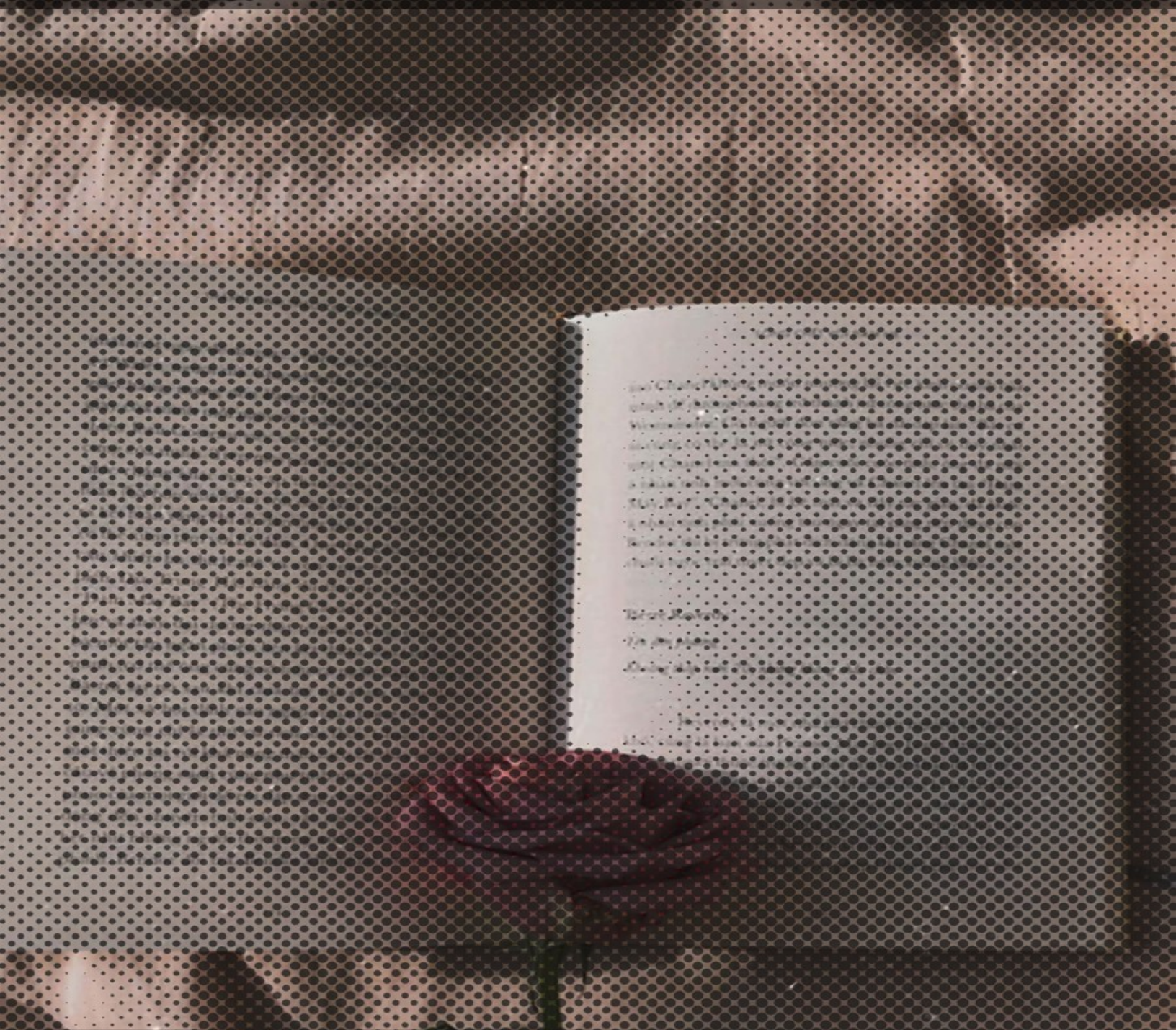


# Harriet Lewis



## *Neva's three lovers*



**Harriet Lewis**

# **Neva's three lovers**

**A novel**



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# **CHAPTER I.**

## **THE GAME WELL BEGUN.**

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Sir Harold Wynde, Baronet, was standing upon the pier head at Brighton, looking idly seaward, and watching the play of the sunset rays on the waters, the tossing white-capped waves, and the white sails in the distance against the blue sky.

