

5 Much to everyone's astonishment, the young Chinese juggler, Han, severed his wife's carotid artery with one of his heavy knives in the course of a performance. The young woman died on the spot. Han was immediately arrested.

10 At the scene of the event were the director of the theatre, Han's Chinese assistant, the announcer and more than three hundred spectators. There was also a policeman who had been stationed behind the audience. Despite the presence of all these witnesses, it was a complete mystery whether the killing had been intentional or accidental.

15 Han's act was as follows: his wife would stand in front of a wooden board about the size of a door and, from a distance of approximately four yards, he would throw his large knives at her so that they stuck in the board about two inches apart, forming a contour around her body. As each knife left his hand, he would let out a staccato exclamation as if to punctuate his performance.

The examining judge first questioned the director of the theatre.

"Would you say that this was a very difficult act?"

20 "No, Your Honour, it's not as difficult as all that for an experienced performer. But to do it properly, you want steady nerves and complete concentration."

"I see. Then assuming that what happened was an accident, it was an extremely unlikely type of accident?"

"Yes, indeed, Your Honour. If accidents were not so very unlikely, I should never have allowed the act in my theatre."

25 "Well then, do you consider that this was done on purpose?"

30 "No, Your Honour, I do not. And for this reason: an act of this kind performed at a distance of twelve feet requires not only skill but at the same time a certain—well, intuitive sense. It is true that we all thought a mistake virtually out of the question, but after what has happened. I think we must admit that there was always the possibility of a mistake."

“Well then, which do you think it was—a mistake or on purpose?”

“That I simply cannot say. Your Honour.”

5 The judge felt puzzled. Here was a clear case of homicide, but whether it was manslaughter or premeditated murder it was impossible to tell. If murder, it was indeed a clever one, thought the judge.

Next, the judge decided to question the Chinese assistant who had worked with Han for many years past.

“What was Han’s normal behaviour?” he asked.

10 “He was always very correct. Your Honour; he didn’t gamble or drink or run after women. Besides. last year he took up Christianity. He studied English and in his free time always seemed to be reading collections of sermons—the Bible and that sort of thing.”

“And what about his wife’s behaviour?”

15 “Also very correct, Your Honour. Strolling players aren’t always the most moral people, as you know. Mrs. Han was a pretty little woman and quite a few men used to make propositions to her, but she never paid the slightest attention to that kind of thing.”

“And what sort of temperaments did they have?”

20 “Always very kind and gentle, Sir. They were extremely good to all their friends and acquaintances and never quarrelled with anyone. But...” He broke off and reflected a moment before continuing. “Your Honour, I’m afraid that if I tell you this, it may go badly for Han. But to be quite truthful, these two people, who were so gentle and unselfish to others, were amazingly cruel in their relations to each other.”

“Why was that?”

25 “I don’t know, Your Honour.”

“Was that the case ever since you first knew them?”

30 “No. Your Honour. About two years ago Mrs. Han was pregnant. The child was born prematurely and died after about three days. That marked a change in their relations. They began having terrible rows over the most trivial things, and Han’s face used to turn white as a sheet. He always ended by suddenly growing silent. He never once

raised his hand against her or anything like that—I suppose it would have gone against his principles. But when you looked at him, Your Honour, you could see the terrible anger in his eyes! It was quite frightening at times.

5 “One day I asked Han why he didn’t separate from his wife, seeing that things were so bad between them. Well, he told me that he had no real grounds for divorce, even though his love for her had died. Of course, she felt this and gradually stopped loving him too. He told me all this himself. I think the reason he began reading the Bible and all those sermons was to calm the violence in his heart and stop himself from hating his wife, whom he had no real cause to hate. Mrs. Han was really a pathetic woman.  
10 She had been with Han nearly three years and had travelled all over the country with him as a strolling player. If she’d ever left Han and gone back home, I don’t think she’d have found it easy to get married. How many men would trust a woman who’d spent all that time travelling about? I suppose that’s why she stayed with Han, even though they got on so badly.”

15 “And what do you really think about this killing?”

“You mean, Your Honour, do I think it was an accident or done on purpose?”

“That’s right.”

