

DETECTIVE TALES

December Issue
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The Mouse started through the wallet, paper by paper. . . .

CROOKED PATH TO GLORY

By DONALD G. CORMACK

HIS NAME was William Seevers, but the police and others who knew him called him just plain Mouse. If he'd had any friends they'd probably have called him that too.

Seevers was an ugly little guy. He stood about five feet two or three, and his manner was nervous and jumpy. His small black eyes were set close together, his decayed, broken teeth had a rodent look, and his large ears fanned outward prominently. All in all, Mouse was a perfect name for him.

He lived like a mouse, too. He was used to dwelling in dark, dirty places and he ventured out usually at night. He was apprehensive, easily frightened, and he existed on any loose crumbs he could find. Crumbs that didn't belong to him. The police tolerated him, though, because he was also an informer, a stool pigeon. Men like the Mouse usually are.

He was about as far as you could get from a hero. In all his life, so far, he'd never done anything even slightly heroic. When he dreamed at all—and it was only lately he had

Just to look at him, you wouldn't have thought he amounted to much. Yet, when the chips were down, his life turned out to be as good as anybody's. . . .

started that foolishness—it was of a quiet place where no one bullied him and where fear didn't dominate the present, disaster the morrow. That was Mouse's idea of heaven. That and Rose Kulick.

It was dark and the Mouse was standing on the corner of River and Front Street. A thin, misty rain was falling, causing people to hurry, collars up and heads bent forward into the drifting wet. It was also a Saturday night. To men in the Mouse's profession, that was a perfect set-up—hurrying crowds, poor visibility and pay-day-thickened wallets.

But a struggle was going on inside Mouse Seevers's thin, pigeon-breasted body. He'd promised Rose he wouldn't lift any more wallets—or, as the Mouse put it, wire any more leathers.

Promises to Rose Kulick were important to Mouse Seevers because he loved her—the first girl he'd ever loved—and because it was around her peroxidized head that all his new dreams were built. He realized, too, that this was her final try for happiness; he was the last person in the world she would ever believe in. He couldn't let her down. After years of bitter disappointment, betrayal and cruel trickery she had held out her work-roughened hands one last time toward some crazy, shining dream she had. A place in the country—even an old broken down farm—and a husband. A legal honest-to-God husband.

The Mouse was conscious of his importance in Rose's scheme of things—as important to her as she was to him. He shouldn't break any promises. But, on the other hand, he wanted to take Rose out for a few beers when she was through work later on—and he didn't have any money. He was supposed to have gotten a job that week—a job washing cars, he'd told Rose—but his boasting had been a bit premature. He'd tried, all right, but he had so little to offer. He was small, weak and ignorant. The Mouse was nobody's bargain.

The outcome of his inner struggle was pretty much of a sure thing. In the prize ring of the Mouse's morality, often-defeated honesty usually went down for the count in the first round. This time he whitewashed the one-sided contest by telling himself he'd be hurting Rose more if he were forced to admit he hadn't an honest job yet. It would loosen the foundation of their precarious future before any building had even begun.

Mouse Seevers floated into the passing crowd like a vagrant autumn leaf drifting into a wandering stream. As a professional wire, Mouse was an artist. Before he reached the next corner, he had picked out his sucker, had maneuvered his position nicely, and had arranged a jostling collision that was absurdly innocent. He immediately apologized in his thin, piping voice, seeming frightened and

confused. He looked so wretched and forlorn that the fat victim apologized right back, twice as earnestly. It was almost a pleasure to be cleaned by Mouse Seevers.

Then he was around the corner, away from the crowd, the thick wallet pocketed and tightly clutched in his hand. The Mouse congratulated himself on a perfect job. It was a shame, really, he thought, that such talent as his would shortly go to waste. But now he felt light-hearted and peaceful. There was no longer any struggle going on inside him, and he had an undetermined sum of money. Only one last quick action and the job would be complete.

But right then the bottom dropped out of Mouse's scheme of things. Defeat crushed down on him numbingly.

Detective Sergeant Bray stood just a few feet ahead of him, leaning against the glass window of a coffee pot as he probed his mouth with a toothpick. And there was no doubting but that he'd seen Mouse Seevers. The big, burly man in the Chesterfield overcoat raised one hand, shoved his derby on the back of his head, crooked his little finger at Mouse and wiggled it lazily back and forth.

