

"You think she will consent?"
 "Consent?" And the professor raised his bushy eyebrows in surprise. "Why, of course. You can tell her we have settled the matter between us."

David left the old man to his books and went off in search of Eve. In spite of the assurance he had received, he was by no means certain of the reception he would get. Eve had always been friendly and pleasant and hospitable, but he was very doubtful if she had ever thought of him in the light of a lover. He had given her quite a number of hints, but bright and clever as she was generally, she seemed a little obtuse in some things. Had she lived more in the world she would have discovered his intentions weeks ago, but her secluded life had rendered her quite unsuspecting of ulterior motives.

He found her in the drawing-room busy with some needlework. She rose at once and extended her hand to him. She looked very sweet and winsome in her simple summer gown, and her greeting lacked nothing in cordiality.

"It's all right," he reflected. "I've nothing to do but go ahead and win."

CHAPTER II.

THE TEST.

BART and Geoff decided before taking any definite action to pay another visit to Rose Villa. Geoff might be wrong in his diagnosis. Bart could not bring himself to believe that a girl of Eve's sweetness and refinement would accept a bounder of the type of David Wiggs. They discussed the matter again as they made their way through the park in the direction of Dr. Marsden's residence. Geoff had received a shock from which he had not quite recovered, when his pretty cousin Ethel married an old rake of sixty-five for a title and a house in Park Lane. If Ethel thought so little of herself in comparison with position, what reason had he for assuming that Eve would cherish a loftier conception of the dignity of her sex? Geoff talked like a man of forty who had had a wide and disappointing experience.

"I tell you what, Bart," he said as they strolled slowly along under the trees. "Girls don't look at things as we do. We idealize them. I don't know why we should, but we do; but girls never idealize themselves. They look upon marriage as—well—as a profession, shall I say. I don't say they all do, but a good many of them do. They want to get settled, to have a house of their own; and the most eligible man—that is the man who has the most money and the best prospects—has the best chance."

"I don't believe it," Bart burst out at length. "Eve can't be that sort of a girl."

"David may be all right from her point of view," Geoff urged. "Of course, he's ugly, and—and—he isn't a gentleman; but then, what experience has she had?"

"Trust a girl's instincts. I tell you, I don't believe Wiggs has any more chance than we would have."

"I wish I could think so," Geoff answered. And then they walked on again in silence.

They were told on reaching Rose Villa that Miss Marsden was engaged, but that the professor was in his study. And the maid led the way upstairs to his room.

Bart fancied he heard voices—low but urgent—as he passed the drawing-room door, and a vague feeling of fear and unrest took possession of him.

The old man received them very kindly, as was his habit, talked about the weather, the chances of the various boats during Eights Week, the approach of "schools," the more recent debates at the Union. He apologized for the absence of Eve. She was engaged and might not be at liberty for some time.

He did not invite them to stay to tea, and they were both quick to notice that he appeared restless and more or less on the *qui vive*.

Bart was just turning away from the window to say good-bye to the professor, when he heard the front door bang. Instinctively he stood still for a moment longer, and he saw David Wiggs walk slowly down the garden path and pass into the street. There was nothing in his gait to indicate either depression or exultation.

The professor walked down the stairs with them and opened the front door. They talked loudly in the hope of attracting Eve's attention, but she did not come into the hall. At the garden gate Bart turned, hoping that he might see her face at the window, but she kept resolutely out of sight.

For a considerable distance they walked in silence, then Geoff remarked casually: "We did not gain much by our visit this afternoon."

"I'm not so sure," was the somewhat sullen answer.

Geoff glanced round with a look of surprise, but did not venture any remark.

"Do you know," Bart said at length, "that Wiggs was with Eve all the time?"

"How do you know that?"

"I saw him leave the house."

Geoff gave a low whistle, but did not make any further reply.

"Did you notice," Bart ventured after another long pause, "how restless and absent-minded the professor seemed?"

"I had a feeling that we were not particularly welcome."

"He knew, of course, that Wiggs was with Eve. I hope, Geoff, that you have not been right all along. I confess I am beginning to have my fears—"

"That she will accept him?"

