



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, father's son, under the evil influence of Robert Underwood, a fellow student at Yale, leads a life of dissipation, marries the daughter of a banker who dies in prison, and is disinherited by his father. He tries to get work and fails. A former college classmate 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 Annie, Howard's stepmother, has apartments at the Astoria, and is dependent in pecuniary circumstances. Howard remains a day and a night, and decides to ask him for the \$2,000. Underwood, taking advantage of his intimacy with Mrs. Jeffries, becomes a sort of social burglar. Discovering the 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. All desires for whom he has been writing as a housekeeper, demanding an accounting. He cannot make good. Howard Jeffries calls in an intoxicated condition. He asks Underwood for \$2,000.



CHAPTER VI.—Continued.

He helped himself to another drink, his hand shaking so that he could hardly hold the decanter. He was fast approaching the state of complete intoxication. Underwood made no attempt to interfere. Why should he care if the young fool made a sot of himself? The sooner he drank himself insensible the quicker he would get rid of him.

"No, Howard," he said; "you'd never make a decent member of society."

"Praps not," hiccoughed Howard.

"How does Annie take her social ostracism?" inquired Underwood.

"Like a brick. She's all to the good."

"All the same, I'm sorry I ever introduced you to her," replied Underwood. "I never thought you'd make such a fool of yourself as to marry."

Howard shook his head in a manly manner, as he replied:

"I don't know whether I made a fool of myself or not, but she's all right. She's got in her the makings of a great woman—very crude, but still the makings. The only thing I object to, she insists on going back to work, just as if I'd permit such a thing. Do you know what I said on our wedding day?" Mrs. Howard Jeffries, you are entering one of the oldest families in America. Nature has fitted you for social leadership. You'll be a potted, pampered member of that select few called the "999," and now, damn it all, how can I ask her to go back to work? But if you'll let me have that \$2,000—"

By this time Howard was beginning to get drowsy. Lying back on the sofa, he proceeded to make himself comfortable.

"Two thousand dollars!" laughed Underwood. "Why, man, I'm in debt up to my eyes."

As far as his condition enabled him, Howard gave a start of surprise.

"Hard up!" he exclaimed. Pointing around the room, he said: "What's all this—a bluff?"

Underwood nodded.

"A bluff, that's it. Not a picture, not a vase, not a stick belongs to me. You'll have to go to your father."

"Never," said Howard despondently. The suggestion was evidently too much for him, because he stretched out his hand for his whisky glass. "There's done with me," he said dolefully.

"He'll relent," suggested Underwood.

Howard shook his head drowsily. Touching his brow, he said:

"Too much brains, too much up here." Placing his hand on his heart, he went on: "Too little down here. Once he gets an idea, he never lets it go. He holds on. Obstinate. One idea—stick to it. Gee, but I've made a mess of things, haven't I?"

Underwood looked at him with contempt.

"You've made a mess of your life," he said bitterly. "Yet you've had some measure of happiness. You, at least, married the woman you love. Drink as much as you are, I envy you. The woman I wanted married some one else, damn her!"

Howard was so drowsy from the effects of the whisky that he was almost asleep. As he lay back on the sofa, he gurgled:

"Say, old man, I didn't come here to listen to hard-boiled stories. I came to tell one."

In a mad fashion he began to sing. "Oh, listen to my tale of woe," while Underwood sat glaring at him, wondering how he could put him out.

As he reached the last verse his head began to nod. The words came thickly from his lips and he sank sleepily back among the soft divan pillows.

Just at that moment the telephone bell rang. Underwood quickly picked up the receiver.

"Who's that?" he asked. As he heard the answer his face lit up and he replied eagerly: "Mrs. Jeffries—yes. I'll come down. No, tell her to come up."

Hanging up the receiver, he hastily went over to the divan and shook Howard.

"Howard, wake up! confound you! You've got to get out—there's some body coming."

He shook him roughly, but his old classmate made no attempt to move.

"Quick, do you hear?" exclaimed Underwood impatiently. "Wake up—some one's coming."

Howard sleepily half opened his eyes. He had forgotten entirely where he was and believed he was on the train, for he answered:

"Sure, I'm sleepy. Say—porter, make up my bed."

His patience exhausted, Underwood was about to pull him from the sofa

by force, when there was a ring at the front door.

Bending quickly over his companion, Underwood saw that he was fast asleep. There was no time to awaken him and get him out of the way, so, quickly, he took a big screen and arranged it around the divan so that Howard could not be seen. Then he hurried to the front door and opened it.

Alicia entered.

CHAPTER VII.

For a few moments Underwood was too much overcome by emotion to speak. Alicia brushed by in haughty silence, not deigning to look at him. All he heard was the soft rustle of her clinging silk gown as it swept along the floor. She was incensed with him, of course, but she had come. That was all he asked. She had come in time to save him. He would talk to her and explain everything and she would understand. She would help him in this crisis as she had in the past. Their long friendship, all these years of intimacy, could not end like this. There was still hope for him. The situation was not as desperate as he feared. He might yet avert the shameful end of the suicide. Advancing toward her, he said in a hoarse whisper:

"Oh, this is good of you, you've come—this is the answer to my letter."

