

# A Prince of Gamblers

by Edward Phillips Oppenheim, 1866-1946

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„DO you see, Mr. Arneston? Isn't it shocking? Can't we do something—speak to the captain or the purser? Surely that sort of thing ought not to be allowed.“

They had paused in their promenade up and down the deck of the Cunarder. The night was warm for the time of the year, and someone had fastened back the door of the smoking-room. They themselves, the man and the girl, stood in the darkness. The room into which they looked was ablaze with softly flashing electric lights. At a little round table four men were seated playing cards. Before each was a little pile of chips. They played quickly and in silence, after the fashion of gamblers. Of the four, three were of uninteresting appearance; the fourth was conspicuous amongst them both for his youth and good looks. It was towards him that the girl had motioned; it was upon his pale, nervous face that her eyes were bent now, full of anxiety and concern.

Illustration:

Four men were playing cards.

„It seems such a shame,“ she whispered, looking up at her companion. „He is so young, and I know that he cannot afford it. Can't we do something?“

Her arm tightened a little upon his. Her tone was full of pleading, for, like all women and most men, she had great faith and much confidence in the man by her side. Stephen Arneston looked from her to the boy and back again.

„Well, I'm afraid that's not easy,“ he said. „Mr. Franklin is not very old, and not very wise, but he's Britisher enough to hate being interfered with. Besides, he's a stranger to me. I'm afraid I should only get a snubbing if I interfered.“

„A snubbing from a boy!“ she answered, smiling appealingly up at him. „Why, I don't think that will hurt you very much, Mr. Arneston. Don't you want to go in and talk to him?“

How interested she was! He smothered a sigh, and looked idly in through the open door.

„It would be so nice of you,“ she murmured.

„But what can I do?“ he objected. „I have scarcely spoken to any of those men all the voyage. I can't go in and force myself upon them.“

„Mr. Arneston.“

„Well?“

„Suppose that he was your younger brother?“

„I wish he were yours.“

She laughed softly, such a delicate, musical little laugh.

„Why?“

„Do you want to know?“ he asked.

A little flush of colour came into her cheeks. She was wonderfully pretty. A little wisp of her hair brushed against his cheek. She drew further away from him, but her fingers remained upon his arm.

„We are wasting time, and it is so foolish of you,“ she said. „You know what I mean, what I want you to do. If Mr. Franklin were your brother you wouldn't see him sit there night after night and lose, lose, lose all the time. You'd interfere or something, I know. Please.“

He sighed heavily and withdrew his arm. „Well, let me tuck you up in your chair first, and make you comfortable,“ he said, „then I'll see whether I can send him out to you.“

She withdrew herself with an alacrity which irritated him.

„No, don't wait,“ she begged; „go in now; please don't wait. I shall be all right, and Mrs. Chase is over there in her chair. I shall talk to her for a few minutes.“

Stephen Arneston stooped low, for he was a tall man, and entered the smoking-room. The little party at the table glanced up as he entered, but no one addressed him. He lit a cigarette, and took a seat from where he could overlook the boy's hand.

There were four in the party playing poker. What the Stakes were Arneston had no means of telling, but they were evidently high, from the curious rapt attention which each one was giving to his hand. The man sitting on the boy's left hand was an American, Mortimer Hansom, and he was certainly the coolest of the party. Opposite to him was an Englishman, who played always with the utmost care, but who, from his irritated manner, was obviously a loser; and on his left was an oil merchant from Cincinnati, who spat on the floor and smoked all day and all night soft, black cigars of appalling strength. Arneston glanced at the other two and Franklin carelessly, then he fixed his attention upon Hansom. There was something about the man which puzzled him.

By and by, a little stir amongst the party attracted him. Franklin was raising the draw. Hansom was raising back. From where he lounged, Arneston could see the boy's hand, and his lips resolved themselves into a half-formed whistle. The boy was in luck. He had been dealt four tens.

„Two hundred.“

„And a hundred,“ Hansom replied, nonchalantly.

„And another,“ the boy declared.

„Five hundred,“ from Hansom.

The Englishman, with an exclamation of disgust, threw his cards upon the table. The oil merchant had gone out at the first raise. The boy's hand was shaking; he could not control his excitement.

„Six hundred.“

„Make it a thousand, if you like,“ Hansom remarked, laying down his hand to light a cigarette. „Only us two in, so we may as well have a little gamble.“

„I'll play for a thousand,“ the boy said hoarsely.

