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DASHIELL HAMMETT

ZIGZAGS OF TREACHERY

One

All know about Dr. Estep's death," I said, "is the stuff in the papers." Vance Richmond's lean gray face took on an expression of distaste.

"The newspapers aren't always either thorough or accurate. I'll give you the salient points as I know them; though I suppose you'll want to go over the ground for yourself, and get your information first-hand."

I nodded, and the attorney went on, shaping each word precisely with his thin lips before giving it sound.

"Dr. Estep came to San Francisco in 1898 or 1899 — a young man of twenty-five, just through qualifying for his license. He opened an office here, and, as you probably know, became in time a rather excellent surgeon. He married two or three years after he came here. There were no children. He and his wife seem to have been a bit happier together than the average.

"Of his life before coming to San Francisco, nothing is known. He told his wife briefly that he had been born and raised in Parkersburg, W. Va., but that his home life had been so unpleasant that he was trying to forget it, and that he did not like to talk — or even think — about it. Bear that in mind.

"Two weeks ago — on the third of the month — a woman came to his office, in the afternoon. His office was in his residence on Pine Street. Lucy Coe, who was Dr. Estep's nurse and assistant, showed the woman into his office, and then went back to her own desk in the reception room.

"She didn't hear anything the doctor said to the woman, but through the closed door she heard the woman's voice now and then — a high and anguished voice, apparently pleading. Most of the words were lost upon the nurse, but she heard one coherent sentence. 'Please! Please!' she heard the woman cry. 'Don't turn me away!' The woman was with Dr. Estep for about fifteen minutes, and left sobbing into a handkerchief. Dr. Estep said nothing about the caller either to his nurse or to his wife, who didn't learn of it until after his death.

"The next day, toward evening, while the nurse was putting on her hat and coat preparatory to leaving for home, Dr. Estep came out of his office, with his hat on and a

letter in his hand. The nurse saw that his face was pale — 'white as my uniform,' she says — and he walked with the care of one who takes pains to keep from staggering.

“She asked him if he was ill. 'Oh, it's nothing!' he told her. 'I'll be all right in a very few minutes.' Then he went on out. The nurse left the house just behind him, and saw him drop the letter he had carried into the mailbox on the corner, after which he returned to the house.

“Mrs. Estep, coming downstairs ten minutes later — it couldn't have been any later than that — heard, just as she reached the first floor, the sound of a shot from her husband's office. She rushed into it, meeting nobody. Her husband stood by his desk, swaying, with a hole in his right temple and a smoking revolver in his hand. Just as she reached him and put her arms around him, he fell across the desk — dead.”

“Anybody else — any of the servants, for instance — able to say that Mrs. Estep didn't go to the office until after the shot?” I asked.

The attorney shook his head sharply.

“No, damn it! That's where the rub comes in!”

His voice, after this one flare of feeling, resumed its level, incisive tone, and he went on with his tale.

“The next day's papers had accounts of Dr. Estep's death, and late that morning the woman who had called upon him the day before his death came to the house. She is Dr. Estep's first wife — which is to say, his legal wife! There seems to be no reason — not the slightest — for doubting it, as much as I'd like to. They were married in Philadelphia in 1896. She has a certified copy of the marriage record. I had the matter investigated in Philadelphia, and it's a certain fact that Dr. Estep and this woman — Edna Fife was her maiden name — were really married.

“She says that Estep, after living with her in Philadelphia for two years, deserted her. That would have been in 1898, or just before he came to San Francisco. She has sufficient proof of her identity — that she really is the Edna Fife who married him; and my agents in the East found positive proof that Estep had practiced for two years in Philadelphia.

“And here is another point. I told you that Estep had said he was born and raised in Parkersburg. I had inquiries made there, but found nothing to show that he had ever lived there, and found ample evidence to show that he had never lived at the address he had given his wife. There is, then, nothing for us to believe except that his talk of an unhappy early life was a ruse to ward off embarrassing questions.”

“Did you do anything toward finding out whether the doctor and his first wife had ever been divorced?” I asked.

“I'm having that taken care of now, but I hardly expect to learn that they had. That would be too crude. To get on with my story: This woman — the first Mrs. Estep — said that she had just recently learned her husband's whereabouts, and had come to see him in an attempt to effect a reconciliation. When she called upon him the afternoon before his death, he asked for a little time to make up his mind what he should do. He promised to give her his decision in two days. My personal opinion, after talking to the woman several times, is that she had learned that he had accumulated some money, and that her interest was more in getting the money than in getting him. But that, of course, is neither here nor there.

“At first the authorities accepted the natural explanation of the doctor's death — suicide. But after the first wife's appearance, the second wife — my client — was arrested and charged with murder.

“The police theory is that after his first wife's visit, Dr. Estep told his second wife the whole story; and that she, brooding over the knowledge that he had deceived her, that she was not his wife at all, finally worked herself up into a rage, went to the office after his nurse had left for the day, and shot him with the revolver that she knew he always kept in his desk.

“I don't know, of course, just what evidence the prosecution has, but from the newspapers I gather that the case against her will be built upon her fingerprints on the revolver with which he was killed; an upset inkwell on his desk; splashes of ink on the dress she wore; and an inky print of her hand on a torn newspaper on his desk.

“Unfortunately, but perfectly naturally, one of the first things she did was to take the revolver out of her husband's hand. That accounts for her prints on it. He fell — as I told you — just as she put her arms around him, and, though her memory isn't very clear on this point, the probabilities are that he dragged her with him when he fell across the desk. That accounts for the upset inkwell, the torn paper, and the splashes of ink. But the prosecution will try to persuade the jury that those things all happened before the shooting — that they are proofs of a struggle.”

“Not so bad,” I gave my opinion.

“Or pretty damned bad — depending on how you look at it. And this is the worst time imaginable for a thing like this to come up! Within the past few months there have been no less than five widely advertised murders of men by women who were supposed to have been betrayed, or deceived, or one thing or another.

“Not one of those five women was convicted. As a result, we have the press, the

public, and even the pulpit, howling for a stricter enforcement of justice. The newspapers are lined up against Mrs. Estep as strongly as their fear of libel suits will permit. The women's clubs are lined up against her. Everybody is clamouring for an example to be made of her.

“Then, as if all that isn't enough, the prosecuting attorney has lost his last two big cases, and he'll be out for blood this time — election day isn't far off.”

The calm, even, precise voice was gone now. In its place was a passionate eloquence.

“I don't know what you think,” Richmond cried. “You're a detective. This is an old story to you. You're more or less callous, I suppose, and sceptical of innocence in general. But I know that Mrs. Estep didn't kill her husband. I don't say it because she's my client! I was Dr. Estep's attorney, and his friend, and if I thought Mrs. Estep guilty, I'd do everything in my power to help convict her. But I know as well as I know anything that she didn't kill him — couldn't have killed him.

“She's innocent. But I know too that if I go into court with no defence beyond what I now have, she'll be convicted! There has been too much leniency shown feminine criminals, public sentiment says. The pendulum will swing the other way — Mrs. Estep, if convicted, will get the limit. I'm putting it up to you! Can you save her?”

“Our best mark is the letter he mailed just before he died,” I said, ignoring everything he said that didn't have to do with the facts of the case. “It's good betting that when a man writes and mails a letter and then shoots himself, that the letter isn't altogether unconnected with the suicide. Did you ask the wife about the letter?”

“I did, and she denies having received one.”

“That wasn't right. If the doctor had been driven to suicide by her appearance, then according to all the rules there are, the letter should have been addressed to her. He might have written one to his second wife, but he would hardly have mailed it. Would she have any reason for lying about it?”

“Yes,” the lawyer said slowly, “I think she would. His will leaves everything to the second wife. The first wife, being the only legal wife, will have no difficulty in breaking that will, of course; but if it is shown that the second wife had no knowledge of the first one's existence — that she really believed herself to be Dr. Estep's legal wife — then I think that she will receive at least a portion of the estate. I don't think any court would, under the circumstances, take everything away from her. But if she should be found guilty of murdering Dr. Estep, then no consideration will be shown her, and the first wife will get every penny.”

