



The Siege of the Seven Suitors

By MEREDITH NICHOLSON

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CHAPTER IX.

Cecilia's Silver Notebook.

MISS HOLLISTER disappeared in the hall without excuse, and I entered the library to find Cecilia sitting alone by the fire. She put aside a book she had been reading and, seeing that her suit had not followed me, asked at once as to my visit to the inn.

"I conveyed your message," I answered, "but you have seen Mr. Wiggins since, unless I am greatly mistaken."

"Yes; he called this afternoon. We had several callers at the tea hour. I had rather expected you back."

"The fact is," I replied, "that after I had taken luncheon at the Prescott Arms I got lost among the hills, and while in the act of robbing an apple orchard I came most unexpectedly upon your sister."

"Hezekiah!" "The same. And, oddly enough, I had met her before, though I didn't realize it was she until the meeting in the orchard. It was in the Asolando that I saw her; she was at the cashier's wicket the afternoon I met your aunt there."

"You have given me information, Mr. Ames. I did not know that Hezekiah had ever been connected with the Asolando."

"Oh, it was only that one historic day. She says the place was unbearable. She jarred the holiest chords of the divine lyre by harsh comments on the pre-Raphaelite profile. One of the devotees was so shocked that she dropped a plate or something and, to put it coarsely, Hezekiah got the bounce."

My description of Hezekiah's brief tenure of office at the Asolando seemed to amuse Cecilia greatly.

"There is no one like my sister," she said. "There never was and there never will be any one half so charming. Hezekiah is an original, who breaks all the rules and yet always sends the ball over the net. And it is because she is so inexpressibly dear and precious that I am anxious that nothing shall ever hurt her—nothing mar the sweet, beautiful child spirit in her."

It was my turn to laugh now. Cecilia's manifestation of maternal solicitude for Hezekiah seemed absurd, for Hezekiah in her way was older. Hezekiah had faced Diana and plucked arrows from her girdle—she had heard Homer at the roadside singing of Achilles' shield.

"Hezekiah is reasonably safe, I should say, because she is so amazingly swift of foot and eye and so nimble of speech. She is not to be caught in a net or tripped with a word."

"I suppose that is so," remarked Cecilia soberly. "You thought her happy when you met her today? She did not strike you as being a girl with a wound in her heart? She wasn't particularly sad?"

"Not more so than sunlight on rippled water or the song of the lark ascending."

"Of course you made no reference to Mr. Wiggins? If I had imagined you would meet her I should have."

She ended with an embarrassment that I now understood, and I broke in cheerfully.

"We did mention him. She asked me if I had seen him, and it was the thought of him that evoked her merriest laughter."

She shook her head and sighed, then her manner changed abruptly.

"You delivered my message to Mr. Wiggins?"

"I did. He is badly out of sorts and sees nothing clearly. He is very bitter toward your aunt. He thinks she has treated him outrageously."

"Aunt Octavia has done nothing of the kind," she replied with spirit. "Mr. Wiggins has no right to speak of Aunt Octavia save in terms of kindness. If her wits are sharper than his, it is not her fault, that I can see. But there are matters here that I do not understand, Mr. Ames. I trust you, as my aunt evidently does, or I should not be talking to you as I am, and I am moved to ask a favor of you, a favor of considerable weight, in view of the fact that you are a professional man, with, doubtless, many pressing calls upon your time."

I bowed humbly before this compliment. My time had been lightly appraised by Miss Octavia and again by Wiggins. A long telegram from my assistant that reached me while I dress

ed for dinner had urged my immediate attendance upon my office. Some of my best clients, now reopening their houses for the winter, were in desperate straits. But, Octavia Hollister's do not occur in the life of every young man, and both Cecilia and Hezekiah had taken strong hold upon my imagination. Wiggins' place among the dramatic personae would in itself have compelled my sympathetic attention, and the nine silk hats that I had seen bobbing over the stile still danced before my eyes.

"Miss Hollister," I said, "my time is yours to command. My office is well organized, and I am sure that my assistant is equal to any demands that may be made upon him. Pray state in what manner I may serve you."

"I am going far, I know, Mr. Ames, but I beg that you will not be in haste to leave my aunt's house. She must have been strongly prejudiced in your favor or she would not have asked you here on so short acquaintance. I am confident that she has no thought of your leaving. She expressed her great liking for you at luncheon, and I am sure that she will see to it that you do not lack for entertainment. I assume that you must have gathered from what Mr. Wiggins told you of my acquaintance with him the peculiar plight in which I am placed."

