

# BLACKSHEEP!

By Meredith Nicholson

Illustrations by Henry 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, 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 Cornford, 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 state to deliver the \$60,000 to train-robbler Leary at Walker's farm, where Archie gets new insight into workings of the crime world. Now read on.

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 proceeding. 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 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 show up! Not that you had to, but it's a good deal more fun having somebody to keep you company in the kitchen."

"Give me a towel and I'll promise not to break anything." "You don't look as 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 girls 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 know you were a real gent the first squint I got of you. You can't fool me much on human nature."

"You're always lived up here?" asked Archie, mock under her frank approval. "Certainly not. I was born in Missouri, a grand old state if I do say it myself, and we came here when I was twelve. I went through high school and took dairying and the do-

mestic 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, and 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 romantic ideas about the great game 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, for she 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 some time 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 anyone 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—"

"Is 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 you might help."

To be called big and brave and strong by so charming a person, to enjoy her confidence and to be her chosen aid in an hour of need and 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,

who owns a farm just a little way down the road. He and I have been in love with each other ever since we went to school together, really and truly lovers. He was at college when I was, so I know him very well. But pop doesn't like him, and when he found how matters stood he refused to allow me to see him any more. And he's been very hard about it. We've been waiting for a chance to run away and get married. I met him last night in the lane and everything's arranged for us to leave to-night, run into Brattleboro and be married there and then go on to Boston and wait till pop's disposed to be reasonable. He wants me to marry a preacher at Saxby Center who's almost as old as pop, and has three grown children. I thought maybe you could pretend to take me for a little ride in your car, and pick up Abijah and give us a lift. My things are all packed and hid away in the garage; so all I need to do is to get my hat."

"Of course I couldn't come back here," Archie suggested. "Your father would be sure to vent his wrath on me."

"Oh, I'd thought of that!" she exclaimed. "But you could go on and wait somewhere for the Governor to catch up with you."

"I'd have to make sure he didn't catch up with me! He'll be mighty sore about this."

"Well, if you're afraid of him—" "Pooh! I certainly am not afraid of him," he declared contemptuously. "He and I were bound to part sometime."

Through the cajoleries of a girl he had known only a few hours he was ready to break with his comrade by mischievously upsetting the domestic affairs of a host who doubtless had not forgotten how to kill men who incurred his displeasure. Sally had affected him like a strong cordial and as they walked to the house he grew increasingly keen for the proposed adventure. Sally, like Isabel, had dared him to be brave, and he screwed his courage to the sticking point.

"If you don't mind I'll take Sally for a little run down the road," he suggested casually when they found the Governor and Mrs. Walker still gossiping on the veranda.

No objection was raised by Mrs. Walker beyond an injunction not to be gone long and a warning not to go without her jacket.

"No joy riding," the Governor called after them. Sally's a valuable asset of this family and I'll hold you personally responsible. Comly, for her safe return."

III

At the garage Sally produced a satchel which Archie tossed into the car, and they were quickly humming through the lane and into the highway.

"Run by the school house when we come to it and then stop. Abijah will be there."

When the car stopped Sally jumped out and was immediately joined by a young man to whom she spoke rapidly out of Archie's hearing. Her explanations finished she brought him to the car and presented him as Mr. Strong.

"Mr. Comly is going to the minister's with us and then give us a lift toward Boston. That's ever so much better than anything we'd thought of, Bijah!"

"Whatever you say, little girl! I'll shut off the lights on my machine and get my traps."

Archie, testing his searchlight, let its beam fall upon Abijah as though by accident and found Sally's lover a very well-dressed, decent-looking fellow. All his life he would be proud of his daring in saving Sally Walker from marriage with the odious widower and mating her with the youth of her choice. The bride and groom elect were established in the back seat and he experienced a sharp, jealous twinge, when, turning to ask her a question about the road, he caught them in a rapturous kiss. This was what it meant to be young and free, and youth and freedom were things he had never until now appraised at their true worth.

"How long do we stop at Brattleboro?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Only long enough to get the knot tied," Abijah answered, "I was in town this afternoon and everything's set."

"I hope," said Sally, "you'll give the bride away; it would be just fine of you, Mr. Comly."

"I was hoping you'd ask me," he flung back. "I want to be as prominent in the wedding party as possible."

Sally's nuptials were blessed in a little parsonage, with the minister's wife and daughter and Archie as the sole witnesses. The minister had only lately come to town and therefore confined his inquiries to the strict re-

quirements of ecclesiastical and Vermont law.

"Well, Sally," Archie remarked, as he joined them, "for better or worse you are married. I certainly wish you all good luck."

