

THE BETRAYAL

BY E. PHILLIPS
OPPENHEIM

"For his sister's sake," Colonel Ray said softly, "I want to keep him out of it if I can. Therefore I hit him a little harder than was necessary. He should be hors de combat for some time."

"But why didn't you cry out to me?" I said. "I should not have run if I had known that I had an ally there."

"To run was exactly what I wanted you to do," Ray answered. "You had the dispatch box, and I wanted to see you safe away."

I glanced at his bandaged head and arm.

"I suppose that I ought to apologize to you," I said.

"Under the circumstances," he declared, "we will cry quits."

Then as we walked together in the glittering spring sunshine, this big silent man and I, there came upon me a swift, poignant impulse, the keener perhaps because of the loneliness of my days, to implore him to unravel all the things which lay between us. I wanted the story of that night, of my concern in it, stripped bare. Already my lips were opened, when round the corner of the rough lane by which Braster Grange was approached on this side came a doctor's gig. Ray shaded his eyes and gazed at its occupant.

"Is this Bourlairs, Ducaigne?" he asked, "the man who shot us?"

"It is Dr. Bourlairs," I answered. Ray stopped the gig and exchanged greetings with the big sandy-haired man, who held a rein in each hand as though he were driving a market wagon. They chatted for a moment or two, idly enough, as it seemed to me. "Any one ill at the Grange, doctor?" Ray asked at length.

The doctor looked at him curiously. "I have just come from there," he answered. "There is nothing very seriously wrong."

"Can you tell me if Lord Blenavon is there?" Ray asked.

The doctor hesitated.

"It was hinted to me, Colonel Ray," he said, "that my visit to the Grange was not to be spoken of. You will understand, of course, that the etiquette of our profession—"

"Quite right," Ray interrupted. "The fact is, Lady Angela is very anxious about her brother, who did not return to Rowchester last night, and she has sent us on as a search party. Of course, if you are able to help us she would be very gratified."

The doctor hesitated.

"The duke and, in fact, all the family have always been exceedingly kind to me," he remarked, looking straight between his horse's ears. "Under the circumstances you mention, if you were to assert that Lord Blenavon was at Braster Grange, I do not think that I should contradict you."

Ray smiled.

"Thank you, doctor," he said. "Good morning."

The doctor drove on, and we pursued our way.

"It was a very dark night," Ray said, half to himself, "but if Blenavon was the man I hit he ought to have a cracked skull."

After all, our interrogation of the doctor was quite unnecessary. We were admitted at once to the Grange by a neatly-dressed parlor-maid. Mrs. Smith-Lessing was at home, and the girl did not for a moment seem to doubt her mistress's willingness to receive us. As she bustled herself poking the fire and opening wider the thick curtains, Ray asked her another question.

"Do you know if Lord Blenavon is here?"

"Yes, sir," the girl answered promptly. "He was brought in last night rather badly hurt, but he is much better this morning. I will let Mrs. Smith-Lessing know that you are here, sir."

She hurried out, with the rustle of stiff starch and the quick light-footedness of the well-trained servant. Ray and I exchanged glances.

"After all, this is not such a home of mystery as we expected," I remarked.

"Apparently not," he answered. "The little woman is playing a bold game."

Then Mrs. Smith-Lessing came in.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Lord Blenavon's Surrender.

She came in very quietly, a little pale and wan in this cold evening light. She held out her hand to me with a subdued but charming smile of welcome.

"I am so glad that you have come to see me," she said softly. "You can help me, too, about this unfortunate young man who has been thrown upon my hands. I—"

Then she saw Ray, and the words seemed to die away upon her lips. I had to steel my heart against her to shut out the pity which I could scarcely help feeling. She was white to the lips. She stood as one turned to stone, with her distended eyes fixed upon him. It was like a trapped bird, watching its impending fate. She faltered a little on her feet, and I could not help it—I hurried to her side with a chair. As she sank into it she thanked me with a very plaintive smile.

"Thank you," she said, simply. "I am not very strong, and I did not know that man was with you."

