

THE BETRAYAL

BY E. PHILLIPS
OPPENHEIM

We crossed the park together. All the while she talked to me easily and naturally of the country around, the great antiquity of its landmarks, the survival of many ancient customs and almost obsolete forms of speech. At last we came to a small plantation, through which we emerged on to the cliffs. Here, to my surprise, we came upon a quaintly shaped gray stone cottage almost hidden by the trees. I had passed on the sands below many times without seeing it.

"Rather a strange situation for a house, is it not?" Lady Angela remarked. "My grandfather built it for an old pensioner, but I do not think that it has been occupied for some time."

"It is marvelously hidden," I said. "I never had the least idea that there was a house here at all."

"There is a little path there, you see, leading to the sands," she said. "It saves you quite half the distance to your cottage if you do not mind a scramble. You must take care just at first. So many of the stones are loose."

I understood that I was dismissed, and I thanked her and turned away. But she almost immediately called me back.

"Mr. Ducaigne!"

"Lady Angela."

Her dark eyes were fixed curiously upon my face. She seemed to be weighing something in her mind. I had a fancy that when she spoke again it would be without that deliberation—almost restraint—which seemed to accord a little strangely with the girl's leanness of her appearance and actual years. She stood on the extreme edge of the cliff, her slim, straight figure—dressed to angularity against the sky—seemed so long without speech that I had time to note all these things. The sunshine, breaking through the thin-topped pine trees, lay everywhere about us; a little brown feathered bird, scarcely a dozen yards away, came to us so lustily that the soft feathers around his throat stood out like a ruff. Down below the sea came rushing on to the shingles.

"Mr. Ducaigne," she said at last, "did my father make you any offer of employment this afternoon?"

It was a direct, almost a blunt question. I was taken by surprise, but I answered her without hesitation.

"He made me no definite offer," I said. "At the same time he asked me a great many questions, for which he must have had some reason, and he gave me the idea that, subject to the approval of some others, he was thinking of me in connection with some post."

"Colonel Ray was telling me," she said, "how unfortunate you have been with your pupils. I wonder—don't you think, perhaps, that you might get me one?"

"I have tried," I answered. "So far I have not been lucky. At present, too, I scarcely see how I could expect to get any, for I have nowhere to put them. I had to give up the lease of the Grange, and there is no house round here which I could afford to take."

Some portion of her delicate assurance had certainly deserted her. Her manner was almost nervous.

"If you could possibly find the pupils," she said, hesitatingly, "I should like to ask you a favor. The Manor Farm on the other side of the village is my own, and I should so like it occupied. I would let it to you furnished for ten pounds a year. There is a man and his wife living there now as caretakers. They would be able to look after you."

"You are very kind," I said again, "but I am afraid that I could not take advantage of such an offer."

"Why not?"

"I have no claim upon you or your father," I answered. "We are almost strangers, are we not? I might accept and be grateful for employment, but this is charity."

"A very convenient reply, Mr. Ducaigne," she remarked, with faint sarcasm. "I gave you credit for a larger view of things."

I found her still inexplicable. She was evidently annoyed, and yet she did not seem to wish me to be. There was a cloud upon her face and a nervousness in her manner which I wholly failed to understand.

"If I were to tell you," she said, raising her eyes suddenly to mine, "that your acceptance of my offer would be a favor—would put me under a real obligation to you?"

"I should still have to remind you," I declared, "that as yet I have no pupils, and it takes time to get them. Further, I have arrived at that position when immediate employment, if it is only as a breaker of stones upon the road, is a necessity to me."

She sighed.

"My father will offer you a post," she said slowly.

"Now you are a real Samaritan, Lady Angela," I declared. "I only hope that it may be so."

Her face reflected none of my enthusiasm.

"You jump at conclusions," she said, coldly. "How do you know that the post will be one which you will be able to fill?"

"If your father offers it to me," I answered confidently, "he must take the risk of that."

I was surprised at her speech—perhaps a little nervous, I was an "Honors" man, an exceptional linguist, and twenty-five. It did not seem likely to me that there was any post which the Duke might offer which, on the score of ability, at any rate, I should not be competent to fill.

"He will offer it to you," she said, looking steadily at me on to the sands below, "and you will accept it. I am sorry."

"Sorry!" I exclaimed.

"Very. If I could find you those pupils I would," she continued. "I could persuade you to lay aside for a while the pride which a man seems to think a part of his natural equipment. It would make me very happy."

