

# MIKE SHAYNE

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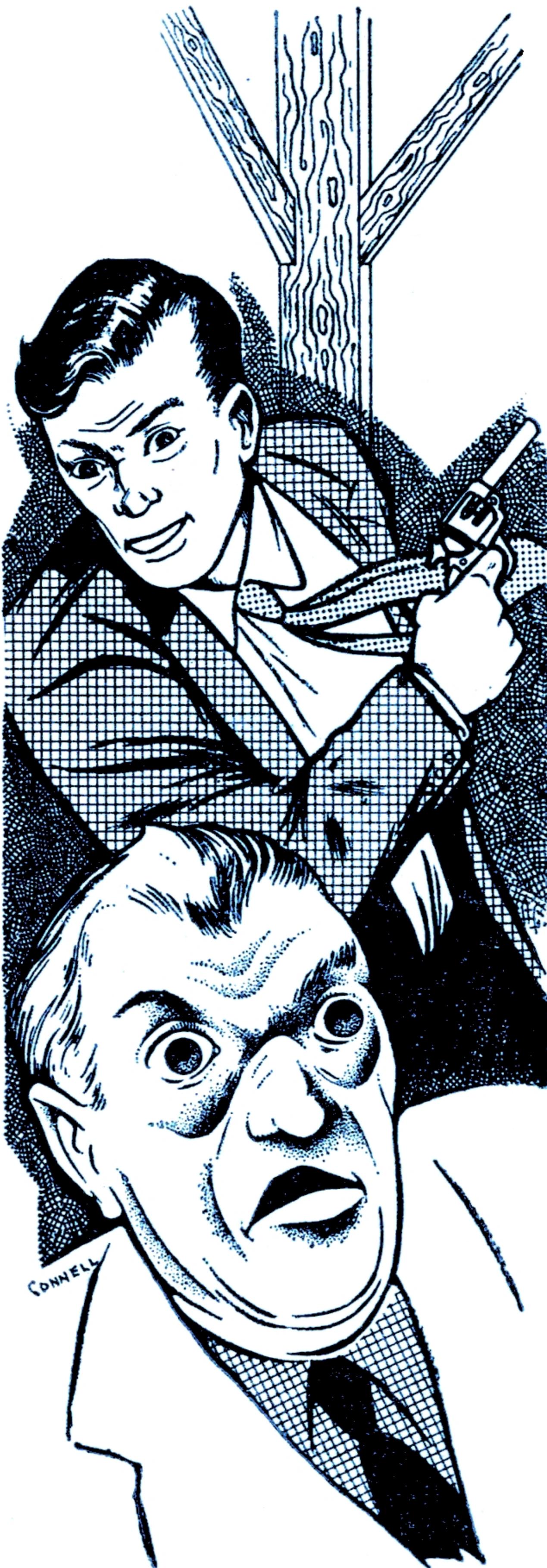
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# Scratch One Mark



*The killer's gambling session frameup seemed perfect. Only...it wasn't.*

by DAN J. MARLOWE

THE BIG BLOND man had already turned the key in the lock of his desk drawer when the door to his office burst open unceremoniously and his unannounced visitor dropped down in the chair across from him. The blond man's light-colored eyes narrowed slightly, but his lips curved in what could have been a smile.

"Yes, Ted?" he said softly. He leaned back in his swivel chair and folded his hands gently in his lap.

Ted Lindsay sat sprawled in the opposite chair, a small, dark, intense-looking man of thirty-odd with small, dark, intense eyes behind rimless glasses. He turned his

head to read aloud in a deliberate tone the reversed black lettering on the door. "Lieutenant Joseph Conway." The thin mouth drew down sardonically at the corners. "How's the youngest police lieutenant in the state today, Joe?"

"Just fine," the big man said easily. He had gone to school with Ted Lindsay, whose casual attitude was no novelty to him. He wondered if Ted had ever realized just how close he had come once or twice to discovering that he had been taking a little too much for granted. "Someone you'd like arrested?"

