

BLACKSHEEP!

by Meredith Nicholson



CHAPTER I.

MRS. HOWARD FEATHERSTONE spent much of her time thinking up things for her brother, Archibald Bennett, to do, and as Archie was the ideal bachelor brother, he accepted her commissions in the most amiable spirit and his services were unflinchingly satisfactory.

"The agent who's been looking up a summer house for us says this is an unusual opportunity, as there are a few places to let at Bailey Harbor and this one is unexpectedly on the market. Howard's simply swamped with work—and we'd all appreciate it if you could run up there for us."

The many preoccupations of his brother-in-law, who held a seat in Congress and took his job seriously, were well known to Archie, and as Archie had nothing on earth to do, it was eminently fitting that he should assume some of Featherstone's domestic burdens. Archie had planned to leave for the Canadian Rockies two days later, but he obligingly agreed to take a look at the Bailey Harbor house that had been placed so providentially within reach of his sister.

"The owner belongs to that old New England Congdon family," Mrs. Featherstone explained; "they date from the beginning of time, and some of them are a trifle eccentric."

"If you're renting a house from that family it's just as well to look into it carefully. All right, May, I'll inspect the premises for you."

Archie was already mentally planning the details of his trip with his customary exactness. He traveled constantly in the interest of his health and knew train schedules by heart.

Archie's condition was always a grateful topic of conversation and now Mrs. Featherstone, in her most sisterly tone, broached the subject of his health.

"I haven't much faith in this idea of your going to the Rockies; you know you tried the Alps five years ago and the altitude nearly killed you."

Archie smiled wanly. "I seem doomed to sit on the sidelines and watch the game," he agreed gloomily.

To look at him no one would believe that he had a nerve in his tail frame. Once a friend carried him off to a farm where an autocratic athletic trainer rejuvenated tired business men, and Archie survived the heroic treatment and returned bronzed and hardened and feeling better than he ever had felt in his life. But after a winter spent in an office and leisure to think of himself as an invalid, he renewed his acquaintance with the waiting rooms of specialists.

"There will be a few people in for dinner tonight," remarked Mrs. Featherstone as he rose to go; "very simple, you know; and Howard just telephoned that he can't possibly come, so if you can arrange it, Archie—it will be a real help to me."

"All right, May, I was going to have dinner with Weld and Coburn, but if you really want me—"

"Oh, that's perfectly fine of you, Archie! And Isabel Perry will be here; you know she's the dearest girl, and I always thought you really did like her. Her father lost all his money before he died and she's had a position as gymnasium teacher in Miss Gordon's school. This summer she's to run a girls' camp up in Michigan and she can't help making a success of it."

When he found himself sitting beside her later at Mrs. Featherstone's table she said to him:

"I passed you on the street the other day and made frantic efforts to attract your attention but you were in a trance and failed to see my signals."

"I was taking my walk," he stammered.

"My walk!" she repeated. "You speak as though you had a monopoly on that form of exercise. I must say you didn't appear to be enjoying yourself. Your aspect was wholly funereal and your demeanor that of a man with a certain number of miles wished on him."

"Four a day," Archie confessed with an air of resignation; "two in the morning and two before dinner. By the doctor's orders," he added with the wistful smile that usually evoked sympathetic murmurs in feminine auditors.

"Oh, the doctors!" remarked the girl as though she had no great opinion of doctors in general or of Mr. Bennett's medical advisers in particular. He was used to a great deal of sympathy and he was convinced that Miss Perry was an utterly unsympathetic person.

"What would you call a good walk?" he asked a little tartly.

"Oh, ten, twenty, thirty! I've done fifteen and gone to a dance at the end of the tramp."

"But you haven't my handicap," he protested defensively. "You can't be very gay about walking when you're warned that excessive fatigue may have disastrous results!"

She was not wholly without feeling for her face grew grave for a moment and she met his eyes searchingly, with something of the professional scrutiny to which he had long been accustomed.

"Eyes clear, color very good; voice a trifle weak and suggesting timidity and feeble initiative. Introspective; a little self-conscious, and unimportant nervous symptoms indicated by the rolling of bread crumbs."

"I've paid doctors large fees for telling me the same things," he said. "I wish you would write those items down for me. I'm in earnest about that."

"Your case interests me and I'll consider this matter of advising you."

"I shall expect the document to-morrow afternoon!"

"You're a tremendously formal person, Mr. Bennett. What you really need is a good hard jar. Every morning you know exactly what you're going to do every hour of the day. It's routine that kills. Suppose you were to hold up a bank messenger in Wall Street and skip with a satchel-full of negotiable securities and then, after the papers were through ragging the police for their inefficiency you would drive up to the bank in a taxi, walk in and return the money, saying you had found it in the old family pew at Trinity when you went in to say your prayers! Here would be an opportunity to break the force of habit and awaken your self-confidence."