“Did he leave enough to make half of it, say, worth sending an innocent person to the

gallows for?”

“He left about half a million, roughly; two hundred and fifty thousand dollars isn't a mean inducement.”

“Do you think it would be enough for the first wife — from what you have seen of her?”

“Candidly, I do. She didn't impress me as being a person of many very active scruples.”

“Where does this first wife live?” I asked.

“She's staying at the Montgomery Hotel now. Her home is in Louisville, I believe. I don't think you will gain anything by talking to her, however. She has retained Somerset, Somerset and Quill to represent her — a very reputable firm, by the way — and she'll refer you to them. They will tell you nothing. But if there's anything dishonest about her affairs — such as the concealing of Dr. Estep's letter — I'm confident that Somerset, Somerset and Quill know nothing of it.”

“Can I talk to the second Mrs. Estep — your client?”

“Not at present, I'm afraid; though perhaps in a day or two. She is on the verge of collapse just now. She has always been delicate; and the shock of her husband's death, followed by her own arrest and imprisonment, has been too much for her. She's in the city jail, you know, held without bail. I've tried to have her transferred to the prisoner's ward of the City Hospital, even; but the authorities seem to think that her illness is simply a ruse. I'm worried about her. She's really in a critical condition.”

His voice was losing its calmness again, so I picked up my hat, said something about starting to work at once, and went out. I don't like eloquence: if it isn't effective enough to pierce your hide, it's tiresome; and if it is effective enough, then it muddles your thoughts.

Two

I spent the next couple of hours questioning the Estep servants, to no great advantage. None of them had been near the front of the house at the time of the shooting, and none had seen Mrs. Estep immediately prior to her husband's death.

After a lot of hunting, I located Lucy Coe, the nurse, in an apartment on Vallejo Street. She was a small, brisk, businesslike woman of thirty or so. She repeated what Vance Richmond had told me, and could add nothing to it.

That cleaned up the Estep end of the job; and I set out for the Montgomery Hotel,

satisfied that my only hope for success — barring miracles, which usually don't happen — lay in finding the letter that I believed Dr. Estep had written to his first wife.

My drag with the Montgomery Hotel management was pretty strong — strong enough to get me anything I wanted that wasn't too far outside the law. So as soon as I got there, I hunted up Stacey, one of the assistant managers.

“This Mrs. Estep who's registered here,” I asked, “what do you know about her?”

“Nothing, myself, but if you'll wait a few minutes I'll see what I can learn.”

The assistant manager was gone about ten minutes.

“No one seems to know much about her,” he told me when he came back. “I've questioned the telephone girls, bellboys, maids, clerks, and the house detective; but none of them could tell me much.

“She registered from Louisville, on the second of the month. She has never stopped here before, and she seems unfamiliar with the city — asks quite a few questions about how to get around. The mail clerks don't remember handling any mail for her, nor do the girls on the switchboard have any record of phone calls for her.

“She keeps regular hours — usually goes out at ten or later in the morning, and gets in before midnight. She doesn't seem to have any callers or friends.”

“Will you have her mail watched — let me know what postmarks and return addresses are on any letters she gets?”

“Certainly.”

“And have the girls on the switchboard put their ears up against any talking she does over the wire?”

“Yes.”

“Is she in her room now?”

“No, she went out a little while ago.”

“Fine! I'd like to go up and take a look at her stuff.”

Stacey looked sharply at me, and cleared his throat.

“Is it as—ah — important as all that? I want to give you all the assistance I can, but —”

“It's this important,” I assured him, “that another woman's life depends on what I can learn about this one.”

“All right!” he said. “I'll tell the clerk to let us know if she comes in before we are through; and we'll go right up.”

The woman's room held two valises and a trunk, all unlocked, and containing not the least thing of importance — no letters — nothing. So little, in fact, that I was more than half convinced that she had expected her things to be searched.

Downstairs again, I planted myself in a comfortable chair within sight of the key-rack, and waited for a view of this first Mrs. Estep.

She came in at 11:15 that night. A large woman of forty-five or fifty, well-dressed, and carrying herself with an air of assurance. Her face was a little too hard as to mouth and chin, but not enough to be ugly. A capable-looking woman — a woman who would get what she went after.

Three

Eight o'clock was striking as I went into the Montgomery lobby the next morning and picked out a chair, this time within eye-range of the elevators.

At 10:30 Mrs. Estep left the hotel, with me in her wake. Her denial that a letter from her husband, written immediately before his death, had come to her didn't fit in with the possibilities as I saw them. And a good motto for the detective business is, “When in doubt — shadow 'em.”

After eating breakfast at a restaurant on O'Farrell Street, she turned toward the shopping district; and for a long, long time — though I suppose it was a lot shorter than it seemed to me — she led me through the most densely packed portions of the most crowded department stores she could find.

She didn't buy anything, but she did a lot of thorough looking, with me muddling along behind her, trying to act like a little fat guy on an errand for his wife, while stout women bumped me and thin ones prodded me and all sorts got in my way and walked on my feet.

Finally, after I had sweated off a couple of pounds, she left the shopping district, and cut up through Union Square, walking along casually, as if out for a stroll.

Three-quarters way through, she turned abruptly, and retraced her steps, looking sharply at everyone she passed. I was on a bench, reading a stray page from a day-old

newspaper, when she went by. She walked on down Post Street to Kearney, stopping every now and then to look — or to pretend to look — in store windows, while I ambled along sometimes behind her, sometimes almost by her side, and sometimes in front.

She was trying to check up the people around her, trying to determine whether she was being followed or not. But here, in the busy part of town, that gave me no cause for worry. On a less crowded street it might have been different, though not necessarily so.

There are four rules for shadowing: Keep behind your subject as much as possible; never try to hide from him; act in a natural manner no matter what happens; and never meet his eye. Obey them, and, except in unusual circumstances, shadowing is the easiest thing that a sleuth has to do.

Assured, after a while, that no one was following her, Mrs. Estep turned back toward Powell Street, and got into a taxicab at the St. Francis stand. I picked out a modest touring car from the rank of hire-cars along the Geary Street side of Union Square, and set out after her.

Our route was out Post Street to Laguna, where the taxi presently swung into the curb and stopped. The woman got out, paid the driver, and went up the steps of an apartment building. With idling engine my own car had come to rest against the opposite curb in the block above.

As the taxicab disappeared around a corner, Mrs. Estep came out of the apartment-building doorway, went back to the sidewalk, and started down Laguna Street.

“Pass her,” I told my chauffeur, and we drew down upon her.

As we came abreast, she went up the front steps of another building, and this time she rang a bell. These steps belonged to a building apparently occupied by four flats, each with its separate door, and the button she had pressed belonged to the right-hand second-story flat.

Under cover of my car's rear curtains, I kept my eye on the doorway while my driver found a convenient place to park in the next block.

I kept my eye on the vestibule until 5:35 p.m., when she came out, walked to the Sutter Street car line, returned to the Montgomery, and went to her room.

I called up the Old Man — the Continental Detective Agency's San Francisco manager — and asked him to detail an operative to learn who and what were the occupants of the Laguna Street flat.

That night Mrs. Estep ate dinner at her hotel, and went to a show afterward, and she displayed no interest in possible shadowers. She went to her room at a little after eleven, and I knocked off for the day.

Four

The following morning I turned the woman over to Dick Foley, and went back to the Agency to wait for Bob Teal, the operative who had investigated the Laguna Street flat. He came in at a little after ten.

“A guy named Jacob Ledwich lives there,” Bob said. “He's a crook of some sort, but I don't know just what. He and 'Wop' Healey are friendly, so he must be a crook! 'Porky' Grout says he's an ex-bunko man who is in with a gambling ring now; but Porky would tell you a bishop was a safe-ripper if he thought it would mean five bucks for himself.

“This Ledwich goes out mostly at night, and he seems to be pretty prosperous. Probably a high-class worker of some sort. He's got a Buick — license number 645-221 — that he keeps in a garage around the corner from his flat. But he doesn't seem to use the car much.”

