

THE ALAMANCE GLEANER.

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NO. 8

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The Siege of the Seven Suitors

By MEREDITH NICHOLSON

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orange—and stood gravely gazing at me. She held the curtains apart—they made, indeed, a kind of frame for her—but as our eyes met she advanced at once and spoke my name.

CHAPTER III.

At Hopfield Manor.

MISS HOLLISTER'S summons lay on my desk the next morning and was of the briefest. I was requested to call at Hopfield Manor at 4 o'clock the following afternoon, being Thursday. A trap would meet me at Katoanah, and it was suggested that I come prepared to spend the night, so that the condition of the flies might be discussed and any necessary changes planned during the evening. The note, signed Octavia Hollister, was written in a flowing hand on a wholly impeccable note sheet stamped Hopfield Manor, Katoanah.

Before taking the train I sought Wiggins by telephone at his office and at the Hare and Tortoise, where he lodged, but without learning anything as to his whereabouts. His office did not answer, but Wiggins' office had never been responsive to the telephone, so this was not significant. The more I considered his conduct during the recall of my visit to the Asolando the more I wondered, and in spite of my wish to ignore utterly Jewett's revelations as to Wiggins' summer abroad, I was forced to the conclusion that Jewett had not lied. I had known Wiggins long, and this was the first time that I had ever been conscious of any withholding of confidence on his part, and on my own I had not merely confided all my hopes and aims to him, but I had leaned upon him often in my perplexities. There was, indeed, a kind of boyish compact between us that we should support each other through all difficulties. His reserve, I knew, a diffident and sensitive nature, and it was wholly possible that in his affair with Cecilia Hollister had not prospered he had fled to his ranch there to wrestle in seclusion with his disappointment. My mind was busy with such speculations as I sped toward Katoanah, where I found the trap from Hopfield Manor awaiting me.

"It's rather poor going over the hills; about five miles, sir," said the driver as we set off.

"This was the first week in October. There was just enough in the air to make a top coat comfortable. The team of blacks spoke well for Miss Hollister's stable, and the liveried driver kept them moving steadily, but eased the pace as we rose on the frequent slopes to the shoulders of the plainland. Wiggins' hills. Early frosts had already wrought their magic in the foliage, and the battle banners of winter's vanguard flashed along the horizon. I rejoiced that my business, vexations enough in many ways, yet afforded me so charming an outing as this.

Presently we climbed a hill that shouldered its way well above its fellows and came out upon a broad ridge, where we entered at once a noble gateway set in an old stone wall and struck off smartly along a fine bit of macadam. The house, the driver informed me, was a quarter of a mile from the gate. The way led through a wild woodland, in which elms and maples predominated, and before this had grown monotonous we came abruptly upon an Italian garden, beyond which rose the house. I saw it at once for one of Pepperton's best performances. Pepperton is easily our best man in domestic Tudor, and the whole setting of Hopfield Manor—the sunken garden, the superb view, the billowing fields and woodlands beyond—all testified to a taste which no ignorant owner had thwarted. The house was Tudor, but in no servile sense. It was also Pepperton. I lifted my eyes with immediate professional interest to the chimney pots on the roof. It occurred to me on the instant that I had never before been called to retouch forms as much as I about his construction. I had an immense respect for Pepperton, my specialist in chimney, had been a subject of frequent chatter between us, I anticipated with a chuckle the pleasure I should have later in telling him that at least one of his lines had required my services.

My good opinion of Miss Hollister did not diminish as I stepped within the broad hall. Houses have their own manner of speech, and Hopfield Manor spoke to all the senses in accents of taste and refinement. A servant took my bag and ushered me into a charming library. A fire smoldered lazily in the great fireplace; there was in the room the faintest scent of burnwood, but the smoke rose in the fire in a perfectly mannerly fashion, and on trusting in my hand I felt a good draft of air. I instinctively knelt on the hearth and peered up, but saw nothing unworkmanlike—Pepperton was not a fellow to have obvious mistakes behind him. But possibly that was not one of the recalcitrant dupes I had been called to inspect, and I even saw continuing my enjoyment of the beautiful room when I became conscious, by rather curious and mixed processes, not wholly of the eye, that a young woman had drawn back the light portieres—they were dark brown, with borders of burnt

—an my embarrassment I rose and of-fored the broad butler to Cecilia, who declined it. The austerity of her rejection rather unnerved me.

"I assure you, Miss Hollister, that I have no wish to become a habitue of the place," I said. "And yet you will pardon me if I repeat that, but for it, I should not now be enjoying the hospitality of your Asolando."

She lifted her head from her cup and bowed, but I was immediately interested in the fact that her niece was speaking.