"We'll be back in a week and everything will be smooth as butter," Sally declared lightly.

The wedding journey from Brattleboro to Benningham was marred by tire trouble and freakishness on the part of the engine, and as neither of his passengers knew the roads Archie's good nature was severely tested by the exigencies of the night drive.

Abijah helped with the tires but only stared helplessly while Archie poked at the engine. Sally was far more resourceful and lent her assistance with her usual good cheer, a cheer which Archie felt he would miss when he bade them good-bye at Bennington. As a mark of special favor she moved to the front seat to keep him company and facilitate the study of sign posts.

"I've put you to an awful lot of trouble," Sally remarked with real contrition. "And you've left your friend the Governor far behind. I suppose they started out to look for us in pop's machine when we didn't show up and they may be close behind us now. The only thing I'm sorry about it missing hearing pop swear when he found I had skipped. It would be funny if they thought I'd run off with you, wouldn't it! I'd just love that!"

"I don't think it's so funny you didn't," Archie answered. "I think it was my mistake!"

The groom had drawn up his knees and was attempting to sleep on the back seat. It was quite improper to flirt with the newest of brides, but Sally gave tolerant ear and even encouraged Archie's protestations of admiration while Abijah bumped about in the tonneau and now and then rolled off the seat when the enraptured driver negotiated a sharp turn. But for Sally's disposition to make the most of her last hours with him the drive would have bored Archie exceedingly.

Sally and Abijah were eager to leave Bennington as soon as possible.

"Don't think we're not appreciating what you've done for us," said Abijah, "but Sally and I had better shake you and that machine right here. Sally's folks'll be sure to be after us and they'll just about argue we came this way."

Archie laid to his soul the flattering unctious that Abijah was jealous. Justification of this suspicion was supported by the bridegroom's sudden anxiety to depart out of Vermont with the utmost expedition. Archie had every intention of ordering as gorgeous a breakfast as Bennington's best hotel could provide but Abijah promptly vetoed this suggestion and they ate at a lunch counter, which Archie found a most disagreeable proceeding. Abijah left Sally and Archie eating scrambled eggs while he set forth to acquire information about trains. He returned while they were still at the counter to report that a train was almost immediately

available. His haste annoyed Archie, who hated being hurried at his meals. At the station Abijah hung about the baggage-room, where he had no business whatever, as though trying to create the impression that he was traveling alone. When the train came along he climbed into the smoker with his own bag, leaving Archie to assist Sally into the chair car.

"Abijah's just a little afraid pop might have telephoned, you know, or be coming after us. He'll move in here when the train starts."

"I don't like to leave you like this," said Archie mournfully.

"Oh, it will be all right," Sally answered bravely. "Abijah's nervous; that's all. That was certainly some ride we had last night. I hope you'll go up to the hotel now and get a good sleep."

"Oh, I'll look out for that," Archie replied.

"I suppose we'll hardly meet again," he said with a dejection which he hoped would elicit a promise of further meetings.

"I'm afraid it will be a long, long time before I see you," she said with a lingering tenderness and wistfulness.

"I hope you're going to be very happy, Sally. And I shall think of you always as you were last night. I shall never forget our talk by the brook."

"Neither shall I," she murmured. Her lashes were wonderful; not till that moment had he done justice to her lashes.

Belated passengers were now brushing past them in the aisle. The conductor, walking briskly along the platform, shouted all aboard with heartless finality. It seemed like the voice of doom to Archie.

"Good-bye, Sally!"

He put out his hand, but with a quickness that took his breath away she flung her arms round his neck and kissed him. The touch of her hand by the brook under the stars was as nothing to this. Two young girls seeking seats giggled at the frankness and heartiness of the salutation. In old times Archie would have perished of humiliation; but an overwhelming joy filled his soul. The giggles of bread-and-butter misses who knew nothing of life and love were beneath his notice. Sally's arms were still about his neck, her lips were parted expectantly.

"You must go, honey," she whispered and his kiss fell like a punctua-

tion upon her last delectable word.

If she hadn't given him a gentle push toward the door he might never have reached the vestibule. Another person who shared his haste to leave the train materially assisted him by gentle pressure to the platform. His brain whirled from the intoxication of Sally's kiss—indeed the two kisses, or specifically the kiss received and the kiss returned. But his exaltation was of brief duration; for there beside him stood Isabel like an accusing angel, severe and implacable. It was she whose gentle impulsion had facilitated his exit from the parlor car, and beyond question she had witnessed the kissing, a disagreeable circumstance that fell smotheringly upon his ecstatic mood.

(Continued next week)

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