"Am I to understand that you practice what you preach? I don't mean to be impertinent but really, —"

"Oh, I'm perfectly capable of doing anything I've suggested. I mean to dig for buried treasure this summer, realizing the dream of a lifetime. Talk about romance being dead! My grandfather was a planter in Mississippi, before the Civil War. In about 1860 he saw trouble ahead, and as he was opposed to secession he turned everything he had into gold, bought several tracts of land in Michigan and New York and secretly planted his money. My father inherited the land, and that's where I'm opening my camp."

"And the gold hasn't been found?" asked Archie, deeply interested.

"Not a coin so far! You see grandfather made his will in war time and only divided the land, being afraid to mention the buried treasure in a document that would become a public record when he died."

"This is most exciting. It's only unfortunate that it's not pirate gold to give zest to your enterprise."

"Oh, the pirate in the story is a cousin of mine, who inherited the land up near the St. Lawrence and has dug all over it without result. My father gave the Michigan scenery to me, but this cousin of mine has been digging on my land, most unwarrantably! He's rather a dashing young person!"

When it came time for Isabel to say good-night to her hostess, Bertlett was hovering near to offer his services in calling her car.

"Nothing like that for me! But —" she hesitated and said "a mock gravity, 'if you're not afraid of the night air or the excessive fatigue you might take me home. That will add a mile to your prescription but you can ride back!"

She spoke of her plans for the summer with charming candor as they set off at a brisk pace.

Isabel was enthusiastic about the summer camp; if it succeeded she meant to conduct an outdoor school for girls, moving it from Michigan to Florida with the changing seasons.

There was no question of her making a success of it, he said, marveling at her vitality, her exuberance, the confidence with which she view the future.

"I wish you all good luck," he said when they reached the house of the friend she was visiting. "The camp will be a great success—I'm sure of that. This has been the happiest evening I've spent since —"

"Since you began taking everything so hard? Please quit looking on your life as a burden; try to get some fun out of it!"

"Don't forget me in the rush of

things! And particularly don't forget that note of instructions. I'm counting on that! If I don't get it I will be terribly disappointed."

She surveyed him gravely, then answered lightly, "Oh, very well! You shall have it, sir!"

CHAPTER II.

Archie didn't know that the note caused Isabel a great deal of trouble. She must write a note that would not require an answer; this she felt to be imperatively demanded by the circumstance. She thought Archibald Bennett a nice fellow and she was sorry for him, but no more and no less sorry than she would have been for any one else who failed to find the world a pleasant place to live in. Something a little cryptic, yet something that would discourage further confidences without wounding him—this would solve the problem. Finally she hit upon these lines and copied them in her best hand:

Or his deserts are small,
That dares not put it to the touch
to gain or lose it all.

After reading the lines aloud several times she decided that they would serve her purpose admirably and dispatched it to Mr. Bennett immediately.

The note reached Archie just as he was leaving his sister's house. He had hoped for a long letter in the vein of the girl's chaffing humor, and the size of the missive was a distinct disappointment.

He opened it gingerly, and his face fell as he pondered the verse. It was a neat well-bred slap at him as a man without initiative or courage. At the dinner table she had expressed much the same thought that was condensed in the verse, but the quotation, unrelieved by her smile, carried a sting. Perhaps this was the way Isabel Perry thought of him, as a loser in the game of life; but he experienced a pleasant tingle in the blood when he reflected that this may have been the wrong reading and very different from the sense she meant to convey. His spirits soared as he decided that the last line was intended to be read unbrokenly and that it constituted a challenge flung at him with a toss of her head, a flash of her brown eyes.

Archie was lulled to sleep by the encouraging thought that what she had done was to give him a commission to redeem himself by strange and moving adventures.

At two o'clock he reached Bailey Harbor. He stepped into the only taxi in sight and drove to the village druggist's for the key to the Congdon house.

"Just go in and take your time to it," said the man. Lights and water haven't been turned off and if you take the house your folks can step right in. If you don't find it convenient to stop here again, just leave the key under the door mat."

"I guess you'll find the place all shipshape," said the driver, as they set off. "Folks came up early but didn't stay long. Left in a hurry. Family troubles, I reckon! I don't know nothin', mind ye, but there's talk she had trouble with her husband."

The confidence of the chauffeur only mildly interested Archie. It was unseasonably warm and the air was lifeless and humid.

"Think it will rain?" he asked the driver.

"Yep," he replied with a glance at the sea. "There's going to be a lively kick-up before mornin'."

They reached the house and Archie discharged the driver. In a moment he was standing in a big living-room that exhaled an atmosphere of comfort and good taste.

Fully satisfied with his investigations, Archie picked up a book, became absorbed and read until he was roused by a clap of thunder that seemed to shake the world. Hurrying to the window he found that the storm had already broken, and that it would be impossible for him to catch the five-o'clock train.

