

The Garden Murder Case

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WNU Service

CHAPTER IX—Continued —II—

A change came over the girl. She relaxed, as if from a sudden attack of weakness. She did not take her eyes from Vance, and appeared to be appraising him and deciding what course to follow.

Before she managed to speak Heath stamped up the passageway and opened the study door. He carried a woman's black-and-white tweed top-coat over his arm. He cocked an eyebrow at Vance and nodded triumphantly.

"I take it, Sergeant," Vance drawled, "your quest has been successful. You may speak out." He turned to Zalia Graem and explained: "Sergeant Heath has been searching for the gun that fired the second shot."

The girl became suddenly animated and leaned forward attentively.

"After going over the roof and the stairs and the hall of the apartment, I thought I'd look through the wraps hanging in the hall closet," said Heath. "The gun was in the pocket of this." He threw the coat on the davenport and took a .38 gun-metal revolver from his pocket. He broke it and showed it to Vance and Markham. "Full of blanks—and one of 'em has been discharged."

"Very good, Sergeant," Vance complimented him. "Whose coat is this, by the by?"

"I don't know yet, Mr. Vance; but I'm going to find out pronto." Zalia Graem had risen and come forward.

"I can tell you whose coat that is," she said. "It belongs to Miss Beeton, the nurse. I saw her wearing it yesterday."

"Thanks awfully for the identification," returned Vance, his eyes resting dreamily on her.

"All right." She focused her gaze on Vance again. "Lemmy Merrit, one of the various scions of the horsey aristocracy that infests our eastern seaboard, asked me to drive out to Sands Point with him for the polo game tomorrow. I thought I might dig up some more exciting engagement and told him to call me here this afternoon at half-past three for a final yes or no. I purposely stipulated that time, so I wouldn't miss the running of the Handicap. As you know, he didn't call till after four, with excuses about not having been able to get to a telephone. I tried to get rid of him in a hurry, but he was persistent—the only virtue he possesses, so far as I know. I left him dangling on the wire when I came out to listen to the race, and then went back for a farewell and have-a-nice-time-without-me. Just as I hung up I heard what sounded like a shot and came to the door, to find everyone hurrying along the hall. An idea went through my head that maybe Woody had shot himself—that's why I went mid-Victorian and almost passed out when I saw him. That's everything."

Vance rose and bowed. "Thanks for your ultimate candor, Miss Graem. I'm deuced sorry I had to torture you to obtain it. And please ignore the nightmares you accused me of manufacturing."

The girl frowned as her intense gaze rested on Vance.

"I wonder if you don't really know more about this affair than you pretend."

"My dear Miss Graem! I do not pretend to know anything about it." Vance went to the door and held it open for her. "You may go now, but we shall probably want to see you again tomorrow, and I just ask for your promise that you will stay at home where you will be available."

"Don't worry, I'll be at home." As she went out, Miss Beeton was coming up the passageway toward the study. The two women passed each other without speaking.

"I'm sorry to trouble you, Mr. Vance," the nurse apologized, "but Doctor Siefert has just arrived and asked me to inform you that

he wished very much to see you as soon as possible. Mr. Garden," she added, "has told him about Mr. Swift's death."

At the moment her gaze fell on the tweed coat, and a slight puzzled frown lined her forehead. Before she could speak Vance said:

"The sergeant brought your coat up here. He didn't know whose it was. We were looking for something." Then he added quickly: "Please tell Doctor Siefert that I will be very glad to see him at once. And ask him if he will be good enough to come here to the study." Miss Beeton nodded and went out.

CHAPTER X

There was a soft knock, and Vance turned from the window. He was confronted by Garden, who had opened the study door without waiting for a summons.

"Sorry, Vance," Garden apologized, "but Doc Siefert is downstairs and says he'd like to see you, if convenient, before he goes."

Vance looked at the man a moment and frowned.

"Miss Beeton informed me of the fact a few minutes ago. I asked her to tell the doctor I would be glad to see him at once. I can't understand his sending you also. Didn't the nurse give him the message?"

"I'm afraid not. I know Siefert sent Miss Beeton up here, and I assumed, as I imagine Siefert did, that you had detained her." He looked round the room with a puzzled expression. "The fact is, I thought she was still up here."

"You mean she hasn't returned downstairs?" Vance asked.

"No, she hasn't come down yet." Vance took a step forward. "Are you sure of that, Garden?"

"Yes, very sure." Garden nodded vigorously. "I've been in the front hall, near the foot of the stairs, ever since Doc Siefert arrived."