The oil merchant, who was dealing, took up the pack and looked towards the boy. He hesitated, fingering one of his cards nervously. Then he threw it, face downwards, upon the table.

„One.“

The card dealt him he scarcely glanced at. The dealer turned to Hansom, who looked his hand through thoughtfully.

„I guess I'll play what I've got,“ he remarked, laying them down and lolling back in his chair.

„Your bet, Mr. Franklin.“

„Make it fifteen hundred,“ the boy said, wetting his lips.

„Two thousand.“

The boy steadied himself and hesitated.

„I ought to raise you,“ he said, „but I've no more money. What have you got?“

Hansom turned them over one by one—nine, ten, knave, queen, king of clubs. The boy watched each card with fascinated eyes and slowly whitening cheeks. As he realised the truth, the perspiration broke out on his forehead. The other two players looked at Hansom with awe stricken faces.

„It is the first straight flush,“ he remarked pleasantly, „which I have ever held. Oblige me by touching the bell, sir. We will drink a bottle of wine to it. I'm sorry to run up against you again.“ he continued, turning carelessly to the boy. „I suppose you had something good?“

„I had four tens,“ the boy answered.

A little murmur of sympathy. „Darned hard lines!“ from the oil merchant, a chuckle from the Englishman, who was thanking his stars that he was out of it. Then the waiter brought in wine. The boy drained his glass, and rose none too steadily.

„You'll excuse me,“ he said. „I think I've had about enough poker for to-night.“

#### Illustration

A little murmur, which he ignored. He made his way out on to the deck; Arneston followed a moment or two later.

She was already by his side. They were leaning over the rail together as though watching the phosphorus. Arneston moved into the shadow of the

awning, and stood there with his eyes fixed upon them, and a bitter smile parting his thin lips. Her frank, sweet face was upturned towards the boy's. There were tears in her eyes; she was even holding his hand. The boy was looking away. Stephen Arneston turned on his heel and swore.

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HE came face to face with her a few minutes later. Her eyes were still dimmed with tears. She stopped short in front of him, and he felt instinctively the change in her attitude. He had been tried and found wanting.

„Mr. Arneston, will you tell me what has happened?“ she demanded.

„I am afraid,“ he answered, „that Mr. Franklin has lost a good deal of money.“

„You were there?“ she exclaimed. „You saw it happen? You made no effort to interfere?“

He looked down at her coldly.

„Please be reasonable, Miss Van Decker,“ he said. „What possible excuse had I for interfering? Mr. Franklin would have been the first to tell me to mind my own business. So far as I could see the money was fairly lost and won. I was quite powerless. I had not even the excuse of being a friend of Mr. Franklin's. I have not spoken a dozen words to him in my life.“

„It seems to have been no one's business,“ she said bitterly, „to prevent a boy's ruining himself. No, I can manage alone, thanks. Good-night, Mr. Arneston.“

She passed him and went below. Arneston lit a cigar, and leant over the rail. To all appearance he was enjoying the cool night wind, the moonlit sea, the soft swirl of the water parted by the bow of the steamer and falling away in little showers of fire with a thousand phosphorescent lights. But as a matter of fact he saw none of these things. His eyes were fixed upon vacancy; he was looking backwards down the long, dreary avenue of a life of disappointments and many evil things.

He resumed his walk, for a girl's face had floated up before his eyes, and of her he did not dare to think. So he walked fast and smoked fiercely for more than an hour. Then the sound of a laugh, a man's laugh, echoing out from that still open door, brought him suddenly to a standstill. His whole expression had changed. He listened again; there was something in the voice too. Then he hesitated no longer. He entered the smoking-room, and sat for awhile in a dark corner, with his eyes fixed upon Mr. Mortimer Hansom. For an hour or more he watched him covertly. Then he yawned, bade a general good-night, and walked out.

