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## The Siege of the Seven Suitors

By MREDITH NICHOLSON

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### CHAPTER VII.

#### I Meet Hezekiah.

Wiggins asked me to lunch, and on the way back to the inn, after inquiring my plans for returning to town, he proposed that I delay my departure until the following day. What he wanted, and he put it bluntly, was a friend at court, and as I had seemingly satisfied him of my entire good faith and of my devotion to his interests he begged that I prolong my stay in Miss Hollister's house, giving as my excuse the condition of the chimneys of Hopfield Manor. He brushed aside my plea of other engagements and appealed to our old friendship. He was taking his troubles hard, and I felt that he really needed counsel and support in the involved state of his affairs. Did not see how my continued presence under Miss Hollister's roof could materially assist him, and the thought of remaining there when there was no work to be done was repugnant to my sense of professional honor, but he was so persistent that I finally yielded.

While we ate luncheon I sought by every means to divert his thoughts to other channels. After we were seated in the dining room four other men followed, exercising considerable care in placing themselves as far from one another as possible. A few moments later a motor hummed into the driveway, and we heard its owner ordering his chauffeur to return to town and hold himself subject to telephone call. This latest arrival appeared shortly in the dining room, and surveying the rest of us with a disdainful air, sought a table in the remotest corner of the room. Others appeared, until eight in all had entered. The presence of these men at this hour, their air of aloofness and the care they exercised in isolating themselves interested me. They appeared to be gentlemen. They were indeed, suggestive of the ampler metropolitan world, and one of them was unmistakably a foreigner.

While Wiggins appeared to ignore them, I was conscious that he reviewed the successive arrivals with every manifestation of contempt. One of these gentlemen seemed familiar, I could not at once recall his name, but something in his manner teased my memory for a moment before I placed him. Then it dawned upon me that he was the third man I had met in the field overhanging the garden after my eavesdropping experience the day before. I thought it as well, however, not to mention this fact, or to speak of the man I had seen so grimly posted in the midst of the cornfield. I was an observer, a looker on, at Hopfield, and my immediate business was the collecting of information.

"Will you kindly tell me, Wiggy, who these strange gentlemen are and just what has brought them here at this hour?"

"I know them—they are guests of the inn. Most of them were more or less companions in our procession across Europe last summer. The one in the tan suit is Henderson—you must have heard of him. The short dark chap with auburn countenance is John Stewart Dick, who pretends to be a philosopher. As for the others—"

"He dismissed them with a jerk of the head. My wife struggled with his explanation. It is my wish to reduce information to plain terms.

"Are these gentlemen, then, your rivals for the hand of Miss Cecilia Hollister? If so, they are a solemn band of suitors, I must confess."

"You have hit it, Ames. They are suitors, assembled from all parts of the world."

"Nice looking fellows, except the chap with the monocle, who has just ordered rather more liquor than a gentleman should at this hour."

"That is Lord Ardovore. I have feared at times that Miss Octavia favored him."

"Possibly, but not likely. But how long is this thing going to last? If you know the going of him on here, and Miss Cecilia Hollister has chosen one of you for her husband I shudder for your nerves. I imagine that as one of these gentlemen is likely to begin shooting across his plate at any minute. Such a situation would become intolerable very quickly if I were in the game and forced to lodge here."

"I hope," replied Wiggins with a smile, "that you don't imagine these fellows can crowd me out. I've paid for a month's lodging in advance, and if you will stand by me I'm going to win."

"Spoken like a man, my dear Wiggins. You may count on me to the sweet or bitter end, even if I pull down all the superb chimneys with which Tappan adorned that house up yonder."

He silently clasped my hand. A little later I telephoned from the inn to my office explaining my absence and instructing my assistant to visit several pressing clients, and I instructed the valet at the Hare and Tortoise to send me a week's supply of linen and an odd suit or two.

At about 3 o'clock I left Wiggins in the care of the inn and set out on my return to Hopfield Manor.

