



The THIRD DEGREE

A NARRATIVE OF METROPOLITAN LIFE
By CHARLES KLEIN
AND
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ILLUSTRATIONS BY RAY WALTERS

SYNOPSIS.

Howard Jeffries, banker's son, under the evil influence of Robert Underwood, a 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 tries to get work and fails. A former college chum 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 Alicia, Howard's stepmother, has apartments at the Astruria, and is apparently in prosperous circumstances. Howard recalls a \$250 loan to Underwood, that remains unpaid, and decides to ask him for the \$2,000 he needs. Underwood, taking advantage of his intimacy with Mrs. Jeffries, Sr., becomes a sort of social highwayman. Discovering his true character she denies him the house. Underwood's absence from a function causes comment among Mrs. Jeffries' guests.

CHAPTER IV.—Continued.

"In a word," laughed the judge, "you mean that any one trained to read my mind can tell just what's passing in my brain?"

"Precisely," replied the doctor with a smile "the psychologist can tell with almost mathematical accuracy just how your mental mechanism is working. I admit it sounds uncanny, but it can be proved. In fact, it has been proved, time and time again."

Alicia came up and took the doctor's arm.

"Oh, Dr. Bernstein," she protested, "I can't allow the judge to monopolize you in this way. Come with me. I want to introduce you to a most charming woman who is dying to meet you. She is perfectly crazy on psychology."

"Don't introduce me to her," laughed the judge. "I see enough crazy people in the law courts."

Dr. Bernstein smiled and followed his hostess. Judge Brewster turned to chat with the banker. From the distant music room came the sound of a piano and a beautiful soprano voice. The rooms were now crowded and newcomers were arriving each minute. Servants passed in and out serving iced delicacies and champagne.

Suddenly the butler entered the salon and, quietly approaching Alicia, handed her a letter. In a low tone he said:

"This letter has just come, m'm. The messenger said it was very important and I should deliver it at once."

Alicia turned pale. She instantly recognized the handwriting. It was from Robert Underwood. Was not her last message enough? How dare he address her again and at such a time? Retiring to an inner room, she tore open the envelope and read as follows:

Dear Mrs. Jeffries: This is the last time I shall ever have you with my letters. You have forbidden me to see you again. Practically you have sentenced me to a living death, but as I prefer death shall not be partial, but full and complete oblivion. I take this means of letting you know that unless you revoke your cruel sentence of banishment I shall make an end of it all. I shall be found dead, Monday morning, and you will know who is responsible.

Yours devotedly,
ROBERT UNDERWOOD.

An angry exclamation escaped Alicia's lips, and crushing the note up in her hand, she bit her lips till the blood came. It was just as she feared. The man was desperate. He was not to be got rid of so easily. How dare he—how dare he? The coward—to think that she could be frightened by such a threat. What did she care if he killed himself? It would be good riddance. Yet suppose he was in earnest, suppose he did carry out his threat? There would be a terrible scandal, an investigation, people would talk, her name would be mentioned. No—no—that must be prevented at all costs.

Distracted, not knowing what course to pursue, she paced the floor of the room. Through the closed door she could hear the music and the chatter of her guests. She must go to see Underwood at once, that was certain, and her visit must be a secret one. There was already enough talk.

CHAPTER V.

Among the many huge caravansaries that of recent years, have sprung up in New York to provide luxurious quarters regardless of cost for those who can afford to pay for the best, none could rival the Astruria in size and magnificence. Occupying an entire block in the very heart of the

residential district, it took precedence over all the other apartment hotels of the metropolis as the biggest and most splendidly appointed hostelry of its kind in the world. It was, indeed, a small city in itself. It was not necessary for its fortunate tenants to leave it unless they were so minded. Everything for their comfort and pleasure was to be had without taking the trouble to go out of doors. On the ground floor were shops of all kinds, which catered to the Astruria's patrons. There were also on the premises a bank, a broker's office, a hairdresser, and a postal telegraph office. A special feature was the garden court, containing over 30,000 square feet of open space, and tastefully laid out with palms and flowers. Here fountains splashed and an orchestra played while the patrons lounged on comfortable rattan chairs or gossiped with their friends. Up on the sixteenth floor was the cool roof garden, an exquisite bower of palms and roses artificially painted by a famous French artist, with its recherche restaurant, its picturesque tziganes, and its superb view of all Manhattan island.