Ray broke in. His voice sounded harsh, his manner, I thought, was unnecessarily brutal.

"I can understand," he said, "that you find my presence a little unwelcome. I need scarcely say that this is not a visit of courtesy. You know very well that willingly I would never spend a moment under the same roof as you. I am here to speak a few plain words, to which you will do well to listen."

She raised her eyes to his. Her courage seemed to be returning at the note of battle in his tone. Her small, well-shaped head was thrown back. The hands which grasped the sides of her chair ceased to tremble.

"Go on," she said.

"We will not play at cheap diplomacy," he said, sneeringly. "I know you by a dozen names, which you alter and adopt to suit the occasion. You are a creature of the French police, one of those parasitic creatures who

live by sucking the honesty out of a person. You are here because the more private workings of the English council of defense are being held at Rowchester. It is your object by bribery, or theft, or robbery, or the seductive use of those wonderful charms of yours, to gain possession of copies of any particulars whatever about the English autumn maneuvers, which, curiously enough, have been arranged as a sort of addendum to those on your side of the channel. You have an ally, I regret to say, in the duke's son, who are seeking to gain for yourself a far more valuable one in the person of this boy. You say to yourself, no doubt, 'Like father, like son.'—You ruined and disgraced the one. You think, perhaps, the other will be as easy."

"Stop!" she cried.

He looked at her curiously. Her face was drawn with "pain." In her eyes was the look of a being stricken to death.

"It is terrible!" she murmured, "that men so coarse and brutal as you should have the gift of speech. I do not wish to ask for any mercy from you, but if I am to stay here, and listen, you will speak only of facts."

He shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

"You should be hardened by this time," he said, "but I forgot that we have an audience. 'It is always wrong to play a little to the gallery, isn't it? Well, facts, then. The boy is warned against you, and from today this house is watched by picked detectives. Blenavon can avail you nothing, for he knows nothing. Such clumsy schemes as last night's are foredoomed to failure and will only get you into trouble. You will have to wait your time here. Take my advice, and go!'"

She rose to her feet. Smaller and frailer than ever she seemed, as she stood before Ray, dark and massive.

"Your story is plausible," she said coldly. "It may even be true. But apart from that, I had another and a greater reason for coming to England, for coming to Braster Grange. I came to seek my husband—the father of this boy. I am even now in search of him."

I held my breath and gazed at Ray. For the moment it seemed as though the tables were turned. No signs of emotion were present in his face, but he seemed to have no words. He simply looked at her.

"He left me in January," she continued, "determined at least to have speech with his son. He heard then for the first time of the absconding trustee. He came to England, if not to implore his son's forgiveness, at least to put him above want. And in this country he has never been heard of. He has disappeared. I am here to find him. Perhaps," she added, leaning a little over towards Ray, and in a slightly altered tone, "perhaps you can help me?"

Again it seemed to me that Ray was troubled by a certain speechlessness. When at last he found words, they and his tone were alike harsh, almost violent.

"Do you think," he said, "that I would stretch out the little finger of my hand to help you or him? You know very well that I would not. The pair of you, in my opinion, were long since outside the pale of consideration from any living being. If he is lost, let him be. If he is dead, so much the better still."

"It is because I know how you feel towards him," she said, slowly, "that I wondered—yes, I wondered!"

"Well?"

"Whether you could not, if you chose, solve for me the mystery of his disappearance."

There was as much as a dozen seconds or so of tense silence between them. She never once flinched. The cold question of her eyes seemed to burn its way into the man's composure. A fierce exclamation broke from his lips.

"If he were dead," he said, "and if it were my hand which had removed him, I should count it amongst the best actions of my life."

She looked at him curiously—as one might regard a wild beast.

"You can speak like this before his son?"

"I tell my words at no time and for no man," he answered. "The truth is always best."

Then the door opened, and Blenavon entered. His arm and head were bandaged, and he walked with a limp. He was deathly pale, and apparently very nervous. He attempted a casual greeting with Ray, but it was a poor pretence. Ray, for his part, had evidently no mind to beat about the bush.

"Lord Blenavon," he said, "this house is no fit place for your father's son. I have warned you before, but the time for advice is past. Your hostess here is a creature of the French police, and her business here is to subvert you and others whom she can buy or cajole into a treasonable breach of confidence. It is very possible that you know all this, and more. But I appeal to you as an Englishman and the representative of a great English family. Are you willing to leave at once with us and to depart altogether from this part of the country, or will you face the consequences?"

Blenavon was a coward. He shook and stammered, but he was not even master of his voice.

"I do not understand you," he faltered. "You have no right to speak to me like this."

"Right or no right, I do," Ray answered. "If you refuse I shall not spare you. Last night was only one incident of many. I break my faith as a soldier by giving you this opportunity. Will you come?"

"I am waiting now for a carriage," Blenavon answered. "I have sent to the house for one."

"You will not return to the house," Ray said shortly. "You will leave here for the station, the station for London and London for the Continent. You do this, and I hold my peace. You refuse, and I see Lord Chelsford and your father tonight."

From the first I knew that he would yield, but he did it with an ill grace.

"I don't see why I should go," he

said, sulkily.

"Either you and I together, or I alone, are going to catch the 6 o'clock train to London," Ray said. "If I go alone you will be an exile from England for the rest of your life, your name will be removed from every club to which you belong, and you will have brought irreparable disgrace upon your family. The choice is yours."

Blenavon turned towards the woman as though for aid. But she stood with her back to him, pale and with a thin scornful smile upon her lips.

"The choice," Ray repeated, glancing at his watch, "is yours, but the time is short."

"I will go," Blenavon said. "I was off in a day or two, anyway. Of what you suspect me I do not know, and I don't care. But I will go."

Ray put his watch into his pocket. "Better come too," he said quietly. "You have no more chance here. Everyone knows now who and what you are."

She looked at him with white expressionless face.

"It does not suit me to leave the neighborhood at present," she said calmly.

If she had been a man Ray would have struck her. I could see his white teeth clenched fiercely together.

"It does not suit me," he said, in a low tone, "to have you here. You are a plague spot upon the place. You have been a plague spot all your life. Whatever you touch you corrupt."

She shrank away for a moment. After all, she was a woman, and I hated Ray for his brutality.

"What a butcher you are!" she said, looking at him curiously. "If ever you should marry—God help the woman."

"There are women and women," he answered roughly. "As for you, you do not count in the sex at all."

She turned away from him with a little shudder, and for the first time

away with a shudder. Blenavon stepped quietly into the carriage. Then Ray came over to me, and as he looked searchingly into my face, he pointed out the carriage drive.

"Boy," he said, "you are young, and in hell itself there cannot be many such as she. You think me brutal. It is because I remember your mother."

He stepped into the carriage. I turned round and set out for Rowchester.

CHAPTER XXV.

My Secret.

There followed for me another three days of unremitting work. Then midway through one morning I threw my pen from me with a great sense of relief. They might come or send for me when they chose. I had finished. My eyes were hot and my brain weary. Instinctively I threw open my front door, and it seemed to me that the wind and the birds were calling.

So I walked northwards down on the beach, across the grass-sprinkled sandhills, and the mud-mottomed marshes. I walked with my cap stuffed in my pocket, my head bared to the freshening wind, and all the way I met no living creature. As I walked, my thoughts, which had been concentrated for these last few days upon my work, went back to that terrible half-hour at Braster Grange. I thought of Ray. I realized now that for days past I had been striving not to think of him. The man's sheer brutality appalled me. I believed in him now wholly. I believed at least in his honesty, his vigorous and trenchant loyalty. But the way of the man was surely brutal to torture even vermin caught in the trap, and that woman, adventuress though she might be, had flinched before him in agony, as though her very nerves were being hacked out of her body. And Blenavon, too! Surely he might have remembered that he was her brother. He might have helped him to retain

gram."

"I am glad," I answered. "I have just finished my work, and I want some more."

