in fact—and it was easy to pick up gossip about him."

He adjusted his glasses carefully, and referred to his note-book.

"He married a Miss Hawthorn in nineteen-ten. She's wealthy, but Pfyfe doesn't benefit much by it, because her father sits on the money-bags—— "

"Mr. Tracy, I say," interrupted Vance; "never mind the *née*-Hawthorn and her doting papa—Mr. Pfyfe himself has confided in us about his sad marriage. Tell us, if you can, about Mr. Pfyfe's extra-nuptial affairs. Are there any other ladies?"

Tracy looked inquiringly at the District Attorney: he was uncertain as to Vance's *locus standi*. Receiving a nod from Markham, he turned a page in his note-book and proceeded.

"I found one other woman in the case. She lives in New York, and often telephones to a drug stores near Pfyfe's house, and leaves messages for him. He uses the same 'phone to call her by. He had made some deal with the proprietor, of course; but I was able to obtain her 'phone number. As soon as I came back to the city I got her name and address from Information, and made a few inquiries. . . . She's a Mrs. Paula Banning, a widow, and a little fast, I should say; and she lives in an apartment at 268, West Seventy-fifth Street."

This exhausted Tracy's information; and when he went out, Markham smiled broadly at Vance.

"He didn't supply you with very much fuel."

"My word! I think he did unbelievably well," said Vance. "He unearthed the very information we wanted."

"*We* wanted?" echoed Markham. "I have more important things to think about than Pfyfe's amours."

"And yet, y'know, this particular amour of Pfyfe's is going to solve the problem of Benson's murder," replied Vance; and would say no more.

Markham, who had an accumulation of other work awaiting him and numerous appointments for the after-

noon, decided to have his lunch served in the office; so Vance and I took leave of him.

We lunched at The Elysée, dropped in at Knoedler's to see an exhibition of French Pointillism, and then went to Aeolian Hall were a string quartette from San Francisco was giving a programme of Mozart. A little before half-past five we were again at the District Attorney's office, which at that hour was deserted except for Markham.

Shortly after our arrival Miss Hoffman came in, and told the rest of her story in direct, business-like fashion.

"I didn't give you all the particulars this morning," she said; "and I wouldn't care to do so now unless you are willing to regard them as confidential, for my telling you might cost me my position."

"I promise you," Markham assured her. "that I will entirely respect your confidence."

She hesitated a moment and then continued.

"When I told Major Benson this morning about Mr. Pfyfe and his brother, he said at once that I should come with him to your office and tell you also. But on the way over, he suggested that I might omit a part of the story. He didn't exactly tell me not to mention it; but he explained that it had nothing to do with the case and might only confuse you. I followed his suggestion; but after I got back to the office I began thinking it over, and knowing how serious a matter Mr. Benson's death was, I decided to tell you anyway. In case it did have some bearing on the situation, I didn't want to be in the position of having withheld anything from you."

She seemed a little uncertain as to the wisdom of her decision.

"I do hope I haven't been foolish. But the truth is, there was something else besides that envelope, which Mr. Benson asked me to bring him from the safe the day he and Mr. Pfyfe had their quarrel. It was a square, heavy package, and, like the envelope, was marked 'Pfyfe-Personal.' And it was over this package that Mr. Benson and Mr. Pfyfe seemed to be quarrelling."

"Was it in the safe this morning when you went to get the envelope for the Major?" asked Vance.

"Oh, no. After Mr. Pfyfe left last week, I put the package back in the safe along with the envelope. But Mr. Benson took it home with him last Thursday—the day he was killed."

Markham was but mildly interested in the recital, and was about to bring the interview to a close when Vance spoke up.

"It was very good of you, Miss Hoffman, to take this trouble to tell us about the package; and now that you are here, there are one or two questions I'd like to ask. . . . How did Mr. Alvin Benson and the Major get along together?"

She looked at Vance with a curious little smile.

"They didn't get along very well," she said. "They were so different. Mr. Alvin Benson was not a very pleasant person, and not very honorable, I'm afraid. You'd never have thought they were brothers. They were constantly disputing about the business; and they were terribly suspicious of each other."

"That's not unnatural," commented Vance, "seeing how incompatible their temp'raments were. . . . By the bye, how did this suspicion show itself?"

"Well, for one thing, they sometimes spied on each other. You see, their offices were adjoining, and they would listen to each other through the door. I did the secretarial work for both of them, and I often saw them listening. Several times they tried to find out things from me about each other."

Vance smiled at her appreciatively."

"Not a pleasant position for you."

"Oh, I didn't mind it," she smiled back. "It amused me."

"When was the last time you caught either one of them listening?" he asked.

The girl quickly became serious.

"The very last day Mr. Alvin Benson was alive I saw

the Major standing by the door. Mr. Benson had a caller —a lady—and the Major seemed very much interested. It was in the afternoon. Mr. Benson went home early that day—only about half an hour after the lady had gone. She called at the office again later, but he wasn't there, of course, and I told her he had already gone home."

"Do you know who the lady was?" Vance asked her.

"No, I don't," she said. "She didn't give her name."

Vance asked a few other questions, after which we rode up town in the subway with Miss Hoffman, taking leave of her at Twenty-third Street.

Markham was silent and preoccupied during the trip. Nor did Vance make any comments until we were comfortably relaxed in the easy chairs of the Stuyvesant Club's lounge room. Then, lighting a cigarette lazily, he said:

"You grasp the subtle mental processes leading up to my prophecy about Miss Hoffman's second coming—eh, what, Markham? Y'see, I knew friend Alvin had not paid that forged cheque without security, and I also knew that the tiff must have been about the security, for Pfyfe was not really worrying about being jailed by his *alter ego*. I rather suspect Pfyfe was trying to get the security back before paying off the note, and was told there was 'nothing doing.' . . . Moreover, Little Goldylocks may be a nice girl and all that; but it isn't in the feminine temp'rament to sit next door to an altercation between two such rakes and not listen attentively. I shouldn't care, y'know, to have to decipher the typing she said she did during the episode. I was quite sure she heard more than she told; and I asked myself: Why this curtailment? The only logical answer was: Because the Major had suggested it. And since the *gnädiges Fräulein* was a forthright Germanic soul, with an inbred streak of selfish and cautious honesty, I ventured the prognostication that as soon as she was out from under the benev'lent jurisdiction of her tutor, she would tell us the rest, in order to save her own skin if the

matter should come up later. . . . Not so cryptic when explained, what?"

"That's all very well," conceded Markham petulantly. "But where does it get us?"

"I shouldn't say that the forward movement was entirely imperceptible."

Vance smoked a while impassively.

"You realise, I trust," he said, "that the mysterious package contained the security."

"One might form such a conclusion," agreed Markham. "But the fact doesn't dumbfound me—if that's what you're hoping for."

"And, of course," pursued Vance easily, "your legal mind, trained in the technique of ratiocination, has already identified it as the box of jewels that Mrs. Platz espied on Benson's table that fatal afternoon."

Markham sat up suddenly; then sank back with a shrug.

"Even if it was," he said, "I don't see how that helps us. Unless the Major knew the package had nothing to do with the case, he would not have suggested to his secretary that she omit telling us about it."

"Ah! But if the Major knew that the package was an irrelevant item in the case, then he must also know something about the case—eh, what? Otherwise, he couldn't determine what was, and what was not, irrelevant. . . . I have felt all along that he knew more than he admitted. Don't forget that he put us on the track of Pfyfe, and also that he was quite pos'tive Captain Leacock was innocent."

Markham thought for several minutes.

"I'm beginning to see what you're driving at," he remarked slowly. "Those jewels, after all, may have an important bearing on the case. . . . I think I'll have a chat with the Major about things."

Shortly after dinner, at the Club that night, Major Benson came into the lounge-room where we had retired for our smoke; and Markham accosted him at once.

"Major, aren't you willing to help me a little more in

getting at the truth about your brother's death?" he asked.

The other gazed at him searchingly: the inflection of Markham's voice belied the apparent casualness of the question.

"God knows it's not my wish to put obstacles in your way," he said, carefully weighing each word. "I'd gladly give you any help I could. But there are one or two things I cannot tell you at this time. . . . If there was only myself to be considered," he added, "it would be different."

"But you do suspect someone?" Vance put the question.

"In a way—yes, I overheard a conversation in Alvin's office one day, that took on added significance after his death."

"You shouldn't let chivalry stand in the way," urged Markham. "If your suspicion is unfounded, the truth will surely come out."

"But when I don't *know*, I certainly ought not to hazard a guess," affirmed the Major. "I think it best that you solve this problem without me."

Despite Markham importunities, he would say no more; and shortly afterward he excused himself and went out.

Markham, now profoundly worried, sat smoking restlessly, tapping the arm of his chair with his fingers.

"Well, old bean, a bit involved, what?" commented Vance.

"It's not so damned funny," Markham grumbled. "Everyone seems to know more about the case than the police or the District Attorney's office."

"Which wouldn't be so disconcertin' if they all weren't so deuced reticent," supplemented Vance cheerfully. "And the touchin' part of it is that each of 'em appears to be keeping still in order to shield someone else. Mrs. Platz began it: she lied about Benson's having any callers that afternoon, because she didn't want to involve his tea companion. Miss St. Clair declined point-blank to tell you

anything, because she obviously didn't desire to cast suspicion on another. The Captain became voiceless the moment you suggested his affianced bride was entangled. Even Leander refused to extricate himself from a delicate situation lest he implicate another. And now the Major! . . . Most annoyin'. On the other hand, don't y'know, it's comfortin'—not to say upliftin'—to be dealing exclusively with such noble, self-sacrificin' souls."

"Hell!" Markham put down his cigar and rose. "The case is getting on my nerves. I'm going to sleep on it, and tackle it in the morning."

"That ancient idea of sleeping on a problem is a fallacy," said Vance, as we walked out into Madison Avenue, "—an *apologia*, as it were, for one's not being able to think clearly. Poetic idea, y'know. All poets believe in it—nature's soft nurse, the balm of woe, childhood's mandragore, tired nature's sweet restorer, and that sort of thing. Silly notion. When the brain is keyed up and alive, it works far better than when apathetic from the torpor of sleep. Slumber is an anodyne—not a stimulus."

"Well, you sit up and think," was Markham's surly advice.

"That's what I'm going to do," blithely returned Vance; "but not about the Benson case. I did all the thinking I'm going to do along that line four days ago."

Chapter XVII

THE FORGED CHEQUE

(*Wednesday, June* 19 ; *forenoon.*)

We rode downtown with Markham the next morning, and though we arrived at his office before nine o'clock, Heath was already there waiting. He appeared worried, and when he spoke his voice held an ill-disguised reproof for the District Attorney.

