

# **The Siege of The Seven Suitors**

BY  
MEREDITH NICHOLSON



"HEZEKIAH"

**"Hezekiah"**

TO  
THE HONORABLE THOMAS R. MARSHALL

MY DEAR GOVERNOR:—It was ordered by the franchises of destiny that you become the chief executive of a state in which the telling of tales brightened the hunter's camp-fire and cheered the lonely pioneer's cabin before our people learned the uses of ink; and the supreme fitness of this lies in the fact that you are yourself the best of story-tellers and entitled, for your excellence in this particular, as well as for weightier reasons, to sit at the head of the table in that commonwealth to which we are both bound by many and dear ties.

The morning brings to your mail-box so many demands, necessitating the most varied and delicate balancings and adjustments, that I serve you ill in adding to your burdens the little packet that contains this tale. Pray consider, however, that I have hidden it discreetly beneath a pile of documents touching nearly the state's business; or that I hastily serve it upon you in the highway, an unsanctioned writ from that high court of letters in which I am the least valiant among the bailiffs.

Sincerely yours,  
M. N.

MACKINAC ISLAND,  
*August 10, 1910.*

# CONTENTS

- I. MY FRIEND WIGGINS IS INTRODUCED
- II. THE BEGINNING OF MY ADVENTURE
- III. I FALL INTO A BRIAR PATCH
- IV. WE DINE IN THE GUN-ROOM
- V. THE STRANGE BEHAVIOR OF A CHIMNEY
- VI. I DELIVER A MESSAGE
- VII. NINE SILK HATS CROSS A STILE
- VIII. CECILIA'S SILVER NOTE-BOOK
- IX. I MEET A PLAYFUL GHOST
- X. MY BEFUDDLEMENT INCREASES
- XI. I PLAY TRUANT

- XII. THE RIDDLE OF THE  
SIBYL'S LEAVES
- XIII. I DISCOVER TWO  
GHOSTS
- XIV. LADY'S SLIPPER
- XV. LOSS OF THE SILVER  
NOTE-BOOK
- XVI. JACK O' LANTERN
- XVII. SEVEN GOLD REEDS
- XVIII. TROUBLE AT THE  
PRESCOTT ARMS
- XIX. THE GHOST OF  
ADONIRAM CALDWELL
- XX. HEZEKIAH PARTITIONS  
THE KINGDOM

# **THE SIEGE OF THE SEVEN SUITORS**

## I MY FRIEND WIGGINS IS INTRODUCED

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 down-town 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. When tough steaks are served from the club grill, we always attribute them to the cattle on Wiggins's hills. Or if the lamb is ancient, we declare it to be of Wiggins's shepherding. It is the way of our humor to hold Wiggins responsible for things. His good nature is usually equal to the worst we can do to him. He is the kind of fellow that one instinctively indicts without hearing testimony. We all know perfectly well that Wiggins's ranch is a wheat ranch.

Wiggins is an athlete, and his summers in the West and persistent training during the winter in town keep him in fine condition. As I faced him to-night 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 glum and dispirited. He had through many years honored me with his confidence, and I felt that to-night, after we 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, maccaroons, and all that sort of thing. They call it the Asolando."

I was ambling on, expecting to sharpen his curiosity gradually as I recited 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 waiter who served us glanced at him in surprise, a fact which I mention merely to confirm my assertion that the dropping of a spoon into his soup was an extraordinary occurrence in Wiggins's life. Wiggins was a proper person. On the ranch, twenty miles from a railroad, he always dressed for dinner.

"The Asolando," I repeated, to break the spell of his blank stare. "Know the place?"

He recovered in a moment, but he surveyed me quizzically before replying.



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

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

"You always were tolerably susceptible, but broiled butterflies and moth-wings soufflé 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's 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 tired, and it was a long way to the club, and"—

Dissimulation is not an art as 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 viands are good as such stuff goes, and the gentle hand-maidens are restful to the eye,—Pippa, 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."

"The calendar has said it."

"So you settled your bill with Pippa! I believe this was her day."

"Then you really do know the inner workings of the Asolando," I continued; "I thought you would show your hand presently. Then it is perhaps Gloria, Beatrice or Francesca who minds the till on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, alternating with Pippa, who took my coin to-day. It's a pretty idea. It has the delicacy of an arrangement by Whistler or the charm of a line in Rossetti. So you have seen the blessed damozel at the cash-desk."

