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'Fresh from the gardens'

The Bishop Murder Case

A PHILO VANCE STORY

BY S. S. VAN DINE

SYNOPSIS.

A man known as Cock Robin is shot with an arrow on the archery range beside the home of Prof. Dillard. The crime seems to be a mad man's dramatization of "Who Killed Cock Robin?" District Attorney Markham is puzzled and calls in Philo Vance, wealthy young bachelor who dabbles in the solving of unusual mysteries. Sperling (German for Sparrow) was the last seen with Robin. Both he and Robin were in love with Belle Dillard, the professor's niece. Sigurd Arnesson, a protege of the professor's wishes all information on the case so he can solve it mathematically. A neighbor, Pardee, shows an interest in the case. Mrs. Drukker, a neighbor with an unbalanced mind, believes her grown-up son to be still a baby. The son is a cripple with abnormal intellect, and a mathematician. Vance determines to question Drukker.

CHAPTER IX.

When we were again in the Dillard drawing room and Miss Dillard had left us to rejoin her uncle in the library, Vance, without preliminaries, proceeded to the business in hand.

"I didn't care to worry your mother, Mr. Drukker, by questioning you in front of her, but inasmuch as you called here this morning shortly before Mr. Robin's death, it is necessary—as a mere routine procedure—that we seek whatever information you can give us."

Drukker had seated himself near the fireplace. He now drew in his head cautiously, but made no answer.

"You came here," continued Vance, "about half past nine, I believe, to call on Mr. Arnesson."

"Yes."

"By way of the archery range and the basement door?"

"I always come that way. Why walk around the block?"

"But Mr. Arnesson was out this morning."

Drukker nodded. "At the university."

"And, finding Mr. Arnesson away, you sat for a while in the library with Professor Dillard, I understand, discussing an astronomical expedition to South America."

"The expedition of the Royal Astronomical Society to Sobral to test the Einsteinian deflection," amplified Drukker.

"How long were you in the library?"

"Less than half an hour."

'And then?"

"I went down to the archery room, and glanced at one of the magazines. There was a chess problem in it—a Zugszwang end-game that came up recently between Shapiro and Marshall—and I sat down and worked it out. . . ."

"Just a moment, Mr. Drukker." A note of suppressed interest came in Vance's voice. "You're interested in chess?"

"To a certain extent. I don't spend much time at it, however. The game is not purely mathematical; and it's insufficiently speculative to appeal to a wholly scientific mind."

"Did you find the Shapiro-Marshall positi[illegible]"

"Not so difficult as tricky." Drukker was watching Vance shrewdly. "As soon as I discovered that an apparently useless pawn move was the key to the impasse, the solution was simple."

"How long did it take you?"

"Half an hour or so."

"Until about half past ten, shall we say?"

"That would be about right." Drukker settled deeper into his chair, but his covert alertness did not relax.

"Then you must have been in the archery-room when Mr. Robin and Mr. Sperling came there."

The man did not answer at once, and Vance, pretending not to notice his hesitancy, added: "Professor Dillard said they called at the house about ten and, after waiting a while in the drawing room here, went down to the basement."

"Where's Sperling now, by the way?" Drukker's eyes darted suspiciously from one to the other of us.

"We expect him here any minute," Vance replied. "Sergeant Heath has sent two of his men to fetch him."

The hunchback's eyebrows lifted. "Ah! So Sperling is being forcibly brought back." He pyramided his spatulate fingers and inspected them musingly. Then he slowly lifted his eyes to Vance. "You asked me if I saw Robin and Sperling in the archery room. Yes; they came downstairs just as I was going."

Vance leaned back and stretched his legs before him.

"Did you get the impression, Mr. Drukker, that they had—as we euphemistically say—been having words?"

The man considered this question for several moment.

"Now that you mention it," he said at length, "I do recall that there seemed to be a coolness between them. I wouldn't however, care to be too categorical on that point. You see, I left the room almost immediately after they entered."

"You went out the basement door, I think you said, and thence through the wall gate into 75th Street. Is that correct?"

For a moment Drukker seemed loath to answer; but he replied with an effort of unconcern.

"Quite. I thought I'd take a stroll along the river before going back to work. I went to the Drive, then up the bridle path, and turned into the park at 79th Street."

Heath, with his habitual suspicion of all statements made to the police, put the next question.

"Did you meet any one you knew?"