I made a wrong turn on leaving the Prescott Arms, and I came out walking near Katonah village. I got my bearings of a shopkeeper and started again for Hopfield Manor, but the mid-afternoon was warm, and the hills were steep, and as Miss Hollister's address was not at hand I was obliged to

I drove into a dense corner and soon saw the man's check. On a sunny slope several hundred yards above the high way lay an orchard, advertised to be the larcenous eye by the riddlest of red apples. Not in many years had I robbed an orchard, and I felt irresistibly drawn toward the gnarled trees, which were still, in their old age, abundantly fruitful.

I drew down a bough and plucked my first apple, tasted and found it good. At my palate's first responsive titillation something whizzed past my ear, and following the flight of the missile, I saw an apple of goodly size fall and roll away into the grass. I had imagined myself utterly alone, and even now as I looked guiltily around no one was in sight. The apple had passed my ear swiftly and at an angle quite un-Newtonian. It had been fairly aimed at my head, and the law of gravitation did not account for it. As I continued my scrutiny of the landscape I was addressed by a voice whose accents were not obnoxious. Rather, the tone was good natured and indulgent if not indeed a trifle patronizing. The words were these:

"Soup of the evening, beautiful soup!" It was then that, lifting my eyes, I beheld, sitting lengthwise of the wall, with her feet drawn comfortably under her, a girl in a white sweater, bareheaded, munching an apple. There was no question of identity. It was the girl whose head behind the cashier's grill of the Asolando had interested me on the occasion of my second visit to the tea room. In soliciting my attention by reciting a line of verse, she had merely followed the rules of the tea room in like circumstances. The casting of the apple at my head possessed the virtue of novelty. While I tried to think of something to say I pecked at my own apple, but kept an eye on her. She concluded her repast calmly and flung the core.

"I mentioned soup," she remarked. "The courses are mixed. We have parakeet of fruit. Are you fish, fowl or good red herring?"

"Daughter of Eve, I will be anything you like, I'm obliged for the apple, and I apologize for having entered Eden uninvited."

"You're not my Eden. Nobody invited me. But it's not too much to say that these apples are grand."

"And you live?"

"Over there somewhere beyond that ridge. And she waved her hand vaguely toward the village and landscape beyond."

"I'm glad we're both in the same boat. I'm a trespasser myself. I don't even know the name of the owner. But if you have had only one apple two more are coming to you if you follow Atlanta's precedent."

"Don't follow precedents, and I've forgotten the name of the boy who threw the apple in the race. It doesn't matter, though. Nothing matters very much."

Her hands clasped her knees. Her skirt was short, and I was conscious that she wore tan shoes. She continued to regard me with lazy curiosity. She seemed younger than at the Asolando. Not more than eighteen, I think. Apples reddened on the bough in her lifetime. She was every bit as slender and more youthful in her sweater than in the snowy vestments of the Asolando. Her hair, which in the glow of the lamp at Asolando cash desk had been golden, was today burnished copper and was brushed straight back from her forehead and tied with a black ribbon.

"I quite agree with your philosophy. Nothing is of great importance. What is it you're so anxious about?"

"So it's not your orchard?" she asked. "The thought datters me. I own no lands nor ships at sea. I'm a chimney doctor, and if necessary I'll apologize for it."

"You needn't submit testimonials. I take the swallows out of my own chimneys."

"That requires a deft hand, and I'm sure you're considerate of the swallows."

"You may come up here and sit on the wall if you care to. I saw you driving in a trap. I hope your horse isn't afraid of motors. Motors speed scandalously on that road."

"I am not in the least worried about my horse. It's borrowed. As you remarked, this is a nice orchard. I like it here."

"If you are going to be silly you will find me little inclined to nonsense."

"Shall we talk of the Asolando? I haven't been back since I saw you there, and yet—let me see, isn't this your day there?"

"She seemed greatly amused, and her laughter rose with a fountain-like spontaneity and fell, a splash of musical sound, on the mellow air of the orchard. She had changed her position as I joined her, sitting erect and kicking her heels lazily against the wall."

