

Sylvester: or The Wicked Uncle (Regency Romances)

By Georgette Heyer

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"Reading Georgette Heyer is the next best thing to reading Jane Austen."?Publishers Weekly

Rank, wealth, and elegance are no match for a young lady who writes novels...

Sylvester, Duke of Salford, has exacting requirements for a bride. Then he meets Phoebe Marlow, a young lady with literary aspirations, and suddenly life becomes very complicated. She meets none of his criteria, and even worse, she has written a novel that is sweeping through the ton and causing all kinds of gossip... and he's the main character!

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"A truly brilliant Heyer with an adorable and very real heroine and a hero who is very human!"

"One of Heyer's most unsung achievements, a classic Pride and Prejudice story. Hilarity and adventure throughout."

"The hero may be my all-time favorite. He is so drily funny it takes your breath away. What a wonderful love story."

"Hilariously funny, romantic, even touching in a subtle way."

Georgette Heyer wrote over fifty novels, including Regency romances, mysteries, and historical fiction. She was known as the Queen of Regency romance, and was legendary for her research, historical accuracy, and her extraordinary plots and characterizations.

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Editorial Review

Review
"SYLVESTER, OR THE WICKED UNCLE is a Regency romp at its best. Ms. Heyer creates characters that are realistic, lively, and humorous and the secondary characters are just as entertaining. " - ***Book Lover and Procrastinator***

"It oozes with words classically denoting that time period and flashbacks of Austen careens in the background. " - ***Aisle B***

"The heroes are flawed and arrogant but of course we love them anyway. The dialogue is witty and amusing and these make great beach reads." - ***Book Magic***

"*Sylvester* is a great historical romance and it really shouldn't be missed!" - ***Once Upon A Chapter***

"Sparkling wit and an entertaining banter between hero and heroine like Austen... " - ***A Work in Progress***

"One of the best Heyer romances I've read so far... " - ***Stiletto Storytime***

"By far and away one of the wittiest romances that I have read..." - ***Seriously Reviewed***

"Another sensational ride into Georgette Heyer's historical world." - ***Historical Hilarity***

"It's easy to see why Heyer is still considered a master of the genre even today... " - ***Debbie's Book Bag***

"A sweet regency romance, with truly funny, witty dialogue." - ***In the Hammock***

About the Author
Georgette Heyer's novels have charmed and delighted millions of readers for decades. English Heritage has awarded Georgette Heyer one of their prestigious Blue Plaques, designating her Wimbledon home as the residence of an important figure in British history. She was born in Wimbledon in August 1902. She wrote her first novel, The Black Moth, at the age of seventeen to amuse her convalescent brother; it was published in 1921 and became an instant success.

Heyer published 56 books over the next 53 years, until her death from lung cancer in 1974. Her last book, My Lord John, was published posthumously in 1975. A very private woman, she rarely reached out to the public to discuss her works or personal life. Her work included Regency romances, mysteries and historical fiction. Known as the Queen of Regency romance, Heyer was legendary for her research, historical accuracy and her extraordinary plots and characterizations. She was married to George Ronald Rougier, a barrister, and they had one son, Richard.

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One

Sylvester stood in the window of his breakfast parlour, leaning his hands on the ledge, and gazing out upon a

fair prospect. No view of the ornamental water could be obtained from this, the east front of Chance, but the undulations of a lawn shaved all summer by scythemen were broken by a cedar, and beyond the lawn the stems of beech-trees, outliers of the Home Wood, shimmered in wintry sunlight. They still held their lure for Sylvester, though they beckoned him now to his coverts rather than to a land where every thicket concealed a dragon, and false knights came pricking down the rides. He and Harry, his twin, had slain the dragons, and ridden great wallops at the knights. There were none left now, and Harry had been dead for almost four years; but there were pheasants to tempt Sylvester forth, and they did tempt him, for a succession of black frosts had made the ground iron-hard, robbing him of two hunting days; and a blusterous north wind would not have invited the most ardent of sportsmen to take a gun out. It was still very cold, but the wind had dropped, and the sun shone, and what a bore it was that he should have decided that this day, out of all the inclement ones that had preceded it, should be devoted to business. He could change his mind, of course, telling his butler to inform the various persons now awaiting his pleasure that he would see them on the following day. His agent-in-chief and his man of business had come all the way from London to attend upon him, but it did not occur to Sylvester that they could find any cause for complaint in being kept kicking their heels. They were in his employ, and had no other concern than to serve his interests; they would accept his change of mind as the caprice to be expected from a noble and wealthy master.

