

Cop on the corner

by Darragh Aldrich



HERE was always something doing on Officer Mike M'Closkey's beat. If it wasn't the traffic, it was the kids—the Western Street gang. And always it was that little tough of a Jimmy Casey at the bottom of everything. "Tough" Casey was what he liked to be called. M'Closkey knew that.

It was queer, but somehow M'Closkey knew, too, the secret desire of Jimmy's heart: to have his picture published on the front page of the newspapers with his full name under it and "Tough" in parenthesis, the way they do the regular stick-ups. Like this: "James (Tough) Casey." Maybe Mike M'Closkey knew about it because he had had pretty much that kind of a secret longing himself when he was Jimmy's age.

Jimmy would have been as surprised as anything if he had known that the cop on the corner could see right down into his mind like that, for if there was anybody in all the world that Jimmy Casey hated it was Cop M'Closkey. Sometimes, though, it was pretty hard for Tough to remember he hated the big man with a sort of flat crooked nose. It had been bused with a ball bat when he was a kid, so he said. Jimmy wondered how it could be done. He longed for a nose like M'Closkey's.

Remembering your hatred came hard when you saw M'Closkey standing there, a big burly over-six footer in the midst of traffic rushing this way, that way, in four directions. Sometimes Jimmy Casey's eyes glistened as he watched him at dusk behind the street refuse box on the corner. Why, there wasn't anybody that dast move until M'Closkey let 'em!

Mike hated to run in that Casey kid, for he knew that things were getting pretty serious for Jimmy down at the Juvenile Court. In fact they would have been very serious long ago had it not been for M'Closkey. He had seen the Judge in his chambers beforehand and had told him about Jimmy.

"His mother went off with another guy, Yer Honor, six years ago when the kid was only five. She was nothing but a Wop anyhow and you couldn't expect much—"

"But you say his father is Irish?" asked the Judge.

"Oh, sure, Yer Honor," admitted Mike deprecatingly, "but one of them pool-hall and slot-machine bums, sleepin' off booze daytimes and gone all night. If you wouldn't mind tryin' the kid on probation, sir. He's not a bad kid if somebody could get a-holt of him right. I was kinda like him myself once."

At the Judge's suggestion, one of the Y. M. C. A. men and the Probation Officer himself had tried to "get a-holt" of Jimmy in every way. They had called at the shack Jimmy referred to as home. Casey Sr. listened to them with a yawn, thanked them with a charming smile, referred to his deep affection for his son and his grief and surprise that Jimmy had annoyed anybody.

THAT night when Jimmy joyously appeared to get the supper, with a couple of onions and a potato he had fished from Jake's wagon and two bits of steak bone he had triumphantly unearthed from a garbage can, Casey Sr. told him about the call. Wanted to know why he had to bring disgrace upon the noble name of Casey and beat him until there were raw welts on the skinny little body. Jimmy hated his father, too. But in a different way from the hating of M'Closkey. When, a few days later, somebody from the schools came to find out why Jimmy hadn't shown up for almost a week, Jimmy didn't tell them about his back. He said that he wasn't coming any more. So they went to Officer M'Closkey.

It was a warm evening in late May when, at the behest of the school principal, Mike M'Closkey dropped in at the shack somewhat wearily to see if he could get a-holt of Jimmy. A steamy fragrance filled the air. Jimmy had a pair of old khaki pants roped around his middle, but he was shirtless and the scars on his back were red and sinister.

"Where'd ye get them?" demanded M'Closkey who knew without asking and ached in the knowing.

"Fightin'—and I kilt the other guy. Whadye going to do about me now? Trow anudder scare into me?"

"This time ye're going to be sent up," M'Closkey roared. "Tell your story to the Judge yourself. He'll give ye full time and no mercy." Then he snuffed luxuriously. Even on a hot night that stuff in the rusty old kettle smelled great. Funnny kid—cooking a meal with the temperature like it was.

Cop M'Closkey told the Judge the whole thing in the morning while Jimmy listened—defiant, surly, but with a strange, piteful gleam in his eyes as he heard M'Closkey reporting everything. Even, curiously enough,

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about his cooking. And the Judge sentenced James (Tough) Casey to the Juvenile Detention Farm. Then he proceeded to show Jimmy that everything he had done was just sneaking and sly and cowardly. He showed how M'Closkey had always been on the squire with him but he was too big a man to bother with a little mosquito like Jimmy any longer.

