

THE DIVORCE COURT MURDER

By Milton Propper

EIGHTH INSTALMENT
SYNOPSIS . . . Six persons are in an inner office of the law firm of Dawson, McQuire and Locke at Philadelphia. A master hearing in the divorce case of Rowland vs. Rowland is under way. Mrs. Rowland, represented by her lawyer brother, Mr. Willard; Mr. Rowland, the defendant, and his attorney, Mr. Trumbull; the court clerk and Mr. Dawson, the master, are the six persons. There is a new development in the case. After failing to defend himself against the charge of adultery in earlier hearings, Mr. Rowland digs up evidence and asks the court's permission to produce witnesses and resist the suit. Judge Dawson overrules the heated objections of Mr. Willard, and orders the witness brought in. Rowland's lawyer goes to get the witness but finds her dead—chloroformed. She is Mrs. Barbara Keith, wife of a prominent Philadelphia business man. Judge Dawson phoned for the police. Detective Tommy Rankin is assigned to the case. He is now questioning all of the parties involved in the case. **NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY.**

Rankin nodded, in appreciation of the diabolical effectiveness of the late Tom Marshall's measures.

"So, with the divorce goes the management of the estate," he summarized. "But I thought Harvey Willard had means. Both he and your wife inherited from Peter Willard's estate. Why should he need the trusteeship?"

The young man shook his head. "He's not rich any more, and anyhow Adele was willed most of it. Willard's share all disappeared in poor investments and the stock market. And Marshall's will permitted him to spend for his own benefit the thirty per cent he didn't need to transfer annually. I happen to know he is hard pressed by creditors. Unless he can obtain plenty of funds before July first, he's a ruined man; they will close in and force him into bankruptcy. Adele is too smart to throw good money after bad and won't lend it to him. Only a prompt divorce decree can save him."

"Still," the detective pointed out, "if your wife intends to marry Campbell shortly, what good will that do him? As her husband, he then becomes the Marshall executor and Willard's situation isn't bettered at all."

"Even with temporary control of the estate," Rowland returned, "he might manage to slide out from under." He extinguished his cigarette. "Besides, he had no more idea of Adele's intentions in that direction than I had until my spying brought results."

He paused, and after a brief moment for reflection, Rankin acquiesced.

"Yes, I can understand that. Now, what did you discover by watching Mrs. Rowland?"

"Two weeks ago I obtained the evidence I needed," Rowland resumed his narrative. "It was on the Wednesday evening after the last hearing. I had learned several days before from the chauffeur that Campbell was back in town; and for some evenings I continued my usual watch and trailed them. Then that

Wednesday, May twenty-fourth, Finley reported he had been dismissed for the evening and also added this significant item: Adele's maid had casually informed him that she was instructed to pack an overnight bag for her."

"Well, right after supper, I took up my watch by the entrance of the Willard estate. Campbell, driving a Cadillac coupe, arrived at eight o'clock and Adele joined him with her overnight bag. But for the early part of the evening, they did nothing more censorable than on other occasions. First, they went to the Forrest theatre. At eleven o'clock they visited the Organdy Club on Broad street, but I didn't dare follow them in. Instead, I parked near Campbell's car, looked into it and saw that he too had brought an overnight bag. He and my wife remained in the night club until midnight. And perhaps twenty minutes before they appeared, Mrs. Keith came out of the place by herself and—"

Rankin's interruption was abrupt. "All alone?" he demanded sharply. "She was at the Organdy unescorted?"

"Yes, and it puzzled me too," Rowland replied. "I called her and she explained that she had been to the opera for which Mr. Keith did not care. Because the club was so close by, she went in to see the floor show. I realized, for a married woman in her position, the story didn't ring true. I didn't question her, as it was none of my business and beside the point. I was too thankful for her appearance just when I needed a witness to worry about it."

"You were well enough acquainted with Mrs. Keith to enlist her aid in such a personal matter?"

The young man made an apologetic gesture. "I'm afraid I wasn't fair to her and took advantage of her lucky appearance," he explained persuasively. "You see, I asked her to join me, but I didn't tell her why I wanted her; I only said it would be an important service to me and urgent. I was excited and that made her curious and desire to help me. It wasn't until we were already trailing my wife and Campbell away from the club toward the city limits, that she fully realized the predicament I placed her in. But it was too late then and she was sporty enough to see it through; for my sake, she agreed to risk the publicity and gossip and give evidence. If I had ever dreamed it would end like this . . ."

He left the sentence unfinished, compressing his lips with a sigh, shaking his head dolefully. An awkward silence followed until Rankin asked:

"Then you and Mrs. Keith were good friends, Rowland. How long have you known her?"

"I met her two winters ago, at Palm Beach, though, like all Philadelphia society, I had heard of Mortimer Keith. She stayed at the Royal Arms Hotel, where Adele and I were; and because he was too busy to join her, she was a grass widow and needed company. That, her social position and her attractiveness made her welcome with all the young men at the resort. I did my share to entertain her; I rode and visited the casino with her, and

several times attended the dog races. Even Adele acted fairly cordial toward her."

"Well, what happened the night you followed your wife and Campbell?" the detective prompted. "Where did they lead you?"