“What sort of looking fellow is he?”

“A big guy — six feet or better — and he'll weigh a couple hundred easy. He's got a funny mug on him. It's broad and heavy around the cheeks and jaw, but his mouth is a little one that looks like it was made for a smaller man. He's no youngster — middle-aged.”

“Suppose you tail him around for a day or two, Bob, and see what he's up to. Try to get a room or apartment in the neighbourhood — a place that you can cover his front door from.”

Five

Vance Richmond's lean face lighted up as soon as I mentioned Ledwich's name to him.

“Yes!” he exclaimed. “He was a friend, or at least an acquaintance, of Dr. Estep's. I met him once — a large man with a peculiarly inadequate mouth. I dropped in to see the doctor one day, and Ledwich was in the office. Dr. Estep introduced us.”

“What do you know about him?”

“Nothing.”

“Don't you know whether he was intimate with the doctor, or just a casual acquaintance?”

“No. For all I know, he might have been a friend, a patient, or almost anything. The doctor never spoke of him to me, and nothing passed between them while I was there that afternoon. I simply gave the doctor some information he had asked for and left. Why?”

“Dr. Estep's first wife — after going to a lot of trouble to see that she wasn't followed — connected with Ledwich yesterday afternoon. And from what we can learn he seems to be a crook of some sort.”

“What would that indicate?”

“I'm not sure what it means, but I can do a lot of guessing. Ledwich knew both the doctor and the doctor's first wife; then it's not a bad bet that she knew where her husband was all the time. If she did, then it's another good bet that she was getting money from him right along. Can you check up his accounts and see whether he was passing out any money that can't be otherwise accounted for?”

The attorney shook his head.

“No, his accounts are in rather bad shape, carelessly kept. He must have had more than a little difficulty with his income-tax statements.”

“I see. To get back to my guesses: If she knew where he was all the time, and was getting money from him, then why did his first wife finally come to see her husband? Perhaps because —”

“I think I can help you there,” Richmond interrupted. “A fortunate investment in lumber nearly doubled Dr. Estep's wealth two or three months ago.”

“That's it, then! She learned of it through Ledwich. She demanded, either through Ledwich, or by letter, a rather large share of it — more than the doctor was willing to give. When he refused, she came to see him in person, to demand the money under threat — we'll say — of instant exposure. He thought she was in earnest. Either he couldn't raise the money she demanded, or he was tired of leading a double life. Anyway, he thought it all over, and decided to commit suicide. This is all a guess, or a series of guesses — but it sounds reasonable to me.”

“To me, too,” the attorney said. “What are you going to do now?”

“I'm still having both of them shadowed — there's no other way of tackling them just now. I'm having the woman looked up in Louisville. But, you understand, I might dig

up a whole flock of things on them, and when I got through still be as far as ever from finding the letter Dr. Estep wrote before he died.

“There are plenty of reasons for thinking that the woman destroyed the letter — that would have been her wisest play. But if I can get enough on her, even at that, I can squeeze her into admitting that the letter was written, and that it said something about suicide — if it did. And that will be enough to spring your client. How is she to-day — any better?”

His thin face lost the animation that had come to it during our discussion of Ledwich, and became bleak.

“She went completely to pieces last night, and was removed to the hospital, where she should have been taken in the first place. To tell you the truth, if she isn't liberated soon, she won't need our help. I've done my utmost to have her released on bail — pulled every wire I know — but there's little likelihood of success in that direction.

“Knowing that she is a prisoner — charged with murdering her husband — is killing her. She isn't young, and she has always been subject to nervous disorders. The bare shock of her husband's death was enough to prostrate her — but now — You've got to get her out — and quickly!”

He was striding up and down his office, his voice throbbing with feeling. I left quickly.

Six

From the attorney's office, I returned to the Agency, where I was told that Bob Teal had phoned in the address of a furnished apartment he had rented on Laguna Street. I hopped on a street car, and went up to take a look at it.

But I didn't get that far.

Walking down Laguna Street, after leaving the car, I spied Bob Teal coming toward me. Between Bob and me — also coming toward me — was a big man whom I recognised as Jacob Ledwich: a big man with a big red face around a tiny mouth.

I walked on down the street, passing both Ledwich and Bob, without paying any apparent attention to either. At the next corner I stopped to roll a cigarette, and steal a look at the pair.

And then I came to life!

Ledwich had stopped at a vestibule cigar stand up the street to make a purchase. Bob Teal, knowing his stuff, had passed him and was walking steadily up the street.

He was figuring that Ledwich had either come out for the purpose of buying cigars or cigarettes, and would return to his flat with them; or that after making his purchase the big man would proceed to the car line, where, in either event, Bob would wait.

But as Ledwich had stopped before the cigar stand, a man across the street had stepped suddenly into a doorway, and stood there, back in the shadows. This man, I now remembered, had been on the opposite side of the street from Bob and Ledwich, and walking in the same direction.

He, too, was following Ledwich.

By the time Ledwich had finished his business at the stand, Bob had reached Sutter Street, the nearest car line. Ledwich started up the street in that direction. The man in the doorway stepped out and went after him. I followed that one.

A ferry-bound car came down Sutter Street just as I reached the corner. Ledwich and I got aboard together. The mysterious stranger fumbled with a shoe-string several pavements from the corner until the car was moving again, and then he likewise made a dash for it.

He stood beside me on the rear platform, hiding behind a large man in overalls, past whose shoulder he now and then peeped at Ledwich. Bob had gone to the corner above, and was already seated when Ledwich, this amateur detective — there was no doubting his amateur status — and I got on the car.

I sized up the amateur while he strained his neck peeping at Ledwich. He was small, this sleuth, and scrawny and frail. His most noticeable feature was his nose — a limp organ that twitched nervously all the time. His clothes were old and shabby, and he himself was somewhere in his fifties.

After studying him for a few minutes, I decided that he hadn't tumbled to Bob Teal's part in the game. His attention had been too firmly fixed upon Ledwich, and the distance had been too short thus far for him to discover that Bob was also tailing the big man.

So when the seat beside Bob was vacated presently, I chucked my cigarette away, went into the car, and sat down, my back toward the little man with the twitching nose.

“Drop off after a couple of blocks and go back to the apartment. Don't shadow Ledwich any more until I tell you. Just watch his place. There's a bird following him, and I want to see what he's up to,” I told Bob in an undertone.

He grunted that he understood, and, after a few minutes, left the car.

At Stockton Street, Ledwich got off, the man with the twitching nose behind him and me in the rear. In that formation we paraded around town all afternoon.

The big man had business in a number of poolrooms, cigar stores, and soft-drink parlours — most of which I knew for places where you can get a bet down on any horse that's running in North America, whether at Tanforan, Tijuana, or Timonium.

Just what Ledwich did in these places, I didn't learn. I was bringing up the rear of the procession, and my interest was centered upon the mysterious little stranger. He didn't enter any of the places behind Ledwich, but loitered in their neighbourhoods until Ledwich reappeared.

He had a rather strenuous time of it — labouring mightily to keep out of Ledwich's sight, and only succeeding because we were downtown, where you can get away with almost any sort of shadowing. He certainly made a lot of work for himself, dodging here and there.

After a while, Ledwich shook him.

The big man came out of a cigar store with another man. They got into an automobile that was standing beside the curb and drove away, leaving my man standing on the edge of the sidewalk twitching his nose in chagrin. There was a taxi stand just around the corner, but he either didn't know it or didn't have enough money to pay the fare.

I expected him to return to Laguna Street then, but he didn't. He led me down Kearny Street to Portsmouth, where he stretched himself out on the grass face—down, lit a black pipe, and lay looking dejectedly at the Stevenson Monument, probably without seeing it.

I sprawled on a comfortable piece of sod some distance away — between a Chinese woman with two perfectly round children and an ancient Portuguese in a gaily checkered suit — and we let the afternoon go by.