"What about this Leacock, Mr. Markham?" he asked. "It looks to me like we'd better grab him quick. We've been tailing him right along ; and there's something funny going on. Yesterday morning he went to his bank and spent half an hour in the chief cashier's office. After that he visited his lawyer's, and was there over an hour. Then he went back to the bank for another half-hour. He dropped in to the Astor Grill for lunch, but didn't eat anything—sat staring at the table. About two o'clock he called on the realty agents who have the handling of the building he lives in ; and after he'd left, we found out he'd offered his apartment for sub-lease beginning to-morrow. Then he paid six calls on friends of his, and went home. After dinner my man rang his apartment bell and asked for Mr. Hoozitz : Leacock was packing up! . . . It looks to me like a get-away."

Markham frowned. Heath's report clearly troubled him ; but before he could answer, Vance spoke.

"Why this perturbation, Sergeant? You're watching the Captain. I'm sure he can't slip from your vigilant clutches."

Markham looked at Vance a moment ; then turned to Heath.

"Let it go at that. But if Leacock attempts to leave the city, nab him."

Heath went out sullenly.

"By the bye, Markham," said Vance, "don't make an appointment for half-past twelve to-day. You already have one, don't y'know. And with a lady."

Markham put down his pen, and stared.

"What new damned nonsense is this?"

"I made an engagement for you. Called the lady by 'phone this morning. I'm sure I woke the dear up."

Markham spluttered, striving to articulate his angry protest.

Vance held up his hand soothingly.

"And you simply must keep the engagement. Y'see, I told her it was you speaking; and it would be shocking taste not to appear. . . . I promise, you won't regret meeting her," he added. "Things looked so sadly befuddled last night—I couldn't bear to see you suffering so. Cons'quently, I arranged for you to see Mrs. Paula Banning —Pfyfe's Éloïse, y'know. I'm pos'tive she'll be able to dispel some of this inspissated gloom that's enveloping you."

"See here, Vance!" Markham growled. "I happen to be running this office——" He stopped abruptly, realising the hopelessness of making headway against the other's blandness. Moreover, I think, the prospect of interviewing Mrs. Paula Banning was not wholly alien to his inclinations. His resentment slowly ebbed, and when he again spoke his voice was almost matter-of-fact.

"Since you've committed me, I'll see her. But I'd rather Pfyfe wasn't in such close communication with her. He's apt to drop in—with preconcerted unexpectedness."

"Funny," murmured Vance. "I thought of that myself. . . . That's why I 'phoned him last night that he could return to Long Island."

"You 'phoned him—!"

"Awf'lly sorry and all that," Vance apologised. "But you'd gone to bed. Sleep was knitting up your ravell'd

sleave of care ; and I couldn't bring myself to disturb you. . . . Pfyfe was so grateful, too. Most touchin'. Said his wife also would be grateful. He was pathetically consid'-rate about Mrs. Pfyfe. But I fear he'll need all his velvety forensic powers to explain his absence."

"In what other quarters have you involved me during my absence?" asked Markham acrimoniously.

"That's all," replied Vance, rising and strolling to the window.

He stood looking out, smoking thoughtfully. When he turned back to the room, his bantering air had gone. He sat down facing Markham.

"The Major has practically admitted to us," he said, "that he knows more about this affair than he has told. You naturally can't push the point, in view of his hon'rable attitude in the matter. And yet, he's willing for you to find out what he knows, as long as he doesn't tell you himself—that was unquestionably the stand he took last night. Now, I believe there's a way you can find out without calling upon him to go against his principles. . . . You recall Miss Hoffman's story of the eavesdropping ; and you also recall that he told you he heard a conversation which, in the light of Benson's murder, became significant. It's quite prob'ble, therefore, that the Major's knowledge has to do with something connected with the business of the firm, or at least with one of the firm's clients."

Vance slowly lit another cigarette.

"My suggestion is this: call up the Major, and ask permission to send a man to take a peep at his ledger accounts and his purchase and sales books. Tell him you want to find out about the transactions of one of his clients. Intimate that it's Miss St. Clair—or Pfyfe, if you like. I have a strange mediumistic feeling that, in this way, you'll get on the track of the person he's shielding. And I'm also assailed by the premonition that he'll welcome your interest in his ledger."

The plan did not appeal to Markham as feasible or fraught with possibilities ; and it was evident he disliked

making such a request of Major Benson. But so determined was Vance, so earnestly did he argue his point, that in the end Markham acquiesced.

"He was quite willing to let me send a man," said Markham, hanging up the receiver. "In fact, he seemed eager to give me every assistance."

"I thought he'd take kindly to the suggestion," said Vance. "Y'see, if you discover for yourself whom he suspects, it relieves him of the onus of having tattled."

Markham rang for Swacker.

"Call up Stitt and tell him I want to see him here before noon—that I have an immediate job for him."

"Stitt," Markham explained to Vance, "is the head of a firm of public accountants over in the New York Life Building. I use him a good deal on work like this."

Shortly before noon Stitt came. He was a prematurely old young man, with a sharp, shrewd face and a perpetual frown. The prospect of working for the District Attorney pleased him.

Markham explained briefly what he wanted, and revealed enough of the case to guide him in his task. The man grasped the situation immediately, and made one or two notes on the back of a dilapidated envelope.

Vance also, during the instructions, had jotted down some notations on a piece of paper.

Markham stood up and took his hat.

"Now, I suppose, I must keep the appointment you made for me," he complained to Vance. Then: "Come, Stitt, I'll take you down with us in the judges' private elevator."

"If you don't mind," interposed Vance, "Mr. Stitt and I will forego the honour, and mingle with the commoners' in the public lift. We'll meet you downstairs."

Taking the accountant by the arm, he led him out through the main waiting-room. It was ten minutes, however, before he joined us.

We took the subway to Seventy-second Street and walked up West End Avenue to Mrs. Paula Banning's

address. She lived in a small apartment-house just around the corner in Seventy-fifth Street. As we stood before her door, waiting for an answer to our ring, a strong odour of Chinese incense drifted out to us.

"Ah! That facilitates matters," said Vance, sniffing. "Ladies who burn joss-sticks are invariably sentimental."

Mrs. Banning was a tall, slightly adipose woman of indeterminate age, with straw-coloured hair and a pink-and-white complexion. Her face in repose possessed a youthful and vacuous innocence; but the expression was only superficial. Her eyes, a very light blue, were hard; and a slight puffiness about her cheek-bones and beneath her chin attested to years of idle and indulgent living. She was not unattractive, however, in a vivid, flamboyant way; and her manner, when she ushered us into her over-furnished and rococo living-room, was one of easy-going good-fellowship.

When we were seated and Markham had apologised for our intrusion, Vance at once assumed the rôle of interviewer. During his opening explanatory remarks he appraised the woman carefully, as if seeking to determine the best means of approaching her for the information he wanted.

After a few minutes of verbal reconnoitring, he asked permission to smoke, and offered Mrs. Banning one of his cigarettes, which she accepted. Then he smiled at her in a spirit of appreciative geniality, and relaxed comfortably in his chair. He conveyed the impression that he was fully prepared to sympathise with anything she might tell him.

"Mr. Pfyfe strove very hard to keep you entirely out of this affair," said Vance; "and we fully appreciate his delicacy in so doing. But certain circumst'nces connected with Mr. Benson's death have inadvertently involved you in the case; and you can best help us and yourself—and particularly Mr. Pfyfe—by telling us what we want to know, and trusting to our discretion and understanding."

He had emphasised Pfyfe's name, giving it a significant

intonation ; and the woman had glanced down uneasily. Her apprehension was apparent, and when she looked up into Vance's eyes, she was asking herself : How much does he know ? as plainly as if she had spoken the words audibly.

" I can't imagine what you want me to tell you," she said, with an effort at astonishment. " You know that Andy was not in New York that night." (Her designation of the elegant and superior Pfyfe as " Andy " sounded almost like *lèse-majesté*.) " He didn't arrive in the city until nearly nine the next morning."

" Didn't you read in the newspaper about the grey Cadillac that was parked in front of Benson's house ? " Vance, in putting the question, imitated her own astonishment.

She smiled confidently.

" That wasn't Andy's car. He took the eight o'clock train to New York the next morning. He said it was lucky that he did, seeing that a machine just like his had been at Mr. Benson's the night before."

She had spoken with the sincerity of complete assurance. It was evident that Pfyfe had lied to her on this point.

Vance did not disabuse her ; in fact, he gave her to understand that he accepted her explanation, and consequently dismissed the idea of Pfyfe's presence in New York on the night of the murder.

" I had in mind a connection of a somewhat diff'rent nature when I mentioned you and Mr. Pfyfe as having been drawn into the case. I referred to a personal relationship between you and Mr. Benson."

She assumed an attitude of smiling indifference.

" I'm afraid you've made another mistake." She spoke lightly. " Mr. Benson and I were not even friends. Indeed, I scarcely knew him."

There was an overtone of emphasis in her denial—a slight eagerness which, in indicating a conscious desire to be believed, robbed her remark of the complete casualness she had intended.

" Even a business relationship may have its personal

side," Vance reminded her; "especially when the intermediary is an intimate friend of both parties to the transaction."

She looked at him quickly; then turned her eyes away.

"I really don't know what you're talking about," she affirmed; and her face for a moment lost its contours of innocence, and became calculating. "You're surely not implying that I had any business dealings with Mr. Benson?"

"Not directly," replied Vance. "But certainly Mr. Pfyfe had business dealings with him; and one of them, I rather imagined, involved you consid'rably."

"Involved me?" She laughed scornfully, but it was a strained laugh.

"It was a somewhat unfortunate transaction, I fear," Vance went on, "unfortunate in that Mr. Pfyfe was necessitated to deal with Mr. Benson; and doubly unfortunate, y'know, in that he should have had to drag you into it."

His manner was easy and assured, and the woman sensed that no display of scorn or contempt, however well simulated, would make an impression on him. Therefore, she adopted an attitude of tolerantly incredulous amusement.

"And where did you learn about all this?" she asked playfully.

"Alas! I didn't learn about it," answered Vance, falling in with her manner. "That's the reason, d'ye see, that I indulged in this charming little visit. I was foolish enough to hope that you'd take pity on my ignorance and tell me all about it."

"But I wouldn't think of doing such a thing," she said, "even if this mysterious transaction had really taken place."

"My word!" sighed Vance. "That *is* disappointin'. . . . Ah, well. I see that I must tell you what little I know about it, and trust to your sympathy to enlighten me further."

Despite the ominous undercurrent of his words, his

levity acted like a sedative to her anxiety. She felt that he was friendly, however much he might know about her.

" Am I bringing you news when I tell you that Mr. Pfyfe forged Mr. Benson's name to a cheque for ten thousand dollars ? " he asked.

She hesitated, gauging the possible consequences of her answer.

" No, that isn't news. Andy tells me everything."

