



A flame split the black night, a gun cracked and a bullet whistled over Asher's head

MERRY CHRISTMAS, COPPER!

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

It was Christmas Eve and all was cheer and gayety, but in a dark alley along Patrolman Asher's beat lurked grim murder!

AS he had done every Christmas Eve for several years, Patrolman Ben Asher stopped on the corner where the Salvation Army man in a Santa Claus costume rang his bell as he stood beside the contribution pot on its tripod. Asher dropped a coin into the pot.

"Merry Christmas!" he said.

"Merry Christmas to you, Officer!" the Salvation Army man responded.

Patrolman Ben Asher walked on. Christmas spirit seemed to be everywhere. The little shops in this side street in a poorer section of the city were thronged with late shoppers. A spit of snow was in the air, but the cold wind had died down. It would be a pleasant Christmas Eve, Asher thought.

Generally, the Christmastide gave him a feeling of lonesomeness and made him

gloomy. He was forty-eight now, and had been a police officer since the age of twenty-two. The death of his childless wife ten years before had stricken him and killed his ambition.

He lived alone in a couple of comfortable rooms. He was a faithful member of the force, content to do his daily duties, not seeking advancement. He was quiet, capable, and the precinct captain wished he had more like him.

For eight years, he had had the night beat in this section. He knew almost everybody, and they knew him. He knew boys and girls starting on the wayward path and had checked many of them in time. He knew the industrious men of families, the small business men, the no-goods who hung around the pool halls and were potential criminals. And he knew the rascals, of whom there were several.

And they all knew Patrolman Ben Asher. They called him "copper," some in derision and some without affront. Little children ran to him when they smashed a finger, and mothers asked him to look up kids who should be home. Those on the ragged edge of the Law looked at him askance, knowing he was a man who did his duty at all times.

As he strolled along the street toward the report box two squares down, Asher acknowledged salutations and exchanged "Merry Christmas!" with scores. The feeling of lonesomeness began leaving him. He hoped it would be a quiet night.

THE only trouble Asher expected would be in Tony Parson's place. Tony, a middle-aged man with a squint in one eye, was an unsavory character who ran a cafe on a corner. Shady characters were made welcome in Tony's place, which had half a dozen exits.

Tony was after every dollar he could get. He tolerated racketeers, policy agents;

racetrack touts, and had a bad habit of forgetting the legal closing hour. Often, men were found in the alley behind Tony's place, stretched unconscious, their pockets inside out, and the bitter scent of chloral hydrate on their breath.

Asher crossed a street and began passing along a row of dingy buildings where cheap shops were on the ground floor and cheap living quarters above and in the basements. The happy passing crowd jostled him, but he did not protest.

"Officer Asher!" a woman called.

He raised his head and saw Mrs. Fergus standing at the bottom of a flight of steps beckoning him. Beside her was a young girl.

Asher waved at them and started making his way through the crowd to get to them. He had known Mrs. Fergus for many years. Fifteen years before, his testimony had sent her husband to prison for five years, and he knew the struggle she had made to rear a baby boy, who had turned out to be a young scamp. She leased part of a floor in this building, renting rooms to transient lodgers.

"I was waitin' for you to pass, Officer Asher," Mrs. Fergus told him when he finally reached her side. "'Tis a Christmas gift I have for you." She extended a small package tied with a bit of soiled ribbon. "'Tisn't much, but the right spirit is behind it."

"I'm sure of that, Mrs. Fergus," Asher replied. "I'll put it in my locker with the others, and admire it when I get off post."

"'Tis a lot of Christmas gifts you get, I'm thinkin', a popular officer like you."

"I'm none too popular with some," Asher said, smiling as he thought of Tony Parsons and his friends.

"'Tis about my boy Eddie I'd say a word, He's hangin' around Parsons' place again, I'm sure. And Mary here—you know Mary Timmons, of course—she's

worrying about him, too. Eddie is only nineteen, and I'm afraid he's a lot like his father, my Jim, rest his soul! He's wild and wayward. I'm hopin' and prayin' they call him for the Army soon, for 'twill make a proper man of him."

