

The Garden Murder Case

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SYNOPSIS

Philo Vance, famous detective, and John F. X. Markham, district attorney for New York county, are dining in Vance's apartment when Vance receives an anonymous telephone message informing him of a "disturbing psychological tension at Professor Ephraim Garden's apartment" advising that he read up on radio-active sodium, consult a passage in the Aeneid and counseling that "Equanimity is essential." Professor Garden is famous in chemical research. The message, decoded by Vance, reminds him that Professor Garden's son Floyd and his puny cousin, Woode Swift, are addicted to horse-racing. Vance says that "Equanimity" is a horse running next day in the Rivermont handicap. Vance is convinced that the message was sent by Dr. Siefert, the Gardens' family physician. He arranges to have lunch next day at the Gardens' penthouse. Vance is greeted by Floyd Garden and meets Lowe Hamble, an elderly follower of horse racing. Floyd expresses concern over Swift's queer actions. Mrs. Garden, supposedly ill, comes downstairs and places a \$100 bet on a horse. Gathered around an elaborate loud speaker service, listening to the racing are Cecil Kroon, Madge Weatherby and Zalia Graem, who bet varying amounts on the race. There is tension under the surface gaiety. Zalia and Swift are not on speaking terms. Kroon leaves to keep an appointment before the race starts. Miss Beeton, a nurse, and Vance bet on "Azure Star." Swift recklessly bets \$10,000 on "Equanimity" and goes to the roof garden to hear the results. Floyd follows Swift, remaining away several minutes. Zalia answers a phone call in the den. Soon after the announcement that "Azure Star" wins, the guests hear a shot. Vance finds Swift dead, shot through the head with a revolver nearby. He says Swift has been murdered. After calling the police, he finds the door of a vault ajar. Kroon returns.

CHAPTER IV—Continued

"That's the general impression," he returned blandly. "You're not psychic—are you? I didn't mention how Swift died, but the fact is, he did die by a revolver shot. Superficially, I admit, it looks like suicide." Vance smiled coldly. "Your reaction is most interestin'. Why, for instance did you assume that he shot himself, instead of—let us say—jumping off the roof?"

Kroon set his mouth in a straight line, and a look of anger came into his narrowed eyes. He fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette, and finally stammered:

"I don't know—exactly . . . except that—most people shoot themselves nowadays."

"Oh, quite," Vance's lips were still set in a stern smile. "Not an uncommon way of assisting oneself out of this troublous world. But, really y'know, I didn't mention suicide at all. Why do you take it for granted that his death was self-inflicted?"

Kroon became aggressive. "He was healthy enough when I left here. No one's going to blow a man's brains out in public like this."

"Blow his brains out?" Vance repeated. "How do you know he wasn't shot through the heart?"

Kroon was now obviously flustered.

"I—I merely assumed—"

Vance interrupted the man's embarrassment.

"However," he said, without relaxing his calculating scrutiny, "your academic conclusions regarding a more or less public murder are not without some logic. But the fact remains, some one did actually shoot Swift through the head—and practically in public. I could bear to know just where you've been and just when you returned to the apartment house here."

Kroon's gaze wandered.

"I believe I remarked before I went out," he said, with an attempt at serenity, "that I was going to a relative's to sign some silly legal documents—"

"And may I have the name and address of your relative—an aunt, I believe you said?" Vance requested pleasantly. "I'm in charge of the situation here until the officials arrive."

Kroon took the cigarette from his mouth with a forced air of non-

chalance and drew himself up haughtily.

"I cannot see," he replied stiffly, "that that information concerns any one but myself."

"Neither can I," admitted Vance cheerfully. "I was merely hopin' for frankness. But I can assure you, in view of what has happened here this afternoon, that the police will want to know exactly when you returned from your mysterious signing of documents. And now I must ask you to join the others in the drawing-room, and to wait there until the police arrive. I trust you have no objections."

"None whatever, I assure you," Kroon returned with a display of cynical amusement. "The regular police will be a relief, after this amateur hocuspocus."

When Kroon had disappeared into the drawing room, Vance went immediately to the front door, opened it quietly and, walking down the narrow public corridor, pressed the elevator button. A few moments later the sliding door opened and a dark, thin, intelligent-looking boy of perhaps twenty-two, in a light-blue uniform, looked out enquiringly.

"Going down?" he said respectfully.

"I'm not going down," Vance replied. "I merely wanted to ask you a question or two. I'm more or less connected with the district attorney's office."

"I know you, Mr. Vance." The boy nodded alertly.

"A little matter has come up this afternoon," Vance said, "and I think you may be able to help me . . ."

"I'll tell you anything I know," agreed the boy.

"Excellent! Do you know a Mr. Kroon who visits the Garden apartment?—The gentleman is blond and has a mustache."

"Sure, I know him," the boy returned promptly. "He comes up here nearly every afternoon. I brought him up today."