I bowed. If she groped in the dark and needed my help in finding the light, I was not the man to desert her. I had dropped my plumb line into too many dark chimneys not to feel the fascination of mystery. As I expressed again my entire willingness to abide at Hopefield Manor as long as she wished, the footman announced Mr. Hartley Wiggins.

We had hardly exchanged greetings before another man was announced, and then another. I should say that it was at intervals of about three minutes that the sedate servant appeared in the curtained doorway and announced a caller until nine had been admitted. My spirits soared high as the gentlemen from the Prescott Arms appeared one after the other. The earlier arrivals rose to greet the later ones, and as they were all in evening clothes I experienced, as when I had seen the same gentlemen in their afternoon raiment crossing the stile, a sense of something fantastic and eerie in them. In the interest of brevity and to avoid confusion, I tabulate them here with a notation as to their residence and occupation, taking such data from the notebook in which, at subsequent dates, I set down the facts which are the basis of this chronicle.

Hartley Wiggins, lawyer and farmer. Hare and Tortoise club, New York.

Linnæus B. Henderson, planter, Roanoke, Va.

Cecil Hugh, Lord Arrowood, no occupation. Arrowood, Hants, England.

Daniel P. Ormsby, manufacturer of knit goods, Utica, N. Y.

S. Forrest Hume, lecturer on Scandinavian literature, Occidental university, Long Trail, Okla.

John Stewart Dick, pragmatist, Omaha, Neb.

Pendennis J. Arbuthnot, banker and horseman, Lexington, Ky.

Percival B. Shallenberger, novelist and small fruits, Sycamore, Ind.

George W. Gorse, capitalist, Redlands, Cal.

We rose and stood in our several places when a moment later Miss Octavia entered. She greeted the suitors graciously and then in her most charming manner called one after the other to sit beside her on a long davenport, the time apportioned being weighed with nicety, so that none might feel himself slighted or preferred. These interviews consumed more than half an hour, and the movement thus occasioned gave considerable animation to the scene.

It may seem ridiculous that nine gentlemen thus paying court to a young woman should call upon her at the same hour, but I must say that the gravity of the suitors and the entire sobriety of Cecilia did not affect me humorously, nor did I feel at all out of place in this strange company. I found myself agreeably engaged for several minutes in discussing Ibsen with the Oklahoma professor, who proved to be a delightful fellow. His experience of life was apparently wide, and he told me with an engaging frankness of his meeting with the Hollisters in France and of his pursuit of them over many weary miles the previous summer. As no one had elected his courses in the university at the beginning of the fall term, he had been granted a leave of absence, and this accounted for his freedom to press his suit at Hopefield Manor at this season. He was a big fellow, with clean cut features, and bore himself with a manly determination that I found attractive.

He alone, I may say, of the nine

men who had thus appeared in Miss Octavia's library met me in a cordial spirit. Even Wiggins seemed not wholly pleased to find me there again, though he had asked me to remain. The manner of the others expressed disdain, suspicion or fierce hostility.

When the last man rose from the davenport Miss Octavia called me to her side. She seemed contrite at having neglected me during the day, but assured me that later she hoped to place an entire day at my disposal. As we talked the nine suitors sat in a semicircle about Cecilia, while the group listened to an anecdotal exchange between Professor Hume and Henderson, the Virginia planter. My opinion of Cecilia Hollister as a girl of high spirit, able to carry off any situation no matter how difficult, rose to new altitudes as I watched her. If this strange wooing was not to her liking she certainly made the best of it. She capped Henderson's best story with a better one in negro dialect, and no professional entertainer could have improved upon her recital. As she finished we all joined in the general laugh, Lord Arrowood's guffaw booming out a trifle boisterously, when Miss Octavia quietly rose and excused herself. About five minutes later, when the company had plunged into another series of anecdotes, I suddenly became conscious that the fireplace, near which I sat, had all at once begun to act strangely. Much in the manner of its performance the previous night, it abruptly gasped and choked, the smoke ballooned in a great swirl and then poured out into the room.

After my examination of the flues in the morning I had dismissed them from my mind, and this extraordinary behavior of the library fireplace astounded me. It is not in reason that a perfectly normal fireplace, built in the most approved fashion and with chimneys that rise into as clear an ether as October can bestow could act so monstrously without the intervention of some malign agency. We had discussed all the possibilities the previous night, and I was not anxious to bear further lay opinions. The chimney's conduct was annoying, the more so that to my professional sense it was inexplicable.