"Stop," I interrupted. "You must explain this, Lady Angela." She shook her head. "Explain is just what I cannot," she said, sadly. "That is what I can never do."

I was completely bewildered now. She was looking seaward, her face steadily averted from mine. As to her attitude towards me, I could make nothing of it. I could not even decide whether it was friendly or implacable. Did she want this post for someone else? If so, surely her influence with her father would be strong enough to secure it. She had spoken to me kindly enough. The faint air or reserve that she seemed to carry with her everywhere, which, coupled with a certain quietness of deportment, appeared to most of the people around her, to indicate pride, had for these few minutes, at any rate, been lifted. She had come down from the clouds, and spoken to me as any other woman to any other man. And now she had wound up by throwing me into a state of hopeless bewilderment.

"Lady Angela," I said. "I think that you owe me some explanation. If you can assure me that it is in any way against your wishes, if it will give me the shadow of a reason why I should refuse what has not yet been offered to me—well, I will do it. I will do it even if I must starve."

A little forced smile parted her lips. She looked at me kindly.

"I have said a great deal more than I meant to, Mr. Ducaigne. I think that it would have been better if I had left most of it unsaid. You must go your own way. I only wanted to guard you against disappointment."

"Disappointment!" You think, after all, then—

"No, that is not what I meant," she interrupted. "I am sure that you will be offered the post, and I am sure that you will not hesitate to accept it. But, nevertheless, I think that it will bring with it great disappointments. I will tell you this. Already three young men whom I knew very well have held this post, and each in turn has been dismissed. They have lost the confidence of their employers, and though each, I believe, was ambitious and meant to make a career, they have now a black mark against their name."

"You are very mysterious, Lady Angela," I said, doubtfully.

"It is of necessity," she answered. "Perhaps I take rather a morbid view of things, but one of them was the brother of a great friend of mine, and they fear that he has lost his reason. There are peculiar and painful difficulties in connection with this post, Mr. Ducaigne, and I think it only fair to give you this warning."

"You are very kind," I said. "I only wish that the whole thing was clearer to me."

She smiled a little sadly.

"At least," she said, "let me give you one word of advice. You will be brought into contact with many people whose integrity will seem to you a positive and certain thing. Nevertheless, trust everyone alike. Trust no one. Absolutely no one, Mr. Ducaigne. It is your only chance. Now go."

Her gesture of dismissal was almost imperative. I scrambled down the path and gained the sands. When I looked up, she was still standing there. The wind blew her skirts around her slim young limbs, and her hair was streaming behind her. Her face seemed like a piece of delicate oval statuary, her steady eyes seemed fixed upon some point where the clouds and sea meet. She took no heed of me, she did not even see my gesture of farewell. I left her there inscrutable, a child with the face of a Sphinx. She had set me a riddle which I could not solve.

CHAPTER VII.

Colonel Ray's Ring.

The ring lay on the table between us. Colonel Ray had not yet taken it up. In grim silence he listened to my story. When I finished, he smiled upon me as one might upon a child that needed humoring.

"So," he said, slipping the ring upon his finger, "you have saved me from the hangman. What remains?"

Your reward, eh?"

"I may seem to you," I answered hotly, "a fitting subject for jokes. I am sorry that my sense of humor is not in touch with yours. You are a great traveler, and you have shaken death by the hand before. For me it is a new thing. The man's face haunts me! I cannot sleep or rest for the thought of it—as I have seen it dead, and saw it alive pressed against my window—that night. Who was he?"

"How do you know?" Ray asked, "that he wanted anything from you?"

"He looked in at my window."

"He might have seen me enter."

Then I told him what I had meant to keep secret.

"He asked for me in the village. He was directed to my cottage."

Ray had been filling his pipe. His fingers paused in their task. He looked at me steadily.

"How do you know that?" he asked. "The person who he spoke in the village told me so."

"Then why did that person not appear at the inquest?"

"Because I asked her not to," I told him. "If she had given evidence the verdict must have been a different one."

"It seems to me," he said quietly, "that you have acted foolishly. If that young woman, whoever she may be, choose to tell the truth later on, you will be in an awkward position."

"If she had told the truth yesterday," I answered, "the position would have been quite awkward enough. Let that go! I want to know who that man was, what he wanted with me?"

Colonel Ray shrugged his shoulders.

"My young friend," he said, "have you come from Braster to ask that question?"

"To give you that ring and to ask you that question."

"How do you know that the ring is mine?"

"I saw it on your finger when you were giving me a wine."

