

# **NEVA'S CHOICE**

A Sequel to "Neva's Three Lovers"

BY  
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## **SYNOPSIS OF “NEVA’S THREE LOVERS.”**

A beautiful young widow, Mrs. Octavia Hathaway, with the connivance of her admirer, Craven Black, succeeded in marrying the wealthy widower, Sir Harold Wynde, who had a daughter, Neva, at school in France, and a son, George, with his regiment in India. A hurried call to the deathbed of his son frustrated the design of the two adventurers to poison the baronet, who, after his son died, was reported to have been killed by a tiger in India, instead of which he was kept prisoner by a treacherous native servant. After fifteen months of outward mourning Lady Wynde married Craven Black, and in order to secure the large fortune of her stepdaughter, she determined that Neva should marry Black’s son, Rufus. The latter, however, although in fear of his father, was not unscrupulous. He had married a young girl named Lalla Bird, but as both were under age he was persuaded that the marriage was illegal. Lalla was reported to have thrown herself into the river on learning this, but the body recovered was not hers. She found employment as governess to the children of a Mrs. Blight. Rufus, believing her dead, proposed to Neva, but was refused, and the young heiress became betrothed to Lord Towyn.

**NEVA'S CHOICE.**

# CHAPTER I.

## NEVA'S ANSWER TO LORD TOWYN.

Mr. and Mrs. Craven Black, summoning the indispensable Mrs. Artress to a private conference, passed some hours in their own room in anxious deliberation upon their future course in regard to Neva. It was necessary to the full success of the daring game they were playing, that Neva should marry Rufus Black; but she had rejected him, completely and finally, in obedience to her instincts of duty to God and to herself, and her enemies began to believe that they would have serious trouble in forcing her into the marriage.

In accordance with the conclusion to which they finally arrived, Mrs. Artress went away from Hawkhurst that very afternoon in the family brougham, and two trunks belonging to her were conveyed to Canterbury in a spring wagon. It was given out that she was going to London to visit a friend. She really went up to London, but to what point she then directed her wanderings no one knew.

Rufus Black wandered disconsolately all day in the park, and came in an hour before dinner. His father encountered him in the upper hall, and went into his room with him.

"That's a fine face, Rufus," said Craven Black, sneeringly, "to win the heart of a girl like Miss Wynde. You look as if you were traveling straight to the dogs."

"So I am, sir," said Rufus, recklessly.

“You dare to answer me in that manner?”

“To whom should I tell the truth, if not to you?” cried Rufus desperately. “You have made me what I am. I married a pure and innocent young girl, who but for me was utterly friendless in the wide world. You tore me from her. You persuaded me that my marriage was illegal—”

“And wasn’t it?”

“I suppose it was, but it was not null and void. It could have been set aside by due process of law, because I was a minor, and because I perjured myself in declaring that I was of age; but I refuse to believe that it was null and void, no marriage at all. I never wronged my poor Lally as you pretend.”

“Why this spasm of virtue?” demanded Craven Black, with a cynical smile. “The girl’s dead, isn’t she?”

“Yes, she’s dead! God help me!”

“What a tragic groan! This morning you were in despair because Miss Wynde rejected you. To-night you are mourning after your corn-chandler’s daughter. I’d like to understand you—I would indeed. Which are you wailing after, Miss Wynde or Lalla Rookh?”

“Which?” cried Rufus, with wild eyes. “For the girl you and I murdered! It is she whom I mourn! I think of her stark form and open eyes and dead bruised face, as she must have looked when they brought her up out of the river, and my heart is like to break within me. She haunts me day and night. In my bed I waken from my dreams to clasp her closer to me, but my arms

close on the empty air. I seem to feel the touch of her hands on my face—oh, Heaven! I shall never feel them there again! I was a poor pitiful coward. Yet what could I do? And yet you and I are Lally's murderers!"

Craven Black shivered involuntarily.

"You act as if you had a touch of the D. T." he said. "Have you been spending the day in a Canterbury pot-house?"