Again he lingered on deck, looking once more seaward with blind eyes. Something of a struggle held the man. He might save the boy, but at what a cost! After all, if she cared for Franklin, what did it matter? It was his luck, he muttered bitterly. The sudden access of good fortune which was taking him back to his native country with a new lease of life before him had suddenly become a flavourless thing. It had come to him late in life, this sudden flood of affection, half passionate, half tender. He was forty years old, and never until she had stepped on to the steamer at Boston had her sex or any member of it been to him anything save an object of half cynical, half scornful indifference. Now he was realising with a vengeance the existence of what he had always regarded as the folly of weaker men. He faced the problem boldly. In his new personality as John Arneston of Arneston Court, a great landowner, head of a family who for hundreds of years had thought themselves greater because

untitled—well, he had a chance. She had welcomed his society, a frank and pleasant comradeship had existed between them, dating from the first evening when their sense of humour had been jointly touched and their eyes had met across the dinner table. Only there was the boy. They were old friends, and until the poker had been started he had been her constant companion. Now the boy was ruined.

She was cherishing, it was true, an unreasonable anger against him, but that must pass away. In the morning she would see things more fairly. She would recognise the fact that after all there was nothing which he could have done. A ruined boy would surely not be a formidable rival. A sense of his folly must, on cool reflection, outweigh her sympathy. She might pity him, but his plight was not one to inspire respect, and she was not the woman to love without it. But on the other side came all those swift, chivalrous impulses which had kept him poor all his days, but which had left in his wake both men and women who spoke of him with bated breath, a prodigy, a man on the surface as hard as nails, but with the great heart of a woman hidden away like a thing to be ashamed of. He might save the boy yet, and lose her. The one would very likely involve the other. The boy was nothing to him but an obstacle, yet he never hesitated. Only he cursed the laugh, the open door, and the favouring wind which had brought it to his ears.

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AN hour later, when Mr. Mortimer Hansom lifted the sheet which hung outside his state-room and stepped inside, he was surprised to find a man fully dressed sitting upon his bunk. He was still more surprised to see that the intruder was John Arneston, and to find himself looking into the dark muzzle of a Colt's revolver. He uttered a little exclamation of surprise, and threw up his hands with a familiar gesture. It was quite like old times.

Illustration:

He threw up his hands quite like old times.

„Don't make a noise," Arneston said softly. „Sit down opposite to me there. I want to talk to you; only a few words."

Mr. Mortimer Hansom was nervous and shaken, but he seated himself as desired and attempted a little weak bluster.

„What the deuce do you want with me?" he asked.

„With Mr. Mortimer Hansom," Arneston said, coolly, „nothing. With Jim Morton—just a word, that's all."

„Well, I'm—"

„You can protest till you're black in the face," Arneston continued. „I can stand it. This is what I have to say. You have won over a thousand pounds from young Franklin on this trip. It will have to be refunded."

Hansom, whose face was white with fury, touched the button of the electric light which was by his side. He leant forward, peering curiously into Arneston's face, very pale now in this moment of his danger, but unflinching.

„Who the deuce are you?" he asked, musingly, half to himself.

Arneston shrugged his shoulders.

„That has nothing to do with the matter," he said.

A sudden light flashed into Hansom's face, triumphant, yet fearful. Arneston set his lips hard, but his heart sank like lead. He was lost.

„Now I understand,“ Hansom exclaimed bitterly. „Too small fish for the prince himself, eh? I don't care. It's a dirty game to sit by without a word and then expect to rope in the coin.“

„I do not understand you,“ Arneston said. „What I require is that you return that money to young Franklin, nothing more or less.“

„Oh, don't try to bluff me,“ the other exclaimed, disgusted. „You'll have to stand in, I suppose, but it's hard lines. How much do you want?“

„What I want is this, and this only,“ Arneston said firmly. „That—money—is—to—be—returned—to—young—Franklin. If it is not done by tomorrow night, I shall go to the captain. You can guess what the result of that will be.“

Hansom was bewildered.

„What's your game, then?“ he exclaimed. „I don't see what you're driving at. Do you want to win it from him yourself—to get the lot?“

Arneston rose.

„By ten o'clock tomorrow evening,“ he said, „that money is to be returned. You know the alternative.“

Hansom faced him white and angry.

„How on earth am I to return it?“ he asked. „He won't take it. How could he? You don't want me to give myself away altogether, I suppose?“

Arneston hesitated. „There is no necessity for that,“ he said. „You can lose it back to him to-morrow.“

He lifted the sheet and stepped outside. Hansom forgot to wish him good-night.