"I'm sure it will," Asher agreed.

"Him and Mary here are in love. I'm hopin' that may be the salvation of him, too. They're young yet, but by the time he comes back from the Army they'll be old enough to marry and settle down."

"I'll keep an eye on him, Mrs. Fergus," Asher said.

He touched his cap and went on down the street.

Beside Parsons' cafe was a bootblack stand and tobacco store, just a hole in the wall, where Asher had a private locker. He kept his rain clothes there in changeable weather, and put his lunch bucket there each evening, for he liked to fix his own lunch at home and eat it at a little restaurant where he bought coffee.

Each year on Christmas Eve, as he received presents from people on his beat, Asher put them in the locker. The place was closed at night, but he had a key to the door and one for the locker inside. He stopped there now, unlocked the door and the locker and tucked Mrs. Fergus' present in, with the others. He had already gathered quite a few.

When he left, he locked the door behind him and sauntered toward the corner.

"Hello, Copper!" somebody said.

He saw Eddie Fergus in the shadows.

"Hello, Eddie," Asher greeted. "I was talkin' to your mother and Miss Mary Timmons a few minutes ago. It's a fine girl I you've got yourself."

"Yeah, I know," Eddie said.

"Your mother was sayin' you might be called for the Army any day."

"That's right. My number'll be coming

up, but I don't care. I want to get a crack at them Japs. How I hate 'em when I think of Pearl Harbor! Why, why—I've hated 'em even more than I've hated coppers!"

"So you hate coppers, Eddie?"

"My dad did time, didn't he? Oh, I know he had it comin', accordin' to the laws. They caught him and others crackin' a crib. They put him away, and my mother almost starved and had me to raise. A devil of a life for her! You were one of the coppers, Asher! Your testimony pinned the thing on him! And when he got out, he was sick, and soon died."

"I know all that, Eddie," Asher said softly. "That's just a slice of life."

"And everybody thought I'd be like him 'cause I was a con's son. Every crook in town was ready to take me under his wing."

"You don't have to throw in with crooks because your father made a mistake," Asher told him. "Be smart, Eddie. You can't beat the Law and the cops."

EDDIE nodded, thoughtfully.

"How I've hated you for years!" he said. "Every time I saw you, I said to myself, 'There's the copper who put my old man in prison!' But I learned somethin' today. Mom told me."

"Your mother told you what?"

"How you helped her after you sent my Dad to the pen. How you often slipped her a couple of bucks out of your pay when she was hungry. How you helped her get the lease, and sent her roomers, and saw that they were the right kind and behaved in her place. It made me think different."

"I felt sorry for her, Eddie, and you were only a baby. Your mother and you shouldn't suffer for what your father had done, I thought."

"So you needn't worry about me,

Copper,” Eddie said. “I’m goin’ straight. I was bein’ educated, all right, by experts. I can pick locks, and know a lot of crooked tricks.”

“I’m glad you’re going straight, Eddie.”

“I’m goin’ in the Army and get in this scrap. Then I’m comin’ home, if I ain’t hurt, and marry Mary Timmons and get me a job and take care of her and Mom. I’m startin’ decent tonight, Copper, on Christmas Eve. And I’m startin’ by giving you a little tip. I’m goin’ to play stool pigeon to show you I mean what I’m sayin’.

“What’s all this, Eddie?”

“Jake Harbin and Louie Monds and their gang are in the neighborhood. They’ve got their eyes on the second-floor loft at number two-ten on the street below. Bales of prewar silk are stored there, Copper. Heavy stuff, worth plenty, the kind of stuff the Jake Harbin gang always goes after. Nothin’ cheap about them.”

“I know,” Asher said.

“Christmas Eve, say about an hour from now, when everybody’s hustlin’ around and got their minds on tomorrow and coppers are careless—it’d be a good time for ‘em, huh? That’s just a tip, Copper, for what you did for my Mom and me when I was a little kid. And I’m going straight.”

