

The GARDEN MURDER CASE

by S. S. VAN DINE

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CHAPTER XI—Continued

Vance jumped down and turned to us.

"Frightfully sorry," he said. "Height does affect most people. I didn't realize." He looked at the girl. "Will you forgive me?"

As he spoke Floyd Garden stepped out on the roof through the passageway door.

"Sorry, Vance," he apologized, "but Doc Siefert wants Miss Beeton downstairs—if she feels equal to it. The mater is putting on one of her acts."

The nurse hurried away immediately, and Garden strolled up to Vance. He was again fussing with his pipe.

"A beastly mess," he mumbled. "And you've certainly put the fear of God and destruction into the hearts of the pious boys and girls here this afternoon. They all got the jitters after you talked with them."

He looked up. "The fact is, Vance, if you should want to see Kroon or Zalia Graem or Madge Weatherby for any reason this evening, they'll be here. They've all asked to come. Must return to the scene of the crime, or something of that kind. Need mutual support."

"Perfectly natural. Quite," Vance nodded. "I understand their feelings. . . . Beastly mess, as you say. . . . And now suppose we go down."

Doctor Siefert met us at the foot of the stairs.

"I was just coming up for you, Mr. Vance. Mrs. Garden insists on seeing you gentlemen." Then he added in a low tone: "She's in a tantrum. A bit hysterical. Don't take anything she may say too seriously."

We entered the bedroom. Mrs. Garden, in a salmon-pink silk dressing gown, was in bed, bolstered up by a collection of pillows. Her face was drawn and, in the slanting rays of the night-light, seemed flabby and unhealthy. Her eyes glared demoniacally as she looked at us, and her fingers clutched nervously at the quilt. Miss Beeton stood at the far side of the bed, looking down at her patient with calm concern; and Professor Garden leaned heavily against the window-sill opposite, his face a mask of troubled solicitude.

"I have something to say, and I want you all to hear it," Mrs. Garden's voice was shrill and strident. "My nephew has been killed to-day—and I know who did it!" She glared venomously at Floyd Garden who stood near the foot of the bed, his pipe hanging limply from the corner of his mouth. "You did it!"

She pointed an accusing finger at her son. "You've always hated Woody. You've been jealous of him. No one else had any reason to do this despicable thing. I suppose I should lie for you and shield you. But to what end? So you could kill somebody else? You killed Woody, and I know you killed him. And I know why you did it. . . ."

Floyd Garden stood through this tirade without moving and without perceptible emotion.

"And why did I do it, mater?" "Because you were jealous of him. Because you knew that I had divided my estate equally between you two—and you want it all for yourself. You always resented the fact that I loved Woody as well as you. And now you think that by having got Woody out of the way, you'll get everything when I die. But you're mistaken. You'll get nothing! Do you hear me? Nothing! Tomorrow I'm going to change my will. Woody's share will go to your father, with the stipulation that you will never get or inherit a dollar of it. And your share will go to charity." She laughed hysterically and beat the bed with her clenched fists.

Doctor Siefert had been watching the woman closely. He now moved a little nearer the bed.

"An ice-pack, immediately," he said to the nurse; and she went quickly from the room. Then he busied himself with his medicine case and deftly prepared a hypodermic injection.

The woman relaxed under his patient dictatorial scrutiny and permitted him to give her the injection. She lay back on the pillows, staring blankly at her son. The nurse returned to the room and arranged the ice-bag for her patient.

Doctor Siefert then quickly made out a prescription and turned to Miss Beeton.

"Have this filled at once. A teaspoonful every two hours until Mrs. Garden falls asleep."

Floyd Garden stepped forward and took the prescription.

"I'll phone the pharmacy," he said. "It'll take them only a few minutes to send it over." And he went out of the room.

As we passed the den door, we could hear Floyd Garden telephoning.

"I think Mrs. Garden will quiet down now," Doctor Siefert remarked to Vance when we reached the drawing-room. "As I told you, you mustn't take her remarks seriously when she's in this condition. She will probably have forgotten about it by tomorrow."

"Her bitterness, however, did not seem entirely devoid of rationality," Vance returned.

Siefert frowned but made no comment on Vance's statement. Instead he said in his quiet well-modulated voice, as he sat down leisurely in the nearest chair: "This whole affair is very shocking. Floyd Garden gave me but a few details when I arrived. Would you care to enlighten me further?"

Vance readily complied. He briefly went over the entire case, beginning with the anonymous telephone message he had received the night before. (Not by the slightest sign did the doctor indicate any previous knowledge of that telephone call. He sat looking at Vance with serene attentiveness, like a specialist listening to the case history of a patient.) Vance withheld no important detail from him.

"And the rest," Vance concluded, "you yourself have witnessed."

Siefert nodded very slowly two or three times.

"A very serious situation," he commented gravely, as if making a diagnosis. "Some of the things you have told me seem highly significant. A shrewdly conceived murder—and a vicious one. Especially the hiding of the revolver in Miss Beeton's coat and the attempt on her life with the bromin gas in the vault."

"I seriously doubt," said Vance, "that the revolver was put in Miss Beeton's coat pocket with any intention of incriminating her. I imagine it was to have been taken out of the house at the first opportunity. But I agree with you that the bromin episode is highly mysterious." Vance, without appearing to

den was in the bedroom, leaning over his mother.

"Your solicitude won't do you any good, Floyd," Mrs. Garden cried. "Being kind to me now, are you? Telephoning for the prescription—all attention and loving kindness. But don't think you're pulling the wool over my eyes. It won't make any difference. Tomorrow I change my will! Tomorrow . . ."

We continued on our way out, and heard no more.