"On the contrary I was never there on Tuesday, Thursday, or Saturday, and I therefore passed no coin to Francesca, Gloria or Beatrice. My only visit was on a day last May, and my recollection of the system is doubtless imperfect."

"Then beyond doubt I saw Pippa. She makes the change on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Her eyelashes are a trifle too long for the world's peace."

"I dare say. I have n't your charming knack, Ames, of picking up acquaintances, so you must n't expect me to form life-long friendships with young women at cash-desks. I suppose it did n'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 hashery. I sometimes fear that so much crawling through chimneys is clouding your intellect. It ought to have been clear even to your smoky chimney-pot that those girls in there are not the kind you can ask to meet you by the old mill at the fall of dewy eve, or who write notes to popular romantic actors. There's not a girl in that place who has n'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 inn-keepers' act, where common swine are fed for profit. The servants serve for love of the cause; it's a sort of cult. But I suppose you are incapable of grasping it. There was always something sordid in you, and I'm pained to find that you're getting worse."

Wiggins had, before now, occasionally taken this attitude toward me, and it was always with a view to obscuring some real issue between us. He requires patience; it is a mistake to attempt to crowd him; but give him rope and he will twist his own halter.

We sparred further without result. I had suggested a topic that had clearly some painful association for my friend. He drank his coffee gloomily and lighted a cigar much blacker than the one I knew to be his favorite in the Hare and Tortoise humidor. He 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.

I was moodily turning over the evening newspapers when Jewett turned up. Jewett always knows everything. I shall not call him a gossip, but he comes as near deserving the name as a man dares who lectures on the Renaissance before clubs and boarding-schools. Jewett knows his Botticelli, but his knowledge of his contemporaries is equally exact. He dropped the ball into the green of my immediate interest with a neat approach-shot.

"Too bad about old Wiggy," he remarked with his prelude sigh.

"What's the matter with Wiggins?" I demanded.

"Ah! He has n't told you? Thought he told you everything."

This was meant for a stinger, and I felt the bite of it.

"You do me too much honor. Wiggins is not a man to throw around his confidences."

"And I rather fancy that his love-affairs in particular are locked in his bosom."

Jewett was a master of the art of suggestion; he took an unnecessarily long time to light a cigar so that his words might sink deep into my consciousness.

"Saw her once last spring. Got a sight draft from the Bank of Eros. Followed her across the multitudinous sea. Bang!"

"But Wiggy has n't been abroad. Wiggy was on his Dakota ranch all summer. He's all tanned from the sun, just as he is every fall," I persisted.

"Wrote you from out there, did he? Sent you picture-postals showing him herding his cattle, or whatever the beasts are? Kept in touch with you all the time, did he? I tell you his fine color is due to Switzerland, not Dakota."

"Wiggins is n't a letter-writer, nor the sort of person who wants to paper your house with picture-postals. His not writing does n't mean that he was n't on his ranch," I replied, annoyed by Jewett's manner.

"Never dropped you before, though, I wager," he chirruped. "I tell you he saw Miss Cecilia Hollister at the Asolando tea-shop: just a glimpse; but almost immediately he went abroad in pursuit of her. The chevalier—that's her aunt Octavia—was along and another niece. My sister saw the bunch of them in Geneva, where the chevalier was breaking records. A whole troop of suitors followed them everywhere. My sister knows the girl—Cecilia—and she's known Wiggy all her life. She's just home and told me about it last night. She thinks the chevalier has some absurd scheme for marrying off the girl. It's all very queer, our Wiggy being mixed up in it."

"Don't be absurd, Jewett. There's nothing unusual in a man being in love; that's one fashion that does n't change

much. I venture to say that Wiggins will prove a formidable suitor. Wiggins is a gentleman, and the girl would be lucky to get him."

"Quite right, my dear Ames; but alas! there are others. The competition is encouraged by the aunt, the veteran chevalier. My sister says the chevalier seems to favor the suit of a Nebraska philosopher who rejoices in the melodious name of Dick."

Jewett was playing me for all his story was worth, and enjoying himself immensely.

"For Heaven's sake, go on!"

