Willard Huntington Wright

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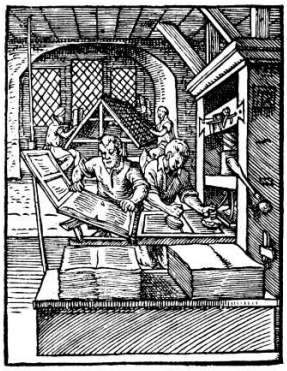

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CHAPTER I

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"WHO KILLED COCK ROBIN?"

(*Saturday, April 2; noon*)

Of all the criminal cases in which Philo Vance participated as an unofficial investigator, the most sinister, the most bizarre, the seemingly most incomprehensible, and certainly the most terrifying, was the one that followed the famous Greene murders.[1] The orgy of horror at the old Greene mansion had been brought to its astounding close in December; and after the Christmas holidays Vance had gone to Switzerland for the winter sports. Returning to New York at the end of February he had thrown himself into some literary work he had long had in mind—the uniform translation of the principal fragments of Menander found in the Egyptian papyri during the early years of the present century; and for over a month he had devoted himself sedulously to this thankless task.

Whether or not he would have completed the translations, even had his labors not been interrupted, I do not know; for Vance was a man of cultural ardencies, in whom the spirit of research and intellectual adventure was constantly at odds with the drudgery necessary to scholastic creation. I remember that only the preceding year he had begun writing a life of Xenophon—the result of an enthusiasm inherited from his university days when he had first read the *Anabasis* and the *Memorabilia*—and had lost interest in it at the point where Xenophon's historic march

led the Ten Thousand back to the sea. However, the fact remains that Vance's translation of Menander was rudely interrupted in early April; and for weeks he became absorbed in a criminal mystery which threw the entire country into a state of gruesome excitement.

This new criminal investigation, in which he acted as a kind of *amicus curiæ* for John F.-X. Markham, the District Attorney of New York, at once became known as the Bishop murder case. The designation—the result of our journalistic instinct to attach labels to every *cause célèbre*—was, in a sense, a misnomer. There was nothing ecclesiastical about that ghoulish saturnalia of crime which set an entire community to reading the "Mother Goose Melodies" with fearful apprehension;[2] and no one of the name of Bishop was, as far as I know, even remotely connected with the monstrous events which bore that appellation. But, withal, the word "Bishop" was appropriate, for it was an *alias* used by the murderer for the grimmest of purposes. Incidentally it was this name that eventually led Vance to the almost incredible truth, and ended one of the most ghastly multiple crimes in police history.

The series of uncanny and apparently unrelated events which constituted the Bishop murder case and drove all thought of Menander and Greek monostichs from Vance's mind, began on the morning of April 2, less than five months after the double shooting of Julia and Ada Greene. It was one of those warm luxurious spring days which sometimes bless New York in early April; and Vance was breakfasting in his little roof garden atop his apartment in East 38th Street. It was nearly noon—for Vance worked or read until all hours,

and was a late riser—and the sun, beating down from a clear blue sky, cast a mantle of introspective lethargy over the city. Vance sprawled in an easy chair, his breakfast on a low table beside him, gazing with cynical, regretful eyes down at the treetops in the rear yard.

I knew what was in his mind. It was his custom each spring to go to France; and it had long since come to him to think, as it came to George Moore, that Paris and May were one. But the great trek of the post-war American *nouveaux riches* to Paris had spoiled his pleasure in this annual pilgrimage; and, only the day before, he had informed me that we were to remain in New York for the summer.

For years I had been Vance's friend and legal adviser—a kind of monetary steward and agent-companion. I had quitted my father's law firm of Van Dine, Davis & Van Dine to devote myself wholly to his interests—a post I found far more congenial than that of general attorney in a stuffy office—and though my own bachelor quarters were in a hotel on the West Side, I spent most of my time at Vance's apartment.

I had arrived early that morning, long before Vance was up, and, having gone over the first-of-the-month accounts, now sat smoking my pipe idly as he breakfasted.

"Y' know, Van," he said to me, in his emotionless drawl; "the prospect of spring and summer in New York is neither excitin' nor romantic. It's going to be a beastly bore. But it'll be less annoyin' than travelin' in Europe with the vulgar hordes of tourists jostlin' one at every turn.... It's very distressin'."