" And did you also know that Mr. Benson, when informed of it, was rather put out ?—that, in fact, he demanded a note and a signed confession before he would pay the cheque ? "

The woman's eyes flashed angrily.

" Yes, I knew that too. And after all Andy had done for him ! If ever a man deserved shooting, it was Alvin Benson. He was a dog. And he pretended to be Andy's best friend. Just think of it—refusing to lend Andy the money without a confession ! . . . You'd hardly call that a business deal, would you ? I'd call it a dirty, contemptible, underhand trick."

She was enraged. Her mask of breeding and good-fellowship had fallen from her ; and she poured out vituperation on Benson with no thought of the words she was using. Her speech was devoid of all the ordinary reticencies of intercourse between strangers.

Vance nodded consolingly during her tirade.

" Y'know, I sympathise fully with you." The tone in which he made the remark seemed to establish a closer *rapprochement*.

After a moment he gave her a friendly smile.

" But, after all, one could almost forgive Benson for holding the confession, if he hadn't also demanded security."

" What security ? "

Vance was quick to sense the change in her tone. Taking advantage of her rage, he had mentioned the security while the barriers of her pose were down. Her frightened, almost involuntary query told him that the right moment had

arrived. Before she could gain her equilibrium or dispel the momentary fear which had assailed her, he said, with suave deliberation :

" The day Mr. Benson was shot he took home with him from the office a small blue box of jewels."

She caught her breath, but otherwise gave no outward sign of emotion.

" Do you think he had stolen them ? "

The moment she had uttered the question she realised it was a mistake in technique. An ordinary man might have been temporarily diverted from the truth by it. But by Vance's smile she recognised that he had accepted it as an admission.

" It was rather fine of you, y'know, to lend Mr. Pfyfe your jewels to cover the note with."

At this she threw her head up. The blood had left her face, and the rouge on her cheeks took on a mottled and unnatural hue.

" You say I lent my jewels to Andy ! I swear to you— "

Vance halted her denial with a slight movement of the hand and a *coup d'ilœ*. She saw that his intention was to save her from the humiliation she might feel later at having made too emphatic and unqualified a statement ; and the graciousness of his action, although he was an antagonist, gave her more confidence in him.

She sank back into her chair, and her hands relaxed.

" What makes you think I lent Andy my jewels ? "

Her voice was colourless, but Vance understood the question. It was the end of her deceptions. The pause which followed was an amnesty—recognised as such by both. The next spoken words would be the truth."

" Andy had to have them," she said, " or Benson would have put him in jail." One read in her words a strange, self-sacrificing affection for the worthless Pfyfe. " And if Benson hadn't done it, and had merely refused to honour the cheque, his father-in-law would have done it. . . . Andy is so careless, so unthinking. He does things without weighing the consequences : I am all the time having to

hold him down. . . . But this thing has taught him a lesson—I'm sure of it."

I felt that if anything in the world could teach Pfyfe a lesson, it was the blind loyalty of this woman.

"Do you know what he quarrelled about with Mr. Benson in his office last Wednesday?" asked Vance.

"That was all my fault," she explained, with a sigh. "It was getting very near to the time when the note was due, and I knew Andy didn't have all the money. So I asked him to go to Benson and offer him what he had, and see if he couldn't get my jewels back. . . But he was refused—I thought he would be."

Vance looked at her for a while sympathetically.

"I don't want to worry you any more than I can help," he said; "but won't you tell me the real cause of your anger against Benson a moment ago?"

She gave him an admiring nod.

"You're right—I had good reason to hate him." Her eyes narrowed unpleasantly. "The day after he had refused to give Andy the jewels, he called me up—it was in the afternoon—and asked me to have breakfast with him at his house the next morning. He said he was home and had the jewels with him; and he told me—hinted, you understand—that maybe—*maybe* I could have them. That's the kind of beast he was! . . . I telephoned to Port Washington to Andy and told him about it, and he said he'd be in New York the next morning. He got here about nine o'clock, and we read in the paper that Benson had been shot that night."

Vance was silent for a long time. Then he stood up and thanked her.

"You have helped us a great deal. Mr. Markham is a friend of Major Benson, and, since we have the cheque and the confession in our possession, I shall ask him to use his influence with the Major to permit us to destroy them—very soon."

Chapter XVIII

A CONFESSION

(Wednesday, June 19 ; 1 *p.m.)*

When we were again outside, Markham asked :

" How in Heaven's name did you know she had put up her jewels to help Pfyfe ? "

" My charmin' metaphysical deductions, don't y'know," answered Vance. " As I told you, Benson was not the open-handed, big-hearted altruist who would have lent money without security ; and certainly the impecunious Pfyfe had no collateral worth ten thousand dollars, or he wouldn't have forged the cheque. *Ergo :* someone lent him the security. Now, who would be so trustin' as to lend Pfyfe that amount of security except a sentimental woman who was blind to his amazin' defects ? Y'know, I was just evil-minded enough to suspect there was a Calypso in the life of this Ulysses when he told us of stopping over in New York to murmur *au revoir* to someone. When a man like Pfyfe fails to specify the sex of a person, it is safe to assume the female gender. So I suggested that you send a Paul Pry to Port Washington to peer into his trans-matrimonial activities : I felt certain a *bonne amie* would be found. Then, when the mysterious package, which obviously was the security, seemed to identify itself as the box of jewels seen by the inquisitive housekeeper, I said to myself : ' Ah ! Leander's misguided Dulcinea has lent him her gewgaws to save him from the yawning dungeon.' Nor did I overlook the fact that he had been shielding someone in his explanation about the cheque. Therefore, as soon as the lady's name and address were learned by Tracy, I made the appointment for you. . . ."

We were passing the Gothic-Renaissance Schwab residence which extends from West End Avenue to Riverside Drive at Seventy-third Street; and Vance stopped for a moment to contemplate it.

Markham waited patiently. At length Vance walked on.

"....Y'know, the moment I saw Mrs. Banning I knew my conclusions were correct. She was a sentimental soul, and just the sort of professional good sport who would have handed over her jewels to her *amoroso*. Also, she was bereft of gems when we called—and a woman of her stamp always wears her jewels when she desires to make an impression on strangers. Moreover, she's the kind that would have jewellery even if the larder was empty. It was therefore merely a question of getting her to talk."

"On the whole, you did very well," observed Markham.

Vance gave him a condescending bow.

"Sir Hubert is too generous. But tell me, didn't my little chat with the lady cast a gleam into your darkened mind?"

"Naturally," said Markham. "I'm not utterly obtuse. She played unconsciously into our hands. She believed Pfyfe did not arrive in New York until the morning after the murder, and therefore told us quite frankly that she had 'phoned him that Benson had the jewels at home. The situation now is: Pfyfe knew they were in Benson's house, and was there himself at about the time the shot was fired. Furthermore, the jewels are gone; and Pfyfe tried to cover up his tracks that night."

Vance sighed hopelessly.

"Markham, there are altogether too many trees for you in this case. You simply can't see the forest, y'know, because of 'em."

"There is the remote possibility that you are so busily engaged in looking at one particular tree that you are unaware of the others."

A shadow passed over Vance's face.

"I wish you were right," he said.

It was nearly half-past one, and we dropped into the

Fountain Room of the Ansonia Hotel for lunch. Markham was preoccupied throughout the meal, and when we entered the subway later, he looked uneasily at his watch.

"I think I'll go on down to Wall Street and call on the Major a moment before returning to the office. I can't understand his asking Miss Hoffman not to mention the package to me. . . . It might not have contained the jewels, after all."

"Do you imagine for one moment," rejoined Vance, "that Alvin told the Major the truth about the package? It was not a very cred'table transaction, y'know; and the Major most likely would have given him what-for."

Major Benson's explanation bore out Vance's surmise. Markham, in telling him of the interview with Paula Banning, emphasised the jewel episode in the hope that the Major would voluntarily mention the package; for his promise to Miss Hoffman prevented him from admitting that he was aware of the other's knowledge concerning it.

The Major listened with considerable astonishment, his eyes gradually growing angry.

"I'm afraid Alvin deceived me," he said. He looked straight ahead for a moment, his face softening. "And I don't like to think it, now that he's gone. But the truth is, when Miss Hoffman told me this morning about the envelope, she also mentioned a small parcel that had been in Alvin's private safe-drawer; and I asked her to omit any reference to it from her story to you. I knew the parcel contained Mrs. Banning's jewels, but I thought the fact would only confuse matters, if brought to your attention. You see, Alvin told me that a judgment had been taken against Mrs. Banning, and that, just before the Supplementary Proceedings, Pfyfe had brought her jewels here and asked him to sequester them temporarily in his safe."

On our way back to the Criminal Courts Building Markham took Vance's arm and smiled.

"Your guessing luck is holding out, I see."

"Rather!" agreed Vance. "It would appear that the

late Alvin, like Warren Hastings, resolved to die in the last dyke of prevarication. . . . *Splendide mendax*, what ? "

" In any event," replied Markham, " the Major has unconsciously added another link in the chain against Pfyfe."

" You seem to be making a collection of chains," commented Vance drily. " What have you done with the ones you forged about Miss St. Clair and Leacock ? "

" I haven't entirely discarded them—if that's what you think," asserted Markham gravely.

When we reached the office Sergeant Heath was awaiting us with a beatific grin.

" It's all over, Mr. Markham," he announced. " This noon, after you'd gone, Leacock came here looking for you. When he found you were out, he 'phoned Headquarters, and they connected him with me. He wanted to see me—very important, he said ; so I hurried over. He was sitting in the waiting-room when I came in, and he called me over and said : ' I came to give myself up. I killed Benson.' I got him to dictate a confession to Swacker, and then he signed it. . . . Here it is." He handed Markham a typewritten sheet of paper.

Markham sank wearily into a chair. The strain of the past few days had begun to tell on him. He sighed heavily.

" Thank God ! Now our troubles are ended."

Vance looked at him lugubriously, and shook his head.

" I rather fancy, y'know, that your troubles are only beginning," he drawled.

When Markham had glanced through the confession he handed it to Vance, who read it carefully with an expression of growing amusement.

" Y'know," he said, " this document isn't at all legal. Any judge worthy the name would throw it precip'tately out of court. It's far too simple and precise. It doesn't begin with ' greetings ' ; it doesn't contain a single ' wherefore-be-it ' or ' be-it-known ' or ' do-hereby ' ; it says nothing about ' free will ' or ' sound mind ' or ' disposin' mem'ry ' ; and the Captain doesn't once refer to himself as

'the party of the first part.' . . . Utterly worthless, Sergeant. If I were you, I'd chuck it."

Heath was feeling too complacently triumphant to be annoyed. He smiled with magnanimous tolerance.

"It strikes you as funny, doesn't it, Mr. Vance?"

"Sergeant, if you knew how inord'nately funny this confession is, you'd pos'tively have hysterics."

Vance then turned to Markham.

