

BLACKSHEEP!

By Meredith Nicholson

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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 foot 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 Concord, 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. Now read on.

CHAPTER VI

When they reached the dining room at ten the next morning they found Seebrook and Walters just finishing breakfast. Miss Seebrook was having coffee in her room, her father explained in response to Archie's polite inquiries.

"We're hoping to get away this afternoon," he continued. "It will take only a few minutes to transact our business when the man I'm waiting for appears; he's an uncertain quantity, and there's no telling when he'll show up. But we're having a good time and I shan't mind another day or two. If only you gentlemen would bear us company!"

"Ah, you are very kind!" said the Governor; "but we must resume our ramble toward the Pacific. We are more or less dated up for little entertainments on the way."

Seebrook and Walters lingered in the office as Archie and the Governor paid their account. As they waited for their car to be sent round from the garage a machine drew up and discharged a short, wiry, elderly man in a motor coat that was much too large for him. He was accompanied by an enormous amount of luggage and from the steps of the inn gave orders in a high piping voice as to the manner of its disposal. As the various pieces were hustled into the office he enumerated them in an audible tone as though inviting the co-operation of all the loungers in making an inventory of his effects. When this had been concluded Seebrook stepped up and accosted the newcomer.

"Mr. Congdon, I am very glad to see you. I hope you are not worn out by your drive."

"Worn out!" snapped the little man. "Do you imagine a run of a hundred miles would fatigue a man of my constitution? I assure you that you are mistaken if you think I am feeling my age. Seventy! And I don't feel a day over fifty, not a day, sir. But I shall rest for a few hours as a precaution, a mere precautionary measure and be able to meet you for our little business at two-thirty sharp."

"That will suit me perfectly," replied Seebrook.

Archie hung about impatiently waiting for the Governor to make his farewells to the old lady and her granddaughters on whom he had expended his social talents at the dance. Mr. Congdon was quarreling with the clerk over the location of the rooms he had reserved. Having frightened the clerk into readjusting the entire registration to accommodate him, he demanded to know whether his son, Mr. Putney Congdon, was stopping in the house.

Assured that Mr. Putney Congdon was not in the inn and hadn't been there within the recollection of the office staff, the senior Congdon exploded violently upon Seebrook and Walters.

"Things have come to a pretty pass in this topsy turvy world when a man can't find his own son! For three days I've been wiring his clubs and all other places he could possibly be with-

out result. And I have learned that his wife has left Bailey Harbor and the house there is closed. Closed! How dare they close that house when I was about to pay them a visit!"

Seebrook and Walters expressed their sympathy in mild tones that roused the old gentleman to greater fury.

"Can a whole family be obliterated and no trace left behind? Is it possible that they've been murdered in their beds, servants and all, and the police not yet aware of it?"

At the mention of murder Archie began stealthily feeling his way along the cigar counter to a water cooler. There seemed to be no escaping from the Congdons and here was the father of Putney boldly publishing to the whole state of New Hampshire his fear that his son had been murdered. The concentration of the hotel staff upon the transfer of Mr. Congdon's luggage to his room left the Governor and Archie to manage the removal of their own effects to the waiting car. Seebrook and Walters obligingly assisted, laughing at Congdon's eccentricities.

Seebrook seized the Governor's kit bag containing the sixty thousand dollars and carried it out to the car. The sight of it in Seebrook's hand gave Archie sensations of nausea that were not relieved by the grin he detected on the Governor's face. Within an hour or two at the most the substitution and robbery would be discovered and the country would ring with the demand for their detention. But the Governor was carrying off the departure with his usual gaiety. It was clear that he had made the most favorable impression upon Seebrook and Walters; and in the cordial handshaking and expressions of hope for future meetings Archie joined with the best spirit he could muster. A cheery good-bye caused him to look up. Miss Seebrook with a red rose in her hand waved to him from her window.

As he lifted his cap she dropped the rose with a graceful sweep of the arm.

"Like the old stage coach days!" cried the Governor, applauding Archie's catch.

He jumped into the machine and Archie scrambled after him. Archie's last impression of the inn was the blur of a waving handkerchief in Miss Seebrook's window.

"We are a success, my boy! You bore yourself marvelously well," said the Governor, testing the gears. Ah, that little touch of the rose was worth all our perils; nothing in my experience was ever prettier than that! A lovely girl; you might do worse if you were not already plighted. If she had come down to say good-bye it would have been much less significant. But the rose, the red, red rose! It wouldn't be a bad idea to stick it in an envelope and mail it to the girl you were telling me about—the one who sent you forth to shatter kingdoms. I guess that would jostle her a little, particularly if you were to enclose a line telling her that it had fallen to your hand from a curtain lattice."

"I don't know her address," mumbled Archie.

He suggested the dangers of their situation, thinking that here at last was something that would sober the Governor. But the Governor merely laughed as he swung the car round a sharp corner.