Little did he suspect what the next few weeks held in store for him. Had he known I doubt if even the prospect of an old pre-war spring in Paris would have taken him away; for his insatiable mind liked nothing better than a complicated problem; and even as he spoke to me that morning the gods that presided over his destiny were preparing for him a strange and fascinating enigma—one which was to stir the nation deeply and add a new and terrible chapter to the annals of crime.

Vance had scarcely poured his second cup of coffee when Currie, his old English butler and general factotum, appeared at the French doors bearing a portable telephone.

"It's Mr. Markham, sir," the old man said apologetically. "As he seemed rather urgent, I took the liberty of informing him you were in." He plugged the telephone into a baseboard switch, and set the instrument on the breakfast table.

"Quite right, Currie," Vance murmured, taking off the receiver. "Anything to break this deuced monotony." Then he spoke to Markham. "I say, old man, don't you ever sleep? I'm in the midst of an *omelette aux fines herbes*. Will you join me? Or do you merely crave the music of my voice ——?"

He broke off abruptly, and the bantering look on his lean features disappeared. Vance was a marked Nordic type, with a long, sharply chiselled face; gray, wide-set eyes; a narrow aquiline nose; and a straight oval chin. His mouth, too, was firm and clean-cut, but it held a look of cynical cruelty which was more Mediterranean than Nordic. His face was strong and attractive, though not exactly handsome. It was the

face of a thinker and recluse; and its very severity—at once studious and introspective—acted as a barrier between him and his fellows.

Though he was immobile by nature and sedulously schooled in the repression of his emotions, I noticed that, as he listened to Markham on the phone that morning, he could not entirely disguise his eager interest in what was being told him. A slight frown ruffled his brow; and his eyes reflected his inner amazement. From time to time he gave vent to a murmured “Amazin’!” or “My word!” or “Most extr’ordin’ry!”—his favorite expletives—and when at the end of several minutes he spoke to Markham, a curious excitement marked his manner.

“Oh, by all means!” he said. “I shouldn’t miss it for all the lost comedies of Menander.... It sounds mad.... I’ll don fitting raiment immediately.... *Au revoir*.”

Replacing the receiver, he rang for Currie.

“My gray tweeds,” he ordered. “A sombre tie, and my black Homburg hat.” Then he returned to his omelet with a preoccupied air.

After a few moments he looked at me quizzically.

“What might you know of archery, Van?” he asked.

I knew nothing of archery, save that it consisted of shooting arrows at targets, and I confessed as much.

“You’re not exactly revealin’, don’t y’ know.” He lighted one of his *Régie* cigarettes indolently. “However, we’re in for a little flutter of toxophily, it seems. I’m no leading authority on the subject myself, but I did a bit of potting with the bow at Oxford. It’s not a passionately excitin’ pastime—much duller than golf and fully as complicated.” He smoked a

while dreamily. “I say, Van; fetch me Doctor Elmer’s tome on archery from the library—there’s a good chap.”[3]

I brought the book, and for nearly half an hour he dipped into it, tarrying over the chapters on archery associations, tournaments and matches, and scanning the long tabulation of the best American scores. At length he settled back in his chair. It was obvious he had found something that caused him troubled concern and set his sensitive mind to work.

“It’s quite mad, Van,” he remarked, his eyes in space. “A mediæval tragedy in modern New York! We don’t wear buskins and leathern doublets, and yet—*By Jove*!” He suddenly sat upright. “No—no! It’s absurd. I’m letting the insanity of Markham’s news affect me....” He drank some more coffee, but his expression told me that he could not rid himself of the idea that had taken possession of him.

“One more favor, Van,” he said at length. “Fetch me my German diction’ry and Burton E. Stevenson’s ‘Home Book of Verse.’”

When I had brought the volumes, he glanced at one word in the dictionary, and pushed the book from him.

“That’s that, unfortunately—though I knew it all the time.”

Then he turned to the section in Stevenson’s gigantic anthology which included the rhymes of the nursery and of childhood. After several minutes he closed that book, too, and, stretching himself out in his chair, blew a long ribbon of smoke toward the awning overhead.

“It can’t be true,” he protested, as if to himself. “It’s too fantastic, too fiendish, too utterly distorted. A fairy tale in terms of blood—a world in anamorphosis—a perversion of

all rationality.... It's unthinkable, senseless, like black magic and sorcery and thaumaturgy. It's downright demented."

He glanced at his watch and, rising, went indoors, leaving me to speculate vaguely on the cause of his unwonted perturbation. A treatise on archery, a German dictionary, a collection of children's verses, and Vance's incomprehensible utterances regarding insanity and fantasy—what possible connection could these things have? I attempted to find a least common denominator, but without the slightest success. And it was no wonder I failed. Even the truth, when it came out weeks later bolstered up by an array of incontestable evidence, seemed too incredible and too wicked for acceptance by the normal mind of man.