But Sylvester was not capricious, and he had no intention of succumbing to temptation. Caprice bred bad servants, and where the management of vast estates was concerned good service was essential. Sylvester had only just entered his twenty-eighth year, but he had succeeded to his huge inheritance when he was nineteen, and whatever follies and extravagances he had committed they had never led him to treat that inheritance as his plaything, or to evade the least one of its responsibilities. He had been born to a great position, reared to fill it in a manner worthy of a long line of distinguished forebears, and as little as he questioned his right to command the obedience of all the persons whose names were inscribed on his staggering payroll did he question the inescapability of the duties which had been laid on his shoulders. Had he been asked if he enjoyed his consequence he would have replied truthfully that he never thought of it; but he would certainly have disliked very much to have had it suddenly removed.

No one was in the least likely to ask him such a question, of course. He was generally considered to be a singularly fortunate young man, endowed with rank, wealth, and elegance. No bad fairy had attended his christening to leaven his luck with the gift of a hunchback or a harelip; though not above medium height he was well proportioned, with good shoulders, a pair of shapely legs, and a countenance sufficiently pleasing to make the epithet handsome, frequently bestowed on it, not altogether ridiculous. In a lesser man the oddity of eyes set with the suspicion of a slant under flying black brows might have been accounted a blemish; in the Duke of Salford they were naturally held to lend distinction; and those who had admired his mother in her heyday remembered that she too had that thin, soaring line of eyebrow. It was just as though the brows had been added with a paintbrush, drawn in a sleek line upwards towards the temples. In the Duchess this peculiarity was charming; in Sylvester it was less attractive. It gave him, when he was vexed, and the upward trend was exaggerated by a frown, a slight look of a satyr.

He was about to turn away from the window when his attention was caught by a small, scampering figure. Emerging from the shelter of a yew hedge, a little boy with a cluster of golden curls set off across the lawn in the direction of the Home Wood, his nankeen-covered legs twinkling over the grass, and the freshly laundered frill of his shirt rucked up under one ear by a duffle coat, dragged over his little blue jacket by hurried and inexpert hands.

Sylvester laughed, throwing up the window. His impulse was to wish Edmund success in his adventure, but even as he leaned out he checked it. Though Edmund would not stop for his nurse or his tutor he would do so if his uncle called to him, and since he seemed to have made good his escape from these persons it would be unsportsmanlike to check him when his goal was within sight. To keep him dallying under the window

would put him in grave danger of being captured, and that, reflected Sylvester, would lead to one of those scenes which bored him to death. Edmund would beg his leave to go off to the woods, and whether he gave it or withheld it he would be obliged to endure the reproaches of his widowed sister-in-law. He would be accused of treating poor little Edmund either with brutal severity, or with a heartless unconcern for his welfare; for Lady Henry Rayne could never bring herself to forgive him for having persuaded his brother (as she obstinately affirmed) to leave Edmund to his sole guardianship. It was of no use for anyone to tell Lady Henry that Harry's will had been drawn up on the occasion of his marriage, merely to ensure, in the event of accident, which no one had thought more unlikely than Harry himself, that any offspring of the match would be safe under the protection of the head of his house. However stupid Sylvester might think her she hoped she was not so green as to imagine that his attorney would have dared to insert so infamous a clause except at his express command. Sylvester, with the wound of Harry's death still raw, had allowed himself to be goaded into bitter retort: ‘If you imagine that I wished to have the brat thrust on to me you are even greener than I had supposed!'

