

UNCONFESSED

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WNU Service

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SYNOPSIS

Lella Seton, young and beautiful and an expert on paintings, is commissioned to go over the collection of paintings in the home of the wealthy Kellers in New York, where a party is in progress. From her window she witnesses a man in another room strike a woman. Shortly after Mrs. Keller sends up word, asking her to join the party at dinner. Lella hastily dresses and goes down. She is seated between Mr. Deck, a critic, and Monty Mitchell, a noted lawyer. Introductions follow. There are Mr. Harriden, Miss Letty Van Alstyn, Mrs. Crane, Mrs. Watkins and Prince and Princess Rancini, guests. Lella finds she is taking the place of Nora Harriden. Dan Harriden leaves the table, and Mitchell explains he has gone up to see how his wife's headache is. He returns shortly. Deck, saying he must put in a call, leaves. Upon his return, he begs Lella to secretly take a message to Nora "to take no steps until I see you." Lella consents. Lella finds the Harriden rooms empty and so informs Deck. Coming out she passes Letty. Harriden asks Princess Rancini to run up and see his wife. The princess reports the absence of Nora. Search is fruitless. Harriden admits that he had a row. Anson, maid, reports seeing Deck near Nora's room. Letty tells of seeing Lella come from the room. Lella accuses Harriden of having struck his wife. This Harriden denies. From the Harridens' window Lella sees what proves to be Nora's lifeless body. A ghastly head wound caused death. Dan says she was lying on her bed when he went to dinner, and when he ran up later the room was dark. Thinking she was asleep, he left without seeing her. Mrs. Keller comes upon a pool of blood in the closet. A diamond chain is missing. Donahey, police inspector, questions the guests. Harriden brands Lella's story of seeing a man strike a woman a lie. Anson tells of seeing Deck outside the Harriden door. Deck says he passed by in seeking a lost handkerchief. Elkins, a servant, tells of overhearing Deck threaten Mrs. Harriden earlier in the day.

CHAPTER V—Continued

Donahey's head was thrusting out on his thick neck like a turtle's.

"Well, Mr. Deck?"

His silence agonized me. And then he said, "I don't remember," and his lips twitched in a mockery of a smile.

"You don't remember?"

"Not a word. I was quite tight before dinner. . . . I haven't the faintest recollection of anything said downstairs."

Donahey ground out, "Yet you remember that you went up early to your room, you said?"

"Oh, I remember that," Deck said jauntily. "I got to my room all right," he went on, "and the cold water revived me. But everything that went on downstairs is just a total loss."

"Do you happen to remember," said the inspector with terrible sarcasm, "any reason why you could have said the words you have no recollection of saying to Mrs. Harriden?"

Deck was silent.

"What was between you?" Donahey shot out.

"Friendship," said Deck.

I know that I felt I could not bear to look at Harriden, and yet I looked at him and saw him standing, like a man of stone, his grim, blunt profile toward that younger man. The sheer beauty of Deck seemed somehow insolent and flaunting before that husband's haggard eyes. I felt a sharp cleavage of sympathy . . . terror for Deck and anguish for that bereft man's pain.

It was the easing of a physical strain when Harriden turned and walked out of the room.

I remember a dull surprise at finding it was only half-past two when I was in my room.

I was so spent emotionally that I was conscious of nothing but a rushing depression. There was no denying the reality of Elkins' high-strung words.

And I had my own corroboration

of Deck's desperate message, Take no steps.

For all my exhaustion I could not sleep; my thoughts kept milling about in confused conjecturing. Had Deck been the man at the window had he followed her up to finish the quarrel there?

It might have been Deck, I thought. He might have slipped away when he heard Harriden come in the next room—she might have promised to meet him as soon as possible in the gallery. Then she did not come. Perhaps her husband had stayed too long in the room.

What was their quarrel about, I wondered, my temples throbbing heavily against the pillow. Was she threatening to leave him—was he mad with jealousy? The sorriest woman on God's earth. . . . Had he gone up from dinner to carry out his wild threat?

Oh, no, no, no! Only to see her, to plead with her. For he had sent me up later to try to get word to her, to urge her to take no steps. . . .

Oh, fool that I had been not to speak out before! Then my story might have carried conviction, but now it would seem a lame invention of mine to save him.

Or had his sending me on that errand been merely a ruse on his part, to make it appear that he still believed her in her room, when all the time he knew that room was untenanted and her poor body shrouded in the shrubbery below?

I did not know what to believe. My mind went round and round in the mazes of its doubt. . . . He had been so long away from that table. . . . But that had been because he was trying to reach her, my defensive heart instantly declared. He had told me that her room phone did not answer—of course, he had gone to her door and knocked—perhaps even tried it.

