



(Will Be Shown Soon in Picture Form at El Portal)

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE:

When Jonathan Blake, adventurous young member of Lloyds of London insurance group, is forced to flee France to escape the wrath of Napoleon, he effects the rescue of a beautiful English woman, with whom he falls deeply in love. After his return, he discovers to his dismay that she is Lady Elizabeth Stacy, wife of the dissolute Lord Stacy, who has repeatedly been refused admittance to the insurance syndicate headed by Jonathan and his aged friend and benefactor, John Angerstein. Resolutely, Jonathan remains away from places where he might meet Lady Elizabeth. He finally meets her and her husband at a London gambling resort. Stacy, still intent on forcing Jonathan to admit him to the syndicate, invites him to dine at the Stacy home. After an emotional scene, they agree not to see each other at the Stacy home, but to meet at the studio of Sir Thomas Lawrence, where a portrait of Lady Stacy is being painted.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sir Thomas Lawrence had finished Lady Stacy's portrait, and taking advantage of an opportunity afforded by his brief absence from the room, Jonathan and Elizabeth had kissed each other goodbye for the last time. They were still in each other's arms when the studio door opened softly; both turned at sound of a propitiatory little cough and found Lord Everett Stacy and a stranger standing in the doorway.

"I beg your pardon," Lord Stacy murmured. "We are de trop, aren't we? And softly he closed the door."

Elizabeth was the stronger of the two. She took the blow standing. They looked into each other's eyes—and Jonathan kissed her again. "Whatever happens to me," he whispered, "will be a cheap price for me to pay for those stolen hours of ecstasy. Hereafter I shall operate in the open. Pray God he sends me a challenge."

"He will not. He is an arrant coward. Well, my very dear one, if he divorces me, then that disgrace will also be a cheap price to pay for these stolen moments."

"Au revoir," he choked, and left her. On the sidewalk Lord Stacy and his friend stood. His solicitor, no doubt, Jonathan thought. Well, this is going to be hard on John Angerstein.

When he arrived at his lodgings, his servant mixed him a whiskey and soda and he sat down to sip it and to await a visit he had a feeling was impending. Nor was he disappointed. The door bell clanged presently, and his servant returning from answering it, murmured:

"Lord Everett Stacy, sir."

"Alone?"

"Quite, sir."

"Show Lord Stacy in."

Deliberately rude, Jonathan remained seated when his visitor entered. "I have been waiting this visit, Stacy," he said calmly. "Fire away."

Lord Stacy bowed and sat down uninvited. Deliberately he poured himself a whiskey and soda, sipped it with evident enjoyment, and sighed.

"I had no idea," said Jonathan lightly, "that you had returned to London. Lady Stacy informed me that you had been sent abroad, by the Admiralty on a secret mission. It occurred to me at the time that the Admiralty must be devilishly put to it for an Ambassador when Lord Drayton chose you."

"I have never been away, my dear Blake. I have been resting quietly at my club."

"Of course you have had me followed?"

"Naturally."

"And you put two and two together and got four."

"Oh, no, my dear Blake. I found one and one together and got two."

"A pun is the lowest form of wit. Stacy, but what can one expect from the lowest form of human life? What's the proposition? Lay it on the table, face up, without further play-acting. There is a price to be paid, of course. Name it."

Lord Stacy lighted a cigar very deliberately. Then: "Adverting again to the suggestion I once made you with reference to admitting me to the Angerstein syndicate, it has occurred to me that you might care to reconsider your decision in that matter. In fact, it has occurred to me that you might hasten to reconsider it."

"It seems that I must do some reconsidering," Jonathan admitted.

"Stout fella. Undoubtedly, I have no funds to invest now. They have—er—ah—vanished, in the unaccountable manner in which funds—er—ah—vanish."

"I had an idea they would."

"By the way, I understand that you had the bad taste to dress up that little maid, Polly, like a lady and introduce her at Lady Masham's gambling house."

"That is quite true. I made a bet that before midnight she would be presented to the Prince of Wales as Lady Bradford. She was—and I won two thousand pounds."

"I am inclined to think that His Royal Highness might resent such familiarity, should the story come to his attention. And I have an idea, also, that if and when dear Lady Masham learns of the incident she will forbid you admittance thereafter."

"The prince knows all about it. I had old Q tell him. His Royal Highness not only regarded the incident as a joke but sent for me to congratulate me on my superb nerve in making such a bet. A very sporty gentleman is our prince. As for Lady Masham's opinion, I do not care a damn. She is a person of no importance and no social standing. She is the proprietress of a gambling house for the elite of

London. A word from old Q and she'd fall dead."

