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# A Prince of Sinners

By E. Phillips Oppenheim

Author of "The Train," "The Sparrow," "A Millionaire's Yesterday," Etc.

PART III.  
CHAPTER I.  
An Aristocratic Recruit.

An early spring came with a rush of warm west wind, sunshine, and the perfume of blossoming flowers. The chestnuts were out at the Park fully a week before their time, and already through the great waxy buds the color of the coming rhododendrons was to be seen in sheltered corners of the Park. London put out its window boxes, and remembered that it had, after all, for two short months a place amongst the beautiful cities of the world. Bus conductors began to whistle, and hansom cab drivers to wear a bunch of primroses in their coats. Kingston Brooks, who had just left his doctor, turned into the Park and mingled idly with the throng of people.

For the first time for many months he suffered his thoughts to travel over a wider range than usual. The doctor's words had been sharp and to the point. He must have instant change—change, if not of scene, at least of occupation. Scarcely to be wondered at, Brooks thought to himself, with a faint smile, when he thought of the past twelve months, full of the brim of strenuous labor, of ceaseless striving with a bureau task. Well, he was in smoother waters now. He might withdraw his hand for a while, if necessary. He had gone his way, and held his own so far against all manner of onslaught. Just then he heard himself called by name, and looking up, found himself face to face with Sybil Caroom.

"Mr Brooks! Is it really you, then, at last?"

He set his teeth hard but he could not keep the unusual color from his cheeks.

"It is really I, Lady Sybil. How do you do?"

Sybil was charming in a lilac-colored dress and hat as fresh and dainty as her own complexion. She looked straight into his eyes and told him that he ought to be ashamed of himself.

"Oh, it's not the least use looking as though you were going to edge away every moment," she declared, laughing. "I am going to keep you for quite a long time, and make you tell me about everything."

"In which case, Lady Sybil," her escort remarked, good-humoredly, "you will perhaps find a better use for me at some future time."

"How sweet of you," she answered blandly. "Do you know, Mr. Brooks? Mr. Kingston Brooks, Lord Bertram Mr. Brooks is an old friend of mine, and I have so many questions I want to ask him."

"Lord Bertram, a slim, aristocratic young man, raised his hat and glanced with some interest at the other man.

"The Mr. Kingston Brooks of the East End—Lavy's friend?" he asked politely.

Brooks smiled.

"I am afraid," he said, "that I am the person who is being exposed—in that the word? I warn you, Lady Sybil, that I am a questionable character."

"I will take the risk," she answered, gaily.

"I think you may safely do so," Lord Bertram answered, raising his hat. "Good morning, Lady Sybil—morning, Mr. Brooks!"

She led him towards the chairs.

"I am going to take the risk of your being in an extravagant frame of mind," she said, "and make you pay for two chairs—up here on the back row. Now, first of all, do you know that you look shockingly ill!"

"I have just come from my doctor," Brooks answered. "He agrees with you."

"I am glad that you had the sense to go to him," she said. "Tell me, are you just run down or is there anything serious the matter with you?"

"Nothing serious at all," he answered. "I have had a great deal to do, and no holiday during the past year, so I suppose I am a little tired."

"You look like a ghost," she said. "You have been overworking yourself ridiculously. Now, why you have never been to see us?"

"I have been nowhere," he answered. "My work has claimed my undivided attention."

"Why?"

"Nonsense," she answered. "You have been living for a year without a shilling cab ride of us and you have not even once called. I really wonder that I am sitting here with you as though prepared to forgive you. Do you know that I have written you

"Of course you must. When will you come and dine quietly with us in Berkeley Square and go to the theatre?"

He shook his head.

"It is very kind of you," he said, "but—"

"When will you come and have tea with me, then?"

He set his teeth. He had done his best.

"Whenever you choose to ask me," he answered with a sort of dogged resignation.

She looked at him half curiously half tenderly.

"You are so much changed," she murmured, "since those days at Eton. You were a boy then, although you were a thoughtful one—now you are a man, and when you speak you speak like an old man. Come I want the other Mr. Brooks."

He sat quite still. Perhaps at that moment of detachment, he realized more keenly than ever the withering nature of the battle through which he had passed. Indeed he felt older. Those days at Eton lay very far back, yet the girl by his side made him feel as though they had been but yesterday. He glanced at her covertly. Gracious, fresh, and as beautiful as the spring itself. What demon of mischief had possessed her that she should, with all her army of admirers, her gay life, her host of pleasures, still single him out in this way and bring back to his memory days which he had told himself he had wholly forgotten? She was not of the world of his adoption, she belonged to the things which he had forgotten.

"The other Mr. Brooks," he murmured, "is dead. He has been burned in the furnace of this last wonderful year. That is why I think—I fear it is no use your looking for him—and you would wish to have a stranger to tea with you."

"That," she said, "is ingenious, but not convincing. So you will please come tomorrow at four o'clock I shall stay in for you."

