

BLACKSHEEP!

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INTRODUCTION

Archibald Bennett, wealthy bachelor, travels constantly in the interest of his health. He meets Isabel Perry, who recommends a life of crime, adventure, romance and excitement as a cure for his nerves. Archie goes to Bailey Harbor to investigate a summer house for his sister. A heavy storm forces him to spend the night there. During the night he is awakened by footsteps, and in an encounter with the intruder, who sees Archie's figure reflected in the mirror and shoots. Archie fires in return, wounding the intruder, who makes his escape. Archie plans flight to evade publicity. He starts cross-country afoot in the night. At dawn he is stopped on a lonely country road by "The Governor," master-mind criminal who mistakes him for a fellow criminal. Archie, fleeing, is afraid to tell the truth—falls in with "The Governor," is whisked across country in a stolen car. Sees story in newspaper of killing at Bailey Harbor and, frightened, he decides to say nothing but stick with his strange friend and await developments. At Cornford, N. H., Archie comes upon Isabel Perry at the hotel desk but she refuses to recognize him. The Governor, by a clever plan, switches stolen money for good money. Archie used as decoy—making love to niece of agent sent to meet eccentric Congdon here next day. Archie and the Governor drive away without creating suspicion and speed across state to deliver the \$60,000 to train-robbler Leary at Walker's farm, where Archie gets new insight into workings of the crime world. At the first opportunity Walker's daughter appeals to Archie to help her elope with a young farmhand. He decides to assist, cutting away from the Governor and taking the couple across state in a wild night ride. Seeing Sally onto the train—he is rewarded with a fond farewell kiss—and returns to find Isabel Perry had witnessed the whole scene. Now read on.

CHAPTER FOUR

"You were on that train!" he exclaimed;—the most fatiguing of questions and the poorest possible opening for a conversation.

"I thought I had made it sufficiently plain at Portsmouth that I resent your following me! The meeting there might have been by accident, but seeing you here I am convinced—I am convinced that you are spying upon me!"

"But, Miss Perry—" she interrupted, "that knowing or suspecting what I am trying to do you would show me some consideration!"

"But I can explain; really I can explain if you will give me a moment!"

"I understand perfectly that but for me you shouldn't be loitering here! And you practically acknowledged at Portsmouth that you were interesting yourself in the affairs of the Congdons!"

"We are playing at cross purposes quite unnecessarily," protested Archie. "Why not confess just what your interest is in that family? I told you quite plainly at Portsmouth that I had reason to believe I had shot Putney Congdon at Bailey Harbor! But for the courage you put in my heart I should never have done that!"

"If you did that you have ruined everything! A dastardly act for which I hope you will pay the full penalty of the law!"

This was wholly unreasonable and quite beside himself he shook his finger in her face.

"You seem to forget that you advised me to flout the law; to do just the things I have been doing, roving the world, shooting and plundering!"

"Everything has gone wrong," she said, "and you may have all the satisfaction you can get out of your interference, your intrusion upon affairs of the greatest delicacy, in which my assistance and my honor are pledged. That car standing yonder belongs to me and before I leave I want you to walk away from here as rapidly as possible and not turn your head!"

He did not even confirm her statement as to the proximity of the car, but crossed the platform with the crestfallen air of a child in disgrace.

He knew nothing save that he was enormously tired and he went to the hotel and crawled wearily into bed.

He was sitting on the edge of the bed when a gently insinuating knock caused him to start.

"Come!" The door opened slowly, wide enough to permit a man's head to be thrust in. A face wearing an amused smile, a familiar face but the last he expected to see, met his gaze. "What?"

The Governor widened the opening in the door and squeezed through. "My dear Archie!" he exclaimed as he locked the door, "how infinitely relieved I am! I was afraid some harm had befallen you, but to find you here safe and sound fills my heart with gratitude."

He flung down his cap and linen duster, chose a chair by the window and seated himself with a little sigh. "I hope," Archie ventured timidly, "that you came alone?"

"Oh, yes; I'm alone! Trust me for that; but my friend Walker was not easily shaken. And his provocation! O my boy, his provocation to justifiable homicide and all that sort of things!"

"Well, I only did what I thought was right," Archie declared doggedly. "I wasn't weighing the consequences."