He turned on the lights and sat down to think. The roof and walls rang under the downpour and he decided that after all to spend the night in an abandoned house would be a lark.

The storm showed no sign of abating and as nightfall deepened the gloom he set about making himself comfortable. Peeling twinges of hunger, he explored the kitchen pantry. The Congdons had left a well-stocked larder and, finding bacon, eggs, and bread, he decided that the cooking of supper would be a jolly

incident of the adventure. In arranging the table he found a telegram under a plate at what he assumed to be Mrs. Congdon's place. His curiosity overcame his scruples and he read the message:

New York, June 10, 1917.
Mrs. Alice B. Congdon,
Bailey Harbor, Maine.

Your letter has your characteristic touch of cruelty. We may as well part now and be done with it. But the children you cannot have. Remember that I relinquish none of my rights on this point. I demand that you surrender Edith at once and I will communicate with you later about the custody of Harold until such time as he is old enough to come to me.

Putney Congdon.

The cautious hint of the taxi driver that domestic difficulties were responsible for the breaking up of the Congdon household found here a painful corroboration.

After speculating on the affair for a few moments he went ahead with the preparation of his supper. He wished Isabel could see him and know that for once the routine of his life had been interrupted only to find himself resourceful and the easymaster of his fate.

He made a point of washing the dishes and putting them carefully away. These matters attended to, he roamed over the house which now had a new interest for him since the Congdon family skeleton had come out of its closet and danced around the dinner table. In a drawer of the desk was an automatic pistol and a box of cartridges. This Archie thrust into his pocket thinking it not a bad idea to be prepared for invasion.

Then he switched off the lights in the lower rooms and established himself in the guest chamber. He was half asleep when he was roused by footsteps on the veranda below.

CHAPTER III.

It was close upon midnight, and the presence of a prowler on the premises caused his heart to gallop wildly. He seized the pistol, crept to the window and peered cautiously out, when a sound in the room below renewed his alarm. He gained the door in two jumps. He could hear the opening and closing of drawers and see the flash of an electric lamp as the intruder moved swiftly about. Then

through the vast silence of the big house the unknown gave voice to his anger and disappointment:

"Well, I'll be damned!"

A series of quick flashes on the wall gave warning of the intruder's invasion of the upper rooms.

Archie drew back and waited. His thoughts and emotions in this hour of danger interested him. It was immensely gratifying to him to realize that while his heart was beating quickly, his pulse was regular.

The thief had become more cautious and was tiptoeing up the uncarpeted treads of the stair, still sending occasionally a bar of light ahead. He was now coming boldly down the hall as though satisfied that the house was empty. A flash of his lamp fell upon the door frame just about Archie's left hand. A flash clipped the dark for an instant. Then a hand groped along the wall seeking the switch. Archie could hear its soft rasping over the wall. As the switch snapped the room flooded with light. The bewilderment held the man in the doorway and he raised his arm and passed his hand over his eyes to shield them from the light. The burglar's shoulders drooped as he gazed at Archie's figure which was reflected in long mirror. The eyes of the two men met, the gaze of each gripping and holding that of the other. Then swiftly the intruder jerked a pistol from his pocket and fired blank into the mirror. The report crashed horribly in the room, followed by the tinkle of fragments of glass. Archie aimed at the doorway, but his shot seemed only to hasten the man's flight. A rug slipped and the fugitive fell with a frightened yell that rang eerily through the house. In the hall Archie turned on all the lights and gaining the landing fired at the retreating figure as it lurched toward the front door. At the crack of the gun the fugitive stopped short, clapped his hand to his shoulder and groaned, then sprang through the front door and Bennett heard immediately the quick patter of his feet feet on the walk.

The lock bore no evidence of having been forced. The frame of the photograph of the young girl that had so charmed him lay on the floor face down. Bennett picked it up and found that the picture had been removed.

It was a curious business, but he dismissed the subject from his mind to consider the graver business of how to avoid the disagreeable consequences of his encounter. He must leave the house and escape from Bailey Harbor before daybreak, and he went upstairs and hurriedly began dressing.

At one o'clock he was drinking coffee and munching toast and jam to fortify himself for his journey.

He had shot and perhaps killed a man, and his mind surged now with self-accusations. He needn't have fired the shot—the thief was running away and very likely would not have molested him further. He was sorry for the fellow—wounded or dead; but in a moment he was shuddering as he reflected that the bullet that had splintered the mirror had really been meant for him, and it had struck with great precision just where the reflection of his head had presented a fair target to the startled marksmen.

He turned out the lights and (placing the key under the door mat stole through the garden. The man he had shot down might even now be lying dead in his path, and he lifted his feet high to avoid stumbling over the corpse. But more appalling was the thought that the fugitive might be lying in ambush, and he carried his pistol before him at arm's length against such an emergency.

He gained the road, glanced toward the house, and set off in the general direction of the New Hampshire border.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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