Vance shortly broke in on my futile speculations. He was dressed for the street, and seemed impatient at Markham's delay in arriving.

"Y' know, I wanted something to interest me—a nice fascinatin' crime, for instance," he remarked; "but—my word!—I wasn't exactly longin' for a nightmare. If I didn't know Markham so well I'd suspect him of spoofing."

When Markham stepped into the roof garden a few minutes later it was only too plain that he had been in deadly earnest. His expression was sombre and troubled, and his usual cordial greeting he reduced to the merest curt formality. Markham and Vance had been intimate friends for fifteen years. Though of antipodal natures—the one sternly aggressive, brusque, forthright, and almost ponderously serious; the other whimsical, cynical, debonair, and aloof from the transient concerns of life—they found in each other

that attraction of complementaries which so often forms the basis of an inseparable and enduring companionship.

During Markham's year and four months as District Attorney of New York he had often called Vance into conference on matters of grave importance, and in every instance Vance had justified the confidence placed in his judgments. Indeed, to Vance almost entirely belongs the credit for solving the large number of major crimes which occurred during Markham's four years' incumbency. His knowledge of human nature, his wide reading and cultural attainments, his shrewd sense of logic, and his *flair* for the hidden truth beneath misleading exteriors, all fitted him for the task of criminal investigator—a task which he fulfilled unofficially in connection with the cases which came under Markham's jurisdiction.

Vance's first case, it will be remembered, had to do with the murder of Alvin Benson;[4] and had it not been for his participation in that affair I doubt if the truth concerning it would ever have come to light. Then followed the notorious strangling of Margaret Odell[5]—a murder mystery in which the ordinary methods of police detection would inevitably have failed. And last year the astounding Greene murders (to which I have already referred) would undoubtedly have succeeded had not Vance been able to frustrate their final intent.

It was not surprising, therefore, that Markham should have turned to Vance at the very beginning of the Bishop murder case. More and more, I had noticed, he had come to rely on the other's help in his criminal investigations; and in the present instance it was particularly fortunate that he

appealed to Vance, for only through an intimate knowledge of the abnormal psychological manifestations of the human mind, such as Vance possessed, could that black, insensate plot have been contravened and the perpetrator unearthed.

“This whole thing may be a mare’s-nest,” said Markham, without conviction. “But I thought you might want to come along....”

“Oh, quite!” Vance gave Markham a sardonic smile. “Sit down a moment and tell me the tale coherently. The corpse won’t run away. And it’s best to get our facts in some kind of order before we view the remains.—Who are the parties of the first part, for instance? And why the projection of the District Attorney’s office into a murder case within an hour of the deceased’s passing? All that you’ve told me so far resolves itself into the utterest nonsense.”

Markham sat down gloomily on the edge of a chair and inspected the end of his cigar.

“Damn it, Vance! Don’t start in with a mysteries-of-Udolpho attitude. The crime—if it is a crime—seems clear-cut enough. It’s an unusual method of murder, I’ll admit; but it’s certainly not senseless. Archery has become quite a fad of late. Bows and arrows are in use to-day in practically every city and college in America.”

“Granted. But it’s been a long time since they were used to kill persons named Robin.”

Markham’s eyes narrowed, and he looked at Vance searchingly.

“That idea occurred to you, too, did it?”

“Occurred to me? It leapt to my brain the moment you mentioned the victim’s name.” Vance puffed a moment on

his cigarette. “‘Who Killed Cock Robin?’ And with a bow and arrow! ... Queer how the doggerel learned in childhood clings to the memory.—By the by, what was the unfortunate Mr. Robin’s first name?”

“Joseph, I believe.”

“Neither edifyin’ nor suggestive.... Any middle name?”

“See here, Vance!” Markham rose irritably. “What has the murdered man’s middle name to do with the case?”

“I haven’t the groggiest. Only, as long as we’re going insane we may as well go the whole way. A mere shred of sanity is of no value.”

He rang for Currie and sent him for the telephone directory. Markham protested, but Vance pretended not to hear; and when the directory arrived he thumbed its pages for several moments.

“Did the departed live on Riverside Drive?” he asked finally, holding his finger on a name he had found.

“I think he did.”

