

By E. Phillips Oppenheim

Author of

A Prince of Sinners, Etc.

THE RAYAL

A Powerful
and
Fascinating Serial Story.

(Continued from Sunday's edition.)

So I was forced to touch him after all. Nevertheless I kept my eyes as far as possible from the ghastly face with the long hideous wound across it. I saw now, however, in one swift unwilling glance, what manner of man this was. He had thin features, a high forehead, deep-set eyes too close together, a thin iron-grey moustache. Whatever his station in life may have been, he was not of the laboring classes, for his hands were soft and his nails well cared for. We laid him in the bottom of the wagon, and covered him over with a couple of sacks. John cracked the whip and strode along by the side of the horses. Blanche Moyal and I followed behind. She was unusually silent, and once or twice I caught her glancing curiously at me, as though she had something which it was in her mind to say, but needed encouragement to say. As we neared my cottage she asked me a question.

"Why don't you want me to say that I saw this man in the village last night, and that he asked for you, Mr. Ducaïne?" I cannot understand what difference it makes. He may have spoken to others besides me, and then it is bound to be known. What harm can it do you?"

"I cannot explain how I feel about it," I answered. "I am not sure that I know myself. Only you must see that if it were known that he set out from the village last night to call upon me, people might say unpleasant things."

"She lowered her voice. 'You mean—that they might suspect you of killing him?'"

"Why not? Nobody knows much about me here, and it would seem suspicious. It was I who found him, and only a few hundred yards from my cottage. If it were known that he had left the village last night to see me, you think that it would occur to anyone to wonder if we had met and quarrelled? There could be no proof, of course, but the mere suggestion is unpleasant enough."

"We were in the middle of the open road, and the wagon was several yards in front. Nevertheless she drew a little closer to me, and almost whispered in my ear."

"Do you know who he is, what he wanted to see you about?"

"I have no idea," I answered. "I am quite sure that I never saw him before in my life."

"Did you see him last night?" she asked.

"Not to speak to," I answered. "I did catch just a glimpse of him, I believe, in a strange way. But that was all."

"What do you mean?"

"I saw him looking in through my window, but he came nearer. Lady Angela and Colonel Ray were in the room."

"In your room?"

"Yes, Colonel Ray called to say that he was sorry to have spoiled my lecture."

"And Lady Angela?"

"Yes."

"She came in too?"

"The girl's open-mouthed curiosity irritated me."

"I happened to be ill when Colonel Ray came. They were both very kind to me."

"This man, then," she continued, "he looked in and went away?"

"I suppose so," I answered. "I saw no more of him."

"She turned towards me breathlessly. 'I don't see how a fall could have killed him, or how he could have been dived off into the marshes just there. The creek isn't nearly deep enough to have drowned him unless he had walked deliberately in and lain down. He was quite sober, too, when he spoke to me. Mr. Ducaïne, how did he die? What killed him?'"

"If I could answer your questions," I said, "I should have done so much easier in my own mind. But I cannot know no more about it than you do."

"We were both silent for a time, but I saw that there was a new look in her face. It was a welcome sign, and I was glad to see her so interested."

"You are Mr. Ducaïne, sir?" he asked, touching his hat.

"Yes," I answered. "I was to take back an answer if I found you at home."

"He handed it to me, and I tore it open. It contained a few lines, in a large sprawling hand-writing."

"Rowchester, Wednesday morning. 'The Duke of Rowchester presents his compliments to Mr. Ducaïne, and would be much obliged if he could make it convenient to call upon him at Rowchester between three and four o'clock this afternoon.'

"I folded the note up and turned to the groom."

"Will you tell his Grace," I said, "that you found me on the road, and I was unable, therefore, to write my answer. But I will call at the time he mentions."

"The man touched his hat and rode away. Blanche Moyal, who had been standing a few yards off, rejoined me. 'Has the Duke sent for you to go there?' she asked, with obvious curiosity."

"Yes. He has offered to lend me the village hall," I told her, "and expect that is what he wants to see me about."

