

The THIRD DEGREE

A NARRATIVE OF
METROPOLITAN LIFE

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AND
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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 divan. Alicia enters. She demands a promise from Underwood that he will not take her 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 in 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 renounces 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 when 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. The Underwood letter and Annie's perjured testimony clear Howard. The elder Jeffries offers to take Howard abroad.

CHAPTER XIX.—Continued.

He waited and looked at her curiously as if wondering what her answer would be. He waited some time, and then slowly she said:

"I think—you had better go!"

"You don't mean that!" he exclaimed, in genuine surprise.

She shook her head affirmatively.

"Yes, I do," she said; "your father wants you to take your position in the world, the position you are entitled to, the position your association with me prevents you from taking—"

Howard drummed his fingers on the tablecloth and looked out of the window. It seemed to her that his voice no longer had the same candid ring as he replied:

"Yes, father has spoken to me about it. He wants to be friends, and I—"

He paused awkwardly, and then added: "I admit I've—I've promised to consider it, but—"

Annie finished his sentence for him: "You're going to accept his offer, Howard. You owe it to yourself, to your family, and to—"

She laughed as she added: "I was going to say to millions of anxious readers."

Howard looked at her curiously. He did not know if she was jesting or in earnest. Almost impatiently he exclaimed:

"Why do you talk in this way against your own interests? You know I'd like to be friendly with my family, and all that. But it wouldn't be fair to you."

"I'm not talking against myself, Howard. I want you to be happy, and you're not happy. You can't be happy under these conditions. Now be honest with me—can you?"

"Can you?" he demanded.

"No," she answered, frankly, "not unless you are." Slowly she went on: "Whatever happiness I've had in life I owe to you, and God knows you've had nothing but trouble from me. I did wrong to marry you, and I'm willing to pay the penalty. I've evened matters up with your family; now let me try and square up with you."

"Evened up matters with my family?" he exclaimed in surprise. "What do you mean?"

With a smile she replied ambiguously: "Oh, that's a little private matter of my own!" He stared at her, unable to comprehend, and she went on, gravely: "Howard, you must do what's best for yourself. I'll pack your things. You can go when you please—"

He stared gloomily out of the window without replying. After all, he thought to himself, it was perhaps for the best. Shackled as he was now, he would never be able to accomplish anything. If they separated, his father would take him into his business. Life would begin for him all over again. It would be better for her, too. Of course, he would never forget her. He would provide for her comfort. His father would help him arrange for that. Lighting a cigarette, he said, carelessly:

"Well—perhaps you're right. Maybe a little trip through Europe won't do me any harm."

"Of course not," she said, simply. Busy with an obstinate match, he did not hear the sigh that accom-

panied her words or see the look of agony that crossed her face.

"But what are you going to do?" he inquired, after a silence.

With an effort, she controlled her voice. Not for all the world would she betray the fact that her heart was breaking. With affected indifference, she replied:

"Oh, I shall be all right. I shall go and live somewhere in the country for a few months. I'm tired of the city."

"So am I," he rejoined, with a gesture of disgust. "But I hate like the deuce to leave you alone."

"That's nothing," she said, hastily. "A trip abroad is just what you need." Looking up at him, she added: "Your face has brightened up already!"

He stared at her, unable to understand. "I wish you could go with me."

She smiled. "Your father's society doesn't make quite such an appeal to me as it does to you." Carelessly, she added: "Where are you going—Paris or London?"

He sent a thick cloud of smoke curling to the ceiling. A European trip was something he had long looked forward to.

"London—Vienna—Paris," he replied, gayly. With a laugh, he went on: "No, I think I'll cut out Paris. I'm a married man. I mustn't forget that!"

Annie looked up at him quickly. "You've forgotten it already," she

said, quietly. There was reproach in her voice as she continued: "Ah, Howard, you're such a boy! A little pleasure trip and the past is forgotten!"

A look of perplexity came over his face. Being only a man, he did not grasp quickly the finer shades of her meaning. With some irritation, he demanded:

"Didn't you say you wanted me to go and forget?"

She nodded.

"Yes, I do, Howard. You've made me happy. I want you to be happy."

He looked puzzled.

"You say you love me?" he said, "and yet you're happy because I'm going away. I don't follow that line of reasoning."

"It isn't reason," she said with a smile, "it's what I feel. I guess a man wants to have what he loves and a woman is satisfied to love just what she wants. Anyway, I'm glad. I'm glad you're going. Go and tell your father."

Taking his hat, he said: "I'll telephone him."

"Yes, that's right," she replied. "Where's my case?" he asked, looking round the room.

She found it for him, and as he opened the door, she said: "Don't be long, will you?"

He laughed.

"I'll come right back. By George!" he exclaimed, "I feel quite excited at the prospect of this trip!" Regarding her fondly, he went on: "It's awfully good of you, old girl, to let me go."

Annie averted her head.

"Now, don't spoil me," she said, lifting the tray as if to go into the kitchen.

"Wait till I kiss you good-by," he said, effusively.

Taking the tray from her, he placed it on the table, and folding her in his arms, he pressed his lips to hers.

"Good-by," he murmured; "I won't be long."

As soon as he disappeared she gave way completely, and sinking into a chair, leaned her head on the table and sobbed as if her heart would break. This then, was the end! Suddenly there was a ring at the bell. Hastily putting on a clean apron, she opened the door. Judge Brewster stood smiling on the threshold. Annie uttered a cry of pleasure. Greeting the old lawyer affectionately, she invited him in. As he entered, he looked questioningly at her red eyes, but made no remark.

"I'm delighted to see you, judge," she stammered.

As he took a seat in the little parlor, he said: "Your husband passed me on the stairs and didn't know me."

"The passage is so dark!" she explained, apologetically.