THE Mouse realized with chilling dismay that he'd committed the cardinal sin of any wire. He'd allowed himself to be picked up with a hot leather still in his possession. Like a man on his way to the scaffold, numb with dread, he walked hesitantly toward Detective Bray.

The wizened little man shuffled to a halt about three feet from Bray and the detective's huge hand shot out, seized the Mouse's pipe-stem arm and jerked him up close. The powerful grip tightened, twisted, and the Mouse thought his arm would snap. His gasp of pain chattered into silence as Bray suddenly started to shake him like a rag, then released him as suddenly. Mouse knew Bray wasn't angry; this was just routine.

"Why, you lousy stoolie," Bray said, and Mouse nodded in sad agreement. "Where the hell have you been? I been looking all over for you, Mouse. I got a job for you—something big! If you never produced before, you'll produce now, see? And I mean *produce!*"

If it had been possible to feel relief in Bray's clutches, Mouse would have felt it then. The big man probably hadn't seen his little job of a moment ago—unless, of course, he was just playing with him. He'd soon know.

The Mouse's pallid face peered up at Bray in the misting dampness, but he said nothing. He had learned never to speak to a cop unless a question was asked. He knew what Bray was going to tell him, though, because Jack-

son of Homicide had grabbed him only that afternoon, over on Water Street, and had punched him around a bit too. When the boys got as tough as this, something big was really going on. The whole department was in an awful sweat.

"My orders come straight from the Commissioner," Bray told him. "He's promised a ten-percent blanket demotion, all precincts, for men out of uniform—unless we suddenly get good. I'm passing the herring right on to you, Mouse. You're a three-time loser on the books already; the next trip is your last. You'll make that trip, Mouse! Twenty-four hours after the Commissioners' deadline expires, you'll make it—unless you do me some good in the meantime.

"Keep those big ears of yours flapping!

thousand workers goes above peacetime-norm, that area gets colored pink. Index-pink's okay. It can be due to speedup, to inexperienced workers, to longer hours. But as the accident-factor goes higher, the index color gets darker. And this city, with an area for fifty miles around, is colored red.

"Know what that means, Mouse? Not just two or three enemy agents at work, but an organized outfit trying to cripple West coast production! With Europe out of the war, we'll be the country's production front—and they're working on it already!"

The Mouse didn't know about accident-factors or peacetime-norms, but he understood what Bray meant. And, even though he would have failed in every qualification the Army asked—physical, moral and mental—he

Learn things—I don't care how! Pick up information the law isn't supposed to get! Drift around! Understand?"

The Mouse's former sense of relief didn't even have time to get started. His new set of shakes were just a continuation of the old. It was the old threat—and it was still as good as the first time. Co-operate or get the works.

"Sure, Mr. Bray. Sure!" His ugly little face was twisted in bewildered helplessness. "Mr. Jackson told me the same thing—only I don't know what to look for! I hear a million things every day. Any one of them could be what you want."

"Look," Bray said. "You read the papers. You know the number of accidents we've been having in the city's defense plants—break-downs, fires, explosions, what-not. The F.B.I. says the percentage is too high for this area. They've been investigating; they've had to detail more men out here; they've appealed directly to the loyal workers for co-operation. All that makes the headlines—and every word of it implies that the Mayor doesn't know his business, that the Police Commissioner is a dope and that the Police Department stinks. It means we've fallen far below other cities in aiding the government in the national emergency."

"I get it," Mouse said. "I catch."

"The G-men have a big map. I've seen it," Bray went on. "When the accident-factor per-

was still fiercely patriotic. The Mouse was proud of being an American. Now, for the first time since Bray had grabbed him, his eyes stopped shifting nervously from the big man's hands to his tie and back again.

"You can depend on me," he said. "I'll listen good!"

Detective Sergeant Bray dropped his tough pose for a moment—something he'd never done in front of a stoolie before. The Mouse, though, was his own product. He'd grabbed the runt after that last rap and had promised him a fourth conviction—with or without honest evidence—unless he fell into line and learned to sing for the police. Seven years ago, that had been.

