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Honor of Thieves

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Honor of Thieves

A Novel



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PREFACE.

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“It seems to me,” said a philosopher once, “that there are no entirely good men in the world, and none completely bad. Single out your best man, and you will find that he lacks perfection in some part of him; and examine your worst, and you will see that he has at least one redeeming quality.”

In this book the men mostly verge towards bad: but some are better than others. Because they are merely human, they act according to their lights. You may meet others like them any day if you go out and about, and most of them give extremely good dinners. Till they are found out, you consider them amusing: afterwards, being better than they, you instantly set them down as most pernicious scoundrels, and shake hands with yourself, and write to your tailor to order more noticeable phylacteries on the next new suit. This is called “keeping up a healthy moral tone,” and does a great deal of good in the world.

SCALLOWAY,
SHETLAND ISLANDS,
1895.

HONOR OF THIEVES.

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CHAPTER I.

THE ANTECEDENTS OF PATRICK ONSLOW.

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Miss Rivers picked out the name of Patrick Onslow in the society paper which lay upon her knee, and drew idle circles round it with a pink ball-pencil. Fairfax tugged at his mustache, and returned to the subject which they had been discussing.

“The fellow has,” said Fairfax, “a genial insolence of manner which seems rather taking with some people. But I confess I shouldn’t have thought him the man you would have cared to see twice, Amy.”

“You’re prejudiced, obviously; and I’ve a good mind to say maliciously prejudiced. I don’t know how much you saw of him, because I can’t be invited to a Wanderers’ Club dinner; you don’t know how much I saw of him, because you missed some distant train and didn’t come here to the ball last night. But I’ll tell you: I saw all I could. He’s perfectly and entirely charming. He’s been everywhere, done everything, and he isn’t a bit *blasé*.”

“I heard,” said Fairfax, “that Mrs. Shelf was lionizing Onslow round last night as the great traveler. Does he belong to the advertising variety of globe-trotter? Did he sit in a side room and hold a small audience spellbound with a selection from his adventures?”

Miss Rivers shrugged her shoulders. “Not he. But you know what Mrs. Shelf is when she gets any show person at one of her functions. The poor man had to stand it for a while, because she held on to him as though he might have

been her fan. But he escaped as soon as he decently could by saying he wanted to dance. He asked me to give him the fourth waltz. I did it out of sheer pity, because I saw Mrs. Shelf's thumbscrews were making him writhe."

"Shows how little a man knows about the girl he's engaged to. Now, I had always imagined that, having the pick of the men, you invariably wrote down the best dancers, and never saddled yourself with a stranger who was a very possible duffer."

Amy Rivers laughed. "That's generalizing. But it was different last night, because, so to speak, I'm a member of the household here. A ward counts as a sort of niece, doesn't she? Or between that and an adopted daughter? But, anyway, it was out of sheer pity for Mr. Onslow in the first instance, and it was with distinct qualms that I let him take me down to dance. I quite intended, after half a round, to say the room was too crowded, and go and sit somewhere. That is to say, I made up my mind to do this when he asked me. However, when I dropped my fingers on his arm to go down-stairs, I had my doubts. You know after two seasons one gets instinctively to know by the first touch how a man will dance. And when he put his arm around me, and we moved to the music, I felt like going on forever. Waltzing is hard just now, because it's in a transition state between two styles; but his dancing was something to dream about. We started off with the newest quick waltz. Hamilton, it was just lovely! He was so perfect that just for experiment I altered my step—by degrees, you know. Automatically, and without anything being seen, he changed too; and we were dancing the old slow glide before

I knew. And his steering was perfect. In that whirling, teeming, tangled mob he never bumped me once. I gave him two more waltzes, and cut another couple in his favor.”

“Which makes five in all,” said Fairfax, rather stiffly.

Amy Rivers took his hand and patted it. “Don’t be cross, dear. You know how I love a good dance, and one doesn’t meet a partner like Mr. Onslow every day. I suppose he’s done his waltzing in Vienna and Paris, and Yorkshire, and New Orleans, as well as here in London; and by averaging them all up he can’t help but be good.”

“Is it from going to those places that Mrs. Shelf called him the Great Traveler?”

“Of course not! Hamilton, how stupid you are about him! Why, he’s rummaged about in every back corner of the world, so they say.”