"I think Aunt Octavia is hard on the Asolando," she was saying. "Aunt Octavia is interested in the revival of romance, and romance without poetry seems to me wholly impossible."

"The are is decadent, and I know no better way of restoring the race to its ancient vim and energy than by sending men back to the camp and field or to all the high seas in new armadas. Her fine olive face, crossed with dark hair, verified the impression I had gathered from Jewett, that she was a woman of cultivation. She had read the poets; Dante and Petrarch spoke from her eyes. Cecilia was no bad name for her; she suggested heavenly harmonies. And as for Jewett's story of Wiggins' infatuation, I was content. I had seen her, and she made no mistake about it. Yes, the house was built by Mr. Pepperton, but not for us. My aunt bought it of the estate of the gentleman who built it. This will be her first winter here."

Miss Hollister herself appeared. She greeted me without surprise and much as she might have spoken to any guest in her house. I had sometimes been treated as though I were the agent of a decorator's shop, or a delinquent plumber, by the people whom I served, but Miss Hollister and her niece established me upon a plane that was wholly social. I was made to feel that it was the most natural thing in the world for me to be there, having tea, with no business ahead of me but to be agreeable. The fact that I had come to regret the distemper of my flies was utterly negligible. I remembered with satisfaction that I had journeyed from town in a new business suit that made the best of my attenuated figure, and I will not deny that I felt at ease. Miss Hollister talked briskly as she made tea. "It is not necessary for you to take tea if you don't care for it, Mr. Ames," she said, as I rose and handed the first cup to Cecilia. "If you will touch the bell at your elbow you may have lipids of quite another sort."

"You are most generous, Miss Hollister. Tea will suffice for the moment. It is fitting that I should take it here, having been a weakness for tea as well as curiosity and chance that threw me in your way at the Asolando."

"That absurd—that preposterous hole in the wall!"

She put down her cup and faced me, continuing: "Mr. Ames, I will not deny that if it had not been for General

Glendenning's cordial indorsement of you, and the further fact that I had known your late father, I should not have invited you to my house on the occasion to which you refer. My contempt for Jewett's story of Wiggins' interest in a singular person, but her whims were amusing. I felt that she was less cryptic than her niece, and the thought of Cecilia drove me back upon Jewett's story of Wiggins' interest in that quarter. I resolved to write to Wiggins when I got back to town the next day and abuse him roundly for running off without so much as a goodbye. That, most emphatically, was not like dear old Wiggins."

CHAPTER IV.

I Fall Into a Brier Patch.

I HAD BEEN sitting on a stone wall watching the shadows lengthen, when I saw a young man running roundly toward a highway along which wagons and an occasional motorcar had passed during my reverie. The

young man was rough and ruggedly set, and he wore a hat that marked the boundary at the roadside was hidden by a tangle of raspberry bushes, and my foot, turning on a stone concealed in the wild grasses, I fell clumsily and rolled a dozen yards into a tangle of the berry bushes. As I lay there, I heard voices in the road, but I should have thought nothing of it had I not seen through a break in the vines and all around within reach of my hand Cecilia Hollister talking earnestly to some one not yet disclosed. She was hatless, but had flung her golf cap over her shoulder. The scarlet lining of the hood turned up about her neck made an effective setting for her noble head.

"Oh, I can't tell you! I can't help you! I mustn't even appear to give you any advantage. I went into it with my eyes open, and I'm in honor bound not to tell you anything. You have said nothing—nothing, remember that. There is absolutely nothing between us."

"But I must say everything. I refuse to be blinded by these absurd restrictions, whatever they are. It's not fair. It's inviting me into a game where the cards are not all on the table. I've come to make an end of it!"

My hands had suffered by contact with the briars, and I had been mistaking them with my handkerchief, but I fell back upon the slope in my astonishment at the soliloquy. Cecilia Hollister I had seen plainly enough, though the man's back had been toward me, but anywhere on earth I should have known Wiggins' voice. I protest that it is not my way to become an eavesdropper voluntarily, but to disclose myself now was impossible. It had not been Wiggins—but Wiggins would never have understood through the window of crisp leaves in which I lay, and to turn back and ascend the slope the way I had come would have been to advertise my presence to the figures in the road.

"The whole thing is absurd, perfectly absurd. I know of nothing that would contribute more to human enjoyment than a rest here between Germany and England. The Hague idea in pure sentimentalism—if sentimentalism can ever be said to be pure. I will go further and say that I consider it positively immoral."

