

THE WICKERSHAM EPISODE

By GEORGE HIBBARD

Drawing by T. K. Hanna

I KNEW it instantly. I was convinced of it from the very first. No one could look so experienced and yet guileless; no one could be so fascinating and still unconscious; could speak with such a charming little foreign accent; could have such wonderful, reddish, tousled, wopsy hair,—without having some mystery about her. Nobody could enter a room with such a perfect four feet and four inches of absolute dignity; nobody could advance with such entire ease on such tiny feet so consummately shod; nobody in the world could sit down and dispose with such grace of such little hands so superbly well gloved,—without at once awakening anybody's suspicion. I had often read of just such beings.

Could I hesitate to believe when I met in real life this charming and bewildering creature, so divinely dressed, that she must be what every novel of *haute finance* and high politics had always described as an "adventuress"? To be sure, I had not in the least a clear idea of what that might be. I knew this, however, that such a person was one who would bear watching.

The week's end party at Greenlawns was very large; for the country house was very big, and the Wickershams were very hospitable. Then anybody who was ever asked to the great Long Island place always went. One was absolutely sure not to be bored, and, what society esteems quite as much, one could not tell in what form the amusement would present itself. There was all the excitement of a gamble on what was really a sure thing. One was certain to meet interesting people, though who they might be always remained a question. The chance of coming on the latest man to make a new fortune or inherit an old one was very nearly equal. You might find the prima donna whose note was the clearest and highest on the stage of the Metropolitan. You might meet the grand dame whose diamonds were the biggest and brightest in all the boxes in front. You possibly might be placed at luncheon next to some one who was just off for the North Pole. You might be taken in to dinner by a stranger who was just back from the last South American revolution.

THEREFORE, when I had been whirled from the station and arrived just a little less hot and dusty at five o'clock, I was not surprised to discover the Hon. Arthur Carden-Carew, all eyeglass and silence, at the small tea table with Mrs. Wickersham. He was not one of the heavy, ruddy Englishmen, but one of the pale, precise kind. I was a good deal astonished, though I was at Greenlawns, when a few moments afterward Mrs. Carden-Carew entered with the effect on one that I have tried to describe. As soon as I could, I got Emily Wickersham aside and began to ask questions.

"I don't think that mama knows much about them," Emily answered. "She met them at the Creedmoors, and at once invited them down to add to her human bric-à-brac. The Hon. Mrs. Arthur—she's a perfect dear—was a Russian, a Countess in her own right,—the Countess Sziszski."

"I knew it!" I exclaimed with a little cry of satisfaction. After that could there remain the vestige of a doubt? The name was enough to settle it in my mind; for they were always Countesses with unpronounceable titles. The Hon. Arthur was just the sort of quiet, insignificant looking person to be a dupe or an accomplice, I had not decided which. That she must be a spy at least, I concluded immediately. What more might prove to be the case, time alone could reveal, and I decided quickly that my duty lay in helping and hurrying time along in this particular.

I could not get any more out of Emily; she was so anxious to confide in me about Charley Tremaine, with whom she was head over ears in love,—the course of true love in the most regular manner not going smoothly at all. He was something remarkable in the way of family and position, but poor, and only Mr. Wickersham's private secretary,—the Wickershams being dazzlingly new and hippodromically rich.

I knew perfectly the course I should pursue. I must appear entirely unconscious, in order not to give any warning of my intention. At the same time I must take note of everything with unceasing vigilance. I must not let the slightest fact escape me. With such an adversary I could not afford to lose a moment or leave a stone unturned.

To be sure, I met with something of a setback at the start; but all cannot be plain sailing. Having just arrived, there was a good deal to say, and before I had finished Mrs. Carden-Carew had slipped from

the room without my noticing it. I had stayed so often at Greenlawns that when Mrs. Wickersham told me I was in the Delft room as usual, I did not need anyone to show me the way.