"Then you believe," he said, "that I killed him?"

"It is no concern of mine," I cried hoarsely. "I do not want to know. I do not want to hear. But I tell you that the man's face haunts me. He asked for me in the village. I feel that he came to Rowchester to see me. And he is dead. Whatever came to say or to tell me will be buried with him. Who was he? Tell me that?"

Ray smoked on for a few moments reflectively.

"Sit down, sit down!" he said gruffly, "and do abandon that 'ragical' aspect. The creature was not worth all this agitation. He lived like a dog, and he died like one."

"It is true, then?" I murmured.

"If you insist upon knowing," Ray said coolly, "I killed him! There are

have killed men more than once. I have watched them galloping up with waving swords, and their fine faces ablaze with the joy of battle, and all the time one's revolver went spitting, and the saddles were empty. Yet never once have I sent a brave man to his last account without regret, enemy and fanatic though he was. I am not a bloodthirsty man. When I kill, it is because necessity demands it. As for that creature whom you found in the marshes, well, if there were a dozen such in this room now, I would do my best to rid the earth of them. Take my advice. Dismiss the whole subject from your mind. Go back to Braster and wait. Something may happen within the next twenty-four hours which will be very much to your benefit. Go back to Braster and wait."

"You will tell me nothing, then?" I asked.

"It is treating me like a child. I am not a sentimentalist. If the man

gentleman might not care about it, but there's times when any sort of a job is better than none, eh?"

"It is very kind of you, Mr. Moyat," I answered, "and very kind of Miss Blanche to have thought of it. A week ago I shouldn't have hesitated. But within the last few days I have had a sort of offer—I don't know whether it will come to anything, but it may. Might I leave it open for the present?"

I thought that Mr. Moyat was a little disappointed. He flicked the cob with the whip, and looked straight ahead into the driving mist.

"Just as you say," he declared. "I ain't particular in want of anyone, but I'm getting to find my own book-keeping a bit hard, especially now that my eyes ain't what they were. Of course, it would only be a thirty bob a week job, but I suppose you'd live on that all right, unless you were

deserved death the matter is between you and your conscience. But he came to Rowchester to see me. I want to know why."

"Go back to Rowchester and wait," Ray said. "I shall tell you nothing. Depend upon it that his business with you, if he had any, was evil business. He and his whole brood left their mark for evil wherever they crawled."

"His name?" I asked.

"Where there's no papers upon him?" Ray demanded.

"None."

"So much the better," Ray declared grimly. "Now, my young friend, I have given you all the time I can spare. Beyond what I have said I shall say nothing. If you had known me better—you would not be here still."

So I left him. His words gave me no loophole of hope. His silence was the silence of a strong man, and I had no weapons with which to assail it. I had wasted the money which I could ill afford on this journey to London. Certainly Ray's advice was good. The sooner I was back in Braster the better.

From the station I had walked straight to Ray's house, and from Ray's house I returned, without any deviation, direct to the great terminus. For a man with less than fifty pounds in the world London is scarcely a hospitable city. I caught a slow train, and after four hours of jolting, cold, and the usual third-class miseries, alighted at Rowchester Junction. Already I had started on the three-mile tramp home, my coat collar turned up as some slight protection against the drizzling rain, when a two-wheeled trap overtook me, and Mr. Moyat shouted out a gruff greeting. He raised the waterproof apron, and I clambered in by his side.

"Been to Sunbridge?" he inquired cheerfully.

"I have been to London," I answered.

"You haven't been long about it," he remarked. "I saw your on the eight-twenty, didn't I?"

I nodded.

"My business was soon over," I said.

"I've been to Sunbridge," he told me, "and went over with the Grace. My girl was talking about you the other night, Mr. Ducaigne."

I started.

"Indeed?" I answered.

"Seemed to think," he continued, "that things had been growing a bit rough for you, losing those pupils after you'd been at the expense of taking the Grange, and all that, you know."

"It was rather bad luck," I admitted quietly.

"I've been wondering," he continued, with some diffidence, "whether you'd care for a bit of work in my office. Just to carry you along till things looked up. Blanche, she was set upon it that I should ask you anyway. Of course, you being a college young



Her Dark Eyes Were Fixed Curiously Upon My Face.

thinking of getting married, eh?" I laughed derisively.

"Married, Mr. Moyat?" I exclaimed.

"Why, I'm next door to a pauper," he remarked thoughtfully, "if one's a steady sort of chap, and means work, as picking up a girl with a bit of brass now and then."