"I might, at that," Ted Lindsay said as if the idea had just occurred to him. "On the other hand, I might not." He leveled a finger across the desk, the dark eyes mocking. "Has Dave Corbin been asked to step aside yet, so that you can be the youngest police *captain* in the state?"

"Dave'll be around a while, Ted."

"If he is, it'll be in spite of you," the slender man said. He grinned crookedly. "I know you, boy. You're ambitious."

Lieutenant Joseph Conway considered the man across the desk. "I know you, too, Ted—fortunately for you. I know that eight years ago you took over a patchwork, hand-me-down hardware store from your father, and that it's now the largest in the area. I know that you play the tightest

game of draw poker in a hundred square mile radius. Do I really need to know anything more about you?" He smiled. "You haven't said whom you wanted arrested."

Ted Lindsay scowled. "That's what I like about small towns. You and I are friends, which doesn't necessarily mean that we like each other." He straightened abruptly in his chair. "You coming by the game tonight?"

"I'm speaking to a group at the Boys' Club at ten."

The crooked grin returned. "Still politicking, Joe?"

"I wasn't elected to this chair."

"That's right," Ted Lindsay agreed promptly. "A little afraid of the electorate, perhaps? Or possibly it's easier to do a little sub rosa campaigning for the people who can appoint a deserving young man to a suitable office?" He waited for a response, and when none was forthcoming he continued. "Haven't seen you much at the game lately. Turned your back on it?"

"I've been a little busy."

"I wonder." The intense dark eyes explored the big man speculatively. "Could it be that the youngest police lieutenant in the state now feels it a little bit indiscretionary to be a regular in the town's high stakes poker game?" Syrup dripped from every syllable. "I'd gotten into the habit of thinking that that game had been pretty good to you."

"I don't think I'd disagree, Ted."

"I don't mean just financially, understand. I remember when Big Joe Conway was a raggedy-pants kid fresh out of school playing in a game he couldn't afford because some of the better people in town played in it too. Like Doc Morrissey. And Judge Schofield. You going to marry Ann Schofield, Joe? She put the seal of approval yet on your Nordic chromosomes?"

The blond man glanced up at the wall clock, elaborately. "You're going to make me late for dinner."

"At Judge Schofield's?" Ted inquired, and waved a hand negligently. "Don't let me detain you."

"You must have had a reason for coming by the office."

"It'll keep. Never let it be said that ol' Ted diverted a man from his star-guided purpose in life."

"One more time, Ted. Why are you here?"

"I asked you if you were coming by the game tonight."

"You did. There's a reason I should come by?"

"There, now," the slender man said approvingly. "The bright young police official doesn't need to be hit in the head more than four or five times, does he?"

Lindsay stretched lazily in his chair, and then removed a small brown notebook from his shirt pocket. The man behind the desk had seen the notebook before. Like the natural-born figure filbert

that he was, Ted kept book upon the winnings and losings of everyone who sat in on the town's weekly poker game. An estimate of his own winnings for a given period some time back had been so remarkably close to the fact that the man behind the desk had determined never to underestimate Ted Lindsay.

"I thought you might like to come by, Joe, and take a lesson from a man who, in the last—" Ted Lindsay glanced down at the notebook in his hand "—eleven sessions has won seventeen thousand dollars."

"Thousand?—" The big man was halfway out of his chair.

"Thousand. Cheerful winner, too."

"If you're serious, Ted, who in the star-spangled hell is losing that kind of money? What kind of limit are you maniacs playing? Are you all crazy completely? This town can't stand that kind of noise."

"Oh, it's not such a noisy process."

"Was it you, Ted?"

"Sad to relate, it was not, Joey. In the same eleven sessions I was relieved of three hundred eighteen iron men. Previously won, of course."

"Who dropped the bundle, then? No one around here could afford seventeen hundred."