When the sun had gone low enough for the ground to become chilly, the little man got up, shook himself, and went back up Kearny Street to a cheap lunchroom, where he ate meagrely. Then he entered a hotel a few doors away, took a key from the row of hooks, and vanished down a dark corridor. Running through the register, I found that the key he had taken belonged to a room whose occupant was 'John Boyd, St. Louis, Mo.,' and that he had arrived the day before.

This hotel wasn't of the sort where it is safe to make inquiries, so I went down to the street again, and came to rest on the least conspicuous near-by corner.

Twilight came, and the street—and shop-lights were turned on. It got dark. The night traffic of Kearny Street went up and down past me: Filipino boys in their too-dapper clothes, bound for the inevitable blackjack game; gaudy women still heavy-eyed from their day's sleep; plain-clothes men on their way to headquarters, to report before going off duty; Chinese going to or from Chinatown; sailors in pairs, looking for action of any sort; hungry people making for the Italian and French restaurants; worried people going into the bail-bond broker's office on the corner to arrange for the release of friends and relatives whom the police had nabbed; Italians on their homeward journeys from work; odds and ends of furtive-looking citizens on various shady errands.

Midnight came, and no John Boyd, and I called it a day, and went home.

Before going to bed, I talked with Dick Foley over the wire. He said that Mrs. Estep had done nothing of any importance all day, and had received neither mail nor phone calls. I told him to stop shadowing her until I solved John Boyd's game.

I was afraid Boyd might turn his attention to the woman, and I didn't want him to discover that she was being shadowed. I had already instructed Bob Teal to simply watch Ledwich's flat — to see when he came in and went out, and with whom — and now I told Dick to do the same with the woman.

My guess on this Boyd person was that he and the woman were working together — that she had him watching Ledwich for her, so that the big man couldn't double-cross her. But that was only a guess — and I don't gamble too much on my guesses.

Seven

The next morning I dressed myself up in an army shirt and shoes, an old faded cap, and a suit that wasn't downright ragged, but was shabby enough not to stand out too noticeably beside John Boyd's old clothes.

It was a little after nine o'clock when Boyd left his hotel and had breakfast at the grease-joint where he had eaten the night before. Then he went up to Laguna Street, picked himself a corner, and waited for Jacob Ledwich.

He did a lot of waiting. He waited all day, because Ledwich didn't show until after dark. But the little man was well-stocked with patienc e— I'll say that for him. He fidgeted, and stood on one foot and then the other, and even tried sitting on the curb for a while, but he stuck it out.

I took it easy, myself. The furnished apartment Bob Teal had rented to watch Ledwich's flat from was a ground-floor one, across the street and just a little above the

corner where Boyd waited. So we could watch him and the flat with one eye.

Bob and I sat and smoked and talked all day, taking turns watching the fidgeting man on the corner and Ledwich's door.

Night had just definitely settled when Ledwich came out and started up toward the car line. I slid out into the street, and our parade was under way again—Ledwich leading, Boyd following him, and we following him.

Haif a block of this, and I got an idea!

I'm not what you'd call a brilliant thinker — such results as I get are usually the fruits of patience, industry, and unimaginative plugging, helped out now and then, maybe, by a little luck — but I do have my flashes of intelligence. And this was one of them.

Ledwich was about a block ahead of me; Boyd half that distance. Speeding up, I passed Boyd, and caught up with Ledwich. Then I slackened my pace so as to walk beside him, though with no appearance from the rear of having any interest in him.

“Jake,” I said, without turning my head, “there's a guy following you!”

The big man almost spoiled my little scheme by stopping dead still, but he caught himself in time, and, taking his cue from me, kept walking.

“Who the hell are you?” he growled.

“Don't get funny!” I snapped back, still looking and walking ahead. “It ain't my funeral. But I was coming up the street when you came out, and I seen this guy duck behind a pole until you was past, and then follow you up.”

That got him.

“You sure?”

“Sure! All you got to do to prove it is turn the next corner and wait.”

I was two or three steps ahead of him by this time. I turned the corner, and halted, with my back against the brick building front. Ledwich took up the same position at my side.

“Want any help?” I grinned at him —, a reckless sort of grin, unless my acting was poor.

“No.”

His little lumpy mouth was set ugly, and his blue eyes were hard as pebbles.

I flicked the tail of my coat aside to show him the butt of my gun.

“Want to borrow the rod?” I asked.

“No.”

He was trying to figure me out, and small wonder.

“Don't mind if I stick around to see the fun, do you?” I asked mockingly.

There wasn't time for him to answer that. Boyd had quickened his steps, and now he came hurrying around the corner, his nose twitching like a tracking dog's.

Ledwich stepped into the middle of the sidewalk, so suddenly that the little man thudded into him with a grunt. For a moment they stared at each other, and there was recognition between them.

Ledwich shot one big hand out and clamped the other by a shoulder.

“What are you snooping around me for, you rat? Didn't I tell you to keep away from 'Frisco?”

“Aw, Jake!” Boyd begged. “I didn't mean no harm. I just thought that —”

Ledwich silenced him with a shake that clicked his mouth shut, and turned to me.

“A friend of mine,” he sneered.

His eyes grew suspicious and hard again and ran up and down me from cap to shoes.

“How'd you know my name?” he demanded.

“A famous man like you?” I asked, in burlesque astonishment.

“Never mind the comedy!” He took a threatening step toward me. “How'd you know my name?”

“None of your damned business,” I snapped.

My attitude seemed to reassure him. His face became less suspicious.

“Well,” he said slowly, “I owe you something for this trick, and — How are you fixed?”

“I have been dirtier.” Dirty is Pacific Coast argot for prosperous.

He looked speculatively from me to Boyd, and back.

“Know The Circle?” he asked me.

I nodded. The underworld calls Wop Healey's joint The Circle.

“If you'll meet me there tomorrow night, maybe I can put a piece of change your way.”

“Nothing stirring!” I shook my head with emphasis. “I ain't circulating that prominent these days.”

A fat chance I'd have of meeting him there! Wop Healey and half his customers knew me as a detective. So there was nothing to do but to try to get the impression over that I was a crook who had reasons for wanting to keep away from the more notorious hang-outs for a while. Apparently it got over. He thought a while, and then gave me his Laguna Street number.

“Drop in this time tomorrow and maybe I'll have a proposition to make you — if you've got the guts.”

“I'll think it over,” I said noncommittally, and turned as if to go down the street.

“Just a minute,” he called, and I faced him again. “What's your name?”

“Wisher,” I said. “Shine, if you want a front one.”

“Shine Wisher,” he repeated. “I don't remember ever hearing it before.”

It would have surprised me if he had — I had made it up only about fifteen minutes before.

“You needn't yell it,” I said sourly, “so that everybody in the burg will remember hearing it.”

And with that I left him, not at all dissatisfied with myself. By tipping him off to Boyd, I had put him under obligations to me, and had led him to accept me, at least tentatively, as a fellow crook. And by making no apparent effort to gain his good graces, I had strengthened my hand that much more.

I had a date with him for the next day, when I was to be given a chance to earn —

illegally, no doubt — 'a piece of change.'

There was a chance that this proposition he had in view for me had nothing to do with the Estep affair, but then again it might; and whether it did or not, I had my entering wedge at least a little way into Jake Ledwich's business.

I strolled around for about half an hour, and then went back to Bob Teal's apartment.

“Ledwich come back?”

“Yes,” Bob said, “with that little guy of yours. They went in about half an hour ago.”

“Good! Haven't seen a woman go in?”

“No.”

I expected to see the first Mrs. Estep arrive sometime during the evening, but she didn't. Bob and I sat around and talked and watched Ledwich's doorway, and the hours passed.

At one o'clock Ledwich came out alone.

“I'm going to tail him, just for luck,” Bob said, and caught up his cap.

Ledwich vanished around a corner, and then Bob passed out of sight behind him.

Five minutes later Bob was with me again.

“He's getting his machine out of the garage.”

I jumped for the telephone and put in a rush order for a fast touring car.

Bob, at the window, called out, “Here he is!”