Shortly after nine o'clock the next morning there was a telephone call from Doctor Siefert. Vance was still abed when the telephone rang, and I answered it. The doctor's voice was urgent and troubled when he asked that I summon Vance immediately. Vance slipped into his Chinese robe and sandals and went into the anteroom.

It was nearly ten minutes before he came out again.

"Mrs. Garden was found dead in her bed this morning," he drawled. "Poison of some kind. I've phoned Markham, and we'll be going to the Garden apartment as soon as he comes. A bad business, Van—very bad."

Markham arrived within half an hour. In the meantime Vance had dressed and was finishing his second cup of coffee.

"What's the trouble now?" Markham demanded irritably, as he came into the library. "Perhaps now that I'm here, you'll be good enough to forego your cryptic air."

Vance looked up and sighed. "Do sit down and have a cup of coffee while I enjoy this cigarette. Really, y'know, it's deuced hard to be lucid on the telephone." He poured a cup of coffee, and Markham reluctantly sat down. "And please don't sweeten the coffee," Vance went on. "It has a delightfully subtle bouquet, and it would be a pity to spoil it with saccharine."

Markham, frowning defiantly, put three lumps of sugar in the cup.

"Why am I here?" he growled. Vance drew deeply on his cigarette and settled back lazily in his chair. "Siefert phoned me this morning, just before I called you. Explained he didn't know your private number at home and asked me to apologize to you for not notifying you direct."

"Notifying me?" Markham set down his cup.

"About Mrs. Garden. She's dead. Found so this morning in bed. Probably murdered."

"Good God!"

"Yes, quite. Not a nice situation. No. The lady died some time during the night—exact hour unknown as yet. Siefert says it might have been caused by an overdose of the sleeping medicine he prescribed for her. It's all gone. And he says there was enough of it to do the trick. On the other hand, he admits it might have been something else."

CHAPTER XII

Markham pushed his cup aside with a clatter and lighted a cigar. "Where's Siefert now?" he asked.

"At the Gardens. Very correct. Standing by, and all that. The nurse phoned him shortly after eight this morning—it was she who made the discovery when she took Mrs. Garden's breakfast in. Siefert hastened over and after viewing the remains and probing round a bit called me. Said that, in view of yesterday's events, he didn't wish to go ahead until we got there."

"Well, why don't we get along?" snapped Markham, standing up.

Vance sighed and rose slowly from his chair.

"There's really no rush. The lady can't elude us. And Siefert won't desert the ship."

"Hadn't we better notify Heath?" suggested Markham.

"Yes—quite," returned Vance, as we went out. "I called the sergeant just after I phoned you. He's been up half the night working on the usual police routine. Stout fella, Heath. Amazin' industry. But quite futile."

Miss Beeton admitted us to the Garden apartment. She looked drawn and worried, but she gave Vance a faint smile of greeting which he returned.

"I'm beginning to think this nightmare will never end, Mr. Vance," she said.

Vance nodded somberly, and we went on into the drawing-room where Doctor Siefert, Professor Garden, and his son were awaiting us.

"I'm glad you've come, gentlemen," Siefert greeted us, coming forward.

Professor Garden sat at one end of the long davenport, his elbows resting on his knees, his face in his hands. He barely acknowledged our presence. Floyd Garden got to his feet and nodded abstractedly in our direction. A terrible change seemed to have come over him. He looked years older than when we had left him the night before.

"What a hell of a situation!" he mumbled, focusing watery eyes on Vance. "The mater accuses me last night of putting Woody out of the way, and then threatens to cut me off in her will. And now she's dead! And it was I who took charge of the prescription. The doc says it could have been the medicine that killed her."

Vance looked at the man sharply. "Yes, yes," he said in a low, sympathetic tone. "I thought of all that, too, don't y' know. But it certainly won't help you to be morbid about it."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

"I called the Sergeant Just After I Phoned You."

do so, was watching the doctor closely. "When you asked to see me on your arrival here this afternoon," he went on, "I was hoping that you might have some suggestion which, coming from one who is familiar with the domestic situation here, might put us on the track to a solution."

Siefert solemnly shook his head several times.

"No, no. I am sorry, but I am completely at a loss myself. When I asked to speak to you and Mr. Markham it was because I was naturally deeply interested in the situation here and anxious to hear what you might have to say about it." He paused, shifted slightly in his chair, and then asked: "Have you formed any opinion from what you have been able to learn?"

"Yes. Oh, yes. Frankly, however, I detest my opinion. I'd hate to be right about it. A sinister, unnatural conclusion is forcing itself upon me. It's sheer horror." He spoke with unwonted intensity.

Siefert was silent, and Vance turned to him again.

"I say, doctor, are you particularly worried about Mrs. Garden's condition?"

A cloud overspread Siefert's countenance, and he did not answer at once.

"It's a queer case," he said at length, with an obvious attempt at evasion. "As I recently told you, it has me deeply puzzled. I'm bringing Kattelbaum up tomorrow."

"Yes. As you say. Kattelbaum." Vance looked at the doctor dreamily. "My anonymous telephone message last night mentioned radioactive sodium. But equanimity is essential. Yes. By all means. Not a nice case, doctor—not at all a nice case. . . . And now I think we'll be toddlin'." Vance rose and Siefert also got up.

"If there is anything whatever that I can do for you . . ." he began.

"We may call on you later," Vance returned, and walked toward the archway.

Siefert did not follow us, but turned and moved slowly toward one of the front windows, where he stood looking out, with his hands clasped behind him. We re-entered the hallway and found Sneed waiting to help us with our coats.

We had just reached the door leading out of the apartment when the strident tones of Mrs. Garden's voice assailed us again. Floyd Gar-