

THE KENNEL MURDER CASE

== S. S. VAN DINE ==

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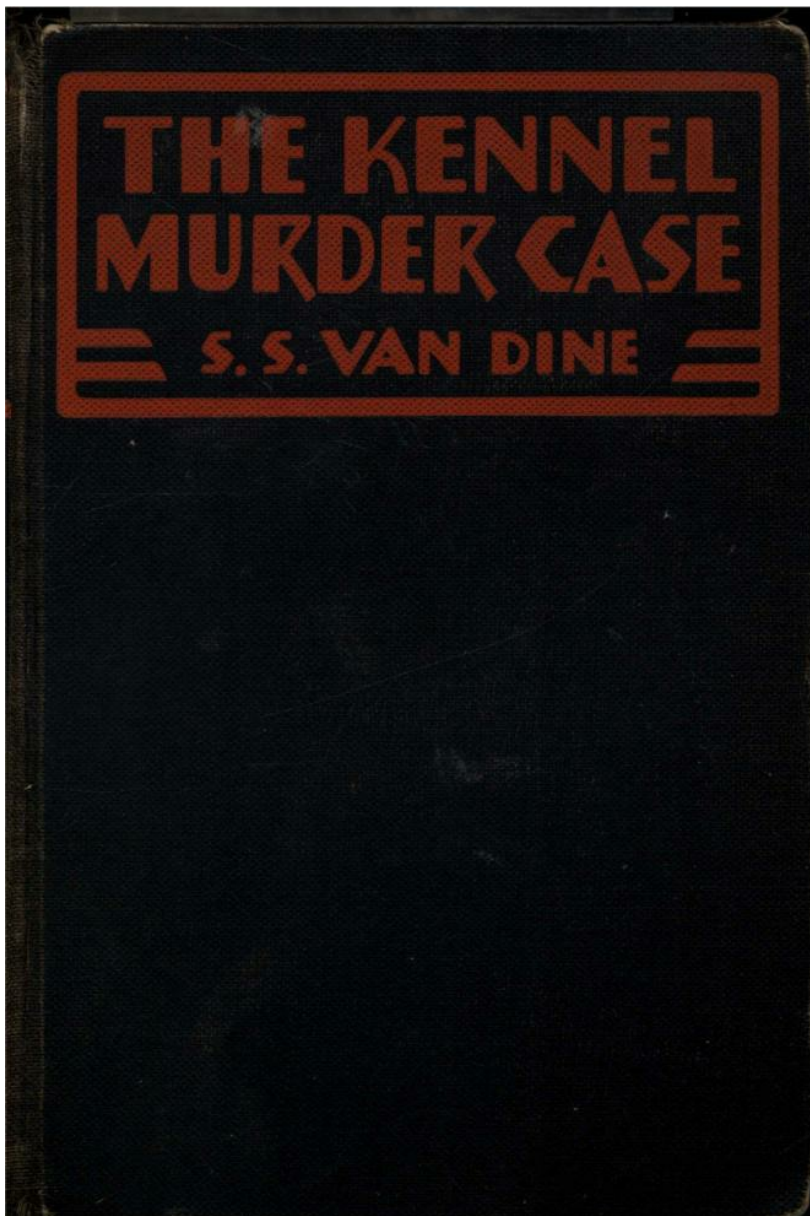
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**THE KENNEL
MURDER CASE**

A PHILO VANCE STORY

By

S. S. VAN DINE

Plus on apprend à connaître l'homme, plus on
apprend à estimer le chien.

—*Joussenet.*

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TO
THE SCOTTISH TERRIER CLUB
OF AMERICA

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CHARACTERS OF THE BOOK

PHILO VANCE
JOHN F.-X. MARKHAM
District Attorney of New York County.

ERNEST HEATH
Sergeant of the Homicide Bureau.

ARCHER COE
A collector of Chinese ceramics.

BRISBANE COE
His brother.

RAYMOND WREDE
A dilettante and friend of the Coes.

HILDA LAKE
Archer Coe's niece.

SIGNOR EDUARDO GRASSI
An officer in the Milan Museum of Oriental Antiquities.

LIANG TSUNG WEI
The Coe cook.

GAMBLE
The Coe butler.

LUKE ENRIGHT
An importer.

MAJOR JULIUS HOGGINBOTTOM
Sportsman and dog breeder.

ANNIE COCHRANE
A maid.

HENNESSEY
Detective of the Homicide Bureau.

BURKE
Detective of the Homicide Bureau.

SNITKIN
Detective of the Homicide Bureau.

SULLIVAN
Detective of the Homicide Bureau.

EMERY
Detective of the Homicide Bureau.

GUILFOYLE
Detective of the Homicide Bureau.

CAPTAIN DUBOIS
Finger-print expert.

DETECTIVE BELLAMY
Finger-print expert.

PETER QUACKENBUSH
Official photographer.

DOCTOR EMANUEL DOREMUS
Medical Examiner.

SWACKER
Secretary to the District Attorney.

CURRIE
Vance's valet.

CHAPTER I

THE BOLTED BEDROOM

(Thursday, October 11; 8.45 a. m.)

It was exactly three months after the startling termination of the Scarab murder case⁽¹⁾ that Philo Vance was drawn into the subtlest and the most perplexing of all the criminal problems that came his way during the four years of John F.-X. Markham's incumbency as District Attorney of New York County.

Indeed, so mystifying was this case, so apparently inexplicable were its conflicting elements, that the police were for adding it to their list of unsolved murder mysteries. And they would have been justified in their decision; for rarely in the annals of modern crime has there been a case that seemed to reverse so completely the rational laws by which humanity lives and reasons. In the words of the doughty and practical Sergeant Ernest Heath of the Homicide Bureau, the case "didn't make sense." On the surface it smacked of strange and terrifying magic, of witch-doctors and miracle-workers; and every line of investigation ran into a blank wall.

In fact, the case had every outward appearance of being what arm-chair criminologists delight in calling the perfect crime. And, to make the plotting of the murderer even more mystifying, a diabolical concatenation of circumstances was superimposed upon the events by some whimsical and perverse god, which tended to strengthen every weak link in the culprit's chain of ratiocination, and to turn the entire bloody affair into a maze of incomprehensibility.

Curiously enough, however, it was the very excess of ardor on the part of the murderer when attempting to divert suspicion, that created a minute hole in the wall of mystery, through which Vance was able to see a glimmer of light. In the process of following that light to the truth, Vance did what I believe was the shrewdest and profoundest detective work of his career. It was his peculiar knowledge of special and out-of-the-way facts, combined with his almost uncanny perception of human nature, that made it possible for him to seize upon apparently unimportant clues and resolve them into a devastating syllogism.

Vance for years had been a breeder of Scottish terriers. His kennels were in New Jersey, an hour's ride from New York, and he spent much of his time there studying pedigrees, breeding for certain characteristics which he believed essential to the ideal terrier, and watching the results of his theories. Sometimes I think he manifested a greater enthusiasm in his dogs than in any other recreative phase of his life; and the only time I have seen evidences of a thrill in his eyes comparable to that when he had unearthed and acquired a magnificent Cézanne water-color or discovered a rare piece of Chinese ceremonial jade in a mass of opaque modern cuttings, was when one of his dogs went up to Winners.

I mention this fact—or idiosyncrasy, if you prefer—because it so happened that Vance's ability to look at a certain stray Scottish terrier and recognize its blood-lines and show qualities, was what led him to one phase of the truth in the remarkable case which I am now recording.

That which led Vance to another important phase of the truth was his knowledge of Chinese ceramics. He possessed, in his home in East 88th Street, a small but remarkable collection of Chinese antiquities—museum pieces he had acquired in his extensive travels—and had written various articles for Oriental and art journals on the subject of Sung and Ming monochrome porcelains.

Scotties and Chinese ceramics! A truly unusual combination. And yet, without a knowledge of these two antipodal interests, the mysterious murder of Archer Coe, in his old brownstone house in West 71st Street, would have remained a closed book for all time.

The opening of the case was rather tame; it promised little in the line of sensationalism. But within an hour of the telephone call Markham received from the Coe butler, the District Attorney's office and the New York Police Department were plunged into one of the most astounding and baffling murder mysteries of our day.

It was shortly after half-past eight on the morning of October 11, that Vance's door-bell rang; and Currie, his old English valet and majordomo, ushered Markham into the library. I was temporarily installed in Vance's duplex roof-garden apartment at the time. There was much legal and financial work to be done—an accumulation of months, for Vance had insisted that I accompany him on the Mediterranean cruise he took immediately after the solving of the Scarab murder. For years, almost since our Harvard days, I had been Vance's legal adviser and monetary steward (a post which included as much of friendship as of business) and his affairs kept me fairly busy—so busy, in fact, that a two months' interregnum meant much overtime labor afterwards.

On this particular autumn morning I had risen at seven and was busily engaged with a mass of cancelled checks and bank statements when Markham arrived.

"Go ahead with your chores, Van Dine," he said, with a perfunctory nod. "I'll rout out the sybarite myself." He seemed a trifle perturbed as he disappeared into Vance's bedroom, which was just off the library.

I heard him call Vance a bit peremptorily, and I heard Vance give a dramatic groan.

"A murder, I presume," Vance complained through a yawn. "Nothing less than gore would have led your footsteps to my boudoir at this ungodly hour."

"Not a murder——" Markham began.

"Oh, I say! What time might it be, then?"

"Eight forty-five," Markham told him.

"So early—and not a murder!" (I could hear Vance's feet hit the floor.) "You interest me strangely. . . . Your wedding morn perhaps?"

"Archer Coe has committed suicide," Markham announced, not without irritation.

"My word!" Vance was now moving about. "That's even stranger than a murder. I crave elucidation. . . . Come, let's sit down while I sip my coffee."

Markham re-entered the library, followed by Vance clad in sandals and an elaborate Mandarin robe. Vance rang for Currie and ordered Turkish coffee, at the same time settling himself in a large Queen Anne chair and lighting one of his favorite *Régie* cigarettes.

Markham did not sit down. He stood near the mantelpiece, regarding his host with narrowed, inquisitive eyes.

"What did you mean, Vance," he asked, "by Coe's suicide being stranger than murder?"

"Nothing esoteric, old thing," Vance drawled languidly. "Simply that there would be nothing particularly remarkable in any one's pushing old Archer into the Beyond. He's been inviting violence all his life. Not a sweet and love-inspiring chappie, don't y' know. But there's something deuced remarkable in the fact that he should push himself over the border. He's not the suicidal type—far too egocentric."

"I think you're right. And that idea was probably in the back of my head when I told the butler to hold everything till I got there."

Currie entered with the coffee, and Vance sipped the black, cloudy liquid for a moment. At length he said:

"Do tell me more. Why should you be notified at all? And what did the butler pour into your ear over the phone? And why are you here curtailing my slumbers? Why everything? Why anything? Just why? Can't you see I'm bursting with uncontrollable curiosity?" And Vance yawned and closed his eyes.

"I'm on my way to Coe's house," Markham was annoyed at the other's attitude of indifference. "Thought maybe you'd like to—what's your favorite word?—toddle' along." This was said with sarcasm.

"Toddle," Vance repeated. "Quite. But why toddle blindly? Do be magnanimous and enlighten me. The corpse won't run away, even if we are a bit latish."

Markham hesitated, and shrugged. Obviously he was uneasy, and obviously he wanted Vance to accompany him. As he had admitted, something was in the back of his head.

"Very well," he acquiesced. "Shortly after eight this morning Coe's butler—the obsequious Gamble—phoned me at my home. He was in a state of nerves, and his voice was husky with fear. He informed me, with many hems and haws, that Archer Coe had shot himself, and asked me if I would come to the house at once. My first instinct was to tell him to notify the police; but, for some reason, I checked myself and asked him why he had called me. He said that Mr. Raymond Wrede had so advised him——"

"Ah!"

"It seems he had first called Wrede—who, as you know, is an intimate family friend—and that Wrede had immediately come to the house."

"And Wrede said 'get Mr. Markham.' " Vance drew deep on his cigarette. "Something dodging about in the recesses of Wrede's brain, too, no doubt. . . . Well, any more?"

"Only that the body was bolted in Coe's bedroom."

"Bolted on the inside?"

"Exactly."

"Amazin'!"

"Gamble brought up Coe's breakfast at eight as usual, but received no answer to his knocking. . . ."

"So he peeped through the keyhole—yes, yes, butlers always do. Some day, Markham, I shall, in a moment of leisure, invent a keyhole that can't be seen through by butlers. Have you ever stopped to think how much of the world's disturbance is caused by butlers being able to see through keyholes?"

"No, Vance, I never have," returned Markham wearily. "My brain is inadequate—I'll leave that speculation to you. . . . Nevertheless, because of your dalliance in the matter of inventing opaque keyholes, Gamble saw Coe seated in his armchair, a revolver in his hand, and a bullet wound in his right temple. . . ."

"And, I'll warrant, Gamble added that his master's face was deathly pale—eh, what?"

"He did."

"But what about Brisbane Coe? Why did Gamble call Wrede when Archer's brother was in the house?"

"Brisbane Coe didn't happen to be in the house. He's at present in Chicago."

"Ah! Most convenient. . . . So when Wrede arrived he advised Gamble to phone direct to you, knowing that you knew Coe. Is that it?"

"As far as I can make out."

"And you, knowing that I had visited Coe on various occasions, thought you'd pick me up and make it a conclave of acquaintances."

"Do you want to come?" demanded Markham, with a trace of anger.

"Oh, by all means," Vance replied dulcetly. "But, really, y' know, I can't go in these togs." He rose and started towards the bedroom. "I'll hop into appropriate integuments." As he reached the door he stopped. "And I'll tell you why your invitation enthalls me. I had an appointment with Archer Coe for three this afternoon to look at a pair of peach-bloom vases fourteen inches high he had recently acquired. And, Markham, a collector who has just acquired a pair of peach-bloom vases of that size doesn't commit suicide the next day."

With this remark Vance disappeared, and Markham stood, his hands behind him, looking at the bedroom door with a deep frown. Presently he lighted a cigar and began pacing back and forth.

"I shouldn't wonder if Vance were right," he mumbled, as if to himself. "He's put my subconscious thought into words."

A few minutes later Vance emerged, dressed for the street.

"Awfully thoughtful of you, and all that, to pick me up," he said, smiling jauntily at Markham. "There's something positively fascinatin' about the possibilities of this affair. . . . And by the by, Markham, it might be convenient to have the pugnacious Sergeant^[2] on hand."

"So it might," agreed Markham drily, putting on his hat. "Thanks for the suggestion. But I've already notified him. He's on his way uptown now."

Vance's eyebrows went up whimsically.

"Oh, pardon! . . . Well, let's grope our way hence."

We entered Markham's car, which was waiting outside, and were driven rapidly up Madison Avenue. We cut through Central Park to the West Side, came out at the 72nd-Street entrance, and went for a block against traffic on Central Park West. Turning into 71st Street, we drew up at No. 98.

The Coe house was an old brownstone mansion of double frontage occupying two city lots, built in a day when dignity and comfort were among the ideals of New York architects. The house was uniform with the other residences in the block, with the exception that most of the houses were single structures with only a twenty-foot frontage. The basements were three or four feet below the street level and opened on a sunken, paved away. Flights of stone stairs, with wide stone balustrades, led to the first floors, each house being entered through a conventional vestibule.

As we ascended the steps of the Coe house the door was opened for us before we had time to pull the old-fashioned brass bell-knob; and the flushed face of Gamble looked out at us cringingly. The butler made a series of suave bows as he pulled the heavy oak door ajar for us to enter.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Markham." His voice reeked of oily subservience. "It's very terrible, sir. And I really didn't know just what I should do——"

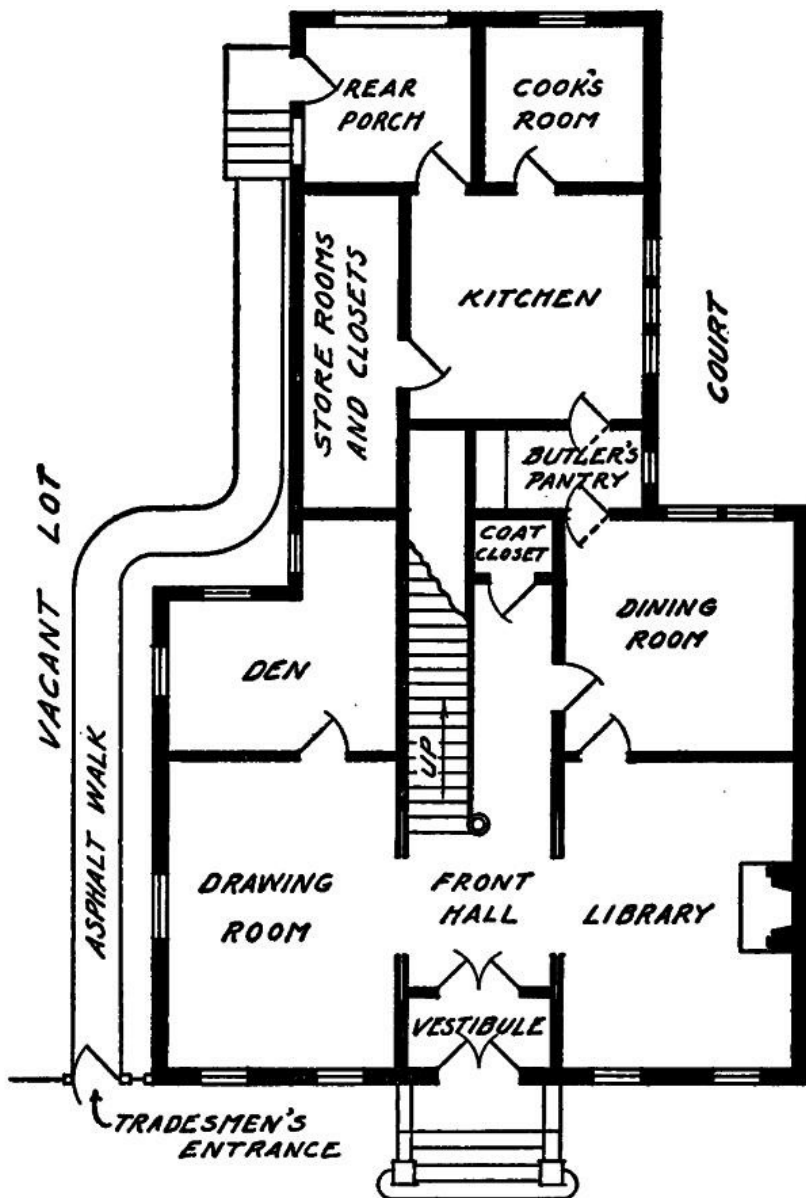
Markham brushed the man aside and we stepped into the dimly lighted hallway. A heavy deep-napped carpet covered the entire hall, and several dingy oil paintings made enormous black squares against the dark tapestry on the walls. Ahead of us a broad flight of carpeted stairs led upward into a vault of darkness. On the right hung a pair of deep naroon portières evidently veiling double sliding doors. To the left were other portières; but these were drawn back, and we could look through the open doors into a stuffy drawing-room, filled with all manner of heavy ancient furniture.

Two men came forward from this room to greet us. The one in advance I recognized immediately as Raymond Wrede. I had met him several times at the Coe home when I had accompanied Vance there to inspect some particular "find" in Chinese pottery or bronzes, which Archer Coe had made. Wrede, I knew, was a close friend of the Coe family, and particularly of Hilda Lake, Archer Coe's niece. He was a studious man in his late thirties, slightly gray, with an ascetic, calm face of the chevaline type. He was mildly interested in Oriental ceramics—probably as a result of his long association with Coe—though his particular fancy was ancient oil lamps; and he owned a collection of rare specimens for which (I have been told) the Metropolitan Museum of Art had offered him a small fortune.

As he greeted us this morning, there was a look bordering on bewilderment in his wide-set, gray eyes.

He bowed formally to Markham, whom he knew slightly; nodded perfunctorily to me; and extended his hand to Vance. Then, as if suddenly remembering something, he turned toward the man behind him, and made a brief presentation, which in reality was an explanation.

"Signor Grassi^[3] . . . Mr. Grassi has been a house guest of Mr. Coe's for several days. He represents an Italian museum of Oriental antiquities at Milan."



WEST 71ST STREET

DIAGRAM OF THE LOWER FLOOR OF THE COE HOUSE

Grassi bowed very low, but said nothing. He was considerably shorter than Wrede, slim, immaculately dressed, with shiny black hair brushed straight back from his forehead, and a complexion whose unusual pallor was accentuated by large luminous eyes. His features were regular, and his lips full and shapely. His manicured hands moved with an almost feline grace. My first impression was that he was effeminate, but before many days had passed I radically changed my opinion.

Markham wasted no time on ceremony. He turned abruptly to Gamble.

"Just what is the situation? A police sergeant and the Medical Examiner will be here any moment."

"Only what I told you on the telephone, sir." The man, beneath his obsequious manner, was patently frightened. "When I saw the master through the keyhole I knew he was dead—it was quite unnerving, sir—and my first impulse was to break in the door. But I thought it best to seek advice before taking such a responsibility. And, as Mr. Brisbane Coe was in Chicago, I phoned to Mr. Wrede and begged him to come over immediately. Mr. Wrede was good enough to come, and after looking at the master he suggested that I call you, sir, before doing anything else."

"It was obvious"—Wrede took up the story—"that poor Coe was dead, and I thought it best to leave everything intact for the authorities. I didn't want to insist on having the door broken in."

Vance was watching the man closely.

"But what harm could that have done?" he asked mildly. "Since the door was bolted on the inside, suicide was rather plainly indicated—eh, what?"

"Perhaps you are right, Mr. Vance." Wrede appeared ill at ease. "But—somehow—my instinct told me that it might be best——"

"Quite—quite." Vance took out his cigarette-case. "You, too, were sceptical—despite the appearances."

Wrede gave a start, and stared fixedly at Vance.

"Coe," Vance continued, "wasn't exactly the suicidal type—was he?"

"No-o." Wrede's eyes did not shift.

Vance lighted a cigarette.

"My own feeling is you acted quite wisely."

"Come!" Markham turned toward the stairs and made a peremptory gesture to Gamble. "Lead the way."

The butler turned and mounted the stairs. Markham, Vance and I followed, but Wrede and Grassi remained below. At the head of the stairs Gamble fumbled along the wall and pressed an electric switch-button. A light flooded the upper hallway. Directly ahead of us was a wide door, ivory enamelled. Gamble stood by the switch and, without a word, indicated the door.

Markham came forward, tried the knob, and shook it. Then he knelt down and looked through the keyhole. When he rose his face was grim.

"It looks as if our suspicions were unfounded," he said in a low voice. "Coe is sitting in his chair, a black hole in his right temple, and his hand is still clutching a revolver. The electric lights are on. . . . Look, Vance."

Vance was gazing at an etching on the wall at the head of the stairs.

"I'll take your word for it, Markham," he drawled. "Really, y' know, it doesn't sound like a pretty sight. And I'll see it infinitely better when we've forced an entry. . . . I say! Here's an early Marin. Rather sensitive. Same feeling for delicate composition we find in his later water-colors. . . ."

At this moment the front door bell rang violently, and Gamble hastened down the stairs. As he drew the door back, Sergeant Ernest Heath and Detective Hennessey burst into the lower hallway.

"This way, Sergeant," Markham called.

Heath and Hennessey came noisily up the stairs.

"Good morning, sir." The Sergeant waved a friendly hand to Markham. Then he cocked an eye at Vance. "I mighta known you'd be here. The world's champeen trouble-shooter!" He grinned good-naturedly, and there was genuine affection in his tone.

"Come, Sergeant," Markham ordered. "There's a dead man in this room, and the door's bolted on the inside. Break it open."

Heath, without a word, hurled himself against the crosspiece of the door just above the knob, but without result. A second time his shoulder crashed against the crosspiece.

"Give me a hand, Hennessey," he said. "That's a bolt—no foolin'. Hard wood."

The two men threw their combined weight against the door, and now there was a sound of tearing wood as the bolt's screws were loosened.

During the process of battering in the door, Wrede and Grassi mounted the stairs, followed by Gamble, and stood directly behind Markham and Vance.

Two more terrific thrusts by Heath and Hennessey, and the heavy door swung inward, revealing the death chamber.

[1] "The Scarab Murder Case" (Scribners, 1930).

[2] Vance was referring to Sergeant Ernest Heath, of the Homicide Bureau, who had been in charge of the various cases in which Vance had figured.

[3] I learned later that Grassi claimed some family connection with the famous Italian doctor who, with Bastianelli, furthered the researches of Ronald Ross and proved that the Anopheles—a genus of mosquito—is the only insect that carries the malaria germ, and the sole method of transmission of this disease.

CHAPTER II

THE DEAD MAN

(Thursday, October 11; 9.15 a. m.)

The room, which was at the extreme rear of the house, was long and narrow, with windows on two sides. There was a bay window opposite the door, and a wide double window at the left, facing east. The dark green shades were all drawn, excluding the daylight. But the room was brilliantly lighted by an enormous crystal chandelier in the centre of the ceiling.

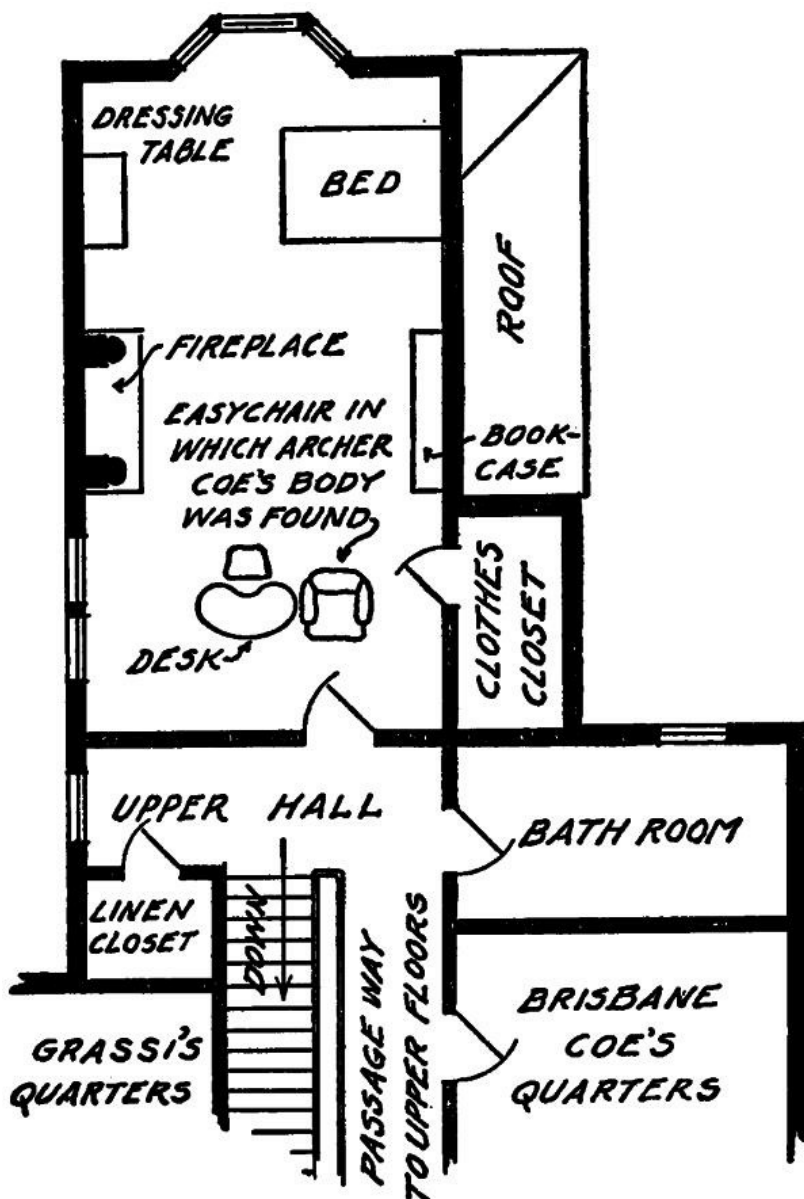
At the rear of the room stood an enormous canopied bed, which, I noticed, had not been slept in. The covers were turned back with meticulous precision. The bedroom, like the drawing-room, contained far too much furniture. On the right was a large embayed book-case filled with octavo and quarto volumes, and, facing the door was a mahogany kidney-shaped desk covered with books, pamphlets and papers—the desk of a man who spends many hours at literary labor. To the left of this desk, in the east wall, was a large fireplace with an Empire mantel of bronze and Venetian marble, supported by two ugly caryatides. Gas logs were in the grate. About the walls hung at least a dozen Chinese scroll paintings. Had there not been a bed and a dressing-table in the room, one would have taken it for a collector's sanctum.

These details of the room, however, protruded themselves upon us later. What first focused our attention was the inert body of Archer Coe, with its quiet pallid face and the black grisly spot on the right temple. The body was slumped down in a velvet upholstered armchair beside the desk. The head seemed to lie almost on the left shoulder, as if the impact of the bullet had forced it into an unnatural angle.

There was an expression of peace on the thin aquiline features of the dead man; and his eyes were closed as though in sleep. His right hand—the one nearest the fireplace—lay on the end of the desk clutching a carved, ivory-inlaid revolver of fairly large calibre. His left hand hung at his side over the tufted arm of the chair.

There was a straight Windsor chair behind the desk, and I could not help wondering why Coe had selected the armchair at the side of the desk, facing the door. Was it because he had considered it more comfortable for his last resting place in this life? The answer to this passing speculation of mine did not come for many hours; and when it did come, as a result of Vance's deductions, it constituted one of the vital links in the evidential chain of this strange and perplexing case.

Coe's body was clothed in a green silk-wool dressing-gown which came nearly to his ankles; but on his feet, which were extended straight in front of him, was a pair of high, heavy street shoes, laced and tied. Again a question flashed through my mind: Why did Coe not wear bedroom slippers with his dressing-gown? The answer to this question also was to prove a vital point in the solution of the tragedy.



DIA GRAM OF ARCHER COE'S BEDROOM

Vance went immediately to the body, touched the dead man's hand, and bent forward over the wound in the forehead. Then he walked back to the door with its hanging bolt, scrutinized it for a moment, ran his eye around the heavy oak framework and lintel, and turned slowly back to the room. A frown wrinkled his brow. Very deliberately he reached in his pocket and took out another cigarette. When he had lighted it, he strolled to the west wall of the room and stood gazing at a faded ninth-century Chinese painting of Uccushma.^[4]

In the meantime the rest of us had pressed round the body of Coe, and stood inspecting it in silence. Wrede and Grassi seemed appalled in the actual presence of death. Wrede spoke to Markham.

"I trust I did right in advising Gamble to call you before breaking in the door. I realize now that if there had remained a spark of life——"

"Oh, he was quite dead hours ago," Vance interrupted, without turning from the painting. "Your decision has worked out perfectly."

Markham swung about.

"What do you mean by that, Vance?"

"Merely that, if the door had been broken in, and the room overrun with solicitous friends, and the body handled for signs of life, and all the locked-in evidence probably destroyed, we would have had a deuced difficult time arrivin' at any sensible solution of what really went on here last night."

"Well, it's pretty plain to me what went on here last night." It was Heath who projected himself, a bit belligerently, into the talk. "This guy locked himself in, and blew his brains out. And even

you, Mr. Vance, can't make anything original outa that."

Vance turned slowly and shook his head.

"Tut, tut, Sergeant," he said pleasantly. "It's not I who am going to spoil your simple and beautiful theory."

"No?" Heath was still belligerent. "Then who is?"

"The corpse," answered Vance mildly.

Before Heath could reply, Markham, who had been watching Vance closely, turned quickly to Wrede and Grassi.

"I will ask you gentlemen to wait downstairs. . . . Hennessey, please go to the drawing-room and see that these gentlemen do not leave it until I give them permission. . . . You understand," he added to Wrede and Grassi, "that it will be necessary to question you about this affair after we have had the verdict of the Medical Examiner."

Wrede showed his resentment at Markham's peremptory manner; but Grassi, with a polite smile, merely bowed; and the two, followed by Hennessey, passed out of the room and down the stairs.

"And you," said Markham to Gamble, "wait at the front door and bring Doctor Doremus here the moment he arrives."

Gamble shot a haunted look at the body, and went out.

Markham closed the door, and then wheeled about, facing Vance, who now stood behind Coe's desk gazing down moodily at the dead man's hand clutching the revolver.

"What's the meaning of all these mysterious innuendos?" he demanded testily.

"Not innuendos, Markham," Vance returned quietly, keeping his eyes on Coe's hand. "Merely speculations. I'm rather interested in certain aspects of this fascinating crime."

"Crime?" Markham gave a mirthless smile. "It was all very well for us to theorize before we got here—and I was inclined to agree with you that suicide seemed incompatible with Coe's temperament—but facts, after all, form the only reasonable basis for a decision. And the facts here seem pretty clean-cut. That door was bolted on the inside; there's no other means of entrance or exit to this room; Coe is sitting here with the lethal weapon——"

"Oh, call it a revolver," interrupted Vance. "Silly phrase, 'lethal weapon.'"

Markham snorted.

"Very well. . . . With a revolver in his hand, and a hole in his right temple. There are no signs of a struggle; the windows and shades are down, and the lights burning. . . . How, in Heaven's name, could it have been anything but suicide?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Vance shrugged wearily. "But it wasn't suicide—really, don't y' know." He frowned again. "And that's the weird part of it. Y' see, Markham, it should have been suicide—and it wasn't. There's something diabolical—and humorous—about this case. Humorous in a grim, satirical sense. Some one miscalculated somewhere—the murderer was sitting in a game with the cards stacked against him. . . . Positively amazin'!"

"But the facts," protested Markham.

"Oh, your facts are quite correct. As you lawyers say, they're irresistible. But you have overlooked additional facts."

"For instance?"

"Regard your bedroom slippers." Vance pointed to the foot of the bed where a pair of soft red Mephisto slippers were neatly arranged. "And then regard these heavy blucher boots which the corpse is wearing. And yet he has on his dressing-gown, and is sitting in his easy chair. A bit incongruous, what? Why did the hedonistic and luxury-loving Coe not change his footwear to something more relaxing for this great moment in his life. And note that haste was not a factor. His robe—an execrable coat, by the by—is neatly buttoned; and the girdle is tied in an admirable bow-knot. We can hardly assume that he suddenly decided on suicide half-way through his changing from street clothes to negligée. And yet, Markham, something must have stopped him—something must have compelled him to sit down, stretch his legs out, and close his eyes before he had finished the operation of making himself sartorially comfortable."

"Your reasoning is not altogether convincing," Markham countered. "A man might conceivably wear heavy shoes with a dressing-gown."

"Perhaps," Vance nodded. "I sha'n't be narrow-minded in these matters. But, assuming Coe is a suicide, why should he have chosen this chair facing the door? A man bent on doing a workmanlike job of shooting himself would instinctively sit up straight, where he could perhaps brace his arms and steady his hand. If he were going to sit by the desk at all he would, I think, have chosen the straight chair where he could rest both elbows on the top and thus insure a steady, accurate aim."

"His arm is on the end of the desk," put in Heath.

"Oh, quite—and in a rather awkward position—eh, what? Considering how low the easy chair is, Coe could not possibly have had his elbow on the desk when he pulled the trigger. If so, the shot would have gone over his head. His arm was necessarily lower than the desk when the gun was fired—if *he fired it*. Therefore, we must assume that after the bullet had entered his brain, he lifted his right arm to the desk and arranged it neatly in its present position."

"Maybe yes and maybe no," muttered Heath, after a pause during which he studied the body and raised his own right hand to his forehead. Then he added aggressively: "But you can't get away from that bolted door."

Vance sighed.

"I wish I could get away from it. It bothers me horribly. If it wasn't for the fact that the door was bolted on the inside, I'd be more inclined to agree that it was suicide."

"What's that?" Markham looked at Vance in amazement. "Now you're talking in paradoxes."

"Oh, no," Vance shook his head slightly. "A man of Coe's intelligence wouldn't plan suicide and then deliberately make it difficult for any one to reach his body. What could he have gained by securely bolting the door on the inside so that it would have to be broken in? The act of shooting would have been over in a second; and there was no danger of his being disturbed in his own bedroom. Had he killed himself he would have wanted Gamble—or some one else—to find him at the earliest possible moment. He would certainly not have placed deliberate difficulties in their way."

"But," argued Markham, "your very theory contradicts itself. Who but Coe could have bolted the door on the inside?"

"No one, apparently," answered Vance with a dispirited sigh. "And that's what makes the affair so dashed appealin'. The situation reads thus: A man is murdered; then he rises and bolts the door after the slayer has departed; and later he arranges himself in an easy chair so as to make it appear like suicide."

"That's a swell theory!" grunted Heath disgustedly. "Anyway, we'll know more about it when Doc Doremus gets here. And my bet is he's going to wash the whole case up by calling it suicide."

"And my bet is, Sergeant," Vance replied mildly, "that he's going to do nothing of the sort. I have an irresistible feelin' that Doctor Doremus will inform us that it is *not* suicide."

Heath screwed his face into a questioning frown and studied Vance. Then he snorted.

"Well, we'll see," he mumbled.

Vance paid scant attention. His eyes were moving over the desk. At one side of the blotter lay a quarto volume of "Li Tai Ming Ts'u T'ou P'u," by Hsiang Yüan-p'ien.^[9] A pair of gold library shears were inserted between the pages, and Vance opened the book at this point, revealing a large colored plate of an amphora-shaped P'in Kuo Hung vase of a slightly neutralized red glaze shading into a liver color, and broken by patches of olive green and spots of russet brown.

"You see, Markham," he said, "Coe was apparently dreaming of his latest acquisition in peach-bloom shortly before he departed this life. And it is rather safe to assume that a man contemplating suicide does not indulge his acquisitiveness and investigate the history of his ceramic wares just before sending a bullet into his brain."

Markham waited without answering.

"And here's something else rather significant." Vance pointed to a small pile of blank note paper in the middle of the blotter. "This paper is lying a little on the bias, in the position that a right-handed man would place it if he contemplated writing on it. And, also, note that at the head of the first page is yesterday's date—Wednesday, October 10——"

"Ain't that natural?" put in Heath. "All these birds who commit suicide write letters first."

"But, Sergeant," smiled Vance, "the letter isn't written. Coe got no farther than the date."

"Can't a guy change his mind?" Heath persisted.

Vance nodded.

"Oh, quite. But, in that case, the pen would, in all probability, be in the holder set. And you will observe that the pen container is empty, and that there is no pen visible on the desk."

"Maybe it's in his pocket."

"Maybe." Vance stepped back and, bending over, ran his gaze over the floor round the desk. Then he knelt down and looked under the desk. Presently he reached out his arm and, from

beneath the right-hand tier of drawers, drew forth a fountain-pen. Rising, he held the pen out.

"Coe dropped the pen, and it rolled under the desk." He placed it beside the note paper. "Men don't ordinarily drop fountain-pens in the middle of writing something and then fail to pick them up."

Heath glowered in silence, and Markham asked:

"You think Coe was interrupted in the midst of writing something?"

"Interrupted? . . . In a way perhaps." Vance himself seemed puzzled. "Still there are no signs of a struggle, and he is reclining in an easy chair at the end of the desk. Furthermore, his features are quite serene; his eyes are closed peacefully—and the door was bolted on the inside. . . . Very strange, Markham."

He walked to the shaded window and back, smoking leisurely. Suddenly he stopped and lifted his head, looking Markham straight in the eyes.

"Interrupted—yes! That's it! But not by any outside agency—not by an intruder. He was interrupted by something more subtle—more deadly. He was interrupted *while he was alone*. Something happened—something sinister intruded—and he stopped writing, dropped the pen, forgot it, rose, and seated himself in that easy chair. Then came the end, swift and unexpected—*before he could change his shoes*. . . . Don't you see? Those shoes are another indication of that terrible interruption."

"And the gun?" asked Heath contemptuously.

"I doubt if Coe even saw the gun, Sergeant."

[4] Uccchushma was "the Killer of Demons," and many pictures of him are in existence. Perhaps the best is in the British Museum.

[5] "An Illustrated Description of the Celebrated Wares of Different Dynasties." (Dr. S. W. Bushell has made translations of this great work in his famous book on Chinese ceramics.)

CHAPTER III

A STARTLING DISCOVERY

(Thursday, October 11; 9.30 a. m.)

At this moment the front door downstairs opened and shut with a bang, and we could hear a rather strident feminine voice address the butler.

"Morning, Gamble. Take my clubs and tell Liang to rustle me up some tea and muffins."

Then there came a sound of footsteps on the stairs, and Gamble's appealing voice said:

"But, Miss Lake, I beg of you—just a moment, please."

"Tea and muffins," came Miss Lake's voice curtly; and the footsteps continued up the stairs.

Markham and Heath and I stepped toward the door just as the young woman reached the upper landing.

Miss Hilda Lake was a short, somewhat stockily built woman of about thirty, strong, resilient and athletic-looking. Her blue-gray eyes were steady and, I thought, a trifle hard; her nose was small and too broad for beauty; and her lips were full though unemotional. Her yellow-brown hair was cut short and combed straight back from a broad, low forehead. A soft felt hat was tucked under her arm. She wore a tweed suit and heavy tan oxfords with rubber soles. A white shirtwaist with a green four-in-hand added a final touch of mannishness to her appearance.

As she reached the head of the stairs and saw Markham, she came forward with a swinging stride and held out her hand.

"Greetings," she said. "What brings you here so early? Business with uncle, I suppose." She ran her eyes appraisingly over Heath and me as she spoke, and frowned. Then before Markham could answer she added: "Anything wrong?"

"Something seriously wrong, Miss Lake," Markham replied, trying to bar her way into the room. "If you will be so good as to wait——"

But the young woman, with an aggressive gesture, brushed past us and entered the room. The moment she caught sight of Archer Coe she went swiftly to him and knelt down, putting her arm about him.

"Hey! Don't touch that body!" Heath stepped quickly up to her and put his hand on her shoulder none too gently, pulling her to her feet.

She swung toward him angrily, both hands sunk deep into the outer pockets of her tweed jacket, and stood glowering at him, her feet wide apart.

Markham stepped diplomatically into the breach.

"Nothing must be touched, Miss Lake," he explained, "until the Medical Examiner arrives."

She regarded Markham calculatingly.

"Is it also against the law to tell me what's happened?" she asked.

"We know little more than you do," Markham returned mildly. "We have just arrived, and we found your uncle's body exactly as you see it."

She turned, without taking her hands from her pockets, and contemplated the inert figure in the armchair.

"Well, what do you *think* has happened?" She put the question in a hard, even tone.

"There is every appearance of suicide. . . ."

"Suicide?" She turned back to Markham coldly. "I wouldn't call it that."

Vance, who had been standing at the rear of the room near the bed, came forward.

"Neither would I, Miss Lake," he said.

She moved her head slightly and lifted her eyebrows.

"Ah! Good morning, Mr. Vance. In the excitement of the moment I didn't see you. . . . You are quite right—it's not suicide." Her eyes narrowed. "It's been a long time since you called. Ceramics and corpses would seem to be the only attractions this house holds for you." (I thought I detected a note of resentment in her voice.)

