

# Final Exam for a Death Degree

By Lawrence De Foy



*Of the thirty private sleuths that went to college to learn to be masterminds at crime-detecting, clumsy Mooshkin was the dumbest. Yet when murder was committed right before their eyes, only one was able to spot it—Mooshkin, the class dunce!*

**R**OOM 203, Arts and Sciences Building, was a typical lecture room. But the tiers of chairs, each with its wide desk arm, tonight held men of evident, even weighty, maturity. The bearlike human, who had just entered, closed the door behind him and padded across to the desk in front. Several horsy laughs greeted him. From the second row, Bill Caldwell, claim man for Atlas Mutual, called:

“Hi, Moose! That two-bit snooper

agency of yours in on this gag, too?”

Professor Archibald Ferentz, a gnat of a man with black-ribboned pinch-nose glasses stiffened disdainfully. He aimed his gray-tipped goatee at the assemblage.

“This is no gag, let me assure you,” he said waspishly. “Your companies, gentlemen, have jointly arranged that you—er—insurance claim investigators be given my course in practical psychology to increase your mental acuity—for reasons

best known to themselves," he added. He turned to the big man towering over him. "You are . . .?"

"Mooshkin. From the Carkin Investigation Bureau."

Ferentz ran his eye down a typewritten list. "I don't seem to find your name here."

"I'm taking my partner's place," growled Mooshkin, glaring at them. "George Carewe."

"Ah, yes. Well, take a seat. You're somewhat late."

Caldwell beckoned, indicating an empty seat beside him. Mooshkin plowed through the front row and lowered his huge bulk gingerly. The professor continued, twining his fingers in his chin foliage:

"As I was saying, gentlemen, the faculty of rapid and accurate observation is not inherited. No, indeed. It is a matter of intensive training, as I intend to prove to you this evening. Applied psychology, briefly, is the efficient usage of such mental equipment as, ahem, each of us may possess. In a few moments we will conduct an experiment in observation—of both eye and ear—which will demonstrate how greatly we neglect our powers in this respect. Later experiments of a similar nature will be made to show our progress—if, ahem, any!"

**H**IS listeners chuckled self-consciously. Ferentz picked up a sheaf of papers from his desk. "My assistant, Mr. Beaudry, will distribute these question sheets. Please leave them face down. Do not look at them until I tell you to do so."

Mr. Beaudry, a suavely sleek graduate student of the collar ad type, circulated in a cloud of hoarse murmurs.

"This is old stuff, Moose," Caldwell muttered, leaning over. "They have some

lad rush in and pull a few silly stunts, I hear. Then—"

The assistant, passing them, turned back suddenly. His handsome face flushed. "What?" he rasped tensely.

Caldwell gaped. "Huh?"

"You were talking about me. I heard you! You said I looked silly. Don't deny it!"

"On your way, son," Mooshkin growled. "Nobody mentioned you. Go peddle your papers."

Beaudry's lips worked, but he didn't say anything more. The Atlas claim man stared after him when he left. "What's he, a screwball? Us talkin' about him. Wow!"

The querulous look of a giant grizzly was on the big man's face. "Forget it. You started to say something about this business tonight."

"Oh. Well, my boy told me usually some guy rushes in and maybe stabs somebody with a rubber dagger. Something like that. Then they ask you a lot of dopey questions, see? Like what he did and what he said—stuff like that. Man, you gotta keep your eyes open or you make some pretty dumb mistakes."

Mooshkin sat back, his scowl relaxing to a languid frown. He felt a little relieved. Ever since his partner had talked him into taking said partner's place at this course of lectures, the big man had been uneasy. He had finished the seventh grade and formal schooling at the same time.

Of course, George would have been much more at home with this college stuff. But no! He had to smooth-talk Mooshkin into it. The high-pressure weasel!

"Moose," George had said, "you know more about practical psychology than the lad who wrote the book. Go up there and show up our clients' own hired hands, pal. That'll bring us more business than we can handle."

George, the super-salesman. Mooshkin snorted. As usual, the patter had worked. And here he was, going to college!

He sat up again as Beaudry, his paper-passing done, went down to take his stand beside the tall electrical switchboard in the corner. Mooshkin eyed the panel, studded with circuit-breakers, rheostats, and dials, with the faint apprehension of the average layman. In the space between the panel and the wall a maze of copper wiring led to several large and small generators.

"I must insist," Professor Ferentz was saying, "that all of you remain in your seats during this experiment." He walked around behind his oversize desk and nodded to his assistant.

The lights began to dim as Beaudry manipulated a knob. Most of the "class" tipped heads backward to watch them fade out. Some sort of fiberboard shutters over the windows on the side cut off the rays of the campus street lights.

"All ready," came the voice of the professor through the pitchy gloom.

A vivid blue spotlight flashed over the banked heads of the audience to focus on the front of the room. It gave subsequent proceedings a strangely dreamlike and unreal quality. The hooded and robed figure it found before the wide desk was fantastic.

"What do you want?" spoke Ferentz.

"Death," answered the figure. He raised a gun and aimed it at the professor, who took another gun from the desk drawer. But the first shot came from Beaudry, firing across the front of the room. The hooded figure clutched his arm and cried out, then started to return the fire. All three guns blazed in a fusillade.

A chubby little man jumped from his seat in the first row. The blue light gleamed on a small bald spot on his crown.

"Stop this!" he shrilled angrily. "Stop

it now!" He dashed into the line of fire, then staggered. His voice was panicky over the explosions. "Wait! I'm shot!"

He groped for a corner of the desk as the firing ceased, missed it, and collapsed heavily behind it, leaving only his feet and ankles showing . . .

"THIS should indicate how reliable are our faculties when excited," the professor finished. "Thirty shots from three revolvers, indeed. Mr. Caldwell has much to learn." He laid the paper down and picked up another.

"Mr.—ah, Mooshkin? Where is he?"

Mooshkin hunched big shoulders toward his ears and lumbered to his feet. His eyes seemed to be fixed on something far away. "Hold it a minute," he rumbled thoughtfully. "I guess I better change my answer on that fourth one."

Ferentz raised neat eyebrows. "The fourth question? Er, the one concerning the injuries? But, my dear sir, the answers you have given, while colloquial, are perfectly in order. Allow me to read it back to you: 'The black Ku Kluxer yelled like he took one in the left arm once, and Baldy from the first row caught one that probably rubbed him out.' " The professor looked up.

"I still guess I better change it," Mooshkin said doggedly. The claim men registered riotous approval of what they took to be a form of clowning.

"Please!" the pointed little beard bristled angrily. "In what way do you wish to change it? The robed person was quite evidently shot in the arm, while I specifically requested Dr. Muller to remain recumbent until the questions had been answered, to show that he was—"

The professor stopped short, jarred by some intuitive terror. "Dr. