

The THIRD DEGREE

A Narrative of Metropolitan Life

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SYNOPSIS.

Howard Jeffries, banker's son, under the evil influence of Robert Underwood, fellow-student at Yale, leads a life of dissipation, marries the daughter of a gambler who died in prison, and is disowned by his father. He is out of work and in desperate straits. Underwood, who had once been engaged to Howard's stepmother, Alicia, is apparently in prosperous circumstances. Taking advantage of his intimacy with Alicia, he becomes a sort of social highwayman. Discovering his true character, Alicia denies him the house. He sends her a note threatening suicide. Art dealers for whom he acted as commissioner, demand an accounting. He cannot make good. Howard calls at his apartments in an intoxicated condition to request a loan of \$2,000 to enable him to take up a business proposition. Howard drinks himself into a maudlin condition, and goes to sleep on a divan. A caller is announced and Underwood draws a screen around the drunken sleeper. Alicia enters. She demands a promise from Underwood that he will not take his life. He refuses unless she will renew her patronage. This she refuses, and takes her leave. Underwood kills himself. The report of the pistol awakens Howard. He finds Underwood dead. Howard is turned over to the police. Capt. Clinton, notorious for his brutal treatment of prisoners, puts Howard through the third degree, and finally gets an alleged confession from the harassed man. Annie, Howard's wife, declares her belief in her husband's innocence, and calls on Jeffries, Sr. He refuses to help unless she will consent to a divorce. To save Howard she consents, but when she finds that the elder Jeffries does not intend to stand by his son, except financially, she swears his help. Annie appeals to Judge Brewster, attorney for Jeffries, Sr., to take Howard's case. He declines. It is reported that Annie is going on the stage. The banker and his wife call on Judge Brewster to find some way to prevent it. Annie again pleads with Brewster to take Howard's case. He consents. Alicia is greatly alarmed when Annie tells her Brewster has taken the case. She confesses to Annie that she called on Underwood the night of his death and that she has his letter in which he threatened suicide, but begs for time before giving out the information. Annie promises Brewster to produce the missing woman at a meeting at his home. Brewster accuses Clinton of forcing a confession from Howard.

CHAPTER XVIII.

As Annie entered the room and caught sight of Mr. Jeffries, she instinctively drew back. Just at that moment the banker was, perhaps, the one man in the world whom she was most anxious to avoid. Capt. Clinton no longer had any terror for her. Now that the missing witness had been found and the precious "suicide letter" was as good as in their possession there was nothing more to fear. It was only a question of time when Howard would be set free. But it was not in this girl's nature to be concerned only with herself. If she possessed a single womanly virtue, it was supreme selfishness. There was some one beside herself to take into consideration—a poor, vacillating, weak, miserable woman who wished to do what was right and had agreed to do so, but who, in the privacy of her own apartments, had gone down on her knees and begged Annie to protect her from the consequences of her own folly. Her husband must not know. Annie had promised that if there was any way possible the knowledge of that clandestine midnight visit to Underwood's rooms should be kept from him. Yet there stood the banker! She was afraid that if they began questioning her in his presence she might be betrayed into saying something that would instantly arouse his suspicions.

Judge Brewster went quickly forward as she came in and led her to a chair. Capt. Clinton and Mr. Jeffries eyed her in stolid silence. Looking around in a nervous kind of way, Annie said quietly to the judge:

"May I speak to you alone, judge?"

"Certainly," replied the lawyer.

He was about to draw her aside when Capt. Clinton interfered.

"One moment!" he said gruffly; "if this is all open and above board, as you say it is, judge—I'd like to ask the young lady a few questions."

"Certainly, by all means," said the judge quickly.

The captain turned and confronted Annie. Addressing her in his customary aggressive manner, he said:

"You promised Judge Brewster that you'd produce the woman who called at Underwood's apartment the night of the shooting?" Annie made no reply, but looked at the lawyer. The captain grinned as he added: "The witness wants instructions, judge."

"You can be perfectly frank, Mrs. Jeffries," said the lawyer reassuringly. "We have no desire to conceal anything from Capt. Clinton."

Annie bowed.

"Yes," she said slowly; "I promised Judge Brewster that she would come here to-night."

"Did she promise to come?" growled the captain.

"Yes."

"Well, where is she?" he demanded. "She hasn't come yet," she replied, "but she will, I'm sure—I know she will."

"How did you come to find her?" demanded the captain suspiciously.

Annie hesitated a moment and glanced at Mr. Jeffries. Then she said hesitatingly:

"That I—I cannot say—now."

Capt. Clinton's massive bulldog jaw closed with an ominous click.

"Decline to answer, eh? What's her name?"

She remained silent.

"What's her name?" he repeated impatiently.

"I cannot tell you," she said firmly. "Do you know it?" he bellowed.

"Yes," she answered quietly.

"Know it, but can't say, eh? Hum!" He folded his arms and glared at her. Mr. Jeffries now interfered. Addressing Annie angrily, he said:

"But you must speak! Do you realize that my son's life is at stake?"