“Well, well.” Vance closed the book, and fixed a quizzically triumphant gaze on the District Attorney. “Markham,” he said slowly, “there’s only one Joseph Robin listed in the telephone direct’ry. He lives on Riverside Drive, and his middle name is—Cochrane!”

“What rot is this?” Markham’s tone was almost ferocious. “Suppose his name *was* Cochrane: are you seriously suggesting that the fact had anything to do with his being murdered?”

“’Pon my word, old man, I’m suggesting nothing.” Vance shrugged his shoulders slightly. “I’m merely jotting down, so to speak, a few facts in connection with the case. As the

matter stands now: a Mr. Joseph Cochrane Robin—to wit: Cock Robin—has been killed by a bow and arrow.—Doesn't that strike even your legal mind as deuced queer?"

"No!" Markham fairly spat the negative. "The name of the dead man is certainly common enough; and it's a wonder more people haven't been killed or injured with all this revival of archery throughout the country. Moreover, it's wholly possible that Robin's death was the result of an accident."

"Oh, my aunt!" Vance wagged his head reprovingly. "That fact, even were it true, wouldn't help the situation any. It would only make it queerer. Of the thousands of archery enthusiasts in these fair states, the one with the name of Cock Robin should be accidentally killed with an arrow! Such a supposition would lead us into spiritism and demonology and whatnot. Do you, by any chance, believe in Eblises and Azazels and jinn who go about playing Satanic jokes on mankind?"

"Must I be a Mohammedan mythologist to admit coincidences?" returned Markham tartly.

"My dear fellow! The proverbial long arm of coincidence doesn't extend to infinity. There are, after all, laws of probability, based on quite definite mathematical formulas. It would make me sad to think that such men as Laplace[6] and Czuber and von Kries had lived in vain.—The present situation, however, is even more complicated than you suspect. For instance, you mentioned over the phone that the last person known to have been with Robin before his death is named Sperling."

"And what esoteric significance lies in that fact?"

“Perhaps you know what *Sperling* means in German,” suggested Vance dulcetly.

“I’ve been to High School,” retorted Markham. Then his eyes opened slightly, and his body became tense.

Vance pushed the German dictionary toward him.

“Well, anyway, look up the word. We might as well be thorough. I looked it up myself. I was afraid my imagination was playing tricks on me, and I had a yearnin’ to see the word in black and white.”

Markham opened the book in silence, and let his eye run down the page. After staring at the word for several moments he drew himself up resolutely, as if fighting off a spell. When he spoke his voice was defiantly belligerent.

“*Sperling* means ‘sparrow.’ Any school boy knows that. What of it?”

“Oh, to be sure.” Vance lit another cigarette languidly. “And any school boy knows the old nursery rhyme entitled ‘The Death and Burial of Cock Robin,’ what?” He glanced tantalizingly at Markham, who stood immobile, staring out into the spring sunshine. “Since you pretend to be unfamiliar with that childhood classic, permit me to recite the first stanza.”

A chill, as of some unseen spectral presence, passed over me as Vance repeated those old familiar lines:

> “Who killed Cock Robin?
> ‘I,’ said the sparrow,
> ‘With my bow and arrow.
> I killed Cock Robin.’”

[1] “The Greene Murder Case” (Scribners, 1928).

[2] Mr. Joseph A. Margolies of Brentano’s told me that for a period of several weeks during the Bishop murder case more copies of “Mother Goose Melodies” were sold than of any current novel. And one of the smaller publishing houses reprinted and completely sold out an entire edition of those famous old nursery rhymes.

[3] The book Vance referred to was that excellent and comprehensive treatise, “Archery,” by Robert P. Elmer, M.D.

[4] “The Benson Murder Case” (Scribners, 1926).

[5] “The ‘Canary’ Murder Case” (Scribners, 1927).

[6] Though Laplace is best known for his “Méchanique Célestee,” Vance was here referring to his masterly work, “Théorie Analytique des Probabilités,” which Herschel called “the ne plus ultra of mathematical skill and power.”

CHAPTER II

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ON THE ARCHERY RANGE

(*Saturday, April 2; 12.30 p. m.*)

Slowly Markham brought his eyes back to Vance.

"It's mad," he remarked, like a man confronted with something at once inexplicable and terrifying.

"Tut, tut!" Vance waved his hand airily. "That's plagiarism. I said it first." (He was striving to overcome his own sense of perplexity by a lightness of attitude.) "And now there really should be an *inamorata* to bewail Mr. Robin's passing. You recall, perhaps, the stanza:

> "Who'll be chief mourner?
> 'I,' said the dove,
> 'I mourn my lost love;
> I'll be chief mourner.'"