"Really, y'know, I shouldn't put too much stock in this. It may, however, prove a valuable lever with which to prise open the truth. In fact, I'm jolly glad the Captain has gone in for imag'native lit'rature. With this entrancin' fable in our possession, I think we can overcome the Major's scruples, and get him to tell us what he knows. Maybe I'm wrong, but it's worth trying."

He stepped to the District Attorney's desk, and leaned over it cajolingly.

"I haven't led you astray yet, old dear; and I'm going to make another suggestion. Call up the Major and ask him to come here at once. Tell him you've secured a confession—but don't you dare say whose. Imply it's Miss St. Clair's, or Pfyfe's—or Pontius Pilate's. But urge his immediate presence. Tell him you want to discuss it with him before proceeding with the indictment."

"I can't see the necessity of doing that," objected Markham. "I'm pretty sure to see him at the Club to-night, and I can tell him then."

"That wouldn't do at all," insisted Vance. "If the Major can enlighten us on any point, I think Sergeant Heath should be present to hear him."

"I don't need any enlightenment," cut in Heath.

Vance regarded him with admiring surprise.

"What a wonderful man! Even Goethe cried for *mehr Licht*; and here you are in a state of luminous saturation! . . . Astonishin'!"

"See here, Vance," said Markham, "why try to complicate the matter? It strikes me as a waste of time, besides being an imposition, to ask the Major here to discuss Lea-

cock's confession. We don't need his evidence now, anyway."

Despite his gruffness there was a hint of reconsideration in his voice; for though his instinct had been to dismiss the request out of hand, the experiences of the past few days had taught him that Vance's suggestions were not made without an object.

Vance, sensing the other's hesitancy, said:

"My request is based on something more than an idle desire to gaze upon the Major's rubicund features at this moment. I'm telling you, with all the meagre earnestness I possess, that his presence here now would be most helpful."

Markham deliberated, and argued the point at some length. But Vance was so persistent that in the end he was convinced of the advisability of complying.

Heath was patently disgusted, but he sat down quietly and sought solace in a cigar.

Major Benson arrived with astonishing promptness, and when Markham handed him the confession, he made little attempt to conceal his eagerness. But as he read it his face clouded, and a look of puzzlement came into his eyes.

At length he looked up, frowning.

"I don't quite understand this; and I'll admit I'm greatly surprised. It doesn't seem credible that Leacock shot Alvin. . . . And yet, I may be mistaken, of course."

He laid the confession on Markham's desk with an air of disappointment, and sank into a chair.

"Do *you* feel satisfied?" he asked.

"I don't see any way around it," said Markham. "If he isn't guilty, why should he come forward and confess? God knows, there's plenty of evidence against him. I was ready to arrest him two days ago."

"He's guilty all right," put in Heath. "I've had my eye on him from the first."

Major Benson did not reply at once; he seemed to be framing his next words.

"It might be—that is, there's the bare possibility—that Leacock had an ulterior motive in confessing."

We all, I think, recognised the thought which his words strove to conceal.

"I'll admit," acceded Markham, "that at first I believed Miss St. Clair guilty, and I intimated as much to Leacock. But later I was persuaded that she was not directly involved."

"Does Leacock know this?" the Major asked quickly.

Markham thought a moment.

"No, I can't say that he does. In fact, it's more than likely he still thinks I suspect her."

"Ah!" The Major's exclamation was almost involuntary.

"But what's that got to do with it?" asked Heath irritably. "Do you think he's going to the chair to save her reputation?—Bunk! That sort of thing's all right in the movies, but no man's that crazy in real life."

"I'm not so sure, Sergeant," ventured Vance lazily. "Women are too sane and practical to make such foolish gestures; but men, y'know, have an illim'table capacity for idiocy."

He turned an inquiring gaze on Major Benson.

"Won't you tell us why you think Leacock is playing Sir Galahad?"

But the Major took refuge in generalities, and was disinclined even to follow up his original intimation as to the cause of the Captain's action. Vance questioned him for some time, but was unable to penetrate his reticence.

Heath, becoming restless, finally spoke up.

"You can't argue Leacock's guilt away, Mr. Vance. Look at the facts. He threatened Benson that he'd kill him if he caught him with the girl again. The next time Benson goes out with her, he's found shot. Then Leacock hides his gun at her house, and when things begin to get hot, he takes it away and ditches it in the river. He bribes the hall-boy to alibi him; and he's seen at Benson's house at twelve-thirty that night. When he's questioned he

can't explain anything. . . . If that ain't an open-and-shut case, I'm a mock-turtle."

"The circumstances are convincing," admitted Major Benson. "But couldn't they be accounted for on other grounds?"

Heath did not deign to answer the question.

"The way I see it," he continued, "is like this: Leacock gets suspicious along about midnight, takes his gun and goes out. He catches Benson with the girl, goes in, and shoots him like he threatened. They're both mixed up in it, if you ask me; but Leacock did the shooting. And now we got his confession. . . . There isn't a jury in the country that wouldn't convict him."

"*Probi et legales homines*—oh, quite!" murmured Vance.

Swacker appeared at the door.

"The reporters are clamouring for attention," he announced with a wry face.

"Do they know about the confession?" Markham asked Heath.

"Not yet. I haven't told 'em anything so far—that's why they're clamouring, I guess. But I'll give 'em an earful now, if you say the word."

Markham nodded, and Heath started for the door. But Vance quickly planted himself in the way.

"Could you keep this thing quiet till to-morrow, Markham?" he asked.

Markham was annoyed.

"I could if I wanted to—yes. But why should I?"

"For your own sake, if for no other reason. You've got your prize safely locked up. Control your vanity for twenty-four hours. The Major and I both know that Leacock's innocent, and by this time to-morrow the whole country'll know it."

Again an argument ensued; but the outcome, like that of the former argument, was a foregone conclusion. Markham had realised for some time that Vance had reason to be convinced of something which as yet he was unwilling to divulge. His opposition to Vance's requests were, I had

suspected, largely the result of an effort to ascertain this information; and I was positive of it now as he leaned forward and gravely debated the advisability of making public the Captain's confession.

Vance, as heretofore, was careful to reveal nothing; but in the end his sheer determination carried his point; and Markham requested Heath to keep his own counsel until the next day. The Major, by a slight nod, indicated his approbation of the decision.

"You might tell the newspaper lads, though," suggested Vance, "that you'll have a rippin' sensation for 'em tomorrow."

Heath went out, crestfallen and glowering.

"A rash fella, the Sergeant—so impetuous!"

Vance again picked up the confession, and perused it.

"Now, Markham, I want you to bring your prisoner forth—*habeas corpus* and that sort of thing. Put him in that chair facing the window, give him one of the good cigars you keep for influential politicians, and then listen attentively while I politely chat with him. . . . The Major, I trust, will remain for the interlocut'ry proceedings."

"That request, at least, I'll grant without objections," smiled Markham. "I had already decided to have a talk with Leacock."

He pressed a buzzer, and a brisk, ruddy-faced clerk entered.

"A requisition for Captain Philip Leacock," he ordered.

When it was brought to him he initialled it.

"Take it to Ben, and tell him to hurry."

The clerk disappeared through the door leading to the outer corridor.

Ten minutes later a deputy sheriff from the Tombs entered with the prisoner.

Chapter XIX

VANCE CROSS-EXAMINES

(*Wednesday, June* 19 ; 3.30 *p.m.*)

CAPTAIN LEACOCK walked into the room with a hopeless indifference of bearing. His shoulders drooped ; his arms hung listlessly. His eyes were haggard like those of a man who had not slept for days. On seeing Major Benson, he straightened a little and, stepping toward him, extended his hand. It was plain that, however much he may have disliked Alvin Benson, he regarded the Major as a friend. But suddenly realising the situation, he turned away, embarrassed.

The Major went quickly to him and touched him on the arm.

"It's all right, Leacock," he said softly. "I can't think that you really shot Alvin."

The Captain turned apprehensive eyes upon him.

"Of course, I shot him." His voice was flat. "I told him I was going to."

Vance came forward, and indicated a chair.

"Sit down, Captain. The District Attorney wants to hear your story of the shooting. The law, you understand, does not accept murder confessions without corroborat'ry evidence. And since, in the present case, there are suspicions against others than yourself, we want you to answer some questions in order to substantiate your guilt. Otherwise, it will be necess'ry for us to follow up our suspicions."

Taking a seat facing Leacock, he picked up the confession.

"You say here you were satisfied that Mr. Benson had wronged you, and you went to his house at about half-past twelve on the night of the thirteenth. . . . When you speak of his wronging you, do you refer to his attentions to Miss St. Clair?"

Leacock's face betrayed a sulky belligerence.

"It doesn't matter why I shot him. Can't you leave Miss St. Clair out of it?"

"Certainly," agreed Vance. "I promise you she shall not be brought into it. But we must understand your motive thoroughly."

After a brief silence Leacock said:

"Very well, then. That was what I referred to."

"How did you know Miss St. Clair went to dinner with Mr. Benson that night?"

"I followed them to the Marseilles."

"And then you went home?"

"Yes."

"What made you go to Mr. Benson's house later?"

"I got to thinking about it more and more, until I couldn't stand it any longer. I began to see red, and at last I took my Colt and went out, determined to kill him."

A note of passion had crept into his voice. It seemed unbelievable that he could be lying.

Vance again referred to the confession.

"You dictated: 'I went to 87, West Forty-eighth Street, and entered the house by the front door.' . . . Did you ring the bell? Or was the front door unlatched?"

Leacock was about to answer, but hesitated. Evidently he recalled the newspaper accounts of the housekeeper's testimony in which she asserted positively that the bell had not rung that night.

"What difference does it make?" He was sparring for time.

"We'd like to know—that's all," Vance told him. "But no hurry."

"Well, if it's so important to you: I didn't ring the bell; and the door wasn't unlocked." His hesitancy was

gone. " Just as I reached the house, Benson drove up in a taxicab—— "

" Just a moment. Did you happen to notice another car standing in front of the house? A grey Cadillac? "

" Why—yes."

" Did you recognise its occupant? "

There was another short silence.

" I'm not sure. I think it was a man named Pfyfe."

" He and Mr. Benson were outside at the same time, then? "

Leacock frowned.

" No—not at the same time. There was nobody there when I arrived. . . . I didn't see Pfyfe until I came out a few minutes later."

" He arrived in his car when you were inside—is that it? "

" He must have."

" I see. . . . And now to go back a little: Benson drove up in a taxicab. Then what? "

" I went up to him and said I wanted to speak to him. He told me to come inside, and we went in together. He used his latch-key."

" And now, Captain, tell us just what happened after you and Mr. Benson entered the house."

" He laid his hat and stick on the hat rack, and we walked into the living-room. He sat down by the table, and I stood up and said—what I had to say. Then I drew my gun and shot him."

