

The DIVORCE COURT MURDER

By MILTON PROPPER



SECOND 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 Mr. Trumbull to bring in the first witness. Mr. Trumbull has just gone to an outer office to bring the witness.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

As they waited the door opened and Mr. Trumbull reappeared. But he was alone, a different man from the shrewd vigilant attorney who, only a brief time before, had left the office. He had difficulty finding his tongue.

"Good God, come quickly, all of you!" he managed to gasp out. "I don't know what's the trouble, but something is seriously wrong in there. . . I . . ."

He grasped the back of his chair to support himself, and Mr. Dawson cut in sharply.

Something wrong, Mr. Trumbull? What do you mean—what's the matter?"

Allen Rowland was the first to spring to his feet.

"What's happened, Trumbull?" he demanded, in a voice filled with anxiety, "Mrs. Keith is all right, isn't she? There's no reason to worry about her?"

The other shook his head solemnly. "I'm afraid she's very ill, Rowland, she's unconscious—completely out; she shows no animation and I can't get any reaction or rouse her and she looks dreadfully white. . . We had all better hurry."

His excitement and agitation conveyed themselves to his listeners, as they hastened from the office. In his concern, Mr. Rowland pushed ahead, the lawyer immediately behind. Mr. Dawson came next. Mr. Willard made way for his sister, in whose eyes gleamed a light, had it been observed, that suggested an emotion more powerful than mere interest; while his own lips curved in a smirk.

In this order, they all passed through the chamber adjoining Mr. Dawson's office, an anteroom into which his door opened. It was also the law library of the concern. Two other doors led from the library, the one in the left wall, opposite the windows, into the main office of the suite, where the employees, stenographers, telephone operator and law clerks worked. The second door opened directly across from Mr. Dawson's.

It was ajar, and, led by Rowland, the group crowded thru it into still another office. It contained a dark oak table, oak chairs with leather seats, and a plain, dull green carpet. From the hall, the inscription read, "1505. Law Offices. Dawson, MacQuire & Locke. Entrance at 1507."

A woman sat in the swivel chair, but in a peculiar position that promptly revealed something was wrong. She slumped rather than rested in it, her weight pushing it back on its pivot. Her head barely protruding above the rear support, was thrown back as against a cushion, so that she stared at the ceiling. Her left leg stretched out straight, while the right one was bent at the knee, drawn against her body. Her mouth was open, but strained and thin rather than loose, in a suggestion of mortal agony.

The sight of the recumbent, motionless figure caused the group to pause on the threshold for an instant. Anxiety was written in every face, except Mrs. Rowland's.

"First I thought she had just fallen asleep," Mr. Trumbull remarked. "I spoke to her and when she didn't respond, I tried to waken her. Then I discovered that . . . She wasn't well."

"But what is it? What's the matter with her?" the clerk queried breathlessly. "She

looks so strange—so pale and stiff."

In two quick strides Allen Rowland crossed to the swivel chair. He placed trembling hands on Mrs. Keith's shoulders.

His voice sounded tense and appalled. "Barbara! What is it, Barbara? Answer me. . ." Receiving no reply, he recoiled visibly, looking up in distress. "It's really serious," he whispered swiftly. "Mr. Dawson, isn't there a doctor in the building?"

The lawyer followed him to the woman's side, grim lines of worry changing the more genial aspects of his countenance. He took her right wrist and as he felt for her pulse, he became still more grave and serious.

"Yes, we should call a doctor," he agreed, after a moment of utter stillness, painful and pregnant, "but I fear it's too late to do anything for her." He shook his head. "She isn't just ill or unconscious; she's already dead."

It was four o'clock that same Wednesday afternoon, when Tommy Rankin, at the Central Detective Bureau in City Hall, received instructions to proceed to the law offices of Dawson, MacQuire & Locke. Captain Thomas took the message, and relayed the assignment to Rankin. The detective had just reached the Bureau with the completed report of his most recent case and investigation of the gem robbery at the aristocratic Wentworth home in Mount Airy.

"Here's a new job for you, Tommy." The captain informed Rankin. "It was old Henry Dawson himself who phoned,

and he was worried; and everyone in the city knows his reputation for keeping his head in almost any crisis."

"Say, captain, why don't you let some one else handle it?" Rankin protested, without too much emphasis. "I've just finished a puzzling one and I guess I deserve a vacation." He shrugged in comic helplessness. "Oh well, I suppose it's all in a day's work, Thomas. Where do I go?"

Primarily because of his youth, he fitted in few respects the typical conception of a detective. Only thirty, he looked twenty-five. In appearance considered handsome, he had a high forehead, surmounted by curly dark brown hair. His lips were thin, and usually set together beneath sensitive nostrils; he had a determined chin and dark, piercing eyes, constantly alert. He was broad-shouldered, of medium height, and powerfully built.

As usual, when the captain knew Rankin was about to undertake a fresh inquiry, he could not resist his customary quip.

"Who would you like along with you in this case, Tommy?" he inquired, his smile thinly veiled. "You'll probably need plenty of help before this business is over."

For he was aware that ordinarily it was Rankin's policy to work as at lone wolf. He preferred to have exclusive charge of an assignment, even of its routine features, until compelled by its complications to enlist outside aid.

Recognizing the captain's jibe, Rankin grinned, but his reply brought a stare of amazement to his colleague's stout features.

"You're probably right, captain," he said; "that's why I think I'll lug Jenkins along, and a couple of cops."

He collected Jenks and two uniformed officers and set out. Rankin located on the directory board the firm of Dawson, MacQuire & Locke and they boarded an express elevator to the fifteenth floor.

The offices they sought were directly opposite the cage, as they stepped from it. Three doors fronted the corridor, marked respectively 1505, 1507 and 1509; and the glazed front of 1509 also instructed visitors to enter at 1507, the central door.

Entering the main office of the firm, 1507, the detective and his companions at once realized the substantial size prosperity of the lawyers' practice. Several people waited in the chairs lined against the inner wall, on both sides of the door. Six desks were arranged behind the rail with as many employees—stenographers, law clerks and students. But extraordinarily enough, no one worked, nor was the usual clatter of typewriters heard. They all watched the new ar-

rivals silently, with bated breaths, from which Rankin sensed their anxiety and suspense.

He noted all details before an elderly man came forward and greeted him in obvious relief.

"You've come from Headquarters, of course?" He extended his hand. "It's good of you to be so prompt. I'm Dawson—Henry Dawson. I think we had better step into the library, where we'll have greater privacy."

The detective posted his two uniformed men at the main door, 1507; then ordering Jenks to remain outside as well, he followed the lawyer into the library. Two other men awaited them there.

Mr. Dawson introduced them. "This is Mr. Simpkins, clerk of Common Pleas Court, Number Three. Dr. Samuel Clark, whose offices are on the twelfth floor of this building; we summoned him immediately, although it was too late for medical aid. Mr.—"

"Rankin, Thomas Rankin," the detective supplied, and shook hands. "Glad to meet you. Then it is a matter of

death, requiring the attention of the police?"

Gravely nodding, the lawyer proceeded to explain. "I regret it's quite serious enough for that. Briefly, here is the situation. I have been holding a series of hearings in a divorce action in my office, in a contested case. This afternoon, the first testimony for the defense to prevent the granting of the divorce was to be presented. The complaining party offered some opposition to the introduction of Mrs. Barbara Keith, the first witness for the defense. And when Mr. Trumbull, counsel for the defendant, went to bring her in, he found

(Continued on Page Four)

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