

BLACKSHEEP!

By Meredith Nicholson

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INTRODUCTION

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 lead him to believe he has shot Putney Congdon—the owner of the house. They proceeded 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—is 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 that he may be able to serve her. At a dance at Ruth's home, Archie meets Isabel! Now read on!

"In spite of my warnings you continue to follow me!" said Isabel, when they were established in the supper room.

"Are we to have another row? I don't believe I can go through with it."

"No; for rows haven't got us anywhere. And Ruth whispered to me a moment ago to be very nice to you. While the gentleman on the other side of me is occupied we might clear up matters a little."

"It's not in my theory of life to explain things; I tried explaining myself at Portsmouth and again at Bennington but you were singularly unsympathetic. Please be generous and tell me why you were skipping all over New England, darting thru trains and searching hotel registers and manifesting uneasiness when policemen appeared."

"It occurred to me after the Bennington interview that I might have been unjust, but I was in a humor to suspect everyone. When you said you'd shot Putney Congdon you frightened me to death. Of course you did nothing of the kind!"

"This is wonderful chicken salad," he said hastily. "I beg of you to do it full justice. The people about us mustn't get the idea that we're discussing homicide. Now, to answer your question, I had to shoot Mr. Putney Congdon and in edging away from the scene of my bloodshed I was guilty of other indiscretions that made me chatter like a maniac when I saw you."

"My own nerves had gone to pieces or I shouldn't have flared up as I did at Portsmouth and I was even more irresponsible when I saw you in that parlor car at Bennington. And please don't think that because I am showing you so much tolerance I am wholly satisfied that you weren't trying to thwart my own criminal adventures. When you met me at Portsmouth I was trying to meet poor Mrs. Congdon somewhere to help kidnap her little girl!"

"Edith—a lovely child," Archie remarked, and picked up the napkin that slipped from her knees. He enjoyed her surprise.

"If I hadn't been warned by Ruth that you were to be trusted in this business I should begin screaming. How did you know the child's name? What do you know about the Congdons?"

"Volumes! Let my imagination play on your confession. You were trying to find Mrs. Congdon and whisk the child away to your camp, when I ran into you. You had missed connections with the mother and thought I was trying to embarrass and frustrate you! I had troubles of my own and you couldn't have done me a greater wrong."

"Mrs. Congdon was in a panic; skipping about with the children to avoid her husband; but it was really her father-in-law who was pursuing her. Mrs. Congdon loves her husband and from what Ruth says he's devoted to her, but the father-in-law is a malicious mischief maker! I came here to meet Ruth, who is an old friend of hers, hoping she might be able to deliver the little girl to me undetected. I was to run with Edith as hard as I could for Heart o' Dreams, my girls' camp, you know, up in Michigan."

"How stupid I am! With a word you might have made unnecessary

our two alterations! We have but a moment more, and I shall give you in tabloid form my adventures to date."

Of the Governor he spoke guardedly, finding that Isabel knew nothing about him beyond a shadowy impression that she had derived from Ruth that he was a wanderer who had charmed her fancy. When he finished, he said:

"We can't stay here any longer, I suppose; there's a young blade at the door looking for you now. Is there any way I can serve you?"

"Ruth has explained all that to Mr. Saulsbury by now. She felt sure that he would help; and, believe me, I have confidence in you."

Archie and the Governor walked back to the hotel in the best of humor. As they crossed the lobby the Governor suddenly slapped his pockets and walked up to the cigar stand. A tall man in a gray traveling cap was talking earnestly to the clerk, meanwhile spinning a twenty-dollar gold piece on the show case. The Governor purchased some cigarettes and while waiting for change nodded to the stranger who absently responded and began tapping the coin with the handle of a penknife.

"Not many of those things in circulation nowadays," the Governor remarked, thrusting the cigarettes into his pocket. The stranger carelessly inspected the two gentlemen in evening dress and handed the coin to the Governor.

"What d'ye think of that?" he asked.