"Did you see any of the others come down?"

"Why, yes," Garden told him. "Kroon came down and went out."



I Heard What Sounded Like a Shot.

And then Madge Weatherby. And shortly after the nurse had gone up with Siefert's message to you, Zalia came down and hurried away. But that's all. And, as I say, I've been down there in the front hall all the time."

"What about Hammle?"

"Hammle? No, I haven't seen anything of him. I thought he was still here with you." "That's deuced queer." Vance moved slowly to a chair and sat down with a perplexed frown. "It's possible you missed him. However, it doesn't matter. Ask the doctor to come up, will you?"

When Garden had left us Vance sat smoking and staring at the ceiling. I knew from the droop of his eyelids that he was disturbed.

"Deuced queer," he muttered again.

"For Heaven's sake, Vance," Markham commented irritably. "It's entirely possible Garden wasn't watching the stairs as closely as he imagines."

"Yes. Oh, yes." Vance nodded vaguely. "Everyone worried. None on the alert. Normal mechanisms not functioning. Still, the stairs are visible half way up the hall, and the hall itself isn't very spacious . . ."

"It's quite possible Hammle went down the main stairs from the terrace, wishing, perhaps, to avoid the others."

"He hadn't his hat up here with him," Vance returned without looking up. "He would have had to enter the front hall and pass Garden to get it. No point in such silly maneuvers . . . But it isn't Hammle I'm thinking of. It's Miss Beeton. I don't like it . . ." He got up slowly and took out another cigarette. "She's not the kind of girl that would neglect taking my message to Siefert immediately, unless for a very good reason."

"A number of things might have happened—"

"Yes, of course. That's just it. Too many things have happened here today already." Vance went to the north window and looked out into the garden. Then he returned to the center of the room and stood for a moment in tense meditation. "As you say, Markham." His voice was barely audible. "Something may have happened. . . . Suddenly he threw his cigarette into an ash tray and turned on his heel. "Oh, my word! I wonder . . . Come Sergeant. We'll have to make a search—immediately."

He opened the door quickly and started down the hall. We followed him with vague apprehension, not knowing what was on his mind and with no anticipation of what was to follow. Vance peered out through the garden door. Then he turned back, shaking his head.

"No, it couldn't have been there. We would have been able to see." His eyes moved inquiringly up and down the hall, and after a moment a strange, startled look came into them. "It could be!" he exclaimed. "Oh, my aunt! Damnable things are happening here. Wait a second."

He rapidly retraced his steps to the vault door. Grasping the knob, he rattled it violently; but the door was now locked. Taking the key from its nail, he inserted it hurriedly into the lock. As he opened the heavy door a crack, a pungent, penetrating odor assailed my nostrils. Vance quickly drew back.

"Out into the air!" he called over his shoulder, in our direction. "All of you!"

Instinctively we made for the door to the garden.

Vance held one hand over his nose and mouth and pushed the vault door further inward. Heavy amber-colored fumes drifted out into the hall, and I felt a stifling, choking sensation. Vance staggered back a step, but kept his hand on the door-knob.

"Miss Beeton! Miss Beeton!" he called. There was no response and I saw Vance put his head down and move forward into the dense fumes that were emanating from the open door. He sank to his knees on the threshold and leaned forward into the vault. The next moment he had straightened up and was dragging the limp body of the nurse out into the passageway.

As soon as the girl was out of the vault, Vance took her up in his arms and carried her unsteadily out into the garden, where he placed her gently on the wicker settee. His face was deathly pale; his eyes were watering; and he had difficulty with his breathing. When he had released the girl, he leaned heavily

against one of the iron posts which supported the awning. He opened his mouth wide and sucked the fresh air into his lungs.

The nurse was gasping stertorously and clutching her throat. Although her breast was rising and falling convulsively, her whole body was limp and lifeless.

At that moment Doctor Siefert stepped through the garden door, a look of amazement on his face. He had all the outward appearance of the type of medical man Vance had described to us the night before. He was about sixty, conservatively but modestly attired, and with a bearing studiously dignified and self-sufficient.

With a great effort Vance drew himself erect.

"Hurry, doctor," he called. "It's bromin gas."

Siefert came rapidly forward, moved the girl's body into a more



It Was Part of a Broken Vial.

comfortable position and opened the collar of her uniform.

"Nothing but the air can help her," he said, as he moved one end of the settee around so that it faced the cool breeze from the river. "How are you feeling, Vance?"