“Good boy, Eddie! I’ll help you all the way. Thanks for the tip.”

“They’ll have a truck in the dark alley behind the loft buildin’. They’ll probably fix the watchman somehow. I feel like a heel tellin’ you this, ‘cause I picked it up in Tony’s.”

“It’s a fine way to start on the right path, Eddie, and that doesn’t make you a heel. Jake Harbin, Louie Monds and their gang—they’ve killed men, Eddie, though we’ve never pinned it on ‘em. Defenseless men, Eddie—like old night watchmen.”

“Keep your eyes open, Copper. Phone the tip in and keep out of it yourself and pound your beat.”

Before Asher could reply to that, Eddie Fergus had slipped into the passing crowd and was gone.

Thoughtfully, Asher walked on toward the corner and the front entrance of Tony Parsons’ cafe. He didn’t know exactly how to take Eddie, though the boy had seemed sincere enough. In that neighborhood, a policeman was always wary of traps.

“Hello, Copper.”

This time, it was Tony Parsons who stopped Asher, and that was almost enough of a surprise to be a shock. Tony generally passed him voicelessly with a dark scowl.

“What’s on your mind?” Asher asked.

“Copper, you’ve caused me a lot of trouble,” Tony said. “I’ll admit, though, that you’ve always been fair. Never jumped me ‘less I had the jump comin’.”

“Thanks for that much,” Asher said. “I never bother any man unless he’s breakin’ the law.”

“I’ve been pinched so many times that the judge don’t think court’s open ‘less I’m waitin’ to make a plea. But this is Christmas time, Copper. Things always seem different Christmas. I got to thinkin’ about you today when I was buyin’ presents for some of the boys. It’d be a decent thing, I thought, to buy one for you. After all, I tells myself, a man’s got to make his livin’, even if it’s as a cop. That’s his job, same as runnin’ a cafe is mine. Here, Copper, and Merry Christmas!”

Tony Parsons offered a package, and Asher took it.

“Thanks, Tony, if you really mean it,” Asher said. “But understand, takin’ a present from you doesn’t put me under obligations.”

“Sure not, Copper! Just a present from

a friend at Christmas time. Tuck it in your locker with the rest. It's just somethin' you can use, and if the size ain't right, let me know and I'll have it changed."

Tony grinned, waved his hand and hurried into his cafe.

Asher felt of the small package. He knew it was a box, and it seemed to be a box of socks or neckties. On it was a card which read: To Patrolman Asher from Tony Parsons, Merry Christmas.

ASHER turned back to unlock the door of the bootblack stand and put the package in his locker. When he emerged and locked the door again, he was wondering about the events of the past few minutes.

Eddie Fergus had promised to make a man of himself, and Tony Parsons was giving Christmas presents to a policeman. That made the world look upside down.

Asher considered seriously the tip Eddie Fergus had given him. It might be an honest tip, or it might be a hoax, designed to get Asher into a trap. He had always felt that Eddie hated him for sending his father to prison.

He didn't want to make a fool of himself by telephoning the tip to Headquarters and having the robbery detail rush out on Christmas Eve and find it a hoax. They'd scorch him for a thing like that. Nor did he want to make a fool of himself by ignoring the tip and then finding in the morning that the Jake Harbin gang had lifted a truckload of expensive silks.

He decided he would saunter around the neighborhood and see if he could learn anything. He walked past Tony's cafe and glanced through the open door as somebody held it wide to make an exit. The place was crowded. Men were three deep along the bar and the booths were

filled with men and women drinking and eating.

He saw Tony telephoning and the waiters hurrying around, and the bartenders and cashier busy. Asher strolled on to the next corner, bumping the Christmas Eve throng and smiling at the happy holiday faces.

The loft building was on the parallel street below, but in that same block. The side street was almost in complete darkness, with only a couple of street lights burning. Asher unbuttoned the flap of his uniform overcoat, got his service revolver out of its scabbard, and held it in his right hand as he thrust the hand into his overcoat pocket.

