

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.

"LONDON is a wicked place, and thou'd better keep away."

He laughed a little scornfully and walked out of the room.

He had been in London a week when Geoff came face to face with him in Paddington Station. He had driven all the distance in his motor-car, and had taken ten days on the journey. He had zigzagged across England, visiting every place of interest that he could hear of. He was his own chauffeur, and had become a rather expert driver.

He had been happier during the last few weeks than at any time since Eve refused him, but the sight of Eve and Geoff together was like a match to gunpowder. It awoke to fury the sleeping demon within him. If the meeting had been in the lonely country instead of the crowded city, he did not know what would have happened. He ached to strangle Geoff and carry off Eve by sheer force.

He left his car outside the station, and followed them on to the platform. Keeping out of sight, he marked their every movement, their every expression; saw their last kiss just before the train moved out of the station.

What he felt no one knew. He was almost beside himself with rage and jealousy. Eve looked lovelier than ever, and his passion flamed to a white heat.

"The time will come," he muttered to himself; and, turning on his heel, he strode away.

CHAPTER VII

BITTER-SWEET

BART GORDON, having won his fellowship, returned to Oxford in October.

He had been back a fortnight before he ventured to call at Rose Villa. He would have postponed the visit still longer if he could have found another excuse. Geoff had written him expressing surprise that he had not yet called, and reminding him of his duty, if not of his promise, to give an eye to Eve and do his best to lighten her loneliness.

Reason as well as conscience urged him to give Eve a very wide berth. He knew well enough that the sight of her face would awaken all his old passion.

On the other hand he had promised Geoff that he would call and see her, and a promise ought to be kept. Moreover, he and Eve had been good friends in the past, and it would look like churlishness if he neglected her now; and besides all that, there was no denying the fact that his heart was aching for a sight of her face. What was he to do—break his promise or take the risk?

Bart walked across the park that dull, rainy afternoon like a man going to his doom, and yet there was a strange thrill of jubilation in his heart. The aftermath would no doubt be pain and humiliation, and possibly remorse. He could not help it. In any case, before the bitter would come the sweet. To see Eve again was worth something. To watch her making tea, to listen to the ripple of her laughter, to watch the shadows come and go in her sweet brown eyes, to catch the sunshine of her smiles, surely it would be worth suffering a good deal for.

His heart was beating in his throat when he rang the door bell, and a minute later he was shown into the drawing-room, where Eve sat deep in an easy chair with a book in her hands and her feet on the fender.

At sight of Bart she sprang to her feet with a little cry of pleasure, and the color deepened in her cheeks in a moment.

"I had almost thought you were never coming," she said a little reproachfully, "but I suppose you have been very busy."

"Very busy," he answered a little awkwardly. "You see, I haven't come back for pleasure this time, but for real hard work."

"And do you want me to take that as a compliment?" she questioned, lifting shy eyes to his.

"Well—in a way—yes," he stammered. "I mean—well, it is always a pleasure, don't you know, to come here."

"It is nice of you to say that," she answered with a ripple of laughter; "and yet, if it be true, I don't understand why you have delayed so long."

"Oh, well, don't you see," and he laughed shyly, "I have to try to practise a few virtues occasionally."

"But I understood that one of your duties was to look after me," and she laughed pleasantly. "I'm

afraid I shall have to think, in spite of your pleasant speeches, that you regard that particular duty, at any rate, as a rather irksome one."

"Oh, no, I don't—believe me, I don't," he answered, growing confused. "If I thought you needed looking after I would be here every day. And then, you see, if a duty becomes—well, becomes a pleasure, don't you know—why, where is the virtue of it?"

"Then you think there is no virtue except in doing unpleasant things?"

"Oh, now you have me," and he laughed quite cheerfully. "Do you know, I never thought of the matter in that light. I wonder if Spencer, in his 'Data of Ethics,' has anything to say on that subject? I will look it up to-morrow."

"Oh, I wouldn't, if I were you," she answered, turning her bright eyes full on him and laughing again. "To be always putting one's actions in a scale and weighing them must be an awful nuisance. Better follow our hearts and do the things that come first, and not bother whether they weigh a pound avoirdupois or only fourteen ounces. Besides, how do we know that the scale itself doesn't want adjusting?"

He stared at her with wide-open eyes, then laughed somewhat dubiously. In her light, inconsequential way she was plunging him into depths that he had not sounded. He was a clergyman's son, and had been brought up within the lines of strict orthodoxy. The Church's moral weights and measures had been fixed for all time, and any suggestion that they might need readjusting was nothing less than startling.