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Arneston was an early riser. The decks were barely scrubbed before he was on deck, bare-headed, his face turned to the west wind, which came sweeping across the wilderness of white-topped waves and deep grey hollows. They were rising and falling heavily, sailors were busy lashing the chairs, and little fountains of white spray leaped every moment into the fleeting sunlight. Turning near the gangway, he came face to face with Helen Van Decker.

She smiled and held out her hand. They walked side by side.

„Do you know I wanted to see you early, Mr. Arneston,“ she said. „I was wrong last night, and unjust. There was nothing which you could do. Will you forgive me?“

He bowed his head. He felt the compulsion of her eyes, but he struggled against it.

„There is nothing,“ he said quietly, „to forgive.“

She was not satisfied quite. She stole a sidelong glance at him, and was shocked at the colourless cheeks and the black lines under his eyes.

„Why, Mr. Arneston, you are ill,“ she exclaimed. „I'm so sorry. Isn't there anything we can do?“

He shook his head.

„I had rather a bad night,“ he said, „but there's nothing the matter.“

„I think I shall have to look after you to-day,“ she said, laughing. „You were so nice to me when I wasn't feeling well. Don't you think I'd make a real good nurse? Come, one more turn, and we must go down for breakfast. I want to tell you something, Mr. Arneston. Dick has been awfully good and sensible. He has

promised me faithfully not to touch a card again this voyage. It's such a relief to me."

He stopped short.

"Not—not to play again at all?" he asked.

She looked at him surprised.

"Not even to touch a card," she declared vigorously. "Don't you think it's real sensible of him?"

"I don't know," he said; "he might win back some of his losings."

She dropped his arm and looked at him in honest amazement.

"Well, I am surprised to hear you talk like that, Mr. Arneston. Please don't put any such idea into his head. Now, we've got to amuse him all day. Shall we get up a shuffle-board tournament or play cricket?"

They drifted into general conversation, and presently went down to breakfast. Franklin came disconsolately up to them afterwards and they played shuffleboard with much energy until nearly luncheon time. Hansom, who had come out of the smoking-room as though to watch, touched Arneston on the shoulder.

"I'm not going to wait about all day," he said, shortly. "When are you going to bring the young cub in?"

"Directly," Arneston answered. "Go back and wait."

Hansom moved sullenly off. A few minutes later Arneston was alone with the boy.

"Miss Van Decker tells me that you have sworn off poker," he remarked.

The boy nodded.

"I promised I wouldn't play again this trip."

Arneston smiled.

"I don't know much about it," he said; "but that seems rather a pity to me. Winnings and losings, in my experience, generally level themselves up. It's a mistake to leave off just because you've been hit."

"That's exactly what I tell Helen," Franklin exclaimed, eagerly. "I feel an awful ass to have made such a promise. However, I've made it, and there's an end of it, I suppose. She won't let me off."

Arneston said nothing at the moment. They stood for a while watching a passing steamer. Then he touched the boy on the shoulder.

"Let us go in the smoking-room and have a drink," he said. "I won the pool yesterday, and I must stand those fellows some champagne."

The boy followed him with alacrity.

At luncheon the two seats on either side of Helen Van Decker remained empty. Helen, who was somewhat of an impatient young woman, waited for a quarter of an hour, and then went up on deck. Neither Franklin nor Arneston was visible. She was just giving up the search when a familiar voice from the smoking room brought her to a sudden standstill. The door was closed, but, after a moment's hesitation, she opened it. She stood upon the threshold amazed, speechless with disgust and anger; for, not only was the boy seated there with cards in his hand, a pile of chips before him, but his opposite neighbour was John Arneston.

"Dick!" she exclaimed. "Mr. Arneston!"

Arneston rose respectfully, and turned a pale, sorrowful face towards her, but he did not say a word. The boy frowned.

"Don't bother now, please, Helen," he said. "I shall not be down to luncheon."

She looked at Arneston once again, and his eyes fell before the withering contempt of her gaze. Then she came boldly into the room, and laid her hand lightly upon the boy's shoulder.

„Your promise, Dick,“ she said softly.

„Well, I've broken it,“ he answered, shortly. „It was a silly promise to make. The luck has changed to-day. Do, please, go away, Helen. Ladies are not allowed in here.“

She passed out with never a glance at Arneston, who held back the open door for her. The game went on in silence.

At four o'clock Arneston leant back in his chair. „You're a bit in, aren't you, Franklin?“ he asked.