He was not yet fifty years of age, tall and handsome and stately, with fair complexion, fair hair, and keen blue eyes, which at times beamed with a warm and genial radiance that seemed to emanate from his soul. The rare nobility of that soul expressed itself in his features. His commanding intellect betrayed itself in his square, massive brows. His grand nature was patent in every look and smile. He was a widower with two children, the elder a son, who was a captain in a fine regiment in India, the younger a daughter still at boarding-school. He possessed a magnificent estate in Kent, a house in town, and a marine villa, and rejoiced in a clear income of seventy thousand pounds a year.

As might be expected from his rare personal and material advantages, he was a lion at Brighton, even though the season was at its height, and peers and peeresses abounded at that fashionable resort. Titled ladies—to use a well-worn phrase—“set their caps” for him; manœuvring mammas smiled upon him; portly papas with their “quivers full of daughters,” and with groaning purses, urged him to dine at their houses or hotels; and widows of every age looked sweetly at him, and thought how divine it would be

to be chosen to reign as mistress over the baronet's estate of Hawkhurst.

But Sir Harold went his ways quietly, seeming oblivious of the hopes and schemes of these manœuverers. He had had a good wife, and he had no intention of marrying again. And so, as he stood carelessly leaning against the railing on the pier head, under the gay awning, his thoughts were far away from the gaily dressed promenaders sauntering down the chain pier or pacing with slow steps to and fro behind him.

The sunset glow slowly faded. The long gray English twilight began to fall slowly upon promenaders, beach, chain pier, and waters. The music of the band swallowed up all other sounds, the murmur of waters, the hum of gay voices, the sweetness of laughter.

But suddenly, in one of the interludes of the music, and in the midst of Sir Harold's reverie, an incident occurred which was the beginning of a chain of events destined to change the whole future course of the baronet's life, and to exercise no slight degree of influence upon the lives of others.

Yet the incident was simple. A little pleasure-boat, occupied by two ladies and a boatman, had been sailing leisurely about the pier head for some time. The boatman, one of the ordinary pleasure boatmen who make a living at Brighton, as at other maritime resorts, by letting their crafts and services to chance customers, had been busy with his sail. One of the ladies, a hired companion apparently, sat at one side of the boat, with a parasol on her knee. The other lady, as evidently the employer, half reclined upon the plush

cushions, and an Indian shawl of vivid scarlet lavishly embroidered with gold was thrown carelessly about her figure. One cheek of this lady rested upon her jewelled hand, and her eyes were fixed with a singular intentness, a peculiar speculativeness, upon the tall and stalwart figure of Sir Harold Wynde.

There was a world of meaning in that long furtive gaze, and had the baronet been able to read and comprehend it, the tragical history we are about to narrate would never have happened. But he, wrapped in his own thoughts, saw neither the boat nor its occupants.

The little craft crept in quite near to the pier head—so near as to be but a few rods distant—when the boatman shifted his helm to go about and stand upon the other tack. The small vessel gave a lurch, the wind blowing freshly; the lady with the Indian shawl started up, with a shriek; there was an instant of terrible confusion; and then the sail-boat had capsized, and her late occupants were struggling in the waters.

In a moment the promenaders of the chain pier had thronged upon the pier head. Cries and ejaculations filled the air. No one could comprehend how the accident had occurred, but one man who had been watching the boat averred that the lady with the shawl had deliberately and purposely capsized it. *And this was the actual fact!*

Sir Harold Wynde was startled from the trance-like musings by the lady's shriek. He looked down upon the waters and beheld the result of the catastrophe. The boat's sail lay half under water. The boatman had seized the lady's companion and was clinging to the upturned boat. The

companion had fainted in his arms, and he could not loosen his hold upon her unless he would have her drown before his eyes. The lady, at a little distance from her companions in peril, tangled in her mass of scarlet and gold drapery, her hat lost, her long hair trailing on the waves, seemed drowning.

Her peril was imminent. No other boats were near, although one or two were coming up swiftly from a distance.

The lady threw up her white arms with an anguished cry. Her glance sought the thronged pier head in wild appealing. Who, looking at her, would have dreamed that the disaster was part of a well-contrived plan—a trap to catch the unwary baronet?

As she had expected from his well-known chivalrous character, he fell into the trap. His keen eyes flashed a rapid glance over beach and waters. The lady was likely to drown before help could come from the speeding boats. Sir Harold pulled off his coat and made a dive into the sea. He was an expert swimmer, and reached the lady as she was sinking. He caught her in his arms and struck out for the boat. The lady became a dead weight, and when he reached the capsized craft her head lay back on his breast, her long wet tresses of hair coiled around him like Medusean locks, and her pale face was like the face of a dead woman.

Sir Harold clung to the side of the boat opposite that on which the boatman supported his burden. And thus he awaited the coming of the boats.

Among the eager thronging watchers on the pier head above was a tall, fair-faced man, with a long, waxed

mustache, sinister eyes and a cynical smile. He alone of the throng seemed unmoved by the tragic incident.

“It was pretty well done,” he muttered, under his breath —“a little transparent, perhaps, and a trifle awkward as well, but pretty well done! The baronet fell into the trap too, exactly as was hoped. Your campaign opens finely, my beautiful Octavia. Let us see if the result is to be what we desire. In short, will the baronet be as unsuspecting all the way through?”

Sir Harold certainly was unsuspecting at that moment. The helpless woman in his arms aroused into activity all the chivalry of his chivalric nature. He held her head above the creeping waves until the foremost boat had reached him. His burden was the first to be lifted into the rescuing craft; the lady’s companion followed; the baronet and the boatman climbing into the boat last, in the order in which they are named.

The capsized boat was righted and its owner took possession of her. The rescuing craft transported the baronet and the two ladies to the beach. The lady companion had recovered her senses and self-possession, but the lady employer lay on the cushions pale and motionless.

On reaching the landing, a cab was found to be in waiting, having been summoned by some sympathizing spectator. The companion, uttering protestations of gratitude, entered the vehicle, and her mistress was assisted in after her. The former gathered her employer in her arms, crying out:

“She is dead! She is dead! I have lost my best friend—”



“Not so, madam,” said Sir Harold, in kindly sympathy. “The lady has only fainted, I think. To what place shall I tell the cabman to drive?”

“To the Albion Hotel. Oh, my poor, poor lady! To die so young! It is terrible!”

Sir Harold made some soothing response, but being chilled and wet, did not find it necessary to accompany to their hotel the heroines of the adventure. He gave their address to the cabman, watched the cab as it rolled away, and then breaking loose from the crowd of friends who gathered around him with anxious interrogatories, he secured his coat and procured a cab for himself and proceeded to his own hotel.

It was not until he had had a comfortable bath, and was seated in dry attire in his private parlor, that Sir Harold remembered that he did not know the name of the lady he had served, or that he had not even seen her face distinctly.

“She is as ignorant of my name and identity,” he thought, “as I am of hers. If the incident could be kept out of the papers, I need never be troubled with the thanks of her husband, father, or brother.”

But the incident was not kept out of the papers. Sir Harold Wynde, being a lion, had to bear the penalty of popularity. The next morning’s paper, brought in to him as he sat at his solitary breakfast, contained a glowing account of the previous evening’s adventure, under the flaming head line of “Heroic Action by a Baronet,” with the sub-lines: “Sir Harold Wynde saves a lady’s life at the risk of his own. Chivalry not yet dead in our commonplace England.” And there followed a highly imaginative description of the lady’s

adventure, her name being as yet unknown, and a warm eulogy upon Sir Harold's bravery and presence of mind.

The baronet's lip curled as he read impatiently the fulsome article. He had scarcely finished it when a waiter entered, bringing in upon a silver tray a large squarely enveloped letter. It was addressed to Sir Harold Wynde, was stamped with an unintelligible monogram, and sealed with a dainty device in pale green wax. As the baronet's only lady correspondent was his daughter at school, and this missive was clearly not from her, he experienced a slight surprise at its reception.

The waiter having departed, Sir Harold cut open the letter with his pocket knife, and glanced over its contents.

They were written upon the daintiest, thickest vellum paper unlined, and duly tinted and monogrammed, and were as follows:

ALBION HOTEL, Tuesday Morning.

"SIR HAROLD WYNDE: The lady who writes this letter is the lady whom you so gallantly rescued from a death by drowning last evening. I have read the accounts of your daring bravery in the morning's papers, and hasten to offer my grateful thanks for your noble and gallant kindness to an utter stranger. Life has not been so sweet to me that I cling to it, but yet it is very horrible to go in one moment from the glow and heartiness of health and life down to the very gates of death. It was your hand that drew me back at the moment when those gates opened to admit me, and again I bless you—a thousand thousand times, I bless you. Alas, that I have to write to you myself. I have

neither father, lover, nor husband, to rejoice in the life you have saved. I am a widow, and alone in the wide world. Will you not call upon me at my hotel and permit me to thank you far more effectively in person? I shall be waiting for your coming in my private parlor at eleven this morning.

“Gratefully yours,  
“OCTAVIA HATHAWAY.”

