

# UNCONFESSED

By MARY HASTINGS BRADLEY

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## CHAPTER XIII—Continued

"She is. And now's her chance, but much good it will do her. Dan's had a dose of the sex to last him a lifetime. . . . But I want to see Letty. Mitchell went on, thoughtfully. "We'll just wait here and grab her when she comes out. That gives me an excuse for lingering in the light of your lovely eyes."

"You leave my eyes out of it," I said crossly.

"But I can't. They are in it. You didn't suppose it was your ability to tell an Angelico from an Angelica that made me your shield and buckler, did you? Where is your feminine intuition? What do you think I've been rallying round you for? Intellectual curiosity?"

"Because you're a lovely character," I said promptly. "Because you have sympathy and protectiveness and insight and intuition."

"Are you running for anything?" he inquired politely.

"Running for my life," I told him and that sobered us both.

He reverted to my theories. "You think it's Rancini—?"

"And you think—?"

"I don't think—yet. I just know something, something whose implications I can't quite fathom. And yet—"

"But what is it you know—? If you'll tell me—"

If he had told me then! But Letty Van Alstyn, with Deck in her wake, appeared at the dining-room entrance, and he hurried to rise to meet them.

"Letty darling," said Mitchell quickly, "what kind of cigarettes does our Alan smoke? Not a word out of you, Deck! It's an intelligence test," he told her, his keen eyes hard on her. "You have to be right the first time."

The girl smiled vaguely. "But I haven't the least idea."

"Then why did you say to the officer, when you asked for a cigarette, 'Ask Mr. Deck for his—I like his kind'?"

There was a queer stillness about me. Letty Van Alstyn looked merely perplexed. "Did I say that? I don't remember. I suppose I thought the man's would be terrible."

"As it happens, he doesn't smoke at all, but you didn't know that. You were just making sure he asked Deck for his case. And I ask you—why?"

Letty shrugged. "But I don't remember saying that. . . . I've just been telling Lanny how simply sick I feel to have asked for a smoke then. That did bring it on, didn't it? It was beastly luck."

"I haven't got it in for you, old dear," Deck told her lightly.

"All right. You fall, Letty. Maybe you know the answer, Deck? What kind of cigarettes do you smoke?"

"Luckies," said Deck ironically.

I saw his hand touch Letty's arm, and she said quickly, "Monty, do something for me—that's a darling. Never mind about the old cigarette case. I want you to run up and get Dan to come down here."

She added, "He'll go mad, all alone in that awful room. Tell him I simply must see him. Tell him it's important. You will, won't you?"

"Why not?" said Mitchell agreeably. "Only why didn't you ask Dan for a smoke? He was just behind you."

"Lawyer!" said Letty, in her mild, amused tone. "If you must know I don't like Dan's kind."

"What kind is that?"

She knew that. "Macedonias. But what difference does it make? Do go up now and make him come."

"All right, all right."

He looked back at me as if he were about to say something, then went on up the steps. Deck, without a backward look, was following Mitchell and I moved on after them.

At the landing Deck turned to the left-hand branch leading towards his room, and Mitchell took the right with me behind him. At the second floor he turned directly to Harriden's door and after a soft knock, apparently unresponded to, moved on to Mrs. Harriden's room. Just as I started up the next flight, I looked back and saw him enter.

I hadn't the slightest inclination to go on up to my room. Nothing there invited me. The moment I was left alone, without the excitement of Deck's presence, without the companionship of Mitchell, I felt myself in the grip of the old uncertainties and gloomy harassments.

Nothing had come of my laboriously thought-out suspicions. Nothing was cleared up. Mitchell had not seemed much impressed when I had told him, but then, Mitchell's manner was unrevealing when he chose to make it so. I wondered over his questions about the cigarettes. I wondered if he was trying to bring Letty's mind back to that afternoon, to that feeling which had so strangely overcome her. I wondered if he had found anything about the brown crescent.

I hated to be shut away with my own thoughts and when, at the top of

the stairs, the gray cat ran past me I tried to capture it. It eluded me, but determinedly I turned back after it. Even a cat was better company than myself.

But it was down the stairs ahead of me, and I heard Harriden's voice saying angrily, "Damn that beast! It's always trying to get in here!"

He and Mitchell had come out of the room, I saw, and I heard the door slam. The two men went downstairs together, and I turned and went up my flight again. The cat came, too, and this time I got hold of it. Snuggling my cheek against its warm fur I carried it into my room.