Markham's head jerked slightly, and his fingers beat a nervous tattoo on the table.

"Good God, Vance! There is a girl in the case. And there's a possibility that jealousy lies at the bottom of this thing."

"Fancy that, now! I'm afraid the affair is going to develop into a kind of *tableau-vivant* for grown-up kindergartners, what? But that'll make our task easier. All we'll have to do is to find the fly."

"The fly?"

"The *Musca domestica*, to speak pedantically.... My dear Markham, have you forgotten?——

“Who saw him die?
‘I,’ said the fly,
‘With my little eye;
I saw him die.’”

“Come down to earth!” Markham spoke with acerbity. “This isn’t a child’s game. It’s damned serious business.”

Vance nodded abstractedly.

“A child’s game is sometimes the most serious business in life.” His words held a curious, far-away tone. “I don’t like this thing—I don’t at all like it. There’s too much of the child in it—the child born old and with a diseased mind. It’s like some hideous perversion.” He took a deep inhalation on his cigarette, and made a slight gesture of repugnance. “Give me the details. Let’s find out where we stand in this topsy-turvy land.”

Markham again seated himself.

“I haven’t many details. I told you practically everything I know of the case over the phone. Old Professor Dillard called me shortly before I communicated with you——”

“Dillard? By any chance, Professor Bertrand Dillard?”

“Yes. The tragedy took place at his house.—You know him?”

“Not personally. I know him only as the world of science knows him—as one of the greatest living mathematical physicists. I have most of his books.—How did he happen to call you?”

“I’ve known him for nearly twenty years. I had mathematics under him at Columbia, and later did some legal work for him. When Robin’s body was found he phoned me at once—about half past eleven. I called up Sergeant

Heath at the Homicide Bureau and turned the case over to him—although I told him I'd come along personally later on. Then I phoned you. The Sergeant and his men are waiting for me now at the Dillard home."

"What's the domestic situation there?"

"The professor, as you probably know, resigned his chair some ten years ago. Since then he's been living in West 75th Street, near the Drive. He took his brother's child—a girl of fifteen—to live with him. She's around twenty-five now. Then there's his protégé, Sigurd Arnesson, who was a classmate of mine at college. The professor adopted him during his junior year. Arnesson is now about forty, an instructor in mathematics at Columbia. He came to this country from Norway when he was three, and was left an orphan five years later. He's something of a mathematical genius, and Dillard evidently saw the makings of a great physicist in him and adopted him."

"I've heard of Arnesson," nodded Vance. "He recently published some modifications of Mie's theory on the electrodynamics of moving bodies.... And do these three—Dillard, Arnesson and the girl—live alone?"

"With two servants. Dillard appears to have a very comfortable income. They're not very much alone, however. The house is a kind of shrine for mathematicians, and quite a *cénacle* has developed. Moreover, the girl, who has always gone in for outdoor sports, has her own little social set. I've been at the house several times, and there have always been visitors about—either a serious student or two of the abstract sciences up-stairs in the library, or some noisy young people in the drawing-room below."

“And Robin?”

“He belonged to Belle Dillard’s set—an oldish young society man who held several archery records. ...”

“Yes, I know. I just looked up the name in this book on archery. A Mr. J. C. Robin seems to have made the high scores in several recent championship meets. And I noted, too, that a Mr. Sperling has been the runner-up in several large archery tournaments.—Is Miss Dillard an archer as well?”

“Yes, quite an enthusiast. In fact, she organized the Riverside Archery Club. Its permanent ranges are at Sperling’s home in Scarsdale; but Miss Dillard has rigged up a practice range in the side yard of the professor’s 75th-Street house. It was on this range that Robin was killed.”

“Ah! And, as you say, the last person known to have been with him was Sperling. Where is our sparrow now?”

“I don’t know. He was with Robin shortly before the tragedy; but when the body was found he had disappeared. I imagine Heath will have news on that point.”

“And wherein lies the possible motive of jealousy you referred to?” Vance’s eyelids had drooped lazily, and he smoked with leisurely but precise deliberation—a sign of his intense interest in what was being told him.

“Professor Dillard mentioned an attachment between his niece and Robin; and when I asked him who Sperling was and what his status was at the Dillard house, he intimated that Sperling was also a suitor for the girl’s hand. I didn’t go into the situation over the phone, but the impression I got was that Robin and Sperling were rivals, and that Robin had the better of it.”