20 “Well, Sir, I’ve been thinking about it from every angle since the day it happened. The more I think, the less I know what to make of it. I’ve talked about it with the announcer, and he also says he can’t understand what happened.”

“Very well. But tell me this: at the actual moment it did happen, did it occur to you to wonder whether it was accidental or on purpose?”

“Yes, Sir, it did. I thought, ‘He’s gone and killed her.’”

“On purpose you mean?”

25 “Yes, Sir. However, the announcer says that he thought, ‘His hands slipped.’”

“Yes, but he didn’t know about their everyday relations as you did.”

“That may be, Your Honour. But afterwards I wondered if it wasn’t just because I did know about those relations that I thought, ‘He’s killed her.’”

“What were Han’s reactions at the moment?”

“He cried out, ‘Ha.’ As soon as I heard that, I looked up and saw blood gushing from his wife’s throat. For a few seconds she kept standing there, then her knees seemed to fold up under her and her body swayed forward. When the knife fell out, she collapsed on the floor, all crumpled in a heap. Of course there was nothing any of us could do—we just sat there petrified, staring at her... As to Han, I really can’t describe his reactions, for I wasn’t looking at him. It was only when the thought struck me, ‘He’s finally gone and killed her’ that I glanced at him. His face was dead white and his eyes closed. The stage manager lowered the curtain. When they picked up Mrs. Han’s body she was already dead. Han dropped to his knees then, and for a long time he kept praying in silence.”

“Did he appear very upset?”

“Yes, Sir, he was quite upset.”

“Very well. If I have anything further to ask you, I shall call for you again.”

The judge dismissed the Chinese assistant and now summoned Han himself to the stand. The juggler’s intelligent face was drawn and pale; one could tell right away that he was in a state of nervous exhaustion.

“I have already questioned the director of the theatre and your assistant,” said the judge when Han had taken his place in the witness-box. “I now propose to examine you.”

Han bowed his head.

“Tell me.” said the judge, “did you at any time love your wife?”

“From the day of our marriage until the child was born I loved her with all my heart.”

“And why did the birth of the child change things?”

“Because I knew it was not mine.”

“Did you know who the other man was?”

“I had a very good idea. I think it was my wife’s cousin.”

“Did you know him personally?”

“He was a close friend. It was he who first suggested that we get married. It was he who urged me to marry her.”

"I presume that his relations with her occurred prior to your marriage."

"Yes, Sir. The child was born eight months after we were married."

"According to your assistant, it was a premature birth."

"That is what I told everyone."

5 "The child died very soon after birth, did it not? What was the cause of death?"

"He was smothered by his mother's breasts."

"Did your wife do that on purpose?"

"She said it was an accident."

10 The judge was silent and looked fixedly at Han's face. Han raised his head but kept his eyes lowered as he awaited the next question. The judge continued:

"Did your wife confess these relations to you?"

"She did not confess, nor did I ever ask her about them. The child's death seemed like retribution for everything and I decided that I should be as magnanimous as possible, but..."

15 "But in the end you were unable to be magnanimous?"

"That's right. I could not help thinking that the death of the child was insufficient retribution. When apart from my wife, I was able to reason calmly, but as soon as I saw her, something happened inside me. When I saw her body, my temper would begin to rise."

20 "Didn't divorce occur to you?"

"I often thought that I should like to have a divorce, but I never mentioned it to my wife. My wife used to say that if I left her she could no longer exist."

"Did she love you?"

"She did not love me."

25 "Then why did she say such things?"

“I think she was referring to the material means of existence. Her home had been ruined by her elder brother and she knew that no serious man would want to marry a woman who had been the wife of a strolling player. Also, her feet were too small for her to do any ordinary work.”

5 “What were your physical relations?”

“I imagine about the same as with most couples.”

“Did your wife have any real liking for you?”

10 “I do not think she really liked me. In fact, I think it must have been very painful for her to live with me as my wife. Still, she endured it. She endured it with a degree of patience almost unthinkable for a man. She used to observe me with a cold, cruel look in her eyes as my life gradually went to pieces. She never showed a flicker of sympathy as she saw me struggling in agony to escape into a better, truer sort of existence.”

