One

This is Mr. Chrostwaite," Vance Richmond said.

Chrostwaite, wedged between the arms of one of the attorney's large chairs, grunted what was perhaps meant for an acknowledgment of the introduction. I grunted back at him, and found myself a chair.

He was a big balloon of a man — this Chrostwaite — in a green plaid suit that didn't make him look any smaller than he was. His tie was a gaudy thing, mostly of yellow, with a big diamond set in the centre of it, and there were more stones on his pudgy hands. Spongy fat blurred his features, making it impossible for his round purplish face to even hold any other expression than the discontented hoggishness that was habitual to it. He reeked of gin.

"Mr. Chrostwaite is the Pacific Coast agent for the Mutual Fire Extinguisher Manufacturing Company," Vance Richmond began, as soon as I had got myself seated. "His office is on Kearny Street, near California. Yesterday, at about two forty-five in the afternoon, he went to his office, leaving his machine — a Hudson touring car — standing in front, with the engine running. Then minutes later, he came out. The car was gone."

I looked at Chrostwaite. He was looking at his fat knees, showing not the least interest in what his attorney was saying. I looked quickly back at Vance Richmond; his clean gray face and lean figure were downright beautiful beside his bloated client.

"A man named Newhouse," the lawyer was saying, "who was the proprietor of a printing establishment on California Street, just around the corner from Mr. Chrostwaite's office, was run down and killed by Mr. Chrostwaite's car at the corner of Clay and Kearny Streets, five minutes after Mr. Chrostwaite had left the car to go into his office. The police found the car shortly afterward, only a block away from the scene of the accident — on Montgomery near Clay.

"The thing is fairly obvious. Someone stole the car immediately after Mr. Chrostwaite left it; and in driving rapidly away, ran down Newhouse; and then, in fright, abandoned the car. But here is Mr. Chrostwaite's position; three nights ago, while driving perhaps a little recklessly out —"

“Drunk,” Chrostwaite said, not looking up from his plaid knees; and though his voice was hoarse, husky — it was the hoarseness of a whisky-burned throat — there was no emotion in his voice.

“While driving perhaps a little recklessly out Van Ness Avenue,” Vance Richmond went on, ignoring the interruption, “Mr. Chrostwaite knocked a pedestrian down. The man wasn't badly hurt, and he is being compensated very generously for his injuries. But we are to appear in court next Monday to face a charge of reckless driving, and I am afraid that this accident of yesterday, in which the printer was killed, may hurt us.

“No one thinks that Mr. Chrostwaite was in his car when it killed the printer — we have a world of evidence that he wasn't. But I am afraid that the printer's death may be made a weapon against us when we appear on the Van Ness Avenue charge. Being an attorney, I know just how much capital the prosecuting attorney — if he so chooses — can make out of the really, insignificant fact that the same car that knocked down the man on Van Ness Avenue killed another man yesterday. And, being an attorney, I know how likely the prosecuting attorney is to so choose. And he can handle it in such a way that we will be given little or no opportunity to tell our side.

“The worst that can happen, of course, is that, instead of the usual fine, Mr. Chrostwaite will be sent to the city jail for thirty or sixty days. That is bad enough, however, and that is what we wish to —”

Chrostwaite spoke again, still regarding his knees.

“Damned nuisance!” he said.

“That is what we wish to avoid,” the attorney continued. “We are willing to pay a stiff fine, and expect to, for the accident on Van Ness Avenue was clearly Mr. Chrostwaite's fault. But we —”

“Drunk as a lord!” Chrostwaite said.

“But we don't want to have this other accident, with which we had nothing to do, given a false weight in connection with the slighter accident. What we want then, is to find the man or men who stole the car and ran down John Newhouse. If they are apprehended before we go to court, we won't be in danger of suffering for their act. Think you can find them before Monday?”

“I'll try,” I promised; “though it isn't —“

The human balloon interrupted me by heaving himself to his feet, fumbling with his fat jewelled fingers for his watch.

“Three o'clock,” he said. “Got a game of golf for three-thirty.” He picked up his hat and gloves from the desk. “Find 'em, will you? Damned nuisance going to jail!”

And he waddled out.

Two

From the attorney's office, I went down to the Hall of Justice, and, after hunting around a few minutes, found a policeman who had arrived at the corner of Clay and Kearny Streets a few seconds after Newhonse had been knocked down.

