

## CHAPTER XXXVII

Angela's appeal for protection set Philip thinking.

As the reader is aware, his sole motive in consenting to become, as it were, a sleeping partner in the shameful plot, of which his innocent daughter was the object, was to obtain possession of his lost inheritance, and it now occurred to him that even should that plot succeed, which he very greatly doubted, nothing had as yet been settled as to the terms upon which it was to be reconveyed to him. The whole affair was excessively repugnant to him: indeed, he regarded the prospect of its success with little less than terror, only his greed over-mastered his fear.

But on one point he was very clear: it should not succeed except upon the very best of terms for himself, his daughter should not be sacrificed unless the price paid for the victim was positively princely, such guilt was not to be incurred for a bagatelle. If George married Angela, the Isleworth estates must pass back into his hands for a very low sum indeed. But would his cousin be willing to accept such a sum? That was the rub, and that, too, was what must be made clear without any further delay. He had no wish to see Angela put to needless suffering, suffering which would not bring an equivalent with it, and which might, on the contrary, entail consequences upon himself that he shuddered to think of.

Curiously enough, however, he had of late been signally free from his superstitious fears; indeed, since the night when he had so astonished Arthur by his outbreak about the shadows on the wall, no fit had come to trouble him, and he was beginning to look upon the whole thing as an evil dream, a nightmare that he had at last lived down. But still the nightmare might return, and he was not going to run the risk unless he was very well paid for it. And so he determined to offer a price so low for the property that no man in his senses would accept it, and then wrote a note to George asking him to come over on the following evening after dinner, as he wished to speak to him on a matter of business.

"There," he said to himself, "that will make an end of the affair, and I will get young Heigham back and they can be married. George can never take what I mean to offer; if he should, the Egyptian will be spoiled indeed, and the game will be worth the candle. Not that I have any responsibility about it, however; I shall put no pressure on Angela, she must choose for herself." And Philip went to bed, quite feeling as though he had done a virtuous action.

George came punctually enough on the following evening, which was that of the day of Lady Bellamy's conversation with Angela, a conversation which had so upset the latter that she had already gone to her room, not knowing anything of her cousin's proposed visit.

The night was one of those dreadfully oppressive ones that sometimes

visit us in the course of an English summer. The day had been hot and sultry, and with the fall of the evening the little breeze that stirred in the thunder-laden air had died away, leaving the temperature at much the same point that is to be expected in a tropical valley, and rendering the heat of the house almost unbearable.

"How do you do, George?" said Philip. "Hot, isn't it?"

"Yes, there will be a tempest soon."

"Not before midnight, I think. Shall we go and walk down by the lake, it will be cooler there, and we shall be quite undisturbed? Walls have ears sometimes, you know."

"Very well; but where is Angela?"

"I met her on the stairs just now, and she said that she was going to bed--got a headache, I believe. Shall we start?"

So soon as they were well away from the house, Philip broke the ice.

"Some months back, I had a conversation with Lady Bellamy on the subject of a proposal that you made to me through her for Angela's hand. It is about that I wish to speak to you now. First, I must ask if you still wish to go on with the business?"

"Certainly, I wish it more than ever."

"Well, as I intimated to Lady Bellamy, I do not at all approve of your suit. Angela is already, subject to my consent, very suitably engaged to your late ward, a young fellow whom, whatever you may think about him, I like very much; and I can assure you that it will require the very strongest inducements to make me even allow such a thing. In any case, I will have nothing to do with influencing Angela; she is a perfectly free agent."

"Which means, I suppose, that you intend to screw down the price?"

"In wanting to marry Angela," went on Philip, "you must remember that you fly high. She is a very lovely woman, and, what is more, will some day or other be exceedingly well off, whilst you--you must excuse me for being candid, but this is a mere matter of business, and I am only talking of you in the light of a possible son-in-law--you are a middle-aged man, not prepossessing in appearance, broken in health, and, however well you may have kept up your reputation in these parts, as you and I well know, without a single shred of character left; altogether not a man to who a father would marry his daughter of his own free will, or one with whom a young girl is likely to find happiness."

"You draw a flattering picture of me, I must say."

"Not at all, only a true one."

"Well, if I am all you say, how is it that you are prepared to allow your daughter to marry me at all?"

"I will tell you; because the rights of property should take precedence of the interests of a single individual. Because my father and you between you cozened me out of my lawful own, and this is the only way that I see of coming by it again."

"What does it matter? in any case after your death the land will come back to Angela and her children."

"No, George, it will not; if ever the Isleworth estates come into my hands, they shall not pass again to any child of yours."

"What would you do with them, then?"

"Marry, and get children of my own."

George whistled.

"Well, I must say that your intentions are amiable, but you have not got the estates yet, my dear cousin."

"No, and never shall have, most likely; but let us come to the point. Although I do not approve of your advances, I am willing to waive my objections and accept you as a son-in-law, if you can win Angela's consent, provided that before the marriage you consent to give me clear transfer, at a price, of all the Isleworth estates, with the exception of the mansion and the pleasure-grounds."

"Very good; but now about the price. That is the real point."