I wondered if he had peeped in and found darkness and ghostly curtains blowing in the wind. Or if he had found the door locked—locked by an unknown assassin who was still inside.

I determined to try to make Deck confide in me. Since I already knew so much, since I had proved staunch, surely he would tell me the truth. . . . But if his sending me had been a ruse—? My mind wearied from all this wondering. At last I slept.

I woke very suddenly. I woke to the instant impression that some one was in my room. I lay there with my eyes shut, not daring to open them, trying to feign sleep, feeling in every nerve that something was there—something just within the door. There had been some sound, some indefinable sound that had waked me.

Every instant the feeling grew more terrible; I knew then that fear could be paralyzing, for I lay there literally unable to move or speak, simply helpless and terrified, waiting for something horrible to happen.

Then there was a creak at the door and soft, muffled steps down the hall. I knew I was not imagining those steps; I heard them, though my own thumping heart beats sounded louder to me. I suppose it was only a moment or two, really, that I lay in the grip of that helplessness, then motion and sense came back to me, and I reached out and managed to flash on the night light with fingers that fumbled frantically for the tiny chain as if each instant of darkness was a danger. Then I jumped up and ran for the door.

I forced myself to look out down the blackness of that hall. I saw nothing. I heard nothing. I did not go out and look down the stairs; I dodged back and shut and locked my door.

Should I call some one on the house phone? I moved toward it but hesitated, caught back by the fear of something hysterical and

panicky. It was easy for overwrought nerves to play tricks and in my half-asleep condition I might have imagined those sounds within my door. The steps, though, had been real. But the steps could easily be accounted for. Donahey had said the house was guarded and very likely one of the policemen was patrolling the hall and, finding my door ajar, had paused to make sure my room was occupied.

I persuaded myself that this was so. What else could it be? Confidence had revived with the lighted room and I told myself the rustling had been only the night wind playing with the folds of my satin frock left lying on the chair by the door. My very excess of past terror and my ashamed reaction against it swept me now too far in the other direction, for I did not phone.

It was not easy to get to sleep again, but I did, ultimately, and it was bright day when I waked, with the sun streaming across the dark, polished floor, over the white fur rug, to glow on the rose-red of the deep-cushioned chair. But no sun could lift the depression of that past night or banish the pictures



"I Think You Are Wanted by the Police."

moving before my eyes—Nora Harriden's limp, gold-clad body in her husband's arms . . . that husband's face, rigid, grief-stricken . . . Deck's defiant, high-held head and his bitter, tormented eyes.

I must get to Deck, I thought excitedly, and hurried into a cold shower, wondering what was done about breakfast in that house. I phoned the question and was informed that breakfast would be up.

Coffee was my chief need, black and hot, and I welcomed it all the more since the maid who brought the tray told me that the inspector would like to see me as soon as possible. I took a last look at myself in the glass, then went downstairs.

The halls were empty; so, too, was the big entrance hall, except for a policeman at the front door. In the drawing room Donahey was behind his usual table. He nodded in response to my good morning, then jerked his head toward a couple of young men at a table at the far end of the room and sent me to have my fingerprints taken.

That was to be expected, I thought, and certainly I had nothing to worry about, except that I was rather interested in the process of print taking, for I knew something about the work, so I fell into chat with the two young men. It was just a formality, they said; there was nothing to be gained from all this print taking unless they got the print of some insider, for all the household had been over the room.

"Except Dick," said a heavy voice beside us.

I started, and found Harriden staring down at us out of red-rimmed eyes. The man's face looked as if years instead of hours had passed; the deep lines in it were accentuated till they seemed like seams.

"Deck wasn't in the room after the murder—and don't you forget that," he admonished grimly.

I was impatient to see Deck. I thought of phoning to his room, then I remembered that a policeman might be listening in—I thought of getting in touch with Monty Mitchell and trusting him with a message. But Donahey detained me then with more questions, and I had to go over what I had said before and tell him more about myself and how I happened to be there at all. At the end he told me I must appear at the inquest on Sunday morning.

I went out in the hall and wandered about a little irresolutely, thinking that if I kept out in sight I might encounter either Alan Deck or Monty Mitchell without having to phone and betray my eagerness to the officials. As a pretext for lingering I read the papers over and over.

The headlines were sensational—Society Beauty Murdered—and the first pages were filled with stories of Nora's life, and there was one account of the famous yellow diamond chain. The pendant on it, it was stated, was a flawless jewel which had been worn on the turban of a royal Turkish family, for generations; the last heir had given it to Mrs. Harriden instantly upon her expression of admiration—a costly gesture, which her husband had paid for, later, by persistent losses at cards. The chain, so the paper said, had been assembled by Mr. Harriden to match the pendant.