I joined Bob in time to see Ledwich going into his vestibule. His car stood in front of the house. A very few minutes, and Boyd and Ledwich came out together. Boyd was leaning heavily on Ledwich, who was supporting the little man with an arm across his back. We couldn't see their faces in the dark, but the little man was plainly either sick, drunk, or drugged!

Ledwich helped his companion into the touring car. The red tail-light laughed back at us for a few blocks, and then disappeared. The automobile I had ordered arrived twenty minutes later, so we sent it back unused.

At a little after three that morning, Ledwich, alone and afoot, returned from the direction of his garage. He had been gone exactly two hours.

Eight

Neither Bob nor I went home that night, but slept in the Laguna Street apartment.

Bob went down to the corner grocer's to get what we needed for breakfast in the morning, and he brought a morning paper back with him.

I cooked breakfast while he divided his attention between Ledwich's front door and the newspaper.

“Hey!” he called suddenly, “look here!”

I ran out of the kitchen with a handful of bacon.

“What is it?”

“Listen! 'Park Murder Mystery!'“ he read. “'Early this morning the body of an unidentified man was found near a driveway in Golden Gate Park. His neck had been broken, according to the police, who say that the absence of any considerable bruises on the body, as well as the orderly condition of the clothes and the ground near by, show that he did not come to his death through falling, or being struck by an automobile. It is believed that he was killed and then carried to the park in an automobile, to be left there.'“

“Boyd!” I said.

“I bet you!” Bob agreed.

And at the morgue a very little while later, we learned that we were correct. The dead man was John Boyd.

“He was dead when Ledwich brought him out of the house,” Bob said.

I nodded.

“He was! He was a little man, and it wouldn't have been much of a stunt for a big bruiser like Ledwich to have dragged him along with one arm the short distance from the door to the curb, pretending to be holding him up, like you do with a drunk. Let's go over to the Hall of Justice and see what the police have got on it — if anything.”

At the detective bureau we hunted up O'Gar, the detective-sergeant in charge of the

Homicide Detail, and a good man to work with.

“This dead man found in the park,” I asked, “know anything about him?”

O'Gar pushed back his village constable's hat — a big black hat with a floppy brim that belonged in vaudeville — scratched his bullet-head, and scowled at me as if he thought I had a joke up my sleeve.

“Not a damned thing except that he's dead!” he said at last.

“How'd you like to know who he was last seen with?”

“It wouldn't hinder me any in finding out who bumped him off, and that's a fact.”

“How do you like the sound of this?” I asked. “His name was John Boyd and he was living at a hotel down in the next block. The last person he was seen with was a guy who is tied up with Dr. Estep's first wife. You know — the Dr. Estep whose second wife is the woman you people are trying to prove a murder on. Does that sound interesting?”

“It does,” he said. “Where do we go first?”

“This Ledwich — he's the fellow who was last seen with Boyd — is going to be a hard bird to shake down. We better try to crack the woman first — the first Mrs. Estep. There's a chance that Boyd was a pal of hers, and in that case when she finds out that Ledwich rubbed him out, she may open up and spill the works to us.

“On the other hand, if she and Ledwich are stacked up against Boyd together, then we might as well get her safely placed before we tie into him. I don't want to pull him before night, anyway. I got a date with him, and I want to try to rope him first.”

Bob Teal made for the door.

“I'm going up and keep my eye on him until you're ready for him,” he called over his shoulder.

“Good,” I said. “Don't let him get out of town on us. If he tries to blow, have him chucked in the can.”

In the lobby of the Montgomery Hotel, O'Gar and I talked to Dick Foley first. He told us that the woman was still in her room — had had her breakfast sent up. She had received neither letters, telegrams, nor phone calls since we began to watch her.

I got hold of Stacey again.

“We're going up to talk to this Estep woman, and maybe we'll take her away with us. Will you send up a maid to find out whether she's up and dressed yet? We don't want to announce ourselves ahead of time, and we don't want to burst in on her while she's in bed, or only partly dressed.”

He kept us waiting about fifteen minutes, and then told us that Mrs. Estep was up and dressed.

We went up to her room, taking the maid with us.

The maid rapped on the door.

“What is it?” an irritable voice demanded.

“The maid; I want to —”

The key turned on the inside, and an angry Mrs. Estep jerked the door open. O'Gar and I advanced, O'Gar flashing his “buzzer.”

“From headquarters,” he said. “We want to talk to you.”

O'Gar's foot was where she couldn't slam the door on us, and we were both walking ahead, so there was nothing for her to do but to retreat into the room, admitting us — which she did with no pretence of graciousness.

We closed the door, and then I threw our big load at her.

“Mrs. Estep, why did Jake Ledwich kill John Boyd?”

The expressions ran over her face like this: Alarm at Ledwich's name, fear at the word “kill,” but the name John Boyd brought only bewilderment.

“Why did what?” she stammered meaninglessly, to gain time.

“Exactly,” I said. “Why did Jake kill him last night in his flat, and then take him in the park and leave him?”

Another set of expressions: Increased bewilderment until I had almost finished the sentence, and then the sudden understanding of something, followed by the inevitable groping for poise. These things weren't as plain as billboards, you understand, but they were there to be read by anyone who had ever played poker — either with cards or people.

What I got out of them was that Boyd hadn't been working with or for her, and that, though she knew Ledwich had killed somebody at some time, it wasn't Boyd and it wasn't last night. Who, then? And when? Dr. Estep? Hardly! There wasn't a chance in the world that — if he had been murdered — anybody except his wife had done it — his second wife. No possible reading of the evidence could bring any other answer.

Who, then, had Ledwich killed before Boyd? Was he a wholesale murderer?

These things were flitting through my head in flashes and odd scraps while Mrs. Estep was saying:

“This is absurd! The idea of your coming up here and —”

She talked for five minutes straight, the words fairly sizzling from between her hard lips; but the words themselves didn't mean anything. She was talking for time — talking while she tried to hit upon the safest attitude to assume.

And before we could head her off, she had hit upon it — silence!

We got not another word out of her; and that is the only way in the world to beat the grilling game. The average suspect tries to talk himself out of being arrested; and it doesn't matter how shrewd a man is, or how good a liar, if he'll talk to you, and you play your cards right, you can hook him — can make him help you convict him. But if he won't talk you can't do a thing with him.

And that's how it was with this woman. She refused to pay any attention to our questions — she wouldn't speak, nod, grunt, or wave an arm in reply. She gave us a fine assortment of facial expressions, true enough, but we wanted verbal information — and we got none.

We weren't easily licked, however. Three beautiful hours of it we gave her without rest. We stormed, cajoled, threatened, and at times I think we danced; but it was no go. So in the end we took her away with us. We didn't have anything on her, but we couldn't afford to have her running around loose until we nailed Ledwich.

At the Hall of Justice we didn't book her; but simply held her as a material witness, putting her in an office with a matron and one of O'Gar's men, who were to see what they could do with her while we went after Ledwich. We had had her frisked as soon as she reached the Hall, of course; and, as we expected, she hadn't a thing of importance on her.

O'Gar and I went back to the Montgomery and gave her room a thorough overhauling — and found nothing.

“Are you sure you know what you're talking about?” the detective-sergeant asked as we left the hotel. “It's going to be a pretty joke on somebody if you're mistaken.”

I let that go by without an answer.

“I'll meet you at six-thirty,” I said, “and we'll go up against Ledwich.”

He grunted an approval, and I set out for Vance Richmond's office.

Nine

The attorney sprang up from his desk as soon as his stenographer admitted me. His face was leaner and grayer than ever; its lines had deepened, and there was a hollowness around his eyes.

“You've got to do something!” he cried huskily. “I have just come from the hospital. Mrs. Estep is on the point of death! A day more of this — two days at the most—and she will —”

I interrupted him, and swiftly gave him an account of the day's happenings, and what I expected, or hoped, to make out of them. But he received the news without brightening, and shook his head hopelessly.

“But don't you see,” he exclaimed when I had finished, “that that won't do? I know you can find proof of her innocence in time. I'm not complaining — you've done all that could be expected, and more! But all that's no good! I've got to have — well — a miracle, perhaps.

