

A MURDER CASE

Shiga Naoya

Table of Contents

<u>A MURDER CASE</u>	1
<u>Shiga Naoya</u>	2
<u>THE END</u>	9

A MURDER CASE

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A sudden tragedy had happened, in which Fan, a young Chinese, who was a member of some juggler's party, had slashed the carotid artery of his wife with a jack knife, during one of their juggling performances. The young wife died on the spot, and Fan was immediately arrested.

The manager of the party, an assistant Chinese, and more than three hundred spectators had been witnesses of the tragedy.

In one corner of the pit of the theatre a policeman was seated in a high chair watching the performance. But no one knew whether the killing had been intentional or not, though the tragedy had taken place before the eyes of a number of onlookers.

The performance had begun with a feat of knife throwing, which had been performed in the following manner:—

The young wife was placed in a standing position in front of a thick board of wood of the size of a door. The husband, standing twelve feet away, threw big knives towards her, one after another, and as they hit their mark, they would stick fast in the board, thus making an outline of bristling knives round the woman just two inches from her body.

At the trial, the judge first of all questioned the manager.

“Was this feat at all difficult to perform?”

“No, your honour, it was not so very difficult for a skilful juggler, except that he needed to be in complete command of steady nerve.”

“Then is it impossible to look upon it as a mere accident on the part of Fan?”

“Of course, your honour, such a performance had its risks, very possible risks.”

“Then do you think that this accident may have been an intentional crime?”

“No, your honour, I don't think that at all, because, you see, it was a feat in which one must make the best of one's only skill, and also make use of a certain intuitive talent in throwing knives from a distance of twelve feet; and one can't be certain that it can be done as surely as by using some machine for the purpose. It is true, your honour, that before it really happened, it didn't enter our heads that such an accident might be possible. But now that it has happened, we don't care for people to think that we had entertained any such fear, and we don't care to be judged accordingly.”

“What is your opinion of the real truth of the occurrence?”

“I don't know at all.”

The judge seemed puzzled. All the facts of the case pointed to murder, yet there was no evidence at all to decide whether it had been intentional or not. If it had been an intentional murder, he felt that no subtler crime could be committed.

The judge then called in the assistant Chinese who had been a member of the party even before Fan had joined it.

A MURDER CASE

“Tell me something of Fan's everyday behaviour,” said the judge.

“He is a man of very good behaviour, your honour,” answered the assistant. “He never went in for gambling, he never indulged in women or drinking either. Moreover, ever since last year he has embraced the Christian faith. He also spoke English fairly well and in his leisure time he often read sermons and such things.”

“How did his wife behave?”

“She also behaved well, Your honour. Strolling performers are not always people of good behaviour, you know. Some of them occasionally elope with other men's wives. But Fan's wife was never the kind of woman who could be seduced by anyone at all, even though she was a pretty woman and was sometimes made advances to.”

“What is your opinion of the characters of these two young people?”

“They were both exceedingly gentle and kind towards others, and both of them were gifted with a lot of self-restraint when they became angry with anyone, but (Here the Chinese assistant stopped short, and after thinking for an instant, he continued) I fear it may be disadvantageous to him if I say this, your honour, but speaking candidly, these two people who were so gentle and kind and modest, were cruel to each other.”

“What was their reason?”

“ I don't know, your honour.”

“Have they behaved in this way ever since you first became acquainted with them?”

“Yes, Your honour. Two years ago the wife gave birth to a premature child, who died three days later, and ever since then their lives gradually seemed to become discordant. Very trifling matters sometimes caused them to quarrel, and he would then suddenly become very pale. But in most cases he soon quietened down, and became silent, doing nothing violent to his wife. His Christian faith seemed to influence him from doing anything cruel to her, although quite often his face plainly showed that he was endeavouring to control some unbearable anger. So one day I said to him, 'If there is such discord, don't you think it would be better if you and your wife parted?' 'But,' he answered, 'if she has any reason to want a divorce, I have none at all.' He was very indulgent after All, your honour. Once I heard him say that it was quite natural that a wife who was not loved by her husband should in time lose all her love for him. His motive in reading his Bible and all those sermons seems to have been an idea of his that by doing so he might perhaps be able to calm the disturbance in his heart, and thus cure his rather cruel feeling for his wife, for apparently there was no real reason for his dislike. She was to be pitied, your honour. For the past three years, and ever since she married Fan she has been continuously on the travel, going from one place to another, living the life of a strolling performer. The only one she had belonging to her was her only brother, a dissipated youth, who existed in his native village without a home. If she was to part from her husband and return to her native place, where would she find a house to live in, or who would believe in or marry a woman who had left there years before to join a party of strolling players?”