Alicia ignored his extended hand and took a seat. Then, turning on him, she exclaimed indignantly:

"The answer should be a horse- whip. How dare you send me such a message?" Drawing from her bag the letter received from him that evening, she demanded:

"What do you expect to gain by this threat?"

"Don't be angry, Alicia."

Underwood spoke soothingly, trying to conciliate her. Well he knew the seductive power of his voice. Often he had used it and not in vain, but to-night it fell on cold, indifferent ears.

"Don't call me by that name," she snapped.

Underwood made no answer. He turned slightly paler and, folding his arms, just looked at her, in silence. There was an awkward pause.

At last she said:

"I hope you understand that everything's over between us. Our acquaintance is at an end."

"My feelings toward you can never change," replied Underwood earnestly. "I love you—I shall always love you."

Alicia gave a little shrug of her shoulders, expressive of utter indifference.

"Love!" she exclaimed mockingly. "You love no one but yourself."

Underwood advanced nearer to her and there was a tremor in his voice as he said:

"You have no right to say that. You remember what we once were. Whose fault is it that I am where I am to-day? When you broke our engagement and married old Jeffries to gratify your social ambition, you ruined my life. You didn't destroy my love—you couldn't kill that. You may forbid me everything—to see you—to speak to you—even to think of you, but I can never forget that you are the only woman I ever cared for. If you had married me, I might have been a different man. And now, just when I want you most, you deny me even your friendship. What have I done to deserve such treatment? Is it fair? Is it just?"

Alicia had listened with growing impatience. It was only with difficulty that she contained herself. Now she interrupted him hotly:

"I broke my engagement with you because I found that you were deceiving me—just as you deceived others."

"It's a lie!" broke in Underwood. "I may have trifled with others, but I never deceived you."

Alicia rose and, crossing the room, carefully inspected one of the pictures on the wall, a study of the nude by Bouguereau.

"We need not go into that," she said laughingly. "That is all over now. I came to ask you what this letter—this threat—means. What do you expect to gain by taking your life unless I continue to be your friend? How can I be a friend to a man like you? You know what your friendship for a woman means. It means that you would drag her down to your own level and disgrace her as well as yourself. Thank God, my eyes are now opened to your true character. No self-respecting woman could afford to allow her name to be associated with yours. You are as incapable of disinterested friendship as you are of common honesty." Coldly she added: "I hope you quite understand that henceforth my house is closed to you. If we happen to meet in public, it must be as strangers."

Underwood did not speak. Words seemed to fail him. His face was set and white. A nervous twitching about the mouth showed the terrible mental strain which the man was under. In the excitement he had forgotten about Howard's presence on the divan behind the screen. A listener might have detected the heavy breathing of the sleeper, but even Alicia herself was too preoccupied to notice it. Underwood extended his arms pleadingly:

"Alicia—for the sake of auld lang syne!"

"Auld lang syne," she retorted. "I want to forget the past. The old memories are distasteful. My only object in coming here to-night was to make the situation plain to you and to ask you to promise me not to—carry out your threat to kill yourself. Only cowardly should you kill yourself? Only cowards do that. Because you are in trouble? That is the coward's way out. Leave New York. Go where you are not known. You are still young. Begin life over again, somewhere else." Advancing toward him, she went on: "If you will do this I will help you. I never want to see you again, but I'll try not to think of you unkindly. But you must promise me solemnly not to make any attempt against your life."

"I promise nothing," muttered Underwood doggedly.

"But you must," she insisted. "It would be a terrible crime, not only against yourself, but against others. You must give me your word."

Underwood shook his head.

"I promise nothing."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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At last she said:

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"You have no right to say that. You remember what we once were. Whose fault is it that I am where I am to-day? When you broke our engagement and married old Jeffries to gratify your social ambition, you ruined my life. You didn't destroy my love—you couldn't kill that. You may forbid me everything—to see you—to speak to you—even to think of you, but I can never forget that you are the only woman I ever cared for. If you had married me, I might have been a different man. And now, just when I want you most, you deny me even your friendship. What have I done to deserve such treatment? Is it fair? Is it just?"

Alicia had listened with growing impatience. It was only with difficulty that she contained herself. Now she interrupted him hotly:

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Underwood made no answer. He turned slightly paler and, folding his arms, just looked at her, in silence. There was an awkward pause.

At last she said:

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"Love!" she exclaimed mockingly. "You love no one but yourself."

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Alicia had listened with growing impatience. It was only with difficulty that she contained herself. Now she interrupted him hotly:

"I broke my engagement with you because I found that you were deceiving me—just as you deceived others."

"It's a lie!" broke in Underwood. "I may have trifled with others, but I never deceived you."