"Out the Park Drive and left on the Ridge Pike," Rowland said. "We passed through Roxborough and Norristown. At Collegeville we caught up and followed them off to the right, along the narrow country road paralleling Perkiomen Creek. At the end of five miles, they halted finally at a substantial stucco bungalow along the creek. It was then one-thirty."

"Again I drove my car past, about two hundred feet, and parked where a clump of trees fringed the road and hid us from the cottage. Campbell produced a key and unlocked the door; then he turned on the lights. I have inquired about it since and learned it belongs to Nick Alberti, the manager of the Organdy Club, a friend of Campbell's. Adele was then cautious enough to pull down all the blinds. Still watching silently in the darkness, Mrs. Keith and I could make out they were drinking in the living room. At two-thirty they started to retire and a half hour later Campbell turned out the lights. I considered I had gathered enough evidence against Adele to enter a defense to her suit; so I retraced the trail with Mrs. Keith back to the city."

The speaker concluded his narrative and fell silent until Rankin asked:

"And at no time did your wife or Campbell see you or become suspicious of your presence?"

"I'm practically certain they never realized they were being followed."

"Then they and Mr. Willard had no idea in advance with whom they had to reckon? Mr. Trumbull felt reasonably sure they hadn't identified Mrs. Keith as your chief witness before she arrived at the hearing this afternoon?"

Allen Rowland pondered a moment. "That's right, unless Adele noticed her at the night club," he offered at length, "and she probably didn't; her arrival there that night must have been one of the reasons Mrs. Keith left without waiting for her date."

"Yes, I suppose that's possible," Rankin frowned uncertainly. "And you have no other proofs of your wife's infidelity? Your entire case depended on her?"

"Mrs. Keith's death doesn't leave me a leg to stand on," Rowland replied, a harsh note in his voice.

Abruptly, the detective shifted the subject. "Now, just one more point, Mr. Rowland," he said. "About the night of Wednesday, February first, when Mrs. Rowland caught you and Miss Edmond together at the Sunset Inn, I've found out that immediately after the interruption, Mrs. Keith's husband arrived there. Can you tell me how he came to be there or what his connection was with . . ." he paused delicately, "your intrigue?"

But as Jill Edmond had done, the young man professed to be unable to account for the manufacturer's appearance. He had never met Mortimer Keith, he said; though, having seen him several times, he had recognized him when he entered the room. He could add no explanation or detail to the secretary's description of the incident.

Concluding his questions on this circumstance, Rankin thanked Rowland and dismissed him.

His next step was to examine the dead woman's checkbook. Except for two stubs, her accounts seemed in perfect order; her expenditures, with the date, purpose or name of payee and amount, were carefully audited. The sums she spent were comparatively small and far from commensurate. Rankin wondered at her low balance, which never exceeded five thousand dollars, and at present came to less than one.

The two check-stubs which were not identifiable as to purpose, however, indicated exceptionally large sums. One check had been drawn about three months ago, and the past Thursday—for two thousand and three thousand dollars, respectively. The only clue to the reason for these withdrawals was the word "personal" written on each stub.

Before the detective could ponder the significance of these entries, a knock interrupted him. At his command, the policeman he had sent to locate Mortimer Keith opened it and entered the room.

"Yes, Cottman?" Rankin greeted him. "You've been gone a long time. Is Mr. Keith with you?"

The officer shook his head. "No, I haven't found him; he isn't in town at all," he replied. "It was too late to visit his offices, so I called at the Aldwich Apartments and learned from his butler, Stanley, that he had gone away—on business, he thought, to Washington."

Rankin pursed his lips in disappointment. "Washington? I suppose you discovered what business took him there and communicated with the people he went to see, Cottman?" the detective inquired.

"No, I didn't, although I tried to; that's what took me so long. The secretary said it had something to do with the New Ray Silk Company. Neither he nor the butler had any idea at what hotel Mr. Keith might stop, tonight."

"Hotel? Then he isn't expected back today?"

The policeman shook his head.

"No, not until tomorrow," he answered, "when he's completed his business."

"Well, I imagine we can wait and give him a chance to turn up according to schedule," Rankin said, dismissing Cottman.

Johnson entered as Cottman left. "Finished, Johnson?" asked Rankin. Johnson did not reply until the officer had gone. "I've taken everybody's fingerprints, Tommy," he said, "but I can't make a detailed report until I've had time to study them—say tomorrow morning."

(Continued Next Week)

BORN WITHOUT BRAIN, LIVES 27 DAYS

New York, Aug. 19.—A baby born without a brain, but which lived 27 days, puzzled physicians who studied the strange case tonight.

A post-mortem examination revealed that the child's brain cavity contained only water. Otherwise the baby seemed to be normal.

Name of the parents was not disclosed by authorities at St. Vincent's Hospital, where the child spent its short life.

3 MISSING IN PLANE

Cheyenne, Wyo., Aug. 19.—A private airplane, carrying three prominent Indiana residents, was missing tonight and believed to have crashed in the mountain wilderness somewhere between Helena, Mont., and Denver. The ship left Helena airport Thursday afternoon for Denver.

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