He was to regret those hasty words, for although he had immediately retracted them he had never been allowed to forget them; and they formed today, when the custody of Edmund had become a matter of acute importance, the foundation-stone of Lady Henry's arguments. ‘You never wanted him,' she reminded him. ‘You said so yourself.'

It had been partly true, of course: except as Harry's son he had had very little interest in a two-year-old infant, and had paid no more heed to him than might have been expected of a young man. When Edmund began to grow out of babyhood, however, he saw rather more of him, for Edmund's first object, whenever his magnificent uncle was at Chance, was to attach himself as firmly as possible to him. He had qualities wholly lacking in Button, Edmund's nurse (and his father's and uncle's before him), or in Mama. He showed no disposition to fondle his nephew; he was indifferent to torn clothes; such conversation as he addressed to Edmund was brief and to the point; and while he might, in an unpropitious mood, send him somewhat peremptorily about his business, it was always possible that he would hoist him up on to his saddle before him, and canter off with him through the park. These attributes were accompanied by a less agreeable but equally godlike idiosyncrasy: he exacted instant obedience to his commands, and he had a short way of dealing with recalcitrants.

Sylvester thought that Ianthe and Button were doing their best to spoil Edmund, but while he did not hesitate to make plain to that astute young gentleman the unwisdom of employing with him the tactics that succeeded so well in the nursery it was rarely that he interfered with his upbringing. He saw no faults in Edmund that could not speedily be cured when he was rather older; and by the time he was six had grown to like him as much for his own sake as for his father's.

Edmund had disappeared from view. Sylvester pulled the window down again, thinking that he really ought to provide the brat with a livelier tutor than the Reverend Loftus Leyburn, the elderly and rather infirm cleric who was his – or, more accurately, his mother's – chaplain. He had thought it a poor arrangement when Ianthe had begged Mr Loftus to teach Edmund his first lessons, but not a matter of sufficient moment to make it necessary for him to provoke her by refusing to agree to the scheme. Now she was complaining that Edmund haunted the stables, and learned the most vulgar language there. What the devil did she expect? wondered Sylvester.

He turned from the window as the door opened, and his butler came in, followed by a young footman, who began to clear away the remains of a substantial breakfast.

‘I'll see Mr Ossett and Pewsey at noon, Reeth,' Sylvester said. ‘Chale and Brough may bring their books in to me at the same time. I am going up to sit with her grace now. You might send down a message to Trent,

warning him that I may want –' He paused, glancing towards the window. ‘No, never mind that! The light will be gone by four o'clock.'

‘It seems a pity your grace should be cooped up in the office on such a fine day,' said Reeth suggestively.

‘A great pity, but it can't be helped.' He found that he had dropped his handkerchief, and that the footman had hurried to pick it up for him. He said, ‘Thank you', as he took it, and accompanied the words with a slight smile. He had a singularly charming smile, and it ensured for him, no matter how exacting might be his demands, the uncomplaining exertions of his servants. He was perfectly well aware of that, just as he was aware of the value of the word of praise dropped at exactly the right moment; and he would have thought himself extremely stupid to withhold what cost him so little and was productive of such desirable results.

Leaving the breakfast-parlour, he made his way to the main hall, and (it might have been thought) to another century, since this central portion of a pile that sprawled over several acres was all that remained of the original structure. Rugged beams, plastered walls, and a floor of uneven flagstones lingered on here in odd but not infelicitous contrast to the suave elegance of the more modern parts of the great house. The winged staircase of Tudor origin that led up from the hall to a surrounding gallery was guarded by two figures in full armour; the walls were embellished with clusters of antique weapons; the windows were of armorial glass; and under an enormous hood a pile of hot ashes supported several blazing logs. Before this fire a liver-and-white spaniel lay in an attitude of watchful expectancy. She raised her head when she heard Sylvester's step, and began to wag her tail; but when he came into the hall her tail sank, and although she bundled across the floor to meet him, and looked adoringly up at him when he stooped to pat her, she neither frisked about him nor uttered barks of joyful anticipation. His valet was hardly more familiar with his wardrobe than she, and she knew well that pantaloons and Hessian boots meant that the most she could hope for was to be permitted to lie at his feet in the library.

