

THE DIVORCE COURT MURDER

By Milton Propper

TENTH INSTALLMENT

The detective could not decide whether to believe the story or not.

"Do you know whether Mrs. Keith ever visited Allerton, Indiana?" Abruptly Rankin shifted the subject.

The other shook his head. "Allerton? Certainly not in the four years since we met; before that, she may have been there. She never mentioned it . . . Why do you ask?"

"I found an empty bottle with an old label from a hospital in that town in her medicine closet. It had contained pyramidon."

Rankin bent toward him to emphasize the importance of his next question.

"Isn't it a fact, Mr. Keith, that in spite of your liberal allowance and income, your wife was always pressed for funds?"

Mortimer Keith looked startled. "How could you guess that, Rankin?" he exclaimed. "It's true she worried about money, and often approached me for more, for charities and clothes. Once I questioned her about it, and she made some vague excuse about losing it in stocks."

"Perhaps this will explain her expenditures," Rankin said, "these check-stubs and canceled checks."

As he studied them, Mr. Keith's lips tightened into a formidable line, and his eyes flashed in features darkened by a swift anger.

"Steady payments like this for two years," he cried harshly, at last, "as if she were being blackmailed to prevent me from learning some secret about her!"

"They certainly suggest that," Rankin said, in disappointed tones. "You had no knowledge of them or to whom or for what reason she drew them."

"No, this is my first inkling of them."

"Were you aware, sir, that Mrs. Keith would be a witness in that Rowland divorce suit in Mr. Dawson's office, yesterday?"

Mr. Keith shook his head. "Not until I read where she met her death."

"Had you any idea," Rankin asked, "how she happened to accompany young Rowland, two weeks ago, and be in a position to give evidence for him?"

"I still don't understand how she ever permitted herself to become involved in such a vulgar public scandal!" the manufacturer rasped out.

"Did you know Mrs. Keith was going out that Wednesday night at all?"

"Yes, she was to visit her physician, who attends her when her headaches become particularly vicious. Dr. Anton Brantman on Pine Street. I didn't pay any attention to when she left or returned home."

"Then, Mr. Keith, what was your connection with the Rowland divorce action?"

At the abruptness with which the detective shot this question the other gazed at him in perplexity and surprise.

"My connection?" he repeated wonderingly. "I don't follow you, Rankin; I haven't the slightest interest in it."

Rankin's voice rang with the vigor he put into his unexpected offensive.

"In that case," he demanded, "what were you doing at Sunset Inn, the evening of February first—when Mrs. Rowland discovered her husband in compromising relations with her secretary there!"

If it was Tommy Rankin's intention to startle the manufacturer by his sudden query, he succeeded admirably.

"How in the world did you find that out?" he finally asked in a dry voice.

Rankin saw no harm in answering. "It came out at the hearing that you reached the Inn just after Mrs. Rowland's party and witnessed the interruption of her husband's affair."

"Well, it . . . all happened quite accidentally . . . I had no warning of what was happening," the other floundered. "I was driving to New York alone that night, and when I reached Quakertown, I decided to sleep there because it was so late. I had left Philadelphia at about . . ."

Obviously he was stalling for time. "That won't wash, Mr. Keith!" the detective answered curtly. "You surely don't hope to persuade me your presence was only a coincidence?"

Mr. Keith compressed his lips. "Yes, of course that's ridiculous. The truth is, I have no explanation to offer; I can't tell you why I went there."

It was Rankin's turn to be taken aback—and he stared incredulously, as though he had not heard right.

"You can't tell me, Mr. Keith?" he said harshly. "You mean you won't?"

"Have it any way you like, Rankin," his opponent returned, firmly. "It concerns me alone and can't possibly be of interest to the authorities. It is a private matter I prefer not to disclose."

"Mr. Keith," Rankin cried sharply, "do you realize what your refusal means? Nothing is private in a murder case; and I am investigating the murder of some one near to you, your wife."

The manufacturer winced. "If it had any relation to the crime at all, I promise you I wouldn't hesitate to speak out, Rankin."

"I'm the best judge of what is pertinent to the case and what isn't, Mr. Keith."

But Mortimer Keith shook his head. "I'm sorry I can't oblige," he said more gently.

The detective had to acknowledge defeat in his effort to discover the secret of Mr. Keith's visit to Sunset Inn. The man stood clearly within his right in not answering.

Leaving Cottman on guard the detective returned to Headquarters. "That fellow Campbell Cordon's been hunting has shown up, Tommy," the captain announced. "He came in and asked for you of his own accord, twenty minutes ago."

Rankin began by ignoring the hand Campbell proffered, and the visitor flushed.

