

UNCONFESSED

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WNU Service

CHAPTER VII—Continued

There were three people, I thought, on whom suspicion might justifiably rest; there were the Prince and Princess Rancini and Letty Van Alstyn, but there was not a scrap of evidence against any of them.

No, there were four. I had to be honest with myself; I couldn't pretend. There was Alan Deck. And against him was all the evidence they had.

I wanted to see Deck. I wanted to talk with him. Not here, with Clancy at hand—yes, here, even though we could say nothing that mattered. If I could see him again, I thought I could find an answer to that worrying uncertainty in me.

The testing was a difficult business. The handkerchief had been so thoroughly washed that I began to despair of uncertainty in my experiments. Not about the rust marks; those I did make sure of.

Then, in one of the corners, close under the fold of the hemstitched hem, I found traces of stain that yielded a blood reaction.

"That's blood," I said. In the intervals of waiting and drying I walked up and down the gallery.

I found myself wishing to get at the records of these pictures to begin the real work for which I had come. For a few moments I forgot the nightmare of that murder. I grinned at a Magdalen, attributed to Titian, analogous to the one at Naples, and then I was caught by a lovely little Virgin whose suppliant, adoring curves and pure, poignant ecstasy made me yearn to prove her the creation of Angelico that she was labeled.

As my mind bit on these familiar realities my nerves steadied, and when I went down with the policeman to make my report I was feeling more like myself.

Alan Deck was with Monty Mitchell, and when he saw me he came forward quickly, with a "Good morning, accomplice!" in his mocking way. Monty said, "Find anything?" And they both came with me while I had my moment of importance, making my report to Donahy.

I used all the words and technical terms that I thought he would not know but the main facts were clear—blood in one corner, and five marks of rust.

Donahy nodded, as if he had guessed it all the time, and I moved away with Deck. Mitchell stayed with the inspector; I remember seeing him turn the handkerchief about very slowly in his hands.

Deck said thoughtfully, "That blood rather disposes of the theory that the diamonds might have been put there by some one who just picked them up—afterwards."

And at my assent he said, "Well, that's that!" in a hard voice.

Grant now appeared before us, announcing that a buffet luncheon was being served in the dining room. As I went to wash my stained fingers I saw Miss Van Alstyn in the hall ahead of me. As she paused at her door, opposite that closed door behind which Nora Harriden was lying, I saw the maid, Anson stop her, holding something in her hand.

"Yes, I threw it away," I heard Miss Van Alstyn say. "It's broken—throw it out."

"It's so pretty," Anson murmured. "If you don't mind my keeping it—"

"As you like," said Miss Van Alstyn indifferently and disappeared into her room.

Out of an impulse of friendliness for that pretty Anson I turned and asked her what she had.

"It's for the hair, miss, only the comb is broken," she told me. "May-

be I could get another fixed on. It's so pretty—"

It was pretty—a sharp-pointed crescent about four or five inches long, glittering with bright brown stones. The comb, at right angles to the crescent, had been broken sharply off. I picked it up; it seemed a little large and too heavy for anywhere except the back of the head, above a froth of curls. It was of some solid brown metal and I thought another comb could easily be soldered on.

"It's worth it," I told Anson, and she said she had been afraid to carry it away without asking, for fear it had fallen in the basket by mistake.

I was reflecting that costume jewelry, to Miss Van Alstyn, was not worth repairing, and then, staring at those hard, pointed ends, that solid metal—

If a woman had a thing like this in her hands . . . if she struck out with it, furiously. . . .

"When did you find this, Anson?" Last night, she told me. When she had been arranging the room for the night.

"Were the broken pieces of the comb in the basket, too?"

"I did see some broken pieces. But they went with the trash. They couldn't have been fixed."

"With the trash? Where did the trash go?"

"Why, in the incinerator, Miss," she answered, eyes widening at my questions.

"And was the incinerator going?"

"Last night, miss? I couldn't say. I know it hasn't been going this morning for that policeman gave orders not to have anything burned."

I turned the crescent about. No sign of a blood film over any of its brightness—but blood could be superficially washed off in running water. A blow with it, a jab with one of those viciously pointed ends, would have broken off the comb. . . .



The Prince Rancini Walked By.

She might not have thought to wash off the pieces of the comb. . . .