"I hear about you and Rose," Bray said quietly, noticing how the shrimp jumped and began to shake again. "Me. I'm all for it. The books tell how the two of you are slated to wind up in a year or so. You on a slab in the morgue with your tongue cut out and your lips sewed together. Rose in a—in a worse place. Your one hope is to get out of the city, never come back. That's the only way you can lick the books—and maybe this is your big chance. The government has plenty of reward money out these days, Mouse. You'll be due for a chunk of it if you're in on the kill."

Abruptly he turned his back on the trembling, wide-eyed Mouse and walked away with his usual solid deliberation.

MOUSE SEEVERS lived in the rear basement of a wretched rooming house. His room was furnished with a cot and mattress, a rumpled blanket, a wooden chair and an ancient wardrobe. The single bulb dangling from a cord overhead gave out a reluctant, pale glow, as though ashamed of illuminating such a place. But it was sanctuary to the Mouse; it was home. He was glad to be there.

Immediately he was inside, he locked the door, pulled down the ragged shade and fumbled out the wallet. Its thickness promised all kinds of wealth—but that's as far as it went. The Mouse slumped slowly down on the bed and sat there motionless, his face woe-begone and his eyes glaring at the wallet as though it had insulted him personally. Inside the money compartment there was a single five dollar bill and two ones. Seven lousy bucks! The rest of the wealth-promising fatness was due to wads of personal papers, memorandums, receipts. In money-order stubs alone there was evidence of thousands of dollars paid out in the past few weeks. None of it meant anything to him.

Mouse hurled the wallet across the room with a curse. It was just his luck to pick a rich man's pocket at the moment when that man was short of ready cash. He cursed again.

Not so long ago he would have accepted the seven dollars with a philosophic shrug and been content. But just now he needed money so badly that he had let his hopes soar; he'd imagined a hundred, two hundred dollars. He needed money because Rose had told him she had more than three hundred dollars in the bank and Mouse had intimated, without actually saying it, that he had saved just about as much. That made six hundred dollars, Rose had said, and with nine hundred dollars more they could start their new life.

Fifteen hundred dollars, that was her goal. With it they could buy a little country store, maybe, or a filling station, or some other small business. Even a chicken farm would be heaven.

Thinking of Rose, Mouse's hollow-cheeked, lined face lost some of its ugliness as it softened surprisingly. He remembered seeing Rose for the first time when she'd been a countergirl over at Smitty's, and how she'd knocked his heart for a loop first thing. But she hadn't been able to see Mouse. After a solid week of his fumbling attempts at friendship, when it had finally dawned on her he was actually asking for a date, she'd laughed at him. She went on dates with other guys, though—drinking beer, seeing a show, dancing. The Mouse persisted—and got nowhere. He wondered long and earnestly what the magic combination could be.

Then one night when business was slow and Rose listened to him out of boredom he suddenly said the right thing. It frightened him at the time, the abrupt change that came over her. All he'd said was that he dreamed of getting away from the city, of living in the country where it was quiet, and of having a girl like Rose with him for companionship. Up to there Rose had just showed a vague interest. But when he repeated it, said he dreamed of a girl like Rose for his *wife*, that had made the big difference. From that moment on she could see the Mouse. From then on selling the rest of the idea was a breeze. Mouse often wondered why she'd cried when he first said the word "wife."

Rose and the Mouse had been married for a whole week now, but it was a secret. They weren't living together, though, and didn't intend to until the city was behind them and their new life had begun. That's why money was so important to Mouse SeEVERS.

Suddenly he bounced up from the cot and peered at a battered old alarm clock that stood on the shelf in the wardrobe. It was already after nine; the Mouse had to be going to meet Rose.

The problem of ditching the incriminating wallet was easily taken care of. The Mouse had a cactus plant on the window-sill—the only sort of living thing that would last in that gloomy atmosphere, he'd found—and he lifted the plant out of the pot, replaced it on top of the wallet. Now he was all set.

AS Mouse approached the Idle Hour Bowling Gardens, where Rose worked, he spotted the cops' Black Maria standing unobtrusively on a side street. He'd seen another one, hurrying along the main avenue so he knew a cleanup was under way. The sweat-boxes in the local precincts would be working overtime that night. At the thought of it, Mouse's hands and forehead beaded damply.