The baronet read the letter again and again. His generous soul was touched by its sorrowful tone.

“A widow and alone in the world!” he thought. “Poor woman! What sentence could be sadder than that? She is elderly, I am sure, and has lost all her children. I do not want to hear her expressions of gratitude, but if I can make the poor soul happier by calling on her I will go.”

Accordingly, at eleven o’clock that morning, attired in a gentleman’s unexceptionable morning dress, Sir Harold Wynde, having sent up his card, presented himself at the door of Mrs. Hathaway’s private parlor at the Albion Hotel, and knocked for admittance.

The door was opened to him by the lady’s companion, who greeted him with effusiveness, and begged him to be seated.

She was a tall, angular woman, with sharp features, whose characteristic expression was one of peculiar hardness and severity. Her lips were thin, and were usually compressed. Her eyes were a light gray, furtive and sly, like a cat’s eyes. Her pointed chin gave a treacherous cast to her countenance. Her complexion was of a pale, opaque gray; her hair, of a fawn color, was worn in three puffs on

each side of her face, and her dress was of a tint to match her hair. Sir Harold conceived an instinctive aversion to her.

"Mrs. Hathaway?" he said politely, with interrogative accent.

"No, I am not Mrs. Hathaway," was the reply, in a subdued voice, and the furtive eyes scanned the visitor's face. "I am only Mrs. Hathaway's companion—Mrs. Artress. Mrs. Hathaway has just received your card. She will be out directly."

The words were scarcely spoken when the door of an inner room opened, and Mrs. Hathaway made her appearance.

Sir Harold stood up, bowing.

The lady was by no means the elderly, melancholy personage he had expected to see. She was about thirty years of age, and looked younger. She had a tall, statuesque figure, well-rounded and inclined to *embonpoint*. She carried her head with a certain stateliness. Her hair was dressed with the inevitable chignon, crimped waves, and long, floating curl, and despite the monstrosity of the fashion, it was decidedly and undeniably picturesque. Her face, with its clear brunette complexion, liquid black eyes, Grecian nose, low brows, and faultless mouth, was very handsome. There was a fascination in her manners that was felt by the baronet even before she had spoken.

She was not dressed in mourning, and it was probable, therefore, that her widowhood was not of recent beginning. She was clothed in an exquisitely embroidered morning dress of white, which trailed on the floor, and was relieved



with ornaments of pale pink coral, and a broad coral-colored sash at her waist.

"*This* is Mrs. Hathaway, Sir Harold," said the gray looking lady's companion.

The lady sprang forward after an impulsive fashion, and clasped the baronet's hands in both her own. Her black eyes flooded with tears. And then, in a broken voice, she thanked her preserver for his gallant conduct on the previous evening assuring him that her gratitude would outlast her life. Her protestations and gratitude were not overdone, and unsuspecting Sir Harold accepted them as genuine, even while they embarrassed him.

He remained an hour, finding Mrs. Hathaway charming company and thoroughly fascinating. The companion sat apart, silent, busy with embroidery, a mere gray shadow; but her presence gave an easy unconstraint to both the baronet and the lady. When Sir Harold took his departure, sauntering down to the German Spa, he carried with him the abiding memory of Mrs. Hathaway's handsome brunette face and liquid black eyes, and thought himself that she was the most charming woman he had met for years.

From that day, throughout the season, the baronet was a frequent visitor at Mrs. Hathaway's private parlor. The gray companion was always at hand to play propriety, and the tongues of gossips, though busy, had no malevolence in them. Sir Harold had his own horses at Brighton, and placed one at Mrs. Hathaway's disposal. The widow accepted it, procured a bewitching costume from town, and had daily rides with the baronet. She also drove with him in his open, low carriage, and bowed right and left to her acquaintances

upon such occasions with the gracious condescension of a princess. She sailed with him in his graceful yacht, upon day's excursions, her companion always accompanying, and rumor at length declared that the pair were engaged to be married.

Sir Harold heard the reports, and they set him thinking. The society of Mrs. Hathaway had become necessary to him. She understood his tastes, studying them with a flattery so delicate that he was pleased without understanding it. She read his favorite books, played his favorite music, and displayed talents of no mean order. She was fitted to adorn any position, however high, and Sir Harold thought with a pleasant thrill at his heart, how royally she would reign over his beautiful home.

In short, questioning his own heart, he found that he had worshiped his dead wife, who would be to him always young, as when he had buried her—but with the passion of later manhood, an exacting, jealous yearning affection, which gives all and demands all. With his children far from him, his life had been lonely, and he had known many desolate hours, when he would have given half his wealth for sympathy and love.