In imagination I saw Letty Van Alstyn snatching this crescent from her hair, striking out recklessly. . . .

Anson was staring at me; I handed it back to her, saying something about my interest in imitations to excuse my absorption in it. . . . Letty Van Alstyn came out of her room, passing down to luncheon, and in the vague smile she swept over us I felt a sharpening of curiosity.

Scrubbing my stained fingers, brushing out my hair, I tried to fit the pieces together in this pattern. . . . Suppose Letty were guilty—how about that scene at the window? Well, that could have had

nothing to do with the actual murder—it might have been Deck, or Rancini or Harriden for all his denials. . . .

Suppose it had been Harriden. Suppose he had gone on down to dinner, and Nora had been in bed, resentful, hysterical, when Letty had dropped in on her way down. Nora might have surmised that Letty had been stirring up Dan's jealousy, so there was every reason for a scene between them. A terrific scene, in which Letty, in blind rage or in self protection had struck out with the first thing at hand. . . .

I had to imagine her picking up one of Dan's handkerchiefs to wipe off the blood . . . thrusting Nora into the closet . . . waiting till she was sure the rest were down at dinner, then putting her out the window. Perhaps the blood-stained handkerchief had been a crumpled ball in Letty's brown bag and after dinner she had gone up to wash it out—that was when she had met me in the hall, outside Mrs. Harriden's door.

Perhaps the yellow diamonds had been in Letty's brown bag, too. And late that night—or rather early in the morning—she had torn the initials out of the dried handkerchief and stolen up to my room.

The pieces fitted together. I thought, excitedly. But there was nothing in the world to sustain that wild suspicion but my vivid imagination—nothing unless there should be blood upon the piece of broken comb in the incinerator.

I fairly raced down, then, to the buffet luncheon, eager to pour this out to Mitchell.

Mitchell was busily filling a plate so I went over to him. His eyes looked darker and more alert than ever; his black hair, which began quite far back on his forehead, was standing up in an excited crest. We sat down at a corner of the table—he hated eating in his lap, he declared—and under my breath I poured out my conjectures.

Promptly he dashed my hopes. "Incinerator been going for an hour. Donahy let them start it up when he saw there wasn't any rags there—just trash and garbage. Did you keep the crescent?"

When I said I hadn't, he advised me to get it and test it for blood. But he seemed a little detached. He even said, "I think you're barking up the wrong tree."

"It was your tree," I told him indignantly. "You thought she would be a guilty soul."

"Oh, a possibility—yes. But somehow—" He left it in dubiety.

We went on talking. I remember saying about the inquest. "Why don't they have it today and get it over with?" And he said that Donahy wanted to do more work on the case, wanted enough for an indictment, if possible. And he said, "By keeping people herded up like this, in an isolation camp, he can induce a state of nerves that may cause a breakdown. Anything may develop any moment. That's psychology."

After luncheon he had me get my hat and coat and, with Donahy's permission, he took me outdoors and marched me up and down the landscaped road in front of the house where cool winds and sunshine had their tonic effect.

The shore was being patrolled by guards to keep reporters and curiosity seekers from landing, and I had a feeling of being under martial law in some internment camp.

Other members of the house-party were out taking exercise, too; the Prince Rancini walked by, very smartly turned out with spats and a cane. After we had passed each other twice he turned, smiling, to ask permission to join us.

Without his wife's presence he expanded into gaiety; he seemed to me to be a big, light-hearted pleas-

ure-loving fellow, with a Continental's casual cynicism about life and emotional responsiveness to beauty. He stopped to show us a particularly lovely contrast of light and dark blue in the sea, pointing with his stick, and he told us of his swimming feats at Capri and his skiing records at St. Moritz and of his shooting triumphs in Scotland.

For a time I was amused at this distraction; no one could have imagined that we three people, promenading up and down those stately avenues, chatting of tournaments were three members of an isolated household darkened by death and shadowed by suspicion.

Mitchell said very little—he had small chance against the prince except through interruptions. But he created a diversion by suddenly tripping over a root and emitting a succession of fervent damns as he hopped about distressfully. "It's this confounded ankle—strained it a year ago. May I borrow your stick?" he asked the prince.

I thought Rancini passed it over rather reluctantly. At the time I imagined he fancied it as part of his own costuming. Mitchell leaned on it as he walked along with us, refusing to return to the house. "Be all right in a second."