"Nice girl, this Cecilia. You know the Hollisters,—oodles of money in the family. The chevalier's father scored big in baby-buggies—responsible for the modern sleep-inducing perambulators; sold out to a trust. The father of Wiggins's inamorata had started in to be a marine painter. A founder of this club, come to think of it, but dropped out long ago. You have heard of him—Bassford Hollister. Funny thing his having to give up art. Great gifts for the marine, but never could overcome tendency to seasickness. Honest! Every time he painted a wave it upset him horribly. The doctors could n't help him. Next tried his hand at the big gulches down-town. There was a chance there to hit off the metropolitan sky-line and become immortal by doing it first; but a new trouble developed. Doing the high buildings made him dizzy! Honest! He was good, too, and would have made a place, but he had to cut it out. 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 cute 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's heart away. She's Cecilia, you know. Very literary and that sort of thing, and pushed tea and cookies at the Asolando when that idiocy was opened. Wiggins saw her there last spring. Miss Hollister, the aunt,—whom I 'm fond of calling the chevalier,—picked up her nieces about that time and hauled them off to Europe, and Wiggins scampered after them. I don't know what they did to Wiggy, but you see how he acts. I rather imagine that the chevalier did n't smile on his suit. She's a holy terror, that woman, with an international reputation for doing weird and most unaccountable things. She draws a sort of royalty on all the baby-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 a place she used to have at Newport a few years ago, ostensibly to do a frieze or something, and she made him teach her to fire a gun. You know Fortner, with his artistic ideals! And he did n't know any more about guns than a flea. It was droll, decidedly droll. But she kept him there a

month,—wouldn't let him off the reservation; but she paid him his fee just the same, though he never painted a stroke. When he got back to town, he was a wreck. It was just like being in jail. I warn you to let her alone. If you should undertake to fix her flues she's likely to put you to work digging potatoes. She's no end of a case."

"Well, Wiggins is a good fellow, one of the very best," I remarked, as I absorbed these revelations, "and it is n't the girl's aunt he wants to marry."

"He's a capital fellow," affirmed Jewett, "and that's why it's a sin this had to happen to him. There's no telling where this affair may lead him. There's something queer in the wind, all right. The chevalier has brother Bassford where he can't whimper; I rather fancy he feeds from her hand. His girls have n't any prospects except through the chevalier. Nice girls, so I'm told; but between the father with his vertiginous tendencies and a lunatic aunt who holds the family money-bags, I don't see much ahead of them. Miss Cecilia Hollister is living with her aunt; it's a sort of compulsory sequestration; she has to do it whether she wants to or not. I rather fancy it's to keep her away from Wiggins."

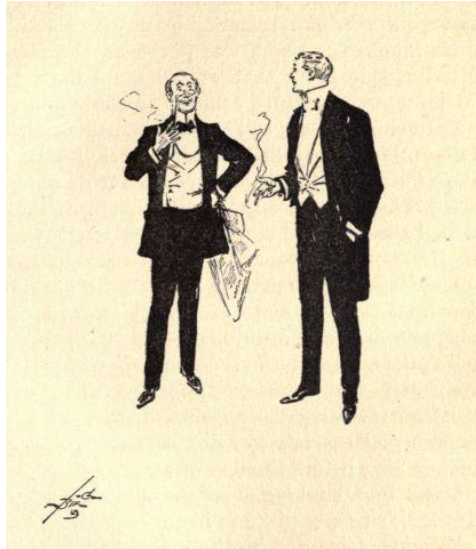
"And the other sister; where does she come in?"

"Not important, I fancy. Rumor is silent touching her. In fact I 've never heard anything of her. But this Cecilia is no end handsome and proud. Poor old Wiggy!"

I was already ashamed of myself for having encouraged Jewett to discuss Wiggins's affairs, and was about to leave



him, when he snorted, in a disagreeable way he had, at some joke that had occurred to him, and he continued chuckling to himself to attract my attention. My frown did not dismay him.



**He continued chuckling to himself to attract my attention.**

"I knew there was something," he was saying, "about Miss Cecilia's younger sister, and I've just recalled it. The girl has a most extraordinary name, quite the most remarkable you ever heard."

He laughed until he was purple in the face. I did not imagine that any name known to feminine nomenclature could be so humorous.

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