“So they say, yes! Teheran to Timbuctoo. But what does he say himself about his wanderings beyond the tram-lines? Shuffles mostly, doesn’t he? And who’s met him anywhere? Not a soul will come forward to speak. I tell you, Amy, there’s something uncanny about this Patrick Onslow. He turns up here periodically in London after some vague exploring trip to a place that isn’t mapped, and you can never pin him to tell exactly where he’s been. He comes with money, spends it *en prince*, and then goes off again, nominally perhaps to the Gobi Desert, and returns with another cargo.”

“How romantic!” said Miss Rivers.

“Yes, isn’t it?” said her *fiancé* drily. “If he’d lived a century earlier, one would have said he’d got a sound business connection as a pirate somewhere West Indies way.

As this year is eighteen ninety-three, and that explanation's barred, one simply has to accept him as an uncomfortable mystery."

"Hamilton, how absurd you are! Wherever did all this rigmarole come from?"

"From the club, and London gossiping places generally. I suppose we ought to be indebted to Onslow for providing us with something to talk about."

"But tell me; if his antecedents are so queer, how is it he goes about so much here? He's apparently asked everywhere—at least, so Mrs. Shelf says—and he knows everybody who's worth knowing."

Fairfax laughed. "Why does London society take up with an ex-bushranger from Australia, or a glorified advertising cowboy from the wild, wild West? Simply because London society is extremely parochial, and gets desperately bored with its own little self undiluted. Now, Onslow has undoubtedly wandered about outside the parish; and occasionally he lets drop hints which make one think he's seen some queerish ups and downs in places where polite society doesn't go; and, in fact, he preserves a good-humored reticence about most of his doings. This makes people thoughtful and speculative. If a Chinese extradition warrant was to turn up to-morrow to arrest him for sticking up a three-button mandarin beyond the Great Wall, nobody would be a bit surprised; or if he were to tell the City this afternoon that he'd a concession for a silver mine in an unexplored part of Venezuela which he wished to dispose of at reasonable rates, we'd take it with pleased equanimity.

Now, you know, Amy, there's a fearful joy in entertaining a man of that stamp."

"Especially when he's as fascinating as Mr. Onslow can be when he chooses. And such a waltzer! But you speak as if he was a savage from some back settlement, come into decent society for the first time. He isn't that in the least. He's a gentleman distinctly."

"My dear Amy, I never meant to suggest that he was not. There's no particular secret about his life. He comes of a good west-county family; was a Harrow boy, and played in their eleven; went through Cambridge; and afterwards found a berth in the Diplomatic Service. Then, by way of variety, he got engaged to be married to a girl who jilted him; on the strength of which he began to run wild. He started on six months' leave for a trip into Tibet, but he stayed beyond the limits of the postal system for two years and a half, and when he got back to England the Diplomatic Corps found that they could get on very well without him. So he continued his rambles. He doesn't seem able to settle down."

"That's because he can't forget the girl who threw him over," exclaimed Miss Rivers. "How awfully romantic! I wonder who she was? She couldn't have been anybody nice, or she wouldn't have done it, because he's a regular dear. And fancy his remembering her all this time! I just love him for it."

"Some fellows," remarked Fairfax judiciously, "would get jealous if the girl they were going to marry talked about another man this way."

Miss Rivers reassured him first practically, and then in words. “You goose!” said she; “if I cared for him in that way, don’t you see, I shouldn’t have spoken about him to you at all.”

Fairfax did not answer directly. He kissed her thoughtfully, and after a while he said: “I’m not superstitious, dear, as a general thing. Work in a shipping office tends to make one painfully matter of fact. But for all that, I wish this fellow Onslow would either marry or get crumpled up in a cab accident, or have himself safely fastened down out of harm’s way somewhere. I’ve got a foreboding, Amy, that he’s going to do a bad turn either to you or to me—which means both of us. I know it’s absurd, but I can’t get rid of it.”

“How creepy!” said Amy Rivers. “But what nonsense, Hamilton!”

CHAPTER II

A FORTUNE FOR THE PAIR OF US.

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Mr. Theodore Shelf's carriage and pair drew up at the smartest house in Park Lane, and Mr. Theodore Shelf went up the steps and entered the door which a man servant opened for him. He was a stout, middle-aged man, with a clean-shaven face, and a short frock-coat of black broadcloth. He allowed himself to be eased of his hat and umbrella, and then passed through the gorgeous hall to the rosewood billiard-room at the back. There he found his guest, Mr. Patrick Onslow, in shirt-sleeves, practising fancy shots by himself.