“I was just leaving the Hall when I seen a bus scoot around the corner at Clay Street,” this patrolman — a big sandy-haired man named Coffee — told me. “Then I seen people gathering around, so I went up there and found this John Newhouse stretched out. He was already dead. Half a dozen people had seen him hit, and one of 'em had got the license number of the car that done it. We found the car standing empty just around the corner on Montgomery Street, pointing north. There was two fellows in the car when it hit Newhouse, but nobody saw what they looked like. Nobody was in it when we found it.”

“In what direction was Newhouse walking?”

“North along Kearny Street, and he was about three-quarters across Clay when he was knocked. The car was coming north on Kearny, too, and turned east on Clay. It mightn't have been all the fault of the fellows in the car — according to them that seen the accident. Newhouse was walking across the street looking at a piece of paper in his hand. I found a piece of foreign money—paper money — in his hand, and I guess that's what he was looking at. The lieutenant tells me it was Dutch money — a hundred-florin note, he says.”

“Found out anything about the men in the car?”

“Nothing! We lined up everybody we could find in the neighbourhood of California and Kearny Streets — where the car was stolen from — and around Clay and Montgomery Streets — where it was left at. But nobody remembered seeing the fellows getting in it or getting out of it. The man that owns the car wasn't driving it — it was stole all right, I guess. At first I thought maybe there was something shady about the accident. This John Newhouse had a two—or three-day-old black eye on him. But we run that out and found that he had an attack of heart trouble or something a couple days ago, and fell, fetching his eye up against a chair. He'd been home sick for three days — just left his house half an hour or so before the accident.”

“Where'd he live?”

“On Sacramento Street — way out. I got his address here somewhere.”

He turned over the pages of a grimy memoranda book, and I got the dead man's house number, and the names and addresses of the witnesses to the accident that Coffee had questioned.

That exhausted the policeman's information, so I left him.

Three

My next play was to canvass the vicinity of where the car had been stolen and where it had been deserted, and then interview the witnesses. The fact that the police had fruitlessly gone over this ground made it unlikely that I would find anything of value; but I couldn't skip these things on that account. Ninety-nine per cent of detective work is a patient collecting of details — and your details must be got as nearly first-hand as possible, regardless of who else has worked the territory before you.

Before starting on this angle, however, I decided to run around to the dead man's printing establishment — only three blocks from the Hall of Justice — and see if any of his employees had heard anything that might help me.

Newhouse's establishment occupied the ground floor of a small building on California, between Kearny and Montgomery. A small office was partitioned off in front, with a connecting doorway leading to the pressroom in the rear.

The only occupant of the small office, when I came in from the street, was a short, stocky, worried-looking blond man of forty or thereabouts, who sat at the desk in his shirt-sleeves, checking off figures in a ledger against others on a batch of papers before him.

I introduced myself, telling him that I was a Continental Detective Agency operative, interested in Newhouse's death. He told me his name was Ben Soules, and that he was Newhouse's foreman. We shook hands, and then he waved me to a chair across the desk, pushed back the papers and book upon which he had been working, and scratched his head disgustedly with the pencil in his hand.

“This is awful!” he said. “What with one thing and another, we're heels over head in work, and I got to fool with these books that I don't know anything at all about, and —”

He broke off to pick up the telephone, which had jingled.

“Yes... This is Soules... We're working on them now... I'll give 'em to you by Monday noon at the least... I know! I know! But the boss's death set us back. Explain that to Mr. Chrostwaite. And... And I'll promise you that we'll give them to you Monday

morning, sure!”Soules slapped the receiver irritably on its hook and looked at me.

“You'd think that since it was his own car that killed the boss, he'd have decency enough not to squawk over the delay!”

“Chrostwaite?”

“Yes — that was one of his clerks. We're printing some leaflets for him—promised to have 'em ready yesterday — but between the boss's death and having a couple new hands to break in, we're behind with everything. I've been here eight years, and this is the first time we ever fell down on an order — and every damned customer is yelling his head off. If we were like most printers they'd be used to waiting; but we've been too good to them. But this Chrostwaite! You'd think he'd have some decency, seeing that his car killed the boss!”

I nodded sympathetically, slid a cigar across the desk, and waited until it was burning in Soilless mouth before I asked:

“You said something about having a couple new hands to break in. How come?”

“Yes. Mr. Newhouse fired two of our printers last week — Fincher and Keys. He found that they belonged to the I.W.W., so he gave them their time.”

“Any trouble with them or anything against them except that they were Wobblies?”