Lord Arrowood had retreated discreetly toward the door, and the others had risen and stood close behind Cecilia, whose gaze was bent rather accusingly upon me. A dark thought had crossed my mind. As our eyes met I felt that she had read my suspicions and did not wholly reject them. Henderson was valiantly poking the logs, while one of two of the other men gave him the benefit of their advice. I crossed the hall to the drawing room, but no one was there. I went back to the billiard room, but saw nothing of Miss Octavia. Cecilia had rung for the footman, and I passed him in the hall on his way to answer her summons. I stopped him with an inquiry on my lips, but I could not ask the question. Even in my perplexity as to the cause of the chimney's remarkable performance I did not so far forget myself as to communicate my suspicion to a servant.

"Nothing, Thomas," I said, and the man passed on. It was possible, of course, that Miss Octavia knew more than she cared to tell about the erratic ways of the library chimney, or she might indeed be the cause of its vagaries. Sufficient time had elapsed after retirement from the library to allow her to gain the roof and clap a stopper on the chimney pot. This did not, however, account for the fact that on the previous evening she had been present in the library when the same chimney had manifested a similar sulkeness. I was still pondering these things when I heard loud laughter from the library and on returning found the logs again blazing in the fireplace, from which the smoke rose demurely in the flue.

"This fireplace is like a geyser, Mr. Ames," said Cecilia, "and spurts smoke at regular intervals. As I remember, the clock on the stair was striking 9 last night when the smoke poured out, and there—it is striking 9 now!"

She tossed her head slightly, and this was, I thought, in disdain of the suspicion that must still have shown itself a little stubbornly in my face. I withdrew again in a few minutes and followed the great chimney's course upward. Miss Octavia's apartments were at the front of the house, her sitting room windows looking out upon the Italian garden. Her doors were closed, but I knew from my examination in the morning that the flue

of her fireplace tapped the chimney that rose from the drawing room and had nothing whatever to do with the library chimney.

From the fourth floor I gained the roof by the route followed on my inspection of the house in the morning. The smoke from the library chimney was rising in the crisp, still air blithely. I leaned upon the crenellations and looked off across the hills, enjoying the loveliness of the sky, in which the planets throbbed superbly. There was nothing to be learned here, and I crept back to the trap door through which I had come, made it fast and continued on down to the library.

There somewhat to my surprise I found that in my absence all but Hume had taken their departure. As I paused unseen in the doorway I caught words that were clearly not intended for my ear.

Cecilia sat by the long table near the fireplace. Hume stood before her, his arms folded.

"You are kind. You do me great honor, Professor Hume, but under no circumstances can I become your wife."

I retreated hastily to the billiard room, where I took a cue from the rack and amused myself for perhaps fifteen minutes, when, hearing the

outer door close and knowing that Hume had departed with his congee, I returned to the library.

Cecilia sat where I had left her, and at first glance I thought she was reading. But she turned quickly as I crossed the room. She held in her hand an oblong silver trinket not larger than a card case. A short pencil similar to those affixed to dance cards was attached to it by a slight cord, and she had, I inferred, been making a notation of some kind on a leaf of the silver bound booklet. Even after she had looked up and smiled at me her eyes sought the page before her. Then she closed the covers and clasped the pretty toy in her hand. As though to divert my attention she recurred at once to the chimney in a vein of light irony.

"You see," she said, "there is ample reason for your remaining here. You would hardly find anywhere else so interesting a test of your professional powers as Hopefield Manor offers. The house is haunted beyond question, and I can see that you are not a man to leave two defenseless women to the mercy of a ghost who drops down chimneys at will."

I suffered her chaff for several minutes, then I asked point blank:

"Pardon me, but have you the slightest idea that Miss Octavia is behind this? It is not possible that she was responsible last night. But she was not on this floor awhile ago when the smoke poured in here. I should be glad to hear your opinion."

"I saw that you suspected her before you left the room, Mr. Ames, and I must say that the idea is in no way creditable to you. If you entertain such a suspicion you must supply a motive, and just what motive would you attribute to my Aunt Octavia in this instance?"

Her tone and manner piqued me or I should not have answered as I did.

"It is possible," I said, "that some of these gentlemen who came here tonight were not her liking, and it may have occurred to her to get rid of them by the obviously successful method of smoking them out."

She rose, still clasping the little silver backed notebook, and looked me over with amusement in her face and eyes.

"You are almost too ingenious, Mr. Ames. I hope that by breakfast time you will have some more plausible solution of the problem. Good night."

And so, tightly clasping the little book, she left the room. I followed her to the door, and at the turn of the stair she glanced down and nodded. Her face as it hung above me for an instant seemed transfigured with happiness.

(To Be Continued.)