But not even a cat and cream silk walls and rose red cushions could make the room bearable that night. It was a wet, windy night, October turned dismal, and a tall tree kept tapping at a pane like fingers.

I tried to marshal the facts in my mind and study them. And I thought of something that had not occurred to me before—that the finding of the diamond in Deck's case might be utterly unrelated to any of the rest. I would not put it past Harriden to bolster the case he sincerely thought he had against Deck by planting that pendant in his case. He might have found it about the room that night and resolved to make it clinch the evidence he was so sure of in his own mind.

He might have found the chain itself, for that matter. He might have planted that chain on me. He hated me enough for having told about the scene at the window. But no—the chain was wrapped in the stained handkerchief—the handkerchief from which Nora Harriden's blood had been washed. It was Rancini, I thought, who had tipped up the stairs in the night to my room with that.

I thought of going to Donahay and trying to talk things over with him. I wanted to do anything that would take me out of that lonely room. So I went downstairs again.

I took the cat in my arms for company. It was purring, in deceptive quiet, but the moment we were on the second floor it made a clear spring and raced away down the hall.

As I looked after it I saw it vanish about the edge of the door that was ajar into Mrs. Harriden's room. I waited; nothing happened. Harriden evidently wasn't there. A perfect panic of fear possessed me; I shared all Harriden's feelings about having the cat in that room for I had been brought up never to let a cat be alone with the dead.

I waited a moment more, then hurried to the door of the room, said "Kitty, kitty, kitty," very softly and coaxingly but with no result. Then I looked in.

The room was faintly lighted by one or two rose shaded lamps. No one was there but that still figure under the white sheet on the bed.

As I looked into the room, my throat filling with that emotion that death evokes, I saw the overhanging cloth quiver and stir—then out from under the bed came the cat, arching its back against the draping sheet. I was desperately afraid that it would make a sudden spring on the bed so I stole in softly and tried to catch it but it evaded me and ran towards the fireplace.

"Kitty, kitty, kitty," I said, my hushed tones appealing, and I thought the creature hesitated, then, as I made another move, it leaped the low screen into the fireplace where the white birch logs were laid and rubbed against one of the tall, brass andirons. Then it stopped rubbing and began to reach up and lick that andiron.

I licked the edges of the brass, first experimentally, then enthusiastically, and it seemed to me as if all the blood in my body rushed to my heart and pounded there. That andiron—that tall, sharp-pointed andiron. . . . I made a swift rush to the absorbed cat and caught it up.

I knew now. I knew something, at any rate. It was like seeing disconnected things by lightning. One or two scenes stood out with fiery distinctness. Another flash and I would see more.

I ought to have gone out of that room then. I ought to have gone straight to Donahay and told him. I knew it. I moved towards the door, the cat in my arms. And then my eyes fell on a small leather case on the table. Nora Harriden's dressing case. The case which, I believed, had held her letters. The case which might yet hold them.

I make no defense for what I did then. It was utterly indefensible. But I felt on me the pressure of Deck's desperate need, the savageness of Harriden's hate. I felt that Deck's life might depend upon getting that last letter of his out of Harriden's hands.

And here was opportunity. If I could get that letter back—if no real motive could be shown—

I went to that case, and, gripping the cat firmly under my arm, I opened it. Swiftly I ran my icy fingers along the green silk lining where I had seen Harriden's big, blunt fingers stop suddenly in their exploring. When I had seen his face change to that still attentiveness.

But the lining was smooth, unpadding by paper. It was flat. Empty.

I was so intent that I heard nothing. My first intimation of any approach was Harriden's harsh voice booming out.

## CHAPTER XIV

Those next few moments were branded in on me with red-hot irons. I never think of them without feeling the burning agony of their humiliation, and the utter panic of their fear.

That triumphant voice, venting its rage, shouting a summons for the others to come. . . . That heavy hand gripping my arm. . . . I tried to wrench my-

self away but Harriden's hold was like steel. The consciousness of my own foolishness and foolhardiness filled me to suffocation.

The room seemed to be crowded with faces, appearing almost at once. They swam before me in a blur of confusion. Hostile faces, quickened with curiosity. The guests of that house-party, I thought hysterically, were like supers in a show, always gathering in some mob scene. They must get a wonderful kick out of it.

"Looking through my wife's dressing case—after more jewelry," Harriden funged out for their benefit.

