

UNCONFESSSED

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 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. Harriden admits that he had a row, and believes she is secretly hiding. Letty tells of seeing Lella come from the room. Lella accuses Harriden of having struck his wife. This Harriden denies. From the Harriden's 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. Donahay, police inspector, questions the guests. Harriden 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. Elkins, a servant, tells of overhearing Deck threaten Mrs. Harriden earlier in the day. Deck explains he was intoxicated and does not remember. That night Lella awakes with the impression of someone being in her room and then hears steps in the hall. Believing she was mistaken, she does not report it.

CHAPTER V—Continued

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 his shrug.

I said, "Who, indeed?" in his own Italian, and at that he changed back to smiles and began to sport 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. I hadn't heard her come up nor had he, and his face was a comical study in boyish-looking guilt.

Aloudly, the Princess Rancini murmured, "I think you are wanted by the police. They asked me to tell you



"I Think You Are Wanted by the Police."

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 Donahay 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, I 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 Donahay 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 undid the pin, and let the cloth drop in 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 noises in the night. I blurted, "Why, there was some one then—there was some one!"

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 into 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 Donahay, "and there's no one in it except those whose names we know. Nobody has got out of here during the night of this morning. It's been surrounded."

"Then he's here now," I said. "He's here, all right," Donahay 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 wouldn't be wearing that dress tonight, too 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 Donahay 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 said the dress was right by the door, didn't you?" he asked of me.

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

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

"Very feasible," said Mitchell, "if he found the trail getting too hot. . . . But you don't know that the one who hid them was the one who did the murder."

"No," said Donahay.

"No," said Mitchell, very firmly. "Some one may very well have found them afterwards and just not mentioned it. And then he got cold feet for fear of being suspected of the murder and so got rid of them in this hiding place."

"Sounds far-fetched," was Donahay's comment. "What's the matter with this girl's hiding them herself?"

It was out in the open at last, the accusation.

"Well, there are lots of matters against that," said Mitchell in a very reasonable tone. "One is that Miss Seton isn't the sort of person who goes about hiding diamonds."

The inspector grunted. "Somebody hid 'em. Somebody got 'em off Mrs. Harriden's neck. And you can't deny that this girl had the opportunity when she went upstairs, after dinner—"

"The room was empty when I entered it," I flashed at him.

"That's what you say." "Anson must know that she made the room before I came up," I said. "The Princess Rancini was up just after me, and she found the room ready for the night. There wasn't time, between our visits—"

I couldn't go on.

Donahay's thoughts were following mine. "No-no, there wasn't time," he conceded equably. "Not for the killing. . . . But there'd have been time enough for you to pick up the shiners," he added. "You might have found them lying about."

I stared back at him and hardness came to me. "You are very wrong," I said curtly, "and you are wasting time you ought to spend in finding the real criminal."

"Anybody might pick up diamonds," said Donahay, looking me over with his experienced eyes.

"But why would they be left there?" I went on, trying desperately to be lucid. "Why would any one who killed Mrs. Harriden for her jewels go away and leave them behind?"

"He might not have killed her for her jewels," Donahay pointed out. "Then you came along and did the finding—"

Harriden's voice overtook his. Harriden had been standing there, watching, his eyes as hard as flints now,

suddenly, he intervened. "She was Deck's confederate," he said. "The thing's clear enough. He did the killing. It may have been for—reasons of his own—the harsh voice grated over the words then went indomitably on, "but certainly cupidly played a part afterwards. He took that chain. Stuffed it into his pocket and went down to diner. Passed it to Miss Seton at the table. She went upstairs to hide them in her gown."

"But why, then, would she go into your wife's room?" Mitchell wanted to know.

"There's a diamond missing," said Harriden grimly. "The big one. He sent her up to look for it. She made up this cock-and-bull story of a slapped cheek as an excuse."