"Don't get shook, Lieutenant. The bank's still safe. You've been a little out of touch. There's a few

new faces in the game since you've been around. Real estate man from Chesterbrook. I've got him down for four. And a wild man from downstate—a dairyman. He's in for seventy-five hundred if he's in for a quarter." Ted Lindsay closed the notebook with a snap. "And then there's Austin Schofield."

"Austin Schofield?" the blond man said sharply. "Judge Schofield's nephew?"

"You know any other Austin Schofields?" the slender man asked with burlesque solemnity.

"Let's have it, Ted."

"Sure. I've got him down for three."

"Three? Three thousand?" The chair squeaked as the big man left it, his voice thickened in its vehemence. "You're crazy. That kid never had three hundred, even, of his own in his damn life."

"Nevertheless." Ted Lindsay waved the notebook. "Chapter and verse. Three thousand."

"Does the Judge know? Who let him in the game anyhow, Ted? A kid like that in with you pirates."

"Now pull up on the reins a minute, Joe," Ted Lindsay said. "Who comes to the game with better qualifications? I tell you the first night he showed Bart and Doc and a couple more of us shook his hand and made him more than welcome. That game's been played practically every Tuesday night

for the last twenty-five years, come drought or blizzard. His father played in the game, and his uncle played in it. Until the Judge dropped out recently it wasn't very often there wasn't a Schofield sitting in."

"Sure, but a Schofield who knew what he was doing! That milksop, pansy kid—! And that kind of money being won and lost; the game's gotten out of hand. I remember when if a man threw a check into a pot everyone there knew just about how much it over-drew him."

Ted Lindsay grinned. "Remember the Wednesday morning scrounging sessions to get those overdrafts covered?"

"I remember that a man could make four twenty-five dollar touches around the square and straighten himself out. That was when it was a sensible game. I'm going to put a stop to this foolishness. I asked you before—does the Judge know?"

"I just told you the Judge dropped out some time back. If no one told you, who do you think told him?"

Lindsay sat with his head cocked to one side as though testing the sound of what he had just heard. "Just what did you mean, you're going to put a stop to this foolishness, Joe?"

"What I said." The big man bit off the words.

"Yes? How?"

"If I have to, by padlocking Bart Chisolm's warehouse."

"You're not getting a little too big for your britches, are you, boy? Bart Chisolm can throw his weight around in this town. And that game in his warehouse is an institution."

"Can the institution stand the echoes from a half-wired-up kid putting three thousand stolen dollars into it?"

"Stolen?"

"Oh, come off it, Ted! You think he dug it out of the ground? You know he's been clerking in the Judge's office this summer. He must have—" A balled fist slammed the desk top with such force a glass paperweight jumped into the air. "Dammit, Ted, why didn't you come to me before?"

"That's not the question I thought you'd ask me, Joey," Ted Lindsay said softly. He slid down in his chair, face inscrutable. "I realize you're a little touchy where the name Schofield is concerned. But I really expected you'd ask me why I came to you now."

The silence built up between them for sixty seconds before the man behind the desk spoke again. "There's a big winner? One big winner?"

"There is a big winner. Seventeen thousand dollars worth. Charlie Ballou."

"That bushelfoot won seventeen thousand?"

Ted frowned. "I'm in the some-

what painful process of revising my previous estimate of ol' bushelfoot Charlie."

"You mean you think he's doing something?"

"No." Ted Lindsay said it slowly, as though he were tasting the sound of the word. "I don't think he's doing anything, because I've been watching him. And I do mean watching. Seemed like kind of a bad joke at first, as poor a card player as Charlie winning so consistently. So help me, if I played poker like Charlie I'd take up praying for a better world. Still, when the money steadily gravitates in the same direction, you kind of put the glass on it. There are a couple of little things.

"I've been paying more attention to his game lately than I have my own, and I think he *knows* something. It's almost uncanny the way he pours the coal on when he's top hand. Last week I kept track: all night long he never called once on a hand he won. The losers called him every time. That's confidence. Or something."

"He's back-reading them?"

"If he is. I'd like to know how. I've taken home at least two dozen decks of cards out of that game, and I've tested them with calipers, ultra-violet light, acid, and transparencies. If they're marked, it's quite a job."

