

# Blacksheep

By Meredith Nicholson

## 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 flights to evade publicity. He starts cross-country afoot—now read on:

## ARCHIE MEETS "THE GOVERNOR"

The first glimmer of dawn was breaking over a gray world, when a curious whistle, a long pipe and then a short quick one, in the roadside a little way ahead brought Archie to a halt. He drew his gun from his overcoat pocket and stood perfectly quiet. In a few seconds the whistle was repeated, and Archie, grown suddenly bold, checked an impulse to fly and imitated it.

A man rose from behind a stone wall on the right and walked toward him.

"That you, Hoky?" he called sharply, peering through the mist.

Seeing that he was not Hoky but a stranger with a pistol, he sprang forward and wrenched the gun from Archie's hand.

Stop squealing! Bad enough for you to fool me with that whistle without pulling a gun. Now you get right over there by the fence where I'm pointing and we'll consider matters a little.

"I was just walking to Portsmouth," began Archie in a blithe tone he hoped would prove convincing. His captor laughed ironically.

"Now you listen to me! You've been up to something, so don't tell me that you're taking a little before breakfast stroll to Portsmouth to work up an appetite. In the first place, have you seen a man about your size along the road anywhere?"

"Not a soul!" declared Archie solemnly.

"Mighty queer Hoky doesn't turn up! I warned the beggar against these sea-side villas; they're all outfitted with fancy burglar alarms that make a deuce of a row when you step on the wire. It rings a gong loud enough to wake the dead and then some chap jumps out of bed and turns on all the lights in the house and very likely open up with a gun before you can say Jerusalem. But Hoky thought he knew better."

Archie clutched at the stone fence against which his captor had pushed him and his breath came in long gasps.

"You mean," he faltered, "that you fear your friend has been shot?"

"That, my dear sir, is exactly what troubles me!"

"Archie's tongue clung to the roof of his mouth as he tried to murmur his sympathy for the stranger's sorrow. The thought that he was probably talking to the accomplice of the man he had shot was terrifying; the stranger seemed enormously fond of Hoky and if he knew that he had within his grasp the person who was responsible for Hoky's failure to return from his visit to Bailey Harbor he would very likely make haste to avenge his friend's death. It seemed to Archie that the gods were playing strange tricks upon him indeed. The man's speech was not the argot he had assumed from his reading of crook stories to be common utterance of the underworld. There was something attractive in the fellow. He carried himself jauntily, and his clean-shaven, rounded face and fine gray eyes would not have suggested his connection with burglary. He was an engaging sort of person, and Archie decided suddenly that the man might be of service to him. He was in pressing need of a change of clothes, but he was in no condition to proceed to Portsmouth to redeem his suitcase; an impression that was confirmed unexpectedly by his captor.

"You will pardon my candor, but you certainly look like the devil. Let me introduce myself to you as the Governor. Among the powers that prey that is my proud cognomen, not to say alias. Now please be frank, what mischief brings you here at this hour?" Archie gave serious thought to his answer. If he could convince this person that he was a crook he would be less likely to suspect that he had been instrument of Hoky's undoing.

"I've got to make a getaway and be in a hurry about it," declared Archie in a confidential air.

"A little trouble of some sort, eh? It rather occurred to me that you were retromenading for mere pleasure," replied the Governor. "A fashionable defaulter, perhaps? No? Then let it go at murder, tho I confess you don't look as tho you would have a stomach for homicide."

"I came damned near getting pinched!" asserted Archie stoutly. "The cops back there in that town gave me a hard run for it. I was just crawling through the window of a drug store when here comes a chap, tiptoeing through the alley, and I bolted for the tall timber as hard as I could spring. The fire bell rang, and the whole town woke up. There'll be a whole army looking for me; and if your friend Hoky's been killed they'll be keen to pinch me as another member of the gang."

The Governor listened patiently. "An amateur, I take it?" he remarked.

"Hell, no," grumbled Archie scornfully. "But I always play the game alone; I never had any use for pals. They get in the way."

"Wrong my boy; wrong! A good partner like me is essential. As for myself I rarely venture to expose myself in these little affairs; but I advise and counsel the brethren. You haven't the judgment of a month-old infant. A stormy night always makes honest householders wakeful. Your attempt, my son, speaks for courage, but not for discretion. You should always ask me about such things."

"I'm sorry," replied Archie meekly, "that I didn't run into you sooner."

"The loss is mine!" cried the Governor heartily. "But let us be practical. We must make a long jump, son, for the coast will ring with this, particularly if Hoky is lying cold at the undertaker's."

"When Hoky persisted in his illchosen enterprise I lifted a little roadster that I've tucked away down here in a peaceful lane. Thought I'd be all ready to give the old boy a long pull for freedom when he came back, but—!"