He knew every foot of this district. He knew the uneven places in the walks, the dark spots between buildings where an assassin or stickup man could lurk. He knew the exits from every building and the conditions of the buildings as clearly as any member of the fire department.

He walked slowly, softly in the thin film of snow on the walks, keeping the fine spit of snow out of his eyes so his vision would not be blinded at a crucial moment. He listened to every sound.

When he came to the corner of the street below, he stood in a dark spot with his back flat against a building, and looked and listened. The loft building was next to the corner building and the street was dark except for a street light at each end of the block. There was no residential property on this street, only wholesale houses and loft buildings.

Asher watched and listened for several minutes, but saw nobody in the street except one inebriated individual who seemed to be trying to get home with a bunch of parcels. Asher decided to cross the street and take a look at the alley behind the loft building.

He crossed the street swiftly, so a lookout, if there happened to be one, might not spot him. He was thinking of the black record of the Jake Harbin gang. Jake and Louie Monds had both done time for burglary, but for the past several years had escaped incarceration. They had been hauled in for questioning several times, but always seemed to have an alibi. And both had jobs as automobile mechanics.

Both men were about forty, and they generally recruited two or three younger men to work with them. Asher had suspected they had been after Eddie Fergus. They would consider him a good prospect for their gang, since his father had been a convict and Eddie had gone around for years telling how he hated coppers.

Asher slipped quietly along the side street and came to the mouth of the narrow alley which ran behind the wholesale establishments. No lights were burning in the alley, and there should have been two. Asher knew they had been burning the previous night when he made his rounds.

That made him suspicious. The high wind of the afternoon might have broken the globes, but he doubted it. He took his hand out of his overcoat pocket, bringing his service revolver with it. He removed his glove and gripped the gun.

Entering the alley, he kept close to the buildings as he went forward slowly to investigate. His steps were silent, and he felt his way, for he could see nothing in the pitch blackness after he got into the alley a short distance from the street. He was thankful he knew the alley well.

Then he heard a slight sound, and stopped abruptly. A whisper came to him on the wind. He fumbled beneath his overcoat and brought out his flashlight. Holding it high in his left hand, he aimed it and slipped the catch. The beam of light shot out, focused and dropped, revealing a

truck at the rear door of the loft building, with two men tossing bales into it.

"Cops!" somebody yelled.

A flame split the black night, a gun cracked and a bullet whistled over Asher's head. He extinguished the flashlight and darted quickly across the alley to the opposite wall.

Two more shots came, and Asher could tell two men were firing at him from different positions. Somebody inside the building yelled, and he heard feet pounding. Asher tossed two quick shots at the gun-flashes and dodged to a new position before the return fire came.

HIS move carried him forward, toward the truck. He crashed against an empty packing case that had been left in the alley in disregard of city ordinances, and for once he was glad a law had been broken. From behind the packing case he emptied his gun, then flattened himself on the snowy pavement to reload frantically.

He had heard a cry of pain. As the thieves opened up again, directing their fire across the alley, evidently thinking he had changed position, Asher saw by the gun-flashes that one man sprawled lifelessly at the side of the truck.

He knew this was a battle for himself alone, for as far as he knew there was no help for him in the vicinity. If prowling officers happened to be in the neighborhood and were attracted by the gunfire, they might come to his assistance. But there were no people living anywhere near to put in urgent calls for the police.

He fired four shots quickly, and by the gun-flashes from the guns of the thieves he saw another man fall and sprawl at the end of the truck. A heavy fire was returned, and Asher discovered that he had two more men with whom to deal. They began pouring lead at him, and for a short time he didn't dare change his position.

Then, as he pulled himself together to dash across the narrow alley and go forward again, somebody behind him began firing. He crouched quickly against the wall, thinking that the gang's lookout had caught him from behind. But he heard a shout from a hoarse voice he did not recognize.

"Stay with 'em, Copper! Here's help!"