"Yes, I do," she replied quickly. "I'm glad to see that you are beginning to realize it, too. But I can't tell you yet—"

The judge turned to the police captain.

"I may tell you, captain, that even I myself have not succeeded in learning the name of this mysterious personage."

Addressing Annie, he said: "I think you had better tell us. I see no advantage in concealing it any further."

Annie shook her head.

"Not yet," she murmured; "she will tell you herself when she comes."

"Hh! I thought as much!" exclaimed the banker incredulously.

The captain rose and drew himself up to his full height, a favorite trick of his, when about to assert his authority.

"Well, when she does come!" he exclaimed, "I think you may as well understand she will be taken to headquarters and held as a witness."

"You'll arrest her!" cried the lawyer.

"That's what I said, judge. She's a material witness—the most important one the State has. I don't intend that she shall get away—"

"Arrest her! Oh, judge, don't let him do that!" exclaimed Annie in dismay.

Judge Brewster grew red in the face. Wrathfully he said:

"She is coming to my house of her own free will. She has trusted to my honor—"

"Yes—yes!" cried Annie. "She trusts to your honor, judge."

Capt. Clinton grinned.

"Honor cuts mighty little ice in this matter. There's no use talking. I shall place her under arrest."

"I will not permit such a disgraceful proceeding!" cried the lawyer.

"With all due respect, judge," retorted the policeman impudently, "you won't be consulted. You have declared yourself counsel for the man who has been indicted for murder—I didn't ask you to take me into your confidence—you invited me here, treated me to a lecture on psychology, for which I thank you very much, but I don't feel that I need any further instruction. If this woman ever does get here, the moment she leaves the house Maloney has instructions to arrest her, but I guess we needn't worry. She has probably forgotten her appointment. Some people are very careless in that respect." Moving toward the door, he added: "Well, if it's all the same to you, I'll wait downstairs. Good-night."

He went out, his hat impudently tilted back on his head, a sneer on his lips. The banker turned to the judge.

"I told you how it would be," he said scornfully. "A flax in the pan!"

The lawyer looked askance at Annie.

"You are sure she will come?" he asked.

"Yes, I am sure!" With concern she added: "But the disgrace of arrest! It will kill her! Oh, judge, don't let them arrest her!"

"Tell me who she is!" commanded the lawyer sternly.

It was the first time he had spoken to her harshly and Annie, to her dismay, thought she detected a note of doubt in his voice. Looking toward the banker, she replied:

"I can't tell you just now—she'll be here soon—"

"Tell me now—I insist," said the lawyer with growing impatience.

"Please—please don't ask me!" she pleaded.

Mr. Jeffries made an angry gesture.

"As I told you, Brewster, her whole story is a fabrication trumped up for some purpose—God knows what object she has in deceiving us! I only know that I warned you what you always may expect from people of her class."

The judge said nothing for a moment. Then quietly he whispered to the banker:

"Go into my study for a few moments, will you, Jeffries?"

The banker made a gesture, as if utterly disgusted with the whole business.

"I am going home," he said testily. "I've had a most painful evening—most painful. Let me know the re-

sult of your investigation as soon as possible. Good night. Don't disturb me to-night, Brewster. To-morrow will do."

He left the room in high dudgeon, banging the door behind him. Annie burst into a laugh.

"Don't disturb him!" she mimicked. "He's going to get all that's coming to him."

Shocked at her levity, the lawyer turned on her severely.

"Do you want me to lose all faith in you?" he asked sternly.

"No, indeed," she answered contritely.

"Then tell me," he demanded, "why do you conceal this woman's name from me?"

"Because I don't want to be the one to expose her. She shall tell you herself."

"That's all very well," he replied, "but meantime you are directing suspicion against yourself. Your father-in-law believes you are the woman; so does Capt. Clinton."

"The captain suspects everybody," she laughed. "It's his business to suspect. As long as you don't believe that I visited Underwood that night—"

The judge shook his head as if puzzled.

"Candidly, I don't know what to think," he said. "I want to think the very best of you, Annie, but you won't let me."

She hesitated a moment and then, quickly, she said:

"I suppose I'd better tell you and have done with it—but I don't like to—"

At that moment a servant entered and handed the lawyer a card.

"The lady wants to see you at once, sir."

"To see me," asked the lawyer in surprise: "are you sure she hasn't come for Mr. Jeffries?"

"No, sir; she asked for you."

Annie sprang forward.

"Is it Mrs. Jeffries?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied.

"Let me see her, judge," she exclaimed eagerly. "I'll tell her who it is and she can tell you—she's a woman—and I'd rather let me speak to her, please!"

Addressing the servant, the lawyer said:

"Ask Mrs. Jeffries to come up."

Turning to his client, he went on:

"I see no objection to your speaking to Mrs. Jeffries. After all, she is your

husband's stepmother. But I am free to confess that I don't understand you. I am more than disappointed in your failure to keep your word. You promised definitely that you would bring the witness here to-night. On the strength of that promise I made statements to Capt. Clinton which I have not been able to substantiate. The whole story looks like an invention on your part."

