

## **Three Is a Lucky Number** *Margery Allingham*

At five o'clock on a September afternoon Ronald Torbay was making preparations for his third murder. He was being very careful. He realized that murdering people becomes more dangerous if you do it often.

He was in the bathroom of the house that he had recently rented. For a moment he paused to look in the mirror. The face that looked back at him was thin, middle-aged and pale. Dark hair, a high forehead and well-shaped blue eyes. Only the mouth was unusual – narrow and quite straight. Even Ronald Torbay did not like his own mouth.

A sound in the kitchen below worried him. Was Edyth coming up to have her bath before he had prepared it for her? No, it was all right: she was going out of the back door. From the window he saw her disappearing round the side of the house into the small square garden. It was exactly like all the other gardens in the long street. He didn't like her to be alone there. She was a shy person, but now new people had moved into the house next door, and there was a danger of some silly woman making friends with her. He didn't want that just now.



Each of his three marriages had followed the same pattern. Using a false name, he had gone on holiday to a place where no one knew him. There he had found a middle-aged, unattractive woman, with some money of her own and no family. He had talked her into marrying him, and she had then agreed to make a will which left him all her money. Both his other wives had been shy too. He was very careful to choose the right type of woman: someone who would not make friends quickly in a new place.

Mary, the first of them, had had her deadly ‘accident’ almost unnoticed, in the bathroom of the house he had rented – a house very like this one, but in the north of England instead of the south. The police had not found anything wrong. The only person who was interested was a young reporter on the local newspaper. He had written something about death in the middle of happiness, and had printed photographs of Mary’s wedding and her funeral, which took place only three weeks after the wedding.

Dorothy had given him a little more trouble. It was not true that she was completely alone in the world, as she had told him. Her brother had appeared at the funeral, and asked difficult questions about her money. There had been a court case, but Ronald had won it, and the insurance company had paid him the money.

All that was four years ago. Now, with a new name, a newly invented background, and a different area to work in, he felt quite safe.

From the moment he saw Edyth, sitting alone at a little table in the restaurant of a seaside hotel, he knew she was his next ‘subject’. He could see from her face that she was not happy. And he could also see that she was wearing a valuable ring.

After dinner he spoke to her. She did not want to talk at first, but in the end he managed to start a conversation. After that, everything went as he expected. His methods were old-fashioned and romantic, and by the end of a week she was in love with him.

Her background was very suitable for Ronald’s purpose. After teaching at a girls’ school for ten years, she had gone home to look after her sick father and had stayed with him until he died. Now, aged forty-three, she was alone, with a lot of money, and she didn’t know what to do with herself.

Five weeks after they met, Ronald married her, in the town where they were both strangers. The same afternoon they both

made a will leaving all their property to each other. Then they moved into the house which he had rented cheaply because the holiday season was at an end. It was the most pleasant of his marriages. He found Edyth a cheerful person, and even quite sensible – except that it was stupid of her to believe that a man would fall in love with her at first sight. Ronald knew he must not make the mistake of feeling sorry for her. He began to make plans for ‘her future’, as he called it.

Two things made him do this earlier than he intended. One was the way she refused to talk about her money. She kept all her business papers locked in a desk drawer, and refused to discuss them. His other worry was her unnecessary interest in his job. Ronald had told Edyth that he was a partner in an engineering company, which was giving him a long period of absence. Edyth accepted the story, but she asked a lot of questions and wanted to visit his office and the factory.

So Ronald had decided that it was time to act.

He turned from the window; and began to run water into the bath. His heart was beating loudly he noticed. He didn't like that. He needed to keep very calm.

The bathroom was the only room they had painted. He had done it himself soon after they arrived. He had also put up the little shelf over the bath which held their bottles and creams and a small electric heater. It was a cheap one, with two bars, and it was white, like the walls, and not too noticeable. There was no electric point in the bathroom, but he was able to connect the heater to a point just outside the door.

He turned on the heater now, and watched the bars become red and hot. Then he went out of the room. The controls for all the electricity in the house were inside a cupboard at the top of the stairs. Ronald opened the door carefully and pulled up the handle which turned off the electricity. (He had a cloth over his hand, so that he would not leave fingerprints.)

Back in the bathroom the bars of the heater were turning black again. Still using the cloth, he lifted the heater from the shelf and put it into the bath water, at the bottom end of the bath. Of course, you could still see it. It looked as if it had fallen off the shelf by accident.

