

## NEW YEAR'S EVE TEST

By JOHNSTON McCULLY

**Patrolman Larry Murphy wants to be a plainclothesman—and makes a good start when he tackles a tough gang!**

**A**N hour before midnight on New Year's Eve, Patrolman Larry Murphy, dressed in civilian garb, was one of a mob.

The walks along the broad avenue had been crowded with merrymakers since nightfall. The crowd had overflowed the walks and thronged the street itself, leaving only a narrow lane for the passage of vehicles. As midnight approached and the birth of a new year occurred, even that narrow lane would be congested with hilarious humanity, and vehicles would take to the side streets.

Murphy was elbowed and jostled and had his feet trod upon. Without his uniform on, he was just one of the crowd—a huge man of forty, the picture of health and strength, having something of the appearance of a truck driver on a holiday.

Yet he was on duty. He and a few other patrolmen from the precinct had been ordered into plain clothes for the evening by Jim Dayle, the precinct captain. It was a night when any number of policemen probably would not be enough.

"Keep your eyes open for dips and purse snatchers," Captain Dayle had told them. "This is the night they get busy. In the street jam, with horns blowing and everybody yelling and confetti filling the air, folks get careless, and dips and purse snatchers reap a harvest."

As the men had started out, Dayle had called Murphy back into his office.

"Larry," he had said. "You've been in uniform about fifteen years. Your record is about as clean as a man's can be. You know police business and never lose your head. You're steady and dependable. You're married and have a couple of kids. And you've put in for elevation to the rank of plainclothesman. Because of the extra salary?"

Murphy had grinned. "I sure can use that, Cap'n, with a couple of kids growin'," he had replied. "But that's not all. I feel that I'm in a rut, not gettin' anywhere. Gettin' into the plainclothes detail would make me feel like I was gettin' somewhere."

"I can understand that," the captain had told him. "You have a chance tonight to test yourself

and see what you can do. Your examination papers and your oral examination have put you at the top of the list. There are two plainclothesmen to be named from this precinct, and I have to pick a couple of men out of five eligibles to recommend for the job. I hope you're one of them. But you know me, Murphy—I never play favorites. The best men in my opinion will be recommended."

"I understand that, Cap'n."

"There's a great difference between uniform work and plainclothes work, Murphy. You haven't the weight of the uniform."

"What do you mean by that, Cap'n?"

"The sight of a policeman's uniform does something to most people. It carries weight. It's a picture of the Law. Everybody knows you're a copper. A plainclothesman doesn't carry the weight of the uniform. Nobody knows he's a copper until he flashes his badge. I can't explain it exactly, but . . . Well, Murphy, go out and do the best you can."

"Yes, sir," Murphy had said.



**S**O, on a roving commission, he had gone forth into the streets filled with merrymakers. He had orders to prowl around where he wished, do his duty in any emergency, and return to the station

house at two in the morning to report and check out.

It was eleven now. Murphy had been going through the crowd, drifting along with it, keeping his eyes and ears open. He had encountered no dips or purse snatchers. The only semblance of crime he had seen had been a few men who had taken too much liquor and were rather noisy—but everybody was noisy tonight. Once he had seen a fight start, but a couple of officers in uniform who happened to be near had stopped it before Murphy could get through the crowd.

Murphy came to a crowded corner and managed to get up on the steps in front of a hotel. That put him a couple of feet above the heads of the jostling crowd. He could look down upon the passersby in the jammed street. And he saw Eddie Dix.

Eddie was a product of Murphy's precinct. He had lived there with his widow mother. Murphy had chased him home from street corners, pool halls and crap games many times during Eddie's early teens.

Eddie had fallen in with bad companions and had gone wrong. At seventeen, he had been sent to the juvenile house of correction. Released at twenty-one, within a month he had been caught in an act of burglary and had been sentenced to the Big House.

That had killed his mother. Eddie had been released with time off for good behavior, and got a job. But he hadn't been able to settle down and go straight. He had been caught again, and had been released only recently after serving five years. Eddie Dix was a two-time loser. Another conviction would stamp him as an habitual criminal, and he would be put away for life.

Murphy watched Eddie closely. He was standing on the walk in the crowd, talking to a man Murphy didn't know. The jostling crowd gradually forced the pair over to the steps. They did not notice Murphy as he stepped down behind them. They were talking in low tones, but Murphy could hear what they said despite the din in the street.

"Do you catch or carry, Eddie?" the other man was asking.

"Catch."

"Me, too. I lost my carry man somewhere in the crowd, but we'll get together again soon. I'll meet him around the corner, and we'll get busy. How are you makin' out?"

