

THE THIRD MAN

By Silas K. Hocking



CHAPTER I.

A STRANGE PROPOSAL

"SUPPOSE we both propose to her?"

"What folly, Geoff!"

"Of course, neither of us has the ghost of a chance."

"Do you want her—that is, are you in love with her?"

"Well, not exactly—only—"

"Then why trifle with so serious a matter? Would you like a practical joke played on your own sister?" And Bart Gordon's face flushed a little angrily.

"You misunderstand me, old man," the other answered quickly. "It's that cur Wiggs of whom I am thinking. I'd like to head him off by hook or by crook."

"I confess I fail to understand even now," Gordon replied after a pause.

"Then answer me this. Would you like to see Eve Marsden married to David Wiggs?"

"No, I wouldn't." And Gordon's face flushed again. "I'd rather see her buried."

"Exactly. So would I. But he'll marry her, as safe as houses, unless he's headed off."

"What makes you think so?"

"Oh, any number of things. In the first place, he wants her. In the second place, the old man likes him; and, in the third place, she may think he's her only chance."

"I don't know why she should think that."

"Put yourself in her place, man. Think of her secluded life. It is by the merest accident that we have been admitted into the circle of her acquaintances. Then Wiggs comes along. Almost the first eligible man she has ever known intimately. He has money, and cheek, and a smooth tongue. If she thinks he's the only chance she's likely to get—why, she'll accept him."

"I don't see that that necessarily follows," Gordon answered, growing red again.

"Well, not necessarily, perhaps, but likely." And Geoff Lincoln walked to the window and looked down into the street. Gordon watched him with a puckered forehead and a troubled light in his eyes. His dislike of David Wiggs was as strong as Lincoln's, his admiration of Eve Marsden as great—perhaps greater—and the suggestion that she and David might make a match of it was peculiarly distasteful to him. But the proposal of his friend, Geoff Lincoln, was really too absurd to be treated seriously.

He waited for Geoff to speak again. The subject had a peculiar—even painful—fascination for him. Geoff, however, appeared to be absorbed in something that was taking place in the street.

"Do you really think that bounder has a chance?" Gordon questioned at length.

Geoff gave a little start, then turned slowly round and faced his friend. "If I did not think he had a chance I should not have alluded to the matter," he said quietly.

"Which means that Eve likes him?" the other questioned, after a pause.

"After a fashion, perhaps. That she loves him I don't believe; but he is pertinacious, as you know—"

"But Eve Marsden would never marry a man unless she loved him."

Geoff laughed uneasily. "Don't be too ready to stake your existence on that assumption," he said. "Girls will do the most unaccountable things. Take the case of my cousin Ethel."

"Oh, that was an extreme case. Besides, Eve is not an ordinary girl, she has refinement, imagination—ideals. Do you remember what she said to us one evening when we were discussing Wordsworth?"

"Wiggs is as able to discuss Wordsworth with her as you or I. Besides, he has come in for heaps of money. Don't forget that. He may be a rank outsider from your point of view, but girls don't see men with men's eyes. He has an oily tongue and an insinuating manner, and a girl like Eve, who has been kept in a kind of walled garden all her life, may be easily imposed upon, particularly if the old man speaks a good word for him."

Gordon turned and walked back to his chair and began to fill his pipe. "Somebody ought to tell her," he muttered at length.

"But who's to do it? Besides, the way to make a girl determined to marry a man is to warn her against him. The more you blackguard him the more she'll admire him."

Gordon struck a match angrily on the underside of the mantelpiece and began pulling vigorously at his pipe.

"Of course, it is no business of ours," Lincoln went on. "Neither you nor I can marry her, though if we were in a position we might do worse; but that is nothing to the point. What is to the point is, we both admire Eve Marsden. We'd both be awfully sorry to see her spoil her life, as she'd be certain to do if she married Wiggs, and we'd both do anything in reason to stop his little game."

"I'd like to wring his neck," Gordon muttered savagely.

"My proposal is less primitive," Lincoln answered with a laugh. "Wringing necks has gone out of fashion."

"So has practical joking, for that matter—at least, with educated people."

"Then suggest something better, my wise and sedate friend. I have made what I consider a practical proposal. It has the merit of simplicity. If it does no good I don't see that it can do much harm."

"But what possible good could come of it; tell me that."