"She may. Good heavens! it will be a burning shame if she does."

"I've told you all along that unless Wiggs is headed off, he'll marry her as safe as houses."

It was on the following morning that Bart broached the subject again. He felt that if he did not, Geoff would not. Geoff had delivered his ultimatum, as it were, and would now let the matter rest. Bart was pouring out tea. They took it in turns to preside at the breakfast table.

"Have you thought anything more about the suggestion you made the other day, Geoff?" he questioned, without taking his eyes off the teapot.

"To what suggestion do you refer?" Geoff questioned after he had emptied his mouth of toast.

"Really, old man, I did not know you were so prolific in ideas," Bart laughed.

"You don't know me, my friend; ideas and suggestions flow from me without effort and without end."

"Do be serious, Geoff, for a moment. I admit I scouted your suggestion the other day, but, really and truly, I can't think of anything better."

"I quite believe you, old man."

"The point is, are you still prepared to carry it out? After our experience yesterday I scent serious danger. Mind you, I don't believe Eve cares for him an ounce; but what excuse has she for rejecting him? I mean, what excuse has she that would weigh with her father?"

"But suppose you should propose to her and she should accept you?"

"That is a proposition that won't hold water for a moment, as you know?"

"I mean if she were willing to wait."

"It's no use discussing that. Our business is to side-track Wiggs, if possible. Are you still willing to carry out your own suggestion?"

"Quite willing. Mind you, I'm not very hopeful of results, particularly after yesterday's visit to Rose Villa. But I agree with you—we ought to do our best. We shall blame ourselves afterwards if we don't."

"Then we are agreed at last. Now let us discuss details. My own feeling is, there is no time to be lost. Will you propose first, or shall I?"

"Suppose we toss for it?"

"Agreed." And a penny was spun in the air without loss of time.

The lot fell to Geoff, and he pocketed the penny in silence.

"Will you call round this afternoon?" Bart questioned after a long pause.

"I don't know. Perhaps I will. The sooner it's over the better," and Geoff's brow contracted and his face became unusually grave. Now that he had come really face to face with his own proposition he saw difficulties and possible complications that had not occurred to him before. To propose marriage when he really did not want to marry her—well, to say the least of it, it was a case of doing evil that good might come.

He was exceedingly restless and ill at ease all the morning, and the lectures on English and Roman law to which he listened left but the vaguest impression on his mind. It was his own proposition, and yet now, when it came to the point, he did not quite like it, and the chances of heading off David Wiggs seemed more and more remote.

He felt painfully nervous as he made his way in the direction of Rose Villa. There was an air of unreality over the whole business. He kept wondering how he should begin; how he should introduce the subject; what excuses he should make; what form of words he should use.

He found Eve in the drawing-room alone, engaged in decorating a table-cover with various colored silks. She rose at once to receive him, dropping her needle as she did so. Her greeting was exceptionally friendly, though her smile lacked the brightness he was accustomed to. He spent several minutes in searching for the needle, and when he had found it he insisted on threading it for her; then he dropped into a chair not a yard away and commenced talking about the tennis match of the previous afternoon.

She did not seem particularly interested, he thought. Some of her answers were not very relevant, and now and then, when she glanced at him, her eyes had a distant look. Also, she was paler than usual, and he thought once or twice that her lips trembled a little.

He could not help feeling that she was in trouble of some kind, and his heart went out to her in a great sympathy. She had never looked more winning, more dainty, more absolutely sweet and wholesome. He drew his chair a little closer and dropped his voice to a lower tone.

Bart waited for Geoff's return with impatience. It would be his turn to go on the morrow or the day following that, unless Geoff should discover in his interview that she was already pledged to David Wiggs. It was this latter possibility that troubled him most. David had most of the winning cards. He had not to wait to make a position—his position was already made; he could provide Eve with a good home to-morrow—that is, if a good home meant a large house, plenty of servants and unlimited cash. Bart resented his own poverty, almost resented his youth, and chafed under the hard fate that doomed him to long years of toil before he would be in a position to maintain a wife.

