

THE BETRAYAL

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

Author of *A Master of History, A Prince of Sinners, The Master of the Game, The Adventures of Mysterious Mr. Jabin, The Yellow Crayon, The Traitor, The Man and His Kingdom, A Millionaire of Yesterday, etc.*

CHAPTER XII.

The Prince did not wait for my answer, for Lady Angela looked back, and he hastened to her side. He seemed in no hurry, however, to leave the place. The evening was cloudy and unusually dark. A north wind was tearing through the grove of stunted firs, and the roar of the incoming sea filled the air with muffled thunder. The Prince looked about him with a little grimace.

"It is indeed a lonely spot," he remarked. "One can imagine anything happening here. Did I not hear of a tragedy on the other day—a man found dead?"

"If you have a taste for horrors, Prince," I remarked, "you can see the spot from the edge of the cliff here."

The Prince moved eagerly forward. "I disclaim all such weakness," he said. "But the little apartment which I read of did seem to me to be a—ah, I forget, but it interested me."

I pointed downwards to where the creek-river mingles into the sea. "There was a little to the left of the white palings," I said. "The man was supposed to have been cast up from the sea."

He measured the distance with his eye. I anticipated his remark.

"The tide is only halfway up now," I said, "and on that particular night there was a terrible gale."

"Nevertheless," he murmured, half to himself, "it is a long way. Was the man what you call identified, Mr. Duane?"

"No."

"There were no letters or papers found upon him?"

"Yes."

The Prince looked at me sharply. "That," he said softly, "was strange. Does it not suggest to you that he may have been robbed?"

"I had not thought of it," I answered. "The verdict, I believe, was simply found."

"Found drowned," the Prince repeated. "Ah! Found drowned. By-the-by," he added suddenly, "who did find him?"

"I did," I said coolly.

"You?" the Prince peered at me closely through the dim light. "That," he said reflectively, "is interesting."

"You find it so interesting," I remarked, "that perhaps you could help to solve the question of the man's identity."

He seemed startled. "But, no. Why should you think that?"

I turned to join Lady Angela. He did not immediately follow.

"Why did you bring him?" I asked her softly. "You had some reason."

"He was making inquiries about you," she answered, "secretly and openly. I thought you ought to know, and I could think of no other way of putting you on your guard."

"The Prince of Malors?" I murmured. "He surely would not stoop to play the spy."

She was silent, and moved a step or two further away from the spot where he still stood as though absent. The angle of his figure was clearly defined through the twilight against the empty background of space. He was on the very edge of the cliff, almost looking over his head, she said loudly, "But I have heard the others talk, Lord Chelsford especially. He is a man, they say, with a twofold reputation. He has clearly played a great part in the world of pleasure, almost a theatrical part; but, you know, the French people like that."

"It is true," I murmured. "They love their heroes decked in tinsel."

She nodded.

"They say that it is part of a poet, and that he has serious political ambitions. He contemplates always some great scheme which shall make him a hero, if only for a day, of the French mob."

A day would be sufficient, for he would strike while—Prince, be careful," she called out. "Ah!"

We heard a shrill cry, and we saw the Prince sway on the verge of the cliff. He threw up his arms and clutched wildly at the air, but he was too late to save himself. We saw the ground crumble beneath his feet, and with a second cry of despair he disappeared.

Groton, Lady Angela, and I reached the edge of the cliff at about the same moment. We peered over in breathless anxiety. Lady Angela clutched my arm, and for a moment I did not know the least care what had happened to the Prince.

"Don't be frightened," I whispered. "The descent is not by any means easy, but he can't possibly have got to the bottom. I will climb down and look for him."

She shuddered.

"Oh, you mustn't," she exclaimed. "It is not safe. How terrible it looks down there!"

I raised my voice and shouted. Almost immediately there came an answer. "I am here, my friends, in the middle of a cliff. I dare not move. It is so dark I cannot see where to put my foot. Can you lower me a lantern, and will you see if I can climb up?"

Groton hastened back to the cottage. "I think you will be all right," I cried out. "It is not half as steep as it looks."

"I believe," he answered, "that I can see a path up. But I will wait until the lantern comes."

The lantern arrived almost immediately. We lowered it to him by a rope, and he examined the face of the cliff.

"I think that I should like to help myself with the rope. Can you both hold it tightly?"

"All right," I answered. "We've got it."

He clambered up with surprising agility. But as he reached the edge of the cliff he groaned heavily.

"Are you hurt?" Lady Angela asked.

"It is my foot," he muttered. "I have twisted it in falling."

Groton and I helped him to the cottage. He hobbled painfully along with tightly clenched lips.

