



The THIRD DEGREE

A NARRATIVE OF METROPOLITAN LIFE

By CHARLES KLEIN AND ARTHUR HORNBLow

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 step-mother, 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 seizes 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 defend Howard. He consents. Alicia is greatly alarmed when she learns from Annie that 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. Annie appears without the witness and refuses to give the name. Alicia arrives. Capt. Clinton declares Annie has tricked them. Alicia hands him Underwood's letter. Annie lets Clinton believe the letter was written to her. She is arrested.

CHAPTER XIX.

The Jeffries case suddenly entered into an entirely new phase, and once more was deemed of sufficient public interest to warrant column after column of spicy comment in the newspapers. The town awoke one morning to learn that the long-sought-for witness, the mysterious woman on whose testimony everything hinged, had not only been found, but proved to be the prisoner's own wife, who had been so active in his defense. This announcement was stupefying enough to overshadow all other news of the day, and satisfied the most jaded palate for sensationalism.

The first question asked on all sides was: Why had not the wife come forward before? The reason, as glibly explained by an evening journal of somewhat yellow proclivities, was logical enough. The telling of her midnight visit to a single man's rooms involved a shameful admission which any woman might well hesitate to make unless forced to it as a last extremity. Confronted, however, with the alternative of either seeing her husband suffer for a crime of which he was innocent or making public acknowledgment of her own frailty, she had chosen the latter course. Naturally, it meant divorce from the banker's son, and undoubtedly this was the solution most wished for by the family. The whole unsavory affair conveyed a good lesson to reckless young men of wealth to avoid entangling themselves in undesirable matrimonial adventures. But it was no less certain, went on this journalistic mentor, that this wife, unfaithful as she had proved herself to be, had really rendered her husband a signal service in her present scrape. The letter she had produced, written to her by Underwood the day before his death, in which he stated his determination to kill himself, was, of course, a complete vindication for the man awaiting trial. His liberation now depended only on how quickly the ponderous machinery of the law could take cognizance of this new and most important evidence.

The new turn of affairs was naturally most distasteful to the police. If there was one thing more than another which angered Capt. Clinton it was to take the trouble to build up a case only to have it suddenly demolished. He scoffed at the "suicide letter," safely committed to Judge Brewster's custody, and openly branded it as a forgery concocted by an immoral woman for the purpose of defeating the ends of justice. He kept Annie a prisoner and defied the counsel for the defense to do their worst. Judge Brewster, who loved the fray, accepted the challenge. He acted promptly. He secured Annie's release on habeas corpus proceedings and, his civil suit against the city having already begun in the courts, he suddenly called Capt. Clinton to the stand and gave him a grilling which more than atoned for any which the police tyrant had previously made his victims suffer. In the limelight of a sensational trial, in which public servants were charged with abusing positions of trust, and showed Capt. Clinton up as a bully, and



Placed the Rolls and Butter on the Table.

a grafter, a bribe-taker, working hand and glove with dishonest politicians, not hesitating even to divide loot with thieves and dive-keepers in his greed for wealth. He proved him to be a consummate liar, a man who would stop at nothing to gain his own end. What jury would take the word of such a man as this? Yet this was the man who still insisted that Howard Jeffries was guilty of the shooting of Robert Underwood!

But public opinion was too intelligent to be hoodwinked for any length of time by a brutal and ignorant policeman. There was a clamor for the prisoner's release. The evidence was such that further delay was inexcusable. The district attorney, thus urged, took an active interest in the case, and after going over the new evidence with Judge Brewster, went before the court and made formal application for the dismissal of the complaint. A few days later Howard Jeffries left the Toms amid the cheers of a crowd assembled outside. At his side walked his wife, now smiling through tears of joy.

