

THE THIRD MAN

By Silas K. Hocking



SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS

Geoffrey Lincoln and Bart Gordon, seniors at Oxford, toss a coin to decide which shall propose first to Eve Marsden, hoping to prevent her accepting David Wiggs, a rich upstart. The lot falls on Geoff, who is accepted, much to his surprise. He admires, but does not love Eve. Geoff had taken Eve to the station after her visit to his people, when he meets David Wiggs. Bart Gordon, having promised Geoffrey Lincoln to look after Eve during his absence, calls on her and finds he cares more for Eve than he should. Eve goes motoring with David Wiggs, who purposely takes the wrong turn and puts his motor out of order. Bart finds out late in the evening where Eve has gone and starts out on his wheel to find her.

"SO I suggested to Miss Marsden that she should sit still and I would go in search of a farmhouse and try to borrow a horse and trap to take us home. I don't know how far I went, but it must have been a good many miles; but there wasn't a house to be seen anywhere.

"When I got back the car was empty. She had evidently gone in search also, in the other direction. So I followed, hoping I should overtake her. I got back into the main road, but without getting a glimpse of her. I thought she must have found some one to bring her home."

"But didn't you call to her?"

"I shouted till I was hoarse, but the wind was roaring so in the hedges and trees that I don't expect she heard me."

The old man looked at David for a moment or two without speaking.

"I don't understand why Eve ran away from you," he said at length. "How could she hope to find her way alone? Besides, the darkness terrifies her."

"I don't think she ran away from me," David said mildly. "You see, we had got into a nasty hole, and she was anxious to do her part towards finding a way out."

"But what could she do? She had very thin shoes, if I remember aright. Why, the child will be dead of terror by this time." And he started out of his chair, went to the door again, and peered out into the darkness.

David followed him, and stood by his side. "I don't think she will come to any harm," he said consolingly. "She did not seem a bit terrified when I left her in the car."

"But that's hours ago."

"She may have reached some cottage or farmhouse, and if so, why, she may stay all night."

"No, no. She won't do that, not if she has to walk on bare feet. She'll know how distressed I shall be. You did not meet Bart Gordon, of course?"

"No. Why should I meet him?"

"He's gone off to look for you—at least, for Eve. He stayed here with me for the best part of an hour, and then bolted home for his bicycle."

David's lips curled scornfully. "He might as well look for a needle in a haystack on such a night as this," he said.

"No doubt; but he's prepared to do his best."

They stood for several minutes at the open door, then turned back again into the house.

"I don't want to blame you unfairly," the old man said, after a long silence, "but—but—if evil befalls my child—"

Meanwhile, Bart Gordon had been pushing his way farther and farther into the country, stopping every now and then to make inquiries. David's car had been seen by several people, but he could get no tidings of its return from anyone he met. After a couple of hours of steady pedalling, he pulled up at the junction of two roads, and got off his machine. It was intensely dark, and there was not a glimmer of light to be seen over all the country-side.

He had some knowledge of the neighborhood. Some distance away to the left was a large wood. He remembered bicycling past it in the early summer, and was struck then by its remoteness from any human habitation.

All the way from Oxford a suspicion had been steadily growing in his mind, until now it amounted almost to a conviction. If David could make Geoff doubtful, or jealous, or suspicious, he would do it, and do it at any cost. He would not hesitate to compromise Eve in carrying out his scheme; indeed, to do that would seem to his dull brain the surest way of gaining his end.

This afternoon his opportunity had come. To pretend that his car had broken down would be the easiest thing in the world, and he would seek the most remote and lonely place he knew for the accident.

Bart mounted his bike again and rode on slowly. He had left the main road behind him, and the road in front of him was rutty and badly kept; it ran between

high banks of earth, as though it had been cut through a low hill. The light from his acetylene lamp pierced only a few feet of the black wall in front of him. Suddenly he sprang from his bicycle with an exclamation; his lamp had revealed a crouching figure by the roadside. He stood still for a moment and turned the lamp full on, and the same instant his heart gave a great bound.

"Eve!" he cried.

She rose slowly to her feet and shaded her eyes with her hand.

"Who are you?" she asked, "and what do you want?"

"I am Bart Gordon," he answered; "surely you know me?"

"Bart Gordon?" and she stumbled towards him with outstretched hands.

"Oh, you will save me, won't you?" she cried. "Something has happened—I can't quite recollect what. I seem to have got lost. Where am I?"

"You will be all right again directly, I hope," I he said soothingly. "Don't worry about anything. wonder if you could sit on my bicycle, while I wheel it?"