"I can assure you, Mr. Moyat," I said as coolly as possible, "that anything of that sort is out of the question so far as I am concerned. I should never dream of even thinking of getting married till I had a home of my own and an income."

He seemed about to say something, but checked himself. We drove on in silence till we came to a drive pile of buildings standing a little way back from the road. He moved his head towards it.

"They tell me Braster Grange is taken after all," he remarked. "Mr. Hulshaw told me so this morning."

I was very little interested, but was prepared to welcome any change in the conversation.

"Do you know who is coming there?" I asked.

"An American lady, I believe, name of Lessing. I don't know what strangers want coming to such a place, I'm sure."

I glanced involuntarily over my shoulder. Braster Grange was a long pile of buildings which had been occupied for many years. Between it and the sea was nothing but empty marshland. It was one of the bleakest spots along the coast—to the casual observer nothing but an arid waste of sands in the summer, a wilderness of desolation in the winter. Only those who have dwelt in those parts are able to feel the fascination of that great empty land, a fascination potent enough, but of slow growth. Mr. Moyat's remark was justified.

We drove into his stable yard and clambered down.

"You'll come in and have a bit of supper," Mr. Moyat insisted.

I hesitated. I felt that it would be wiser to refuse, but I was cold and wet, and the thought of my fireless room depressed me. So I was ushered into the long, low dining-room, with its old hunting prints and black oak furniture, and best of all, with its huge log fire. Mrs. Moyat greeted me with her usual negative courtesy. I do not think that I was a favorite of hers, but whatever her welcome lacked in impressiveness Blanche's made up for it. She kept looking at me as though anxious that I should remember our common secret. More than once I was almost sorry that I had not let her speak.

"You've had swell callers again," she remarked, as we sat side by side at supper-time. "A carriage from Rowchester was outside your door when I passed."

"Ah, he's a good sort is the duke," Mr. Moyat declared appreciatively. "A clever chap, too. He's A1 in politics,

and a first-class businessman, chairman of the great Southern Railway Company, and on the board of several other city companies."

"I can't see what the gentry want to meddle with such things at all for," Mrs. Moyat said. "There's some as says as the duke's lost more than he can afford by speculations."

"The duke's a shrewd man," Mr. Moyat declared. "It's easy to talk."

"If he hasn't lost money," Mrs. Moyat demanded, "why is Rowchester Castle let to that American millionaire? Why doesn't he live there himself?"

"Prefers the east coast," Mr. Moyat declared cheerfully. "More bracing, and suits his constitution better. I've heard him say so himself."

"That is all very well," Mrs. Moyat said, "but I can't see that Rowchester is a fit country house for a nobleman. What do you think, Mr. Ducaigne?"

I was more interested in the discussion than anxious to be drawn into it, so I returned an evasive reply. Mrs. Moyat nodded sympathetically.

"Of course," she said, "you haven't seen the house except from the road, but I've been over it many a time. Mrs. Felton was housekeeper and the duke didn't come down so often, and I say that it's a poor place for a duke."

"Well, well, mother, we won't quarrel about it," Mr. Moyat declared, rising from the table. "I must just have a look at the mare. Do you look after Mr. Ducaigne, Blanche."

To my annoyance the retreat of Mr. and Mrs. Moyat was evidently planned, and accelerated by a frown from their daughter. Blanche and I were left alone—whereupon I, too, rose to my feet.

"I must be going," I said, looking at the clock.

Blanche only laughed, and bade me sit down by her side.

"I'm so glad dad brought you in to-night," she said. "Did he say anything to you?"

"What about?"

"Never mind," she answered archly. "Did he say anything at all?"

"He remarked once or twice that it was a wet night," I said.

"Stupid!" she exclaimed. "You know what I mean."

"He did make me a very kind offer," I admitted.

She looked at me eagerly.

"I told him that I am expecting an offer of work of some sort from the duke. Of course it may not come. In any case, it was very kind of Mr. Moyat."

She drew a little closer to me.

"It was my idea," she whispered. "I put it into his head."

"Then it was very kind of you, too," I answered.

She was apparently disappointed. We sat for several moments in silence. Then she looked around with an air of mystery, and whispered still more softly into my ear—

"I haven't said a word about that—to anybody."

"Thank you very much," I answered. "I was quite sure that you wouldn't, as you had proved it."

Again there was silence. She looked at me with some return of that half-fearsome curiosity which had first come into her eyes when I made my request.