"She tossed her head. 'You didn't tell me just now when I told you that father had offered to speak about it?'"

"I am afraid," I said gravely, "my mind was made of more serious matters."

"She said no more until we reached the front of the Duke's house. Then she did not offer me her hand, but she stood quite close to me, and spoke in an unusually low tone."

"You wish me, then," she said, "not to mention about that man who is asking the way to your cottage?"

"It seems quite necessary," I answered, "and it would only mean that I should be bothered with questions which I could not answer."

"Very well," she said. "Good-bye!"

I shuddered to myself as I followed the wagon down the narrow street towards the police station. A strange reverie had crept into her mind during the latter portion of our walk. There was something in her mind which she shrank from putting into words. Did she believe that I was responsible for this grim tragedy which had so cruelly thrown its shadow over my hum-drum little life?

CHAPTER V.

The Graciousness of the Duke. At a quarter-past three that afternoon

I was ushered into the presence of the Duke of Rowchester. I had never seen him before, and his personality at once interested me. He was a small man, grey-haired, keen-eyed, clean shaven. He received me in a somewhat bare apartment, which he tilted to as his workroom, and I found him seated before a desk strewn with papers. He rose immediately at my entrance, and I could feel that he was taking more than usual note of my appearance.

"You are Mr. Ducaïne," he said, holding out his hand. "I am glad to see you."

He motioned me to a chair facing the window, a great uncurtained affair, through which the north light came flooding in, whilst he himself sat in the shadows.

"No, whatever," I answered. "The Duke rose to his feet. I took up my hat."

"If Colonel Ray is in," I said, "and it is not inconvenient, I should be glad to see him for a moment."

"Quite, thank you," I answered. "Lady Angela and Colonel Ray were very kind to me."

He nodded, and then glanced at the papers on his desk.

"I have been going through several matters connected with the estate, Mr. Ducaïne," he said, "and I have come across one which concerns you."

"The proposed lease of the Grange," I remarked.

"Exactly. It seems that you arranged a three years' tenancy with Mr. Hulsehaw, my agent, and were then not prepared to carry it out."

"I interposed. 'I explained the circumstances to Mr. Hulsehaw. I was promised two pupils if I took a suitable house in this neighborhood, but after all my plans were concluded, their father died unexpectedly, and their new guardian made other arrangements.'

"Exactly," the Duke remarked. "The only reason why I have allowed the matter is that I disapproved of the course adopted by my agent, who, I believe, enforced the payment of a year's rent from you."

"I was within his rights, your Grace," I said.

"He may have been," the Duke admitted, "but I consider his action arbitrary. Not only that, but it was unnecessary, for he has already found another house for the pupils. I have instructed him, therefore, to send you a cheque for the amount you paid him, less the actual cost of preparing the lease."

Now my entire capital at that moment was something under three shillings. A gift of fifty pounds, therefore, which after all was not a gift but only the return of my own money, was more than opportune—it was Heaven-sent. I could have given away to my feelings I should have sprung up and wrung the little man's hands. As it was, however, I expected my face betrayed my joy.

"Your Grace is exceedingly kind," I told him. "The money will be invaluable to me just now."

"The Duke inclined his head. 'I am only sorry,' he said, 'that Hulsehaw should have said anything so impossible. It is to leave the conduct of one's affairs wholly in the hands of another person. Now there is a further matter, Mr. Ducaïne, concerning which I desired to speak to you. It refers to your projected lecture last night.'

"I beg that your Grace will not allude to it," I said, hastily. "It is really of very little importance."

"The Duke had a habit which I began at this time to observe. He appeared to enter into all discussions with the subject, and then, without warning, he would simply endure with patience, and then continued on his way without the slightest reference to me. He sat during my lecture with his half-closed eyes, and when I had finished he went on, wholly ignoring it."