It was a glad home-coming to the little flat in Harlem. To Howard, after spending so long a time in the narrow prison quarters, it seemed like paradise, and Annie walked on air, so delighted was she to have him with her again. Yet there were still anxieties to cloud their happiness. The close confinement, with its attendant worry, had seriously undermined Howard's health. He was pale and attenuated, and so weak that he had several fainting spells. Much alarmed, Annie summoned Dr. Bernstein, who administered a tonic. There was nothing to cause anxiety, he said, reassuringly. It was a natural reaction after what her husband had undergone. But it was worry as much as anything else. Howard worried about his father, with whom he was only partially reconciled; he worried about his future, which was as precarious as ever, and most of all he worried about his wife. He was not ignorant of the circumstances which had brought about his release, and while liberty was sweet to him, it had been a terrible shock when he first heard that she was the woman who had visited Underwood's rooms. He refused to believe her sworn evidence. How was it possible? Why should she go to Underwood's rooms knowing he was there? It was preposterous. Still the small voice rang in his ears—perhaps she's untrue! It haunted him till one day he asked point-blank for an explanation. Then she told that she had perjured herself. She was not the woman. Who she really was she could not say. He must be satisfied for the present with the assurance that it was not his wife. With that he was content. What did he care for the opinion of others? He knew—that was enough! In their conversation on the subject Annie did not even mention Alicia's name. Why should she?

Weeks passed, and Howard's health did not improve. He had tried to find a position, but without success, yet every day brought its obligations which had to be met. One morning Annie was bustling about their tiny dining room preparing the table for their frugal luncheon. She had just placed the rolls and butter on the table, and arranged the chairs, when there came a rinz at the front door-

bell. Early visitors were not so infrequent as to cause surprise, so, without waiting to remove her apron, she went to the door and opened it. Dr. Bernstein entered.

"Good morning, Mrs. Jeffries," he said, cheerily. Putting down his medical bag, he asked: "How is our patient this morning?"

"All right, doctor. He had a splendid night's rest. I'll call him."

"Never mind, I want to talk to you." Seriously, he went on: "Mrs. Jeffries, your husband needs a change of scene. He's worrying. That fainting spell the other day was only a symptom. I'm afraid he'll break down unless—"

"Unless what?" she demanded, anxiously.

He hesitated for a moment, as if unwilling to give utterance to words he knew must inflict pain. Then he quickly continued:

"Your husband is under a great mental strain. His inability to support you, his banishment from his proper sphere in the social world is mental torture to him. He feels his position keenly. There is nothing else to occupy his mind but thoughts of his utter and complete failure in life. I was talking to his father last night, and—"

"And what?" she demanded, drawing herself up. She suspected what was coming, and nerved herself to meet it.

"Now, don't regard me as an enemy," said the doctor in a conciliatory tone. "Mr. Jeffries inquired after his son. Believe me, he's very anxious. He knows he did the boy a great injustice, and he wants to make up for it."

"Oh, he does?" she exclaimed, sarcastically.

Dr. Bernstein hesitated for a moment before replying. Then he said, lightly: "Suppose Howard goes abroad for a few months with his father and mother?"

"Is that the proposition?" she demanded.

The doctor nodded.

"I believe Mr. Jeffries has already spoken about it to his son," he said.

Annie choked back a sob and, crossing the room to conceal her emotion, stood with her back turned, looking out of the window. Her voice was trembling as she said:

"He wants to separate us, I know. He'd give half his fortune to do it. Perhaps he's not altogether wrong. Things do look pretty black for me, don't they? Everybody believes that my going to see Underwood that night had something to do with his suicide and led to my husband being falsely accused. The police built up a fine romance about Mr. Underwood and me—and the newspapers! Every other day a reporter comes and asks us when the divorce is going to take place—and who is going to institute the proceedings, Howard or me. If everybody would only mind their own business and let us alone he might forget. Oh, I don't mean you, doctor. You're my friend. You made short work of Capt. Clinton and his 'confession.' I mean people—outsiders—strangers—who don't know us, and don't care whether we're alive or dead; those are the people I mean. They buy a one-cent paper and they think it gives them the right to pry into every detail of our lives." She paused for a moment, and then went on: "So

you think Howard is worrying? I think, so, too. At first I thought it was because of the letter Mr. Underwood wrote me, but I guess it's what you say. His old friends won't have anything to do with him and—he's lonely. Well, I'll talk it over with him—"

"Yes—talk it over with him."