Sure enough the roadster was there, and the Governor became suddenly a man of action. Kneeling down he detached a New York license tag from the machine drew from his pocket a Maine tag and attached it, humming meanwhile.

"The rural police haven't learned this simple device," he explained, as he sent the discarded tag skimming into a corn field. He jumped in and bade Archie take the seat beside him. The car was soon bumping merrily over a rough road that wound through a pine wood. They followed a grass-grown trail that ended abruptly at an abandoned lumber camp.

"We'll shoot the car around behind that pyramid of sawdust and walk a bit to stretch our legs," the Governor informed Archie. There was no trace of a path where he struck off into the woods, but he strode along with the easy confidence of one who is sure of his destination. They brought up presently beside a brook and in a moment more reached a log hut planted on the edge of the high bank.

"What do you think of that, Sir Archibald?" inquired the Governor carelessly. Then, as Archie paused, he added, "Oh your name? Perfectly easy! Archibald Bennett was neatly sewed in your coat pocket by your tailor as I observed when I rubbed my hands over your waistcoat to see if you wore a bade."

"I got these duds out of a suitcase I sneaked—and that's no name of mine!" Archie explained hurriedly, still anxious to convince the Governor that he was a thief.

"Very careless of you not to rip out the label. Men have been hanged on slighter evidence. But Archibald is not a name to sneeze at, and I rather like Archie, so Archie I shall continue to call you. Now, we'll see what we can do to shake up a breakfast."

He drew out a key and opened the door of the hut.

"Not a bad place, Archie. I stumbled upon it a couple of years ago quite by accident and use it occasionally." He opened a cupboard revealing a quantity of provisions, and they prepared their breakfast.

"My friend," said the Governor, soberly as they rose from the table, "we have dipped our hands in the same dish and broken bread together. I don't mind saying that you're a likable chap. I'll be a good pal to you and I ask you to be straight with me. Are we friends or—?"

He put out his hand and Archie grasped it.

"All right, Archie—for such you shall be to the end of the chapter, whether you lied about it or not. And now let's deal with practical affairs. I'm going to spend the afternoon on that stolen machine. I'll paint 'er white to symbolize our purity. There's an assortment of clothes the boys left from time to time. You can pick 'em over while I'm working on the car."

In doffing the clothing he had acquired honestly and substituting stolen raiment, it was almost as though Archie were changing his character as well. He wondered what Isabel would say if she knew that he had already slipped the leash that bound him to convention and performed even more reckless deeds than she had prescribed for him.

"Well, I must say you're a credit to our gent's clothing department!" remarked the Governor upon his return. "What do you make of this? Found it in the car."

He extended a crumpled telegram which read:

Putney Congdon, Thackeray Club, N. Y.

I am offering the house for rent. Shall take every precaution to protect my children from your brutality.

A. B. G.

Archie felt the hut whirling around him. What he held was beyond question the reply of Mrs. Congdon to her husband's telegram that had been left lying on the dinner table. And if Congdon had left New York for Bailey Harbor immediately to put into effect his threat to abduct his child, it might have been Congdon he had shot—not Hoky.

The Governor's ceaseless flow of talk fortunately diverted his thoughts to more cheerful channels, and he obeyed with alacrity a hint that he prepare luncheon. After this had been consumed the Governor suggested a game of chess, produced a set of ivory chessmen from a cupboard and soon proved himself a skillful player.

At the end of two hours the Governor declared that they must take a nap before setting out and turned into one of the beths. He was soon snoring. Archie kicked about restlessly for a time, but finally, slept—only to wander through a wild phantasmagoria of crime.

"To gain or lose it all," he was stammering as he opened his eyes. But it was not Isabel he was addressing, but his confederate, blandly smiling.

"The boy quotes poetry!" exclaimed the Governor. "Archie, you've come in answer to my prayers! Together we shall drink of the fount of Castalia. We shall

chum with Apollo and the Muses Nine! But the gods call us elsewhere! We'll snatch a bite and be off! And we've got a job all waiting for us. One of the brotherhood has commissioned me to dig up some boodle he's planted over in New Hampshire. You may recall the incident. Red Leary, a rare boy, held up an express messenger and sauntered off with fifty thousand dollars in new bank notes fresh from the Treasury. Do you follow me?

"He hid it somewhere and wants your help in recovering it."

"Right the first time! That cash is tucked away in the cellar of a church and by this time tomorrow night we'll have it all ready for old Red and check the item from our tablets."

"But the numbers of those notes are in every bank in the country; the police are only waiting for the bills to get into circulation to pounce on the thief."

"I am more and more delighted with you, my son! That point had given me no little worry. But something will turn up; there will be a way out of the difficulty. Chuck your old duds into the creek and close the windows. We'll hit the long trail."

