The Siege of The Seven Suitors

By

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(Continued from Last Issue.)

CHAPTER VIII.

Nine Silk Hats Cross a Stile.

SO this was the child whose devotion had rendered Wiggins so miserable and the sister of whom Cecilia Hollister and her aunt had spoken so strangely. I had not suspected it. She was as unlike Cecilia as possible, and the difference lay in her independent spirit and bubbling humor.

She jumped down from the wall, shook three apples from a tree and sustained them in the air with the deftness and certainty of practiced jugglery. Her absorption was complete, and when she wearied of this sport she flung the apples away, one after the other, with a boy's free swing of the arm. Herrick would have delighted in her, Dobson would have spun her bright hair into a rondeau, but only Aldrich, with a twinkle in his eye, could have brought her up to date in a dozen chiming couplets.

She had gone on up to the crest of the orchard and stood clearly limned against the sky, her hands thrust into the pockets of her sweater. She appeared to be intent upon something that lay beyond and half turned her head and summoned me by whistling. I liked this better than the quotation method of address. It was a clear, shrill pipe, that whistle, and she emphasized it further by a peremptory wave of her arm. When I stood beside her I was surprised to find that the site commanded a wide area, including the unmistakable roofs and chimneys of Hopefield Manor, half a mile distant.

"You will see something funny down there in a minute. They are out of sight now, but there's a stile, the kind with steps, just beyond those trees. It's in a path that leads from the Prescott Arms to Aunt Octavia's. Look!"

My eyes discovered the stile. It was set in a wall that was, she told me, the boundary dividing Hopefield Manor from another estate nearer our position.

Suddenly a silk hat bobbed in the path beyond the stile. It rose as its owner mounted the steps, it paused an instant when the top of the stile was reached, then quickly descended and came toward us, a black blot above a black coat. I was about to ask her the meaning of this apparition when a second silk hat bobbed in the path and then rose like its predecessor, descending and keeping on its way until hidden from our sight by shrubbery. A third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth followed. Nine gentlemen in silk hats crossing a stile in a lonely pasture between woodlands; so much was plain to the eye from our vantage ground. But I groped blindly for an explanation of this spectacle. The bobbing hats and dark coats suggested wanderers from some dark Plutonian 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 nine 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 pall 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 to 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 went on any kind of wheels. She's rather exacting, you know, 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?"

"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 if not shy and retiring."

A heartbroken, lovelorn girl did not speak here. She whistled softly to

Nine Gentlemen in Silk Hats Crossing a Stile.

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 tell me this: What do you think of Wiggy's chances?"

"Of winning your sister? I should say from my knowledge of Wiggins that he is a man much given to staying in a game once the cards are shuffled."

"Then you think he knows the game?"

There seemed to be something beneath the surface 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 speak-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, settling 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 snugly; then suddenly, as the wheels gained momentum, she bent low for a spurt, and her rapidly receding figure became a gray blur in the purple dusk.

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Miss Octavia was in the gayest spirits at dinner that night, and struck afield 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 lagged. She referred in no way whatever to her chimneys, nor did she ask me 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—for this was the ignoble fact—I felt the threads 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 mummified 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 inordinately 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 cupboarded 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 pans 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 executors 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 nightmares thus inspired he had 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 that delights Hezekiah's palate, and under G in file 3, in the corner behind you, there is even now a 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 Hopefield 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 meringues 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 homelier 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 genus, and where cooks have been careful in eliminating the seeds and the juice hasn't made sodden dough of the crust a cherry 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 criticise her in any particular," I replied.

"Will you kindly inform me just when you made the acquaintance of my younger niece? I should greatly dislike 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 at the mention of my friend. My smile did not escape Miss Octavia.

"The soul color of pies varies greatly, Mr. Ames."

"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 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;" when they had been determined a husband would be found for Hezekiah. I did not doubt that Miss Hollister's intentions toward her nieces were the friendliest, no matter what strange devices she might employ to bend those young women to her purposes.

CHAPTER IX.

Cecilia's Silver Notebook.