"Seventeen thousand would buy quite a job."

"They're not marked, Joe."

"So how is he doing it, Ted?"

"When I find out, I'll be glad to let you know."

"But you're sure he's doing it?"

Ted Lindsay's hesitation was fractional. "He's got to be."

"It may be a little late, but I'll be by tonight."

Aroused curiosity was in the slender man's voice. "Don't tell me ol' Sherlock discovered the method that quick?"

"No. I'll play it by ear. See you tonight."

Ted Lindsay struggled a moment against the abrupt dismissal, then rose reluctantly to his feet. He started to say something, changed his mind, nodded, and turned to the door.

The man behind the desk looked after his departed figure for a moment, glanced up at the clock, and stood up purposefully. His glance rested for an instant on the reversed black lettering on the door upon which Ted Lindsay had commented so jibingly: *Lieutenant Joseph Conway*. A long, long way removed from Big Joe Conway. A long, hard way removed.

Lieutenant Joseph Conway ran lightly down the back steps of the police station, and slid under the wheel of his car in the parking lot. He drove rapidly out Main Street to Maple, where he turned right and parked four doors beyond the rear entrance of the Ellis Hotel.

There were no elevators at the rear of the Ellis, so that entrance was rarely used. Lieutenant Conway walked up four flights of steps without passing anyone, and knocked on the door of 417.

"Who is it?" The voice was muffled through the door.

"Conway." He looked hard at the wiry, dark-skinned man who opened the door. "What are you doing here, Max? You know you and Charlie can't risk being seen together."

"Nobody's seen us together," Charlie Ballou said from the bed where he was stretched out in stocking feet. "I just got tired of sitting here popping my bubble-gum and invited Max up for a drink. What's yours?"

"Some other time."

"Business?" Charlie Ballou asked alertly. He removed his fat hands from behind his head and sat up on the edge of the bed—a short, pudgy individual with a round, cheerful face and thinning hair. He stretched mightily, smothering a yawn, and glanced at Max Hawkins hovered over the complicated game of solitaire spread out on the coffee table while the delicate looking hands idly riffled an extra deck of cards.

"Always glad to cooperate with the Law, Lieutenant," Charlie Ballou said lightly, slipping his feet into unlaced shoes as he shuffled to the bureau and ran a comb through his tousled hair. In the

glass his glance probed thoughtfully at his visitor, but his face when he turned was as bland as a bowl of jello. "Trouble? A beef on the game?"

"You might call it that. Ted Lindsay's a little itchy. He's watching you. He thinks you're back-reading them."

"Just me he's watching? Not Max?"

"Not Max."

Charlie Ballou tugged gently at a plump earlobe. "Anything specific?"

"In particular he's noticed the way you ride hell out of your winning hands. He's got an adding machine for a mind; don't underestimate him."

"Just so he doesn't take to noticing who's dealing eighty percent of those winning hands—"

Charlie Ballou looked over at Max at the coffee table. "Nothing fatal, I'd say. I've been careless; pushing a little hard. We'll throw Lindsay a few bones for a couple of weeks, Max. Nothing's bothering him that a couple of winning nights won't make him forget all about."

Max Hawkins nodded, the dark face serious, the long, prehensile fingers flicking a rainbow of cards from hand to hand.

Charlie Ballou turned back to his visitor. "That's the kind of information that makes your weekly envelope a good investment, young fella."

"There's a little bit more, Charlie."

The stout man's eyes narrowed. "Like what?"

"Like Austin Schofield."

The fat lips pursed comically. "Mama's boy?"

"The same. I should have been paying closer attention to the game, Charlie. Austin's off-limits."

"Now just how do you figure that, Lieutenant?" Charlie Ballou sounded genuinely curious.

"I'll give it to you quick. I'll be living in this town for the rest of my life, and I've got plans for it. Austin Schofield is Judge Schofield's nephew, and I happen to be marrying Judge Schofield's daughter. The Judge has done a lot for me, and my plans include his doing a lot more. That answer you?"