"You are insatiable," she declared, smiling. "You have written for three days, days and nights too, I believe, and you look like a ghost. You ought to take a rest now. You ought to want one at any rate."

Then the smile faded from her lips, and the anxiety of a sudden thought possessed her.

"I have not heard a word from Colonel Ray," she said. "It terrifies me to think that he may have told my father about Blenavon."

"You must insist upon it that he does not," I declared. "Your brother has left England, has he not?"

"He is at Ostend."

"Then Colonel Ray will keep his word," I assured her. "Besides, you have written to him, have you not?"

"I have written," she answered. "Still, I am afraid. He will do what he thinks right, whatever it may be."

"He will respect your wishes," I said. She smiled a little bitterly.

"He is not an easy person to influence," she murmured. "I doubt whether my wishes, even my prayers, would weigh with him a particle against his own judgment. And he is severe—very severe."

I said nothing, and we walked for some time in silence.

"Next week," she said abruptly, "I must go back to London."

It was too sudden! I could not keep back the little exclamation of despair. She walked for some time with her head turned away from me, as though something on the dark, clear horizon across the waters had fascinated her, but I caught a glimpse of her face, and I knew that my secret had escaped me. Whether I was glad or sorry I could not tell. My thoughts were all in hopeless confusion. When she spoke, there was a certain reserve in her tone. I knew that things would never again



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during the interview she hid her face in her hands. It was all I could do to avoid speech.

"Come," he said, "do you agree? Will you leave this place? I promise you that your schemes here at any rate are at an end."

She turned to me. Perhaps something in my face had spoken the sympathy which I could not wholly suppress.

"Guy," she said, "I want to be rid of this man, because every word he speaks hurts. But I cannot even look at him any more. At this war of words he has won. I am beaten. I admit it. I am crushed. I am not going away. I spoke truthfully when I said that I came to England in search of your father. We may be of use to the creatures that man would have you believe, but we have been husband and wife for eighteen years, and it is my duty to find out what has become of him. Therefore I stay."

I could see Ray's black eyes flashing. He almost gripped my arm as he drew me away. We three left the house together. At the bottom of the drive we met a carriage sent down from Rowchester. Ray stopped it.

"Blenavon and I will take this carriage to the station," he said. "Will you, Ducaigne, return to Lady Angela and tell her exactly what has happened?"

"Oh, come, I'm not going to have that," Blenavon exclaimed.

"It will not be unexpected news," Ray said sternly. "Your sister suspects already."

"I'm not going to be bundled away and leave you to concoct any precious story you think fit," Blenavon declared, doggedly.

"Get in," he said in a low, suppressed tone.

There was something almost animal in the fury of Ray's voice. I looked

just a portion of his self-respect. Was he as severe on every measure of wrong-doing? I fancied to myself the meeting on that lonely road between the poor white-faced creature who had looked in upon my window, and this strong merciless man. Warned with exercise as I was, I shivered. Ray reminded me of those grim figures of the Old Testament. An eye for an eye, a life for a life, were precepts with him indeed. He was as inexorable as Fate itself. I feared him, and I knew why. I feared him when I thought of Angela, almost over-sensitive, so delicate a flower to be held in his strong, merciless grasp. I walked faster and faster, for thoughts were crowding in upon me. Such a tangled web, such bitter sweetness as they held for me. These were the thoughts which in those days it was the struggle of my life to keep from coming to fruition. I knew very well that, if once I gave way to them, I would have been in my nerves, in every beat of my pulse, a wild and beautiful dream, against which I was fighting always a hopeless battle.

Far away, coming toward me along the sands, I saw her. I stopped short. For a moment my heart was not with joy, then I looked wildly around, thinking of flight. It was not possible. Already she had seen me. She waved her hand and increased her pace, walking with the swift effortless grace of her beautiful young limbs, her head thrown back, a welcoming smile already parting her lips. I set my teeth and prepared myself for the meeting. Afterwards would come the pain, but for the present the joy of seeing her, of being with her, was everything! I hastened onward.