"Don't you believe that I hadn't a care for our safe flight! You must learn to use your eyes, son. There was one of the brotherhood of the road right there in the office when we left. I gave him instructions last night. He's a sneak thief of considerable intelligence who gave me the sign as I was pretending to leave for that call on my old friend. I smuggled him upstairs to keep watch for me and he proved himself a fellow of decided merit. He'll be hanging round Concord today and as the absurd police will be obliged to make an arrest to save their reputations he will put himself in their way and encourage the idea by subtle means that he might have been the malefactor who robbed Seebrook's trunk and left Leary's bills behind. They will be unable to make a case against him but he'll probably get thirty days for loitering. Then he'll walk out and draw a thousand dollars from one of our little private banks further along the road for so chivalrously throwing himself into the breach! I can find you men who will do a year's time to save the men higher up. This satisfies the public as the zeal of its paid

protectors and makes it possible for men of genius like you and me to walk in high places unmolested. A damnable system, Archie, but we learned it from the greedy trust magnates. You take the wheel; it just occurs to me that you said you were a fair driver."

CHAPTER VII.

With all his outward candor the Governor had, Archie found, reserves that were quite unaccountable. He let fall allusions to his past in the most natural fashion, with an incidental air that added to their plausibility, without ever tearing aside the veil that concealed his origin or the manner of his fall, if, indeed, a man who so jubilantly boasted of his crimes and seemed to find an infinite satisfaction and delight in his tortures, could be said to have fallen. Having mentioned Battisboro as the point at which they were to foregather with Red Leary, the Governor did not refer to the matter again, but those routes and made detours without explanation.

It was on the second afternoon out of Concord that the Governor suddenly bade Archie, whom he encouraged to drive much of the time, pause at a gate.

"We linger here, son. May I suggest that you take your cue from me? Bill Walker is an honest dairyman to all intents and purposes, but really an old crook who got tired of dodging sheriffs and bloodhounds and bought this farm. A sober, industrious family man, you will find him, with a wife and one daughter. This is one of the best stations of the underground railroad; safe as a mother's arms, and you will never believe you're not the favored guest of a week-end party. Walker's an old chum of Leary's. They used to cut up in the most reprehensible fashion out West in old times. You've probably wondered what becomes of old crooks. Walker is of course an unusual specimen, for

he knew when the quitting was good, and having salted away a nice little fortune accumulated in express hold-ups, he dwells here in peace and passes the hat at the meeting house every Sunday. You may be dead sure that only the aristocracy of our profession have the entrée at Walker's.

A gray-bearded man with a pronounced stoop, clad in faded blue overalls, was waiting for them at the barn.

"Just run the machine right in," he called.

The car disposed of, the Governor introduced Archie as one of his dearest friends, and the hand Archie clasped was undeniably roughened by toil. Walker mumbled a "glad-to-see-ye," and lazily looked him over.

There was nothing in his speech or manner to suggest that he had ever been a road agent. He assisted them in carrying their traps to the house, talking farmer fashion of the weather, crops and the state of the roads. The house was connected with the barn in the usual New England style. In the kitchen a girl sang cheerily and hearing her the Governor paused and struck an attitude.

The girl appeared at a window, rested here bare arms on the sill and smilingly saluted them with a cheery "Hello there!"

"Look upon that picture!" exclaimed the Governor, seizing Archie's arm. "In old times upon Olympus she was cup-bearer to the gods, but there she is Sally Walker, and never so charming as when she sits enthroned upon the milking stool. Miss Walker, my old friend, Mr. Comly, or Archilles, as you will!"

A very pretty picture Miss Walker made in the kitchen window, a vivid portrait that immediately enhanced Archie's pleasurable sensations in finding a haven that promised rest and security. He black hair swept back smoothly from her forehead and there was the glow of perfect health in her rounded cheeks. Archie noted her dimples and the white even teeth that made something noteworthy and memorable in her smile.

"Well, Mr. Sausbury, I've read all those books you sent me and the candy was the finest I ever tasted."

"She remembers! Amid all her domestic cares, she remembers! My dear lad, the girl is one in a million!"

"You'd think Mr. Sausbury was crazy about me!" she laughed. "But he makes the same speeches to every girl he sees, doesn't he, Mr. Comly?"

"Indeed not," protested Archie, rallying bravely to the Governor's support. He's been raving about you for

days and my only surprise is that he so completely failed to give me the faintest idea—idea—"

"Of your charm, your ineffable beauty!" the Governor supplied.

"You'd better chase yourselves in to the house now or pop'll be peeved at having to wait for you."

On the veranda a tall elderly man rose from a hammock in which he had been reading a newspaper and stretched himself. His tanned face was deeply lined but he gave the impression of health and vigor.

"Leary," whispered the Governor in and aside and immediately introduced him.

"The road has been smooth and the sky is high," said the Governor in response to a quick anxious questioning of Leary's small restless eyes.