“Suppose that you do finally get the truth out of Ledwich and the first Mrs. Estep or it comes out during their trials for Boyd's murder? Or that you even get to the bottom of the matter in three or four days? That will be too late! If I can go to Mrs. Estep and tell her she's free now, she may pull herself together, and come through. But another day of imprisonment — two days, or perhaps even two hours — and she won't need anybody to clear her. Death will have done it! I tell you, she's —”

I left Vance Richmond abruptly again. This lawyer was bound upon getting me worked up; and I like my jobs to be simply jobs — emotions are nuisances during business hours.

Ten

At a quarter to seven that evening, while O'Gar remained down the street, I rang Jacob Ledwich's bell. As I had stayed with Bob Teal in our apartment the previous night, I was still wearing the clothes in which I had made Ledwich's acquaintance as Shine

Wisher.

Ledwich opened the door.

“Hello, Wisher!” he said without enthusiasm, and led me upstairs.

His flat consisted of four rooms, I found, running the full length and half the breadth of the building, with both front and rear exits. It was furnished with the ordinary none-too-spotless appointments of the typical moderately priced furnished flat — alike the world over.

In his front room we sat down and talked and smoked and sized one another up. He seemed a little nervous. I thought he would have been just as well satisfied if I had forgotten to show up.

“About this job you mentioned?” I asked presently.

“Sorry,” he said, moistening his little lumpy mouth, “but it's all off.” And then he added, obviously as an afterthought, “For the present, at least.”

I guessed from that that my job was to have taken care of Boyd — but Boyd had been taken care of for good.

He brought out some whisky after a while, and we talked over it for some time, to no purpose whatever. He was trying not to appear too anxious to get rid of me, and I was cautiously feeling him out.

Piecing together things he let fall here and there, I came to the conclusion that he was a former con man who had fallen into an easier game of late years. That was in line, too, with what Porky Grout had told Bob Teal.

I talked about myself with the evasiveness that would have been natural to a crook in my situation; and made one or two carefully planned slips that would lead him to believe that I had been tied up with the 'Jimmy the Riveter' hold-up mob, most of whom were doing long hitches at Walla Walla then.

He offered to lend me enough money to tide me over until I could get on my feet again. I told him I didn't need chicken feed so much as a chance to pick up some real jack.

The evening was going along, and we were getting nowhere.

“Jake,” I said casually — outwardly casual, that is — “you took a big chance putting that guy out of the way like you did last night.”

I meant to stir things up, and I succeeded.

His face went crazy.

A gun came out of his coat.

Firing from my pocket, I shot it out of his hand.

“Now behave!” I ordered.

He sat rubbing his benumbed hand and staring with wide eyes at the smouldering hole in my coat.

Looks like a great stunt, this shooting a gun out of a man's hand, but it's a thing that happens now and then. A man who is a fair shot (and that is exactly what I am — no more, no less) naturally and automatically shoots pretty close to the spot upon which his eyes are focused. When a man goes for his gun in front of you, you shoot at him — not at any particular part of him. There isn't time for that — you shoot at him. However, you are more than likely to be looking at his gun, and in that case it isn't altogether surprising if your bullet should hit his gun — as mine had done. But it looks impressive.

I beat out the fire around the bullet-hole in my coat, crossed the room to where his revolver had been knocked, and picked it up. I started to eject the bullets from it, but, instead, I snapped it shut again and stuck it in my pocket. Then I returned to my chair, opposite him.

“A man oughtn't to act like that,” I kidded him; “he's likely to hurt somebody.”

His little mouth curled up at me.

“An elbow, huh?” putting all the contempt he could in his voice; and somehow any synonym for detective seems able to hold a lot of contempt.

I might have tried to talk myself back into the Wisher role. It could have been done, but I doubted that it would be worth it; so I nodded my confession.

His brain was working now, and the passion left his face, while he sat rubbing his right hand, and his little mouth and eyes began to screw themselves up calculatingly.

I kept quiet, waiting to see what the outcome of his thinking would be. I knew he was trying to figure out just what my place in this game was. Since, to his knowledge, I had come into it no later than the previous evening, then the Boyd murder hadn't brought me in. That would leave the Estep affair — unless he was tied up in a lot of other

crooked stuff that I didn't know anything about.

“You're not a city dick, are you?” he asked finally, and his voice was on the verge of friendliness now: the voice of one who wants to persuade you of something, or sell you something.

The truth, I thought, wouldn't hurt.

“No,” I said, “I'm with the Continental.”

He hitched his chair a little closer to the muzzle of my automatic.

“What are you after, then? Where do you come in on it?”

I tried the truth again.

“The second Mrs. Estep. She didn't kill her husband.”

“You're trying to dig up enough dope to spring her?”

“Yes.”

I waved him back as he tried to hitch his chair still nearer.

“How do you expect to do it?” he asked, his voice going lower and more confidential with each word.

I took still another flier at the truth.

“He wrote a letter before he died.”

“Well?”

But I called a halt for the time.

“Just that,” I said.

He leaned back in his chair, and his eyes and mouth grew small in thought again.

“What's your interest in the man who died last night?” he asked slowly.

“It's something on you,” I said, truthfully again. “It doesn't do the second Mrs. Estep any direct good, maybe; but you and the first wife are stacked up together against her. Anything, therefore, that hurts you two will help her, somehow. I admit I'm wandering

around in the dark; but I'm going ahead wherever I see a point of light — and I'll come through to daylight in the end. Nailing you for Boyd's murder is one point of light.”

He leaned forward suddenly, his eyes and mouth popping open as far as they would go.

“You'll come out all right,” he said very softly, “if you use a little judgment.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Do you think,” he asked, still very softly, “that you can nail me for Boyd's murder — that you can convict me of murder?”

“I do.”

But I wasn't any too sure. In the first place, though we were morally certain of it, neither Bob Teal nor I could swear that the man who had got in the machine with Ledwich was John Boyd.

We knew it was, of course, but the point is that it had been too dark for us to see his face. And, again, in the dark, we had thought him alive; it wasn't until later that we knew he had been dead when he came down the steps.

Little things, those, but a private detective on the witness stand — unless he is absolutely sure of every detail — has an unpleasant and ineffectual time of it.

“I do,” I repeated, thinking these things over, “and I'm satisfied to go to the bat with what I've got on you and what I can collect between now and the time you and your accomplice go to trial.”

“Accomplice?” he said, not very surprised. “That would be Edna. I suppose you've already grabbed her?”

“Yes.”

He laughed.

“You'll have one sweet time getting anything out of her. In the first place, she doesn't know much, and in the second — well, I suppose you've tried, and have found out what a helpful sort she is! So don't try the old gag of pretending that she has talked!”

“I'm not pretending anything.”

Silence between us for a few seconds, and then —

“I'm going to make you a proposition,” he said. “You can take it or leave it. The note Dr. Estep wrote before he died was to me, and it is positive proof that he committed suicide. Give me a chance to get away — just a chance — a half-hour start — and I'll give you my word of honour to send you the letter.”

“I know I can trust you,” I said sarcastically.

“I'll trust you, then!” he shot back at me. “I'll turn the note over to you if you'll give me your word that I'm to have half an hour's start.”

“For what?” I demanded. “Why shouldn't I take both you and the note?”

“If you can get them! But do I look like the kind of sap who would leave the note where it would be found? Do you think it's here in the room maybe?”

I didn't, but neither did I think that because he had hidden it, it couldn't be found.

“I can't think of any reason why I should bargain with you,” I told him. “I've got you cold, and that's enough.”

“If I can show you that your only chance of freeing the second Mrs. Estep is through my voluntary assistance, will you bargain with me?”

“Maybe — I'll listen to your persuasion, anyway.”

“All right,” he said, “I'm going to come clean with you. But most of the things I'm going to tell you can't be proven in court without my help; and if you turn my offer down I'll have plenty of evidence to convince the jury that these things are all false, that I never said them, and that you are trying to frame me.”

