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The Siege of the Seven Suitors

By MEREDITH NICHOLSON

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"The calendar has said it."

"So you settled your bill with Pippa? This change on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Her eyelashes are a trifle too long for the world's peace."

"I dare say. I haven't your charming knack, Ames, of picking up acquaintances, so you mustn't expect me to form lifelong friendships with young women at cash desks. I suppose it didn't occur to you that those young women who tend till and serve the tables in there are persons of education and taste. The Asolando is not a common habery. There's not a girl in that place who hasn't a social position as good as yours or mine. The Asolando's a kind of fad, you know, Ames; it's not a tavern within the meaning of the lawkeepers act, where common swine are fed for profit. The servants serve for love of the cause; it's a sort of cult."

Wiggins excused himself shortly, and I had a glimpse of him later, in the writing room, engaged upon letters, a fact in itself disquieting for Wiggins never wrote letters, and it was he who had favored making the Hare and Tortoise writing room into a den for pipe smokers. The epistolary habit, he maintained, was one that should be discouraged where he was. I was moodily turning over the evening newspaper when Jewett turned up. Jewett always knew everything. He dropped the ball into the green of my immediate interest with a neat approach.

"Too bad about old Wiggy," he remarked with his prelude to a story. "I dined with Hartley Wiggins at the Hare and Tortoise on an evening in October not very long ago. It may be well to explain that the Hare and Tortoise is the smallest and most select of clubs, whose windows afford a pleasant view of Gramercy park. The club is comparatively young, and it is our joke that we are so far all tortoises, creeping through our several professions without aid from any hare. I hasten to explain that I am a chimney doctor. Wiggins is a lawyer; at least I have seen his name in a list of graduates of the Harvard Law school, and he has an office downtown, where I have occasionally found him sedately playing solitaire while he waited for some one to take him out to luncheon. He spends his summers on a South Dakota ranch, from which he derives a considerable income."

Wiggins is an athlete, and his summers in the west and persistent training during the winter keep him in fine condition. As I faced him tonight in our favorite corner of the Hare and Tortoise dining room the physical man was fit enough, but I saw at once that he was gum and dispirited. He had through many years honored me with his confidence, and I felt that tonight after he got well started I should hear what was on his mind. I hoped to cheer him with the story of a visit I had by chance paid that afternoon to the Asolando tea room, for, though Wiggins is a most practical person, I imagined that he would be diverted by my description of a place which, I felt sure, nothing could tempt him to visit. I shall never forget the look he gave me when I remarked at about his third spoonful of soup:

"By the way, I dropped into an odd place this afternoon—Burne-Jones buns, Rossetti macaroons and all that sort of thing. They call it the Asolando."

"Was anything odd, expecting to sharpen his curiosity gradually as I revealed the joys of the tea room, but at Asolando his spoon dropped, and he stared at me blankly. It should be known that Wiggins is not a man whose composure is lightly shaken."

"The Asolando," I repeated, to break the spell of his blank stare. "Know the recovered in a moment, but he surveyed me quizzically before replying:

"Of course I have heard of the Asolando, but I thought you didn't go in for that sort of thing. It's a trifle girlish, you know."

"That's hardly against it. I found the girliness altogether attractive."

"You always were tolerably susceptible, but broiled buttered and both wings' soufle seem to me rather pale food for a man in your vigorous health."

"They must have discriminated in your favor. I saw no such things, though to be sure I was afraid to quibble over the waitress' suggestions. May I ask when you were there?"

"Oh, I dropped in quite accidentally one day last spring. I saw the sign and remembered that somebody had spoken of the place, and I was there, and it was a long way to the club, and"

Discrimination is not an art in Wiggins' attempts to practice it at times. He is by nature the most straightforward of mortals. It was clear that he was withholding something, and I resolved to get to the bottom of it.

"I don't think the Asolando is a place that would attract either of us, and yet the winds are good as such stuff goes, and the gentle handmaidens are useful to the eye—Flops, Francesca, Gloria and the rest of 'em."

Wiggins pried open his artichoke with the care of a botanist. He had regained his composure, but I saw that the subject interested him.

"You were there this afternoon?" he inquired.

"Yes, my first and only appearance."

"And this is Monday."

He was so torn up over his two failures that he blew in his share of the perambulator money in riotous living. Lost his wife into the bargain and has settled down to a peaceful life up in Westchester county in one of these cozy little bungalows, the real estate operators build for you if you pay a dollar down for a picture of an acre lot."

