for a single moment a vision of violet light. It rose apparently from nowhere, it passed away into space. It was visible barely for five seconds, then it had gone. Granet spoke with a little sob.

"My God!" he murmured. "They're coming!"

Collins was already on his feet. He had straightened himself wonderfully, and there was a new alertness in his manner. He, too, wore rubber shoes and his movements were absolutely noiseless. He carried a little electric torch in his hand, which he flashed around the room while he placed several small articles in his pocket. Then he pushed open the door and listened. He turned back, held up his finger and nodded. The two men passed down the stairs, through the sitting-room, out on to the lawn by a door left unfastened, and round the house to the shed. Together they pushed the car down the slight incline of the drive. Granet mounted into the driving-seat and pressed the self-starter. Collins took the place by his side.

"Remember," Granet whispered, "we heard something and I met you in the hall. Sit tight."

They sped with all the silence and smoothness of their six-cylinder up the tree-hung road, through the sleeping village and along the narrow lane to Market Burnham. When they were within about a hundred yards of the gate, Granet brought the car to a standstill.

"There are at least two sentries that way," he said, "and if Sir Meyville told me the truth, they may have a special guard of Marines out to-night. This is where we take to the marshes. Listen. Can you hear anything?"

They both held their breath.

"Nothing yet," Collins muttered. "Let's get the things out quickly."

Granet hurried to the back of the car, ripping open the coverings. In a few moments they had dragged over the side a small collapsible boat of canvas stretched across some bamboo joints, with two tiny sculls. They clambered up the bank.

"The creek must be close here," Granet whispered. "Don't show a light. Listen!"

This time they could hear the sound of an engine beating away in the boat-house on the other side of the Hall. Through the closely-drawn curtains, too, they could see faint fingers of light from the house on the sea.

"They are working still," Granet continued. "Look out, Collins, that's the creek."

They pushed the boat into the middle of the black arm of water and stepped cautiously into it. Taking one of the paddles, Granet, kneeling down, propelled it slowly seaward. Once or twice they ran into the bank and had to push off, but very soon their eyes grew accustomed to the darkness. By degrees the creek broadened. They passed close to the walls of the garden, and very soon they were perceptibly nearer the quaintly-situated workshop. Granet paused for a moment from his labours.

"The Hall is dark enough," he muttered. "Listen!"

They heard the regular pacing of a sentinel in the drive. Nearer to them, on the top of the wall, they fancied that they heard the clash of a bayonet. Granet dropped his voice to the barest whisper.

"We are close there now. Stretch out your hand, Collins. Can you feel a shelf of rock?"

"It's just in front of me," was the stifled answer.

"That's for the stuff. Down with it."

For a few moments Collins was busy. Then, with a little gasp, he gripped Granet's arm. His voice, shaking with nervous repression, was still almost hysterical.

"They're coming, Granet! My God, they're coming!"

Both men turned seaward. Far away in the clouds, it seemed, they could hear a faint humming, some new sound, something mechanical in its regular beating, yet with clamorous throatiness of some human force cleaving its way through the resistless air. With every second it grew louder. The men stood clutching one another.

"Have you got the fuse ready? They must hear it in a moment." Granet muttered.

Collins assented silently. The reverberations became louder and louder. Soon the air was full of echoes. From far away inland dogs were barking, from a farm somewhere the other side of the road they heard the shout of a single voice.

"Now," Granet whispered.

Collins leaned forward. The fuse in his hand touched the dark substance which he had spread out upon the rock. In a moment a strange, unearthly, green light seemed to roll back the darkness. The house, the workshop, the trees, the slowly flowing sea, their own ghastly faces--everything stood revealed in a blaze of hideous, awful light. For a moment they forgot themselves, they forgot the miracle they had brought to pass. Their eyes were rivetted skyward. High above them, something blacker than the heavens themselves, stupendous, huge, seemed suddenly to assume to itself shape. The roar of machinery was clearly audible. From the house came the mingled shouting of many voices. Something dropped into the sea a hundred yards away with a screech and a hiss, and a geyser-like fountain leapt so high that the spray reached them. Then there was a sharper sound as a rifle bullet whistled by.

"My God!" Granet exclaimed. "It's time we were out of this, Collins!"

He seized his scull. Even at that moment there was a terrific explosion. A stream of lurid fire seemed to leap from the corner of the house, the wall split and fell outwards. And then there came another sound, hideous, sickly, a sound Granet had heard before, the sound of a rifle bullet cutting its way through flesh, followed by an inhuman cry. For a moment Collins' arms whirled around him. Then, with no other sound save that one cry, he fell forward and disappeared. For a single second Granet leaned over the side of the boat as though to drive after him. Then came another roar. The sand flew up in a blinding storm, the whole of the creek was suddenly a raging torrent. The boat was swung on a precipitous mountain of salt water and as quickly capsized. Granet, breathless for a moment and half stunned, found his way somehow to the side of the marshland, and from there stumbled his way towards the road. The house behind him was on fire, the air seemed filled with hoarse shoutings. He turned and ran for the spot where he had left the car. Once he fell into a salt water pool and came out wet through to the waist. In the end, however, he reached the bank, clambered over it and slipped down into the road. Then a light was flashed into his eyes and a bayonet was rattled at his feet. There were a couple of soldiers in charge of his car.

"Hands up!" was the hoarse order.

Granet calmly flashed his own electric torch. There were at least a dozen soldiers standing around, and a little company were hurrying down from the gates. He switched off his light almost immediately.

"Is any one hurt?" he asked.

There was a dead silence. He felt his arms seized on either side.

"The captain's coming down the road," one of the men said. "Lay on to him, Tim!"