I WAS sauntering down the well known corridor leading to my very charming apartments, when I heard a sudden convulsive little scream. A door sprang open, and out rushed the Countess Sziszski—who was. She appeared more charming, if anything, in her partial disarray, with her hair and garments flying about her.

"What is it?" I cried. "Oh!" she moaned, her big eyes and her small mouth open with fright. "An enormous little mouse!" She spoke with such a very slight and attractive lisp and accent. "So huge!"

"Where?" I wailed. "I saw it in my room. It may come here." We clung to each other in terror. "If we make a great noise we may drive it away," I exclaimed bravely.

"You will help me?" she appealed. "I dare not!" "Hello! What's all this?" inquired the Hon. Arthur himself, coming round the corner. "What's up, Doette?"

She explained, grasping his arm in a way to make any man adore her. Doette! Of course she would be called something like that. Still, her very natural panic in such a terrible situation influenced me unavoidably. I could not feel quite the same toward her after we had stood clasped in each other's arms in the face of a common peril. I understood, however, that I must expect to find her winning. To be sympathetic and seductive was part of her stock in trade. I said that I must steel myself against her charms. Though others might be beguiled, I must not let myself be misled or blinded.

She did, in fact, simply fascinate everybody,—in this only living up to her part, as I told myself. I felt at once a great sense of superiority in being the only one who was not hoodwinked and victimized. At dinner all were carried away with her, and even after dinner before the men came she quite won the hearts of all the women. If, however, I had needed anything to confirm me in my conclusion, what happened when bridge began did it at once. She won. She won constantly and largely. To be sure, I could see that she played marvelously well; but then such people always played well, and always won. That was the finishing touch, the last stroke, and the last straw. No longer need I have a shadow of hesitation, and I was more determined than ever to watch out.

Really, when I found myself alone in my room after sending Faustine away I was unusually excited. I did not often come on such a perfectly lovely opportunity for the exercise of my unquestioned abilities in the investigation of the unusual and the solution of the mysterious. There was a time, to be sure,



"That's It!" He Exclaimed Joyfully.

when I had doubted; but so many remarkable adventures had followed one after the other that I could no longer be surprised by anything, and was prepared for all.

I DAWDLED about, and an hour had passed before I began really to get ready to go to bed. Just as I had raised my fingers to the first hairpin, I stood arrested before the mirror with my hand poised in the air. A slight noise in the corridor attracted my attention. The door next to mine was cautiously opened. The soft pitpat of footfalls on the polished floor came to my ears.

Immediately I was alert. One instant, and I had shut off the electric light. Another, and I stood peering out into the darkness of the hall. Away at the end of the passage I saw a small ghostlike form flit round a corner. I will confess that for a moment I was breathless. No matter how well I may be convinced of something curious, I am always a little amazed when I am finally proved right. Here was this delightful, doubtful, and consequently dangerous, unknown stealing down in the dead of night into the deserted house. What could it mean? I must, I felt, discover and thwart what could be only a nefarious design.

With the swiftness of a rapid change artist, I was out of my crackling dinner dress and into a noiseless gown. With the caution of a red Indian,—though I am thankful to say I did not look in the least like any squaw I ever saw,—I was on the trail.

The absolute silence as I slipped down the grand main staircase was oppressive. The weird darkness was even terrifying. The faint light of the moon shone through the stained glass, only dimly lighting the wide hall. I kept my eyes fastened on the small figure gliding along before me. Where was she going? What was her object? I was not long left in doubt as to the destination of the midnight prowler.

Directly, without hesitation, as if following out a well matured plan, she made straight toward the billiard room. She entered immediately and swiftly. I stood stockstill behind a portière, looking eagerly after her. The numerous tall windows let in the pale green moonlight in a way that made it easier for me to follow her movements. I saw her pause a moment, then begin actively to inspect the tables and shelves. She seconded the efforts of her eyes with her hands; and I watched her as she felt everywhere. She was trying to find something! That was to be seen with half an eye, and I was staring with both mine wide open. For what was she looking? Ah! the