"Partly," the round-faced man replied easily. "So you're building your fences around this pasture. Well, I still don't see how it's supposed to affect our arrangement."

"Don't go stupid on me, Charlie. I just told you. The kid is off-limits. You've hooked him for five grand."

"That sounds a little steep." Charlie looked over at the listening Max, who shrugged noncommittally. "So I wouldn't argue over a few dollars, if you say it's five. But so what?"

"It's stolen money."

"I couldn't care less, Lieutenant. I have no trouble at all in spending it."

"I'll take it, Charlie. Right now."

"You'll take it." The tone was expressionless. "Just like that, you'll take it."

"Not like that. Like this." Charlie Ballou retreated an instinctive half-step at the swift appearance of the dark-muzzled .38 from the shoulder holster beneath the big man's jacket. "If necessary."

The revolver hovered negligently equidistant between Charlie and Max. "I know about the derringer in your sleeve holster, Max," Conway said. "Don't get careless."

The stout man strove to sound amused. "You can't stand that kind of noise, boy. Any more than we can. Relax. You're among friends. What makes you so hairy?"

"I played that record for you. Now get me five thousand dollars."

"So you can play big shot? I'm afraid not." He said it mildly. "Your position's a little weak, Lieutenant. You brought us into this game and turned us loose in return for a hundred fifty bucks in a plain white envelope every Wednesday morning. I bought the deal with no fences around anyone. It goes as it lays."

"Circumstances alter cases, Charlie."

"Not with me they don't."

Conway took two quick steps forward, reversing the gun in his hand as he did so. Charlie Ballou flinched, but not quickly enough. The gun butt sank three quarters

of an inch deep in the muscle of his right forearm, and the stout man yelped and fell over on the bed, white-faced. He stared up in panic at the man who bent over him, then half-straightened to keep an eye on the motionless Max.

Conway's voice was vibrant. "You seem to be a little slow today, Charlie; I told you this was important to me. Let me tell you just how important, and I'm only going to tell you once. You make your living with that harmlessly foolish middleaged-child's face of yours. In sixty seconds I'm going to work you over with this gun butt until you haven't a face left. I'll break your jaw in enough places so that it'll be six weeks before you talk to anyone about it. Unless you get me five thousand dollars, and I mean right now."

"Bureau . . . drawer!" Charlie Ballou managed to get out, and watched Conway sidle to the bureau, placing his feet as carefully as a ballet dancer.

He removed a bulging brown envelope from the top drawer, and tossed it on the coffee table in front of Max, disrupting the solitaire game. "Count. Fast."

The slim fingers rippled through the sheaf of bills, and silently pushed a third of the stack across the table. Charlie Ballou was sitting up on the bed, holding onto his arm, his face pasty as he watched the big man stuff the bulky package in his inside jacket

pocket. The stout man ran the tip of his tongue over livid lips; his voice was hoarse. "You play rough, kid."

"I don't play."

Ballou tried to smile. "You sold me. Our deal still go on the game?"

"Why not? I'll see that young Schofield's not there to tempt you."

"Business is business, huh?" The smile this time was more of a success, but Charlie winced when he tried to move his arm.

"There is one other thing," Conway said thoughtfully. He approached the coffee table. "Don't let Charlie talk you into anything foolish, Max. Because if he should, and I get one crack at you, you'll never forget it. Is that perfectly clear?"

He looked down at the sallow lace and the slim, long-fingered hands. "I'll put both your hands together, and I'll empty every chamber in this gun right through both of them. After that you can try dealing cards the rest of your life with a pair of hooked claws."

Charlie Ballou had a touch of color back in his face. Now he tried to put a little jauntiness into his tone. "I still don't see why you're pawing the ground. A mark is a mark. Right?"

"Wrong. You're not *that* stupid, Charlie. You knew who he was, and you knew my connections. You just didn't give a damn. I'd advise you to think it over the

next time you feel like gambling with my prospects."

