

THE BETRAYAL

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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CHAPTER XXXV. Angela's Confession.

The Duke was in his study awaiting my arrival. I saw him rise and bow slightly to my stepmother. Then I closed the door and left them alone.

I wandered through the house, a little at a loss to know what to do with myself. It was too soon to go to Ray, and the work on which I was engaged was all in the study. Just as I passed the drawing-room door, however, it opened suddenly, and Lady Angela came out, talking to a white-haired old gentleman, who carried a stick on which he leaned heavily. He looked at me rather curiously, and then began to hobble down the hall at a great pace. But Lady Angela laid her hand upon his arm.

"Why, Sir Michael," she exclaimed, "this won't do at all. You can't look him in the face and run. Mr. Ducaine, this is Sir Michael Trevelyan."

He swung round and held out his hand. His eyes searched my face eagerly.

"Nephew," he said, "I want to meet you, and I did want to see you. I bless my soul you've got Mr. Ducaine's eyes and mouth. Come and dine with me one night next week—any night; let me know. Good-bye, good-bye, Lady Angela, bless you. Here, James, give me your warm down the steps, and whistle for my fellow to draw up. There he is, in the middle of the road, the fellow who has been looking at me so curiously. I think that we should both have laughed at the tears which we had seen in his eyes."

"Poor old man," she murmured. "He is very nervous and very sensitive. I know that he dreads seeing you, and yet he came this afternoon for no other purpose. Will you come into the drawing-room for a moment?"

There was a certain stiffness in her manner, which was new to me. She remained standing, and her soft dark eyes were full of grave inquiry.

"Mr. Ducaine," she said, "I passed you just now driving in a hansom with a person of whom I disapprove. May I know what it is that you were with her?"

"It is no secret at all, Lady Angela," I answered. "I was sent to fetch her by your father."

"By my father?" she repeated incredulously. "Do you mean that she is in this house?"

"Certainly," I answered. "Your father is anxious, I believe, about Lord Blenven. It occurred to me that he perhaps hoped to get news of him from Mrs. Smith-Lessing. At any rate he sent me for her."

She seemed to me to be trembling a little. Her eyes sought mine almost pathetically. She was afraid of something. In the half-light she appeared to me to be so frail and girlish that a great wave of tenderness swept in upon me. I longed to take her into my arms—even to hold her hands and try to comfort her. Surely to do these things was the privilege of the man who loved her. And I loved her—loved her so that the pain and joy of it were woven together like the things in my heart, fighting against the grim silence which lay like a seal upon my lips. But there were moments when I was sorely tried, and this was one of them. My eyes fell from hers. I dared not look her in the face.

"It is this—this!" she said, falteringly. "It is all that I know," I answered.

Then we were silent. With a little sigh she sank down in the corner of a high-backed easy chair. It seemed to me that she was thinner, that something of the delicate childishness of her appearance had passed away since her coming to London. I knew that she was in trouble, and I dared not ask her the cause of it. "I wish that we were going back to Braster tomorrow," she said suddenly. "Everything and everybody is different here. You seem to spend most of your time trying to avoid me, and—Colonel Ray, I do not know him, but he has become like a walking tragedy."

"I have not tried to avoid you," I said.

"No," she said. "I have not."

"Then I stopped short. Her eyes were fixed upon mine and the lie stuck in my throat. I went on desperately.

"I think," I said, "that if you fancy Colonel Ray is different you should ask him about it."

She shook her head dejectedly.

"I cannot," she said. "Sometimes I am frightened of Colonel Ray. It is like that just now."

"But you should try and get over it," I said gently. "He has strange moods, but you should always remember that he is the man whom you are going to marry. There ought to be no secrets between you, and I know—yes, I know that he is very fond of you."

She leaned a little forward. Her hair was a little disheveled, and her eyes were most haggard. Her under lip was quivering like a child's.

"I am afraid of him," she sobbed out suddenly. "I am afraid of him, and I have promised to marry him. Can't someone help me?"

Her head fell suddenly forward and she was buried in her hands. Her whole frame shook with convulsive weeping, and then suddenly a little white hand shot out towards me. She did not look up, but the hand was there, timid, yet inviting. I dropped on my knee by her side, and I held it in mine.

"Dear Lady Angela," I murmured. "You must not give way like this, you must not! Ray is not used to women, and he is very young. But he loves you, I know that he loves you."

"I don't want him to love me," she sobbed. "Oh, I know that I am foolish and wicked and childish, but I am afraid of him."

I kept silence, for my own battle was a hard one. The little hand was holding fast to mine. She lay curled up in the corner of the chair, her face hidden, her slim delicate figure shaking every now and then with sobs. All the while I longed passionately to take her into my arms and comfort her.

