



What Was the Good of Regrets?

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, 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 expelled from college days, and had once been engaged to Alicia, Howard's stepmother, has recently become a millionaire. Underwood 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 denounces him. Alicia receives a note from Underwood, threatening suicide. She decides to go and see him. He is in desperate financial straits. Art dealers for whom he has been acting as commissioner, demand an accounting. He cannot make good. Howard Jeffries calls in an intoxicated condition. He asks Underwood for \$2,000 and is told by the latter that he is in debt up to his eyes. 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 him that he will not take his life, pointing to the disgrace that would attach to herself. Underwood refuses to promise unless she will renew her patronage.

CHAPTER VII.—Continued.

"I don't believe you intend to carry out your threat. I should have known from the first that your object was to frighten me. The pistol display was highly theatrical, but it was only a bluff. You've no more idea of taking your life than I have of taking mine. I was foolish to come here. I might have spared myself the humiliation of this clandestine interview. Good-night!"

She went toward the door. Underwood made no attempt to follow her. In a hard, strange voice, which he scarcely recognized as his own, he merely said:

"Is that all you have to say?"

"Yes," replied Alicia, as she turned at the door. "Let it be thoroughly understood that your presence at my house is not desired. If you force yourself upon me in any way, you must take the consequences."

Underwood bowed, and was silent. She did not see the deadly pallor of his face. Opening the door of the apartment which led to the hall, she again turned.

"Tell me, before I go—you didn't mean what you said in your letter, did you?"

"I'll tell you nothing," replied Underwood doggedly.

She tossed her head scornfully.

"I don't believe that a man who is so cowardly enough to write a letter like his has the courage to carry out his threat." Stuffing the letter back into her bag, she added: "I should have known it in the waste-paper basket, set on second thoughts, I think I'll see it. Good-night."

"Good-night," echoed Underwood mechanically.

He watched her go down the long hallway and disappear in the elevator. Then, shutting the door, he came slowly back into the room and sat down at his desk. For ten minutes he sat there motionless, his head bent forward, every limb relaxed. There was deep silence, broken only by Howard's regular breathing and the loud ticking of the clock.

"It's all up," he muttered to himself.

He thought he had heard a woman's voice—a voice he knew. Perhaps that was only a dream. He must have been asleep some time, because the lights were out and, seemingly, everybody had gone to bed. He wondered what the noise which started him could have been. Suddenly he heard a groan. He listened intently, but all was still. The silence was uncanny.

Now thoroughly frightened, Howard cautiously groped his way about, trying to find the electric button. He had no idea what time it was. It must be very late. What an ass he was to drink so much! He wondered what Annie would say when he didn't return. He was a hound to let her sit up and worry like that. Well, this would be a lesson to him—it was the last time he'd ever touch a drop. Of course, he had promised her the same thing a hundred times before, but this time he meant it. His drinking was always getting him into some fool scrape or other.

He was gradually working his way along the room, when suddenly he stumbled over something on the floor. It was a man lying prostrate. Stooping, he recognized the figure.

"Why—it's Underwood!" he exclaimed.

At first he believed his classmate was asleep, yet considered it strange that he should have selected so uncomfortable a place. Then it occurred to him that he might be ill. Shaking him by the shoulder, he cried:

"Hey, Underwood, what's the matter?"

No response came from the prostrate figure. Howard stooped lower, to see better, and accidentally touching Underwood's face, found it clammy and wet. He held his hand up in the moonlight and saw that it was covered with blood. Horror-stricken, he cried:

"My God! He's bleeding—he's hurt!"

What had happened? An accident—or worse? Quickly he felt the man's pulse. It had ceased to beat. Underwood was dead.

For a moment Howard was too much overcome by his discovery to know what to think or do. What dreadful tragedy could have happened? Carefully groping along the mantelpiece, he at last found the electric button and turned on the light. There, stretched out on the floor, lay Underwood, with a bullet hole in his left temple, from which blood had flowed freely down on his full-dress shirt. It was a ghastly sight. The man's white, set face, covered with a crimson stream, made a repulsive spectacle. On the floor near the body was a highly polished revolver, still smoking.

Howard's first supposition was that burglars had entered the place and that Underwood had been killed while defending his property. He remembered now that in his drunken sleep he had heard voices in angry altercation. Yet why hadn't he called for assistance? Perhaps he had and he hadn't heard him.

He looked at the clock, and was surprised to find it was not yet midnight. He believed it was at least five o'clock in the morning. It was evident that Underwood had never gone to bed. The shooting had occurred either while the angry dispute was going on or after the unknown visitor had departed. The barrel of the revolver was still warm, showing that it could only have been discharged a few moments before. Suddenly it flashed upon him that Underwood might have committed suicide.

But it was useless to stand there theorizing. Something must be done. He must alarm the hotel people or call the police. He felt himself turn hot and cold by turn as he realized the serious predicament in which he himself was placed. If he aroused the hotel people they would find him here alone with a dead man. Suspicion would at once be directed at him, and it might be very difficult for him to establish his innocence. Who would believe that he could have fallen asleep in a bed while a man killed himself in the same room? It sounded preposterous. The wisest course for him would be to get away before anybody came.