"What, alone, Mr. Onslow?"

"Why, yes. I did have a hundred up with your niece earlier, but some one came for her."

"Niece? Oh, Amy, you mean—Miss Rivers? Ah, my dear sir! from the love we have for her in this household, and the way we treat her, you naturally fancy she is a blood relation. It is a graceful compliment for you to pay, Mr. Onslow; but it is my duty to correct you. Miss Rivers is legally only my ward."

"Ward? Oh, see that? Red hard against the cushion, and white bang over the bottom pocket. Neat cannon, wasn't it, considering the long time since I've handled a cue?"

"The only child of my late partner. You know, the firm still stands as Marmaduke Rivers and Shelf. We call ourselves on the billheads, 'Agents to the Oceanic Steam Transport Co.,'

though, of course, we really own the whole line. You see our flag, sir, in every sea.”

“I know. Nagasaki to Buenos Ayres; gin and gunpowder on the West Coast; coals and cotton at New Orleans.”

“And we do not send our steamers for the business of trade alone, Mr. Onslow. We pick our captains and officers with an eye to a holier purpose. We trust that they spread a Christian influence in all their ports of call,” observed Mr. Shelf unctuously.

“Yes; I saw them at work once at Axim, on a tramp steamer you sent down there. They were taking Krooboys on board. The skipper received them on one of the bridge-deck ladders with a knuckleduster, and kicked ’em along. The chief stood by with a monkey-wrench and tickled them with that as they passed down to the lower deck aft. They mentioned at the time that this process had a fine Christianizing influence; prevented the boys from being uppish; showed ’em what the white man could do when he liked; taught ’em humility, in fact. I say, there’s a pull towards this bottom pocket. People have been sitting on the table.”

“Mr. Onslow—Mr. Onslow, you are making a very serious accusation against one of my ship’s companies.”

“Accusations? I? Never a bit of it. The fellows only acted according to their lights. That’s the only way sailormen know of getting Krooboys to work; and it was a case of squeezing the work out of them or having the natural sack from you. And so, as they didn’t know another method, they fell back on knuckleduster and monkey-wrench. I’ll play you fifty up.”

Mr. Shelf put up a large white hand. "No; I don't play billiards myself. So many young men have been ruined by the pursuit, that I refrain from it by way of setting an example. But my friends who visit here are not so scrupulous, and I have the table for them."

"Beautiful!" said Onslow. He might have been referring to his own play, or to Mr. Shelf's improving sentiment.

"You see, Mr. Onslow, from my position, so many people look up to me that it is nothing short of my bounden duty to deprive myself of certain things, and be, so far as possible, a humble model for them to form themselves by. Long before a constituency sent me to Parliament, I devoted my best energies to Christianizing the lower classes, and I hope not without success. If appreciation is any criterion, I may say that I was elected president of no less than twelve improvement societies. It took me much time and thought to attend to them. Yet I wish I could have given more."

"Yes—that pocket does pull; there's a regular tram-line towards it. H'm, mighty good work of yours. But doesn't it sour on you sometimes? Don't you want a day off occasionally? A run down to Monte Carlo, for instance?"

"Monte Carlo! You horrify me, Mr. Onslow. You are my guest, and I cannot speak strongly; but this is a very poor jest of yours."

"Well, perhaps you know best about that place. Monte Carlo is risky at the best of times for some folks, because you're bound to meet crowds of people you know; and if they aren't on the razzle-dazzle too, and pinned to decent silence through their own iniquities, some of them are apt to split when they get home again. But I don't know why you

should be horrified, seeing that we are *entre quatre yeux* here, and not on one of your pious example platforms. You know you've been in a far hotter shop than Monte Carlo.— See me pot that red? Ah, *rouge perd*—Barcelona, to wit. If you remember, you were staying at the Cuatro Naciones, and at nights you used to cross the Rhambla, and——”

“Mr. Onslow, how did you know all this?”

“Do you remember objecting to take a sheaf of obvious spurious notes, and there was a row, and somebody whipped out a knife, and somebody else floored the knifeman with a chair?”

“Yes—no.”

“After which you very sensibly bolted. Well, I had only just that moment come in, but I saw you were a fellow-islander, and that's why I handled the chair. You don't remember me, and I didn't know your name, but I recognized you the moment your wife introduced us, because I never forget a face.”