"I shall find both in Octavia," he thought, his noble face brightening. "I shall not wrong my children in marrying her. My son will be my heir. My daughter's fortune will not be imperilled by my second marriage. Neva is sixteen, and in two years more will come home. How can I do better for her than to give her a beautiful mother, young enough to win her confidence, old enough to be her guide? Octavia would love my girl, and would be her best chaperon in society, to

which Neva must be by and by introduced. I should find in Octavia then a mother for my daughter, and a gentle loving wife and companion for myself. But will she accept me?"

He put the question to the test that very evening. He found the handsome widow alone in her parlor, the gray companion being for once absent, and he told her his love with a tremulous ardor and passion that it would have been the glory of a good woman to have evoked from a nature so grand as Sir Harold's.

The fascinating widow blushed and smiled assent, and her black-tressed head drooped to his shoulder, and Sir Harold clasped her in his arms as his betrothed wife.

With a lover's impetuosity he begged her to marry him at an early day. She hesitated coyly, as if for months she had not been striving and praying for this hour, and then was won to consent to marry him a month thence.

"I am alone in the world, and have no one to consult," she sighed. "I have an old aunt, a perfect miser, who lives in Bloomsbury Square, in London. She will permit me to be married from her house, as I was before. The marriage will have to be very quiet, for she is averse to display and expense. However, what she saves will come to me some day, so I need not complain. I shall want to keep Artress with me, Sir Harold. I can see that you don't like her, but she has been a faithful friend to me in all my troubles, and I cannot abandon her when prosperity smiles so splendidly upon me. I may keep her, may I not?"

Thus appealed to, Sir Harold smothered his dislike of the gray companion, and consented that she should become an inmate of his house.

Mrs. Hathaway proceeded to explain the causes of her friendlessness. She was an orphan, and had early married the Honorable Charles Hathaway, the younger son of a Viscount, who had died five years before. The Honorable Charles had been a dissipated spendthrift, and had left his wife the meagre income of some three hundred pounds a year. Her elegant clothing was, for the most part, relics of better days. As to the expensive style in which she lived, keeping a companion and maid, no one knew, save herself and one other, how she managed to support it. Her name and reputation were unblemished, and the most censorious tongue had nothing to say against her.

And yet she was none the less an unscrupulous, unprincipled adventuress.

This was the woman, the noble, gallant baronet proposed to take to his bosom as his wife, to endow with his name and wealth, to make the mother and guide of his pure young daughter. Would the sacrifice of the generous, unsuspected lover be permitted?

It *was* permitted. A month later their modest bridal train swept beneath the portals of St. George's Church, Hanover Square. The bride, radiant in pearl-colored moire, with point lace overdress, wore a magnificent parure of diamonds, presented to her by Sir Harold. The baronet looked the picture of happiness. The miserly aunt of Mrs. Hathaway, a skinny old lady in a low-necked and short-sleeved dress of pink silk, that, by its unsuitability, made her seem absolutely hideous, attended by a male friend, who gave away the bride, was prominent among the group that surrounded the altar.



Sir Harold's son and heir was in India, and his daughter had not been summoned from her boarding-school in Paris. The baronet's tender father soul yearned for his daughter's presence at his second marriage; but Lady Wynde had urged that Neva's studies should not be interrupted, and had begged, as a personal favor, that her meeting with her young step-daughter might be delayed until her ladyship had become used to her new position. She professed to be timid and shrinking in regard to the meeting with Neva, and Sir Harold, in his passionate love for Octavia, put aside his own wishes, yielding to her request. But he had written to his daughter, announcing his intended second marriage, and had received in reply a tender, loving letter full of earnest prayers for his happiness, and expressing the kindest feelings toward the expected step-mother.

The words were spoken that made the strangely assorted pair one flesh. As the bride arose from her knees the wife of a wealthy baronet, the wearer of a title, the handsome face was lighted by a triumphant glow, her black eyes emitted a singular, exultant gleam, and a conscious triumph pervaded her manner.

She had played the first part of a daring game—and she had won!

As she passed into the vestry to sign the marriage register, leaning proudly upon the arm of her newly made husband, and followed by her few attending personal friends, a man who had witnessed the ceremony from behind a clustered pillar in the church, stole out into the square, his face lighted by a lurid smile, his eyes emitting the same peculiar, exultant gleam as the bride's had done.

