

The Kennel Murder Case

By S. S. VAN DINE

"There was nothing cryptic about it, my dear Markham," Vance was moving about the room aimlessly, looking at the various vases and objects d'art. "When the sergeant told me that Wrede owned a dog, I was particularly interested, for he wasn't the type of man that could love any animal. He was an enforced egotist, with a somewhat violent inferiority complex—his egotism, in fact, had been automatically built up to cover his complete lack of confidence in himself. He had a shrewd, unscrupulous brain which he was unable to use in any practical way. And he was constantly in need of substitutes for his sense of inferiority. It is not uncommon for persons of his nature to go in for dumb animals. They do not do so because of any instinctive liking for the animals, but because, having failed to impress themselves upon their equals, they can bully and torment an animal, and thus give themselves a feeling of heroism and superiority. The animal is merely an outlet for their lack of self-confidence, and, at the same time, the animal gratifies their profound instinct for domination. The moment I heard that Wrede had owned a dog, I wanted to see the dog, for I was sure he had mistreated it. And when I saw the Doberman's frightened and timid demeanor, I knew that he had suffered horribly at Wrede's hands. Markham, that Doberman showed all the signs of having been beaten and abused—and that fitted perfectly with my estimate of Wrede's character."

"But," objected Markham, "the Doberman certainly showed no timidity at the sight of Wrede. He was aggressive and vicious—ugh!"

"He had regained his confidence in himself," Vance explained. "Enright's kindness and benevolent treatment after the dog's terrible experiences at Wrede's hands was what, in the end, revived the Doberman sufficiently to kill Wrede."

He sat down and lighted another cigarette.

"Almost any man may be a murderer, but only a certain type of man can injure a dog the way that Scottie was injured here the other night. By striking that little bitch over the head, the murderer left his signature on the crime. . . . Now do you understand why I was so interested in Wrede's Doberman Pinscher?"

Markham leaned forward.

"Do you mean to say that Wrede did it?"

Vance held up his hand.

"Just a moment I want to talk to Liang. There are certain things to be explained. Perhaps Liang will tell us now."

Before Gamble had brought the Chinaman, Heath arrived. He was pale and upset. He nodded abstractedly and sat down.

Liang entered the library from the dining room and stood respectfully at the door, without looking at any of us.

Vance rose and went to him, holding out his cigarette case.

"Please have a smoke, Mr. Liang." His tone was that of an equal. "This is not to be an interrogation. It's a conference in which we need your help."

Liang inclined his head with a murmured "Thank you," and took one of the cigarettes, which Vance lighted for him.

Vance returned to his chair and Liang sat down.

"Mr. Liang," Vance began, "I think that I apprehend the position in which you have been placed by the unfortunate events which have taken place in this house, and I also think you realize that I have not been entirely

ignorant of your predicament. You have acted, I might say, in very much the same way I myself might have acted, had our positions been reversed. But the time has come when frankness is wisdom—and I hope you trust me sufficiently to believe me when I tell you that no possible danger can come to you. You are no longer in jeopardy. There is now no possibility of misunderstanding. As a matter of fact, I have not misunderstood you from the first."

Liang again bowed his head, and said:

"I should be most happy to help you, if I might be assured that the truth would prevail in this unhappy house, and that I would not be accused of things which some one desired I should be accused."

"I can assure you of that, Mr. Liang," Vance returned quietly. Then he added significantly: "Mr. Wrede is dead."

"Ah," the man murmured. "That puts a different aspect on matters."

"Oh, quite. Mr. Wrede was killed by a dog he had abused."

"Lao-Tzu has said," returned Liang, "that he who abuses the weak is eventually destroyed by his own weakness."

Vance inclined his head in polite agreement.

"Some day," he said, "I hope the wisdom of the Tao Teh King will penetrate to our western civilization. . . . But, handicapped as we are by lack of knowledge of the profound wisdom of the Orient, I can only ask you to help us in our present dilemma. . . . Will you tell us what happened—or, rather, what you saw—when you returned to this house between eight and nine Wednesday night?"

Liang moved slightly in his chair and let his eyes rest searchingly on Vance. He hesitated before he spoke, drawing deeply on the cigarette that Vance had given him.

"It was exactly eight," he began in an even voice. "When I entered the kitchen I heard voices here in the library. Mr. Wrede and Mr. Archer Coe were talking. They were angry. I tried not to listen, but their voices came until they penetrated even to my bedroom. Mr. Coe was protesting violently, and Mr. Wrede was becoming more angry every second. I heard a scuffle, a startled ejaculation, and a noise as if something heavy had fallen on to the floor. A brief silence ensued—and I thought I detected the tinkling sound of breaking china. Then another silence. A few moments later I heard some one pass stealthily through the kitchen and go out the rear door. I waited in my bedroom for perhaps fifteen minutes, asking myself if I should interfere with matters which did not concern me; and then I decided that, in loyalty to my employer, I should investigate the situation."

"So I came forth and looked in the library here. The room was empty, but the small table in front of the davenport was upset. I put it on its feet, then returned to the kitchen and read for perhaps an hour. But something seemed to trouble me—I did not like the fact that Mr. Wrede had not gone out the front door, but went out so stealthily through the kitchen. I went upstairs to Mr. Coe's bedroom and knocked on the door. There was no answer. I tried the door. It was unbolting; and when I opened it, I saw Mr. Coe seated in his chair, apparently asleep. But I did not like the color of his face. I went to him and touched him, but he did not move—and I knew he was dead. . . . I came out of the room, closed the door, and returned to the kitchen."