“You're mistaken. I never was in such a place in my life, sir. Think of the position I occupy. Why, the thing's absurd!”

“Now, my good sir, why waste lies? I'm not going to show you up. No fear. Why should I? It would probably ruin you, and I should stand self-convicted of being in the lowest and most desperate gambling hell in Europe, without being made a sixpence richer by the transaction. Only you didn't know me, and you thought I didn't know you; and I thought it would be handier if we were open about one another's little ways at once before we went any further. Who knows but what we might be partners in some profitable business together?” Onslow put his cue down and faced his host, with

hands deep in his trousers pockets. "It's worth thinking about," he observed.

Mr. Theodore Shelf stood before the fireplace and drew a handkerchief across his forehead with trembling fingers. "What business do you refer to?" he asked at length.

"None whatever. I'm not a business man. I make discoveries and don't know how to use them. You are a business man and may be able to see where the money profit comes in. If you can, why then we'll share the plunder. If you can't, we're neither of us worse off than before."

"But this is vague. What sort of discoveries? Have you found a mine?"

"No, sir; in the present instance a channel!"

"A channel?—I don't understand you."

"A deep-water channel leading in to a certain coast, where everybody else supposes there is nothing but shallow water. The Government charts put down the place as partly unsurveyed, but all impossible for navigation. The upgrowth of coral, they say, is turning part of the sea into dry land. In a large measure this is true; but at one point—which I have discovered—a river comes down from the interior, and the scour of this river has cut a deep narrow channel out through the reefs to the deep sea water beyond."

"Well," Shelf broke in, "I see no value in that."

"Wait a minute! In confidence I'll tell you it is on the West Coast of Florida—on the Mexican Gulf coast. The interior of southern Florida is called the Everglades. It's partly lake, partly swamp; built up of mangroves, saw-grass, cypress trees, and water; tenanted by snakes, alligators, wild beasts, and a few Seminole Indians. Only one expedition of

whites has been across it—or rather only one expedition known to history. But I've been there, right into the heart of the Everglades; in fact, I've just come from there; and I netted £1000 out of the trip."

"How?" asked Shelf, eagerly.

"Never mind exactly how. That's partly another man's business. Shall we say the other man gave me a commission there, and I carried it out, and got duly paid? Anyway, that's sufficient explanation. But now about this channel I've found. If one gives it to the chart people, they'll simply say, 'Thank you,' and publish your name in one number of an official magazine which nobody reads. I don't long for fame of that kind. I've the sordid taste to much prefer gold."

"I think I understand you," said Shelf. "Give me a minute to think it out."

"A week if you like," said the other; and, picking up his cue, again returned to the billiard-table.

The balls clicked lazily, and the rosewood clock marked off the seconds with firmness and precision. Shelf lay back in his chair, his finger-tips together beneath the square chin, his eyes watching the shadows which the lamps cast on the frescoed ceiling. He looked entirely placid. No one would have guessed the simmer of thoughts which were popping and bubbling in his brain. A stream of projects came before him, flashed into detail, and were dismissed as impracticable. It was the great trait of this man's genius that he could think with the speed of a hurricane, and clear his head of an unprofitable idea a moment after it was born.

Twenty schemes occurred to him, all to be dismissed: and then came the twenty-first; and that stayed. He ran a mental finger through all its leading details: he conned over a thousand minutiae. It was the thing to suit his purpose.

A bare minute had passed, but he needed no more time for his deliberations. The scheme seemed perfect to him, without flaw, without chance of improvement. The hugeness of it thrilled him like a draught of spirit. He was betrayed away from his unctuous calm; his hands dropped on to the arms of the chair.

With a heavy start he clambered to his feet, strode forward, and seized Onslow by the arm. "If your channel and Everglades will answer a purpose I want, there's half a million of English sovereigns to be made out of it."

Onslow turned and faced him with a long, thin-drawn whistle. "£500,000! Phew!"

"Hush! there's somebody coming. But it's to be had if you're not afraid of a little risk."

"I fear nothing on this earth," said Onslow, "when it's to my interest not to fear. Moreover, though I'm not a saint, my standard of morality is probably a shade higher than yours. I don't mind doing some sorts of dirty things; but there are shades in dirtiness, and at some tints I draw the line. It's dangerous to—er—have the tips of these cues glued on so badly. They fly off and hit people."