“She could not help remaining with Fan, your honour, even though there was terrible discord in their married life.”

“And what is your opinion of the tragedy?” asked the judge.

“Did he do it intentionally or by mistake, do you mean?”

“Yes.”

“To speak plainly, I have thought and thought about it ever since it happened, but the more I think, the more puzzling it becomes to me, your honour.”

“But why?”

“I don't know. At any rate, the whole affair seems very mysterious, there's no denying that, your honour. Everybody feels the same about it, you know. Our announcer also says he cannot understand it either.”

“What did you think the instant the tragedy happened?”

“I thought ... yes, I thought he had killed her intentionally”

A MURDER CASE

“Well.”

“But I'm told that our announcer thought, that Fan had missed his aim.”

“Did he? But wasn't it natural for your announcer to think such a thing when he was acquainted with the unhappy relationship that existed between the couples?”

“It may be so, but even though I thought at first that Fan's deed had been intentional, after carefully considering about it again, I now fancy that my judgment may have been prejudiced by knowing too much about the private life of the couple.”

“What was Fan's attitude at that time?”

“As the knife hit, he sprang forward with a shriek. After that I saw blood bursting from the woman's neck. She stood still for a minute, and then bending her knees suddenly, was suspended a few moments by the knives sticking all round her. As they gradually began to fall off the board one by one, her body collapsed, face downwards. Nobody dared to move. Everyone of the audience stared as if turned stone. I can't speak definitely about Fan's attitude at the time, because for the moment I was too much taken aback, but I suppose that for a few moments he also must have been rather dazed. After that it dawned upon me that he had killed his wife. Then I noticed that he had turned deathly pale, and was standing stock still with his eyes closed. As the stage curtain came down, we rushed to the poor woman and raised her body, but found that she was dead. Fan at that time seemed horror-stricken, and at last said, 'Whatever made me commit such a fault?' He then knelt down and prayed for some time.”

“Didn't he seem to be in a panic?”

“Yes, your honour, a little.”

“All right. If it is necessary I shall summon you again.”

The judge dismissed the assistant juggler, and asked for Fan to be brought before him. The latter was rather a clever-looking man, with a strong and well-shaped mouth. As soon as the judge's eyes rested upon him, he saw that the man was suffering from nervous strain.

“We have questioned your manager and the assistant,” said the judge, “and will now question you.”

Fan nodded.

“Up to the present, have you never loved your wife?”

“I have loved my wife with all my heart from the day of our marriage until her death, sir.”

“How was it then that you both disagreed?”

“It was, sir, because I knew that her baby was not mine.”

“Do you know the man?”

“I can guess, sir. He is her cousin.”

“Are you acquainted with him?”

“Yes, sir. He is one of my bosom friends. It was he who first suggested our marriage. He persuaded me into it, sir.”

“Was your relationship with your wife begun before your marriage?”

“Of course, sir. The baby was born eight months after our marriage.”

“Your assistant says that the child's birth was premature.”

“I told him so.”

“I'm told that the child soon died.”

“Yes sir, it died.”

“What caused its death?”

“It was suffocated by her breasts.”

“Did Your wife do it intentionally?”

“She said it was an accident.”

The judge said nothing but looked steadily at Fan's face. Fan's eyes dropped, and he waited for the judge to ask another question.

A MURDER CASE

“Did Your wife confess her unlawful relationship to you?”

“No, sir, she didn't. I didn't ask. Thinking the death of her child had been a kind of atonement for her unfaithfulness, I determined to be as kind and generous to her as possible.”

“But after that time did you begin to find it hard to be generous and kind to her? “

“I had some feeling that even the death of the child could not drive from my mind, sir. When I was separated from her, to some extent I thought kindly of her, but when she was with me and happened to be doing anything, a feeling of unbearable displeasure took hold of me, especially when I looked upon her body.”

“Didn't you think of getting a divorce from her?”

“I wanted very often to do so, sir, but I never said anything to her about it.”

“Why ?”

“Because, sir, I was weak, and she had once said to me that she would die if ever I divorced her.”

“Did your wife love you?”

“No, sir.”

“Then why did she say such a thing?”

“ I think it was because she realised that she must live ... her parent's home had been ruined by her brother, and she knew that no decent man would ever marry the former wife of a strolling juggler. Besides, she suffered from some extreme weakness of the legs, which made it impossible for her to do any hard work.”