"Nothin' yet," Eddie replied. "I'm not wastin'

my time and takin' a chance fussin' with small stuff. My carry man went into the hotel bar to get a drink. I'm waitin' for him."

"Pretty slick idea of Jeff's, huh? He gets a cut, but he manages things. Pairs us off, and we all head back to his hide-out. Share and share alike. Nobody knows how much is in the bag until the cut. He's got twelve couples of us out tonight. After Jeff takes his percentage, we all split the pot. Fair enough! And if we're snagged, Jeff's mouthpiece bails us out and we hightail."

"Easy with the talk," Eddie warned.

The other man drifted away through the crowd, and Eddie Dix struck a match and lit a cigarette. He was small, rat-faced, furtive, dangerous. He stood there smoking, waiting for his teammate to return, and watching the passersby for a potential victim.

Murphy realized what that conversation had meant, and he knew the identity of "Jeff." That would mean Jeff Renland, a gangster and head of a mob, watched by the police for some time but never caught with sufficient evidence to convict.

Now Renland, it appeared, had collected as a side line a gang of pickpockets and purse snatchers and paired them off and sent them out. All loot went into a common pot, and everybody shared alike after Renland took his percentage. He gave them protection in case of disaster, furnishing lawyer and bail.

Eddie jumped and almost swallowed his cigarette when Murphy touched him on the shoulder.

"Hello, Eddie," Murphy said. "Going to watch the New Year come in, huh? Hope you're makin' plenty of good resolutions."

Eddie fought himself to regain his composure. "Why—howdy, Murph!" he greeted. "Didn't know you at first in your civvies. Copper Murphy, out of uniform and dressed in his Sunday best and off his beat! Turned human for an evenin', Murph? Havin' a little fun on your own?"

"I don't have to wear a uniform all the time, Eddie," Murphy said. "I get an hour off now and then."

"I'll bet you're glad to shed it at times. Well—Happy New Year, copper, and keep your nose clean."

"Wait a minute, Eddie!" Murphy ordered, as the rat-eyed man began to move into the passing crowd to get away. "I happened to overhear a part of your talk with that lug who just left you. So you catch

tonight, do you? You pick a pocket or snatch a purse, and pass it quickly to your carry man, so if you're grabbed and searched nothin' will be found on you."

"Aw, we were just gassin'," Eddie said.

"Don't give me any of that stuff, Eddie. Listen, boy! You're a two-time loser already. You know what it'll mean if you're convicted again. It'll mean that you'll be sent to the Big House for life, as an habitual criminal. Is it worth that much, Eddie? It'd be a pretty big price to pay, wouldn't it? Get smart!"

**E**DDIE'S lips twisted and his eyes glittered. "Do I have to listen to a sermon by a copper on New Year's Eve?" he asked.

"I'm just tellin' you, Eddie. I was interested in what I overheard about Jeff, too. That'd be Jeff Renland, of course. If you got in a jam, Eddie, he'd throw you to the wolves. You're a sucker to play his game. Bein' a crook is bad enough, Eddie, but bein' a sucker is worse."

"You on duty now?" Eddie asked.

"I am," Murphy replied. "Special duty tonight. If I see you make a wrong move, I'll take you in as quick as I would the next man, even if I did know your mother and admire her for the losin' fight she made to keep you straight."

"Listen to me, Murph! You're a good patrolman. Walkin' a beat and tryin' doors at night and stoppin' fights—that's your line. Don't ever try to crash into the big time, Murph. You'll maybe get yourself hurt."

"I'll chance that, Eddie."

"With men like Jeff Renland, you wouldn't last as long as a snowball in a furnace. Let the Headquarters dicks play around with men like him. They've been after him for years, and haven't nailed him yet. And if they ever do nail him, he'll beat the rap. He's got plenty of foldin' money and a swell mouthpiece."

"It catches up with all of 'em some day," Murphy observed. "Crime isn't a payin' business in the end. You're walkin' the wrong path, boy. Why don't you break away from it? Go to some other part of the country and get a job."

"You're sourin' my New Year's spirit," Eddie interrupted. "So long, copper! It's nice to have met you again." He twisted his lips and slid into the passing crowd.

Murphy lost sight of him almost immediately,

and made his own slow progress through the crowd in the general direction Eddie Dix had gone. He was watching, listening as he elbowed and shoved and tried to keep his footing. The light snow of a couple of days before had melted, but there remained small patches of ice on the walks and pavement. There was no cold wind tonight to deter the merry-makers.