"Wasn't the inquest horrid?" she said. "Father says they were five hours deciding—and there's old Joe Hassell; even now he won't believe that—that he came from the sea."

"It isn't a pleasant subject," I said quietly. "Let us talk of something else."

She was swinging a very much beaded slipper backwards and forwards, and gazing at it thoughtfully.

"I don't know," she said. "I can't help thinking of it sometimes. I suppose it is terribly wicked to keep anything back like that, isn't it?"

"If you feel that," I answered, "you had better go and tell your father everything."

She looked at me quickly.

"Now you're cross," she exclaimed. "I'm sure I don't know why."

"I am not cross," I said, "but I do not wish you to feel unhappy about it."

"I don't mind that," she answered, lifting her eyes to mine. "If it is better for you."

The door opened and Mr. Moyat appeared. Blanche was obviously annoyed, I was correspondingly relieved. I rose at once, and took my leave.

"Blanche got you to change your mind?" he said looking at me closely.

"I am not cross," I said, "but I do not wish you to feel unhappy about it."

"Miss Moyat hasn't tried," I answered, shaking him by the hand. "We were talking about something else."

Blanche pushed past her father and came to let me out. We stood for a moment at the open door. She pointed down the street.

"It was just there he stopped me," she said in a low tone. "He was very pale, and he had such a slow, strange voice, just like a foreigner. It was in the shadow of the market-hall there. I wish I'd never seen him."

A note of real fear seemed to have crept into her voice. Her eyes were straining through the darkness. I forced a laugh as I lit my cigarette.

"You mustn't get fanciful," I declared. "Men die every day, you know, and I fancy that this one was on his last legs. Good-night."

Her lips parted as though in an answering greeting, but it was inaudible. As I looked round at the top of the street I saw her still standing there in the little flood of yellow light, gazing across towards the old market-hall.

to the table. Lord Chelsford was a cabinet minister and a famous man. What could he have to do with any appointment which the duke might offer me? I read the few words over and over again. The handwriting, the very faint perfume which seemed to steal out of the envelope, a moment's swift retrospective thought, and my fancy had conjured her into actual life. She was there in the room with me, slim and shadowy, with her quiet voice and movements, and with that haunting, doubtful look in her dark eyes. What had she meant by that curious warning? What was the knowledge or the fear which inspired it? If one could only understand!

I sat down in my chair and tried to read, but the effort was useless. Directly opposite to me was that black uncurtained window. Every time I looked up it seemed to become more the frame for a white evil face. At last I could bear it no longer. I rose and left the house. I wandered capsize across the marshes to where the wet seaweed lay strewn about, and the long waves came rolling seawards, a wilderness now indeed of gray mist, of dark silent tongues of sea waves cleaving the land. There was no wind—no other sound than the steadfast, monotonous lapping of the waves upon the sands. Along that road he had come, the faintly smiling light upon my face showed where he had pressed his face against the window. Then he had wandered on, past the tomb beneath the turn of the road, bending landwards. A few yards farther was the creek from which he had dragged him. The events of the past few days to reconstruct themselves in my mind, and I fought against their slow coalescence. I did not wish to remember—to believe. In my heart I felt that for some hidden reason Ray was my friend. This visit of the duke, whatever it might portend, was without doubt inspired by him. And, on the other hand, there was the warning of Lady Angela, so earnestly expressed, so solemn, almost sad. How could I see light through all these things? How could I hope to understand?

The duke came punctually, spruce and debonair, a small rose in his buttonhole, his wizened cheeks aglow with the smart of the stinging east wind. With him came Lord Chelsford, whose face and figure were familiar enough to me from the papers of the illustrated papers. Dark, spare, and tall, he spoke seldom, but I felt all the while the merciless investigation of his searching eyes. The duke, on the other hand, seemed to have thrown aside some part of his constant reserve, and spoke at greater length and with more freedom than I had heard him.

"You see, Mr. Ducaigne," he began, "I am not a man who makes idle promises. I am here to offer you employment, if you are open to accept a post of some importance, and also, if he frank with you, of some danger."

"If I am qualified for the post, your grace," I answered, "I shall be only too willing to do my best. But you must excuse me if I express exactly what is in my mind. I am almost a stranger to you. I am a complete stranger to Lord Chelsford. How can you rely upon my trustworthiness? You must have so many young men to choose from who are personally known to you. Why do you come to me?"

"The Duke smiled grimly.

"In the first place," he said, "we are