

The Kingdom of The Blind

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM.

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SYNOPSIS:

The story, written in 1916, begins with Lady Anselman's luncheon-party at the Ritz Hotel, London. Among the guests are Lord Romsey, a Cabinet Minister; Surgeon-Major Thomson, Chief Inspector of Field Hospitals; his fiancée, Geraldine Conyers; her brother, a naval lieutenant, and his fiancée Olive Moreton; Captain Ronald Granet, nephew of the hostess, home with a wounded arm. Lieut. Conyers receives commission on a "mystery" ship and Major Thomson decodes a secret message from the battlefield.

CHAPTER V.

Lord Romsey, after his luncheon-party, spent an hour at his official residence in Whitehall and made two other calls on his way home. His secretary met him in the spacious hall of his house in Portland Square a few moments after he had resigned his coat and hat to the footman.

"There is a gentleman here to see you who says that he made an appointment by telephone, sir," he announced. "His name is Sidney—the Reverend Horatio Sidney, he calls himself."

Lord Romsey stood for a moment without reply. His lips had come together in a hard, unpleasant line. It was obvious that this was by no means a welcome visitor.

"I gave no appointment, Ainsley," he remarked. "I simply said that I would see the gentleman when he arrived in England. You had better bring him to my study," he continued, "and be careful that no one interrupts us."

The young man withdrew and the Cabinet Minister made his way to his study. A little of the elasticity, however, had gone from his footsteps and he seated himself before his desk with the air of a man who faces a disagreeable quarter of an hour. He played for a moment with a pen-holder.

"The skeleton in the cupboard," he muttered to himself gloomily. "Even the greatest of us," he added, with a momentary return of his more inflated self, "have them."

There was a knock at the door and the secretary reappeared, ushering in this undesired visitor.

"This is Mr. Sidney, sir," he announced quietly.

The Cabinet Minister rose in his place and held out his hand in his best official style, a discreet mixture of reserve and condescension. His manner changed, however, the moment the door was closed. He withdrew his hand, which the other had made no attempt to grasp.

"I am according you the interview you desire," he said, pointing to a chair, "but I will be glad if you will explain the purport of your visit in as few words as possible. You will, I hope, appreciate the fact that your presence here is a matter of grave embarrassment to me."

Mr. Sidney bowed. He was a tall and apparently an elderly man, dressed with the utmost sobriety. He accepted the chair without undue haste, adjusted a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles and took some papers from his pocket.

"Sir," he began, speaking deliberately but without any foreign accent, "I am here to make certain proposals to you on behalf of a person who at your own request shall be nameless."

Lord Romsey frowned ponderously and tapped the desk by his side with his thick forefinger.

"I cannot prevent your speaking, of course," he said, "but I wish you to understand from the first that I am not in a position to deal with any messages or communications from your master, whoever he may be, or any one else in your country."

"Nevertheless," the other remarked drily, "my message must be delivered."

An impulse of curiosity struggled through the gloom and apprehension of Lord Romsey's manner. He gazed at his visitor with knitted brows.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "An Englishman?"

"It is of no consequence," was the colorless reply.

"But it is of consequence," Lord Romsey insisted. "You have dared to proclaim yourself an ambassador to me from a country with whom England is at war. Even a discussion between us amounts almost to treason. On second thoughts I decline to receive you."

He held out his hand toward the electric bell which stood on his study table. His visitor shook his head.

"I wouldn't adopt that attitude, if I were you," he said calmly. "You know why. If you are really curious about my nationality, there is no harm in telling you that I am an American citizen, that I have held for three years the post of American chaplain at Brussels. Better let me say what I have come to say."

Lord Romsey hesitated. His natural propensity for temporizing asserted itself and his finger left the bell. The other continued.

"You are in the unfortunate position, Lord Romsey, of having failed absolutely in your duty towards your own country, and having grossly and traitorously deceived a personage who has always treated you with the greatest kindness. I am here to see if it is possible for you to make some amends."

"I deny every word you say," the Minister declared passionately, "and I refuse to hear your proposition."

Mr. Sidney's manner suddenly changed. He leaned forward in his chair.

"Do not be foolish," he advised. "Your last letter to a certain personage was dated June second. I have a copy of it with me. Shall I read it to you, word by word?"

"Thank you, I remember enough of it," Lord Romsey groaned.

"You will listen, then, to what I have to say," the envoy proceeded, "or that letter will be published in The Times to-morrow morning. You know what that will mean—your political ruin, your everlasting disgrace. What use will this country, blinded at the present moment by prejudice, have for a statesman who, without authority, pledged his Government to an alliance with Germany, who over his own signature—"

"Stop!" Lord Romsey interrupted. "There is no purpose in this. What is it you want?"

"Your influence in the Cabinet. You are responsible for this war. It is for you to end it."

"Rubbish!" the other exclaimed hoarsely. "You are attempting to saddle me with a responsibility like this, simply because my personal sympathies have always been on the side of the country you are representing."

"It is not a question of your personal sympathies," Mr. Sidney returned swiftly. "In black and white you pledged your Government to abstain from war against Germany."

"How could I tell," the statesman protested, "that Germany was thinking of tearing up treaties, or entering into a campaign of sheer and scandalous aggression?"

"You made no stipulations or conditions in what you wrote," was the calm reply. "You pledged your word that your Government would never declare war against Germany. You alluded to the French entente as an unnatural one. You spoke eloquently of the kinship of spirit between England and Germany."

Lord Romsey moved uneasily in his chair. He had expected to find this an unpleasant interview and he was certainly not being disappointed.

"Well, I was mistaken," he admitted. "What I said was true enough. I never did believe that the Government with which I was associated would declare war against Germany. Even now, let me tell you that there isn't a soul breathing who knows how close the real issue was. If your people had only chosen any other line of advance!"