"No; I have been wandering in the park, trying to forget. You need not fear that I shall get drunk again."

"Your reflections were rather singular for a rejected lover of Miss Wynde," sneered Craven Black. "I thought you loved the heiress?"

"So I do, but not as I loved Lally. If Miss Wynde does not take pity on me, I am lost. The love of a good woman would save me from madness and utter despair. In time I might grow to love her as I loved Lally, and in any case I would worship her from very gratitude."

"I am blessed if I can understand you," said Craven Black, his lips curling. "You love a dead woman and a living woman, and mourn one while you want to marry the other. It is very curious. It's a pity you are not a Mahommedan, so that you could have had both."

"Stop!" cried Rufus, in a tone of command. "Don't speak such words in connection with the names of Lally and Miss Wynde. I want to marry Neva to save myself from going mad—"



“After another woman? Exactly. No wonder Miss Wynde declined the honor, with thanks.”

“I shall leave here to-morrow,” said Rufus.

“You won’t do any such thing. You will stay at Hawkhurst for the remainder of the week, and play the lover to Miss Wynde, and sigh like any donkey in her ears, and spout poetry, and touch her heart. ‘Faint heart never won fair lady,’ says the proverb. Girls often refuse a man the first time he offers, for fear of being held too cheap. Pursue the girl gently, but keep pursuing.”

“She says her father wrote her a letter saying he knew me,” said Rufus doggedly. “She asked me about him, and I told her I didn’t know Sir Harold from a butcher.”

“You did?” gasped Craven Black. “The devil!”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, you have put your foot in it. I knew you were a fool, but I didn’t suppose you had arrived at such a low state of idiocy as it appears you have. Didn’t I tell you what to tell the girl if she ever spoke of her father?”

“I believe you did, but I couldn’t stand there with her eyes on me and deliberately lie to her. I understood about the letter. *You* wrote it.”

“Hush! I’ve a good mind to leave you to yourself, and let you fetch up in some union,” declared Craven Black angrily. “Such a dolt as you are isn’t fit to live. How do you expect the girl to marry you when you yourself put obstacles in the way?”

“See here,” said Rufus. “What are you going to make out of my marriage with Neva Wynde?”

“Ten thousand pounds a year, which you are to formally agree to pay me out of her income.”

“I thought you had some motive in the matter besides love to me. But I’d pay it if she’d marry me. But she won’t.”

“She will, if you choose to be a little bolder. We leave here, my wife, Neva and myself, next Monday for Wynde Heights. Mrs. Black will use all her influence with Neva during our absence to induce her to accept you, and I am sure she will succeed. You are to hold yourself in readiness to come to us at any moment on receiving my summons.”

“Where is Wynde Heights?”

“In Yorkshire.”

“Very well. I will come when you notify me. But I don’t think going will do any good. Miss Wynde is no coquette, and not likely to change her mind. Besides, she is likely to marry Lord Towyn.”

“I think not,” said Craven Black significantly. “She is a minor, and I don’t believe she would marry against the wishes of her step-mother?”

“The question is if your wife *is* her step-mother,” remarked Rufus, still recklessly. “The probability is that the relationship is worn out by this time, and the sense of duty that Miss Wynde may have felt toward her father’s widow will fall short when it comes to be directed toward Craven Black’s wife.”

“We won’t go into details,” said his father coolly. “If you want to marry the girl, keep telling her so. There’s nothing like persistence.”

“Ye-s; but about that ten thousand pounds a year?” said Rufus thoughtfully. “I don’t think it would be right to take any such sum out of her income, and besides, it might be impossible.”

“Leave that to me. As to the right and wrong of it, a perjurer is not qualified to judge. Confine yourself to what you can understand. It is time to get ready for dinner, and I advise you to come down with a cheerful face.”

With this advice, Craven Black went away to his own rooms.

Rufus resolved to act upon his father’s advice, and when he went down to dinner with a pale, melancholy face, and haggard eyes, he wore an air of assumed cheerfulness which touched Neva’s heart.

