

"I'll see you in perdition first," he sneered. "David Wiggs, leave us for to-night," the professor interposed. "You and I will have a word later."

"But really, Dr. Marsden—" he began. "No more words to-night, please. My daughter desires you to go—that should be enough."

For a moment he hesitated; then, muttering something under his breath he turned on his heel and walked away.

Eve walked slowly into the house, supported on one side by Bart and on the other by her father.

The morning but one following, Geoff Lincoln found two letters by the side of his plate when he came down to breakfast. The first was from Eve, the second from Bart. He read Eve's first, and his face flamed crimson as his eyes ran down the pages.

Eve told him the whole story of her adventure in her simple, straightforward way.

"The black-hearted villain!" he muttered to himself. "I'll wring his neck when I meet him."

Bart's letter was much briefer and in some respects more reticent. He made light of the part he had played, but he left no doubts as to his opinion of David.

Geoff did no work that day. He caught the earliest train to Oxford, and by noon was at Rose Villa. He was eager to see Eve, eager to talk to her face to face.

She had just got downstairs when he arrived, and was huddled up in a corner of the big couch in the drawing-room. There were dark rims under her eyes, which accentuated the pallor of her face, and when she reached her hands to him they shook in spite of herself.

He knelt on the floor by her side, and kissed her; then drew up a chair close to her couch, and took her hand in his. He felt in a protective mood. She belonged to him, and he was proud of his charge. Her beauty still appealed to him; her gentleness and grace helped to smother some of the doubts that had worried him for weeks past. He was never likely to meet with anyone who would appeal to him as Eve did.

"I am glad you have come, Geoff," she said, looking up at him with swimming eyes; "it is better than writing."

"I could not rest until I had seen you," he answered.

"You blame me, of course?" she questioned, a soft blush stealing over her pale face.

"No, dear, I do not," he replied promptly. "I blame your father."

"Father is very much upset. He hates being deceived in people, and there is no denying that he thought very highly of—"

"Don't mention his name, dear. Let us hope that we shall never look upon his ugly face again."

"You may meet him, for I believe he is still in Oxford."

"If I do meet him," he said savagely, "he will not very soon forget it."

They talked until lunch time, and then the professor bustled in, looking rather confused and ill at ease.

"It's all my fault," he said, before Geoff had time to speak; "all my fault. However, Eve is nearly all right again. She had a nasty tumble, and, I fancy, slight concussion. But—oh well, she is looking quite herself again to-day."

After lunch Geoff went off to look up Bart. He jumped up in surprise when Geoff's head appeared round the door.

"I am delighted to see you," he said, his honest face beaming, "awfully delighted."

"I came up, of course, on Eve's account—"

"That Wiggs is a villain, Geoff."

"Yes, I know it."

"I nearly wrung his neck the other night."

"I wish you had. If ever by any chance I meet him, he will not soon forget it."

"The mischief is, you can't punish him without making a talk."

Geoff looked thoughtful for a moment, then he said, "I'm awfully obliged to you, old man. It was an inspiration on your part, or a providence."

"Perhaps the latter. Theology is a frightfully interesting subject."

"You'll be a clergyman yet," Geoff laughed.

"I don't know. I'm beginning to like teaching. Besides, the Thirty-Nine Articles rather boggle me; they include too much and exclude too much. How goes the law?"

"About as usual. At present I am in the running for a private secretaryship—There happens to be living somewhere in one of the home counties a Mr. Kingsland, who is a wealthy shipowner—I believe, also, a Member of Parliament. I understand that he is an able man, not extraordinarily well educated, and is also politically ambitious. Well, he wants a private secretary."

"My name has been mentioned to him by some kind friend, and I understand he has done me the honor of looking up my record at the 'Varsity. The salary he is willing to pay is liberal, to say the least of it."

"Now I must get back to Rose Villa."

"You are returning to town to-night?"

"By the 9.40 train."

"Well, good luck to you."

"And to you."

So they parted. It was growing dusk when Geoff crossed the park. His thoughts were chiefly with his friend whom he had just left.

"Good old Bart," Geoff said to himself as he made his way along under the bare trees; "he deserves to succeed."

Suddenly, at a bend in the road, he came to face face with David Wiggs, and in a moment he felt transformed, his blood seemed to leap like fire in his veins; his hands clasped involuntarily; his eyes blazed with excitement.

David started, and would have passed without a word, but Geoff stepped in front of him. He felt an almost overpowering impulse to take him by the throat and crush the life out of him.

Geoff controlled his voice with difficulty. "I would like just a word with you, David Wiggs," he said, and his lips grew white with passion.

"Then please be quick about it, for I have an engagement, and am already late." He spoke in a tone of lofty indifference and unconcern.

"Your engagement can possibly stand over to some future occasion," Geoff answered, with a slight sneer; "my business with you is urgent."

"Indeed!"

"I came to-day in consequence of a letter I received this morning from Miss Marsden."

"How interesting."

"You think so? Possibly, before I have done with you, you will find it less interesting than you imagine."

"Is that all you have to say to me? For, if so, I will wish you good night."

"By no means. I have only begun. I have much to say and much to do."

"Really?"

The sneering tone made Geoff wince, but he controlled himself by a great effort.

"I have no desire," he said, with forced calmness, "to bandy words with a man of your type, but I intend to wipe out your insult to Miss Marsden."