WHEN Jimmy Casey, bright-eyed and clear-skinned, returned to Western street, school was about to begin. Jimmy opined that he might as well go.

He hadn't forgotten M'Closkey. He asked for him first thing. M'Closkey hadn't been on duty for about a week, the gang told him. Nobody knew why. Then, rather apologetically, they told Jimmy about the Shillelagh Club. M'Closkey had formed it about a month before.

It sounded good but Jimmy's eyes narrowed and he didn't say so.

"Who's the kink?"

"Mike. Mike M'Closkey hisself. It's president he is. He wouldn't like to hear you call him a kink. He don't believe in kinks."

"You gotta pass an exam to get in," ventured Izzy fearfully. "Then you gotta pass another exam to get your shillelagh." With elaborate casualness he twirled a wooden cudgel depending from his wrist by a leather thong which might have been a logger's bootlace.

"Humph!" Tough's mouth curled but his eyes shone with envy. "Where'd you get it?"

"Mike had 'em made fer us—" it was Skinny the Swede. "We've each got one. Only the others left theirs to home 'cept me and Izzy."

"Cause you thought I'd take 'em away from you."

"But Mike said—"

"How'd you get this 'Mike' stuff?"

"Well, he told us to call him 'Mike' in the club. That's one of the rules. First names."

"Hand over a shillelagh." Tough assumed control as usual. "I'll show you a few things."

Finally Izzy swallowed hard and took upon himself the job of spokesman: "Have a heart, Tough," he whined. "You can't join. You ain't ellygibble. You got the works and you're disqualified."

"When you been sent up," Skinny the Swede explained, "you're out. Y'see, we're sorta assistant cops. We gotta keep order. And to keep order, we gotta show 'em what order is. When you get in trouble yourself it shows you're not tough enough to stand the gaff."

"Beths!" Izzy came into the discussion with a great twirl of his stick. "And the Shillelagh that takes the gaff the best all week

stands by Mike in the middle of the street directin' traffic and helpin' spot stolen cars the next Sattidy night."

Jimmy made it clear that he wouldn't join their old club if they gave him a million. Then he decided to begin on M'Closkey. He knew where Pap kept his gun and he knew where M'Closkey lived. If the cop was laying off for a spell, he would probably be home about dusk.

TOUGH Casey neared the M'Closkey bungalow. He felt somewhat nervously of The Thing in his pocket that made it bulge. The Thing was cold to the touch but it would spit fire. Pap wouldn't miss it for a while. The fellows next door said Pap was out at the works for ninety days.

Tough Casey's hand shook a little as it hovered over the door bell. Before he had pressed the button, M'Closkey's door flew open suddenly. Tough staggered back a step and all but lost his balance. The anxious-looking youngish man carrying a black bag looked for a moment as startled as Tough himself.

"For the love of Pete!" he exclaimed. "What do you want, Kid?"

"I wanta see Cop M'Closkey." Tough told him in firm tones, gripping his gun.

"Then you will have to keep on wanting for a while longer, my boy," the man told him. "Officer M'Closkey and his wife are both down with flu. There's nobody with them. I've sent for a nurse."

"I gotta see him," persisted Tough desperately. "I gotta see him—quick—now!"

The doctor hesitated.

"Tell him—" Jimmy's voice quivered for his body was on fire as he fingered the cold steel. "Tell him it's Tough Casey!"

The doctor weakened as he saw Tough's white face. "I'll tell him, and see what he says. Come in!"

Jimmy looked around. Golden oak furniture, radio, and a picture of M'Closkey with his hair slick and his wife all dolled up in white with flowers on her. Through that door, the kitchen! Think of cooking on a white stove like that! But a coffee pot and other things were sitting around on the M'Closkey stove as if they'd been left in a hurry. Jimmy had forgotten all about The Thing in his pocket. His eyes were shining. He whirled about at a sound behind him.

"Mike says," the doctor was smiling at Tough Casey, "that he will let you see him on one condition. Seems he remembers the smell of a kind of soup you were making one night when he called at your house. Says he and

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set it on the table by Mike's bed as he was requested to do, the strangest thing of all happened. It started with Mike's wanting to know how soon the soup would be done and saying that he couldn't stand waiting for it much longer. At that, something in Jimmy's breast seemed to swell and his eyes dropped to the shillelagh which lay alongside of him on the bed.