That evening he sang with her while she played upon the piano. He quoted poetry to her in the third drawing-room, where they were alone, and afterward induced her to walk with him in the moonlight upon the terrace.

The next day he was full of delicate attentions to Miss Wynde. She found a bouquet of wood violets at her plate at breakfast, with the dew still upon them, and knew who had procured them for her. He asked to be allowed to accompany her on her morning ride, and Neva assented. After the ride, they played chess, gathered bouquets in the conservatory, and, later, walked in the park. Neva was gently courteous to him all the

while, but there was a quiet reserve in her manner that forbade him to speak again of love or marriage to her.

The day after Lord Towyn called at Hawkhurst, and Mr. and Mrs. Craven Black received him with all courtesy, and were so politely attentive to him that he could not exchange a word with Neva unheard by them.

The young earl went away, as may be supposed, troubled and annoyed.

On Friday he rode over again from his marine villa, and was similarly entertained, and again could not see Neva alone.

On Saturday he came to Hawkhurst in the early morning, and learned at the lodge gate that Miss Wynde, attended by her groom, was gone for a ride, and that she had gone by the Dingle Farm. His heart bounded within him, and he spurred away in eager pursuit.

He traversed the wood and crossed the wide common, and skirted the dangerous chalk pit, and rode up to the old farm gate just as Neva, remounting her horse, came riding out on her return.

The young earl's warm blue eyes flashed a tender radiance upon her, and he raised his hat, his golden hair gleaming in the sunshine while his noble face glowed with a laughing delight. An answering radiance flashed from Neva's red-brown orbs, and she blushed as she bade him a careless good-morning.

"I came out to meet you," said Lord Towyn, as he wheeled his horse and rode at her side.

“I have much to say to you.”

He glanced over his shoulder, but the discreet groom was hanging back, and with a mental blessing upon the fellow, Lord Towyn saw that the field was clear, and that the time had arrived in which to learn his fate.

They rode on for a little while in silence, until they were past the chalk pit and out upon the breezy common. The groom was out of earshot, and the young earl said gently:

“Neva, I have been twice to Hawkhurst to receive the answer you promised me, but I could not speak to you alone. I may not find another opportunity than this, as you go with the Blacks to Wynde Heights on Monday. And so, although this does not seem a fitting place, I ask you again if you will be my wife. I love you, Neva, with all my heart and soul. If you will trust your happiness to me, you will find in me a true lover to the end of our days. Do you think you could be happy with me?”

Neva’s pure proud face flushed hotly, and she bent her head low toward her saddle-bow. Lord Towyn waited for her answer in an almost breathless suspense, but she did not speak until they were in the wood path and out of sight of even the lagging groom.

Then she lifted her head shyly, and turned upon her lover a face as divinely fair and roseate as a June morning, and although she spoke no word he read assent in the drooping eyes, the reddening cheeks, and the proud, tremulous mouth.

He pressed toward her in rapture, and seized one little gauntleted hand, pressing it in his own.

“It is Yes, Neva?” he whispered, as if fearing the very birds might hear him. “Oh, my darling, how shall I deserve this great joy?”

He raised her hand to his lips, and the contact thrilled his very soul. He looked back. No one was in sight. He stooped in his saddle and bent toward her, and his kiss, warm, tender and passionate, fell upon her scarlet mouth, and thus they were betrothed.

The next instant he was again erect in his saddle, and the ecstasy of his glowing face and the unrepressed rapture of his manner, and the tender caressing in his very gaze, proclaimed his great and solemn joy.

“I have a ring, it was my mother’s, Neva, and I ask you to wear it as a sign of our engagement to each other,” he said. “When I see my mother’s ring on your finger, I shall feel that you are indeed mine.”

He took from his little finger a gold ring set with a single brilliant of great size and splendor. Neva tremblingly removed her gauntlet, and the young earl placed the ring upon that finger which custom has dedicated to the purpose.

“That is the seal of our betrothal,” he whispered.

Neva slowly put on her glove.

