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A Prince of Sinners
 By E. Phillips Oppenheim
 Author of "The Traitors," "The Survivor," "A Millionaire of Yesterday," Etc.

CHAPTER VI—Continued.

"There is just one thing we have to ask for and insist upon," Brooks continued. "When you come to us for help, tell us the truth. If you've been drunk all the week and haven't earned any money, well, we may help you out with a Sunday dinner. If you've been in prison and won't mind owing up to it, we shall send you away for that reason. We want your women to come and bring us your children, that we can have a look at them, tell us how much you all make a week between you, and what you need most to make you a bit comfortable. And we want your husbands to come and tell us where they work, and what rent they pay, and if they haven't any work, and can't get it, we'll see what we can do. I tell you I don't care to start with whether you're sober and industrious, or idle, or if we can't give you any one of a leg-up if we can't, I don't see how we shall get up all ways, because we shall keep that up. Now we'll give you any one a fair chance. Now do you want to ask any questions?"

A pallid but truculent-looking young man pushed himself to the front.

"Ere, guv'nor!" he said. "Supposing yer was to stand me a coat—I ain't had one for two months—should I 'ave to come 'ere on a Sunday and sing bloomin' hymns?"

"If you did," Brooks answered him, "you'd do it by yourself, and you'd stand a fair chance of being run out. There's going to be no preaching or hymn-singing here. Those sorts of things are very well in their way, but they're nothing to do with this show. Now let's get to work."

"Sounds a bit o' right, and no mistake," the young man remarked, turning round to the crowd. "I'm going to stop and 'ave a go for that coat."

A young man in a bright scarlet jersey pushed himself to the front followed by a little volley of chaff more or less good-natured.

"There's Salvation Joe wants a new trombone."

"Christian Sall's blown a hole in the old one, eh, Joe?"

Breathless he reached Brooks' side. The sweat stood out in beads upon his forehead. He seemed not to hear a word that was said amongst the crowd. Brooks smiled at him good-humoredly.

"Well, sir," he said, "what can I do for you?"

"I happened in, sir, out of curiosity," the young man said, in a strange nasal twang, the h'itage of outdoor preaching: "I hope to hear of one more good work begun in this den of iniquity and to clasp hands with another brother in God."

"Glad to see you," Brooks said. "You'll remember we're busy."

"The message of God," the young man answered, "must be spoken at all times."

"Oh, chuck 'im out!" cried the disjunct costermonger, spitting upon the floor. "That sort o' stuff fair sickens me."

The young man continued as though he had not heard.

"Such charity as you are offering," he cried, "is corruption. You are going to dispense things for their carnal welfare, and you do nothing for their immortal souls. You will not let them even shout their thanks to God. You will fill their stomachs and leave their souls hungry."

The costermonger waved a wonderful red handkerchief, and spat once more on the floor. Brooks laid his hand upon the young man's shoulder.

"Look here, my young friend," he said, "you're talking rot. Men and women who live down here in wretchedness, and who are fighting every moment of their time to hang on to life don't want to be talked to about their souls. They need a leg-up in the world, and we're come to try and give it to them. We're here as friends, not

—and precious little good there is for know."

Mrs. Harding was not unreasonably annoyed. She turned round with flashing eyes and belittling attitude.

"Who the 'ell asked you for anything?" she exclaimed. "Can't yer keep your blomm'n' mouths closed?"

A pale-faced little man pushed his way through the throng. He was dressed in a semi-clerical garb, and he tapped Brooks on the shoulder.

"Can you favor me with one moment's private conversation, sir?" he said. "My name is John Deeling, and I am a minister of the Gospel. The Mission House in Fennell Street is my special charge."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Deeling," Brooks answered, "but I can't spare any time for private conversation now. Can't you speak to me here?"

Mr. Deeling looked doubtfully at the girl who stood still before the desk, silent, but breathing hard. A sullen shade had fallen upon her face. She looked like a creature at bay.

"It is concerning this unfortunate young person."

"I can assure you," Brooks said, dipping his pen in the ink, "that no recommendation is necessary. I shall do what I can for her."