"Sit down, Campbell," he invited blandly. "I've often wanted to meet you; considering our mutual interests, it's strange we haven't done so before."

Campbell sat aside his cane. "Yes, it is," he agreed. "I might return the compliment, Rankin; you're to be congratulated on your splendid reputation. It's a privilege to know you."

"I had expected to hear from you before this," the detective continued. "It's been in all the papers that we wanted to communicate with you."

"That's what really brought me in," Campbell returned easily. "I happened to be called hastily to the country, where there were no newspapers. I spent the night on the Perkiomen Creek, at the cottage of

my friend, Nick Alberti, who manages the Organdy Club."

Rankin spoke casually. "That was where so much of the trouble began, wasn't it, Campbell? When you and Mrs. Adele Rowland spent a night there, two weeks ago?"

At the deliberate provocation, the racketeer compressed his lips resentfully and his eyes flashed; but with an effort he held his peace.

"What about that phone call in the lawyer's office?" Rankin challenged. "You were there to cry out, 'Oh, my God!' and 'You fool!' That didn't mean very pleasant news. You were alarmed enough to rush out quickly to . . . well, be on hand yourself and then leave the city."

Again Campbell's features hardened. "You haven't a single fact to prove any connection with Mrs. Keith. It's no use, Rankin; you can't show I had any knowledge of her death before today, or expect me to admit anything you can use."

"At least you have no objection to telling me who phoned you," Rankin suggested.

"Oh, but I certainly have. That's my private affair."

Abruptly the detective shifted his attack. "If I'm not mistaken you reached Mr. Dawson's office yesterday before Mrs. Keith arrived with her escort."

"No, I wasn't there then," Campbell corrected him. "I followed them by a few minutes—it must have been almost twenty to three; and they had already gone into the library to wait."

"Mrs. Keith chose to stay in the inner office, fifteen-o-five, where she could be alone," Rankin stated, "and you were aware of that; in fact, Mrs. Rowland joined you from the library to tell you that." His tone became hostile. "Just before she entered fifteen-o-five herself, to unlock the hall door."

The implied accusation brought Campbell forward in his chair, in a swift burst of anger.

"So that's what you're getting at," he said, through his teeth. "You'll claim next I committed the murder myself! Damn it, Rankin, be careful with your charges; you might have the unpleasant job of trying to prove them. I was in the main office during the time she was killed."

"So you know when that happened?" the detective observed dryly.

"And why not?" his visitor demanded wrathfully. "It's in all the papers that she died between half-past two and three o'clock."

"Well, what about the time before you arrived—two-thirty-eight—or after you left. That was at two-fifty-six; you still had four minutes leeway. And the whole business could be accomplished in hardly more than a minute. Mrs. Rowland had unlocked the door from the corridor and pulled the curtains; it was only necessary to enter fifteen-o-five, close the window, chloroform Mrs. Keith and then open them again."

Excited, Campbell appeared ready to burst out a refutation, but caught himself, in a desperate attempt to regain his equanimity.

"Well, what of that?" He spoke more calmly. "It's all words, Rankin, nothing more; you've no foundation or confirmation of any of these suppositions. It's ridiculous for me to take them at all seriously."

Disappointed at his control, Rankin played his trump card, his unwavering gaze fixed on the other.

"Campbell," he demanded slowly, "where can I find Mitch Riley? I think he could help me and I would like to have a short conversation with him."

At last he had penetrated Campbell's vigilant guard. Startled and furious, a cold rage leaped to his eyes in which the detective recognized amazement, shock and, what was most significant, fear.

He could not keep a strained timbre from his voice. "Mitch Riley? Oh, yes, he's one of Nick's friends from New York, isn't he, Rankin?"

"Yes, of Alberti's, Duch Sykes and plenty others I needn't mention. Yesterday afternoon, he was in the office where Mrs. Keith died; he considerably left his fingerprints on the table beside her. And when I learn why he was there, they are going to hang somebody, Campbell!"

Campbell regained his composure. "No, I don't understand his presence, if he was really there. You'll have to scout around to his friends to account for it, Rankin. All I know is that I haven't laid eyes on him."

When the racketeer left Headquarters at the close of the interview, Smith, a plain-clothes man followed him.

Continued Next Week

KILLS WIFE, SON, SELF

Kennansville, Sept. 1.—Edward A. Farrow, 70, retired real estate operator, today shot and killed his wife, Mrs. Elsa Houston Farrow, 50, and her 12-year-old son, Lukie Houston, and then ended his own life with a pistol bullet.

Duplin county officers said they believed Farrow, widely known in this region as a land-owner, committed the acts under mental derangement.

Suffering from the delusion that all food offered her was poisoned, Miss Amy Caldwell of St. Paul starved to death.

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