"This is a strange little corner of the world," he said, "and the minds of the people here are for the most part like the minds of the children of the East. I have heard some remarks concerning the war from one or two of my tenants which have not pleased me. I thought of an excellent opportunity to endeavor to instruct them as to the real facts of the case. It was not until after the affair was arranged—not, indeed, until I was actually in the hall—that I heard of your misfortune in selecting an evening which you had already reserved for your own lecture. I trust that you will allow me to offer you the free use of the hall for a few days, and that you may select. My people here, and I myself, shall esteem it a pleasure to be amongst your audience."

"I was quite overwhelmed. I could hardly believe my ears. The Duke went on to speak for a while on general matters, and then skilfully brought the conversation back again to myself and my own affairs. Before I knew it, I was for some time subjected to a close and merciless cross-examination. My youth, my college career, my subsequent adventures seemed all of a sudden of interest to him, and I, although I was a man of no special talents, increased, answered him with the obedience of a schoolboy."

"It came to an end at last. I found myself confronted with a question which I had answered it truthfully, and which he had disclosed my penniless condition. I rose instead to my feet."

"Your Grace will excuse me," I said. "but I am taking up too much of your time. It is not possible that these small personal details can be of any interest to you."

"He waved me away, and I, feeling that I was not in the least obliged, resumed my journey. The Duke's manner throughout, and the framing of his questions, had been too tactful to awaken any resentment. But I had a very strong impression of his ill-humored and friendly state to anyone, a democrat enough to feel that a cross-examination which would have been in a little too personal even from the Duke of Rowchester."

"Sitt down, Mr. Ducaïne," he said. "I do not blame you for resenting what seems to be curious, but you must take my word for it that it is nothing of the sort. I can perhaps explain myself better by asking you another sort of question. Are you in a position to accept a post of some importance?"

"I looked at him in surprise, as well I might."

"Sitt down, Mr. Ducaïne," he repeated. "I have said enough, I hope, to prove that I am not trifling with you. You have managed, at any rate, to surprise me very much, your Grace," I

said. "I am eager to receive employment of any sort. May I ask what it was that you had in view?"

"He shook his head slowly. 'I cannot tell you to-day,' he said. 'It is a matter upon which I should have to consult others.'

"May I ask at whose suggestion you thought of me?" I asked.

"It was Colonel Ray who pointed out certain necessary qualifications which you possess," the Duke answered. "I shall report to him, and to some others, the result of our conversation, and I presume you have no objection to my making such inquiries as I think necessary concerning you?"

"None whatever," I answered. "The Duke rose to his feet. I took up my hat."

"If Colonel Ray is in," I said, "and it is not inconvenient, I should be glad to see him for a moment."

"Quite, thank you," I answered. "Lady Angela and Colonel Ray were very kind to me."

He nodded, and then glanced at the papers on his desk.

"I have been going through several matters connected with the estate, Mr. Ducaïne," he said, "and I have come across one which concerns you."

"The proposed lease of the Grange," I remarked.

"Exactly. It seems that you arranged a three years' tenancy with Mr. Hulsehaw, my agent, and were then not prepared to carry it out."

"I interposed. 'I explained the circumstances to Mr. Hulsehaw. I was promised two pupils if I took a suitable house in this neighborhood, but after all my plans were concluded, their father died unexpectedly, and their new guardian made other arrangements.'

"Exactly," the Duke remarked. "The only reason why I have allowed the matter is that I disapproved of the course adopted by my agent, who, I believe, enforced the payment of a year's rent from you."

"I was within his rights, your Grace," I said.

"He may have been," the Duke admitted, "but I consider his action arbitrary. Not only that, but it was unnecessary, for he has already found another house for the pupils. I have instructed him, therefore, to send you a cheque for the amount you paid him, less the actual cost of preparing the lease."

Now my entire capital at that moment was something under three shillings. A gift of fifty pounds, therefore, which after all was not a gift but only the return of my own money, was more than opportune—it was Heaven-sent. I could have given away to my feelings I should have sprung up and wrung the little man's hands. As it was, however, I expected my face betrayed my joy.