"You misapprehend me, sir," Deeling said, with some solemnity. "I regret to say that no recommendation is possible. In life, Edward Owston, I regret to speak so plainly before ladies, sir, but she is a notorious character, a hardened and incurable prostitute."

Brooks looked at him for a moment fixedly.

"Did I understand you to say, sir, that you were a minister of the Gospel?" he asked.

"Certainly! I am well known in the neighborhood."

"Then if you take my advice," Brooks said, sternly, "you will take off those garments and break stones upon the street. It is to help such unfortunate and cruelly ill-used young women as this that I and my friends have come this way. Be off, sir. Miss Harding, send her to our clothes store in the inner room there. I hope you will permit us to be of some further use to you later on."

The girl half dazed, passed away. Mr. Deeling, his face red with anger turned towards the door.

"You may call it a Christian deed, sir," he exclaimed, angrily, "to encourage vice of the worst description. We shall see what the bishop, what the Press, have to say about it."

"I don't care a snap of the fingers what you, or the bishop, or the Press have to say," Brooks rejoined, equably; "but lest there should be those here who agree with your point of view, let them hear this from me as a piece, to prevent any misunderstanding. We are here to help to the best of our ability all who need help, whatever their characters. They are equally welcome to what we have to offer, whether they be thieves, or prostitutes, or drunkards, or respectable men and women. But if I were asked what really brought me here for what class of people in the world my sympathies and the sympathies of my friends have been most warmly kindled, I should say, for such as that young woman who has just presented herself here. If she asks for them, she will have from us food and clothes and the use of our baths and reading rooms whenever she chooses, and I will guarantee that not one of my women friends here who come in contact with her will ask a single question as to her mode of life, until she invites their confidence. If you think that she is responsible for her present state, you and I differ—I for I think that one shadow of blame rests upon her, and I differ again. And if there are any more like her in the room, let them come out, and they shall have all that they ask for, that is within our power to give."

"Hear, hear, guv'nor!"

"That's ginger for 'em."

"Out of this, old white choker. There's beans for you."

They let him pass through. On the threshold he turned and faced Brooks again.

"At least," he said, "I can promise you this. God's blessing will never be upon your work. I doubt whether you will be allowed to continue it in this Christian country."

Brooks rose to his feet.

"Mr. Deeling," he said, "you and your mission system of work amongst the poor have been fighting a losing battle in this country for fifty years and more. A Christian country you call it. Go outside in the streets. Look north and south, east and west look at the people, look at their children, look at their homes. Is there one shadow of improvement in this labyrinth of horrors year by year, decade by decade? You know in your heart that there is none. Therefore if new means be chosen, do not condemn them too rashly. Your mission houses, many of them, have been nothing but breeding-places for hypocrisy. It is time the old order was changed. Now, sir, you are next. What can we do for you?"

A weary-looking man with hollow eyes and nervously-twitching fingers found himself pushed before the desk. He seemed at first embarrassed and half dazed. Brooks waited without any sign of impatience. When at last he spoke, it was without the slightest trace of any Cockney accent.

"I beg your pardon, sir! I ought not perhaps to intrude here, but I don't know who needs help more than I do."

"You got as much as you deserve," Mr. Bullson retorted. "Besides, you're so plaguing impatient. You don't hear your mother talk like that."

Selina whispered something under her breath which Mr. Bullson, if he heard, chose to ignore.

"I've explained to you all before," he continued, "that up to the end of last year we've been holding the entire property—over a million pounds

worth, between five of us. Our time's come now. Now, look here—I'll listen to what you've got to say—all of you. Supposing I've made up my mind to launch out. How do you want to do it? You first, mother."

Mrs. Bullson looked worried.

"My dear Peter," she said, "I think we're very comfortable as we are. A large household means more care, and a man-servant about the place is a thing I could never abide. If you felt like taking stings at Mr. Thompson's as well as our own chapel, so that we could go there when we felt we needed a change, I think I should like it sometimes. But it seems a waste of good money with Sundays only coming once in seven days."

Mr. Bullson shook with good-humored laughter.