Drukker turned angrily, but Vance quickly stepped into the breach.

"It really doesn't matter, Sergeant. If it's necessary later on to ascertain that point, we can take the matter up again." Then to Drukker: "You returned from your walk a little before eleven, I think you said, and entered your house by the front door."

"That's right."

"You saw nothing, by the way, that was in the least extr'ordin'ry when you were here this morning?"

"I saw nothing except what I've told you."

"And you're quite sure you heard your mother scream at about half past eleven?"

Vance did not move as he asked this question; but a slightly different note had crept into his voice, and it acted on Drukker in a startling manner. He heaved his squat body out in his chair and stood glaring down on Vance with menacing fury. His tiny round eyes flashed, and his lips worked convulsively. His hands, dangling before him, flexed and unflexed like those of a man in a paroxysm.

"What are you driving at?" he demanded, his voice a shrill falsetto. "I tell you I heard her scream. I don't care a damn whether she admits it or not. Moreover, I heard her walking in her room. She was in her room, understand, and I was in my room, between eleven and twelve. And you can't prove anything different. Furthermore, I'm not going to be cross-examined by you or anyone else as to what I was doing or where I was. It's none of your damned business—do you hear me?. . ."

So insensate was his wrath that I expected any minute to see him hurl himself on Vance. Heath had risen and stepped forward, sensing the potential danger of the man. Vance, however, did not move. He continued to smoke languidly, and when the other's fury had been spent, he said quietly and without a trace of emotion:

"There's nothing more we have to ask you, Mr. Drukker. And really, y' know, there's no need to work yourself up. It merely occurred to me that your mother's scream might help to estalbish the exact time of the murder."

"What could her scream have to do with the time of Robin's death? Didn't she tell you she saw nothing?" Drukker appeared exhausted, and leaned heavily against the table.

At this moment Professor Dillard appeared in the archway. Behind him stood Arnesson.

"What seems to be the matter?" the professor asked. "I heard the noise here, and came down." He regarded Drukker coldly. "Hasn't Belle been through enough to-day without your frightening her this way?"

Vance had risen, but before he could speak Arnesson came forward and shook his finger in mock reprimand at Drukker.

"You really should learn control, Adolph. You take life with such abominable seriousness. You've worked in interstellar spatial magnitudes long enough to have some sense of proportion. Why attach so much importance to this pin-point of life on earth?"

Drukker was breathing stertorously.

"These swine——" he began.

"Oh, my dear Adolph!" Arnesson cut him short. "The entire human race are swine. Why particularize? . . . Come along. I'll see you home." And he took Drukker's arm firmly and led him downstairs.

"We're very sorry we disturbed you, sir," Markham apologized to Professor Dillard. "The man flew off the handle for some unknown reason. These investigation are not the pleasantest things in the world; but we hope to be through before long."

"Well, make it as brief as you can, Markham. And do try to spare Belle as much as possible. Let me see you before you go."

When Professor Dillard had returned upstair Markham asked Vance: "What do you make of Drukker?"

"Decidedly not a pleasant character. Diseased physically and mentally. A congenital liar. But canny—oh, deuced canny. An abnormal brain—you often find it in cripples of this type. Sometimes it runs to real constructive genius, as with Steinmetz; but too often it takes to abstruse speculation along impractical lines, as with Drukker. Still, our little verbal give-and-take has not been without fruit. He's hiding something that he'd like to tell but doesn't dare."

"He's touchy on the subject of that hour between eleven and noon," said Markham.

"We're at least getting some luggage aboard," said Vance. "Our excitable mathematical wizard has opened up some very interestin' lines of speculation. And Mrs. Drukker is fairly teemin' with possibilities."

"I'm here to tell you, Mr. Markham, that we're wasting our time," put in Heath. What's the good of all these parleys? Sperling's the boy we want, and when my men bring him in and put him through a little sweating, we'll have enough material for an indictment. He was in love with the Dillard girl and was jealous of Robin—not only on account of the girl, but because Robin could shoot those red sticks straighter than he could. He had a scrap with Robin in this here room—the professor heard 'em at it."

"And," added Vance ironically, "his name means 'sparrow.' *Quod erat demonstrandum*—No, Sergeant; it's much too easy. It works out like a game of Canfield with the cards stacked; whereas this thing was planned much too carefully for suspicion to fall directly on the guilty person."

(To be continued.)

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