

THE THIRD MAN

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Geoff was worse than a rival; he had actually stolen the woman he loved. He did not know, of course. Everything had been done fairly and squarely, but the result was tragic all the same. He had never imagined such a termination for a moment.

Bart went back to the window again, and stared into the street. He supposed he would get used to the idea in time, but for the moment everything, except a dull pain at his heart, seemed terribly unreal.

The old don accepted Geoff as his future son-in-law with a good many inward protests. He hated having his calculations upset. He had nothing against Geoff personally; he was a very nice young man, and in time, given health and a fair chance, might make his way in the world; but, compared with David Wiggs as a husband for Eve, he was not to be mentioned on the same day. David could, and would, have taken Eve off his hands at once. All anxiety respecting the future would have been at an end.

He had yielded in the end for the sake of peace and quietness. He hated to see Eve in tears; it disturbed the harmony of things; it was as bad as a snowstorm in June. He had never quite realized before how illogical women were. Eve swept all his arguments aside as if they were of no account.

She didn't love David Wiggs, and she did love Geoff Lincoln, and that was practically all he could get out of her. Neither was he able to get any real satisfaction out of Geoff.

"Don't you think it is very foolish," he demanded sternly, "to engage yourself to a girl before you have made a position for yourself?"

"And what business had you to propose to her before asking my consent?"

"I apologize for that, of course,"

Geoff answered frankly. "You see, I did not intend speaking quite so soon."

"Then why did you speak?" the old man thundered.

"Well, that is not a very easy question to answer. We do a good many things under the influence of a sudden impulse."

"You mean that you do. I never act on impulse. I hope I have too much sense."

"We have not all the same amount of self-command that you possess."

"I want Eve to marry a man who is able to maintain her. You talk about love. All young people do. It is a passing phase; a pleasant though dangerous emotion; a fleeting passion. You cannot live on sentiment. Rent has to be paid and food and clothes provided."

Geoff, however, did not reply. It occurred to him that silence might be golden under the circumstances.

A few minutes later he found Eve in the drawing-room, looking as sweet and dainty as a June rose. She rose at once, with a smile and a blush, and held up her face to be kissed.

Geoff felt years older than he did a week ago. He was a man now, and this fair girl had promised to be his wife.

It was all very wonderful and not a little intoxicating. When he was alone a good many awkward questions presented themselves to him—questions for which he could find no very satisfactory answer; but here, in the presence of Eve, every unpleasant and disquieting thing was forgotten. It was just pure delight to sit and look at her. From her crown of sunny hair to her daintily slipped feet she was a perfect picture.

"Was father very cross?" she questioned, with half-averted glance.

"He was rather."

"My heart was thumping in my throat all the time you were with him."

"Dear little girl."

"You do care for me lots and lots?"

"Heaps and heaps."

"I am so thankful, Geoff, and—and—happy. It is such a deliverance."

"But you would never have consented to marry David Wiggs?"

"I should have been most unhappy if I had. But father was so bent on it, and David was very determined, and really I do think he was very fond of me. It did not occur to me that anybody else could care for me so much."

Geoff did not reply for some time; then he said slowly and with averted eyes, "I think we will not talk about David again, if you do not mind."

"You are not jealous, you foolish boy."

"No, it is not jealousy. Bart felt just the same."

"Bart Gordon?" And a soft blush suffused her neck and face, then slowly vanished, leaving her paler than usual.

"Bart is the best fellow in the world," he replied warmly. "I hope he will win a fellowship, then he will be able to look after you when I am gone down?"

She glanced up at him and smiled.

"Do you think I shall need looking after, Geoff?"

"Oh, I don't mean that I am afraid. But if Bart remains up, he will be able to take you out sometimes and be company for you."

"That would be very nice." And she dropped her eyes again.

"I intend to earn money as soon as possible. It will take time, of course, to win a position, but now that I have you I shall work like a nigger."

"You must not overwork yourself, Geoff."

"Oh, there is no fear of that," he said, with a laugh, "but I don't intend keeping you waiting any longer than I can help."

"I don't mind waiting in the least, now that—that— You know what I mean! Oh, I can wait as long as you like," and she lifted her face to him again and smiled.

"Do you know," he said, with a note of pride in his voice, "I think you are the sweetest girl in the world?" and he bent over and kissed her.

David Wiggs received his dismissal with an ill-grace. He had not an excess of amiability at the best; at the worst

he had less than his fair share. That he should have a somewhat exaggerated idea of his own importance was perhaps natural; the grace of humility had never been given a fair chance. His father had been a successful cotton-spinner. David was his only son—his only child, in fact; hence, on Abel Wiggs's death, about nine months previously, David had come into possession of more money than was good for him, and was likely to come in for a good deal more should he survive his mother.

It was Abel Wiggs's great ambition that his son David should be a gentleman. He did not claim any such distinction himself. He began life in a cotton mill as a half-timer, and gradually worked his way up to the position of manufacturer.

"Keep thy eyes open, David," was his father's parting injunction, "and learn to do th' correct thing. Don't be fooled by foak who don't understand business. Always be up a few minutes afore your neighbor, if you're to get on. And don't you be imposed upon; no man wins respect by lying down for others to tread on him. Keep a civil tongue; but don't remain in anybody's debt. If a man downs you, bide your time till you get quits. Insults should be returned with compound interest. Always do more than thou says, David, especially to the man to whom thou owes a grudge. If there's owt to be gained by pulling an oar, don't be afraid of sweatin'. Remember thou'rt thy father's son, and do credit to thy upbringing."

David took on polish rather slowly, but in most respects he lived up to his father's injunctions. He became quite proficient on the river, and won his college colors—that was his one distinction, and he spoke of it with somewhat exaggerated modesty. He managed in his second year to pass Mods, but never got any farther; his attempt to get through Schools two years later was a dismal failure.

He could not help recalling his father's words as he wandered away from Rose Villa, after that May evening, when Eve informed him that she was betrothed to Geoff Lincoln: "Always do more than thou says, David, especially to the man to whom thou owes a grudge."

He shut his teeth tightly and quickened

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