"Your Grace is exceedingly kind," I told him. "The money will be invaluable to me just now."

"The Duke inclined his head. 'I am only sorry,' he said, 'that Hulsehaw should have said anything so impossible. It is to leave the conduct of one's affairs wholly in the hands of another person. Now there is a further matter, Mr. Ducaïne, concerning which I desired to speak to you. It refers to your projected lecture last night.'

"I beg that your Grace will not allude to it," I said, hastily. "It is really of very little importance."

"The Duke had a habit which I began at this time to observe. He appeared to enter into all discussions with the subject, and then, without warning, he would simply endure with patience, and then continued on his way without the slightest reference to me. He sat during my lecture with his half-closed eyes, and when I had finished he went on, wholly ignoring it."

"This is a strange little corner of the world," he said, "and the minds of the people here are for the most part like the minds of the children of the East. I have heard some remarks concerning the war from one or two of my tenants which have not pleased me. I thought of an excellent opportunity to endeavor to instruct them as to the real facts of the case. It was not until after the affair was arranged—not, indeed, until I was actually in the hall—that I heard of your misfortune in selecting an evening which you had already reserved for your own lecture. I trust that you will allow me to offer you the free use of the hall for a few days, and that you may select. My people here, and I myself, shall esteem it a pleasure to be amongst your audience."

"I was quite overwhelmed. I could hardly believe my ears. The Duke went on to speak for a while on general matters, and then skilfully brought the conversation back again to myself and my own affairs. Before I knew it, I was for some time subjected to a close and merciless cross-examination. My youth, my college career, my subsequent adventures seemed all of a sudden of interest to him, and I, although I was a man of no special talents, increased, answered him with the obedience of a schoolboy."

"It came to an end at last. I found myself confronted with a question which I had answered it truthfully, and which he had disclosed my penniless condition. I rose instead to my feet."

"Your Grace will excuse me," I said. "but I am taking up too much of your time. It is not possible that these small personal details can be of any interest to you."

"He waved me away, and I, feeling that I was not in the least obliged, resumed my journey. The Duke's manner throughout, and the framing of his questions, had been too tactful to awaken any resentment. But I had a very strong impression of his ill-humored and friendly state to anyone, a democrat enough to feel that a cross-examination which would have been in a little too personal even from the Duke of Rowchester."

"Sitt down, Mr. Ducaïne," he said. "I do not blame you for resenting what seems to be curious, but you must take my word for it that it is nothing of the sort. I can perhaps explain myself better by asking you another sort of question. Are you in a position to accept a post of some importance?"

"I looked at him in surprise, as well I might."

"Sitt down, Mr. Ducaïne," he repeated. "I have said enough, I hope, to prove that I am not trifling with you. You have managed, at any rate, to surprise me very much, your Grace," I

said. "I am eager to receive employment of any sort. May I ask what it was that you had in view?"

"He shook his head slowly. 'I cannot tell you to-day,' he said. 'It is a matter upon which I should have to consult others.'

"May I ask at whose suggestion you thought of me?" I asked.

"It was Colonel Ray who pointed out certain necessary qualifications which you possess," the Duke answered. "I shall report to him, and to some others, the result of our conversation, and I presume you have no objection to my making such inquiries as I think necessary concerning you?"

"None whatever," I answered. "The Duke rose to his feet. I took up my hat."

"If Colonel Ray is in," I said, "and it is not inconvenient, I should be glad to see him for a moment."

"Quite, thank you," I answered. "Lady Angela and Colonel Ray were very kind to me."

He nodded, and then glanced at the papers on his desk.

"I have been going through several matters connected with the estate, Mr. Ducaïne," he said, "and I have come across one which concerns you."

"The proposed lease of the Grange," I remarked.

"Exactly. It seems that you arranged a three years' tenancy with Mr. Hulsehaw, my agent, and were then not prepared to carry it out."

"I interposed. 'I explained the circumstances to Mr. Hulsehaw. I was promised two pupils if I took a suitable house in this neighborhood, but after all my plans were concluded, their father died unexpectedly, and their new guardian made other arrangements.'