Vance ignored the unfriendly criticism.

"Why do you repudiate the suicide theory?" he asked with pronounced courtesy.

"Very simple," she replied. "Uncle was too great an egotist to deprive the world of his presence."

"But egotism," Vance submitted, "is often the cause of suicide. Boredom, don't y' know—the inability to find a responsive appreciation. Suicide gives the egotist his one supreme moment of triumph." Vance spoke with academic aloofness.

"Uncle Archer needed no supreme moments," Hilda Lake returned contemptuously. "He had such moments every time he acquired a Chinese knock-knack. An utterly worthless piece of soft Chün porcelain in a silk nest, which was of no use to any human being, gave him a greater thrill than I would get out of beating Bobby Jones."

"And of just what use would *that* achievement be to any human being?" smiled Vance.

"Oh, I know how you feel about ancient pottery," she returned good-naturedly. "And, anyway, I wasn't trying to be erudite—I was merely indulging in analogies by way of explaining why I don't think uncle killed himself."

"Forgive me," Vance bowed. "You are unquestionably right. But neither Mr. Markham nor Sergeant Heath agrees with us. They are quite ready to dismiss the case as suicide."

She looked from Markham to Heath with a hard, cold smile.

"And why not?" she asked. "It would be so easy—and would save a lot of bally scandal."

Markham was piqued by the woman's attitude.

"Who, Miss Lake," he asked in his typical courtroom manner, "would have any reason for desiring your uncle's death?"

"I, for one," she answered unhesitatingly, looking Markham straight in the eye. "He irritated me beyond words. There was no sympathy between us. He stood in the way of everything I wanted to do; and he was able to make life pretty miserable for me because he held the purse-strings. A nice cold arctic day it was for me when he was appointed my guardian and I was made dependent on him." (Her voice became bitter. There was a clouded angry look in her eyes, and her square jaw was set slightly forward.) "His death at any time these past ten years would have been a godsend to me. Now that he's out of the way I'll get my patrimony and be able to do what I want to do without interference."

Markham and Heath regarded her in amazed indignation. There was something icily venomous in her manner—a calculating hatred more potent and devastating even than her words. It was Vance's languid and indifferent voice that broke the momentary silence that followed her tirade.

"My word! Really, y' know, Miss Lake, you're dashed refreshin' in your frankness. . . . Are we to accept your comments as a confession of murder?"

"Not at present," was the even reply. "But if the authorities are set on calling it suicide, I may come forward later and claim the credit for his demise—by way of upholding the honor of the family. You see, I regard a good healthy justifiable murder in higher esteem than a paltry suicide."

The blood was mounting to Markham's cheeks; he was becoming angry at Hilda Lake's apparent flippancy.

"This is scarcely the time for jesting," he reproved her.

"Oh, of course." She looked at him with chilly eyes. "It's the perfect occasion for solemnity. . . . Well, I was never partial to emulating the owl. However, I'll do my best in the circumstances."

Markham regarded her sternly, but her fixed gaze did not waver.

"Who besides yourself," he asked, trying to control his feelings, "would have had reason to murder your uncle?"

The woman looked up at the ceiling with meditative shrewdness and sat down on the edge of the desk.

"Any number of persons." She spoke indifferently. "*De mortuis*—and all that kind of rot—but, after all, the fact that Uncle Archer is dead doesn't make him any more admirable. And there are several people who would prefer him dead to alive."

Heath had stood solemnly by during this astonishing conversation, puffing at a long black cigar and studying the woman with puzzled belligerence. At this point he spoke sourly.

"If you think your uncle was such a wash-out and you were so glad to find he'd been croaked, why did you run over to him and kneel down, and pretend to be worried?"

Hilda Lake gave the Sergeant a withering, yet whimsical, look.

"My dear Mr. Policeman, I simply wanted to make sure he was dead."

Markham stepped forward.

"You're a brutally unfeeling woman, Miss Lake," he said through set jaws.

Vance proffered her his cigarette-case.

"Won't you have a *Régie*?" he asked.

"No, thanks." She was now looking down at Archer Coe's body. "I rarely smoke. Bad for the wind—upsets the nerves. . . . Yes," she mused, as if reverting to her conversation with Markham, "there won't be any great mourning at dear uncle's passing."

Markham returned to the point.

"Would you care to name any one in particular who might be pleased with Mr. Coe's death?"

"That wouldn't be cricket," she returned. "But I'll say this much: there are several Chinese gentlemen whom uncle has swindled and tricked out of rare treasures, who will be delighted to learn that his collecting days are over. And you probably know yourself, Mr. Markham, that there were many unpleasant rumors after uncle's return from China last year—gossip about his desecrating graveyards and removing funerary urns and figures. He received several threatening letters."

Markham nodded.

"Yes, I remember. He showed me one or two of them. . . . Do you seriously believe an outraged Oriental killed him?"

"Certainly not. The Chinese have more sense than to kill any one for a piece of bric-à-brac."

Vance yawned and strolled between Hilda Lake and Markham. Again he held out his cigarette-case.

"Oh, do have a cigarette," he pleaded. "Sometimes they quiet the nerves, don't y' know."

The woman looked up at him and gave a hard, questioning smile. Then, after a moment's hesitation she took one of his *Régies*, and he lighted it for her.

"What do you think of this affair, Mr. Vance?" she asked casually.

"Dashed if I know." He spoke lightly. "Your suggestion of a Chinaman is most fascinat'g. I wonder if there are any *objets d'art* missing from the house."

"I wouldn't be surprised." She blew a long ribbon of smoke toward the ceiling. "Personally, I hope they're all gone. I'd infinitely prefer Wedgwood and Willow ware."

Markham again took the floor.

"I'm afraid we're all talking a bit dramatically. . . . If your uncle's death was not suicide, Miss Lake, how do you account for the fact that the door of this room was bolted on the inside?"

Hilda Lake rose to her feet, a puzzled look on her face.

"Bolted on the inside?" she repeated, turning toward the door. "Ah! So you had to break in!" She stood still for several moments looking at the hanging bolt. "That's different."

"In just what way?" asked Vance.

"Maybe, after all, it was suicide!"

A bell sounded downstairs, and we could hear Gamble opening the front door.

Markham stepped quickly to Hilda Lake's side, and put his hand on her arm.

"The Medical Examiner is probably coming. Will you be so good as to go to your room and wait there?"

"Right-o." She strode to the door, her hands still in her pockets. Before she went out she turned. "But please send Gamble up with my tea and muffins. I'm positively starving."

A minute later Doctor Emanuel Doremus was ushered into the room. He was a wiry, nervous man, cynical, hard-bitten, and with a jaunty manner. He wore a brown top-coat, and a derby set far back on his head. He resembled a stock salesman far more than he did a doctor.

He greeted us with a wave of the hand, and glanced about the room. Then he teetered back and forth on his toes, and pinned a baleful eye on Heath.

"More shenanigan," he complained. "I was in the midst of hot-cakes and sausages when I got your message. You always pick on me at meal-time, Sergeant. . . . Well, what have you got for me now?"

Heath grinned and jerked his thumb toward Coe's body. He was used to the Medical Examiner's grousing.

Doremus turned his head and let his indifferent eyes rest on the dead man for several moments.

"The door was bolted on the inside, doctor," Markham volunteered. "We had to break it in."

Doremus drew a deep sigh and turned back to Heath with a grunt of disgust.

"Well, what about it?" he asked impatiently. "Couldn't you have let me finish my breakfast? All you needed was an order to remove the body." He reached in his pocket and drew out a small pad of printed blanks. "If you'd have given me the low-down, I'd have sent an assistant." His voice had become peevish.

"Mr. Markham told me to call you personally, doc," Heath explained. "It ain't my funeral."

Doremus, holding his fountain-pen poised, cocked an eye at Markham.

"Straight case of suicide," he announced breezily. "Nothing to worry about. I'll give you the approximate time of death, if you want it. And the routine autopsy. . . ."

Vance was lighting another cigarette leisurely.

"I say, doctor," he asked languidly; "would it be unprofessional if you looked at the body?"

Doremus spun round.

"I'm going to look at the body," he snapped. "I'm going to dissect it—I'm going to give it a *post mortem*. What more do you want?"

"Just why, doctor," pursued Vance, "do you jump at the conclusion that it's suicide?"

Doremus sighed impatiently.

"The gun's in his hand; the bullet wound is in the right place; and I know a dead man when I see one. Furthermore, the door——"

"Was bolted on the inside," Vance finished. "Oh, quite. But what about the body?"

"Well, what about it?" Doremus began filling in the order. "There's the body—look at it yourself."

"I have looked at it, don't y' know."

"You see, doc," Heath explained, with a grin of satisfaction, "Mr. Vance and I made a bet. I said you'd say suicide; and he said you'd say murder."

"I'm a doctor, not a detective," Doremus returned acidly. "The guy's dead, with a bullet hole in his right temple. He's holding a gun in his right hand. It's just the kind of wound that could have been self-inflicted. His position is natural—and the door was locked on the inside. The rest of it is up to you fellows in the Homicide Bureau. If the bullet from the gun don't fit, the autopsy'll show it. You'll get all the data tomorrow. Then you can draw your own conclusions."

Vance had sat down in a chair near the west wall and was smoking placidly.

"Would you mind, doctor, taking a close look at that bullet hole before you return to your hot-cakes and sausages? And you might also scrutinize the dead man's mouth."

Doremus stared at Vance a moment; then he approached Archer Coe's body and bent over it. He inspected the wound carefully, and I saw his eyebrows go up. He lifted the hair from the left temple, and there was visible to all of us a dark bruised indentation on the scalp along the hair line. Doremus touched it with delicate fingers, and for the first time I got a distinct impression of the man's professional competency. Then he lifted Coe's upper lip slightly, and seemed to inspect his teeth, which appeared blood-stained from where I stood. After a close inspection of the dead man's mouth, he again focused his attention on the bullet wound in the right temple.

Presently he stood up straight, pushed his derby even farther back on his head, and fixed a calculating gaze on Vance.

"What's in your mind?" he asked truculently.

"Nothing at all—the brain's a mere vacuum." Vance took his cigarette from his lips and yawned. "Did you find anything illuminatin'?"

Doremus nodded, his eyes still on Vance.

"Yeah. Plenty!"

"Oh, really, now?" Vance smiled ingratiatingly. "And you still think it's suicide?"

Doremus crammed his hands into his pockets and made a wry face.

"Hell, no! . . . There's something queer here—something damned queer." His eyes shifted to Coe's body. "There's blood in his mouth, and he's got a slight fracture of the skull on the left frontal. He's had a dirty blow by a blunt instrument of some kind. . . . Damned queer!"

Markham, his eyes mere slits, came forward.

"What about that bullet wound in his right temple?"

Doremus looked up, took one hand from his pocket, and pointed toward the dead man's head.

"Mr. Markham," he said with precise solemnity, "that baby had been dead for hours when that bullet entered his head!"

CHAPTER IV

A STRANGE INTERRUPTION

(Thursday, October 11; 10 a. m.)

The only person in the room who was not staggered by this unexpected announcement was Vance. Heath stood staring at the corpse as if he almost expected it to rise. Markham slowly took his cigar from his mouth and looked vaguely back and forth between Doremus and Vance. As for myself, I must admit that a cold chill ran up my spine. The sight of a dead man sitting with a revolver in his hand and a bullet wound in his temple, coupled with the knowledge that the bullet had been fired into him after death, affected me like a piece of African sorcery. Its unreality and unnaturalness aroused in me those obscure primordial fears that are hidden deep in even the most civilized organisms.

Vance, as I say, was unaffected. He merely nodded his head slightly and lighted another cigarette with steady fingers.

"Interestin' situation—eh, what?" he murmured. "Really, Markham, a man doesn't ordinarily shoot himself after death. . . . I fear you simply must eliminate the suicide theory."

Markham frowned deeply.

"But the bolted door——"

"A dead man doesn't ordinarily bolt doors either," Vance returned.

Markham turned, with slightly dazed eyes, to Doremus.

"Can you determine what killed him, doctor?"

"If given time," Doremus had become sullen: he did not like the turn of events.

"I say, doctor," drawled Vance, "what's the state of *rigor mortis* in our victim?"

"It's well advanced," Doremus, as if to verify his statement, again leaned over Coe's body and, after attempting to move the head, grasped the arm hanging over the chair and then kicked Coe's outstretched feet. "Yep, well advanced. Dead eight to twelve hours."

"Can't you come closer than that?" asked Heath sourly.

"Give me a chance." The Medical Examiner was irritable. "I'm going to take a closer look at this guy before I go. . . . Lend me a hand, Sergeant, and we'll put him on the bed. . . ."

"Just a moment, doctor," Vance spoke peremptorily. "Take a look at the hand on the desk. Is it clutching the revolver tightly?"

Doremus shot the other an angry look, hesitated, and then, bending over Coe's hand, fumbled with the dead man's fingers.

"He's clutching the gun tight, all right." With difficulty he bent Coe's fingers and removed the revolver, taking great care not to make finger-prints on it.

Heath came forward and gingerly inspected the weapon. Then he wrapped it in a large pocket handkerchief, and placed it on the blotter.

"And, doctor," pursued Vance, "was Coe's finger pressed directly against the trigger?"

"Yep," was Doremus's curt answer.

"Then we may assume that the revolver was placed in Coe's hand before *rigor mortis* set in, what?"

"Assume anything you like!"

Markham's diplomacy again came to the fore.

"We can't assume anything without help from you, doctor," he said graciously. "The point Mr. Vance raises may prove an important one. We'd like your opinion."

Doremus partly curbed his irritation.

"Well, I'll tell you. He"—pointing to Coe's body—"may have had the gun in his hand when he died. I wasn't present, y' understand. And if the gun was already in his hand, then nobody put it there later."

"In that case how could it have been fired?"

"It couldn't. But how do *you* know it was fired? There's no way of telling until the *post mortem* whether the bullet in his head came from the gun he was holding."

"Do the calibre of the revolver and the wound correspond?"

"Yes, I'd say so. The gun's a .38, and the wound looks the same size."

"And," put in Heath, "one chamber of the gun's been fired."

Markham nodded, and looked again at the Medical Examiner.

"If it should prove to be true, doctor, that the revolver in Coe's hand fired the shot in his head, then we could assume, could we not, as Mr. Vance suggested, that the revolver had been placed in the dead man's hand before *rigor mortis* set in?"

"Sure you could," Doremus's tone was greatly modified. "Nobody could have forced the gun into his hand and made it appear natural after *rigor mortis* had set in."

Though Vance's eyes were moving idly about the room, he was listening closely to this conversation.

"There is," he remarked, in a low voice, "another possibility. Far-fetched, I'll admit, but tenable. . . . Men have been known to do queer things after death."

We all looked at him with questioning astonishment.

"Don't go spiritualistic on us, Vance," Markham snapped. "Just what do you mean by dead men doing queer things?"

"There are recorded instances of suicides who have shot themselves and then thrown the weapon thirty feet away. Dr. Hans Gross in his 'Handbuch für Untersuchungsrichter'——"

"But that hardly applies here."

"No-o," Vance drew deeply on his cigarette. "Quite so. Just a fleeting thought."

Markham studied Vance a moment; then turned back to Doremus.

"Did Coe die of that blow on the head?"

The Medical Examiner once more teetered on his toes, and pursed his lips. Then, without a word, he made another examination of Coe's head. Straightening up, he looked Markham in the eye.

"There's something funny here. There's been an internal hemorrhage—what might be expected from a severe blow on the head. Blood in the mouth and all that. . . . But, Mr. Markham,"—Doremus spoke impressively—"that blow on the left frontal wasn't powerful enough to kill a man. A slight fracture, but nothing serious—just enough to stun him. . . . Nope, he didn't die of concussion or a fractured skull."

"And he didn't die of the revolver shot," added Vance. "Most fascinatin'! . . . Still, the johnny's dead, don't y' know."

Doremus swung jerkily about to Heath.

"Come on, Sergeant."

He and Heath lifted Coe's body and carried it to the bed. Together they removed the clothes from the dead man, hung them over a chair by the bed, and Doremus began his examination. He went over the body carefully from head to foot for abrasions and wounds, and ran his fingers over the bones in search of a possible fracture. The body was lying on its back, and as Doremus pressed his hand over the right side we could see him pause and bend forward.

"Fifth rib broken," he announced. "And a decided bruise."

"That's certainly not a serious injury," ventured Markham.

"Oh, no. Nothing at all. He might not even have known it, except for a little soreness."

"Did it happen before or after death?"

"Before. Otherwise there'd be no epidermal discoloration."

"And that blow on the head was also before death, I take it."

"Sure thing. He got a little bunged up before he died, but that isn't what killed him."

"Perhaps," suggested Vance, "the blow on the head and the broken rib are related. He may have been stunned and, in falling, struck his rib against some object."

"Possibly." Doremus nodded without looking up. He was now inspecting the palms of Coe's hands.

"Was the blow on the head powerful enough to have rendered him unconscious?" Vance was looking around the room at the various pieces of furniture, and there was a veiled interest in his eyes.

"Oh, yes," Doremus told him. "More than likely."

Vance's gaze came to rest on a heavy teak-wood chest near the east windows. Going to it he opened the lid and looked in. Then he closed it almost immediately.

"And," pursued Vance, turning back to the Medical Examiner, "would Coe have regained consciousness very soon after that blow on his head?"

"That's problematical." Doremus straightened and screwed up his face into a perplexed frown. "He might have remained unconscious for twelve hours, and he might have come to in a few minutes. All depends. . . . But that's not what's bothering me. There are a couple of small abrasions on the inside of the right-hand fingers and a slight cut on the knuckle—and they're all fresh. I'd say he'd put up a scrap with whoever cracked him over the head. And yet his clothes were certainly neat—no sign of having been mussed—and his hair's combed and slicked down. . . ."

"Yeah, and there was a gun in his hand, and he was sitting restful-like and looking peaceful," added Heath with puzzled disgust. "Somebody musta dolled him up after the battle. A swell situation."

"But they didn't change his shoes," put in Markham.

"Which explains his still wearing his street shoes with his bathrobe." Heath addressed this remark to Vance.

Vance gazed mildly at the Sergeant for a moment.

"Why should any one re-dress a person he has just knocked unconscious, and then comb his hair? It's a sweet, kind-hearted thought, Sergeant, but somehow it's not the usual procedure. . . . No, I'm afraid we'll have to account for Coe's coiffure and sartorial condition along other lines."

Heath studied Vance critically.

"You mean he changed his clothes himself and combed his hair after his head was bashed in?"

"It's not impossible," said Vance.

"In that case," Markham asked, "why did he not also change his shoes?"

"Something intervened."

During this speculation Doremus had turned Coe's body over so that it now lay on its face. I was watching him and I saw him suddenly lean forward.

"Aha! Now I've got it!"

His exclamation brought us all up short.

"Stabbed, by George!" he announced excitedly.

We all drew close to the bed and looked down at the area on the body at which Doremus was pointing.

Just below Coe's right shoulder-blade and near the spine was a small diamond-shaped wound about half an inch in diameter. It was a clean-cut wound etched with black coagulated blood. Apparently there had been no external bleeding. This fact struck me as unusual, and Markham must have received the same impression, for, after a moment's silence, he asked Doremus about it.

"All wounds do not bleed externally," Doremus explained. "This is especially true of clean, quick stabs that pass through thin membranes into the viscera: they frequently show little or no external blood. Like contusions. The bleeding is internal. . . . This stab closed immediately and the lips of the wound adhered. An internal hemorrhage was caused. Very simple. . . . Now we have an explanation of everything."

Vance smiled cynically.

"Oh, have we, now? We have only an explanation of the cause of Coe's death. And that explanation complicates the situation horribly. It makes the case even more insane."

Markham shot him a quick glance.

"I can't see that," he said. "It at least clarifies one point we have been discussing. We now know what stopped him in the middle of changing his clothes."

"I wonder. . . ." Vance crushed out his cigarette in an ash-tray on the night-table, and picked up the silk-wood dressing-gown which Coe had been wearing when we found him. He held it up to the light and inspected it minutely. There was no cut or hole of any kind in it. We all looked on in stupefied silence.

"No, Markham," Vance said, placing the gown over the foot of the bed. "Coe didn't have on his dressing-gown when he was stabbed. That change was made later."

"Still and all," Heath argued, "the guy mighta had his hand under the robe when he did the stabbing."

Vance shook his head ruefully.

"You forget, Sergeant, that the gown was buttoned tightly and that the belt was neatly tied around Coe's middle. . . . But let us see if we can verify the matter."

He walked quickly to the clothes-closet in the west wall, whose door was slightly ajar. Opening the door wide, he stepped inside. A moment later he emerged with a clothes-hanger from which depended a coat and waistcoat of the same sombre gray material as that of the trousers Coe had been wearing.

Vance ran his fingers over the coat in the vicinity of the right shoulder, and there was revealed a slit in the material the exact size of the wound in Coe's back. There was a similar slit in the back of the waistcoat, coinciding with the one on the coat.

Vance held the two articles of clothing close to the light and touched the slits with his fingers.

"These holes," he said, "are slightly stiffened at the edges, as if some substance had dried on them. I think that substance will be found to be blood. . . . There's no doubt that Coe was fully dressed when he was stabbed, and that the blood on the dagger, or knife, soiled the edges of these two cuts when it was withdrawn."

He replaced the hanger in the closet.

After a moment Markham expressed the thought uppermost in all our minds.

"That being the case, Vance, the murderer must have taken Coe's coat and vest off, hung them in the closet, and then put the dressing-gown on the stabbed man."

"Why the murderer?" Vance parried. "The indications are that some one else came here after Coe was dead and sent a bullet through his head. Couldn't this other hypothetical person have made the change in the corpse's habiliments?"

"Does that theory help us any?" Markham asked gruffly.

"Not a bit," Vance cheerfully admitted, "even if it were true—which, of course, we don't know. And I'll admit it sounds incredible. I merely made the suggestion by way of indicating that, at this stage of the game, we should not jump at conclusions. And the more obvious the conclusion, the more cautious we should be. This is not, my dear Markham, an obvious case."

Doremus was becoming bored. Criminal technicalities were not in his line: his entire interest was medical; and with the finding of the wound in Coe's back, he felt that he had discharged his duties for the time being. He gave a cavernous yawn, stretched himself, and reached for his hat which he had placed on the floor beside the bed.

"Well, that lets me out." He squinted at Heath. "I suppose you want a quick autopsy."

"I'll say we do." The Sergeant's head was enveloped in a cloud of cigar smoke. "When can we get it?"

"Tonight—if you must have it." Doremus drew a sheet over the prone figure on the bed, and made out an order for the removal of the body. "Get him down to the morgue as soon as possible." He shook hands cordially with every one and walked briskly toward the door.

"Just a moment, doctor." Markham's voice halted him. "Any remote possibility of suicide here?"

"What?" Doremus wheeled in surprise. "Not a chance. That bird was stabbed in the back—couldn't possibly have done it himself. He died of internal hemorrhage caused by the stab. He's been dead eight or ten hours—maybe longer. The broken rib and the blow on the left frontal are minor affairs—didn't do any particular damage. The bullet in his right temple don't mean a thing—he was already dead. . . . Suicide? Huh!" And with a wave of the hand he went out.

Markham stood for a time looking unhappily at the floor. Finally he made a commanding gesture to Heath.

"You'd better notify the boys, Sergeant. Get the finger-print men and the photographer. We're in for it. . . . And you'll take charge, of course."

Before Markham had finished speaking, Heath was on his way to the extension telephone which stood on a tabouret beside the desk. A moment later he was in touch with the Police Headquarters Telegraph Bureau. After turning in a brief report to be relayed to the various departments, he ordered the Bureau to notify the Department of Public Welfare to send a wagon immediately for Coe's body.

"I hope, sir," he said a bit pleadingly to Markham, turning from the phone, "that you are not going to step out on this case. I don't like the way things stack up. Almost anything mighta happened here last night." (I had rarely seen the Sergeant so perturbed; and I could not blame him, for every phase of the crime seemed utterly contradictory and incomprehensible.)

"No, Sergeant," Markham assured him; "I shall remain and do all I can. There must be some simple explanation, and we're sure to find it sooner or later. . . . Don't be discouraged," he added, in a kindly tone. "We haven't begun the investigation yet."

Vance had seated himself in a low-backed chair near the windows and was smoking placidly, his eyes on the ceiling.

"Yes, Markham,"—he spoke languidly, yet withal thoughtfully—"there's some explanation, but I doubt if it will prove to be a simple one. There are too many conflicting elements in this equation; and each one seems to eliminate all the others. . . ."

He took a deep inhalation on his cigarette.

"Let us summarize, for the sake of clarity, before we proceed with our interviews of the family and guests. . . . First, Coe was struck over the head and perhaps rendered unconscious. Then he probably tumbled against some hard object and broke a rib. All this was evidently preceded by some sort of physical *contretemps*. Coe was, we may assume, in his street clothes at the time. Later on—how much later we don't know—he was stabbed in the back through his coat and waistcoat with a small, peculiarly shaped instrument, and he died of internal hemorrhage. At some time subsequent to the stabbing, his coat and waistcoat were removed and carefully hung up in the clothes-closet. His dressing-gown was put on, buttoned, and the belt neatly tied about him. Moreover, his hair was correctly combed. *But his street shoes were not changed to bedroom slippers.* Furthermore, we found him sitting in a comfortable attitude in an easy chair—in a position he could not possibly have been in when he was stabbed. And his broken rib indicates clearly that he was at one time prostrate over some hard object. . . . Then, as if all this were not incongruous enough, we know that after he was killed by the stab in his back and before *rigor mortis* had set in, a bullet crashed into his right temple. The gun from which the bullet was presumably fired was clutched tightly in his right hand, so tightly that the official *Esculapius* had difficulty in removing it. And we must not forget the serene expression on Coe's face: it was not the expression of a man who had been struggling with an antagonist and been knocked unconscious by a blow on the head. And this fact, Markham, is one of the strangest phases of the case. Coe was in a peaceful, or at least a satisfied, state of mind when he departed this life. . . ."

Vance puffed again on his cigarette, and his eyes became dreamy.

"So much for the present situation as it relates to Coe's dead body and to the hypothetical events leading up to his demise. Now, there are other elements in the situation that must be taken into consideration. For instance, we found him in a room securely and powerfully bolted on the inside, and with no other means of ingress or egress. All the windows are closed, and all the shades drawn. The electric lights are burning, and the bed has not been slept in. What took place here last night, therefore, must have happened before Coe's usual time for retiring. Furthermore, I am inclined to think that we must also consider the implied fact that, just before his death, he had been reading about peach-bloom vases and that he had started to write a letter or make a memorandum of some kind. That dated piece of stationery and that fountain-pen on the floor must be added to the problem. . . ."

At this point we could hear hurried footsteps mounting the stairs, and the next moment Gamble stood at the door with a startled look in his eyes.

"Mr. Markham," he stammered, "excuse the interruption, sir, but—but there's something queer—very queer, sir—down in the front hall."

CHAPTER V

THE WOUNDED SCOTTIE

(Thursday, October 11; 10.30 a. m.)

The butler's attitude was one of amazement rather than fear; and we all regarded him with misgivings.

"Well, what's in the hall?" barked Markham. Vance's recapitulation had produced an irritating effect on him.

"A dog, sir!" Gamble announced.

Markham gave a start of exasperation.

"What of it?"

"A wounded dog, sir," the butler explained.

Before Markham could answer, Vance had leaped to his feet.

"That's the thing I've been waiting for!" There was a suppressed note of excitement in his voice. "A wounded dog! My word! . . ." He went swiftly to the door. "Come along, Gamble," he called, as he passed quickly down the stairs.

We all followed in silent amazement. The situation up to this point had been topsy-turvy enough, but this new element seemed to shunt the case still further off the track of rationality.

"Where is it?" Vance demanded when he had reached the lower hallway.

Gamble stepped to the heavy portières at the right of the entrance door, and drew one of them aside.

"I heard a strange sound just now," he explained. "Like a whine, sir. It startled me terribly. When I looked back of this curtain, there I saw the dog."

"Does it belong to any one in the house?" Markham asked.

"Oh, no, sir!" the man assured him. "That's why I was so startled. There's never been a dog in this house since I've been here—and that's going on ten years."

As he held back the portière, we could see the small, prone shape of a slightly brindled Scottish terrier, lying on its side with its four short legs stretched out. Over the left eye was a clotted wound; and on the floor was a black stain of dried blood. The eye beneath the wound was swollen shut, but the other eye, dark hazel and oval, looked up at us with an expression of tragic appeal.

Vance was already on his knees beside the dog.

"It's all right, lassie," he was murmuring. "Everything's all right."

He took the dog tenderly in his arms, and stood up.

"What street's this?" he asked of no one in particular. "Seventy-first? . . . Good! . . . Open that door, Gamble."

The butler, apparently as much surprised as any of the rest of us, hurried to obey.

Vance stepped into the vestibule, the dog held gently against his breast.

"I'm going to Doctor Blamey,"^[6] he announced. "He's just up the street. I'll be back presently." And he hurried down the stone steps.

This new development left us all even more puzzled than before. Vance's animated response to Gamble's announcement regarding the dog, and his cryptic remark as he hurried downstairs, added another element of almost outlandish mystery to a situation already incredibly complicated.

When Vance had disappeared with the wounded Scottie in his arms, Heath, frowning perplexedly, turned to Markham and crammed his hands into his trousers' pockets.

"This case is beginning to get to me, sir," he complained. "Now, what do you suppose is the meaning of this dog business? And why was Mr. Vance so excited? And anyhow, what could a dog have to do with the stabbing?"

Markham did not answer. He was staring at the front door through which Vance had just passed, chewing his cigar nervously. Presently he fixed Gamble with an angry look.

"You never saw that dog before?"

"No, sir." The butler had become oily again. "Never, sir. No dog at all has ever been in this house—"

"No one here was interested in dogs?"

"No one, sir. . . . It's most mysterious. I can't imagine how it got in the house."

Wrede and Grassi had come to the drawing-room door, and stood looking up curiously into the hall.

Markham, seeing them, addressed himself to Wrede.

"Do you, Mr. Wrede, know anything about a small black shaggy dog that might have found access to this house?"

Wrede looked puzzled.

"Why, no," he answered, after a slight hesitation. "No one here cared for dogs. I happen to know that both Archer and Brisbane detested pets."

"What about Miss Lake?"

"She has no use for dogs. She likes cats. She had a blue Persian at one time, but Archer made her get rid of it. That was years ago."

Markham frowned.

"Well, a dog has just been found here in the hall—back of those curtains."

"That's most remarkable." Wrede seemed genuinely astonished. "I can't imagine where it came from. It must have followed some one in, without being seen."

Markham did not answer, and Heath, taking his cigar from his mouth, stepped forward belligerently, and thrust out his jaw.

"But *you* like dogs, don't you?" he shot forth, in his best third-degree manner.

Wrede was taken aback by the Sergeant's sudden aggressiveness.

"Why, yes," he said. "I'm very fond of them. I've always kept one till I moved into the apartment next door. . . ."

"What kind of a dog?" demanded Heath, without relaxing his bellicose manner.

"A Doberman Pinscher," Wrede told him, and turned to Markham. "I don't exactly understand this man's questions."

"We're all a little on edge," Markham apologized. "Some very peculiar things went on in this house last night. Coe did not commit suicide—he was murdered."

Wrede did not appear surprised.

"Ah!" he murmured. "I was afraid of that."

Grassi now gave a guttural exclamation, and stepped into the hall.

"Murdered?" he repeated. "Mr. Coe was murdered?" His face was abnormally pale, and his dark eyes stared at Markham in frightened wonderment. "I understood he had taken his own life with a revolver."

"He was stabbed in the back," Markham informed him. "The bullet did not enter his head till after death."

Again the Italian gave a curious guttural exclamation and leaned heavily against the casing of the drawing-room door. So white was his face that for a moment I thought he was going to faint. Heath was watching him like a tiger, and at this point he moved deliberately forward until his face was within six inches of Grassi's.

"Stabbed with a dagger!" he spat out. "*In the back*. Wop stuff. What d'ye know about it?"

As quickly as he had gone pale, the Italian drew himself together, and stood erect with great dignity, looking Heath steadily in the eyes. A slow sneering smile curled the corners of his heavy lips.

"I know nothing about it, sir," he said with quiet suavity. "I am not of the police. Perhaps *you* know a great deal about it." His tone, though on the surface polite, was an insult.

Heath was piqued.

"We know plenty," he boasted truculently. "And when we get going, it won't be so damn pleasant for you."

Markham stepped forward and placed his hand on Heath's shoulder.

"This can wait, Sergeant," he said placatingly. "We've considerable preliminary investigating to do before we question Mr. Grassi."

Heath snorted and walked reluctantly toward the stairs.

"You gentlemen will have to wait in the drawing-room for a while," Markham said to Grassi and Wrede. "And please be so good as to keep the door closed until we want you."

At these words, Hennessey waved the two men back into the drawing-room and drew the sliding doors shut.

"Come, Sergeant," Markham said. "We'd better make a once-over of Coe's room before the boys get here."

Heath sullenly led the way upstairs.

During the next five minutes or so, Markham and the Sergeant walked about Coe's quarters giving them a cursory inspection. As I have said, the room was at the rear with windows in the east and south walls. Heath went to each window and raised the shades. When he had completed his rounds he went up to Markham, who was standing before the clothes-closet door, looking inside.

"Here's a funny one, sir. The windows are all shut tight—but that ain't all. Every one of 'em is locked. And this room is on the second story, so that no one could get in from the outside. Why all the precaution?"

"Archer Coe was a peculiar man, Sergeant," Markham replied. "He was always afraid burglars would break in and steal his treasures."

The answer did not satisfy Heath.

"Who'd want this junk?" he grumbled sceptically, and moved to the desk.

Markham, after casually inspecting the closet, walked across the room to the teak-wood chest beneath one of the east windows. I then remembered that Vance had regarded this chest curiously during his conversation with Doctor Doremus about Coe's broken rib.

Heath was now standing in the middle of the room, gazing about him disgustedly.

"It's a cinch," he said, "that nobody could get in or out of this joss-house except by the door. It beats me."

The fact was that the only door in the room other than the main door which we had found bolted on the inside, was the one leading into the small clothes-closet. There was no private bathroom: the house had been built in an era when one common bathroom on the second floor was considered the height of sanitary luxury. We learned later, however, that Miss Lake had installed another bathroom on the third floor. Archer Coe, and his brother Brisbane, whose bedroom was at the front of the house on the same floor as Archer's, had shared the main bathroom which led off the hall between their quarters.

"I've seen nothing of the weapon that killed Coe," Markham remarked.

"It's not here," Heath asserted dogmatically. "It was withdrawn from Coe's body, and I'll bet the guy cached it where it wouldn't be found."

"That's possible," Markham agreed. "Anyway, I think you'd better open the windows—it's close in here. And you might turn off the electric lights."

"Nothing doing." The Sergeant was indignant. "You see, sir," he hastened to explain apologetically, "somebody pressed those window catches and also pushed the light switch. And I want to know who it was. I'm going to have Cap Dubois^[7] get me the finger-prints."

A few minutes later Vance returned to the house. As he entered the room his face was troubled, and anger smouldered in his gray eyes.

"There's a good chance she'll live," he reported; "but that was a vicious blow some one dealt her. A blunt instrument of some kind. Doctor Blamey is fixing her up, and I'll know more about her condition tonight." (I had rarely seen Vance so upset.)

"What does it all mean?" Markham asked him. "Where does that dog fit in?"

"I don't know yet." Vance sank into a chair and took out his case of *Régies*. "But I have a feelin' it's our opening wedge. That little dog is the one totally irrelevant item in this whole bloody affair—she's our one contact with the world outside. She doesn't belong here, and therefore will have something important to say to us. Furthermore, she was wounded in this house."

Markham's eyes suddenly narrowed.

"And the wound was similar to the one on Coe's head, and in the same place."

Vance nodded dubiously.

"But that may be merely a coincidence," he returned after a moment. "In any event, no one in this house cared for dogs. There's never been one here, and I've often heard both Coe and his brother express themselves on the subject. I once had to sit for half an hour listening to Brisbane read aloud Ambrose Bierce's libelous attack on dogs.^[8] No member of this household brought that dog in, Markham. But had the dog got in by mistake, no member of the family would have hesitated to strike it."

"You think an outsider brought it in?"

"No, that wouldn't be reasonable either." Vance frowned meditatively. "That's the strange thing about the dog's presence here. It was probably a terrible accident—a fatal miscalculation. That's why I'm so deuced interested. And then there's this point to be considered: the person who found the dog here was *afraid to let her out*. Instead—for his own safety—he tried to kill her and then hid her behind the portières downstairs. And he almost succeeded in killing her."

"Could the doctor tell at what time she was hurt?"

"Not exactly. But from the condition of the swelling about the eye and the dried blood in the wound, he said it might have been as long as twelve hours ago."

"That coincides."

"Oh, yes—quite. The dog either witnessed the stabbing or was present in the house shortly afterward."

"It's a curious situation," Markham murmured.

"Yes, it's curious," Vance agreed. "And damnable. But once we trace the dog's ownership, we may know something pertinent."

Markham looked doubtful.

"How, in Heaven's name, are we going to trace a stray dog?" he asked dispiritedly. "The city is full of them. And if it belonged to the person who entered here last night, the owner is certainly not going to advertise for it or even answer a 'found' advertisement."

"True," Vance nodded. "But the matter isn't as obscure and difficult as that. That little Scottie is no mere pet-shop companion. Far from it. She'd make trouble in the ring for some of our leading winners. I went over her as carefully as I could when she lay on Blamey's operating table. She has a short back, a fine spring of ribs, and a perfect tail; and she's low to the ground, with well bent stifles and sturdy hind-quarters. Also she has *anazin* bone and substance. I know a little about Scotties, Markham, and I have an idea she's got both Laurieston and Omsay blood in her. Her sturdiness and substance, coupled with her somewhat bold and slightly light eye, indicates the Laurieston strain—a great strain, by the by, but not sufficiently sensitive for my taste. On the other hand, she has certain very definite refinements—a lean, clean head and a sensitive muzzle, small ears, and a slightly receding occiput—all of which spells Omsay."

"That's all very well"—Markham was annoyed by Vance's technicalities—"but what do those things mean to any one but a breeder? I can't see that they get us anywhere."

"Oh, but they do," smiled Vance. "They get us much farther. The breeding of certain blood-lines in this country is known to every serious dog fancier. And a bitch like this one is the result of years of intensive breeding. There are such things as pedigrees and stud books and A. K. C. records and professional handlers and licensed judges; and it is not altogether impossible to trace a blue-blooded dog once you have a few clues as to its blood-lines and cross-strains. Furthermore, she's in perfect show condition now; and the chances are that a dog as good as this one has been shown. And whenever a dog is shown, another set of facts is put on record."

Heath had been listening to Vance with bored scepticism. Now he asked a question.

"Do you mean to tell me, Mr. Vance, that you can find the owner of any good dog you run across?"

"Oh, no, Sergeant," Vance hastened to assure him. "I only say that, provided a dog has been put on record and shown, and also provided one has a definite idea of the dog's progenitors, there is a good chance that, with patience, the owner may be found."

"Huh!" Heath was unimpressed. "But even if you did find the owner of this mut, where would you be? The owner might simply say, 'Oh, thank you, kind sir. The little devil ran away last Thursday.'"

Vance smiled.

"So he might, Sergeant. But well-bred dogs don't follow strangers into unknown houses. Moreover, dogs as good as this one are not generally permitted to roam the streets unattended." He lay back in his chair and partly closed his eyes. "There's something particularly strange about that dog's presence in this house last night. If I had the explanation, I'd know infinitely more about the murderer."

Heath gave Vance a shrewd look.

"Maybe the murderer was somebody who was fond of dogs," he suggested through his teeth. (It was obvious that he had Wrede in mind.)

"Oh, quite the contrary, Sergeant." Vance looked at Heath quizzically. "Until we have further data, we must assume that the murderer viciously injured the Scottie—probably to keep her quiet ____."

What Vance was going to say further was interrupted by a noise of footsteps and voices in the lower front hall. A moment later, three plain-clothes men and two uniformed officers from the local precinct station clattered into the room. On seeing the District Attorney they hesitated.

"I have taken charge of the case," Markham told them. "We're handling it from Headquarters, but we'll want two men to guard the house."

"Certainly, sir." A heavy-set, gray-haired man saluted, and turned to the uniformed officers. "You, Hankon and Riordan, stay here. Mr. Markham'll give you orders." He turned back to the District Attorney. "If there's anything else, Chief, let me know. I'm Lieutenant Smith."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

[6] Edwin Reginald Blamey, M.R.C.V.S., the official veterinarian of the American Kennel Club, whose offices and surgery are at 17 West 71st Street.

[7] Captain Dubois was the finger-print expert of the New York Police Department; and Heath had asked especially that he be sent to the house.

[8] Vance was referring to "Concerning Dogs" in "The Shadow on the Dial," a collection of Bierce's essays published posthumously by Robertson in San Francisco.

CHAPTER VI

THE IVORY-HEADED STICK

(Thursday, October 11; 11 a. m.)

The three plain-clothes men went out—reluctantly, I thought; but in important criminal cases handled by Headquarters, the men from the local station are automatically eliminated.

They had scarcely departed when the finger-print experts—Captain Dubois and Detective Bellamy—arrived, with the official photographer, Peter Quackenbush. Under Heath's orders, they went systematically about their work.

"What I want most," the Sergeant told them, "are the prints on those window-catches, the push-button of the electric-light switch, and the door-knob. We'll get the finger-prints of the people in the house later for comparison. . . . What I want to know is who locked those windows and turned on the lights in this room. And I want to know who went out this room last."

Vance beckoned Heath to one side.

"I can throw some light into the gloom of your uncertainties, Sergeant," he said. "Coe himself locked the windows and pulled down the shades; and he also switched on the lights. But I'll admit I'm in a Stygian darkness as to who was the last person to handle the door-knob. And I'm frightfully afraid that we won't be able to ascertain that important fact by sign-manuals."

Heath blinked and looked up questioningly. He was about to answer, but instead he called to Captain Dubois.

"Say, Cap; take the right thumb-print of the body on the bed, and see if you can check it with the prints on the window-catches and the light switch."

Dubois turned from one of the east windows, where he was sprinkling a light saffron powder over the flat surface of the lever of the catch, and, picking up his small black satchel, went to the bed. A few minutes later he returned with a piece of cardboard on which was an ink impression of Coe's thumb. Holding it under the light, he inspected it with a jeweller's-glass. Then he laid it on the desk and, going back to the window, closely inspected the flat surface of the catch. After a moment he gave a grunt.

"You had the right dope, Sergeant," he said, taking the glass from his eye. "It looks like the guy on the bed locked this window."

He then went through the same process of minute comparison with the catches on the other windows. When he was through he came to Heath.

"All the same—as far as I can see. Two of the lock-plates are blurred, but they seem to match."

The Sergeant shot Vance a sidelong look, but Vance had again relaxed in his chair and was smoking dreamily with closed eyes.

"Now, Cap," said Heath, "try the switch and the door-knob."

Dubois went to the switch and, after sprinkling the powder over it, blew upon it gently and studied it through his jeweller's-glass.