The Duchess's apartments comprised, besides her bedchamber, and the dressing-room occupied by her maid, an antechamber which led into a large, sunny apartment, known to the household as the Duchess's Drawing-room. She rarely went beyond it, for she had been for many years the victim of an arthritic complaint which none of the eminent physicians who had attended her, or any of the cures she had undergone, had been able to arrest. She could still manage, supported by her attendants, to drag herself from her bedchamber to her drawing-room, but once lowered into her chair she could not rise from it without assistance. What degree of pain she suffered no one knew, for she never complained, or asked for sympathy. ‘Very well' was her invariable reply to solicitous enquiries; and if anyone deplored the monotony of her existence she laughed, and said that pity was wasted on her, and would be better bestowed on those who danced attendance on her. As for herself, with her son to bring her all the London on-dits, her grandson to amuse her with his pranks, her daughter-in-law to discuss the latest fashions with her, her patient cousin to bear with her crotchets, her devoted maid to cosset her, and her old friend, Mr Leyburn, to browse with her amongst her books she thought she was rather to be envied than pitied. Except to her intimates she did not mention her poems, but the fact was that the Duchess was an author. Mr Blackwell had published two volumes of her verses, and these had enjoyed quite a vogue amongst members of the ton; for although they were, of course, published anonymously the secret of their authorship soon leaked out, and was thought to lend considerable interest to them.

She was engaged in writing when Sylvester entered the room, on the table so cleverly made by the estate carpenter to fit across the arms of her wing-chair; but as soon as she saw who had come in she laid down her pen, and welcomed Sylvester with a smile more charming than his own because so much warmer, and exclaimed: ‘Ah, how delightful! But so vexatious for you, love, to be obliged to stay at home on the first good shooting-day we have had in a se'enight!'

‘A dead bore, isn't it?' he responded, bending over her to kiss her cheek. She put up her hand to lay it on his shoulder, and he stayed for a moment, scanning her face. Apparently he was satisfied with what he saw there, for he let his eyes travel to the delicate lace confection set on her silvered black hair, and said: ‘A new touch, Mama? That's a very fetching cap!'

The ready laughter sprang to her eyes. ‘Confess that Anna warned you to take notice of my finery!'

‘Certainly not! Do you think I must be told by your maid when you are looking in great beauty?'

‘Sylvester, you make love so charmingly that I fear you must be the most outrageous flirt!'

‘Oh, not outrageous, Mama! Are you busy with a new poem?'

‘Merely a letter. Dearest, if you will push the table away, you may draw up that chair a little, and we can enjoy a comfortable prose.'

This he was prevented from doing by the hurried entrance from the adjoining bedchamber of Miss Augusta Penistone, who begged him, somewhat incoherently, not to trouble himself, since she considered the task peculiarly her own. She then pushed the table to the side of the room, and instead of effacing herself, as he always wished she would, lingered, amiably smiling at him. She was an angular, rather awkward lady, as kind as she was plain, and she served the Duchess, whose kinswoman she was, in the capacity of a companion. Her good-nature was inexhaustible, but she was unfortunately quite unintelligent, and rarely failed to irritate Sylvester by asking questions to which the answers were patent, or commenting upon the obvious. He bore it very well, for his manners were extremely good, but when, after stating that she saw he had not gone out hunting, she recollected that one didn't hunt after severe frost and said, with a merry laugh at her mistake: ‘Well, that was a stupid thing for me to have said, wasn't it?' he was provoked into replying, though with perfect suavity: ‘It was, wasn't it?'