That part was plausible enough. I've testified before juries all the way from the city of Washington to the state of Washington, and I've never seen one yet that wasn't anxious to believe that a private detective is a double-crossing specialist who goes around with a cold deck in one pocket, a complete forger's outfit in another, and who counts that day lost in which he railroads no innocent to the hoosegow.

Eleven

“There was once a young doctor in a town a long way from here,” Ledwich began. “He got mixed up in a scandal — a pretty rotten one — and escaped the pen only by the skin of his teeth. The state medical board revoked his license.

“In a large city not far away, this young doc, one night when he was drunk — as he

usually was in those days —told his troubles to a man he had met in a dive. The friend was a resourceful sort; and he offered, for a price, to fix the doc up with a fake diploma, so he could set up in practice in some other state.

“The young doctor took him up, and the friend got the diploma for him. The doc was the man you know as Dr. Estep, and I was the friend. The real Dr. Estep was found dead in the park this morning!”

That was news — if true!

“You see,” the big man went on, “when I offered to get the phoney diploma for the young doc — whose real name doesn't matter — I had in mind a forged one. Nowadays they're easy to get — there's a regular business in them — but twenty-five years ago, while you could manage it, they were hard to get. While I was trying to get one, I ran across a woman I used to work with — Edna Fife. That's the woman you know as the first Mrs. Estep.

“Edna had married a doctor — the real Dr. Humbert Estep. He was a hell of a doctor, though; and after starving with him in Philadelphia for a couple of years, she made him close up his office, and she went back to the bunko game, taking him with her. She was good at it, I'm telling you — a real cleaner — and, keeping him under her thumb all the time, she made him a pretty good worker himself.

“It was shortly after that that I met her, and when she told me all this, I offered to buy her husband's medical diploma and other credentials. I don't know whether he wanted to sell them or not — but he did what she told him, and I got the papers.

“I turned them over to the young doc, who came to San Francisco and opened an office under the name of Humbert Estep. The real Esteps promised not to use that name any more — not much of an inconvenience for them, as they changed names every time they changed addresses.

“I kept in touch with the young doctor, of course, getting my regular rake-off from him. I had him by the neck, and I wasn't foolish enough to pass up any easy money. After a year or so, I learned that he had pulled himself together and was making good. So I jumped on a train and came to San Francisco. He was doing fine; so I camped here, where I could keep my eye on him and watch out for my own interests.

“He got married about then, and, between his practice and his investments, he began to accumulate a roll. But he tightened up on me — damn him! He wouldn't be bled. I got a regular percentage of what he made, and that was all.

“For nearly twenty-five years I got it — but not a nickel over the percentage. He knew I wouldn't kill the goose that laid the golden eggs, so no matter how much I threatened

to expose him, he sat tight, and I couldn't budge him. I got my regular cut, and not a nickel more.

“That went along, as I say, for years. I was getting a living out of him, but I wasn't getting any big money. A few months ago I learned that he had cleaned up heavily in a lumber deal so I made up my mind to take him for what he had.

“During all these years I had got to know the doc pretty well. You do when you're bleeding a man — you get a pretty fair idea of what goes on in his head, and what he's most likely to do if certain things should happen. So I knew the doc pretty well.

“I knew, for instance, that he had never told his wife the truth about his past; that he had stalled her with some lie about being born in West Virginia. That was fine — for me! Then I knew that he kept a gun in his desk, and I knew why. It was kept there for the purpose of killing himself if the truth ever came out about his diploma. He figured that if, at the first hint of exposure, he wiped himself out, the authorities, out of respect for the good reputation he had built up, would hush things up.

“And his wife — even if she herself learned the truth — would be spared the shame of a public scandal. I can't see myself dying just to spare some woman's feelings, but the doc was a funny guy in some ways — and he was nutty about his wife.

“That's the way I had him figured out, and that's the way things turned out.

“My plan might sound complicated, but it was simple enough. I got hold of the real Esteps — it took a lot of hunting, but I found them at last. I brought the woman to San Francisco, and told the man to stay away.

“Everything would have gone fine if he had done what I told him; but he was afraid that Edna and I were going to double-cross him, so he came here to keep an eye on us. But I didn't know that until you put the finger on him for me.

“I brought Edna here and, without telling her any more than she had to know, drilled her until she was letter-perfect in her part.

“A couple days before she came I had gone to see the doc, and had demanded a hundred thousand cool smacks. He laughed at me, and I left, pretending to be as hot as hell.

“As soon as Edna arrived, I sent her to call on him. She asked him to perform an illegal operation on her daughter. He, of course, refused. Then she pleaded with him, loud enough for the nurse or whoever else was in the reception room to hear. And when she raised her voice she was careful to stick to words that could be interpreted the way we wanted them to. She ran off her end to perfection, leaving in tears.

“Then I sprung my other trick! I had a fellow — a fellow who's a whiz at that kind of stuff — make me a plate: an imitation of newspaper printing. It was all worded like the real article, and said that the state authorities were investigating information that a prominent surgeon in San Francisco was practicing under a license secured by false credentials. This plate measured four and an eighth by six and three-quarter inches. If you'll look at the first inside page of the Evening Times any day in the week you'll see a photograph just that size.

“On the day after Edna's call, I bought a copy of the first edition of the Times — on the street at ten in the morning. I had this scratcher friend of mine remove the photograph with acid, and print this fake article in its place.

“That evening I substituted a 'home edition' outer sheet for the one that had come with the paper we had cooked up, and made a switch as soon as the doc's newsboy made his delivery. There was nothing to that part of it. The kid just tossed the paper into the vestibule. It's simply a case of duck into the doorway, trade papers, and go on, leaving the loaded one for the doc to read.”

I was trying not to look too interested, but my ears were cocked for every word. At the start, I had been prepared for a string of lies. But I knew now that he was telling me the truth! Every syllable was a boast; he was half-drunk with appreciation of his own cleverness — the cleverness with which he had planned and carried out his program of treachery and murder.

I knew that he was telling the truth, and I suspected that he was telling more of it than he had intended. He was fairly bloated with vanity — the vanity that fills the crook almost invariably after a little success, and makes him ripe for the pen.

His eyes glistened, and his little mouth smiled triumphantly around the words that continued to roll out of it.

“The doc read the paper, all right — and shot himself. But first he wrote and mailed a note — to me. I didn't figure on his wife's being accused of killing him. That was plain luck.

“I figured that the fake piece in the paper would be overlooked in the excitement. Edna would then go forward, claiming to be his first wife; and his shooting himself after her first call, with what the nurse had overheard, would make his death seem a confession that Edna was his wife.

“I was sure that she would stand up under any sort of an investigation. Nobody knew anything about the doc's real past; except what he had told them, which would be found false.

“Edna had really married a Dr. Humbert Estep in Philadelphia in 1896; and the twenty-seven years that had passed since then would do a lot to hide the fact that that Dr. Humbert Estep wasn't this Dr. Humbert Estep.

“All I wanted to do was convince the doc's real wife and her lawyers that she wasn't really his wife at all. And we did that! Everybody took it for granted that Edna was the legal wife.

“The next play would have been for Edna and the real wife to have reached some sort of an agreement about the estate, whereby Edna would have got the bulk — or at least half — of it; and nothing would have been made public.

“If worse came to worst, we were prepared to go to court. We were sitting pretty! But I'd have been satisfied with half the estate. It would have come to a few hundred thousand at the least, and that would have been plenty for me — even deducting the twenty thousand I had promised Edna.

“But when the police grabbed the doc's wife and charged her with his murder, I saw my way into the whole roll. All I had to do was sit tight and wait until they convicted her. Then the court would turn the entire pile over to Edna.

“I had the only evidence that would free the doc's wife: the note he had written me. But I couldn't — even if I had wanted to — have turned it in without exposing my hand. When he read that fake piece in the paper, he tore it out, wrote his message to me across the face of it, and sent it to me. So the note is a dead give-away. However, I didn't have any intention of publishing it, anyhow.

“Up to this point everything had gone like a dream. All I had to do was wait until it was time to cash in on my brains. And that's the time that the real Humbert Estep picked out to mess up the works.