"I do believe you want your tea," she said, with the same bright, jaunty air. "Well, you shall not have to wait long for it," and she walked across to the bell-push.

"Father is out," she explained, when the girl brought in the tea, "so you will have to put up with my poor company."

"Do you know," she went on after a few moments, "that there is to be a concert at the town hall this day week?"

"Oh!" He raised his eyes slowly and looked at her.

"You don't care for concerts, I think?"

"Oh, yes, I do. In fact, I am awfully fond of good music."

"I have had two tickets for the balcony given me."

He went on, pouring him out another cup of tea. "Father, as you know, detests concerts; besides, he rarely goes out now at nights. And—and as you have been installed as my chaperon, I—I—why, of course——" and she raised her eyes to his and laughed.

"If you only knew——" he began, then stopped abruptly and blushed.

"Only knew what?" she questioned innocently.

"Well, what a treat it is to get away from one's books, and from oneself, in fact. I assure you I shall look forward eagerly to the concert."

"You will not need to put on evening clothes," she said in matter-of-fact tones. "You might come along to high tea, and if the weather is fine we might walk down together."

"That would be jolly!"

"And after the concert you might see me into a cab."

He nodded and popped another biscuit into his mouth.

It was quite dark when he got back to his rooms, and for awhile he sat in the firelight with his hands deep in his pockets and his eyes half closed. He had spent a very pleasant afternoon with Eve, and now the reaction had come. He expected it, of course, after the sweet the bitter.

Eve was more beautiful than ever in his eyes; he loved her with a passion that was more completely absorbing; he longed to possess her with a more intense desire.

A week later he found himself once more at Rose Villa. Eve received him in the drawing-room, as usual. The doctor was in his study. She was a little more sedate in her talk than during his previous visit, but none the less charming on that account. She made sympathetic inquiries about his work, and seriously suggested that he should take more exercise. She showed great interest in his programme of lectures, and led him on unconsciously to talk about himself and the future.

It was quite dark when they left the house to go to the concert. Outside the gate Eve took his arm as though he had been an elder brother. It was well that she did not feel the thrill that ran through him; he did not even press her hand with his arm, yet all the way he walked like a man who was passing through an enchanted land. In his ears her soft voice rang like music, and every now and then the light in her eyes gave him glimpses of an impossible heaven.

Such a mingling of sweet and bitter he had never known before. It was rapture beyond all words to love her; it was joy unspeakable even to be her friend. But to be forestalled, to know that his love was unrequited, that her heart was in the keeping of another—that was grief too deep for utterance.

He never had any clear recollection what the concert was like. He remembered only Eve. She sat enthralled, listening. He sat enthralled, also, looking at her.

Toward the end of the concert she laid her hand suddenly on his arm, and he felt it tremble.

"Look," she whispered, "in the front row of all. He is turning his head—there, he has seen us."

Bart flushed and grew angry. Standing up and waving his programme at them was David Wiggs.

CHAPTER VIII

APPREHENSION

BART recognised David by the slightest possible inclination of the head, but Eve, with her usual impulsiveness and generosity, waved her hand to him. Bart frowned and looked a little annoyed. David's lack of taste grated on his nerves. Eve's readiness to greet her old lover came to him with a slight shock of surprise.

In the large vestibule, as he expected, David was waiting for them. He rushed up to Eve as though they were the best friends in the world and seized her outstretched hand in both his. "It is a pleasure to see you again," he panted, "an awful pleasure; and you look so well, too. I can't tell you how delighted I am. And how is your father? I hope he is first-rate."

"He is very well, thank you," Eve replied quietly.

"You will give him my kindest regards, won't you, and tell him that I will be looking in to see him in a few days—perhaps to-morrow. He rattled on with scarcely a pause for breath, as though afraid Eve might cut in with a sudden "Good night."

"I was not aware you had returned to Oxford again," she said as soon as he gave her an opening.

"Oh, I am not at the 'Varsity," he laughed. "I wish I were. I don't expect I shall ever have so jolly a time again. I've just had five or six weeks in London; fine place is London, and awful fun dodging the traffic, I can assure you. Won't you let me take you home in my car? I could get it round in no time."

"No, thank you."

"It wouldn't be a bit of trouble, I assure you. "Miss Marsden is in my charge at present," Bart