

THE DIVORCE COURT MURDER

By Milton Propper

FOURTEENTH INSTALLMENT

"Well, there was the fact that Ellen and Garrett had only a small fraction of the stolen goods," said the nurse who had attended the former Mrs. Keith. "After she was here six months, Ellen realized I sympathized with her, and once permitted herself to confide in me. When I asked how she got into this trouble, she didn't try to justify herself, but only Garrett. He wasn't naturally bad, she claimed, and she did her best to stop him from going wrong. But he admired his friend's smartness and his influence, and the temptation of easy money was too much for him. I could tell she clearly feared and despised the fellow."

Rankin spoke eagerly. "Did she tell you anything about who he was and what became of him?"

"She could hardly know what happened to him after her arrest." The matron shook her head. "But she mentioned the name by which she knew him; more than likely it was an alias. If I'm not mistaken, he traveled as Fred Dennis."

But the matron had no idea of her charge's history, once she passed beyond the walls of the penitentiary. She had never heard from her. Nor could she supply any further details about Fred Dennis, or his description, which Rankin particularly desired. And she was ignorant of how Ellen Trent met her lover or where, in court, she had been represented by a Mr. Nathan Lewis, a Fort Wayne lawyer, in all probability appointed by the judge to defend her, because she had no money.

Late that afternoon, Tommy Rankin presented himself, by appointment made over the telephone, at the law office of Mr. Nathan Lewis. Evidently the lawyer had prospered since the day, six years before, when he was appointed by the court, an impecunious young lawyer, to defend Ellen Trent.

Mr. Lewis studied Rankin's card and motioned him to a deep armchair.

"Yes, Mr. Rankin?" he inquired politely, but with quiet reserve. "You're from the Philadelphia Police Bureau, I see. How can I be of service to you?"

"I called you to make sure you wouldn't leave the office before I

arrived," the detective replied. "It's about a young woman whose mysterious murder I am investigating in the East. Her name is Barbara Keith and she was once your client, charged with concealing and disposing of stolen goods. You knew her as Ellen Trent."

The lawyer looked genuinely shocked, and shook his head solemnly.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he murmured. "Of course, I recall the case quite well. Exactly what happened to her?"

Briefly Rankin related enough of the tragedy to enlist Mr. Lewis' cooperation. The latter listened attentively.

"I have reason to believe," Rankin concluded, "that this affair in Fort Wayne—her arrest and imprisonment—has a bearing on her death. She was being blackmailed by some one familiar with her past. And you can probably tell me more about it, from her angle, than anyone else."

Mr. Lewis pondered. "Under these circumstances, I suppose I am justified in revealing whatever I can to help you. To me, it has always seemed a most distressing situation, for which the girl was not to blame at all. Her misfortune was to love a ne'er-do-well. Yet there were the goods, the evidence that she knew of the robberies, and her obvious relations with one of the men. I considered it most wise that she plead guilty and trusted to the court's leniency for a minimum sentence."

"That's one of the details I want," the detective cut in quickly. "It's been suggested to me, from other sources, that she was really quite innocent."

"I'm firmly convinced of that," Mr. Lewis declared. "At our first interview in the city jail, she assured me she was ignorant of Garrett's dishonesty until after they had lived here for six months. At times she wondered why he stayed out so late at night. She found out about him eventually when he returned at dawn, after a narrow escape during an attempted robbery. He had been separated from Dennis and brought back some of the loot; then she realized his occupation and taxed him with it."

"And what's your opinion of Garrett? Did you gather he was vicious or just weak?"

The lawyer spread his hands. "Miss Trent insisted it was entirely Dennis' fault; without his persuasion and the enticement of easy money, Garrett would never have gone wrong. She loved him so, it was almost pitiful how she deluded herself about his worthiness."

"Have you any idea, Mr. Lewis," he asked, "how and where she met Garrett in the first place?"

After some cogitation, the attorney recalled that the girl had mentioned that they became acquainted in Akron, Ohio, late in 1925. She worked as a wrapper in a large department store there and met the young man at a dance hall. Mr. Lewis was not better informed than Mortimer Keith had been. She had no relatives left, he believed.

The lawyer told how her sweetheart became acquainted with Fred Dennis. It was at the Indianapolis race track, where Garrett began to hang about when he failed to obtain work, in hope of acquiring some loose change. But the girl could not name, Mr. Lewis explained as Rankin probed more thoroughly, any of Dennis' other associates.

"No wonder she detested Dennis so!" Rankin exclaimed. "He threatened her happiness, endangered the man she loved and brought her endless worry and anxiety for his welfare."

"Exactly," Mr. Lewis agreed. "That's the reason, when Garrett was killed, she considered him his murderer. I have a vivid picture of her in prison, crushed and numbed by his death; she didn't care what happened to her without him. But she had one interest—a grim determination that Fred Dennis should suffer for it."