Quickly he picked up his hat and made for the door. Just as he was about to lay hand on the handle there was the click of a latchkey. Thus headed off, and not knowing what to do, he halted in painful suspense. The door opened and a man entered. He looked as surprised to see Howard as the latter was to see him. He was clean-shaven and neatly dressed, yet did not look the gentleman. His appearance was rather that of a servant. All these details flashed before Howard's mind before he blurted out:

"Who the devil are you?"

The man looked astonished at the question and eyed his interlocutor closely, as if in doubt as to his identity. In a cockney accent he said loftily:

"I am Ferris, Mr. Underwood's man, sir." Suspiciously, he added: "Are you a friend of Mr. Underwood's, sir?"

He might well ask the question, for Howard's disheveled appearance and ghastly face, still distorted by terror, was anything but reassuring. Taken by surprise, Howard did not know what to say, and like most people questioned at a disadvantage, he answered foolishly:

"Matter? No. What makes you think anything is the matter?"

Brushing past the man, he added: "It's late. I'm going."

"Stop a minute!" cried the man servant. "There was something in Howard's manner that he did not like. Passing quickly into the sitting room, he called out: "Stop a minute!" But Howard did not stop. Terror gave him wings and, without waiting for the elevator, he was already half way

down the first staircase when he—

"Murder! Stop that! Stop that man! Stop that man!"

There was a rush of feet and hum of voices, which made Howard run all the faster. He leaped down four steps at a time in his anxiety to get away. But it was no easy matter descending so many flights of stairs. It took him several minutes to reach the main floor.

By this time the whole hotel was aroused. Telephone calls had quickly warned the attendants, who had promptly sent for the police. By the time Howard reached the main entrance he was intercepted by a mob too numerous to resist.

Things certainly looked black for him. As he sat, white and trembling, under guard in a corner of the entrance hall, waiting for the arrival of the police, the valet breathlessly gave the sensational particulars to the rapidly growing crowd of curious on-lookers. He had taken his usual Sunday out and on returning home at midnight, as was his custom, he had let himself in with his latchkey. To his astonishment he had found this man, the prisoner, about to leave the premises. His manner and remarks were so peculiar that they at once aroused his suspicion. He hurried into the apartment and found his master lying dead on the floor in a pool of blood. In his hurry the assassin had dropped his revolver, which was lying near the corpse. As far as he could see, nothing had been taken from the apartment. Evidently the man was disturbed at his work and, when suddenly surprised, had made the bluff that he was calling on Mr. Underwood. They had got the right man, that was certain. He was caught red-handed, and in proof of what he said, the valet pointed to Howard's right hand, which was still covered with blood.

"How terrible!" exclaimed a woman bystander, averting her face. "So young, too!"

"It's all a mistake, I tell you. It's all a mistake," cried Howard, almost panic-stricken. "I'm a friend of Mr. Underwood's."

"Nice friend!" sneered an onlooker. "Tell that to the police," laughed another.

"Or to the marines!" cried a third.

"It's the chair for his'n!" opined a fourth.

By this time the main entrance hall was crowded with people, tenants and passersby attracted by the unwonted commotion. A scandal in high life is always a cause for the sensation seeker. Everybody excitedly inquired of his neighbor:

"What is it? What's the matter?"

Presently the rattle of wheels was heard and a heavy vehicle driven furiously, drew up at the sidewalk with a jerk. It was the police patrol wagon, and in it were the captain of the precinct and a half dozen policemen and detectives. The crowd pushed forward to get a better view of the burly representatives of the law as, full of authority, they elbowed their way unceremoniously through the throng. Pointing to the leader, a big man in plain clothes, with a square, determined jaw and a bulldog face, they whispered one to another:

"That's Capt. Clinton, chief of the precinct. He's a terror. It'll go hard with any prisoner he gets in his clutches!"

Followed by his uniformed myrmidons, the police official pushed his way to the corner where sat Howard, dazed and trembling, and still guarded by the valet and elevator boys.

"What's the matter here?" demanded the captain gruffly, and looking from Ferris to the white-faced Howard. The valet eagerly told his story:

"I came home at midnight, sir, and found my master, Mr. Robert Underwood, lying dead in the apartment, shot through the head." Pointing to Howard, he added: "This man was in the apartment trying to get away. You see his hand is still covered with blood."

Capt. Clinton chuckled, and expanding his mighty chest to its fullest, licked his chops with satisfaction. This was the opportunity he had been looking for—a sensational murder in a big apartment hotel, right in the very heart of his precinct! Nothing could be more to his liking. It was a rich man's murder, the best kind to attract attention to himself. The sensational newspapers would be full of the case. They would print columns of stuff every day, together with his portrait. That was just the kind of publicity he needed now that he was wire-pulling for an inspectorship. They had caught the man "with the goods"—that was very clear. He promised himself to attend to the rest. Conviction was what he was after. He'd see that no tricky lawyer got the best of him. Concealing, as well as he could, his satisfaction, he drew himself up and, with blustering show of authority, immediately took command of the situation. Turning to a police sergeant at his side, he said:

"Maloney, this fellow may have had an accomplice. Take four officers and watch every exit from the hotel. Arrest anybody attempting to leave the building. Put two officers to watch the fire escapes. Send one man on the roof. Go!"

"Yes, sir," replied the sergeant, as he turned away to execute the order.

Capt. Clinton gave two strides forward, and catching Howard by the collar, jerked him to his feet.

"Now, young feller, you come with me! We'll go upstairs and have a look at the dead man."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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