“No — they were pretty good workers.”

“Any trouble with them after he fired them?” I asked.

“No real trouble, though they were pretty hot. They made red speeches all over the place before they left.”

“Remember what day that was?”

“Wednesday of last week, I think. Yes, Wednesday, because I hired two new men on Thursday.”

“How many men do you work?”

“Three, besides myself.”

“Was Mr. Newhouse sick very often?”

“Not sick enough to stay away very often, though every now and then his heart would

go back on him, and he'd have to stay in bed for a week or ten days. He wasn't what you could call real well at any time. He never did anything but the office work — I run the shop."

"When was he taken sick this last time?"

"Mrs. Newhouse called up Tuesday morning and said he had had another spell, and wouldn't be down for a few days. He came in yesterday — which was Thursday — for about ten minutes in the afternoon, and said he would be back on the job this morning. He was killed just after he left."

"How did he look — very sick?"

"Not so bad. He never looked well, of course, but I couldn't see much difference from usual yesterday. This last spell hadn't been as bad as most, I reckon — he was usually laid up for a week or more."

"Did he say where he was going when he left? The reason I ask is that, living out on Sacramento Street, he would naturally have taken a car at that street if he had been going home, whereas he was run down on Clay Street."

"He said he was going up to Portsmouth Square to sit in the sun for half an hour or so. He had been cooped up indoors for two or three days, he said, and he wanted some sunshine before he went back home."

"He had a piece of foreign money in his hand when he was hit. Know anything about it?"

"Yes. He got it here. One of our customers — a man named Van Pelt — came in to pay for some work we had done yesterday afternoon while the boss was here. When Van Pelt pulled out his wallet to pay his bill, this piece of Holland money — I don't know what you call it — was among the bills. I think he said it was worth something like thirty-eight dollars. Anyway, the boss took it, giving Van Pelt his change. The boss said he wanted to show the Holland money to his boys — and he could have it changed back into American money later."

"Who is this Van Pelt?"

"He's a Hollander — is planning to open a tobacco importing business here in a month or two. I don't know much about him outside of that."

"Where's his home, or office?"

"His office is on Bush Street, near Sansome."

“Did he know that Newhouse had been sick?”

“I don't think so. The boss didn't look much different from usual.”

“What's this Van Pelt's full name?”

“Hendrik Van Pelt.”

“What does he look like?”

Before Soules could answer, three evenly spaced buzzes sounded above the rattle and whirring of the presses in the back of the shop.

I slid the muzzle of my gun — I had been holding it in my lap for five minutes — far enough over the edge of the desk for Ben Soules to see it.

“Put both of your hands on top of the desk,” I said.

He put them there.

The pressroom door was directly behind him, so that, facing him across the desk, I could look over his shoulder at it. His stocky body served to screen my gun from the view of whoever came through the door, in response to Soules's signal.

I didn't have long to wait.

Three men —black with ink — came to the door, and through it into the little office. They strolled in careless and casual, laughing and joking to one another.

But one of them licked his lips as he stepped through the door. Another's eyes showed white circles all around the irises. The third was the best actor — but he held his shoulders a trifle too stiffly to fit his otherwise careless carriage.

“Stop right there!” I barked at them when the last one was inside the office — and I brought my gun up where they could see it.

They stopped as if they had all been mounted on the same pair of legs.

I kicked my chair back, and stood up.

I didn't like my position at all. The office was entirely too small for me. I had a gun, true enough, and whatever weapons may have been distributed among these other men were out of sight. But these four men were too close to me; and a gun isn't a thing

of miracles. It's a mechanical contraption that is capable of just so much and no more.

If these men decided to jump me, I could down just one of them before the other three were upon me. I knew it, and they knew it.

“Put your hands up,” I ordered, “and turn around!”

None of them moved to obey. One of the inked men grinned wickedly; Soules shook his head slowly; the other two stood and looked at me.

I was more or less stumped. You can't shoot a man just because he refuses to obey an order — even if he is a criminal. If they had turned around for me, I could have lined them up against the wall, and, being behind them, have held them safe while I used the telephone.

But that hadn't worked.

My next thought was to back across the office to the street door, keeping them covered, and then either stand in the door and yell for help, or take them into the street, where I could handle them. But I put that thought away as quickly as it came to me.

These four men were going to jump me — there was no doubt of that. All that was needed was a spark of any sort to explode them into action. They were standing stiff-legged and tense, waiting for some move on my part. If I took a step backward — the battle would be on.