"I have not come here to recriminate," Mr. Sidney declared. "That is not my mission. I am here to state our terms for refraining from sending your letters—your personal letters to the Kaiser—to the English Press."

Lord Romsey sprang to his feet.

"Good God, man! Do you know what you are saying?" he exclaimed.

"Perfectly," the other replied. "I told you that my errand was a serious one. Shall I proceed?"

The Minister slowly resumed his seat. From behind the electric lamp his face was ghastly white. In that brief pause which followed he seemed to be looking through the walls of the room into an ugly chapter of his future. He saw the headlines in the newspapers, the leading articles, the culmination of all the gossip and mutterings of the last few months, the end of his political career—a disgraceful and ignoble end! Surely no man had ever been placed in so painful a predicament. It was treason to parley. It was disgraceful to send this man away.

"Germany wants peace," this visitor continued calmly. "She may not have accomplished all she wished to have accomplished by this war, and she is still as strong as ever from a military point of view, but she wants peace. I need say no more than that." Lord Romsey shook his head.

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"Even if I had the influence, which I haven't," he began, "it isn't a matter of the Government at all. The country would never stand it."

"Then you had better convert the country," was the prompt reply. "Look upon it as your duty. Remember this—you are the man in all this world, and not the Kaiser, who is responsible for this war. But for your solemn words pledging your country to neutrality, Germany would never have forced the issue as she has done. Now it is for you to repair the evil. I tell you that we want peace. The first overtures may come ostensibly through Washington, if you will, but they must come in reality from you."

The Minister leaned back in his chair. His was the calmness of despair.

"You might as well ask me," he said simply, "to order our Fleet out of the North Sea."

Mr. Sidney rose to his feet.

"I think," he advised, "that you had better try what you can do, Lord Romsey. We shall give you a little time. We may even extend it, if we find traces of your influence. You have two colleagues, at least, who are pacifists at heart. Take them on one side, talk in a whisper at first. Plant just a little seed but be careful that it grows. We do not expect impossibilities, only—remember what failure will mean to you."

Lord Romsey looked steadfastly at his visitor. Mr. Sidney was tall and spare, and there was certainly nothing of the Teuton or the American in his appearance or accent. His voice was characterless, his restraint almost unnatural. Relieved of his more immediate fears, the Minister was conscious of a renewed instinct of strong curiosity.

"How can I communicate with you, Mr.—Sidney?" he asked.

"In no way," the other replied. "When I think it advisable I shall come to see you again."

"Are you an American or a German or an Englishman?"

"I am whichever I choose for the moment," was the cool response. "If you doubt my credentials, I can perhaps establish myself in your confidence by repeating the conversation which took place between you and the Kaiser on the terrace of the Imperial Palace at Potsdam between three and four o'clock on the afternoon of April the seventh. You gave the Kaiser a little character sketch of your colleagues in the Cabinet, and you treated with ridicule the bare idea that one or two of them, at any rate, would ever consent—"

"That will do," the Minister interrupted hoarsely.

"Just as you will," the other observed. "I wish you good-day, sir. The issue is now before you quite plainly. Let us soon be able to appreciate the effect of your changed attitude."

Lord Romsey touched his bell in silence and his visitor took a grave and decorous leave. He walked with the secretary down the hall.

"These are sad days for all of us," he said benignly. "I have been telling Lord Romsey of some of my experiences in Brussels. I was American chaplain at the new church there when the war broke out. I have seen sights which I shall never forget, horrors the memory of which will never leave me."

The secretary nodded sympathetically. He was trying to get off early, however, and he had heard a good deal already about Belgium.

"Will you let one of the servants fetch you a taxi cab?" he suggested. "I prefer to walk a little distance."

Mr. Sidney replied. "I am quite at home in London. I was once, in fact, invited to take up a pastorate here. I wish you good-day, sir. I have had a most interesting conversation with your chief, a conversation which will dwell for a long time in my memory."

The secretary bowed and Mr. Sidney walked slowly to the corner of the Square. Arrived there, he hailed a passing taxi cab which drew up at once by the side of the kerb. In stepping in, he brushed the shoulder of a man who had paused to light a cigarette. He lingered for a moment to apologize.

"I beg your pardon," he commenced—

For a single moment his self-possession seemed to desert him. He looked into the cold, incurious face of the man in officer's uniform who was already moving away, as though he had seen a ghost. His hesitation was a matter of seconds only, however.

"It was very clumsy of me," he concluded.

Major Thomson touched his cap as he moved off.

"Quite all right," he said serenely. (To be continued.)

The "No-Luck" Gardener.

He stuck a few rose bushes into the ground in the back yard one day.

He did not prune them and he permitted wild shoots to grow.

He never cultivated the soil. He never sprayed the bushes after the warm days set in.

He did nothing to help them or encourage them, but later whenever gardening was the topic of conversation he always said:

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Luck and Diamonds.

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Turning to the walls of his house, he saw in them scores of similar pebbles. He picked out a few, showed them to an expert and learned that they were diamonds. The walls of his house were literally incrustated with them. Thus was discovered the famous Dutoitspan mine, which in a single generation was destined to yield tens of millions of dollars' worth of diamonds.

Riding one day at sundown to bring in his horses, a Boer farmer saw a meerkat scraping earth from its burrow. The earth had an odd look that led the Dutchman to start to fill his handkerchief with it. To his astonishment he presently found in his fingers a three-fourths carat diamond. He panned over more of the earth and found more diamonds. He had found the Wesselton mine.

The styles change in everything but babies.

Mollie and Freddy had been to a party, and were just leaving. "Good-bye," said Mollie to the hostess. "Mother says we've enjoyed ourselves very much, thank you."

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