MISS HOLLISTER disappeared in the hall without excuse, and I entered the library to find Cecilia sitting alone by the fire. She put aside a book she had been reading and, seeing that her aunt had not followed me, asked at once as to my visit to the inn.

"I conveyed your message," I answered, "but you have seen Mr. Wiggins since, unless I am greatly mistaken."

"Yes; he called this afternoon. We had several callers at the tea hour. I had rather expected you back."

"The fact is," I replied, "that after I had taken luncheon at the Prescott Arms I got lost among the hills, and while in the act of robbing an apple orchard I came most unexpectedly upon your sister."

"Hezekiah!"

"The same. And, oddly enough, I had met her before, though I didn't realize it was she until the meeting in the orchard. It was in the Asolando that I saw her; she was at the cashier's wicket the afternoon I met your aunt there."

"You have given me information, Mr. Ames. I did not know that Hezekiah had ever been connected with the Asolando."

"Oh, it was only that one historic day. She says the place was unbearable. She jarred the holiest chords of the divine lyre by harsh comments on the pre-Raphaelite profile. One of the devotees was so shocked that she dropped a plate or something and, to put it coarsely, Hezekiah got the bounce."

My description of Hezekiah's brief tenure of office at the Asolando seemed to amuse Cecilia greatly.

"There is no one like my sister," she said. "There never was and there never will be any one half so charming. Hezekiah is an original, who breaks all the rules and yet always sends the ball over the net. And it is because she is so inexpressibly dear and precious that I am anxious that nothing shall ever hurt her—nothing mar the sweet, beautiful child spirit in her."

It was my turn to laugh now. Cecilia's manifestation of maternal solicitude for Hezekiah seemed absurd, for Hezekiah in her way was older. Hezekiah had raced with Diana and plucked arrows from her girdle—she had heard Homer at the roadside singing of Achilles' shield.

"Hezekiah is reasonably safe, I should say, because she is so amazingly swift of foot and eye and so nimble of speech. She is not to be caught in a net or tripped with a word."

"I suppose that is so," remarked Cecilia soberly. "You thought her happy when you met her today? She did not strike you as being a girl with a wound in her heart? She wasn't particularly sad?"

"Not more so than sunlight on rippled water or the song of the lark ascending."

"Of course you made no reference to Mr. Wiggins? If I had imagined you would meet her I should have"—

She ended with an embarrassment that I now understood, and I broke in cheerfully.

"We did mention him. She asked me if I had seen him, and it was the thought of him that evoked her merriest laughter."

She shook her head and sighed, then her manner changed abruptly.

"You delivered my message to Mr. Wiggins?"

"I did. He is badly out of sorts and sees nothing clearly. He is very bitter toward your aunt. He thinks she has treated him outrageously."

"Aunt Octavia has done nothing of the kind," she replied with spirit. "Mr. Wiggins has no right to speak of Aunt Octavia save in terms of kindness. If her wits are sharper than his, it is not her fault, that I can see. But there are matters here that I do not understand, Mr. Ames. I trust you, as my aunt evidently does, or I should not be talking to you as I am, and I am moved to ask a favor of you, a favor of considerable weight, in view of the fact that you are a professional man, with, doubtless, many pressing calls upon your time."

I bowed humbly before this compliment. My time had been lightly appraised by Miss Octavia and again by Wiggins. A long telegram from my assistant that reached me while I dressed for dinner had urged my immediate attendance upon my office. Some of my best clients, now reopening their houses for the winter, were in desperate straits. But, Octavia Hollisters do not occur in the life of every young man, and both Cecilia and Hezekiah had taken strong hold upon my imagination. Wiggins' place among the dramatis personae would in itself have compelled my sympathetic attention, and the nine silk hats that I had seen bobbing over the stile still danced before my eyes.

"Miss Hollister," I said, "my time is yours to command. My office is well organized, and I am sure that my assistant is equal to any demands that may be made upon him. Pray state in what manner I may serve you."

