







# THE DIVORCE COURT MURDER

by MILTON PROPPER...



HARPER & BROTHERS 1934

SECOND INSTALLMENT 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.

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 his office.

"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's 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 unconscious—no reaction and I don't see any reason to 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 through 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 pivots. Her head, barely protruding above the rear support, was thrown back 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 wake 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, an 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." "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 a 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 and 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 arrivals 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 she was dead. ... There are indications that her death was neither normal nor accidental."

Rankin's eyes widened in interest and he asked sharply:

"Not normal? That leaves only murder or suicide? Where was she when she died, Mr. Dawson?"

The lawyer inclined his head toward the door leading from the library into 1505, adjoining.

"In that office," he replied "where, I understand, she was waiting until she would be called to give her testimony. On being informed by Mr. Trumbull of his discovery, we entered and naturally assumed she had suffered a stroke or heart attack or something of that sort. But Dr. Clark's examination suggests she met her end by violence."

"I believe she was chloroformed to death," the physician volunteered.

Rankin focused a penetrating gaze on the doctor. "Chloroform, Dr. Clark? Are you positive of that? What evidence supports your diagnosis?"

"The woman's eyes were dilated, which is a dependable sign of death by some such irregular means," Dr. Clark returned. "I've had no opportunity to examine her blood, but I don't doubt it will be darkish and fluid. In addition, there are red marks on her arms and wrists as if some one had had a powerful grip on them."

"Then your opinion of what occurred is that some one seized her and forcibly administered chloroform through her nose until she succumbed?"

The physician nodded. "Yes, the symptoms, her position, pushed back like that in the chair, and the rough handling she must have received all point to it."

"Well, unless more than one per-

son was concerned," Rankin commented, "a man was probably responsible. Dr. Clark, how quickly does chloroform act to prove fatal?"

"The time is uncertain, and varies with the person," the other responded; "perhaps two minutes, and at most, a few seconds longer than that. On the other hand, it might kill in even less time than a minute. Administered with a satu-

rated cloth or cotton, it would be very efficient."

(Continued Next Week.)

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