"Mr. Chimney Man, something terrible happened just after you left that afternoon. I was bounced, fired—I lost my job."

"Incredible! I'm sure it was not for any good cause. I can testify that you were a model of attention—you were supremely discreet. You repelled me in the most delicate manner when I intimated that I should come often on the days that you made the change."

"The sad part of it was that that was not only my last day, but my first. I had never been there before, except for a nibble now and then when I was in town. But I couldn't stand it. It was like being in jail—in fact, I think jail would be preferable. But I'm glad I spent that one day there. They dispensed with my company because I remarked to one of the silly girls who are making the Asolando their life work that I thought the English pre-territorial carried the dish faster than her. The girl to whom I referred this brava was so shocked she dropped a teacup—you know how brittle everything is in there—and I came home. You were really the only ad-venturer I got out of my day there. And I didn't get you entirely satisfied, did I?"

"Thank you, Frances, for these confidences. And having lost your position you are now free to roam the hills and dream on orchard walls. Your scheme of life is to my liking. I can see with half an eye that that walls of no prison house can ever hold you again."

She nodded a dreamy acquiescence.

Then she turned two very brown eyes full upon me and demanded: "What is your name, please?"

I mentioned it.

"And you doctor chimneys? That sounds very amusing."

"I'm glad you like it. Most people think it absurd."

"What are you doing here? There's no chimney in sight."

"Oh, I have a commission in the neighborhood, Hopfield Manor. You may have heard of Miss Hollister's place."

"Of course, every one knows of her."

"And now that I think of it, it was she about whom you asked in the Asolando that afternoon. You wanted to know what she said about the tea room."

"I remember perfectly."

"She was quiet for a moment, then she threw back her head and laughed that rare laugh of hers. 'You might let me into the joke.'"

"It wouldn't mean anything to you. I have a lot of private jokes that are for my own consumption."

"Your way of laughing is adorable. I hope to hear more of it. In the Asolando you repulsed me in a manner that won my admiration, but I venture to say now that, if you roam these pastures, I am the grass beneath your feet, and if yonder tuffet water be sacred to you I sit beside the brook to hear its song."

"You talk well, sir, but from your tone I fear you can't forget that we met first in the Asolando. That day of my life is past, and I am by no means what you might call an Asolando. I don't seem to impress you with that fact. I'm a human being, not to be picked like a red apple, or trampled upon like grass, or trampled upon like a foolish little brook. I'm greatly given to the highway, and I prefer marauding. I like asphalt pavements, too, for the matter of that. I should give a motor, but lacking the coin I pedal a bicycle. My wheel lies down there in the bushes. You see, Mr. Chimney Man, I am a plain spoken person and have no intention of deceiving you. My name was Frances for one day only. It may interest you to know that my real name is Hezekiah."

"Hezekiah! Then you are Cecilia's sister and Miss Hollister's niece?"

"Golly."

"And you live?"

"Over there somewhere beyond that ridge. And she waved her hand vaguely toward the village and landscape beyond."

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gested wanderers from some dark Pictoulan cave, bent upon mischief to the upper world. Their step was jaunty—they moved as though drilled to the same cadence.

We waited a moment, expecting that another figure might join the strange procession, but none was the correct count. I looked down to find Hezekiah checking them off on the fingers of her slim brown hand.

"Has there been a funeral, and are they the returning plaid bearers?" I inquired.

"Not yet," she replied.

Her face showed amusement. The twitching of her lips encouraged hope that another of those delightful laughs was imminent. She said:

"Those are Cecilia's suitors. They have been to Aunt Octavia's tea. They're staying at the Prescott Arms probably."

"They're terribly formal. I can't get rid of the impression of somberness created by those fellows. You'd hardly expect them to tramp cross country in those duds. Such grandeur should go on wheels."