I asked myself what was best for me to do, and decided that since no one knew I had returned to the house I would go away and come back much later that night. So I went—to some friends of mine. When I returned at about midnight, I made unnecessary noise, so that anyone in the house would hear me returning. After a while I came again into this library

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LOS ANGELES.—Ned Sparks (above), won fame as a "grouchy" husband in movie comedies. His wife was given a divorce last week on the ground that he'd developed the same disposition at home.

and looked round very carefully, for I could not understand what had happened that night. I found the poker lying on the hearth, and there was blood on it. I also found the dagger in the larkie Yung Cheng Ting yao vase on the table there. I had a definite feeling that both of these articles were left here for some special purpose, and it occurred to me that if a murder had been committed that evening, it was I who was supposed to take the blame."

"You are quite right, Mr. Liang. I think that both weapons were left here in order to involve you."

"I did not quite understand the situation," the Chinaman continued. "But I felt that it might be safer for me if I took the poker and the dagger and hid them. I could see the possibility of a case being built up against me, if the weapons were found in the library, especially as it might be proved that I had been here at the time. Moreover, the dagger is Chinese and it could be easily ascertained that I was not in sympathy with the means Mr. Archer Coe used in depicting my country of its rightful antiques."

"Yes," nodded Vance. "That was no doubt the intention of the murderer. . . . And so, when you had the opportunity, you placed both weapons in the room upstairs?"

"That is true," Liang admitted. "I placed them there when the butler sent me to Miss Lake's room the next morning. Perhaps if I had realized how serious the situation was and had understood all of its complications, I might have acted differently. I do not yet understand the mechanism of the crime. The physical misunderstanding,

so to speak, between Mr. Wrede and Mr. Archer Coe took place in this library, and yet his dead body was in his bedroom upstairs."

"There was no possibility," inquired Vance, "that Mr. Wrede could have assisted Mr. Coe upstairs, after the murder?"

"Oh, no," Liang was quite emphatic. "Within a few moments of the encounter here in the library, Mr. Wrede came out through the kitchen, surreptitiously, and departed through the rear door."

"How can you be sure it was Wrede if you did not see him?" asked Vance.

The Chinaman gave a slow smile. "In my country the senses are more acute than in the Occident. I had heard Mr. Wrede move about this house too often not to know his step and sense his presence." Liang paused and looked at Vance. "And may I be permitted now to ask a question of you?"

Vance bowed acquiescence.

"Ask me any question you care to, Mr. Liang, and I will try to be as frank as you have been."

"How, then, did you know that I was aware of the crime on the night it was committed?"

"There were several indications, Mr. Liang," Vance replied; "but it was you yourself who told me as much—by a slip of the tongue. When I first spoke to you, the next morning, you mentioned a tragedy; and when I asked you how you knew there had been a tragedy, you replied you had heard Gamble telephoning—while you were preparing breakfast."

Liang looked at Vance for a moment, a puzzled expression in his eyes. Then a faint smile appeared slowly on his mouth.

"I understand now," he said. "I had already prepared the breakfast when the butler telephoned, for he discovered the crime when he was taking Mr. Coe's breakfast to him."

"Yes, I gave myself away, but it took a clever man to grasp the error."

Vance acknowledged the compliment.

"And now I shall ask you another question, Mr. Liang. Why were you pretending to work in the kitchen at three o'clock yesterday morning, after the attack on Mr. Grassi?"

The Chinaman looked up shrewdly. "Pretending?"

"The ink was quite dry on the papers you had so neatly arranged on the kitchen table."

"I also smile again upon Vance over Liang's ascetic mouth.

"I was afraid, afterward," he said, "that you might have noticed that. . . . The fact is, Mr. Vance, I was standing guard. At about half-past two that morning, I was awakened by a slight sound. I sleep lightly—and I am sensitive to sounds. I listened, and some one opened the door and passed through the kitchen into the butler's pantry and the dining room, and on into the library."

"You recognized the footsteps?"

"Oh, yes. The person who came in so softly was Mr. Wrede. . . . I nat-

urally did not trust him knowing what I did, and I hoped that I could trap him in some way. So I rose, dressed, turned on all the lights in the kitchen, and took my post at the table—as if I were working. Fifteen minutes later, I heard Mr. Wrede come back softly into the butler's pantry and then retreat again toward this room. I knew that he had seen the lights in the kitchen and was afraid to enter. I did not hear the front door open—which is the only other means of egress except the windows—and I decided to stand my ground."

"A little later I heard Mr. Grassi call out, and then I heard the butler telephoning. Even so, I thought it best to remain in the kitchen, for it occurred to me that Mr. Wrede might

still be hiding in the house, waiting for a chance to escape through the rear door. When you came into the kitchen and informed me of the attack on Mr. Grassi, I suggested the den window. I could not see how else Mr. Wrede could have gone out of the house."

Liang looked up sadly.

"I am sorry my efforts were not more successful, but at least I made it difficult for Mr. Wrede."

Vance got up and put out his cigarette.

"You've helped us no end," he said. "You've clarified many things. We are most grateful."

He walked to Liang and held out his hand. The Chinaman took it and bowed.

(CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.)

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