There was a dreadful silence. Harriden went on, "She may have found it, and she may not. Deck may have the diamond on her. He may have been holding out on her."

I said in a low voice, "This would all be funny if it wasn't so terrible," and Mr. Keller murmured uneasily, "You're going pretty far in your accusations, Dan. . . ."

"You were meeting Mr. Deck in the gallery just before dinner," Donahay reminded me. "Now how about that?"

"I told you that was sheer accident," Mitchell created a brisk diversion.

"Mr. Harriden's feelings are really not evidence. Now that cloth those diamonds were tied up in is evidence. May I see it?"

Donahay handed it over. It was a piece of linen, a fine hemstitched handkerchief, with one corner torn out as if to remove a monogram. The cloth was crumpled and faintly stained.

Mitchell examined it, then passed it to me. "What do you make of it, Miss Seton?"

"It's been washed," I said, trying hard to speak normally. "Washed and dried. Those brown marks look like radiator marks."

"Washed, by Jimmy!" Mitchell was alert as a terrier. "Now what do you think was washed out, Mr. Inspector?"

We all knew the answer to that—blood.

"Your man going over the handkerchiefs in this house?" Mitchell rather sharply asked of Donahay, and Donahay passed on his disrelish at the rebuke in the brusqueness of his tone to his subordinate, as he gave the order.

Harriden said, belligerently, that probably the man hadn't used his own.

"Then why tear out the monogram?" Mitchell retorted. His keen eyes, behind their glasses, studied Harriden almost banteringly. "Trying to discredit the clue, in case the hankies don't match?"

Harriden reddened. "I'm not making a secret of what I think," he said harshly. "Deck threatened my wife, and he carried out his threats. And, by God, I'll bring it home to him! As for this girl, who was his accomplice—"

"Don't let your feelings get the better of your judgment," the lawyer advised drily. "You've every reason to be sore as hell, but don't get a complex, and try to fit the facts to it."

He swung around to Donahay. "Let me know when you have that hanky report, and I'll be back for it. Both of us will," and his arm on my arm turned me about with him and headed me toward the door. "Let's go and talk this over," he said to me.

His tone was so friendly, so intimate, that I was touched to the quick; I had never needed a friend more in my life.

Together we went out into the hall and he led the way to a deep cushioned couch and proceeded to light cigarettes for us both. "Now this is very interesting," he said cheerfully. "I wonder if you have any chemicals with you that could test those spots on that handkerchief? Find out if they are rust or blood?"

At my assent he said, "Good!" heartily and then, "I'll get Donahay to give you the handkerchief. He'll probably send a guard with it. It's pretty important evidence—about all we have so far."

"Harriden's down on Deck like hell," I ventured. "Was Deck—was Mrs. Harriden—"

"Oh, her infatuation was notorious. I don't know the ins and outs—I wasn't one of their intimates. I never liked her."

"I don't see how you could resist her," I said honestly and thought of her dark, amazing eyes, her slim, seductive loveliness.

"Oh, a man could lose his head over her—Deck did, apparently—but I don't lose my head," the young lawyer informed me. "She wasn't likable."

And I thought of Nora Harriden's dead mouth, with its sharp, cruel edges. . . .

"Whatever they were quarreling about," Mitchell went on, "I don't see the motive for killing her. He may have been cooling to her and going after some other girl, and she was threatening to tell the girl—but that's not motive enough for murder."

"All that they have against you now is that you had the opportunity to pick up the chain and that it was found, this morning, secreted in your dress. It was secreted in a handkerchief whose identifying marks were torn out, that had been recently washed and dried without benefit of ironing, and the implication from that is that the handkerchief might have been bloodstained. Now, could Deck have passed you the chain at dinner in that very handkerchief? Going into the horrid details we have to imagine Deck thrusting Nora into the closet, wiping his hands on his hanky, or wiping off the point of whatever he

jabbed her with, and then promptly washing out the aforesaid hanky and drying it on the radiator. Then he put Nora out the window, snatched his hanky off the radiator, and came down to dinner. . . . Yes, it just could have been done. . . . Or he could have done the hanky washing and the consignment of the gems to you later in the evening, while all the bustle was going on."

"I hardly saw him—"

"Who's to prove that? What I'm examining is the strength of the possible case against you. How can you prove that you didn't know him in New York? You should never have let yourself meet him accidentally in that gallery! . . . I'm not saying, mind you, that you couldn't get a jury to believe that the chain was planted on you, as you say, but you don't want to get into all that if you can be kept out. And the best way to keep you out is to find who did the planting."

I nodded, rather helplessly.

"If the jury believes it was Alan Deck, they will at least look into the case against you as an accomplice. If the jury is shown that it is not Deck, there isn't any accomplice case against you."

"Yes, but suppose they do find the murderer—and he doesn't confess to stealing the diamonds. How am I going to prove that I didn't find the chain in the room when I came up and hid it myself?"

"You wouldn't have the blood-stained hanky to hide it in, silly—if that stains prove to be blood."

This was our chance, he said, to look into the situation. Rapidly, incisively, he spread that house-party out like a pack of cards about me. The servants he swept away with one conclusive gesture. He had been going into that all morning; every one was a retainer tried and true, some inherited from the elder Kellers, and almost



"We All Know the Answer to That—Blood."

all of long standing here. Elkins, the most recent addition, had impeccable references. And every one of them was downstairs after eight o'clock, except the maids busy with the rooms.

Then he dealt out the guests. It had to be some one who came along after eight o'clock when both Harriden and Anson had seen Mrs. Harriden on her bed. The thing was to discover in what order they had come down to dinner, and he had been working on that, he told me. The Kellers had been down first, then Mrs. Crane, and after that there was a confusion of accounts. The Watkins said they had come down and sat out in the lounge behind the long entrance hall before they registered among the others.

"Susy Watkins might have something against Nora Harriden," he said. "She was crazy over Deck, once for a time, but he couldn't see her for Nora. But that was the moment to put Nora out of business and not now."

He went on to speak of the Rancinis. "They're just landed—he'd hardly have cooked up an infernal passion for Nora so soon."

"But he knew her abroad," I told him.

"A European past! That needs scrutiny. He might have been the gent in the room with Nora about seven-thirty. He might have slipped in before Dan came up, and they had that fracas that you saw."

I objected. "But he couldn't have killed her then—she was seen afterwards at eight."

"He might have popped in again after Dan had gone down. The princess admitted they didn't go down together. She says he was late."

"It might have been the princess herself," I said. "She might have found out that he'd been in Mrs. Harriden's room and had one of those spasms of jealousy."

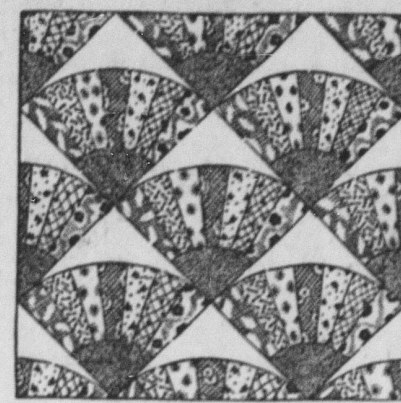
"But there were no signs of jealousy downstairs. Murder seems too serious for a first explosion. . . . Of course, she might not have meant murder—just meant to speak her mind about the prince's visit. And then, Nora, being in a state of nerves, tried to thrust her out and she caught up something handy—they haven't been able to find out yet what it was done with. But we'll take that up later. . . . Now you'd say the Rancinis, one or the other, might have been the one?"

I couldn't imagine it of them. But then, I couldn't imagine it of any one. To murder, I thought, one would have to be literally possessed by fury.

I asked a really sensible question. "What time was Harriden down? Before or after the Rancinis?"

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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