"Don't!" I begged. "Oh, don't. Ray has told me his story. He has made me his confidant. He has told me how unhappy he has been, and how he loves you. Oh, Lady Angela, what is there I can say? What can I do?"

I was losing my head a little, I think, for her fingers were gripping mine convulsively, warm and tender little fingers which seemed to be drawing me all the while closer to her.

"I am so miserable," she murmured.

Then suddenly her other arm was around my neck, her wet tear-stained face was pressed to mine. I scarcely knew how it happened, but I knew that she was in my arms, and my lips were pressed to hers. A sudden, beautiful wave of color flooded her cheeks; she smiled steadily up at me. She gave a delicious little sigh.

of satisfaction and then buried her face on my shoulder. Almost at the same moment Ray entered the room.

She did not at once raise her head, although she pushed me gently away from her at the sound of the opening door. But I, who was standing facing that direction, saw him from the first, a dark stern figure, standing as though rooted to the ground, with the door-handle still in his hand. For the second time in one day he seemed to have intervened at the precise psychological moment. He did not speak to me, nor I to him. Lady Angela, as though wondering at the suddenness, turned her head at last, and a little gasping cry broke from her lips.

"Mostyn," she exclaimed. "Is that you?"

For answer he turned towards the wall and flooded the room with electric light. Then he looked at us both intently and anxiously; only this time I saw that much of his wonderful self-control was wanting. He did not answer Lady Angela. He did not glance towards her.

"You cur!" he cried. "Twice in a day am I to be brought face to face with your cursed treachery? Twice in a day!"

Lady Angela, may I beg that you will leave us."

She stood up and faced him, slim and white-faced, yet with her head thrown back and her voice steady.

"Mostyn," she said, "this is my fault. I do not ask for your forgiveness. I have behaved shamefully, but I was mistaken. Mr. Ducaine is blameless. It was my fault."

"You will pardon the keenness of my observation," she said. "I was unfortunate enough to find you tell us your story. You will oblige me, Lady Angela, by leaving us alone."

"I would have spoken, but she held out her hand."

"I think you forget, Colonel Ray," she said. "This is my house. I am not disposed to leave you and Mr. Ducaine here together in your present mood."

He laughed harshly.

"Are you afraid for your lover?" he asked.

"I promise you that I will hold him person sacred."

"Lady Angela," I begged. "Please leave us."

Then came an interruption so unexpected and yet so natural that the whole scene seemed at once to dissolve into bathos. The door was thrown open, and a footman ushered in callers.

"Lady Chelsford and the Marchioness of Cardigan," he announced.

"Mrs. and the Misses Colquhoun, Sir George Trevelyan."

It was a transformation. The room, with its dull notes of tragedy, was suddenly filled with faint perfumes, shaken from the rustling draperies of half a dozen women, a little chorus of light voices started the label of small talk. Lady Angela had taken her place behind the large round table and was talking nonsense with the tall young guardsman who had drawn his chair up to her side, and I, with a plate of sandwiches in my hand, nearly ran into Ray, who was carrying a cup of tea. For a quarter of an hour we played our parts in the comedy. Then a servant entered the room and whispered in my ear.

"His Grace would be glad to see you in the library, sir."

I rose at once. Angela's eyes were fixed upon mine questioningly. As I passed the table I spoke to her, and purposely raised my voice so that Ray should hear.

"Your father has sent for me, Lady Angela. He is terribly indignant to-day."

She smiled back to me quietly. I lingered in the hall for a minute, and Ray joined me there. He did not speak a word, but he motioned me fiercely to precede him to the library. Directly we entered it was clear that something unusual had happened. The great safe stood open. Lord Chelsford and the Duke were both awaiting our coming.



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CHAPTER XXXVI. I Lose My Post.

The Duke solemnly closed the door.

"Ray," he said, "I am glad that you are here. Something serious has happened. Mr. Ducaine, Lord Chelsford and I desire to ask you a few questions."

I bowed. What was coming? I could not indeed imagine, unless Ray had already made the disclosure.

"The word code for the safe today was Magenta, I believe," the Duke asked.

"That is correct, sir," I answered.

"And it was known to whom?"

"The question is," the Duke said quietly, "did she know it?"

Then I realized the object of this cross-examination. The color flared suddenly into my cheeks, and I suddenly felt the absence of those papers was extraordinary to me. I utterly failed to understand it.

"I think I know what you mean, sir," I said. "It is true that Mrs. Smith-Lessing is my stepmother. I believe it is true, too, that she is connected with the French Secret Police. I was there this afternoon—you yourself sent me. But I did not tell Mrs. Smith-Lessing the code word, and I have nothing of the kind upon me."

