



HEZEKIAH

## CHAPTER XXI.

Trouble at the Prescott Arms.

**C**ECILIA'S hand, that had rested on the pommel of her saddle, dropped to her side, and she stood erect, her eyes wide with wonder.

"What do you mean?" she gasped. "I mean exactly what I have said. If it had been that strutting young philosopher from the west you would—well, you would have allowed him to say what was in his mind. Am I not right?"

"I wonder, I wonder"—she faltered, drawing away the better to observe me.

"You wonder how much I know! To relieve your mind without parleying further, I will say to you that I know everything."

"Then Aunt Octavia must have told you, and that seems incredible. It was distinctly understood—"

"Your aunt told me nothing. Not by words did any one tell me."

"Not by words?" she asked, eyeing me wonderingly and clearly feeling that I might be playing some trick upon her. "Then can it be that Hezekiah—but no! Hezekiah doesn't know."

"Trust Hezekiah for not telling secrets," I answered evasively. "Give me credit for some imagination. The air of Hopefield is stimulating, and in the few days I have spent in your aunt's house I have learned much that I never dreamed of before."

"I don't understand it. You are wholly inexplicable."

"I am the simplest and least guileful of beings, I assure you. Yet I have done some things here not in the slightest way related to chimney doctoring and something else I expect to do for which I believe you will thank me through all the years of your life."

"Ah, if you really know, that is possible," she sighed wearily. "I am very tired of it all. I was very foolish ever to have agreed to Aunt Octavia's plan. You have seen those men. Any one of them might, you know. And she shrugged her shoulders impatiently."

"Any one of them might be the seventh man. There, you see I do know. And I mean to help you."

She was immensely relieved. There was no question of that. Gratitude shone in her eyes, and then as I marveled at their beautiful dark depths fear suddenly possessed them. The change in her was startling. I caught a fleeting glimpse of Hartley Wiggins riding slowly with bowed head toward the inn.

It was plain that that glimpse of him had touched Cecilia's pity. If I had doubted the sincerity of her regard for him before I spurned the thought now. I was anxious to requicken hope in her.

"I have told you enough, Miss Hollister, to make it clear that I am in a position to help you."

"But there is always"—she began, then ceased abruptly and lifted her head proudly—"there is always Mr. Wiggins' attitude toward my sister. Not for anything in the world would I cause her the slightest unhappiness. You must see that, now that you know her."

I laughed aloud. Cecilia's concern for Hezekiah's happiness was so absurd that I could not restrain my mirth for a moment. Displeasure showed promptly in Cecilia's face.

"Pardon me, but maybe you don't quite understand Hezekiah," I said.

"Is it possible, then, that you do?" she inquired coldly. "I imagine your opportunities for seeing her have not been numerous."

"Well, it isn't so much a matter of seeing her, when you've read of her all your life and dreamed about her. She's in every fairy story that ever was written; she dances through the mythologies of all races. Hers is the kingdom of the pure in heart. Her mind is like a beautiful bright meadow by the sea and her thoughts the dipping of swallow wings on lightly swaying grasses." Cecilia's manner changed, and she smiled.

"You seem to have an attack of something. It looks serious."

I helped her into the saddle, and she looked down at me with amusement in her eyes. My praise of Hezekiah had pleased her, and I felt, as when we journeyed together into town, her kindly, human qualities. She said:

"You are not coming home for lunch, are you? Then I shall see you at 4. I hope the hiding place of the ghost will prove

# The Siege of the Seven Suitors

By  
MEREDITH NICHOLSON

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Interesting. Aunt Octavia has built her hopes high, and I may add that she has expressed the greatest admiration of you to me. On her ride this morning she declared that great things are in store for you. I hope so, too, Mr. Ames."

She gave me her hand and rode away.

The inn was a mile distant, and I set off at a brisk pace, turning over in my mind various projects for controlling the characters now upon the stage in such manner that Wiggins should become the seventh man. Cecilia could not always run away from him without violating the terms of her aunt's stipulation, and it was unlikely that she would attempt further to guide or thwart the pointing finger of fate. I relied little upon any arrangement effected among the suitors to stand together. Hume had already found a chance to speak. Lord Arrowood had bitten the dust and turned his face homeward, and Wiggins had been near the brink only that morning. It was unlikely that any of the active candidates remaining would stumble upon the key to the situation, which Hezekiah had given into my keeping.