"Mother, mother," he said, "we shall never smarten you up, shall we, girls? Now, what do you say, Selina?"

"I should like a country house quite ten or fifteen miles away from here, lots of horses and carriages, and a house in town for the season."

Selina declared, boldly.

"And you, Louise?"

"I would like what Selina has said."

Mr. Bullson looked a little grave.

"The house in London," he said, "you shall have, whether I buy it or only hire it for a few months at a time. If we haven't friends up there, there are always the theatres and music-halls, and lots going on. But a country house is a bit different. I thought of a building up at Nicholson's Corner, where the trams stop. The land belongs to me, and there's the room for the biggest house in Medchester."

Selina tossed her head.

"Of course," she said, "if we have to spend all our lives in this hateful suburb it doesn't matter whether you stay here or build another house, no one will come to see us. We shall never get to know anybody."

"And supposing you go out into the country," Mr. Bullson argued, "how do you know that you'll make friends there?"

"People must call," Selina answered, "if you subscribe to the horse-race and you must get made a magistrate."

"We have lived here for a great many years," said Mr. Bullson, "and there are very superior people living almost at our doors whom you girls can't know to box to."

Selina tossed her head.

"Superior you call them, do you? A silly-stupidity, but I think they form themselves into little sets, and if you don't belong, they treat you as a 'ch' you can't smalt-pox."

"The men are all pleasant 'nough," Mr. Bullson remarked. "I meet them in the trams and in business, and they're always glad enough to pass the time o' day."

"Oh, the men are all right," Selina answered. "It is easy enough to know them. Mr. Wensome trod on my dress the other day, and apologized as if he'd torn it off my back, and the next day he gave me his seat in the car. I always acknowledged him, and he's glad enough to come and talk, but if his wife's with him, she looks straight ahead as if every one else in the car were mummies."

Mr. Bullson cut the end of a cigar thoughtfully, and motioned Louise to get him a light.

"You see, your mother and I are getting on in life," he said, "and I a great thing to ask us to settle down in a place where there's no slipping off down to the club in the evening, and no chance of a friend dropping in for a chat. We've got to an age when we've got to have some one to talk to. I ain't going to say that a big house in the country isn't a nice thing to have, and the gardens and that would be first class. But it's a big move, and it ain't to be decided about all in a hurry."

"Why, father, there's the shooting," Selina exclaimed. "You're fond of that, and the men will go anywhere for really good shooting, and make her wives go, too. If you could get a place with plenty of it, and a fox-cove or two on the estate, I'm perfectly certain we should be all right."

Mr. Bullson looked still a little doubtful.

"That is all very well," he said, "but I don't want to bribe people into my house with shooting and good cooking, and nursing their blooming foxes. That ain't my idea of making friends."

"It's only breaking the ice—just at first," Selina argued. "Afterwards I'm sure you'd find them friendly enough."

"I tell you what I shall do," Mr. Bullson said, deliberately. "I shall consult the friend I have coming to dinner tonight."

Selina smiled contemptuously.

"Pshaw!" she exclaimed. "What do any of them know about such things?"

"You see my friends are willing to give me a character, sir," the man remarked, with a ghost of a smile.

"My name is Edward Owston. I was clerk at the large drapery firm, Messrs. Appleby, Sons, and Dawson, in St. Paul's Churchyard, for fourteen years. I have a verified character from them. They were obliged to cut down their staff, owing to foreign competition, and I have never succeeded in obtaining another situation. There, in working for fifteen shillings a week, I walked the streets until my boots were worn through and my clothes hung round me like rags. I was in bad luck at first—afterwards it was my clothes. I have been selling matches for a month—it has brought me in two shillings a week."

"How old are you?" Brooks asked.

"Thirty-four, sir."

Brooks nearly dropped his pen.

"What?" he exclaimed.

"Thirty-four, sir. It is four years since I lost my situation."

The man's hair was grey, a little stubby grey beard was putting out from his chin. His eyes were almost lost in deep hollows. Brooks felt a lump in his throat, and for a moment pretended to be writing busily. Then he looked up.