"But you must," persisted Alicia. "I won't stir from here until I have your promise."

He looked at her curiously.

"If my life has no interest for you, why should you care?" he asked.

There was a note of scorn in his voice which aroused his visitor's wrath. Crumpling up his letter in her hand, she confronted him angrily.

"Shall I tell you why I care?" she cried. "Because you accuse me in this letter of being the cause of your death—I, who have been your friend in spite of your dishonesty. Oh! it's despicable, contemptible! Above all, it's a lie—"

Underwood shrugged his shoulders. Cynically he replied:

"So it wasn't so much concern for me as for yourself that brought you here."

Alicia's eyes flashed as she answered:

"Yes, I wished to spare myself this indignity, the shame of being associated in any way with a suicide. I was afraid you meant what you said."

"Afraid," interrupted Underwood bitterly, "that some of the scandal might reach as far as the aristocratic Mrs. Howard Jeffries, Sr.!"

Her face flushed with anger, Alicia paced up and down the room. The man's taunts stung her to the quick. In a way, she felt that he was right. She ought to have guessed his character long ago and had nothing to do with him. He seemed desperate enough to do anything, yet she doubted if he had the courage to kill himself. She thought she would try more conciliatory methods, so, stopping short, she said more gently:

"You know my husband has suffered through the wretched marriage of his only son. You know how deeply we both feel this disgrace, and yet you would add—"

Underwood laughed mockingly.

"Why should I consider your husband's feelings?" he cried. "He didn't consider mine when he married you." Suddenly bending forward, every nerve tense, he continued hoarsely: "Alicia, I tell you I'm desperate. I'm hemmed in on all sides by creditors. You know what your friendship—your patronage means? If you drop me now, your friends will follow—they're a lot of sheep led by you—and when my creditors hear of me they'll be down on me like a flock of wolves. I'm not able to make a settlement. Prison stares me in the face."

Glancing around at the handsome furnishings, Alicia replied carelessly: "I'm not responsible for your wrongdoing. I want to protect my friends. If they are a lot of sheep, as you say, that is precisely why I should warn them. You have borrowed their money, cheated them at cards, stolen from them. Your acquaintance with me has given them the opportunity. But now I've found you out. I refuse any longer to sacrifice my friends, my self-respect, my sense of decency." Angriely she continued: "You thought you could bluff me. You've adopted the coward's way of forcing me to receive you against my will. Well, you've failed. I will not sanction your robbing my friends. I will not allow you to sell them any more of your high-priced rubbish, or permit you to cheat them at cards."

Underwood listened in silence. He stood motionless, watching her flushed face as she heaped reproaches on him. She was practically pronouncing his death sentence, yet he could not help thinking how pretty she looked. When she had finished he said nothing, but going to his desk, he opened a small drawer and took out a revolver.

Alicia recoiled, frightened.

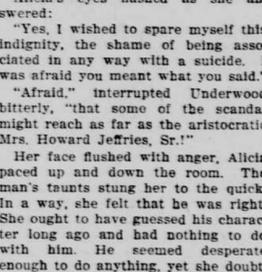
"What are you going to do?" she cried.

Underwood smiled bitterly.

"Oh, don't be afraid. I wouldn't do it while you are here. In spite of all you've said to me, I still think too much of you for that." Replacing the pistol in the drawer, he added: "Alicia, if you desert me now, you'll be sorry to the day of your death."

His visitor looked at him in silence. Then, contemptuously, she said:

(TO BE CONTINUED.)



for force, when there was a ring at the front door.

Bending quickly over his companion, Underwood saw that he was fast asleep. There was no time to awaken him and get him out of the way, so, quickly, he took a big screen and arranged it around the divan so that Howard could not be seen. Then he hurried to the front door and opened it.

Alicia entered.

CHAPTER VII.

For a few moments Underwood was too much overcome by emotion to speak. Alicia brushed by in haughty silence, not deigning to look at him. All he heard was the soft rustle of her clinging silk gown as it swept along the floor. She was incensed with him, of course, but she had come. That was all he asked. She had come in time to save him. He would talk to her and explain everything and she would understand. She would help him in this crisis as she had in the past. Their long friendship, all these years of intimacy, could not end like this. There was still hope for him. The situation was not as desperate as he feared. He might yet avert the shameful end of the suicide. Advancing toward her, he said in a hoarse whisper:

"Oh, this is good of you, you've come—this is the answer to my letter."

Alicia ignored his extended hand and took a seat. Then, turning on him, she exclaimed indignantly:

"The answer should be a horse- whip. How dare you send me such a message?" Drawing from her bag the letter received from him that evening, she demanded:

"What do you expect to gain by this threat?"

"Don't be angry, Alicia."

Underwood spoke soothingly, trying to conciliate her. Well he knew the seductive power of his voice. Often he had used it and not in vain, but to-night it fell on cold, indifferent ears.

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