

THE BETRAYAL

BY E. PHILLIPS
OPPENHEIM

CHAPTER XXXIII.

The Duke's Message.

It was late, but I felt that I must see Ray. I went to his house, little expecting to find him there. I was shown, however, into the study, where he was hard at work with a pile of correspondence. He wore an ancient shooting jacket, and his feet were encased in slippers. As usual, his pipe was between his teeth, and the tobacco smoke hung about him in little clouds.

"Well," he said gruffly. "What do you want of me? I am busy. Speak to the point."

"I have come to ask your advice," I said. "I am afraid that I must resign my post."

"Why?"

"My father is in London. I have seen and spoken with him."

"With that woman?"

"Yes."

"And you have spoken to him in a public place, perhaps?"

"Yes."

Ray was silent for a moment. Then he looked at me keenly.

"Do you want to give it up?" he asked.

"No," I answered. "But do you suppose Lord Chelsford and the others would be willing for me to continue under the circumstances?"

"Probably not," he admitted. "The duke would not, at any rate."

"Then what am I to do?" I asked.

"I don't know," he answered shortly. "It requires consideration. I will see Lord Chelsford. You shall hear from me in the morning."

That was all the consolation I had from Colonel Mostyn Ray.

At 10 o'clock the next morning the duke came to me in the study, where I was already at work. He was looking even for him, particularly at the pink rosette in his button-hole. His greeting was almost cordial. He gave me a few instructions, and then lit a cigarette.

"What is this about your resignation, Ducaigne?" he asked.

"I do not wish to resign, sir," I answered. "I have explained certain circumstances to Colonel Ray, which it seemed to me might make my resignation necessary. He promised to confer with Lord Chelsford, and let me know the result."

The urbanity slowly faded from the duke's face.

"I am your employer," he said coldly. "I do not understand why you thought it necessary to go to Colonel Ray."

"It was entirely owing to the fact," Ray, sir," I answered, "that I received the appointment, and he has practically made himself responsible for me."

"You are mistaken," the duke answered. "The responsibility is shared by all of us. Your unfortunate family history was known to the whole board."

"Then I am less indebted to Colonel Ray, sir, than I imagined," I answered. "I am very glad, however, that it is known. Perhaps Lord Chelsford may not consider my resignation necessary."

"The circumstances being—"

"I have seen and spoken with my father in London," I answered.

"The duke was silent."

"I presume," he said, after a short pause, "that you must yourself realize the indiscretion of this."

"I went at once to Colonel Ray and offered my resignation," I answered.

"The duke nodded."

"Your father," he said slowly, "is in London?"

"Yes, sir."

"Alone?"

"I hesitated. Yet perhaps the duke had a right to know the truth."

"He is with the lady who occupied Braster Grange, sir, until last week," I answered. "She passed under the name of Mrs. Smith-Lessing, but I believe that she is in reality my stepmother."

The duke stood at the window. He held his cigarette between his fingers, and he stood sideways to me. Nothing about his attitude or face was unusual. Yet I felt myself watching him curiously. There was something about his manner which seemed to me to suggest some powerful emotion only kept in check by the exercise of a strong will.

"This is the person, I believe," he said in a slow measured tone, "with whom my son, Lord Blenavon, was said to have been intimate?"

"Lord Blenavon was certainly a constant visitor at Braster Grange," I answered.

"You know her address in London?" the duke asked.

"Yes."

He turned and faced me. He was certainly paler than he had been a few minutes ago.

"I should be glad," he said, "if you would arrange for me to have an interview with her."

"An interview with Mrs. Smith-Lessing?" I repeated incredulously.

"The duke inclined his head."

"There are a few questions," he said, "which I wish to ask her."

"I can give you her address," I said.

"I wish you to see her and arrange for the interview personally," the duke answered.

"You will see that my visiting her does not prejudice me further with the board, sir?" I ventured to say.

"You can take that for granted," the duke said.