My eyes raced through the accounts of the guests; there was no reference to Alan Deck except as "a favorite in the Long Island set." No reporter, I was sure, had been able to get in the house; the paper had had to take the facts that Donahey had given out, and the list of guests and do what they could with their imagination.

I began to think that all of the guests were upstairs, gathered intimately in the Kellers' private sitting room, talking things over by themselves; I felt so alone in that house that it was a comfort to see the Prince Rancini coming out from the long lounge just behind this entrance hall. He looked at me with the Latin's quick interest in his big, brown eyes—a stalwart, handsome fellow, with white teeth flashing in his brown face as he smiled at me. I smiled back at him, and he came up to me.

"A terrible business," he said, rolling out his r's. Very fervently I agreed.

To make conversation I asked him if he had known Mrs. Harriden well. I knew that he had landed only a day or so ago, but I thought they had probably met abroad.

Instantly his eyes changed. He looked at me narrowly as if questioning what I meant. "One has met—but who knows anybody?" he said, with a shrug of his shoulders.

I said, "Who, indeed?" in his own Italian, and at that he changed back to smiles and began to spout Italian at me. I felt so eager for some one human to talk to that I told him why I was there, and he declared that he must see that famous gallery, he must learn something of the ways of detecting frauds. He would go with me to that gallery, he said.

It was when I was saying, "But when could we go?" that his wife glided to my side.

Alloofly, the Princess Rancini murmured, "I think you are wanted by the police. They asked me to tell you to come," and began to talk in wearied tones to her husband as if I was dismissed.

I thought, furiously, that she was one of the most hateful women I had ever met.

I didn't take time to wonder what Donahey wanted now; I just went

straight to the table where he was standing, with a little group about him. There was a man in uniform, noticed, and the Kellers with Dan Harriden and Monty Mitchell. In the midst of my "Good mornings," my eyes fell on a dress lying over a chair, its folds trailing—my frock the ice blue satin frock I had worn the night before.

I didn't have time for anything but astonishment when Donahey spoke, measuredly. "You recognize this dress, Miss Seton?"

"Of course. It's mine." For no reason that I could name or help my voice sounded defiant.

He went forward and lifted a fold of blue satin, disclosing the underside of the skirt. There, pinned by a safety pin, hung a little sort of bag, like a tied-up handkerchief.

"And you recognize this?"

"Why no—what is it?" I stammered.

With slow deliberation he unfolded the pin, and let the cloth drop to one of his palms. From the opening folds his thick fingers picked up a chain strung with glittering stones. He stared at it, then dangled it before us all. It was a chain of diamonds—yellow diamonds.

CHAPTER VI

I WAS too astonished to speak; I stood staring at the dress, then a recollection of the last time I had seen it, lying over a chair in my room near the door, swept my mind back, in a flash, to those nights in the night. I blurted, "Why, there was some one then—there was some one there!"

Hurriedly I tried to tell them about it, about my waking and my fright, and my conclusion that it was just the steps of a policeman moving about outside, and as I stammered out the story I saw disbelief in their faces and could hardly blame them for it. Oh, the idiot that I had been not to have phoned some one at once!

It seemed too mad to put in words. Carefully I controlled my voice which was shaking with excitement and said stiffly, "But you must see what this means—that the one who stole those diamonds was in this house last night—that he must be still hiding about—"

"We've combed this house with a fine tooth comb, young lady," said Donahey, "and there's no one in it except those whose names we know. Nobody has got out of here during the night or this morning. It's been surrounded."

"Then he's here now," I said.

"He's here, all right," Donahey echoed with ominous finality. "And he isn't going to get away."

Monty Mitchell said thoughtfully, "A pity you have let this find be known. The thief, whoever he was, might have meant to hide the stones only till the first flurry of searching died down. He could feel reasonably sure that Miss Seton would be wearing that dress tonight, in light and gay and all that, so he thought he had a good temporary hiding place."

I was passionately grateful for his words and for his coming and standing by me, as if casually.

"Why do you imagine he chose that dress for a hiding place?" asked Donahey very slowly as if picking his way.

"The position of the room, for one thing," said Mitchell. "It was near the art gallery, and its door was visible from the gallery door—later on the gallery would have been a good lurking place till he saw his chance to nip in and retrieve the jewels. I rather think he meant to retrieve them," he went on thoughtfully, screwing up his black eyebrows, "for they are too valuable to ignore. . . . You saw the dress was right by the door, didn't you?" he asked of me.

"On a chair by the door," I repeated.

Donahey glanced up and said, "Does it strike you as feasible, Mitchell, that any one who committed murder for those diamonds would take a chance on losing them afterwards?"

(TO BE CONTINUED)