David took another step back involuntarily. He was not deficient in physical strength, but he strongly objected at the moment to an encounter with a man who was half-mad with passion.

"If you are afraid of your coat being damaged,"



"At that moment he was conscious of a new sensation or a new emotion."

I will give you time to take it off," Geoff went on, after a pause, "but if you imagine you are going to escape, you are mistaken."

CHAPTER XIII

AT CLOSE QUARTERS

DAVID looked round him for some way of escape. He saw that Lincoln was in a towering rage, and he did not like the look of anger that blazed in his eyes. He would have taken to his heels, but was afraid of looking ridiculous; to be laughed at as a coward would be the worst of all punishments.

"Look here," he said sulkily, "what do you want with me?"

"I want to thrash you, and, what is more, I intend to do it."

"Have you forgotten where we are, and that we are both supposed to be gentlemen?"

"No one ever hurled that accusation at you, David Wiggs. No one ever will. You are a cad and a villain, and you know it."

"You had better be careful what you say," David answered, with a defiant flourish of his cane.

"Careful?" And like a flash of lightning he dealt David a stinging blow on the face with the palm of his hand.

David staggered under the impact, and then struck at Geoff with his cane. In a moment, however, the latter had wrenched it out of his hand, and had struck him another blow across the face.

David sprang forward, almost blind with pain and rage, and tried to get in a blow below the belt,

but Geoff was too wary for him, and cut him across the shoulders with the cane.

"Give me back my cane!" David howled. "This is a coward's trick of yours."

"You were the first to use it," Geoff flung back at him; "now you shall get the benefit of it," and he brought it down on David's shoulders a second time.

"I don't call this fair fighting," the latter almost screamed.

"I did not intend it to be," was the reply. "I am simply thrashing a coward for his villainy," and down came the cane again.

David sprang forward and got his arms round Geoff's waist, and tried to throw him. But this only gave Geoff a better opportunity for the use of the cane. The blows fell as thick as rain. He loosed his grip at length, and staggered back; but Geoff was in no mood to let him escape.

Following him with a spring like a panther, he drove his left fist straight in David's face, which brought him suddenly to the ground.

"This is to teach you," he said, "that you can't kidnap and insult ladies with impunity."

"I did neither—believe me," David howled.

"You did both, you hound, and you know it," Geoff hissed. "You never intended to return to tea."

You went on until it was dark of deliberate purpose; you took the wrong turn intentionally, got lost intentionally, and chose the loneliest place in the whole county to break down in. Oh, you villain! You meant— Yes, you know what you meant, and I know."

And down came the cane again on the writhing body.

Exhausted at length, Geoff flung the cane from him; then, giving the prostrate body a kick, he said,

"You had better get up now and go home to your mother, and get her to bathe your bruises."

"I'll have the law on you for this," David moaned.

"You are welcome to do so," Geoff answered.

"I shall be glad to appear before any judge or jury in the country."

David lay still a moment or two longer, then struggled slowly and painfully to his feet.

With a bitter scowl upon his face, he limped away. Geoff watched him till he had disappeared in the shrouding mist, then turned, and made his way toward Rose Villa.

Eve was waiting for him in the drawing-room, ready to pour out tea.

"Why, Geoff!" she exclaimed, "what is the matter with you?"

"Is anything the matter?" he questioned, with a wry smile.

"Well, look at yourself in the mirror. Have you had a fall?"

"I do look a bit tumbled, don't I?" he laughed, glancing at himself in the glass.

"Tumbled? Why, you look as if— But what is the matter with your hand?"

"I evidently need washing," he said with grim humor. "I'll be back again in a few moments."

He looked quite respectable again when he returned to the drawing-room.

"Now, will I do, little girl?" he questioned, smiling broadly, and he leaned over her chair and kissed her.

She glanced at the back of his hand, which had come into contact with David's front teeth; then she looked up into his face, which also showed a few traces of his recent encounter.

"You must have your tea first," she said, with a winning smile; "then you must tell me all about it."

"Where is your father?" he questioned.

"He had an early tea, and is gone out. We expected you back long since."

"I have been detained. I did not intend remaining away from you so long."

"I forgive you. How is your friend?"

"Very well, and not a bit changed. Some people would have had swelled head, but Gordon is as diffident as ever. He'll never have a very big opinion of himself."

"I believe we are commanded not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think, are we not?"

"Bart needs no exhortation of that kind," Geoff laughed. "He'd be all the better if he had a little more conceit."

"I'm not so sure," she answered, with an elusive smile; "he seems to me so refreshingly genuine and sincere."

For awhile silence fell between them, while Geoff slaked his thirst and demolished a plate of bread and butter.

"Now, dear, tell me about your adventures this afternoon," Eve said at length. "I feel sure they have been exciting."

Geoff laid down his cup and laughed. "You jump to conclusions too hastily," he answered, with a humorous twinkle of the eye.

"Oh no, the evidence is overwhelming. Women are not so blind or so illogical as you profess to believe. Have you seen David Wiggs?"

He sat up straight and laughed again. "Why do you ask that question?" he said.

"And why do you answer my question by asking another?"

"Well, little girl, I have met David Wiggs. Does that satisfy you?"

"No, Geoff. I want to know all about it. You are hot-tempered, I know. Did you quarrel—I mean, did you come to blows?"

"I spoke to him. He wanted to pass me, but I would not let him. It was something of a relief to me to tell him what I thought of him. Then I struck him—"

"First?"