

Blue Skies

Beatrice Redpath

Illustrated by

J. H. Beynon

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Blue Skies

*A Husband Sends His Young Wife Abroad—to
Venice. She Wearies and Flees
to Palermo. Was it Jealousy?
Remorse? What?*

By BEATRICE REDPATH

Illustrations by J. H. Beynon

Michael was over by the window talking to Mrs. Freddie Miller. Enid could see his dark head rising above the groups of people who filled her beautiful room. He caught her eye as she was passing with an empty cup on her way to the tea table.

“Enid. Come over here a minute.”

She paused, hesitating, with an impulse to pretend she hadn’t heard. She didn’t like Mrs. Miller, and old Miss Baxter was waiting for a fresh cup of tea.

“Enid.”

She couldn’t pretend while Michael was being so insistent. As she came towards them she noticed that Michael’s dark face was lit with an expression of eagerness which she had missed there lately. Whatever could that silly little Mrs. Miller have been saying to put it there?

“Mrs. Miller has just been telling me that she rented her house last autumn and went to the Riviera for six months.”

Enid felt rather blank as she looked from Michael to Mrs. Miller. This scrap of information didn’t appear interesting enough to bother telling her while old Miss Baxter waited for her tea.

“That must have been awfully nice,” she murmured conversationally.



"Evasions, nothing but evasions."

"It's such an excellent plan for married people to get away from each other now and then," Mrs. Miller remarked as seriously as though she were saying something really new and important. "Then there's not nearly so much chance of their getting bored with one another. Why, when I came back Freddie was actually delighted to see me," and her laugh was a metallic tinkle that grated on Enid. "But seriously," she went on, looking at Michael, "I think he enjoyed living at his club and being quite free again as much as I enjoyed being away. Then there are such delightful places to stay, and so ridiculously cheap. You wouldn't believe me if I were to tell you the cost of the whole trip. It was simply nothing at all."

"Mrs. Miller says she'll give us the names of some of the places she stayed," Michael put in with surprising animation.

Enid looked at him in bewilderment.

"But Michael, why? You wouldn't be able to get away long enough, would you?"

"No, of course not. But you could. We wouldn't have any difficulty in renting the house — —"

"Oh, no trouble at all," Mrs. Miller broke in. "I heard of some people only the other day who were just dying to get a house in this neighborhood. You know, the David Muirs. They would be such splendid tenants. I'll call up Mrs. Muir this evening and tell her your house is for rent."

"But it isn't," Enid broke in half laughing, half angry at this absurdly sudden disposal of herself and her house. What on earth had Michael been saying to make Mrs. Miller imagine that she would even consider such a thing? Rent her lovely house! Leave Michael living at the club! She never had cared much about travelling. Whatever made Michael imagine that she would do such a thing? Mrs. Miller must really have hypnotized him with the description of her trip. "I have no intention of renting it," she said, recognizing a stiffness in her tone. But she felt as though an irritating wasp had buzzed into her lovely room. Mrs. Miller looked something like a wasp with her yellow hair and thin black and yellow clad body. "I don't care a bit about going to the Riviera."

"But you'd like it when you got there," Michael said with such a queer urgency in his tone, just as though it were the most important thing in the world for her to pack up that very minute and leave for the Riviera. It was too extraordinary. "You've always said you longed to see Venice and Rome and all the rest of it. Heavens, I'd chuck everything in a minute if I could possibly go. Think of nothing but blue skies while we're having all sorts of weather at home. Of course you'll go, Enid. It's a splendid idea."

"Of course she will," smiled Mrs. Miller with an air of friendly patronage.

In another moment Enid felt that she would be rude.

"You couldn't persuade me to go," she said, turning away with old Miss Baxter's cup.

She felt puzzled as she crossed the room. Michael really seemed to want her to go. She couldn't make it out. But lately things had seemed just a little

bit strange between them. It was as though invisible barriers had sprung up, shutting her out. But that he should make such a suggestion to her was startling.

She stood in the garden after everyone had left, watching the shadows that were like long hands stretching out to draw away the light. She had always been so sure of Michael. Wasn't it perhaps foolish to be so sure of anyone in this world where human emotions are so unstable? There must be some good reason for Michael to appear so anxious for her to leave him and go to Italy for six months. And yet even yesterday she would have sworn that he loved her tenderly, oh, tenderly. This left her not quite so sure.

They had been married just three years. She was thirty-four and Michael would be thirty-seven this year. Three years wasn't very long in which to learn to know a person. There must be so much about Michael she didn't know, suppressed desires, latent ambitions, things of which she had no conception.