"Exactly," the Duke remarked. "The only reason why I have allowed the matter is that I disapproved of the course adopted by my agent, who, I believe, enforced the payment of a year's rent from you."

"I was within his rights, your Grace," I said.

"He may have been," the Duke admitted, "but I consider his action arbitrary. Not only that, but it was unnecessary, for he has already found another house for the pupils. I have instructed him, therefore, to send you a cheque for the amount you paid him, less the actual cost of preparing the lease."

you quite half the distance to your cottage if you do not mind a scramble. You must take care just at first. So many of the stones are loose."

"I understood that was dismissed, and I thanked her an hurried away. But she almost immediately called me back."

"Mr. Ducaïne?"

Her dark eyes were fixed curiously upon my face. She seemed to be weighing something in her mind. I had a fancy that, when she spoke again, it would be without that deliberation—almost restraint—which seemed to accord with her presence and actual years. She stood on the extreme edge of the cliff, her slim figure outlined to angularity against the sky. She remained so long, my thought speech that I had time to note these things. The muffled for breaking through the thin-topped pine trees, lay everywhere about us; a little brown feathered bird, scarcely a dozen yards from the Duke, was perched on a rock, its head turned towards the Duke, as if it were waiting for him to speak.

"No, whatever," I answered. "The Duke rose to his feet. I took up my hat."

"If Colonel Ray is in," I said, "and it is not inconvenient, I should be glad to see him for a moment."

"Quite, thank you," I answered. "Lady Angela and Colonel Ray were very kind to me."

He nodded, and then glanced at the papers on his desk.

"I have been going through several matters connected with the estate, Mr. Ducaïne," he said, "and I have come across one which concerns you."

"The proposed lease of the Grange," I remarked.

"Exactly. It seems that you arranged a three years' tenancy with Mr. Hulsehaw, my agent, and were then not prepared to carry it out."

"I interposed. 'I explained the circumstances to Mr. Hulsehaw. I was promised two pupils if I took a suitable house in this neighborhood, but after all my plans were concluded, their father died unexpectedly, and their new guardian made other arrangements.'

"Exactly," the Duke remarked. "The only reason why I have allowed the matter is that I disapproved of the course adopted by my agent, who, I believe, enforced the payment of a year's rent from you."

"I was within his rights, your Grace," I said.

"He may have been," the Duke admitted, "but I consider his action arbitrary. Not only that, but it was unnecessary, for he has already found another house for the pupils. I have instructed him, therefore, to send you a cheque for the amount you paid him, less the actual cost of preparing the lease."

Now my entire capital at that moment was something under three shillings. A gift of fifty pounds, therefore, which after all was not a gift but only the return of my own money, was more than opportune—it was Heaven-sent. I could have given away to my feelings I should have sprung up and wrung the little man's hands. As it was, however, I expected my face betrayed my joy.

"Your Grace is exceedingly kind," I told him. "The money will be invaluable to me just now."

"The Duke inclined his head. 'I am only sorry,' he said, 'that Hulsehaw should have said anything so impossible. It is to leave the conduct of one's affairs wholly in the hands of another person. Now there is a further matter, Mr. Ducaïne, concerning which I desired to speak to you. It refers to your projected lecture last night.'

"I beg that your Grace will not allude to it," I said, hastily. "It is really of very little importance."

"The Duke had a habit which I began at this time to observe. He appeared to enter into all discussions with the subject, and then, without warning, he would simply endure with patience, and then continued on his way without the slightest reference to me. He sat during my lecture with his half-closed eyes, and when I had finished he went on, wholly ignoring it."

"This is a strange little corner of the world," he said, "and the minds of the people here are for the most part like the minds of the children of the East. I have heard some remarks concerning the war from one or two of my tenants which have not pleased me. I thought of an excellent opportunity to endeavor to instruct them as to the real facts of the case. It was not until after the affair was arranged—not, indeed, until I was actually in the hall—that I heard of your misfortune in selecting an evening which you had already reserved for your own lecture. I trust that you will allow me to offer you the free use of the hall for a few days, and that you may select. My people here, and I myself, shall esteem it a pleasure to be amongst your audience."