So that afternoon I called at No. 29 Bloomsbury street, and in a shabby back room of a gloomy, smoke-begrimed lodging house I found my father and Mrs. Smith-Lessing. He was lying upon a horsehair sofa, apparently dozing. She was gazing negligently out of the window, and drumming upon the window-pane with her fingers. My arrival seemed to act like an electric shock upon both of them. It struck me that to her it was not altogether welcome, but my father was nervously anxious to impress upon me his satisfaction at my visit.

"Now," he said, drawing his chair up to the table, "we can discuss this little matter in a business-like way. I am delighted to see you, Guy, quite delighted."

"What matter?" I asked quietly.

My father coughed and looked towards my stepmother, as though for guidance. But her face was a blank.

"Guy," he said, "I am sure that you are a young man of common sense. You will prefer that I speak to you plainly. There are some fools at our end—I mean at Paris—who think they will be better off for a glance at the doings of your military board. Up to now we have kept them supplied with a little general information. Lord Blenavon, who is a remarkably sensible young man, lent us his assistance. I tell you this quite frankly. I believe that it is best."

He was watching me furtively. I did my best to keep my features immovable.

"With Lord Blenavon's assistance," my father continued, "we did at first very well. Since his departure we have not been so fortunate. I will be quite candid. We have not succeeded at all. Our friends pay generously, but they pay by results. As a consequence you people seem to be quite nearly penniless. This fact induces me to make you a special-averting offer."

My stepmother seemed about to speak. She checked herself, however.

"Go on," I said.

My father coughed. There was a bottle upon the table, and he helped himself from it.

"My nerves," he remarked, "are in a shocking state this morning. Can I offer you anything?"

I shook my head. My father poured out nearly a glass full of the very spirit, diluted it with a little, a very little, water, and drank it off.

"Your labors, my dear boy," he continued, "I refer, of course, to the labors of the military council, are, I believe, concentrated upon a general scheme of defense against any possible invasion on the part of France. Quite a lot of one can wonder at it. These military maneuvers of our friends across the water are just a little obvious even to John Bull, eh? You don't answer. Quite right, quite right! Never consult yourself uselessly. It is very good diplomacy. Let me see, where was I? Ah! The general scheme of defense is, of course, known to you?"

"Naturally," I admitted.

"With a list of the places to be fortified, eh? The positions to be held and the general distribution of troops? No doubt, you have gone into the railway and commissariat arrangements?"

"All these details," I assented, "have gone through my hands."

He dabbed his forehead with a corner of his handkerchief. There was a gleam of purple color in his cheeks. He kept his bloodshot eyes fixed upon me.

"I will tell you something, Guy," he said, "which will astonish you. You realize for yourself, of course, that such details as you have spoken of can never be kept altogether secret? There are always leakages, sometimes very considerable leakages. Yes, Guy, he added, "there are people, friends of mine in Paris, who are willing to pay a very large sum of money—such a large sum of money—that it is worth dividing. Guy—for just a bare outline of the whole scheme. Foolish! Of course it is foolish. But with them money is no object. They think they are getting value for it. Absurd! But, Guy, what should you say to five thousand pounds?"

"It is a large sum," I answered.

He plucked me by the sleeve. His eyes were hungering already for the gold.

"We can get it," he whispered hoarsely. "No trouble to you—no risk. I can make all the arrangements. You have only to hand me the documents."

"I must think it over," I said.

He leaned back in his chair.

"Why?" he asked. "What need is there to hesitate? The chance may slip by. There are many others on the look out."

"There is no one outside the military board save myself who could give these particulars," I said slowly.

"But my friends," he said sharply. "There is a foolish offer. They may change their minds. Guy, my boy, I know the world well. Let me give you word of advice. When a good thing turns up, don't play with it. The men who decide quickly are the men who do things."

I thrust my hand into my breast-pocket and drew out a roll of papers.

"Supposing I have already decided," I said.