Vance was closely watching the man, and Markham was leaning forward tensely.

" How did it happen that he was reading at the time? "

" I believe he did pick up a book while I was talking. . . . Trying to appear indifferent, I reckon."

" Think now: you and Mr. Benson went into the living-room directly from the hall, as soon as you entered the house? "

" Yes."

" Then how do you account for the fact, Captain, that

when Mr. Benson was shot he had on his smoking-jacket and slippers?"

Leacock glanced nervously about the room. Before he answered he wet his lips with his tongue.

"Now that I think of it, Benson did go upstairs for a few minutes first. . . . I guess I was too excited," he added desperately, "to recollect everything."

"That's natural," Vance said sympathetically. "But when he came downstairs did you happen to notice anything peculiar about his hair?"

Leacock looked up vaguely.

"His hair? I—don't understand."

"The colour of it, I mean. When Mr. Benson sat before you under the table lamp, didn't you remark some—difference, let us say—in the way his hair looked?"

The man closed his eyes, as if striving to visualise the scene.

"No—I don't remember."

"A minor point," said Vance indifferently. "Did Benson's speech strike you as peculiar when he came downstairs—that is, was there a thickness, or slight impediment of any kind, in his voice?"

Leacock was manifestly puzzled.

"I don't know what you mean," he said. "He seemed to talk the way he always talked."

"And did you happen to see a blue jewel-case on the table?"

"I didn't notice."

Vance smoked a moment thoughtfully.

"When you left the room after shooting Mr. Benson, you turned out the lights, of course?"

When no immediate answer came, Vance volunteered the suggestion:

"You must have done so, for Mr. Pfyfe says the house was dark when he drove up."

Leacock then nodded an affirmative.

"That's right. I couldn't recollect for the moment."

"Now that you remember the fact, just how did you turn them off?"

"I——" he began, and stopped. Then, finally: "At the switch."

"And where is that switch located, Captain?"

"I can't just recall."

"Think a moment. Surely you can remember."

"By the door leading into the hall, I think."

"Which side of the door?"

"How can I tell?" the man asked piteously. "I was too—nervous. . . . But I think it was on the right-hand side of the door."

"The right-hand side when entering or leaving the room?"

"As you go out."

"That would be where the bookcase stands?"

"Yes."

Vance appeared satisfied.

"Now, there's the question about the gun," he said. "Why did you take it to Miss St. Clair?"

"I was a coward," the man replied. "I was afraid they might find it at my apartment. And I never imagined she would be suspected."

"And when she was suspected, you at once took the gun away and threw it into the East River?"

"Yes."

"I suppose there was one cartridge missing from the magazine, too—which in itself would have been a suspicious circumstance."

"I thought of that. That's why I threw the gun away."

Vance frowned.

"That's strange. There must have been two guns. We dredged the river, y'know, and found a Colt automatic, but the magazine was full. . . . Are you sure, Captain, that it was *your* gun you took from Miss St. Clair's and threw over the bridge?"

I knew no gun had been retrieved from the river, and I wondered what he was driving at. Was he, after all,

trying to involve the girl? Markham, too, I could see, was in doubt.

Leacock made no answer for several moments. When he spoke, it was with dogged sullenness.

"There weren't two guns. The one you found was mine. . . . I refilled the magazine myself."

"Ah, that accounts for it." Vance's tone was pleasant and reassuring. "Just one more question, Captain. Why did you come here to-day and confess?"

Leacock thrust his chin out, and for the first time during the cross-examination his eyes became animated.

"Why? It was the only honourable thing to do. You had unjustly suspected an innocent person; and I didn't want anybody else to suffer."

This ended the interview. Markham had no questions to ask; and the deputy-sheriff led the Captain out.

When the door had closed on him a curious silence fell over the room. Markham sat smoking furiously, his hands folded behind his head, his eyes fixed on the ceiling. The Major had settled back in his chair, and was gazing at Vance with admiring satisfaction. Vance was watching Markham out of the corner of his eye, a drowsy smile on his lips. The expressions and attitudes of the three men conveyed perfectly their varying individual reactions to the interview—Markham troubled, the Major pleased, Vance cynical. It was Vance who broke the silence. He spoke easily, almost lazily.

"You see how silly the confession is, what? Our pure and lofty Captain is an incredibly poor Munchausen. No one could lie as badly as he did who hadn't been born into the world that way. It's simply impossible to imitate such stupidity. And he did so want us to think him guilty. Very affectin'. He prob'bly imagined you'd merely stick the confession in his shirt-front and send him to the hangman. You noticed, he hadn't even decided how he got into Benson's house that night. Pfyfe's admitted presence outside almost spoiled his impromptu explanation of having entered *bras dessus bras dessous* with

his intended victim. And he didn't recall Benson's semi-négligé attire. When I reminded him of it, he had to contradict himself, and send Benson trotting upstairs to make a rapid change. Luckily, the toupee wasn't mentioned by the newspapers. The Captain couldn't imagine what I meant when I intimated that Benson had dyed his hair when changing his coat and shoes. . . . By the bye, Major, did your brother speak thickly when his false teeth were out? "

"Noticeably so," answered the Major. "If Alvin's plate had been removed that night—as I gathered it had been from your question—Leacock would surely have noticed it."

"There were other things he didn't notice," said Vance: "the jewel-case, for instance, and the location of the electric-light switch."

"He went badly astray on that point," added the Major. "Alvin's house is old-fashioned, and the only switch in the room is a pendant one attached to the chandelier."

"Exactly," said Vance. "However, his worst break was in connection with the gun. He gave his hand away completely there. He said he threw the pistol into the river largely because of the missing cartridge, and when I told him the magazine was full, he explained that he had refilled it, so I wouldn't think it was anyone else's gun that was found. . . . It's plain to see what's the matter. He thinks Miss St. Clair is guilty, and is determined to take the blame."

"That's my impression," said Major Benson.

"And yet," mused Vance, "the Captain's attitude bothers me a little. There's no doubt he had something to do with the crime, else why should he have concealed his pistol the next day in Miss St. Clair's apartment? He's just the kind of silly beggar, d'ye see, who would threaten any man he thought had designs on his fiancée, and then carry out the threat if anything happened. And he has a guilty conscience—that's obvious. But for what? Cer-

tainly not the shooting. The crime was planned ; and the Captain never plans. He's the kind that gets an *idée fixe*, girds up his loins, and does the deed in knightly fashion, prepared to take the cons'quences. That sort of chivalry, y'know, is sheer *beau geste* : its acolytes want everyone to know of their valour. And when they go forth to rid the world of a Don Juan, they're always clear-minded. The Captain, for instance, wouldn't have overlooked his Lady Fair's gloves and handbag—he would have taken 'em away. In fact, it's just as certain he would have shot Benson as it is he didn't shoot him. That's the beetle in the amber. It's psychologically possible he would have done it, and psychologically impossible he would have done it the way it was done."

He lit a cigarette and watched the drifting spirals of smoke.

"If it wasn't so fantastic, I'd say he started out to do it, and found it already done. And yet, that's about the size of it. It would account for Pfyfe's seeing him there, and for his secreting the gun at Miss St. Clair's the next day."

The telephone rang: Colonel Ostrander wanted to speak to the District Attorney. Markham, after a short conversation, turned a disgruntled look upon Vance.

"Your blood-thirsty friend wanted to know if I'd arrested anyone yet. He offered to confer more of his invaluable suggestions upon me in case I was still undecided as to who was guilty."

"I heard you thanking him fulsomely for something or other. . . . What did you give him to understand about your mental state?"

"That I was still in the dark."

Markham's answer was accompanied by a sombre, tired smile. It was his way of telling Vance that he had entirely rejected the idea of Captain Leacock's guilt.

The Major went to him and held out his hand.

"I know how you feel," he said. "This sort of thing is discouraging ; but it's better that the guilty person should

escape altogether than that an innocent man should be made to suffer. . . . Don't work too hard, and don't let these disappointments get to you. You'll soon hit on the right solution, and when you do—" His jaw snapped shut, and he uttered the rest of the sentence between clenched teeth. "—you'll meet with no opposition from me. I'll help you put the thing over."

He gave Markham a grim smile, and took up his hat.

"I'm going back to the office now. If you want me at any time, let me know. I may be able to help you—later on."

With a friendly, appreciative bow to Vance, he went out.

Markham sat in silence for several minutes.

"Damn it, Vance!" he said irritably. "This case gets more difficult by the hour. I feel worn out."

"You really shouldn't take it so seriously, old dear," Vance advised lightly. "It doesn't pay, y'know, to worry over the *trivia* of existence.

'Nothing's new,
And nothing's true,
And nothing really matters.'

Several million johnnies were killed in the War, and you don't let the fact bedevil your phagocytes or inflame your brain cells. But when one rotter is mercifully shot in your district, you lie awake nights perspiring over it, what? My word! You're deucedly inconsistent."

"Consistency——" began Markham; but Vance interrupted him.

"Now don't quote Emerson. I inf'nitely prefer Erasmus. Y'know, you ought to read his *Praise of Folly*; it would cheer you no end. That goaty old Dutch professor would never have grieved inconsolably over the destruction of Alvin *Le Chauve*."

"I'm not a *fruges consumere natus* like you," snapped Markham. "I was elected to this office——"

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"Oh, quite—'loved I not honour more' and all that," Vance chimed in. "But don't be so sens'tive. Even if the Captain has succeeded in bungling his way out of jail, you have at least five possibilities left. There's Mrs. Platz . . . and Pfyfe . . . and Colonel Ostrander. . . and Miss Hoffman . . . and Mrs. Banning. I say! Why don't you arrest 'em all, one at a time, and get 'em to confess? Heath would go crazy with joy."

Markham was in too crestfallen a mood to resent this chaffing. Indeed, Vance's light-heartedness seemed to buoy him up.

"If you want the truth," he said, "that's exactly what I feel like doing. I am restrained merely by my indecision as to which one to arrest first."

"Stout fella!" Then Vance asked: "What are you going to do with the Captain now? It'll break his heart if you release him."

"His heart'll have to break, I'm afraid." Markham reached for the telephone. "I'd better see to the formalities now."

"Just a moment!" Vance put forth a restraining hand. "Don't end his rapturous martyrdom just yet. Let him be happy for another day at least. I've a notion he may be most useful to us, pining away in his lonely cell like the prisoner of Chillon."

Markham put down the telephone without a word. More and more, I had noticed, he was becoming inclined to accept Vance's leadership. This attitude was not merely the result of the hopeless confusion in his mind, though his uncertainty probably influenced him to some extent; but it was due in large measure to the impression Vance had given him of knowing more than he cared to reveal.

"Have you tried to figure out just how Pfyfe and his Turtledove fit into the case?" Vance asked.