Vance was dabbing his eyes with a handkerchief. He blinked once or twice and smiled faintly.

"I'm quite all right." He went to the settee and looked down at the girl for a moment. "A close call," he murmured.

Siefert inclined his head gravely. At this moment Hammle came strutting up briskly from a remote corner of the garden.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "What's the matter?"

Vance turned to the man in angry surprise.

"Well, well," he greeted him. "The roll call is complete. I'll tell you later what's the matter. Or perhaps you will be able to tell me. Wait over there." And he jerked his head in the direction of a chair nearby.

"I wish I'd taken the earlier train to Long Island," Hammle muttered.

"It might have been better, don't y'know," murmured Vance, turning away from him.

The nurse's strangled coughing had abated somewhat. Her breathing was deeper and more regular, and the gasping had partly subsided. Before long she struggled to sit up. Siefert helped her.

"Breathe as deeply and rapidly as you can," he said. "It's air you need."

The girl made an effort to follow instructions, one hand braced against the back of the settee, and the other resting on Vance's arm.

A few minutes later she was able to speak, but with considerable difficulty.

"I feel—better now. Except for the burning—in my nose and throat."

"What happened?" she asked.

"We don't know yet." Vance returned her gaze with obvious distress. "We only know that you were poisoned with bromin gas in the vault where Swift was shot. We were hoping that you could tell us about it yourself."

She shook her head vaguely, and there was a dazed look in her eyes.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you very much. It all happened so unexpectedly—so suddenly. All I know is that when I went to tell Doctor Siefert he might come upstairs, I was struck on the head from behind, just as I passed the garden door. The blow didn't render me entirely unconscious, but it stunned me so that I was unaware of anything or anybody around me. Then I felt myself being caught from behind, turned about, and forced back up the passageway and into the vault. I have a faint recollection of the door being shut upon me, although I wasn't sufficiently rational to protest or even to realize what had happened. But I was conscious of the fact that inside the vault there was a frightful suffocating smell."

"Yes. Not a pleasant experience. But it could have been much worse." Vance spoke in a low voice and smiled gravely down at the girl. "There's a bad bruise on the back of your head. That too might have been worse, but the starched band of your cap probably saved you from more serious injury."

The girl had got to her feet and stood swaying a little as she steadied herself against Vance.

"I really feel all right now." She looked at Vance wistfully. "And I have you to thank—haven't I?"

Siefert spoke gruffly. "A few more minutes of that bromin gas would have proved fatal. Whoever found you and got you out here did so just in time."

The girl had not taken her eyes from Vance.

"How did you happen to find me so soon?" she asked him.

"Belated reasoning," he answered. "I should have found you several minutes before—the moment I learned that you had not returned downstairs. But at first it was difficult to realize that anything serious could have happened to you."

"I can't understand it even now," the girl said with a bewildered air. "Neither can I—entirely," returned Vance. "But perhaps I can learn something more."

Going quickly to a pitcher of water Heath had brought, he dipped his handkerchief into it. Pressing the handkerchief against his face, he disappeared into the passageway. A minute or so later he returned. In his hand he held a jagged piece of thin curved glass, about three inches long.

It was part of a broken vial, and still clinging to it was a small paper label on which was printed the symbol "Br."

"I found this on the tiled floor, in the far corner of the vault. It was just beneath one of the racks which holds Professor Garden's assortment of chemicals. There's an empty space in the rack, but this vial of bromin couldn't have fallen to the floor accidentally. It could only have been taken out deliberately and broken at the right moment." He handed the fragment of glass to Heath.

"Take this, Sergeant, and have it gone over carefully for fingerprints. But if, as I suspect, the same person that killed Swift handled it, I doubt if there will be any telltale marks on it. However . . ." "This was a dastardly thing, Vance," Siefert burst out, his eyes flashing.

"Yes. All of that, doctor. So was Swift's murder . . . How are you feeling now, Miss Beeton?"

"A little shaky," she answered with a weak smile. "But nothing more." She was leaning against one end of the settee.

"Then we'll carry on, what?" "Of course," she returned in a low voice.

Floyd Garden stepped out from the hallway at this moment. He coughed.

"What's this beastly odor in the hall?" he asked. "It's gotten downstairs. Is anything wrong?"

"Not now. No," Vance returned. "A little bromin gas a few minutes ago; but the air will be clear in a little while. No casualties. Every one doing well . . . Did you want to see me?"

Garden looked round at the group on the roof with a puzzled air.

(TO BE CONTINUED)