“And so the sparrow killed Cock Robin.” Vance shook his head dubiously. “It won’t do. It’s too dashed simple; and it doesn’t account for the fiendishly perfect reconstruction of the Cock-Robin rhyme. There’s something deeper—something darker and more horrible—in this grotesque business.—Who, by the by, found Robin?”

“Dillard himself. He had stepped out on the little balcony at the rear of the house, and saw Robin lying below on the practice range, with an arrow through his heart. He went down-stairs immediately—with considerable difficulty, for the old man suffers abominably from gout—and, seeing that the man was dead, phoned me.—That’s all the advance information I have.”

“Not what you’d call a blindin’ illumination, but still a bit suggestive.” Vance got up. “Markham old dear, prepare for something rather bizarre—and damnable. We can rule out accidents and coincidence. While it’s true that ordin’ry target arrows—which are made of soft wood and fitted with little bevelled piles—could easily penetrate a person’s clothing and chest wall, even when driven with a medium weight bow, the fact that a man named ‘Sparrow’ should kill a man named Cochrane Robin, *with a bow and arrow*, precludes any haphazard concatenation of circumstances. Indeed, this incredible set of events proves conclusively that there has been a subtle, diabolical intent beneath the whole affair.” He moved toward the door. “Come, let us find out something more about it at what the Austrian police officials eruditely call the *situs criminis*.”

We left the house at once and drove up-town in Markham’s car. Entering Central Park at Fifth Avenue we

emerged through the 72nd-Street gate, and a few minutes later were turning off of West End Avenue into 75th Street. The Dillard house—number 391—was on our right, far down the block toward the river. Between it and the Drive, occupying the entire corner, was a large fifteen-story apartment house. The professor’s home seemed to nestle, as if for protection, in the shadow of this huge structure.

The Dillard house was of gray, weather-darkened limestone, and belonged to the days when homes were built for permanency and comfort. The lot on which it stood had a thirty-five-foot frontage, and the house itself was fully twenty-five feet across. The other ten feet of the lot, which formed an areaway separating the house from the apartment structure, was shut off from the street by a ten-foot stone wall with a large iron door in the centre.

The house was of modified Colonial architecture. A short flight of shallow steps led from the street to a narrow brick-lined porch adorned with four white Corinthian pillars. On the second floor a series of casement windows, paned with rectangular leaded glass, extended across the entire width of the house. (These, I learned later, were the windows of the library.) There was something restful and distinctly old-fashioned about the place: it appeared like anything but the scene of a gruesome murder.

Two police cars were parked near the entrance when we drove up, and a dozen or so curious onlookers had gathered in the street. A patrolman lounged against one of the fluted columns of the porch, gazing at the crowd before him with bored disdain.

An old butler admitted us and led us into the drawing-room on the left of the entrance hall, where we found Sergeant Ernest Heath and two other men from the Homicide Bureau. The Sergeant, who was standing beside the centre-table smoking, his thumbs hooked in the armholes of his waistcoat, came forward and extended his hand in a friendly greeting to Markham.

“I’m glad you got here, sir,” he said; and the worried look in his cold blue eyes seemed to relax a bit. “I’ve been waiting for you. There’s something damn fishy about this case.”

He caught sight of Vance, who had paused in the background, and his broad pugnacious features crinkled in a good-natured grin.

“Howdy, Mr. Vance. I had a sneaking idea you’d be lured into this case. What you been up to these many moons?” I could not help comparing this genuine friendliness of the Sergeant’s attitude with the hostility of his first meeting with Vance at the time of the Benson case. But much water had run under the bridge since that first encounter in the murdered Alvin’s garish living-room; and between Heath and Vance there had grown up a warm attachment, based on a mutual respect and a frank admiration for each other’s capabilities.

Vance held out his hand, and a smile played about the corners of his mouth.

“The truth is, Sergeant, I’ve been endeavorin’ to discover the lost glories of an Athenian named Menander, a dramatic rival of Philemon’s. Silly, what?”

Heath grunted disdainfully.

“Well, anyhow, if you’re as good at it as you are at discovering crooks, you’ll probably get a conviction.” It was the first compliment I had ever heard pass his lips, and it attested not only to his deep-seated admiration for Vance, but also to his own troubled and uncertain state of mind.

Markham sensed the Sergeant’s mental insecurity, and asked somewhat abruptly: “Just what seems to be the difficulty in the present case?”

“I didn’t say there was any difficulty, sir,” Heath replied. “It looks as though we had the bird who did it dead to rights. But I ain’t satisfied, and—oh, hell! Mr. Markham ... it ain’t natural; it don’t make sense.”

