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The Siege of The Seven Sutors

By MEREDITH NICHOLSON

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SYNOPSIS

Hartley Wiggin is in love with Cecilia Hollister. His friend Arnold Ames meets an elderly lady at the Amelands tea room. She is Cecilia's Aunt Octavia, an eccentric woman of wealth. She invites Ames to Hopedale Manor. Ames is fascinated by Francesca, a tea room girl.

Ames sees Cecilia's mysterious mood watching the house. He hears of Hopedale, Cecilia's sister. Wiggin calls upon Cecilia. The chimney smokes mysteriously.

The house is said to have a ghost. Cecilia tells Ames she is in deep trouble and asks him to urge Wiggin not to call upon her again.

Wiggin regards Ames as a rival. Aunt Octavia dangles Wiggin because his ancestors were Tories. Wiggin is interested in both Cecilia and Francesca. Cecilia has nine suitors.

Ames meets Francesca in an orchard and learns that she is Hopedale. They are still bitter enemies. Ames asks Cecilia to reveal her secret.

Cecilia rejects Professor Hume and makes a record in her silver book. The butler tells Ames a British officer's ghost haunts the house.

Ames finds Cecilia and her father, Basil Hollister, fencing on the roof. Elderly lady is the unknown to Aunt Octavia. Hollister vanishes mysteriously through the hall wall.



"'Tis morning and the days are long!"

mirration and that you didn't get your share. So when her suitors began a siege of the castle, whose gates were locked against you, you plugged the chimney with a trunk tray and played at being ghost and otherwise sought to terrify your sister's lovers.

"That's not nice, Chinneys. You mean that I'm jealous." "No, I don't mean that you are jealous now. I throw it into the remote and irrevocable past. You were jealous. You don't care so much now, and I hope you will care less."

"That's being impertinent. If you talk that way I shall call you Mr. Ames and go home." "You can't do that, Hopedale." "I should like to know why not. If you say I'm jealous of Cecilia now or that I ever was I shall be very, very angry, for it's not true."

"No, you see things very differently now. You told me only last night that Cecilia might have Hartley Wiggin. Assuming that she wants him! And you and he have been good friends, haven't you? You had good times on the town assisting Providence in finding your aunt a cook who went walking with him."

"I did, I did," mocked Hopedale. "And why do you suppose I did?" "Because Wiggin's the best of fellows, a solid, substantial citizen who raises wheat to make bread out of."

"And angel food and ginger cookies," added Hopedale, feeling absent in the pockets of her coat. "No, Chinneys, you're a nice boy and you don't play like a wild man when a feather duster hits you in the dark, but there are some things you don't know yet."

CHAPTER XX.
Seven Gold Reds.

as the sun climbed to the zenith and Hopedale flung aside her coat. The breeze caught the ends of her tie and snapped them behind her. She was wholly absorbed in her task and so boy could have managed a pocket knife better. The first red she made a trifle longer than the first. The succeeding ones she trimmed to graduated lessening lengths, till seven in all had been cut, and then she noticed that—

"Seven," she murmured, laying their neatly in order on her knee. "I remember the right number by a poem I read the other day in an old magazine."

She reached down and plucked several long leaves of tough grass with which she began to bind the reeds together, repeating:

"Seven gold reeds grew tall and slim—
Close by the river's headed brim—
Pan, the goat herded, followed fast,
"It will be easier," said Hopedale. "If you hold the pipes while I tie them."

I found this propinquity wholly agreeable. It was pleasant to sit on a log beside Hopedale. It seemed so far cry to the stunted Mediterranean and Pan and dryads and naiads, as Hopedale bound her reeds to the music of complaints. There was no self-consciousness in her recitation. She seemed to be telling of something that she had seen herself on the other side.

"That's a good idea. Dick is untransferable. I hope you haven't kicked wrong." "As we were saying, about the notebook," she resumed, "the fifth man has already been accepted by Cecilia. The dates of the proposals are written in the notebook, so I learned from the book that Mr. Ormsby, Mr. Arbutnot and Mr. Gorse had proposed on the steamer. Professor Hume, you know, tried his luck at Hopedale, and Lord Arrowsmith must have stopped Cecilia as she was riding to the station on my bicycle yesterday morning. His goose is hooked."

"I wish, Hopedale, that you would stay caught!"

"He stopped to tell papa goodby and spoke very highly of you. Papa and you are the only gentlemen he met in America. But now we come to Mr. Wiggin."

"We do; and why in the name of all that is beautiful and good hasn't he asked her yet?"

Providence a little. Five men have at ready got their quotas."

"That's why don't they clear out and stop their nonsense?" "Oh, it's their pride, I suppose, and every man probably thinks that when Cecilia has been a little more of him in particular. In contrast with the others, he will win her favor. They're afraid of one another, those men. That's the reason they've been herding together so close since the first day you came. Mr. Wiggin was taking it for granted that he was the whole thing—just like the man—and those others forced him to join in some arrangement by which they were to hang together. These claims in a bunch came from that, as though any one of them wouldn't take advantage of the other if he saw a chance! Some of this I got from Wiggin himself, the rest I just guessed."

"But you may not know that they sent a delegation after me into town to warn me off the grass."

"That was Mr. Dick. He never says me when Cecilia was around, and he was terribly snippy sometimes and supercilious, but I'm going to get even with him. I've about underlined him for number six," she concluded with the number of a queen who, about to give her child to the world, was for the day, glances calmly over the list of victims.

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"I wish, Hopedale, that you would stay caught!"

"What do you mean?" she gasped. "I mean exactly what I say. If it had been that strutting young philosopher from the west you would, well, you would have allowed him to say that was in his mind. Am I not right?"

"Wonder, I wonder!" she faltered, snawing away the better to observe me.

"You wonder how much I know? To relieve your mind without parrying further, I will say to you that I know everything."

"Then Aunt Octavia must have told you, and that seems incredible. It was distinctly understood—"

"Your aunt told me nothing. Not by words did any one tell me."

"Not by words?" she asked, eyeing me wonderingly and clearly feeling that I might be playing some trick upon her. "Then can't it be that Hopedale and Hopedale doesn't know?"

"Trust Hopedale for not telling secrets," I answered evasively. "Give me credit for some imagination. The air of Hopedale is stimulating, and in the few days I have spent in your aunt's house I have learned much that I never dreamed of before."

"I don't understand it. You are wholly inexplicable."

"I am the simplest and least glibful of beings, I assure you. Yet I have done some things here not in the slightest way related to chimney-doctoring and something else I expect to do for you, and that seems incredible. It was through all the years of your life."

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The characters now upon the stage in such manner that Wiggin should become the seventh man. Cecilia could not always run away from him without violating the terms of her aunt's stipulation, and it was unlikely that she would attempt further to guide or thwart the pointing finger of fate. I relied little upon any arrangement effected among the suitors to stand together. Hume had already found a chance to speak. Lord Arrowsmith had bitten the dust and turned his face homeward, and Wiggin had been near the brink only that morning. It was unlikely that any of the active candidates remaining would stumble upon the key to the situation, which Hopedale had given into my keeping.

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