"Same here," he nodded. "I can't be sure, you understand, until I get the photographic enlargements and compare 'em. But the prints look the same—the whorl type with a pronounced ridge dot and several distinctive bifurcations."

"Never mind the enlargements," Heath told him. "Try the knob."

Again Dubois used his insufflator to puff the powder over the door-knob, and inspected the result closely with the aid of a flash-light.

"I'd say the same person handled the knob," he told the Sergeant. "But it's not as clear as it might be."

Heath grunted.

"No use trying the outside knob," he said. "Too many people have handled it this morning."

He smoked a while in silence.

"Try that gun on the desk, wrapped in my handkerchief."

Dubois obeyed.

"Nothing here," he told the Sergeant after a few minutes. "The trigger's incised and wouldn't take a print. And on the left side of the butt there's a blur on the ivory which may or may not be the dead bird's thumb-print."

"Nothing else on the gun?" Heath asked with obvious disappointment.

"Nope." Dubois inserted the glass in his eye and again leaned over the revolver. "Looks to me as if it had been wiped clean before the fellow picked it up."

"It had." Vance spoke lethargically. "It's a waste of time to inspect the gun. If there are any marks on it, they're Coe's."

The Sergeant stood glaring at Vance. Finally he shrugged, and waved his hand in dismissal to Dubois.

"Thanks, Cap. I guess that'll be all."

"Want me to have photographs made and verify the findings?"

Vance had risen and was crushing out his cigarette.

"Really, y' know, Sergeant," he remarked, "it's not necessary."

Heath hesitated; then he shook his head at Dubois.

"Don't bother."

Dubois and Bellamy and the photographer had scarcely quitted the room when Commanding Officer Moran of the Detective Bureau, followed closely by Detectives Burke and Snitkin of the Homicide Bureau, came in.

Moran greeted us pleasantly and asked Markham several questions concerning the case. News of it had been relayed to him from the Telegraph Division after Heath's report over the telephone. He seemed relieved to find Markham on the scene, and, at the District Attorney's request, officially assigned Heath to the case. He left us almost immediately, manifestly glad to get away.

Burke and Snitkin had come at Heath's specific request, and, after greeting the Sergeant, stood by the mantelpiece awaiting orders.

Markham had sat down in the Windsor chair at the desk, and after telephoning his office that he would be delayed, he lighted a fresh cigar and made a peremptory gesture to Heath.

"Let's see what we can find out from the people in the house, Sergeant." He deferred to Vance. "What do you say to beginning with Gamble?"

Vance nodded.

"Quite. A bit of domestic gossip to start with. And don't fail to pry into the movements and whereabouts of brother Brisbane last night."

There was, however, another interruption before the examinations took place. The front door-bell rang, and Hennessey called up the stairs.

"Hey, Sergeant! The Public Welfare chariot is here."

Heath bawled out an order, and presently two men bearing a coffin-shaped basket entered the room. They lifted Coe's body into it, and, without a word, carried their gruesome burden out.

"And now let's have the windows open," ordered Markham. "And turn out those ghastly electric lights."

Snitkin and Burke leaped to obey him; and a moment later the fresh October air was drifting into the room.

Markham drew a deep breath and looked at his watch.

"Get Gamble up here, Sergeant," he said, leaning back in his chair.

Heath sent one of the uniformed officers to the street with instructions to keep all strangers away from the house. The other he stationed in the hall outside of Coe's room. He ordered Burke to the lower hall to answer the front door. Then he disappeared down the stairs.

Presently he returned with the butler in tow.

Markham beckoned Gamble to the desk. The man came boldly forward, but, despite his effort, he could not disguise his nervous fear. His face was a bluish white, and his eyes shifted constantly.

"We want some information about the conditions in this house last night," Markham began gruffly. "And we want the truth—understand?"

"Certainly, sir—anything I know, sir." The man tried to meet Markham's stern gaze, but his eyes fell almost immediately.

"First, take a look at that revolver." Markham pointed to the ivory-inlaid weapon on the desk before him. "Ever seen it before?"

Gamble glanced at it quickly and nodded his head.

"Yes, sir. I've seen it often. It was Mr. Archer Coe's revolver."

"Where did he keep it?"

"In the drawer of the library table, downstairs."

"When did you see it last?"

"Yesterday morning, sir, when I was straightening up the library. Mr. Coe had left a record-book on the table, and when I put it away in the drawer, I saw the revolver."

Markham nodded, as if satisfied.

"Now sit down over there." He pointed to a straight chair by the door. When Gamble had seated himself, Markham continued. "Who was in the house last night after dinner?"

"Yesterday was Wednesday, sir," the man answered. "There is no dinner here on Wednesdays. It's the servants' night off. Every one dines out—except Mr. Archer Coe occasionally. I fix a cold supper for him sometimes before I go."

"And last night?"

"Yes, sir. I prepared a salad and cold cuts for him. The rest of the family had engagements outside."

"What time did you go?"

"About six-thirty, sir."

"And there was no one but Mr. Archer Coe in the house at that time?"

"No, sir—no one. Miss Lake telephoned from the Country Club early in the afternoon that she would not be home till late. And Mr. Grassi, Mr. Coe's guest, went out shortly before four."

"Do you know where he went?"

"I understood he had an appointment with the Curator of Oriental Antiquities of the Metropolitan Museum."

"And Mr. Brisbane Coe, you said over the phone, was in Chicago." Markham's statement was actually a question.

"He wasn't in Chicago at that time, sir," Gamble explained. "He was *en route*, so to speak. He took the five-thirty train from the Grand Central last evening."

Vance lifted his eyebrows and shifted forward in his chair.

"The Lake Shore Limited, eh?" he remarked. "Why the slow train? Why not the Twentieth Century? He would have saved three hours' travel."

"Mr. Brisbane is very conservative, sir," Gamble explained. "And very cautious. He dislikes travelling on fast trains, and always took the slower ones."

"Well, well." Vance sank back in his chair, and Markham resumed the interrogation.

"How do you know Mr. Coe took the five-thirty train?"

Gamble looked perplexed.

"I didn't exactly see him off, sir," he replied, after blinking several times. "But I phoned for the reservations, and packed his suit-case, and got him a taxi."

"What time did he leave the house?"

"A little before five, sir."

Vance again roused himself from apparent lethargy.

"I say, Gamble,"—he spoke without looking up—"when did the cautious Mr. Brisbane decide on his jaunt to Chicago?"

The butler turned his head toward Vance in mild surprise.

"Why, not until after four o'clock. It was a rather sudden decision, sir—or so it seemed to me."

"Does he usually make these sudden decisions?"

"Never, sir. This was the first time. And I must say it struck me as most unusual. He generally plans on his Chicago trips the day before."

"Ah!" Vance raised his eyes languidly. "Does he make many trips to Chicago?"

"About one a month, I should say, sir."

"And does he tarry long on these visits?"

"Only a day or so."

"Do you know what the attraction is in Chicago?"

"Not exactly, sir," Gamble was growing restless. He clasped his hands tightly together and gazed straight ahead. "But several times I have heard him discussing the meetings there of some learned society. My impression is that he goes to Chicago to attend them."

"Yes, quite reasonable. . . . Queer chap, Brisbane," Vance mused. "He's interested in all sorts of out-of-the-way subjects. . . . So he made a sudden decision to migrate west after four o'clock yesterday, and departed before five. . . . Most interestin' . . . And, by the by, Gamble, did he tell any one but you of his decision?"

"I hardly think so, sir—except Mr. Archer, of course. The fact is, there was no one else in the house."

"Did he speak to any one over the phone between four o'clock and his departure?"

"No one, sir."

"And there were no visitors to whom he might have confided his intentions?"

"No, sir. No one called."

"Most interestin'," Vance repeated. "And now, Gamble, think carefully before you answer. Did you notice anything unusual in Mr. Brisbane Coe's manner last evening?"

The man gave a slight start, and I noticed that the pupils of his eyes expanded. His gaze turned quickly to Vance, and he swallowed twice before answering.

"I did, sir—so help me God, I did! He was not altogether himself. He's usually very calm and even-going. But before he left here he seemed distracted and—fidgety. And he did a most peculiar thing, sir, before he left the house:—he shook hands with Mr. Archer. I've never seen him shake hands with Mr. Archer before. And he said 'Good-bye, brother.' It was most peculiar, for he has never, to my knowledge, called Mr. Archer by anything but his first name."

"Oh, really now!" Vance was studying the butler closely. "And how did Mr. Archer take this unwanted burst of fraternal affection?"

"I doubt if he even noticed it, sir. He was studying a piece of egg-shell china under an electric bulb; and he scarcely answered Mr. Brisbane."

"That would be like Archer," Vance commented to Markham. "When he was absorbed in an example of Chinese ceramic art, the roof could have toppled in, and he wouldn't have been aware of it. . . . Do you mind if I continue with Gamble?"

Markham nodded his assent, and Vance turned again to the butler.

"As I understand it, when Mr. Brisbane had gone you and Mr. Archer were left alone in the house."

"Why, yes, sir." The man was breathing heavily; all of his obsequiousness had departed. "But I only stayed long enough to prepare Mr. Archer's supper. . . ."

"And left Mr. Archer alone?"

"Yes! He was sitting in the library downstairs reading."

"And where did you go and how dispose yourself?"

Gamble leaned forward earnestly.

"I had dinner in Childs, and then I went to a motion picture."

"Not an exciting evening, was it, Gamble? . . . And what other servants are there in the house?"

For some reason the man breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"There's only two, sir, besides myself." His voice was steadier now. "The Chinese cook——"

"Ah, a Chinese cook, eh? How long has he been here?"

"Only a few months."

"Go on."

"Then there's Miss Lake's personal maid. And that's all, sir—except the woman that comes twice a week to clean house."

"When did the cook and Miss Lake's maid leave the house yesterday?"

"Right after lunch. That's the usual order on Wednesdays, sir."

"And when did they return?"

"Late last night. I myself came in at eleven; and it was about half-past eleven when Myrtle—that's the maid's name—returned. I was just retiring—about midnight, I should say, sir—when I heard the cook sneak in."

Vance's eyebrows went up.

"Sneak?"

"He always sneaks, sir." There was a note of animosity in Gamble's voice. "He's very sly and tricky and—devious, sir—if you know what I mean."

"Probably his oriental upbringing," remarked Vance casually, with a faint smile. "So the cook sneaked in about midnight, eh? . . . Tell me, is it usual for the servants to stay out late Wednesdays?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then, if any one were familiar with the domestic arrangements here, he would know that he could count on the house being free from servants Wednesday nights."

"That's right, sir."

Vance smoked thoughtfully a moment. Then:

"Do you know at what hour Miss Lake and Mr. Grassi came in last night?"

"I couldn't say, sir." Gamble shot Vance a curious look from the corner of his eye. "But it must have been very late. It was after one o'clock before I went to sleep, and neither of them had returned at that time."

"Mr. Grassi has a key to the house?"

"Yes, sir. I had an extra one made for him at Mr. Coe's request."

"How long has Mr. Grassi been Mr. Coe's guest?"

"It was a week yesterday."

Vance was silent for a moment. His eyes, as they looked out of the east windows, were placid, but there was the suggestion of a frown on his forehead; and I knew that something was troubling him. Without change of expression he put an apparently irrelevant question to Gamble.

"Did you, by any chance, see Mr. Archer Coe after you returned to the house last night?"

"No—I didn't see him, sir." There was a slight hesitancy in the reply, and Vance looked toward the man quickly.

"Come, come, Gamble," he admonished severely. "What's on your mind?"

"Well, sir—it's really nothing; but when I went up to bed I noticed that the library doors were open and that the lights were on. I thought, of course, that Mr. Archer was still in the library. And then I noticed the light in Mr. Archer's bedroom here, through the keyhole—it's quite noticeable in a dark hall as you come up the stairs, sir—and I took it for granted that he had retired. So I went back to the library and turned out the lights and shut the doors."

"You heard no sound in here?"

"No, sir." Gamble leaned forward and regarded Vance with staring eyes. "Do you think he was dead then?"

"Oh, undoubtedly. If you'd taken the trouble to glance through the keyhole last night, you'd have seen him just as you saw him this morning."

Gamble appeared stunned.

"Good God, sir! And I never knew!" he exclaimed in a hoarse whisper.

Vance yawned mildly.

"Really, y' know," he said, "we sha'n't hold it against you. . . . And, by the by, there's a question I forgot to ask. Did Mr. Brisbane Coe take a walking-stick with him when he set forth for Chicago?"

Gamble drew himself together, and gave a puzzled nod.

"Yes, sir. He never goes anywhere without a stick. He's subject to rheumatism——"

"So he's told me a score of times. . . . And what kind of stick did he take with him?"

"His ivory-headed stick, sir. It's his favorite. . . ."

"The one with the crooked handle and the carvings?"

"Yes, sir. It's a most unusual stick, sir. Mr. Brisbane bought it in Borneo years ago. . . ."

"I know the stick well, Gamble. I've seen him carrying it on various occasions. . . . You're quite sure, are you, that he took this particular stick with him to Chicago?"

"Positive. I handed it to him myself at the door of the taxicab."

"You'd swear to that?"

Gamble was as mystified as the rest of us at Vance's insistence.

"Yes, sir!" he returned resolutely.

Vance kept his eyes on the man, and stood up. He walked very deliberately to where Gamble sat, and looked down at him searchingly.

"Gamble,"—he spoke pointedly—"did you see Mr. *Brisbane* Coe in this house after you returned last night?"

The butler went white, and his lips began to tremble. The question was so unexpected that even I received a distinct shock from it. Markham half rose in his chair, and Heath froze into a startled attitude, his cigar half raised to his lips. Gamble cringed beneath Vance's steady gaze.

"No, sir—no, sir!" he cried. "Honest to God, I didn't! I would have told you if I had."

Vance shrugged and turned away.

"Still, he was here last night."

Markham struck the desk noisily with his fist.

"What's back of that remark?" he demanded. "How do you know Brisbane Coe was here last night?"

Vance looked up blandly, and said in a mild tone:

"Very simple: his ivory-headed stick is hanging over the back of one of the chairs in the lower hall."

CHAPTER VII

THE MISSING MAN

(Thursday, October 11; 11.45 a. m.)

There was a momentary tense silence. Vance's statement, with the possibilities it suggested, threw a pall of vague horror over all of us. I was watching Gamble, and again I saw the pupils of his eyes dilate. Unsteadily he rose, and bracing himself with one hand on the back of his chair, glared at Vance like a man who had seen a malignant spectre.

"You—are sure you saw the stick, sir?" he stammered, with a hideous contortion of the face. "I didn't see it. And Mr. Brisbane never hangs his stick over the hall chair. He always puts it in the umbrella-stand. Maybe some one else——"

"Don't be hysterical, Gamble," Vance interrupted curtly. "Who but Mr. Brisbane himself would bring that precious stick back to the house and hang it over a chair in the hall?"

"But, Mr. Vance, sir," the man persisted in an awed tone, "he once reprimanded me for hanging it over a chair—he said it might fall and get broken. Why, sir, should he hang it over the chair?"

"Less noisy, perhaps, than chucking it into a brass umbrella-holder."

Markham was leaning over the desk scowling at Vance.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded.

Vance lifted his eyes slowly and let them rest on the District Attorney.

"I opine, my dear Markham," he said slowly, "that brother Brisbane didn't want any one to hear him when he returned here last night."

"And why do you 'opine' any such thing?" Markham's irritation was bordering on anger.

"There may have been sinister business afoot," Vance returned evasively. "Brisbane started for Chicago on a night when he knew no one but Archer would be home. And then he missed his train—to speak euphemistically. He returned to the house—with his stick. And here's his stick hanging over the back of a tufted chair . . . but no Brisbane. And Archer—the sole occupant of this cluttered domicile last night—has gone to his Maker in most outlandish fashion."

"Good God, Vance!" Markham sank back in his chair. "You don't mean that Brisbane——?"

"Tut, tut! There you go jumping at conclusions again. . . ." Vance spoke in an offhand manner, but he could not entirely disguise his deep concern over the situation. He began walking up and down, his hands sunk deep in his coat pockets. "I can understand Brisbane's presence here last night," he murmured as if to himself, "but I can't understand the presence of his stick here this morning. It's very curious—it doesn't fit into the picture. Even if he had not taken the Lake Shore Limited to Chicago, there were other trains later on. The Iroquois goes about midnight, and there's another slow train around twelve-thirty. . . ."

Heath took his cigar from his mouth.

"How do you know the bird didn't take one of those trains—that is, supposing he'd missed the Lake Shore Limited?"

"By the stick in the lower hall, Sergeant."

"Couldn't a guy forget his stick?"

"Not Brisbane Coe—and certainly not in the circumstances. . . ."

"What circumstances?" cut in Markham.

"That's what I don't know exactly," Vance made a wry face. "But I begin to see a method in all this seeming madness; and that stick downstairs stands out like some terrible and accusing error. . . ."

He stopped abruptly, and suddenly swinging about, went toward the door.

"I'll be back in a minute. There's a possibility. . . ." He passed swiftly into the hall.

Heath looked disgustedly at Markham.

"What's he got on his mind, sir?"

"I couldn't tell you, Sergeant." Markham was even more puzzled than Heath.

"Well, sir, if you ask me," the Sergeant submitted surlily, "I think Mr. Vance is leaning too heavily on that stick. We've only got this guy's word"—he jerked his thumb toward Gamble—"that he took it with him in the first place. And until we know definitely that he didn't go to Chicago, we're stirring up a lot of trouble for nothing."

Markham, I felt, was inclined to agree, but he made no comment.

Presently Vance returned to the room, smoking abstractedly. His face was crestfallen.

"He's not there," he announced. "I thought Brisbane might be in his room. But the shades are up; and the bed hasn't been slept in; and the lights are out." He sat down wearily. "His room's empty."

The Sergeant planted himself in front of Vance.

"Look here, Mr. Vance, even if he did miss the Lake Shore Limited, he's probably on his way to Chicago. Anybody might forget a stick. His suit-case ain't here——"

Vance leaped to his feet.

"The suit-case—that's it! What would he have done with the suit-case if he had not taken the early train and had intended to go on to Chicago later . . . ?"

"He'd have checked it in the station, wouldn't he?" asked Heath contemptuously.

"Exactly!" Vance wheeled to Gamble. "Describe that suit-case."

"It was quite an ordinary case, sir," the man replied in a dazed tone. "Black seal-skin, leather lined, with rounded corners, and the initials 'B. C.' in gold letters on one end."

Vance turned back to Heath.

"Can you check on that in the parcel room at the station, Sergeant? It's important."

Heath looked interrogatively toward Markham, and received a significant nod.

"Sure I can," he said. He beckoned Snitkin with a jerk of the head. "Got the dope?"

The detective grinned.

"Hell, yes," he rumbled. "A cinch."

"Then hop to it," ordered Heath. "And phone me pronto. . . . Make it snappy."

Snitkin disappeared from the room with an alacrity that seemed out of all keeping with his bulk.

Markham drummed nervously on the desk and fixed a sombre, inquisitive gaze on Vance who was now standing by one of the east windows looking meditatively out into the October sunshine.

"Where do you think Brisbane Coe fits into this affair?" he asked.

"I don't know—I'm not sure." Vance spoke quietly, without turning. "But many strange things happened here last night. Certain plans went awry. Events overlapped one another. Nothing happened on schedule. And until we know more of the preliminaries, we'll merely go on plunging around in the dark."

"But Brisbane Coe," persisted Markham.

Vance turned slowly back to the room.

"There has always been bad blood between Archer and Brisbane, for some reason. I've never understood it. It wasn't merely the antagonism of similar temperaments. It went deeper than that. . . . By the by, maybe Miss Lake could enlighten us while we're waiting for Snitkin's call. . . . I say, Gamble; ask the young lady to be good enough to join us here."

The butler went out, and we could hear him mounting the stairs to the third floor.

Five minutes later Hilda Lake came swinging into the room, dressed in a dazzling yellow *bouclé* sport suit.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting and all the usual amenities," she said, sitting down and crossing her knees; "but I hadn't quite finished doffing my golf togs when the far-from-admirable Crichton summoned me. Anyway, I should be furious with you. Why was I denied my muffins and tea?"

Vance apologized.

"We've been using Gamble a bit intensively."

"Oh, he's full of the family's scandals. I sincerely hope he never takes it into his head to turn blackmailer. He'd impoverish us. . . . Did you get many racy items from him?"

"Alas, no!" Vance sighed with simulated lugubriousness. "The fact is, Gamble has been passionately upholding the honor of the Coes."

Hilda Lake looked at Gamble with comical amazement.

"You positively stagger me, Gamble. I'll speak to Uncle Brisbane today and have your wages raised."

"In the meantime," said Vance, "I'm sure you're hungry. . . . Gamble, take tea and muffins to Miss Lake's quarters." The man, who had been standing in the door, bowed and disappeared; and Vance turned pleasantly back to Miss Lake. "By the time your breakfast is ready we will let you return to your rooms." Then he added with a serious mien. "There are a few questions we'd like you to answer"

She gave Vance a cold look, and waited with imperturbable calm.

"What was the cause," he asked, "of the animosity between Archer and Brisbane Coe?"

"Oh, that!" A cynical smile curled her lips. "Money—nothing else. Old Major Coe left everything to Uncle Archer. Uncle Brisbane had only an allowance—until Uncle Archer should die. Then the money was to go to him. The situation naturally irked him, and he got pretty nasty about it at times. It amused me no end,—I was in the same predicament. The fact is, I've often been tempted to make an alliance with Uncle Brisbane for the purpose of murdering Uncle Archer. Together we could have got away with it, don't you think?"

"I'm sure you could—even alone," Vance returned lightly. "What held you back?"

"My unspeakable golf score. I've needed all my time and energy to improve my game."

"Most distressing," sighed Vance. "And now some one has killed Uncle Archer for you."

"I'm sure it's my reward for virtue." Though her tone was hard, there was an undercurrent of bitter passion in it. "Or perhaps," she added, "Uncle Brisbane went ahead on his own."

"That might bear looking into," smiled Vance. "The only difficulty is that Gamble tells us Mr. Brisbane hopped to Chicago at five-thirty last evening."

The woman's eyes flickered—there was little doubt that Vance's statement had been unexpected; but she replied almost at once.

"That doesn't mean anything. Uncle Brisbane has dabbled enough in criminology to prepare a perfect alibi in the event he himself contemplated a flutter in crime."

Vance regarded her amiably before speaking again.

"What takes him on those periodical trips to Chicago?" he asked with sudden seriousness.

Hilda Lake shrugged.

"Heaven knows. He never mentioned the matter to me and I never asked." She leaned forward. "Perhaps it's a lady!" she exclaimed in a taunting tone. "If he told any one, that person was Uncle Archer. And I'm afraid it's too late to get any information from that quarter now."

"Yes, a bit too late," agreed Vance. He sat down on the edge of the desk and clasped his hands around one knee. "But let us suppose that after Mr. Brisbane announced his intention of going to Chicago last evening, he remained in New York all night. What would you say to that?"

Hilda Lake scrutinized Vance shrewdly for a time before replying. Then she answered gravely:

"In that case you may eliminate Uncle Brisbane as a suspect. He's much too smooth and canny to leave any such loopholes. He has a very tricky and clever mind—too many persons underestimate him—and if he planned a murder, I'm sure he'd arrange it so as to escape detection." She paused momentarily. "Did Uncle Brisbane remain in New York last night?"

"I don't know," Vance responded candidly. "I was merely indulging in suppositions."

"How clever of you!" There was a steely look in her eyes, and her forehead puckered with a slight frown.

At this moment Gamble passed the door on his way upstairs, with a small covered serving-tray in his hands.

Vance stood up.

"Ah! There are your muffins, Miss Lake. I sha'n't keep you any longer."

"Thanks awfully." She rose and went quickly from the room.

Vance stood at the door until Gamble returned from the third floor, and ordered him to wait in the lower hall. When the man had gone below, he glanced at his watch and strolled back into the room.

"I'd rather not go on till we hear from Snitkin. Do you mind waiting, Markham?"

Markham got up and paced to the bed and back.

"Have it your own way," he grumbled. "But I can't see the importance of the suit-case. There's small probability, it seems to me, of its being at the station. And in the event it isn't there, we will be no better off than we are now."

"On the other hand," Vance returned, "if it is at the station, we may conclude that Brisbane did not go to Chicago last night."

Markham studied Vance gloweringly.

"And if he didn't go, what then?"

"Oh, I say—really! My word, Markham, I'm no Delphic oracle. We've only started this—what do the yellow journals call it?—probe. . . . But I'm quite sure Brisbane intended to go to Chicago at some time last night. And if he didn't go, something unexpected kept him here."

"But his being in New York doesn't connect him with Archer Coe's murder."

"Certainly not. . . . But I crave enlightenment." He suddenly sobered. "Markham, that last-minute decision of Brisbane's to get out of town had some connection with Archer's death—I'm sure of that. He knew something—or feared something. Or perhaps. . . . But, anyway, he intended to go to Chicago last night. And maybe he did go. . . . but I want to be sure."

He strolled to the mantel and looked critically at a small, three-legged bowl of delicate green, with a carved teak-wood cover surmounted by a handle of white jade.

"Ming celadon," he said, running his fingers over the lustrous glaze. "A perfect velvety texture, and an unusual shape. A very rare piece. Celadon, Markham, has baffled occidental artificers; even the Chinese can no longer produce it. It's very old—some experts have placed its origin as far back as the Sui dynasty in the sixth and seventh centuries, naming Ho Chou as its inventor. But the most beautiful celadons, I think, are Ming—those that came from the hands of the Ching-té-chên experts. I rather imagine, don't y' know, that this is such a piece." He inspected it closely, particularly studying the down-flow of the glaze about the base. "There's a great similarity between the *Kuan-yao* of the Sung dynasty and the Imperial celadons made in the province of Kiang-si; but, as a rule, the Lung-chuan factories used a reddish *pâte*. And this piece has a white *pâte*—a characteristic of Ching-té-chên celadons. . . ."

"Vance," interrupted Markham irritably, "you're boring me to tears."

"My word!" Vance put down the celadon bowl and sighed. "And I was trying to entertain you until Snitkin reported. . . ."

As he spoke, the phone rang. Heath answered it, and after listening for several minutes, replaced the receiver on the hook.

"The suit-case is there, all right," he announced. "Snitkin picked it out at once—it was on the 'hurry' shelf. The bird at the window says a middle-aged, nervous guy checked it around six last night, saying he'd missed his train—and he was shaking so he could hardly lift the bag to the counter."

Vance nodded slowly.

"I was afraid of that—and yet I was hoping it wasn't so." He took out a cigarette and lighted it with slow and deliberate precision—a sign of his tense perturbation. "Markham, I don't like this situation; I don't at all like it. Something unforeseen has happened: unforeseen—and sinister. It wasn't on the cards. Brisbane Coe intended to go to Chicago last night—and *he didn't go*. Some terrible thing stopped him. . . . And something stopped Archer Coe before he could change his shoes. . . ." He leaned over the desk and looked straight at Markham. "Don't you see what I mean? Those shoes of Archer's—and that stick of Brisbane's. . . . *That stick—in the front hall!* It shouldn't have been there. . . . Oh, my precious aunt! . . ." He threw his cigarette into a tray, and hurried toward the door.

"Come, Markham. . . . Come, Sergeant. There's something hideous in this house. . . . and I don't want to go alone."

As he spoke, he ran down the stairs, Markham and Heath and I following. When he had reached the lower hall, he pulled the portières aside and opened the library door. He looked round him,

and then passed into the dining-room.

After several minutes' search, he returned to the hall.

"Maybe the den," he said; and hurrying through the drawing-room, where Wrede and Grassi sat near the window, he went into the small room at the rear. But he came back at once, a bewildered look in his eyes.

"Not there." His tone was unnatural. "But he's somewhere—somewhere. . . ."

He came again into the front hall.

"He wouldn't be on the third floor, and he's not on the second floor." Vance stood staring at the ivory-headed stick which, for the first time, I noticed hanging over the back of a chair beside the library door. "There's his stick," he said; "but his hat and top-coat. . . . Oh, what a fool I've been!"

He brushed Gamble out of his way, and walked swiftly down the narrow corridor along the stairs until he came to the closet door at the rear of the hall.

"Your flashlight, Sergeant," he called over his shoulder, as he placed his hand on the door-knob.

He pulled the door open, revealing only a great rectangle of blackness. Almost simultaneously, the circle of yellow light from Heath's pocket flashlight penetrated the gloom.

Markham and I were behind him, straining our eyes into the closet. There were various overcoats and hats hanging from the hooks.

"Lower, Sergeant!" came Vance's dictatorial voice. "The floor—the floor! . . ."

The light descended; and then we saw the thing that Vance, through some process of obscure logic, had been searching for.

There, in a huddled heap, his glassy eyes staring up at us, lay the dead body of Brisbane Coe.

CHAPTER VIII

THE *TING* YAO VASE

(Thursday, October 11; 12.15 p. m.)

Though the sight was not altogether unexpected, in view of Vance's strange actions and even stranger comments, I received a tremendous shock as I gazed down into the closet. A large irregular pool of blood, perhaps a foot in diameter, had spread over the hardwood floor just beneath Coe's shoulder. It had dried and darkened, and looked sinisterly black against the yellow boarding.

Even to an amateur like myself the fact that Brisbane Coe was dead was apparent. The stiff, unnatural pose of the body, and the hideous fixity of his gaze, together with the drawn bloodless lips and the wane pallor of his skin, attested to violent and unexpected death. I had rarely seen a corpse as lifeless as Coe's, as irremediably beyond all human possibility of resuscitation.

And as I looked at it, temporarily petrified by the horror of this new development, I could not help comparing the dead body of Brisbane with that of Archer. They were both tall and cadaverous; and, although Archer was the older by five years, they had a certain similarity of facial features. But whereas Archer had died with a peaceful expression on his face, and in a natural and comfortable position, Brisbane had a shocked, almost wild, look in his eyes, as if he had been startled and frightened at the moment of death.

The discovery of Brisbane Coe's body affected all of us strongly. Heath stared down with hunched shoulders. The blood seemed to have left his face, and he was like a man hypnotized. Markham's jaw was set, and his eyes were mere slits.

"Good God!" he breathed, in an awe-stricken voice, and looked vaguely at Vance who stood beside the Sergeant gazing down critically at the dead man.

Vance spoke, and his voice, usually so calm, sounded strained and unnatural.

"It's worse than I thought. . . . I had hoped he might still be alive—a prisoner perhaps. I didn't altogether expect this."

Heath's hand containing the flashlight dropped to his side, and he stepped back. Vance closed the closet door and turned.

"It's very strange," he murmured, looking at Markham yet past him. "He is without his hat and top-coat; and yet his stick is hanging here in the hall. And he is *dead in the closet*. Why not in his own room?—or the library?—or anywhere else but in there? . . . Nothing fits, Markham. The whole picture has been painted by a crazy man."

Markham stared at him; then he said in a dazed voice:

"I can't follow any of it. Why did Brisbane Coe return here last night? And who knew he was going to return?"

"If only I could answer those questions!"

Burke and Gamble were sitting on a hall bench near the drawing-room door. The butler's face was white and drawn. He had not seen the dead man in the closet, for our bodies had shielded him. But it was obvious that he suspected the truth.

Vance went to him.

"What kind of top-coat and hat did Mr. Brisbane wear when he went to the station last night?"

The man made a desperate effort to pull himself together.

"A—a tweed coat, sir," he replied huskily, "—black-and-white tweed. And a light gray fedora hat."

Vance returned to the closet, and presently emerged with a hat and coat.

"Are these the ones?"

Gamble swallowed hard and nodded his head.

"Yes, sir." His eyes stared abnormally at the two articles of attire.

Vance replaced the coat and hat in the closet, and commented to Markham:

"They were hanging up so neatly."

"Is it not possible," asked Markham, "that just as he had hung them up after returning to the house, he was killed?"

"Possible—yes," Vance nodded slowly. "But that would not explain the other things that went on here last night. It's more reasonable, I think, to assume that Brisbane was killed as he was preparing to leave the house. But then again, there's the time element. . . ."

Heath had already gone to the hall telephone and was dialing a number.

"I'll soon get the time element for you," he growled.

A moment later he was speaking to Doctor Doremus in his office in the Municipal Building.

"The doc's coming right away," he said, hanging up the receiver.

"In the meantime, Markham," suggested Vance, "I think we might have parlance with the Chinese cook. . . . Fetch him, will you, Gamble."

The butler hastened through the dining-room door at the rear, and Vance strolled into the library, the rest of us following.

The library was a fairly large room on the north front of the house, directly opposite to the drawing-room. Although there were perhaps a thousand volumes in a series of book-shelves occupying almost the entire south wall, the room did not have the general appearance of a library. It resembled far more a curio shop. There were various cabinets containing carved jade and jewelry and *objets d'art* of oriental design and workmanship; and on every available flat surface stood examples of Chinese ceramic art, ceremonial bronzes, ivory figures, and carved lacquer ornaments. Many of the pieces of furniture were of teak-wood and camphor-wood; and, wherever space permitted, large squares of brocaded and embroidered silk had been hung and draped. In the centre of the west wall was a rococo Louis-Quinze mantelpiece which seemed hideously out of place; and here and there were pieces of modern furniture—a large fumed-oak Mission library table, an overstuffed davenport, a steel commercial filing cabinet, and several pseudo-colonial mahogany straight chairs—all of which gave to the room a violent air of anachronistic chaos.

We had scarcely seated ourselves when a tall, slender, scholarly-looking Chinaman of about forty stepped softly into the room through the door between the library and the dining-room. He was dressed in an immaculate white duck suit, and wore black padded slippers. He stood beside the door with relaxed immobility, and, after one swift glance at us, lifted his eyes uneagerly above our heads. Though he looked at nothing in particular, I felt that he saw everything.

Vance regarded the man curiously, and it was several moments before he spoke. Then he asked:

"What is your name?"

"Liang," came the soft and almost inaudible response.

"Your whole name, please."

There was a slight pause, and the man gave Vance a fleeting glance.

"Liang Tsung Wei."

"Ah! . . . And I understand you are the Coe cook."

The other nodded quickly.

"Me cook."

Vance sighed, and a faint smile overspread his face.

"Be so good as to forgo the pidgin-English, Mr. Liang. It will handicap our conversation terribly." He slowly lighted a cigarette. "And please take a chair."

The Chinaman, with a faint flicker in his eyes, moved his gaze till it rested on Vance's face. Then he bowed and sat down in an arm-chair between the door and the book-shelves.

"Thank you," he said in a finely modulated voice. "I suppose you desire to question me regarding the tragedy last night. I deeply regret I can throw no light upon it."

"How do you know there has been a tragedy?" Vance inspected the end of his cigarette.

"I was preparing the breakfast," Liang returned, "and I heard the butler impart the information over the telephone."

"Ah, yes—of course. . . . Have you been long in this country, Mr. Liang?"

"Two years only."

"Interested in the culin'ry art of America?"

"Not particularly—although I am a student of occidental customs. Western civilization is of great interest to certain of my countrymen."

"As are, also, I imagine," added Vance, "the rare ceremonial pieces of Chinese art that have been pilfered from your temples and graves."

"We of course regret their loss," the man answered mildly.

Vance nodded understandingly, and was silent for a moment. Then:

"Where were you educated, Mr. Liang?"

"At the Imperial University at Tientsin and at Oxford."

"You are a member, I presume of the Kuomintang."

The Chinaman inclined his head affirmatively.

"But no longer," he supplemented. "When I realized that Russian ideals were taking root in my countrymen's minds, and that the ideals of the Tang and the Sung were receding further and further, I joined the Ta Tao Hwei.^[9] Being a Laoist by temperament among confrères who were mostly Confucianists, I realized that my idealism was unfitted for eras of hysteria; and I soon withdrew from all active participation in politics. I still have faith, however, in the old cultural ideals of China, and I am waiting patiently for the day when the philosophic dicta of the Tao Teh King will re-establish the spiritual and intellectual equilibrium of my country."

Vance made no comment. He merely asked:

"How did you happen to seek employment with Mr. Coe?"

"I had heard of his collection of Chinese antiquities and of his great knowledge of oriental art, and I believed that the atmosphere might prove to be congenial."

"And have you found it congenial?"

"Not altogether. Mr. Coe was a very narrow and selfish man. His interest in art was purely personal. He wished to keep his treasures away from the world—not to share them with humanity."

"A typical collector," observed Vance. He raised himself slightly in his chair and yawned. "By the by, Mr. Liang; when did you leave the house yesterday?"

"About half-past two," came the low answer. The Chinaman's face was an inscrutable mask.

"And you returned at what time?"

"Shortly before midnight."

"You were not here at any time in the interim?"

"No. I was visiting friends on Long Island."

"Chinese friends?"

"Yes. They will be most happy to verify my statement."

Vance smiled.

"I've no doubt. . . . Did you return by the front or the rear door?"

"The rear door—through the tradesmen's entrance and the yard."

"Where do you sleep?"

"My quarters, such as they are, are connected with the kitchen."

"Did you go to bed immediately upon your return?"

There was a momentary hesitation on the man's part.

"Not immediately," he said. "I cleared away the remains of Mr. Coe's supper, and made myself some tea."

"Did you, by any chance, see Mr. Brisbane Coe after you returned last night?"

"Mr. Brisbane Coe?" The other repeated the name questioningly. "The butler told me this morning not to prepare breakfast for him as he had gone to Chicago. . . . Was he here last night?"

Vance ignored the question.

"Did you hear any sounds in the house before you retired?" he went on.

"Not until Miss Lake returned. She is always vigorous and noisy. And a quarter of an hour later Mr. Grassi came in. But aside from that I heard no sound whatever."

Vance, during this interrogation, had appeared casual; and his manner had been deferential. But now a perceptible change came over his attitude. His eyes hardened, and he leaned forward in his chair. When he spoke, his voice was cold and uncompromising.

"Mr. Liang," he said, "at what time did you first return to this house—*early last night*?"

There was a clouded, far-away look in the Chinaman's eyes; and his long thin fingers moved with silken smoothness along the arms of his chair.

"I did not return early last night," he answered, in a faintly sing-song voice. "I arrived at midnight."

Vance did not shift his steady gaze.

"Yes, you arrived at midnight—Gamble heard you come in. But I am speaking of your earlier visit—some time around eight o'clock, let us say."

"You are evidently laboring under a misapprehension," Liang returned, without change of intonation or expression.

Vance ignored the retort.

"And what did you see in this room at about eight o'clock?"

"How could I have seen anything, when I was not here?" came the calm, unruffled reply.

"Did you see Mr. Archer Coe?" persisted Vance.

"I assure you——"

"And was any one with him?"

"I was not here."

"Perhaps you visited Mr. Coe's bedroom upstairs," Vance went on with quiet but firm insistence. "And then, it may be, you thought it advisable to disappear from the house for several hours; and you went out, returning at midnight."

Again Liang's hands moved caressingly over the arms of his chair, and his eyes sought Vance's face. There was a mild look of wonder in them.

"I was not in this house"—he spoke with deliberation—"between half-past two yesterday afternoon and midnight." There was a finality in both his manner and his tone.

Vance sighed wearily, and, turning to the hall door, called Gamble.

"Where was Mr. Archer Coe sitting last night when you went out?" he asked, when the butler had appeared.

"On the davenport, sir," Gamble told him. "In that corner near the floor lamp. It was Mr. Archer's favorite seat."

Vance nodded and rose.

"That will be all for the present. Attend to your duties till we need you."

Gamble went out, and Vance walked to the davenport and looked down at it. There were three down-filled cushion-seats on it, and the one at the end nearest the lamp was depressed. Beside the lamp, and in front of the davenport, stood a low massive tabouret of teak-wood; and on the floor near the hearth lay a copy of Tchou Tô-y's "Les Bronzes antiques de la Chine."

Vance contemplated the tabouret and the book for a moment. Then, without turning, he said:

"Mr. Liang, did you find this tabouret upset when you returned to the house early last night?"

For the first time the Chinaman seemed to lose his cool ivory equanimity. His eyelids drooped noticeably, and he made a slight involuntary movement. Before he could answer, Vance added:

"And perhaps you set it right. . . . But you overlooked the book that had fallen from it."

"I was not here," Liang repeated.

"It will be a simple matter," said Vance, "to go over the tabouret for finger-prints and to compare them with yours."

"It would be unnecessary, however," came the calm reply. "You would undoubtedly find my finger-prints on it. I often touch the furniture and objects in this room."

Vance smiled faintly and, I thought, admiringly.

"In that case, we sha'n't bother."

He moved round the lamp and stood for a moment beside a circular camphor-wood table just behind the davenport. There were various pieces of small carved ivory figures and at least two dozen snuff-bottles of jade, amber, quartz, crystal and modelled porcelain, scattered about the table's surface; and in the centre, on a slender teak-wood base, stood a white baluster-type vase about nine inches tall.

I had noticed Vance stop and glance at this vase when he had first entered the library; but now he studied it critically as if something about it puzzled him. We were all watching him; and not the least interested person in the room was Liang. His eyes were fixed on Vance's face, and there was a gentle surprise in them—a surprise which, unless my imagination was playing tricks on me, was mingled with apprehension.

"Extr'ordin'ry!" Vance murmured after several moments' contemplation of the vase. Then he lifted his eyes lethargically. "I say, Mr. Liang; was this bit of pottery on the table early last night?"

"How could I possibly know that?" Liang asked in a vague, mechanical voice.

Vance picked up the vase and inspected it closely.

"Not exactly a museum piece, is it, Mr. Liang?" he mused. "Rather inferior. I'm astonished that Mr. Coe would have given it a place in his collection. The shops along Fifth Avenue are full of them, at most reasonable prices. . . . I should say it was imitation *Ting yao* made under Tao Kuang." He flicked the vase with the nail of his middle finger. "Better material perhaps than the Sung ceramists used, but thicker. Inferior workmanship, too; and the glaze is lacking in the rich lustre of *Ting yao*, especially *Pai ting*. This piece would never have deceived a collector as shrewd as Archer Coe. . . . Do you not agree with me, Mr. Liang?"

"Mr. Coe knew much about Chinese ceramics," the Chinaman answered evasively, without taking his eyes from Vance.

"Tao Kuang, Markham," Vance elucidated, "was the most consistent imitator of all foregoing dynastic wares in the history of China. And he marked his imitations with no regard for veracity, although genuine *Pai ting yao* and *Nan ting yao* were never marked." He turned the vase over. "Ah! The Wan Li signature." He shook his head sadly. "No, Archer would never have been taken in by this specimen. . . . It's most confusin'."

He started to replace the vase on its stand, but suddenly withheld the movement of his hand, and set the vase to one side.

Leaning over, he pushed the little teak-wood pedestal out of the way, revealing a tiny triangle of thin white porcelain, about an inch wide, which had been lying hidden underneath. Carefully adjusting his monocle he picked up the bit of porcelain and held it between his thumb and forefinger to the light.

