

UNCONFESSED

Mary Hastings Bradley

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CHAPTER XIV—Continued

"But she saw my wife on the bed. You've got her testimony to that!" Harriden's voice had loudened; beligerence rang out of it.

I glanced over at the bed. Mrs. Harriden lay very small beneath that sheet. "People see what they expect to see," I said slowly. "Anson saw a dummy made of a comforter arranged on that bed. The room was darkened; you let her have a glance through the half open door, then you closed it and went down to dinner."

No one spoke then. No one moved. "But you kept worrying about that body in the closet. Perhaps you hadn't taken the diamonds then—perhaps you had, but you realized you hadn't made it look enough like a robbery. Like an assault from outside. You began seeing the situation. So you went upstairs, halfway through dinner, and when you were opening the window, you realized you could make it look like suicide. So you took your wife out of the closet and thrust her out, down into the shrubbery. Perhaps you had seen the blood on the floor—"

I stopped. I had a queer feeling that I was wrong. I said, "I think you hadn't seen it—but you thought it wise to look that closet till you could look it over, later. You looked it and came down again to dinner."

I remembered how he had come down to dinner. I think we were all remembering it. Coming down stolidly, quietly, saying his wife was still sleeping. Going on with his meal. Talking to Letty Van Alstyn.

"You were thinking you could make it seem either accident or suicide and after dinner you asked the princess to go up—you talked of a row between you, of her overwrought state of mind, of her hysterical threats. You created the impression of a neurotic, irresponsible woman, ready for any rashness. . . . You didn't want that closet opened. When Mrs. Keller had the housekeeper unlock it, you were quick to enter. You said there was nothing there. Then they found the blood. You realized you had to make it look like robbery."

My voice grew slower, raggeder. "I don't know when you picked up the diamonds—perhaps at the beginning when you meant to make it seem the work of an outside thief. After you decided upon suicide you didn't speak of their disappearance. But when you saw it had to seem robbery, then you thought of them again."

It seemed to me that I had been talking forever in that world of shadows. Not a word now out of Harriden. Not a sign from him except that immobile attention.

"I don't know now why you plinned that chain in my dress that night," I said, and my voice shook over that. "You were furious at me because I had told of the scene at the window . . . but you were hating Alan Deck even more—"

"Perhaps you saved out the big pendant intentionally from the first for him," I said. "A man might have hidden a single stone. . . . Your chance came when you found his case lying about. You stuffed the diamond under the cigarettes, but you couldn't get it back to him at once. You couldn't leave it out for him to find till all the outsiders were gone. Then you saw that he found it."

I stopped suddenly, utterly spent. I was trembling from head to foot; my blood felt like ice in my veins.

"Are we crazy—to listen to this pack of lies?" Harriden demanded. His brusque tone seemed to sweep away my words like a house of cards. "Donahay—I want this girl arrested."

I felt a terrible despair. No one would believe. I had no shred of proof. Nothing but that andiron—and the blood on it could not speak. Nor could the dead under the sheet.

Mitchell's voice came suddenly. "Not so fast, Harriden. . . . Donahay, you've heard this story. I can supply a few details. That handkerchief was dried on the radiator in Mr. Harriden's own bathroom."

Harriden's voice rumbled out. "That's another lie! You were listening to that fool Anson."

The name fell like a bolt upon me. I had literally forgotten Anson in my absorption in this first tragedy. Now his words, and their implication, was a shock galvanizing me to life again.

"No lie," Mitchell gave back and his voice was clear-cut, authoritative—his courtroom voice. "The rust spots on that handkerchief correspond exactly to the places where the paint has been flaked off on that particular radiator—and on no other in the house. That evidence is conclusive."

Mitchell stepped forward, confronting Harriden.

"The first death was accidental, Dan. Pity you tried to camouflage it—to incriminate others. . . . Anson was murder."

"Anson?" he growled. "I never saw Anson."

"Oh, yes you did," I flung out. "When she brought the fresh towels to your bathroom. . . . You were in your room or in this one all that part of the morning. That hour when Anson had been killed."

I remembered his testimony. That he had heard no noise in Rancini's room. "And if I had, I wouldn't have cared." And I held fast to my little thread of a clue—my clue that I thought had gone astray, that had puzzled me so.

I rushed on. "When I saw her in the hall that morning she had her

arms full of towels. Lavender for the prince's room, pink for these two. She carried them all into Rancini's room, and when she came out she had forgotten the pink ones—she told me she had to go back for them. I saw her go in. . . . Afterwards I went to look for those towels. I thought—"

Apologetically my glance sought the prince. He was standing there with a stupefied air. "I thought that—that if Anson had been killed there, at that time, then the pink towels would still be there. But they were not, and the maid who had taken over the room, on Anson's disappearance, said she had found none. So I knew that Anson had taken her towels and gone." I raised my eyes again to Harriden. "I knew the pink towels were for these rooms. So I asked the maid to look in here—you were downstairs then—and she did. She said the fresh towels were distributed in both bedrooms but that Anson hadn't taken away the soiled ones. I thought that Anson might have been so nervous in these rooms that she had hurried away forgetfully, and gone, for some reason, again into the prince's room, where she met her death. . . . But that wasn't so."