"Splendid, my dear Archie, to see how beautifully you rose to the situation—a situation that spoke powerfully to your generous heart! If there has been any error it is mine. I should have known from the way you played up to the Seebrook girl that you were far too susceptible to be trusted with women. The error is mine; not yours, Archie; I don't blame you a particle. Sally is a winsome lass; she has a way with her, that girl!"

"If you don't mind," said Archie with dignity, "we'll stop talking nonsense. What happened?"

"Just a little curious, are you, as to what followed your amazing breach of hospitality? Ran away with a pretty girl, assisted in marrying her to an undesirable son-in-law, and now you want to know how the old folks take it! Oh, Archie, for sheer innocence you are a wonder!"

"Walker had no right to force a girl like Sally to marry an old curmudgeon she hated. I never hesitated as to the course I should take after she told me her story. The marriage was in proper form and I haven't a single regret!"

"What you did, Archie," the Governor resumed paternally, "was to marry Sally, the incomparable, Sally the divine, to Pete Barney, the diamond thief."

"You mean—you mean I married the girl to a crook?" gasped Archie. "One of the smoothest in the game! And Sally knew he was a crook! I suppose it was the diamonds that fetched her. If you'd looked at his hands you would have noticed that he hadn't the paws of an honest Green Mountain farmer. Pick-pocket originally and marvelously deft; but precious stones are his true metier. The trifling little necklace he had on

his person when he struck Walker's is worth a cool hundred thousand. He'll have to break it up and sell 'em in the usual way and it will take time."

Archie sank upon the bed; he had done a horrible thing, hardly second to murder, and his penitence weighed heavily upon him.

"It doesn't seem possible that the girl would have deceived me!"

"We never know when they are going to deceive us, Archie! Sally hated the farm and was crazy to escape. She lifted a couple of hundred dollars the old man kept under a plank in the parlor floor—an emergency fund in case he ever had to run for it. A nasty trick, I call it; most unfilial on Sally's part. The Walkers are crushed by her conduct. And I vouched for you at the Walkers; it's almost as bad as though I had betrayed them myself. You will not, of course, make the serious error of knocking at the Walker door again! That would be rubbing it in."

"I don't want you to think me ungrateful," Archie stammered. "The girl made a fool of me; I see it all now!"

"She made a fool of you but you in turn made a fool of me! And while I'm not caviling, you will pardon me, son, if I suggest that hereafter you play square with me. I don't mean to curb your personal enterprise, or set any limit on your little affairs of the heart. But let's have no more foolishness."

"I haven't a thing to say for myself!" blurted Archie, who was at the point of tears. "I was weak, miserably weak. I had no idea that any one could lie as that girl did. And it's not fair for me to stay on with you. I can't ask you to trust me again. We'd better part company right here!"

"How completely you misjudge me, Archie! There's a charm in you begotten of your very innocence and helplessness, and I should be very unhappy if we parted now. We've shared some danger together and in spite of your weaknesses I'm fond of you. And if I left you to your own devices something quite disastrous might happen to you."

The Governor was unconcernedly sketching one of the diagrams with which he seemed to visualize his plans. Archie was startled now to hear his companion muttering to himself:

"Aries, the Lamb, the Fishes! For a time I stumbled and walked in darkness but the leading light is clearer now. The moving finger writes—writes!"

Archie had caught one day a

glimpse of several of the sodical signs drawn on the margin of a newspaper where the Governor had neglected to erase them; but he was astounded to find that he was in the company of a man who took counsel of the stars.

"Ne sous une mauvaise étoile! You catch the sense admirably. When you see me scribbling I am calculating the potency of the dark fate that overhangs me and trying to estimate when if ever the cloud will pass. Don't trouble your head with those fancies; leave them to me. Hope is buoyed in me by the fact that never yet have my figures erred."

"To return to practical affairs, we shall abandon Collins' machine and I'll wire him where to pick it up. Then we'll entrain at our leisure."

"If you don't mind my asking, I'd like to know where we're bound for?"

"New York, my dear boy; but you needn't be alarmed. It will be hot there and we'll only pause for a day or so. We both need to freshen up our wardrobe a bit."