They had taken a path that ran down through the shrubberies to the side of the lake, and then turned up towards Caresfoot's Staff. Before answering George's remark, Philip proposed that they should sit down, and, suiting the action to the word, placed himself upon the trunk of a fallen tree that lay by the water's edge, just outside the spread of the branches of the great oak, and commanding a view of the area beneath them.

"The moon will come out again presently," he said, when George had followed his example. "She has got behind that thunder-cloud. Ah!" as a bright flash of lightning passed from heaven to earth, "I thought that we should get a storm; it will be here in half an hour."

All this Philip said to gain time; he had not quite made up his mind what price to offer.

"Never mind the lightning. What do you offer for the property,

inclusive of timber, and with all improvements--just as it stands, in short."

"One hundred thousand pounds cash," said Philip, deliberately.

George sprang from his seat, and sat down again before he answered.

"Do you think that I am drunk, or a fool, that you come to me with such a ridiculous offer? Why, the probate valuation was two hundred thousand, and that was very low."

"I offer one hundred thousand, and am willing to settle thirty thousand absolutely on the girl should she marry you, and twenty thousand more on my death. That is my offer--take it, or leave it."

"Talk sense, man; your terms are preposterous."

"I tell you that, preposterous or not, I will not go beyond them. If you don't like them, well and good, leave them alone, and I'll put myself in communication with young Heigham to-morrow, and tell him that he can come and marry the girl as soon as he likes. For my part, I am very glad to have the business settled."

"You ask me to sacrifice half my property," groaned George.

"My property, you mean, that you stole. But I don't ask you to do

anything one way or the other. I am to understand that you refuse my offer?"

"Give me a minute to think," and George hid his face in his hand, and Philip, looking at him with hatred gleaming in his dark eyes, muttered between his teeth,

"I believe that my turn has come at last."

When some thirty seconds had passed in silence, the attention of the pair was attracted by the cracking of dead leaves that sounded quite startling in the intense stillness of the night, and next second a tall figure in white glided up to the water's edge, and stood still within half a dozen paces of them.

Involuntarily Philip gripped his cousin's arm, but neither of them moved. The sky had rapidly clouded up, and the faint light that struggled from the moon only served to show that the figure appeared to be lifting its arms. In another second that was gone too, and the place was totally dark.

"Wait till the moon comes out, and we shall see what it is," whispered George, and, as he spoke, there came from the direction of the figure a rustling sound as of falling garments.

"What can it be?" whispered Philip.



They were not left long in doubt, for at that instant a vivid flash from the thunder-cloud turned the darkness into the most brilliant day, and revealed a woman standing up to her knees in the water, with her arms lifted, knotting her long hair. It was Angela. For one moment the fierce light shone upon the stately form that gleamed whiter than ivory--white as snow against the dense background of the brushwood, and, as it passed, they heard her sink into the water softly as a swan, and strike out with steady strokes towards the centre of the lake.

"It is only Angela," said Philip, when the sound of the strokes grew faint. "Phew! what a state she gave me."

"Is she safe?" asked George, in a husky voice. "Hadn't I better get a boat?"

"She needs no help from you, she is quite capable of looking after herself, especially in the water, I can tell you," Philip answered, sharply.

Nothing more was said till they reached the house, when, on entering the lighted study, Philip noticed that his cousin's face was flushed, and his hands shaking like aspen leaves.

"Why, what is the matter with you, man?" he asked.

"Nothing--nothing. I am only rather cold. Give me some brandy."

"Cold on such a night as this? That's curious," said Philip, as he got the spirit from a cupboard.

George drank about a wine-glassful neat, and seemed to recover himself.

"I accept your offer for the land, Philip," he said, presently.

His cousin looked at him curiously, and a brilliant idea struck him.

"You agree, then, to take fifty thousand pounds for the Isleworth estates in the event of your marrying my daughter, the sale to be completed before the marriage takes place?"

"Fifty thousand! No, a hundred thousand--you said a hundred thousand just now."

"You must have misunderstood me, or I must have made a mistake; what I meant is fifty thousand, and you to put a thousand down as earnest money--to be forfeited whether the affair comes off or not."

George ground his teeth and clutched at his red hair, proceedings that his cousin watched with a great deal of quiet enjoyment. When at

length he spoke, it was in a low, hoarse voice; quite unlike his usual hard tones:

"Damn you!" he said, "you have me at your mercy. Take the land for the money, if you like, though it will nearly ruin me. That woman has turned my head; I must marry her, or I shall go mad."

"Very good; that is your affair. Remember that I have no responsibility in the matter, and that I am not going to put any pressure on Angela. If you want to marry her, you must win her within the next eight months. Then that is settled. I suppose that you will pay in the thousand to-morrow. The storm is coming up fast, so I won't keep you. Good night," and they separated, George to drive home--with fever in his heart, and the thunderstorm, of which he heard nothing, rattling round him--and Philip to make his way to bed, with the dream of his life advanced a step nearer realization.

"That was a lucky swim of Angela's to-night," he thought. "Fifty thousand pounds for the estate. He is right; he must be going mad. But will he get her to marry him, I wonder. If he does, I shall cry quits with him, indeed."