He looked back from the door; neither Charlie nor Max had changed position. On the stairs he separated the wad of bills into two sections, and restored the slightly larger one to the inside breast pocket. His mind was busy as he ran down the balance of the stairs. Eighteen months ago it had been a good idea to import those two upstairs into the game, but eighteen months ago he hadn't known he could marry Ann Schofield. Now they represented a hazard, at the very least a potential blackmail threat.

Lieutenant Conway settled his big body behind the wheel of his car, rested his hands lightly on the steering wheel, and considered the possibilities. It didn't take him long to make up his mind. From his years of poker playing a maxim subconsciously filtered into the forefront of his thoughts: when you make a move, make it a strong one. Charlie and Max called for a strong move.

He started the car and drove over to Chisolm's Hay and Grain Company. The front was dark, but he rapped on the glass panel in the door with his ring until old Bart's bald head appeared behind the glass.

"Afraid you was a customer, Joe," the old man told him as he stood aside to let him in. "I don't aim to keep this place open day

an' night, too." He led the way to the rear of the dusty smelling store, a wide-set, slow-moving man.

Lieutenant Conway sat down in the chair Bart Chisolm pulled out for him and looked around the little office littered with cracked dishes of seed samples and half empty grain bags. His host seated himself ponderously at the old-fashioned rolltop desk, settled a pair of battered spectacles on his highbridged nose, and swivelled in his chair to look over the top of them.

"Social visit, Joe?" Chisolm asked.

"Not exactly. I hear the game's gone a little frantic."

The old man smiled. "Shouldn't wonder but what you're right. Boys will be boys. Been six, eight weeks since I've sat in myself; got a little too rich for my tired old blood. I've had it in mind to drop around and talk it over with Dave, but you know how it is. You keep puttin' it off—"

"Talk it over with Dave Corbin? Why?"

Bart Chisolm smiled his slow, easy smile. "You young fellas tend to think nothin's ever happened in this world if it hasn't happened to you personal. Now I mind the time fourteen, fifteen years ago that the reg'lars in the game was crowded out by a passel of high-rollers drifted in from all around this end of the state. I talked it over

with Dave Corbin that time. He raided the game."

"*Raided* it!"

Bart's eyes twinkled behind the spectacles. "Before your time, I guess. Your poker playin' time, anyway. Just seemed to happen, somehow, that the night Dave broke in an' collared 'em all upstairs warn't no one in the game but highrollers. All the locals was to home beatin' their wives, I reckon. Dave took 'em all in, charged 'em with bein' present, fined 'em ten dollars apiece, and turned 'em loose. Kind of broke up the game, it did. Couple of months later a few of us regulars started it up again."

Lieutenant Joseph Conway sat in the dingy office with a hundred watt bulb coming on in his mind. *Thank you, Bart*, he thought. *That makes it so simple. So beautifully simple.* He cleared his throat. "I have a feeling you're going to be raided tonight, Bart."

The old man nodded solemnly. "Clear the air a mite, I shouldn't wonder. I'll make a few phone calls. Don't believe there's anyone I'll talk to that'll need to get dusted off by the mule if they know his heels are cocked."

He frowned. "'Cept Ted Lindsay, maybe. He's set in his ways. Susie Goddard, used to teach you boys in high school, always said Ted tended to scatter a bit in his thinking, but then of course Susie never saw him at a card table.

Kind of a needler, too. Really likes to lift up in the saddle to put a little weight on the spurs when he can see 'em diggin' in. But a real good poker player, that boy. Almost as good as you, Joe."

"Thanks, Bart. Don't call Ted. Let him come. He'll make it look better, and I'll see to it that he gets away in the scuffle." *I should have a local witness present when I kill Charlie and Max*, Lieutenant Conway thought; *Ted would do nicely*.

He drove home in the twilight's heat, showered, and changed. The shoulder holster's bulge under the white linen suit was scarcely noticeable in the mirror, and he hurried out to his car again. He was late.

