

The THIRD DEGREE

A Narrative of Metropolitan Life

By CHARLES KLEIN and ARTHUR HORNBLow

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RAY WALTERS

SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—Howard Jeffries, boy'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. Forced to leave college, he tries to get work and fails. His wife, Annie, is straight as a die, and has a heart of gold. A former college chum makes a business proposition to Howard which requires \$2,000 cash, and Howard is broke.

CHAPTER II.—Robert Underwood, who had made love to Annie in his college days and was repulsed, and was once engaged to Howard's stepmother, Alicia, is a welcome visitor at the Jeffries home. Underwood has apartments in the Astoria, an exclusive apartment house. Howard recalls a \$50 loan to Underwood that remains unpaid and decides to ask him for the \$2,000 he needs.

CHAPTER III.—Mrs. Jeffries, Sr., foolishly encourages a dangerous intimacy with Underwood which the latter takes advantage of until he becomes a sort of social highwayman. Discovering his true character, Mrs. Jeffries denies him the house.

CHAPTER VI.

The door slammed, and Underwood returned to the sitting room. Taking no notice of Howard, he walked over to the desk, slowly selected a cigar and lit it. Howard looked up at him foolishly, not knowing what to say. His frequent libations had so befuddled him that he had almost forgotten the object of his visit.

"Excuse my butting in, old chap," he stammered, "but—"

Underwood made no answer. Howard stared at him in comic surprise. He was not so drunk as not to be able to notice that something was wrong.

"Say, old fellow," he gurgled; "you're a regular Jim Dumps. Why so choppfallen, so—? My! what a long face! Is that the way you greet a classmate, a fellow frat? Wait till you hear my hard-luck story. That'll cheer you up. Who was it said: 'There's nothing cheers us up so much as other people's misery?' Reaching for the whisky bottle, he went on: "First I'll pour out another drink. You see, I need courage, old man. I've got a favor to ask. I want some money. I not only want it—I need it."

Underwood laughed, a hollow, mocking laugh of derision. His old classmate had certainly chosen a good time to come and ask him for money. Howard mistook the cynical gaiety for good humor.

"I said I'd cheer you up," he went on. "I don't want to remind you of that little matter of two hundred and fifty bucks which you borrowed from me two years ago. I suppose you've forgotten it, but—"

A look of annoyance came over Underwood's face.

"Well, what of it?" he snapped. Howard took another drink before he continued.

"I wouldn't remind you of the loan, old chap; but I'm up against it. When the family kicked me out for marrying the finest girl that ever lived, my father cut me off with a piking allowance which I told him to put in the church plate. I told him I preferred independence. Well," he went on with serio-comic gravity, "I got my independence, but I'm—I'm dead broke. You might as well understand the situation plainly. I can't find any business that I'm fitted for, and Annie threatens to go back to work. Now, you know I can't stand anything like that. I'm too much of a man to be supported by any woman."

He looked toward Underwood in a stupid kind of way, as if looking for some sign of approval, but he was disappointed. Underwood's face was a study of supreme indifference. He did not even appear to be listening. Some-what disconcerted, Howard again raised the glass to his lips, and thus refreshed, went on:

"Then I thought of you, old chap. You've made a rousing success of it—got a big name as art collector—made lots of money and all that—"

Underwood impatiently interrupted him.

"It's impossible, Jeffries. Things are a little hard with me, too, just now. You'll have to wait for that \$250."

Howard grinned.

"Taint the \$250, old man, I didn't want that. I want a couple of thousand."

Underwood could not help laughing. "A couple of thousand? Why not make it a million?"

Howard's demand struck him as being so humorous, that he sat down convulsed with laughter.

Looking at him stupidly, Howard helped himself to another drink.

"It seems I'm a bit," he said, with a grin.

Underwood by this time had recovered his composure.

"So you've done nothing since you left college?" he said.

"No," answered Howard. "I don't seem to get down to anything. My ideas won't stay in one place. I got a job as time-keeper, but I didn't keep it down a week. I kept the time all right, but it wasn't the right time." Again raising the glass to his lips, he added: "They're so beastly particular."



Sank Sleepily Back Among the Soft Divan Pillows.

"You keep pretty good time with that," laughed Underwood, pointing to the whisky.

Howard grinned in drunken fashion. "It's the one thing I do punctually," he hiccupped. "I can row, swim, tennis, football, golf and polo, as well as anybody, but I'll be damned if I can do anything quite as well as I can do this."

"What do you want \$2,000 for?" demanded Underwood.

"I've got an opportunity to go into business. I want \$2,000 and I want it deuced quick."

Underwood shrugged his shoulders. "Why don't you go home and ask your father?" he demanded.

His visitor seemed offended at the suggestion.

"What!" he exclaimed, with comic surprise, "after being turned out like a dog with a young wife on my hands! Not much—no. I've injured their pride. You know father married a second time, loaded me down with a stepmother. She's all right, but she's so confoundedly aristocratic. You know her. Say, didn't you and she—wasn't there some sort of an engagement once? Seems to me I—"

Underwood rose to his feet and abruptly turned his back.

"I'd rather you wouldn't get personal," he said curtly. Sitting down at a desk, he began to rummage with some papers and, turning impatiently to Howard, he said:

"Say, old man, I'm very busy now. You'll have to excuse me."