We were close enough for any of the four to have reached out and touched me. One of them I could shoot before I was smothered — one out of four. That meant that each of them had only one chance out of four of being the victim — low enough odds for any but the most cowardly of men.

I grinned what was supposed to be a confident grin — because I was up against it hard — and reached for the telephone: I had to do something! Then I cursed myself! I had merely changed the signal for the onslaught. It would come now when I picked up the receiver.

But I couldn't back down again — that, too, would be a signal — I had to go through with it.

The perspiration trickled across my temples from under my hat as I drew the phone closer with my left hand.

The street door opened! An exclamation of surprise came from behind me.

I spoke rapidly, without taking my eyes from the four men in front of me.

“Quick! The phone! The police!”

With the arrival of this unknown person — one of Newhouse's customers, probably — I figured I had the edge again. Even if he took no active part beyond calling the police in, the enemy would have to split to take care of him — and that would give me a chance to pot at least two of them before I was knocked over. Two out of four — each of them had an even chance of being dropped — which is enough to give even a nervy man cause for thinking a bit before he jumps.

“Hurry!” I urged the newcomer.

“Yes! Yes!” he said — and in the blurred sound of the 's' there was evidence of foreign birth.

Keyed up as I was, I didn't need any more warning than that.

I threw myself sidewise — a blind tumbling away from the spot where I stood. But I wasn't quite quick enough.

The blow that came from behind didn't hit me fairly, but I got enough of it to fold up my legs as if the knees were hinged with paper — and I slammed into a heap on the floor...

Something dark crashed toward me. I caught it with both hands. It may have been a foot kicking at my face. I wrung it as a washerwoman wrings a towel.

Down my spine ran jar after jar. Perhaps somebody was beating me over the head. I don't know. My head wasn't alive. The blow that had knocked me down had numbed me all over. My eyes were no good. Shadows swam to and fro in front of them — that was all. I struck, gouged, tore at the shadows. Sometimes I found nothing. Sometimes I found things that felt like parts of bodies. Then I would hammer at them, tear at them. My gun was gone.

My hearing was no better than my sight — or not so good. There wasn't a sound in the world. I moved in a silence that was more complete than any silence I had ever known. I was a ghost fighting ghosts.

I found presently that my feet were under me again, though some squirming thing was on my back, and kept me from standing upright: A hot, damp thing like a hand was across my face.

I put my teeth into it. I snapped my head back as far as it would go. Maybe it smashed into the face it was meant for. I don't know. Anyhow the squirming thing was no longer on my back.

Dimly I realised that I was being buffeted about by blows that I was too numb to feel. Ceaselessly, with head and shoulders and elbows and fists and knees and feet, I struck at the shadows that were around me...

Suddenly I could see again — not clearly — but the shadows were taking on colours; and my ears came back a little, so that grunts and growls and curses and the impact of blows sounded in them. My straining gaze rested upon a brass cuspidor six inches or so in front of my eyes. I knew then that I was down on the floor again.

As I twisted about to hurl a foot into a soft body above me, something that was like a burn, but wasn't a burn, ran down one leg — a knife. The sting of it brought consciousness back into me with a rush.

I grabbed the brass cuspidor and used it to club a way to my feet — to club a clear space in front of me. Men were hurling themselves upon me. I swung the cuspidor high and flung it over their heads through the frosted glass door into California Street.

Then we fought some more.

But you can't throw a brass cuspidor through a glass door into California Street between Montgomery and Kearny without attracting attention — it's too near the heart of daytime San Francisco. So presently — when I was on the floor again with six or eight hundred pounds of flesh hammering my face into the boards — we were pulled apart, and I was dug out of the bottom of the pile by a squad of policemen.

Big sandy-haired Coffee was one of them, but it took a lot of arguing to convince him that I was the Continental operative who had talked to him a little while before.

“Man! Man!” he said, when I finally convinced him. “Them lads sure — God! — have worked you over! You got a face like a wet geranium!”

I didn't laugh. It wasn't funny.

I looked out of the one eye which was working just now at the five men lined up across the office — Soules, the three inky printers, and the man with the blurred 's,' who had started the slaughter by tapping me on the back of the head.

He was a rather tall man of thirty or so, with a round ruddy face that wore a few bruises now. He had been, apparently, rather well-dressed in expensive black clothing, but he was torn and ragged now. I knew who he was without asking — Hendrik Van

Pelt.

