



"I believed Howard guilty. Why shouldn't I?"

The THIRD DEGREE

A NARRATIVE OF METROPOLITAN LIFE

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY RAY WALTERS

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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 denounces him, 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 denounces him, 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 denounces him, and in desperate straits.

CHAPTER XV.—Continued.

"You're not afraid to help him," she said. "I know that—you just said so."

Judge Brewster raised his hat and brought it down on the desk with a bang which raised in a cloud the accumulated dust of weeks. His face set and determined, he said:

"You're quite right! I'm going to take your case!"

Annie felt herself giving way. It was more than she could stand. For victory to be hers when only a moment before defeat seemed certain was too much for her nerves. All she could gasp was:

"Oh, judge!"

The lawyer adjusted his eyeglasses, blew his nose with suspicious energy, and took up a pen.

"Now don't pretend to be surprised—you knew I would. And please don't thank me. I hate to be thanked for doing what I want to do. If I didn't want to do it, I wouldn't."

Through her tears she murmured: "I'd like to say 'thank you.'"

"Well, please don't," he snapped. But she persisted. Tenderly, she said:

"May I say you're the dearest, kindest?"

Judge Brewster shook his head. "No—no—nothing of the kind."

"Most gracious—noble-hearted—courageous," she went on.

The judge struck the table another formidable blow.

"Mrs. Jeffries!" he exclaimed.

She turned away her head to hide her feelings.

"Oh, how I'd like to have a good cry," she murmured. "If Howard only knew!"

Judge Brewster touched an electric button, and his head clerk entered.

"Mr. Jones," said the lawyer quickly, "get a stenographic report of the case of the People against Howard Jeffries, Jr.; get the coroner's inquest, the grand jury indictment, and get a copy of the Jeffries confession—get everything—right away!"

The clerk looked inquiringly, first at Annie and then at his employer. Then respectfully he asked:

"Do we, sir?"

"We do," said the lawyer laconically.

CHAPTER XVI.

"Now, my dear young woman," said Judge Brewster, when the astonished head clerk had withdrawn, "if we are going to get your husband free we must get to work, and you must help me."

His visitor looked up eagerly.

"I'll do anything in my power," she said quickly. "What can I do?"

"Well—first of all," said the lawyer with some hesitation, "I want you to see a certain lady and to be exceedingly nice to her."

"Lady?" echoed Annie, surprised.

"Mrs. Howard Jeffries, Sr.," he replied slowly.

"Howard's stepmother!" she ejaculated.

A clerk entered and handed his employer a card. The lawyer nodded and said in an undertone:

"Show her in." Turning round again, he went on: "Yes—Howard's stepmother. She's out there now. She wants to see you. She wishes to be of service to you. Now, you must conciliate her. She may be of great use to us."

Annie's face expressed considerable doubt.

"Perhaps so," she said, "but the door was slammed in my face when I called to see her."

"That's nothing," answered the judge. "She probably knows nothing about it. In any case, please remember that she is my client—"

She bowed her head and murmured obediently:

"I'll remember."

The door of the office opened and Alicia entered. She stopped short on seeing who was there, and an awkward pause followed. Judge Brewster introduced them.

"Mrs. Jeffries, may I present Mrs. Howard, Jr.?"

Alicia bowed stiffly and somewhat haughtily. Annie remained self-possessed and on the defensive. Addressing the banker's wife, the lawyer said: "I told Mrs. Howard that you wished to speak to her." After a pause he added: "I think, perhaps, I'll leave you together. Excuse me."

He left the office and there was another embarrassing silence. Annie waited for Mrs. Jeffries to begin. Her attitude suggested that she expected something unpleasant and was fully prepared for it. At last Alicia broke the silence:

"You may think it strange that I have asked for this interview," she began, "but you know, Annie—"

Interrupting herself, she asked: "You don't mind my calling you Annie, do you?"

The young woman smiled.

"I don't see why I should. It's my name and we're relatives—by marriage." There was an ironical ring in her voice as she went on: "Relatives! It seems funny, doesn't it, but we don't pick and choose our relatives. We must take them as they come."

