

THE GALTON CASE

Material: A 'Lew Archer' suspense novel by Ross Macdonald (Kenneth Millar).

General Locale: Los Angeles, San Francisco, and a Canadian slum.

Publisher: Cassell. London.

Theme: A young man, persuaded by gangsters to impersonate the missing grandson of a very rich old lady, gradually manages to prove that the gangsters are really the murderers of his father; he has been asked to impersonate himself.

Suitable for: Two male leads.

Synopsis: LEW ARCHER, a private detective, is hired by GORDON SABLE, lawyer to the Galton estate. ARCHER is introduced to old MRS. GALTON, an invalid, not expected to live long. He also meets MRS. GALTON's physician, DOCTOR HOWELL, and his daughter, SHEILA HOWELL.

ARCHER is asked to investigate the disappearance of ANTHONY GALTON, Mrs. Galton's son, who ran off and married a sluttish girl from a disreputable part of San Francisco. A child was born, but soon afterwards, Anthony, his wife, and the child vanished. That was twenty years ago.

ARCHER finds evidence that Anthony was robbed and murdered by gangsters. Searching for the wife, ARCHER meets a young man calling himself JOHN LINDSAY, apparently the son of Anthony Galton. Aware that a large inheritance is involved, ARCHER is at first skeptical. But the lawyer, SABLE, is soon convinced that the youth really is MRS. GALTON's grandson. So is the old lady. ARCHER, only half persuaded, continues to investigate other aspects of the mystery, including the fatal stabbing of CULLIGAN, a servant who works for GORDON SABLE, the lawyer.

His inquiries lead ARCHER into trouble. He is threatened. Gangsters are somehow involved. ARCHER walks into a trap. He is beaten up and lands in hospital.

Now, when ARCHER becomes certain that the missing heir is a phoney, he finds himself discouraged by SABLE. The lawyer pays him off handsomely - insisting that he has done all that was expected of him. ARCHER begins to suspect this is all too true; he was hired to discover the young man conveniently planted - JOHN 'GALTON' is an imposter, an accomplice of gangsters plotting to get their hands on the Galton money.

ARCHER's only ally is DOCTOR HOWELL. Howell's daughter has fallen in love with JOHN 'GALTON' or LINDSAY. The doctor, suffering parental jealousy, re-hires ARCHER to continue the inquiries.

The clues lead ARCHER across the border to a slum in a Canadian city. There ARCHER finds proof that JOHN LINDSAY's background is not what he has claimed it to be. ARCHER discovers a sordid boarding house, a rendezvous and hideout for ex-convicts, extortionists and gamblers. A pathetic drunk, called FREDERICKS, owns the establishment, but it is run by MRS. FREDERICKS, a coarse, strong-willed woman in her forties. MRS. FREDERICKS is JOHN LINDSAY's mother.

Comment:

Returning to Los Angeles, ARCHER learns that JOHN 'GALTON' has disappeared, taking SHEILA HOWELL with him. And GORDON SABLE's wife has had a nervous breakdown, confessing to the stabbing of the servant, CULLIGAN.

ARCHER pursues the runaway couple. He discovers that they are following a trail very parallel to his own investigations. The reason soon emerges: JOHN GALTON really is the Galton heir.

The irony is revealed in final scenes of confrontation. Anthony Galton's murderers are the same gangsters who conceived the scheme of persuading the grandson to impersonate himself without his knowing it. The youth agreed to do so. But he had private motives. He has long suspected that the man living with his mother is not his true father. And these instincts have been gradually confirmed during the period when he has been posing as JOHN GALTON.

Young GALTON, pretending to be an accomplice of the gangster group, which includes the lawyer, SABLE and CULLIGAN and the drunk FREDERICKS, is really trying to identify the murderers of his father. Ironically, LEW ARCHER - employed to expose him as a fraud - helps the young man to discover his real identity. FREDERICKS commits suicide. And the story ends with a powerful and poignant scene between the mother and son.

The narrative follows the pattern of such films as 'The Big Sleep', and 'The Maltese Falcon'. It has tension, excitement, violence and a constant series of surprises. It's an excellent thriller.

But that's not its real value as a film subject. The richness is in the character of the young man bent on revenging the death of his murdered father, identifying the killers and coming to terms with the tragic figure of his mother.

This isn't fully brought out in the novel. It can't be - because the story is seen entirely as plot; situation and character relationships are hard to explore in the pattern of a 'who-dunnit'.

An important shift of emphasis is worth considering. A film adaptation could make much more of the relationship between Archer and the young man. Archer could have a bigger emotional stake in the events. And the story could be told much more from the viewpoint of Galton.

Examine the boy's situation. He is a product of two violently contrasted influences. Through his mother and his environment, he is conditioned to be a criminal; yet from his father, he inherits instincts of another kind. The boy is a stranger in each of two worlds; he is not at home in the privileged society of his grandmother, and yet he detests the moral squalor of his mother's criminal associates. His only confidante is the girl he has fallen in love with, SHEILA HOWELL. And, even more interesting, the only man who can really help him is an adversary, LEW ARCHER.

Conflict between GALTON and ARCHER could be the spine of the movie version. It is tempting to think of it in terms of a triangle: Two men and the girl, SHEILA. Rivals, the young man and the detective ought to be on the same side, but they are forced into opposite camps. GALTON, when he is alone with ARCHER, might tacitly admit that he has been deliberately trained to impersonate the missing heir - but can ARCHER prove it? GALTON can use subtle blackmail, challenging ARCHER to denounce him to the invalid Mrs. Galton - dare ARCHER risk the shock which would almost certainly kill her? ARCHER, hating him, must keep silent until he has complete proof of the conspiracy. Which is what GALTON also wants, since that

proof provides the means of identifying the murderers of Anthony Galton, JOHN's father.

When Archer does unearth the facts, there is a poignant dilemma for himself. ARCHER is in a 'Sidney Carlton' situation. He could easily ruin the boy. By exposing only half of the truth, ARCHER could brand GALTON as an imposter, an accomplice of criminals. But ARCHER is an honest man. He must help his rival win the girl and inherit a vast fortune.

Indeed, the final resolution goes even deeper. Disguised as thriller-gangster-melodrama, the story really contains elements that are epic - Hamlet stuff.

JOHN GALTON comes at last to confront a mythological tragedy of Oedipus pattern; the false father who murdered the true one, the evil seducer of a faithless mother. LEW ARCHER's gift to the young couple is to dispel the dark shadow that has clouded the boy's life since childhood. It's the power of these concepts that makes an exciting piece of detective-fiction reverberate in one's imagination.