

UNCONFESSED

By MARY HASTINGS BRADLEY

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WNU Service

CHAPTER VIII—Continued

"I'll give you five thousand—five thousand for a few words. Only no faking. I want the truth."

"You are utterly mistaken in me, Mr. Harriden," I said steadily. "I couldn't sell information if I had it. . . I know nothing at all of Alan Deck and his secrets."

Some one knocked. I called, "Come in," and the door opened. There stood Alan Deck.

At sight of Harriden he stiffened, then, with assumed naturalness to me, "About those pictures—"

Harriden got to his feet; his eyes flickered from Deck back to me with a malevolent sort of satisfaction.

"Well—is it yes?" he said harshly, his look holding mine.

"It's no, Mr. Harriden."

Without another word to me, without a glance toward Dick, he marched past him, out the door.

I burst out, "Oh, why did you come?" to Dick.

His gaze that had followed Harriden to the door flashed back to me.

"What was Dan doing here?"

"Trying to buy me," I said. "Offered me five thousand dollars to find out what you and his wife were quarreling about."

"Want me to toss you a yarn to win the five?" said Alan Deck with a sudden smile.

I was sorry for him, for the tormented look that underlay the pride and challenge of his high-held head. Quickly I began to talk about Rancini and the discovery of his sword cane.

I thought his interest would seize on that, but he shrugged it away. "Well, what of it? What do you think you can prove?"

At the unresponsiveness of his face I flung out, "But don't you want to find out who did it before the inquest tomorrow?"

"Let the dicks find out," he said. "They can't hold me now on a few words when I was lit. . . I'm not worrying about tomorrow."

"I want to get out of this damn house!" he broke out. "I want to get back to New York—back to my office, back to sanity and sense—I never want to see a soul here again! Except you—I want to take you out to dinner and to a theater, and I want you to go dancing with me in that blue satin gown—I want to hold you in my arms, to soft music, you understand—"

And then he dropped into a chair—the deep cushioned chair beside the little white one I was sitting in and said coaxingly, "Talk to me, Lella. Tell me about your picture puzzles and the fakes and the millionaires you rescue. The pre-depression millionaires. Tell me all the stories of your young art life."

Nothing that we said mattered; it was all about paintings and artists and people and plays.

The telephone broke in on it. Monty Mitchell's voice told me to come down at once.

We both went down, I expecting heaven-knows-what of revelation, but finding only that Mitchell wanted my report on the hair ornament.

I murmured that he had said I was barking up the wrong tree, but I scurried back upstairs, and this time I got the crescent with no delay, for Miss Van Alstyn was in her room and produced the gewgaw from her jewel box.

"Is there anything special about it?" she murmured, and I said lamely enough that I wanted to study the stones. I might as well have studied Plymouth Rock, for there was no blood to be found on them. If there ever had been any, she'd had all the time in the world to wash it off. . . I gave it back to her and went downstairs again, finding Mitchell and Deck deep in talk.

"I found it. Nothing," I reported shortly to Mitchell.

He merely nodded, then said ear-

nestly, "I am telling Deck this 'I don't remember' stuff won't wash with a coroner's jury."

Deck's eyes, brilliant and haggard, played with him. "What do you suggest I say?"

Monte was ready. As I dropped down on the end of the couch beside him, he offered, low-toned, "Suppose Nora was jealous of Dan and Letty and threatened to raise the roof about them, and you warned her not to. What?"

"Got a cigarette?" said Deck. "Mine are all gone." He put the case he had taken out back in his pocket rather slowly. Casually he mentioned, "What about the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?"

The lawyer did not bat an eyelash. "Isn't that the truth—now that your head has cleared?"

"Why drag in Letty?"

"Why not? You'll have to explain those threats, and that does it—with no discredit to yourself."

Deck grinned. "You're a swell lawyer, Monty."

"And you need one."

Deck rose with a vague word or two. Silently we sat there and watched his tall figure sauntering away. Monty Mitchell's lips were creased in a taut line; he knew, and I knew, with heart-catching anxiety, that whatever Deck had done or not done, whatever had been between him and that dead woman, whatever danger menaced him now, he was going on in his own high-handed way, to play his lone, defiant game. And I was terribly afraid for him.

CHAPTER IX

NOTHING happened that night. I gathered in a stout, dignified gray cat that I found promenading the hall and fed it morsels from my squab and tried to pretend that I was not lonely. It seemed a thousand years since I had looked down to those two dark silhouettes in that front window.

I tried again to reconstruct those silhouettes, hoping that some trick of memory would bring to life a forgotten detail, but I was so tired that their shapes wavered fantastically before me.

Nothing was going to interest that jury, I thought, except the finding of those diamonds inside my dress and the report of Deck's violent threats to Nora Harriden. And his absence from the table.

I needed all the rest I could get to face that tomorrow, so I took a hot bath and went to bed.

At first I slept, then as my weariness wore off, my worrying thoughts kept coming to the surface, rousing me, and at last, in the early morning dark I lay wide awake, my mind racing like an engine. I thought of the questions they were likely to ask me and a sudden qualm assailed me. I had taken it absolutely for granted that I would tell the same story which I had told Donahey about my reasons for going up to Mrs. Harriden's room, and that Deck would tell his same story, but now—

This was different, this testimony before a coroner and a jury. This was under oath.

Suppose Deck wanted me to tell "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth"—to show that since he had asked me to go up he believed that Nora Harriden was still alive?

I had to find out, I thought, stricken with belated panic, before I went into that jury room. I would phone him for an interview the very moment it was light enough to make my call possible.

Then my mind turned to that handkerchief with the rust marks. Some time on Friday night that handkerchief had been drying on a radiator.

Now a thought came to me. I didn't know all that Donahey had asked, but I knew that in front of me no one had asked if such a handkerchief had been seen.

I made up my mind to see every maid on that floor in the morning.

It was Anson my thoughts circled about. I remembered that Anson had not volunteered anything about the open window, though its being open must have seemed a trifle unusual. She had not volunteered anything. She had given me a distinct impression of diffident reticence.

Elkins, too, had not come forward with his statements until he had been questioned, and then he had had a bad struggle between his duty to his employers and his conscience and love of importance. I began to think it quite possible that some one has seen something that only direct questioning would bring out.

Day was a desperate laggard. Very slowly the pale oblongs of my window lightened.

Seven o'clock. Could I telephone then? No, that was far too early—I forced myself to wait till seven-thirty. Then there was no answer. The instrument was dead.

I decided to dress and go downstairs. Dressing took time. I combed my duff of hair into decorum and



"You Lie So Convincingly."

put on a subdued lipstick. Then, just as I was ready to leave, came a knock at my door and the breakfast tray.

I asked my maid what rooms she looked after. "Why yours, miss, and the next when it is occupied."

"Then you aren't very busy now?" I suggested.

"I assist with the linen. The mending, I mean," she explained.

Mending and the third-floor rooms—and mine was the only one occupied on the third floor. No use going into the questions about the handkerchiefs, now, though I decided to ask Mitchell to see that the question was asked at the inquest of every one. I hurried through my breakfast to get downstairs.

I took the staircase to the left. One flight down I saw Anson standing in talk with the maid who did my room, and I quickened my steps toward her.

Her arms were piled with fresh towels and the feminine in me could not resist paying attention to those towels, they were so lovely.

Anson's pretty face was troubled as she turned it to me. I said, "Oh, Anson, there's something I want to ask you," and the other maid slipped away. Anson said, "Just a minute please. I'll be right out," and turned into the door of Prince Rancini, with a quick, preliminary knock.

I didn't want to stand there waiting so I walked on down the hall, past the closed door where Nora Harriden was lying, then turned and sauntered slowly along.

Ahead of me I saw Anson come hurriedly out of Rancini's door her hands to her disordered hair, and behind her the prince made a Jack-in-the-Box appearance, popping

back as he caught sight of me but not before I had glimpsed his flashing, amused smile.

Anson was breathing quickly. "Those foreigners!" she threw out, tucking in the loosened edges of her starched white frill. "He can keep his hands off!" she added, resentment stirring her out of her reticence.

"Why don't you complain to the princess?" I suggested wickedly.

That startled Anson more than Rancini had done. She looked at me out of shocked eyes. "Oh, the maid is always wrong," she said with cynical succinctness. "If you'll excuse me, miss, I'll be going back for my towels," and she cast a look, troubled for all her recovered composure, at the closed door of the room.

"Just a moment, Anson. I was waiting to see you. I want to ask you something."

She kept her face away from me. "I'll be telling all I know at the inquest this morning."

"I know, but I want to speak to you first. You know you said to the inspector that you could not say that Mr. Deck had been in Mrs. Harriden's room—when you saw him in the hall—you remember you said that, don't you?"

"I remember," she said almost reluctantly. "I didn't like to say anything else and make the gentleman trouble—I didn't know what words he had been using to the poor lady then."

Her voice changed to such sternness that I said quickly, "But perhaps Elkins didn't understand—"

"He's not one to misunderstand," she told me firmly. "I'm promised to Elkins so I might say I know him. He didn't like to say what he had to say, but it was his duty. A man making such threats—I!"