"At four o'clock," he repeated helplessly.

Lady Caroom waved to them from the path.

"Sybil, come here at once," she exclaimed, "and bring Mr. Brooks with you. Dear me, what troublesome people you have been to find. I am very glad indeed to see you again."

She looked Brooks in the face as she held his hand, and with a little start he realized that she knew.

"You most quixotic young man," she exclaimed, "come home with us at once and explain how you dared to avoid us all this time. What ghost you look. I hope it is your conscience. Don't pretend you can sit with your back to the horse, but get in there, sir, and—James, the little scamp—make yourself as comfortable as you can. Here, James! Upon my word, Mr. Brooks, you look like one of those poor people you have been working for in the slums. If starvation was catching, I should think you had caught it. You must try my muffins."

Sybil caught his eye and laughed.

"Mother hasn't altered much, has she?" she asked.

on the hearth smoking a cigarette, joined languidly in the conversation.

"You think Brooks ought to take some notice of Lavilette's impudence, then?"

"Well, I'm afraid his not doing so looks rather flimsy," the first speaker remarked. "That thousand pound note must have been a sort of a myth."

"I think not," Lord Arranmore remarked quietly. "I ought to know, for I sent it myself."

Every man straightened himself in his easy chair. There was a thrill of interest.

"You're joking, Arranmore."

"Not I! I've sent him three amounts—annually."

"Well, I'd no idea that sort of thing was in your line," one of the men exclaimed.

"More it is," Arranmore answered. "Personally, I don't believe in charity—in any modern application of it at any rate. But this man Brooks is a decent sort."

"You know who Brooks is, then?"

"Certainly. He was my agent for a short time in Medchester."

Mr. Hennibal, who was one of the men sitting round, doubled his copy of "Verity" up and beat the air with it.

"I knew I'd heard the name," he exclaimed. "Why, I've met him down at Eton. Nice-looking young fellow."

Arranmore nodded.

"Yes, that's Brooks."

Mr. Hennibal's face beamed.

"Great Scott, what a haul!" he exclaimed. "Why, you've got old Lavilette on toast—you've got him for suing damages too. If it is this why Brooks has been hanging back—just to let him go far enough—by Jove, he's a smart chap."

"I don't fancy Brooks has any idea of the sort," Lord Arranmore answered. "All the same I think that Lavilette must be stopped and made to climb down."

Curiously enough he met Brooks the same afternoon in Lady Caroom's drawing-room.

"This is fortunate," he remarked. "I wished for a few minutes conversation with you."

"I am at your service," Brooks answered quietly.

The room was fairly full so they moved a little on one side. Lord Arranmore for a moment or two studied his son's face in silence.

"You show signs of the struggle," he remarked.

"I have been overworked," Brooks answered. "A week or two's holiday is all I require—and that I am having. As for the rest," he answered, looking Lord Arranmore in the face, "I am not discouraged. I am not even depressed."

"I congratulate you—upon your zeal."

"You are very good."

"I was going to speak to you," Lord Arranmore continued, "concerning the paragraph in this week's Verity, and these other attacks which you seem to have provoked."

Brooks smiled.

"You too?" he exclaimed.

"I also!" Lord Arranmore admitted. "You scarcely see how it concerns me of course, but in a remote sense it does."

"I am afraid I am a little dense," Brooks remarked.

"I will not embarrass you with any explanation," Lord Arranmore remarked. "But all the same I am going to surprise you. Do you know that I am very much interested in your experiment?"

Brooks raised his eyebrows.

"Indeed?"

"Yes, I am very much interested," Lord Arranmore repeated. "I should like you to understand that my views as to charity and charitable matters remain absolutely unchanged. But at the same time I am anxious that you should test your schemes properly and unhampered by any pressure from outside. You are all the sooner likely to grow out of conceit with them. Therefore let me offer you a word of advice. Publish your accounts and see Lavy for a thousand pounds."

Brooks was silent for a moment.

"My own idea," he said, slowly, "was to take no notice of these attacks. The offices where the financial part of our concern is managed are open to our subscribers at any time, and the books are there for their inspection. It is only at the branches where we do not admit visitors."

"You must remember," Lord Arranmore said, "that these attacks have been growing steadily during the last few months. It is of course no concern of mine, but if they are left unanswered surely your funds must suffer."

"There have been no signs of it up to the present," Brooks answered in every day.

"This worst attack," Lord Arranmore remarked, "only appeared in this week's Verity. It is bound to have some effect."

Brooks shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not fear it," he answered calmly. "As a matter of fact, however, I am going to form a council to take over the management of the financial organization. It is getting too large a thing for me with all my other work. Is there anything else you wished to say to me?"

The eyes of the two men met for a moment—both unflinchingly. Perhaps they were each searching for something they could not find.

"There is nothing else. Don't let me detain you."