It was half after eleven now, and the crowd was getting thicker and noisier. Murphy had confetti thrown upon him and horns blown in his ears. Strident voices were screeching on every side of him. People were struggling to get into cafes and restaurants.

Murphy slid a hand beneath overcoat and coat to make sure his shoulder holster was in position and the automatic it contained easy to draw if necessity arose. He passed other police officers and nodded to some he knew. He was thinking that perhaps nothing would happen, that he would return to the precinct station house and report to Captain Dayle that the night had been uneventful.

He had been hoping that he would have a chance to show his ability. He had revealed that on many occasions during the years, but always in uniform. What Captain Dayle wanted, he judged, was to learn what Murphy would do in a moment of emergency.

He wanted the plainclothes job badly. The extra salary would help with his wife and the children. The latter were at an age where they kicked out shoes swiftly and always seemed to be wanting clothes and spending money. The boy was fourteen and the girl twelve now.

And he wanted the job for another reason—as an indication of advancement. He had been in uniform for a long time—standing still, he told himself. His wife and kids would be proud of him if he got the promotion he sought.

He came to where the broad avenue branched into two streets, and turned down the right-hand street. And, a short distance ahead of him, he saw Eddie Dix again. Eddie was with another man, no doubt his "carry" man. They were walking slowly side by side, and it was evident that Eddie was searching for a prospective victim.

He found him as Murphy watched from the near distance. The victim was a middle-aged, prosperous-looking man with a young woman on either side of him. They were claiming all his attention.

Murphy saw Eddie and his teammate get behind the three and follow them. Eddie surged forward and brushed against the man once, and when the fellow turned Eddie was looking in another direction. Murphy understood Eddie's move. He had been trying to ascertain whether the prosperous-looking man had a wallet in a hip pocket.

Men supposed to be sensible about such things still carried wallets in their hip pockets, Murphy knew. That was an invitation to a dip. A good dip could slip a tiny knife attached to a ring on the end of his forefinger, slit the side of the pocket and let the wallet tumble into his hand, and in such a crowd the victim probably would never feel it, would not know he had been robbed until later.

Murphy struggled to get nearer, watching Eddie and his carry man closely as he did so. The crowd had thinned for an instant, and it would not have been wise for Eddie to make a move then.

**B**UT there came a surge in the crowd, a tight jam of human beings around the man with the two women. Murphy managed to get through and within a few feet of Eddie.

Another surge in the crowd came, and Murphy, edging closer, saw Eddie make his move. His right hand went under the bottom of the victim's coat. He got a wallet and handed it back quickly to his carry man, who started to move aside.

Murphy shot out his two hands and collared them both.

"Caught you!" he roared. "You!" he barked at the man with the two women.

"This man just picked your hip pocket and got a wallet. Come along as a witness."

"You—" the startled victim said, as he felt quickly and found the wallet gone.

"I'm a police officer," Murphy said.

The crowd surged away and back and away again, trying to avoid the center of disturbance. Murphy was gripping both men by their coat collars. The carry man tried to twist away, and Murphy jerked him back. But the move gave Eddie Dix his chance.

Eddie had more sense than to carry a gun, being a two-time loser and not entitled to a permit. He knew what it would mean if caught with a gun on him. But he carried a knife, razor sharp, a knife with a blade of legal size. And he got it out quickly, since Murphy did not have him by the wrists, and

made a quick slash.

Murphy felt searing flame along his right forearm, another streak of flame as the knife cut through his clothing and reached the skin on his chest.

His prisoners twisted free and slammed into the dense crowd. Women began screaming and men yelling. Murphy plunged after the pair, fighting to make a path for himself.

"One side!" he howled. "Police officer!"

Eddie Dix led the way to the crowded walk, made it with his pal a few steps behind him. Murphy had his automatic out now, but dared not fire at the fleeing crooks. In that thick crowd he was sure to wound or kill one or more innocent bystanders.

But they saw the expression on Murphy's face, saw the weapon he held, and began screeching and fighting to get out of his path. He gained on the pair ahead slightly. They made it to a corner and turned into the side street. An officer in uniform, standing on the corner, let them pass and seemed to be bewildered.

He held up a hand when he saw Murphy coming, holding the automatic. Murphy took his shield from his pocket and showed it.

"Murphy . . . Twelfth Precinct . . . pickpockets . . . come on!" he shouted.

He pounded on after the two, and the officer pounded on behind him, catching up rapidly.

"There they go!" Murphy told him. His breath was commencing to come in painful gasps.

The crowd in the side streets was much thinner, and people got out of their way quickly. Eddie Dix and his pal were almost half a block ahead. Murphy tried a quick shot at a time when there was little danger of hitting an innocent person, and missed. The policeman beside him had his service pistol out of its holster, but did not fire.