The Governor turned the gold disk to the light and then flung it sharply on the wooden end of the counter, where it rang musically. He handed it back with a smile.

"The real thing, all right! Wish I had a couple of million just like it."

"It's a good thing you haven't!" the man remarked with a grin.

"It doesn't seem possible we can lose!" he said when they reached their rooms. "There will be cross-current yet; but a strong tide has set in, bearing us one."

"That chap was Dobbs, a government specialist in counterfeiters, and that twenty-dollar piece had almost the true ring, but not quite. The man who turned it out showed me the difference only yesterday. Perky? Certainly. He said Eliphalet Congdon had taken a bagful to pass on the unwary. The old boy had changed a lot of them in New England and the government is not ignoring the matter."

"You don't think old man Congdon has been here lately?" asked Archie.

"Only a day or two ago! I picked that up while I was buying my magazine. Congdon bought some stogies at the cigar stand and changed that twenty. We're all loaded for Eliphalet, Archie. After you told me your kidnapping story, I telegraphed to Perky for all the possible places where the old man might be. Perky has ranged the country with him and from his data we can keep tab on the old boy. Dobbs knows nothing of the kidnapping; it's the gold piece that interests him. I overheard enough to know we're on the right track. Eliphalet Congdon owns a farm in Ohio. Perky spent a month there boring out gold pieces. What we've got to do, Archie, is to find the Congdon girl and turn her over to your Isabel and my Ruth. A very pretty job, demanding our best attention."

"But we're not leaving here until—"

"You were about to say that we can't shake the dust of Rochester from our sandals before we've made our party calls. Alas, no! We shall not communicate with our ladies again. First we must justify their confidence in us and find the Congdon child. It's still the open road for us, Archie. Good night and pleasant dreams."

The new car which the Governor purchased proved to be a racer and he drove it with the speed of a king's messenger bearing fateful tidings.

"We ride for our ladies! Let the constables go hang!"

At Buffalo the Governor made earnest efforts to rent a yacht without confiding to Archie what use he expected to make of it. None being in the market, the Governor set about hiring a tug, and did in fact lease one for a month from a dredging company, paying cash and the wages of the crew in advance, and reserving an option to buy. The Arthur B. Grover was to be sent to Cleveland and held there for orders. He might want to negotiate the lakes as far as Duluth, he told the president of the company, who was surprised and chagrined when the singular Mr. Saulsbury readily accepted a figure that was intended to be prohibitive.

"We must be ready for anything," he remarked to Archie. "The signs

point to a disturbance of great waters and there's nothing like being prepared."

At Cleveland Archie's last doubt as to his mentor's connection with the underworld of which he talked so entertainingly was removed. Reaching the city at midnight the car was left at a garage downtown, their trunks expressed to Chicago, and they arrived by a devious course at an ill-smelling boarding house. Here, the Governor informed Archie, only the aristocracy of the preying professions were received.

Next morning Archie was dragged from the hardest bed he had ever slept in.

"No more scented soap!" cried the governor. "Here's where we get down to brass tacks and let our whiskers flourish."

He threw a rough suit of clothes on a chair and bade Archie get into it as quickly as possible.

"We shall leave this thriving city as farm hands eager to step softly upon the yielding clod. We go by trolley a little way, and if you have never surveyed the verduous Ohio valley from a careening trolley car, you have a joy coming to you. But don't assume that we shall ride all the way; it's afoot for us, Archie! We shall be tramps seeking honest labor but awfully choosy about the jobs we take!"

The first night they slept in a barn, without permission, begged a breakfast and walked until Archie cried for mercy. At the end of the fourth day as they kicked their heels against the pier of a bridge that spanned the Sandusky, watching the stars slip into their places into the soft tender sky, the Governor's quick ear detected the step of a pedestrian approaching from the west.

"Unless we've missed a turn somewhere, that's Perk. A punctual chap, this is the exact time and place for our meeting, and he should bear tidings of interest in our affairs."

The man, who was dressed like a farm laborer, responded carelessly to the Governor's greeting, and swung himself to a seat beside him on an abutment.