Alicia made an effort to appear conciliatory.

"As we are—what we are—let's try to make the best of it."

"Make the best of it?" echoed Annie. "God knows I'm willing, but I've had mighty little encouragement, Mrs. Jeffries. When I called to see you the other day, to beg you to use your influence with Mr. Jeffries, 'not at home' was handed to me by the liveried footman and the door was slammed in my face. Ten minutes later you walked out to your carriage and were driven away."

"I knew nothing of this—believe me," murmured Alicia apologetically.

"It's what I got just the same," said the other dryly. Quickly she went on: "But I'm not complaining, understand—I'm not complaining. Only I did think that at such a time one woman might have held out a helping hand to another."

Alicia held up her hand protestingly.

"How could I?" she exclaimed. "Now, be reasonable. You are held responsible for Howard's present position."

"Yes—by the police," retorted Annie grimly, "and by a couple of yellow journals. I didn't think you'd believe all the gossip and scandal that's been printed about me. I didn't believe what was said about you."

Alicia started and changed color.

"What do you mean?" she exclaimed haughtily. "What was said about me?"

"Well, it has been said that you married old Jeffries for his money and his social position."

"Old Jeffries!" protested Alicia indignantly. "Have you no respect for your husband's father?"

"Not a particle," answered the other coolly, "and I never will have till he acts like a father. I only had one interview with him and it finished him with me for all time. He ain't a father—he's a fish."

"A fish!" exclaimed Alicia, scandalized at such lese majeste.

Annie went on recklessly:

"Yes—a cold-blooded—"

"But surely," interrupted Alicia, "you respect his position—his—"

"No, m'm; I respect a man because he behaves like a man, not because he lives in a marble palace on Riverside drive."

Alicia looked pained. This girl was certainly impossible.

"But surely," she said, "you realized that when you married Howard you—you made a mistake—to say the least?"

"Yes, that part of it has been made pretty plain. It was a mistake—his mistake—my mistake. But now it's done and it can't be undone. I don't see why you can't take it as it is and—"

She stopped short and Alicia completed the sentence for her:

"—and welcome you into our family—"

"Welcome me? No, ma'am. I'm not welcome and nothing you or your set could say would ever make me believe that I was welcome. All I ask is that Howard's father do his duty by his son."

"I do not think—pardon my saying so," interrupted Alicia stiffly, "that you are quite in a position to judge of what constitutes Mr. Jeffries' duty to his son."

"Perhaps not. I only know what I would do—what my father would have done—what any one would do if they had a spark of humanity in them. But they do say that after three generations of society life red blood turns into blue."

Alicia turned to look out of the window. Her face still averted she said:

"What is there to do? Howard has acknowledged his guilt. What sacrifices we may make will be thrown away."

Annie eyed her companion with contempt. Her voice quivering with indignation, she burst out:

"What is there to do! Try and save him, of course. Must we sit and do nothing because things look black? Ah! I wasn't brought up that way. No, ma'am, I'm going to make a fight!"

"It's useless," murmured Alicia, shaking her head.

"Judge Brewster doesn't think so," replied the other calmly.

The banker's wife gave a start of surprise. Quickly she demanded:

"You mean that Judge Brewster has encouraged you to—to—"

"He's done more than encourage me—God bless him!—he's going to take up the case."

Alicia was so thunderstruck that for a moment she could find no answer.

"What!" she exclaimed, "without consulting Mr. Jeffries?"

She put her handkerchief to her face to conceal her agitation. Could it be possible that the judge was going to act, after all, in defiance of her husband's wishes? If that were true, what would become of her? Concealment would be no longer possible. Discovery of her clandestine visit to Underwood's apartment that fatal night must come. Howard might still be the murderer, Underwood might not have committed suicide, but her visit to his rooms at midnight would become known. Judge Brewster was not the man to be deterred by difficulties once he took up a case. He would see the importance of finding the mysterious woman who went secretly to Underwood's rooms that night of the tragedy.

"He consulted only his own feelings," went on Annie. "He believes in

Howard, and he's going to defend him."