Ahead of them, Eddie and his pal darted into a dark alley.

The police officers came to the mouth of the dark alley and pulled up. They could hear feet pounding the pavement in the alley. No lights were burning behind any of the buildings except one at the far end.

"After 'em!" Murphy said, gulping to get air into his lungs.

"They may be armed," the policeman said. "Watch out!"

"One's a two-timer loser. He wouldn't risk

havin' a gun on him. The other—I don't know."

Another uniformed man, who had seen the chase, came pounding to the end of the alley, service pistol out and ready for business. The first one explained to him as Murphy started into the alley. The policemen followed him.

Halfway to the next street, a thin streak of light showed for an instant as a door was opened. In that streak of light, Murphy and the two with him saw Eddie Dix and his pal dodge in. A door was closed and the streak of light cut off.

"I know where that is—this is my regular beat," the first policeman Murphy had called on for help said. "There's one front exit."

"One of you cover it, and the other come with me," Murphy said. He began running through the alley.

The first uniformed man he had met charged after him, and the other hurried to the street with the intention of getting around to the front. The man with Murphy came to the door and stopped. Murphy stopped beside him.

"This is an old four-story building," the policeman informed Murphy. "Some cheap loft firms in it. A few cheap apartments in front."

**T**ALKING swiftly and in disjointed sentences, Murphy related the conversation he had overheard between Eddie Dix and the other crook.

"Jeff Renland, huh?" the policeman said. "Be feathers in our caps if we could catch him wrong. Maybe I'd better phone for help."

"And maybe we'd better break in here quick and catch 'em hot," Murphy suggested. "If this is one of Jeff Renland's hangouts, you can be sure he's got a getaway."

The door was locked. The policeman used his service pistol and broke the lock. Then they found the door was bolted, too. The policeman backed away and hurled himself against it. At the third charge, the bolt was torn off the old door, and they sprawled inside.

A couple of shots came from the top of a short flight of stairs as they entered. The policeman blazed away at the flashes. Murphy was commencing to feel weak, and realized he had lost some blood. That, and the exertion of smashing through the crowd and running was commencing to rob him of strength he needed badly now.

Murphy and the uniformed man went up the flight of steps almost silently and came to a

hallway. The hallway was in total darkness. They slipped along one wall. They heard somebody move a short distance down the hall, heard heavy breathing.

The uniformed man used his flashlight. It revealed a man crouching against the wall with a weapon held ready.

"Drop it!" Murphy ordered.

The man against the wall knew from the direction in which the voice had come that the officer with the flashlight was not alone. But he hesitated.

"Drop it!" Murphy ordered again. "Quick!"

The man against the wall, half-blinded by the flashlight, bent forward and let his weapon slip from his hand and clatter on the floor. Murphy and the policeman advanced, the uniformed man holding the light on the man in front.

"I know this bird—sneak thief and hophead!" he told Murphy.

Murphy grabbed the crook by the arm. "Where'd they go?" he demanded. "The two who came in here—Eddie Dix and his pal."

"I—I don't know."

"We haven't any time to play tag with you," Murphy warned. "What I want is a quick answer."

The crook seemed to sag back against the wall. And suddenly he made a dive for the gun he had dropped to the floor. The uniformed man pistol-whipped him and sent him crashing to the floor in the path of the flashlight's gleam.

"Hit him too hard," the uniformed officer said. "He can't take a rap like that. He'll be out for some time. Let's go on. I know this bird—can have him picked up any time."

They went cautiously along the hall, making as little noise as possible. Finally they came to a cross hall, and entered that carefully, weapons held ready. They went toward the front of the building. No lights were showing through the transoms there, no streaks of light coming from beneath doors, and they heard no voices.

"Next floor up," the policeman suggested.

They found the stairs and went up slowly and cautiously. Above them, they heard the floor boards of the old building creaking. At the top of the stairs there was darkness except where a thin film of light came from beneath one of the doors. Nobody was in the hall, as far as they could see. Expecting a gun explosion and a hail of lead, they stood tense while the policeman used his flashlight.

The hall was empty.

Voices came to them from inside the door, and they crept close to listen.

“Cursed fools to come rushing here!” some man was saying. “They’ll call for help and go through the place. Eddie, you haven’t any sense.”

“Only thing I could do,” they heard Eddie Dix whimper. “One of the coppers is from my home precinct and knows me, Jeff.”