Judge Schofield was sitting on the wide veranda when Conway drove up, his frail figure dwarfed by the big chair. Conway never headed his car into the spacious grounds at the rim of the graveled driveway without thinking that one day all this would be Ann's, and that what was Ann's would very soon be his. A very human feeling, he felt.

The judge raised the glass in his hand as the big man lithely ascended the steps. Under the mane of white hair the seamed, parchmented face had a yellowed look. "Evening, Joe. Join me?"

"Thanks. If you have a moment after dinner, sir—?"

"Surely. Don't let me forget."

Dinner, as always, Conway

thought, was a testimonial to the judge's taste no less than to his pocketbook. Ann sat directly opposite him, complaisantly agreeable in her absent-minded way. Not for the first time he wondered what really went on within that pale, cool looking envelope.

He had a feeling at times that she might qualify as a truly passionless woman. Not that it mattered. A few miles away he had a quiet little arrangement that was anything but passionless, and Ann or no Ann, he saw no necessity for disturbing it. Before or after marriage, for that matter.

In the library afterward he accepted one of the Judge's slim panatellas, and when the Judge had stiff-jointedly lowered himself into his wing chair handed him three thousand dollars of Charlie's money, and a quick rundown.

The old man listened impassively, but the lined features were drawn and tired long before the finish. His voice was a rasp, a faint echo of the man he had been. "I appreciate this, Joe. Evidently it's not only the cuckolded husband who's the last to hear things. I had no idea . . . the boy has the combination to the office safe, of course—" He tapped the bills thoughtfully on the arm of his chair. "How the devil did you manage to recover this?"

"Let's say I knew which way to lean, sir."

"Evidently," the Judge said

drily. "It's not the first time you've impressed me with the force and vigor with which you attack a problem."

The tired eyes stared unseeingly at the panelled bookcases a moment before refocusing. "I especially appreciate your giving me the opportunity to handle this myself, Joe. Austin is a little . . . unstable. I feel responsible for him. My brother—" He exhaled a cloud of light blue smoke impatiently. "Lame ducks. The world is full of lame ducks. I'll have a talk with you presently about Austin. Not tonight."

"We'll housebreak him, Judge."

The lined face was unsmiling. "We'll do exactly that. You're a strong shoulder, Joe. I seem to need one lately."

"I'm speaking downtown tonight, sir, so if you'll excuse me—"

The Judge nodded, and Conway left the library with the aging man seated in his huge chair and staring out across the big, high-ceilinged room. He made his good-night to Ann at the coffee table on the veranda; unquestioningly she held up her face to be kissed. Cool. Cool and untouched. Unemotional? He couldn't decide. Some day he would make an impression upon this girl stranger to whom he was engaged, and she would stop this business of looking right through him . . .

On the way downtown he stopped at Jim Browning's, and

walked around to the back of the house. Jim himself answered the door, his lean features questioning. "Have to roust you out a little later tonight, Jim."

He nodded, unperturbed. "Someone cookin' a little mash? Will I need boots?"

"No boots. It's in town. We're raiding the game."

His head went back as if he'd been hit. "The game? Hell, Joe—"

"Dave will call you, Jim. This is a special." Jim Browning was Dave Corbin's man. Conway mused as he walked back out to his car. He needed Dave's man to testify to what happened to Charlie and Max. When it happened.

He drove to Dave Corbin's, and found him and his wife seated on their front porch in the late dusk that was nearly darkness. Doris Corbin knowingly excused herself after a moment so that they could talk.

The weatherbeaten police captain listened carefully, a hand absently rubbing his long, bristled jawline, lank grey hair standing up all over his head. He nodded finally. "Shame, in a way. Still, 'pears like it's the thing to do. Little coolin' off period will be no bad thing all around. Thing seems to go in cycles. You say Bart's taking care of everything?"

"Yes. I thought I'd take Jim along with me. I just came from

there. He's a little nervous; I told him you'd call him."

Dave Corbin smiled. "Jim's a good man. I'll call him. You need me for anything?"