The Idle Hour was full of smoke, noise, odors and people, as usual. The alleys, billiard tables and shuffleboard games were all in use, and the small bar was crowded. The Mouse's quick-searching eyes found Rose over by the line of booths, serving some customers. He stood at the head of the short flight of entrance stairs, looking down at her for a moment. Mouse took a deep, proud breath.

It's true that Rose still had a beautiful figure, slim and well formed, but that was about all. She was well into her thirties; her bleached hair showed darkly at the roots; her once-pretty face was hard and mask-like; her wary, knowing eyes had obviously seen just about everything, most of it bad; and her rouged mouth told of the bitterness and pain that had followed her life. But to Mouse

Seevers she was beautiful; maybe he could feel and see more than the casual observer.

Mouse didn't get a chance to go to Rose just then. Louie, a tough little hop-head who worked for The Turk, motioned him over to his booth with a jerk of his head. Mouse answered quickly, his knees feeling weak—and more courageous men than the Mouse felt the same way when The Turk sent one of his men after them.

Louie was alone in the booth and Mouse sat down slowly, cautiously, watching the man. He could tell by his eyes that Louie was high again; he knew he'd have to be careful. For a long moment each of them sat there, elaborately unconcerned, both taut and watchful. The Mouse lit a cigarette with a shaking hand.

"How's everything?" Mouse asked suddenly. "How you doin'?"

"Fine," Mouse said with false enthusiasm. "Just fine!"

Louie batted some smoke from in front of his face impatiently. "Put out that cigarette," he snapped, and watched carefully as Mouse complied. "You work today, Mouse? Any luck?"

Caution gripped the Mouse. He could see Rose watching the two of them from a distance, her face apprehensive, and he wished he could reassure her. Meantime, his expression showed disgust.

"Work, Louie? Me, work, with that flatfoot Bray on my tail every minute?" He snorted. "It wasn't bad enough before so now the whole damn police department goes crazy. They got orders to pick up everyone but the mayor. They—"

Louie waved the small talk aside impatiently, scowling. One white hand began to tap nervously on the table. A nerve in the corner of his mouth went haywire, jiggling his face crazily.

"A friend of The Turk's lost something over on Front Street today," Louie said slowly. "A leather. He figures some wire hooked him by mistake. No hard feelings, you understand; nothing like that. Anyone can make a mistake. But this friend of The Turk's—a good friend—wants it back. Bad. So The Turk sent some of us out looking and asking."

The Mouse just shook his head, his pulses drumming a riot.

"Some wire hooked it," Louie went on doggedly. "He took out the dough—only a few bucks—and ditched the leather. That's okay. This pal of The Turk's wants to know where. Is it in the bay? In an ashbarrel? Is it burned? He'd give some dough to get that answer. He lost it in your territory, Mouse. Know anything?"

The Mouse shook his head again, afraid to speak. Warning bells were clanging in his

mind now. He knew he was face to face with ruthless, cruel extermination. He locked his hands so his trembling fingers wouldn't show.

"Think hard, Mouse," Louie insisted. "You got nothing to be afraid of. Like I say, if you speak up now, you got nothing to fear. If you don't, and we find out later—" Louie took a long, narrow-bladed penknife out of his pocket and began to clean his nails. He waited. "Thinking, Mouse?"

The Mouse was thinking, all right. He was thinking the chances were excellent that the wallet in his room was the one Louie was after. But to admit he had it—when he'd already had time to examine it at his leisure—would be a lousy method of committing suicide. He was afraid to tell Bray he had it, though. Even if the detective did forgive his lapse from grace in acquiring it, the Mouse was certain he'd see precious little of the reward money if the wallet turned out to be as important as it seemed. To get any substantial sum, the Mouse had to contribute some concrete help—in person and before witnesses.

The thought of using the wallet's information himself, alone, startled and frightened him. What a ridiculous idea! How could any sane— The sharp pricking of the knife blade against his wrist made him jump, suddenly conscious of Louie again.

"I think you better come with me, Mouse. I think maybe The Turk wants to talk to you in a more private place!"