"Now, this is eminently different," he remarked, studying it closely. "Apparently a particle of genuine Sung *Ting yao*. Not *Nan ting*, either; it hasn't the rice-flower color, but is a dazzling white. A soft *pdie*, like vellum. . . . very thin and fragile. . . . and opaque, despite its fineness. . . . Still, it might be 'Yuan *Shu fu yao* or *Yung lo*. . . . But that really doesn't matter, don't y' know. A vase of this delicate porcelain would do honor to any collection."

Gently he placed the little white triangle in his pocket, and addressed the Chinaman, who had sat immobile and unblinking during Vance's comments.

"Did not Mr. Coe possess a Sung *Ting yao* vase, Mr. Liang, about the size of this execrable Tao Kuang?"

"I believe he did." Liang spoke in a curiously repressed voice, without modulation or inflexion. "Although, as you suggested, it might have been *Shu fu yao* made in the Yuan dynasty. There is, as you know, little appreciable difference between them."

"And when did you see the *Ting yao* vase last?"

"I do not remember."

Vance kept his steady gaze on the man.

"When, Mr. Liang, did you last see this nineteenth-century imitation?" He pointed to the vase on the table.

Liang did not reply at once. He looked thoughtfully at the vase for a full half-minute; then his eyes returned to Vance.

"I have never seen it before," he said finally.

"Fancy that!" Vance returned his monocle to his waistcoat pocket. "And here it sits in a place of honor, crying out its spuriousness to any one who enters the room. . . . Most interestin'."

Markham, who had been chafing under Vance's apparent irrelevancies, now spoke.

"This art discussion may be interesting to you, Vance; but it certainly does not interest me. What possible connection can a vase have with the murder of Archer and Brisbane Coe?"

"That point," answered Vance dulcetly, "is what I am endeavorin' to ascertain. Y' see, Markham, Archer Coe would not have included this Tao Kuang vase in his collection. Why is it here? I haven't the groggiest notion.—On the other hand, that little broken piece of Sung porcelain is of a beautiful quality. I can imagine Coe waxing ecstatic over a vase of such ware."

"Well?" Markham retorted irritably. "I still can't see the significance. . . ."

"Nor can I," Vance became serious. "But it has significance—and a vital significance. It is another absurdly irrelevant factor in this hideous case."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because," replied Vance, "that little triangular bit of *Ting yao* porcelain was on the table just back of where Archer Coe sat last night. And it was hidden beneath a vase which Archer would not have tolerated in the same room with him. . . ."

He paused and looked up sombrely.

"Moreover, Markham, that broken fragment of porcelain has blood on it."

[9] "The Great Sword Society," an organization opposed to extra-territoriality and foreign aggression and plunder.

CHAPTER IX

A THREAT OF ARREST

(Thursday, October 11; 12.45 p. m.)

Liang was dismissed with instructions to remain in the house until further notice.

While we were waiting for the Medical Examiner, there ensued a brief discussion concerning the blood on the piece of porcelain and Liang's possible relationship to the events preceding the double murder. But Vance was evidently as much in the dark as the rest of us; and there was little to be done until we had Doctor Doremus's report.

Heath had taken a violent dislike to Liang, and suggested to Vance that, if there was any possibility of Liang's having been in the house earlier than midnight on the day before, he would take the Chinaman to Headquarters and "let the boys shellack 'im."

Vance promptly discouraged the proposal.

"It would be a waste of time, Sergeant. You would learn nothing by such crude methods. Chinamen are not like Occidentals. When they make up their minds to remain silent, there is no known torture that can force them to speak. For centuries the Chinese have been impregnated with Buddhistic stoicism; and Liang would merely be indifferent to your most violent third-degree methods. We must approach this problem from a different angle."

"Still and all, you think the Chink was here early last night and that he knows something about what went on."

"Oh, undoubtedly," Vance admitted.

"Maybe it was him who put the bathrobe on the guy upstairs."

"That," replied Vance, "was one of the possibilities I was toying with."

It was at this point in the discussion that Burke came to the door and beckoned to Heath.

"Say, Sergeant," he reported from the corner of his mouth, "that Chink just went upstairs. Right with you?"

Heath looked sour, and shot Vance an angry look.

"Now, what's the idea?" he bawled.

Gamble entered the hall from the dining-room at this moment, and Vance addressed him.

"What is Liang doing upstairs?"

The butler seemed perturbed at Vance's tone, and replied with apologetic obsequiousness:

"I told him to fetch Miss Lake's tray, and tidy up her quarters.... Shouldn't I have done it, sir? You told me to proceed with my duties...."

Vance scrutinized the man closely.

"When he returns keep him downstairs," he said. "And you'd better stay here yourself."

Gamble bowed and returned to the dining-room; and a moment later Doctor Doremus arrived. He was in execrable mood and, after a brusque nod, he glared at Heath angrily.

"First you ruin my breakfast, and now you interfere with my lunch," he protested. "Don't you ever eat?"

The Sergeant grinned: years of contact had taught him not to take the waspy Medical Examiner too seriously.

"Me, I'm dieting," he chuckled.... "Want to see the body?"

"What d'ye think I'm here for?" snapped Doremus.

"Well, follow the leader." And Heath went briskly out of the room and down the corridor to the closet.

We were close behind him when he opened the closet door. Doremus, straightway assuming a professional air, knelt down and touched Brisbane Coe's body.

"Dead," he announced. "But even a member of the Homicide Bureau could have guessed that."

Heath simulated astonishment.

"Honest, is he dead? And me thinking all the time he was playing 'possum!"

Doremus snorted.

"Take hold of his shoulders." And he and the Sergeant carried the body into the library and placed it on the davenport. For the second time that day Doremus went about his gruesome task, and once again I was forced to admire the man's deftness and competency.

"Could you tell us, doctor," Vance asked, "which of the two victims died first?"

Doremus, who had been testing the movability of the dead man's head and limbs, glanced at his watch.

"That's easy," he said. "The one upstairs. The advance of *rigor mortis* in the two bodies is practically the same. This one might be slightly further along; but it's been nearly four hours since I went over the other fellow. Therefore, I'd say that this one died anywhere from two to three hours later."

"How about nine o'clock last night?" put in Heath.

"Maybe," Doremus again bent over the corpse. "But I'd put it later. Say eight o'clock for the one upstairs and about ten o'clock for this one.... That's not certain, y'understand; but it's my guess."

He then proceeded with his examination. After a while he straightened up and frowned at Markham.

"You know what killed this guy?"

Markham shook his head.

"Not yet. What was it?"

"A stab in the back!... Same like the fellow upstairs. And almost in the same place."

"And the weapon?"

"The same. A sharp, narrow, four-cornered instrument. Only, in this case, the hemorrhage was external. A lot of blood lost."

"Died instantly, I take it," remarked Vance.

"Yep." The doctor nodded. "Must have fallen in his tracks."

Vance picked up the blood-stained coat and waistcoat of the dead man, and inspected them.

"And this time the stab was through the clothes he was wearing," he commented. "A minor point, but worth verifying.... I say, doctor; any indications of a struggle?"

"Nope." Doremus put on his hat at a rakish angle. "Not a sign. He got it in the back when he wasn't expecting it. Startled him for a split second probably—look at that expression!—and then he curled up and passed out. Doubt if he even saw the fellow that did him in. Quick, smooth business."

"Devilish business," emended Markham.

"Oh, well, I'm no moralist," Doremus confessed. "I'm a doctor. There're too many people in the world anyway." He began filling in a printed blank. "Here's your removal order, Sergeant. And I suppose you'll be wanting a *post-mortem* report today.... All right, ship him down to the morgue—and maybe you'll get the report today, and maybe you won't."

He started for the door, but turned and fixed Heath with a leering eye.

"Say, look here. Got any more corpses round the house? If you have, bring 'em out now. I can't be running up here all day. I got work to do."

"Running?" Heath retorted with good-natured sarcasm. "With that fancy limousine the city furnishes you?..."

"So long," said Doremus. "I want food." And in another moment he had slammed the front door behind him.

Heath went at once to the telephone and ordered the wagon from the Department of Public Welfare. Then he returned to the library.

"Now where do we stand?" he asked, spreading his hands hopelessly.

Vance gave him a commiserating smile.

"About the middle of the Gobi desert, I should say, Sergeant."

"And where might that be, Mr. Vance?"

"The Gobi desert," explained Vance, "—or, more correctly, simply the Gobi^[10]—is an almost unexplored territory in Mongolia, extending from the Pamirs to the Khyang mountains, and from the Yablonoi mountains to Altyn-tag and the Nanshan—which are the northernmost ranges of the Kuenlun mountains. The Chinese call the Gobi desert Han-hal and Sha-mo. The Mongolians say Sa-mak—"

"That's enough, sir," Heath interrupted. "I understand what you mean." He regarded Vance shrewdly. "And it's my opinion the Chink cook did it. If Mr. Markham would give me the word, I'd arrest him now."

"Why such haste, Sergeant?" sighed Vance. "You haven't a particle of evidence against him—and he knows it. That's why he will not admit that he was here earlier last night."

Heath started to say something but Markham made a gesture for silence.

"See here, Vance," he said, "how do you know Liang was here early last night?"

"By the fact that Gamble heard him come in at midnight. Gamble said he 'sneaked' in; but I assure you, Markham, if Liang had wanted to come in the back way without being heard, he would have done so with no difficulty whatever. Moreover, I imagine he always comes in silently—it's a Chinese characteristic. On general principles, the Chinese never want their movements, however innocent, to be known to foreigners. But last night Liang was heard returning—and Gamble had already retired to the fourth floor. A bit significant—eh, what? Liang probably saw Gamble's boudoir light ablaze, and let it be known, in a subtle way, that he was arriving from his afternoon and evening off. I can even imagine Liang leaving the kitchen door and windows open while he clattered Archer Coe's supper dishes and brewed himself a pot of tea. . . . Tea at midnight for a cultured Chinaman? No, no, Markham. Really, it's not done in the best oriental circles. And Liang had probably been flooding his system with *goak-fa* steepings most of the evening. He was merely signalling to Gamble that he had returned at midnight."

"I see what you mean." Markham nodded dubiously. "But, after all, your reasoning is purely speculative."

"Oh, yes," Vance admitted. "But the entire case is in a speculative stage just now, what? . . . Anyway, I have even more definite evidence that Liang was here early last night, and I'll present him with it later. . . . And that being the present state of affairs, what do you say to our having polite intercourse with Wrede and the Signor Grassi?"

Markham waved his hand in assent.

"And we'd better go upstairs," Vance suggested. "Brisbane is not a pretty sight."

Heath gave orders to Burke to remain at the library door and see that no one entered the room. Gamble was told to stay in the front hall and answer the door bell.

"Which one of the babies do you want first?" the Sergeant then asked.

"The Italian, by all means," said Vance. "He's frightfully upset, and therefore in an admirable state of mind for questioning. We'll keep Wrede till later,—he's teeming with possibilities."

Heath went toward the drawing-room door as Vance and Markham and I ascended the stairs to Archer Coe's room. Liang, with Miss Lake's breakfast tray, was descending from the third floor when we reached the upper landing, and he stood deferentially aside as we entered Coe's bedroom.

Grassi and the Sergeant joined us a few seconds later.

"Mr. Grassi," Vance began without preliminaries, "we should like to know exactly what your social and professional status is in this house. A very serious situation has developed here, and we are in need of all the information, however seemingly irrelevant, we can obtain. . . . We understand you have been a house guest of Mr. Coe's for a week."

The Italian now had himself well in hand. He walked to the easy chair in which Archer Coe's body had been found, and sat down in leisurely fashion.

"Yes—that is right," he returned, looking at Vance with calm disdain. "I came here at Mr. Coe's invitation a week ago yesterday. It was to have been a fortnight's visit."

"Had you any business with Mr. Coe?"

"Oh, yes. Business, one might say, was the basis of the invitation. . . . I am connected, in an official capacity, with a museum of antiquities in Milan," he explained; "and I had hoped to be able to purchase from Mr. Coe certain specimens of Chinese ceramic art from his remarkable collection."

"His *Ting yao* vase, for example?"

Grassi's dark eyes became suddenly brilliant with astonishment; but almost at once a wary look came into them, and he smiled with cold politeness.

"I must admit I was interested in the vase," he said. "Such pieces are very rare. Perhaps you know that genuine *Ting yao* of the Sung dynasty—not the *Tu ting yao* with its inevitable crackle—is practically unprocureable today."

Vance was standing by the east windows regarding the other with apparent unconcern.

"Yes, I knew that. . . . And you are sure Mr. Coe's vase is not *Shu fu yao*?"

"Quite sure—though it really does not matter whether the vase is Imperial ware or not. It is a magnificent specimen, of the amphora shape. . . . Have you examined it?"

"No," Vance told him. "I've never seen it. . . . but I think I've had a fragment of it in my hand."

Grassi stared.

"A fragment!"

"Yes, a small triangular piece," Vance nodded. Then he added: "I have grave fears, Mr. Grassi, that the *Ting yao* vase has been broken."

The Italian stiffened, and his eyes clouded with suspicious anger.

"It's impossible! I was inspecting the vase only yesterday afternoon. It was on the circular table in the library."

"There's only a Tao Kuang vase there now," Vance informed him.

"And where, may I be permitted to ask, did you find this fragment of *Ting yao*?" The man's tone was cold and sceptical.

"On the same table," Vance replied carelessly. "Beneath the Tao Kuang."

"Indeed?" There was a sneer in the inflexion of the word.

Vance appeared to ignore it. He made a slight gesture of the hand as if dismissing an unimportant matter, and came closer to the Italian.

"I understand from Gamble that you left the house at about four o'clock yesterday afternoon."

Grassi smiled courteously, but he was patently on his guard.

"That is correct. I had a business appointment for dinner and the evening."

"With whom?"

"Is that information necessary?"

"Oh, very." Vance met the other's smile with one equally arctic.

Grassi shrugged with elaborate resignation.

"Very well, then. . . . With one of the curators of the Metropolitan Museum of Art."

"And," continued Vance, without change of tone, "at what time last night did you meet Miss Lake?"

The Italian rose indignantly, his sombre eyes flashing.

"I resent that question, sir!" His voice, though dignified, was unsteady. "Even if I had met Miss Lake, I would not tell you."

"Really, Mr. Grassi," Vance smiled, "I would not have expected you to. Your conduct is quite correct. . . . I take it for granted you were aware that Miss Lake is engaged to Mr. Wrede."

Grassi calmed down quickly and resumed his seat.

"Yes; I knew there was some understanding. Mr. Archer Coe informed me of the fact. But he also stated—"

"Yes, yes. He also stated that he was opposed to the alliance. He enjoyed Mr. Wrede intellectually, but did not regard him favorably as a husband for his ward. . . . What is your opinion of the situation, Mr. Grassi?"

The Italian seemed surprised at Vance's question.

"You must forgive me, sir," he said after a pause, "if I plead my inability to express an opinion on the subject. I may say, however, that Mr. Brisbane Coe disagreed with his brother. He was very much in favor of the marriage, and stated his views most emphatically to Mr. Archer Coe."

"And now both of them are dead," Vance remarked.

Grassi's eyelids drooped, and he turned his head slightly.

"Both?" he repeated in a low voice. (The man's purely speculative attitude puzzled me greatly.)

"Mr. Brisbane was stabbed in the back shortly after Mr. Archer was killed," Vance informed him.

"Most unfortunate," the Italian murmured.

"Have you," asked Vance, "any suggestion as to who might desire to have these two gentlemen out of the way?"

Grassi suddenly became austere and aloof.

"I have no suggestion," he replied in a flat, diplomatic voice. "Mr. Archer Coe was the type of man who might inspire enmities; but Mr. Brisbane Coe was quite the opposite—genial, shrewd, kindly——"

"But he had undercurrents of passion and resentment," suggested Vance.

"Oh, yes," the other agreed. "Also great capabilities. But he was clever enough not to antagonize people."

"An excellent characterization," Vance complimented him. "And what are your impressions of Mr. Wrede? . . . I assure you any opinion you express will go no further."

Grassi appeared ill at ease. He did not answer at once but contemplated the wall before him for some time. Finally he spoke in the slow, precise manner of a man carefully choosing his words.

"I have not been particularly impressed by Mr. Wrede. On the surface he is most charming. He has a pleasing manner, and is an excellent conversationalist. He has delved into many things; but I have a feeling he is inclined toward superficiality. Withal, he is very clever. . . ."

"Cleverness is our national curse," Vance remarked.

Grassi gave him an appreciative glance.

"I have felt that, since being in this country. England, however, has neither cleverness nor profundity."

"Which," supplemented Vance, "gives her a great advantage. . . . But forgive my interruption. You were speaking of Mr. Wrede."

Grassi readjusted his thoughts.

"Mr. Wrede, as I have said, impresses me as being very clever. But I have sensed another side to him. He is capable, I should say, of unexpected things. I have a feeling he would stop at nothing to gain his own ends. Beneath his gracious exterior is a sublimated hardness—a cruelty such as the Aztecs——"

"Thank you!" Vance cut in on the other's remark with unwonted harshness. "I perfectly understand your feelings." He looked down at Grassi contemptuously. "And now, sir, we should like to know exactly what you did yesterday between four o'clock in the afternoon and one o'clock in the morning." His tone was almost menacing.

The Italian made a valiant effort to meet Vance's stern gaze.

"I have said all I intend to say," he announced.

Vance faced the man threateningly.

"In that case," he said, "I shall have to order your arrest on suspicion of having murdered Archer and Brisbane Coe!"

A look of abject fear came over Grassi's pallid face.

"No—you can't—do that," he stammered. "I didn't do it—I assure you I didn't do it!" His voice rose. "I'll tell you anything you want to know—anything at all. . . ."

"That's much better," Vance remarked coldly. "Explain where you were yesterday."

Grassi leaned forward, grasping the arms of the chair with frantic force.

"I went to Doctor Montrose's for tea," he began in a high-pitched, nervous voice. "We discussed ceramics; and I stayed to dinner. At eight o'clock I excused myself and went to the railway station to take the train for Mount Vernon—to the Crestview Country Club. . . ."

"Your appointment with Miss Lake was at what time?"

"Nine o'clock." The man looked appealingly at Vance. "There was to be a dance. . . . but—I took the wrong train,—I'm not familiar——"

"Quite—quite," Vance spoke encouragingly. "And what time was it when you arrived at the Club?"

"It was after eleven." Grassi fell back into the chair, as if exhausted. "I had to make several transportation changes," he continued in a forced tone. "It was most unfortunate. . . ."

"Yes, very," Vance studied the other icily. "Did the lady forgive your tardiness?"

"Yes! Miss Lake accepted my explanation," the man returned, with a show of heat. "The fact is, she did not arrive until several minutes after I did. She had motored to the Arrowhead Inn with friends for dinner, and had an accident of some kind on her return to the Club."

"Very distressing," murmured Vance. "Were her friends with her at the time of the accident?"

Grassi hesitated and moved uneasily.

"I do not believe they were," he answered. "Miss Lake told me she had motored back alone."

At this point Detective Burke stepped into the room.

"That Chink downstairs wants to speak to Mr. Vance," he said. "He's all hot and bothered."

Vance nodded to Heath.

"Send him up, Burke," the Sergeant ordered.

Burke turned and called down the stairs.

"Step on it, Wun Lung." He beckoned sweepingly with his whole arm.

Liang appeared at the door and waited till Vance came to him. He said something in a low voice which the rest of us in the room could not distinguish, and held out a crudely twisted paper parcel.

"Thank you, Mr. Liang," said Vance; and the Chinaman, with a bow, returned downstairs.

Vance took the parcel to the desk and began opening it.

"The cook," he said, speaking directly to the Italian, "has just found this package tucked away in the garbage-pail on the rear porch. It may interest you, Mr. Grassi."

As he spoke, he smoothed out the corners of the paper; and there were revealed to all of us many fragments of beautiful, delicate porcelain with a pure-white lustre.

"Here," he went on, still addressing the Italian, "are the remains of Mr. Coe's *Ting yao* vase. . . . And, if you will notice, several of these pieces of fragile Sung porcelain are stained with blood."

Grassi rose and stared at the fragments, stupefied.

[10] Gobi is a Mongol word meaning "desert."

CHAPTER X

"NEEDLES AND PINS"

(Thursday, October 11; 1.15 p.m.)

There was a long silence. Finally Grassi looked up.

"It's an outrage!" he exclaimed. "I don't comprehend it in the least. . . . And the blood! Do you think, sir, that this vase had anything to do with the death of Mr. Coe?"

"Without doubt." Vance was watching the Italian with a puzzled look. "But pray sit down again, Mr. Grassi. There are one or two more questions I should like to ask you."

The other resumed his seat reluctantly.

"If you were with Miss Lake at the Country Club late last night," Vance proceeded, "how did it happen that you and she returned to the house at different hours? I presume, of course, that you accompanied her back to the city."

Grassi appeared embarrassed.

"It was Miss Lake's suggestion," he said, "that we should not be heard entering the house at the same time. So I waited in Central Park for a quarter of an hour after she had gone in."

Vance nodded.

"I thought as much. It was the proximity of your two returns that made me conclude that possibly you had been together last night. And furthermore, business appointments with curators of the Metropolitan Museum are not apt to extend into the early hours of the morning. . . . But what reason did Miss Lake give for the deception?"

"No particular reason. Miss Lake merely said she thought it would be better if Mr. Brisbane Coe did not hear us coming in together."

"She specifically mentioned Mr. Brisbane Coe?"

"Yes."

"And she did not mention Mr. Archer Coe?"

"Not that I remember."

"That is quite understandable," Vance remarked. "Uncle Brisbane was her ally in her engagement to Mr. Wrede; and she may have feared that he would not have approved of her being out so late with another man. . . . The older generation, Mr. Grassi, is inclined to be strait-laced about these little matters. The modern girl is quite different."

The Italian was manifestly grateful for Vance's attitude, and bowed his appreciation.

Vance strolled to the window.

"By the by, Mr. Grassi, your quarters here are the suite of rooms at the front of the house on this floor, are they not?"

"Why, yes," the man replied, lifting his eyebrows. "They are directly over the drawing-room and den."

"When you came in last night—or rather, this morning—where did you hang your hat and coat?"

Again a cautious look came into the Italian's eyes.

"I did not wear an outer coat. But I carried my hat and stick to my own room."

"Why? There is a coat closet in the lower hall."

Grassi moved uneasily, and I could have sworn the pallor of his face increased.

"I did not care to make a noise opening and shutting the closet door," he explained.

Vance made no comment, and there was a short silence. Presently he turned from the window and walked back to the desk.

"That will be all for the present," he said pleasantly. "And thank you for your help. . . . Would you mind waiting in your room? We shall probably want to question you again before the afternoon is over. I shall see that Gamble serves you luncheon."

The man rose and started to say something. But, evidently thinking better of it, he merely bowed and went down the passageway of the hall toward the front of the house.

Markham was immediately on his feet.

"What about that broken vase?" he demanded, pointing at the parcel of porcelain fragments on the desk. "Was that the thing with which Archer Coe was struck over the head?"

"Oh, no," Vance picked up one of the larger pieces and snapped it easily between his fingers. "This delicate *ting yao* china would crack under the least pressure. If a man were struck with such a vase he would hardly feel it. The vase would simply break into pieces."

"But the blood. . . ."

"There was no blood on Archer's head," Vance selected one of the fragments and held it up. "Moreover, please note that the blood is not on the outer glaze, *but on the inside of the vase*. The same is true of the little piece I found on the table downstairs."

Markham looked at Vance in amazement.

"How, in the name of Heaven, do you account for that?"

Vance shrugged.

"I'm not accounting for it at present—not altogether. And yet, it's a most fascinatin' point. The only noticeable blood in this affair is that which trickled from Brisbane's wound and from the Scottie's head. But I can't possibly connect this broken vase with Brisbane's death or with the Scottie."

"And how do you connect it with Archer's death?"

Vance became evasive.

"Wasn't it standing on the table directly behind the seat that Archer was occupying when Gamble left the house last night to indulge his taste for the art of the cinema?"

"What of it?" queried Markham, with no attempt to curb his exasperation.

Vance took out his cigarette-case and sighed.

"What of it, indeed? . . . Give me a little more time," he said. "I have a fairly definite idea about this broken vase with the bloodstains on the inside; but it's too fantastic—too incredible. I want to verify my suspicions. . . ." His voice trailed off, and he lighted his cigarette meditatively.

Markham regarded him a while and then said:

"The whole affair strikes me as fantastic and incredible."

Vance exhaled a blue ribbon of smoke.

"Suppose we talk to Wrede," he suggested. "We may know more when he has unburdened his heart to us. He has ideas—otherwise he would not have had Gamble phone direct to you."

Markham gave an order to Heath, but at that moment Burke announced the arrival of the wagon from the Department of Public Welfare. The Sergeant went into the hall and was half-way down the stairs when Vance turned quickly from his contemplation of a Ch'ien Lung gourd-shaped vase in *mille-fleur* pattern, and hastened after him.

"Just a moment, Sergeant!"

So impetuous was Vance's manner that Markham and I followed him into the hall.

"I could bear," Vance called down to Heath, "to snoop in the pockets of Brisbane's suit before it's taken away. . . . Would you mind?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Vance," Heath, for some reason, was in good humor. "Come along."

We all went to the library. The Sergeant closed the door.

"I had the same idea," he said. "I've been figuring right along that maybe that slick butler was lying to us about the ticket to Chicago."

It took but a short time to empty the pockets of Brisbane Coe's suit to the library table. But there was nothing of interest among the contents, only the usual items to be found in a man's pockets—a wallet, handkerchiefs, keys, a fountain-pen, a watch, and the like. There were, however, the ticket and berth reservations to Chicago, and also the parcel-room check for the suit-

case.

Heath was crestfallen, and expressed himself in violent terms.

"The ticket's here all right," he added; "so I guess he intended to go, after all."

Vance, too, was disappointed.

"Oh, yes, Sergeant, he intended to go. But it was not the ticket that was worrying me. I was hoping to find something else."

"What?" asked Markham.

Vance gave him a vague look.

"Really, don't y' know, I haven't the slightest idea." He would say no more.

Heath summoned the two men waiting in the hall with their basket, and the body of Brisbane Coe was taken away to join that of his brother at the mortuary.

As the men went out to the car, Snitkin came in with the dead man's suit-case.

"I had a hell of a time getting it," he complained apologetically. "Those crabs at the station wouldn't turn it over, and I had to go to Headquarters and get an order from the Inspector."

"There wasn't any hurry." The Sergeant tried to smooth the detective's ruffled feelings.

Then, at Vance's suggestion, he opened the suit-case and examined the contents. They consisted merely of the items which would ordinarily be taken by a man making a short trip.

"Here, you," Heath jerked his head at Gamble. "Look in here and see if these are the things you packed."

Gamble obeyed fearfully. After a moment's inspection he nodded with obvious relief.

"Yes, sir. There's nothing there except what I put in."

Vance nodded to Heath, and the Sergeant ordered Gamble to put the bag away.

"And you, Snitkin," he added, "wait upstairs."

Both men disappeared, and the Sergeant went to the drawing-room doors and pulled them apart.

"Mr. Wrede," he called. "You're wanted."

Wrede came into the library with a haggard, questioning look in his eyes.

"Have you learned anything, Mr. Markham?" His voice seemed to quaver slightly, and as he spoke, his eyes roved over the room. "Where's Mr. Grassi?"

"Mr. Grassi's upstairs." Markham motioned to a chair. "And I'm sorry to say that thus far we have learned very little. . . . We are hoping that you may be able to help us out of our quandary."

"Good Lord! I wish I could." Wrede was like a man on the verge of collapse. "It's horrible!"

Vance had been watching him from under half-closed eyelids.

"It's more horrible than you perhaps realize," he said. "Brisbane Coe has also been murdered."

Wrede looked around him in a dazed way and sank heavily into the nearest chair.

"Brisbane?" His voice seemed to come from afar. "But why—why . . .?"

"Why, indeed?" Vance spoke harshly: there was none of the detached suavity in his manner that had been so noticeable during his interrogation of Grassi. "Nevertheless, he's dead. He, too, was stabbed in the back with a curiously shaped instrument."

Wrede stared straight ahead. His lips moved, but no sound came from them.

"Tell us what you know about this double murder, Mr. Wrede." Vance went on with grim relentlessness.

A shiver ran over Wrede's body.

"I know nothing about it," he replied after a painful pause. "Gamble told me this morning that Brisbane was in Chicago."

"He started for the station yesterday afternoon, but returned here last night—to meet his death."

"Why—should he return?" stammered Wrede.

"Have *you* any ideas on the subject?"

"I?" The man's eyes opened wide. "Not the slightest idea."

"What do you know of the conditions here at the Coe house yesterday? I would like as full a description as you can give; and I would also like a detailed account of your own movements yesterday."

"Why *my* movements?" Wrede's tone was weak and frightened.

"If you don't care to explain them . . ." began Vance pointedly, and stopped.

"I have no reason for secrecy," the other answered quickly. "I was here talking to Archer Coe from ten to twelve yesterday morning——"

"About ceramics—or Miss Lake?"

Wrede caught his breath.

"Both," he answered weakly. "The fact is, Archer and I had a somewhat bitter session regarding my coming marriage with Miss Lake. But it was nothing unusual. He was, as you may know, violently opposed to the marriage. Brisbane took part in the discussion, and called Archer some rather harsh names. . . ."

"And after twelve?"

"I lunched in my apartment. Then I went to an auction at the American Art Galleries. But there was nothing there that interested me particularly; and, besides, I had a bad headache. So I came home around three, and lay down. I did not leave my apartment again until this morning, when Gamble phoned me."

"You live next door, do you not?"

"The first house to the east, across the double vacant lot. It's an old residence that has been converted into an apartment house. I occupy the second floor."

"Who owns the vacant lot?"

"It is part of the Coe estate. Archer put it to lawn, and erected the iron fence on the street. He said he wanted the light and space, and refused to sell."

Vance nodded indifferently.

"So I understood. . . . And you remained in your apartment from three o'clock yesterday afternoon until this morning?"

"That's right. I had a beastly headache. . . ."

"Did you see Miss Lake yesterday?"

"Yes, in the morning, when I was here. The fact is, I made an appointment with her for last night—at the Country Club. But when I got home yesterday afternoon, I called her by phone and excused myself. I was in no condition for dancing."

"Mr. Grassi substituted for you," said Vance.

Wrede's eyes clouded, and he set his jaws.

"So she told me this morning." (I could not determine whether the man was telling the truth or merely being gallant.)

"When Gamble phoned you this morning," Vance asked, "what was your mental reaction to the news?"

Wrede frowned, and it was a considerable time before he answered.

"That would be difficult to analyze. . . . I was not overfond of Archer," he admitted; "and I was not personally distressed by the report of his death. But I was extremely puzzled. It was not like Archer to take his own life; and—frankly—I had very grave doubts. That is why I hastened over here,—I wanted to see for myself. Even when I had looked through the keyhole I could scarcely believe the evidence of my vision, knowing Archer as well as I did. For that reason I advised Gamble to get in immediate touch with Mr. Markham."

Vance's stony contemplation of Wrede did not relax.

"You acted wisely," he observed, with a tinge of sarcasm. "But if you did not believe that Archer Coe had committed suicide, there must have been in your mind another possibility—to wit: that of murder.—Who, Mr. Wrede, do you think would have had sufficient motive to commit the crime?"

Wrede did not answer at once. He appeared sorely troubled and ran his fingers several times through his hair.

"That is a question I have been trying to answer all morning," he replied without looking at Vance. "One may speculate, of course, but it would not be fair to voice those speculations without definite evidence of some kind...."

"Mr. Grass?"

Again a black cloud passed over Wrede's face.

"I—I—really, Mr. Vance, I'm not well acquainted with the man. He was after Coe's collection of Chinese ceramics; but that would hardly constitute a motive for murder."

"No-o." Vance smiled frigidly. "What about Miss Lake?"

Wrede almost leaped from his seat.

"That suggestion is outrageous!" he cried, glowering at Vance. "How dare you——?"

"Spare me the drama," Vance cut in, with a contemptuous smile. "I'm deuced difficult to impress. . . . We're merely discussing possibilities, and we can do far better without a display of histrionic talent, however noteworthy."

Wrede sat back, with a mumbled remark which we could not make out.

"What do you think of Liang, the cook?" Vance asked next.

The man glanced up with a swift, shrewd look.

"Liang, eh? That's quite different. There's something secretive and underhand about that Chinaman. I've never wholly understood his being here. He's certainly not a cook by profession; and from my apartment window I've often seen him sitting on the rear porch writing for hours. My impression is he's a spy of some kind. And he knows Chinese art. Several times I've caught him in this very room inspecting the vases, and studying the signatures on their bases, and running the tips of his yellow fingers over their glazes with the air of a connoisseur. . . . And I've never liked his manner round this house,—he's sly and over-polite. I distrusted him from the first." Wrede nodded his head sagely. "If you knew more of what was back of his presence here, you might know more of Archer Coe's death. . . . At least," he hastened to add, "that is my impression."

Vance stifled a mild yawn.

"The oriental temperament is full of mystic potentialities," he commented. "And my own impression is that Liang knows something about what happened here last night. But, as you suggest, a motive in that direction is still lacking." He leaned against the mantel and let his gaze drift into space. "On the other hand, you yourself had abundant motive for doing away with Archer Coe."

Wrede, to my surprise, did not appear to be offended by this remark.

"Archer was admittedly opposed to your marriage with his niece," Vance went on. "He might even have brought sufficient influence to bear to stop it altogether. And until he died Miss Lake was limited to a small allowance. She would have received her patrimony at Archer's decease. Thus, if you had successfully put Archer out of the way, you would have at once gained a fairly wealthy bride—with no obstacles. Is it not so, Mr. Wrede?"

The man gave a harsh laugh.

"Yes, I suppose so. As you point out, I had ample motive for murdering Archer. But, on the other hand, I would have had no reason whatever for murdering Brisbane."

"Ah, yes—Brisbane. Quite—quite. That second corpse complicates the whole matter."

"Where was Brisbane's body found, may I ask?"

"In the coat closet at the end of the lower hall. . . . You didn't, perchance, open the coat closet this morning?"

"No!" Wrede shuddered. "But I came very near it. Instead, I threw my hat on a chair in the drawing-room."

Vance shook his head in satirical sadness.

"My word! How consistently every one seems to have avoided that closet since Brisbane's occupation of it!"

"Perhaps," suggested Wrede significantly, "Liang was not ignorant of its contents."

"Who knows?" sighed Vance. "And Liang certainly would not tell us. Sad . . . sad . . ."

Wrede lapsed into introspection. Presently he spoke.

"What I can't understand is that boiled door upstairs."

"Neither can we," said Vance, in a matter-of-fact tone. "It's most confusing. But don't let that point disturb your slumbers tonight, Mr. Wrede. I'm thoroughly convinced *you* didn't bolt it."

The man jerked his head up in a queer way.

"Oh, thanks." His attempt at pleasantry was unsuccessful. "Have you found the weapon?" he asked lamely. "That might give you a clue."

"I'm sure it would," agreed Vance.

Heath, who had been standing by the front windows, stepped forward.

"That reminds me." He gave Vance a disgruntled look: obviously he did not like the other's method of interviewing Wrede. "The boys and I are going to give this house a swell looking-over. . . . All right with you, Mr. Markham?"

Markham nodded.

"Go to it, Sergeant. The sooner the better."

Heath went from the room, and Vance resumed his interrogation.

"By the by, Mr. Wrede, are you interested in Chinese ceramics?"

"Not particularly." The man was obviously puzzled by the question. "I have a few pieces, but I'm no expert. However, I couldn't help learning something about the subject during my long association with Archer."

Vance walked to the circular teak-wood table behind the davenport, and pointed at the Tao Kuang vase.

"What's your opinion of this *Ting yao*?"

Wrede rose and came forward.

"*Ting yao*?" There was a perplexed look in his eyes. "That's not a *Ting yao*, is it?"

"I don't believe it is." Vance pretended to study it. "But I was under the impression Archer Coe kept a *Ting yao* vase of the same shape on this table."

Wrede stood, his hands behind him, looking down at the vase. Suddenly he said:

"By Gad, he did, Mr. Vance! But this isn't the vase."

"When did you last see the original vase?"

"I couldn't say. I was in this room yesterday morning—but I didn't notice. There were other things on my mind." He looked at Vance questioningly. "Has this vase anything to do with——?"

"It's difficult to say," Vance replied. "It merely struck me as peculiar that Archer would have a vase like this in his collection."

"It *is* peculiar." Wrede turned his attention again to the table. "This vase might have been substituted for the other."

"It was," said Vance laconically.

"Aha!" Wrede, for some reason I could not understand, seemed pleased; and I asked myself if he were thinking of Grassi.

Vance apparently had not noticed his exclamation. He glanced at his watch.

"That will be all, Mr. Wrede. You'd better run along and get some lunch. But we may want you tomorrow. Will you be at your apartment?"

"Yes, all day." He hesitated. "May I see Miss Lake before I go?"

"By all means. And you might break the news to her of Brisbane's death."

Wrede went out, and we could hear him mounting the stairs.

Markham rose nervously.

"What do you make of the fellow?" he asked.

Vance smoked a moment thoughtfully.

"Peculiar character—far from appealing'. I wouldn't choose him for a boon companion."

"You certainly didn't handle him with gloves."

"He's too clever a talker to be allowed any advantage. My only hope of learning what he might possibly know was to upset his equanimity."

"It occurred to me," said Markham, "that he might have opened the hall closet this morning, and, because of what he saw, told Gamble to phone me."

"It's possible," Vance nodded. "The same thought flitted through my mind. But if that were so, why shouldn't he have told us the moment we arrived?"

"Anyway, it's safe to conclude he doesn't care a great deal for Grassi. It struck me he was jealous of the Italian."

"Oh, quite. And it was news to him that Grassi and Miss Lake were together last night. Curious situation, that." Vance frowned musingly. "But Wrede's real passion of hatred is directed toward the cook. He has sized up Liang pretty accurately. . . . It's strange that Archer, with his Sinological knowledge, didn't suspect Liang's true status."

"Maybe he did," Markham suggested, without interest.

Vance looked up quickly and took his cigarette from his lips.

"My aunt! Maybe he did! . . ."

There came a pounding of heavy footsteps on the hall stairs, and the next moment Heath was standing in the door, beaming triumphantly. He held something in his hand, and, crossing to the table, he threw the object down for our inspection.

It was one of the most beautiful and interesting Chinese daggers I have ever seen.^[1] The blade, which was square with concave sides, was of steel, delicately and minutely incised and perhaps six inches long. It tapered from a thickness of about half an inch at the guard to a stiletto-like point, and was partly encrusted with dried blood. The guard was oval-shaped, of polished gold, and engraved with the original owner's seal. The cylindrical handle was wound with vermilion silk, with the usual row of knots running down one side; and it was surmounted by a tiny figure of Kuan Ti, the Chinese God of War, carved in brown jade. That this dagger was the murder weapon was obvious at one glance.

"Good work, Sergeant," said Vance. "Where did you find it?"

"Under the cushion-seat of the easy chair where we found the dead guy this morning."

"Oh, I say! Really? In Archer Coe's bedroom?" Vance seemed astonished at Heath's announcement. "Most amazin' . . ."

He went swiftly to the dining-room door and called Liang. When the Chinaman appeared Vance beckoned him to the table and pointed at the dagger.

"Ever see that before, Mr. Liang?"

The man regarded the weapon with a look devoid of all expression.

"Yes, I have seen it many times," he responded in a flat voice. "It was always kept in that cabinet near the window, with other similar weapons of my country."

Vance dismissed him, and walked up and down the room several times. Something disturbing was on his mind.

Heath watched him a moment and then looked back at the dagger.

"And not a chance to pick up a finger-print," he complained with disgust. "A silk handle." He chewed viciously on his burnt-out cigar.

"No—no finger-prints," murmured Vance without lifting his eyes from the floor. "But that isn't the chief difficulty, Sergeant. Brisbane Coe was stabbed hours after Archer Coe was stabbed. And yet the dagger is found in Archer Coe's chair upstairs. The whole thing is mad. . . ."

He continued pacing in a brown study. Suddenly he drew up short.

"Sergeant! Bring me Brisbane Coe's top-coat—the black-and-white tweed one—from the hall closet." His voice held a tinge of excitement.

Heath left the room and returned shortly with the garment.

Vance began turning the pockets inside out. A gray silk handkerchief and a pair of gloves fell to the table. Then from the left-hand outside pocket Vance drew forth two pieces of fine, waxed linen string about four feet long. He was about to throw these to one side, when he suddenly bent forward and inspected them. One end of each piece of string was tied securely to a large bent pin.

Heath was looking on with rapt fascination.

"And what might that be, Mr. Vance?" he asked.

Vance did not answer, but put his hand again into the left-hand pocket of the top-coat. When he withdrew it he was holding a long slender piece of steel.

"Ah!" he exclaimed with satisfaction.

We all looked down at it wonderingly. It was perhaps the last thing in the world we expected to see.

The object which Vance had taken from the pocket of Brisbane Coe's coat was a darning-needle!

[1] I learned later that the dagger dated from the Hsüan Tê reign of the Ming dynasty.

CHAPTER XI

MORE BLOODSTAINS

(Thursday, October 11; 1.45 p.m.)

Markham looked from the needle back to the little pile of string, and then at Vance.

"Well, what does that mean—if anything?" he asked.

Vance slowly picked up the needle and the two pieces of string and put them in his own coat pocket.

"It means devilry, Markham. And it means that we are dealing with a shrewd, subtle, and tricky brain. The technique of this crime had been thought out to several decimal points—and then everything went wrong. The murderer was forced to add complications to his plot in order to cover himself. And he has confused the issue out of all recognizability...."

"But what about the string and that damping-needle?" interrupted Markham.

"That was where the plot went wrong——"

"But who used this string and needle? And for what purpose?"

Vance looked up gravely.

"If I knew who used them, I'd have an important key to the entire situation. The fact that they were in Brisbane's top-coat means little. That is the logical place that any one would have put them after having used them. It's always safe, don't y' know, to throw suspicion on a dead man."

Markham stiffened and his eyes became hard.

"You think there's a possibility that Brisbane killed Archer?"

"My word, no!" Vance spoke wearily but with emphasis. "I doubt if Brisbane even returned to the house until Archer was dead."

"You believe the same person killed both Brisbane and Archer?"

Vance nodded, but the puzzled frown did not leave his face.

"Undoubtedly. The technique of both murders was the same; and the same weapon was used in both killings."

"But," argued Markham, "the dagger was found in Archer's bolted bedroom."

"That's another incredible complication," Vance returned. "Really, y' know, the dagger shouldn't have been there. It should have been here in the library."

"Here?" Markham uttered the word with astonishment. "But why in the library? Neither man was killed here."

"I wonder..." Vance leaned over the table, deep in thought. "It would have been the logical place... and yet neither body was found here...."

"Why was this room the logical place?" Markham asked sharply.

"Because of this substituted Tao Kuang vase and the broken piece of *Ting yao* porcelain with the blood on it——" He stopped abruptly and his eyes drifted into space. "That blood-stained *Ting yao*!... Ah! What happened after that Sung vase was broken?—what would the stabber have done then? Would he have gone out, taking the blood with him?... No! He wouldn't have dared—it wouldn't have fitted in with his sinister purpose. He would have been afraid. He was hiding something, Markham..." Vance looked about the room. "That's it: *he was hiding something*!... Twice he hid it... and then something unexpected happened—something startling and upsetting. The corpse should have been here in the library, d'ye see; and therefore the dagger had to be here."

