

BLACKSHEEP!

By Meredith Nicholson

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Isabel Perry recommends a life of crime, adventure, romance and excitement as a cure for Archibald Bennett's nerves. Archie goes to Huddleston to investigate a house for his sister—and spends the night in the empty house. He is awakened by footsteps during the night; the intruder fires at him and misses. Archie fires in return. He doesn't know whether he has killed or only wounded the man, but fearing the publicity, plans to make his escape. In his flight he meets "The Governor"—a master mind criminal who mistakes him for a fellow criminal. Archie, afraid to tell the truth, falls in with "The Governor." A series of events leads him to believe he has shot Putney Congdon—the owner of the house. They proceed to New York, where they are visited by Julia, the Governor's sister. Archie promises her he will stick with the Governor through the strange phase she claims he is passing through. While strolling in the park, Archie sees Mrs. Congdon with her two children, and is witness to the kidnapping of the little girl, Edith. He learns from the Governor that the father-in-law of Mrs. Congdon—a very wealthy man engaged in the circulation of counterfeit twenty-dollar gold pieces. They go to Rochester, where the Governor receives a letter from Ruth, the girl he loves, in which she tells him he may be able to serve her. At a dance at Ruth's home, Archie meets Isabel. Now read on:

At a dance at Ruth's home Archie meets Isabel and they are reconciled. Archie and the Governor proceed to Huddleston and Archie whisks her away to Isabel's camp. They secure work on Eliphalet Congdon's farm, where Isabel has been taken. They learn that Putney Congdon is the man Archie shot—is also there. While Archie is teaching Edith to ride the Governor kidnaps her.

At the same moment Edith jumped into the governor's car, two men sprang out of the second car and rushed at Archie. One of them flung a carriage-robe over his head and twisted it around his throat—then gathered him up, head and heels, and tossed him over the fence. The two cars were enveloped in a cloud of dust when Archie, tearing the blanket from his head, rose to confront the screaming woman. She berated him roughly for his stupidity while he attempted to explain.

"I had better run to the house and telephone to the Tiffin police," he suggested.

"To his infinite surprise she declared in alarm that this must not be done, she would go herself and tell the child's father what had occurred and let him deal with the matter.

"Don't talk about this—do you understand? You're not to say a word about it! I'll fix the foreman; all you've got to do is to keep your mouth shut."

Three days in the harvest field brought to Archie a new respect for his daily bread. He found joy in the discovery that he had strength to throw into the scale against man's necessities. He would bring a holiday to life itself, and he was content to bide his time until the vacation ended. He was passing through an ordeal and if he emerged alive he would be a wiser and better man.

Gossip from the farmhouse reached him at the back door and he was alert for any sign that Putney Congdon meditated leaving. Eliphalet had not returned—this he got direct from Grubbs, who poured out confidences freely as they smoked together after twilight supper.

"I got it through the kitchen that the old man's son is going to clear out tonight. Orders were sent to have a machine ready to take him to town at eleven o'clock. Telegram phoned out this evening made 'em jump out of bed, they say, and he's off for somewhere tonight."

Archie cautiously changed the subject, but he was already planning his departure. The Governor had bidden him follow Congdon and here were his marching orders. The only thing that reconciled him to the unattractive task was the assurance that Congdon would set out at once for Heart of Dreams Camp, where Isabel presumably was now established. At the first opportunity he left Grubbs, and started for town.

Reaching town with an hour to spare, he got his bag from the station and bought a ticket. He spent half an hour at a hotel cleaning up and changing to the clothing he had discarded at Cleveland.

Grubbs carried Putney's luggage across the platform, passing Archie without a sign of recognition. He was followed by a tall man in a gray suit whose left arm was supported by a sling. Grubbs took hasty leave and the two travelers were left alone.

"A warm night," Congdon remarked.

"No red caps here, I suppose."

"I fancy not," Archie replied. "I'll be glad to help you with your bags."

"Oh, thank you! I have a game shoulder, nearly well now, but it gives me a twinge occasionally."

A blast from the locomotive and a humming of the rails woke the station to life. Archie grabbed the larger of Congdon's bags and led the way toward a voice bawling, "Chicago sleeper." Congdon showed his ticket for lower three and climbed in.

"I've got the upper half of the section," said Archie, "but I promise not to be a nuisance to you."

