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A Prince of Sinners

By E. Phillips Oppenheim

Author of "The Traitor," "The Secret," "A Millionaire's Yesterday," Etc.

(Chapter 7, continued.)

"I shall not detain you many minutes," Lord Arranmore answered. "Inside is a comfortable strangers' room where we can chat. Will you have anything?"

"Nothing to drink," Brooks answered. "A cigarette, if you are going to smoke."

Lord Arranmore pushed his cigarette case across the small round table which stood between their easy chairs. The room was empty.

"You will find these tolerable," he promised to be brief, did I not wish to speak for a moment upon a subject which it seems to me might require a readjustment of our financial relations."

Brooks looked up puzzled, but made no remark.

"I refer to the possibility of your desiring to marry. Be so good as not to interrupt me. I have seen you once or twice with Sybil Caroom—and there has been a whisper—but after all that is of no consequence. The name of the young lady would be no concern of mine. But in case you should be contemplating anything of the sort, I thought it as well that you should know what the usual family arrangements are."

"I am sorry," Brooks said, "but I really don't understand what you mean by family arrangements."

"No," Lord Arranmore remarked. "Perhaps if you would allow me to explain—it is your own time which is limited, you know. The eldest son of our family comes in, as you have been told, on his twenty-first birthday, to two thousand pounds a year, which income you are now in possession of. On his marriage this is increased to ten thousand a year, with the possession of either Eaton or Mangochre. In the present case you can take your choice, as I am perfectly indifferent which I retain. But from time to time I thought it best for you to understand the situation. Mr. Ascoug will, at any time, put it into legal shape for you."

"You speak of this arrangement," Brooks said, slowly, "as though it were a corroboration of the settlement upon the eldest son. This scarcely seems possible. There can be no such provision legally."

"I scarcely see," Lord Arranmore said, wearily, "that that has to do with it. The ten thousand pounds a year is, of course, not a legal charge upon the estates. But from time to time which has been the amount which has been the admitted portion of the eldest son upon marriage. It is no gift from me. It is the income due to Lord Kingston of Ross. If you wish for any future explanation I must really refer you to Mr. Ascoug. The discussion of business details is by no means a favorite occupation of mine."

Brooks rose to his feet. His eyes were fixed steadily, almost longingly upon Lord Arranmore's. His manner was not wholly free from nervousness.

"I am very much obliged to you, Lord Arranmore," he said. "I quite understand that you are making me the offer of a princely settlement from the Arranmore estates and to which I have no manner of claim. It is not possible for me to accept it."

"There was a moment's silence. A great clock in the corner ticked noisily. A faint unusual color stole into Lord Arranmore's cheeks.

"Accept it! I accord you no favor. I offer you no gift. The allowance is, I repeat, once which every Lord Kingston has drawn upon his marriage. Perhaps I have spoken before it was necessary. You may not have ever thought of anything of the sort?"

Brooks did not answer.

"I have noticed," Lord Arranmore continued in measured tones, "an intimacy between you and Lady Sybil Caroom, which suggested the idea to me. I look upon Lady Sybil as one of the most charming young gentlewomen of our time, and admirably suited in all respects to the position of the future Marchioness of Arranmore. I presume that as head of the family, I am within my rights in so far as pressing my opinion?"

"Marriage," said Brooks, huskily, "is not possible for me at the present time."

"Why not?"

"I cannot accept money from you. The terms on which we are do not allow it."

"There was an ominous glitter in Lord Arranmore's eyes. He, too, rose to his feet, and remained leaning his hand upon the back of his chair.

"Are you serious? Do you mean that?"

"I do!" Brooks answered.

they have been incorporated in the British Empire?"

"Hope they'll like it," his neighbor remarked, ironically. "Plenty of glory and a good price to pay for it. What licks me is that every one seems to imagine that this tariff bill is going to give the working classes a leg-up. To my mind it's the capitalist manufacturer," answered Brooks. "But after all you can't under present conditions dissociate capital and labor. The benefit of one will be the benefit of the other. No food stuffs are taxed, you know." His neighbor grunted.

"Pity Cobden's ghost can't come and listen to the rot those fellows are talking," he remarked. "We shall see in a dozen years how the thing works out."