"About what time was that?"

"Two or three o'clock, I guess." The boy frowned. "Isn't he in there?"

Vance answered the question by asking another.

"Have you been on the car all afternoon?"

"Sure I have—since noon. I don't get relieved till seven o'clock."

"And you haven't seen Mr. Kroon since you brought him up here early this afternoon?"

The boy shook his head. "No, sir; I haven't."

"Many thanks," he said. "That's all I wanted to know."

The boy pocketed the money and released the door as we turned back to the apartment.

When we re-entered the front hall, the nurse was standing in the doorway of the bedroom at the right of the entrance. There was a worried, inquisitive look in her eyes.

Vance closed the door softly and was about to start up the hall, but he hesitated and turned toward the girl.

"You look troubled, Miss Beeton," he said kindly. "But, after all, you should be accustomed to death."

"I am accustomed to it," she answered in a low voice. "But this is so different. It came so suddenly—without any warning . . . Although," she added, "Mr. Swift always impressed me as more or less the suicidal type."

Vance looked at the nurse approvingly. "Your impression may have been correct," he said. "But it happens that Swift did not commit suicide."

The nurse's eyes opened wide. Her face paled perceptibly.

"You mean someone shot him?" Her words were barely audible.

"We don't know," Vance's voice was matter-of-fact. "But we must find that out . . . Would you like to help me, Miss Beeton?"

She drew herself up; her features relaxed; and she was once

more the unperturbed and efficient nurse.

"I'd be very glad to."

"Then I would like you to stand guard, as it were," he said, with a faint friendly smile. "I want to talk to Mr. Garden, and I don't want anyone to go upstairs. Would you mind taking your post in this chair and notifying me immediately if anyone should attempt to go up?"

"That's so little to ask," the girl replied, as she seated herself in a chair at the foot of the stairs.

Vance thanked her and proceeded to the den. Inside Garden and Zalia Graem were sitting close together on a tapestry davenport and talking in low, confidential tones. An indistinct murmur of voices from beyond the archway indicated that the other members of the group were in the drawing-room.

"I've called the district attorney, and he has notified the police. They should be here any minute now. In the meantime, I'd like to see you alone." He turned his head to Miss Graem and added: "I hope you won't mind."

The girl stood up and arched her eyebrows.

"Pray, don't consider me," she replied. "You may be as mysterious as you wish."

Garden rebuked her peevishly.

"Never mind the hauteur, Zalia." Then he turned to Vance. "Why didn't you ring the buzzer for me?"



"I Say, Stop This Nonsense," He Admonished Her Sternly.

I would have come up. I purposedly stayed here in the den because I thought you might be wanting me."

"I did ring, don't y' know," Vance told him.

"Twice, in fact. But as you didn't come up, I came down."

"There was no signal here," Garden assured him. "And I've been right here ever since I came downstairs."

"I can vouch for that," put in Miss Graem.

"I'm dashed grateful for the corroboration," Vance murmured.

"Are you sure you pressed the button?" Garden asked Vance. "It's damned funny. That system hasn't failed in six years. Wait a minute . . ."

Going to the door he called Sneed. "Go upstairs to the study, Sneed," Garden ordered, "and push the buzzer button."

"The buzzer is out of order, sir," the butler told him imperturbably. "I've already notified the telephone company."

"When did you know about it?" Garden demanded angrily.

The nurse, who had heard the conversation, left her chair and came to the doorway.

"I discovered this afternoon that the buzzer wasn't working," she explained; "so I told Sneed about it

and suggested that he notify the telephone company."

"Oh, I see. Thank you, Miss Beeton." Garden turned back to Vance. "Shall we go upstairs now?"

Miss Graem, who had been looking on with a cynical and somewhat amused expression, started from the room.

"Why go upstairs?" she asked. "I'll fade into the drawing room, and you can talk to your heart's content right here."

Vance studied the girl for a few seconds, and then bowed slightly.

"Thank you," he said. "That will be much better." He stood aside as she strolled leisurely into the hall and closed the door after her.

Vance dropped his cigarette into a small ash tray on the tabouret before the davenport and, moving swiftly to the door, reopened it. From where I stood in the den, I could see that Miss Graem, instead of going toward the drawing room, was walking rapidly in the opposite direction.

"Just a moment, Miss Graem!" Vance's voice was peremptory.

"Please wait in the drawing-room. No one is to go upstairs just now."

She swung about. "And why not?" Her face was flushed with anger, and her jaw protruded with defiance. "I have a right to go up," she proclaimed spiritedly.

Vance said nothing but shook his head in negation, his eyes holding hers.

She returned his look, but could not resist the power of his scrutiny. Slowly she came back toward him. A sudden change seemed to have come over her. Her eyes dimmed, and tears sprang into them.