“Tell me something of the physical relations that existed between you and your wife.”

“Perhaps they were not very different from that of any other ordinary man and woman, sir.”

“Wasn't your wife at all sympathetic towards you?”

“No, I don't think she felt any sympathy towards me at all. I think that it must have caused her quite a lot of pain to have to live with me. But the way she endeavoured to bear it was beyond anyone's imagination. She watched my collapsing life with indifferent eyes, and with a cruel alertness she coldly watched me struggling to live my life as best as I could.”

“Why couldn't you take some active attitude against all this sort of thing?”

“Because, sir, I had various things to consider.”

“What were they?”

“I wanted to feel that I was acting rightly, yet when I tried to think this way, I never found any solution at all.”

“Had you never thought of killing your wife?”

Fan did not answer. The judge repeated the question again. Fan still hesitated before he answered, but at last he said,

“Before that I often wished that she were dead.”

“Then perhaps if the law had permitted you, you might have killed her?”

“It was not that I was afraid of the law. It was only because I was weak, and my desire to live a decent life was very strong in me, sir.”

“And did you think of killing her after that?”

“I made no decision to take her life, but I thought of it, sir.”

“Was that before the accident?”

“ It was on the previous day.”

“Did you have any quarrel with her before the accident?”

“Yes, sir.”

“About what?”

“About quite a trifling matter, sir.”

“All the same, tell me about it.”

“ I have a way of being rather irritable when I'm hungry, you know, and during a meal together I became angry with her because she had taken such a long time preparing it.”

“Were you more angry than usual? “

A MURDER CASE

“No, sir, but my excitement lasted unusually long because at the time I was so irritated to think that recently I had found it so hard to live in peace. I couldn't lie down to sleep at night without my brain being tortured with all kinds of worries. I realised that the very unsettled life I was leading all due to my disturbed relations with my wife — a life full of anxiety and nerve-strain. There were things which I wanted to do to rid myself of this anxiety, yet I did not dare. There seemed no brightness ahead of me at all, even though I had a burning desire to find it. Even though this slow-burning fire in me did not burst into flames, it seemed to choke me, for it went on smouldering, causing me suppressed and intense agony of mind. I felt that in the end it would surely kill me — that I would die some living death.

“Living in that way, I strove hard to bear my life. “Oh, how I wish my enemy would die!” This thought kept on repeating itself over and over again in my mind. Then, why did I not kill her? I knew that if I did, I might be put into prison, but I would not feel sure that life in prison would be worse than the one I was enduring. Then again I thought of the future, and I felt that I must struggle on, even to death, however hard it might prove — trying to break down this terrible barrier of anxiety, but striving always. I desired to go on living in this way ... With these thoughts I gradually forgot about my duty to my wife.

Then I got horribly tired, but it was not the fatigue that can be refreshed by sleep. I felt dazed, and then my strained nerve's relaxed, and this feeling of murder-ous intention gradually faded. I felt very lonely, having the feelings of a man who had been awakened from a terrible nightmare. At the same time I regretted my lack of spirit, which I felt was weakening, even though my highly-strung nerves had almost driven me to a crime the day before.

“When I awoke that morning, I was sure that my poor wife had passed a sleepless night.”

“When you got up that morning, how did you both feel?”

“We spoke no word to one another.”

“Why didn't you think of running away from your wife?”

“Do you mean that if I had done this the result would have saved me?”

“Yes.”

“But with me it was quite different, sir.”

After saying this, Fan stopped short, and gazed steadily at the judge. The latter said nothing, but, in his eyes was an expression of mild compassion, and he nodded his head. Then Fan continued,

“But there still lay a wide gulf between such an idea and the thought of murder, sir. All that day, ever since the morning, I was unconsciously excited. Sometimes you know, fatigue of the body causes a dull excitement of the nerves. Later I was strolling by myself, and a feeling of great loneliness came over me, but it was mixed with an almost unbearable impatience. I had a desperate feeling that I must do something. But the idea of murder never entered my head as it had done the previous night, nor did I feel any anxiety at all over the coming performance of that evening. If I had been at all anxious, I should perhaps not have selected such kind of turn for that day's programme. We had many kinds of turns besides that one. Even until the very moment for us to perform our act that evening, I had no murderous intention in my mind.

