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"My God! Why Are They Hounding Me Like This?"

The THIRD DEGREE

A NARRATIVE OF METROPOLITAN LIFE

By CHARLES KLEIN AND ARTHUR HORNBLow

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RAY WALTERS

SYNOPSIS.

Howard Jeffries, banker's son, under the evil influence of Robert Underwood, a 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 tries to get work and fails. A former college chum makes a business proposition to Howard which requires \$2,000 cash, and Howard is broke. Robert Underwood, who had been repulsed by Howard's wife, Annie, in his college days, and had once been engaged to Alicia, Howard's stepmother, has apartments at the Astoria, and is apparently in prosperous circumstances. Howard recalls a \$250 loan to Underwood, that remains unpaid, and decides to ask him for the \$2,000 he needs. Underwood, taking advantage of his intimacy with Mrs. Jeffries, Sr., becomes a sort of social highwayman. Discovering his true character she denies him the house. Alicia receives a note from Underwood, threatening suicide. She decides to go and see him. He is in desperate financial straits.

CHAPTER V.—Continued.

Underwood laughed nervously. Affecting to misinterpret the other's meaning, he said:

"Yes, you're right. The art and antique business is a delicate business. God knows it's a precarious one!" Reaching for the decanter, he added: "Have a drink."

But Mr. Bennington refused to unbend. The proffer of refreshment did not tempt him to swerve from the object of his mission. While Underwood was talking, trying to gain time, his eyes were taking in the contents of the apartment.

"Come, take a drink," urged Underwood again.

"No, thanks," replied Mr. Bennington curtly.

Suddenly he turned square around. "Let's get down to business, Mr. Underwood," he exclaimed. "My firm insists on the immediate return of their property." Pointing around the room, he added: "Everything, do you understand?"

Underwood was standing in the shadow of the lamp so his visitor did not notice that he had grown suddenly very white, and that his mouth twitched painfully.

"Why, what's the trouble?" he stammered. "Haven't I got prices for your people that they would never have gotten?"

"Yes—we know all that," replied Mr. Bennington impatiently. "To be frank, Mr. Underwood, we've received information that you've sold many of the valuable articles entrusted to you for which you've made no accounting at all."

"That's not true," exclaimed Underwood hotly. "I have accounted for almost everything. The rest of the things are here. Of course, there may be a few things—"

Taking a box of cigars from the desk, he offered it to his visitor.

"No, thanks," replied Bennington coldly, pushing back the proffered box.

Underwood was fast losing his self-control. Throwing away his cigar with an angry exclamation, he began to walk up and down.

"I can account for everything if you give me time. You must give me time. I'm hard pressed by my creditors. My expenses are enormous and collections exceedingly difficult. I have a large amount of money outstanding. After our pleasant business relations it seems absurd and most unfair that your firm should take this stand with

me." He halted suddenly and faced Bennington. "Of course, I'm much obliged to you, personally, for this friendly tip."

Bennington shrugged his shoulders. "The warning may give you time either to raise the money or to get the things back."

Underwood's dark eyes flashed with suppressed wrath, as he retorted:

"Of course, I can get them all back in time. Damn it, you fellows don't know what it costs to run this kind of business successfully! One has to spend a small fortune to keep up appearances. These society people won't buy if they think you really need the money. I've had to give expensive dinners and spend money like water even to get them to come here and look at the things. You must give me time to make a settlement. I need at least a month."

Bennington shook his head. There was a hard, uncompromising look in his face as he replied caustically:

"They're coming for the things tomorrow. I thought it fair to let you know. I can do no more."

Underwood stopped short.

"To-morrow," he echoed faintly.

"Yes," said Bennington grimly. "You might as well understand the situation thoroughly. The game's up. The firm has been watching you for some time. When you tried to sell these things to old Jeffries for one-quarter their real value he instantly recognized where they came from. He telephoned straight to our place. You've been shadowed by detectives ever since. There's a man outside watching this place now."

"My God!" exclaimed Underwood. "Why are they hounding me like this?"

Approaching Bennington quickly, he grasped his hand.

"Bennington," he said earnestly, "you and I've always been on the square. Can't you tell them it's all right? Can't you get them to give me time?"

Before the manager could reply the telephone bell rang sharply. Underwood started. An expression of fear came over his face. Perhaps the firm had already sworn out a warrant for his arrest. He picked up the receiver to answer the call.

"What name is that?" he demanded over the telephone. The name was repeated and with a gesture of relief he exclaimed:

"Howard Jeffries!—what on earth does he want? I can't see him. Tell him I'm—"

Bennington took his hat and turned to go.

"Well, I must be off."

"Don't go," exclaimed Underwood, as he hung up the receiver mechanically. "It's only that infernal ass Howard Jeffries!"