She sat down on a bench, picking up a green scarf which had been left there since last night. She and Michael had been sitting out here in the moonlight, and he had run up to get it to slip it around her shoulders, insisting that the night air was damp. He was always guarding her, protecting her. Sometimes he made her feel as though she were a rare, rare jewel in a blue velvet case. Perhaps some men were naturally chivalrous; perhaps it didn't mean anything more than that.

It had been so strange at first to be so protected after the hard struggle her life had been up until the time she had married Michael. She remembered how he had said to her during the first days of their engagement,

"You're never going to have to struggle any more. That's all ended."

And yet the struggle hadn't been so bad, after all. She could still feel a sense of pride in what she had accomplished by those years of struggle. Left with a young sister and brother to support when she was barely nineteen, it hadn't been easy. There had been times when she hadn't had enough to eat; when she had worn wet shoes because she hadn't a pair to change; when she had shivered because her spring suit had had to face the blast of cold autumn days. But she had been young, strong, and determined not to be beaten in the struggle. Sylvia was married now and happy as a little singing lark; Norman had finished his law course and was doing so well. And how they loved her, those two, bound to her by such bonds of love and faith! Oh, it hadn't been nearly as bad as Michael pictured it.

She saw Michael coming around the corner of the house and supposed he was looking for her. She watched him as he came towards her across the lawn, between the flower beds that were filled with autumn gold. And she was struck by the gravity of his face. As he caught sight of her his face lightened.

“Oh, here you are. I drove Mrs. Miller home, and she gave me a lot of these folders to look at,” he said sitting down beside her and drawing the elastic band off a pile of steamship and hotel advertisements.

Then he was really in earnest. She looked at his profile as he bent to examine them, trying to read what was in his mind. He wasn’t even asking her if she wanted to go. He seemed to be clutching so eagerly at Mrs. Miller’s remark about her trip as though it were a way of salvation for himself. Mrs. Miller’s face flashed before her and she winced away from that thought. So silly, so futile a person. She wouldn’t allow herself to think of it. She sat very still while the garden became a blur of green and gold and thick purple shadows laid themselves down to rest beneath the trees.

“Michael, why do you want me to go?”

“Because I’m sure you’ll enjoy it.”

“But I don’t want to leave you.”

“It will only be for six months.”

“Six months. That’s ages.”

“Not when you’re enjoying yourself.”

Evasions, nothing but evasions. It took them round and round in a circle without getting them anywhere. Could anything in the world be clearer? He wanted to be rid of her. Six months of freedom. For what?

Well, if that were the case the only thing was to pretend she was willing to go. She supposed if she didn’t love him quite so much she might have just blankly refused to go. She couldn’t imagine Mrs. Miller, for instance, being sent abroad against her will. But then Mrs. Miller hadn’t been a penniless girl marrying a very wealthy man. That made all the difference. Michael so often told her that she was foolishly, ridiculously sensitive. Struggle and poverty had made her that way.

“Let me see this one,” she said putting out her hand for one of the luridly colored folders; “I think I should like to go to Venice first.”

She was acutely conscious that her words brought to Michael a profound relief.

* * * * *

Venice with its silver lagoons, its crumbling palaces, its black and silver nights tuned to the songs of the gondoliers wrought in her such aching loneliness that she fled to Rome. There she met an American family who were absorbed in sight-seeing. So she quelled the spirit of romance which the old city with its broken columns and yellow walls might have flung around her and went about with them, armed with guide books, making it a solemn and sober business to see the catacombs and everything which the guide books instructed her to see. This method of sight-seeing stripped Rome of its glamor, robbed it of its spirit of romance, and that was what she wanted. She was not in the mood for glamor or romance. She wanted to busy her mind so that she would keep herself from thinking too much. After six weeks she left her friends and went on by herself to Naples.

She felt much as though she were drifting through a blue and silver world that had all the unreality of a dream. The strong white sunlight soaked through her like a drug; the nights lay over her like an enchantment, until Michael became far away and unreal and there was nothing of more moment in life than the wind among the olive trees, the blue shimmer of sky and sea.

She sat one afternoon on the railing of the balcony of the hotel at Naples gazing out at the Mediterranean while she hummed a little tune unconsciously to herself. It was a wistful little tune for she was thinking of Michael living at his club; of the David Muirs sitting beside her fire in the room with the jade green coverings; of the great mounds of snow along the driveway and of the gray blizzard blowing across the hills.



“Michael—Michael!’ She whispered to the Darkness.”