"I am going far, I know, Mr. Ames, but I beg that you will not be in haste to leave my aunt's house. She must have been strongly prejudiced in your favor or she would not have asked you here on so short acquaintance. I am confident that she has no thought of your leaving. She expressed her great liking for you at luncheon, and I am sure that she will see to it that you do not lack for entertainment. I assume that you must have gathered from what Mr. Wiggins told you of my acquaintance with him the peculiar plight in which I am placed."

I bowed. If she groped in the dark and needed my help in finding the light, I was not the man to desert her. I had dropped my plumb line into too many dark chimneys not to feel the fascination of mystery. As I expressed again my entire willingness to abide at Hopefield Manor as long as she wished, the footman announced Mr. Hartley Wiggins.

We had hardly exchanged greetings before another man was announced, and then another. I should say that it was at intervals of about three minutes that the sedate servant appeared in the curtained doorway and announced a caller until nine had been admitted. My spirits soared high as the gentlemen from the Prescott Arms appeared one after the other. The earlier arrivals rose to greet the later ones, and as they were all in evening clothes I experienced, as when I had seen the same gentlemen in their afternoon raiment crossing the stile, a sense of something fantastic and eerie in them. In the interest of brevity and to avoid confusion, I tabulate them here with a notation as to their residence and occupation, taking such data from the notebook in which, at subsequent dates, I set down the facts which are the basis of this chronicle.

Hartley Wiggins, lawyer and farmer, Hare and Tortoise club, New York.

Linnaeus B. Henderson, planter, Roanoke, Va.

Cecil Hugh, Lord Arrowood, no occupation, Arrowood, Hants, England.

Daniel P. Ormsby, manufacturer of knit goods, Utica, N. Y.

S. Forrest Hume, lecturer on Scandinavian literature, Occidental university, Long Trail, Okla.

John Stewart Dick, pragmatist, Omaha, Neb.

Pendennis J. Arbuthnot, banker and horseman, Lexington, Ky.

Percival B. Shallenberger, novelist and small fruits, Sycamore, Ind.

George W. Gorse, capitalist, Redlands, Cal.

We rose and stood in our several places when a moment later Miss Octavia entered. She greeted the suitors graciously and then in her most charming manner called one after the other to sit beside her on a long davenport the time apportioned being weighed with nicety, so that none might feel himself slighted or preferred. These interviews consumed more than half an hour, and the movement thus occasioned gave considerable animation to the scene.

It may seem ridiculous that nine gentlemen thus paying court to a young woman should call upon her at the same hour, but I must say that the gravity of the suitors and the entire sobriety of Cecilia did not affect me humorously, nor did I feel at all out of place in this strange company. I found myself agreeably engaged for several minutes in discussing Ibsen with the Oklahoma professor, who proved to be a delightful fellow. His experience of life was apparently wide, and he told me with an engaging frankness of his meeting with the Hollisters in France and of his pursuit of them over many weary miles the previous summer. As no one had elected his courses in the university at the beginning of the fall term, he had been granted a leave of absence, and this accounted for his freedom to press his suit at Hopefield Manor at this season. He was a big fellow, with clean cut features, and bore himself with a manly determination that I found attractive.

He alone, I may say, of the nine men who had thus appeared in Miss Octavia's library met me in a cordial spirit. Even Wiggins seemed not wholly pleased to find me there again, though he had asked me to remain. The manner of the others expressed disdain, suspicion or fierce hostility.

When the last man rose from the davenport Miss Octavia called me to her side. She seemed contrite at having neglected me during the day, but assured me that later she hoped to place an entire day at my disposal. As we talked the nine suitors sat in a semicircle about Cecilia, while the group listened to an anecdotal exchange between Professor Hume and Henderson, the Virginia planter. My opinion of Cecilia Hollister as a girl of high spirit, able to carry off any situation no matter how difficult, rose to new altitudes as I watched her. If this strange wooing was not to her liking she certainly made the best of it. She capped Henderson's best story with a better one in negro dialect, and no professional entertainer could have improved upon her recital. As she finished we all joined in the general laugh, Lord Arrowood's guffaw booming out a trifle boisterously, when Miss Octavia quietly rose and excused herself. About five minutes later, when the company had plunged into another series of anecdotes, I suddenly became conscious that the fireplace, near which I sat, had all at once begun to act strangely. Much in the manner of its performance the previous night, it abruptly gasped and choked, the smoke ballooned in a great swirl and then poured out into the room.