It was well on toward 2 o'clock when I approached the inn. Before long the suitors would depart for their afternoon call at the manor, which was an established event of the day. Just as I was about to enter the gate I was arrested by an imperious voice calling, and John Stewart Dick came running toward me. To my surprise he greeted me cordially, even offering his hand.

"You thought you would come after all. Well, I'm glad you did. I've decided that there should be peace between us."

In stature he was the shortest of the suitors, but what he lacked in height was compensated for by a tremendous dignity.

"You have several times addressed me, Mr. Ames, in a spirit of contumely which I have hesitated to punish by the chastisement you deserve, but I am willing to let bygones be bygones. I had intended to offer myself to Miss Hollister this afternoon, with every hope of success, but I yield to you. My only request is that you inform me at once when you have learned her decision."

He clapped on his cap and folded his arms, clearly satisfied with the expressions of surprise to which my feelings betrayed me. Could it be possible that he had guessed the truth, perhaps by deductive processes of which I was ignorant? Whether he had reasoned from some remark thrown out by Miss Octavia as to the influence of seven in the affairs of life and her application of that fateful principle to the choice of a husband for Cecilia, I could not guess, but assuming that he had caught that clew, he might readily enough have managed the rest. I must not allow him to see what I suspected.

"My dear professor, there's an ancient warning against the Greeks bearing gifts. You must give me time to inspect the horse."

"Are you questioning my good faith?" "Be it far from me! I'm a good deal tickled, though, by your genial assumption that if I offered myself to this lady I should be declined with thanks."

He was again belligerent. It may have occurred to him that I might know as much as he, but at any rate he grinned. It was a saturnine grin I did not like.

"I'm starving to death at the door of an inn, and you must excuse me. Have you seen Hartley Wiggins lately?"

"I have indeed. He's taken to lonely horseback rides. He's off somewhere now. He hasn't the stamina for a contest like this. One by one the autumn leaves are falling," he added, with special intention, "and I have given you your chance."

"Thanks, light bringing Socrates from the lands of the Ogalallas. For so much courtesy I shall take pleasure in reading all your posthumous works. Let us cease being absurd."

With this I left him and entered the low raftered office. It was really a pleasant lounging room, unspoiled by the usual hotel office paraphernalia. Dick had followed close behind, and as I paused, hearing voices raised angrily in the dining room beyond, I turned to him for an explanation. As the suitors had been the only guests of the inn since their advent, I attributed the commotion to strife in their own ranks.

"You'd better take a look at those fellows. I've quit them—quite out of it. Remember that," said Dick. The dining room door was slightly ajar, and I flung it open.

Ormsby, Shallenberger, Henderson, Hume, Gorse and Arbuthnot had been engaged with cards at a round table in an alcove, but some dispute having apparently arisen, they stood in their places engaged in acrimonious debate.

As near as I could determine, some one of them—I think it was Ormsby—wished to abandon the game, which had been undertaken to determine in what order they should be permitted to pay visits to Hopefield in future, the calls together having grown intolerable. They were so absorbed that they failed to note my appearance.

"It's no good, I tell you!" cried Ormsby. "There's no fairness in this unless all take their chances together!"

"You ought to have thought of that before we began. This was your scheme, but because the cards are running against you you want to quit. I say we'll go on!" This from Henderson, who struck the table sharply as he concluded.

"You knew Wiggins and Dick weren't going in when we started, and you are not likely to get them in now. Your anxiety to cut the rest of us out by any means seems to have unsettled your mind," shouted Gorse. "I say let's drop this and stand to our original agreement that no man speak till the end of the fortnight."

"After that whole scheme has been torn to pieces like paper! There's been nothing fair in this business from the start! We ought to have kept Arrowood here and held together. And we ought to have got rid of that Ames fellow—he didn't belong in this at all!"

Ormsby's voice rose to a disagreeable squeak as he closed with this indictment of me. Shallenberger seemed to be the only one of the group who had not lost his senses. He was in the farther corner of the alcove, out of sight from the door, but I heard him distinctly as he addressed the other suitors with rising anger.

"We're acting like cads, and cads of the most contemptible sort! I only agreed to this game to satisfy Ormsby. The idea of our sitting here to draw cards to determine the order in which we shall offer ourselves to the noblest and most beautiful woman in the world would be coarse and vulgar if it were not so ridiculous! I'm out of it!"

