

THE "CANARY" MURDER CASE

by S. S. VAN DINE AUTHOR OF THE HENSON MURDER CASE © Charles Scribner's Sons

THE STORY THUS FAR
Skeel's finger prints were found in the apartment of the murdered Margaret Odell, but Vance does not believe him guilty. It is proved later that three other possible suspects have been lying about their whereabouts the night of the murder. The truth comes out that Mannix had been in the building, around midnight, and that Dr. Lindquist, knowing Spotswoode was calling on Margaret Odell, had planned in a jealous fit to kill him when he came out. But this plan was frustrated when Spotswoode jumped into a cab. Skeel telephoned that he will come to the district attorney's office and tell who committed the murder. They wait for him. He does not appear, and when they go to his room they find him dead—strangled, just as Margaret Odell had been.

CHAPTER XLII
(Sunday, p. m., Monday, a. m.; September 16-17)

THE investigation into Skeel's death was pushed with great vigor by the authorities.

Doctor Doremus, the medical examiner, arrived promptly and declared that the crime had taken place between ten o'clock and midnight.

Immediately Vance insisted that all the men who were known to have been in the vicinity acquainted with the Odell girl—Mannix, Lindquist, Cleaver and Spotswoode—be interviewed at once and made to explain where they were during these two hours.

Markham agreed without hesitation and gave the order to Heath, who at once put four of his men on the task.

Mallory, the detective who had shadowed Skeel the previous night, was questioned regarding possible visitors; but inasmuch as the house where Skeel lived accommodated over twenty roomers, who were constantly coming and going at all hours, no information could be gained through that channel.

All that Mallory could say definitely was that Skeel had returned home at about ten o'clock, and had not come out again.

The landlady, sobered and subdued by the tragedy, repudiated all knowledge of the affair.

She explained that she had been "ill" in her room from dinner-time until we had disturbed her recuperation the next morning.

The front door, it seemed, was never locked, since her tenants objected to such an unnecessary inconvenience.

The tenants themselves were questioned, but without result; they were not of a class likely to give information to the police, even had they possessed any.

The finger-print experts made a careful examination of the room, but failed to find any marks except Skeel's own.

A thorough search through the murdered man's effects occupied several hours; but nothing was discovered that gave any hint of the murderer's identity.

A .38 Colt automatic, fully loaded, was found under one of the pillows on the bed; and eleven hundred dollars, in bills of large denomination, was taken from a hollow brass curtain-rod.

Also, under a loose board in the hall, the missing steel chisel, with the fissure in the blade, was found. But these items were of no value in solving the mystery of Skeel's death; and at 4 o'clock in the afternoon the room was closed with an emergency padlock and put under guard.

Markham and Vance and I had remained several hours after our discovery of the body.

Markham had taken immediate charge of the case, and had conducted the interrogation of the tenants.

Vance had watched the routine activities of the police with unwonted interest, and had even taken part in the search.

He had seemed particularly interested in Skeel's evening clothes, and had examined them garment by garment.

Heath had looked at him from time to time, but there had been neither contempt nor amusement in the sergeant's glances.

At half past two Markham departed, after informing Heath that he would be at the Stuyvesant Club during the remainder of the day; and Vance and I went with him. We had a belated luncheon in the empty grill.

"This Skeel episode rather knocks the foundation from under everything," Markham said dispiritedly, as our coffee was served.

"Oh, no—not that," Vance answered. "Rather, let us say that it has added a new column to the edifice of my giddy theory."

"Your theory—yes. It's about all that's left to go on," Markham sighed.

"It has certainly received substantiation this morning. . . . Remarkable how you called the turn when Skeel failed to show up."

Again Vance contradicted him. "You over-estimate my little flutter in forensics, Markham dear."

"You see, I assumed that the lady's stranger knew of Skeel's offer to you. That offer was probably a threat of some kind on Skeel's part; otherwise he wouldn't have set the appointment a day ahead."

"He no doubt hoped the victim of his threat would become amenable in the meantime."