She had just been writing to Michael and had the letter in her hand ready to post. She had told him about a trip she had taken to Pompeii with the Rivers-Wilsons, some people whom she had met and liked. She had told him of the streets, filled with beggars, flower vendors, and pedlars, which made them like a continuous passing show. She had tried to make him see Naples rising from the sea, with its blue, blue skies and its crown of blossoms. And she supposed that Michael, reading her letter would think she was living in a world of joy and beauty. And she wondered if she were not a fool not to tell him that her heart was breaking with loneliness and that nothing had more

reality than a dream. But would he care? That was the question, would he care?

“Stop that Hellish row.”

She started to her feet, staring in complete bewilderment at the only person on the balcony, a man lying in a long deck chair. Just now he was sitting up, glaring at her, a flush on his face, his brown eyes shining angrily.

“Why is it that every woman has to keep up such an infernal racket? Couldn’t you see that I was trying to sleep? There’s no rest to be got in this hotel. What with a confounded orchestra playing all night for a lot of fools to dance and people whistling and humming every time they pass along this balcony it’s enough to send a man crazy.”

Enid stared, her eyes wide with anger and amazement. Then she caught sight of his hands nervously clenched on the gray rug, which was thrown over him, and her anger died down. He had lean sunburnt cheeks with deep furrows on either side of his mouth, and his eyes had the shining glazed look that spoke of sleepless nights. There was a litter of papers, books and magazines tossed down on either side of his chair.

“I know,” she said slowly, “people are intensely aggravating. They are always making unnecessary noise.”

“So you’re not one of those tiresome people who take offence easily?”

“I hope not,” she laughed amused by his frankness.

He contemplated her with slow approval. Enid estimated that he must be about thirty, but he was so worn and fretted by nerves that he appeared to be at least ten years older.

“What are you doing here,” he inquired, “amusing yourself?”

“Trying to.”

“So you find it difficult?”

“At times. You’ve been writing, haven’t you?” she asked, noticing scattered sheets covered with a large sprawling hand.

“Trying to,” he echoed with a smile which accentuated the lines on either side of his mouth.

“Why do you try when you’re not well?”

“Who said I wasn’t well?” he flung at her with a return of his irritated manner.

Enid moved slowly away.

“Sit down—sit down,” he exclaimed, “surely you can stay still a moment.”

“I thought I was tiring you.”

“I’d tell you if you were. Can’t you see I want to talk to you?”

Enid felt half amused by his egotism, half sorry. It was terrible to see anyone whose nerves were so on edge. She slipped into a long chair and took off her hat, pushing back her braids of copper-colored hair which weighted her head, giving it the tilt of a flower.

“My name’s Stroud,” he said, “what yours?”

“Stroud?” Enid gazed at him with interest. “Not Christopher Stroud? Not really!”

Again the flash of annoyance spread across his face.

“Why ‘not really.’ That’s such a foolish remark. Why should you be surprised?”

“I suppose because it’s always surprising to meet an author after you’ve read his books.”

“It’s a great mistake if you’ve happened to like them. I always avoid meeting authors, and I advise you to do the same. This time, of course, it can’t be helped.”

“Well, I did like them, some of them,” she responded.

If he were frank she could be frank as well.

“Why ‘some of them?’” he inquired with childish curiosity.

“I hated your last book. It was so clever it was brittle. It tinkled with clever speeches that meant nothing. You felt the irony wasn’t sincere. It was as though the characters were dressed up in tin armor that rattled instead of clanking when they moved.”

“Well, you’re quite frank, aren’t you?”

“I thought you liked frankness.”

“So I do.”

A waiter appeared in the doorway carrying a tray with tea, and Christopher Stroud called to him to bring another cup.

“You will stay and have a cup of tea with me, won’t you? It’s so beastly lonely. I don’t know a soul in the hotel. Everyone flies from me.”

Enid didn’t wonder very much at that. She sat down opposite the table the waiter had drawn forward for the tray, partly interested in him in spite of his appalling rudenesses.

“I’ve been every kind of an ass,” he said after they had been talking for some time, “and now I’m paying for it. Retribution comes so fast in this world that I don’t see why our ancestors felt themselves called upon to invent a hell. It’s all here. I’ve been through it. And the worst of it is that I’ve ruined my work. It’s just as you say. Don’t I know it. It tinkles with claptrap cleverness.”

He drew for her tiny pictures of his sudden plunge into success, of the shallow clever set who had run after him, writers, artists, and musicians tossing their art about as though it were a clever toy instead of something to be revered, something holy. And his subconsciousness had rebelled finally against it, and the conflict had worn him down. His doctor had sent him abroad for rest and quiet, but the rest had only fretted him, the quiet nagged at him, until he was like a peevish child.