The Duchess intervened at this stage of the dialogue, urging her cousin to go out into the sunshine while it lasted; and after saying that, to be sure, she might venture to do so if dear Sylvester meant to sit with his mama, which she had no doubt of, and pointing out that Anna would come if the Duchess rang the bell, she got herself to the door, which Sylvester was holding open. She was obliged to pause there to tell him that she was now going to leave him to chat with his mama, adding: ‘For I am sure you wish to be private with her, don't you?'

‘I do, but how you guessed it, cousin, I can't imagine!' he replied.

‘Oh!' declared Miss Penistone gaily, ‘a pretty thing it would be if I didn't know, after all these years, just what you like! Well, I will run away, then – but you should not trouble to open the door for me! That is to treat me like a stranger! I am for ever telling you so, am I not? But you are always so obliging!'

He bowed, and shut the door behind her. The Duchess said: ‘An undeserved compliment, Sylvester. My dear, how came you to speak as you did? It was not kind.'

‘Her folly is intolerable!' he said impatiently. ‘Why do you keep such a hubble-bubble woman about you? She must vex you past bearing!'

‘She is not very wise, certainly,' admitted the Duchess. ‘But I couldn't send her away, you know!'

‘Shall I do so for you?'

She was startled, but, supposing that he was speaking out of an unthinking exasperation, only said:

‘Nonsensical boy! You know you could no more do so than I could!'

He raised his brows. ‘Of course I could do it, Mama! What should stop me?'

‘You cannot be serious!' she exclaimed, half inclined still to laugh at him.

‘But I'm perfectly serious, my dear! Be frank with me! Don't you wish her at Jericho?'

She said, with a rueful twinkle: ‘Well, yes – sometimes I do! Don't repeat that, will you? I have at least the grace to be ashamed of myself!' She perceived that his expression was one of surprise, and said in a serious tone: ‘Of course it vexes you, and me too, when she says silly things, and hasn't the tact to go away when you come to visit me, but I promise you I think myself fortunate to have her. It can't be very amusing to be tied to an invalid, you know, but she is never hipped or out of temper, and whatever I ask her to do for me she does willingly, and so cheerfully that she puts me in danger of believing that she enjoys being at my beck and call.'

‘So I should hope!'

‘Now, Sylvester –'

‘My dear Mama, she has hung on your sleeve ever since I can remember, and a pretty generous sleeve it has been! You have always made her an allowance far beyond what you would have paid a stranger hired to bear you company, haven't you?'

‘You speak as though you grudged it!'

‘No more than I grudge the wages of my valet, if you think her worth it. I pay large wages to my servants, but I keep none in my employment who doesn't earn his wage.'

There was a troubled look in the eyes that searched his face, but the Duchess only said: ‘The cases are not the same, but don't let us brangle about it! You may believe that it would make me very unhappy to lose Augusta. Indeed, I don't know how I should go on.'

‘If that's the truth, Mama, you need say no more. Do you suppose I wouldn't pay anyone who wished to keep about you double – treble – what you pay Augusta?' He saw her stretch out her hand to him, and went to her immediately. ‘You know I wouldn't do anything you don't like! Don't look so distressed, dearest!'

She pressed his hand. ‘I know you wouldn't. Don't heed me! It is only that it shocked me a little to hear you speak so hardly. But no one has less cause to complain of hardness in you than I, my darling.'

‘Nonsense!' he said, smiling down at her. ‘Keep your tedious cousin, love – but allow me to wish that you had with you someone who could entertain you better – enter into what interests you!'

‘Well, I have Ianthe,' she reminded him. ‘She doesn't precisely enter into my interests, but we go on very comfortably together.'

‘I am happy to hear it. But it begins to seem as if you won't have the doubtful comfort of her society for much longer.'

‘My dear, if you are going to suggest that I should employ a second lady to keep me company, I do beg of you to spare your breath!'

‘No, that wouldn't answer.' He paused, and then said quite coolly: ‘I am thinking of getting married, Mama.'