She held out her hands entreatingly.

"It's not an invention! Really, judge! Just a little while longer! You've been so kind, so patient!"

There was a trace of anger in the lawyer's voice as he went on:

"I believed you implicitly. You were so positive this woman would come forward."

"She will—she will. Give me only a few minutes more!" she cried.

The lawyer looked at her as if puzzled.

"A few minutes?" he said. Again he looked at her and then shook his head resignedly. "Well, it's certainly infectious!" he exclaimed. "I believe you again."

The door opened and Alicia appeared. The lawyer advanced politely to greet her.

"Good evening, Mrs. Jeffries."

Alicia shook hands with him, at the same time looking inquiringly at Annie, who, by a quick gesture, told her that the judge knew nothing of her secret. The lawyer went on:

"Mrs. Jeffries, Jr., wishes to speak to you. I said I thought there'd be no objection; you don't mind. May she?"

"Yes," murmured Alicia.

"Your husband was here," said the judge.

"My husband!" she cried, startled. Again she glanced inquiringly at Annie and tried to force a smile.

"Yes," said the lawyer; "he'll be glad to know you're here. I'll tell him." Turning to Annie, he said:

"When you're ready, please send and—"

"Very well, judge."

The lawyer went out and Alicia turned round breathlessly.

"My husband was here?" she exclaimed.

"Yes."

"You've told Mr. Brewster nothing?" Annie shook her head.

"I couldn't!" she said. "I tried to, but I couldn't. It seems so hard, doesn't it?" Alicia laughed bitterly and Annie went on: "I was afraid you weren't coming!"

"The train was late!" exclaimed Alicia evasively. "I went up to Stamford to say good-by to my mother."

"To say good-by?" echoed her companion in surprise.

"Yes," said the other tearfully. "I have said good-by to her—I have said good-by to everybody—to everything—to myself—I must give them all up—I must give myself up."

"Oh, it isn't as bad as that, surely?" Alicia shook her head sadly.

"Yes," she said; "I've reckoned it all up. It's a total loss. Nothing will be saved—husband, home, position, good name—all will go. You'll see. I shall be torn into little bits of shreds. They won't leave anything unsaid. But it's not that I care for so much. It's the injustice of it all. The injustice of the power of evil. This man Underwood never did a good action in all his life. And now even after he is dead he has the power to go on destroying—destroying—destroying!"

"That's true," said Annie; "he was no good."

The banker's wife drew from her bosom the letter Underwood wrote her before he killed himself.

"When he sent me this letter," she went on, "I tried to think myself into his condition of mind, so that I could decide whether he intended to keep his word and kill himself or not. I tried to reason out just how he felt and how he thought. Now I know it's hopeless, dull, sodden desperation. I haven't even the ambition to defend myself from Mr. Jeffries."

Annie shrugged her shoulders.

"I wouldn't lose any sleep on his account," she said with a laugh. More seriously she added: "Surely he won't believe—"

"He may not believe anything himself," said Alicia. "It's what other people are thinking that will make him suffer. If the circumstances were only a little less disgraceful—a suicide's last letter to the woman he loved. They'll say I drove him to it. They won't think of his miserable, dishonest career. They'll only think of my share in his death—"

Annie shook her head sympathetically.

"Yes," she said; "it's tough! The worst of it is they are going to arrest you."

Alicia turned ashen pale.

"Arrest me!" she cried.

"That's what Capt. Clinton says," replied the other gravely. "He was here—he is here now—with two men waiting for you. Apologetically she went on: "It wasn't my fault, Mrs. Jeffries—I didn't mean to. What could I do? When I told Judge Brewster, he sent for Capt. Clinton. The police are afraid you'll run away or something—"

"And my husband!" gasped Alicia. "He doesn't know, does he?"

"No, I didn't tell them. I said you'd tell them yourself, but they won't trust you when they know who you are. Let's tell the judge—he may think of a plan. Suppose you go away until—"

Puzzled herself to find a way out of the dilemma, Annie paced the floor nervously. "Oh, this is awful!" she exclaimed. "What are we to do?"

She looked toward Alicia, as if expecting some suggestion from her, but her companion was too much overwhelmed to take any initiative.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

A Snake Story.

Carl Hagenbeck describes an adventure with caged pythons: "My son Heinrich had no sooner opened the door of the cage than the four reptiles, as though by prearranged plan, flew at him with wide open jaws. One of them very nearly succeeded in coiling itself round him, but he defended himself vigorously, and I and a keeper ran to his aid, but it was some minutes before we succeeded in freeing him."

"Then the largest of the four fixed himself firmly with his tail on a rafter at the top of the cage and made savage bites at us. When we had thrown a sack over his head we had to secure further assistance to unloosen his tail. No sooner had we with great effort got it loose than the monster twisted itself around Heinrich's right leg and began to twine itself higher up his body."

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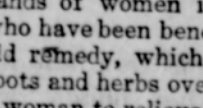
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