The boy nodded. „Yes, I'm about straight,“ he answered, triumphantly.

Arneston took the cards and tore them deliberately in halves.

„That's enough,“ he said. „Let's get out of this cursed atmosphere and have a blow on deck.“

The boy grumbled.

„My luck has just turned,“ he said. „Let's go on a bit.“

But Arneston's words seemed to rule the little party, and they broke up. With flushed cheeks and bright eyes, the boy went off to find Helen Van Decker.

Every afternoon during the voyage Helen had given them tea in a quiet corner. Walking restlessly up and down, Arneston came upon them both. Helen's hand was upon the teapot. Her eyes met his without a quiver of recognition. The boy looked ill at ease, but remained speechless; so Arneston passed on imperturbable, without apparent consciousness of their near presence. He sank into a distant chair, and half closed his eyes. It was not the first time in his life that he had saved another at his own expense. Only this time it hurt.

#### Illustration

Arneston was walking restlessly up and down.

The boy came up to him an hour or so later, awkward, a little shamefaced.

„I say, I'm sorry about Miss Van Decker,“ he began. „Just like a girl, you know. So beastly unreasonable. She's angry because you played cards with me after she'd told you that I'd sworn off.“

„It is of no consequence, thank you,“ Arneston said, wearily.

The boy lingered.

„Far as I'm concerned,“ he said, „I'm jolly well obliged to you. If I'd had to stump up, my uncle would never have forgiven me, for I've been in a tight corner once before, and the money I've got with me is really his. I should have been in a beastly mess if I hadn't had a run of luck this morning. Besides, I'm going to be married soon.“

Arneston half closed his eyes again.

„If you take my advice,“ he said, quietly, „you will make a resolution and keep to it. Never play cards with strangers, and never risk more than you can afford to lose.“

The boy went off laughing. Arneston ordered his dinner to be brought on deck. It was a needless precaution, for next time he entered the saloon he found that his two neighbours had removed to another table.



Meanwhile, Mr. Mortimer Hansom nursed his wrongs until the desire for revenge became insupportable. He was never out of the smoking-room, and he knew nothing of the altered position of affairs. He remembered having seen Arneston and Miss Van Decker together a good deal, and decided to make their friendship his opportunity. He accosted her, hat in hand, on the last afternoon.

„Might I have a word with you, Miss Van Decker?“

She looked at him, surprised but acquiescent.

„It's about Mr. Arneston. It isn't my business, I know, but I feel I'd like to tell you something.“

She nodded.

„Well?“

„He seems to be posing here as a sort of gentleman-at-ease. He ain't. He's a professional gambler, and the cleverest that ever set foot in America. We're all babies to him.“

She caught at the railing, and was suddenly white. Hansom chuckled softly to himself.

„So you're—a professional gambler, too, are you?“ she remarked.

He laughed shortly.

„Well, I gave myself away a bit, I'll allow,“ he said. „Anyhow, here's facts. I won money from a young cub on board here, and Arneston got to know. He came to my room one night, and actually held a revolver to my head while he made me promise to give up the lot.“

„And did you?“ she asked.

„I agreed to let the kid win it back,“ he answered. „There wasn't any other way of returning it. He wouldn't share with me like a white man—wanted the lot, and I expect he's got it by now. You'll forgive the liberty I've taken, young lady, but it don't seem right not to tell you.“

„Forgive you? Rather!“ she exclaimed, flashing a radiant smile upon him. „I'm ever so much obliged to you.“

Arneston came along the deck, his face, as usual, turned seawards, his hands behind him. She left Hansom abruptly, and walked up to him. Hansom chuckled.

„Mr. Arneston,“ she cried, holding out both her hands, „I've been such an idiot. Can you forgive me?“

A red flush stained his cheeks. He looked at her eagerly.

„You don't know everything,“ he said.

„I know all I want to know now, or at any time—there,“ she answered frankly. „I was foolish about Dick. But, you see, he's half engaged to my youngest sister, and they're very fond of one another.“

„Not—not to you?“ he stammered.

She looked at him and blushed delightfully.

„You silly man!“ she murmured, and thrust her arm through his.

Mr. Mortimer Hansom watched them stroll off, amazed. Then he pitched his cigar overboard in disgust.

„It strikes me,“ he muttered, on his way back to the smoking-room, „that I've made a fool's mess of it.“