"I shall have to ask for a pony cart to get up to the house, I am afraid," he said. "I am very sorry to give you so much trouble, Mr. Duane."

"The trouble is nothing," I answered, "but I am wondering how on earth you managed to fall over the cliff."

"I myself, I scarcely know," he answered, "as he slipped the brandy which Groton had produced. I am subject to fits of giddiness, and one came over me as I stood there looking down. I felt the ground sway, and I remember no more, but indeed I fear that I cannot walk."

"We will send you down a cart," I declared. "You will have rather a rough drive across the grass, but there is no other way."

"You are very kind," he declared. "I am in despair at my clumsiness."

sawed. "I saw you at my desk from outside."

"You should consult an oculist," he declared. "I have not left this chair. My foot is still so painful."

"You lie well, Prince," I answered, "but not well enough."

"I am endeavoring," he said. "To accommodate myself to the customs of this wonderful country of yours. In France one sends one's seconds. What do you do here to a man who calls you a liar?"

"The man deserves to be treated who abuses the hospitality of a stranger, and places himself in the position of a common thief."

The Prince shrugged his shoulders lightly, and helped himself to one of my cigarettes.

"You are very young, Mr. Duane," he said, looking at me thoughtfully. "You have no doubt your career to make in the world. So, in a greater sense of the word, have I, I propose, if you will allow me, to be frank with you."

"I have no wish for your confidences, Prince," I answered. "They cannot possibly concern or interest me."

"Do not be too sure of that," he said. "Take all young men of your age, you jump too readily at conclusions. It is very possible that you and I may be of service to one another, and I may add that those of us who are very young, Mr. Duane, are very young."

"I am honored with your confidence, Prince," I said. "I thought that you might know something of the man who was found dead on the cliff."

"I have no special knowledge of Colonel Ray's likes or dislikes," he answered.

"Forgive me," I said. "I thought that you and he were very intimate, and that you might know. I wonder whether he takes the Prince seriously."

"Colonel Ray is one of my best friends," she said, "but I am not in his confidence."

A slight reserve had crept into her tone. I stole a glance at her face; paler and more delicate than ever it seemed in the gathering darkness. Her lips were firmly set, but her eyes were kind. A sudden desire for her sympathy weakened me.

"Lady Angela," I said. "I must talk to some one. I do not know whom to trust. I do not know who is honest. You are the only person whom I dare speak to about this."

She looked round cautiously. We were out of the plantation now, in the open park, where eavesdropping was impossible.

"You have a difficult post, Mr. Duane," she said, "and you will remember."

"Oh, I remember," I interrupted. "You warned me not to take it. But think in what a position I was. I had no career, I was penniless. How could I throw away such a chance?"

"Something has happened—this morning, has it not?" she asked.

I nodded.

She waited for me to go on. She was deeply interested. I could hear her breath coming fast, though we were talking at a small pace. I longed to confide in her absolutely, but I dared not.

"Do not ask me to tell you what it was," I said. "The knowledge would be a terrible burden to me. It is all the time like poison in my brain."

We were walking very close together. I felt her fingers suddenly upon my arm and her soft breath upon my cheek.

"But if you do not tell me everything—how can you expect my sympathy, perhaps my help, about this?"

"I may not ask you for either," I answered sadly. "The knowledge of some things must remain between your father and myself."

"Between my father—and yourself?" she repeated.

I was silent, and then we both started apart. Behind us we could hear the sound of footsteps rapidly approaching. Groton's quick footsteps, muffled and almost noiseless upon the spongy turf. We stood still.

CHAPTER XIII.

A Bribe.

I wheeled round and peered into the darkness. Lady Angela's fingers clutched my arm. I could feel that she was trembling violently. It was Groton whose figure loomed up almost immediately before us—Groton, bareheaded and breathless.

"What is it?" I exclaimed quickly. "I think, sir, that you had better return," he panted.

He pointed over his shoulder towards the "Brand," and I understood. In a moment I was on my way thither, running as I had not done since my college days. I stumbled over antheaps, and more than once I set my foot in the hole; but somehow I kept my balance.

As I neared the cottage I slackened my speed and proceeded more stealthily. I drew close to the window and peered in. The Prince was standing before my desk, with a bundle of papers in his hand. I threw open the door and entered the room. Swift through my movement had been, a second's difficulty with the catch had given the Prince the opportunity. He was crouching in his easy chair when I entered, reclining there with half-closed eyes. He looked up at me with well-simulated surprise.

"Duane," he said, "Mr. Duane," he remarked calmly. "Did you forget something?"

"I forgot," I answered, struggling to recover my wits. "To lock up my desk."