"What news of the lamb in the pasture?" the Governor inquired.

"The little lamb is not happy. The father is expected tonight. I've got orders to chop wood while he's on the reservation."

"The son is not wise to the metal trick and you drop into the background?"

"The true word has been spoken, brother."

"The son has been long on the road. What caused him to linger?"

"A broken arm, so the old man has it; and repairs have been made in a hospital at Portland by the eastern sea."

"Is there work in the fields for willing hands? Shall we find welcome as laborers keen for the harvest?" asked the Governor.

"The slave driver weeps for lack of help and the pay is high. You will be welcome. When the sun makes its shortest shadow tomorrow you will sign papers for the voyage."

"Do I understand," Archie asked at length, "that tomorrow we're going to find jobs on Eliphalet's plantation and kidnap his granddaughter?"

"Much as I hate to anticipate, Archie, it's not only little Edith we're going to kidnap! We're going to steal the old man too!"

CHAPTER VII

"I never saw a tramp yet that was worth his breakfast," snarled Grubbs, the foreman of Eliphalet Congdon's farm. "There's some old hats in the barn; shed them pies y' got on yer heads and try t' look like honest men anyhow."

After supper Perky strolled away in one direction; the Governor in another, and Archie, left to his own devices, fumed at his desertion.

"Mooning? Perky and I have been smoking our pipes off yonder in the woods. He says old Eliphalet is more and more delighted with his work. The more he's delighted the better the sport for us."

"I don't see where the sport comes in!" Archie said testily. He resented his exclusion from the conference with Perky and said so.

"My dear boy, suspense is good for the soul; I'm merely cultivating in you the joy of surprise. The discipline of waiting will sharpen your wits, which is important, as I mean to honor you with considerable responsibility and leave you here when I depart, which will be tonight as dewy eve spreads her sparkling robe—"

"Leave me here! My God, man, I'm not going to be stranded in this wilderness!"

"Patience, little brother, and not quite so vociferous! This much I will impart; tomorrow morning Per-

ky will whisper to Eliphalet that the government is wise to the gold piece trick and that they are watched. Perky will throw a scare into him and then he'll advise him to beat it, and the old chap will throw his arms around Perky's neck and beg for protection. And Perky, with a reputation for never deserting a pal, will seize him firmly by the hand and away they'll go. Next, I take the little girl into my car and start for the camp. You, Archie, will remain here to watch Mr. Putney Congdon. The part I'm assigning to you flatters your intelligence. You are to watch Putney Congdon and follow him when he leaves."

"Cut the rubbish and listen to me," said Archie, his voice quivering with anger; "you think I'm going to follow him? What if he stays all summer?"

"He won't," the Governor answered. "He's going to follow that child of his if it leads him to kingdom come! If you want to see your Isabel again, follow Putney Congdon. You will of course be a model of discretion, but—"

"Do you mean to say you'll tell him where you're taking his child?"

"I shall not of course spoil the joy of the kidnapping by taking Putney in my confidence, but after the child's well out of the way I shall send him a wire telling him where his daughter may be found—a gentle hint, but sufficient to tease his curiosity."

"You will wire him where you're headed for when you haven't told me!"

"I'll just whisper the address in your ear and you'll do well to remember it. Heart o' Dreams Camp, Huddleston, Mich.; postoffice, Calvierville. Good bye and God bless you!"

But the Governor's blessing failed to dispel the gloom that settled upon Archie as he crept through the shed where the laborers were housed and found his cot.

The morning opened auspiciously with a raking from Grubbs, who, finding that the Governor had decamped, most ungenerously held Archie for his departure.

"Look here," he asked suddenly, "d'ye know anything about horses?"

"Oh, I've always been around the horses," said Archie. "Guess I can handle 'em all right."