My interest in this colloquy had led me further into the room, and hearing my step they all turned and faced me. Dick had continued at my side, but the black looks they sent our way



They Failed to Note My Appearance.

were intended, I thought, rather for me. My appearance roused Ormsby to a fresh outburst.

"You're responsible! If you hadn't forced yourself upon the ladies at Hopefield there wouldn't have been any of this trouble!"

"You're only an impostor anyhow. You went to the house to fix a chimney and seem to think you're engaged to spend the rest of your natural life there," protested Henderson.

Then they dropped me and assailed Dick.

"We'd like to know what you expect to gain by dropping out. You got cold feet mighty sudden," bellowed Ormsby. Gorse and Henderson paid similar tributes to the apostate, whose melancholy grin only deepened.

Henderson rallied for a final shot at me.

"A good horsewhipping is what you deserve," he cried, leveling his finger at me.

"Gentlemen," I began, not without inward quaking, "you have spoken loud, naughty words to me, and in reply I must say that your vocal efforts suggest only the melodies of the braying jackass and that your manners, to speak mildly, are susceptible of considerable improvement."

"You leave this neighborhood within an hour," boomed Ormsby, and in his efforts to free himself from his chair it fell backward with a crash that echoed through the long room.

"Then summon the coroner by telephone, for I shall not be taken alive," I answered quietly, trying to recall my youthful delight in Porthos, Athos and Aramis.

"Come along, let us put him out," Henderson was saying in an aside to Ormsby.

"You were playing a game here for a stake not yours for the winning," I continued. "Now I suggest that you shuffle the pack—you three, who are so full of valor—shuffle the pack, I say, and draw for the jack of clubs. Whoever is the fortunate man I shall take pleasure in pitching through yonder very charming casement."

"Agreed!" cried Henderson, and the three flung themselves into their chairs. The placidity of their consent had un-

once, when I misread the jack of spades for the jack of clubs, a shudder passed over me. They were down to the last card, and Ormsby's hand was on it.

Then I looked at the floor to steady myself, and hope leaped within me, for there, by Ormsby's foot—a large and heavy one—lay an upturned card, the jack of clubs, whose lone symbol magnified itself enormously in my amazed eyes.

At this moment I became conscious that something had occurred to distract the attention of the other men, who were staring at some one who had entered noiselessly.

"Gentlemen, you seem immensely interested in the turn of those cards. I am glad to have arrived at the critical moment. Mr. Ormsby, will you kindly lift the remaining card from the table?"

Miss Octavia stood beside me. She was dressed in a dark brown riding habit—the feather in her fedora hat emphasized her usual brisk air.

Ormsby turned up the card. It was the ten of diamonds.

"Gentlemen," I cried, pointing to the card, "what trick is this? Can it be possible that you have been trifling with me in a fashion for which men have died the world over by sword and pistol?"

"Kindly explain, Arnold, the nature of this difficulty," Miss Octavia commanded.

"Simply this, Miss Hollister, if I must answer. I had offered to fight these three gentlemen in order. It was agreed that the man who drew the jack of clubs from the pack with which they had been playing should be my first victim. They have shuffled their own cards and have drawn the whole pack and there is no jack of clubs in the pack! The only possible explanation is one to which I hesitate to apply the obvious plain Saxon terms."

"It dropped out, that's all! You don't dare pretend that we threw out the jack to avoid drawing it!" protested Ormsby, though I saw from the glances the trio exchanged that they suspected one another. Ormsby and Gorse bent down to look for the missing card, but before they found it I stepped forward and drove my fist upon the table with all the power I could put into the blow.

"Stop!" I cried. "I gave you every opportunity to stand up and take a trouncing, but I need hardly say that after this contemptible knavery I refuse to soil my hands on you!"

"Do you insinuate"—began Henderson, jumping to his feet.

"Gentlemen," said Miss Hollister, lifting the riding crop, "it is perfectly clear to me that Mr. Ames has gone as far as any gentleman need go in protecting his honor."

With one sweep of her crop she brushed to the floor the three piles of cards that lay on the table as they had been stacked when drawn.

"Arnold," she said, with indescribable dignity, "will you kindly attend me to my horse?"

nerved me for a moment. D'Artagnan, I was sure, would have fought them all, but I consoled myself as the cards rattled on the bare table with the reflection that, considering the fact that I had never in my life laid violent hands on a fellow being, I was conducting myself with admirable assurance. My weight has always hung well within 130, and physicians have told me that I was incapable of taking on flesh or muscle. Any one of these men could easily toss me through the window I had indicated as a means of their own exit.