"Did you find peace in the churches by the way?" asked Leary.

"In one of the temples we found peace and plenty," answered the Governor as though reciting from a ritual. Leary nodded and gave hitch to his trousers.

"You found the waters of Champlain tranquil, and no hawks followed the landward passage?"

"The robin and the blue bird sang over all the road," he answered then with a glance at Archie: "You gave no warning of the second pilgrim."

"The brother is young and innocent, but I find him an apt pupil," the Governor explained.

"The brother will learn first the wisdom of silence, remarked Leary, and then as though by an afterthought he shook Archie warmly by the hand.

They went into the house where Mrs. Walker, a stout middle-aged woman, greeted them effusively.

"We've got to put you both in one room, if you don't mind," she explained. "But there's two beds in it. I you can make out."

The second floor room to which Walker led them was plainly but neatly furnished and the windows looked out upon rolling pastures. The Governor abandoned his high flown talk and asked blunt questions as to recent visitors, apparently referring to criminals who had lodged at the farm. They talked quite openly while Archie unpacked his bag. The restless activity of the folk of the underworld, their methods of communication and points of rendezvous seemed part of a vast system and he was ashamed of his enormous interest in all he saw and heard. The Governor's cool fashion of talking of the world of crime and its denizens almost legitimized it, made it appear a recognized part of

the accepted scheme of things. Walker aroused the Governor's deepest interest by telling of the visit of Pete Barney, a diamond thief, who had lately made a big haul in Chicago, and had been passed along from one point of refuge to another.

Leary appeared a moment later and Archie was about to leave the room, but the Governor insisted that he remain.

"I'm anxious for you and Red to know that I trust both of you fully."

"What's the young brother—a con?" asked Leary with a glance at Archie.

To be referred to as a confidence man by a gentleman of Leary's professional eminence gave Archie a thrill. The Governor answered by drawing up his sleeves and going through the motions of washing his hands.

The brushing of the hands together Archie interpreted as a code sign signifying murder and the subsequent interchange of words he took to be inquiry and answer as to the danger of apprehension. He felt that Leary's attitude toward him became friendlier from that moment. There was something ghastly in the thought that as the slayer of a human being he attained a certain dignity in the eyes of men like Leary. But he became interested in the transaction that was now taking place between the thief and the Governor. The Governor extracted the sixty one-thousand-dollar bills from his bag, and laid them out on the bed. He rapidly explained just how Leary's hidden booty had been recovered, and the manner in which the smaller denominations had been converted into bills that could be passed without arousing suspicion.

Leary philosophically stowed the bills in his clothing.

"You're done, are you?" asked the Governor; "out of the game?"

"I sure have quit the road," Leary answered. "The old girl has got a few thousands tucked away and I'm goin' to pick her up and buy a motion picture joint or a candy and soda shop somewhere in the big lakes—one of those places that freezes up all winter, so I can have a chance to rest. The old girl has a place in mind."

TO BE CONTINUED

Returns From Spokane

H. E. Maxey returned yesterday from Spokane where he attended the funeral Tuesday of Mrs. Maxey's brother-in-law, E. O. Strand. Mrs. Maxey will remain in Spokane for a few days with her sister.

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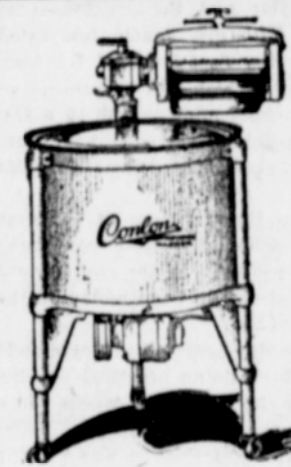
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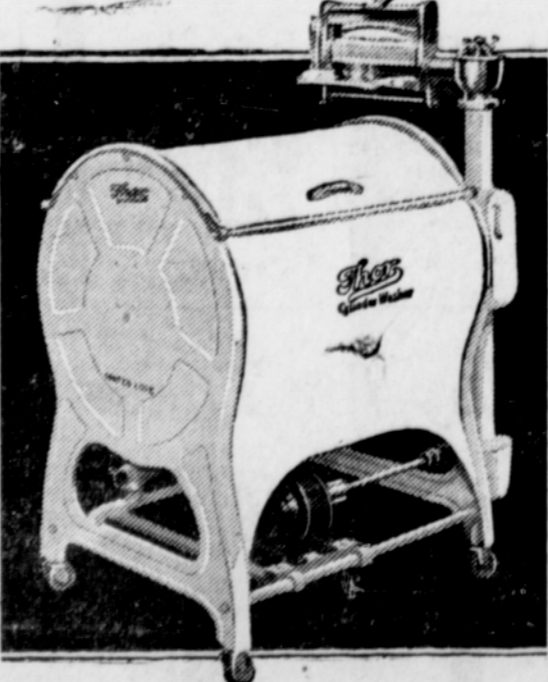
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