“Arthur,” she said suddenly, “do you think papa would have approved my marriage with you?”

“I know he would, my darling. It was his wish, as it was my father’s, that we should marry.”

"If I could only think that he never changed his mind!" sighed the young girl. "I have a letter he wrote me the night before he perished in India, Arthur, and in this letter he says that he desires me to marry Rufus Black."

The young earl looked surprised, incredulous.

"I have the letter with me," said Neva. "You can read it. In it papa says he desires me to marry this young man, whom he esteems and loves. I have struggled to obey papa's last wishes, but I cannot—I cannot! And he was such a good father, Arthur, that I reproach myself continually for my disobedience. I never disobeyed him before, and I seem to see his eyes full of reproach fixed upon me, and to hear his voice—Oh, Arthur! Arthur!"

"Let me see the letter, darling."

Neva extricated it from the folds of her dress, and gave it to him. They halted while he read it. A look of surprise, wonder and incredulity mantled Lord Towyn's face as he read. It was followed by a sternness that well became his fair and haughty face.

"I pronounce the letter a forgery!" he declared. "May I keep it, Neva, for the present? I desire to show it to Mr. Atkins, who shall give us his opinion on the handwriting."

"Yes; keep it," assented Neva.

Lord Towyn carefully put it in his pocket.

"I pronounce the letter a forgery," he repeated sternly. "How did it come to you, darling?"

“Lady Wynde gave it to me on my return from France. Papa desired her to retain it for a year. Who would forge such a letter, Arthur?”

“I don’t know. I am puzzled. One cannot suspect Lady Wynde, and yet—and yet—I don’t know what to think, Neva. I don’t believe Sir Harold ever saw Rufus Black.”

“Rufus says he never saw papa, or that he never spoke to him,” said Neva. “And that remark made me doubt the letter. But Rufus never forged it, Arthur. Rufus is a kind-hearted, but weak-willed boy—he is no more. If he had more ‘backbone’ in his character, he would be even noble. I like him, Arthur, and I know he never wrote that letter. Lady Wynde did not. She is too good for that. It might have been written by Craven Black. I do not like him, and think him quite capable of the forgery, only so many of the words are papa’s own that it seems wicked to doubt its authenticity.”

“I will prove it a forgery!” cried the young earl. “Sir Harold was incapable of binding your fate in this manner to a man you never saw before it was written. There is some foul conspiracy against you, Neva, but we have outwitted your enemies. I am impatient to have you under my own guardianship. The possibility that you have enemies makes me afraid to trust you from me. Give up this visit to Wynde Heights, darling.”

“It is too late, Arthur. We shall stay there but a fortnight, and I have promised to go. Papa bade me love his wife and obey her, and though she no longer bears his name, and I no longer owe her obedience, yet I have given my word to go up to Yorkshire with her, and must keep my promise.”



“But when you return, Neva, you will marry me? Do not condemn me to a long probation. Let us be married quietly some morning at Wyndham church, after due intimation to our friends. Shall it not be so?”

Neva yielded a shy assent.

“We will be married a month hence, Neva?” whispered the ardent young lover.

“Two months,” said Neva, smiling. “I must not be too lightly won, Lord Towyn. And, besides, I must have the orthodox trousseau. I will tell Mrs. Black of our engagement when I am with her at Wynde Heights. Rufus is not going with us, nor is Artress.”

They had threaded the wood and come out upon the highway long since while they were talking, and were now within sight of Hawkhurst. Rufus Black was riding out of the great gates, on his way to meet Neva. The *tete-a-tete* of the young pair was over for the morning, and recognizing the fact, and not wishing to proclaim his happy secret to his defeated rival, Lord Towyn made his adieus to Neva, begging her to write him daily from Yorkshire, which she promised to do, and, then raising his hat to Rufus Black, the young earl spurred his horse and rode swiftly on toward Wyndham.

Neva returned home with Rufus.

On Monday morning, Mr. and Mrs. Craven Black, accompanied by Miss Wynde, departed for Wynde Heights.

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