"It appears I missed that shot," Lord Stacy smiled. "Well, to business. I have no funds, as I believe I remarked previously, but—"

"I gather that you will be pleased if I advance them; if I admit you to membership in the Angerstein syndicate at Lloyd's and finance your membership for say fifty thousand pounds, which should earn you at least five thousand a year."

"I greatly fear, my dear Blake, that I could not be happy on an income of less than ten thousand a year."

"Like Caesar, you are ambitious. In the event that I decline to do this for you—"

"Ah, but you will not."

"My question may be regarded as a hypothetical one."

"Oh, well, in that event, I should, of course, having had the forethought to engage a prominent solicitor as my witness, have no alternative save to enter suit against Lady Stacy for a divorce, charging adultery."

"There has been no adultery. You can not prove that charge."

"It may be implied. You were caught in the lady's arms, your lips fast to hers. Sir Thomas Lawrence would make an excellent witness as to the number of times you dropped in at his studio—always when Lady Stacy was sitting for him."

"I see. And you will name me as the man who has ruined your home?"

"How can I avoid that, my dear fellow, if I must prove my case?"

"Lady Stacy will be disgraced, of course."

Lord Stacy shrugged. "These things happen," he murmured.

Jonathan meditated. "I haven't the hundred thousand pounds to invest for you, Stacy," he said presently, "I shall have to have some time to negotiate a loan."

"Let us say, then, that we meet for further discussion in a week."

"I will be prepared to proceed according to your orders in one week, or I will regretfully fail, and have to see you play out your hand. Until this day, a week, then." He pressed a bell and his servant entered. "Lord Stacy is leaving," he said. "I bid you good-afternoon, sir."

He commenced to laugh softly and Lord Stacy paused, suspicious. "It would be interesting," his lordship murmured languidly, "to know what causes you such mirth."

"I am amused because you are such a pitiable fool, Lord Stacy. I daresay this is the first time you have ever stooped to blackmail. There's a law against it, you know. Punishable, upon conviction, by long imprisonment at hard labor, and members of the House of Lords are not immune from trial. Indeed, you black-hearted rogue, you are not even immune from conviction. You have made the mistake of not having your solicitor discuss the matter with me—in the privacy

of HIS office—but then, I daresay, you could not find a solicitor venal enough for your purpose, for such rascals demand a heavy fee in advance and I happen to know that at present you are living on your wits. So it occurred to me that you would come here tonight to discuss the matter. Unfortunately, you delayed long enough to give me time to get my solicitors here to be witnesses at your attempt to levy blackmail." He drew a cord and the heavy window curtains fell apart, to reveal four gentlemen standing, like soldiers.

"Permit me to introduce to you Messrs. Sir Sidney Craven, Bart., Brook, K. C., and Mr. Martin Burgoyne. These gentlemen constitute Mr. Roger Sturgis, Sir Anthony being the very finest legal firm in England, gentlemen whose testimony no judge would doubt, gentlemen of most impeccable honor."

In unison the quartet bowed to Lord Stacy. As if with one voice they said: "Oh, you poor, unfortunate fellow!"

"Although a person of mediocre mental attainments, gentlemen," said Jonathan, "I imagine Lord Stacy has sense enough to know that he has been seriously wounded in the backfire from his own volley."

Lord Stacy fled down the hall; as Jonathan's servant let him out the front door he planted upon Lord Stacy's posterior the great grandfather of all kicks, for he was a faithful creature and an order from Jonathan was not to be ignored. He returned to the pantry and presently, with great dignity, entered the drawing room with a tray bearing four tall glasses and four spliffs of soda water for the legal talent.

Sir Anthony Brook, K. C., cleared his throat and sampled the whiskey. "Very, very venerable, my dear Blake. And as for falling in love with the lady in question, nothing but my years, my gray hairs and my excess weight have operated to keep me from being your hated rival." His merry old eyes sought the faces of each of his partners. "Shall we charge him a frightful fee, gentlemen," he queried, "or are we sufficiently rewarded in the knowledge that we have it in our power to strike a hearty blow for true love?"

"I loathe the discussion of sordid fiduciary details," Sir Sidney purred, and the other two being English, growled in their beards: "Hear! Hear!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Like most men of his type, Lord Stacy's low cunning sometimes mounted to the level of sheer astuteness. Although not remotely what one might term a man of kidney, he was capable of direct action in moments of panic. And he was tremendously panic-stricken as he picked himself up on the sidewalk in front of Jonathan's lodgings; the door of his wife's handsome brougham waiting for him stood invitingly open and into it