

BLACKSHEEP!

by Meredith Nicholson

Illustration by Hervey Jay Lee



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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, feeling, 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. Archie and the Governor drive away without creating suspicion and speed across the state to deliver the \$60,000 to train-robber Leary at Walker's farm, where Archie gets new insight into workings of the crime world. Now read on.

"On the whole it doesn't sound exciting," the Governor commented, inspecting a clean shirt. "Did your admirable wife get rid of those pearls she pinched last winter? They were a handsome string, as I remember, too handsome to market readily. Mrs. Leary has a passion for precious baubles, Archie," the Governor explained. "A brilliant career in picking up such trifles; a star performer, Red, if you don't mind my bragging of your wife."

Leary seemed not at all disturbed by his revelation of his wife's larcenous affection for pearls. That a train robber's wife should be a thief seemed perfectly natural; indeed it seemed

quite fitting that thieves should mate with thieves. Archie further gathered that Mrs. Leary operated in Chicago, under the guise of a confectionery shop, one of the stations of the underground railroad, and assisted the brotherhood in disposing of their ill-gotten wares. A recent reform wave in Chicago had caused a shake-up in the police department, most disturbing to the preying powers.

"There clean off me, I reckon," said Leary a little pathetically, the reference being presumably to the pestiferous police. "That was a good idea of yours for me to go up into Canada and work at a real job for a while. Must a worked hard enough to change my finger prints. Some bloke died in Kansas awhile back and got all the credit for being the old original Red Leary."

This error of the press in recording Leary's death tickled the Governor mightily, and Leary laughed until he was obliged to wipe the tears from his eyes.

"I'm going to pull my freight after supper," he said. "Walker's got to take me into town and I'll slip out to Detroit where the old girl's waitin' for me."

Walker called them to supper and they went down to a meal that met all the expectations aroused by the Governor's boast of the Walker cuisine.

At the end of the meal Walker left for town to put Leary on a train for Boston. The veteran train robber shook hands all round and waved a last farewell from the gate. Archie was sorry to lose him, for Leary was an appealing old fellow, and he had hoped for a chance to coax from him some reminiscences of his experiences.

Leary vanished into the starlit dusk as placidly as though he hadn't tucked away in his clothing sixty thousand dollars to which he had no lawful right or title. There was something ludicrous in the whole proceedings. While Archie had an income of fifty thousand dollars a year from investments, he had always experienced a pleasurable thrill at receiving the statement of his dividends from his personal clerk in the broker's office, where he drew an additional ten thousand as a silent partner. Leary's method of dipping into the world's capital seemed quite as honorable as

his own. Neither really did any work for the money.

The Governor, smoking a pipe on the veranda and chatting with Mrs. Walker, recalled him from his meditations to suggest that he show a decent spirit of appreciation of the Walker's hospitality by repairing to the kitchen and helping Sally with the dishes. In his youth Archie had been carefully instructed in the proper manner of entering a parlor, but it was with the greatest embarrassment that he sought Sally in her kitchen.

"I was just wondering whether you wouldn't shrow up! Not that you had to, but it's a good deal more fun having somebody to keep you company in the kitchen."

"Given me a towel and I'll promise not to break anything."

"You don't look a though you'd been used to work much," she said, "but take off your coat and I'll hang an apron on you."

His investiture in Mrs. Walker's ample apron made it necessary for Sally to stand quite close to him, and her manner of compressing her lips as she pinned the bib to the collar of his waistcoat he found wholly charming. His heart went pit-a-pat as her fingers, moist from the suds, brushed his chin. She was quite tall; taller than Isabel, who had fixed his standard of a proper height for girls. Sally did not giggle, but acted as normal sensible girl's should act when pinning aprons on young men.

"You've never stopped here before? I thought I didn't remember you. Well, we're always glad to see the Governor, he's so funny; but say, some of the people who come along—!"

"I hope," said Archie, turning a dish to the light to be sure it was thoroughly polished, "I hope my presence isn't offensive?"

"Cut it out!" she returned crisply. "Of course you're all right. I knew you were a real gent the first squint I got of you. You can't fool me much on human nature."

"You've always lived up here?" asked Archie, meek under her frank approval.

