

UNCONFESED

By MARY HASTINGS BRADLEY

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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. 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, and believes she is spitefully hiding. 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. Don 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. Donahay, police inspector, questions the guests. Harriden falls to report the row he had with Nora. He brands Lella's story of seeing a man strike a woman a lie. Anson, a maid, tells of seeing Deck outside the Harriden door. Deck says he passed by in seeking a lost handkerchief.

CHAPTER IV—Continued

"I don't know what time I came up but I was loafing downstairs till I had to hustle to dress," Mitchell reported, and Keller stated that he had gone up before the time in question and had been talking through the open doors with his wife.

Donahay turned toward Alan Deck. "You, Mr. Deck?"

Deck answered, "I went up fairly early to my room—though I haven't any wife to vouch for it." His tone was lightly mocking. "After I changed I went to the picture gallery on the third floor—by the south stairs," he mentioned. "My presence there Miss Seton can certify to. We encountered each other there."

The inspector's gaze moved back to me. "Appointment?"

"Accident," I told him. "We had never met each other before."

"What were you doing there?"

I reminded him that the pictures were my business in the house. Alan Deck said merely, "Time on my hands—things to think out. Like a big place to tramp about in."

Donahay made more of his little notes. Then, as usual, he asked for the exact time of this encounter and listened wearily to our uncertainties that finally decided it had been a little before eight. "That's when I lost my handkerchief," said Deck.

"Now let me get this straight," said Donahay. "Your rooms are in the south wing, second floor. Before dinner you went up to the gallery on the second floor, using the stairs on your side of the house. You met Miss Seton there, accidentally. You lost your handkerchief. During dinner you went up to call your paper, then you remembered that you had lost your handkerchief, probably in the gallery, and you started out to find it. You went along the hall that goes across the length of the house, passing the door of Mrs. Harriden's room."

"Among others," interpolated Deck. "Was that when the maid saw you?"

Deck reflected. "No—when I was coming back from the gallery. She was coming from the south, along the hall toward me."

"O.K. The maid saw you and thought you might have been coming out of the room. That's it, isn't it?"

"That's it," said Deck in his nonchalant voice. "I might just have stopped, wondering if it was worth while to try that call again. I didn't get it, the first time."

Donahay finished his notes without comment, then concentrated again upon me.

"Now then—about this thing at the window now—"

"Can't you forget that?" Harriden demanded. "Why do you want to waste your time—"

"Now, now, Mr. Harriden, it may lead to something. It may have been some outside fellow, somebody who came here to see her on the Q.T. He—"

Harriden made a surge forward and I thought the veins on his congested face would burst. He looked almost at the limit of his self control.

"Are you suggesting that my wife had a clandestine visitor—"

"Not the way you think at all," the official returned with his unmoved de-

tachment. "She might have owed him money, gambling or something, or he might have been blackmailing her. Funny things like that happen. He may have forced his way in, and she didn't want to give him away. She may have hid him in the closet and faked a headache so they could talk while you folks were eating. And then he made a grab at her shiners and they got to struggling, and he stabbed her."

Harriden cursed him for a fool. "Do you think my wife was ever afraid of a blackmailer?" he thundered. "Can't you see this girl is just making this up to get herself some sensational limelight—"

"Well, now, she hasn't any reason for making it up, has she?"

Harriden gave me a sudden, strange look.

"How do I know?" he said wearily. "I don't know a damned thing about her except that she's lying. She cooked up this story to cover up her going into my wife's room."

"Don't you think, Mr. Donahay," came Mrs. Crane's practical voice from somewhere behind us, "that this investigation has gone far enough tonight? It is well on into the morning."

Donahay conceded, "Something in it, lady. There's guards around the place and guards inside the house and nobody is to stir out till we get through with this."

We had risen to go out when one of the policemen came in, bringing a young man in the livery of an under-butler.

CHAPTER V

He was rather a reedy looking young man, with a cadaverous face, prominent cheek-bones and deep-set eyes. He looked excited, and the policeman with him was excited, and he boomed along to the inspector. Donahay took the affairs into his hands. "My man says you've admitted knowing something. Now, what's your name?"

"Elkins," said the man in a strained, nervous voice.

"You work here?"

"Yes, sir, for three years. And I mean no disrespect to my employers in speaking out about a guest. I understand it's my duty to tell anything that I might know."

"That's your duty," said Donahay grimly. "What do you know?"

Elkins was breathing quickly. "People often forget that servants can hear," he said. "They talk out while we're passing things—it's embarrassing. I was just behind that Chinese screen in the lounge when they were talking. I was taking glasses off a table."

"It was the violence of what was being said that caught me," Elkins went on. "Not like the ordinary run of talk of the cocktail hour."

Donahay only nodded encouragingly. "But it was savage sounding, sir. The lady was Mrs. Harriden. She had been drinking with the gentleman, talking together for some time. And then, when I was behind the screen, I heard him say in quite a terrible voice, though very low, 'If you do, you'll be the sorriest woman on God's earth.'"

"And what did she say?"

"I didn't catch that. I got the tone of her voice—it was like she was laughing sort of sassy," said Elkins with a slip into the colloquial. "And the man said to what she said, 'I warn you.' And then he said something about lying, he said, 'I'd say you lied in your teeth,' and she said something again, that I didn't hear. . . . Her words were all run together like. And then he said, 'God, if you do—I warn you.' And then somebody was asking for another shaker, and I had to hurry across the room. . . . And when I heard she was lying dead downstairs—well, I couldn't say this had anything to do with it, but when the officer began asking me had I heard anything of their goings on and was there any bad blood about, why I'd have done less than my duty, sir, if I had covered the facts."

"Sure. You had to tell it," Donahay said evenly. "Now—about this fellow. Who was he? You haven't told us that, yet."

"There, sir. That gentleman there, Mr. Deck."

Deck stood there, and his white face, with his dark, bitter, defiant eyes, sent a queer terror through me. He was like a man in a pillory for all the world to gaze at.

And then my eyes went on, and found the figure of Harriden. He had stood there, back by the door, during that time, listening. . . . And now he looked at Deck.

Donahay'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."

Donahay 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?" Donahay 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 crushing 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 stark, 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 fasten 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. Donahay 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 moving before my eyes—Nora Harriden's limp, gold-clad body in her husband's arms . . . that husband's face, rigid, grief-smitten . . . 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 Donahay 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 Deck," 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, and the flesh was sparer and tighter over the hard-angled bones.

"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 Donahay 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 turbans 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 papers had had to take the facts that Donahay had given out, and the list of guests and do what they could with their imagination.

After the inquest, I supposed, Deck's threats could no longer be kept secret; the papers would make what they could of that. Luckily he would have his own paper to give a favorable version. But he would have to give an explanation of his words—and I hoped fervently that the night had brought him counsel and inspiration. Restlessly I wondered where he was keeping himself.

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 staid, 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.

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