She had ordered dinner in the gun room, but I thought this merely a turn of her humor, and I was taken aback when she led the way into a low, heavily raftered room, where electric scones of an odd type were thrust at irregular intervals along the walls, which were otherwise hung with arms of many sorts in arduous combinations. They were not the litter of antique shops, I saw in a hasty glance, but rifles and wonderfully direct gazes upon me, and the sideboard stood a gun rack and a cabinet which I assumed contained still other and perhaps deadlier weapons. But for the presence of Miss Cecilia, who was essentially typical of our twentieth century American woman, I might have thought I had been in the midst of a military installation. The illustration that I was the guest of some eccentric chateaufort who had invited me to dine with her in a bastion of her fortress before ordering me to some chamber of horrors for execution.

No reference was made to the character of the room. In fact, that Cecilia rather pleaded with her eyes that I should make no reference to it. And Miss Hollister remarked quite casually as though in comment upon my thoughts:

"Consistency has buried its thousands and its tens of thousands. We should live Mr. Ames, for the changes and chances of this troubled life. Between an opera box and a villa at Newport many of my best friends have perished."

Then with startling abruptness she put down her fork and, bending her wonderfully direct gaze upon me, asked a question that caused me to struggle on a bed of asparagus.

"I imagine, Mr. Ames, that you are a member of some of the better clubs in town. If by any chance you belong to the Hare and Tortoise—the name of which I always pleased me—in you by any chance happen to enjoy the acquaintance of Hartley Wiggins?"

Cecilia lifted her head. I saw that she had been as startled as I. It crossed my mind that a denial of my acquaintance with Wiggins might best serve him in the circumstances. But I am not, I hope, without a sense of shame, and I responded promptly:

"Yes, I know him well. We are old friends. I always see a good deal of him during the winter. His summers are spent usually on his ranch in the west. We dined together two days ago at the Hare and Tortoise, just before he set off for the west."

"You will pardon me if I say that it is wholly to his credit that he has forsaken the professions and identified himself with the honorable calling of the husbandman."

"We met Mr. Wiggins while traveling abroad last summer," interposed Cecilia, meeting my eyes quite frankly.

"Met him? Did you say met him, Cecilia?" On the contrary, we found him waiting for us at the dock the morning we sailed," corrected Miss Hollister, "and we never lost him a day in three months of rapid travel. I had never met him before, but I cannot deny that he made himself exceedingly agreeable. If, as I suspected, he had deliberately planned to travel on the same steamer with my two nieces, I have only praise for his conduct. For in these days, Mr. Ames, it warns my heart to find young men showing something of the old chivalric ardor in their affairs of the heart."

"I'm sure Mr. Wiggins made himself very agreeable," remarked Cecilia coolly.

"For myself," retorted Miss Hollister, "I should speak even more strongly. He repeatedly served us with tact and delicacy. I had formed so high an opinion of Mr. Wiggins that I learned with sincerest regret that his ancestors were Tories and took no part in the struggle for American independence. There are times when I seriously question the wisdom of the colonists in breaking with the mother country, but certainly no man of character in this day could have hesitated as to his proper course."

Then, as though by intention, Miss Hollister dropped upon the smooth corner of our table a sentence that drove the color from Cecilia's face.

"Cecilia and Mr. Wiggins were the best of friends," was Miss Hollister's remark.

Cecilia's eyes were on her plate, but her aunt went on in her blithest fashion:

"You may not know that Cecilia is another niece. Cecilia's sister. She was named, at my suggestion, for my father, there being no son in the family, and I trust that so unusual a name in a young girl does not strike you as indefensible."

"On the contrary, it seems to me wholly refreshing and delightful. As I recall the Sunday school of my youth, Cecilia was a monarch of great authority, whose dominion would have

extended from Windsor, she began.

She seemed preoccupied. Wiggins was in her recollection of the glowing landscape—I was confident of this, and poor Wiggins was even now wandering these hills, no doubt, brooding upon his troubles under clear October stars.

Dinner was announced the moment Miss Hollister entered, and I walked out between them. Miss Octavia Hollister was a surprising person, but in nothing was she so delightfully wayward as in the gowns she wore. My ignorance of such matters is immeasurable, but I fancy that she designed her own gowns, and her ideas were thereupon carried out by her skill. At the Asolando, and when we had met at ten in her own house, she had worn the severest of tailored gowns, with short skirt and a coat into whose pockets she was fond of thrusting her hands. Tonight the material was lavender and trimmed in white, but the skirt had not lengthened, and over a white silk waist she wore a kind of cutaway coat that matched the skirt. An egret in her lovely white hair contributed a piquant note to the whole impression. As we passed down the steps, she talked with great animation of the Hague tribunal, just then holding a prominent place in the newspapers for some reason that has escaped me.

"The whole thing is absurd, perfectly absurd. I know of nothing that would contribute more to human enjoyment than a rest here between Germany and England. The Hague idea in pure sentimentalism—if sentimentalism can ever be said to be pure. I will go further and say that I consider it positively immoral."

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