"And the daughter?"

"Well, Bassford Hollister has two daughters. It's the older one that has stolen Wiggins' heart away. She's Cecilia, you know. Very pretty and that sort of thing, and pushed tea and cookies at the Asolando when that idiosyncrasy was opened. Wiggins says he there last spring. Miss Hollister, the aunt, whom I'm fond of calling the chevallier, picked up her niece about that time and invited them off to Enoply on the reservation; but she didn't. I don't know what they did to Wiggy, but you see how he acts. I rather imagine that the chevallier didn't smile on his suit. She's a holy terror that woman, with an international reputation for doing weird and most unaccountable things. The chevallier is really on all the busy buggies in creation. It amounts to a birth tax, in contravention of the free guarantees of the constitution. The people will rise against it some day."

"She's plausible enough, but she's the past mistress of ulterior motive. She got Fortner, the mural painter, up to form lifelong friendships with young women at cash desks. I suppose it didn't occur to you that those young women who tend till and serve the tables in there are persons of education and taste. The Asolando is not a common habery. There's not a girl in that place who hasn't a social position as good as yours or mine. The Asolando's a kind of fad, you know, Ames; it's not a tavern within the meaning of the lawkeepers act, where common swine are fed for profit. The servants serve for love of the cause; it's a sort of cult."

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"I beg your pardon, but this seems to be the seventh table."

still enjoying the Rossetti-like violon in the cashier's tiny booth when a figure suddenly darted from the door just beyond her. The girl lifted her head. On the instant the lamp glowed as she extinguished her light, and the aureoled head ceased to be. And coming toward me down the shop I passed a lady, a lady of years, who beamed at me from a desk with her eyes intent upon the room's inner recesses. Her gown, of a new fashionable gray, was of the severest tailor cut. Her hat was a modified fedora, gray like the gown, and adorned with a single gray feather. She was short, slight, erect, and moved with a quick, bird-like motion, pausing and glancing at the vacant tables that lay between me and the door. She appeared to be engaged in a calculation of some sort, and she raised a logarithm to assist her in counting the tables. The cashier passed behind her unseen and vanished into the kitchen where he fed the "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven." And at seven her eyes rested upon me with a look that mingled surprise and annoyance. She took a step toward me, and I started to rise, but she said quickly:

"I beg your pardon, but this seems to be the seventh table."

"Now that you call my attention to it," I remarked, smiling my feet. "I am bound to concede the point. If by any chance I am intruding?"

"Not in the least. On the other hand, I beg that you remain where you are." And without further ado she sank into a chair opposite my own.

I tinkled a tiny crystal bell that was among the table furnishings, and a waitress appeared and handed the lady, who had thus introduced herself to my acquaintance, a copy of the tiny card on which the articles of refreshment offered by the Asolando were indicated within a border of hand-painted field daisies.

"Never mind that," said the lady to gray, ignoring the card. "You may bring me a canary sandwich and a cocktail, a pink one, provided—provided"—and she held the waitress by her eye—"you have the imported savior and your keeper knows the proper trappe of the spirit after I have named."

"Pardon me, madam," replied the waitress leily, "but you have mistaken the place. The Asolando serves nothing stronger than the pure water of its own fount of Castalia. Intoxicant are not permitted here."

"Intoxicant?" repeated the old lady with asperity. "Do I look like a person given to intoxication? I dare say your Castalia water is nothing but Croton whose flavor has been destroyed by distillation. You may bring me the sandwich I have mentioned and with it a pot of tea. Yes, thank you; lemon with the tea."

As the girl vanished with the light tread that marked the service of the place I again made no rise, but the old lady lifted her hand with a deprecating gesture.

"Pray remain. It is not unlikely that we have friends and ideas in common, and as you were seated at the seventh table it is possible that some order of fate has brought us together."

She took from me in the hand which she had now ungraciously held the copy of the card on which I had so carefully looked it upon the door with every mark of desecration.

"What species of mental disorder does this place represent?" she demanded.

"It is sacred to the fine arts apparatus; an endowed tea room where persons of artistic ideals may come to refresh their souls. Such at least seems to be the program. This is only my second visit, but I have long heard it spoken of by artists, poets and other of my friends."