"Along with a few thousand other enigmas—yes," was the petulant reply. "But the more I try to reason it out, the more of a mystery the whole thing becomes."

"Loosely put, my dear Markham," criticised Vance. "There are no mysteries originating in human beings, y'know; there are only problems. And any problem originating in one human being can be solved by another human being. It merely requires a knowledge of the human mind, and the application of that knowledge to human acts. Simple, what?"

He glanced at the clock.

"I wonder how your Mr. Stitt is getting along with the Benson and Benson books. I await his report with anticipat'ry excitement."

This was too much for Markham. The wearing-down process of Vance's intimations and veiled innuendoes had at last dissipated his self-control. He bent forward and struck the desk angrily with his hand.

"I'm damned tired of this superior attitude of yours," he complained hotly. "Either you know something or you don't. If you don't know anything, do me the favour of dropping these insinuations of knowledge. If you do know anything, it's up to you to tell me. You've been hinting around in one way or another ever since Benson was shot. If you've got any idea who killed him, I want to know it."

He leaned back and took out a cigar. Not once did he look up as he carefully clipped the end and lit it. I think he was a little ashamed at having given way to his anger.

Vance had sat apparently unconcerned during the outburst. At length he stretched his legs, and gave Markham a long contemplative look.

"Y'know, Markham, old bean, I don't blame you a bit for your unseemly ebullition. The situation has been most provokin'. But now, I fancy, the time has come to put an end to the comedietta. I really haven't been spoofing, y'know. The fact is, I've some most int'restin' ideas on the subject."

He stood up and yawned.

"It's a beastly hot day, but it must be done—eh, what?

'So nigh is grandeur to our dust,
So near is God to man.
When duty whispers low, *Thou must*,
The youth replies, *I can*.'

I'm the noble youth, don't y'know. And you're the voice of duty—though you didn't exactly whisper, did you? . . . *Was aber ist deine Pflicht*? And Goethe answered: *Die Forderung des Tages*. But—deuce take it—I wish the demand had come on a cooler day!"

He handed Markham his hat.

"Come, *Postume*. To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.* You are through with the office for to-day—inform Swacker of the fact, will you?—there's a dear! We attend upon a lady—Miss St. Clair, no less."

Markham realised that Vance's jesting manner was only the masquerade of a very serious purpose. Also, he knew that Vance would tell him what he knew or suspected only in his own way, and that, no matter how circuitous and unreasonable that way might appear, Vance had excellent reasons for following it. Furthermore, since the unmasking of Captain Leacock's purely fictitious confession, he was in a state of mind to follow any suggestion that held the faintest hope of getting at the truth. He therefore rang at once for Swacker, and informed him he was quitting the office for the day.

In ten minutes we were in the subway on our way to 94, Riverside Drive.

* This quotation from Ecclesiastes reminds me that Vance regularly read the Old Testament. "When I weary of the professional liter'ry man," he once said, "I find stimulation in the majestic prose of the Bible. If the moderns feel that they simply must write, they should be made to spend at least two hours a day with the Biblical historians."

Chapter XX

A LADY EXPLAINS

(*Wednesday, June* 19 ; 4.30 *p.m.*)

"THE quest for enlightenment upon which we are now embarked," said Vance, as we rode up town, "may prove a bit tedious. But you must exert your will-power, and bear with me. You can't imagine what a ticklish task I have on my hands. And it's not a pleasant one either. I'm a bit too young to be sentimental, and yet, d'ye know, I'm half inclined to let your culprit go."

"Would you mind telling me why we are calling on Miss St. Clair?" asked Markham resignedly.

Vance amiably complied.

"Not at all. Indeed, I deem it best for you to know. There are several points connected with the lady that need eluc'dation. First, there are the gloves and the handbag. Nor poppy nor mandragora shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep which thou ow'dst yesterday until you have learned about those articles—eh, what? Then, you recall, Miss Hoffman told us that the Major was lending an ear when a certain lady called upon Benson the day he was shot. I suspect that the visitor was Miss St. Clair ; and I am rather curious to know what took place in the office that day, and why she came back later. Also, why did she go to Benson's for tea that afternoon? And what part did the jewels play in the chit-chat? But there are other items. For example : Why did the Captain take his gun to her? What makes him think she shot Benson?—he really believes it, y'know. And why did she think that he was guilty from the first?"

Markham looked sceptical.

"You expect her to tell us all this?"

"My hopes run high," returned Vance. "With her verray parfit gentil knight jailed as a self-confessed murderer, she will have nothing to lose by unburdening her soul. . . . But we must have no blustering. Your police brand of aggressive cross-examination will, I assure you, have no effect upon the lady."

"Just how do you propose to elicit your information?"

"With *morbidezza*, as the painters say. Much more refined and gentlemanly, y'know."

Markham considerd a moment.

"I think I'll keep out of it, and leave the Socratic *elenchus* entirely to you."

"An extr'ordin'rily brilliant suggestion," said Vance.

When we arrived Markham announced over the house-telephone that he had come on a vitally important mission; and we were received by Miss St. Clair without a moment's delay. She was apprehensive, I imagine, concerning the whereabouts of Captain Leacock.

As she sat before us in her little drawing-room overlooking the Hudson, her face was quite pale, and her hands, though tightly clasped, trembled a little. She had lost much of her cold reserve, and there were unmistakable signs of sleepless worry about her eyes.

Vance went directly to the point. His tone was almost flippant in its lightness: it at once relieved the tension of the atmosphere, and gave an air bordering on inconsequentiality to our visit.

"Captain Leacock has, I regret to inform you, very foolishly confessed to the murder of Mr. Benson. But we are not entirely satisfied with his *bona fides*. We are, alas! awash between Scylla and Charybdis. We cannot decide whether the Captain is a deep-dyed villain or a *chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*. His story of how he accomplished the dark deed is a bit sketchy: he is vague on certain essential details; and—what's most confusin'—he turned the lights off in Benson's hideous living-room by

a switch which pos'tively doesn't exist. Cons'quently, the suspicion has crept into my mind that he has concocted this tale of derring-do in order to shield someone whom he really believes guilty."

He indicated Markham with a slight movement of the head.

"The District Attorney here does not wholly agree with me. But then, d'ye see, the legal mind is incredibly rigid and unreceptive once it has been invaded by a notion. You will remember that, because you were with Mr. Alvin Benson on his last evening on earth, and for other reasons equally irrelevant and trivial, Mr. Markham actu'lly concluded that you had had something to do with the gentleman's death."

He gave Markham a smile of waggish reproach, and went on:

"Since you, Miss St. Clair, are the only person whom Captain Leacock would shield so heroically, and since I, at least, am convinced of your own innocence, will you not clear up for us a few of those points where your orbit crossed that of Mr. Benson? . . . Such information cannot do the Captain or yourself any harm, and it very possibly will help to banish from Mr. Markham's mind his lingering doubts as to the Captain's innocence."

Vance's manner had an assuaging effect upon the woman; but I could see that Markham was boiling inwardly at Vance's animadversions on him, though he refrained from any interruption.

Miss St. Clair stared steadily at Vance for several minutes.

"I don't know why I should trust you, or even believe you," she said evenly; "but now that Captain Leacock has confessed—I was afraid he was going to, when he last spoke to me—I see no reason why I should not answer your questions. . . . Do you truly think he is innocent?"

The question was like an involuntary cry: her pent-up emotion had broken through her carapace of calm.

"I truly do," Vance avowed soberly. "Mr. Markham

will tell you that before we left his office I pleaded with him to release Captain Leacock. It was with the hope that your explanations would convince him of the wisdom of such a course, that I urged him to come here."

Something in his tone and manner seemed to inspire her confidence.

"What do you wish to ask me?" she asked.

Vance cast another reproachful glance at Markham, who was restraining his outraged feelings only with difficulty; and then turned back to the woman.

"First of all, will you explain how your gloves and handbag found their way into Mr. Benson's house? Their presence there has been preying most distressin'ly on the District Attorney's mind."

She turned a direct, frank gaze upon Markham.

"I dined with Mr. Benson at his invitation. Things between us were not pleasant, and when we started for home, my resentment of his attitude increased. At Times Square I ordered the chauffeur to stop—I preferred returning home alone. In my anger and my haste to get away, I must have dropped my gloves and bag. It was not until Mr. Benson had driven off that I realised my loss, and having no money, I walked home. Since my things were found in Mr. Benson's house, he must have taken them there himself."

"Such was my own belief," said Vance. "And—my word!—it's a deucedly long walk out here, what?"

He turned to Markham with a tantalising smile.

"Really, y'know, Miss St. Clair couldn't have been expected to reach here before one."

Markham, grim and resolute, made no reply.

"And now," pursued Vance, "I should love to know under what circumstances the invitation to dinner was extended."

A shadow darkened her face, but her voice remained even.

"I had been losing a lot of money through Mr. Benson's firm, and suddenly my intuition told me that he was purposely seeing to it that I did lose, and that he could,

if he desired, help me to recoup." She dropped her eyes. "He had been annoying me with his attentions for some time; and I didn't put any despicable scheme past him. I went to his office, and told him quite plainly what I suspected. He replied that if I'd dine with him that night we could talk it over. I knew what his object was, but I was so desperate I decided to go any way, hoping I might plead with him."

"And how did you happen to mention to Mr. Benson the exact time your little dinner party would terminate?"

She looked at Vance in astonishment, but answered unhesitatingly.

"He said something about—making a gay night of it; and then I told him—very emphatically—that if I went I would leave him sharply at midnight, as was my invariable rule on all parties. . . . You see," she added, "I study very hard at my singing, and going home at midnight, no matter what the occasion, is one of the sacrifices—or rather, restrictions—I impose on myself."

"Most commendable and most wise!" commented Vance. "Was this fact generally known among your acquaintances?"

"Oh, yes. It even resulted in my being nicknamed Cinderella."

"Specifically, did Colonel Ostrander and Mr. Pfyfe know it?"

"Yes."

Vance thought a moment.

"How did you happen to go to tea at Mr. Benson's home the day of the murder, if you were to dine with him that night?"

A flush stained her cheeks.

"There was nothing wrong in that," she declared. "Somehow, after I had left Mr. Benson's office, I revolted against my decision to dine with him, and I went to his house—I had gone back to the office first, but he had left—to make a final appeal, and to beg him to release me from my promise. But he laughed the matter off, and after

insisting that I have tea, sent me home in a taxicab to dress for dinner. He called for me about half-past seven."

"And when you pleaded with him to release you from your promise you sought to frighten him by recalling Captain Leacock's threat; and he said it was only a bluff."

Again the woman's astonishment was manifest.

"Yes," she murmured.

Vance gave her a soothing smile.

"Colonel Ostrander told me he saw you and Mr. Benson at the Marseilles."

"Yes; and I was terribly ashamed. He knew what Mr. Benson was, and had warned me against him only a few days before."