The Astruria was the last word in expensive apartment hotel building. Architects declared that it was as far as modern lavishness and extravagance could go. Its interior arrangements were in keeping with its external splendor. Its apartments were of noble dimensions, richly decorated, and equipped with every device, new and old, that modern science and builders' ingenuity could suggest. That the rents were on a scale with the

class which paid social visits to tenants in the Astruria. He was rather seedy looking, his collar was not immaculate, his boots were thick and clumsy, his clothes cheap and ill-fitting.

"Is Mr. Underwood in?" he demanded.

"Not home," replied the attendant insolently, after a pause. Like most hail boys, he took a savage pleasure in saying that the tenants were out. The caller looked annoyed.

"He must be in," he said with a frown. "I have an appointment with him."

This was not strictly true, but the bluff had the desired effect.

"Got an appointment? Why didn't you say so at once?"

Reaching lazily over the telephone switchboard, and without rising from his seat, he asked surlily:

"What's the name?"

"Mr. Bennington."

The boy took the transmitter and spoke into it:

"A party called to see Mr. Underwood."

There was a brief pause, as if the person upstairs was in doubt whether to admit that he was home or not. Then came the answer. The boy looked up.

"He says you should go up. Apartment 165. Take the elevator."

In his luxurious appointed rooms on the fourteenth floor, Robert Underwood sat before the fire puffing nervously at a strong cigar. All around him was a litter of objets d'art, such as would have filled the heart of any



"Yes, I Must See Him at Once."

grandeur of the establishment goes without saying. Only long purses could stand the strain. It was a favorite headquarters for Westerners who had "struck it rich," wealthy bachelors, and successful actors and opera singers who loved the limelight on and off the stage.

Sunday evening was usually exceedingly quiet at the Astruria. Most of the tenants were out of town over the week-end, and as the restaurant and roof garden were only slimly patronized, the elevators ran less frequently, making less chatter and bustle in corridors and stairways. Stillness reigned everywhere as if the sobering influence of the Sabbath had invaded even this exclusive domain of the unholy rich. The uniformed attendants, having nothing to do, yawned lazily in the deserted halls. Some even indulged in surreptitious naps in corners, confident that they would not be disturbed. Callers were so rare that when some one did enter from the street, he was looked upon with suspicion.

It was shortly after seven o'clock the day following Mrs. Jeffries' reception when a man came in by the main entrance from Broadway, and approaching one of the hall boys, inquired for Mr. Robert Underwood.

The boy gave his interlocutor an impudent stare. There was something about the caller's dress and manner which told him instinctively that he was not dealing with a visitor whom he must treat respectfully. No one divides a man's or woman's social status quicker or more unerringly than a servant. The attendant saw at once that the man did not belong

connoisseur with joy. Oil paintings in heavy gilt frames, of every period and school, Rembrandts, Cuyps, Ruysdaels, Reynoldses, Corots, Henners, some on easels, some resting on the floor; handsome French bronzes, dainty china on Japanese teakwood tables, antique furniture, gold embossed clerical vestments, hand-painted screens, costly oriental rugs, rare ceramics—all were confusedly jumbled together. On a grand piano in a corner of the room stood two tall cloisonne vases of almost inestimable value. On a desk close by were piled miniatures and rare ivories. The walls were covered with tapestries, armor, and trophies of arms. More like a museum than a sitting room, it was the home of a man who made a business of art or made of art a business.