"I'll probably need you to play magistrate later."

"I'll hunt up my gavel, and blow the dust off it."

All cleared with Captain Corbin, he thought on the way down to the Boys' Club. Keep the old man posted, so that when the push comes he'll never suspect the direction. Or suspect it too late. Dave Corbin was more nearly ready to retire than he knew.

Lieutenant Conway made his speech at ten thirty, and was held up afterward only long enough to have a drink with First Selectman Mike Winn in the locker room. He drove back to Jim Browning's, and pulled into the driveway. The kitchen light went out at the sound of the tires on the gravel, and Jim crossed the damp grass from his back door and climbed into the car.

"Dave explain it to you?" Conway asked.

"Yeah." It was an embarrassed mumble. "I was afraid you were playin' a little politics, or—"

"Ted Lindsay's in the game, for bait," Conway said, cutting him short. "I'll send him down first. You see to it that he gets away from you. We'll take in the rest."

Conway could see it all very clearly. They would walk down

one at a time until only two were left. Charlie and Max. Charlie and Max would be carried down. Max's sleeve derringer was all the excuse needed, and there would be no one to deny the raiding officer's version of what had happened.

He parked the car in the shadows at the rear of the big warehouse, and found that he was in a hurry to get it accomplished. "This won't take long, Jim."

Jim Browning nodded, slid out, and took up his station beside the warehouse door. Conway took out his key—every regular in the game had his own key to the loft entrance of Bart Chisholm's warehouse—and opened the heavy outer door. On the stairs in the dim light of the naked bulb he removed his jacket and laid it over a projecting beam. He wanted nothing like his pistol snagging on a lapel when he went for it. On second thought he drew it and carried it loosely in his hand as he ascended the stairs.

He could hear the low murmur of voices behind the upstairs door, and knowing that it was never locked, he kicked it open with a bang and walked in on them, fast. "All right, everybody—hold it!"

For an instant heads, arms, and bodies froze grotesquely around the green baize of the table top. He quickly focused on Max at the far end of the table; Max was

the one with the derringer, and the animal instinct that might tip him off as to the reason for the raid.

Conway moved a long stride closer to the table, never taking his eyes from the motionless Max. He could hear Ted Lindsay's unbelieving "What the hell!—" and above it, a sharp, staccato voice that barked "Stickup!"

His ears filled suddenly with the room-contained explosion of a pistol shot, and a jarring slam in the chest that came from nowhere staggered him backward. His forward recoil dropped him to his knees. For a stupefied instant he thought that he pulled his own trigger by mistake, and that his gun had somehow burst.

He struggled to get up; in the wavering light he could see a red-faced man at the card table with a smoking pistol still extended. A couple of seconds and a whole eternity too late he realized it was Ted Lindsay's wild dairyman from downstate, and that Max's derringer had not been the only gun in the game.

He couldn't get off his knees. His eyes were fogging over; he shook his head, trying to clear them. There was something he *had* to see. From a long way off he could hear Ted Lindsay's voice, panic stricken: "You fool—he's a

cop! Didn't you tumble to that?"

"Cop? Good God! I thought it was a heist!"

By an effort that strained his blurring vision the man on the floor separated Charlie Ballou's face from the circle of pale faces staring down at him. The round, childish features wore a sort of half-leer that could have been a triumphant grin; as though absent-mindedly he rubbed the arm which had been pistol-whipped, and the man on his knees knew that Charlie Ballou was answering his question for him: Charlie was the man who had yelled "Stickup!"

Desperately Conway tried to raise his arm. With all his might he willed his arm to raise and the revolver to level, but it was terribly heavy. The room spun dizzily, and his head dropped.

With disinterest he noticed the bright red bubbles on his clean white shirtfront. He was so tired . . . so awfully tired. And it was getting dark . . . dark.

The blond head flew up and back as final realization dawned. Galvanically the heavy body lurched upward in a final convulsive lunge, and then fell onto its back with a crash that shook the room, and the staring eyes reflected glassily the light they could no longer see.