All sympathy for Deck was gone from her now. I went on anxiously. "And there's another thing. Did you happen to see a handkerchief drying on a radiator in any of the rooms last night?"

I wished I could know what that change in her face meant. Had I hit on something—or was she merely startled at the idea? Her answer seemed slow in coming and when it did it was oblique.

"Will they ask me that, miss?"

"Yes, they will ask you that. But if I could know first—"

"I'll tell everything they ask me downstairs," she said at last. "It's my duty. I know, though I'm sorry enough—any one might have washed out a handkerchief—"

I said more; I urged her eagerly but the girl was immovable. She only repeated that she would tell all she knew later.

It is quite futile to look back now and think, "Oh, if I had only done that differently, if I had only found the right word!" I see her there, in her pretty black and white, that secret knowledge which she was so reluctant to reveal in her troubled eyes, and I think that if only I had been able to induce her to share it, perhaps—

But she moved away determinedly, and I went on upstairs to my room where I wrote a note to Mitchell, asking him to have that question put about the handkerchief, and another to Deck, asking him to come to see me as soon as possible. I rang for the maid and asked her to deliver them. Then I waited, hoping desperately that each moment would bring Deck.

He didn't come. He might be testifying. He might be being kept incommunicado. . . I mustn't let myself look so worried; I must seem natural and at ease before that jury.

I was in a tense state of nerves when they finally came for me. My heart was beating sickeningly when I entered that dining room, and for a moment the faces turned to me seemed like blurs in a fog. Then I steadied and took in the groups. I saw a knot of people writing away busily on little pads, newspaper people, I supposed, and I saw Mitchell and Donahey. The six men of the jury were lined along the dazzling black table and the coroner, a tall,

thin man with a drooping mustache, was at the end, and a court reporter, writing away, sat beside the vacant chair for the witness, across from the jury.

"Do you solemnly swear that the testimony that you shall give in this case now on hearing shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help you God?"

I swore it. I told myself to go out of mind any idea of a change of testimony, to hold fast to everything I had already said. I sat down in the witness chair, as I was told, and faced the jury. They were tradespeople from the small, nearby town.

There is no need in going over my testimony. They asked me everything, bit by bit, and I told them all I had told before. About the scene at the window. About meeting Alan Deck in the picture gallery. About being summoned down to dinner. They tried to get me to say the time that Deck had been absent from the table but I said I couldn't say.

When it came to my going up to Mrs. Harriden's room I could feel the attention tightening about me. I tried to shut out of my mind every fear of Deck's change of testimony. I repeated word for word what I had told Donahey.

The coroner put a question I hadn't foreseen.

"Have you anything in your possession, among your chemicals, that would take blood stains out of a handkerchief?"

"Why yes," I said honestly. "Just peroxide often does it."

My voice was breathless something. I was grateful when they went on to the noise I thought I had heard in the night, and why I had not reported it.

"Why you know how it is about noises in the dark," I explained. "The only sounds I could be sure I'd heard were those footsteps out in the hall, and I thought those belonged to a guard—the inspector had said the place would be guarded."

"That is all, Miss Seton. . . Witness is excused."

I was the last. No one else was called; the jury rose and withdrew in the coroner's wake, out to the drawing room. I looked about me—certainly and Mitchell came up to me.

"You're one of the best witnesses I ever saw. . . You lie so convincingly," he said.

I could feel the blood receding from my heart. "Why—did Deck—?" I caught myself up, but I could not turn my eyes away from his knowing dark ones.

"No, he didn't reveal anything," he told me, and my relief was so poignant it must have looked so all over me.

He added, "But I'd give a pig's nickel to know what he really said to you that night—about taking steps."

Then he told me kindly, "I was deceiving you, my dear, when I said that you lied well. To the tortured eye you may appear careful, to one who knows you—But free, to one who knows you—But you made a darned good impression."

"But Deck—"

"Not so good. Elkins' story impressed them. Deck was a fool not to produce an explanation. And to Deck didn't put through any call to his paper that night. At least the telephone girl has no recollection of being asked for a New York number that night."

I asked him if he'd got my note about the handkerchief and if the question had been asked the maid. He told me that no one reported having seen any handkerchief drying.

I was puzzled. "But Anson—didn't Anson—?"

"Anson wasn't there. Hiding out somewhere; reluctant to give testimony, I suppose."

I told Mitchell about my conversation with her, and her words. "She said that she'd be sorry enough to have to tell it. That any one might have washed out a handkerchief."

(TO BE CONTINUED)