

LACKSHEEP!

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 Bailey Harbor 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 in 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 one-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 and they are reconciled. Archie and the Governor promise to find Edith Congdon and secure her away to Isabel's camp. They work on Elphilet Congdon's farm, where Edith has been taken. They learn that Putney Congdon—the man Archie shot—is also there. While Archie is teaching Edith to ride the Governor kidnaps her.

When Putney Congdon leaves the farm, Archie follows him. They become friendly and Archie agrees to go with Putney to Huddleston, where they meet the Governor. The Governor tells Archie that Carey, Isabel's cousin, has blocked the camp and they are unable to get supplies.

Isabel and Ruth attempt to run the blockade. They are run down by Carey, Leary and the Governor, on the way to the camp, rescue them. The next day the Governor's tug runs through with a cargo of supplies.

That same evening the Governor leads his group of men against Carey—in the effort to drive him out. In the assault which followed, the Governor is shot and seriously wounded.

When Dr. Mosgrove finally returned from the Governor's bedside, he eyed the waiting group, quizzically, apparently immensely amused about something.

"What does all this mean?" he whispered. "Pirates in these waters where I've been summering for years! Men shot and police not notified! A girl doctor attending the case! May I trouble you for your name, sir?"

Archie replied with all possible dignity that his name was Ashton Comly, and demanded a professional opinion as to the sick man's chances of recovery. The doctor became instantly serious.

"The bullet pierced the right chest wall and of course there was immediate and copious hemorrhage. You needn't trouble about the delay in getting a doctor; nature went to work at once, forming clots that plugged automatically the gaping mouth of the severed vessels. You men were fortunate to find Dr. Reynolds; she has handled the case admirably."

"Thank you," cried Archie. "Oh, thank you for that! And one thing more; would you advise me to summon the patient's sister?"

"Yes. There being always the uncertainties, I should certainly do so. I'll run up in my launch this evening."

One of the questions that troubled Archie not a little was how the detective was to be disposed of. Leary grinned broadly when Archie gave voice to his thoughts.

"Ole Governor don't do nothin' like anybody else; that chap ain't no detective; he's a gun man we sent to chum with Carey."

Archie bared his head to the cool morning air. It was almost too much to learn that Briggs, who had so gallantly played the part of a government detective was really an ally, shrewdly introduced into the Governor's strategy to awaken fear in Elphilet Congdon.

Archie went at once to the Huddleston station, where he satisfied himself that the lonely agent knew nothing of the transactions of the night.

He drew from his waist coat the envelope the Governor's sister had given him the night she dined in the New York house, and tore it open. In a flowing hand which expressed something of the grace and charm of the woman who had given it to him in circumstances so remarkable, he read: Mrs. Julia Van Doren Graybill, until October 1, Southampton, L. I.

It was the Van Dorens that burnt itself into Archie's consciousness. It was an old name of honorable connotations, one with which he had been familiar all his life. It was chiseled in the wall of the church near the pew held for a hundred years by his own family; it was a name of dignity, associated with the best traditions of Manhattan Island; and this, presumably, was the Governor's name. Graybill was unfamiliar, and this puzzled him, for he knew and could place half a dozen Van Dorens, probably relatives in some degree of the Governor, but he recalled no woman of the family who had married a Graybill.

"Regret that I must act on my promise of several weeks ago and use the address given in confidence. Encouraged to believe that the patient will recover. Suggest, however, that you come at once."

He and Congdon were at the supper table when he received the answer: "Thank you. I am just leaving. J. V. D. G."

Archie was not permitted to enter the sick room, but from time to time he received assurances that the patient's condition was "satisfactory," and at intervals Dr. Reynolds recited with professional brevity data as to temperature, respiration and the like. At eleven o'clock Archie saw the Heart O' Dreams launch approaching Huddleston and leaving Congdon to answer any call from the Governor's bedside, hurried to meet it.

Ruth and Isabel had crossed alone

and their stress of mind and heart was manifest before they landed.

"I felt it; I knew that it would come!" cried Ruth. "If only you hadn't gone there! It wasn't worth the sacrifice."

The obligation to cheer them raised his own spirits as he explained the nature of the Governor's injury while they sat on the hotel veranda. He described the fight at the barricade with reservations, mentioning not at all the fact that a man had died as the result. They understood as fully as he that the whole affair must be suffered to slip into oblivion as quickly as possible.

"The complications are so endless!" exclaimed Isabel with a sigh. "In that mass of mail you delivered last night I found a letter from Mrs. Congdon saying that she would arrive today—almost at once, in fact!"