I tried again to shake off the imprisoning hand. I gasped: "I came in after the cat. . . . It ran in the door."

"You little liar! I shut that door when I went out. I saw to that." He gave my arm a vicious shake. "You sneaked in here the instant this room was left alone. You were watching for the chance—maybe you planned to get it. You were after this dressing case, the key to the jewel box. This finishes you. Arrest her, inspector—I demand her arrest!"

Donahay had materialized out of the blue, the cartoon of an official off duty, in his shirt sleeves, vest unbuttoned, a thick cigar in the corner of his heavy mouth. His hard eyes took it all in.

"Has she got anything, Mr. Harriden?"

"How do I know? I haven't looked yet. I just got here and caught her at it."

"Well, she can't get away," said Donahay comfortably, shifting his cigar. "Better take a look round and see if there's anything missing."

Harriden's grip fell reluctantly from my arm. He went slowly to the closet and looked within to see if the jewel box was safe. I saw him bring it out, try the clasp. It was still locked. There are no words for the agony I felt. The sick mortification. Caught in my own folly.

Then he came back and looked into the open dressing case and a sudden thought seemed to strike him. I saw his fingers move over the lining of the case as if he had seen them move before. Then his face turned a dark, hideous red.

He whirled about and stood over me, thrusting that swarthy, lowering face into my own.

"So that's it, is it?" he said. His voice was terrible. "You give them back—do you hear?"

"Is the key gone?" Donahay was asking, still thinking of the jewel case.

"Lost anything?"

"Papers," Harriden ground out. "She took them. . . . Inspector, she's got a lot of papers on her. Search her, I tell you. Get them back at once."

"I haven't any papers," I said, with sincere thanksgiving that I hadn't.

"Search me, if you like," and I made a wide gesture with one arm. I let the cat go and heard them putting it out.

Then the meaning of it all came to me. The letters had been hidden there, as I surmised—now they were gone. The door had been ajar—he said he had shut it, and I had heard it slam as he and Mitchell had walked off. Some one had come in—Deck had come in and taken the letters.

That was the explanation, I realized belatedly, of Deck's scene downstairs with Letty Van Alstyn—he had been urging her to get Harriden downstairs, knowing she would be only too glad to do it for the sake of her own desire to be with him.

And I had never guessed, never suspected. I had blundered into the room and tried to save him.

In that moment I saw him, appearing suddenly at the crowded doorway, staring surprisedly at me over the crowd. I was afraid that he would blurt out something incriminating himself in order to clear me. I didn't want him telling Harriden to go to the devil, that he had taken his own letters and destroyed them—the scandal would be ineffaceable.

I spoke out quickly, "I came in the room after the cat, Mr. Harriden. I knew you did not want it to run in. And I was just going out when you came and found me—I was just passing the table where this case happened to be."

"You were looking through that case! The cover was open, you little crook—you'd got those letters out. . . . I tell you, inspector, I want her searched."

At that moment a hand slid through my arm and Monty Mitchell was by my side. He was no taller than I, but he seemed a very tower of strength. I felt courage flowing into me through that friendly touch.

"You've gone crazy again, Dan," he said curtly. "You've been having too many drinks with Letty. You heard Miss Seton say she came in after the cat. She is not interested in your letters."

"You mind your business," Harriden retorted. "What's Miss Seton to you?"

"As it happens, we are engaged," said Monty Mitchell. "That's what she is to me."

An electric shock seemed to run through that room, but no one there was more completely astonished than I was myself. Involuntarily I looked about at him, and he gave me back a funny twinkle, his fingers squeezing my arm. I thought what a comfort it would be to put my head down on his shoulder and sob out all my rage and disgust, but pride held my head high.

"That isn't true," I heard myself saying. "I don't need to take advantage of Mr. Mitchell's protection—of his wish to establish a position for me. I have one of my own. . . . I have taken nothing of Mr. Harriden's."

"You're a liar!" said Harriden violently. "Damn you! I don't care whether you're Mitchell's fancy girl or not."

Mitchell struck him in the face. He leaped at him like a bull terrier at a mastiff. The blow caught Harriden

unprepared, and he reeled, a hand at his chin, then, with a choking sound he lunged at his assailant.

With official agility Donahay's big body intervened; Keller and young Watkins sprang to hold Dan.