Edyth was coming back from the garden: he could hear her moving something outside the kitchen door. He pulled a small plastic bottle out of his pocket and began to read again the directions on the back.

A small sound behind him made him turn suddenly. There was Edyth's head, only two metres away, appearing above the flat roof of the kitchen which was below the bathroom window. She was clearing the dead leaves from the edge of the roof. She must be standing on the ladder which was kept outside the kitchen door.

He stayed calm. 'What are you doing there, dear?'

Edyth was so surprised that she nearly fell off the ladder. 'Oh, you frightened me! I thought I'd just do this little job before I came to get ready.'

'But I'm preparing your beauty bath for you.'

'It's kind of you to take all this trouble, Ronald.'

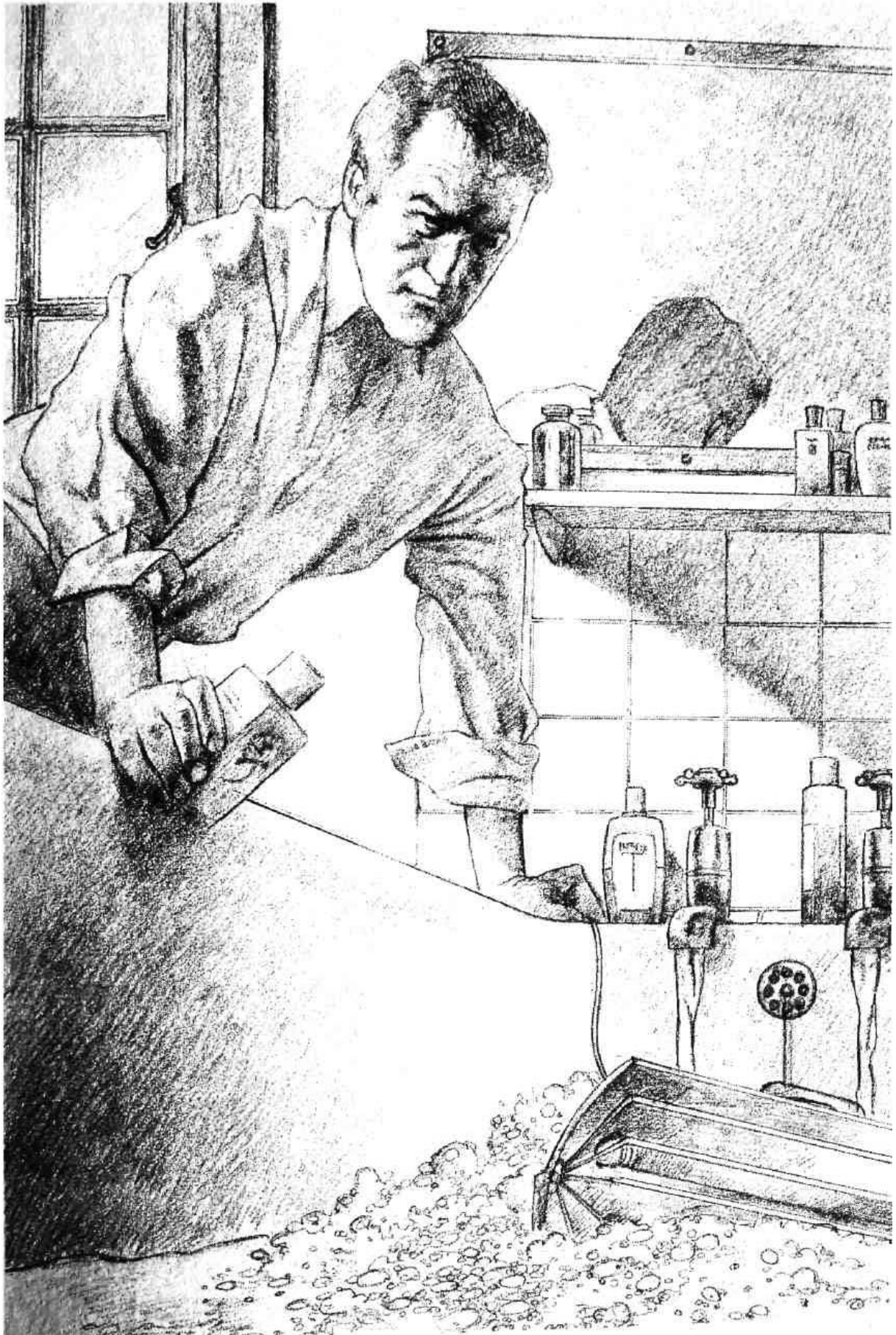
'Not at all. I'm taking you out tonight and I want you to look as nice as – er – possible. Hurry up, dear. The bubbles don't last very long, and like all these beauty treatments, this one's expensive. Go and undress now, and come straight here.'