"I was under the impression that the Colonel and Mr. Benson were good friends."

"They were—up to a week ago. But the Colonel lost more money than I did in a stock pool which Mr. Benson engineered recently, and he intimated to me very strongly that Mr. Benson had deliberately misadvised us to his own benefit. He didn't even speak to Mr. Benson that night at the Marseilles."

"What about these rich and precious stones that accompanied your tea with Mr. Benson?"

"Bribes," she answered; and her contemptuous smile was a more eloquent condemnation of Benson than if she had resorted to the bitterest castigation. "The gentleman sought to turn my head with them. I was offered a string of pearls to wear to dinner; but I declined them. And I was told that, if I saw things in the right light—or some such charming phrase—I could have jewels like them for my very, very own—perhaps even those identical ones, on the twenty-first."

"Of course—the twenty-first," grinned Vance. "Markham, are you listening? On the twenty-first Leander's note falls due, and if it's not paid the jewels are forfeited."

He addressed himself again to Miss St. Clair.

"Did Mr. Benson have the jewels with him at dinner?"

"Oh, no! I think my refusal of the pearls rather discouraged him."

Vance paused, looking at her with ingratiating cordiality.

"Tell us now, please, of the gun episode—in your own words, as the lawyers say, hoping to entangle you later."

But she evidently feared no entanglement.

"The morning after the murder Captain Leacock came here and said he had gone to Mr. Benson's house about half-past twelve with the intention of shooting him. But he had seen Mr. Pfyfe outside and, assuming he was calling, had given up the idea and gone home. I feared that Mr. Pfyfe had seen him, and I told him it would be safer to bring his pistol to me and to say, if questioned, that he'd lost it in France. . . . You see, I really thought he had shot Mr. Benson and was—well, lying like a gentleman, to spare my feelings. Then, when he took the pistol from me with the purpose of throwing it away altogether, I was even more certain of it."

She smiled faintly at Markham.

"That was why I refused to answer your questions. I wanted you to think that maybe I had done it, so you'd not suspect Captain Leacock."

"But he wasn't lying at all," said Vance.

"I know now that he wasn't. And I should have known it before. He'd never have brought the pistol to me if he'd been guilty."

A film came over her eyes.

"And—poor boy!—he confessed because he thought that I was guilty."

"That's precisely the harrowin' situation," nodded Vance. "But where did he think you had obtained a weapon?"

"I know many army men—friends of his and of Major Benson's. And last summer at the mountains I did considerable pistol practice for the fun of it. Oh, the idea was reasonable enough."

Vance rose and made a courtly bow.

"You've been most gracious—and most helpful," he

said. "Y'see, Mr. Markham had various theories about the murder. The first, I believe, was that you alone were the Madame Borgia. The second was that you and the Captain did the deed together—*à quatre mains*, as it were. The third was that the Captain pulled the trigger *a cappella*. And the legal mind is so exquisitely developed that it can believe in several conflicting theories at the same time. The sad thing about the present case is that Mr. Markham still leans towards the belief that both of you are guilty, individually and collectively. I tried to reason with him before coming here; but I failed. Therefore, I insisted upon his hearing from your own charming lips your story of the affair."

He went up to Markham, who sat glaring at him with lips compressed.

"Well, old chap," he remarked pleasantly, "surely you are not going to persist in your obsession that either Miss St. Clair or Captain Leacock is guilty, what? . . . And won't you relent and unshackle the Captain as I begged you to?"

He extended his arms in a theatrical gesture of supplication.

Markham's wrath was at the breaking point, but he got up deliberately and, going to the woman, held out his hand.

"Miss St. Clair," he said kindly—and again I was impressed by the bigness of the man—"I wish to assure you that I have dismissed the idea of your guilt, and also Captain Leacock's, from what Mr. Vance terms my incredibly rigid and unreceptive mind. . . . I forgive him, however, because he has saved me from doing you a very grave injustice. And I will see that you have your Captain back as soon as the paper can be signed for his release."

As we walked out on to Riverside Drive, Markham turned savagely on Vance.

"So! *I* was keeping her precious Captain locked up, and *you* were pleading with me to let him go! You know damned well I didn't think either one of them was guilty—you—you lounge lizard!"

Vance sighed.

"Dear me! Don't you want to be of any help at all in this case?" he asked sadly.

"What good did it do you to make an ass of me in front of that woman?" spluttered Markham. "I can't see that you got anywhere, with all your tomfoolery."

"What!" Vance registered utter amazement. "The testimony you've heard to-day is going to help immeasurably in convicting the culprit. Furthermore, we know about the gloves and handbag, and who the lady was that called at Benson's office, and what Miss St. Clair did between twelve and one, and why she dined alone with Alvin, and why she first had tea with him, and how the jewels came to be there, and why the Captain took her his gun and then threw it away, and why he confessed. . . . My word! Doesn't all this knowledge soothe you? It rids the situation of so much debris."

He stopped and lit a cigarette.

"The really important thing the lady told us was that her friends knew she invariably departed at midnight when she went out of an evening. Don't overlook or belittle that point, old dear; it's most pert'nent. I told you long ago that the person who shot Benson knew she was dining with him that night."

"You'll be telling me next you know who killed him," Markham scoffed.

Vance sent a ring of smoke circling upward.

"I've known all along who shot the blighter."

Markham snorted derisively.

"Indeed! And when did this revelation burst upon you?"

"Oh, not more than five minutes after I entered Benson's house that first morning," replied Vance.

"Well, well! Why didn't you confide in me, and avoid all these trying activities?"

"Quite impossible," Vance explained jocularly. "You were not ready to receive my apocryphal knowledge. It was first necess'ry to lead you patiently by the hand out

of the various dark forests and morasses into which you insisted upon straying. You're so dev'lishly unimag'native, don't y'know."

A taxicab was passing, and he hailed it.

"Eighty-seven West Forty-eighth Street," he directed.

Then he took Markham's arm confidingly.

"Now for a brief chat with Mrs. Platz. And then—then I shall pour into your ear all my maidenly secrets."

Chapter XXI

SARTORIAL REVELATIONS

(*Wednesday, June* 19 ; 5.30 *p.m.*)

THE housekeeper regarded our visit that afternoon with marked uneasiness. Though she was a large powerful woman, her body seemed to have lost some of its strength, and her face showed signs of prolonged anxiety. Snitkin informed us, when we entered, that she had carefully read every newspaper account of the progress of the case, and had questioned him interminably on the subject.

She entered the living-room with scarcely an acknowledgment of our presence, and took the chair Vance placed for her like a woman resigning herself to a dreaded but inevitable ordeal. When Vance looked at her keenly, she gave him a frightened glance and turned her face away, as if, in the second their eyes met, she had read his knowledge of some secret she had been jealously guarding.

Vance began his questioning without prelude or protasis.

"Mrs. Platz, was Mr. Benson very particular about his toupee—that is, did he often receive his friends without having it on?"

The woman appeared relieved.

"Oh, no, sir—never."

"Think back, Mrs. Platz. Has Mr. Benson never, to your knowledge, been in anyone's company without his toupee?"

She was silent for some time, her brows contracted.

"Once I saw him take off his wig and show it to Colonel Ostrander, an elderly gentleman who used to call here very

often. But Colonel Ostrander was an old friend of his. He told me they lived together once."

"No one else?"

Again she frowned thoughtfully.

"No," she said, after several minutes.

"What about the tradespeople?"

"He was very particular about them. . . . And strangers, too," she added. "When he used to sit in here in hot weather without his wig, he always pulled the shade on that window." She pointed to the one nearest the hallway. "You can look in it from the steps."

"I'm glad you brought up that point," said Vance. "And anyone standing on the steps could tap on the window or the iron bars, and attract the attention of anyone in this room?"

"Oh, yes, sir—easily. I did it myself once, when I went on an errand and forgot my key."

"It's quite likely, don't you think, that the person who shot Mr. Benson obtained admittance that way?"

"Yes, sir." She grasped eagerly at the suggestion.

"The person would have had to know Mr. Benson pretty well to tap on the window instead of ringing the bell. Don't you agree with me, Mrs. Platz?"

"Yes—sir." Her tone was doubtful: evidently the point was a little beyond her.

"If a stranger had tapped on the window, would Mr. Benson have admitted him without his toupee?"

"Oh, no—he wouldn't have let a stranger in."

"You are sure the bell didn't ring that night?"

"Positive, sir." The answer was very emphatic.

"Is there a light on the front steps?"

"No, sir."

"If Mr. Benson had looked out of the window to see who was tapping, could he have recognised the person at night?"

The woman hesitated.

"I don't know—I don't think so."

"Is there any way you can see through the front door who is outside, without opening it?"

"No, sir. Sometimes I wished there was."

"Then, if the person knocked on the window, Mr. Benson must have recognised the voice?"

"It looks that way, sir."

"And you're certain no one could have got in without a key?"

"How could they? The door locks by itself."

"It's the regulation spring-lock, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then it must have a catch you can turn off so that the door will open from either side even though it's latched."

"It did have a catch like that," she explained. "but Mr. Benson had it fixed so's it wouldn't work. He said it was too dangerous—I might go out and leave the house unlocked."

Vance stepped into the hallway, and I heard him opening and shutting the front door.

"You're right, Mrs. Platz," he observed, when he came back. "Now tell me: are you quite sure no one had a key?"

"Yes, sir. No one but me and Mr. Benson had a key."

Vance nodded his acceptance of her statement.

"You said you left your bedroom door open on the night Mr. Benson was shot.... Do you generally leave it open?"

"No, I 'most always shut it. But it was terrible close that night."

"Then it was merely an accident you left it open?"

"As you might say."

"If your door had been closed as usual, could you have heard the shot, do you think?"

"If I'd been awake, maybe. Not if I was sleeping, though. They got heavy doors in these old houses, sir."

"And they're beautiful, too," commented Vance.

He looked admiringly at the massive mahogany double door that opened into the hall.

"Y'know, Markham, our so-called civ'lisation is nothing more than the persistent destruction of everything that's beautiful and enduring, and the designing of cheap make-

shifts. You should read Oswald Spengler's *Untergang des Abendlands*—a most penetratin' document. I wonder some enterprisin' publisher hasn't embalmed it in our native argot.* The whole history of this degen'rate era we call modern civ'lisation can be seen in our woodwork. Look at that fine old door, for instance, with its bevelled panels and ornamented bolection, and its Ionic pilasters and carved lintel. And then compare it with the flat, flimsy, machine-made, shellacked boards which are turned out by the thousand to-day. *Sic transit. . . .*"

He studied the door for some time ; then turned abruptly back to Mrs. Platz, who was eyeing him curiously and with mounting apprehension.

"What did Mr. Benson do with the box of jewels when he went out to dinner ? " he asked.

"Nothing, sir," she answered nervously. "He left them on the table there."