“I think I understand what you mean.” Markham regarded the Sergeant appraisingly. “You’re inclined to think that Sperling’s guilty?”

“Sure, he’s guilty,” declared Heath with over-emphasis. “But that’s not what’s worrying me. To tell you the truth, I don’t like the name of this guy who was croaked—especially as he was croaked with a bow and arrow....” He hesitated, a bit shamefaced. “Don’t it strike you as peculiar, sir?”

Markham nodded perplexedly.

“I see that you, too, remember your nursery rhymes,” he said, and turned away.

Vance fixed a waggish look on Heath.

“You referred to Mr. Sperling just now as a ‘bird,’ Sergeant. The designation was most apt. *Sperling*, d’ ye see, means ‘sparrow’ in German. And it was a sparrow, you recall, who killed Cock Robin with an arrow.... A fascinatin’ situation—eh, what?”

The Sergeant’s eyes bulged slightly, and his lips fell apart. He stared at Vance with almost ludicrous bewilderment.

“I said this here business was fishy!”

“I’d say, rather, it was avian, don’t y’ know.”

“You *would* call it something nobody’d understand,” Heath retorted truculently. It was his wont to become bellicose when confronted with the inexplicable.

Markham intervened diplomatically.

“Let’s have the details of the case, Sergeant. I take it you’ve questioned the occupants of the house.”

“Only in a general way, sir.” Heath flung one leg over the corner of the centre-table and relit his dead cigar. “I’ve been waiting for you to show up. I knew you were acquainted with the old gentleman up-stairs; so I just did the routine things. I put a man out in the alley to see that nobody touches the body till Doc Doremus arrives,[7]—he’ll be here when he finishes lunch.—I phoned the finger-print men before I left the office, and they oughta be on the job any minute now; though I don’t see what good they can do....”

“What about the bow that fired the arrow?” put in Vance.

“That was our one best bet; but old Mr. Dillard said he picked it up from the alley and brought it in the house. He probably gummed up any prints it mighta had.”

“What have you done about Sperling?” asked Markham.

“I got his address—he lives in a country house up Westchester way—and sent a coupla men to bring him here as soon as they could lay hands on him. Then I talked to the two servants—the old fellow that let you in, and his daughter, a middle-aged woman who does the cooking. But

neither of ’em seemed to know anything, or else they’re acting dumb.—After that I tried to question the young lady of the house.” The Sergeant raised his hands in a gesture of irritated despair. “But she was all broke up and crying; so I thought I’d let *you* have the pleasure of interviewing her.—Snitkin and Burke”—he jerked his thumb toward the two detectives by the front window—“went over the basement and the alley and back yard trying to pick up something; but drew a blank.—And that’s all I know so far. As soon as Doremus and the finger-print men get here, and after I’ve had a heart-to-heart talk with Sperling, then I’ll get the ball to rolling and clean up the works.”

Vance heaved an audible sigh.

“You’re so sanguine, Sergeant! Don’t be disappointed if your ball turns out to be a parallelopiped that won’t roll. There’s something deuced oddish about this nursery extravaganza; and, unless all the omens deceive me, you’ll be playing blind-man’s-buff for a long time to come.”

“Yeh?” Heath gave Vance a look of despondent shrewdness. It was evident he was more or less of the same opinion.

“Don’t let Mr. Vance dishearten you, Sergeant,” Markham rallied him. “He’s permitting his imagination to run away with him.” Then with an impatient gesture he turned toward the door. “Let’s look over the ground before the others arrive. Later I’ll have a talk with Professor Dillard and the other members of the household. And, by the way, Sergeant, you didn’t mention Mr. Arnesson. Isn’t he at home?”

“He’s at the university; but he’s expected to return soon.”

Markham nodded and followed the Sergeant into the main hall. As we passed down the heavily-carpeted passage to the rear, there was a sound on the staircase, and a clear but somewhat tremulous woman’s voice spoke from the semi-darkness above.

“Is that you, Mr. Markham? Uncle thought he recognized your voice. He’s waiting for you in the library.”

“I’ll join your uncle in a very few minutes, Miss Dillard.” Markham’s tone was paternal and sympathetic. “And please wait with him, for I want to see you, too.”

With a murmured acquiescence, the girl disappeared round the head of the stairs.