The glint of pain in Congdon's eyes sent a wave of remorse through Archie's soul. Congdon bore his affliction manfully. As he played nervously with his watch chain, he inspected Archie with quick, furtive glances.

"I'm all banged up—nerves shot to pieces," he said abruptly, turning his gaze intently upon Archie.

"That's rough. Used to be troubled a good deal myself."

Congdon drew out his watch, said that he had been sleeping badly and hated to go to bed. He sat erect and tried to reach his coat pocket. His face twitched with the pain of the effort.

"I had a bottle of dope I'm supposed to take to help me sleep; must have left it in my bag. Will you poke the button, please?"

"Can't I get it for you?" Archie asked.

"You are very kind. It's the small satchel—a bottle about as long as your hand."

Opening the bag in Congdon's berth Archie's hand fell upon a photograph that lay on top. The face swam before his eyes and he pitched forward in his agitation, bumping his head viciously against the window. It was a photograph of Isabel Perry. He groped for the bottle and crept back to the smoking compartment.

Congdon, the custodian of a photograph of Isabel Perry, demanded a more careful inspection, and Archie studied him with renewed interest. Isabel was hardly a girl to bestow her photograph upon a married man. Congdon had no business with the photograph and Archie bitterly resented its presence in the man's luggage. He jumped when Congdon announced that he was ready to turn in, followed him to the berth, and helped him to undress.

"Whistle if you need anything in the night," said Archie, and allowed the porter to push him into the upper berth—he first he had ever occupied.

When they were aroused by the porter he helped Congdon into his clothes, chose a clean shirt for him and laughingly offered to shave him.

"You're a mighty good fellow! It's about time I was introducing myself. My name is Congdon. I live in New York; just taking a little trip for my health. Going up into the lakes."

"Comly's my name. No particular plans myself. Just knocking about 'em."

By the time Archie had made his toilet they were running into the Chicago station.

"Suppose we have breakfast in the station restaurant? And see here, old man; I don't want to force myself upon you, but if a poor neurasthenic won't bore you too much I wish you'd let me tag you till my train leaves tonight. I hate to be alone."

They not only breakfasted together, but after motoring through the parks they spent an hour at an art institute and then Archie acted as host to luncheon. By this time Archie was fully committed to the further journey into Michigan. On a bench in Grant Park Congdon swung himself into a confidential attitude.

"Life's the devil's own business," he said with a sigh. "I've got to a place where I don't care what happens—everything black anywhere I look. I was happily married; two beautiful children; none finer—but I'll shorten up the story so you can see what a monkey fate and the maker of me. My father's a crank, a genius in his way, but decidedly eccentric. My mother died when I was a youngster, and father tried all sorts of schemes of educating me, whimsical notions, one after another. The result was I've never got a look in anywhere; unfit for everything. After I married he still tried to hold the rein on me, wanted to put me into business I hated and kept meddling with my domestic affairs. All this made me weak and irresolute."

"Well, sir, I was about to offer myself as exhibit A on a slab in the nearest morgue," Congdon continued, "when I met a young woman who seemed to understand me, and right there's where I made the greatest mistake of my life. She made a fool of me—that's the short of it. I took her in to dinner at the house of some friends right here in Chicago—and she diagnosed my case with marvelous penetration. She said I faced life with the soul of a coward, and suggested that I go armed and shoot anyone who stepped on my toes. She recited a piece of verse to the effect that a man fears his fate too much if he won't put his life to the test. 'I was fool enough to believe it. I tried to follow her advice. It ended in my having a row with my father that beat all the other rows I ever had with him and he turned against my wife—said she was trying to estrange us. And when I ran away to escape from the nasty mess he sent here telegrams in my name threatening to kidnap the children and he did in fact kidnap my little daughter. Snatched her away from her mother and carried her out to one of his farms in Ohio. But my wife played a clever trick on the old gentleman and got the child back again and I'm damned glad of it. I got a message that the little girl is up in Michigan, so that's really where I'm headed for."

Archie had suffered a blow but he was meeting it bravely. Having believed that Isabel had given him this same advice quite spontaneously, it was with a shock that he realized that she had offered it in similar terms to Congdon. There was no question as to the identity of the girl—who had bidden Congdon plant his back to the wall and defy the world; no one but Isabel would ever have done that.

"About your child, up there in Michigan," said Archie, "it's wholly possible that your wife sent you the wire as an approach to a reconciliation."