Geoff Lincoln, it was true, was no better off than

he, but then Geoff regarded Eve with different feelings. He did not know that, of course; nobody knew, and he intended to keep the secret to the end, or until such time—

His face brightened as hope pictured a possible day when this sweet dream of his youth should be realized.

There was a step on the stair at length, the door was pushed open and Geoff, flushed and excited, came into the room. Bart glanced at him with a look of apprehension.

"I've done it," Geoff said, flinging his gloves into a corner of the sofa.

"Yes?"

"Sit down, old man, and I'll tell you all about it."

CHAPTER III.

TWISTED LOVES

GEOFF took a cigarette from his case and struck a match. "It's a queer world, this, Bart," he said with a hard laugh.

"Why queer?"

"Because it's nearly always the unexpected that happens."

"Then you were too late?"

"No, I was just in time."

"I don't quite understand!"

"I don't quite understand myself. It will take me some time to sort things out. Anyhow, she's accepted me. Behold in me an engaged man."

"What nonsense, Geoff!" And Bart felt all the blood leaving his face.

"It's the sober truth, anyhow. Unless I'm dreaming—unless we both are. I proposed to Eve Marsden an hour ago, and she accepted me."

"Accepted you?" And Bart walked across to the window and looked down into the street. Was it possible? Perhaps they were both dreaming, after all. He turned on his heel suddenly and faced his friend. Geoff had dropped into an easy chair and was blowing smoke-rings into the air.

"I can hardly realise it yet," he said without turning his head, and speaking in low, passionless tones. "It all came about so suddenly. She is pretty, though, Bart, awfully pretty. I did not know that she cared for me a bit. I don't think fellows ever properly understand girls; but, really, old man, she is one in a thousand, she is indeed. You can't imagine how sweet she is, how shy, how trusting. I'm going to try to make myself worthy of her. I felt a brute for a moment or two. You see, I was not quite prepared for her confidence. But it is all right now, I feel sure it is. A girl like that could make a statue love her."

Bart dropped slowly into an easy chair and rested his chin in the hollow of his hand. The room seemed to be spinning like a merry-go-round at a fair. Geoff's voice sounded indistinct and far away; his brain refused to grasp the reality of things; a numbness had crept over him from head to foot.

"Then Wiggs had not proposed to her?" he found himself asking at length, though he hardly recognized his own voice.

"Well, he had, in a sense, but she had put him off. She's in a rather tight place, poor girl. The professor is quite gone on Wiggs. I understand there was something of a scene yesterday after we left. She seemed awfully grateful to-day for a way out of it."

"But you can't marry her," Bart jerked out abruptly.

"She doesn't want to marry—at least, for years to come. She's awfully sensible, is Eve. Pretty girls as a rule have not much brains, but she is an exception. You've no idea how clever she is."

"Then you think she would not have accepted Wiggs even if you had not come along?"

"Oh, no, I don't say that. You see, the professor assured her that she would never have another chance, and I fancy she was inclined to agree with him. My coming along was a great surprise to her."

"Do you think she would have accepted me if I had gone first?"

"Of course I don't. Accepted you! Come, come, Bart! Girls of the type of Eve only love one man at a time."

"But she might have married Wiggs."

"But she would never have loved him; she assured me that with her own lips. Wasn't it lucky that the man she did care for just came along in the nick of time?"

Bart did not reply for several seconds. He was slowly getting back to his normal self, and things were beginning to appear in their true perspective.

He was not convinced that Eve loved Geoff. She liked him, no doubt, as he liked her. He was infinitely to be preferred to David Wiggs. He could understand that she might hail his proposal as a happy deliverance, he was ready to believe that she was quite satisfied with her choice; but—

In the present instance it was a very big "but" from Bart's point of view. No arrangement could possibly be satisfactory that left him out of the reckoning. Had he been certain that Geoff loved Eve with all his heart, and that she loved him equally well in return, he would still have regarded the arrangement with gloomy apprehension. But since he could not bring himself to believe either proposition, he saw nothing but unhappiness for all concerned.

He tried his best not to betray his feelings. He almost hated Geoff for the moment.

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