“I cut up a sheet of paper with my knives first of all to show the spectators how very sharp they were. Soon my wife appeared. She was thickly rouged and powdered and was dressed in a gorgeous Chinese garment. Her attitude was as usual. Greeting the spectators with a pleasant smile, she placed her body in a standing position before the thick wooden board. Then taking my knives, I stood facing her, at some distance away. It was the first time that we had stood face to face since the previous night. It was then that I first felt the danger of having selected that particular performance for that evening. The thought suddenly came to me that it would be necessary for me to keep my nerves as steady as possible, for fear of making a mistake. I must keep control over my giddiness.

“But however much I tried to be calm, I was still conscious of a great fatigue of heart, body and soul. Then I began to lose confidence. I tried to shut my eyes and keep cool, but a giddy feeling stole over me.

Then the time came for me to start. First of all I threw a knife so that it would stick above her head. It flew and stuck to the board two inches higher than usual. After that I threw two knives one after the other, so that they would stick near her arm-pits, which were showing, for her arms were raised on a level with her shoulders.

A MURDER CASE

When the knives slipped from my hand, they felt sticky to the touch. It then came to my mind that I was not sure where they would fly. Each time after that, as knife after knife flew through the air and stuck to the board, I felt greatly relieved. I strove to be composed, but the strain caused me a lot of worry as I prepared my arm for throwing. Then I threw another knife to the left side of her neck. But just I was going to throw another to the right side, her facial expression suddenly changed. A pitiful expression of intense terror seemed to take hold of her. Perhaps she had some intuition that the next knife would strike her. I cannot say. I then began to feel strongly the influence of her fear and terror stealing into my mind. My giddiness increased, nevertheless I took aim, and threw my knife with all my might, aiming it at a darkness instead of at any target.”

The judge was silent.

“At last I have killed her!” I said to myself.

“Well, do you mean you did it intentionally?”

“Yes, sir. At that moment I suddenly felt that I had done it intentionally.”

“You knelt beside her and prayed, I'm told?”

“Yes, sir, that was merely a cunning idea which by chance entered my mind. I was aware that everyone knew of my Christian faith, so I thought that a pretence of prayer would well fit the occasion.”

“Did it occur to you at all that you had intentionally killed her?”

“Yes, sir, and so I thought that I must make some pretence that it had been involuntary homicide.”

“But what made you think it was intentional murder?”

“My frightened state of mind, sir.”

“And you thought you had succeeded in cheating your audience, didn't you?”

“When I thought about it afterwards I shuddered, sir. It is true that I had pretended to be amazed, but to some extent I lost my head because I was truly sorry for what I had done. But if there had been a single person of keen perception among the onlookers, he would of course have noticed that I was feigning a little. But afterwards I shuddered with shame.”

“I made up my mind that night that I would use every power that was in me to declare myself innocent of the charge. The thought that there was no disputable evidence whatever regarding the murder, made me feel easier in mind. Of course every member of our troupe knew of the discord which existed between my wife and me, so it was natural to some extent that I should be suspected of having committed intentional homicide. But I felt sure that if I insisted with all my power that it had been a mere accident, that's all there would be to it.

“Our relations might make others suspicious, but it would never bring forth any evidence. At any rate I thought, sir, that I should be acquitted on account of insufficient evidence. Whereupon, chewing the matter over secretly, I prepared in my mind the statement I would make in court, for I wished to appear as innocent as possible of the affair.

“But soon I began to wonder why I had thought I had committed a willful murder. I began to feel doubt about my feelings of the previous night, and could not quite regard my action as that of homicide.

“Gradually I became filled with doubt. I became very excited — so excited that I began to lose all patience. I felt strangely happy — so exalted that I could no more remain still. I wanted to cry out loudly.”

“Do you mean that you began to look upon your act as an accident pure and simple?”

“No, sir, Even now I cannot regard it in that light. It was because I thought that if I confessed everything openly I would not be acquitted. To be absolved of the blame meant everything to me, so I thought it would be far more effective to be honest, stating that I was not able to decide. I felt it was better to do this than to declare my innocence. I decided that I would never declare it had been an accident, nor should I assert that it had been intentional. Finally I felt that I could never make any confession either way, sir.”

Fan ceased speaking. The judge was silent for a little while. Then he spoke very gently.

“Your confession as a whole seems to have been truthful. But have you no regret or sorrow for the death of your poor wife?”

“No, none at all, sir. I never imagined it possible that I should be able to speak of my wife's death with so light a heart as possesses me now, even though at times I have felt a kind of irritated love for her.”

“All right. Now you may retire,” said the judge. Fan without answering bowed his head slightly and left the courtroom.

A MURDER CASE

The judge felt that some unspeakable excitement had taken possession of him. He hastily took up his brush and wrote down these words: "Not guilty"

THE END