"Oh, Lord, no! You don't know my wife, Comly. You see I got answers to the telegrams father sent her in my name and she hit right back at me! Don't think she's coaxing me to come back to her. And here's the message I got out there in Ohio that caused me to jump for the train."

He produced from his pocket a crumpled telegram which read: "Your daughter is in safe hands at Huddleston, Michigan. Proceed to that point with serenity and contemplate the stars with a tranquil spirit."

This was so clearly the Governor's work that Archie found it difficult to refrain from laughing.

"You may think it queer that I

rippled on; "and I need hardly say that it's a pleasure to meet on this bleak shore two gentlemen of your caliber. I told a friend of mine that I was enormously fed up with cities and the general human pressure and wanted to go to the most God-forsaken spot in America. He answered without a moment's hesitation that Huddleston, Michigan, would satisfy my loftiest ideal of godforsakenness. He's probably laughing himself to death right now thinking how miserable I am. But I refuse to be bored."

When Congdon pleaded weariness, after dinner, Archie put him to bed and then sauntered away, following a dirt road that wound through the timber. In a little while he came upon the Governor lying with his back against a tree.

"Well, you landed him here!" he remarked, seating himself on a log and producing his pipe. "Or did he bring you? One would think you were old chums to see you together. Not a bad fellow, I should say."

"He's really a good sort," said Archie; "but I'll tell you the whole story."

The Governor listened placidly, interrupting only when Archie repeated what Congdon had said of Isabel. "A wonderful girl!" he ejaculated. "Makes it her business to tease the world along. But now to get down to brass tacks. What you learned of old Eliphalet Congdon's meddlesomeness jibes exactly with what I know of his character. Let me show you something, Archie."

He walked out upon the gravelly shore and pointed through the wide-flung arms of the bay.

"Do you see a little blur of smoke out yonder in the open lake? That's the Arthur B. Grover. I took up my option and the boom-in' thing is mine. It's got a crew of the smartest crooks in all America. And Perky's on board with old Eliphalet Congdon! But, my dear Archie—"

He refilled his pipe and when he had it going to his satisfaction waved his arm toward the camp.

"There's a queer business going on

over there. That cousin of Isabel's is not a myth at all and that money may be buried over there somewhere. The cousin is laying himself out to annoy the camp in every way possible, even going the length of trying to starve 'em out. There's a stuck of supplies at the Huddleston station that they can't move."

"You forget," cried Archie excitedly, "that there are laws even in the wilderness! All we've got to do is to telephone for the sheriff and land him in jail."

"I grant all that," said the Governor, "but the notoriety of the thing would kill the camp. Once it got into the newspapers every father and mother who has a child would go right up in the air. It would make a great first page story—buried treasure—a war for hidden gold centered about a girl's camp—the naughty southerner planting his money in safe territory—all that is fruity stuff for our special correspondent on the spot. No, Archie; ladies like our Ruth and Isabel must be protected from vulgar publicity. It's up to us to smooth out their troubles without resorting to bothersome legal apparatus. The camp has no telephone; the road round to that peninsula is all but inaccessible. They have a launch they're in the habit of using to carry stuff across from Huddleston, but Mr. Richard Carey blocks the way. He is camped at the land entrance, with an army of lumberjacks to help him maintain a blockade."

"Then it is our duty to relieve the beleaguered garrison?"

"Well," the Governor remarked, "it's far more of a mess than I expected. But this is no time for weak-ening! Over there Archie—he pointed toward Heart O' Dreams—are the two finest women in the world. We're going to stand by them no matter whose head gets cracked."

Continued next week.

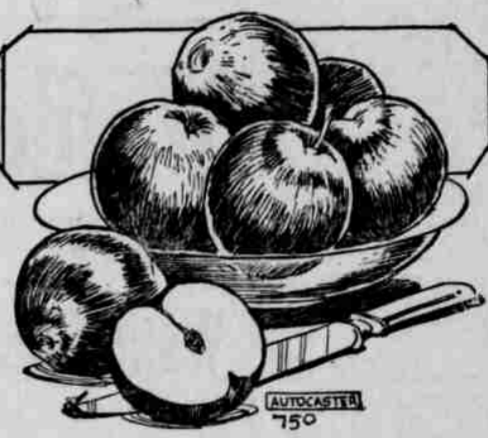
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