The dinner ended with a firework of speeches, and an ovation which left Mr. Bullsum very red in the face and a little watery about the eyes. Brooks and he drove off together afterwards, and Mr. Bullsum occupied the first five minutes or so of the journey with a very vigorous mopping of his cheeks and forehead.

"A great night, Brooks," he said, faintly. "A night to remember, although I don't mind admitting that I am more than a bit exhausted though." Phew!

Brooks laughed and leaning forward, looked out of the windows of the carriage.

"Are we going in the right direction?" he asked. "This isn't the way to 'Homelands'?"

Mr. Bullsum smiled.

"Little surprise for you, Brooks!" he remarked. "We found the sort of place the girls were hankering after for a year. We moved in a fortnight ago."

"Do I know the place?" Brooks inquired.

"Yes, Wotton Hall," Mr. Bullsum remarked, impressively. "Nice old place. Dare say that you remember it."

"Remember it! Of course I do," answered Brooks. "How do the young ladies like it?"

Mr. Bullsum laid hold of the strap of the carriage. The road was rough. The horses were fresh and Mr. Bullsum's head had felt steadier.

"Well," Mr. Bullsum said, "you'd think to hear 'em we'd stepped right into heaven. We're close to the barracks, you know, and I'm blessed if half the officers have not called at my door or whatever goes on, in the most friendly way, just as they used to, you know, when Sir Henry lived there, him as took wine with you, you remember. Lord, you should hear Selina on the military. Can't say I take much to them myself. I'll bet there will be one or two of them hanging around the place tonight—phew!"

Mr. Bullsum mopped his forehead again. The carriage had turned into the drive, and he glanced towards Brooks a little uneasily.

"Do I look—?" though I had been going 'it a bit'?" he asked. "Since Selina's got these young band-box men hanging around she's so mighty particular."

Brooks leaned forward and rescued Mr. Bullsum's necktie from under his ear.

"You're all right," he said, reassuringly. "You must not let the girls bully you, you know."

Mr. Bullsum sat bolt upright.

"You are quite right, Brooks," he declared. "I will not. But we took on the servants here as well, and they are a bit strange to me. After all though, I am the boss and I'll let 'em know it, too."

A footman threw open the door, and took Brooks' dressing case. A butler, hurrying up from the back ground, ushered them into the drawing room. Mr. Bullsum pulled down his waistcoat and marched in, whistling softly a popular tune. Selina and Louise, in elaborate evening gowns were playing bridge with two young men.

Selina rose and held out her hand to Brooks a little languidly.

"So glad to see you, Mr. Brooks," she declared. "Let me introduce Mr. Sippetton, Captain Meyton!"

The two young men were good enough to acknowledge the introduction and Brooks shook hands with Louise. Selina was surveying her father with uplifted eyebrows.

"Why, father, where on earth have you been?" she exclaimed. "I never saw anybody such a sight. Your shirt is like a rag and your collar too."

"Never you mind me, Selina," Mr. Bullsum answered firmly. "As to where I've been, you know quite well. Political dinners may be bad for the linen, and there may be more health drunk than is altogether wise, but a Member of Parliament has to take things as he finds 'em. Don't let us interrupt your game. Brooks and I are going to have a game of billiards."

One of the young men laid down his cards.

"Can't we join you?" he suggested.

"We might have a game of pool if it's not too late?"

"You are soon tired of bridge," Selina remarked, reproachfully. "Very well, we will all go into the billiard room."

The men played a four handed game. Between the shots Selina talked to Brooks.

"Were you surprised?" she said.

"Had you heard?"

"Not a word. I was astonished," he declared.

"You hadn't seen it in the papers either? Most of them mentioned it in the county notes."

"I so seldom read the newspapers," he said. "You like it, of course." Selina was bereft of words.

"How we've existed in that hateful suburb," she whispered under her breath. "And the people around here are so sociable. Page being a member makes it different, of course. Then the barracks— isn't it delightful having them so close! There is always something going on. A cricket match tomorrow, I believe. Louise and I are going to play. Mrs. Malevey— she's the Colonel's wife, you know— persuaded us into it."