Ray moved forward and placed deliberately upon the table the roll of papers which I had given up to him a few hours ago.

"What about these?" he asked, with biting scorn. "Tell the Duke and Lord Chelsford where I found them! Let us hear your gibbering tongue telling the truth for once, sir."

Both the Duke and Lord Chelsford were obviously startled. Ray had always been my friend and upholder. He spoke now with very apparent enmity.

"Perhaps you would prefer to tell the truth," he said. "I will correct you if it is necessary."

"Very well," he answered. "I will tell the story, and a pitiful one it is. This boy I watched, as we all know, for owing to my folly in ignoring his antecedents, a great trust has been reposed in him. News have been sent to me that he had been seen in the company of Mrs. Smith-Lessing in Gattin's Restaurant. Later, that he had found his way to the office of the Duke, and that he had been seen there with an errand from the Duke, but when I arrived he was doing a little business on his own account, and these papers were in the act of passing from him to his father."

"What are they?" Lord Chelsford asked.

"Your Lordship may recognize them," I answered. "They are a summary of the schemes of defence of the southern ports. I was at that moment, the moment when Colonel Ray entered, considering an offer of five thousand pounds for them."

Even Ray was staggered at my admission, and the Duke looked at though he could scarcely believe his ears. Lord Chelsford was busy looking through the papers.

"You young blackguard," Ray muttered through his teeth. "After that admission, do you still deny that you told Mrs. Smith-Lessing, or that you gave her the code word for that safe?"

"Most certainly I deny it," I answered firmly. "The two things are wholly disconnected."

The Duke sat down heavily in his chair. I knew very well that of the three men he was the most surprised. Lord Chelsford, however, laid some notes upon the table.

"I believe, Mr. Ducaine," he said, "that there is a month's due to you. I have added something to the amount. Until today I have always considered your duties admirably fulfilled."

I looked at the notes and at the Duke. "I thank you, Grace," I answered. "I will take the liberty of declining your gift. My salary has been fully paid."

For a moment I fancied I caught a softer gleam in Ray's eyes. He seemed about to speak, but checked himself. Lord Chelsford hurried me from the room, and

only half visible, you know, and if he were alone in the desert at that moment I would shoot him without remorse. Such a breach of trust as this deserves death."

"We are, unfortunately," Lord Chelsford remarked, "not in a position to adopt such extreme measures. It would not even be wise for us to attempt to formulate a legal charge against him. The position is somewhat embarrassing. What do you suggest, Duke?"

I glanced towards the Duke, and I was surprised to see that his hands were shaking. For a man who rarely displayed feeling the Duke seemed to be wonderfully affected.

"I can suggest nothing," he answered in a low tone. "I must confess that I am bewildered. These matters have developed so rapidly."

Lord Chelsford looked thoughtfully for a moment.

"I have a plan in mind," he said slowly. "Duke, should I be taking a liberty if I asked to be left alone with this young man for five minutes?"

The Duke rose slowly to his feet. He had the air of one not altogether approving of the suggestion. Ray glowered upon us both, but offered no objection. They left the room together. Lord Chelsford at once turned to me.

"Ducaine," he said, "forgive me that I did not come to you. I am going to tell you something which will probably surprise you very much. Since the first time when you found me in possession of writing entrusted to the safe, either at Braster House or Cavendish Square, has been got at. Exact copies of them are in my hands today."

I looked at him in blank amazement. The thing seemed impossible.

"But in very many ways," he protested, "the code word for opening the safe has been known only to Colonel Ray, the Duke, and myself."

"The fact remains as I have stated it," Lord Chelsford said slowly. "My information is positive. When you came to me and suggested that you should make a copy of everything in the safe, I thought I thought the idea far-fetched and unworkable. Events, however, have proved otherwise. I have safely received everything which you sent me, and up to the present, with the exception of that first plan of the Winchester forts, we have been at a deadlock."

"If you do not mind telling me, Lord Chelsford, I should very much like to know why you did not explain the exact circumstances to Ray and the Duke this afternoon."

Lord Chelsford nodded.

"I thought that you would ask that," he said. "It is not altogether an easy question to answer. Remember this. The French War Office has today in possession of an altogether false scheme of our proposed defences—a scheme which, if they continue to regard it as genuine, should prove nothing short of disastrous to them. Only you and I are in the secret at present. Positively I did not feel that I cared to extend that knowledge to a single other person. Ray and the Duke separately," I remarked. "The Duke has never been my friend, and Ray has other cases for being angry with me just at present; but between them they rescued me from something like starvation, and it is terrible for me to think of them. Only you and I are in the secret at present. Positively I did not feel that I cared to extend that knowledge to a single other person. Ray and the Duke separately," I remarked. 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