Alicia looked at her anxiously as she tried to read what might be in her mind. Indifferently she went on:

"The papers say there was a quarrel about you, that you and Mr. Underwood were too friendly. They implied that Howard was jealous. Is this true?"

"It's all talk," cried Annie indignantly—"nothing but scandal—lies! There's not a word of truth in it. Howard never had a jealous thought of me—and as for me—why—I've always worshiped the ground he walked on. Didn't he sacrifice everything for my sake? Didn't he quarrel with his father for me? Didn't he marry me? Didn't he try to educate and make a lady of me? My God!—do you suppose I'd give a man like that cause for jealousy? What do the newspapers care? They print cruel statements that cut into a woman's heart, without giving it a thought, without knowing or caring whether it's true or not, as long as it interests and amuses their readers. You—you don't really believe I'm the cause of his misfortunes, do you?"

Alicia shook her head as she answered kindly:

"No, I don't. Believe me, I don't. You were right when you said that at such a time as this one woman should stand by another. I'm going to stand by you. Let me be your friend, let me help you." Extending her hand, she said: "Will you?"

Annie grasped the proffered hand. It was the first that had been held out to her in her present trouble. A lump rose in her throat. Much affected, she said:

"It's the first kind word that—" She stopped and looked closely for a moment at Alicia. Then she went on:

"It's the queerest thing, Mrs. Jeffries, but it keeps coming into my mind. Howard told me that while he was at Underwood's that dreadful night he thought he heard your voice. It must have been a dream, of course, yet he thought he was sure of it. Your voice—that's queer, isn't it? Why—what's the matter?"

Alicia had grown deathly pale and staggered against a chair. Annie ran to her aid, thinking she was ill.

"It's nothing—nothing!" stammered Alicia, recovering herself.

Fearing she had said something to hurt her feelings, Annie said sympathetically:

"I haven't said anything—anything out of the way—have I? If I have I'm sorry—awfully sorry. I'm afraid—I've been very rude and you've been so kind!"

"No, no!" interrupted Alicia quickly. "You've said nothing—done nothing—you've had a great deal to bear—a great deal to bear. I understand that perfectly." Taking her companion's hand in hers, she went on:

"Tell me, what do they say about the woman who went to see Robert Underwood the night of the tragedy?"

"The police can't find her—we don't know who she is." Confidently she went on: "But Judge Brewster will find her. We have a dozen detectives searching for her. Capt. Clinton accused me of being the woman—you know he doesn't like me."

The banker's wife was far too busy thinking of the number of detectives employed to find the missing witness to pay attention to the concluding sentence. Anxiously she demanded:

"Supposing the woman is found, what can she prove? What difference will it make?"

"All the difference in the world," replied Annie. "She is a most important witness." Firmly she went on: "She must be found. If she didn't shoot Robert Underwood, she knows who did."

"But how can she know?" argued Alicia. "Howard confessed that he did it himself. If he had not confessed it would be different."

"He did not confess," replied the other calmly. "Mrs. Jeffries—he never confessed. If he did, he didn't know what he was saying."

Alicia was rapidly losing her self-possession.

"Did he tell you that?" she gasped Annie nodded.

"Yes. Dr. Bernstein says the police forced it out of his tired brain. I made Howard go over every second of his life that night from the time he left me to the moment he was arrested. There wasn't a harsh word between them." She stopped short and looked with alarm at Alicia, who had turned ashen white. "Why, what's the matter? You're pale as death—you—"

Alicia could contain herself no longer. Her nerves were on the point of giving way. She felt that if she could not confide her secret to some one she must go mad. Pacing the floor, she cried:

"What am I to do? What am I to do? I believed Howard guilty. Why shouldn't I? I had no reason to doubt his own confession! Every one believed it—his own father included. Why should I doubt it? But I see it all now! Underwood must have shot himself as he said he would!"

Annie started. What did Mrs. Jeffries mean? Did she realize the tremendous significance of the words she was uttering?

"As he said he would?" she repeated slowly.

"Yes," said Alicia weakly.

Annie bounded forward and grasped her companion's arm. Her face flushed, almost unable to speak from suppressed emotion, she cried:

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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