"Will you get down to something definite?" snapped Markham. "If you have a workable theory, state it in comprehensible terms."

"I have a theory, Markham," Vance replied quietly, "—a theory to account for certain contradictory phases of this case—but I wouldn't dare express it—yet. It's too outlandish. And moreover, it doesn't fit two-thirds of the facts.... But give me a few minutes. Let me see if I can verify one important item in my theory. If I'm able to find what I'm looking for, we'll be a little farther along."

He walked to the mantelpiece and stood before a large blue-green vase.

"A beautiful example of *Tsui se*," he said, running his fingers over the glaze. "Turquoise blue, as we would say, but the Chinese designated it by the color of the kingfisher's feathers. Its manufacture began some time in the Ming dynasty and continued till the Chia Ch'ing era. And there is no crackle in this piece; and there are phoenixes incised in the *pâte*..." He put his finger in the neck. "Too small," he commented, and moved to another vase—a bottle-shaped, dark-red specimen—at the further end of the mantel.

"One of the most perfect examples of *Lang yao* I've ever seen,—ox-blood, or *sang de bœuf*, as we call it. It's as fine as the one in the Schiller collection." He lifted it up, and looked at it closely inside and out. "Watered-green crackle on the base, and signed by the empty double ring in blue, identifying it as K'ang Hsi." He set it back on its standard, and strolled to a cabinet against the west wall. On it stood a vase of brilliant black.

"Mirror-black, Markham," he said, touching it delicately. "And one of the rarest varieties,—note the golden speckles floating in the glaze. For pure beauty, however, I prefer the earlier examples of this ware—the *Chien yao*, for instance, with its green iridescence. *Chien yao* was not made after the Yüan dynasty. The Ming dynasty did not know it; but it came in favor again during the K'ang Hsi era."

As he talked, he fingered the vase lovingly and held its lips toward the light.

"My own mirror-black is K'ang Hsi, with brown reflections; and it's considerably larger than the one in the Allen collection."^[12]

Markham and Heath were watching Vance closely. Both of them knew that he was not talking at random, but that, beneath his apparently aimless chatter about Chinese ceramics, there lurked some definite and serious purpose.

Vance set the K'ang Hsi mirror-black vase back on the cabinet, and let his eyes run over the other ceramic specimens in the room. There was a vase of dead-white glassy porcelain painted in enamel colors in the style of Ku Yüeh-hsüan; a pair of rouleau-form vases decorated with *famille-vert* enamels, with panel designs in a ground of floral brocade; a Lung-ch'üan celadon, copied from an ancient bronze with designs in relief, on fine white ware with a red-brown base; a Sung flower-pot of gray porcelaneous ware with a purple, opalescent glaze; a bluish vase of "soft *chün*" with red markings; a Ju-type vase, pale blue, with carved floral designs; an early Ming turquoise wine-jar incised and bordered; a K'ang Hsi "apple green" vase with a lustrous, transparent glaze; several beautifully incised Kuan Yins of *blanc-de-chine*, or Fukien, ware; and various ginger-jars, ewers, bottles, water pots, bulb-bowls, plates, libation cups, incense tripods, goblets, wine-jars, Shon Lao figures, fish-bowls, beakers, cups, and the like, ranging from the Han dynasty to the Ch'ing.

But Vance did not linger over any one of them. He gave them merely a casual inspection. He seemed to be searching for some particular type of vase, for he would hesitate here and there, shake his head as if in rejection, and pass on to other pieces. At last he completed his rounds and halted. There was a distinct look of disappointment on his face as he turned back to us.

"I'm afraid my theory is a mere broken reed," he sighed.

"I certainly haven't been leaning on it," retorted Markham. He was annoyed at Vance's secretive manner.

"Neither have I, for that matter," said Vance a little sadly. "But it furnished a starting-point to reason from—provided, of course, I could verify it."

He came back slowly toward the centre of the room where we were grouped about the davenport and the circular table. As he reached the end of the library table, he halted and looked down at a small low teak-wood stand on which stood a cornucopia-shaped white vase. The stand was directly behind the end of the davenport farthest from the lamp and against the end of the library table. A set of books piled high on the end of the table almost obscured the vase. Vance approached it.

"That's dashed interestin'," he murmured. "A piece of later *Ting yao*—from the Yüng Ch'eng era, I should say. During the Ming dynasty, y' know, Markham, and the K'ang Hsi, Yüng Ch'eng, and Ch'ien Lung eras of the Ch'ing dynasty, the Chinese ceramists made many facsimiles of Sung *Ting yao*, in every way as beautiful as the earlier pieces. In fact, the Ming and Ch'ing artificers developed and improved on the Sung."

He picked up the vase and began inspecting it.

"A rather thick biscuit, and decorated in relief: copied from an ancient bronze.... Angular crackling in the glaze, which is brittle and glossy.... A very beautiful and perfect specimen."

As he talked, he moved toward the window and held the vase to the light in such a manner that he could look inside it. He peered closely into its broad volute mouth. He then adjusted his monocle and looked again into the interior of the vase.

"I believe there is something here," he said. Moistening his finger on his tongue, he put his hand deep into the vase. When he withdrew it there was a red smear on the end of his finger.

"Yes, quite so," he said, looking closely at his finger.

"What have you found?" demanded Markham.

Vance held out his finger.

"Blood!" he said.

He replaced the vase on its stand and rubbed off the stain on his finger with his handkerchief. Then he fixed a grim gaze upon Markham, who was waiting for some explanation of this new discovery.

"And that vase was also near the davenport, only a few feet from where the Sung *Ting yao* stood. Both vases were used in this devilish plot. . . . A subtle conception—but the plan fell to pieces——"

"See here, Vance,"—Markham spoke quietly, trying to curb his annoyance—"just how were those vases used? And where did the blood on them come from?"

"As I see it, Markham, those two *Ting yao* vases were used to divert suspicion from the real murderer and to focus it on another person; and they were employed as symbols in order to create a false motive. That is to say, the first delicate *Ting yao*—the one which originally stood on that circular table, and which has been supplanted by that execrable Tao Kuang—was to have been the signature of the crime, and to have put ideas in our heads. But it broke, and therefore made the selection of the second vase necessary——"

"You mean we were to regard the crime as being connected with Archer's collection of Chinese ceramics?"

Vance nodded.

"I feel sure of it. But in just what way I don't know. It would probably have been perfectly clear if there had not been a gross miscalculation on the murderer's part."

"We were, you think, supposed to find the blood in the vase?"

Vance frowned.

"No—not the blood exactly. That is where the plot went awry."

"Just a minute, Vance!" Markham's voice was commanding. "Where did that blood come from?"

"From Archer Coe's body!" Vance's answer sent a chill up my spine.

"But there was no external bleeding," Markham reminded him.

"True," Vance leaned against the back of the davenport and lighted a cigarette. "But there was blood on the dagger when it was withdrawn from between Archer's ribs. . . ."

"The dagger?"

"Exactly. . . . As I see it, Markham, the bloody dagger that killed Archer was thrown into the fragile *Ting yao* vase that was on the table there, in order to indicate—by a subtle and devious symbolism—the motive for the crime. But the steel and gold of the dagger broke the vase—it was of almost egg-shell delicacy—and so the dagger was then placed in this other *Ting yao*. In clearing up the broken pieces of the first vase, the murderer overlooked one small fragment."

"But why the substituted vase?"

"In order that no attention would be attracted by the glaring absence of the original one. If a valuable *Ting yao* were missing, it might indicate another motive for the crime, and that motive would have confused the issue and diverted attention from the person the murderer wanted us to think was behind the crime. The substitution of the Tao Kuang vase was in the nature of a precaution."

"That's all very well, perhaps," Markham returned dubiously; "but we did not find the dagger in the other vase——"

"It was taken out and used to kill Brisbane."

"By the murderer of Archer?"

"Unquestionably. No one else would have known where the dagger was."

"But, Vance, that theory doesn't fit the facts. The Sergeant found the dagger upstairs in Archer's room—with the door bolted on the inside. And Archer died hours before Brisbane was stabbed. Why, if the same person killed both of them, didn't he replace the dagger in this vase? Archer was already dead, and Brisbane was killed downstairs. Why should the dagger have been in Archer's bedroom chair?"

Vance smoked unhappily for some time before replying.

"That's what I can't make out," he admitted.

"I got it!" exclaimed Heath. "The guy croaked Archer downstairs and put the dagger in the vase. Just then Brisbane came back from the station and caught him. So he grabbed the dagger and did Brisbane in to protect himself. After that he dragged Archer upstairs, still carrying the dagger, got excited, and left it in the chair where he'd put Archer."

Vance smiled ruefully and shook his head.

"There are too many loopholes in that theory, Sergeant. Brisbane was not stabbed until hours after Archer. The murderer could have been in Philadelphia by the time Brisbane was stabbed. He certainly wouldn't have hurried here for several hours after disposing of Archer——"

"But, Mr. Vance, you yourself said the same person croaked both guys."

"And I still believe it," returned Vance. "The only explanation I have is that the murderer, after killing Archer and placing the dagger in the vase, returned to the house and killed Brisbane, too."

"Then, I ask you,"—the Sergeant became petulant—"how did the dagger get in the bolted room?—and who put the bullet through Archer's head, and why?"

"If I could answer those questions, Sergeant," Vance told him, "I could solve this whole insane problem."

At this moment Wrede came down the stairs and walked past the library to the front door.

"Oh, I say, Mr. Wrede," Vance called out. "Could we speak to you a moment before you go?"

The man turned and came into the library. His face was flushed, and there was a sullen, angry look in his eyes—a look almost murderous. He stood just inside the door, his hands tightly flexed at his sides, looking at Vance with defiant anger.

"Here I am," he announced curtly through set jaws.

"So I observe," Vance murmured mildly. "And you seem rather upset, don't y' know?"

Wrede's tense attitude did not relax; and he said nothing.

"You saw Miss Lake?" Vance asked pleasantly.

The man gave a jerky nod.

"And since speaking to her," Vance pursued languidly, "do you still feel that you have no suggestion to make as to a possible perpetrator of this double crime?"

A shrewd light came into the other's eyes, and he hesitated for several seconds. Then he said:

"Not at the moment. But it might be well if you temporarily concentrated your investigation on Mr. Grassi. I have just learned that Archer Coe had agreed to sell him a considerable section of his collection."

"Indeed?" Vance's eyebrows went up. "Did Miss Lake inform you of the fact?"

Again Wrede hesitated. "Miss Lake and I discussed other matters," he returned at length. Then he added: "It may interest you to know, Mr. Vance, that my engagement to Miss Lake has been broken."

"Most distressing," Vance gave his attention to his cigarette. "But what could Archer's willingness to dispose of part of his collection have to do with his death?"

"I couldn't say," Wrede had become uneasy. "But it strikes me as very peculiar that Archer should consent to sell."

"I'll admit," agreed Vance, "that it doesn't sound altogether reasonable. Maybe, however, he took a great fancy to Mr. Grassi."

Wrede narrowed his eyes, but made no reply, and Vance continued:

"But even had Archer consented to dispose of certain pieces in the hope, let us say, of acquiring others, I still can't see what Mr. Grassi would have gained by his death."

"Archer may have regretted his decision after he had committed himself. . . ."

"I see your point, Mr. Wrede," Vance interrupted coldly. "But what of Brisbane?"

"Could not Brisbane's death have been an accident?"

"Yes—quite." Vance smiled thoughtfully. "I'm sure it was an accident—a most unfortunate accident. Last night was filled with the most amazing accidents. . . . But I sha'n't keep you from your lunch any longer. I merely wanted to ask you how you felt about the matter after having spoken to Miss Lake; and you have answered me quite frankly."

Wrede bowed stiffly.

"I'll be in my apartment all day tomorrow, in case you care to see me again," he said.

He had no sooner closed the front door behind him than Vance called Gamble from the hall.

"Run upstairs," he said, "and, not saying anything, find out where Mr. Grassi is."

The butler left the room, returning shortly.

"Mr. Grassi, sir," he reported, "is in conversation with Miss Lake in her sitting-room on the third floor."

Vance gave a faint satisfied smile.

"And now, Gamble, will you ask Mr. Grassi to come here."

Gamble went out, and Vance turned to Markham.

"I suspected from Wrede's manner that he had found his Latin rival with the young woman. There was probably a most painful scene, and poor Wrede was given his *cong  *. It's very sad. He doesn't like Grassi—he doesn't at all like him. But I doubt if he really suspects him of killing Archer—though I'm sure Wrede doesn't put it beyond him——"

"Then why the insinuations?"

"More subtlety, Markham. Wrede is no fool—he's deuced clever, in fact. And he thinks that, if we turn our attention to Grassi, we will push past the straw man, so to speak, and find somebody else."

"Whom, in the name of Heaven?"

"Miss Lake, of course." Before Markham could answer, Vance went on. "Wrede has become vindictive and bitter. My asking him about Miss Lake as a possible suspect put ideas in his head,—he knows of the acute antagonism that has always existed between her and Archer, and he knows, too, that she is a capable, strong-minded woman. Therefore, when he was humiliated a moment ago in front of Grassi, he turned her over to us, as it were, with Grassi as a smoke-screen."

Grassi entered the library a moment later.

"I understand, sir," Vance addressed him, "that Mr. Archer Coe had consented to sell you certain items from his collection."

The Italian was nervous, and declined the chair Vance offered him.

"Yes," he replied; "that is true. I informed Mr. Wrede of the fact a moment ago. My reason for so doing was that Mr. Wrede practically ordered me out of the house—on the strength of his engagement to Miss Lake, I presume—and I informed him that my business here was not considered inasmuch as a considerable part of Mr. Coe's collection belonged technically to me. It was necessary for me to remain to arrange for packing and shipment."

"And what did Miss Lake say?"

The Italian seemed loath to answer, but at length he said:

"Miss Lake broke off her engagement with Mr. Wrede. And then she asked him to leave the house and remain away."

"Most impulsive!" Vance sighed. "Was she violent about it?"

"She was not over-polite," Grassi admitted; and there was a faint tinge of satisfaction in his tone.

"I say, Mr. Grassi";—Vance spoke suddenly—"do you think that Miss Lake killed her uncle?"

The Italian took a deep, audible breath and stared at Vance.

"I—I—really, sir, I——"

"Thanks awfully for the effort," Vance remarked. "I can quite understand your feelings. We'll let the matter drop. But I should like to know why you didn't tell us before of Mr. Archer Coe's agreement to dispose of some of his collection to you."

Grassi had recovered from his apparent shock at Vance's question concerning the possibility of Hilda Lake's guilt.

"It did not occur to me that the matter was relevant to the present unfortunate situation."

"Was the agreement written or verbal?" Vance asked.

"Written." The man reached in his pocket and handed Vance a folded paper. "At my request Mr. Coe wrote that letter to me yesterday," he explained. "I wished to cable the news to Milan."

Vance unfolded the letter and read it, with Markham, Heath and me looking over his shoulder. It was a holograph letter on personal note-paper, and ran:

Signor Eduardo Grassi.

Dear Sir,

In confirmation of our recent conversation, I hereby agree to sell to you, as a representative of the Museum of Antiquities at Milan, the following pieces in my private collection: . . .

Then came a detailed list of forty or fifty items, including many of Archer Coe's most famous and valuable specimens of Chinese art. The price of these items, which followed in a separate paragraph, caused Heath to suck in his breath; and I must admit that even I was astonished at the high figure. At the end of the letter was Archer Coe's sprawling signature. The date at the head of the document was October 10.

Vance refolded the letter and put it in his pocket.

"We shall keep this for the present," he told Grassi. "It will be perfectly safe, and it will be returned to you anon. It may have some bearing on the case, and the authorities may wish to refer to it."

I had expected Grassi to protest, but instead he bowed in polite acquiescence.

"And now," Vance concluded, "I shall again ask you to wait in your own quarters until we send for you."

Grassi went out, with obvious relief.

"Sergeant," Vance said, "could you get me a sheet of that note-paper on Archer Coe's desk? And his fountain-pen?"

The Sergeant went upstairs and returned shortly with the paper and the pen.

Vance compared the paper with the letter he had taken from Grassi, and made several marks on the paper with Archer Coe's pen. After an inspection of both he said:

"It is certainly Coe's note-paper; and Archer's pen wrote the letter. . . . Most significant."

He returned Grassi's letter to his pocket, and ordered Gamble to take lunch to Miss Lake and Grassi.

"And now, Markham," he said, "we have chived all the inmates. What do you say to emulating the voracious Doremas and seeking food? Eggs *B  n  dict* are in order, with an asparagus-tip salad, and a *souff   au Cacao*. I know a French restaurant in the neighborhood——"

Heath, with a grimace, interrupted him.

"I'm sticking here," he announced. "I got work to do, and the reporters'll be swarming around like flies before long. I'll get my victims later."

Markham had risen.

"I'll either be back or phone you later," he told the Sergeant.

Vance went toward the front door.

"Cheer up, old dear," he exhorted Markham. "It's not nearly so black as it seems. The clouds are beginning to disperse. We have all the data now, and it's simply a matter of arranging them and interpreting them correctly."

"I wish I could feel so optimistic," grumbled Markham, following Vance into the vestibule.

Vance halted and, turning, regarded the perplexed Heath.

"Oh, by the by, Sergeant," he said; "one or two little favors,—there's a good fellow. Will you check up at once—this afternoon, if possible—on the—shall I say alibis?—of Miss Lake and Signor Grassi. Grassi says he dined last night with Doctor Montrose of the Metropolitan Museum, took a wrong train, and ended at the Crestview Country Club at eleven.—Miss Lake, according to her tale as reported by Grassi, dined at Arrowhead Inn with friends, drove to the Country Club alone, had an accident, and arrived shortly after the lost Signor had found his missin' trail."

"That's easy," snorted Heath. "Two good men can check all that in a few hours...."

"And," added Vance, "you might give this house another search. I'm dashed interested in a blunt instrument that might have been used for striking Archer and the wee Scottie."

Heath screwed up his face shrewdly.

"Anything definite in mind, sir?" he asked.

"Oh, yes—quite. I noticed that in the fire set in the living-room everything was intact in the rack but the poker."

Heath nodded. "I get you, sir. If there's a poker in this house, I'll lay hands on it."

"Stout fellow!" Vance continued toward the front door.

"And speaking of dogs, sir," Heath added, "that guy Wrede told me he was very fond of the animals. Owned one before he moved."

"Ah!" Vance paused. "Did he mention the breed?"

"He did. But it wasn't any dog I'd ever heard of."

"It was a Doberman Pinscher," Markham informed him.

"Now that's deuced interestin', y' know," Vance murmured.

"Anything else, Mr. Vance?" Heath asked.

"Well, yes," Vance drawled, turning at the door. "Be so good, Sergeant, as to have the bolt on Archer's bedroom door fixed while we're lunching. I'll want it in perfect working order when I return."

The Sergeant grinned broadly.

"So that's on your mind, is it? ... Sure, I'll have it fixed."

[12] Vance's mirror-black vase, which I had often seen and admired, was fifteen inches tall, whereas the C. P. Allen vase is only seven inches tall.

CHAPTER XII

THE CHINESE CHEST

(Thursday, October 11; 2.15 p. m.)

We walked through the invigorating autumn air to a small French restaurant in West 72nd Street near the Drive. Vance, who knew the *patron* ordered our lunch. We had a glass of Dubonnet, a young Chambertin with our eggs, and a few sips of Grand Marnier after our coffee. Vance talked of dogs in general and of Scottish terriers in particular. He told us of the famous blood lines—the Ems, Barlee, Abertay, Laindon, Alboume, Lauriston, Merlewood, Taybank, Omsay, and Heather—and described their characteristics. He went into the obscure origin of the Scottie, the West Highland and the Cairn; and discussed the status of the Scottie in Great Britain and America. He described the type of dog he preferred, and criticised the tendency among certain Scottish terrier breeders to produce “freaks.”

“Proportion in all things,” he said. “One must approach a Scottie as one approaches a work of art. The fundamental principles are the same. A dog, like a painting or a piece of sculpture, must have free movement in three dimensions, balance, organization, rhythm—a perfect plastic ensemble. If the head is too long and the body too short, both balance and proportion are lost. Some of our breeders, with no appreciation of co-ordinated ensemble, are ruining the conformation and workability of the Scottie by faddish distortions. They are endeavoring to make clowns of a breed of dogs that are fundamentally serious and dignified. The Scottie is at heart a gentleman—deep-natured, reserved, honorable, patient, tolerant, and courageous. He never whines or complains: he meets life as he finds it, with an instinctive philosophy of stoical intrepidity, and a mellow understanding. He is calm and firm—and stubborn. He minds his own business—and minds it well. He is independent, and incapable of an underhand act. He is loyal—and he remembers. He’s a Spartan and can suffer pain without whimpering. He will attack a lion or a tiger if his rights are invaded. And he may die in the struggle; but he never shows the white feather or runs away. He is the grandest and most admirable of all sports—forthright and brave. You know exactly where you stand with a Scottie; and if you are a friend, he is gentle and loving and protective. . . . And this is the dog, Markham, that certain breeders would turn into a grotesque zany —a butt for humor, an object for snickering—by taking away his beautiful proportions, lengthening his foreface, shortening his body and tail, and making of him a monstrosity fit only for gibes. . . .”

Vance paused, sipped his Chambertin, and went on.

“Then there’s the question of size. A tendency has developed among a class of breeders and judges recently to give preference to large, coarse dogs. But there is no reason whatever for Scotties to be large. They are terriers—ground dogs (the very name comes from the Low Latin *terrarius*)—and they are supposed to go to earth for foxes, otters, and other burrowing vermin. Obviously size is a handicap—unless, of course, we desire to turn the breed into freak show dogs. There have, of course, been many heavy champions of undeniable merit; but why any one should favor heavy Scotties in general is a mystery. McCandlish, one of the greatest breeders of Scottish terriers and a man who knows the breed as few others now living, puts the correct weight at sixteen to eighteen pounds for bitches, and eighteen to twenty pounds for dogs. And he is perfectly right. Even the Standard of Points, as adopted by the Scottish Terrier Club of England, says specifically that specimens of over twenty pounds should be discouraged. . . . But does this deter the breeders of ‘freaks’? Alas, no! They want baby elephants. And if they are called on to judge a show, they’ll put down a small dog that meets the Standard, and elevate large, overweight huskies that couldn’t get down a fox-hole. . . .”^[1]

Again Vance sipped his wine.

“There is alas! a tendency here and there to breed show dogs rather than natural terriers. Some breeders, by their intensification of certain ring traits, have robbed Scotties of their natural heritage. With the recent mania in certain quarters for lowness and short legs, many of the breed can’t move as freely as they should—they lack mobility and speed and agility—and it is impossible for them to defend themselves adequately against their enemies. I think it is this loss of terrier power and its resultant loss of confidence that accounts for the increasing number of shy Scotties today. A real Scottie, in his natural state and bred for workability rather than ribbons, possesses an indefinable character of derring-do. This true Scottie character combines keenness and eagerness, a desire to be busy all the time, a readiness to play or fight or raise what-for at any hour of the day: it has in it a deep-seated inquisitiveness, an instinct to investigate whatever turns up—a complete and eager responsiveness to any manifestation, however trivial, of the world about it—a *seeking* quality which keeps the dog’s mind and muscles constantly on the *qui vive*. . . . That is the real terrier character; and there are no keener terriers than Scotties. It’s a quality hard to analyze, as are all colorful personalities; and I suppose the best way to describe it is to call it an ever-blazing internal fire, both physical and temperamental, that shines forth from the dog’s eyes, vitalizes his expression, invigorates his body, and animates his every activity. . . .”

Vance smiled waggishly at Markham.

“I know I’m boring you. But you’ve been thinking much too strenuously all the forenoon. Your brain needs a little relaxation,—and what could be more soporific than my cackle about dogs? . . . And while I’m on the subject, I want to tell you, Markham, that the little wounded Scottie Gamble discovered behind the library portières is a beautiful specimen of what a Scottie should be. She has her faults—every dog has—but she’s the type I’d like to have in my own kennels. She’s small, compact, beautifully balanced—and doesn’t weigh an ounce over seventeen pounds. . . . Poor little devil. She can probably never be shown now, even if she recovers. There’ll be a bad scar over her eye. She certainly didn’t deserve that wound, and I hope she’ll have her revenge by helping us find the murderer.”

He got up.

“I think I’ll phone and see how she’s getting along.”

He went out and returned shortly to the table. He looked more cheerful.

“The doctor says she’s not as badly hurt as he thought at first. A simple fracture, and he had to take only three stitches in her scalp. She’s eating. No fever. Had an intravenous injection of calcium-gluconate, and, aside from being bandaged, she’ll be pretty normal by tomorrow.”

He took another sip of wine.

“And that means that I’ll be pretty busy tomorrow. I’ll have to visit the American Kennel Club and perhaps interview a few Scottie judges.”

“I can’t see the connection——” Markham began.

“But there is a connection,” insisted Vance. “It is no coincidence that a wounded dog is in a strange hostile house at the exact time of a murder. And it is reasonable to assume that it was admitted to the house by the murderer, either accidentally or for a purpose. In either case it will be a definite clue. The ownership of the dog—and especially the address of the owner—will give us something pretty definite to work from. The migrations of the dog last night will throw much light on the movements of the person who came to the Coe house. . . . And there is another point to be considered. Neither Brisbane nor Archer saw the dog, for either one of them—with their dislike for dogs—would have put her out of the house immediately.”

“But where does that deduction lead us?”

“Not far, I’ll admit. But it helps considerably. From the dog’s presence in the house last night we may argue several very interestin’ and illuminatin’ possibilities. First, that the dog did not arrive before the murderer, because Archer would have thrown her out——”

“But Archer might have been the person who injured her?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t put it past him; but if he had kicked her or struck her, he would not have left her behind the curtain beside the library door: he would have thrown her down the front steps to the street. . . .”

“But Brisbane?”

“Ah! That’s just the point I’m coming to. If it had been Brisbane, then the dog was already in the house, or else she followed him in. If she was in the house and it was he who injured her, he was killed at almost the same instant; for if he had been able, he, like Archer, would have put the dog outside. Therefore, in case the dog was there and Brisbane injured her, then it follows that the murderer didn’t see her or left her there with some definite purpose in mind. As for the dog having followed Brisbane in, I think it highly unlikely. He would have noticed her coming in the front door, and she wouldn’t have got further than the vestibule. Moreover, dogs do not sneak in front doors between strangers’ legs——”

“But she followed some one in, obviously,” Markham argued, “—unless, of course, she was deliberately brought there.”

“That is true,” Vance admitted, “and that is a point that puzzles me. She might have followed some one—even a stranger—into the house, provided he had left the door open; but the murderer would scarcely have left the front door open,—in fact, I imagine he would have taken pains to shut it securely. And Brisbane would certainly not have left the door open. And both of them—if they had shut the front door immediately—would have noticed the dog and pushed her back. . . . On the other hand, the vicious injury given the dog seems to indicate that her presence in the house was not deliberate—that, in fact, the person who found her was surprised and, perhaps, frightened. Being afraid he would be seen if he turned her out, he acted impulsively and sought to kill her lest she should start barking and attract attention. In that event, we might conclude that the murderer struck the dog as a sort of self-protective measure; and the second and most important conclusion is that the dog’s presence was not discovered until after the murder.”

“Your reasoning is clear enough,” Markham told him, “but I don’t see in what way it is helpful to us.”

“Oh, but it *is* helpful,” Vance returned cheerfully. “It eliminates certain possibilities: it narrows down certain movements of the murderer; and it leads to a specific interpretation of the two crimes—the murder of Archer and the murder of Brisbane.”

“Forgive me if, as a mere lawyer unversed in logic, I cannot follow your esoteric ratiocinations.”

“Perpend, Markham,” Vance was genially patient. “It is highly unlikely—not to say impossible—that the dog could have followed any one in the front door without being seen. Remember, there is a double door and a vestibule; and the murderer would not have left the front door open behind him. Moreover, if the dog had been deliberately admitted, she would probably not have been injured and left behind the portières. Therefore, in view of the various factors of the situation, I believe the dog entered the house through an open door. And as the murderer would not

have left the front door open, we may, as a hypothesis, assume that he entered by the rear door. And this would be in keeping with the nature of the crime. He could have entered the tradesmen's gate with far less danger of being seen than if he had mounted the front steps; and he would have had the advantage of taking his victim unawares by an approach from the rear of the house. Furthermore, it is not at all unlikely that he would have left both the gate and the rear door open so that he could make his escape without unnecessary noise. In that case the dog could easily have followed him in through the open gate and door, without being seen or heard. And the place where the dog was found—just outside the library door—was a logical spot, for the dog would have come in through the kitchen and dining-room and into the library."

Markham nodded slowly.

"Yes. All that is quite reasonable. But, after all, we now merely have the plausible supposition that the murderer entered by the rear door. It doesn't get us any nearer our victim."

"You're so discouragin'," sighed Vance. "It's not impossible, don't y' know, that this one bit of knowledge—or, shall I say conjecture?—may go a long way toward identifyin' the culprit."

"Any one could have come in the rear door."

"Provided he knew the lie of the land, was familiar with all the domestic arrangements—and could have obtained a key. Also, provided he knew that all the servants would be away that night."

Vance looked up thoughtfully.

"Yes, Markham, already that little Scottie has narrowed down our investigation. Unwittingly she has pointed out several valuable clues to us. She has helped us, no end. And I have a feelin' she's going to tell us a lot more."

It was about half-past three when we returned to the Coe house. The Sergeant was bustling about, giving orders; and as we entered Gamble was descending from the second floor with a small tool-box, accompanied by Burke.

"All set?" demanded Heath, planting himself in front of Burke.

"Right, Sergeant," the detective replied proudly. "That door and lock are as good as they ever were."

Heath turned to Vance.

"And I've got something for you, sir." He swaggered a little as he led us into the library and pointed to the large centre-table. "There's the poker—and it's got blood on it."

Vance went up to it and examined it closely. He picked something from it between his thumb and forefinger, and went to the window.

"Yes, there's dried blood on it—and also a coarse brindle hair." He turned and nodded. "It was this poker, Markham, which wounded the Scottie. And undoubtedly, too, Archer Coe was struck with this poker. The shape of its blunt end coincides perfectly with the wound on Archer's head."

He frowned and looked at the vase in which he had found the bloodstains.

"And, Markham, that poker belongs in this room—in that rack beside the fireplace, just in front of the place on this divan where Archer Coe was sitting when Gamble went out last night. More evidence that something sinister and horrible preceded the crime upstairs. *And it took place in this room.*"

"The poker mighta been carried upstairs, sir," suggested Heath.

"Oh, quite, Sergeant," Vance agreed. "But the broken Sung *Ting yao* vase on the table here, with the blood on it; and that other Yung Cheng *Ting yao* vase with the smear of blood inside; and the wounded Scottie outside the door—what of them? They were not all carried upstairs. . . . No. It seems as if every sign-post were pointing toward this library."

"And yet," argued Markham doggedly, "Archer Coe's body was found upstairs, with his clothes changed, and the lights on, and the door bolted on the inside."

"Yeah," supplemented Heath, "and with a gun in his hand and a bullet in his head."

Vance nodded despondently.

"I know all that, Sergeant. That's the terrible and baffling thing about the crime. The sign-posts of death all indicate this library, yet death, itself was elsewhere. And there's no clear road leading between the two places."

He shrugged as if trying to shake off an unpleasant thought.

"By the by, Sergeant, where did you find the poker?"

Heath cocked an eye at Vance and gave a one-sided grin.

"That's one on you, sir. You looked at it this mornin' and didn't see it."

"What's that!" Markham ejaculated.

"Sure, Chief. Mr. Vance opened that Chinese chest in the bedroom and looked inside."

Vance stiffened.

"Well, what of it, Sergeant?"

"Nothing, sir," the other returned, "except that I found the poker in that chest——"

"The teak-wood chest beneath the east windows?"

"It's the only chest in the bedroom, ain't it, Mr. Vance?"

"You found the poker in that chest?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you."

Vance sat down and drew deeply on his cigarette.

"Who has been in the bedroom, Sergeant, since we went to lunch?" he asked presently.

"No one, sir!" Heath was emphatic. "Burke's guarded it every minute while you've been away. The butler helped him fix the door, but didn't get three feet in the room. And it was me, and no one else, that searched the room."

Markham came forward.

"What's the idea, Vance? Why should the Sergeant's finding the poker upstairs bother you?"

Vance exhaled a long ribbon of smoke, and looked directly at Markham.

"Because, old dear, that chest was empty when I looked in it this mornin'!"

[13] There is little doubt that Vance had been much impressed and helped, especially in the early days of his dog-breeding, by Doctor Fayette C. Ewing's weekly column on Scottish terriers in *Popular Dogs*; and Doctor Ewing's book, *"The Book of the Scottish Terrier"* (for which I, by the way, wrote an appreciative introduction) was one of Vance's "bibles."

CHAPTER XIII

THE SCENTED LIP-STICK

(Thursday, October 11; 3:30 p. m.)

Vance's declaration left us both perturbed and mystified. A new and more intimate element seemed to have entered into the case, although, for the life of me, I could not have analyzed the syllogism leading to such a conclusion. Markham was the first to speak.

"Are you certain, Vance?" he asked, in a rather dazed tone. "Maybe you overlooked——"

"Oh, no," Vance made a gesture of finality. "It wasn't there—oh, quite. Some one put it there after I'd examined the chest."

"But who, in Heaven's name?"

"Come, come, Markham," Vance smiled grimly. "One doesn't know, y' know. A bit mysterious and disconcertin'—eh, what? But I'd say it was the same person who tucked the dagger under the cushion of the chair in which Archer passed away."

"The dagger?"

"Yes, yes—the dagger. That mystery is at least cleared up—the poker explained that incongruity. The dagger didn't belong in Archer's boudoir. Quite the contr'ry. Its presence there confused me abominably. Both the poker and the dagger belonged in the library here. And they weren't here, d' ye see—they were where they shouldn't have been, where they couldn't possibly have been. . . . A gap—a mishap—a bit of superficial thinkin' on some one's part. Panic? Yes, that's what it was. Movin' things from one place to another. Silly idea. People always think that by movin' things they can confuse an issue. More often they merely clarify it."

"I'm glad you see some clarity in this damnable situation," Markham grumbled. "I'm getting more bogged every minute."

"Oh, but I'm not blinded by any dazzlin' illumination yet," Vance stretched himself comfortably in his chair. "I wonder. . . ."

The practical Sergeant projected himself irascibly into the discussion.

"If some one did cache the dagger and the poker upstairs, who'd have had the opportunity? That's what I'd like to figure out."

"Almost any one might have done it, Sergeant," returned Vance lazily. "Both Wrede and Grassi have passed back and forth before the room while we were, downstairs."

Heath thought a moment.

"That's right. And then do you remember how that Miss Lake rushed to the chair when she first came in the room and put her arm back of the corpse? She coulda stuck the dagger under the seat with all of us looking at her."

"Oh, quite. And she could also have come downstairs from the third floor, while we were in the library here, and hidden the dagger when we were *not* looking at her."

Heath nodded.

"Yeah, I guess they all coulda done it. . . . And that cagy butler, he coulda done it."

"And don't overlook the Chinaman. Gamble sent him to fetch Miss Lake's breakfast tray while we were all downstairs."

Heath grasped at this remark.

"That's the guy!" he declared.

"Just a minute, Sergeant!" Markham suppressed him with a gesture, and turned to Vance. "If, as you believe, the dagger and poker were taken from this room and hidden in Coe's bedroom this morning, the inevitable conclusion is that the murderer is one of the persons who have been in the house this morning."

"Not necessarily," Vance shook his head mildly. "Even if the poker and dagger were secretly transferred upstairs, it doesn't follow that the murderer made the transfer. Some one may have done it to shield another, or to divert suspicion from himself. It might have been an act of fear, or even chivalry, by an innocent person."

"Even so," pursued Markham, "the transfer of the weapons would indicate that some one in the house knows more than he has told us."

"There are several persons here who know more than they've admitted. . . . No, no, it was a stupid act. The murderer couldn't have done it. It was some one else—one who didn't know all the facts." Vance stood up and walked the length of the room and back. "Yes, Markham, the murderer was too clever to do a foolish thing like that—to hide weapons where they never could have been. . . . The murderer wanted the weapons found in this library. That's why he tried to hide the dagger twice—once in the egg-shell *Ting yao* vase, and the second time in that Yung Cheng *Ting yao*. And he wanted the poker to be found on the hearth—with the bloodstains on it. He wanted the weapons *in this room* where Archer Coe was sitting when Gamble left the house last night. He figured on this library being the murder room. And then something went wrong—the murder room shifted. Something strange and diabolical happened. The corpse, with a bullet wound in his head and a revolver in his hand, decided on the bedroom upstairs. And when the murderer came back, it was too late to re-arrange the setting——"

"Came back? Too late?" repeated Markham. "What do you mean?"

"Just that." Vance halted and looked down at the District Attorney. "Oh, he came back—he had to come back. Brisbane was killed hours after Archer. And the reason he was too late to transfer the scene of the crime was that Archer's door was bolted on the inside. The scene of his murder had shifted—and he, the murderer, was locked out. He knew last night that neither the dagger nor the poker could be found in the bedroom. Therefore it was not the murderer who placed them there this morning. . . ."

At this moment Gamble appeared at the door leading to the butler's pantry. He was worried and apologetic.

"Give us the tidings, Gamble," said Vance encouragingly, as the man hesitated. "I'm sure you have a tale to unfold."

"I'm very sorry, sir, to interrupt," the butler began, "but an item—if you know what I mean—has just occurred to me. Ordinarily I would have thought little or nothing of it, but in view——"

"What's the item?" Markham snapped.

"It—it's this little gadget, sir," Gamble stammered, laying a small cylindrical metal lip-stick holder on the table. "I found it in the waste-paper basket in this room this morning before I discovered the master's body upstairs, and I threw it out. But a few minutes ago I began thinking about this terrible affair——"

Vance glanced at the lip-stick holder.

"What else did you find in the basket, Gamble?" he interrupted.

"That was all, sir—except the evening paper."

"What evening paper?"

"The one that is delivered here regularly. I placed it on the table here for Mr. Coe before I went out yesterday."

Vance picked up the holder and smelled the top.

"Practically empty," he mused. "Not a gold case—therefore thrown away." He smeared a little of the rouge on his finger and smelled it. "Duplax's Cammine. Made for blondes. . . . Most interestin'." He looked again at Gamble.

"Just where in the basket did you find this?—under the paper or on top of it?"

"On top of it, sir," the man answered with mild surprise. "The paper was crumpled in the bottom of the basket. Mr. Coe always threw the paper there when he had finished reading it. No one else in the house ever read the evening paper, sir."

"And what time does the paper arrive?"

"At half-past five always."

Vance nodded. "And you left the house when?"

"Between half-past five and six, sir. I couldn't say exactly."

"And you are quite sure Mr. Archer Coe had no visitor at the time?"

"Oh, quite, sir," Gamble was again becoming worried. "As I told you——"

"Yes, yes. So you told me," Vance was watching the man from under lazy eyelids. "But a lady seems to have been here. . . . Do you know of any appointment Mr. Coe may have had with the possible owner of that lip-stick?"

"An appointment with a lady?" The butler, for some reason, seemed shocked. "Oh, no, sir I'm sure Mr. Coe had no such appointment. He was—if you understand me, sir—a most abstemious man."

Vance dismissed him brusquely.

"That will be all, Gamble."

When the man had gone, Vance looked waggishly at Markham.

"I fear, old dear, despite Gamble's assurances, that Archer did entertain a lady yesterday afternoon between, let us say, six o'clock and eight—which is probably about the time he was killed." Markham hesitated and pursed his lips.

"Isn't that leaping at conclusions? Archer may have thrown the lip-stick there himself. Miss Lake may have left it here. . . ."

"My dear fellow—oh, my dear fellow! Really, now, Miss Lake, I'm sure, doesn't use a lip-stick; and even if she did it wouldn't be this highly scented and gaudily colored variety. . . ."

Heath was again growing impatient.

"I can't see that it makes any difference anyway. Suppose the old boy did have a dame in for a visit—that's not explaining the cock-eyed things that happened here last night." He thrust an unlighted cigar in his mouth, and gave Vance a curious and rather aggressive look. "What about that bolted door upstairs? You had something in mind, Mr. Vance, when you asked me to get that bolt fixed, didn't you?"

"My notion was a bit vague, Sergeant." Vance crushed out his cigarette. "Of course, people don't get murdered in bolted rooms except in detective novels; and something Miss Lake said to me suggested that I might find a solution to that peculiar and illogical circumstance."

"What was that?" Markham curtly demanded.

"When she was talkin' about Brisbane, don't y' know. You remember she mentioned that he was interested in criminology and was sufficiently clever to cover his tracks if he'd decided to go in for murder. A significant remark, Markham."

"But I don't see the connection." Markham was puzzled. "Brisbane was the victim—not the murderer."

"Oh, I wasn't regardin' him as the culprit. I was thinkin' of Miss Lake's comment in terms of tangents."

"It occurs to me you're always thinking in terms of tangents," Markham growled. "Suppose you elucidate—if possible."

"I live in 'opes," Vance grinned. "Let me question Miss Lake a bit further. I could bear a bit of amplification as to Brisbane's delvings into criminological lore." He sobered and went toward the door. "What do you say to using Archer's bedroom as the scene of the interrogation?"

Markham gave a resigned sigh, and we went upstairs. Heath sent Gamble to ask Miss Lake to join us there; and a few minutes later she came in, swaggering but chilly and, I thought, suspicious.

"Haven't you found the dastard yet?" she asked with a half sneer. "What a pity!"

Vance pushed a chair forward for her, ignoring her taunt.

"We wanted to ask you, Miss Lake," he began gravely, "just what you meant when you spoke of your Uncle Brisbane's having 'dabbled in criminology'—I believe that was your phrase."

"Oh, that!" Her tone was symptomatic of relief. "He was always interested in the subject, along with other fads. Intricate problems worried him immensely. He'd have made an excellent chess player, if he'd had the time and patience. . . ."

"What form did his interest in criminology take?" Vance spoke casually.

"Only reading." The woman made a slight outward gesture of the hands. "To my knowledge he never practised the criminal arts. At heart he was quite respectable, though inclined at times toward fanaticism."

"What did he read mostly?" Vance's tone was even and un eager.

"Criminal cases, court records, detective stories—the usual thing. There are hundreds of volumes in his room. Why not look at them? They'll tell you the whole sad story."

"I'm inclined to follow your suggestion." Vance bowed. "Were you, too, interested in your Uncle Brisbane's books?"

"Oh, yes. There's nothing else interesting in the house. I certainly wouldn't read those dry tomes on ceramics in the library."

"Then you, too, have 'dabbled in criminology'?"

She shot Vance a quick look and gave a forced laugh.

"You might call it that."

"Ah! Then perhaps you can help us." Vance's air became jocular. "We crave to know how this door could have been bolted on the inside. Obviously Archer couldn't have done it with a bullet in his head."