Archie shook his head stubbornly. "I haven't told you this, but I'm supposed to be in the Canadian Rockies. It would be a risky business for me to show up in town!"

"You're a frightful egotist, Archie! This is a large world and man's memory is short. If you see any old friends I beg of you do not attempt to dodge them; shake one and all heartily by the hand. We'll pretend that our black wool is as white as the drifted snow, and no one will run after us shouting, 'Blacksheep, black-sheep!'"

At the station gates a man in gray livery stepped up and touched his cap to the Governor.

"Ah, Tom; glad to see you again!"

"Thank you, sir; is this all the luggage?"

"That's all, Tom. Drive directly home, please."

"We may wander to our hearts' content, Archie, but there's no place like home, particularly when it's little old New York," remarked the Governor, sinking back contentedly.

The car crossed to the Avenue and bore north.

The Governor had not warned him to avoid marking the route, which was as familiar to Archie as the palm of his hand, but somewhere in the Seventies he did for a moment lose track of the streets, and the car swinging east, stopped midway of a block of handsome residences. There was still the chance that this was all by-play, a trick for concealing their arrival in town; but the footman was already ringing the bell of a house whose facade was the most distinguished in sight. The door was opened by a man servant, whose face expressed pleasure as the Governor passed him with all the airs of incontestable proprietorship.

"I think we may as well go at once to our rooms," he said. "You understand, Baring, that we dine at seven-thirty—places for three?"

"Very good, sir: I received your telegram."

On the third floor, Archie surveyed approvingly a lounging room, half library and half office.

He tottered toward a stand on which decanters, syphons, and a silver bowl of ice had been placed. He helped himself generously to Scotch; the Governor contented himself with a glass of mineral water—he never took anything else, he explained.

"Odd, but I've never used the stuff at all. Bless you, no fanatical notions on the subject. And now, my dear Archie—he closed the door and turned on the fan—"you are my guest, in every sense my guest. It may have occurred to you that I may be an interloper here, but such is not the case. I own this house and the ground it stands on and everything in it. You are, of course, not a prisoner; not in any sense, and there's a telephone in your room by which you can talk to all the world quite freely, —no restrictions whatsoever."

"My name is not Saulsbury, of course, but something quite different. The servants in this house do not know my true name. They might, of course, work it out, for I pay taxes here, and my family history is spread in the public records, but the people you see about here are trained to curb their curiosity; I trust them just as I trust you. They are all from under the crust,—the man who met us at the station is a daring house-breaker; the chauffeur a second-story man; the butler is a hotel thief. Down to the scullery maid, who was a clever shoplifter, all the servants are crooks I've picked up and installed here until they can do what Leary's doing, invest their ill-gotten gains in some legitimate business. Baring has enough rewards hanging over him to make any one rich who can telephone his whereabouts to police headquarters in any town in America. As all branches of the profession are represented here by retainers repay my hospitality by keeping me in touch with their comrades everywhere."

"I suppose, I suppose," Archie timidly ventured, "you've told them about me?"

"Not a word! You will act exactly as though you were a visitor in the house of an old friend. And now I must go through this mail—I've got a chap who collects my stuff from some of the unofficial post-offices upstate. The first room to the right is yours."

"You've got to admit the service in this house is excellent. If you don't mind we'll dress for dinner," remarked the Governor lounging in the doorway. "I forgot to say that there's a lady dining with us—"

"A lady!" demanded Archie with a frown.

The Governor crossed the room, stared at the floor for a moment, and then said from the door:

"The lady, my dear boy, is my sister."

"Julia is usually very prompt but she is motoring from Southampton and we must allow her the usual

margin," the Governor remarked when they met in the drawing-room.

The clock had struck the three-quarters when they heard the annunciator tinkle followed by the opening of the front door. The Governor left the room with a bound and Archie heard distinctly his hearty greetings and a woman's subdued replies.

"I'm sorry to be late, but we had to change a tire. No, I'll leave my wraps here."

"Won't you be more comfortable without your hat?"

"No, I'll keep it; thanks!"

The door framed for a moment a young woman who in her instant's pause on the threshold seemed like a portrait figure suddenly come to life. She was taller than the Governor and carried herself with a suggestion of aristocracy.

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