She shook her head as if not quite comprehending.

"Try," he said cheerfully. "Let me lift you. Let your feet hang down on that side—they will be quite out of the way of the pedal. Now put your arm around my neck; you don't mind, do you? There!" And they began to move slowly away.

For awhile neither of them spoke. She leaned heavily toward him, and he had some little difficulty in keeping his machine in an upright position.

"Are you taking me home, Bart?"

His heart thrilled in a moment. It was almost the first time she had called him by his Christian name.

"Yes; at least, I am doing my best."

"You came out on purpose to look for me?"

"Yes."

"I am beginning to understand now. I had a nasty tumble, and rolled down and down; and then—I don't remember anything after that."

"But before you had the tumble?" he questioned. He wanted to know the worst, and yet he almost dreaded to hear it.

"You have never liked David Wiggs. You were right. He ought not to be trusted. Oh, I believe he took the wrong turn on purpose. He meant to get lost—"

"Yes? Go on," he said, after a long pause.

"He professed to be very sorry when the car stopped, but he wasn't sorry a bit; I could hear it in the tones of his voice. He did not want to go in search

of help, but I insisted; and directly he was gone I crept out of the car and ran. Then I climbed over a gate into a wood. Oh, I was never thankful for the darkness before."

"And have you any idea where he is?"

"Perhaps he is running still," and she laughed a little hysterically.

"Running?"

"While I hid in the wood I heard him running down the road as fast as he could. I expect he thought he would overtake me."

"The scoundrel!" Bart muttered under his breath.

"I shouldn't be a bit surprised if he isn't talking to father by this time," she went on, after an interval of silence. "He'll be anxious to tell his story first. He isn't wise, but he has a good deal of cunning."

Bart did not reply: Her nearness to him; the pressure of her hand upon his shoulder; a long strand of her hair which the wind fluttered in his face; her low, gentle voice, which spoke so close to his ear—all seemed to conspire to break down his resolution. She had plighted her troth to his friend, and he must stand aside and see her pass into his keeping.

Conversation ceased for a long space. How could he talk when the tones of his voice might betray him, when his nerves were thrilling in an ecstasy of mingled joy and regret, when his heart was beating in his throat? He wanted to stop and press her to his heart; wanted to pour out his overburdened soul in a torrent of passionate words; wanted to confess his disloyalty to his friend in his devotion to her. Yet Eve, holding tightly to his strong shoulders, knew nothing of this. He plodded along silently and steadily, apparently without emotion.

So they trudged on in silence through the darkness and the boisterous, baffling wind for a mile or more, and then came upon a cottage by the roadside.

Bart knocked at the door at once, which was opened almost instantly. He gave a little start when Eve came into the zone of light; there was blood upon her face and hands, mud was on her dress, her hat was crushed and battered out of all shape, one side of her coat was torn almost into strips.

"Goodness gracious! What is the matter?" the woman of the cottage asked, holding up both hands.

"Please don't be frightened," Eve laughed. "I'm really not so bad as I look. I got a nasty tumble—that is about all."

After a few minutes Bart left the two women together, and mounted his bicycle and rode off to Woodstock to get a conveyance. He was back again in a remarkably short space of time, considering the distance. Eve was looking a little more like herself but it was quite evident that she was suffering very severely from shock. Bart had almost to carry her to the cab, though she revived again wonderfully before they reached Oxford.

David Wiggs and the professor were standing at the open door when they drove up to the gate.

Eve clutched Bart's arm tightly. "You must tell him to go away."

"But how can I tell him?" he questioned.

"You must—you must!" she said excitedly, and she shook from head to foot.

"Had I not better—" he began; but before he could finish the sentence the professor was tugging at the cab door.

CHAPTER XII

BACK AGAIN

"IS IT really you, Eve?" the professor questioned brokenly, and the tears started in his eyes and ran down his cheeks.

"Yes, Daddy, it is I," and in another moment her arms were about his neck.

Then David rushed forward, and began to protest how sorry he was.

Eve raised her eyes for a moment and looked at him; then she spoke to her father quite loudly, "Send that man away, Daddy, and tell him never to come here again."

"You surely don't mean that, Miss Marsden?" David began. "I protest, on my word of honor—"

"Won't you tell him to go, Father?" Eve interrupted. "He must never insult us with his presence again."

"If I were you, Wiggs, I'd clear out of Oxford for good," Bart said sternly.

"Clear out, indeed! I should like to know what for?" he answered defiantly.

"You know well enough what for," Bart replied savagely. "Now, take my tip and go."