This man was the tall, fair-haired gentleman, with waxed mustaches, sinister eyes and cynical smile, who, nearly three months before, had witnessed from the pier head at Brighton the rescue of Mrs. Hathaway from the sea by Sir Harold Wynde. And now this man muttered:

“The game prospers. Octavia is Lady Wynde. The first act is played. The next act requires more time, deliberation, caution. Every move must be considered carefully. We are bound to win the entire game.”

# **CHAPTER II.**

## **A DECISIVE MOVE COMMANDED.**

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Sir Harold and Lady Wynde ate their wedding breakfast in Bloomsbury Square, at the house of Lady Wynde's miserly aunt, Mrs. Hyde. A few of the baronet's choice friends were present. The absence of Sir Harold's daughter was not especially remarked save by the father, who longed with an anxious longing to see her face smiling upon him, and to hear her young voice whispering congratulations upon his second marriage. Neva had been especially near and dear to him. Her mother had died in her babyhood, and he had been both father and mother to his girl. He had early sent his son to school, but Neva he had kept with him until, a year before, his first wife's relatives had urged him to send her to a "finishing school" at Paris, and he had reluctantly yielded. Not even his passionate love for his bride could overcome or lessen the fatherly love and tenderness of years.

Immediately after the breakfast the newly married pair proceeded to Canterbury by special train. The gray companion and Lady Wynde's maid traveled in another compartment of the same coach. The Hawkhurst carriage was in waiting for the bridal pair at the station. Sir Harold assisted his wife into it, addressed a few kindly words to the old coachman on the box, and entered the vehicle. The gray companion and the maid entered a dog-cart, also in waiting.

Hawkhurst was several miles distant, but the country between it and Canterbury was a charming one, and Lady Wynde found sufficient enjoyment in looking at the handsome seats, the trim hedges, and thrifty hop-gardens, and in wondering if Hawkhurst would realize her expectations. She found indeed more enjoyment in her own speculations than in the society of her husband.

About five o'clock of the afternoon, the bridal pair came in sight of the ancestral home of the Wynde's. The top of the low barouche was lowered and Sir Harold pointed out her future home to his bride with pardonable pride, and she surveyed it with eager eyes.

It was, as we have said, a magnificent estate, divided into numerous farms of goodly size. The home grounds of Hawkhurst proper, including the fields, pastures, meadows, parks, woods, plantations and gardens, comprised about four hundred acres. The mansion stood upon a ridge of ground some half a mile wide, and was seen from several points at a distance of three or four miles. It was a grand old building of gray stone, with a long facade, and was three stories in height. Its turrets and chimneys were noted for their picturesqueness. Its carved stone porches, its quaint wide windows, its steep roof, from which pert dormer-windows, saucily projected, were remarkable for their beauty or oddity. Despite its age, and its air of grandeur and stateliness, there was a home-like look about the great mansion that Lady Wynde did not fail to perceive at the first glance.

The house was flanked on either side by glass pineries, grape houses, hothouses, greenhouses and similar



buildings. Further to the left of the dwelling, beyond the sunny gardens, was the great park, intersected with walks and drives, having a lake somewhere in the umbrageous depths, and herds of fallow-deer browsing on its herbage. In the rear of the house, built in the form of a quadrangle, of gray stone, were the handsome stables and offices of various descriptions. The mansion with its dependencies covered a great deal of ground, and presented an imposing appearance.

The house was approached by a shaded drive a half mile or more in length, which traversed a smooth green lawn dotted here and there with trees. A pair of bronze gates, protected and attended by a picturesque gray stone lodge, gave ingress to the grounds.

These gates swung open at the approach of Sir Harold Wynde and his bride, and the gate-keeper and his family came out bowing and smiling, to welcome home the future lady of Hawkhurst. Lady Wynde returned their greetings with graceful condescension, and then, as the carriage entered the drive, she fixed her eager eyes upon the long gray facade of the mansion, and said:

"It is beautiful—magnificent! You never did justice to its grandeurs, Harold, in describing Hawkhurst. It is strange that a house so large, and of such architectural pretension, should have such a bright and sunny appearance. The sunlight must flood every room in that glorious front. I should like to live all my days at Hawkhurst!"

"Your dower house will be as pleasant a home as this although not so pretentious," said Sir Harold, smiling gravely. "It is probable that you being twenty years my

junior, will survive me, Octavia, and therefore I have settled upon you for your life use in your possible widowhood one of my prettiest places, and one which has served for many generations as the residence of the dowager widows of our family.”