"We shall give you a fresh start in life, Edward Owston," he said. "Follow this gentleman as my left. He will find you clothes and food. To-morrow you will go to a cottage which belongs to us at Hastings for a month. Afterwards, if your story is true, we shall find you a suitable situation—if it is partially true, we shall find you something to do. If it is altogether false we cannot help you, for absolute truth in answering our questions is the only condition we impose."

The man never uttered a word. He went out leaning on the arm of one of Brooks' assistants. Another, who was a doctor, after a glance in the returned, after about twenty minutes absence, he leaned forward and whispered in Brooks' ear.

"You'll never have to find a situation for that post fellow. A month's about all he's good for."

Brooks looked round shocked.

"What is it—drink?" he asked.

"The doctor shook his head.

"Not a trace of it. Starvation and exhaustion. If I hadn't been with him just now he'd have been dead before this. He fainted away."

Brooks half closed his eyes.

"It is horrible!" he murmured.

"The costermonger was next. Brooks looked around the room and at the clock.

"Look here," he said, "if I sit here till tomorrow I can't possibly attend to all of you. I tell you what I'll do. If you others will give place to those whose cases are really urgent, I'll be here at seven tomorrow morning till seven tomorrow night, and the next day too, if necessary. It's no good deputing any one else to tell me, because however many branches we open—and I hope we shall open a great many—I mean to manage this one myself. Now are you all agreeable?"

"I am for one," declared the costermonger, moving away from before the desk.

"I ain't in no 'urry. I've 'ad a bit o' bad luck w' my harrer all owing to a plaguing drunken old omnibus-driver, and hoi! I want is a bit o' help towards the security. Josh Auk wants it here he'll let me out a new one. Tomorrow is hoi right for me."

"Well, I expect we'll manage that," Brooks remarked. "Now where are the urgent cases?"

One by one they were elbowed forward. Brooks' pen flew across the paper. It was midnight even before they had finished. Brooks and Mary Scott left together. They were both too exhausted for words.

As they crossed the street Mary suddenly touched his arm.

"Look!" she whispered.

A girl was leaning up against the wall, her face buried in her hands, sobbing bitterly. They both watched her for a moment. It was Amy Harding.

"I will go and speak to her, Mary whispered.

Brooks drew her away.

"Not one word of advice, he said. "Let us keep to our principles. The end will be sure."

They turned the corner of the street. Above the shouting of an angry woman and the crazy song of a drunken man, the girl's sobs still lingered in their ears.

CHAPTER VIII
 Mr. Bullson is Staggered.

Mr. Bullson looked up from his letters with an air of satisfaction.

"Company to dinner, Mrs. Bullson!" he declared.

"Some more of your silly old directors, I suppose," said Selina, discontentedly. "What a nuisance they are."

Mr. Bullson frowned.

"My silly old directors, as you call 'em," he answered, "may not be exactly up to the idea of refinement, but I wouldn't call 'em names if I were you. They've made me one of the richest men in Medchester."

"A lot we get out of it," Louise granted, discontentedly.

"You get as much as you deserve," Mr. Bullson retorted. "Besides, you're so plaguing impatient. You don't hear your mother talk like that."

Selina whispered something under her breath which Mr. Bullson, if he heard, chose to ignore.

"I've explained to you all before," he continued, "that up to the end of last year we've been holding the entire property—over a million pounds

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Mr. Bullson grunted.
 "I don't see how he could do much less," he said. "After all, though every one admits that he's a clever young chap and uncommonly conscientious, he's not well known generally, and he hasn't the position in the town or anywhere which people generally look for in a parliamentary candidate. I may tell you, girls, and quite casually, that whichever of you girls gets married first gets a cheque from me for one hundred thousand pounds."
 "I hope," Mrs. Bullson said, "that he will be properly grateful."
 "I'm sure it is very good of you, pa," Selina declared, affably. She liked the idea of Brooks owing so much to her father.
 "There's no young man," Mr. Bullson said, "whom I like so much or think so much of as Mr. Brooks. If I'd a son like he I'd be a proud man. And as we're here all alone, just the

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