"Oh, they are afraid of Aunt Octavia. She won't allow a motor on her grounds, and I suppose they're afraid they might break some other rule if they were on any kind of wheels. She's rather exacting, you know, my Aunt Octavia."

"I was at the Prescott for luncheon today, and I must have seen these gentlemen there."

"Oh, you were at the Prescott?"

"Almost for the first time her manner betrayed surprise, but mischief danced in the brown eyes. With Wiggins' confession, as to the havoc he had played with Hezekiah's confiding heart fresh in my memory, I felt a delicacy about telling her that it was to see Wiggins that I had visited the inn."

But to my surprise she introduced the subject of Wiggins immediately and with laughter struggling for one of those fountain-like splashes that were so beguiling.

"Oh, Wiggy is staying there! Do you know Wiggy?"

"I know Wiggy, Hezekiah? I know no man better."

"Wiggy is no end of fun, isn't he? I've heard him speak of you. You are his friend the chimney man. He was the last man over the stile. Did you notice that he lingered a moment longer at the top than the others? From his being the ninth man I imagine that he was the last to leave the house, and he probably felt that this set him apart from the others. Wiggy is nothing! He's not shy and retiring."

A heartbroken, lovelorn girl did not speak here. She whistled softly to herself as we descended. The air was cooling rapidly, and the west was hung in scarlet and purple and gold. The horse neighed in the road below, and I knew that I must be on my way to the manor.

"Hezekiah," I said when I had drawn her bicycle from its hiding place, "you'd better leave your wheel here and let me drive you home. It's late, and there's frost in the air. I imagine it's some distance to your house."

"Thank you, Mr. Chimney Man; it is much farther to Aunt Octavia's. But let me this: What do you think of Wiggy's chimney?"

"Oh, winning your sister? I should say from my knowledge of Wiggins that he is a man much given to stay long in a game upon the cards are shuffled."

"Then you think he knows the game?"

There seemed to be something beneath the jesting meaning of her words, but I answered:

"Wiggy's affairs have been few, and while he may not know the game in all its intricacies, he has a shrewd if rather slow mind, and besides, he has asked my help in the matter."

"One of these spent for yourself. John situations, then? Well, I should say, Mr. Chimney Man, I should say—"

"She made ready for flight, looking ahead to be sure of a clear thoroughfare."

"I should say," she concluded, setting her skirts, "that that indicates considerable intelligence on Wiggy's part."

The tires rolled smoothly away, the gravel crunching, the pebbles popping. The white sweater clasped a straight back; then suddenly, as the wheels gained momentum, she bent low for a sport, and her rapidly receding figure became a gray blur in the purple dusk.

Miss Octavia was in the guest aprons at dinner that night, and struck ahead at once with one of her amusing dicta.

"Human beings," she said, "may be divided into two groups—interesting and uninteresting, but idiots abound in both classes."

Cecilia and I discussed this with more or less gravity, until we had exhausted the possibilities, Miss Octavia following with apparent interest and setting us off at a new tangent when our enthusiasm waned. She referred

to no way whatsoever to her chimney, nor did she ask how I had spent the day. I felt the pleading of Cecilia's eyes that I should accept the situation as it stood, and having already agreed to Wiggins' suggestion that I abide in Miss Hollister's house as a spy—I felt the words of conspiracy binding me fast. So far as my hostess was concerned, I was now less a guest than a member of the household.

The variety of subjects that Miss Octavia suggested was amazing. From aeronautics to the negro question, from polar exploration to the political conditions in Bulgaria, she passed with the jauntiest insouciance and apparently with a considerable fund of information to support her positions. She knew many people in all walks of life.

As we rose from the table Miss Octavia declared that she must show me the pie pantry. I was now so accustomed to her ways that I should not have been in the least surprised if she had proposed opening a steel vault filled with a munitioned Egyptian dynasty.

"The gentleman who built this house," she explained, "had already grown rich in the manufacture of the famous ribless umbrella before he acquired a second fortune from a nostrum warranted to cure dyspepsia. He was indignantly fond of pies, and in order that this form of pastry might never be absent from his home, he had a special pantry built to which he might adjourn at his pleasure without any fear of finding the cupboard bare."