(Continued on Page 12.)

Claim Tammany Agent Duped Mrs. Sulzer

CONSPIRACY IN HOME OF GOVERNOR ALLEGED. GOVERNOR'S FRIEND CONFIDENT CASE WILL NEVER GO TO COURT.

Albany, N. Y., Aug. 16.—That Mrs. Sulzer purchased stocks in Wall street on the tip of a Tammany agent who, under direct orders from Tammany wormed his way into the confidence of the Sulzer household, it was declared here today, will be brought out in the statement of Governor Sulzer before the court of impeachment, providing the case goes to trial.

It was said that Sulzer's lawyers, having fortified the governor's case by unearthing this alleged conspiracy, plotted by Tammany and Wall street, feel confident that the case will never go to trial.

The story of this scheme to place Sulzer at the complete mercy of Tammany is that a Tammany's agent, taken into the Sulzer household last fall while Sulzer was away campaigning, "tipped off" to Mrs. Sulzer that "Big Four was due for a sensational rise." The Sulzer finances at that time were low. Sulzer owed approximately $48,000. Mrs. Sulzer was urged to use campaign contributions to make this Big Four stock and pay it back after the stock soared, so the story goes.

All this time, so the defense will attempt to show, the "tipster," a Tammany agent, in constant touch with that organization, knew there was no possibility of such a sensational rise in Big Four. An attempt will be made to show that this Tammany agent tried to get Mrs. Sulzer to pay the Big Four stock on a margin, but that she refused, saying if she bought the stock outright she could use it to reimburse the campaign fund. The defense will attempt to prove that this alleged conspiracy was conceived and worked out for the sole purpose of having a club to wield about the then congressman's head, in the event of his election and if he showed signs of "bucking the tiger."

Mrs. Sulzer was in a very serious condition last night and today, but tonight she is reported as very much improved. Her one desire is to have her husband at her bedside. The fact that it has been necessary that he be at the executive chamber during the day has troubled her greatly. But from the moment that he returns to the great brick pile on Eagle street until she falls into a fitful sleep, the governor remains at her bedside. By order of the doctor there is no discussion of the impeachment proceedings. Occasionally, when she tried to talk to him, the governor gently reassured her and told her that everything is sure to come out all right.

Dr. Robert Abraham, the Sulzer family physician, was forced to return to New York today and she remained under the care of a local physician. It was stated tonight that her condition, while serious, was not dangerous. With rest, quiet and complete care, it was said she would probably recover, but that progress, because of the nature of the calamity, must of necessity be slow.

It has been suggested that she be taken to the mountains, but inasmuch as that would mean separation from her husband, she positively refused to go. So she will be given the best of care at the executive mansion and everyone interested was hoping tonight that she would soon be recuperating.

"I am the governor of the state of New York. My commission came from the people. I am responsible to them. And I will continue to act as chief executive regardless of the aspirations or ambitions of anyone else. This is final."—William Sulzer.

"The law is plain. It makes the lieutenant governor governor of the state pending the great court of impeachment. I will act accordingly."—Martin M. Glynn.

Two I. W. W. Men Get One Year Each

John Phillips and Frank Besinger pleaded guilty in district court yesterday afternoon and were sentenced to one year each in the state penitentiary. Vero Washington, charged with the illegal sale of liquor, entered a plea of guilty and was sentenced to six months in the penitentiary.

Phillips and Besinger, each of whom carried I. W. W. cards, robbed a man early last week near the J. I. Case building They entered a plea of not guilty in the lower court but later changed their minds

A verdict of "accidental death" was returned by the coroner's jury called to investigate the case of the unknown man killed by the Oriental Limited at Larimore Thursday night.