“He shaved his moustache off, put on some old clothes, and came snooping around to see that Edna and I didn't run out on him. As if he could have stopped us! After you put the finger on him for me, I brought him up here.

“I intended salving him along until I could find a place to keep him until all the cards had been played. That's what I was going to hire you for — to take care of him.

“But we got to talking, and wrangling, and I had to knock him down. He didn't get up, and I found that he was dead. His neck was broken. There was nothing to do but take him out to the park and leave him.

“I didn't tell Edna. She didn't have a lot of use for him, as far as I could see, but you

can't tell how women will take things. Anyhow, she'll stick, now that it's done. She's on the up and up all the time. And if she should talk, she can't do a lot of damage. She only knows her own part of the lay.

“All this long-winded story is so you'll know just exactly what you're up against. Maybe you think you can dig up the proof of these things I have told you. You can this far. You can prove that Edna wasn't the doc's wife. You can prove that I've been blackmailing him. But you can't prove that the doc's wife didn't believe that Edna was his real wife! It's her word against Edna's and mine.

“We'll swear that we had convinced her of it, which will give her a motive. You can't prove that the phoney news article I told you about ever existed. It'll sound like a hophead's dream to a jury.

“You can't tie last night's murder on me — I've got an alibi that will knock your hat off! I can prove that I left here with a friend of mine who was drunk, and that I took him to his hotel and put him to bed, with the help of a night clerk and a bellboy. And what have you got against that? The word of two private detectives. Who'll believe you?

“You can convict me of conspiracy to defraud, or something — maybe. But, regardless of that, you can't free Mrs. Estep without my help.

“Turn me loose and I'll give you the letter the doc wrote me. It's the goods, right enough! In his own handwriting, written across the face of the fake newspaper story — which ought to fit the torn place in the paper that the police are supposed to be holding — and he wrote that he was going to kill himself, in words almost that plain.”

That would turn the trick — there was no doubt of it. And I believed Ledwich's story. The more I thought it over the better I liked it. It fitted into the facts everywhere. But I wasn't enthusiastic about giving this big crook his liberty.

“Don't make me laugh!” I said. “I'm going to put you away and free Mrs, Estep — both.”

“Go ahead and try it! You're up against it without the letter; and you don't think a man with brains enough to plan a job like this one would be foolish enough to leave the note where it could be found, do you?”

I wasn't especially impressed with the difficulty of convicting this Ledwich and freeing the dead man's widow. His scheme — that cold-blooded zigzag of treachery for everybody he had dealt with, including his latest accomplice, Edna Estep — wasn't as air-tight as he thought it. A week in which to run out a few lines in the East, and — But a week was just what I didn't have!

Vance Richmond's words were running through my head: “But another day of imprisonment — two days, or perhaps even two hours — and she won't need anybody to clear her. Death will have done it!”

If I was going to do Mrs. Estep any good, I had to move quick. Law or no law, her life was in my fat hands. This man before me — his eyes bright and hopeful now and his mouth anxiously pursed — was thief, blackmailer, double-crosser, and at least twice a murderer. I hated to let him walk out. But there was the woman dying in a hospital...

Twelve

Keeping my eye on Ledwich, I went to the telephone, and got Vance Richmond on the wire at his residence.

“How is Mrs. Estep?” I asked.

“Weaker! I talked with the doctor half an hour ago, and he says —”

I cut in on him; I didn't want to listen to the details.

“Get over to the hospital, and be where I can reach you by phone. I may have news for you before the night is over.”

“What — is there a chance? Are you —”

I didn't promise him anything. I hung up the receiver and spoke to Ledwich. “I'll do this much for you. Slip me the note, and I'll give you your gun and put you out the back door. There's a bull on the corner out front, and I can't take you past him.”

He was on his feet, beaming.

“Your word on it?” he demanded.

“Yes—get going!”

He went past me to the phone, gave a number (which I made a note of), and then spoke hurriedly into the instrument.

“This is Shuler. Put a boy in a taxi with that envelope I gave you to hold for me, and send him out here right away.”

He gave his address, said “Yes” twice, and hung up.

There was nothing surprising about his unquestioning acceptance of my word. He

couldn't afford to doubt that I'd play fair with him. And, also, all successful bunko men come in time to believe that the world — except for themselves — is populated by a race of human sheep who may be trusted to conduct themselves with true sheeplike docility.

Ten minutes later the doorbell rang. We answered it together, and Ledwich took a large envelope from a messenger boy, while I memorised the number on the boy's cap. Then we went back to the front room.

Ledwich slit the envelope and passed its contents to me: a piece of rough-torn newspaper. Across the face of the fake article he had told me about was written a message in a jerky hand.

I wouldn't have suspected you, Ledwich, of such profound stupidity. My last thought will be — this bullet that ends my life also ends your years of leisure. You'll have to go to work now.

Estep.

The doctor had died game!

I took the envelope from the big man, put the death note in it, and put them in my pocket. Then I went to a front window, flattening a cheek against the glass until I could see O'Gar, dimly outlined in the night, patiently standing where I had left him hours before.

“The city dick is still on the corner,” I told Ledwich. “Here's your gat” — holding out the gun I had shot from his fingers a little while back — “take it, and blow through the back door. Remember, that's all I'm offering you — the gun and a fair start. If you play square with me, I'll not do anything to help find you — unless I have to keep myself in the clear.”

“Fair enough!”

He grabbed the gun, broke it to see that it was still loaded, and wheeled toward the rear of the flat. At the door he pulled up, hesitated, and faced me again. I kept him covered with my automatic.

“Will you do me one favour I didn't put in the bargain?” he asked.

“What is it?”

“That note of the doc's is in an envelope with my handwriting and maybe my fingerprints on it. Let me put it in a fresh envelope, will you? I don't want to leave any

broader trail behind than I have to.”

With my left hand — my right being busy with the gun —I fumbled for the envelope and tossed it to him. He took a plain envelope from the table, wiped it carefully with his handkerchief, put the note in it, taking care not to touch it with the balls of his fingers, and passed it back to me; and I put it in my pocket.

I had a hard time to keep from grinning in his face.

That fumbling with the handkerchief told me that the envelope in my pocket was empty, that the death note was in Ledwich's possession — though I hadn't seen it pass there. He had worked one of his bunko tricks upon me.

“Beat it!” I snapped, to keep from laughing in his face.

He spun on his heel. His feet pounded against the floor. A door slammed in the rear.

I tore into the envelope he had given me. I needed to be sure he had double-crossed me.

The envelope was empty.

Our agreement was wiped out.

I sprang to the front window, threw it wide open, and leaned out. O'Gar saw me immediately — clearer than I could see him. I swung my arm in a wide gesture toward the rear of the house. O'Gar set out for the alley on the run. I dashed back through Ledwich's flat to the kitchen, and stuck my head out of an already open window.

I could see Ledwich against the white-washed fence — throwing the back gate open, plunging through it into the alley.

O'Gar's squat bulk appeared under a light at the end of the alley.

Ledwich's revolver was in his hand. O'Gar's wasn't — not quite.

Ledwich's gun swung up — the hammer clicked.

O'Gar's gun coughed fire.

Ledwich fell with a slow, revolving motion over against the white fence, gasped once or twice, and went down in a pile.

I walked slowly down the stairs to join O'Gar; slowly, because it isn't a nice thing to

look at a man you've deliberately sent to his death. Not even if it's the surest way of saving an innocent life, and if the man who dies is a Jake Ledwich — altogether treacherous.

“How come?” O'Gar asked, when I came into the alley, where he stood looking down at the dead man.

“He got out on me,” I said simply.

“He must've.”

I stooped and searched the dead man's pockets until I found the suicide note, still crumpled in the handkerchief. O'Gar was examining the dead man's revolver.

“Lookit!” he exclaimed. “Maybe this ain't my lucky day! He snapped at me once, and his gun missed fire. No wonder! Somebody must've been using an ax on it — the firing pin's broke clean off!”

“Is that so?” I asked; just as if I hadn't discovered, when I first picked the revolver up, that the bullet which had knocked it out of Ledwich's hand had made it harmless.