15 “Why could you not take some decisive action—have it out with her, or even leave her if necessary?”

“Because my mind was full of all sorts of ideals.”

“What ideals?”

“I wanted to behave towards my wife in such a way that there would be no wrong on my side... But in the end it didn’t work.”

20 “Did you never think of killing your wife?”

Han did not answer and the judge repeated his question. After a long pause, Han replied:

“Before the idea of killing her occurred to me, I often used to think it would be a good thing if she died.”

25 “Well, in that case, if it had not been against the law, don’t you think you might have killed her?”

“I wasn’t thinking in terms of the law, Sir. That’s not what stopped me. It was just that I was weak. At the same time I had this over-mastering desire to enter into a truer sort of life.”

“Nevertheless you did think of killing your wife, did you not—later on, I mean?”

“I never made up my mind to do it. But, yes, it is correct to say that I did think about it once.”

“How long was that before the event?”

5 “The previous night... Or perhaps even the same morning?”

“Had you been quarrelling?”

“Yes. Sir.”

“What about?”

“About something so petty that it’s hardly worth mentioning.”

10 “Try telling me about it.”

“It was a question of food. I get rather short-tempered when I haven’t eaten for some time. Well, that evening my wife had been dawdling and our supper wasn’t ready when it should have been. I got very angry.”

“Were you more violent than usual?”

15 “No, but afterwards I still felt worked up, which was unusual. I suppose it was because I’d been worrying so much during those past weeks about making a better existence for myself, and realising there was nothing I could do about it. I went to bed but couldn’t get to sleep. All sorts of upsetting thoughts went through my mind. I began to feel that whatever I did, I should never be able to achieve the things I really  
20 wanted—that however hard I tried, I should never be able to escape from all the hateful aspects of my present life. This sad, hopeless state of affairs all seemed connected with my marriage. I desperately wanted to find a chink of light to lead me out of my darkness, but even this desire was gradually being extinguished. The hope of escape still flickered and sputtered within me, and I knew that if ever it should go  
25 out I would to all intents and purposes be a dead person.

“And then the ugly thought began flitting through my mind, ‘If only she would die! If only she would die! If only she would die! Why should I not kill her?’ The practical consequences of such a crime meant nothing to me any longer. No doubt I would go to prison, but life in prison could not be worse—could only be better—than this present  
30 existence. And yet somehow I had the feeling that killing my wife would solve nothing. It would have been shirking the issue, in the same way as suicide. I must go

through each day's suffering as it came. I told myself; there was no way to circumvent that. That had become my true life now: to suffer.

5 "As my mind raced along these tracks, I almost forgot that the cause of my suffering lay beside me. Utterly exhausted, I lay there unable to sleep. I fell into a blank state of stupefaction, and as my tortured mind turned numb, the idea of killing my wife gradually faded. Then I was overcome by the sad empty feeling that follows a nightmare. I thought of all my fine resolutions for a better life, and realised that I was too weak-hearted to attain it. When dawn finally broke I saw that my wife, also, had not been sleeping..."

10 "When you got up, did you behave normally towards each other?"

"We did not say a single word to each other."

"But why didn't you think of leaving her, when things had come to this?"

15 "Do you mean, Your Honour, that that would have been a solution of my problem? No, no, that too would have been a shirking of the issue! As I told you, I was determined to behave towards my wife so that there would be no wrong on my side."

Han gazed earnestly at the judge, who nodded his head as a sign for him to continue.

20 "Next day I was physically exhausted and of course my nerves were ragged. It was agony for me to remain still, and as soon as I had got dressed I left the house and wandered aimlessly about the deserted part of the town. Constantly the thought kept returning that I must do something to solve my life, but the idea of killing no longer occurred to me. The truth is that there was a chasm between my thoughts of murder the night before and any actual decision to commit a crime! Indeed, I never even thought about that evening's performance. If I had, I certainly would have decided to leave out the knife-throwing act. There were dozens of other acts that could have  
25 been substituted.