"Anson never left the room alive. She began to talk to you about something she had to tell at the inquest. There was something on her mind, a handkerchief she had seen drying on a radiator. The corner was not torn off—you didn't tear that off till you came to pin the diamonds in it. She knew she had to tell about it, but she didn't want to. She told me that any one might have washed out a handkerchief. She tried to explain it to you."

Harriden's eyes were like sheet lightning upon me. "She told you about it. She may have said, too, that she couldn't swear that Mrs. Harriden was on her bed when she had looked in at eight. She was a very simple-minded girl, anxious to be truthful. You lost your head—you may have tried to bribe her as you did me upstairs—you gave your alarm away. And then you jumped for her. You choked the life out of her. You looked up and down the hall. It was empty. You had only a step or two to take to Rancini's door. You saw his room was empty. It was a desperate chance but you had to take it. You got her in the room, you thrust her in the closet. You wiped your prints off the door. You went back to your room, and no one saw you coming out, that—you knew—"

My voice trailed off the words automatically. It was the look in Keller's eyes that prompted them, that uneasy, worrying, disquietude. Tom Keller knew something. Perhaps he had seen Harriden leaving the room. Perhaps he had seen him in the hall.

I knew it with the strange wrought-up divination that possessed me; I knew it so surely that I would have cried it aloud but Mitchell intervened.

"You remembered to wipe the door knob, Dan, but you forgot Deck's taste in cigarettes. Luckies. When you found his case there weren't but two cigarettes in it, not enough to hold a stone in place, so you crammed it full of your own, making sure to keep the diamond at the bottom. That's where you slipped—nobody here smokes Macedonias but you. The case was full of Macedonias."

"And you call that evidence?" Harriden sneered. The man was gathering his power again, full of defiant challenge. "You've turned against your friends, have you, for the sake of—"

"For the sake of a girl you tried to blacken and a man you tried to hang your own guilt on," Mitchell flashed back, his eyes as full of war as Harriden's.

"Evidence—you bet I'll make it stick as evidence. You waited till they were all around Deck, you prompted Letty to ask Clancy for his case, and Deck handed it over. Do you think a jury will believe a man would do that if he had a diamond hidden in it—a stone that would cost him neck? . . . He'd have taken out some cigarettes and passed them back. But Deck just handed it over. Just like that. And Clancy gave it to Letty, and you whispered her to feel it, to tell Clancy to feel it."

He swung away from Harriden. He spoke sharply to a white face. "Why didn't you ask Dan for a smoke? You like his brand—you were smoking them tonight. You'll have to testify he prompted you."

"Oh, Dan, Dan, it isn't so!" Letty Van Alstyn's voice, overwrought, breaking with hysterical strain, sobbed out at him. "You didn't ask me to say anything."

"You shut up!" said Harriden harshly. "Shut up and keep shut up, d'you hear? Let them talk their heads off. That's all there is to it—talk."

"No one will believe it, Dan," she cried half crying. "No one will blame you for anything. We'll all forget it—you'll forget it. Nora wasn't worth it."

"Wasn't worth it?" He gave a dreadful glare at her, then strode to the bed and with a single gesture he tore the sheet away. Nora Harriden's still face lay before us. We saw the loveliness of her profile, like chiseled marble, the rigid, tinted lips, the long, dark lashes, motionless on her cold cheeks.

Then, for one unforgettable second, it seemed as if the dead had moved, and chill terror gripped us, but it was the soft, dark hair stirring in the air from the withdrawn sheet.

"Not worth it?" the man thundered. "She was worth the whole damned lot of you! I'd rather have her little finger than any woman's body. If I can't have her—"

His voice cracked, recovered. "I'll never get over her. And I'll take this out of the hide of every one of you. Out of you, you interloper," he shot at me, "looking in at windows, and out of you," and he thrust his mottled face towards Deck, "running after another man's wife, writing your damned rot to her beauty—"

He burst out. "She didn't want you. She was playing with you—trying to plague me. . . . You couldn't have held her for a week. . . . She was my girl, mine! And you leave me with her. Clear out, all of you. Leave me alone with her while I've got her. . . . Clear out. Clear out."

CHAPTER XV

We went. Incomprehensible as it may seem, that terrible, that extraordinary scene ended with our streaming out of the room, like dismissed children. We left Harriden alone with his dead.

The world seemed to go to pieces about me after that. I was as weak as a rag. The tears on my face were tears of tiredness. Unseeing I blundered through the group at the head of the stairs; I heard a voice. "Miss Seton—" It was Donahay.

He said slowly, "About that andiron—how do you know—"

"The cat licked it. You can have it tested, but I'm sure. You heard him say, 'If you know—that—you did it.'"