"I am sixty-two years old, young man, and I beg to inform you that I consider the Asolando the most preposterous thing I have ever heard of in this most preposterous city. And from a casual glimpse of you I feel justified in saying that a man in your apparent physical health might be in better business than frequenting in mid-afternoon a shop that seems to be a remarkably stupid expression of twentieth century insanity."

"Attendance here is not compulsory," I remarked defensively.

"If you imply that I must have sought the place voluntarily let me correct your false impression immediately. I dropped in here for the excellent reason that this shop is the seventh in numerical progression from Fifth avenue."

"You were not guided by any feeling of interest, then, but rather by superstition?"

"That remark is unworthy of a man of your apparent intelligence. I was born on the 7th of November, and all the great events of my life have occurred on the 7th of the month."

I was relieved to find that she accepted the tea and sandwiches the waitress had brought without parity.

It is not strange, then, that in the first moments of my encounter I believed her capable of quarreling with a waitress, but she thanked the girl pleasantly, lifting her head with a smile that illumined her face attractively. Her demand for a cocktail had not crossed my mind, and I wondered whether she were not playing a part of some kind. She suggested pleasant and wholesome things.

In any event the impression was wholly agreeable. I had to do with a lady and a lady of no mean degree. The marks of breeding were upon her, and she spoke with that quiet authority that is the despair of the vain and vulgar. Her features were small and delicate, her ringless hands were perfectly formed and both face and hands belied the age to which she had so frankly confessed. She was more than forty years of age, and there was not the slightest reason why she should not address me as if pleased her to do so, and her obsession as to the potency of the numeral seven was not in itself proof of an ill balanced mind. Musing thus, I reached the conclusion that this encounter was very likely the sort of thing that happened to patrons of the Asolando. My time was, however, a certain value, and I began to wonder just how I should escape. I was about to excuse myself when my companion suddenly put down her cup and addressed me with a directness that seemed habitual in her.

"I have formed an excellent opinion of your holding up from the manner in which you have suffered my advances, if I may so call them. You set and speak like a gentleman of education. Will you kindly tell me the nature of your occupation?"

I produced one of my professional cards.

ARNOLD AMES,
Consultant in Chemistry,
Suit 27, Landon Building.

She read it aloud without glasses and mused a moment.

"This is very curious," she remarked, placing my card in a silver case she drew from her pocket. "This is very curious indeed. It was only yesterday that my friend General Glendonning mentioned that you were related to the Ames family of Hartford, and your mother was a Farquhar of Charlottesville, Va. If you bear your father's name, I dare say it was he whom I met ten years ago in Paris. There is no reason therefore why you should not be the best of friends."

It was a kind fate indeed that had led me back to the Asolando, and introduced me to the aunt of Wiggins' inamorata. It may well be believed that I was immediately interested, attentive, absorbed. As she smoothed her gloves, Miss Hollister continued to speak in a low musical voice that was devoid of any of the quavers of age.

As it grew late I reached my sixtieth year, Mr. Ames, I decided that my humdrum life must cease. The strictest conventions had glided me from earliest childhood. My experience of life had been limited to those things which women of education and means enjoy—or suffer, as you please to take it. Two years ago I chartered a yacht and cruised about the Lesser Antilles, enjoying many adventures. Later I crossed the Andes, and I have just returned from Switzerland, where I accomplished some of the most difficult ascents. I have a clipping bureau engaged to inform me of all rumors of hidden treasure and sunken ships, and I hope that of this something may come as I retain a marine engineer and corps of divers and can leave at an hour's notice for any likely hunting ground. This may strike you as the most whimsical self-indulgence. Tell me candidly whether my remarks so affect you."

"If it were not that your beneficent and kindly hands have given you noble eminence among American philanthropists I might be less biased in favor of the sort of thing you describe, but your gifts to orphanages, colleges, hospitals—"

"Ah!" she interrupted, "enough of that. Philanthropy in these times is only selfish exploitation, the recreation of the conscience stricken. But you see no reason why," she pursued eagerly, "if I wish to dig up the Caribbean sea in search of Spanish doubloons, I should not do so? Answer me frankly, without the slightest fear."

"I assure you, Miss Hollister, that such projects appeal to me strongly. I have often lamented that my own lot fell in these eventless times. As an architect I proved something of a failure, as a chimney doctor I lead a useful life, but the very usefulness of it bores me, and besides many people take me for a sweep."