"An admirable precaution," he admitted, "especially if one has valuables. It is an exposed spot this, and very lonely."

"I am curious," I said, leaning against the table and facing him. "I am curious to know which of my possessions are possibly of interest or value to the Prince of Malors."

The calm hauteur of his answering stare was excellently done. I had a glimpse now of the aristocrat.

"You speak in enigmas, young man," he said. "Kindly be more explicit."

"My language can scarcely be more explicit," he said. "I am sure you are not a child. I was fool enough to trust you and I left you here alone. But you were not unobserved. Prince, my servant, I am afraid, has been so busy that he has not summoned me back."

"Indeed!" he murmured.

"I might add," I continued, "that I took the liberty of looking in through the side window there before entering."

"If it amused you to do so, or to set your servant to spy upon me, I am afraid I see no reason to object. But your meaning is still unexplained."

"The omission of explanation," I declared, "appears to me to rest with you, Prince. I offered the hospitality of my room, presumably to a gentleman—not to a person who would seize that opportunity to examine my private papers."

"You speak with assurance, Mr. Duane," he said.

"The assurance of knowledge," I answered, "appears to me to rest with you, Prince. I offered the hospitality of my room, presumably to a gentleman—not to a person who would seize that opportunity to examine my private papers."

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wipe his forehead with a spotless cambric handkerchief.

"My dear Lady Angela," he said, "I am most distressed that you should have been a witness of this extraordinary incident. I have been trying to adapt myself to the customs of your country, but alas! I cannot say that I am enamored of them. Here, it seems, that gentlemen who differ must behave like duellists. Will you pardon me if I turn my back to you for a moment? I see a small mirror, and I am convinced that my tie and collar need readjustment."

"But why quarrel at all?" she exclaimed. "Mr. Duane," she added, turning coolly to me, "I trust you have remembered that the Prince is my father's guest."

I was speechless, but the Prince himself intervened.

"The blame, if any," he declared, "was mine. Mr. Duane appeared to misunderstand me from the first. I believe that his little ebullience arose altogether from too great zeal on behalf of his employer. I congratulate him upon it, while I am bound to deprecate his extreme measures."

"Mr. Duane," she asked, turning towards me, "what have you to say?"

"Nothing," I declared, stung by her tone and manner as much as by her coolness, "except that I found the Prince of Malors meddling with my private papers, and subsequently I interrupted him in the offer of a bribe."

The Prince smoothed his necktie, which he had really tied very well, complacently.

"The personal belongings of Mr. Duane," he said calmly, "are without interest to me. I fancy that the Prince of Malors can ignore any suggestions to the contrary. As for the bribe, Mr. Duane, I am not aware that he has anything to sell, and I decline to believe him a blackmailer. I prefer to look upon him as a singularly hot-headed and not over-intelligent person, who takes very long jumps at conclusions. Lady Angela, I find that much better. May I have the pleasure of escorting you to the house?"

I held my tongue, knowing very well that the Prince played his part solely quite clear," he continued. "For years your War Office has suffered from constant dread of an invasion by France. The rumor of the establishment of a nation which in the autumn has inspired your statesmen with an almost paralyzing fear. They see in this merely an excuse for their own inaction, and an irretrievable army within striking distance of your empire. Personally I believe that they are entirely mistaken in their estimate of my country's intentions. That, however, is beside the mark. You follow me?"

"Perfectly," I assured him. "This is most interesting, although as yet it seems to me equally irrelevant. The Prince continued, 'has established a Secret Council of Defence, whose only task it is to plan the successful resistance to that invasion. I am honored with your confidence, Prince, but I still fail to see how these matters concern me.' I said, setting my teeth hard.

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I faced him with white face. "I seemed to have found my way into a strange place," he answered. "I have neither wit nor cunning enough to know true men from false. I would trust you, but you are a murderer. I would have trusted the Prince of Malors, but he has proved himself a common adventurer. So I have made up my mind that all shall be alike. I will be neither friend nor foe to any mortal, but true to my country, to go my way and do my duty, Colonel Ray."

He blew out dense volumes of smoke, puffing furiously at his pipe for several minutes. There seemed to be many things which he had in his mind to say to me. But, as though suddenly altering his purpose, he stood on one side.

"You shall go your own way," he said grimly. "The Lord only knows where it will take you."

It took me in the first place to the Duke, to whom I recounted briefly what had happened. I could see that my story at once made a deep impression upon him. Minutes I had finished he sat for several time since I had known him he seemed nervous and ill at ease. He was unusually pale, and there were deep lines engraved about his mouth. One hand was resting on the table, and I fancied that his fingers were shaking.