"I must," said the manager. As he went toward the door he made a close scrutiny of the walls as if searching for something that was not there. Stopping short, he said:

"I don't see the Velasquez."

"No—no," stammered Underwood nervously. "It's out—out on probation. Oh, it's all right. I can account for everything."

Mr. Bennington continued his inspection.

"I don't see the Gobelin tapestry," he said laconically.

"Oh, that's all right, too, if they'll only give me time," he cried desperately. "Good God, you don't know what it means to me, Bennington! The position I've made for myself will be swept away and—"

Mr. Bennington remained distant and unsympathetic and Underwood threw himself into a chair with a gesture of disgust.

"Sometimes I don't think I care what happens," he exclaimed. "Things haven't been going my way lately. I don't care a hang whether school keeps or not. If they drive me to the wall I'll do something desperate. I'll—"

A ring at the front door bell interrupted him.

"Who can that be?" he exclaimed, started. He looked closely at his companion, as if trying to read in his face if he were deceiving him.

"Probably your friend of the telephone," suggested Bennington.

Underwood opened the door and Howard entered jauntily.

"Hello, fellers, how goes it?" was his jocular greeting.

He was plainly under the influence of liquor. When he left home that evening he had sworn to Annie that he would not touch a drop, but by the time he reached the Astoria his courage failed him. He rather feared Underwood, and he felt the need of a stimulant to brace him up for the "strike" he was about to make. The back door of a saloon was conveniently open and while he was refreshing himself two other men he knew dropped in. Before he knew it, half a dozen drinks had been absorbed, and he had spent the whole of \$5 which his wife had entrusted to him out of her carefully hoarded savings. When he sobered up he would realize that he had acted like a coward and a cur, but just now he was feeling rather jolly. Addressing Underwood with impudent familiarity, he went on:

"The d—d boy didn't seem to know if you were in or not, so I came up anyhow." Glancing at Bennington, he added: "Sorry, if I'm butting in."

Underwood was not in the humor to be very gracious. Long ago young Howard Jeffries had outgrown his usefulness as far as he was concerned. He was at a loss to guess why he had come to see him uninvited, on this particular Sunday night, too. It was with studied coldness, therefore, that he said:

"Sit down—I'm glad to see you."

"You don't look it," grinned Howard, as he advanced further into the room with shambling, uncertain steps.

Conealing his ill humor and promising himself to get rid of his unwelcome visitor at the first opportunity, Underwood introduced the two men.

"Mr. Bennington—Mr. Howard Jeffries, Jr."

Mr. Bennington had heard of the older Jeffries' trouble with his scapegrace son, and he eyed, with some interest, this young man who had made such a fiasco of his career.

"Oh, I know Bennington," exclaimed Howard jovially. "I bought an elephant's tusk at his place in the days when I was somebody." With mock sadness he added, "I'm nobody now—couldn't even buy a collar button."

"Won't you sit down and stay awhile?" said Underwood sarcastically.

"If you don't mind, I'll have a drink first," replied Howard, making his way to the desk and taking up the whisky decanter.

Underwood did not conceal his annoyance, but his angry glances were entirely lost on his new visitor, who was rapidly getting into a maudlin condition. Addressing Bennington with familiarity, Howard went on:

"Say, do you remember that wonderful set of ivory chessmen my old man bought?"

Bennington smiled and nodded.

"Yes, sir; I do, indeed. Ah, your father is a fine art critic!"

Howard burst into boisterous laughter.

"Art critic!" he exclaimed. "I should say he was. He's a born critic. He can criticize any old thing—every old thing. I don't care what it is, he can criticize it. When in doubt—criticise," is nailed on father's escutcheon." Bowing with mock courtesy to each he raised the glass to his lips and said: "Here's how!"

Bennington laughed good humoredly, and turned to go.

"Well, good night, Mr. Jeffries. Good night, Mr. Underwood."

Underwood followed the manager to the door.

"Good night!" he said gloomily.

CHAPTER VI.

The door slammed, and Underwood returned to the sitting room. Taking no notice of Howard, he walked over to the desk, slowly selected a cigar and lighted it. Howard looked up at him foolishly, not knowing what to say. His frequent libations had so befuddled him that he had almost forgotten the object of his visit.

"Excuse my butting in, old chap," he stammered, "but—"

Underwood made no answer. Howard stared at him in comic surprise. He was not so drunk as not to be able to notice that something was wrong.

"Say, old fellow," he gurgled; "you're a regular Jim Dumps. Why so choptfallen, so—? My! what a long face! Is that the way you greet a classmate, a fellow frat? Wait till you hear my hard-luck story. That'll cheer you up. Who was it said: 'There's nothing cheers us up so much as other people's money?'" Reaching for the whisky bottle, he went on:

"First I'll pour out another drink. You see, I need courage, old man. I've got a favor to ask. I want some money. I not only want it—I need it."