"And your mother?" Brooks asked a minute or two later.

Selina tossed her head.

"Mother is so foolish," she declared. "She misses the sound of the drums, and she actually calls the place dead alive, because she can't sit at the windows and see the tradesmen's carts and her neighbors go by that ridiculous!"

Brooks hesitated.

"I suppose so," he answered. "Your mother can have her friends here. It really is only a short drive to Medchester."

"She won't have them often than I can help," Selina declared, doggedly. "Old Mrs. Mason called the other day when Captain Meyton and Mrs. Malevey were here. It was most awkward. But I don't know why I tell you all these things. I declared, abruptly, 'Somehow I always feel that you are quite an old friend.'"

Selina's languishing glance was intercepted by one of her admirers from the barracks, as she had intended it to be. Brooks went off to play his shot and returned smiling.

"I'm only too happy that you should feel so," he declared. "Your father was very kind to me."

"Isn't it almost a pity that you did not stay in Medchester, Mr. Brooks?" Selina remarked, with a faint tone of patronage in her tone. "Papa is so much more influential now and he always was so fond of you."

"It is rather a pity," Brooks remarked with twinkling eyes. "One cannot force all these things, you know."

Selina felt it time to bestow her attention elsewhere, and the game was soon at an end. The girls glanced at the clock and then reluctantly withdrew.

"Remember, Miss Bullsum, that we are relying on you tomorrow," the younger of the two officers was saying as he opened the door. "Two o'clock sharp—but you lunch with Mrs. Malevey first?"

"We shan't forget," Selina assured him, graciously. "Good-night!"

The two young men left soon afterwards. Mr. Bullsum mixed himself a whiskey and soda and stood for a few minutes on the hearthrug before retiring.

"You're not up to the mark, Brooks, my boy," he said kindly.

Brooks shrugged his shoulders.

"I am about as usual," he answered.

Mr. Bullsum set down his glass.

"Look here Brooks," he said, "you have given me many a useful piece of advice even when you used to charge me six and eightpence for it. I am going to turn the tables. One doesn't need to look at you twice to see that things are not going altogether as they should do with you. See here! Are you sure that you are not cutting off your nose to spite your face, eh?"

"Perhaps I am," Brooks answered.

"But it is too late to draw back from it now."

"It is never too late," Mr. Bullsum declared, vigorously. "I've no fancy for weathercocks, but I haven't a half-pint of respect for a man who ain't smart enough to own up when he's made a mistake and who isn't willing to start again on a fresh page. You take my advice Brooks. Be reconciled with your father, and let 'em all know you are. I've seen a bit of Lord Arranmore and I'll stake my last shilling that he's not as bad 'un at heart. You make it up with him Brooks. Come, that's a straight tip and a good one!"

Brooks threw away his cigarette and held out his hand.

"It is very good advice, Mr. Bullsum," he said, "under any ordinary circumstances. I wish I could take it. Good-night!"

Mr. Bullsum grasped his hand.

"You're not offended, my boy?" he asked, anxiously.

"Not I," Brooks answered, heartily. "I'm not such an idiot."

"I don't want to take any liberties," Bullsum said, "and I'm afraid I forgot sometimes who you are, but that's your fault, seeing that you will call yourself only Mr. Kingston Brooks when you're by rights a lord. But if you were the Prince of Wales I still would say that my advice was good. Forgive your father anything that you have against him and start out fresh."

"Well, I'll think about it," Brooks promised.

CHAPTER IX.
A Question and an Answer.

Brooks returned to London to find the annual exceed already commenced. Lady Caroom and Sybil had left for Homburg. Lord Arranmore was yachting on the Channel. Brooks settled down to work and found it a little wearisome.

He saw nothing of Mary Scott, whose duties now brought her seldom to the head office. He began to think that she was avoiding him, and there came upon him about this time a sense of loneliness to which he was sometimes subject. He fought it with hard work—early and late, till the color left his cheeks and black lines bordered his eyes. They pressed him to take a holiday but he declined. Mr. Bullsum wrote begging him to spend a weekend at least at Wotton Hall. He refused this and all other invitations.