"I dare say they do, for unfortunately many people are fools. Let me be upon adventure. My physician pronounces me good for ten years more of active life, and I intend to keep amused. If I were a young man like you I should crawl through chimneys no more, but take to the open road. I resent the harsh clang of these menial people as I walk among the hills that lie behind the manor this morning I heard the bugles calling. I should like to ask you further as to your unusual profession, but errands summon me elsewhere. However, something tells me we shall meet again."

She rose in her swift, birdlike fashion and passed lightly down the room and through the door. She had left a dollar beside her plate to pay her check which I noted called for only 40 cents. I clasped at the cashier's desk. The

aureoled head had not reappeared, but immediately I heard a voice murmuring beside me. I had believed myself alone, and in my surprise I thought some wondrous had made audible one of the verses on the wall.

What of Rafael's sonnets, Dante's picture—

It was she whose aureoled head I had marked earlier in the receipt of custom, the girl who had vanished as Miss Hollister appeared. She was not tall, and her eyes, I saw, were brown. She had clearly not climbed far the stairway of her years, but her serenity was the least bit disconcerting.

"Pardon me," I began, "but I am an ignorant Philistine, and cannot cap the verse you have quoted."

"There is no reason why you should do so. It is the rule of the Asolando that we shall attract the attention of

"The Asolando is denied to outsiders," customers when necessary by speaking of a line of verse. We are not allowed to open a conversation, no matter how imperative, with 'Listen, or the even more vulgar 'Say.'"

"A capital idea, of which I heartily approve, but now that I am a waiting suitor, eager."

"It's merely the check, if you please," she interrupted coldly. "My dress is closed, and the room will refuse further patrons for the next hour, as the executive committee of the Shelley society meets here at 4 o'clock, and the Asolando is denied to outsiders."

"This, then, is my dismissal?" The lady who joined me here for a time left a dollar, which, you will see, is somewhat in excess of her check. My own check of 50 cents is so moderate that I cannot do less than leave \$1 also.

"Thank you," she replied, unshaken by my generosity. "The tips at the Asolando all go to the Sweetness and Light club, which is just now engaged in circulating Matthew Arnold's poems in leaflet form in the jobbing district."

I bowed and had turned away when she arrested me with the line—

"My good blade carves the casques of men."

I turned toward her. "Permit me to inquire," she asked, "whether the lady who joined you here expressed any interest in the life beautiful as it is interpreted in the Asolando?"

"I am constrained to say that she did not. She left the Asolando in the most contemptuous terms."

The golden head bowed slightly, and a smile broadened her lips. But her amusement at my answer was more eloquently stated in her eyes.

"I must explain that my sole excuse for addressing you is that we are required to leave the Asolando, just why strangers seek the Asolando."

"In the case of the lady to whom you refer it was a matter of this being the seventh shop from the corner, and my own appearance was due to the idiosyncrasy, inspired by enthusiastic descriptions of the Asolando's atmosphere and rumors of the cheapness of its food."

"The reasons are quite ample," was her only comment, and her manner did not encourage further conversation.

"May I ask," I persisted, "whether the Asolando's staff is permanent and whether, if I return another day?"

"I take it that you do not mean to be impertinent, so I will answer that my service here is limited to Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. On the other days Pippa is in the cash booth. My name at the Asolando is Francesca. Kindly write your name in the waitress' book at the door as you pass out."

"There was no ignoring this hint. I thought she smiled as I left her.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

The buds which were put in the cellar last fall should be inspected to see if they are getting rooted properly. Possibly they may need watering, while some that have made a good start might be brought upstairs to furnish the first bloom of the season.

There is surely a screw loose or a cog out of place in the makeup of the well fed farmer who drives to town in his big fur coat when the thermometer registers below zero, yet leaves his team unblanketed for an hour or more on the street while he warms his shins before the store fire.

If a measure, which is to be introduced into congress becomes a law it will mean hard shelling ahead for the Brazilian coffee trust. The measure in question proposes to authorize the seizure by the proper government authorities of any imported product that is controlled by a trust.

At Berkeley, Cal., the police have ordered to kill every cat they find outdoors, and the order includes the fancy pure breeds along with the multicolored cat tribe that frequent the back alleys. The health authorities believe the cat tribe is instrumental in spreading smallpox, and this is the reason for the order.

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