"Or a dagger through his lungs," she supplemented, and became suddenly serious. "But he might have done it before the bullet entered his head."

"But he was dead at that time." Vance, too, had become serious and was watching the woman closely.

"Have you never heard of cadaveric spasm, or *rigor mortis*?" she asked contemptuously. "Men, with revolvers in their hands at death, have been known to fire them hours after they were dead, as a result of muscular contraction."

Vance nodded, without changing his expression or shifting his gaze.

"Quite true. There was the famous case in Prague of the suicide who later shot the police inspector!^[14] And there was a more recent case in Pennsylvania!^[15] . . . But I hardly think that condition applies here. Archer, d'ye see, died of a stab in the back. And the position of his hand holding the revolver was not such as would indicate that he himself pulled the trigger."

"Perhaps you're right." I was surprised at her ready acceptance of Vance's dismissal of her suggestion. "Some one else must have bolted the door." She spoke with cynical lightness. "It's quite a problem, isn't it?"

"Are you sure you can't help us?" Vance gazed at her steadily.

"You're trying to flatter me." She gave Vance a hard, straight-lipped smile. "I, of course, know all the usual methods. The string under the door, for instance, tied to a nail thrust through the bow of the key!^[16] But then, there's not a bit of space under this door—it scrapes the sill, in fact—and there's no key—hasn't been one for years.—Then there's the old turn-bolt system which any child can operate with a hairpin and a piece of thread!^[17] But, alas! there's no turn-bolt.—And naturally I know of the melted candle method of bolting a door from the outside;^[18] but this bolt isn't a drop-bolt.—And the piece of ice that will melt and let the bolt fall down!^[19] But that's out, too, for this bolt is the kind that slips over into a groove and turns down."

She quickly became thoughtful: a curious change came over her, and she looked at Vance with a questioning steady stare.

"I've been thinking about that door for several hours," she said tensely; "and I can't find an answer to it. Uncle Brisbane and Mr. Wrede and I often talked about these tricky criminal devices. We worked out various ways and means of doing seemingly impossible things; but bolting this door from the outside was something we never could figure out."

Vance took his cigarette from his mouth with slow deliberation.

"You mean to tell me that you and Brisbane and Mr. Wrede actually discussed the possibilities of bolting this particular door from the outside?"

"Oh, yes." She appeared quite frank. "Many times. But we decided it couldn't be successfully done."

Vance hesitated, and a strange kind of chill ran over me. I felt as if we were approaching something particularly pertinent and, at the same time, sinister.

"Did any one else"—Vance's cool voice brought me back to reality—"ever hear these discussions?"

"No one but Uncle Archer." Hilda Lake had become frigid and indifferent again. "He always ridiculed our speculations."

"What of Liang?" Vance asked casually.

"The cook? Oh, I suppose he heard our idle chatter. I believe we talked over our dire plots at dinner occasionally."

"And now the problem that troubled all of you has been solved." Vance rose and strolled meditatively toward the door. "Very sad. . . ." He opened the door and held it ajar. "Thank you, Miss Lake. We'll try not to disturb you more than is absolutely necessary. I say, you won't mind remaining in your room till dinner time, will you?"

"If I did mind, it wouldn't do me any good, I suppose." She spoke with obvious resentment as she walked toward Vance. When she reached the threshold she swung half-way round and asked aggressively: "May I be permitted to get a book from Uncle Brisbane's room to while away my hours of detention?" Her eyes were narrowed, and her lip curled in an ugly arc.

Vance's calm gaze did not alter.

"I'm dashed sorry, and all that sort of thing," he said politely, "but I'll send you up any book you'd like—later. I've a bit of browsing to do first."

The woman turned on her heel and walked away without a word.

Vance waited until he heard her door close with a bang; then he turned and came back into the room.

"Not a sweet, Victorian clinging vine," he lamented; "but a lady of parts, none the less. . . . Curious, her telling us of her discussions with Brisbane about the possibilities of bolting this door from the outside. There was something back of that, Markham. The young woman had ideas. Now, why should she have tried to be so helpful? And that suggestion about *rigor mortis* and the revolver. . . . Amazing."

"If you want my candid opinion," Markham commented, "she knows, or suspects, more than she's telling; and she's trying to throw us off the track."

Vance considered this for a time.

"Yes—it's possible," he agreed at length. "On the other hand. . . ."

Markham was patently puzzled.

"Any suggestion?" he asked. "What's our next move?"

"Oh, that's indicated." Vance sighed deeply. "Painful as it may prove, I simply must run my eye over Brisbane's books."

Markham also sighed deeply, and rose.

[14] Vance was referring to the case of Wenzel Kokoschka, a co-operative-society cashier, who shot himself, and who hours later seriously wounded Joseph Marcs, an inspector of gendarmes, with the same revolver—the result of *rigor mortis* acting on the trigger of the gun still held in the dead man's hand.

[15] Joseph D. Trego, a war veteran of Reading, Pennsylvania, came very near shooting the coroner, hours after his own death, by the muscular contraction of his hand. It took the coroner half an hour to wrest the revolver from the dead man's hand.

[16] A modification of this old method was employed by Tony Skeel in "The 'Canary' Murder Case."

[17] This method consists merely of putting a hairpin around the handle of the turn-bolt, and then pulling the hairpin out through the keyhole or under the door.

[18] This device was used by Edgar Wallace in his "The Clue of the Twisted Candle," and consists of resting the drop-bolt on a candle which, as it burns down or softens, permits the bolt to fall into place.

[19] A modification of, and an improvement on, the melted candle device.

(Thursday, October 11; 4 p. m.)

We went into Brisbane Coe's room, which was at the front of the house on the west side. It was a long narrow room, somewhat the shape of Archer's, with a large bay window on the street. It was simply furnished, but a series of large oak cabinets about the walls gave it an overcrowded, massive appearance. On the north wall beside the window was a series of simple built-in bookshelves extending to the ceiling. There were, I estimated, between three and four hundred volumes on them, all neatly and meticulously arranged.

Vance went to the window and threw up the shades. Then he drew a chair to the bookshelves, mounted it, and began running his eye systematically over the volumes. I stood behind him and glanced over the titles. Markham and Heath sat down on a long davenport before the fireplace and watched Vance with an air of boredom.

For so small a number of criminological volumes Brisbane Coe's collection was unusually complete. He had Hargrave L. Adam's complete "Police Encyclopædia" of Scotland Yard; the Complete Newgate Calendar; the Notable British Trials Series; Doctor Hans Gross's great handbook for examining magistrates; Dumas' "Celebrated Crimes"; Gayot de Pitaval's "Causes Célèbres et Intéressantes, avec les Jugemens qui les ont décidées"; Maurice Méjan's "Recueil des Causes Célèbres"; and many works in German including Kurt Langenscheidt's "Encyklopädie der Kriminalistik," a set of Der Wiener Pitaval, Friedländer's "Kriminal-Prozesse," a set of Doctor Ludwig Altmann's "Aus dem Archiv des Grauen Hauses," and Leonhard's library of "Aussenseiter der Gesellschaft." In addition, there were various miscellaneous volumes dealing with criminals and their methods, but very little on the psychology of crime or its medico-legal aspects.

In surveying the titles one got the impression that, had Brisbane gone in for crime, he would have been highly practical rather than subtle. The three lower shelves were devoted almost entirely to the classics of detective fiction, from Gaboriau and Poe to A. Conan Doyle and Austin Freeman.

Vance glanced over the books rapidly but carefully. There were but few that were not in his own library, and he was familiar not only with their titles but with their appearance. He gave little attention, however, to the fiction. Just what he was looking for none of us knew; but we did know that he had some definite object in mind, and we suspected, from what he had said to us, that the object of his search related to the bolted door of Archer's bedroom.

After scanning the backs of the books for perhaps fifteen minutes, he sat down and slowly lighted one of his *Régies*.

"It should be here, y' know," he murmured, as if to himself, "—unless it's been taken away. . . ."

He got up leisurely, and again standing on the chair, began to check the volume numbers of the various sets of books. When he came to the red-and-gold set of the "Aussenseiter der Gesellschaft" he gave a nod and stepped down to the floor.

"A volume missing," he announced. He scanned the upper bookshelves carefully. "I wonder. . . ." Then he dropped on his knees and began going more thoroughly over the section of fiction.

When he had come to the lowest shelf he reached forward and took out a thin red-and-gold volume. He glanced at it and leant forward again to inspect the books on either side of the space from which he had extracted the missing volume of the "Aussenseiter der Gesellschaft" series.

"Oh, I say!" he exclaimed. "That's deuced interestin'." He pulled out a small red book. " 'The Clue of the New Pin,' by Edgar Wallace," he read aloud.^[20] "Only, we have two pins and a damning-needle—eh, what? . . . Still, Markham, it's significant that the missing volume of the 'Aussenseiter der Gesellschaft' should be found cheek by jowl with a book dealing with a pin."

Markham took his cigar from his mouth, stood up, and faced Vance with a serious face.

"I see what you mean," he said. "You think that Brisbane, by the help of these books on criminology, worked out some way of bolting Archer's door from the outside, by the use of those pins and string."

Vance gave an affirmative nod.

"Either Brisbane or some one else. It was quite a technical operation." He picked up the "Aussenseiter der Gesellschaft" volume and glanced at the title page. " 'Der Merkwürdige Fall Konrad,' " he read. "By Kurt Bernstein. . . . That doesn't tell us much. I wonder who Konrad might have been and what subtleties he engaged in. . . . I think I'll do a bit of prying into Konrad's criminal past. And I'll glance through Wallace—if you could bear to wait for me a short while."

Markham made a gesture of acquiescence.

"The Sergeant and I will wait downstairs—I've some telephoning to do."

The three of us left Vance alone in Brisbane's room, and as I closed the door I saw Vance stretch himself out on the davenport with the two books.

An hour later he came to the head of the stairs and called down to us. We joined him in Archer's bedroom. He had both books with him, and I noticed that there were pages marked in each.

"I think I've found a solution to one phase of our problem," he announced seriously, when we were seated. "But it may take a bit of working out." He opened the novel. "Wallace has a clever idea here—I found the passage without too long a search. The tale, as I gather at a hasty reading, relates of a dead man found locked in a vault with the key to the door on the table before him. The vault door was locked from the outside, of course. . . . Here's the explanat'ry passage: '*No other word he spoke, but took something from his pocket: it was a reel of stout cotton. Then from his waistcoat he produced a new pin, and with great care and solemnity tied the thread to the end of the pin, Tab watching him intently. And all the time he was working, Rex Lander was humming a little time, as though he were engaged in the most innocent occupation. Presently he stuck the point of the pin in the centre of the table, and pulled at it by the thread he had fastened. Apparently he was satisfied. He unwound a further length of cotton, and when he had sufficient he threaded the key upon it, carrying it well outside the door. The end he brought back into the vault, and then pushed it out again from the inside through one of the air-holes. Then he closed the door carefully. He had left plenty of slack for his purpose and Tab heard the click of the lock as it was fastened, and his heart sank. He watched the door fascinated, and saw that Lander was pulling the slack of the cotton through the air-hole. Presently the key came in sight under the door. Higher and higher came the sagging line of cotton and the key rose until it was at the table's level, slid down the taut cotton, and came to rest on the table. Tighter drew the strain of the thread, and presently the pin came out, passed through the hole in the key, leaving it in the exact centre of the table. Tab watched the bright pin as it was pulled across the floor and through the ventilator.*'"^[21] . . . That's the way Wallace worked his locked door."

"But," objected Markham. "There was an open ventilator in the door, and space beneath the door. Those conditions are not true here."

"Yes—of course," Vance returned. "But don't overlook the fact that there was a string and a bent pin. At least they are common integers in the two problems. . . . Now, let's see if we can combine those integers with certain common integers of the Konrad case." He opened the other book. "Konrad," Vance explained, "was a truck-driver in Berlin nearly fifty years ago. His wife and five children were found dead in their cellar room; and the door—a ponderous affair without even a keyhole or space around the moulding—was securely bolted on the inside. The case was at once pronounced one of murder and suicide on the part of the mother; and Konrad would have been free to marry his *inamorata* (whom he had in the offing) had it not been for an examining magistrate of the criminal court, named Hollmann. Hollmann, for no tangible reason, did not believe in the suicide theory, and set to work to figure out how Konrad could have bolted the door from without. . . . Here's the revelat'y passage—if you'll forgive my rather sketchy sight translation of the German: '*Hollmann, urged on by his conviction that Frau Konrad had not murdered her children and committed suicide, determined, as a last resort, to give the entire door, both inside and outside, a microscopic examination. But there was not the slightest aperture anywhere, and the door fitted so tightly around the frame that a piece of paper could not have been passed through any crevice. Hollmann examined the door minutely with a powerful lens. It required hours of labor; but in the end he was rewarded. Just above the bolt he found on the inside, close to the edge of the door, a very small hole which was barely discernible. Opening the door he inspected the outside surface directly opposite to the hole on the inside. But there was no corresponding hole visible. Hollmann did find on the outside of the door, however, a small spot on which the paint seemed fresher than that on the rest of the door. The spot was solid, but this did not deter Hollmann's investigation. He borrowed a hatpin from one of the tenants in the building, and heating it, ran it through the hole on the inside. With but little pressure the heated hatpin penetrated the door, coming out on the outside exactly in the centre of the newly painted spot. Moreover, when Hollmann withdrew the hatpin a piece of tough horsehair adhered to the pin; and on the pin was also discernible a slight-film of wax. . . . It was obvious then how Konrad had bolted the door from without. He had first bored a tiny hole through the door above the bolt, looped a piece of horsehair over the bolt's knob, and slipped the two ends through the hole. He had then pulled the bolt-knob upward until the horsehair loop was disengaged, withdrawing the horsehair through the hole. A piece of the horsehair had, however, caught in the hole and remained there. Konrad had then filled up the hole with wax and painted it on the outside, thereby eliminating practically every trace of his criminal device. He was later convicted of the murder of his family, sentenced to death, and hanged.*'"^[22]

Heath, as Vance finished reading, leapt to his feet.

"That's a new one on me." He went swiftly to the door and bent over.

Vance smiled.

"There's no hole in the door above the bolt, Sergeant," he said. "No need, don't y' know. There's a keyhole."

Heath squared off and looked at the door.

"Still and all, the keyhole's only half-way over the bolt, and eight inches below it. No string fastened to the bolt and run through that keyhole would lock the room from the outside."

"True, Sergeant," Vance nodded. "But that's where the modification of the trick comes in. The person who planned bolting this door carried the idea to a few more decimal points. Don't forget we have two pieces of string and two pins."

"Well, I don't get it." Heath still stood scowling at the door. "The cases in those two books are easy enough to understand, but neither of 'em will work here."

"Maybe the two together will work," suggested Vance. "Look at the wall just to the right of the jamb and opposite to the bolt. Do you see anything?"

Heath looked closely, using his pocket magnifying glass and his flashlight.

"I don't see much," he grumbled. "Right in the crack of the jamb and wall there's what might be a pinhole."

"That's it, Sergeant!" Vance rose and went to the door; and Markham and I followed him. "I think I'll try the experiment I have in mind."

We all watched him with fascinated interest. First he reached in his pocket and drew forth the two pieces of string and bent pins and the damping-needle he had found in the pocket of Brisbane Coe's overcoat. By means of his pocket knife he straightened one of the pins and inserted it in the hole Heath had found in the wall at the edge of the jamb, giving it several taps with the handle of his knife to drive it in rather securely. He then threaded the other end of the string in the damping-needle and passed it through the keyhole into the hall, removing the needle and letting the string fall to the hall floor. After this operation, he bent the other pin securely round the upright knob of the bolt, passed the string over the pin he had driven into the wall, and, threading this second string into the damping-needle, passed it also through the keyhole to the hall. He then opened the door about eighteen inches, drawing the two strings partly back through the keyhole in a loop to permit the door to swing inward without disturbing his mechanism.

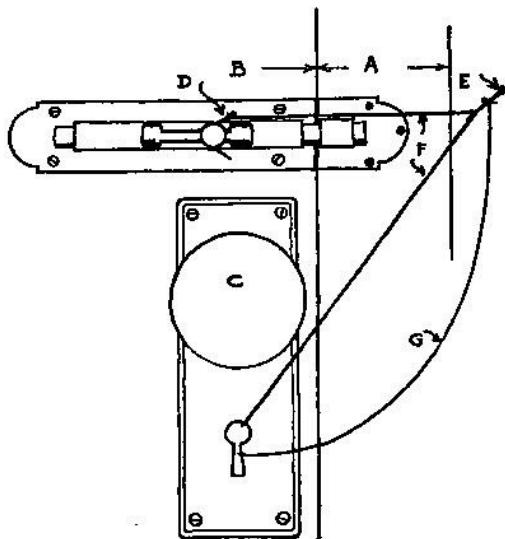


DIAGRAM OF MECHANISM

A—Wooden door jamb.

B—Door.

C—Door knob.

D—Bent pin around knob of slide bolt.

E—Pin in wall at edge of door jamb.

F-F—String attached to pin around bolt-knob running around pin (E) in wall and out through the keyhole.

G—String attached to pin in wall and running out into hall through keyhole.

"Let us see if the device works," he said, with an undercurrent of suppressed excitement. "You stay in the room while I go outside and manipulate the strings."

He bent down and passed under the two strings into the hall. Then he closed the door gently, while we remained inside, our eyes riveted to the two strings and the two pins.

Presently we saw the string which was attached to the bolt-knob go taut, as Vance drew it slowly through the keyhole. Passing over the pin in the wall, which acted as a pulley, the string described a sharp angle, with the pin in the wall as the apex. Slowly Vance drew the string from outside, and the bolt, getting a straight pull around the pin, began to move into its socket on the jamb. The door was bolted!

The next thing we saw was the tightening of the other string—the one attached to the head of the pin in the wall. There came several jerks on the string—the pin in the wall resisted several times and bent toward the source of the pull. Finally, it was disengaged from the wall, and it was then drawn upward from its depending position, disappearing through the keyhole.

The other string, still hooked about the bolt-knob, was then drawn taut through the keyhole, describing a straight line from the bolt-knob to the keyhole which was almost directly below it. Another slight pull by Vance on the string, and the knob fell downward into its groove. Another pull, and the bent pin was disengaged from the knob and pulled through the keyhole into the hall.

Markham, Heath, and I had been bolted in the room from the hall as neatly as if we ourselves had shot the bolt and locked it. And there was no evidence of any kind—save the indiscernible pin-point hole in the crack of the wall—to show that it had not actually been bolted from the inside!

Vance's demonstration had been fascinating and, at the same time, sinister; for it had brought up vague and unplumbed possibilities and revealed to us that we were battling against a shrewd and resourceful antagonist.

The Sergeant, after a moment's stupefaction, threw back the bolt and opened the door.

"It worked?" asked Vance, coming into the room.

"It worked," mumbled Heath laconically, lighting the cigar he had been chewing on viciously for the past half-hour.

[20] It was a Hodder and Stoughton reprint.

[21] Wallace, "The Clue of the New Pin," pp. 274-275.

[22] "Überzeugt, dass Frau Konrad ihre Kinder nicht ermordet und dann Selbstmord begangen hatte, entschloss sich Hollmann, einen letzten Versuch zu machen, und die ganze

Tür inwendig und auswendig mikroskopisch genau zu untersuchen. Aber nirgends war die geringste Öffnung zu finden, ja die Tür passte so genau in ihren Rahmen, dass man nicht einmal einen Papierstreifen durch irgend einen Riss hätte ziehen können. In stundenlanger Arbeit untersuchte Hollmann die Tür mit einer starken Lupe, um endlich seine Mühe belohnt zu sehen. Genau über dem Riegel, an der Innenseite, fast an der Kante der Tür, fand er ein ganz kleines, kaum bemerkbares Loch. Als er aber an der Aussenseite der Tür die dem Loch direkt gegenüberliegende Fläche untersuchte, war kein entsprechendes Loch zu entdecken. Er fand jedoch an dieser Stelle einen kleinen Fleck, wo der Anstrich frischer war, als an der übrigen Tür. Der Fleck war fest, was trotzdem Hollmann in seiner Forschungsarbeit nicht entmutigte. Von einem Mieter im Hause borgte er eine gewöhnliche Hutnadel, heizte sie und führte sie von der Innenseite in das Loch. Mit ganz geringem Druck durchbohrte die geheizte Hutnadel die Tür, und kam genau in der Mitte des frischgestrichenen Flecks an der Aussenseite zum Vorschein. Als Hollmann die Hutnadel wieder herauszog, klebte ein Stück zähes Rosshaar daran fest, während die Nadel mit einer dünnen Wachsschicht überzogen war. . . . Nun war es klar, durch welches Verfahren es Konrad gelungen war, die Tür von aussen zu verriegeln. Zuerst hatte er ein winzig kleines Loch über dem Riegel durch die Tür gebohrt, hatte dann eine Schlinge von Rosshaar um den Knopf am Riegel gelegt und die beiden Enden durch das Loch gezogen. Dann hatte er den Riegelknopf aufwärts gezogen, bis die Schlinge sich vom Knopf abgelöst, und darauf das Rosshaar wieder aus dem Loch herausgezogen. Ein Stück des Rosshaars war jedoch im Loch hängengeblieben. Sodann hatte Konrad das Loch mit Wachs verstopft und es an der Aussenseite mit Farbe überstrichen, und damit sozusagen jede Spur seines verbrecherischen Verfahrens getilgt. Später wurde er des Mordes seiner Familie überführt, zum Tode verurteilt, und gehängt.“—K. Bernstein, “Der Merkwürdige Fall Konrad,” pp. 232-224.

CHAPTER XV

THE DAGGER STRIKES

(Thursday, October 11; 5.30 p. m.)

Markham sat for several minutes in a brown study.

"As you say, Vance," he remarked without looking up, "the technique of the bolting of the door from the hall explains one phase of the problem, but I can't see that we're any further along toward a solution of the double murder. Brisbane, after all, was a victim. Why should he have been interested in bolting Archer in this room?"

"Really, I couldn't say," Vance appeared as puzzled as Markham. "It might not have been Brisbane at all. The fact that the pins and the string were in his overcoat pocket means little . . . and yet . . ."

"If you want my opinion," put in Heath, "it was that Chink. Chinamen are full of tricks. Look at the puzzles those yellow babies think up."

At this moment the front door opened and slammed, and Burke called to the Sergeant from the lower hall. One of the detectives that had been sent out earlier that afternoon to check Miss Lake's and Grassi's alibis had returned to report. He was Emery, from the Homicide Bureau, who had worked on several other cases in which Vance had been interested.^[24] He had been assigned to the Grassi alibi; and his report was brief and efficient.

"I interviewed Doctor Montrose at the Metropolitan. This fellow Grassi arrived there a little after four, and then the two of 'em went to the doc's apartment in East 86th Street. Grassi stayed there for dinner and went out at eight, saying he had an appointment in Mount Vernon at nine. He asked the doc directions for getting to Grand Central station."

Emery took out his note-book and opened it.

"I then hopped out to the Crestview Country Club and talked to the steward. He was for being cagy, but he finally came through and dug up the head waiter and the porter. They both remembered the Italian—on account of Miss Lake, I guess—and as far as they recollected he didn't show up till late—round eleven. Miss Lake had a table reserved for the dance, but didn't get there till after Grassi did. The party broke up about twelve-thirty.—And that's all I got."

Heath made a grimace at Markham.

"That checks with his story. But what I wanta know is where he was between eight and eleven. And there's no way of finding out unless we get a break here."

"He was shuttling to and fro over our complicated transportation system—according to his tale," smiled Vance. Then he turned to Emery. "I say, did Doctor Montrose give you any titbits of gossip regarding Grassi's call aside from his request for information regarding Grand Central station?"

"Nothing, sir," Emery shook his head with ponderous discouragement. "Except that the Italian was called up on the phone during dinner."

When the detective had gone Vance went to the telephone and called Doctor Montrose at his home. After a few minutes' conversation he hung up the receiver and paced up and down.

"That phone call to Grassi," he murmured,—"very strange. Doctor Montrose says it upset Grassi terribly. Hardly finished his dinner, and seemed in a hurry to get away. The phone was in the hall just outside the dining-room door and Montrose couldn't help hearing some of Grassi's end of the conversation. Montrose says he protested bitterly against the message he received—called it an outrage, and intimated strongly that he would take steps. . . . Steps—now what could that mean? And who could have called him and upset him? Who knew he was going to Montrose's for dinner? . . . It couldn't have been Miss Lake—he wouldn't have threatened her and then joined her at a country-club dance. And Wrede could have had no dealings with him. . . . Perhaps Brisbane . . . or Archer. . . ."

It was growing dark and Vance switched on the electric lights. Then he sat down and inhaled deeply on his cigarette.

"Archer—yes, it could have been. . . . Sergeant, suppose you fetch the signor."

Heath went from the room, and Vance said to Markham:

"Ceramics, I opine. Nothing would be so likely to stir up Grassi as a disappointment along that line. . . ."

The Italian was ushered in by the Sergeant; and Vance went straight to the point.

"Who telephoned to you, Mr. Grassi, at Doctor Montrose's yesterday during dinner?"

Grassi gave a slight start; then looked defiantly at Vance.

"It was a personal matter—my own affair."

Vance sighed and with slow deliberation drew from his pocket the agreement that Archer Coe had written to Grassi regarding the sale of his collection. As Vance opened the letter and laid it on his knee, he watched Grassi. I, too, was watching the man, and I saw a peculiar change come over him. His eyes widened and stared; his face became almost blanched; and he stood with breathless rigidity as if suddenly transfixed by hypnosis.

"It was Mr. Archer Coe who phoned you, was it not, Mr. Grassi?" came Vance's flat and unemotional voice.

Grassi neither moved nor spoke.

"Perhaps he regretted the bargain he had made with you for the sale of so many of his beloved pieces," Vance continued. "Perhaps he decided to call the deal off, after thinking it over alone with his treasures. . . . Perhaps he thought it best to inform you immediately of his decision so you would not talk of the transaction to Doctor Montrose. . . ."

Still Grassi did not move, but the inevitable impression he gave was that Vance had guessed the import of the telephone call he had received at the Curator's home the night before.

"I can well imagine how you felt, Mr. Grassi," Vance went on, without alteration of tone. "After all, the bargain had been made and you held Mr. Coe's letter of confirmation. But really, y' know, you shouldn't have threatened him——"

Suddenly the Italian's pent-up emotion broke forth.

"I had every right to threaten him!" he burst forth, the blood rushing back to his face. "For a week I have been negotiating—meeting his constantly increasing prices. Finally, yesterday, we reach an understanding. He puts it in writing, and I cable to Italy announcing my success. Then he rejects the agreement; he tells me he will not sell—that he has changed his mind. He insults me over the telephone: he says I have swindled him. He dares me to do anything about it! He even says to me that he will swear I forced him to sign that letter by pointing a revolver at him. . . . Grassi raised his clenched hands in a gesture of outrage. "What could I do?" he almost shouted. "I threatened him as he had threatened me. I told him I would use any means at my disposal to hold him to his agreement. I was justified!"

"Oh, doubtless—in such circumstances," Vance nodded vaguely. "What did Mr. Coe say then?"

"What did he say?" Grassi took a step toward Vance and bent forward. He spoke in a curious, hushed tone. "He said he would break every vase he owned before he would let me have them."

Vance gave a mirthless smile.

"No wonder you were a bit disconcerted at the sight of those *Ting yao* fragments! . . . But Mr. Coe didn't smash the vase, Mr. Grassi. That desecration was achieved—inadvertently—by the person who killed him. Most unfortunate, what?"

Vance got to his feet wearily, folded Archer Coe's letter, and held it out to Grassi.

"If this document will comfort you, you may have it back. I believe I've finished with it. . . . That will be all for the present."

Grassi hesitated. He studied Vance suspiciously for a moment. Then he took the letter, made a low bow, and left the room.

Markham, who had been following the interview intently, addressed Vance as soon as Grassi was out of hearing.

"A curious and ominous situation. Grassi is refused the collection, on which he has obviously set his heart and staked his honor; and he threatens Coe. Then he disappears for three hours, saying he took the wrong train; and this morning Coe is found dead, with all the superficial indications of suicide."

"Exactly."

"And what's more," added Heath aggressively, "Coe was stabbed in the back with a dagger. These Italians are mighty handy with the stiletto."

"But why should he also stab Brisbane?" Vance asked dispiritedly. "And why the revolver? And why the bolted door? And especially why the Scottie? . . . We now have nearly all the parts of the puzzle, but none of them seems to fit."

"You were counting a great deal on the dog this morning," Markham observed.

"Yes, yes—the dog." Vance lapsed into silence for a while, his eyes gazing out of the east window into the gathering dusk of the October twilight. "And no one here liked dogs—no one but Wrede. Funny he should give his pet away. . . . Vance's voice was scarcely audible; it was as though he were thinking out loud. "A Doberman Pinscher . . . too big, of course, to keep in a small apartment. And I wouldn't take Wrede for a dog lover. Too unsympathetic. . . . I think I'll have converse with him. . . ."

He stepped to the telephone. A moment later he was talking with Wrede. The conversation was very brief, but during it Vance jotted down some notes on the phone pad. When he had replaced the receiver Markham gave an exasperated grunt.

"Why should you be concerned with Wrede's former pets?" he asked.

"I'm sure I don't know," Vance admitted frankly. "Some vague association perhaps. The unknown Scottie was found downstairs; and the only other dog that has been mentioned in this case is Wrede's. I'll confess the connection is far-fetched. But Wrede and dogs don't go together—the combination is almost as incongruous as was the presence of the wounded Scottie in the hall. And I hate incongruities."

Markham strove to control his irritation.

"Well, what did you learn about Wrede's dog?"

"Nothing staggerin'." He had the Doberman only a few months—bought him at a show in Westchester. Then when he moved from his house in Greenwich Village to his present apartment he gave the dog to some friends of his." He pointed to the phone pad. "I have their name—they live on Central Park West, in the eighties. . . . I think I'll drop by and see them. Y'know, Markham, I'm dashed interested in Doberman Pinschers. They're beautiful dogs. And they were the original police dogs in Germany. 'Police dog' is a misnomer, however, when applied to any one breed. Almost any dog may be a police dog. We have the erroneous idea in this country that the German shepherd dog is the only police dog—a misnomer, in fact, he is called a Police Dog, as if the two names were synonymous. In England he is known as an Akbitan. The Doberman Pinscher is a cross between a shepherd dog and a Pinscher—the name given Continental terriers. He's a comparatively new breed, but has become very popular, for, aside from his beautiful conformation, he is strong, muscular, vigorous, intelligent, extremely alert, and, when incensed, vicious and savage. He's an excellent dog for police work, for, once fully trained, he retains his knowledge better than any other dog. . . ."

Markham got up and yawned.

"Thanks awfully. Your dissertation is most edifying. But I hardly think I'll call in a Doberman to solve the present case. It might make the Sergeant jealous."

Heath grinned good-naturedly.

"I'm for anything that'll solve this case, Chief. But I'm thinking that Mr. Vance may have something in his mind."

"Sergeant," said Vance, going toward the door, "you flatter me abominably."

It was decided to discontinue the investigation for the day. We were all tired and confused, and there were no leads to follow. The case was teeming with possibilities, but the contradictions of the various details made logical speculation well-nigh impossible. Vance suggested a complete cessation until he could make an inquiry into the ownership of the wounded Scottie. His sanguine attitude toward the presence of the dog in the house struck me as extravagant; and I knew Markham felt the same way about it. But since there was little more that could be done at the moment, he gave in hopefully to Vance's suggestions.

"It's quite safe," Vance told him, when he had reached the lower hall, "to let the various members of the household go about their business. Only, they should be on hand tomorrow for interrogation. I can assure you, Markham, no one will run away."

A short conference in the drawing-room settled the matter. Gamble was told to proceed with his duties, as usual; and Miss Lake and Grassi were informed that they were free to go and come as they chose, provided they were available for questioning.

"Keep a man in Coe's bedroom, however," Vance admonished the Sergeant; "and it would also be well to have a man outside to check on any one entering or leaving the house."

As we approached the front door Guilfoyle, the detective from the Homicide Bureau whom the Sergeant had sent to check Hilda Lake's alibi, came in and reported. But he had unearthed nothing helpful. Miss Lake had dined at Arrowhead Inn with friends, and had departed alone by motor, arriving at the Crestview Country Club about eleven o'clock. Guilfoyle had been unable to verify the motor accident which ostensibly had delayed her arrival at the Club.

Vance, Markham and I went out into the chill air. It had been a day of horror, and the cool breeze from the park was invigorating. When we were entering the District Attorney's car, Markham asked:

"Were you serious, Vance, about seeing those people to whom Wrede gave the Doberman Pinscher?"

"Oh, quite. . . . It will take only a few minutes."

The name of the people was Enright; and they lived in a penthouse in one of the new apartment buildings on Central Park West, almost opposite the reservoir. The butler informed us that Mrs. Enright was out of the city, and that Mr. Enright was at that moment walking the dog in the park. He suggested that we might find him on the circular path around the reservoir.

Entering the park at 85th Street, we traversed the gardens on the west, crossed the main motor road, and cut across the lawn to the reservoir path. Few people were in the park at this hour and the figures about the reservoir were not many. We sat down on a bench by the path entrance and waited. Presently there appeared round the Fifth Avenue turn a very large man with a dog on a leash.

"That will be Enright," said Vance. "Suppose we stroll toward him."

Enright proved to be a genial, easy-going type of man of great bulk. (I learned later that he was an importer of food-stuffs from out-of-the-way places in the South Seas.) Vance introduced himself and presented Markham and me. Enright was cordial and talkative; and when Vance mentioned Wrede's name he became voluble regarding his long friendship with the man. As he chatted I had a good look at the dog. I was not familiar with the breed, but I was nevertheless struck with his qualities. He was lean and muscular, with beautiful lines, his coat a shiny black with rust-red, sharply defined markings. The dominating impression he gave was that of compact, muscular power, combined with great speed and intelligence—a dog that would make a loyal and protective friend and a dangerous enemy.

"Oh, yes," Enright said, in answer to a question from Vance. "Wrede gave me and the missus Ruprecht last spring. Said he couldn't keep him in a small apartment. We've got a penthouse—plenty of roof for the fellow to run around. But I always take him out at night and give 'im a to-and-fro in the park. Good for him. Dogs get fed up with tiles and brickwork—need to feel the sod under their paws and to get their noses in the good earth now and then. Like human beings. I take a trip to the country every year—into the wilderness.—Rough it—get back to nature——"

"Oh, quite," agreed Vance pleasantly. "But one does miss the conveniences when in the wilderness—doesn't one?"

He went toward the Doberman and bent over, making a friendly clicking sound with his tongue and calling the dog gently by name. He extended the back of his hand slowly toward the dog's muzzle and ran his hand over his occiput and down his slightly arched neck. But the dog would not respond. He shrank back, gave a frightened whine, and crouched down on his haunches, trembling.

"That don't mean he don't like you, Mr. Vance," Enright explained, patting the dog on the head. "He's shy as the devil. Distrustful of strangers. Gad! You should have seen him when I first got him. He crawled under a big settee in the den and wouldn't come out for two days—not even to eat. Had to drag him out twice a day and put him on the roof. Then back he'd go under the settee. . . . Queer ideas dogs get. Neither me nor the missus are formidable, and we love dogs. Wouldn't be without one. But Ruprecht is lots better now than he used to be. Getting a little confidence. He's pretty near all right when he's alone with me."

"He'll probably get over it," Vance told him encouragingly. "The right treatment, don't y'know. . . . He's a beautiful specimen—not a Sieger Kanzler von Sigalsburg,^[30] but he has a clean head, no lippiness, a long arched neck, a deep chest, muscular body and sloping back; and he's correct size—around seventy pounds, I'd say. . . . Ever show him?"

"Oh, I entered him once—Comwall. But he wouldn't show. Lay down in the ring and whimpered. Damn shame, too, for the two fellows that went over him lacked quality—one had a loose shoulder, and the other was cow-hocked and had prominent light eyes."

"It's all in the game," Vance murmured sympathetically.

We walked with the garulous Enright back to his apartment house and took leave of him. When we were in the District Attorney's car, headed downtown, Vance spoke, and his voice was troubled.

"Something queer about that dog, Markham—something deuced queer. Why should he be timid? Why should he distrust and fear strangers? It's not like a Doberman to act that way. By nature they are alert and shrewd and fearless, with energetic natures. They're among the best watch dogs of all the larger breeds. . . . Shy—lying down in the ring. . . . Yes, something has happened to him. He's had a blighting experience of some kind. . . ."

Markham beat an annoyed tattoo on the window ledge of the car.

"Yes, yes; it's very sad, I suppose. But what possible connection can there be between a shy Doberman in Central Park West and the murder of Archer Coe?"

"I haven't the vaguest notion," Vance returned cheerfully. "But there are only two dogs in this case, and one of them is browbeaten and timid, and the other is viciously wounded."

"Pretty far-fetched," Markham grumbled.

Vance sighed.

"I dare say. But so are the circumstances surrounding the murders themselves." He lighted a fresh cigarette and glanced at his watch. "It's drawing on toward dinner time. Currie has promised me flet of sole *Marguéry* and *Chatouillard* potatoes, and hot-house strawberries *Parisienne*. Does that tempt you? . . . And I'll open a bottle of that '95 Château-Quénum you're so fond of."

"You cheer me, old man," Markham gave an order to the chauffeur. "But first I'll take two double ponies of your *Napoléon* brandy. I'm in vile humor."

"Ah, a bit of forgetfulness—eh, what? Quite right you are. There'll be nothing to irk us till tomorrow."

But Vance was mistaken. That night the Coe case entered a new and more sinister phase. Markham dined with us and remained until nearly eleven chatting about various subjects from the drawings of George Grosz to Griffith Taylor's new theory of the migration and status of races. He departed with the understanding that he was to pick us up at ten the next day.

It was exactly half-past two in the morning when Vance's private phone rang. It woke me from a deep sleep, and it was several minutes before I could answer it. Markham's voice came over the wire demanding Vance. I carried the portable phone set to his room and handed it to him in bed. He listened a brief minute; then he set the instrument on the floor, yawned, stretched, and threw back the bedclothes.

"Dash it all, Ván!" he complained, as he rang for Currie. "Grassi has been stabbed!"

^[23] Notably "The Bishop Murder Case."

^[24] This great Doberman, who won his Sieger title when less than fifteen months old, being the youngest dog ever to receive this award, has recently been imported to this country by F. R. Kingman, and made his American championship without difficulty.

CHAPTER XVI

THE DEN WINDOW

(Friday, October 12; 3 a. m.)

When Vance and I arrived at the Coe house, Markham and Sergeant Heath were already there. There was a detective from the Homicide Bureau sitting glumly on the front steps. He gave one look at us and turned his head away—we seemed to spell trouble for him. I did not understand his attitude until later.

Gamble, white and trembling, in bedroom slippers and a long flannel robe, opened the door for us and led the way upstairs. We went to the second floor, walked back toward the front of the house, and entered Grassi's quarters. The curtains were drawn and all the lights were on.

Heath and Markham stood at the foot of Grassi's bed, looking at the prostrate figure lying there. Sitting in a straight chair, on the opposite side of the bed, was a capable-looking man of about forty, short and slightly bald, who reminded me somewhat of Doctor Alexis Carrel.

"This is Doctor Lobsenz," Markham informed Vance. "He has his office in 71st Street, near here, and Gamble called him in."

Doctor Lobsenz looked up, nodded, and went on about his work with swift efficiency.^[25]

Grassi lay on his back, clad in white silk pajamas. He was ghastly pale, and the arm nearest us moved restlessly on the sheets, like that of a person under the influence of hyoscin. There was an area of blood, perhaps twelve inches in diameter, on the sheet at his left side nearest the doctor. His pajama coat was also stained with blood.

Grassi's eyes were closed, but his lips were moving incoherently. The left sleeve of his pajama coat had been ripped up to the shoulder, and there was a pad and a close-fitting dressing around the elbow of his left arm. A stain of blood could be seen through the dressing where the hemorrhage was still oozing.

Presently the doctor rose.

"I think that's all I can do for him at the minute, Mr. Markham," he said. "I'll send for the ambulance immediately."

Markham nodded. "Thank you, doctor."

Then he turned to Vance.

"Grassi was stabbed through the left arm. Doctor Lobsenz says it is not a dangerous wound."

Vance's eyes were on Grassi's face. Without looking up he spoke. "Just what is the nature of the wound, doctor?"

"He was stabbed at the outer border of the biceps tendon, where it crosses the dimple of the anti-cubital fossa. The thrust punctured the median basilic vein and caused a profuse hemorrhage. But it luckily missed the basilic artery."

"What shaped weapon would you say was used?" asked Vance.

The doctor hesitated.

"The wound was a bit ragged, and of a rather peculiar conformation; it was not made with a knife, but with some instrument like a very thick awl."

"Could it have been a small dagger with a diamond-shaped blade?"

"Yes, very easily. The wound was jagged and there was too much bleeding to determine exactly the contours; but I can let you know later, when I've washed and sterilized it."

Vance nodded. "You needn't bother." Then he added: "You're taking him to the hospital?"

"Yes; immediately," the doctor told him. "I have merely put on a temporary dressing—a gauze compress held by a bandage. I'll have to have him in the hospital in order to enlarge and disinfect the wound and to tie up the severed ends of the bleeding vessel. He should be all right by tomorrow."

"Have you given him any medication?"

"He was pretty nervous and upset, and I gave him three grains of sodium-amyltal by mouth. It'll quiet him tonight and he'll be able to return here tomorrow. His arm will be in a sling for a few days, but unless there is an infection there's no danger."

Vance still had his eyes on Grassi.

"Is he in shape to be questioned for a while before you take him to the hospital?" he asked.

The doctor bent over Grassi, felt his pulse, and looked at his pupils.

"Oh, yes." He walked toward the door. "The ambulance won't be here for half an hour." He went into the hall where Gamble was standing.

"Where's the phone?" we heard him ask the butler.

Doctor Lobsenz was no sooner out of the room than Grassi opened his eyes and looked up at us, shifting in the bed and trying to assume a more upright position. Vance arranged the pillows under his shoulders and drew up the sheet. Grassi stared from one to the other of us as if he were surprised to see us there.

"Thank God you've come!" he said, his eyes resting on Vance. "After all that has occurred today—then to have this happen. It's terrible! I hope I never see this house again." He gave a shudder and his eyes closed. "It's an outrage!" he went on. "An unspeakable outrage! I have heard many strange tales of American lawlessness, but this surpasses anything I could have imagined."

"Well, anyway, you weren't killed," Vance murmured.

He was now walking round the room. He seemed suddenly to have forgotten the presence of the man on the bed and to have taken an interest in the various objects on the floor and about the walls. He looked carefully at the door, tried the knob; studied the arrangement of Grassi's shoes near the foot of the bed; opened the closet door and looked inside; moved to the east window, opened the shade and drew it again; took the lid off a small ivoryed clothes hamper, scrutinized the contents and replaced the lid; studied the arrangement of the furniture; and finally switched the lights off and on again.

Grassi's lids were half-closed, but I could see that his eyes followed every move Vance made. When Vance had switched the lights back on, Grassi lifted himself on one elbow.