Deserting the truck in the face of this heavy fire, two men started pounding down the alley toward the other end. Asher sprayed the alley with bullets, and the man behind did the same. Then there was a sudden silence.

"Copper!" Asher heard the man behind him say.

"Here I am."

He kept his gun ready as he heard footsteps coming to him through the darkness. When the footsteps got close, Asher found the man who had helped him was Eddie Fergus.

"Afraid I'd get here too late," Eddie said. "Now I got to get away quick. Had a gun, but no gun permit. I'm wipin' off my fingerprints and leavin' the gun here. It can't be traced."

"What do you know about this?" Asher asked, suspiciously.

"Gave you the tip, didn't I? Learned more afterward. Listen! Did Tony Parsons give you a Christmas package?"

"Yes."

"The thing's a trap. Don't ever admit to anybody else that he gave it to you. He planted marked bills in it, and he telephoned the Morning News, which is battlin' the police department for political reasons, that you'd told him he'd better put some cash in with the socks if he knew what was good for him.

"Why, that—" Asher began.

"Listen, 'cause I've got to get away from here quick! Tony is in on this silk deal. Here's the setup. He knew the

Morning News would phone the Police Commissioner and tell the yarn. Then they'd come to get you for questionin' and drop off a rookie cop to relieve you. He wouldn't know the neighborhood, and wouldn't prowl around here. So the Jake Harbin gang could work 'thout bein' disturbed."

"Why, those rats!" Asher exploded.

"Here! I'm tossing this illegal gun in the alley. Let 'em think one of the gang dropped it. Now, I'm getting away before anybody comes. See you later, Copper."

"Eddie, if it's a frame like this, I'll need you."

"I won't dare talk right out, Copper. The gang'd get me before I got into the Army, or take it out on Mom and Mary."

"But I put Parsons' package in my locker. If they get it and find planted bills in it—"

"Listen! Don't admit you ever got a package from Parsons. Act innocent and puzzle 'em. Say you don't know anything about it. When you talk about this alley battle, hint that one of the men said somethin' about Parsons bein' in it, and let the dicks give him a goin' over."

"But the package—"

"It won't be in the locker. See you later."

"Eddie! Get out of here. Go to the phone booth in the drug store at the corner and phone Headquarters that there's a copper in trouble here, havin' a battle with crooks. Get!"

Eddie Fergus slipped away through the darkness. Crouching against the wall, Asher watched the faint light at the alley's mouth until he saw Eddie dart through it and go on.

Then, sure that his gun was reloaded, he got out his flashlight and went forward cautiously.

The evidence was plain enough. There was the truck partially loaded, and more

bales of silk just inside the door waiting to be put into the truck. There were two groaning men on the ground, unconscious—Jake Harbin and Louie Monds.

This would mean a lot of publicity for him, and possible promotion, Asher knew. It would mean a slap in the face of the Morning News, which had been berating the police department for not catching loft thieves. Maybe he would get a desk sergeant's job out of this, and could be comfortable on bad nights in the precinct station house.

He flashed his light around, and it seemed no time at all until he heard sirens. Police cars tore into both ends of the alley and turned their searchlights on the scene.

UNIFORMED and plainclothes men took over after Asher had made a statement to a captain of detectives and it had been taken down by a stenographer sergeant.

"Better get back to my beat now, I guess," he said.

The captain nodded and waved him away, as another siren announced the arrival of an ambulance. Asher sauntered down the alley, flashing his light. Emerging from the alley, he went along the side street toward the busy avenue.

He was worrying about what Eddie Fergus had told him. He did not doubt that Tony Parsons had made an attempt to frame him. That would be like Tony—help the Jake Harbin gang and at the same time get rid of a beat patrolman who bothered him.

Eddie had said the package would not be in the locker. Asher wondered about that. If Eddie was mistaken, and the package was there, and marked currency was with Tony's Christmas present, it would mean trouble. He remembered that Eddie had stressed the point that he not

admit Tony had given him a Christmas package.