30 "Well, the evening came and finally it was our turn to appear on the stage. I did not have the slightest premonition that anything out of the ordinary was to happen. As usual, I demonstrated to the audience the sharpness of my knives by slicing pieces of paper and throwing some of the knives at the floor-boards. Presently my wife appeared, heavily made up and wearing an elaborate Chinese costume; after greeting the audience with her charming smile, she took up her position in front of the board. I picked up one of the knives and placed myself at the usual distance from her.

"That's when our eyes met for the first time since the previous evening. At once I understood the risk of having chosen this particular act for that night's performance!

Obviously I would have to master my nerves, yet the exhaustion which had penetrated to the very marrow of my bones prevented me. I sensed that I could no longer trust my own arm. To calm myself I closed my eyes for a moment, and I sensed that my whole body was trembling.

5     “Now the time had come! I aimed my first knife above her head; it struck one inch higher than usual. My wife raised her arms and I prepared to throw my next two knives under each of her arms. As the first one left the ends of my fingers, I felt as if something were holding it back; I no longer had the sense of being able to determine the exact destination of my knives. It was now really a matter of luck if the knife  
10    struck at the point intended; each of my movements had become deliberate and self-conscious.

“I threw one knife to the left of my wife’s neck and was about to throw another to the right when I saw a strange expression in her eyes. She seemed to be seized by a paroxysm of fear! Did she have a presentiment that this knife, that in a matter of  
15    seconds would come hurtling towards her, was going to lodge in her throat? I do not know. All I knew was that her terrible expression of fear was reflected in my own heart. I felt dizzy as if about to faint. Forcing the knife deliberately out of my hand, I as good as aimed it into space...

The judge was silent, peering intently at Han.

20    “All at once the thought came to me, ‘I’ve killed her,’” said Han abruptly.

“On purpose. you mean?”

“Yes. Suddenly I felt that I had done it on purpose.”

“After that I understand you knelt down beside your wife’s body and prayed in silence.”

25    “Yes. Sir. That was a rather cunning device that occurred to me on the spur of the moment. I realized that everyone knew me as a believer in Christianity. But while I was making a pretence of praying, I was in fact carefully calculating what attitude to adopt.”

“So you were absolutely convinced that what you had done was on purpose?”

30    “I was. But I realized at once that I should be able to pretend it had been an accident.”

“And why did you think it had been on purpose?”

“I had lost all sense of judgement.”

“Did you think you’d succeeded in giving the impression it was an accident?”

5 “Yes, though when I thought about it afterwards it made my flesh creep. I pretended as convincingly as I could to be grief-stricken, but if there’d been just one really sharp-witted person about, he’d have realized right away that I was only acting. Well, that evening I decided that there was no good reason why I should not be acquitted; I told myself very calmly that there wasn’t a shred of material evidence against me. To be sure, everyone knew how badly I got on with my wife, but if I persisted in saying that it was an accident, no one could prove the contrary. Going  
10 over in my mind everything that had happened, I saw that my wife’s death could be explained very plausibly as an accident.

15 “And then a strange question came to my mind: why did I myself believe that it had not been an accident? To be sure, the previous night I had thought about killing her, but might it not be that very fact which now caused me to think of my act as deliberate? Gradually I came to the point that I myself did not know what actually had happened! At that I became very happy—almost unbearably happy. I wanted to shout at the top of my lungs.”

“Because you had come to consider it an accident?”

20 “No, that I can’t say: because I no longer had the slightest idea whether it had been intentional or not. So I decided that my best way of being acquitted would be to make a clean breast of everything. Rather than deceive myself and everyone else by saying it was an accident, why not be completely honest and say I did not know what happened? I cannot declare it was a mistake; on the other hand I can’t admit it was intentional. In fact, I can plead neither ‘guilty’ nor ‘not guilty’.”

25 Han was silent. The judge, too, remained silent for a long moment before saying softly, reflectively:

“I believe that what you have told me is true. Just one more question; do you not feel the slightest sorrow for your wife’s death?”

30 “None at all! Even when I hated my wife most bitterly in the past, I never could have imagined I would feel such happiness in talking about her death.”

“Very well,” said the judge. “You may stand down.”

Han silently lowered his head and left the room. Feeling strangely moved, the judge reached for his pen. On the document which lay on the table he wrote down the words, "Not Guilty."