"What are you searching for?" he demanded. "What right have you to come in here and take advantage of my helplessness? If you will inform me of what you want I will tell you where to find it—if that is the usual police procedure in this barbarous country."

Despite the venomous sarcasm in his voice there was a marked undercurrent of excitement.

Vance sat down in a chair beside the bed and calmly took out a cigarette, lighting it with leisurely deliberation.

"Is it not," he asked, "the custom in your country also, Mr. Grassi, to glance over a room in which a crime—or an attempted crime—has been committed?"

"Well, what did you find?" demanded the man on the bed.

"Nothing really exciting," Vance replied. "Suppose you tell us what happened."

"That will not take long," Grassi turned to Markham. "But I want justice. I want revenge."

"You'll have it," Markham assured him. "But we'll want your help and co-operation. Do you feel equal to going into this matter now?"

Grassi settled back on the pillows.

"Certainly.—I went to bed early. I was fatigued—the excitement today . . . I am sure you will understand. It was before eleven o'clock—and I went to sleep immediately. I was exhausted—"

"You turned out the lights?" Vance asked casually.

"Naturally. And I also drew down the shades. The street lights are often annoying. . . . I was awakened by some slight noise—I cannot say exactly what it was. But I lay quiet for a moment, listening, and hearing nothing further, started to doze off again when I suddenly became aware—I do not know exactly how to explain it—of the presence of somebody in the room. There was no noise or movement—I had a sort of sixth sense. . . ."

"Perhaps you are psychic," suggested Vance, with a slight yawn.

"It may be," Grassi agreed. "At any rate, I kept perfectly still and let my eyes move about the room. But it was very dark—there was only a faint nimbus of light filtering through the drawn shades. But as I looked at the window I saw a vague shape pass in front of me, and I instinctively threw my left arm across my breast, as if to ward off something which I felt was endangering me, but which I did not understand. Almost simultaneously I felt a sharp stinging pain in my left arm, just above the elbow—and a curious sort of pressure. Whether it was the pain or whether it was from being startled and frightened I do not know, but I lost consciousness for a moment. I probably fainted. . . ."

"When I regained consciousness I felt a warm, sticky wetness under my left side, and the pain in my arm had increased and was throbbing."

Grassi looked at Markham appealingly. Then his eyes moved to Heath, and finally to Vance. Both Markham and the Sergeant were standing close to the bed, listening intently; but Vance had settled down in his chair lethargically and was placidly smoking, as if the man's recital had little or no interest for him. But I knew Vance well enough to realize that he was at this moment intensely absorbed in the recital.

"What did you do then?" Vance asked.

Grassi took a deep breath and again closed his eyes.

"I called out several times and waited; but as no one answered, I arose and pressed the electric switch by the door——"

"On which side of the bed did you arise?" Vance interrupted.

"On the side on which you are sitting," Grassi informed him. "And as soon as I had turned on the lights, I opened the door——"

Vance's eyebrows went up.

"Ah, the door was closed?"

"Not quite. It was, as you say, unlatched. . . . Then I called again—into the hall; and the butler—upstairs—answered me. I sat down on the edge of the bed and waited until he arrived. . . ."

"Did any one else answer your summons?"

"No. The butler went immediately to the telephone in the hall, downstairs, and I could hear him summoning medical assistance."

"He called me also," Markham put in. "That's why we happen to be here."

"And I am most grateful," said Grassi graciously.

Vance rose slowly and walked to a beautiful old Boule cabinet between the two east windows, and ran his fingers over the inlay.

"I say, Mr. Grassi"—he spoke without turning round—"what about that blood-stained bath towel in the hamper?"

Grassi glanced up with more alertness than he had shown at any time during the conversation.

"There was a bath towel on this little stand beside the bed," he explained. "You see, I have no private bath and the butler always leaves me my bath towel at night. When I arose I wrapped it around my arm——"

"Ah, yes—quite so." Vance turned from the Boule cabinet and walked toward the door. "That accounts for the fact that there are no bloodstains on the floor."

Vance was now inspecting the lock of the door.

"How did it happen, Mr. Grassi," he asked in an offhand manner, "that you didn't lock your door before you said your prayers and went to bed last night?"

"The lock does not work," Grassi returned in a tone of injured defiance.

Gamble stepped up to the threshold at this moment.

"That's quite true, sir," he said. "I owe Mr. Grassi an apology. I should have had it mended long ago, but it escaped my memory."

Vance waved the butler away.

"That's quite all right, Gamble. You've explained matters perfectly."

At this moment a siren was heard in the street, and Vance went to the front window and looked out.

"The ambulance is here," he announced. "We hope, Mr. Grassi, that you have a quiet night, and that we will see you tomorrow feeling quite yourself again."

Doctor Lobsenz appeared at the door with Gamble.

"Through with my patient?" he asked. "If so, I'll get some clothes on him and take him along."

Vance nodded.

"Thank you, doctor, and good luck. . . . And now, Markham, suppose we go downstairs to the library and do a bit of thinking—although it's a beastly hour for mentation. . . ."

After Grassi, accompanied by Doctor Lobsenz, had departed, Vance closed the library doors and walked to the large centre table.

"There it is, Markham, old dear," he said with a grim smile, pointing to the Chinese dagger before him.

The dagger lay on the library table in almost exactly the same spot where we had left it the afternoon before; but now there was undried blood upon it and its condition told us, only too plainly, that it was the weapon which had been used to strike through Grassi's arm.

"But why," asked Markham with a puzzled frown, "should the man who attempted to kill Grassi bring the weapon back here to the library?"

"Probably," replied Vance, "for the same reason that the person who stabbed Archer and Brisbane Coe put the dagger in the vase in this same room."

"I don't understand it."

"Neither do I—altogether. But at least there's a certain consistency in the actions of our stabber."

"You think," asked Markham, "that the same person who stabbed the Coes attempted Grassi's life also?"

"Why leap at conclusions?" sighed Vance. "There are so many other things to be ascertained before we can reach any intelligent conclusion."

"For instance?"

Vance arranged himself comfortably in a large chair.

"Well," he said, inhaling deeply on his *Régie*, "I could endure to hear the various persons inside and outside the house chant their runes as to what they know of tonight's happenings. . . . And there are other things which might bear casual scrutiny—to wit: Why did Grassi's call for help not arouse Miss Lake on the third floor ere it penetrated to Gamble's ears? And what hath yon Cerberus on the front stone steps to say about those who may have come and gone tonight? And where, and doing what, was the subtle Mr. Liang during the upheaval? And also what of the doughty guard which I asked to have stationed in Archer Coe's bedroom tonight?"

Heath, who during the entire time we had been at the Coe house had been in a state of silent but aggressive indecision, stood up and squared his shoulders.

"Well, Mr. Vance, we'll get all of your questions answered pronto."

He went resolutely to the front door. Before he opened it he turned back to the library.

"And I'm telling the world I'd like to get the answers to those questions myself. I asked that detective out front who'd been in here tonight, and he said nobody. But we'll ask him again."

He threw the door open.

"Come here, Sullivan," he bawled; and the dejected figure we had passed on the front steps came into the library.

"A guy's been stabbed here," Heath blustered. "You told me no one had come in or gone out the front door. But this is serious business, and we want you to rack your brain, if any, and tell us what you know."

Detective Sullivan was both abashed and defiant.

"I told you, Sergeant," he insisted, "that I've been sitting on those steps since seven o'clock tonight and nothing or nobody, so much as a cockroach, has passed me, goin' or comin'."

"Maybe you went to sleep and just dreamed it all," the Sergeant suggested sarcastically.

Detective Sullivan became indignant.

"Me sleep? Honest, Sergeant, there's enough noise in this two-way traffic street to wake up a dead man, let alone allow anybody to pound his ear."

"That's enough, Sergeant," said Vance mildly. "I think Sullivan is telling the truth. I have a feeling that no one came in the front door tonight."

Sullivan was sent back to the front steps and Heath went into the hall.

"I'll find out about Burke in Coe's room," he offered.

We could hear him going up the steps two at a time and opening Archer's bedroom door. A moment later he appeared with Detective Burke in tow.

"Tell Mr. Markham and Mr. Vance," he ordered gruffly, "what you've been doing all night."

"I been sleeping," Burke admitted frankly. "I pulled up a chair against the door and forgot my troubles. Was there anything the matter with that, Sergeant?"

Heath hesitated.

"Well, I guess not. You been working all day—and I didn't tell you to keep awake. But a guy's been stabbed right down the hall from you, and he called for help—and now you know nothin' about it." The Sergeant shook his head with disgust. "Well, go on back and see if you can keep awake for a while."

Burke went out.

"My fault," the Sergeant explained. "After all, you can't blame him, Mr. Vance."

"Burke wouldn't have been able to help us anyway, I'm afraid," Vance consoled him. . . . "Suppose we commune with Gamble."

The butler was brought in. He was a pitiful figure as he stood before us in questioning fear.

"How do you account for the fact," Vance asked him, "that you could hear Mr. Grassi's call from the second floor and that his appeal for help should entirely have missed the ears of Miss Lake who is on the floor between Mr. Grassi's room and yours?"

Gamble swallowed twice and braced himself against the door.

"That is quite simple, sir," he said. "Miss Lake's boudoir is at the rear of the house and there's a large parlor between her boudoir and the door leading into the hall. I, sir, leave my door open on the fourth floor, in case the front door bell should ring or I should be called."

When Gamble had been sent back to the upper hall, Vance sighed and crushed out his cigarette.

"Well, that explains that. . . . Really, y' know, Markham, we don't seem to be moving with what might be called precipitate rapidity."

He lit a fresh cigarette and stood up.

"I think I'll take a look at the rear of the house. Would you care to stagger along?"

The Sergeant nodded sagely.

"You think the guy that stabbed the Italian got in the back way, do you, Mr. Vance?"

"I have come to the conclusion, Sergeant," Vance returned sadly, as he went toward the door leading into the dining-room, "that thinking at this hour of the morning is a frightful waste of effort."

Vance switched on the dining-room lights, and we followed him toward the kitchen. As he opened the door leading into the butler's pantry I was surprised to see a rectangular line of light around the kitchen door.

Vance halted momentarily.

"I wonder . . ." he murmured, as if to himself. And then: "No, no; Gamble wouldn't have dared come near the rear of the house—he's in a blue funk."

He proceeded across the pantry and pushed open the swinging door into the kitchen.

Under the central light, seated at a large kitchen table of white pine, was Liang, fully dressed, and with a green eye-shade pulled down to the bridge of his nose. Before him on the table were a pile of books and many sheets of scattered paper. As we entered he rose and faced us, removing his eye-shade. He did not seem at all astonished at seeing us there at such an unusual hour; he smiled pleasantly and made a stiff bow.

"Good evening, Mr. Liang," Vance greeted him amiably. "You're working rather late."

"I had many things to do tonight—my work had accumulated. My monthly report to the Ta Tao Huei is overdue. . . . I trust I have not discommoded the household."

"You have been working all night—here in the kitchen?" Vance asked, going to the porch door and trying it. (It was locked.)

"Since eight o'clock," the Chinaman returned. "May I be of any service to you?"

"Oh, no end," Vance sauntered back and perched himself on a high stool. "Have you been aware of anything unusual in the house tonight, Mr. Liang?"

The man looked mildly surprised.

"Quite the contrary. It seemed very peaceful after the excitement today."

"Restful—eh, what? Astonishin'! And yet, Mr. Liang, while you were engaged in your liter'ry labors, Signor Grassi was stabbed."

There was no change of expression on the Chinaman's face as he answered: "That is most unfortunate."

"Yes, yes, quite." Vance's tone was slightly irritable. "But did you, by any chance, hear any one or see any one enter the rear door this evening?"

Liang shook his head slightly in a slow and indifferent negative.

"No," he said. "No one, to my knowledge, entered by the rear door. . . . Perhaps the front door——"

"Many thanks for the suggestion," Vance interrupted with a shrug; "but there's been some one guarding it."

"Ah!" The Chinaman moved his eyes a little until they rested on a point somewhere above Vance's head. "That is indeed interesting. . . . Perhaps the den window——"

"An excellent suggestion!" Vance stepped down from the stool. "The den window, eh, Mr. Liang?"

"It would be a logical choice," the man answered. "It cannot be seen either from the street or from the house, and there is a cement walk immediately beneath it, so that there would be no footprints."

"Our gratitude, and all that, Mr. Liang," Vance murmured. "I'll have a look at the window. . . . Pray continue with your work." And he led the way back through the dining-room into the library.

"Well, what about it?" grumbled Heath. "A swell lot you learned from that Chink."

"Still, Sergeant," Vance returned, "it was kind of Mr. Liang to suggest the den window. Why not take a peep at it?"

Heath hesitated, squinted, and then went swiftly across the hall into the drawing-room. We could hear him open the den door and walk heavily across the small room. A few moments later he returned to the library.

"There's something damn queer about this," he announced. "Maybe the Chink was right, after all. The den window was open—and the sofa that was in front of it was pulled out at a cock-eyed angle." He glanced at Markham helplessly. "Maybe somebody did get in and out of that window, Chief. . . . Anyhow, where do we go from here?"

"Home and to bed, my dear Pepsys," said Vance. "This is no hour for respectable people to be up. There's nothing more to be done here."

[25] It might be interesting to note here that Jacob Munter Lobsenz, M.D., later became Vance's personal physician.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SIX JUDGES

(Friday, October 12; 9 a. m.)

Vance rose early that morning. I myself was around at nine o'clock and was surprised to find him in street clothes and on the point of leaving the house.

"I'll be back in half an hour, Ván," he said, as he went out, but gave no further explanation.

Fifteen minutes later Markham arrived, and he had waited but ten minutes when Vance came in. He was carrying the Scottish terrier bitch in his arms. There was a dressing on her head held in place by adhesive tape, but otherwise she seemed alert and well.

"Morning, Markham." Vance greeted the District Attorney. "Really, y' know, I didn't expect you so early. I've just toddled over to Doctor Blamey's to see how the little Scotch lassie was getting along—and here she is."

He put the dog down and rang for Currie. When the man came he ordered Melba toast and a dish of warm milk.

"A little breakfast for the lass," he explained. "I've a feelin' she's going to do a bit of travellin' today."

Markham looked at him sceptically.

"You still think you can trace the person we want through that dog?"

"It's about our only hope," Vance told him seriously. "The case is far too complicated as it stands—there are too many contradictions. I am sure that you, as a prosecuting attorney, could pin the various crimes on any one of three or four people. But until I have traced the ownership and peregrinations of this Scottie, I sha'n't be satisfied."

Markham frowned. "Just how do you intend to go about it?"

Vance studied the terrier for a few moments as he crumbled the Melba toast into the dish of milk. He ran his hands over her contours; he looked at her teeth; he felt her coat; put his fist under her brisket; and took one of her forelegs in his hand.

"As I told you, Markham, this little bitch is in perfect show condition. She's been trimmed and conditioned by an expert, and it seems pretty certain that she's been entered in some show recently. She's a show dog, and her stripping is that of a professional handler; it is no pet-shop or hospital assistant's job; and owners of dogs do not go to the professional type of trimmer unless they have the ring in mind. My guess is, from her condition, that she's been shown within the last month. And it's simple enough to find what shows have been held within a reasonable radius of New York during that period."

"But why couldn't she have been shown before?" Markham asked.

"Because," explained Vance, "her coat wouldn't have been ready. She's just in full coat now—it's only beginning to go 'bye.' Over a month ago her coat would have been too short. . . . But never mind the technicalities."

He went into the library and returned with his file of *Popular Dogs*. Sitting down in his easy chair he placed the file across his knees and began running his finger down the calendar of official dog shows.

"Now, let's see," he murmured. "During the past month there has been held around New York the show at Syracuse—make a note of these, will you, Ván? Then came the Cornwall show; and after that, Tuxedo. And a week later was the Camden show, which was followed by Westbury, and also the Englewood show. . . . That brings us pretty well up to date, and they are all possibilities. Moreover, if she was on exhibition at any of these shows, she was in either the puppy or the novice class—and perhaps in the American-bred, although I doubt it."

"And how do you figure that?" Markham was still sceptical.

"That's not so difficult," Vance elucidated. "She's about a year old, I should say—perhaps a month or two either way. . . ."

"You mean to tell me," asked Markham, "that you can look at a dog and tell how old it is?"

"Approximately—yes. But one looks at the teeth for one's information. Both the temporary and the permanent teeth of a dog appear at certain ages. The third molar, for instance, appears when the dog is between six and nine months old. And as this Scottie's molars are well formed, I know she is at least nine or ten months old. But that is not the real test. Age is judged largely by the appearance of the incisors and the wearing-away of the cusps. The incisors are crowned with three lobes—a central and two lateral—resembling a *fleur-de-lis*. During the first year these three cusps are all present and show very little wear; but during the second year the middle cusp begins to wear level with the laterals, and the *fleur-de-lis* disappears from the central incisors of the lower jaw. . . . Now, if we assume that this Scottie has had a normal diet, has not had too many bones to gnaw, and has not come in contact with stones, it may fairly accurately be deduced, from the condition of her teeth, that she is about a year old—perhaps just entering her second year. . . ."

"Very well," Markham was becoming bored. "Go on from there."

"Up to twelve months," Vance continued, "dogs are eligible for the puppy class. Moreover, any dog which hasn't won a blue ribbon, except in the puppy class, is eligible for the novice class. This dog is too young to have won any important blue ribbons, and therefore my guess would be that her entries would have been in the puppy and novice classes. . . . It's not an important matter, although it limits and narrows my investigation somewhat."

"It sounds like shooting into the dark," Markham was far from convinced.

"You're right, to a certain extent," Vance agreed. "But there's a simpler way of determining the dog's ownership—and I shall try that first."

Vance stood looking down at the bandaged Scottie as she ate her milk and toast.

"The more I see of her, Markham, the more I'm convinced that there are only about five men in this part of the country who could have done such a perfect job of trimming. It takes a profound knowledge of the Scottish terrier and long years of experience to produce a contour and a balance of coat like this one. William Prentice could have done it; and George Wimberly, and Jimmy McNab, and Ellery Burke, and Steve Parton."

Vance walked round the dog several times, studying her.

"Wimberly is in Boston, so we may eliminate him on the grounds of distance. McNab is working in a private capacity for a kennel on Long Island, and I hardly think he would qualify. Both Burke and Parton are fairly distant from New York, although they are certainly possibilities."

He knelt down and ran his hand over the contour of the dog's neck and lifted the hair along the spine. Then he stood up.

"William Prentice! That's the chap. That outline of the neck and the back has been achieved by a master hand, and there's no greater master at that in this country than Prentice. Furthermore, he's only a short distance from New York. . . . I think I'll try him first. If he did trim this dog he may be able to give us some information as to her ownership."

As soon as Markham had left us that morning, we drove to Mr. Prentice's famous Barlae Kennels at Haworth, New Jersey. Mr. Prentice, a middle-aged Scotsman with a dour demeanor but a twinkle in his blue eyes, stepped out of the main kennel as we alighted from the car. He took one look at the dog in Vance's arms.

"How d'ye do, Mr. Vance," was his greeting. (Vance had known him for years: Prentice had handled many of his dogs in the ring.) "A good one, yon bitch."

"You know her then?" asked Vance eagerly.

"Ay."

"And you trimmed her?"

"Ay."

"And about how long ago might that be?"

"I couldna say exactly, but it was after the first of September."

"Whose bitch is it?"

"That I couldna say. A lady and a gentleman drove up one afternoon and asked me if I could trim the dog at once. I said 'ay,' and I trimmed it."

Vance seemed disappointed.

"Was anything else said?" he asked.

"The gentleman said he wanted the bitch put in show condition."

"Ah! And have you seen her at any of the shows since then?"

Prentice shook his head thoughtfully. "I've been showing mostly Cairns this fall."

"What sort of man brought the dog to you? Could you describe him?"

"Ay. He was a large man, around fifty, and he had little enough to say."

"And the woman?"

"She was young and not difficult to look at."

"A blonde?"

"Ay."

"His daughter, perhaps?"

A shrewd twinkle came into the Scotsman's eyes.

"I hae me doots," was all he vouchsafed.

Vance remained at the Barlæ Kennels for perhaps half an hour, discussing dogs. On the way home he seemed in better spirits.

"In any event, Van," he said, "we can now go ahead with a certain assurance of success. If only Prentice had taken the owner's name and address, how simple everything would have been."

Returning to his apartment, he telephoned to the American Kennel Club and obtained the names of the Scottish terrier judges in the six shows he had selected as the most likely ones where the bitch might have been exhibited.

The six judges turned out to be Marguerite Kimse, Karl B. Smith, Edwin Megargee, William MacBain, Morgan Stinemetz, and Robert D. Hartshorne.

Vance glanced down the list of names he had made.

"Now, let us see. . . . I can probably find most of these judges in the city. Mr. Hartshorne and Mr. Smith may be at their offices, although it is Columbus Day. And at this time of year Mrs. Cole is generally in New York.^[26] I may find Mr. Megargee in his studio. Mr. MacBain is somewhere in Wall Street, I believe; and Mr. Stinemetz surely must have an office in New York. . . . Let's see what we can find out."

He turned to the telephone and kept it busy for the best part of half an hour. Then he rose and took the dog in his arms.

"Come, Van, our itiner'ry begins."

A few minutes later we were in Vance's car, headed for the financial district.

We had to wait some time before Mr. Hartshorne returned to his office from the floor of the Exchange. He showed a keen interest in the dog and went over her carefully. But he could not remember having judged her in the show at which he had officiated. He said he would have been sure to have remembered her because of her outstanding qualities; but he was unable to give us any help.

Mr. MacBain was not in his office that day, because of the holiday. But we found Mr. Karl Smith at the New Cosmopolite Club. Mr. Smith, however, was unable to help us. He was quite sure that the dog had not been shown under him; so we went south again to Union Square to call on Mr. Megargee.

Mr. Megargee was in his studio, working on a large canvas of twelve of the famous Tapsco Caim champions. But here again we met with disappointment, for he was not able to identify the dog as having been entered in the show at which he judged.

"Although there was a good entry," Mr. Megargee explained to Vance, "I know practically every dog and bitch that got in the ribbons that day, and this one was certainly not among them, or she would have taken the blue in either the puppy or the novice class."

Things began to appear discouraging, and Vance was not in the best humor as we drove to the eastside winter studio of Mrs. Marguerite Kimse Cole.

Mr. and Mrs. Cole, owners of the Tobemory Kennels, greeted us graciously and did everything they could to help Vance out of his quandary. But to no avail. Mrs. Cole was positive the dog had not been an entry under her judgeship.

We stayed for a short time, looking at her lovely paintings and etchings of dogs,^[27] and then returned to Vance's apartment for a belated luncheon.

It was past four in the afternoon when we arrived at Mr. William MacBain's Diehard Kennels in Closter, New Jersey. Mr. MacBain, who was then vice-president of the Scottish Terrier Club of America, was busily engaged with some of his young stock. He was most gracious when Vance asked for his assistance. He showed an intense interest in the dog that Vance had brought to him, but was unable to identify her.

"But there's unquestionably Ormsay blood in her," he said, running his hand over her skull.

Mr. MacBain was too old a breeder in the Scottish terrier fancy not to have remembered the dog at once if he had judged her, and when he shook his head in answer to Vance's query there was no doubt whatever that Vance had drawn another blank in his investigation of the wounded dog's ownership.

Vance had succeeded in locating the New York office of Mr. Stinemetz, but, on phoning, learned that he was not in the city that day but could undoubtedly be found at his country home.

Mr. Stinemetz's estate in Orangeburg was only a few miles from the Diehard Kennels and we headed for it somewhat despondently. The sun was setting over the Jersey hills and a cool breeze came up from the southwest.

"This is almost our last chance," Vance observed dejectedly, "—unless the dog has been shown in New England or the south. But if that were the case, why is she here in New York now?"

Vance was downcast: I realized for the first time how much he had counted on this stray Scottish terrier to help him in the solution of the crime which was perplexing him. But it was just at the moment when things seemed darkest that a ray of light was introduced into the situation. It was Mr. Stinemetz—the last of the judges we consulted—who gave Vance the information he was seeking.

Mr. Stinemetz was in his kennel, feeding his dogs, when we arrived. Vance showed him the little lost bitch and asked him if he had ever judged her. Mr. Stinemetz looked at her closely for a moment, took her in his arms and stood her on the show table in his main kennel.

"Yes," he said slowly, after a minute's inspection; "I not only judged her, but I put her up, three weeks ago at Englewood. She won the puppy bitch class, and I would have given her a first instead of a second in the novice class, if she had shown properly. For she has the quality, and if correctly handled should go over the top. But, as I remember, some young woman with little or no experience brought her into the ring. Naturally, she could get no response from the dog. I tried to help her out, but it was hopeless; and I had to give the blue to a bitch that had the style and the ring manners, but who wasn't this one's equal in anatomy. . . . There was one slight fault in the mouth, however."

Mr. Stinemetz held back the dog's lips, exposing her teeth.

"You see this upper incisor; it's out of place. But it's not a serious fault. There's many a champion with a much worse mouth."

Vance thanked him for his help and added: "Do you happen to know what bitch this is, or who owns her?"

Mr. Stinemetz shook his head.

"No, I never saw her before—she must be a newcomer. I didn't see a catalogue of the show and there were no *post mortems* at the judge's table after the show."^[28]

Vance left Mr. Stinemetz's Quince Hill Kennels in a much happier frame of mind.

"Tomorrow," he said, as we drove home through the gathering dusk, "we will know the owner's name."

Immediately upon our arrival in New York, Vance telephoned to Markham at his home, and learned that there had been no developments in the case during the day. Grassi had returned to the Coe house at eleven o'clock that morning, evidently very little the worse for his experience of the previous night. He had wished to go to a hotel, but Markham had prevailed upon him to remain at the Coe residence until some light had filtered into the case, and Grassi had reluctantly agreed to do so.

Wrede had remained indoors all day and had telephoned to Markham twice and offered to give whatever assistance he could.

Hilda Lake had gone out about ten o'clock in the morning, dressed in sport clothes. When Heath had asked her where she was going, she had told him nonchalantly that she was going to take a drive in the country.

Sergeant Heath had remained on duty most of the day, but his labors had consisted in the main of answering phone calls and trying to pacify a small army of reporters with news of purely imaginary "developments." The den window-sill had been gone over carefully for finger-prints, but without results. A general routine investigation had been put in operation by the Sergeant, but, aside from this, nothing had been done.

"The case has me bogged," Markham complained sadly at dinner that night. (We had joined him, at his request, at the Stuyvesant Club.) "I see no way out of the situation. Even if we knew who committed the crimes, we couldn't show how they were accomplished—unless the guilty person himself chose to tell us. . . . And that attack on Grassi! instead of helping us, it has only put us deeper into the well. And there's nothing to take hold of. All the ordinary avenues of investigation are closed. Heaven knows there are enough people who might have done it—and there are enough motives for a dozen murders."

"Sad . . . sad," sighed Vance. "My heart bleeds for you, don't y' know. Still, there's some simple explanation. It's a deucedly complicated puzzle—a cryptogram with apparently meaningless words. But once we have the key letter, the rest of it will fall into place. And the key letter may be the Scottie. I'm hopin' for the best."

He applied himself for a moment to his salad.

"A bit of Beluga caviar," he drawled, "would improve this Russian dressing."

"Shall I report the oversight to the Club's board of governors, Monsieur Brillat-Savarin?"

"Oh, don't bother," Vance returned ducetly. "They'd probably add salted caviar and ruin the dressing completely. . . . You might, however, confide in me the exact condition of the Coe domicile tonight."

"There's little to confide," Markham told him acerbitously. "Heath has done the usual things and gone home. However, he's left two men on guard, one in the street and one at the rear of the house. Grassi has remained in his room all day,—Heath's last report to me was that the gentleman had gone to bed. The lock on his door, by the way, has been fixed; so he'll probably live the night through. Miss Lake came in just as the Sergeant was going. . . . By the way, she took the news of Grassi's stabbing rather hard——"

Vance looked up quickly.

"I say, that's most interestin'."

"The Chinaman did not leave the house," Markham continued, "and told Heath he preferred to remain until the guilty person had been brought to justice."

"I do hope he hasn't too long to wait," Vance sighed. "But it's just as well if Liang stays with us. I feel that he's going to be most helpful to us anon. . . . And you, Markham, old dear: what have you been doing? Milk investigations, I suppose—and committees of eminent citizens who wish to uplift the drama—and interviews with aldermen."

"That's about all," Markham confessed. "What would you have suggested?"

"Really, Markham, I hadn't a suggestion today," Vance leaned back in his chair. "But tomorrow——"

"You're so helpful and satisfying," Markham snapped. " '*Morgen, morgen, nur nicht heute; sagen immer träge Leute.* ' "

"Markham—my very dear Markham!" Vance protested reprovingly. "Really, don't y' know, I'm not lazy. I give you Cicero: '*Aliquod crastinus dies ad cogitandum dabit.* ' "

[26] Marguerite Kimse, the etcher and also a breeder and judge of Scottish terriers, is in private life Mrs. George W. Cole.

[27] Vance owned three of Marguerite Kimse's Scottie etchings—"My Scotties," "Safety First," and "Gangway!"

[28] It is considered unethical for any judge to acquaint himself, either by catalogue or otherwise, with any of the names of the entries in a show at which he is to officiate, and every reputable judge abides by this unwritten law. After the distribution of awards, he may, of course, acquaint himself with the names and ownership of any dog in the entry.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SCOTTIE'S TRAIL

(Saturday, October 13; 9 a. m.)

At nine o'clock the following morning Vance called at the offices of the American Kennel Club, at 221 Fourth Avenue, and explained to the genial and accommodating secretary, Mr. Perry B. Rice, the nature of the information he sought. Mr. Rice was sympathetic and offered to do everything he could to help with the investigation.

"The officially marked catalogue of the Englewood show would give you what data you desire," he said.

He led us down the corridor and into a large room, and introduced us to Mrs. Del Campo, the head of the show department. The room was over forty feet long, with windows across the entire west wall. Great rows of steel filing cabinets lined the side walls, and near the windows was an enormous bookcase with glass doors, lined with red morocco-bound catalogues of all the official shows during nearly half a century. Beside the door was a large tier of open shelves holding all of the judges' books and entry blanks.^[59] Near these open shelves was a series of filing cabinets containing the cards of every registered dog of every breed, showing all the wins each dog had made. A score of silent and efficient girls were at work in this room, filing cards, adding to the records, and checking the innumerable items that arise after every official show. About the walls were framed pictures of famous dogs of the various breeds.

Mrs. Del Campo, when Mr. Rice explained to her what Vance wanted, found the marked Englewood catalogue on which one of the girls was working. Turning to the Scottish terrier section, she ran her finger down the list of Puppy Bitch entries until she came to the winner of the class. The owner's name was given as Julius Higginbottom, and the name of the dog itself as Miss MacTavish. Then followed the A.K.C. Stud Book number and the date of birth—November 20 of the preceding year. The sire of the bitch was given as Champion Omsay Autocrat, and the dam as Laurieston Lovelace. The breeder was Henry D. Bixby.

Vance made a note of these data, and while he was jotting them down, Mrs. Del Campo said:

"This catalogue hasn't yet been checked with the judges' book. . . . Just a minute and I'll compare them."

She procured the Scottish terrier judges' book from one of the desks and, opening it to the page headed Puppy Bitches, looked beside the printed numeral 1. There was a pencilled numeral—258. She compared this with the printed numeral in the catalogue in front of Miss MacTavish's name; and it was the same.

"And that's final?" asked Vance.

"No, not final," Mr. Rice told him. "Those data in the catalogue should be checked with the official pedigree card." And he made a note of the A.K.C. number which appeared after Miss MacTavish's name in the catalogue.

He then took us into the room next door—a room similar to the one we had just left. In this room there was also a great series of steel filing cases filled with cards bearing the official pedigrees and all information concerning every dog registered with the A.K.C., as well as a complete file of nearly five thousand registered kennel names.

Miss Dora Makin, the head of the registration department, took the number that Mr. Rice gave her and, going to a large steel cabinet at the left of the door, pulled out a drawer containing a small row of small cards. These cards were arranged in numerical order under each of the separate breeds. There were white cards for dogs and salmon-colored cards for bitches.

After a moment's search, Miss Makin drew forth Miss MacTavish's card. At the top of it appeared the bitch's name and breed and A.K.C. number. Then came the names of her sire and dam, the date she was whelped, the name of the breeder, and the name and address of the owner. All this information tallied accurately with the data contained in the official catalogue; but there was one added item, namely, the address of Julius Higginbottom, which was Mount Vernon, New York.

"Now, that's final, Mr. Vance," Mr. Rice said. "You may rest assured that the information is correct. We go through that process with every entry in every show. Dog people don't realize the enormous amount of detail work which goes on at the A.K.C. in order to keep the hundreds of thousands of records correct and to insure every one in the dog game an almost absolute protection."

After dropping into an office across the hall to pay his respects to Mr. Louis de Casanova, the editor of *The American Kennel Gazette*, Vance took his departure, and instructed his chauffeur to drive immediately to the Criminal Courts Building on the corner of Franklin and Centre Streets.

On our way downtown Vance expressed his admiration for the A.K.C. system.

"It's amazing, Van. An entire institution based on the ideal of accuracy. It has no commodity to sell: it's purely managerial in essence. It sells only accuracy and protection to the many thousands of sportsmen and dog lovers throughout the country. A unique and astonishing institution."

When we arrived at the District Attorney's office on the fourth floor of the Criminal Courts Building, Markham was in conference with Sergeant Heath. Swacker, the District Attorney's secretary, ushered us immediately into Markham's private office.

"Things are moving," Vance sat down and took out his cigarette case. "I have just come from the American Kennel Club and have discovered a bit of most interesting information. The wounded Scottie, Markham, belongs to none other than Julius Higginbottom."

"And who might he be, Vance? And why does the fact interest you?"

Vance lighted his cigarette leisurely.

"I have met Higginbottom. He's a member of the Crestview Country Club, and he has a large country estate at Mount Vernon, where he spends his entire time living what he imagines to be the life of a country gentleman——"

Heath sat forward in his chair.

"It was the Crestview Country Club at Mount Vernon," he interjected, "where Miss Lake and Grassi went to a dance Wednesday night."

"And that's not all, Sergeant." Vance sprawled luxuriously in his chair and took a deep inhalation on his *Régie*. "Higginbottom knew Archer Coe pretty well. Several years ago Higginbottom inherited, from an aunt, a very fine collection of early Chinese paintings, many of which Coe bought from him at a preposterously low price. Higginbottom is something of a gay bird—the sporting type of man—and knew nothing of the value of the paintings. After he had sold them to Coe he learned from a dealer that they were very valuable, and there was consequent talk, in certain New York art circles, to the effect that Coe had put over a shrewd and somewhat unethical deal on Higginbottom. Higginbottom, as I know, took the matter up with Coe, but without any success, and there has been a certain amount of bad blood between them ever since. Higginbottom was a major in the World War and is a hot-headed sort of a chap."

Markham beat a nervous tattoo on the desk.

"Well, where does that get us?" he asked. "Are you implying that Higginbottom came down from Mount Vernon with his dog and murdered Coe?"

"Good Lord, no!" Vance made a slight gesture of annoyance. "I'm not implyin' anything. I am merely reportin' my findings. But I must confess that I find the relationship between the Scottie and Major Higginbottom and Archer Coe a bit satisfyin'."

"It appears to me," grumbled Markham, "that it merely adds a new and more complicated angle to the situation."

"Don't be discouragin'," sighed Vance. "At least there's food for thought in the combination."

"My mind is already glutted." Markham rose irritably and walked to the window overlooking the Tombs. "What do you propose to do now?"

Vance also rose.

"I'm taking a bit of a jaunt into the country. I am motoring immediately to Mount Vernon, where I hope to have polite and serious—and, I trust, illuminatin'—intercourse with the major concerning Miss MacTavish. . . . Would you care to hear the result of my social endeavors?"

Markham turned from the window and sank heavily into his chair.

"I'll be here all afternoon," he answered glumly.

It was a pleasant drive to Mount Vernon, in the brisk October air. We had little difficulty in finding the Higginbottom estate, and we were lucky enough to find the major sitting on the big colonial front porch.

He was a rotund man of medium height, with a partly bald head and a florid complexion. There was a look of dissipation about his small, beady gray eyes, which no amount of outdoor country living could disguise. But there was a likable joviality about him.

He welcomed Vance effusively and invited us to sit down and have a highball.

"To what do I owe the honor of this call, sir?" He spoke with hospitable good-nature. "I am really delighted. You should come oftener."

"I'd be charmed." Vance sat down beside a small glass table. "But today, Major, d'y'e see, I hopped out here on a little matter of business. . . . The truth is, I'm dashed interested in a Scottie bitch belonging to you—Miss MacTavish—who was shown at Englewood. . . ."

At the mention of the dog's name Higginbottom gave a loud cough, pushed his chair back with a scraping sound, and glanced over his shoulder to the open window leading into the house. The man seemed deeply perturbed, and his tone of voice and his manner, when he answered, struck me as most peculiar.

"Yes, yes; of course," he blustered, rising and walking toward the front steps. "I rarely go to dog shows any more. By the way, Mr. Vance, I want to show you my roses. . . ." And he walked down the stairs toward a small rose garden at the right.

Vance lifted his eyebrows in mild astonishment and followed his host. When we were out of hearing of the house, the major placed his hand on Vance's shoulder and spoke confidentially:

"By gad, sir! I hope my wife didn't hear that question of yours. She's generally in the drawing-room during the mornings, and the windows were open." He appeared troubled. "Yes, sir, it would be most annoying if she heard it. I didn't mean to be impolite, sir—no, sir, by gad!—but you startled me for a moment. . . . A most trying and delicate situation." He put his head a little closer to Vance. "Where did you hear of that little bitch of mine?—were you at the Englewood show?—and why should you be interested?" He glanced again over his shoulder toward the porch. "George! I hope your question didn't reach my wife's ears."

Vance looked at the man quizzically.

"Come, come, Major," he said pleasantly. "It really can't be so serious. I was not at Englewood, and I never saw Miss MacTavish till the day before yesterday. The fact of the matter is, Major, your little bitch is now in my apartment in New York."

"You don't say!—In your apartment?" Higginbottom seemed vastly astonished. "How did she get there?—I don't understand at all. This is most peculiar, Mr. Vance. Pray enlighten me."

"But she is your dog, is she not, Major?" Vance asked quietly.

"Well . . . well—the fact is—that is to say——" Higginbottom was spluttering with embarrassment. "Yes—yes, I suppose you would say that I am the technical owner of her. But I haven't had her at my kennels here for over six months. . . . You see, Mr. Vance, it's this way—I gave Miss MacTavish away to a friend of mine—a very dear friend, y'understand—in New York."

"Ah," breathed Vance, looking up at the cerulean sky. "And who, Major, might this friend be?"

Higginbottom began to splutter again, with an added show of indignation.

"By gad, Mr. Vance! I can't see—really, I can't see—what possible concern that is of any one but myself—and, of course, the recipient. . . . It was a purely private transaction—I might say a personal transaction." He cleared his throat pompously. "Even though you may have the dog in your possession now, I can hardly see—that is, I fail to understand——"

"Major," Vance interrupted brusquely, "I am not prying into your private affairs. But a rather serious matter has arisen, and it will be much better for you to confide in me than to have the District Attorney summon you to his office."

Higginbottom's little eyes opened very wide and he fumbled with the ashes in his pipe.

"Well, well, of course, if the matter is as serious as that, I suppose I can trust you. . . . But, for Heaven's sake, man," he added appealingly, "don't let this go any further."

Again he glanced around to make sure that no one was listening.

"The fact is, Mr. Vance, I have a very dear friend in New York—a young woman—a very charming young woman, I might say——"

"A blonde?" asked Vance casually.

"Yes, yes, the young woman is a blonde. Do you know her by any chance?"

Vance shook his head regretfully.

"No, I haven't had the pleasure. But pray continue, Major."

"Well, you see, it's like this, Mr. Vance. I come to the city quite often—on business, y' understand—and I enjoy a night-club and the theatre now and then, and—you know how it is—I don't care to go alone, and Mrs. Higginbottom has no interest in such frivolous things——"

"Pray don't make apologies, Major," Vance put in. "What did you say the young lady's name was?"

"Miss Doris Delafield—and a very fine young woman she is. Comes of an excellent family——"

"And it was Miss Delafield to whom you gave the dog six months ago?"

"That's right. But I'm most anxious to keep the matter a secret. You see, Mr. Vance, I wouldn't care to have Mrs. Higginbottom know of it, as she might not understand exactly."

"I'm sure she wouldn't," Vance murmured. "And I quite sympathize with your predicament. . . . And where does Miss Delafield live, Major?"

"At the Belle Maison apartments at 90 West 71st Street."

Vance's eyes flickered very slightly as he took out a cigarette and lighted it slowly.

"That's the small apartment house just across the vacant lot from Archer Coe's residence, isn't it?"

"That's right." The major nodded vindictively. "Coe—the old swindler! It served him right, what happened to him the other night. I'll warrant he was killed by somebody he bilked. . . . But, after all," he added more tolerantly, "I couldn't dislike the old chap altogether. And of course we shouldn't say anything but good about the dead. That's the sporting attitude, isn't it?"

"So I understand," nodded Vance. . . . "You've been reading the newspapers, eh, Major?"

"Naturally, sir," Higginbottom seemed a little surprised at the question. "I was interested. The fact is, Mr. Vance, I was calling on Miss Delafield the very night he was murdered."

"Indeed, Major! That's most interesting." Vance leaned over and snapped off a dead leaf from one of the Talisman bushes. "By the by, Major," he went on in an offhand tone, "little Miss MacTavish was found in the Coe house the next morning, with a rather vicious wound across her head."

The major's pipe fell from his mouth to the lawn, and was ignored. He stared at Vance like a man transfixed, and the blood went from his face.

"I—I—really. . . . Are you—sure?" he stammered.

"Oh, quite. Quite. As I told you, I have Miss MacTavish in my apartment now. I found her in the house—in the lower hall. I took her to Doctor Blamey,—she's coming round in first-class shape. . . . But how do you account for the fact, Major?"—Vance looked at the man squarely—"that your dog was in the murder house at the time the crime was committed?"

"Account for it!" the man blustered excitedly. "I can't account for it. . . . Good gad! This is incredible! I'm completely bowled over——"

"But how does it happen, Major," Vance cut in placidly, "that you haven't heard of the dog's absence from Miss Delafield's apartment?—?"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," said the major, and hesitated.

"Ah, what did you forget to tell me?"

The major shifted his eyes.

"I omitted to mention the fact that Miss Delafield sailed for Europe on Wednesday night."

"The night Mr. Archer Coe was murdered," Vance said slowly.

"Just so," the major returned aggressively. "The reason I happened to be at her apartment that night was because we were having a farewell dinner, and I was to see her off on the boat."

"And how does it happen, Major, that your dog was not returned to your kennels here when Miss Delafield sailed for Europe?"

"The fact of the matter is"—Higginbottom became apologetic—"Doris—that is, Miss Delafield—on my advice, left the dog in the care of her maid, who was to look after the apartment during her absence."