"Did you promise his father you'd ask me?" she demanded.

"No—not exactly," he replied, hesitatingly.

Annie looked at him frankly.

"Howard's a pretty good fellow to stand by me in the face of all that's being said about my character, isn't he, doctor? And I'm not going to exactly make me the happiest woman in the world, but don't let it trickle into your mind that I'm doing it for his father's sake."

At that moment Howard entered from the inner room. He was surprised to see Dr. Bernstein.

"How do you feel to-day?" asked the doctor.

"First rate! Oh, I'm all right. You see, I'm just going to eat a bite. Won't you join us?"

He sat down at the table and picked up the newspaper, while Annie busied herself with carrying in the dishes.

"No, thank you," laughed the doctor. "It's too early for me. I've only just had breakfast. I dropped in to see how you were." Taking up his bag, he said: "Good-by! Don't get up. I can let myself out."

But Annie had already opened the door for him, and smiled a farewell. When she returned to her seat at the head of the table, and began to pour out the coffee, Howard said:

"He's a pretty decent fellow, isn't he?"

"Yes," she replied, absent-mindedly, as she passed a cup of coffee.

"He made a monkey of Capt. Clinton all right," went on Howard. "What did he come for?"

"To see you—of course," she replied.

"Oh, I'm all right now," he replied. Looking anxiously at his wife across the table, he said: "You're the one that needs tuning up. I heard you crying last night. You thought I was asleep, but I wasn't. I didn't say anything because—well—I felt kind of blue myself."

Annie sighed and leaned her head on her hand. Wearily she said:

"I was thinking over all that we've been through together, and what they're saying about us—"

Howard threw down his newspaper impatiently.

"Let them say what they like. Why should we care as long as we're happy?"

His wife smiled sadly.

"Are we happy?" she asked, gently.

"Of course we are," replied Howard.

She looked up and smiled. It was good to hear him say so, but did he mean it? Was she doing right to stand in the way of his career? Would he not be happier if she left him? He was too loyal to suggest it, but perhaps in his heart he desired it. Looking at him tenderly, she went on:

"I don't question your affection for me, Howard. I believe you love me, but I'm afraid that, sooner or later, you'll ask yourself the question all your friends are asking now, the question everybody seems to be asking."

"What question?" demanded Howard.

"Yesterday the bell rang and a gentleman said he wanted to see you. I told him you were out, and he said I'd do just as well. He handed me a card. On it was the name of the newspaper he represented."

"Well?"

"He asked me if it were true that proceedings for a divorce were about to be instituted. If so, when? And could I give him any information on the subject? I asked him who wanted the information and he said the readers of his paper—the people—I believe he said over a million of them. Just think, Howard! Over a million people, not counting your father, your friends and relations, all waiting to know why you don't get rid of me why you don't believe me to be as bad as they think I am—"

Howard raised his hand for her to desist.

"Annie—please!" he pleaded.

"That's the fact, isn't it?" she laughed.

"No."

His wife's head dropped on the table. She was crying now.

"I've made a hard fight, Howard," she sobbed, "but I'm going to give up. I'm through—I'm through!"

Howard took hold of her hand and carried it to his lips.

"Annie, old girl," he said, with some feeling, "I may be weak, I may be blind, but nobody on top of God's green earth can tell me that you're not the squarest, straightest little woman that ever lived! I don't care a damn what one million or eight million think. Supposing you had received letters from Underwood, supposing you had gone to his rooms to beg him not to kill himself—what of it? It would be for a good motive, wouldn't it? Let them talk all the bad of you they want. I don't believe a word of it—you know I don't."

She looked up and smiled through her tears.

"You're so good, dear," she exclaimed. "Yes, I know you believe in me." She stopped and continued, sadly: "But you're only a boy, you know. What of the future, the years to come?" Howard's face became serious, and she went on: "You see you've thought about it, too, and you're trying to hide it from me. But you can't. Your father wants you to go abroad with the family."

"Well?"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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