Brooks, who was the leaving guest, stepped quietly away, and Lord Arranmore calmly outstayed all the other callers.

"Your manners," Lady Caroom told him, as the last of her guests departed, "are simply horrid. Who told you that you might all out all my visitors in this base-faced way?"

"You, dear lady, or rather your manner," he answered imperturbably. "It seemed to me that you were saying all the time 'Do not desert me! Do not desert me!' And so I sat tight."

"An imagination like yours," she declared, "is positively unhealthy. Arranmore, what an idiot you are."

"Well?"

"Oh, you know all about it—and yet you hear! Are you tired of your life?"

"Very, very tired of it!" he answered. "But I'm everybody!"

"Of course not. Neither are you really. It is only a mood. Some day you will succeed in what you seem trying so hard to do, and then you will be sorry—and perhaps some others!"

"If one could believe that," he murmured. "Two months ago," she continued, "every one was saying that you had made up your mind to end your days in the hunting field. All Melton was talking about reckless riding, all your hairbreadth escapes."

"Both shockingly exaggerated," he said, under his breath.

"Perhaps, but apart from the papers I have seen people who were out and who have told me that you rode with absolute recklessness simply and purely for a fall, and that you deserved to break your neck a dozen times over. Then there was your week in Paris with Prince Comre, and now your super-parties at the talk of London."

"They are justly famed," he answered gravely, "for you know that I brought home the chef from Volillard's—I am sorry that I cannot ask you to one."

"Don't be ridiculous, Arranmore. Why do you do these things? Does it amuse you or give you any satisfaction?"

"Upon my word, I don't know," he answered.

"Then, why do you do it?"

"Because," he said slowly, "there is a shadow which dogs me. I am trying to escape—and it is always hard on my heels. You are a woman, Catherine, and you don't know the suffering of the most intolerable form of ennui—loneliness!"

"And do you?" she asked, looking at him with softening eyes.

"Always. It rode with me in the turkey frill—and sometimes perhaps it lifted my spurs—why not? And at these suppers you speak of, well, they are all very gay—it is I only who have hidden them, who reap no profit. For whosoever may sit there the chair at my side it always empty."

"You speak sadly," she said, "and yet—"

"Yet what?"

"To hear you talk, Arranmore, with any real feeling about anything is always a relief," she said. "Some times you speak and act as though every emotion which had ever filled your life were dead, as though you were indeed but the shadow of your former self. Even to know that your feet pain is better than to believe you feel pain of any feeling whatever."

"Then you may rest content," he told her quietly, "for I can assure you that pain and I are old friends and close companions."

"You have so much, too, which should make you happy—which should keep you employed and amused," she said softly.

"Employed and amused." His eyes flashed upon her with a gleam of something very much like anger. "It pleases you to mock me!"

"Indeed, no!" she protested. "You must not say such things to me."

"Then remember," he said, bitterly, "that sympathy from you comes always very near to mockery. It is you and you alone who can unlock the door for me. You show me the key—but you will not use it."

A belated caller straggled in and Arranmore took his leave. Lady Caroom for the rest of the afternoon, "victims cold" and seriously imperilled her reputation as a charming and sympathetic hostess.

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In the midst of her busy life—a life of strenuous endeavor mingled with many small self-donations—a certain sense of loneliness—of insufficiency—a new thing to her and hard to cope with in this great city where friends were few. And last night, whilst she had been thinking of it, came the note from Brooks asking if he might come to tea. She had been ashamed of herself ever since. It was maddening that she should be sitting for his coming like a blushing school-girl—the color ready enough to stream into her face at the sound of his footsteps.

He came at last—a surprise in more ways than one. For he had abandoned the blue serge and low hat of his daily life and was attired in frock coat and silk hat—his tie and collar of a new fashion and even his bearing altered—at least so it seemed to her jealous observation. He was certainly looking better. There was color in his pale cheeks and his eyes were bright once more with the joy of life. Her dark eyes took mercenary note of these things and then found seeing at all a little difficult.

"My dear Mary," he exclaimed cheerfully—he had fallen into the way of calling her Mary lately—"this is delightful of you to be in. Do you know that I am really holiday making?"

"Well," she answered, smiling, "I imagined that you were not on your way eastwards."

"Where can I sit? Can I move these?" He swept aside a little pile of newspapers and books, and took possession of the seat which she had purposely appropriated. "The other chairs are so far off, and you seem to have chosen a dark corner. Eastwards, no. I have been at the office all the morning, and we have bought the property in Poplar Grove and the house in Bermondsey. Now I have finished for the day. Doctor's orders."

"If any one has earned a holiday," she said, quietly, "you have. There is some cake on the table there."

"Thanks. Well, it was hard work at first. How we stuck at it down at Steppay, didn't we? Six in the morning till twelve at night. And then how we rushed ahead. It does seem to me that we have been doing nothing but opening branches lately."

(To be Continued.)