"On your advice? . . . Why?"

"I thought it best," the major explained weakly. "You see, sir, if I brought the dog here it might involve the situation a bit, as I would have to give explanations to my wife when Doris—Miss Delafield—returned from Europe and wished to have the dog back. And, of course——"

"Ah, yes. I quite understand," nodded Vance.

"You see," Higginbottom continued, "I had expected my wife to go to Europe this fall, but she decided to remain here, and one or two matters of a—ah—confidential nature arose, which made it advisable for me to let Miss Delafield sail to Europe for a short while—until certain little gossip blew over. . . . I'm sure, Mr. Vance, you can comprehend the situation."

"Oh, quite. And what time did Miss Delafield sail Wednesday night?"

"On the *Olympic*—at midnight."

"And you were in the apartment at what time?"

"I called about six o'clock and we went out immediately. We had dinner—let me see—at a little restaurant—I suppose you might call it a speakeasy—and we remained there until it was time to go to the boat."

"What little restaurant was it?"

Higginbottom knit his brow.

"Really, Mr. Vance, I can't remember." He hesitated. "You know, I'm not certain that it even had a name. It was a small place in the West Fifties—or was it the Forties? It was a place that had been recommended to Miss Delafield by a friend."

"A bit vague—eh, what?" Vance let his eyes come to rest mildly on the major. "But thank you just the same. I think I'll stagger back to New York and have a chat with Miss Delafield's maid. I'm sure you won't mind. What, by the by, is her name?"

The major looked a bit startled.

"Annie Cochrane," he said, and then hurried on: "But I say, Mr. Vance, this thing sounds rather serious. Would you mind if I accompanied you to the city? I myself would like to know why Annie didn't report to me the absence of the dog."

"I'd be delighted," Vance told him.

We drove back to New York with Major Higginbottom, stopping at the Riviera for a hurried luncheon, and went direct to the Belle Maison.

Annie Cochrane was a young dark-haired woman in her early thirties, obviously of Irish descent, and when, on opening the door to our ring, she saw Major Higginbottom, she appeared frightened and flustered.

"Listen here, Annie," the major began aggressively. "Why didn't you let me know that Miss Delafield's dog had disappeared?"

Annie explained stumbingly that she had been afraid to say anything about the dog's disappearance, as she considered it her fault that the dog was gone, and that she had hoped from day to day that it would return. The woman was patently frightened.

"Just when did the dog disappear, Annie?" asked Vance in a consoling tone.

The woman looked up at him gratefully.

"I missed her, sir," she said, "just after Major Higginbottom and Miss Doris went out Wednesday night, at about nine o'clock, sir."

Vance turned to Higginbottom with a faint smile.

"Didn't I understand you to say that you went out at six o'clock, Major?"

Before Higginbottom could answer, the maid blurted: "Oh, no; it wasn't six o'clock. It wasn't until nine o'clock. I got dinner for them here a little after eight."

The major looked down and stroked his chin cogitantly.

"Yes, yes." He nodded. "That's right. I'd thought it was six o'clock, but now I remember. And an excellent dinner you prepared that night, Annie." He looked up at Vance with a smile of nonchalant frankness. "Sorry to have misinformed you, Mr. Vance. The—ah—incident rather slipped my memory. . . . I had intended to take Miss Delafield out to dinner. But when I arrived Annie had prepared everything for us, so we changed our plans."

Vance appeared to accept his explanation without question.

"And what time did you arrive here that evening, Major?"

Higginbottom seemed to ponder the question; but before he could speak Annie supplied the information.

"You arrived about six o'clock, sir," she informed him with a respectful naïveté. "And Miss Doris came in at half-past seven."

"Ah, yes. Quite right, Annie." The major pretended to be grateful for having this moot point recalled to his memory. "Miss Delafield," he explained blandly to Vance, "said she had been shopping."

"Well, well," murmured Vance. "I didn't know the shops were open so late. . . . Astonishin'."

The major squinted his small eyes and glanced quickly in Vance's direction.

"Oh, I'm quite sure," he supplied, "that a number of the smaller Madison Avenue shops are open late."

Vance apparently did not hear this explanation. He had already turned to the maid.

"By the by, Annie," he asked, "was the dog here during dinner?"

"Oh, yes, sir," the woman assured him. "She always gets under my feet when I'm serving."

"And how do you account for the fact that she disappeared immediately after Major Higginbottom and Miss Delafield had gone?"

"I don't know, sir—honest I don't. I looked for her everywhere. I looked out in the back yard and in the court, and I went through every rear hallway in the house. But she wasn't anywhere."

"Why didn't you look in the street?" Vance asked.

"Oh, she couldn't have got into the street," the maid explained. "She was in the kitchen and the dining-room here, sir, and only the front door of the living-room leads into the main hall. But that was closed and locked after Miss Doris and Mr. Higginbottom went out."

"Then, as I understand it, the dog could only have gone into the rear yard?"

"Yes, sir; that's all. And that's the strange thing about it, sir; for if she had been in the rear yard, I would have found her."

"Did you look in the vacant lot next door, between this house and Mr. Coe's residence?"

"I looked there too, sir, though I knew it wouldn't do any good. There's no way she could have gotten through the gate, for it's always kept locked."

"Miss MacTavish was allowed, however, to run in the rear yard, wasn't she?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Being as we are on the first floor, it was most convenient, and I always left the kitchen door open so she could come and go when she wanted to."

Vance did not speak for a moment; then he asked with unwonted seriousness:

"At just what time, Annie, did you start your search for the dog? It is quite important that you be accurate."

"I can tell you almost exactly, sir," the woman answered, without hesitation. "It was when I was through with my dishes and the housework. Miss Doris and Mr. Higginbottom went out at nine o'clock, and when I had straightened everything up, it was exactly half-past ten."

Vance nodded. "How do you account for the dog's disappearance, Annie?"

"I can't account for it, sir. At first, when I couldn't find her, I thought that maybe some delivery boy, or one of the expressmen, had stolen her. She's a sly little devil, she is. And very sweet. And she has a lovable nature. Almost any one could get her to follow them. But no one had been here after seven o'clock that evening."

She turned to the major beseechingly.

"I'm terrible sorry, sir, honest I am. I loved little Miss MacTavish——"

"That's quite all right, Annie," Vance said in a kindly tone. "Miss MacTavish is well and happy."

He turned to Higginbottom.

"By the by," he asked, "where did you get Miss MacTavish, Major?"

"I bought her from Mr. Henry Bibby, when she was five months old, and I turned her over immediately to Miss Delafield," the major said regretfully. "Doris became attached to her and insisted upon showing her. I tried to discourage her——"

"She was quite worthy of being shown," said Vance. . . . "So you drove out to Mr. William Prentice's and had him trim her for the ring—eh, what? . . . But why did you enter her under your own name at Englewood?"

"By gad, I don't know." The major seemed thoroughly disgusted with himself. "One of those foolish things we all do." He looked appealingly at Vance, who nodded sympathetically. "Mr. Bibby made out the papers in my name," the major continued, "and I never took the trouble to have the dog retransferred. It never occurred to me that Doris would want to show her. So I filled out the blank—and there you are. Trouble, trouble, trouble. . . . Is there anything else, Mr. Vance?"

"No, I think not. . . . Only, I'd like to ask Annie another question." He turned to the maid. "Annie," he said, "what kind of lip-stick does Miss Delafield use?"

The maid seemed greatly surprised at this question and stared at Vance. Then she shot a quick glance at Higginbottom.

"Well, do you know, or don't you, Annie?" the major asked her severely.

"Yes, sir, I know. Miss Doris sent me to Broadway to the drug-store only Wednesday morning to buy her a lip-stick."

"Well, tell Mr. Vance what kind it was."

"It was a Duplex Carmine—or something like that; Miss Doris wrote it out for me," she said.

"Thanks awfully, Annie. That will be all."

As we emerged into 71st Street, the major expressed his curiosity in a question: "What about that lip-stick, sir?"

"Nothing serious—I hope," Vance returned casually. "I just wanted to clear up a little point. An empty holder of Duplaix's Carmine lip-stick was found in the waste-paper basket in Mr. Coe's library Thursday morning."

"By gad! You don't say!" The major, however, did not seem particularly perturbed. "Doris must have dropped in on Archer Coe to say good-bye."

"Oh, she knew him, then?"

The major nodded sourly.

"I introduced him to her about a year ago. She visited him occasionally, I understand—though, I might add, I didn't encourage these little visits. Fact is, I told her quite frankly I'd prefer she didn't see him."

"Did Miss Delafield know of the way Coe had treated you in connection with your Chinese paintings?"

"Oh, yes." The major was candor itself. "I told her about it. But she didn't see how that could make any difference. You know how women are. No sense of business ethics."

"No doubt—no doubt," Vance returned vaguely.

Then he held out his hand.

"Well, Major, I want to thank you for your help. I'll let you know of any developments in connection with the little Scottie. In the meantime you may rest assured she is being taken good care of."

"What should I do now?" asked the major.

"Well," returned Vance cheerfully, "if I were you, I'd go home and get a good night's rest."

"Not me," declared the major. "I'm going to the club and dive into my locker—I never needed Scotch as I do at this minute."

When he had gone, Vance entered his car, which was waiting outside the Belle Maison, and gave orders to be driven at once to the Criminal Courts Building. As soon as we were shown into Markham's office, Vance threw himself into a chair and, lying back, closed his eyes.

"I have a bit of news, Markham, old dear," he announced.

"I'm most grateful." Markham reached into a drawer for a fresh cigar. "What might it be?"

Vance sank even deeper into his chair.

"I think I know who killed the Coe brothers."

[29] Mr. Rice explained to us that the judges' books and entry blanks were kept for six or seven months, until they had been thoroughly checked with the records and found correct.

CHAPTER XIX

DEATH AND REVELATIONS

(Saturday, October 13; 4.30 p. m.)

Markham leaned forward in his chair, and gave Vance a quizzical look.

"You positively stagger me," he said. "What name shall I write in on the warrant?"

"Too much haste, Markham," Vance replied him. "Far too much haste. There are various little things to be done—little knots to be tied—before the arm of the law can pounce upon the culprit—only, arms don't pounce, do they?"

"In that case, perhaps you could bring yourself to confide in me." Markham still spoke ironically.

"Really, I'd rather not, old dear. Let me have my little secret for a brief period." Then Vance became serious. "After all, my conclusion is, to a certain extent, only a guess. It hangs on a somewhat slender clue—a clue which any good criminal lawyer could tear to shreds. And the fact that my conclusion satisfies me does not mean that it would satisfy a jury—or even a lawyer. But I believe I can add a little substantiation to it. . . . You don't mind biding a wee, do you, Markham?"

"Since you seem to have gone Scotch," retorted Markham, "I'll merely say that I'll make an effort to dree my weird. . . . I assume, however, that you know how the crimes were committed."

"Alas, no!" Vance shook his head lugubriously. "That's the chief reason why I shall hoard my theory as to who perpetrated them. Really, y' know, Markham, one shouldn't accuse a person of committing a crime when one has no idea how it was committed, and especially when the person could prove conclusively that he couldn't have committed it."

"You sound extremely vague," Markham commented.

"I feel vague," said Vance. "I could make out an excellent case against the murderer for the doing-in of Archer. My great difficulty, however, would be that there was no point whatever in the murderer's killing Brisbane. Motive is lacking—in fact, that particular murder is meaningless from a logical point of view. But I'm sure the murderer most passionately desired the death of Archer. And yet, it would be utterly unreasonable to accuse him of killing Archer—he apparently couldn't possibly have done it. . . . And there you are. Do you not sympathize with me in my predicament?"

"I'm on the point of bursting into tears," returned Markham. "But just what do you propose doing to extricate yourself from your embarrassing situation?"

Vance drew himself together and stood up. He was now alert and serious.

"I propose to go to the Coe house and ask many questions of its inmates. Will you accompany me?"

Markham glanced at the clock on the wall and rang for Swacker.

"I'm leaving for the day," he told his secretary. And, taking his hat and coat from the stand in the corner, he went toward the private-entrance door. "I'm interested," he said, "—in a mild way. . . . But what about Heath?"

"Oh, the Sergeant, by all means," Vance replied. "He's definitely indicated."

Markham returned to his desk and phoned the Homicide Bureau. When he had replaced the receiver he walked back to the door.

"Heath will be waiting for us in front of Police Headquarters."

We got into Vance's car, picked up the Sergeant, who seemed unusually surly, and drove uptown. At 59th Street and Fifth Avenue we entered Central Park and took the winding roads toward the 72nd Street west-side entrance.

It was still light as we passed the lake, although there was a sunset haze in the air. The thermometer had been rising all afternoon, and there was a muggy, warm atmosphere over the city. I remember that the thought passed through my mind that we were probably entering upon Indian summer. The leaves had begun to turn, and the vista of the park, spread out before us in its hazy and speckled coloring, recalled a Monet painting I had seen in the *Salle Commandeau*, in the Louvre.

As we approached the western entrance to the park, I noticed a familiar figure seated on one of the benches just beyond the cut privet hedge, a little distance from the roadway; and at that moment Vance leaned over and gave an order to the chauffeur to halt the car.

"Wrede is communing with his soul on yon bench," he said. "And he was one of the persons with whom I wished to have parley. I think I'll toddle over and put a few questions to him."

He opened the door of the car. We followed him into the roadway and turned east toward a small opening in the hedge.

Wrede was sitting with his back to us, perhaps a hundred feet away, gazing over the lake. Just as we came opposite him along the hedge, I noticed the rotund figure of Enright walking down the path toward the bench on which Wrede sat. He had the Doberman Pinscher on a leash.

"Well, well," Vance remarked; "the talkative Mr. Enright is invading new territory. Perhaps Ruprecht tired of the vista over the reservoir. . . ."

Just then an amazing thing happened. The Doberman suddenly halted in his tracks, drew back a foot or two, and crouched down as if in terror. Then, with a curious whine, he bounded forward, dragging his leash from the astonished Enright's hand. He leapt straight toward Wrede.

Wrede turned his head toward the dog, drew back, and started to rise. But he was too late. The Doberman sprang at him with unerring aim and fastened his powerful fangs in the man's neck. Wrede was bowled over backwards, with the dog on top of him growling throatily. It was a terrible sight.

Sergeant Heath yelled at the top of his voice in a futile effort to distract the dog, and jumped over the hedge with an alacrity that amazed me. As he ran toward the struggling Wrede, he drew his revolver. Vance looked on with a coldness that I could not understand.

"There's justice in that, Markham," he commented, lighting a cigarette with steady fingers.

Heath had now reached the dog and placed the revolver against its head. There were two sharp reports. The Doberman staggered forward on its side and went limp, lying very still.

When we reached Wrede, there was no movement in his body. He lay on his back, his eyes staring, his arms drawn up, as motionless as death. His throat was red, and a great pool of blood had formed under his head. It was a sight I wish I had never seen.

Enright came lumbering up, his mouth open, his face the color of chalk.

"My God!—oh, my God!" he muttered over and over.

Vance stood looking down at Wrede, smoking complacently. He turned to Enright.

"It's quite all right, don't y' know," he said in a hard voice. "It serves him jolly well right. He'd beaten and misused the animal in some outrageous fashion; and this is the dog's revenge."

Vance knelt down and felt the prostrate man's pulse. Then he leaned over and inspected the wound in Wrede's neck, nodding slowly. He stood up and shrugged.

"He's quite dead, Markham," he said without the slightest emotion. "The dog's fangs severed the jugular vein and the carotid artery. Wrede died almost at once from the profuse hemorrhage and, possibly, an air embolism. . . . No use rushing him to a doctor's."

At this moment a uniformed officer came running up. He recognized Markham and saluted.

"Anything I can do, sir?"

"You might call an ambulance, officer," Markham answered in a strained, husky voice. "This is Sergeant Heath of the Homicide Bureau," he added.

The officer hurried away toward his call-box on 72nd Street.

"And what do you want me to do?" wailed the frightened Enright.

Vance answered him.

"Go home and take a stiff drink and try to forget the episode. If we need you, we'll call on you."

Enright made an attempt to answer, but failing, he turned and waddled away into the gathering mist.

"Let's be going, Markham," suggested Vance. "Wrede's appearance doesn't charm me, and the Sergeant will look after things." He turned to Heath. "By the by, Sergeant, we'll be at the Coe house. Join us there after the ambulance comes."

Heath nodded without looking up. He still stood, revolver in hand, gazing down at the dead body of Wrede, like a man hypnotized.

"Who'd have thought a dog could do it!" he mumbled.

"Personally I feel rather grateful to the Doberman," Vance said in a low voice, as he walked away toward his parked car.

It was only two blocks to the Coe residence and nothing was said en route; but when we were seated in the library, Markham broke the silence by trying to put into words his baffled state of mind.

"There's something queer about all this, Vance—your interest in that Doberman Pinscher, and then to have him attack Wrede in that brutal fashion. And I can't see that we're getting anywhere. There's just one tragedy after another, without any light on the case. I suppose you see some connection between the Scottish terrier and the Doberman. Would you mind telling me what was in your mind when you looked up Enright?"

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

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

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

He sat down and lighted another cigarette.

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

Markham leaned forward.

"Do you mean to say that Wrede——?"

Vance held up his hand.

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

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

"He was dead all right. . . . This case don't look right to me." He appealed helplessly to Markham. "What next, Chief?"

"Mr. Vance wants to talk to the Chinese cook," Markham returned listlessly.

"Where'll that get you, Mr. Vance?" Heath asked with solemn hopelessness.

Before Vance could reply, Liang entered the library from the dining-room and stood respectfully at the door, without looking at any of us.

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

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

Liang looked at Vance with studious calm (I shall probably never know what sudden unspoken understanding passed between them in that moment of silent mutual scrutiny.) Liang inclined his head with a murmured "Thank you," and took one of the *Régies*, which Vance lighted for him.

Vance returned to his chair and Liang sat down.

"Mr. Liang," Vance began, "I think I apprehend the position in which you have been placed by the unfortunate events which have taken place in this house, and I also think you realize that I have not been entirely ignorant of your predicament. You have acted, I might say, in very much the same way I myself might have acted, had our positions been reversed. But the time has come when frankness is wisdom—and I hope you trust me sufficiently to believe me when I tell you that no possible danger can come to you. You are no longer in jeopardy. There is now no possibility of misunderstanding. As a matter of fact, I have not misunderstood you from the first."

Liang again bowed his head, and said:

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

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

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

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

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

Vance inclined his head in polite agreement.

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

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

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

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

"I asked myself what was best for me to do, and decided that since no one knew I had returned to the house I would go away and come back much later that night. So I went—to some friends of mine. When I returned at about midnight, I made unnecessary noise, so that any one in the house would hear me returning. After a while I came again into this library and looked round very carefully, for I could not understand what had happened that night. I found the poker lying on the hearth, and there was blood on it. I also found the dagger in the large Yung Cheng *ting yao* vase on the table there. I had a definite feeling that both of these articles were left here for some special purpose, and it occurred to me that if a murder had been committed that night, it was I who was supposed to take the blame. . . ."

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

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

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

"That is true," Liang admitted. "I placed them there when the butler sent me to Miss Lake's room the next morning. Perhaps if I had realized how serious the situation was and had understood all of its complications, I might have acted differently. I do not yet understand the mechanism of the crime. The physical mind, however, so to speak, between Mr. Wrede and Mr. Archer Coe took place in this library, and yet his dead body was in his bedroom upstairs."

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

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

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

The Chinaman gave a slow smile.

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

Vance bowed acquiescence.

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

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

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

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

"I understand now," he said. "I had already prepared the breakfast when the butler telephoned, for he discovered the crime when he was taking Mr. Coe's breakfast to him. . . . Yes, I gave myself away, but it took a clever man to grasp the error."

Vance acknowledged the compliment.

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

The Chinaman looked up shrewdly. "Pretending?"

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

A slow smile again spread over Liang's ascetic mouth.

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

"You recognized the footsteps?"

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

"A little later I heard Mr. Grassi call out, and then I heard the butler telephoning. Even so, I thought it best to remain in the kitchen, for it occurred to me that Mr. Wrede might still be hiding in the house, waiting for a chance to escape through the rear door. When you came into the kitchen and informed me of the attack on Mr. Grassi, I suggested the den window. I could not see how else Mr. Wrede could have gone out of the house."

Liang looked up sadly.

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

Vance got up and put out his cigarette.

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

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

(Saturday, October 13; 6.30 p. m.)

When Liang had gone out, Vance sent Gamble for Hilda Lake. As soon as she entered the library, Vance informed her that Wrede was dead.

She looked at him a moment, lifted her eyebrows, shrugged slightly, and said: "It is no great loss to the world."

"Furthermore," Vance went on, "I believe that Mr. Wrede murdered your uncles and attempted the life of Mr. Grassi."

"I would not be in the least surprised," the young woman commented coldly. "I have suspected all along that he murdered Uncle Archer—but I could not quite see how he accomplished it. Have you learned his *modus operandi*?"

Vance shook his head.

"No, Miss Lake," he admitted. "That's a part of the problem still to be solved."

"But why," she asked, "should he kill Uncle Brisbane? Uncle Brisbane was his ally."

"That's another phase of the problem that must be worked out. There was an error—a miscalculation—somewhere."

"I can understand," Hilda Lake remarked, "why he should attempt Mr. Grassi's life. Mr. Wrede was intensely jealous of Mr. Grassi."

"All clever, scheming men with a sense of their own inferiority," said Vance, "are inclined toward intense jealousy. . . . But there's a particular thought that has entered my mind this evening, and I shall ask you about it.—Tell me, Miss Lake, what reason would Brisbane have had for killing Archer?"

Vance's question amazed me, and when I glanced at Markham and Heath, I saw that they too, were startled. But Hilda Lake accepted it as if it had been the most casual and conventional of queries.

"Oh, various reasons," she answered calmly. "There was a deep antagonism between the two. Uncle Brisbane had many ideas and many ambitions, but he was always handicapped by the fact that Uncle Archer controlled all the money. There was, therefore, the money motive. Again, Uncle Brisbane did not feel that Uncle Archer had treated me fairly, and he was quite anxious for me to marry Mr. Wrede. Uncle Archer, as you know, was violently opposed to the marriage."

"And you, Miss Lake?"

"Oh," she returned offhandedly, "I thought the marriage might be rather a good thing. Mr. Wrede was a comforting kind of soul who wouldn't have bothered me in the slightest—and I was tremendously desirous of escaping from this queer household. I knew all his faults, but as long as they didn't interfere with me—"

"Perhaps," suggested Vance, "the arrival of Mr. Grassi changed your mind a bit?"

For the first time during my acquaintance with Hilda Lake, I noticed a soft, feminine expression come into her eyes. She glanced down as if embarrassed.

"Perhaps, as you say," she replied in a low voice, "the arrival of Mr. Grassi changed my mind."

Vance stood up.

"I hope, Miss Lake," he said, "that you will both be very happy."

We dined at Vance's apartment that night. Both Vance and Markham were troubled, for the case had not had a satisfactory ending,—there were many things that had been left unexplained; there were many links in the chain of evidence which had not been found. But before the night was over there were no longer any mysteries: each step in this monstrous crime, and each perplexing and contradictory factor, had been clarified.

The final elucidation came in a most unexpected manner. We were sitting in Vance's library talking, after dinner.

"I'm not satisfied," grumbled Markham. "There are too many factors in this case which I cannot understand and which have not been satisfactorily explained. Why should Wrede have murdered Brisbane? How did that revolver get in Archer's hand—and why the bullet in his head, long after he was dead? Why the carefully bolted door and all the technical thought that went into the bolting of the door? . . ."

Vance smoked in doleful silence for a while.

"It's dashed mystifyin'," he muttered. "What I can't understand is how Archer got upstairs after he had been stabbed in the library. There's little doubt, after Liang's story, that the bloody work was done downstairs."

"I'm not so sure you're right about that, Vance," submitted Markham. "If your theory is correct, you must logically admit the proposition that a dead man walked upstairs."

Vance inclined his head.

"I realize that," he said thoughtfully. Then he leapt to his feet and stood before Markham, tense and animated. "A dead man walked upstairs," he repeated in a strained, hushed voice. "That's it! That's the answer to everything. . . . Yes, Markham,—he nodded with curious significance—"a dead man walked upstairs!"

Markham looked up at him with benevolent concern.

"Come, come, Vance," he said, in a kindly, paternal tone. "This case has upset you. Take a good stiff nightcap and go to bed——"

"No, no, Markham," Vance cut in, his eyes staring straight ahead. "That's just what happened the other night. Archer Coe—already a dead man—walked upstairs. And—what is even more terrible, Markham—he didn't know he was dead!"

Vance turned quickly and went to a set of thick quarto volumes on the lower shelf of one of his bookcases. He ran his finger along the books until he came to volume "E." He turned the pages and found what he was looking for. Then he glanced down the column of fine type.

"Listen, Markham," he said. "Here's a historical case of a dead person walking." He read from the encyclopædia: "*Elizabeth (Amélie Eugénie), 1837-1898, consort of Francis Joseph, emperor of Austria, a daughter of Duke Maximilian Joseph of Bavaria and Louisa Wilhelmina, was born on the 24th of December, 1837, at Lake Starnberg. . . .*" He turned the page. "But here's the passage regarding her death: *Elizabeth spent much of her time traveling through Europe and at the palace she had built in Corfu. On the 10th of September, 1898, she was walking through the streets of Geneva with her entourage, from her hotel to the steamer, when an anarchist, named Luigi Luccheni, ran suddenly into the roadway and stabbed her in the back, with a shoemaker's awl. The police immediately pounced upon the man and were about to drag him away, when the Empress stayed them and gave the order that they should release him. 'He has not injured me,' she said, 'and I wish, on this occasion, to forgive him.' She continued her walk to the steamer, which was more than half a mile distant, and made a farewell speech to her subjects from the deck. She then retired to her cabin and lay down. Several hours later she was found dead. Luccheni had actually stabbed her without her being aware of it, and she had died hours later of an internal hemorrhage. This crime was the final misfortune which came to the Austrian emperor, and all Europe was aroused to a state of intense indignation.'*"

Vance closed the book and threw it to one side.

"Now do you see what I mean, Markham?" he asked. "A dead person often does strange things without knowing he is dead. . . . But wait a minute. I have another book here——"

He went to another bookcase, and, after a moment's search, pulled out a black, gold-lettered volume.

"Here's a rare book, Markham,—'An Old Gate of England,' by A. G. Bradley.^[30] . . . There's a passage in it I want to read to you. As I remember, it was in the chapter on Rye." He turned the pages. "The passage relates, as I recall, to the Duke of Cumberland's visit to Rye when he made an inspection of the defenses of the neighborhood and was entertained by Mr. Lamb who was still mayor. . . . Ah, here it is—I hope I don't bore you: *'These particulars have been kindly given me by almost the only living representative of the Lamb-Grebell families—which have otherwise died out in Rye. In regard to the Grebell murder, which took place from this house, my informant gives some particulars, unknown to the local chroniclers, in part at least, that are physiologically interesting. Mr. Grebell had been supping with his brother-in-law Lamb, and having some business in the town borrowed his scarlet overcoat. On returning late through the church-yard, he felt some one push heavily as he thought against him, and merely remarking 'Get away, you drunken hound,' passed on to Lamb House, quite unconcerned. He duly reported the incident, but as the family were going to bed, said he felt so tired that, instead of going home, he would have a sleep in the arm-chair by the fire. In the morning he was found dead, with a stab in the back, which had caused internal bleeding.'*^[31] . . . Do you see, Markham? Do you recall what Doctor Doremus said? 'An internal hemorrhage!' That's the whole story—that's the key to everything. That's how Archer could have been killed in the library and still have walked upstairs."

Markham stood up and walked back and forth across the room.

"Good God!" His words were scarcely audible. "So that's the explanation! No wonder we couldn't understand the things that happened there that night. Unbelievable!"

Vance had sunk back into his chair, relaxed. He took a deep inspiration, like a man who had suddenly found a friendly settlement in the midst of a hostile jungle.

"Really, Markham," he said with a slight upward glance, taking out his case of beloved *Régies*, "I'll never forgive you for this—never! It was *you* who guessed the solution. And I knew it all the time, but I couldn't correlate my knowledge."

Markham came to a sudden halt.

"What do you mean by saying that *I* guessed the solution?"

"Didn't you say," asked Vance mildly, "that the only way one could explain the circumstances was by the assumption that a dead man walked upstairs? . . . No, Markham, I am sure I shall never forgive you."

Markham sat down and muttered a disgusted oath. He smoked a while in silence.

"The internal hemorrhage explains many things," he admitted finally. "But I still don't understand Brisbane's death, and the bolted door."

"And yet, d' ye see," returned Vance, "it all fits in perfectly, now that we have the key."

He lay back in his chair and stretched his legs. He took several puffs on his cigarette and half closed his eyes.

"I think, Markham, I can reconstruct the amazin' and contradict'ry occurrences that took place in the Coe domicile last Wednesday night. . . . I doubt if Wrede actually planned to murder Archer Coe that night. The idea had no doubt been in his mind for a long time, for he had obviously taken the precaution of securing a duplicate key to the spring lock on the rear door. But I have a feelin' that he wished only to argue various matters out with Archer last Wednesday night before actually resorting to murder. It's obvious that he called on Archer that night and tried to convince him that he would be the perfect mate for Hilda Lake. Archer disagreed—and disagreed violently. That was no doubt the argument that Liang overheard. I imagine that the debate reached the point where blows were struck. The poker was quite handy, don't y' know, and Wrede, with his tremendous sense of personal inferiority, would naturally reach for some outside agent to help him over the top. He snatched the poker and struck Archer over the head.

"Archer fell forward against the table, upsetting it and fracturing his rib. Wrede was in a quand'ry. But again his sense of inferiority invaded him. He looked round the room quickly, saw the dagger in the cabinet, took it out and, as Archer lay on the floor, drove it into his back. . . . The deed was done. He had vindicated himself in a physical way, and had removed all obstacles from his path. He believed he was alone in the house with Archer; but still there was the question of a suspect. Into his shrewd brain flashed the thought of Liang, whom he had always suspected of being more than a servant. He figured that if he left the Chinese dagger where it would be found in the library, Liang would be the logical suspect. He threw the dagger into the *ting yao* vase. But he threw it in too hard. It broke the vase—and again Wrede was in a quand'ry. He picked up the dagger and placed it in the other vase on the table. Then he gathered up the fragments of the *ting yao*, carried them through the kitchen and placed them in the garbage pail on the rear porch. The poker he had thrown back on the hearth. And he left the house through the rear entrance, passed behind the hedge in the vacant lot, unlatched the gate at the rear of his apartment house, and went to his rooms."

"So far, so good," said Markham. "But what of Brisbane?"

"Brisbane? Ah, yes. *He* was an unexpected element. But Wrede knew nothing about it. . . . As I see it, Markham, Brisbane had planned to get rid of Archer that same night. His trip to Chicago was merely a blind. With his knowledge of criminology and his shrewd technical brain, he had worked out a perfectly logical means of doing away with his brother and having the crime appear a suicide. Naturally he chose Wednesday night when he knew Archer would be alone in the house. He established his alibi by having Gamble make reservations on the 5.15 train to Chicago. His plan was to go back to the house and take a later train. It was an excellent idea, and it was almost detection-proof. And he did come back to the house, Markham, with the definite intention of killing Archer. . . ."

"Still, I don't see——"

"Oh, it's all quite simple," Vance went on. "But before Brisbane returned that night, strange and uncanny things happened. The plot became cluttered with complications, and Brisbane, instead of creating a perfect crime, walked into a plot more diabolical than the one he himself had conceived. . . ."

Vance moved in his chair.

"This is what had happened in the meantime: Archer, recovering from the blow of the poker, and not realizing that he had also been stabbed, went upstairs to his bedroom. The shades were up, and Wrede, from his own apartment, could see him across the vacant lot. . . . No one will ever know what thoughts went on in Coe's mind at this time. But obviously he was incensed at Wrede, and he probably sat down to write him a letter forbidding him ever to put foot in the house again. He began to feel tired—perhaps the blood had commenced to choke his lungs. The pen fell from his fingers. He made an effort to prepare himself for bed. He took off his coat and waistcoat and hung them carefully in the closet. Then he put on his dressing-gown, buttoned it, and tied the belt about him. He walked to the windows and pulled down the shades. That act took practically all of his remaining vitality. He started to get his bedroom slippers, but the black mist of death was drifting in upon him. He thought it fatigue—the result, perhaps, of the blow Wrede had struck him over the head. He sat down in his easy chair. *But he never got up*, Markham. He never changed his shoes. As he sat there the final inevitable fog stifled him! . . ."

"Good God, Vance! I see the horror of it," breathed Markham.

"All these steps in that sinister situation," Vance continued, "are clearly indicated. . . . But think what must have gone on in Wrede's mind when he looked out of his window and saw the man he had murdered moving about the room upstairs, arranging the papers on his desk, changing his clothes, going about his affairs as if nothing whatever had happened!"

Vance inhaled several times on his cigarette and broke the ashes into a small tray beside him.

"My word, Markham! Can you imagine Wrede's emotions? He had killed a man; and yet he could look across a vacant lot and see this dead man acting as if nothing had happened. Wrede had to start all over again. It was a delicate and terrible situation. He knew that he had thrust a deadly dagger into Archer Coe's body. But Archer was still alive—and retribution must inevitably follow. And don't forget that the lights did not go out in Archer Coe's room. Wrede, no doubt, frantically asked himself a thousand times what was going on behind those drawn shades. He not only feared the incalculable mystery of the situation, but, I am inclined to think, he was perturbed most by his speculation concerning the things he could not see. . . . I wouldn't care to put in the two hours that Wrede spent between eight o'clock and ten that night. He realized that some decision must be made—that some action must be taken. But he had nothing whatever to go on: his imagination was his only guide. . . ."

"And he came back!" said Markham huskily.

"Yes," nodded Vance, "he came back. He had to come back! But in that interim of his indecision something unforeseen and horrible had taken place. Brisbane had returned to the house—he had returned stealthily, letting himself in with his own key. He had returned to kill his brother! He looked into the library; the lights were on, but Archer was not there. He went to the drawer of the table and took out the revolver. Then he went upstairs. Perhaps he saw the light through Archer's bedroom door. He opened the door. . . ."

Vance paused.

"Y' know, Markham, I am inclined to think that Brisbane was prepared for any emergency. He had worked out a scheme for killing Archer, placing him in his bedroom with the revolver in his hand, and then bolting the door from the hall, so as to make it appear as suicide. And when he saw Archer sitting in his easy chair, apparently asleep, he no doubt felt that the fates were with him, that his road had been made easy. I can see him tiptoeing across the room to the easy chair where the other sat. I can see him place the revolver against Archer's right temple and pull the trigger—the impact of the bullet drove Archer's head to the left. Then I can see Brisbane place the revolver in Archer's hand and return to the door, where he carefully put in operation the mechanism he had worked out for bolting the door from the hall. . . . My word, Markham, what a situation!—Brisbane shooting a dead man, and then elaborately setting the stage to prove that it was suicide!"

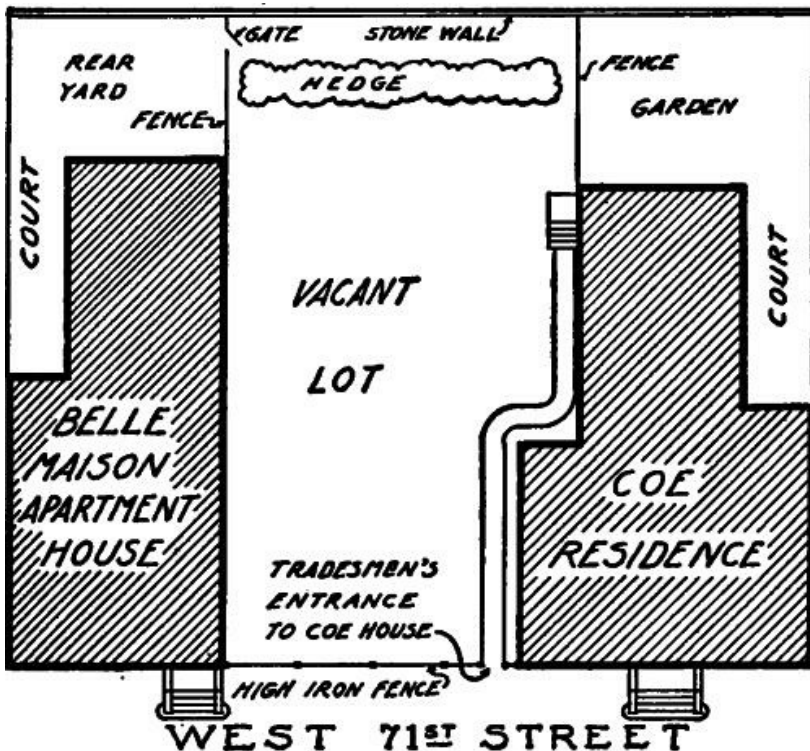


DIAGRAM OF THE BELLE MAISON, THE COE RESIDENCE, AND THE VACANT LOT BETWEEN

"Good God!" breathed Markham.

"But during this tragic farce," Vance went on, "Wrede had arrived at a decision. He had decided to come back to Archer Coe and finish, for all time, the crime which apparently he had only started. He bethought himself of the *Ting yao* vase he had broken, and perhaps fearing its absence would be noted, he picked out a superficially similar vase from his own small collection and carried it back to the Coe house. The hour, I should say, was around ten o'clock. . . . Wrede opened the gate of the rear yard, and left it ajar; and it was then that the Scottie followed him on his dark errand. He went in the rear door of the Coe house, leaving it open—and the Scottie followed. Everything was black and still. He went through the dining-room into the library, and placed his own inferior vase on the teak-wood base where the *Ting yao* vase had stood. He took the dagger from the vase in which he had hidden it, and moved toward the hall. . . ."

Vance raised himself a little in his chair.

"And when he reached the door, Markham, he saw a figure coming down the stairs from the second floor. There was a light in the library, but it was not sufficient to make possible an absolute recognition of the figure on the stairs. To Wrede that figure was Archer. (Archer and Brisbane, you'll recall, were of the same height and general build, and they did not look dissimilar.) Wrede stood behind the potted plants at the library door, the dagger grasped in his hand, and waited till his opportunity came. The shadowy figure came down the stairs and walked toward the closet door at the end of the hall.—Brisbane was no doubt going back for the overcoat and hat which he had left there on coming in. But Wrede, with his inflamed imagination, assumed that Archer was preparing to leave the house to tell some one of the attack—to report him to the police, perhaps. He couldn't be sure; he only knew that it spelled danger for himself. And he was more thoroughly determined than ever to put an end to Archer. . . ."

"Brisbane, as I now see it, had just placed the strings, which he had used for bolting Archer's door, in the pocket of his top-coat, when Wrede came silently upon him from behind and thrust the dagger into his back. He collapsed immediately, and Wrede pushed the body, which he thought was Archer's, entirely into the closet and closed the door. He went back to the library; and it was at this time that he probably stumbled over the Scottie, which had followed him in. He decided that it was safest to get rid of her immediately. She may even have barked, or made some sound when he stumbled over her; and he was in no frame of mind at that moment to meet new emergencies logically. He dropped the dagger back into the vase and picked up the poker. Then he struck the Scottie over the head—it was the simplest and most direct way of dealing with an unexpected circumstance when there was no time for thought. The presence of the dog was unexpected, incalculable. . . ."

"There can be little doubt that the man was in a panic—and with sufficient reason. He did not even switch off the lights in the library. The whole thing was amazing. He went home through the rear door, thinking that he had left Archer's dead body in the coat closet. Then, when Gamble summoned him the following morning, he found that Archer was still in his bedroom, behind a bolted door! The man must have felt that the whole world had gone insane. I imagine he rushed to the hall closet, when Gamble wasn't looking, to check his sanity, so to speak; and then he saw the dead body of Brisbane. Some of the truth, at least, must have dawned upon him. He had killed his friend—his ally—by accident! What mental torture he must have suffered! And there was also in his mind the terrible problem of Archer's death. . . . I wonder the man stood up so well when we arrived. The cold desperation of a final necessity, I suppose. . . ."

Markham moved about the room restlessly.

"I see it all," he muttered, as if to himself. He stopped and swung round. "But what of Wrede's attempted murder of Grassi?"

"That was logical and in keeping with his character," said Vance. "Miss Lake explained it—intense jealousy of his lucky rival. Wrede thought he had successfully pulled the wool over our eyes, and the fact gave him confidence. He knew exactly where the dagger was; he knew the domestic arrangements of the Coe house; he had a key to the rear door; and he doubtless knew of the broken lock on Grassi's door. He had probably brooded over his loss of a wealthy bride until he could no longer resist the urge to follow up his—as he thought—successful murder of Archer by the murder of Grassi. He would thus have won a complete victory over the forces that had temporarily defeated him. His frustrated ego again. And had it not been for Liang's perspicacity—which Wrede underestimated—and the shift of Grassi's arm, he would have succeeded."

"But what," asked Markham, "first gave you the idea that Wrede had committed the murders?"

"The Scottie, Markham," answered Vance. "After having found she belonged to Higginbottom, I ascertained that he had given her to his *inamorata* who lived in the Belle Maison. And once I had followed the Scottie's trail and knew that she belonged next door, I made a bit of an investigation. I learned from a perfectly honest Irish maid that both Higginbottom and his lady fair—a Miss Delafield—had been having a farewell dinner at the time Coe was murdered. 'Y' see, I had thought perhaps that some blond lady with a Duplaix lip-stick had admitted the Scottie into the Coe house earlier in the evening. But although Miss Delafield used Duplaix lip-stick and had undoubtedly called on Archer Coe before half-past seven, it was not she who had let the Scottie in; for the little dog was in the Delafield apartment after nine o'clock that night, and had disappeared some time between then and half-past ten, at which hour the maid instituted a search for her. Moreover, I learned that the Scottie could have entered the Coe house only if some one had unlocked the gate between the Belle Maison and the vacant lot next to the Coe residence. And I further learned that there was no way for the Scottie to escape from the Belle Maison, except into the rear yard. Only some one who had unlocked the gate and opened the rear door of the

Coe residence would have given her the opportunity of entering the house. And Wrede was the only person who could have done this.”

The following year Hilda Lake and Grassi were married, and the alliance seems to have been highly successful. Vance became the owner of Miss MacTavish. He had become attached to her during the days he had nursed her back to health, and the romance (if one may call it that) between Higginbottom and Doris Delafield ran on the rocks shortly after the lady's return from Europe. After her break with the major she showed little interest in the dog; and Higginbottom, in appreciation of some nebulous favor which he considered Vance had done him, made him a present of the bitch. Vance placed her in his kennels, but she did not seem to be happy there; and he finally took her into his apartment. He still has her, and she has been “pensioned” for life. Sometimes I think that Vance would rather part with one of his treasured Cézannes than with little Miss MacTavish.

^[30] A. G. Bradley: “An Old Gate of England” (“The English Countryside Series”), published by Robert Scott, London, 1917.

^[31] Bradley, “An Old Gate of England,” p. 64.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

[The end of *The Kennel Murder Case* by S. S. Van Dine]