Then Rancini began telling about his palace in Rome that he was doing over and about his efforts to collect the tapestries and furniture that he had previously sold. I gathered that he was doing all this with his wife's money.

It was when we returned to the house, and Mitchell was passing back the cane, declaring himself completely recovered, that he made a casual-sounding observation.

"This is one of those trick things, isn't it, prince? Isn't there a spring I feel here—?"

"But yes," said Rancini, without the slightest hesitation. "You press this—please take your hands away. I do it—I know this thing. So—like that. And out comes this little toy."

What came out was the point of a substantial looking knife, quite a stabbing tool. "Another press and a bayonet," said Rancini, laughing.

"Quite a toy," Mitchell commented, eyeing it quizzically. "And not such a toy at that. In Rome now, the streets are safe, but in Paris, when one is late—in the quarters of a little milliner, perhaps—"

"With a jealous lover around the corner," Monty Mitchell suggested.

"Si, si!" Rancini laughed, then under his breath to me he murmured in swift Italian, "When the heart is empty one must pass the hours," and I smiled up at his smile and asked to see the knife again.

I looked hard at it. The sharp, strong point seemed bright, unstained.

CHAPTER VIII

Mitchell said very naturally, "A useful thing, that! A pity Nora Harriden didn't have one at hand when that fellow set on her."

Not a quiver of Rancini's face, as far as I could see. Perhaps the fact that there wasn't a quiver, that his voice was blandly expressionless meant something. Smoothly he agreed, "It might have made all the difference."

We were back in the house again, its walls shut upon us, closing us in to tension and uncertainty and the strain of our own thoughts.

Mitchell went off to Donahy, coming back just for a moment to report that no trace of the pendant had been found. When I went to Anson to get the crescent, with a little made-up speech about my interest in imitation stones, she told me that Miss Van Alstyn had asked for it back, giving her instead a star of brilliants.

She was immensely pleased and I immensely puzzled.

Letty Van Alstyn had been indifference itself before me as to the fate of that broken ornament. Why the sudden, surreptitious change? I tried, on the impulse, to find her but she wasn't in her room; my maid at last located her in the

Keller sitting room, with Mrs. Grant and the two Kellers, playing bridge.

"I don't think they liked my being in on them, and Miss Van Alstyn looked frankly wonderful when I asked for the crescent. She had taken it back, she told me, her eyes reverting to the cards; rather thought she'd get herself another one and so didn't want a plicate about. Certainly I can look at it if I wished; it was where in her room, she supposed vaguely. "Just ask Anson to let it." I closed the door upon her faintly breathed but perfectly audible "Extraordinary."

But Anson could not find the crescent. She promised to bring up to me when she did. "Maybe I locked it up with her jewelry," she suggested.

I decided to wait for the result of Anson's search, and I was sleepy, after the wakeful night



His Eyes Looked Me Through Through.

the walk in the open air that curled up in my rose cushion chair for ten minutes and slept forty. I woke to find Harriden in my room, sitting stolidly there, fronting me with an air of scrutiny.

I sat up quickly, pulling my rumpled gray frock and brushing my hair out of my eyes, and at him with something very much like fright. Behind him the door was closed.

"You needn't try to run," he said to me, and I flung back, "Why should I run? What do you want, Mr. Harriden?"

"I want to know what you know about all this," he growled at me. "You're in with Deck. I want to know what all that row was all—that row with Elkins—"

His voice fumbled so at the end that I felt a pang of pity for him in spite of all my other feelings.

"I never saw Alan Deck come here," I said and spoke quietly and gently as I could, don't know anything about his affairs."

"That's your story, and you stick to it before the others get want the facts, and I'm prepared to pay for them. And I'll let off—I'll let you off whatever those stones have got you in for, you'll tell me everything you know."

"I know nothing." "You know why you went to my wife's room last night. You some reason—even if you slapped you wouldn't go in there."

His eyes, grimly skeptical, looked through and through.

"You can't pull any wool over my eyes. You were meeting Deck before dinner. I want to know he and—what he was there for my wife about. He wanted to know from her—wasn't that it? He never met him before, as you he's interested enough in you to tell you. Your own safety is a good substantial sum of money ought to make you see the

(TO BE CONTINUED)