She was taken so much by surprise that she could only stare at him. He had the reputation of being a dangerous flirt, but she had almost given up hope of his coming to the point of offering for any lady's hand in matrimony. She had reason to think that he had had more than one mistress in keeping – very expensive Cythereans some of them had been if her sister were to be believed! – and it had begun to seem as if he preferred that way of life to a more ordered existence. Recovering from her stupefaction, she said: ‘My dear, this is very sudden!'

‘Not so sudden as you think, Mama. I have been meaning for some time to speak to you about it.'

‘Good gracious! And I never suspected it! Do, pray, sit down and tell me all about it!'

He looked at her keenly. ‘Would you be glad, Mama?'

‘Of course I should!'

‘Then I think that settles it.'

That made her laugh. ‘Of all the absurd things to say! Very well! Having won my approval, tell me everything!'

He said, gazing frowningly into the fire: ‘I don't know that there's so much to tell you. I fancy you guessed I haven't much cared for the notion of becoming riveted. I never met the female to whom I wished to be leg-shackled. Harry did, and if anything had been needed to confirm me in –'

‘My dear, leave that!' she interposed. ‘Harry was happy in his marriage, remember! I believe, too, that although Ianthe's feelings are not profound she was most sincerely attached to him.'

‘So much attached to him that within a year of his death she was pining for the sight of a ballroom, and within four is planning to marry a worthless fribble! It will not do, Mama!'

‘Very well, my dear, but we are talking of your marriage, not Harry's, are we not?'

‘True! Well, I realised – oh, above a year ago! – that it was my duty to marry. Not so much for the sake of an heir, because I have one already, but –'

‘Sylvester, don't put that thought into Edmund's head!'

He laughed. ‘Much he would care! His ambition is to become a mail-coachman – or it was until Keighley let him have the yard of tin for a plaything! Now he cannot decide whether to be a coachman or a guard. Pretty flat he would think it to be told that he would be obliged instead to step into my shoes!'

She smiled. ‘Yes, now he would, but later –'

‘Well, that's one of my reasons, Mama. If I mean to marry I ought, I think, to do so before Edmund is old enough to think his nose has been put out of joint. So I began some months ago to look about me.'

‘You are the oddest creature! Next you will tell me you made out a list of the qualities your wife must possess!'

‘More or less,' he admitted. ‘You may laugh, Mama, but you'll agree that certain qualities are indispensable!

She must be well born, for instance. I don't mean necessarily a great match, but a girl of my own order.'

‘Ah, yes, I agree with that! And next?'

‘Well, a year ago I should have said she must be beautiful,' he replied meditatively. (She is not a beauty, thought the Duchess.) ‘But I'm inclined to think now that it is more important that she should be intelligent. I don't think I could tolerate a hen-witted wife. Besides, I don't mean to foist another fool on to you.'

‘I am very much obliged to you!' she said, a good deal entertained. ‘Clever, but not beautiful: very well! Continue!'

‘No, some degree of beauty I do demand. She must have countenance, at least, and the sort of elegance which you have, Mama.'

‘Don't try to turn my head, you flatterer! Have you discovered amongst the débutantes one who is endowed with all these qualities?'

‘At first glance, I suppose a dozen, but in the end only five.'

‘Five!'

‘Well, only five with whom I could perhaps bear to spend a large part of my life. There is Lady Jane Saxby: she's pretty, and good-natured. Then there's Barningham's daughter: she has a great deal of vivacity. Miss Bellerby is a handsome girl, with a little reserve, which I don't dislike. Lady Mary Torrington – oh, a diamond of the first water! And lastly Miss Orton: not beautiful, but quite taking, and has agreeable manners.' He paused, his gaze still fixed on the smouldering logs. The Duchess waited expectantly. He looked up presently, and smiled at her. ‘Well, Mama?' he said affably. ‘Which of them shall it be?'

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Helen Leavitt:

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Michele Brown:

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