He came to the corner, finally, and walked around it through the blazing light that came from the windows of Tony Parsons' cafe. And he found himself facing his precinct captain, a couple of detectives and a bunch of reporters, including one from the Morning News.

"Asher!" the precinct captain snapped. "I'm having Murphy relieve you and take over your beat."

"What's wrong?" Asher asked.

Tony Parsons thrust his way forward.

"He asks what's wrong," he jibed. "So he's a comedian!"

"Yeah, what's wrong!" the Morning News reporter scoffed.

"I don't get this," Asher said.

"Come with us," the precinct captain ordered.

Asher went with the group to the door of the bootblack stand, where a policeman had been stationed on guard.

"Asher," the captain said, "I'm sorry about this. You've got a splendid record. But this thing—well, Parsons phoned the News a yarn, and they called the Big Boss, and that's why we're here. Spill it, Parsons!"

The cafe man leered at Asher.

"He gives me hints about him better be gettin' a Christmas present from me," he said. "He made the hints pretty strong. He's been ridin' me for years, as the court records show. Hinted he would go easy after this if I'd do the right thing."

"That's a lie!" Asher howled.

"Go on, Tony," the captain ordered.

"Well, I said I'd give him a nice box of socks for Christmas. And he said kids hung up their stockin's on Christmas Eve so Santa Claus could put presents in 'em. 'Just consider, Tony,' he tells me, 'that I've hung up all those socks. And maybe I'd better find foldin' money in every one

of ‘em.”

“Well, what did you do about it?” the captain demanded.

“I put a hundred dollars in marked bills in with the socks and wrapped the package. I gave him the package. He came here and unlocked the door and put the package in his locker, where he keeps his Christmas loot.”

“Maybe he didn’t put it there,” the captain said.

“We were watchin’ him. Had it all fixed. He didn’t undo the package. He put it into the locker, and locked up again and went on attendin’ to his beat. You’ll find the package there, all right, and the marked bills in it. I phoned the News soon as I knew he’d put the package in his locker.”

“Got anything to say, Asher?” the captain asked.

“Only that it’s a lie,” Asher replied. “I’ve never asked any man or woman on my beat for anything all the time I’ve been poundin’ the pavement here.”

“We’ve only to search your locker,” the captain said. “Give me the keys, Asher.”

“Here they are, sir.” Asher handed them over.

“So he tries to bluff it out,” Tony Parsons sneered. “He was seen putting the package in the locker, and nobody’s seen him go near there since. So that’s where you’ll find the marked money.”

One of the detectives was unlocking the door of the bootblack stand.

“Where’ve you been, Asher?” the captain asked.

“I caught the Jake Harbin gang raidin’ a silk loft on the back street, sir. Had a gun fight with ‘em. Somebody must have phoned Headquarters about the battle, ‘cause the squad’s there now. I just left there. I wounded both Jake Harbin and

Louie Monds, and they seem hurt mighty bad.”

He saw Tony Parsons’ face pale, and pointed a finger at him.

“This thing about a bribe and marked money—maybe it was a trick to try to get me taken off the beat tonight and a green man put in my place. Only they misfigured. The gang got busy before I was taken off the beat. Jake Harbin was mutterin’ about Tony seein’ they weren’t bothered by the cops.”

“Yeah?” The captain turned a quick look at Tony. Then he faced Asher again. “Good work, Asher! If it’s as you say, I think you’ve pounded a beat long enough. Maybe we can get you a daytime station desk job. That is, if this thing comes out all right. I’m hoping it does.”

Asher was hoping so, too. Everything had happened so swiftly that he was bewildered. He didn’t quite understand everything. He had done as Eddie Fergus had told him. But what if this was another trick, if Eddie was still hating coppers and trying to get even with one who helped send his father to the pen years ago?

THE detective was unlocking the locker now as another man held a flashlight. He pulled the door open. Asher’s raincoat and cap covering were hanging on pegs. A dozen Christmas packages were in the bottom of the locker.