The detective nodded. "I suppose he realized her opposition and enmity."

"He could hardly help it, the way she always tried to persuade Garrett to break away. It was a continual struggle for ascendancy over him; she told me that when she's almost won him away, Dennis could bring him back to heel with a word."

"But the police didn't catch him, even with her information?" Rankin vouchsafed.

Mr. Lewis toyed with a pen on his desk and pushed back his chair as he replied.

"No, he escaped again," he related, "by the skin of his teeth, just before they broke in."

"And nothing was heard of him afterward? No trace of his whereabouts?"

The lawyer shook his head. "No, he dropped completely out of the picture."

"But at least you have Miss

Trent's description of him," the detective put in.

"The police could give you that," Mr. Lewis replied. "It was their job to hunt him. And I believe they still hold such of Dennis' possessions as didn't have other rightful owners."

"In that case, I'll want to see them at once." Abruptly, Rankin rose and extended his hand.

But instead of shaking hands, Mr. Lewis glanced at his watch and also rose.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Rankin," he said, "I'd like to go along with you to Headquarters. Recalling how favorably the girl impressed me, I'm interested in the case and wish to learn what develops. In fact, if Dennis is responsible for her murder, I feel almost involved in it myself."

"Why, certainly, Mr. Lewis," the detective returned pleasantly. "You're quite welcome to join me and follow it up."

The lawyer had put into words the possibility to which his investigations and all the information he obtained on this journey pointed. Certainly, Fred Dennis had ample reason for harboring malice against Ellen Trent and desiring her death. From the beginning, her opposition to his control over her sweetheart, Garrett, constantly threatened to disrupt his plans and endanger his criminal enterprises. Then, with Dave Garrett's death, her more active hostility resulted calamitously for him. She made him a fugitive from justice. It was hardly likely that a man of his character, vicious and revengeful, yet astute and daring, would hesitate to commit murder in retaliation.

He was familiar with Barbara Keith's past and in a position to disclose it; and as part of his revenge, he could blackmail her by anonymously calling her husband's attention to them, he would establish her relations with Garrett and her prison sentence as a thief. He might even have been aware of the expected baby. To silence him, Mrs. Keith would undoubtedly have been willing to pay dearly.

Why, then, had he chosen to chloroform her during the divorce hearing? And how had he reached her there. To these obstacles to his theory of Dennis' guilt, Rankin had

to produce a solution. So long as Mrs. Keith continued to pay him he would hesitate to kill the goose that laid such golden eggs; and she had given him a check as recently as June first. But there was a limit to the bleeding process. If driven to the wall by his demands, she might have turned on him finally, threatening both to betray him to the authorities and to admit the truth to her husband. The fact that the day before she died she had broached a subject, the delicateness and importance of which her nervousness and alarm attested, supported this supposition. Instead of wishing to speak of a divorce, as Mr. Keith supposed, she may have intended to confess. Though she lost her nerve in the crisis, yet desperate and hounded, she constituted a fresh menace to Dennis.

And always, so long as she lived, her knowledge of his criminal career, which she could pass on to the authorities, endangered his freedom.

Mr. Lewis drove the detective direct to Headquarters. It was his presence rather than Rankin's official card that gained them a prompt audience with Lieutenant Becker.

He was the officer who had arrested Ellen Trent six years before, and led the subsequent raid on Dennis' flat. Even now he was sensitive about that fiasco and mention of it brought a wry frown to his features. Rankin briefly related the story of Barbara Keith's murder and the trail that led to Fort Wayne. When he explained its connection with Fred Dennis and his desire to obtain information about him, Lieutenant Becker nodded.

"Of course, we still have all the things from his apartment," he declared, "that is, his personal things. I'll have them here in a jiffy."

He summoned a policeman from the record room. Within ten minutes the officer returned with papers, reports and several suitcases.

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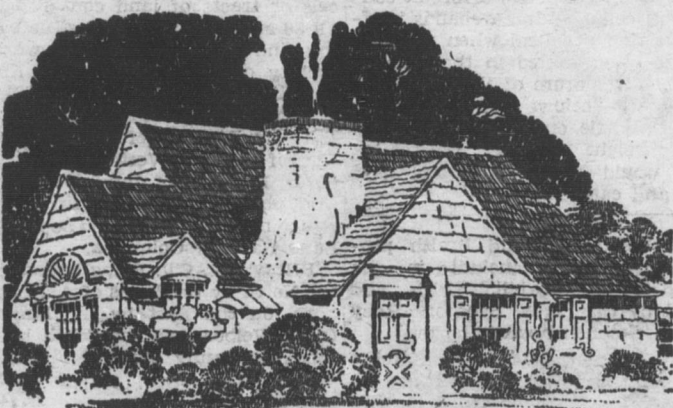
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