"Certainly not. I was born in Missouri, a grand old state of I do say it myself, and we came here when I was twelve. I went through high school and took dairying and the domestic arts in college and I'm twenty-three if you care to know."

When the kitchen was in perfect order they reported the fact to Mrs. Walker and Sally suggested that they stroll to a trout brook which was her own particular property.

He had decided to avoid any reference to the secrets of the underground trail, but his delicacy received a violent shock a moment later, when they were seated on a bench beside the brook.

"Do you know," she said, "you are not like the others?"

"I don't understand," he faltered.

"Oh, cut it out! You needn't try to fool me! When I told you awhile ago I thought you were nice, I meant more than that; I meant that you didn't at all seem like the crooks that sneak through here and hide at our house. You're more like the Governor, and I never understand about the Governor. It doesn't seem possible that any one who isn't forced by necessity into crime would ever follow the life. Now you're a gentleman, any one could tell that, but I suppose you've really done something pretty bad or you wouldn't be here! Now I'm going to hand it to you straight; that's the only way."

"Certainly, Miss Walker; I want you to be perfectly frank with me."

"Well, my advice would be to give yourself up, do your time like a man and then live straight. The Governor has monastic ideas about the great fame but that's no reason why you should walk the thorny road. Now pop would kill me if he knew I was talking this way. It's a funny thing about pop. All I know about him I just picked up a little at a time, and he and ma never wanted me to know. Ma's awful nervous about so many of the boys stopping here, for she hung on to pop all the time he was shooting up trains out West, and having a husband in the penitentiary isn't a pleasant thing to think about. Ma's father ran a saloon down in Missouri; that's how she got acquainted with pop, but ma was always on the square, and they both wanted me brought up right.

"I wouldn't be surprised if pop didn't pull out sometime and beat it for the West. It must be awful tame for a man who's stuck pistols into the faces of express messengers and made bank tellers hand out their cash to settle down in a place like this where there's nothing much to do but go to church and prayer meeting. I don't know how many men pop's killed in his time, but there must be quite a bunch. But pop doesn't seem to worry much. It seems to me if I'd ever pumped a man full of lead I'd have a bad case of insomnia."

"Well, I don't know," remarked Archie, weighing the point judicially. "I suppose you get used to it in time. Your father seems very gentle. You probably exaggerate the number of his—er—homicides."

"Well, pop can be pretty rough sometimes. He and I have our little troubles."

"Nothing serious, I'm sure. I can't imagine any one being unkind to you, Sally."

"It's nice of you to say that. But I'm not perfect and I don't pretend to be!"

Sympathy and tenderness surged within him at this absurd suggestion that any one could harbor a doubt of Sally's perfection. Her modesty, the tone of her voice called for some more concrete expression of his understanding than he could put into words. Her hand, dimly discernible in the dusk of the June stars was invitingly near. He clasped and held it, warm and yielding. She drew it away in a moment but not rebukingly.

"I wonder," she said presently; "I wonder whether you would—whether you really would do something for me?"

"Anything in my power," he declared hoarsely.

"What time is it?" she asked with a jarring return to practical things.

She bent her head close as he held a match to his watch. It was half past eight.

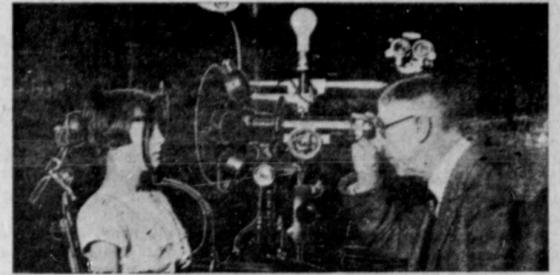
"We'll have to hurry," she said. "When I told you pop and I didn't always agree about everything I was thinking—"

"It it about a man?" he asked, surmising the worst and steeling himself for the blow if it must fall.

"It would be a long story," she said sadly, "and there isn't time to tell it, but the moment I saw you were so big and brave and strong, I thought perplexity profoundly touched him. "I wouldn't trust the Governor, he's too friendly with pop for that. It's

just this way," she went on dreamily. "There's a young man, Abijah Strong, you might help."

To be called big and brave and strong by so charming a person, to enjoy her confidence and be her chosen aid in an hour of need and who owns a farm just a little way down the road. He and I have been (Continued on Page 6)



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