"The prospect is wholly pleasing!" he exclaimed, looking at his watch. "I've played the very devil in the Congdons' affairs. I suppose I should lift my hat politely as she steps from the train and tell her that I'm the brute who attempted to make her a widow. She will of course recognize me instantly as the gentleman who escaped with her in a taxi after the kidnapping of her daughter."

"And there's the train now, and you must permit me to satisfy Mrs. Congdon that her husband is in a mood for immediate reconciliation before I break the news that he is here."

Mrs. Putney Congdon more than justified the impression he had formed of her in their encounter in Central Park by the manner in which she heard his story. He told it with all brevity on the station platform.

It was so incredible that it was not until he described his journey to Huddleston in Putney's company that she was able to see any humor in the series of events that had led them all into the north.

"Poor dear Putney! And he doesn't know yet that you nearly killed him!"

"Oh, there are a lot of things he doesn't know. Your father-in-law has given his solemn promise that he will not again attempt to meddle in your affairs. The umbrella that symbolized his tyranny is at the bottom of the lake and if he should die you and your children wouldn't be thrown upon charity."

"This is all too wonderful to be true," she exclaimed. "After all the misery I've endured it can't be possible that happiness is just ahead of me. Tell me everything."

"In due season you shall know all. Just now your husband's heart to keep you from my husband, and I'm going to send him to you immediately. And I shrink from telling a man I like so much that I tried to kill him not so long ago, I'm going to turn that agreeable business over to you!"

Archie was beset with many fears as he waited the arrival of Mrs. Graybill. His utter ignorance of any details touching the life of his friend seemed now to rise before him like a fog which he was afraid to penetrate.

And there was Ruth, with her happiness hanging in the balance; she was in love with a man of whom she knew nothing; indeed the mystery that enfolded him was a part of his fascination for her, no doubt; and if in the Governor's past life there was anything that made marriage with a young woman of Ruth's fineness and sweetness hazardous, the sooner it was known the better. But when he caught sight of Mrs. Graybill in the vestibule of the train his apprehensions vanished. The poise, the serenity of temper, the unquestioning acceptance of the fate that played upon her life, which he had felt at their first meeting struck him anew.

"Our patient is doing well. The news is all good," he said at once.

"I felt that it would be; I couldn't believe that this was the end!"

Putney and his wife had moved to Heart O' Dreams for a few days. It would be a second honeymoon, Putney said. Mrs. Graybill was introduced into the hotel without embarrassment. She won Dr. Reynolds' heart by the brevity of her questions, and expressed her satisfaction with everything that had been done. When she came down to the dining-room for luncheon she avoided all reference to the sick man. In her way she was as remarkable as the Governor himself.

"I've never been in these parts before," Julia remarked to Archie; "I should be glad if you'd show me the beach. We might take a walk a little later."

The hour in which he waited for her tried his soul. The Governor was the one man who had ever roused in him a deep affection and the dread of finding that under his flippancy, his half-earnest, half-boyish make-believe devotion to the folk of the underworld, he was really an irredeemable rogue, tortured him.

"I'm going to ask you to bear with me," said Mrs. Graybill when they reached the shore, "if I seem to be making this as easy for myself as possible. I know that my brother cares a great deal for you. He sent me little notes now and then—he always did that, though the intervals were sometimes long; I know that he would want you to know. Things have reached a point where if he lives he will tell you himself."

"My brother is Philip Van Doren, and there were just the two of us. An unusual sympathy bound us together from childhood, and there was never a closer tie between brother and sister. I married his most intimate friend. My husband betrayed him; it was the breach of a trust in which they were jointly liable. It was not merely a theft. It was a gross, dastardly thing, without a single mitigating circumstance. My husband killed himself."

"It broke Philip's heart; it broke his spirit! It destroyed his generous faith in all men. He was a brilliant student in college and promised to go far in the law; but he felt keenly the dishonor. The financial part of it he of course took care of; that was the least of it. There was always a strain of mysticism in him; and he had gone deeply into astrology and things like that; and when the dark hour came he pretended to find consolation in them. He was born under an evil star, he said, and would not be free from its spell until he had passed through a spirit of servitude. It sounds like insanity, but it was only a grim ironic distortion of his reason. He said that if honor was so poor a thing he would seek a world that knew no honor. I read to think how he has spent these years!"

"In one of his brief messages he spoke of a young woman who had interested him, but I never can tell when he's serious."

Archie met the question promptly. "A charming young girl, Ruth Hastings, whose antecedents and connections are the best. You need have no fears on that score. You shall see her, very soon."

She permitted him to describe the meeting with Ruth and Isabel at Rochester, and her face betrayed relief and pleasure as he made it clear that the Governor's romance was in no way discreditable.

"It is curious, and in his own way of looking at things may be significant, that your telegram reached me on the day following the seventh anniversary of the beginning of his exile."