Absolute terror came over the Mouse then. He couldn't move, couldn't speak. He could only shake his head slowly, hopelessly.

A HUGE hand suddenly reached into the booth, grabbed Louie by the lapels and dragged him to his feet. It was Detective Sergeant Bray who stood beside them, solid and wide. He lifted Louie up to his tip-toes, almost spitting in the hop-head's face, and then thrust him contemptuously toward a uniformed patrolman, jerking his thumb toward the front door. A moment later he was sitting opposite the Mouse, his eyes narrow and searching.

"Okay, stoolie, open up. Make with a few revelations."

The Mouse, in spite of his fear, was still thinking about the reward money—not because he was brave but because that money was the same to him as life itself.

"Mr. Bray," he asked in his quick, nervous treble, "will you promise a fair share of the reward mon—"

The room was suddenly spinning furiously, filled with red-tailed comets and blazing constellations. A dizzy droning filled the Mouse's ears. When everything settled again, Bray was rubbing one hand against its calloused mate. Pain came to the Mouse only then.

"You bargaining with me, stoolie? You selling something?"

"The Turk," Mouse forced out. "Watch him. He's in it."

"Now you're cooking, Mouse. That's the right kind of stuff—only it's old. We've already got The Turk lined up. Trouble is, he's under somebody's thumb. Scared stiff. Now cook some more."

The Mouse spread his hands helplessly. He ducked once, anticipating a blow that never came.

"That won't do, Mouse! For instance, what was that hop-head grilling you about? He's one of that outfit, so—"

A plainclothesman interrupted then, whispering something in Bray's ear, and a second later the two of them disappeared, going fast. The Mouse was now alone—and he'd heard the whisper: "New emergency at the Pan-Alco plant. Hurry call, pal."

The Mouse must have gone into a fog for several minutes, completely out of the world. When reality slowly faded back in it wasn't so different from his dreaming. Rose Kulick was sitting opposite him, the hard mask gone from her face. Her eyes were bewildered, troubled as she searched his face.

"What is it, Mouse? Are you in a jam? Are they after you for something? What is it, honey?"

Mouse managed a smile, even if a bit crooked. "I was just thinking about a deal that's on. A big deal, Rose. If it goes the way I want, we'll have more money than we ever dreamed of!" The bright, hard fear that jumped to her eyes brought Mouse up short. "I'm working with Bray, dear! The cops are with me on this one. The money I expect is government dough. A big reward."

Rose wasn't satisfied; she knew the Mouse too well. "Why are you so worried, then, honey? You look like—"

"Anybody'd be worried!" he snapped. "There're angles I got to study out. On top of that, I can't take you home tonight. I got to do something for Bray, Rose."

She nodded then, still not satisfied, sensing something of the truth, not believing him completely. "Okay, Mouse, whatever you say. You know best, honey. You can tell me tomorrow."

He left then, kissing her quickly, not trusting himself. At the door he paused for a moment, turned back, wondering if it would be the last time he'd see her. She was standing just as he'd left her, still watching him.

THE Mouse didn't take any chances on Louie being free and out knifing for him. He approached his rooming house from the back way, crept down the alley that ran beside his room. The cactus plant was right on

the window-sill; it was simple to pick up the wallet and fade silently away again.

Mouse didn't pause until he was in an all-night cafeteria, sitting at a table far removed from the rest of the few customers. Then he started through the wallet, paper by paper—and learned nothing. He examined everything that was there, studying each item carefully, but all he saw were strange names, addresses, meaningless notes and memoranda. Without some key, he was lost. Even the name of the man he'd lifted it from seemed innocent: José Vargas.

Finally, in bitter frustration, the Mouse had to admit this couldn't be the wallet Louie had been after. Furthermore, even if it was, how could he tell it was at all related to the sabotage outbreak in the city? There was no link, except Bray's reaction to Mouse's remark made in desperation: The Turk and the sabotage gang were somehow tied up.

The careless dropping of an ordinary business card was what changed everything. On the back, in pencil, was written:

Evanston Motors—Feb. 18—10 AM
Clay Dye and Foundry—Feb. 20—3 PM
National Arms Corp.—Feb. 27—1 AM
Pan-Alco, Inc.—Feb. 28—9 PM

There it was! Three defense-plant disasters that had made headlines—and a fourth that was even now being reported. Mouse had had this wallet in his possession hours before the Pan-Alco disaster had occurred, yet the note on the card called it correctly!