“Then you’ve got to get out of town. Here’s some dough. And keep out until you hear from me. I’m not goin’ to be landed because of a couple of punks who don’t know any better than to run back to headquarters when they get in a jam. Now, we’ve got to leave everything here and get over the roofs. And some of the other boys may come wanderin’ in and get nabbed.”

The policeman bent close and whispered into Murphy’s ear. “Jeff Renland, sure enough,” he said.

“We’re goin’ in there,” Murphy told him.

“We don’t know how many—”

“Makes no difference. We’re goin’ in there. Get ready.”

But they heard more voices inside, and waited and listened.

“Them coppers didn’t come on in,” Jeff Renland was saying. “Jim’s down in the hall, and we’d have heard shootin’.”

He did not know that Jim had been pistol-whipped into silence.

“Eddie,” Jeff Renland continued, “you and your pal get out of here and make your getaway. I’ll be right behind you with George. It’s a good thing none of the others are here.”

“They’re comin’ out,” the policeman whispered to Murphy. “We’ll nab them as they do. Only four in there, from the talk. I told that other copper to phone Headquarters for help. We’ll be havin’ it soon.”

“Take that side of the door, and I’ll take this,” Murphy whispered in reply. “When they pull the door open, we’ll walk in on ‘em.”

A MUTTER of voices inside the room came to them, then feet pounding the floor, and the door was pulled open by Eddie Dix.

“Up with ‘em—everybody!” Murphy barked, shoving Eddie backward and bursting into the room with the uniformed man a step behind him.

The blast of a gun answered him, and a slug

whistled past Murphy’s head. Through a swirl of smoke, he saw Jeff Renland, whom he knew by sight, the man who had been with Eddie in the street, and another, evidently the George mentioned by Renland.

George jerked out a gun, and a bullet from the policeman’s service pistol sent him reeling backward with a shattered shoulder. Jeff Renland had his weapon out as Murphy charged straight into the room.

Blasts of gunfire sounded in the little apartment, smoke swirled. Murphy felt a blow in his left shoulder and knew he had been hit. A mist seemed to be before his eyes. He was already weak enough from loss of blood because of the slashes Eddie Dix had given him with the knife, without carrying the fresh wound also.

The policeman was shouting something. Murphy saw Eddie’s pal go crashing to the floor and sprawl there with a trickle of blood coming from his chest. Jeff Renland, his face that of a wild man, was charging forward with gun up, straight for the door, plainly enough intending to fight his way through.

The policeman gave a grunt and slid down against the wall, to sit on the floor and continue shooting. Murphy felt another blow, this time in his left leg, and almost collapsed. He braced himself against a table by the wall and fought to lift his gun.

His arms suddenly seemed to be as heavy as lead. He bit his lips and tried again to lift the gun. Jeff Renland came charging on. The man whom Renland had called George was on his feet and coming forward also. He gripped his gun.

Again, weapons blasted. A slug smashed into the wall inches from Murphy’s head. Through the swirls of smoke, he saw Jeff Renland reel and fall, his gun dropping from a nerveless hand.

The policeman was trying to shout something. George sent another shot at him, and missed. But the policeman did not miss. Murphy, seemingly on the brink of a black abyss, saw George reel aside and drop.

Then the abyss swallowed him. He seemed to be dropping down, down. Faces flashed before him—his wife, those of the children, Captain Dayle, Eddie Dix. . . .

Through the darkness, after a time, came flashes of red flame, and he seemed to hear voices, but could not make out what was being said. He felt

pain, felt as if he were being lifted. Then he was in the dark abyss again.

He did not know until some time afterward how long he was in that dark abyss. Light came to him slowly, finally. He heard voices, and the sound of soft weeping, and he opened his eyes.

He saw a ceiling, saw somebody in white moving near him. A man in a white coat bent over him.

"He's conscious—he's all right," Murphy heard the man say.

Then his wife was bending over him, her tears dropping softly on his face.

"Oh, Larry!" she murmured. "We were so afraid."

"He'll be all right," the surgeon said. "Passed out from loss of blood more than anything else. Those two slashes, and all his exertion without

having them attended to—and the gunshot wounds later. Nothing serious about the gunshot wounds. We've patched him up. A few days' vacation, and he'll be as good as new."

The doctor stepped away and somebody took his place. Murphy tried to grin when he saw Captain Dayle.

"Well, Murph, you sure scored last night," Dayle told him. "We've got the goods on Jeff Renland at last. The whole four of the crooks will live to do time. The policeman who helped you will get along, too. Men from Headquarters got there just as you passed out."

"I'm—glad," Murphy muttered.

"Oh, yeah!" Captain Dayle said. "Almost forgot. Happy New Year to you—plainclothesman!"