“Well, man, what's the answer?” Coffee was asking me.

By holding one side of my jaw firmly with one hand I found that I could talk without too much pain.

“This is the crowd that ran down Newhouse,” I said, “and it wasn't an accident. I wouldn't mind having a few more of the details myself, but I was jumped before I got around to all of them. Newhouse had a hundred-florin note in his hand when he was run down, and he was walking in the direction of police headquarters — was only half a block away from the Hall of Justice.

“Soules tells me that Newhouse said he was going up to Portsmouth Square to sit in the sun. But Soules didn't seem to know that Newhouse was wearing a black eye — the one you told me you had investigated. If Soules didn't see the shiner, then it's a good bet that Soules didn't see Newhouse's face that day!

“Newhouse was walking from his printing shop toward police headquarters with a piece of foreign paper money in his hand — remember that!

“He had frequent spells of sickness, which, according to friend Soules, always before kept him at home for a week or ten days at a time. This time he was laid up for only two and a half days.

“Soules tells me that the shop is three days behind with its orders, and he says that's the first time in eight years they've ever been behind. He blames Newhouse's death — which only happened yesterday. Apparently, Newhouse's previous sick spells never delayed things — why should this last spell?

“Two printers were fired last week, and two new ones hired the very next day — pretty quick work. The car with which Newhouse was run down was taken from just around the corner, and was deserted within quick walking distance of the shop. It was left facing north, which is pretty good evidence that its occupants went south after they got out. Ordinary car thieves wouldn't have circled back in the direction from which they came.

“Here's my guess: This Van Pelt is a Dutchman, and he had some plates for phoney hundred-florin notes. He hunted around until he found a printer who would go in with him. He found Soules, the foreman of a shop whose proprietor was now and then at home for a week or more at a time with a bad heart. One of the printers under Soules was willing to go in with them. Maybe the other two turned the offer down. Maybe Soules didn't ask them at all. Anyhow, they were discharged, and two friends of Soules were given their places.

“Our friends then got everything ready, and waited for Newhouse's heart to flop again. It did — Monday night. As soon as his wife called up next morning and said he was sick, these birds started running off their counterfeits. That's why they fell behind with their regular work. But this spell of Newhouse's was lighter than usual. He was up and moving around within two days, and yesterday afternoon he came down here for a few minutes.

“He must have walked in while all of our friends were extremely busy in some far corner. He must have spotted some of the phoney money, immediately sized up the situation, grabbed one bill to show the police, and started out for police headquarters — no doubt thinking he had not been seen by our friends here.

“They must have got a glimpse of him as he was leaving, however. Two of them followed him out. They couldn't, afoot, safely knock him over within a block or two of the Hall of Justice. But, turning the corner, they found Chrostwaite's car standing there with idling engine. That solved their getaway problem. They got in the car and went on after Newhouse. I suppose the original plan was to shoot him — but he crossed Clay Street with his eyes fastened upon the phoney money in his hand. That gave them a golden chance. They piled the car into him. It was sure death, they knew his bum heart would finish the job if the actual collision didn't kill him. Then they deserted the car and came back here.

“There are a lot of loose ends to be gathered in — but this pipe-dream I've just told you fits in with all the facts we know — and I'll bet a month's salary I'm not far off anywhere. There ought be a three-day crop of Dutch notes cached somewhere! You people —”

I suppose I'd have gone on talking forever — in the giddy, head-swimming intoxication of utter exhaustion that filled me — if the big sandy-haired patrolman hadn't shut me off by putting a big hand across my mouth.

“Be quiet, man,” he said, lifting me out the chair, and spreading me flat on my back on the desk. “I'll have an ambulance here in a second for you.”

The office was swirling around in front of my one open eye — the yellow ceiling swung down toward me, rose again, disappeared, came back in odd shapes. I turned my head to one side to avoid it, and my glance rested upon the white dial of a spinning clock.

Presently the dial came to rest, and I read it — four o'clock.

I remembered that Chrostwaite had broken up our conference in Vance Richmond's office at three, and I had started to work.

“One full hour!” I tried to tell Coffee before I went to sleep.

The police wound up the job while I was lying on my back in bed. In Van Pelt's office on Bush Street they found a great bale of hundred-florin notes. Van Pelt, they learned, had a considerable reputation in Europe as a high-class counterfeiter. One of the printers came through, stating that Van Pelt and Soules were the two who followed Newhouse out of the shop, and killed him.