His eyes gleamed with excitement. He almost snatched at the papers, but I held them out of his reach. Then with a sharp little cry the woman stood suddenly between us. There was a look almost of horror on her pale strained face, as she held out her hand as though to push me away.

"Guy, are you mad?" she cried.

The veins stood out upon my father's forehead. He regarded her with mingled anger and surprise.

"What do you mean, Maud?" he exclaimed. "How dare you interfere? Guy, give me the papers."

"He shall not!" she exclaimed fiercely.

"Guy, have you lost your senses? Do you want to ruin your whole life?"

"Do you mean," I asked incredulously, "that you do not wish me to join you?"

"Join us! For heaven's sake, no!" she answered fiercely. "Look at your father, an outcast all his life. Do you want to turn the other way whenever you meet an Englishman, to skulk all your days in hiding?"

"I would sooner see you dead than part with those papers," my father muttered.

"Take no notice of her, Guy! Five thousand pounds! I will see it paid to you, every penny of it. And not a soul will ever know!"

My father stood over her, and there was a threat in his face. She did not shrink from him for a moment. She laid her white hands upon my shoulders, and she looked earnestly into my eyes.

"Guy," she said, "even now I do not believe that you meant to be so very, very foolish. But I want you to go away at once. You should never have come. It is not good for you to come near either of us."

I rose obediently. I think that if I had not been there my father would have struck her. He was almost speechless with fury. He poured himself out another glass of brandy with shaking fingers.

"Thank you," I said to her, simply. "I do not think that these papers are worth five thousand. Let me tell you what I came here for. I am a messenger from the Duke of Rowchester."

My father dropped his glass. Mrs. Smith-Lessing looked bewildered.

"The duke," I said to her, "desires to see you. Can you come to Cavendish Square this afternoon?"

"The duke?" she murmured.

"He wishes to see you," I repeated. "Shall I tell him that you will call at 4 o'clock this afternoon, or will you go back with me this?" she asked in a low tone. "I do not understand it. I have never seen the duke in my life."

"I understand no more than you do," I assured her. "That is the message."

"I do not promise to come," she said.

"I must think it over," I said.

"I have no more to say, sir," I declared. "It seems that you are not content with ruining your own life and overshadowing mine. You want to drag me, too, down into the slough."

"You don't understand, my dear boy!"

The door opened and Ray entered. My father pushed her roughly away.

"Come, there's been enough of this fooling," he declared roughly. "Guy, sit down again, my boy. We must have another talk about this matter."

I turned upon him in a momentary fit of passion.

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Ray laughed bitterly. There was about his manner a cold and singular aloofness. We were all judged and condemned.

"An invitation to dinner, I presume," he remarked.

"The duke sent for me," my stepmother said, quietly.

She did not for a moment quail before the scornful disbelief which Ray took no pains to hide.

"You can see for yourself if you like," she continued, "that in a few minutes I shall leave this house, with you, if you are gallant enough to offer me your escort, and I shall go straight to Cavendish Square. You have no imagination, Colonel Ray, or you would not be so utterly surprised. Think for a moment. Does no reason occur to you why the duke might wish to see me?"

It obviously did. He frowned heavily.

"If this absurd story is true," he said, "and the duke has really sent to ask news of Blenavon from you—well, he is a bigger fool than I took him for. But there remains something else to be explained. What are these papers?"

My father laid his trembling hands upon them.

"They have nothing to do with you," he explained. "Nothing at all! It is a little family matter—between Guy and me. Nothing more. They belong to me. Damn you, Ray, why are you always interfering in my concerns?"

Ray turned to me. There was a look in his eyes which I readily understood. At that moment I think that I hated him.

"What are those papers?" he asked.

"Take them and see," I answered.

"If I told you you would not believe me," he said.

He moved a few steps towards them, and then paused. I saw that my father was leaning forward, and in his shaking hand was a tiny gleaming revolver.

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