If Howard had been sober, he would have understood that this was a pretty strong hint for him to be gone, but in his besotted condition, he did not propose to be disposed of so easily. Turning to Underwood, he burst out with an air of offended dignity:

"Underwood, you wouldn't go back on me now. I'm an outcast, a pariah, a derelict on the ocean of life, as one of my highly respectable uncles wrote me. His grandfather was an iron puddler. With a drunken laugh he went on: "Doesn't it make you sick? I'm no good because I married the girl. If I had ruined her life I'd still be a decent member of society."

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," hiccupped 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 maudlin 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 is, 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 petted, pampered member of that select few called the '400,' 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. "Father'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. Drunk on beast 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-luck stories. I came to tell one."

In maudlin 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 somebody 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?"

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."

ment 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 haughtily. "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 that 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 open 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 trembling 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 old 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. Why 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

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:

"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 deathly 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 coward enough to write a letter like this has the courage to carry out his threat." Stuffing the letter back into her bag, she added: "I should have thrown it in the waste-paper basket, but on second thoughts, I think I'll keep 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. "It's no use battling against the tide. The strongest swimmer must go under some time. I've played my last card and I've lost. Death is better than going to jail. What good is life anyway without money? Just a moment's nerve and it will all be over."

Opening the drawer in the desk, he took out the revolver again. He turned it over in his hand and regarded fearfully the polished surface of the instrument that bridged life and death. He had completely forgotten Howard's presence in the room. On the threshold of a terrible deed, his thoughts were leagues away. Like a man who is drowning, and close to death, he saw with surprising distinctness a kaleidoscopic view of his past life. He saw himself an innocent, impulsive school boy, the pride of a devoted mother, the happy home where he spent his childhood. Then came the association with bad companions, the first step in wrongdoing, stealing out of a comrade's pocket in school, the death of his mother, leaving home—with downward progress until he gradually drifted into his present dishonest way of living. What was the good of regrets? He could not recall his

What Was the Good of Regrets?

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."

ed 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 wrong doing. I want to protect my friends. If they are a lot of sheep, as you say, that is precisely why I should warn them. They have implicit confidence in me. 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."

Angrily she continued: "You thought you could bluff me. You've adopted this coward's way of forcing me to position against my will. Well, you've failed. I will not sanction your rebelling 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 face as she heaped reproaches on him. She was practically propped up by death sentence, yet he could not think how pretty she looked.

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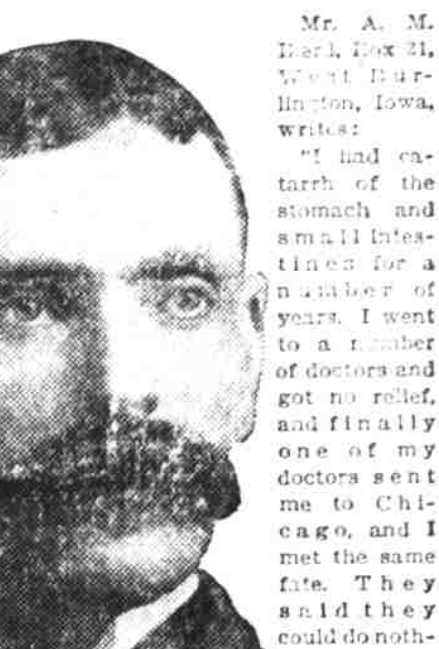
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"I had catarrh of the stomach and small intestines for a number of years. I went to a number of doctors and got no relief, and finally one of my doctors sent me to Chicago, and I met the same fate. They said they could do nothing for me; said I had cancer of the stomach and there was no cure. I almost thought the same, for my breath was offensive and I could not eat anything without great misery, and I gradually grew worse."

"Finally I concluded to try Peruna, and I found relief and a cure for that dreadful disease, catarrh. I took five bottles of Peruna and two of Manalin, and I now feel like a new man. There is nothing better than Peruna, and I keep a bottle of it in my house all the time."

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mother to life. He could never rehabilitate himself among decent men and women. The world had suddenly become too small for him. He must go, and quickly.

Fingering the pistol nervously, he sat before the mirror and placed it against his temple. The cold steel gave him a sudden shock. He wondered if it would hurt, and if there would be instant oblivion. The glare of the electric light in the room disconcerted him. It occurred to him that it would be easier in the dark. Reaching out his arm, he turned the electric button, and the room was immediately plunged into darkness, except for the moonlight which entered through the windows, imparting a ghostly aspect to the scene. On the other side of the room, behind the screen, a red glow from the open fire fell on the sleeping form of Howard Jeffries.

Slowly, deliberately, Underwood raised the pistol to his temple and fired.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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A prominent citizen of Evansville, Ind., writes:—"I was ill for five months with a pulmonary trouble, and had the best of doctors. I had hemorrhages and was in a very bad way. Through the advice of a friend I tried Vinol, and I feel that it saved my life. It is all you recommend it to be. I believe it is the greatest medicine on earth. I have advised others to try Vinol, and they have had the same results." (Name furnished on request.)

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If it does not go to the seat of trouble, heal the inflammation and stop the cough, we will cheerfully