Underwood stared moodily at the glowing logs in the open chimney-place. His face was pale and determined. After coming in from the restaurant he had changed his tuxedo for the more comfortable house coat. Nothing called him away that particular Sunday evening, and no one was likely to disturb him. Ferris, his man servant, had taken his usual Sunday off and would not return until midnight. The apartment was still as the grave. It was so high above the street that not a sound reached up from the noisy Broadway below. Underwood liked the quiet so that he could think, and he was thinking hard. On the flat desk at his elbow stood a dainty demi-tasse of black coffee—untasted. There were glasses and decanters of whisky and cordial, but the stimulants did not tempt him.

He wondered if Alicia would ignore his letter or if she would come to him. Surely she could not be so heartless as to throw him over at such a moment. Crushed in his left hand was a copy of the New York Herald containing an elaborate account of the brilliant reception and musicale given the previous evening at her home. With an exclamation of impatience he rose from his seat, threw the paper from him, and began to pace the floor.

Was this the end of everything? Had he reached the end of his rope? He must pay the reckoning, if not today, to-morrow. As his eyes wandered around the room and he took mental inventory of each costly object, he experienced a sudden shock as he recalled the things that were missing. How could he explain their absence? The art dealers were already suspicious. They were not to be put off any longer with excuses. Any moment they might insist either on the immediate return of their property or on payment in full. He was in the position to do neither. The articles had been sold and the money lost gambling. Curse the luck! Everything had gone against him of late. The dealers would begin criminal proceedings, disgrace and prison stripes would follow. There was no way out of it. He had no one to whom he could turn in this crisis.

And now even Alicia had deserted him. This was the last straw. While he was still able to boast of the friendship and patronage of the aristocratic Mrs. Howard Jeffries he could still hold his head high in the world. No one would dare question his integrity, but now she had abandoned him to his fate, people would begin to talk. There was no use keeping up a hopeless fight—suicide was the only way out!

He stopped in front of a mirror, startled at what he saw there. It was the face of a man not yet 30, but apparently much older. The features were drawn and haggard, and his dark hair was plentifully streaked with gray. He looked like a man who had lived two lives in one. To-night his face frightened him. His eyes had a fixed stare like those of a man he had once seen in a madhouse. He wondered if men looked like that when they were about to be executed. Was not his own hour close at hand? He wondered why the clock was so noisy; it seemed to him that the ticks were louder than usual. He started suddenly and looked around fearfully. He thought he had heard a sound outside. He shuddered as he gazed toward the little drawer on the right-hand side of his desk, in which he knew there was a loaded revolver.

If Alicia would only relent escape might yet be possible. If he did not hear from her it must be for to-night. One slight little pressure on the trigger and all would be over.

Suddenly the bell of the telephone connecting the apartment with the main hall downstairs rang violently. Interrupted thus abruptly in the midst of his reflections, Underwood jumped forward, startled. His nerves were so unstrung that he was ever apprehensive of danger. With a tremulous hand, he took hold of the receiver and placed it to his ear. As he listened, his already pallid face turned whiter and the lines about his mouth tightened. He hesitated a moment before replying. Then, with an effort, he said:

"Send him up."

Dropping the receiver, he began to walk nervously up and down the room. The crisis had come sooner than he expected—exposure was at hand. This man Bennington was the manager of the firm of dealers whose goods he disposed of. He could not make restitution. Prosecution was inevitable. Disgrace and prison would follow. He could not stand it; he would rather kill himself. Trouble was very close at hand, that was certain. How could he get out of it? Pacing the floor, he bit his lips till the blood came.

There was a sharp ring at the front door. Underwood opened it. As he recognized his visitor on the threshold, he exclaimed:

"Why, Bennington, this is a surprise!"

The manager entered awkwardly. He had the constrained air of a man who has come on an unpleasant errand, but wants to be as amiable as the circumstances will permit.

"You didn't expect me, did you?" he began.

Shutting the front door, Underwood led the way back into the sitting room, and making an effort to control his nerves, said:

"Sit down, won't you?"

But Mr. Bennington merely bowed stiffly. It was evident that he did not wish his call to be mistaken for a social visit.

"I haven't time, thank you. To be frank, my mission is rather a delicate one, Mr. Underwood."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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