We moved on to the rear door of the lower hall. Beyond was a narrow passageway terminating in a flight of wooden steps which led to the basement. At the foot of these steps we came into a large, low-ceilinged room with a door giving directly upon the areaway at the west side of the house. This door was slightly ajar, and in the opening stood the man from the Homicide Bureau whom Heath had set to guard the body.

The room had obviously once been a basement storage; but it had been altered and redecorated, and now served as a sort of club-room. The cement floor was covered with fibre rugs, and one entire wall was painted with a panorama of archers throughout the ages. In an oblong panel on the left was a huge illustrated reproduction of an archery range labelled “Ayme for Finsburie Archers—London 1594,” showing Bloody House Ridge in one corner, Westminster

Hall in the centre, and Welsh Hall in the foreground. There were a piano and a phonograph in the room; numerous comfortable wicker chairs; a varicolored divan; an enormous wicker centre-table littered with all manner of sports magazines; and a small bookcase filled with works on archery. Several targets rested in one corner, their gold discs and concentric chromatic rings making brilliant splashes of color in the sunlight which flooded in from the two rear windows. One wall space near the door was hung with long bows of varying sizes and weights; and near them was a large old-fashioned tool-chest. Above it was suspended a small cupboard, or ascham, strewn with various odds and ends of tackle, such as bracers, shooting-gloves, piles, points of aim, and bow strings. A large oak panel between the door and the west window contained a display of one of the most interesting and varied collections of arrows I had ever seen.

This panel attracted Vance particularly, and adjusting his monocle carefully, he strolled over to it.

“Hunting and war arrows,” he remarked. “Most inveiglin’.... *Ah!* One of the trophies seems to have disappeared. Taken down with considerable haste, too. The little brass brad that held it in place is shockingly bent.”

On the floor stood several quivers filled with target arrows. He leaned over and, withdrawing one, extended it to Markham.

“This frail shaft may not look as if it would penetrate the human breast; but target arrows will drive entirely through a deer at eighty yards.... Why, then, the missing hunting arrow from the panel? An interestin’ point.”

Markham frowned and compressed his lips; and I realized that he had been clinging to the forlorn hope that the tragedy might have been an accident. He tossed the arrow hopelessly on a chair, and walked toward the outer door.

“Let’s take a look at the body and the lie of the land,” he said gruffly.

As we emerged into the warm spring sunlight a sense of isolation came over me. The narrow paved areaway in which we stood seemed like a canyon between steep stone walls. It was four or five feet below the street level, which was reached by a short flight of steps leading to the gate in the wall. The blank, windowless rear wall of the apartment house opposite extended upwards for 150 feet; and the Dillard house itself, though only four stories high, was the equivalent of six stories gauged by the architectural measurements of to-day. Though we were standing out of doors in the heart of New York, no one could see us except from the few side windows of the Dillard house and from a single bay window of the house on 76th Street, whose rear yard adjoined that of the Dillard grounds.

This other house, we were soon to learn, was owned by a Mrs. Drukker; and it was destined to play a vital and tragic part in the solution of Robin’s murder. Several tall willow trees acted as a mask to its rear windows; and only the bay window at the side of the house had an unobstructed view of that part of the areaway in which we stood.

I noticed that Vance had his eye on this bay window, and as he studied it I saw a flicker of interest cross his face. It was not until much later that afternoon that I was able to guess what had caught and held his attention.

The archery range extended from the wall of the Dillard lot on 75th Street all the way to a similar street wall of the Drukker lot on 76th Street, where a butt of hay bales had been erected on a shallow bed of sand. The distance between the two walls was 200 feet, which, as I learned later, made possible a sixty-yard range, thus permitting target practice for all the standard archery events, with the one exception of the York Round for men.

The Dillard lot was 135 feet deep, the depth of the Drukker lot therefore being sixty-five feet. A section of the tall ironwork fence that separated the two rear yards had been removed where it had once transected the space now used for the archery range. At the further end of the range, backing against the western line of the Drukker property, was another tall apartment house occupying the corner of 76th Street and Riverside Drive. Between these two gigantic buildings ran a narrow alleyway, the range end of which was closed with a high board fence in which had been set a small door with a lock.

For purposes of clarity I am incorporating in this record a diagram of the entire scene; for the arrangement of the various topographical and architectural details had a very important bearing on the solution of the crime. I would call attention particularly to the following points:—first, to the little second-story balcony at the rear of the Dillard house, which projects slightly over the archery range; secondly, to the bay window (on the second floor) of the Drukker house, whose southern angle has a view of the entire archery range toward 75th Street; and thirdly, to the alleyway between the