Asher flashed a quick look and drew in his breath sharply. Everything was as he had left it, except that Tony Parsons’ package was missing.

“Check the stuff,” the captain told the detective who had opened the locker.

Asher helped.

“That’s a jar of tobacco from the old man who owns the tobacco shop at the corner,” he said. “That package is from Mrs. Fergus, probably a pair of socks she

knit me—does it every year. There’s a pipe, and a pair of slippers and—”

“Where’s your package, Parsons?” the captain snapped, gesturing for Asher to be silent.

“Not there,” Parsons said. “But it has to be! I watched him put it there before I phoned the News.”

“And he hasn’t been here since?”

“I had a man watchin’ for him to come back, but he didn’t.”

“I was pounding my beat, and ran into the Jake Harbin gang,” Asher explained.

“Then, Tony, where’s the package?” the captain demanded. “All this looks like an attempt to defame an honest law officer—and maybe get him out of the way while the Harbin gang—”

“I don’t know anything about Harbin.”

“I’m sending you in for questioning,” the captain decided, motioning to one of his men.

Tony Parsons squealed his rage when he felt the handcuffs. The officers took him toward a police sedan.

A police car came screaming around the corner and stopped. A lieutenant of detectives hopped out and ran up to the captain, and related what had happened in the alley. The captain grinned and slapped Asher on the back.

“Take the rest of the night off,” he said. “Go home and get into your new slippers and load your pipes and listen to the radio. You’ve done more than a day’s work.”

“Thanks, but—well, I’d rather work out the evenin’,” Asher replied. “I’ve got some more Christmas gifts to collect . . . but there won’t be any bribe money in ‘em. Folks around here who’ve known me for years expect it.”

“Stay on duty, then. Take tomorrow off.”

“Thanks, sir. I’ll do that.”

Asher locked the locker and bootblack stand, watched the others get into the cars and drive away, then started strolling up the street.

He was wondering what had happened to that package Parsons had given him. He wished he could meet Eddie Fergus again and learn more.

At the next corner, he did meet Eddie.

“Howdy, Copper!” Eddie said, as if he hadn’t seen Asher before that evening.

“Howdy, Eddie! Merry Christmas!”

“Understand we had a little excitement around here,” Eddie said, drifting around the corner slowly and indicating Asher was to follow.

“A little,” Asher admitted.

Now they were where nobody could overhear.

“What about that package, Eddie?” Asher asked.

“Well, Copper, as you know, I was on my way to becomin’ a crook. I’d had some teachers, all right. Had a pocketful of keys and things. Had learned how to pick locks. I knew what was happenin’, Copper, and I picked the lock of the bootblack stand and got inside, and opened the locker and got that package and got out again without bein’ seen, leavin’ everything in shipshape behind me.”

“You saved me from a bad situation, Eddie.”

“Glad to do it, Copper. Told you I’d changed my mind about you after learnin’ what I did from Mom. Meant it when I said I guess I was goin’ straight. Into the Army, then comin’ back when the job’s done and aimin’ to get married and get a job and be decent.”

“I believe you now, Eddie. That package you took—?”

“My last two crimes, Copper—packin’ an illegal gun and burglary. I got rid of the gun and threw my skeleton keys down a sewer manhole. Now, I’m starting clean.”

“The package—?”

“Oh, that! I tore it open and threw the socks away. They were gaudy plaids, Copper, and you wouldn’t have liked ‘em. They weren’t honest socks, anyhow, comin’ from Tony Parsons.”

“I’m hintin’ about the money—the hundred dollars.”

“Oh, that!” Eddie said, grinning. “I folded the bills up tight and dropped ‘em

into the Salvation Army kettle on the corner when the fake Santa Claus wasn’t lookin’. Tony Parsons’ contribution to the Christmas fund.”

Eddie grinned again, and Asher answered with a grin of his own. Then Eddie started toward the busy street.

“Merry Christmas, Copper!” he said, as he disappeared into the crowd.