"He looked forward to the seventh anniversary as marking the end of the dark influences; he believed there would be a vast change in his affairs."

"If he only lives!" he exclaimed. "Is it possible that he can ever step back into the world he left?"

"You may be sure he has planned a return, with marriage at the very threshold."

"Then God grant that he may live!" he said fervently.

The following evening, after Dr. Mosgrove's visit had left their hopes high, Archie carried her to Heart O' Dreams. Happiness shone in the stars over the northern waters. Putney Congdon and his wife were en-

joying to the full peace that followed upon the storms of their married life.

Isabel gave Archie no opportunity to speak to her alone, and he found her aloofness dismaying. She made a candid confession to Mrs. Congdon, with Putney and Archie standing by. "With malice aforethought I practiced my vampirish arts upon these two men! And, Alice, the cruelest thing you could do would be to forgive me! I couldn't bear it. I flirted with Mr. Congdon; not only that but I took advantage of his distress over his father's efforts to estrange you two to counsel him to lead a reckless, devil-may-care existence. And I tried the same thing on Mr. Bennett, only he was much more susceptible than your husband and took me more seriously. I want you, one and all, to be sure that I hate myself most cordially!"

"The end justified the means, I think," said Mrs. Congdon.

"I found a friend in not going to lose an one result," said Putney. "And if the sick man across the bay recovers I hope I have another lifelong friend there."

"Oh, it's all so strange!" cried Mrs. Congdon. "One might think that we must suffer tribulation before we know what perfect happiness is! Is it possible that you'll ever settle down again?"

"That depends—" Archie remarked, glancing meaningfully at Isabel, a glance which Mrs. Congdon detected and appraised with that prescience which makes every woman a match-maker.

On the eighth day Dr. Mosgrove announced that his visits were no longer necessary; he ran up to Huddleston, he told Archie, for the pleasure of meeting the agreeable people he found there. The Governor was making an extraordinary recovery, and the bracing northern air would soon set him up.

Dr. Mosgrove had made a careful examination of Carey, and recommended that he be sent to a sanatorium for treatment. Parky undertook to carry him to a private institution near Chicago suggested by the doctor, and this became another of the series of strange errands that fell to the lot of the Arthur B. Grover. Elphilet Congdon had been importuning Archie to release him, but it had seemed wise to give the erratic millionaire more time in which to meditate upon his sins.

When the tug returned Archie found that the old gentleman had taken advantage of a day's parole in Chicago to do considerable shopping. In a new suit of clothes he really looked, as Parky said, like a white man; but the change in him was not merely as to his outward person. He opened a bag on deck and displayed with pride a pearl necklace he had purchased for his daughter-in-law, a handsome watch for young Edith and another for his grandson, whom Mrs. Congdon had left with a friend in the East.

Though so many vistas were brightening, Archie was still troubled by Isabel's persistent refusal to see him alone, or to give him any opportunity

to break down the barriers she had raised against him.

"You are running away from me!" he said sternly. "And that's not fair. 'Oh, this is my busiest day! You mustn't think a place like this runs automatically.'"

"I think nothing of the kind. But your studied efforts to escape from me are embarrassing. Ruth, the Congdons, Mrs. Graybill—everybody is noticing it!"

"Certain matters are one's personal affairs," she answered. Really, I must ask you to excuse me."

"I refuse to be snubbed again! You are trampling me under foot, and I refuse to be stepped on any more. I wish to assure you, Miss Perry, that my love for you is not to be spurned with impunity!"

"Please be careful! Those girls over there are watching you."

"A wonderful opportunity for them to see a desperate man making love; an invaluable part of their education! They will never forget how I fell upon my knees and declared myself!"

"Oh, you wouldn't! You really wouldn't! You forget that these children are highly impressionable!"

"So am I, and extremely sensitive. It would be fine if you'd join me in a little walk. If you refuse I shall follow you the rest of the day singing. The Governor and I did a good deal of singing in our travels and—"

As he filled his lungs as though about to burst into song she hastily turned toward the wood.

"You seem to forget that I'm mistress here while you're merely a guest! I hate to say it, but you're in serious danger of becoming a nuisance."

"You're not resentful and hateful enough yet to frighten me away. He either fears his fate too much, Or his deserts are small, That dares not put it to the touch To gain or lose it all."

"I insist that I love you. That's the only thing that matters!"

"Except," she corrected, "your cheerful assumption that I reciprocate the feeling when—"

"You call it an affair! Calamity would be a better term for it."

This silenced him for some time. As she walked before him, carrying her head high, his heart ached with love for her. It would be best perhaps not to urge her further; to wait until the camp closed and then see her in a different environment. It might be that his sister would arrange this for him, and he took courage from the thought.

Continued next week.

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