"Come here, Kid." The hoarse voice was very kind but the keen eyes were boring through Jimmy. Abashed, Jimmy obeyed, his hand gripping the chill, hard Thing that he wished he had left downstairs. "I'll offer ye a trade," the voice went on, so low that even Mary in the other bed paid no attention to it. "I'll trade ye this shillelagh for what ye got in your pocket there. . . . No, the other one, where your hand is. How about it?"

Jimmy turned suddenly sick. "I don't know what ye mean," he said with the old sullen look returning to his eyes.

"And don't ye now?" quizzed the other. "Maybe ye haven't heard, ther, about the Shillelagh Club that's acting as my assistant on the beat?"

"Sure—," nervously—"I heard about 'em soon as I got back."

"Well, then, ye don't need me tellin' ye what this shillelagh means. But nobody that carries a gun can carry a shillelagh. So I thought I'd make ye an even trade fer it."

"But Izzy—he said I wasn't ellygibble 'count of the Farm." The tone as well as the words told Mike M'Closkey precisely what he wanted to know.

"And does that surprise me!" murmured the man. "Why, with the report that they gave me from the Farm I've got ye headin' my list. Yer last offence of childishness was before the club started so that can't keep ye out, if ye care to make the trade."

It was a beautiful shillelagh, smooth wood with a new thong and would twirl grand.

"It b'longs to Pap," as he drew The Thing out slowly and laid it on the bed beside M'Closkey.

"Sure," said M'Closkey, smiling. "If Pap ever wants it, you tell him to ask me fer it." And he slipped it under his pillow as Jimmy lifted the shillelagh with shining eyes. "Don't ye suppose that soup is done by now? I never sniffed such a grand smell in me life."

By the time the soup was ready and Jimmy had learned to twirl the shillelagh from his wrist, the nurse had come. She let him strain the soup himself. Then all he had to do was to watch Mike and Mary propped up in bed, enjoying every mouthful and praising it. Mary smiled at Jimmy and told him she could never hope to make a soup like that.

"I'd like to ask a favor of ye, Jim Casey," Officer M'Closkey was saying, man to man, as the nurse took away the trays at last. "The doctor says I've got to be careful for a long time and I'm sort of dreading the Saturday evening traffic. D'ye think, now, ye could manage to help me out the first Saturday I'm back on the job? I'd like a lift on spotting them cars. I could give ye the numbers of the stolen ones. But ye'd have to keep yer eyes peeled."

A breathless, dizzying sensation swept over Jimmy. Out there in the dusk alongside Big M'Closkey—helping him spot the stolen cars. Jimmy gulped and gripped both hands on the shillelagh until his muscles were white. Something kept coming up in his throat.

"Sure," he said, casually, swallowing hard. "sure—I'd be glad to—to take a night off and help you—any time—Mike!"

BUT THE reason I'm comin' to you about it, Judge—" Mike M'Closkey was again his strong and burly self as he leaned over the desk in the chambers of the Judge of the Juvenile Court, "is because you know him and me and how it is. I t'ought maybe you could give me a character when I take it up legally. It will be grand for Mary, Yer Honor," Mike went on. "Ye ought to hear 'em together in the kitchen. And last Saturday night on traffic duty, Yer Honor—I could not help thinking how foine it would be if it was my son standing there alongside. You'd be surprised, Yer Honor, how he's changed since I got a-holt of him."

"No, M'Closkey, I wouldn't be surprised at all." The Judge made a note on his tab. "There is, as you know, a probationary period. Plenty of time to change your minds, either of you. Then I can help you with the details of the adoption. Have you spoken to the lad about it?"

Mike nodded, his head turned away.

"What did he say?"

"He looked kind of wild at first, as if he wasn't hearing straight. Then says he, 'Gee, Mike, do you mean it?' And then—" Mike brushed an apologetic hand across his eyes—"I never see a kid cry so hard in all my life. Honest, Yer Honor, I was scairt. I—I t'ought he'd tear his insides out. But Mary, she seemed to sort of know what to do. So I left 'em and t'ought I'd come down and talk with you about fixin' it up and all."

Mike nodded, his head turned away.

"Hello, Jimmy Casey—" Mike's voice was hoarse. "Mary wants some ice water. And do you think ye could fix some for her? There's cubes in the refrigerator." He gestured with the small shillelagh in his hand.

ALL THE way up the stairs the frosted crystal cubes tinkled cheerily in a green glass pitcher which he had eyed admiringly when he first went into the kitchen. As Jimmy

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