The billiard-room door had opened, and Amy Rivers had come in, with Fairfax at her heels. Hence Onslow's digression. The matter had not been put in so many words; but he felt sure that the commission of a great robbery had been proposed to him, and he had more than half a mind to

drive his knuckles into Theodore Shelf's lying, hypocritical face on the spot.

CHAPTER III.

THE REQUIREMENTS OF MRS. SHELF.

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Mr. Theodore Shelf wanted to drag Onslow off there and then to his own business-room, on the first floor, to discuss further this great project which he had in his head; but Onslow thought fit to remain where he was. Mr. Shelf nodded significantly towards the new-comers, as much as to hint that a third person with them would be distinctly an inconvenient third. Onslow turned to them, cue in hand, and proposed a game of snooker.

“That’s precisely what we came up for,” said Amy Rivers promptly. “Hamilton, get out the balls. Mr. Onslow, will you put the billiard-balls away, so that they don’t get mixed?”

They played and talked merrily. Their conversation turned on the wretched show at the recent Academy, which they agreed was a disgrace to a civilized country; and Onslow made himself interesting over the art of painting in Paris—mural, facial, and on canvas. When he chose he could be very interesting, this man London had nicknamed “The Great Traveler”; and he generally chose, not being ill-natured.

Mr. Theodore Shelf left the billiard-room with a feeling beneath his waistcoat much akin to sea-sickness. First of all, that plain-spoken Patrick Onslow had not over politely hinted that he was a canting hypocrite, and had showed cause for arriving at the conclusion. This was true, but that didn’t make it any the more digestive. And secondly, he himself, in a moment of excitement, had let drop to this

same pernicious Onslow (who after all was a comparative stranger) a proposal to make the sum of £500,000 at one *coup*. True, he had not mentioned the means; but Onslow had at once concluded it was to be gained by robbery, and he (Theodore Shelf) had not denied the impeachment.

Consequently Mr. Shelf went direct to his own room, locked the door, and fortified his nerves with a liberal allowance of brandy. Then he munched a coffee-bean in deference to the blue ribbon on his coat-lapel, replaced the cognac bottle in the inner drawer of his safe, and sat down to think.

If only he understood Onslow, and, better still, knew whether he might trust him, there was a fortune to be had. Yes, a fortune! And it was wanted badly. The great firm of Marmaduke Rivers and Shelf, which called itself "Agents to the Oceanic Steam Transport Co.," but which really ran the line of steamers which traded under that flag, might look prosperous to the outer eye, and might still rear its head haughtily amongst the first shipping firms of London port. But the man who bragged aloud that he owned it all, from offices to engine-oil, knew otherwise. He had mortgages out in every direction, mortgages so cunningly hidden that only he himself was aware of their vast total. He knew that the firm was rotten—lock, stock, and barrel. He knew that through any one of twenty channels a breakup might come any day; and, following on the heels of that, a smash, which would be none the pleasanter because, from its size and devastating effects, it would live down into history.

He, Theodore Shelf, would assuredly not be in England to face it. Since his commercial barometer had reached

“stormy,” and still showed signs of steady descent, he had been transmitting carefully modulated doles to certain South American banks, and had even gone so far as to purchase (under a *nom d’escroc*) a picturesquely situated estancia on the upper waters of the Rio Paraguay.

There, in case the tempest of bankruptcy broke, the extradition treaties would cease from troubling, and the weary swindler would be at well-fed rest.

But Mr. Theodore Shelf had no lust for this tropical retirement. He liked the powers of his present pinnacle in the City. And that howl of execration from every class of society which would make up his pæan of defeat was an opera that he very naturally shrank from sitting through.

As he thought of these things, he hugged closer to him the wire-haired fox-terrier which sat upon his lap.

“George, old friend,” said Mr. Shelf, “if things do go wrong, I believe you are the only thing living in England which won’t turn against me.”

George slid out a red tongue and licked the angle of Mr. Shelf’s square chin. Then he retired within himself again, and looked sulky. The door had opened, and Mrs. Shelf stood on the mat. There was a profound mutual dislike between George and Mrs. Theodore Shelf.

“You alone, Theodore? I thought Mr. Onslow was here. However, so much the better. I have wanted to speak with you all the morning. Do turn that nasty dog away!”

George was not evicted, and Mr. Shelf inquired curtly what his wife was pleased to want. She seldom invaded this business-room of his, and, when she did, it was for a purpose which he was beginning to abhor. She came to the