"I'm not sure that any good would come of it, but then, one never knows. It might give Eve a little bit better opinion of herself. Open her eyes to the fact that she is really attractive to the other sex. At present she has not the remotest idea how charming she is. Indeed, I believe she thinks herself—thanks to her training—a sort of ugly duckling, a girl that nobody would be likely to notice, much less admire. Hence her special danger. The fear is she will regard Wiggs as a kind of special providence and come to the conclusion that if she rejects him she will never have another chance."

"There would be no great calamity in that."

"From your point of view, perhaps. But in these days girls are expected to marry. It is the only profession open to a great many of them. I don't suppose the old man has been able to make much provision for her future. Hence, naturally, marriage will appeal to her on other than sentimental grounds."

Gordon, however, did not appear quite satisfied. He pulled at his pipe with savage energy and frowned at the fire. He was as eager as Lincoln was to spike David Wiggs' guns and save Eve Marsden from the calamity of marrying a man who was not worthy to tie her shoes. But—

"You had better think the matter over," Lincoln said after a pause, and he turned away from the window and dropped into an easy chair with a book.

Geoffrey Lincoln and Bart Gordon shared rooms. Nearly three years previously they had come up to Oxford with scholarships—the one to Merton and the other to New. They became acquainted during the first term at a Union debate, since when they had been almost inseparable. They were now working for "Greats" which they expected to take during the next month. Beyond that there might be much, or—the other thing.

Gordon intended to have a shot for a fellowship, but was not at all hopeful of success. Lincoln, who had entered at the Middle Temple, would go down to read law with the expectation, a little later, of getting called to the Bar.

They were both young—neither much over twenty-one—both poor, both ambitious, and if neither of them was actually brilliant, Lincoln, at any rate, had more than average ability.

The previous year they had become acquainted with Eve Marsden, the only child of a retired don, who lived in a neat villa on the outskirts of the city. Eve had spent most of her life in a convent school in Brussels. She was an exceedingly pretty girl, shy as a linnet, and with no more knowledge of the world than of the geography of the planet Mars.

Her father had been known in his more active days as old Dr. Dry-as-dust. He had lectured on Roman law for so many years that he almost forgot that he was living in the beginning of the twentieth century.

When, at the age of eighteen, Eve returned from school he was at a loss to know what to do with her, or how to treat her. That she was pretty he could not deny, and that seemed to make his task all the greater. That she was innocent and trusting formed a peril to be guarded against; that he would ultimately have to get her married was a duty that he could not possibly ignore. If he had ever been touched by sentiment or romance, it was so long ago that he had lost all recollection of it.

Since her return, now nearly three years ago, he had guarded her with jealous care. What else could he do? He had a vague notion that girls were helpless things and quite incapable of looking after themselves. If they were kept strictly within well-defined limits they need not give much trouble, but if they once got out of hand there was no knowing what would happen.

At the time our story opens he felt that he was nearing the end of his responsibility. For several months he had been passing through a rather anxious time. Three young men had gained admission to the privacy of Rose Villa, and he was not without misgiving that there were others who, so to speak, were looking over the wall. He had horrible visions of what might happen if Eve got really out of hand.

It had been no part of his programme that young men should be allowed to come to his house, more or less indiscriminately. It was the one thing he had tried to guard against. He had a vision of one suitable young man who should come by his invitation and to whom in due course he would surrender Eve.

Fortunately, in the present instance, two of the young men did not count; they were only youths with their way yet to make in the world, and to whom matrimony, if it entered their thoughts, was in the far distant future.

David Wiggs was of a somewhat different order. He was older than the other two by several years, and was, moreover, master of a very considerable income. He had impressed the professor by his self-confidence, his knowledge of the world, and his general air of robustness. Geoff Lincoln and Bart Gordon were youths, David Wiggs was grown up. John Marsden was so little a man of the world himself that he failed to distinguish between self-reliance and vulgar swagger. The breezy assurance of David acted on him like a tonic.

When he discovered that Eve was the chief attraction he was quite pleased. From his point of view nothing could be better. He encouraged him to come to the house as often as he liked. He was quite certain he would make Eve an excellent husband, and when she was safely married his responsibility would be at an end.

David had no difficulty in getting the old man's consent.

"Have you spoken to her?" he questioned as an afterthought.

"Not yet. I thought it was the proper thing to get your permission first."

"Yes, yes. That shows a correct temper of mind. You may tell Eve it is all right; so we may consider the matter settled."