Out of the woods and once more on a smooth highway the stolen car sped like a frightened ghost through the starry night. The Governor drove with the assurance of a man who knows what he's about. Occasionally the Governor lifted his voice in songs of unimpeachable literary and musical quality that rang sonorously above the hum of the engine.

They struck a stretch of road under repair and slowing up the Governor remarked carelessly as he picked his way through a line of red lanterns:

"Speaking of women, my dear Archie, do you share the joy of the lyric poets in the species? It occurs to me that you have probably had many affairs. I'm thirty-four but I've loved only one woman. And strange as it may seem, she's a bishop's daughter."

This confidence made it incumbent upon Archie to make some sort of reply. The Governor would probably be disappointed in him if he confessed the meagerness of his experiences.

"Well, I'm in the same boat," he answered glibly. "There's only one girl for me! This reference to Isabel Perry, remote and guarded as it was, he defended only on the ground that it was necessary in some way to meet the Governor half-way in his confidences. And it was no lie that he sincerely believed that he loved her. No other girl had ever roused him so much, or given him so good reason for standing off and taking a look at himself. He wondered what she would say if she could see him with a criminal beside him, joyriding in a stolen car.

His thoughts of her had left him far afield when the Governor remarked ruminatively:

"Do you manage to see her? That's the devil of it in my case! The lady's forbidden to recognize me in any way and her father is

a tart old party and keeps sharp watch of her. I can't see her and the regular mails are closed to us. Nevertheless we have an arrangement by which if she ever needs me or thinks I can serve her in any way she's to leave a note in a certain place. It's her own idea and very pretty."

As dawn broke the whistle and rumble of a train caused the Governor to stop the car and dive into his pockets for time tables of which he carried a large supply. He scanned one and hummed his satisfaction.

"We'll get rid of this machine right now as there's a station over there a little way where we can pick up a local right into Portsmouth. He stopped, opened a gate and ran the car through a barnyard and into an empty shed.

"Now for a brisk walk!" They crossed the railroad and were soon buying tickets from a sleepy station master. They alighted at Portsmouth without mishap, and Archie wired his sister that the Congdon house would not do. Then he redeemed his suitcase in the check room and joined the Governor.

They drove to the hotel, where they commanded the best service of the inn. The Governor registered elaborately as Reginald Heber Saulsbury and wrote Archie down as Ashton Comly, indicating the residence of both as New York.

At the breakfast table, the Governor scanned a local paper and with a chirrup passed it to Archie, pointing to a double-column headline, which read, "A Carnival of Burglary in Maine." Archie's eyes fell upon the bizarre photograph of a dead man with which the page was illustrated, and he choked on a fragment of grapefruit as he read the inscription: "Dead Thief, Identity Unknown."

"That's poor old Hoky all right," murmured the Governor, buttering a piece of toast reflectively. "As you seem to be entranced with the literary style of our Bailey Harbor correspondent, I shall take the liberty of helping you to a fried egg."

However, Archie's appetite was pretty effectually spoiled by this paragraph:

"An odd circumstance, more or less remotely connected with the killing of the burglar in the fashionable colony, still remains to be explained. Officer Yerkes shortly before two o'clock, the hour at which the thief was shot in Mr. Cummings' home, saw a man hurrying through Water Street. He bore the appearance of a gentleman, and the officer did not accost him, thinking him a yachtsman from one of the boats in the harbor who had been visiting friends ashore. The man walked oddly, pausing now and then as though in pain, and was carrying his right hand upon his left shoulder. This morning drops of blood were found on the boardwalk crossed by the stranger, and it is believed that this was another of the burglars who was wounded in a struggle somewhere in the interior and was seeking the help of his confederate, presumably the man shot in the Cummings house."

As the paper fell from Archie's hand the Governor took it up.

"You seem agitated, Archie! You must learn to conceal your feelings!" He read the paragraph and glanced quickly at Archie.

"Your wrok, possibly?" murmured the Governor. "Compose

yourself. I'm afraid you lied to me about the drug store. No!" he held up his hand warningly—"tell me nothing! But if we've got a murder behind us we shall certainly be most circumspect in our movements. You interest me more and more, Archie. I congratulate you on your splendid nerve."

Archie's nerve was nothing he could admire himself, but a second cup of coffee put warmth into his vitals and he recovered sufficiently to pay the breakfast check. If it was Congdon he had shot there was still the hope, encouraged by the newspaper, that the wounded man was in no haste to report his injury to the police. But Archie found little comfort in the thought that somewhere in the world there was a man he had shot and perhaps fatally wounded.

He must conceal his anxious concern from the Governor; for more than ever he must rely upon his strange friend for assistance in escaping from the consequences of the duel in the Congdon cottage.

"Your wrok, possibly?" murmured the Governor. "Compose

(To be continued next Tuesday)

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