"Not here, Dan, not here—"

Keller's reminder had its weight. Harriden gave a queer look towards the bed, to that still, sheeted figure of his wife, and his arms fell. He drew a deep, convulsive breath.

He addressed Donahay. "Whoever this girl is, she took those papers."

"What sort of papers were they, Mr. Harriden?"

"Never mind what sort of papers they were. I can identify them quick enough."

"But you have to give us some idea—"

I think Donahay was stalling for time with Mitchell's angry eyes upon him.

"They were letters," Harriden rasped out. "Private letters. She is a thief and a blackmailer." He added, "If they aren't on her she has destroyed them. They were here when I left this room."

Involuntarily our heads turned to that fireplace but no flames danced there. No fire had been touched off since those white birch logs had been laid in preparation for Mrs. Harriden's arrival.

The sight of the andirons exploded something in my brain. It was as though some flash of lightning, the flash I had been waiting for, subconsciously, flung into indelible brilliance the way before my straining vision. I spoke out, throwing all caution to the winds.

"You'll find blood on one of those andirons, Mr. Inspector. On the left hand one. It is Mrs. Harriden's blood. . . . It has been washed away, but it is still in the deep places. . . . She was killed by falling on it, by being thrown back upon it."

In the stillness that descended on the room there was literally no sound. Not even of breath. It seemed as if all those people there had become shadows, noiseless, unreal, impassible, incapable of movement. Only Harriden was real, and he was still, too, still as the dead woman on her bed. I felt as if she lay there, below her sheet, listening intently, waiting upon me.

Then a voice came, Harriden's voice, hoarsened, hardly distinguishable. "If you know—that you did it—"

"No, you," I said. "When you struck at her the second time. When you followed her away from the window. It was you who struck at her at the window," I went on. "You had come

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## The Mind Meter

By LOWELL HENDERSON

**The Four-Word Test**

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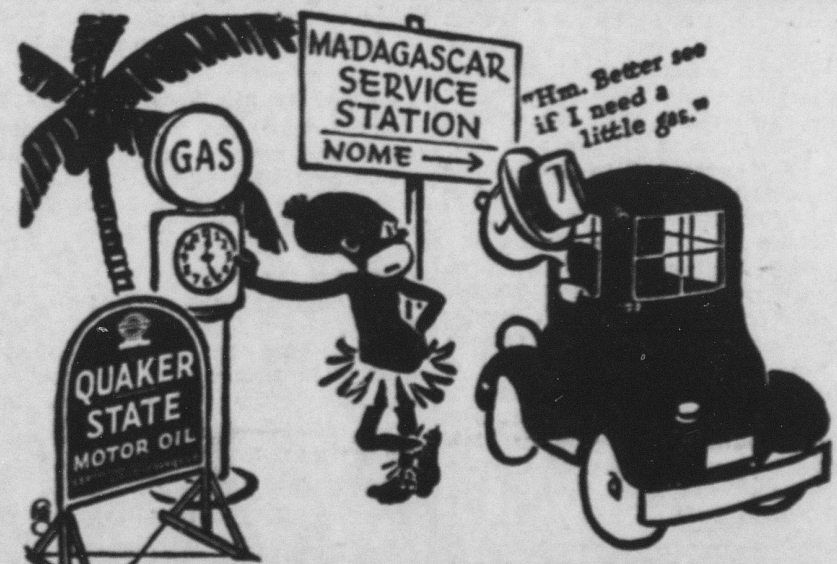
1. Holy, sacred, profane, divine.
2. Tall, squat, lofty, high.
3. Lob, double-play, net ball, ace.
4. New Hampshire, Vermont, Boston, Connecticut.
5. Vain, humble, modest, submissive.
6. Shot put, javelin throw, 100-yard dash, discus throw.
7. Hot, stolid, fiery, ardent.
8. Harvard, Princeton, Vassar, Yale.
9. Tallahassee, Sacramento, Chicago, Baton Rouge.
10. Running, swimming, walking, trotting.

- Answers**
1. Profane.
  2. Squat.
  3. Double-play.
  4. Boston.
  5. Vain.
  6. 100-yard dash.
  7. Stolid.
  8. Vassar.
  9. Chicago.
  10. Swimming.

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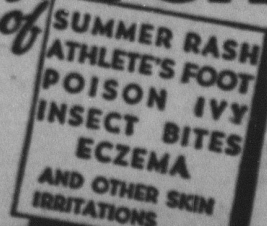
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