The glow on Lady Wynde’s face faded a little, and her lips slightly compressed themselves, as they were wont to do when she was ill pleased.

“I have never asked you about your property, Harold,” she remarked, “but your wife need be restrained from doing so by no sense of delicacy. I suppose your property is entailed?”

“Hawkhurst is entailed, but it will fall to the female line in case of the dying out of heirs male,” replied the baronet, not marking his bride’s scarcely suppressed eagerness. “It has belonged to our family from time immemorial, and was a royal grant to one of our ancestors who saved his monarch’s life at risk of his own. Thus, at my death, Hawkhurst will go, with the title, to my son. If George should die, without issue, Hawkhurst—without the title, which is a separate affair—will go to my daughter.”

“A weighty inheritance for a girl,” remarked Lady Wynde. “And—and if she should die without issue?”

“The estate would go to distant cousins of mine.”

Lady Wynde started. This was evidently an unexpected reply, and she could not repress her looks of disappointment.

“I—I should think your wife would come before your cousins,” she murmured.

“How little you know about law, Octavia,” said the baronet, with a grave, gentle smile. “The property must go to those of our blood. If our union is blessed with children, the eldest of them would inherit Hawkhurst before my cousins. But although the law has proclaimed us one flesh, yet it does not allow you to become the heir of my entailed property. It is singular even that a daughter is permitted to inherit before male cousins, but there was a clause in the royal deed of gift of Hawkhurst to my ancestors that gave the property to females in the direct line, in default of male heirs, but there has never been a female proprietor of the estate. I hope there never may be. I should hate to have the old name die out of the old place. But here we are at the house. Welcome home, my beautiful wife!”

The carriage stopped in the porch, and Sir Harold alighted and assisted out his bride. He drew her arm through his and led her up the lofty flight of stone steps, and in at the arched and open door-way. The servants were assembled to welcome home their lady, and the baronet uttered the necessary words of introduction and conducted his bride to the drawing-room.

This was an immensely long apartment, with nine wide windows on its eastern side looking out upon gardens and park. Sculptured arches, supported by slender columns of alabaster, relieved the long vista, and curtains depending from them were capable of dividing the grand room into three handsome ones. The drawing-room was furnished in modern style, and was all gayety, brightness and beauty. The furniture, of daintiest satin-wood, was upholstered in

pale blue silk. The carpet, of softest gray hue, was bordered with blue.

"It is very lovely," commented the bride. "And that is a conservatory at the end? I shall be very happy here, Harold."

"I hope so," was the earnest response. "But let me take you up to your own rooms, Octavia. They have been newly furnished for your occupancy."

He gave her his arm and conducted her out into the wide hall, with its tessellated floor, up the wide marble staircase, to a suit of rooms directly over the drawing-room.

This suit comprised sitting-room, bedroom, dressing-room and bath-room. Their upholstery was of a vivid crimson hue. A faultless taste had guided the selection of the various adornments, and Lady Wynde's eyes kindled with appreciation as she marked the costliness and beauty of everything around her.

"Your trunks have arrived in the wagon, Octavia," said her husband, well pleased with her commendations. "Mrs. Artress and your maid, who came on in the dog-cart, have also arrived. Dinner has been ordered at seven. I will leave you to dress. And, by the way, should you have need of me, my dressing-room adjoins your own."

He went out. Lady Wynde rang for her maid and her gray companion, and dressed for dinner. When her toilet was made, the baronet's bride dismissed her maid and came out into her warm-hued sitting room, where Mrs. Artress sat by a window looking out into the leafy shadows of the park.

"Well?" said the beauty interrogatively. "What do you think? Have I not been successful?"

“So far, yes,” said the grim, ashen-faced companion, raising her light, hay-colored eyes in a meaning expression. “But the end is not yet. The game, you know, is only fairly begun.”

“Yes, I know,” said the bride thoughtfully. “But it is well begun. But hush, Artress. Here comes my happy bridegroom!”

There was a mocking smile on her lips as she bade Sir Harold enter. The wedded pair had a few minutes’ conversation in the sitting-room, her ladyship’s companion sitting in the deep window seat mute as a shadow, and they then descended to the drawing-room. Mrs. Artress meekly followed. She remained near Lady Wynde, in attendance upon her until after dinner, and then went up to her own room, which was in convenient proximity to the apartments of Lady Wynde.

The bride and bridegroom were left to themselves.

The former played a little upon the grand piano, and then approached her husband, sitting down beside him upon the same sofa. His noble face beamed love upon her. But her countenance grew hard with speculative thoughts.