He looked at her for a moment without speaking, and for a moment there was awkward pause. Then he said: "When does Howard leave you?"

Annie stared in surprise. "How do you know that?" she exclaimed.

"We lawyers know everything," he smiled. Gravely he went on: "His father's attorneys have asked me for all the evidence I have. They want to use it against you. The idea is that he shall go abroad with his father, and that the proceedings will be begun during his absence."

"Howard knows nothing about it," said Annie, confidently.

"Are you sure?" demanded the lawyer, skeptically.

"Quite sure," she answered, positively.

"But he is going away?" persisted the judge.

"Yes, I want him to go—I am sending him away," she replied.

The lawyer was silent. He sat and looked at her as if trying to read her thoughts. Then quietly he said: "Do you know they intend to make Robert Underwood the ground for the application for divorce, and to use your own perjured testimony as a weapon against you? You see what a lie leads to. There's no end to it, and you are compelled to go on lying to

"But you don't understand," she said, gently; "I am to blame."

"You're too ready to blame yourself," he said, testily.

Annie went up to him and laid her hand affectionately on his shoulder. With tears in her eyes, she said: "Let me tell you something, judge. His father was right when he said I took advantage of him. I did. I saw that he was sentimental and self-willed, and all that. I started out to attract him. I was tired of the life I was living, the hard work, the loneliness, and all the rest of it, and I made up my mind to catch him if I could. I didn't think it was wrong then, but I do now. Besides," she went on, "I'm older than he is—five years older. He thinks I'm three years younger, and that he's protecting me from the world. I took advantage of his ignorance of life."

Judge Brewster shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"If boys of 25 are not men they never will be." Looking down at her kindly, he went on: "Pon my word! If I was 25, I'd let this divorce go through and marry you myself."

"Oh, judge!"

That was all she could say, but there was gratitude in the girl's eyes. These were the first kind words any one had yet spoken to her. It was nice to know that some one saw some good in her. She was trying to think of something to say, when suddenly there was the click of a key being inserted in a Yale lock. The front door opened, and Howard appeared.

"Well, judge!" he exclaimed, "this is a surprise!"

The lawyer looked at him gravely.

"How do you do, young man?" he said. Quizzically he added: "You look very pleased with yourself!"

"This is the first opportunity I've had to thank you for your kindness," said Howard, cordially.

"You can thank your wife, my boy, not me!" Changing the topic, he said: "So you're going abroad, eh?"

"Yes, did Annie tell you? It's only for a few months."

The lawyer frowned. Tapping the floor impatiently with his cane, he said: "Why are you going away?"

Taken aback at the question, Howard stammered: "Because—because—"

"Because I want him to go," interrupted Annie quickly.

The lawyer shook his head, and looked steadily at Howard, he said sternly:

"I'll tell you, Howard, my boy. You're going to escape from the scandal-mongers and the gossiping busy-bodies. Forgive me for speaking plainly, but you're going away because your wife's conduct is a topic of conversation among your friends—"

Howard interrupted him. "You're mistaken, judge; I don't care a hang what people say—"

"Then why do you leave her here to fight the battle alone?" demanded the judge, angrily.

Annie advanced, and raised her hand deprecatingly. Howard looked at her as if now for the first time he realized the truth.

"To fight the battle alone?" he echoed.

"Yes," said the judge, "you are giving the world a weapon with which to strike at your wife!"

Howard was silent. The lawyer's words had struck home. Slowly he said:

"I never thought of that. You're right! I wanted to get away from it all. Father offered me the chance and Annie told me to go—"

Annie turned to the judge.

"Please, judge," she said, "don't say any more." Addressing her husband, she went on: "He didn't mean what he said, Howard."

Howard hung his head.

"He's quite right, Annie," he said, shamefacedly. "I never should have consented to go; I was wrong."

Judge Brewster advanced and patted him kindly on the back.

"Good boy!" he said. "Now, Mrs. Jeffries, I'll tell your husband the truth."

"No!" she cried.

"Then I'll tell him without your permission," he retorted. Turning to the young man, he went on: "Howard your wife is an angel! She's too good a woman for this world. She has not hesitated to sacrifice her good name, her happiness, to shield another woman. And that woman—the woman who called at Underwood's room that night—was Mrs. Jeffries, your stepmother!"

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"Then Why Do You Leave Her Here to Fight the Battle Alone?" support the original lie, and that's precisely what I won't permit." Annie nodded acquiescence. "I knew you were going to scold me," she smiled. "Scold you?" he said, kindly. "No—it's myself I'm scolding. You did what you thought was right, and I allowed you to do what I knew was wrong." "You made two miserable women happy," she said, quietly. The lawyer tried to suppress a smile. "I try to excuse myself on that ground," he said, "but it won't work. I violated my oath as a lawyer, my integrity as a man, my honor, my self-respect, all upset, all gone. I've been a very unpleasant companion for myself lately." Rising impatiently, he strode up and down the room. Then turning on her, he said, angrily: "But I'll have no more lies. That's what brings me here this morning. The first move they make against you and I'll tell the whole truth!" Annie gazed pensively out of the window without making reply. "Did you hear?" he said, raising his voice. "I shall let the world know that you sacrificed yourself for that woman." She turned and shook her head. "No, judge," she said. "I do not wish it. If they do succeed in influencing Howard to bring suit against me I shall not defend it." Judge Brewster was not a patient man, and if there was anything that angered him it was rank injustice. He had no patience with this young woman who allowed herself to be trampled on in this outrageous way. Yet he could not be angry with her. She had qualities which compelled his admiration and respect, and not the least of these was her willingness to shield others at her own expense. "Perhaps not," he retorted, "but I will. It's unjust, it's unrighteous, it's impossible!"