Enid couldn’t help feeling sorry for him. He was so terribly alone and so obviously in need of a friend who wouldn’t fly from his sudden gusts of irritation.

“If it wouldn’t bore you dreadfully won’t you come and talk to me sometimes?” he asked as she was leaving. “You don’t know all it would mean.”

It was a friendship progressing much as it had started. His gusts of irritation became less frequent; his eyes lost that shining glazed expression. Enid didn’t need him to tell her that she had done him good. She knew it, and it gave her a feeling of satisfaction. After all, she wasn’t quite useless if she could help this man back to sanity.

There were days when her impulse was to fly from him and refuse to have anything more to do with him. At times he was rude, intolerable in his egotism. But flying from him would have achieved no purpose. She couldn’t just drift away her days beneath blue skies as Michael would have her do. Her roots went too deep into life for her to be satisfied that it should be nothing more than a shimmering dream.

In return for what he had told her about himself she talked to him about Michael; told him about this enforced trip; pondered with him over the

reason for it. But he saw no reason to ponder.

“Some men are fools always wanting what they haven’t got. I wouldn’t cry out my pretty eyes if I were you. You’ll probably find it’s some complete ass of a woman who isn’t worth the tip of your little finger. He’ll find it out when it’s too late. If I were you I’d forget about him and enjoy myself.”

Forget about Michael! It was too absurd to think about. But it gave her a shock that he should so readily accept the idea that it was a woman who had caused Michael to be so urgent about this trip. She supposed she had been foolish to try and imagine anything else as being the cause. Wasn’t it the only thing to think? But not Mrs. Miller, oh, not that silly little fool of a woman. But, after all, what did it matter who it was since it was someone? What would happen at the end of six months? Five of them had already passed. In a few more weeks she would be sailing for home.

She concluded that all there was to do was to drift along from day to day as she had been doing, finding a fair sum of enjoyment in each day to make up for that empty feeling at the back of her mind. And then quite suddenly she recognized that she couldn’t drift along like this any more. Life was always in motion, going forward, never standing still. What had been a frank friendship had slipped into something different.

She was walking up the hill from the bay one afternoon with Christopher when at a sudden turn in the conversation his cool ironic attitude dropped from him and the words came actually stumbling from his lips.

“My dear—suppose we’re not foolish any more. Suppose we face facts. We’re not children, you and I. What are you going to do about it—what are you going to do?”

“Don’t, oh, please don’t,” she protested, “I could never think of anyone but Michael.”

“Aren’t you being a little absurd? We’re only human. It isn’t human nature to go on wanting a man who doesn’t want you, when there’s another close by who is wanting you with every fibre of his soul and body. Not unless you’re simply foolish and perverse. You’re not the kind that’s always crying for the moon just because it’s out of reach. It isn’t reasonable to suppose that the image of Michael isn’t growing a bit blurred. What’s the use of pretending it isn’t?”

She turned away, refusing to meet his eyes, which seemed to be looking through her as though she were glass. The image of Michael was growing blurred and faint. What was the use of saying it wasn’t? Her faith in Michael

had faltered during these past weeks. She remembered the relief he had seemed to feel when she had said she would do as he asked and come over here. And yet Michael—Michael—she would have sworn by all the saints that he loved her. But now, somehow, she didn't feel so sure. Was Christopher undermining her faith with his cynical outlook on human nature? If she did as Christopher wanted her to do wouldn't she be confirming his cynicism? Did she care for him? She didn't know.

"There have been so many others with you," she said feebly, trying to turn things away from herself and her own feelings.

"All the more reason that I should know now how I feel. Don't be a fool, Enid. This kind of thing doesn't happen every day. I've experienced enough to know that. You're not going to cheapen yourself by running back to a man who so clearly wants to be rid of you. You're not the kind of woman who could be happy living alone. Enid, you know you care. Look at me. I can see it in your face."

She covered her face with her hands.

"I care about Michael," she insisted. "I only care about Michael."

"I'll wait. You'll change your mind before very long. I'm sure of that."

She sat late that night crouched down on her window seat, looking out at the little lights that twinkled everywhere like chains of brightly-colored jewels. The night was like purple grapes and there was a bitter sweet smell blowing through it that was the scent of some white flowering tree. She pressed her fingers against her eyes to try and shut out everything except Michael's face. But when she tried to conjure it up before her something drifted between that was like gray smoke.

"Michael—Michael!" she whispered to the darkness, and the sound of a bell ringing somewhere outside the window was like the echo of a laugh. Michael wasn't thinking of her; Michael had sent her away to be rid of her; Michael was content and satisfied without her.