“Let me see,” said she, speaking with well-assumed lightness. “What were we talking about when we arrived, Harold? Oh, about your property! So, this dear old Hawkhurst will belong to George? And what will Neva have?”

“Her mother’s fortune, and several estates which are not entailed. Neva will be a very rich woman without Hawkhurst. You also, Octavia, will be handsomely provided for, without detriment to my children.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” said Lady Wynde. “But if the estates are not entailed which you intend to give to Neva, you must leave them to her by will. Have—have you made your will?”

“Yes; but since I have contracted a new marriage, I shall have to make a new will. I shall attend to that at my leisure.”

Lady Wynde became thoughtful, but did not press the subject. She excused her questionings on the plea of interest in her husband’s children, and Sir Harold gave no thought to them.

The days went by; the weeks and months followed. Neva Wynde had not been summoned home, her step-mother finding plenty of excuses for deferring the return of her step-daughter. Perhaps she feared that a pair of keen young eyes, unvailed by glamor, would see how morally hideous she was—how base and scheming, and unworthy of her husband.

Sir Harold’s infatuation with his wife deepened as the time wore on. His love for her became a species of worship. All that she did was good in his eyes.

Lady Wynde went into society, visited the first county families, and received them at Hawkhurst. She gave a ball, dancing and dinner parties, “tea-fights,” and fetes champetres, without number. She promoted festivities of every sort, and became one of the most popular ladies in the county. She was a leader of fashion too, and withal was so gracious, so circumspect, so full of delicate flattery to every one, that even venomous tongued gossip had naught but good to say of her. Her position at Hawkhurst was thus firmly established, and she might be called a happy woman.



As the months went on, an air of expectancy began to be apparent in her manner. The gray companion shared it, moving with a suppressed eagerness and nervousness, as if waiting for something. And that which she waited for came at last.

It was one February evening, more than a year after the bride's coming home to Hawkhurst. Outside the night was wild. Within Lady Wynde's dressing-room the fire glowed behind its silvered bars, and its rays danced in bright gleams upon the crimson furniture. The lamps burned with mellow radiance. In the centre of the room stood the lady of Hawkhurst. She had dismissed her maid, and was surveying her reflection in a full-length mirror with a complacent smile.

She was attired in a long robe of crimson silk, and wore her ruby ornaments. Her neck and arms were bare. Her liquid black eyes were full of light; her face was aglow.

In the midst of her self-admiration, her gray companion entered abruptly, bearing in her hand a letter. Lady Wynde turned toward her with a startled look.

"What have you there, Artress?" she demanded.

"A letter addressed to me," was the reply. "I have read it. I have a question to ask you, Octavia, before I show the letter to you. Sir Harold Wynde adores you. He loads you with gifts. He lays his heart under your feet. You are his world, his life, his very soul. And now I want to ask you—do you love him?"

The ashen eyes shot a piercing glance into the handsome brunette face, but the black eyes met hers boldly and the full lips curled in a contemptuous smile.

“Love him?” repeated Lady Wynde. “You know I do not. Love him? You know that I love another even as Sir Harold loves me! Love him? Bah!”

The gray woman smiled a strange mirthless smile.

“It is well,” she said. “Now read the letter. The message has come at last!”

Lady Wynde seized the letter eagerly. It contained only these words, without date or signature:

*“The time has come to get rid of him! Now!”*

# **CHAPTER III.**

## **A FATEFUL MOVE DECIDED UPON.**

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Notwithstanding that the sinister message, contained in the single line of the mysterious missive brought to Lady Wynde by her gray companion, had been long expected, it brought with it none the less a shock when it came.

The paper fluttered slowly from the unloosed fingers of the baronet's wife to the floor, and into the liquid black eyes stole a look half of horror and half of eagerness. Unconsciously her voice repeated the words of the message, in a hoarse whisper:

*"It is time to get rid of him. Now!"*

Lady Wynde shuddered at the sound of her own voice, and she stared at her gray companion, her eyes full of shrinking and terror. Those ashen orbs returned her stare with one that was bold, evil, and encouraging.

"I—I haven't the courage I thought, Artress," faltered her ladyship. "It is a terrible thing to do!"

"You love Sir Harold, after all?" taunted the companion, as she picked up the sinister slip of paper and burned it.

"No, no, but he trusts me; he loves me. There was a time, Artress, when I could not have harmed a dog that licked my hand or fawned upon me. And now—but I am not so bad as you think. I am base, unscrupulous, manœuvring, I know. My marriage was but part of a wicked plan, the fruit