"The cat—the cat put you on to it?" He stared at me again. "I'll have to get that andiron," he added glumly, "at once."

I got away from them then. I went downstairs where a knot of policemen in a huddle told me that the excitement above had been having its repercussions here. I let them stare;

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strength had gone out of me. I didn't reach even to his exhalation.

"My God, how did you do it?" he demanded. "That was the most smashing accusation—"

I interrupted, "Did you get your letters?"

"Every one. And burned them. The last one wasn't there—she hadn't kept it."

"I'm glad." I was glad, too, for Harriden's sake. Hard enough to know that his wife was in love with another but harder to know that she had been thrown aside, repudiated.

I said, "I did go in after the cat. But when I saw the case there, I opened it to look for those letters for you. He caught me at it."

His arm which had been lying along the top dropped about my shoulders with a quick caress. "You darling!" I didn't feel like a darling. I didn't know that I even wanted to be his darling. His arm dropped so readily about shoulders—it had about Letty Van Alstyn when he wanted her to coax Dan down from his room.

But his voice had taken on a new gravity. "I've never met any one like you, Letty Seton. I'd be a better man if I had. You're all loyalty, all courage. I told you you looked like a fair saint when I met you in that gallery, and I'm taking you as my saint. My bright saint."

Mitchell came out, carrying three tumblers of amber liquid on a tray. I saw his quick eyes taking us in, but if his expression changed, his voice was cheerfully unheeding. "Here you are. Hot toddies. Sugar? Lemon?"

"I'm telling her what a wonderful girl she is," said Deck gaily.

Mitchell put the tray carefully on a little table before the sofa and sat down on the other side of me. "She's a thorough fool of a girl, to trail into that room after a cat—to open that case for your letters—for I suppose that she was looking for your letters? Knowing all the time how grave the evidence was against her. . . . A thorough-going fool," he insisted firmly, "but—an endearing one. I grant you that."

I smiled over the top of my glass at him. "Mercy, not justice, Your Honor!" "I hope you never have to say 'Your Honor,'" he replied, soberly.

Deck leaned forward, across me. "How do you think it stands, Monty? You've just been talking with those fellows. Is there enough of a case?"

"To hold him—yes. To make it stick—no. Not unless something more turns up. Unless he makes more of an admission than he has done. . . . Letty, here, just did a brilliant bit of guesswork. It was overwhelming when she poured it all out—and it fits. But how much of it can be proved—"

He broke off, taking a drink. "About that scene at the window," he resumed. "Dan probably thinks Letty is prepared to swear to him now—but are you?" he asked of me suddenly.

I shook my head, perplexed. "I can swear to myself that I know it is so—but I couldn't swear to a court that I recognized him."

"But don't say that yet to Donahay," Monty counseled. "Our hope now is for some admission. . . . He went on to tell us that he had been working on estimates about that gruesome pool of blood, about the time it must have taken to form. He said, 'That was why I was a little unexcited about Rancini or Letty—I couldn't persuade myself that either of them had had time enough for that. Now you, Alan, when you were upstairs, had just a little more time—'"

"Thanks for nothing," said Deck warily.

Grant came, bearing a silver tray with coffee pot and cups. Behind him was Graft with another tray of sandwiches.

"Splendid!" said Mitchell approvingly. "I'll pour the coffee. Letty, engulf this cheese sandwich. You look another girl already."

"The bacon sandwiches will be ready in a moment, Mr. Mitchell."

That food was marvelous. The bacon sandwiches, when they came, were crisp and appetizing. We all ate as if we were famished, and under the stimulus of food and drink the talk went eagerly back and forth.

Mitchell went on to tell what else he had been working on—the time it took rust stains to form. The radiator had not been rusted; there had been tiny flecks in the paint on which the linen had touched unstained metal; and for rust to form, in those conditions, required more time than the interval in which Deck had absented himself from the table.

"I've been pointing that out to Donahay all along," he said. "You couldn't have left the handkerchief and retrieved it afterwards for you weren't in Harriden's room afterwards. Only on the threshold of Nora's. Your absence gave time for radiator marks but not for rust. And Letty found rust in her tests."

Deck raised his coffee cup. "To Letty—my salvation."

"Oh, you aren't saved yet," said Mitchell drily.

We talked about everything as it came into our minds; I remember asking about the crescent and its strange appearance in Anson's dead hand and Mitchell's saying "It was just one of those things. Those things that you think are going to be clues and turn out to be will of the wisps."

I know that Mitchell told us something he had found out, that Letty had been in the room with Nora after they had come up to dress. She had let that out when talking about the prints in the room. She had said, "Of course my prints are there. I was looking for Nora—and then I was in the room before—I went to dress. Just for a moment."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

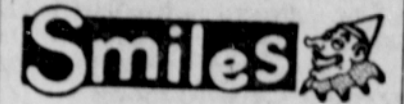
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