Oh, she was afraid of Christopher, of his urgency, his cool philosophies, his clear-cut decisions that sliced at life, discarding so ruthlessly all that encumbered him. Now he would hack at her life and discard Michael—supplanting him with himself. But she knew that Michael could never be supplanted. If she were to lose him and marry Christopher there would always be a great dark void within her which never, never could be filled.

Her fear brought her to her feet and urged upon her a quick decision. She would run away from Christopher; she would leave in the morning for

Palermo and stay there until it was time to sail for home.

She wrote a few lines to Christopher omitting to tell him where she was going, cabled her change of address to Michael, and wired for rooms. Then she plunged into a frenzy of packing; dragging open trunks, pulling out bureau drawers, while all the time she saw before her Christopher's cool challenging smile. Did she think she could escape from herself by running away, he seemed to be saying to her. Yes, that was what she was doing. Just running away from herself. But she continued to pack with feverish energy. She was afraid of herself, afraid to listen to Christopher. Just one more month, and she would be home again with Michael, home in the room with the jade green hangings, in the garden that would just be commencing to bud and blossom.

She felt a mixed sensation of loneliness and relief as she dressed for dinner the first evening in Palermo. As she crossed the rotunda to the dining-room she saw a familiar figure standing beside one of the tall palms at the entrance. She stopped short and stared in surprise, slightly aghast. Christopher. He came towards her smiling.

"My dear, really what a goose you are. Did you think you could run away from me like that? I got your note a few minutes after you had left. The porter told me you had taken the boat to Palermo."

She laughed helplessly. There seemed nothing else to do. And she wondered whether she was altogether sorry that he had come.

"But why did you come when you knew I was trying to get away from you?"

"You weren't trying to get away from me," he said, half smiling as he spoke her own thought, "you were only running away from yourself."

They had finished dinner and were crossing the rotunda to the garden when a boy came up to her and handed her a cable. She tore it open quickly. It was from Michael:

Enjoying yourself so much arrange to stay over another six months.

Michael.

The paper fluttered from her hand. Christopher stooped to pick it up.

"Not bad news, I hope."

She shook her head.

“I don’t suppose you’d call it bad news,” she said with a little strangling laugh. “Michael tells me to stay over here for another six months.”

Christopher folded the cable and gave it back to her.

“Suppose we go out into the garden,” he said, “there’s a spiffing moon.”

Enid was coming into the hotel the next day when a woman who had been sitting on the verandah got up and darted towards her, greeting her effusively.

“Oh, my dear, I was quite sure last night at dinner that it was you. I said so to my sister when I saw you come in with that tall good-looking man, but she said it was quite impossible. There I’ll be glad to be able to tell her I was right.”

It was a Miss Craven, a gossipy old maid who lived near Enid at home. Enid had always studiously avoided her.

“I didn’t see you,” she murmured. “Are you and your sister staying at this hotel?”

“We just arrived yesterday. Well, I am glad to see a familiar face. At first I thought you were with your husband, and then I realized that of course he couldn’t be here with all that dreadful Security Trust investigation going on. Isn’t it shocking? They say that some of the directors—oh, my dear of course no one would believe anything against your husband. But so unpleasant, I don’t blame you a bit for coming right over here away from it all. Goodness knows how it will end. My sister and I follow every word. They do say—but perhaps I shouldn’t be talking about it to you. I’m sure you must be dreadfully worried.”

“Security Trust Investigation,” Enid repeated blankly.

Michael was one of the directors of the Security Trust. But he had never mentioned anything to her about an investigation. He had never even hinted that anything was wrong. She hadn’t seen the papers from home; no one had mentioned it to her in letters.

“Would you care to see the papers?” babbled on Miss Craven, “they’re just full of it. Well, I do think you were just wise to pack up and get away from it all. So unpleasant, that kind of thing! So worrying for your husband! You look as though you were enjoying yourself. Such a heavenly spot, Palermo. I always say —”

Enid was staring at a tall palm that waved across a clear sky. Blue skies. Quick tears started to her eyes, blotting out the waving palm, the blue sky, painting there instead Michael's face as he came to her across the lawn at home, Michael with a sober expression on his face, a package of hotel folders in his hand.

Why hadn't she known? Michael, guarding, cherishing, protecting, always. Dear foolish Michael, robbing her of her woman's right to share in the struggle. Insisting that there should always be blue skies above her. Dear foolish Michael. Blue skies—gray skies, what difference as long as they were shared?

Miss Craven stood with a sentence suddenly clipped short in the middle of the verandah. Christopher waited in the garden with an ambiguous expression on his face. At the office Enid and an attentive clerk were busy looking up steamship sailings.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Blue Skies* by Beatrice Redpath]