"And that money hidden in the curtain-rod leads me to think he was blackmailing the Canary's murderer, and had been refused a further donation just before he phoned you yesterday."

"That would account, too, for his having kept his guilty knowledge to himself all this time."

"You may be right. But now we're worse off than ever, for we haven't even Skeel to guide us."

"At least we've forced our elusive culprit to commit a second crime to cover up his first, don't you know."

"What you've learned what the Canary's various amorists were doing last night between ten and twelve, we may have something suggestive on which to work. By the way, when may we expect this thrilling information?"

"It depends upon what luck Heath's men have. Tonight, some time, if everything goes well."

It was, in fact, about half past eight when Heath telephoned the reports.

But here again Markham seemed to have drawn a blank. A less satisfactory account could scarcely be imagined.

Doctor Lindquist had suffered a "nervous stroke" the preceding afternoon, and had been taken to the Episcopal Hospital.

He was still there under the care of two eminent physicians whose word it was impossible to doubt; and it would be a week at least before

he would be able to resume his work.

This report was the only definite one of the four, and it completely exonerated the doctor from any participation in the previous night's crime.

By a curious coincidence neither Mannix, nor Cleaver, nor Spotswoode could furnish a satisfactory alibi.

All three of them, according to their statements, had remained at home the night before.

The weather had been inclement; and though Mannix and Spotswoode admitted to having been out earlier in the evening, they stated that they had returned home before ten o'clock.

Mannix lived in an apartment-house, and as it was Saturday night, the lobby was crowded, so that no one would have been likely to see him come in.

Cleaver lived in a small private apartment-house without a doorman or hallboys to observe his movements.

Spotswoode was staying at the Stuyvesant Club, and since his rooms were on the third floor, he rarely used the elevator.

Moreover, there had been a political reception and dance at the club the previous night, and he might have walked in and out at random a dozen times without being noticed.

"Not what you'd call illuminating," said Vance, when Markham had given him this information.

"It eliminates Lindquist, at any rate."

"Quite. And, automatically, it eliminates him as an object of suspicion in the Canary's death also; for these two crimes are part of a whole—integers of the same problem. They complement each other. The latter was conceived in relation to the first—was, in fact, a logical outgrowth of it."

Markham nodded. "That's reasonable enough. Any way, I've passed the combative stage. I think I'll drift for a while on the stream of your theory and see what happens."

"What irks me is the disquieting feeling that positively nothing will happen unless we force the issue. The lad who maneuvered those two obits had real brain in him."

As he spoke Spotswoode entered the room and looked about as if searching for some one.

Catching sight of Markham, he came briskly forward, with a look of inquisitive perplexity.

"Forgive me for intruding, sir," he apologized, nodding pleasantly to Vance and me, "but a police officer was here this afternoon inquiring as to my whereabouts last night."

"It struck me as strange, but I thought little of it until I happened to see the name Tony Skeel in the headlines of a 'special' tonight and read he had been strangled."

"I remember you asked me regarding such a man in connection with Miss Odell, and I wondered if, by any chance, there could be any connection between the two murders, and if I was, after all, to be drawn into the affair."

"No, I think not," said Markham. "There seemed a possibility that the two crimes were related; and, as a matter of routine, the police questioned all the close friends of Miss Odell in the hope of turning up something suggestive."

"You may dismiss the matter from your mind. I trust," he added, "the officer was not unpleasantly importunate."

"Not at all." Spotswoode's look of anxiety disappeared. "He was extremely courteous, but a bit mysterious—Who was this man Skeel?"

"A half-world character and ex-burglar. He had some hold on Miss

Odell, and, I believe, extorted money from her."

A cloud of angry disgust passed over Spotswoode's face.

"A creature like that deserves the fate that overtook him."

"We chatted on various matters until ten o'clock, when Vance rose and gave Markham a reproachful look."

"I'm going to try to recover some lost sleep. I'm temperamentally unfitted for a policeman's life."

(To Be Continued)

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