Underwood laughed, a hollow, mocking laugh of derision. His old class-

mate had certainly chosen a good time to come and ask him for money. Howard mistook the cynical gaiety for good humor.

"I said I'd cheer you up," he went on. "I don't want to remind you of that little matter of two hundred and fifty bucks which you borrowed from me two years ago. I suppose you've forgotten it, but—"

A look of annoyance came over Underwood's face.

"Well, what of it?" he snapped.

Howard took another drink before he continued.

"I wouldn't remind you of the loan, old chap; but I'm up against it. When the family kicked me out for marrying the finest girl that ever lived, my father cut me off with a piking allowance which I told him to put in the church plate. I told him I preferred independence. Well," he went on with serio-comic gravity, "I got my independence, but I'm—I'm dead broke. You might as well understand the situation plainly. I can't find any business that I'm fitted for, and Annie threatens to go back to work. Now, you know I can't stand anything like that. I'm too much of a man to be supported by any woman."

He looked toward Underwood in a stupid kind of way, as if looking for some sign of approval, but he was disappointed. Underwood's face was a study of supreme indifference. He did not even appear to be listening. Something disconcerted, Howard again raised the glass to his lips, and thus refreshed, went on:

"Then I thought of you, old chap. You've made a rousing success of it—got a big name as art collector—made lots of money and all that—"

Underwood impatiently interrupted him.

"It's impossible, Jeffries. Things are a little hard with me, too, just now. You'll have to wait for that \$250."

Howard grinned.

"Taint the \$250, old man, I didn't want that. I want a couple of thousand."

Underwood could not help laughing. "A couple of thousand? Why not make it a million?"

Howard's demand struck him as being so humorous that he sat down convulsed with laughter.

Looking at him stupidly, Howard helped himself to another drink.

"It seems I'm a hit," he said with a grin.

Underwood by this time had recovered his composure.

"So you've done nothing since you left college?" he said.

"No," answered Howard. "I don't seem to get down to anything. My ideas won't stay in one place. I got a job as time-keeper, but I didn't keep it down a week. I kept the time all right, but it wasn't the right time."

Again raising the glass to his lips, he added: "They're so beastly particular."

"You keep pretty good time with that," laughed Underwood, pointing to the whisky.

Howard grinned in drunken fashion. "It's the one thing I do punctually," he hiccupped. "I can row, swim, play tennis, football, golf and polo as well as anybody, but I'll be damned if I can do anything quite as well as I can do this."

"What do you want \$2,000 for?" demanded Underwood.

"I've got an opportunity to go into business. I want \$2,000 and I want it deuced quick."

Underwood shrugged his shoulders. "Why don't you go home and ask your father?" he demanded.

His visitor seemed offended at the suggestion.

"What!" he exclaimed, with comic surprise, "after being turned out like a dog with a young wife on my hands! Not much—no. I've injured their pride. You know father married a second time, loaded me down with a stepmother. She's all right, but she's so confoundedly aristocratic. You know her. Say, didn't you and she—wasn't there some sort of an engagement once? Seems to me I—"

Underwood rose to his feet and abruptly turned his back.

"I'd rather you wouldn't get personal," he said curtly. Sitting down at a desk, he began to rummage with some papers and, turning impatiently to Howard, he said:

"Say, old man, I'm very busy now. You'll have to excuse me."

If Howard had been sober, he would have understood that this was a pretty strong hint for him to be gone, but in his besotted condition, he did not propose to be disposed of so easily. Turning to Underwood, he burst out with an air of offended dignity:

"Underwood, you wouldn't go back on me now. I'm an outcast, a pariah, a derelict on the ocean of life, as one of my highly respectable uncles wrote me. His grandfather was an Iron Puddler. With a drunken laugh he went on: 'Doesn't it make you sick? I'm no good because I married the girl. If I had ruined her life I'd still be a decent member of society.'"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Sardines Suggested It.

Richard Croker, at a luncheon at Palm Beach, was reminded, by a course of grilled sardines, of a story.

"You know, of course," he said, "the Horse Guards at Whitehall in London. They are the finest English regiment. Every man is over six feet, from the colonel down, and on guard before Whitehall, with their jack boots, their snowy buckskin breeches, their enormous shakoos and their brass breastplates, they make, on their fine horses, an imposing sight."

"Once, as I motored past Whitehall, I saw a little street urchin leaping up and down before one of the stately guards in his bright, bulging breastplate, and shouting:

"'Now, then, old tin jacket, I'm after you with a sardine opener!'"