"Did you see them after he had gone ? "

"Yes ; and I was going to put them away. But I decided I'd better not touch them."

"And nobody came to the door, or entered the house, after Mr. Benson left ? "

"No, sir."

"You're quite sure ? "

"I'm positive, sir."

Vance rose, and began to pace the floor. Suddenly, just as he was passing the woman, he stopped and faced her.

"Was your maiden name Hoffman, Mrs. Platz ? "

The thing she had been dreading had come. Her face paled, her eyes opened wide, and her lower lip drooped a little.

Vance stood looking at her, not unkindly. Before she could regain control of herself, he said :

"I had the pleasure of meeting your charmin' daughter recently."

"My daughter . . . ? " the woman managed to stammer.

* The book—or a part of it—has, I believe, been recently translated into English.

"Miss Hoffman, y'know—the attractive young lady with the blond hair—Mr. Benson's secret'ry."

The woman sat erect, and spoke through clamped teeth.

"She's not my daughter."

"Now, now, Mrs. Platz!" Vance chid her, as if speaking to a child. "Why this foolish attempt at deception? You remember how worried you were when I accused you of having a personal interest in the lady who was here to tea with Mr. Benson? You were afraid I thought it was Miss Hoffman. . . . But why should you be anxious about her, Mrs. Platz? I'm sure she's a very nice girl. And you really can't blame her for preferring the name of Hoffman to that of Platz. *Platz* means generally a place, though it also means a crash or an explosion; and sometimes a *Platz* is a bun or a yeast-cake. But a *Hoffman* is a courtier—much nicer than being a yeast-cake, what?"

He smiled engagingly, and his manner had a quieting effect upon her.

"It isn't that, sir," she said, looking at him appealingly. "I made her take the name. In this country any girl who's smart can get to be a lady, if she's given a chance. And——"

"I understand perfectly," Vance interposed pleasantly. "Miss Hoffman is clever, and you feared that the fact of your being a housekeeper, if it became known, would stand in the way of her success. So you elim'nated yourself, as it were, for her welfare. I think it was very generous of you. . . Your daughter lives alone?"

"Yes, sir—in Morningside Heights. But I see her every week." Her voice was barely audible.

"Of course—as often as you can, I'm sure. . . . Did you take the position as Mr. Benson's housekeeper because she was his secret'ry?"

She looked up, a bitter expression in her eyes.

"Yes, sir—I did. She told me the kind of man he was; and he often made her come to the house here in the evenings to do extra work."

"And you wanted to be here to protect her?"

"Yes, sir—that was it."

"Why were you so worried the morning after the murder, when Mr. Markham here asked you if Mr. Benson kept any firearms around the house?"

The woman shifted her gaze.

"I—wasn't worried."

"Yes, you were, Mrs. Platz. And I'll tell you why. You were afraid we might think Miss Hoffman shot him."

"Oh, no, sir, I was'nt!" she cried. "My girl wasn't even here that night—I swear it!—she wasn't here. . . ."

She was badly shaken: the nervous tension of a week had snapped, and she looked helplessly about her.

"Come, come, Mrs. Platz," pleaded Vance consolingly. "No one believes for a moment that Miss Hoffman had a hand in Mr. Benson's death."

The woman peered searchingly into his face. At first she was loath to believe him—it was evident that fear had long been preying on her mind—and it took him fully a quarter of an hour to convince her that what he had said was true. When, finally, we left the house she was in a comparatively peaceful state of mind.

On our way to the Stuyvesant Club Markham was silent, completely engrossed with his thoughts. It was evident that the new facts educed by the interview with Mrs. Platz troubled him considerably.

Vance sat smoking dreamily, turning his head now and then to inspect the buildings we passed. We drove east through Forty-eighth Street, and when we came abreast of the New York Bible Society House he ordered the chauffeur to stop, and insisted that we admire it.

"Christianity," he remarked, "has almost vindicated itself by its architecture alone. With few exceptions, the only buildings in this city that are not eyesores are the churches and their allied structures. The American æsthetic credo is: Whatever's big is beautiful. These depressin' gargantuan boxes with rectangular holes in 'em, which are called skyscrapers, are worshipped by Americans

simply because they're huge. A box with forty rows of holes is twice as beautiful as a box with twenty rows. Simple formula, what? . . . Look at this little five-storey affair across the street. It's inf'nitely lovelier—and more impressive, too—than any skyscraper in the city. . . ."

Vance referred but once to the crime during our ride to the Club, and then only indirectly.

"Kind hearts, y'know, Markham, are more than coronets. I've done a good deed to-day, and I feel pos'tively virtuous. Frau Platz will *schlafen* much better to-night. She has been frightfully upset about little Gretchen. She's a doughty old soul; motherly and all that. And she couldn't bear to think of the future Lady Vere de Vere being suspected. . . . Wonder why she worried so?" And he gave Markham a sly look.

Nothing further was said until after dinner, which we ate in the Roof Garden. We had pushed back our chairs, and sat looking out over the tree-tops of Madison Square.

"Now, Markham," said Vance, "give over all prejudices and consider the situation judiciously—as you lawyers euphemistically put it. . . . To begin with, we now know why Mrs. Platz was so worried at your question regarding firearms, and why she was upset by my ref'rence to her personal int'rest in Benson's tea-companion. So, those two mysteries are elim'nated. . . ."

"How did you find out about her relation to the girl?" interjected Markham.

"'Twas my ogling did it." Vance gave him a reproving look. "You recall that I 'ogled' the young lady at our first meeting—but I forgive you. . . . And you remember our little discussion about cranial idiosyncrasies? Miss Hoffman, I noticed at once, possessed all the physical formations of Benson's housekeeper. She was brachycephalic; she had over-articulated cheek-bones, an orthognathous jaw, a low flat parietal structure, and a mesorhinian nose. . . . Then I looked for her ear, for I had noted that Mrs. Platz had the pointed, lobeless, 'satyr' ear—sometimes called the Darwin ear. These ears run in

families ; and when I saw that Miss Hoffman's were of the same type, even though modified, I was fairly certain of the relationship. But there were other similarities—in pigment, for instance ; and in height—both are tall, y'know. And the central masses of each were very large in comparison with the peripheral masses : the shoulders were narrow and the wrists and ankles small, while the hips were bulky. . . . That Hoffman was Platz's maiden name was only a guess. But it didn't matter."

Vance adjusted himself more comfortably in his chair.

"Now for your judicial considerations. . . . First, let us assume that at a little before half-past twelve on the night of the thirteenth the villain came to Benson's house, saw the light in the living-room, tapped on the window, and was instantly admitted. . . .What, would you say, do these assumptions indicate regarding the visitor?"

"Merely that Benson was acquainted with him," returned Markham. "But that doesn't help us any. We can't extend the *sus. per coll.* to everybody the man knew."

"The indications go much further than that, old chap," Vance retorted. "They show unmistakably that Benson's murderer was a most intimate crony, or, at least, a person before whom he didn't care how he looked. The absence of the toupee, as I once suggested to you, was a prime essential of the situation. A toupee, don't y'know, is the sartorial *sine qua non* of every middle-aged Beau Brummel afflicted with baldness. You heard Mrs. Platz on the subject. Do you think for a second that Benson, who hid his hirsute deficiency even from the grocer's boy, would visit with a mere acquaintance thus bereft of his crowning glory? And besides being thus denuded, he was without his full complement of teeth. Moreover, he was without collar or tie, and attired in an old smoking-jacket and bedroom slippers! Picture the spectacle, my dear fellow. . . A man does not look fascinatin' without his collar and with his shirtband and gold stud exposed. Thus attired he is the equiv'lent of a lady in curl-papers. . . . How

many men do you think Benson knew with whom he would have sat down to a *téte-à-téte* in this undress condition ? "

" Three or four, perhaps," answered Markham. " But I can't arrest them all."

" I'm sure you would if you could. But it won't be necess'ry."

Vance selected another cigarette from his case, and went on :

" There are other helpful indications, y'know. For instance, the murderer was fairly well acquainted with Benson's domestic arrangements. He must have known that the housekeeper slept a good distance from the living-room and would not be startled by the shot if her door was closed as usual. Also, he must have known there was no one else in the house at that hour. And another thing : don't forget his voice was perfectly familiar to Benson. If there had been the slightest doubt about it Benson would not have let him in, in view of his natural fear of house-breakers, and with the Captain's threat hanging over him."

" That's a tenable hypothesis. . . . What else ? "

" The jewels, Markham—those orators of love. Have you thought of them ? They were on the centre-table when Benson came home that night ; and they were gone in the morning. Wherefore, it seems inev'table that the murderer took 'em—eh, what ? . . . And may they not have been one reason for the murderer's coming there that night ? If so, who of Benson's most intimate *personæ gratæ* knew of their presence in the house ? And who wanted 'em particularly ? "

" Exactly, Vance." Markham nodded his head slowly. " You've hit it. I've had an uneasy feeling about Pfyfe right along. I was on the point of ordering his arrest to-day when Heath brought word of Leacock's confession ; and then, when that blew up, my suspicions reverted to him. I said nothing this afternoon because I wanted to see where your ideas had led you. What you've been saying checks up perfectly with my own notions. Pfyfe's our man—— "

He brought the front legs of his chair down suddenly.

"And now, damn it, you've let him get away from us!"

"Don't fret, old dear," said Vance. "He's safe with Mrs. Pfyfe, I fancy. And anyhow, your friend, Mr. Ben Hanlon, is well versed in retrieving fugitives. . . . Let the harassed Leander alone for the moment. You don't need him to-night—and to-morrow you won't want him."

Markham wheeled about.

"What's that?—I don't want him? . . . And why, pray?"

"Well," Vance explained indolently. "He hasn't a congenial and lovable nature, has he? And he's not exactly an object of blindin' beauty. I shouldn't want him around me more than was necess'ry, don't y' know. . . . Incidentally, he's not guilty."

Markham was too nonplussed to be exasperated. He regarded Vance searchingly for a full minute.

"I don't follow you," he said. "If you think Pfyfe's innocent, who, in God's name, do you think is guilty?"

Vance glanced at his watch.

"Come to my house to-morrow for breakfast, and bring those alibis you asked Heath for; and I'll tell you who shot Benson."

Something in his tone impressed Markham. He realised that Vance would not have made so specific a promise unless he was confident of his ability to keep it. He knew Vance too well to ignore, or even minimise his statement.

"Why not tell me now?" he asked.

"Awf'lly sorry, y'know," apologised Vance; "but I'm going to the Philharmonic's 'special' to-night. They're playing César Franck's D-minor, and Stransky's temp'-rament is em'nently suited to its diatonic sentimentalities. . . . You'd better come along, old man. Soothin' to the nerves and all that."

"Not me!" grumbled Markham. "What I need is a brandy-and-soda."

He walked down with us to the taxicab.