THE WATER ON THE IOWA SIDE RECEDING SOMEWHAT

The high water which has been prevalent in the bottoms on the Iowa side of the river is gradually beginning to drop, and in a few days, at the present rate, most of the higher land will be free from the flood waters, although in the lower places it will be some time before the water is dried up. The water for several miles west of the Junction almost completely covers the farming lands, and at the big bridge, between the Junction and the Missouri river, the water has risen to such a height that it greatly resembles a small river. Several of the farm houses through this strip of territory have been entirely surrounded by water and it became necessary for the owners to get to and fro in boats, and in several instances considerable property was lost by being washed away by the flood water. The ridge of land near the big Burlington bridge has protected that part of the district and it has been the washing away of this ridge at Henton that permits the river to break into the lowlands each season. It is very fortunate for the residents in the bottoms that the flood was of no greater duration or the loss to property would have been very heavy.

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Local News

From Monday's Daily.

A. W. Meisinger of Mynard was in the city Saturday attending to business matters for a few hours.

Roy E. Howard of Mynard was in the city today for a few hours looking after some matters of business.

W. F. Gillespie, the Mynard grain man, came in Saturday from his home and spent several hours here visiting with his friends.

County Attorney C. H. Taylor was a visitor yesterday in Union, where he spent the day with his mother, Mrs. Barbara Taylor.

O. J. Gilson and wife departed this morning on No. 6 for East Moline, Illinois, where they will visit relatives for a short time.

Henry Horn of Cedar Creek was in the city Saturday for a few hours visiting with his friends and attending to business matters.

P. A. Horn, one of the good, reliable farmers of Eight Mile Grove precinct, drove in Saturday from his home to look after some trading.

Fred Engelke, from the vicinity of Murray, was in town Saturday attending to some weekend shopping and visiting among friends.

Robert Fitch, jr., of near Rock Bluffs, drove up from his home Saturday morning and spent the day looking after business matters.

Mrs. Mary Allison was in Union yesterday, spending the day with relatives and friends, returning home on the afternoon Missouri Pacific.

Henry Born drove in Saturday from his home, southwest of the city, and spent several hours looking after some matters of trading with the merchants.

Mrs. William McCauley was a passenger this morning for Omaha, accompanying her sister, Mrs. Messersmith, of Havelock, that far on her way home.

Miss Ruth Chapman of Lincoln Sundayed in this city with her mother, Mrs. Agnes Chapman and family, returning to the capital city yesterday afternoon.

Stuart and John Janda, who are employed at Havelock, came down Saturday evening on No. 2 and spent Sunday with their parents, Frank Janda and wife.

Henry Guthmann of Murdock was in the city yesterday visiting with his father, F. R. Guthmann, who is quite sick, returning to his home this morning on No. 15.

Albert Funk departed yesterday morning for Lincoln, taking six men with him, who will be employed by the Nebraska Construction company in their bridge gang.

Max Adams returned this morning to his home at York, Neb., after a few days' visit with his parents, Mr. and Mrs. W. T. Adams, at their farm home, south of this city.

Walter Briggs, who is employed in the McElwain jewelry store, departed this morning for Randolph, Neb., where he will make a short visit with relatives and friends.

T. M. Carter departed this afternoon on No. 23 for Blair, where he will visit for a few days. Mrs. Jerome F. Jacobs and baby of Boise, Idaho, who have been here, guests at the Carter home for a few days, accompanied him as far as Omaha.

W. S. Smith came up this morning from his home at Murray to spend the day with his friends in the county seat. Mr. Smith is enjoying a short vacation from his duties on the road.

Julius Sprick of Pilger, Neb., came in Saturday evening and spent Sunday with the family of his father-in-law, John Albert, departing this morning on No. 15 for his home.

County Superintendent Mary E. Foster and her guest, Miss Sweeney of Nebraska City were passengers yesterday morning for Union, where they visited for the day with the parents of Miss Foster.

Dr. H. C. Randall of Julesburg, Colorado, came in yesterday and made a short visit with his friends, Superintendent and Mrs. W. S. Askwith, at the Masonic Home, returning to his home this afternoon.

N. P. Schultz and Dwight Patterson were in Union yesterday for a few hours attending to some matters of business, and were accompanied home on the evening train by J. M. Patterson, cashier of the Union bank.

Frank A. Clويد and wife departed for the country yesterday, spending the day at the hospitable home of Mr. and Mrs. George A. Kaffenberger, west of this city, and enjoyed a dinner such as can only be found at this home.

Another Old-Time Dance.

The Red Men have arranged to give their old-fashioned dance on Wednesday evening, April 16, at their hall on lower Main street, and the committee has begun already to make preparations for making the event one of the most enjoyable that the order has given. A regular old-fashioned good time is in store for all those attending and a big crowd is looked for.

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