Shallenberger caught my eye and indicated with a slight jerk of the head that I had better run before it was too late. The painstaking care with which Henderson had fallen upon the cards was disquieting, to put it mildly. Dick nudged me in the ribs and offered to hold my coat.

"It will not be necessary," I replied carelessly. "Tender your services to the other gentlemen. Come, gentlemen—hurry. Let us not waste time here."

"If Ormsby turns up the card you're a dead man," Dick was muttering gloomily.

"They're all alike to me," I replied loudly. "Mr. Ormsby is very beautiful. I shall hope not to disfigure him permanently." But as I spoke my tongue was a wabbling dry clapper in my mouth.

I was bending over now, watching the three men pick up the cards, and

(To Be Continued.)

## THAT DEAR APPENDIX.

If colic or pain ventures night your abdomen, Some doctor will tell you it is a bad omen;

Then, quick as a flash, he is whetting a knife, Quite eager to carve you and lengthen (?) your life.

I've made up my mind it is best to keep mum; To smile and look pleasant and never act glum,

For the doctor, consarn him, is right on the job, Me of my appendix determined to rob.

—F. B. T.

Leland Briggs was a passenger on the early Burlington train for Omaha this morning, where he looked after some business matters and met Floyd McDaniel, who is returning from his year's work at the Kearney Military academy.

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## MISS ESTHER LARSON

ENTERTAINS FOR MISS  
ETHEL BALLANCE

From Tuesday's Daily.

A number of young ladies were very pleasantly entertained at a linen shower by Miss Esther Larson at her home last evening, which was in honor of Miss Ethel Ballance, whose marriage to Mr. Paul Morgan will occur on Wednesday, June 4. The house had been prettily decorated in hearts and the spring flowers for the occasion. On their arrival the guests were put to work hemming dust cloths, which were presented to the bride-to-be upon their completion. An hour or so was then devoted to card games, in which Miss Florence White captured the prize, a handkerchief. A two-course luncheon was served, Miss Bernese Newell assisting. The bride-to-be was seated at a table which had been appropriately decorated in hearts, spring flowers and ribbons, the packages containing the linen pieces to be presented to her by the guests being tied to ribbon streamers and arranged in a promiscuous manner about her table.

## SPLENDID TIME ENJOYED AT THE F. S. RAMSEY HOME

From Wednesday's Daily.

Last evening at the home of Mr. and Mrs. F. S. Ramsey a party of young people gathered to give a mock wedding in honor of Miss Bess Edwards. The bridal party, which were Miss Ola Kaffenberger, the bride, and Miss Gladys McMaken, the groom, arrived at 9 o'clock in an automobile, and at 9:30 the wedding march, played by Mrs. Ramsey, sounded through the rooms and the bride, followed by "Mr. Johnson," the best man, who was Miss Dora Kaffenberger;

Miss Wanda Ramsey, the bridesmaid; Miss Maddox and the others that were in the wedding party—Helen Egenberger, May Glenn, Sophia Hild and Ruth Roman, as Mr. and Mrs. Karson; Margaret Albert, Mrs. Johnson, Harold Ramsey and John and Charles Egenberger—were the charming little girls who very prettily carried the bride's train and ring.

While the wedding ceremony was performed by Miss Mildred Snyder, Mr. Larson stily came in on the gathering and listened to the ceremony. After the "wedding" delicious refreshments were served of ice cream, cake and wafers. After several hours of enjoyment the guests departed, having had a delightful time.

## CARDS OUT ANNOUNCING THE MARRIAGE OF WELL KNOWN YOUNG PEOPLE

Cards are out announcing the wedding of Miss Elenor Critchfield of Omaha to Mr. George Vogle, a well-to-do farmer of South Bend. Miss Critchfield has been principal of the South Bend schools for the past two years, and in that capacity has been very successful. She is a graduate of Doane college academy and completed the two-years' course in Doane college, specializing in English literature. Miss Critchfield won first prize in a reading contest among the Cass county teachers during the teachers' institute held at Weeping Water last summer. She is the oldest daughter of Edward S. Critchfield, a deputy United States revenue collector. They will be at home at South Bend after July 1. The news of the wedding of this young lady, who has been one of the leading teachers of the county, will be very pleasing to her many friends, who will join in wishing the happy couple a long and happy life in their journey together.

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