One day he took up a newspaper, which was chiefly concerned with the doings of fashionable people, and the name of Lady Caroom caught his eye. He read that her beautiful daughter, Lady Sybil was quite the belle of Homburg, that the Duke of Atherton was in constant attendance, and that an interesting announcement might be made at any moment. He threw aside the paper and looked into the stuffy little street, where even at night the air seemed stifling and unwholesome. After all, he had made the best of his life? He had started a great work. Hundreds and thousands of his fellow creatures would be better for it. So far all was well enough. But personally—was this entire self abnegation necessary?—was he fulfilling his duty to himself? He was not rather sacrificing his future to a prejudice—an idea? In any case he knew that it was too late to retract. He had renounced his proper position in life and it was too late to claim it. And there had gone with it—Sybil! After all why should he arrogate to himself judgment? The sins of his father were not his concern. It was chiefly he who suffered by his present attitude, yet he had chosen it deliberately. He could not draw back. He had cut himself off from her world—he saw now the folly of his ever for a moment having been drawn into it. It must be a chapter closed.

The weeks passed on, and his loneliness grew. One day the opening of still another branch brought him for a moment into contact with Mary Scott. She too, was looking pale, and yet she was bright, even animated. She seemed to feel none of the dejection which had stolen away from him the whole flavor of life. Her light easy laugh and cheerful conversation were like a tonic to him. He remembered those days at Medchester. After all she was the first woman he had ever looked upon as a comrade, though he had taken out of her sex and considered singly.

She spoke of his ill-looks and with some apprehension.

"I am all right," he assured her, "but a little dull. Take pity on me and come out to dinner one night this week."

They dined in the annex of a fashionable restaurant practically out of doors—a cool green lawn for a carpet and a fountain playing close at hand. Mary wore a white dinner-gown, gossamer like and airy. Her rich brown hair was tastefully arranged, her voice had never seemed to him so soft and pleasant. All around was the hum of cheerful conversation. A little world of people seemed to be there whose philosophy of life after all was surely the only true one, where hearts were light with the joy of the moment. The dinner was carefully served, the wine, which in his solitude he had neglected, stole through his veins with a pleasant warmth. Brooks felt his nerves relax, the light came back to his eyes and the color to his cheeks. Their conversation grew brighter—almost gay. They both carefully avoided all mention of their work—it was a holiday. The burden of his too carefully thought out life seemed to pass away. Brooks felt that his youth was coming to him a little late, but with delicious freshness.

He smoked a cigarette and sipped his coffee, glancing every now and then at his companion with approving eyes. For Mary, whose dress was so seldom a matter of moment to her, chanced to look her best that night. The delicate pallor of her cheeks under the rich tone of her hair, seemed quite apart from any suggestion of ill-health, her eyes were wonderfully full and soft, a quaint pearl ornament hung by a little gold chain from her elegant forehead. A sort of dreamy content came over Brooks. At the last why should he throw himself in despair against the gates of that other world, outside which he himself had elected to dwell? It was only madness for him to think of Sybil. While Lord Arranmore lived he must remain Kingston Brooks—and for Kingston Brooks it seemed that even mere friendship with her was forbidden. He could live down those memories. They were far better crushed. He thought of that moment in Mary's sitting room, that one moment of her self-betrayal and his heart beat with unaccomplished force. Why not rob her of the bitterness of that memory? He looked at the white hand resting for a moment on the table so close to his and a sudden impulse came over him to snatch it up and to feel his loneliness fade away forever in the new light in her face.

"Let us go and sit on the other side of the lawn," he said, leaning over to whisper her. "We can hear the music better."

They found a quiet seat where the music from the main restaurant reached them, curiously mingled with the tinkling of the cab bells from Piccadilly. Brooks leaned over and took her hand.

"Mary," he said, "will you marry me?"

She looked at him as though she expected to find in his face some faint sign of madness, some clue to words which seemed to her wholly incomprehensible. But he had all the appearance of being in earnest. His eyes were serious, his fingers had tightened over hers. She drew a little away and every vestige of color had vanished from her cheeks.

"Married you?" she exclaimed.

He bent over her and he laughed softly in the darkness. A mad impulse asked for Minard's and take no other.

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