She led the way through the butler's pantry and into a small cupboards room adjoining the table linen closet. At her command the butler threw open the doors and disclosed lines of shelves so arranged as to accommodate in the most compact and orderly form imaginable several dozens of pies. These pastries, in the jars as they had come from the oven, peeped out invitingly. Miss Octavia explained their presence in her usual impressive manner.

"It was one of the conditions of the sale of this house to me by the original owner's executor that the pie vault should be kept filled at all times, whether I am in residence here or not. He felt greatly indebted to pie for the success of the dyspepsia cure. It had widened and steadily increased the market for the cure, and pie was to him a consecrated and sacred food. It was his habit to eat a pie every night before retiring, and on the nightmarish that inspired him he planned the strategy of all his campaigns against dyspepsia. The man had elements of greatness, and these shelves are a monument to his genius. In order to keep perfect my title to this property it is necessary for me to maintain a pastry cook, and as I do not myself care greatly for pie the total output is distributed among the people of the neighborhood every second day. The station agent at Bedford is a heavy consumer, and a retired physician at Mount Kisco has a standing order for a dozen a week. My niece Hezekiah, of whom you have heard me speak, is partial to a particular type of pie, and one only. It is the gooseberry pie which I distribute in the corner behind you, there is even one gooseberry pie that I shall send to Hezekiah, who, for reasons I need not explain, does not now visit here."

"But the dyspepsia man—you speak of him as though he were dead."

"Your assumption is correct, Mr. Ames. The builder of Hopfield died only a few weeks after he had established himself in this house. Having entered upon the enjoyment of his well earned leisure and made it unnecessary that he should ever go pieless to bed, he gave himself up for a fortnight to a mad indulgence in meager and died after great suffering, steadily refusing his own medicine to the end."

We still lingered in the pie crypt after this diverting recital, while Miss Octavia entertained me with her views on pies.

"The soul color of pies varies greatly, Mr. Ames. It has always seemed to me that apple pie stands for the domestic virtues of our civilization. It is substantial, nutritious and filling. The custard and lemon varieties are feminine and do not, perhaps for that reason, appeal to me. Cherry pie at its best is the last and final expression of the pie genius, and where cooks have been careful in eliminating the seeds and the juice isn't the pie meets the soul's highest demands. In the gooseberry I find a certain raciness or, if I may use the expression, zip, that is highly stimulating. Both qualities you will observe in Hezekiah if you come to know her well."

"I have already formed a high opinion of Miss Hezekiah, and I should deal harshly with any one who ventured to criticize her in any particular."

"Will you kindly inform me just when you made the acquaintance of my younger niece? I should greatly like to believe you guilty of dissimulation, but when Hezekiah was mentioned in the gun room last night your silence led me to assume that she was wholly unknown to you."

"She was, I assure you, at the dinner hour last night. But I met her quite by chance this afternoon in an orchard at no great distance from this house."

Miss Octavia paused in the hall and bent her head in thought for a moment.

"May I inquire whether she referred in any way to Mr. Wiggins in this interview?"

"She did, Miss Hollister," I replied. And I could not help smiling as I remembered Hezekiah's laughter as she mentioned my friend. My smile did not escape Miss Octavia.

"Just how, may I ask, did she refer to Mr. Wiggins?"

"As though she thought him the funniest of human beings. She laughed deliciously at the bare mention of his name."

"It was not your impression, then, that she was deeply enamored of him; that she was eating her heart out for him?"

"Decidedly not, Miss Hollister. She gave me quite a different idea."

"You relieve me greatly. Mr. Wiggins' sense of humor is the slightest, and I should not in the least fancy him for Hezekiah. And besides, I am not yet ready to arrange a marriage



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for her.

She laid the slightest stress on the final pronoun. It was a fair inference, then, that Miss Cecilia's affairs were being "arranged