With shaking fingers he turned the card over. The printed side read harmlessly: *WAR WORKERS EMPLOYMENT BUREAU*, José Vargas, Director, 110 South Water Street, City.

The Mouse got up and left the cafeteria quickly.

* * *

Over on South Water Street the Mouse stood back in the full darkness, opposite number 110. He was terrified. He was shaking all over. He wished fervently he'd never had such a crazy idea as this. But he was there, in spite of his fear.

One thing Mouse had done before he left the cafeteria, one sensible thing. He'd called Detective Bray's precinct and left a message for him, telling where he was and asking help immediately. All he had to do was wait for Bray to get the message and realize what it meant. He felt that now he was sufficiently part of any raid to justify sharing in the reward.

South Water Street was an ancient, run-down place near the bayfront. Once a rooming

section for sailors, it was now given over to small businesses and warehouses. Number 110 had formerly been a private home, by its looks, but it had come a long way since. All its windows were boarded up except those on the second floor.

After a period of waiting, the night-sounds had a soothing effect on Mouse: the faint ship-calls from the bay; the distant rumbling noise from the living part of the city; nearer at hand the sudden clamor of a passing truck. Then, before he quite understood his action, Mouse found himself crossing the street, drifting up the alley beside the old house. The thought of money may have done it; a desire to show off before Rose; perhaps curiosity, too. But Mouse knew he was going to break into the War Workers Employment Bureau and take a quick look around.

Getting inside, for Mouse, was easy. He went in through a basement room similar to his own, crept up the ancient stairway to the main floor. Here Mouse found the offices of the agency, and there was nothing suspicious about them. Desks for interviews; a row of typewriters for the stenographers; a long line of steel filing cases; a bare waiting room. But Mouse was glad Bray and his men were coming. Certain that Vargas' business was just a blind, he could have told nothing from the evidence before him.

Mouse was a coward, and he'd never denied it. Once he'd seen the inside of the place, he was suddenly anxious to get out. Mouse realized that Bray might not get his message for hours yet. Meantime. . . .

Abruptly, Mouse had a bad case of the jitters. He wondered why he'd ever broken in the first place.

The jitters were short-lived, though; complete paralysis swept them away as a gun-muzzle came through the darkness to prod Mouse sharply in the back. A disembodied hand gripped his collar from behind, holding his swaying form upright. "Get going, pal," a voice said in his ear. "Make with the feet—straight ahead."

IN A sort of nightmare sequence Mouse saw himself herded out into the rear courtyard, through a gaping hole in a wooden fence that led to a second rear courtyard just like the one he'd left, and finally into the basement of the ramshackle house standing there. Every window of this place was boarded up, as though deserted, and Mouse knew he was in the gang's hideout.

The stocks of canned goods and provisions in the kitchen indicated that enemy agents remained here concealed until time for further usefulness. Beyond, at the end of a long hall where he was held waiting for a few minutes, Mouse could look into the huge living room.

It was a classroom now, with a dozen "students" listening to a practical lecture. The teacher, speaking in a foreign tongue, was indicating certain adjustments, pointing to other bolts on a huge wooden model of a complicated machine. From the motions of his hands, Mouse knew he wasn't teaching how to understand and *run* the machine, but how to understand and *wreck* it.

In the rear of the room were other working models; on the wall hung maps and diagrams. The whole thing fell easily into place, now. Here, in this school of sabotage, men were trained to wreck specific types of machines in a way that would leave them undetected. After that, the employment bureau connected with the school would find them the exact places they were fitted for, along with hundreds of other perfectly innocent and loyal workers who were listed at the agency. It was a well-hidden plan.

Mouse was prodded forward again, this time into a room opposite the classroom. It was apparently an office—and the man behind the desk was the same one Mouse had wired that afternoon on Water Street, the same fat man who had apologized so nicely after Mouse had jostled him. He was ending a phone conversation as the prisoner entered.