"Well, go to the barn and clean up the pony, and clap on a boy's saddle you'll find there; and there's a sorrel mare in the last stall on the left you can take. The old man's granddaughter wants to ride. I gotta waste a horse right now so a grown man can play with a kid. Guess all them Congdons got something wrong with 'em! The old man's skipped out this morning without sayin' whether

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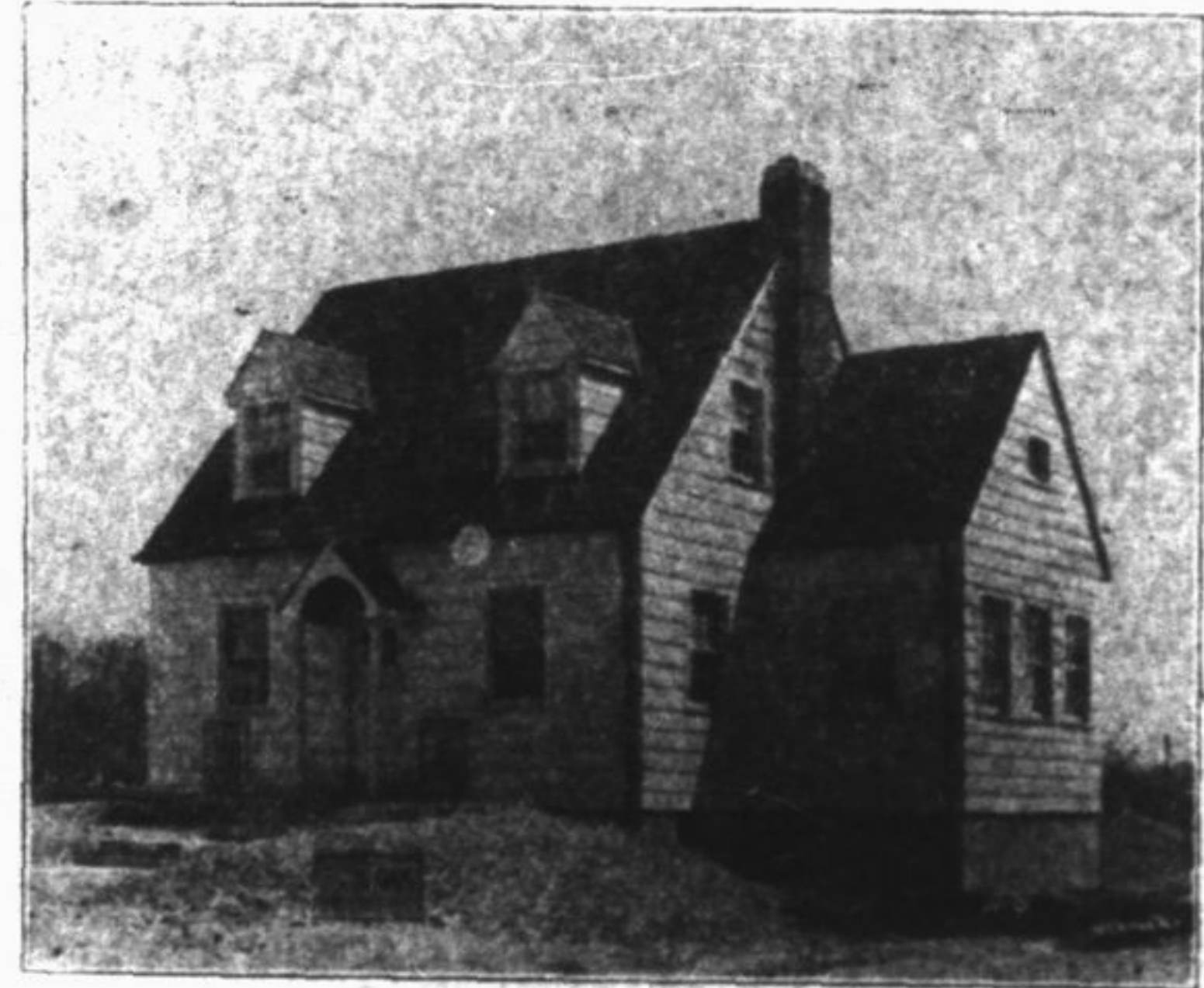
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