"I could not stay indoors," she said, as she turned by my side, "although I have an old aunt and some very untimely visitors to entertain. Besides, I have news! My father is coming down today, and I think some of the others. We have just had a telegram."

She was not angry! I hugged that thought to myself. She was startled and serious, but she was not angry.

"One season is very much like another," she said, "but it is not possible to absent oneself altogether. Then afterwards there is Cowes and Homburg, and I always have a plan for at least three weeks in Scotland. I believe we shall close Rowchester altogether."

"The duke?" I asked.

"He never spends the summer here," she answered. "We are generally together after July, so perhaps," she added, "you may have to endure more of my company than you think."

She looked at me with a quaint, provoking smile. How dare she? I was master of myself now, and I answered her coldly.

"I shall be very sorry to leave here," I said. "I hope if my work lasts so long that I shall be able to go on with it at the Brand."

She made no answer to that, but in a moment or two she turned and looked at me thoughtfully.

"You are rather a surprising person," she remarked. "In many ways. And you certainly have strange tastes."

"Is it a strange taste to love this place?" I asked.

"Of course not. But, on the other hand, it is strange that you should be content to remain here indefinitely. Solitude is all very well at times, but at your age I think that the vigorous life of a great city should have many attractions for you. Life here, after all, must become something of an abstraction."

"It contents me," I declared shortly. "Then I am not sure that you are in an altogether healthy frame of mind," she answered coolly. "Have you no ambitions?"

"Such as I have," I muttered, "are hopeless. They were built on sand—and they have fallen."

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"Then reconstruct them," she said.

"You are far too young to speak with such a note of finality."

"Such as I," I answered, "I suppose, I shall. At present I am content to live on amongst the fragments. One needs only imagination. The things one dreams about are always more beautiful and perhaps more satisfying than the things one does."

Again our eyes met, and I fancied that this time she was looking a little frightened. At any rate she knew. I was sure of that.

"What an ineffective sort of proceeding!" she murmured.

A creek separated us for a few minutes. When we came together again I asked her a question.

"There is something, Lady Angela," I said, "which, if you would forgive the impertinence of it, I should very much like to ask you."

She moved her head slowly, as though giving a tacit consent. But I do not think that she was quite prepared for what I asked her.

"When are you going to marry Colonel Ray?"

She looked at me quickly, almost furtively, and I saw that her cheeks were flushed. There was a look in her eyes, too, which I could not fathom.

"The date is not decided yet," she said. "You know there is some talk of trouble in Egypt, and if so he might have to leave at a moment's notice."

"It will not be any rate, before the autumn, then?" I persisted.

I drew a little breath of relief. I was reckless whether she heard it or not. Suddenly she paused.

"Who is that?" she asked.

I recognized him at once—a small gray figure, standing on the top of a sandhill a little way off, and regarding us steadily. It was the duke.

"Your father?" I said.

We quickened our pace. If Lady Angela was in any way discomfited she showed no signs of it. She waved her hand, and the duke solemnly removed his hat.

"I am so glad that he has come down before the others," she said. "I am longing to have a talk with him. And I don't believe he knows anything about Blenavon. No, he's far too cheerful."

She went straight up to him and passed her arm through his. He greeted me stiffly, but not unkindly.

"I am so glad that you have come," she said. "If I had not heard I should have telegraphed to you. I've seen it in all the papers."

"You approve?" I heard him ask quietly.

"Approve is not the word," she declared eagerly. "It is magnificent."

"I wonder," he asked, "if you realize what it means?"

"It simply doesn't matter," she answered, with a delightful smile. "I can make my own dress, if you like. Annette is a shocking nuisance to me."

"I am afraid," he remarked, with an odd little smile, "that Blenavon will scarcely regard the matter in the same light."

"Bother Blenavon!" she answered lightly. "I suppose you know that he's gone off abroad somewhere?"

"I had a hurried line from him with information to that effect," the duke answered. "I think that it would have been more respectful if he had called to see me on his way through London."

I heard her sigh of relief.

"Now, tell me," she begged, "where shall we begin? Cowes, Homburg, town house, or Annette? I'm ready."