"I was quite overwhelmed. I could hardly believe my ears. The Duke went on to speak for a while on general matters, and then skilfully brought the conversation back again to myself and my own affairs. Before I knew it, I was for some time subjected to a close and merciless cross-examination. My youth, my college career, my subsequent adventures seemed all of a sudden of interest to him, and I, although I was a man of no special talents, increased, answered him with the obedience of a schoolboy."

"It came to an end at last. I found myself confronted with a question which I had answered it truthfully, and which he had disclosed my penniless condition. I rose instead to my feet."

"Your Grace will excuse me," I said. "but I am taking up too much of your time. It is not possible that these small personal details can be of any interest to you."

"He waved me away, and I, feeling that I was not in the least obliged, resumed my journey. The Duke's manner throughout, and the framing of his questions, had been too tactful to awaken any resentment. But I had a very strong impression of his ill-humored and friendly state to anyone, a democrat enough to feel that a cross-examination which would have been in a little too personal even from the Duke of Rowchester."

"Sitt down, Mr. Ducaïne," he said. "I do not blame you for resenting what seems to be curious, but you must take my word for it that it is nothing of the sort. I can perhaps explain myself better by asking you another sort of question. Are you in a position to accept a post of some importance?"

"I looked at him in surprise, as well I might."

"Sitt down, Mr. Ducaïne," he repeated. "I have said enough, I hope, to prove that I am not trifling with you. You have managed, at any rate, to surprise me very much, your Grace," I

said. "I am eager to receive employment of any sort. May I ask what it was that you had in view?"

"He shook his head slowly. 'I cannot tell you to-day,' he said. 'It is a matter upon which I should have to consult others.'

"May I ask at whose suggestion you thought of me?" I asked.

"It was Colonel Ray who pointed out certain necessary qualifications which you possess," the Duke answered. "I shall report to him, and to some others, the result of our conversation, and I presume you have no objection to my making such inquiries as I think necessary concerning you?"

"None whatever," I answered. "The Duke rose to his feet. I took up my hat."

"If Colonel Ray is in," I said, "and it is not inconvenient, I should be glad to see him for a moment."

"Quite, thank you," I answered. "Lady Angela and Colonel Ray were very kind to me."

He nodded, and then glanced at the papers on his desk.

"I have been going through several matters connected with the estate, Mr. Ducaïne," he said, "and I have come across one which concerns you."

"The proposed lease of the Grange," I remarked.

"Exactly. It seems that you arranged a three years' tenancy with Mr. Hulsehaw, my agent, and were then not prepared to carry it out."

"I interposed. 'I explained the circumstances to Mr. Hulsehaw. I was promised two pupils if I took a suitable house in this neighborhood, but after all my plans were concluded, their father died unexpectedly, and their new guardian made other arrangements.'

"Exactly," the Duke remarked. "The only reason why I have allowed the matter is that I disapproved of the course adopted by my agent, who, I believe, enforced the payment of a year's rent from you."

"I was within his rights, your Grace," I said.

"He may have been," the Duke admitted, "but I consider his action arbitrary. Not only that, but it was unnecessary, for he has already found another house for the pupils. I have instructed him, therefore, to send you a cheque for the amount you paid him, less the actual cost of preparing the lease."

"No, that is not what I meant," she interrupted. I am sure that you will be offered the post, and I am sure that you will not hesitate to accept it. But nevertheless I think that it will bring you great disappointments. I will tell you what I think. I have held this post, and each in turn has been dismissed. They have lost the confidence of their employers, and though each, I believe, was ambitious and meant to make a career, they have now a black mark against their name."

"You are very mysterious, Lady Angela," I said, doubtfully.

"It is of necessity," she answered. "Perhaps I