"But you don't understand," she protested, in a broken voice. "I'm to blame for this tragedy—it wasn't the race. If it hadn't been for me Woody would be alive now. I—I feel terrible about it. And I wanted to go upstairs—to see him."

Vance put his hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Really," he said softly, "there's nothing to indicate that you're to blame."

Zalia Graem looked up at Vance searchingly.

"Then what Floyd has been trying to tell me is true—that Woody didn't shoot himself?"

"Quite true," said Vance.

The girl drew a deep breath, and her lips trembled. She took a quick impulsive step toward Vance, and resting her head against his arm, burst into tears.

Vance placed his hands on her arms and held her away from him.

"I say, stop this nonsense," he admonished her sternly. "And don't try to be so deuced clever. Run along to the drawing room."

Soon Mrs. Garden came through the archway with a look of resentful determination, and strode aggressively down the hall.

"Zalia has just told me," she said angrily, "that you forbade her to go upstairs. It's an outrage! But surely I may go up. This is my house, remember. You have no right whatever to prevent me from spending these last minutes with my nephew."

Vance turned to confront her. There was a pained look on his face, but his eyes were cold and stern.

"I have every right, madam," he said. "The situation is a most serious one, and if you will not accept that fact, it will be necessary for me to assume sufficient authority to compel you to do so."

The woman raised her eyebrows, shrugged her shoulders, and, turning indifferently, went back up the hall.

"Frightfully sorry, Vance," apologized Garden.

"The mater is a dowager. Not accustomed to taking orders. And she resents it. She'd probably have spent the day in bed, if Doc Siefert hadn't firmly told her not to get up."

"That's quite all right," Vance spoke indifferently. Then he came quickly to the den door. "Let's have our little chat—eh, what?" He stood aside for Garden to enter the room, then he followed and closed the door.

"Garden," he began, "there are a few things that I'd like to have cleared up before the district attorney and the police arrive." He

turned about leisurely and sat down at the desk, facing Garden.

"Anything I can do to help," Garden mumbled, lighting his pipe.

"A few necessary questions, don't y' know," Vance went on. "Hope they won't upset you, and all that. But the fact is, Mr. Markham will probably want me to take a hand in the investigations, since I was a witness to the preamble of this distressin' tragedy."

"I hope he does," Garden returned. "It's a damnable affair, and I'd like to see the axe fall, no matter whom it might behead." His pipe was giving him trouble. "By the way, Vance," he went on quietly, "how did you happen to come here today? I've asked you so often to join our racing seance—and you pick the one day when the roof blows off the place."

Vance kept his eyes on Garden for a moment.

"The fact is," he said at length, "I got an anonymous telephone message last night, vaguely outlining the situation here and mentioning Equanimity."

Garden jerked himself up to keener attention.

"The devil you say!" he exclaimed. "That's a queer one. Man or woman?"

"Oh, it was a man," Vance replied casually.

Garden pursed his lips and, after a moment's meditation, said quietly:

"Well, anyway, I'm damned glad you did come . . . What can I tell you that might be of help? Anything you want, old man."

"First of all, then," asked Vance, "did you recognize the revolver? I saw you looking at it rather apprehensively when we came out on the roof."

Garden frowned, and finally answered, as if with sudden resolution:

"Yes! I did recognize it, Vance. It belongs to the old gentleman—"

"Your father?"

Garden nodded grimly. "He's had it for years. Why he ever got it in the first place, I don't know—he probably hasn't the slightest idea how to use it . . ."

"By the by," Vance put in, "what time does your father generally return home from the university?"

"Why—why—" Garden hesitated and then continued: "on Saturdays he's always here early in the afternoon—rarely after three. Gives himself and his staff a half-holiday . . . But," he added, "father's very erratic . . ." His voice trailed off nervously.

Vance took two deep inhalations on his cigarette; he was watching Garden attentively. Then he asked in a soft tone:

"What's on your mind?—Unless, of course, you have good reason for not wanting to tell me."

Garden took a long breath and stood up. He seemed to be deeply troubled as he walked across the room and back.

"The truth is, Vance," he said, as he resumed his place on the davenport, "I don't even know where the pater is this afternoon. As soon as I came downstairs after Woody's death, I called him to give him the news. I thought he'd want to get here as soon as possible in the circumstances. But I was told that he'd locked up the laboratory and left the university about two o'clock."

CHAPTER V

I could not understand the man's perturbation; and I could see that it puzzled Vance as well. Vance endeavored to put him at his ease.

"It really doesn't matter," he said, as if dismissing the subject. "It may be just as well that your father doesn't learn of the tragedy till later." He smoked for a moment.

"But to get back to the revolver: where was it usually kept?"

"In the center drawer of the desk upstairs," Garden told him promptly.

"And was the fact generally known to the other members of the household, or to Swift himself?"

Garden nodded. "Oh, yes. There was no secret about it. We often joked with the old gentleman about his 'arsenal.'"

(TO BE CONTINUED)