'Very well, dear.' She began to climb down the ladder.

Ronald opened the little bottle, and poured the liquid into the bath. He turned on the water again, and in a moment the bath was full of bubbles, smelling strongly of roses. They covered the little heater completely; they even covered the sides of the bath.

Edyth was at the door. 'Oh Ronald! It's all over everything – even on the floor!'

That doesn't matter. You get in quickly before it loses its strength. I'll go and change now. Get straight in and lie down. It



*He turned on the water again . . .*

will give your skin a bit of colour!’

He went out and paused, listening. She locked the door, as he expected. He walked slowly to the electricity box, and forced himself to wait another minute.

‘How is it?’ he shouted.

‘I don’t know yet. I’ve only just got into the bath. It smells nice.’

His hand, covered with the cloth, was on the controls.

‘One, two . . . three,’ he said, and pulled the handle down. A small explosion from the electric point behind him told him that the electricity had gone off. Then everything was silent.

After a time he went and knocked on the bathroom door.

‘Edyth?’

There was no answer, no sound, nothing.

Now he had to prepare the second stage. As he knew well, this was the difficult bit. The discovery of the body must be made, but not too soon. He had made that mistake with Dorothy’s ‘accident’, and the police had asked him why he had got worried so soon. This time he decided to wait half an hour before he began to knock loudly on the bathroom door, then to shout for a neighbour and finally to force the lock.

There was something he wanted to do now. Edyth’s leather writing-case, which contained all her private papers, was in the drawer where she kept her blouses. He had discovered it some time ago, but he had not forced the lock open because that would frighten her. Now there was nothing to stop him.

He went softly into the bedroom and opened the drawer. The case was there. The lock was more difficult than he expected, but he finally managed to open the case. Inside there were some financial documents, one or two thick envelopes and, on top of these, her Post Office Savings book.

He opened it with shaking fingers, and began reading the figures – £17,000 . . . £18,600 . . . £21,940 . . . He turned over a

page, and his heart jumped wildly. On 4<sup>th</sup> September she had taken almost all the money out of her savings account!

Perhaps it was here, in these thick envelopes? He opened one of them; papers, letters, documents fell on the floor.

Suddenly he saw an envelope with his own name on it, in Edyth's writing. He pulled it open, and saw in surprise that the date on the letter was only two days ago.

Dear Ronald,

If you ever read this, I am afraid it will be a terrible shock to you. I hoped it would not be necessary to write it, but now your behaviour has forced me to face some very unpleasant possibilities.

Did you not realize, Ronald, that any middle-aged woman who has been rushed into marriage to a stranger will ask herself about her husband's reason for marrying her?

At first I thought I was in love with you, but when you asked me to make my will on our wedding day, I began to worry. And then, when you started making changes to the bathroom in this house, I decided to act quickly. So I went to the police.

Have you noticed that the people who have moved into the house next door have never spoken to you? Well, they are not a husband and wife, but a police inspector and a policewoman. The policewoman showed me two pieces from old newspapers, both about women who had died from accidents in their baths soon after their marriages. Both pieces included a photograph of the husband at the funeral. They were not very clear, but I was able to recognize you. So I realized that it was my duty to agree to do what the Inspector asked me to do. (The police have been looking for the man since the photographs were given to them by your second wife's brother.) The Inspector said the police needed to be sure that you were guilty: you must be given the opportunity to try the crime again. That's why I am forcing myself to be brave, and to play my part.

I want to tell you something, Ronald. If one day you lose me, out of

the bathroom, I mean, you will find that I have gone but over the kitchen roof, and am sitting in the kitchen next door. I was stupid to marry you, but not quite as stupid as you thought,

Yours,  
EDYTH.

Ronald's mouth was uglier than ever when he finished reading the letter. The house was still quiet. But in the silence he heard the back door open suddenly, and heavy footsteps rushed up the stairs towards him.