"If you're foreman there you ought to be able to fire anyone you damn please," Vargas was saying. "Never mind. We'll work it another way, like before. Simply arrange an 'accident' to remove one man in that section. But remember—one of my men has to be in section five before next Monday noon. That's all."

He slammed down the phone then, turned to Mouse, scowling. Slowly, though, at sight of Mouse, he began to grin. Mouse, his eyes bulging with fright, grinned back.

"So," Vargas said. "The little one. Good. Come, Manuel, we'll dispense with him immediately. A simple detail."

They were at the foot of the stairs when a second assistant came running to Vargas, whispering a message. The fat man stiffened a little, looked briefly at Mouse—and now his smile was grimly tight, utterly without humor. He led the way quickly to a rear room on the second floor.

Vargas didn't pay any attention to the two men waiting there. They jumped to their feet, crushing out cigarettes, but Vargas was interested only in the shuttered window. He opened it a crack, looked cautiously out. Mouse twisted until he also caught a view.

The employment bureau was ablaze with light; men tramped from room to room. Outside, other cops searched the alley with flashlights. It was obvious they wouldn't leave an inch of the premises unsearched, a single file unexamined.

Vargas cursed and swung back to the man who had captured Mouse. "Downstairs," he snapped. "Silence them. No talk, no lights. These police will be gone within an hour. They have no way of connecting the school with the bureau. We're safe—if we're quiet! Fix the little one. . ."

Before Mouse could think, a rough gag was thrust into his mouth and one of Vargas' assistants gun drawn, stood guard by the doorway. Vargas himself was intent on the window while the second man sat at the desk, his gun lying before him.

With a sick realization of utter defeat, both for Rose and himself, Mouse watched the police activity—so close, so efficient, yet so useless. If he only had some way to call them! He saw the reward money slipping slowly through his hands; in a few minutes more Detective Bray would become disgusted and would leave. Mouse didn't care much for himself. It was Rose he was thinking about. Rose and her last chance for happiness slipping away. And a strange, alien anger welled up in the Mouse then—fury at these men who had come to wreck his country's war effort, who watched contemptuously while Bray searched vainly, who stood right now but fifty feet from swift justice. And Rose's happiness.

Mouse Seevers felt like breaking out in tears.

It was the sight of the gun that gave him the crazy idea. Mouse had never shot a gun; he hardly knew one end from the other. But he knew that guns made noise—and of the right kind. Furthermore, he was such a harmless looking little shrimp, so completely terrified, that the others had almost forgotten he was there. Later they'd remember him, kill him off-handedly.

The Mouse's lunge would have done credit to an athlete; it was done with the desperation of a man leaping for his life. Actually, the Mouse was leaping to his death. But he made

it. He had the gun off the desk and in his hand before anyone knew he'd moved. And that was all Mouse asked.

His first roaring shot showered plaster down on Vargas' head. His second try was better. Vargas collapsed to his knees, his fat hands holding his stomach. Then something hit Mouse in the back—something that felt like a molten half-dollar striking flatly—and the terrific blow smashed him onto his face. He twisted quickly with the fall, shot the man behind the desk as neatly as an expert, forced the wild-shooting thug by the door back into the hall. Then, with painful slowness, Mouse worked his pain-wracked numbing body across the room until he could lean his back against the wall. The men from below would be coming now.

THAT was the way Detective Bray found the Mouse—leaning against the wall. His gun lay beside him, empty. Two other slugs were buried in his body by then, but he was still alive. He wiped blood from his mouth as he looked up at the incredulous Bray.

"That reward money," he gasped in quick, pain-lumped phrases, "It goes to my wife now—doesn't it—Bray?" The detective nodded solemnly. The Mouse smiled happily. Then he said: "Get Rose."

Mouse Seevers only just had time to tell Rose goodby and that was all. Every cop in the room had his hat off when the peroxided, hard-faced girl he'd thought was so beautiful finally got to her feet, her make-up running with tears. In that moment, strangely, she really did look beautiful.

"My husband," she said, as though she loved the sound of the word, "my husband was one great guy. The greatest guy any girl ever—" she stopped, unable to speak.

"He was more than a great guy," Detective Bray said with quiet conviction. "He died for his country—and for you, Rose. He was a hero."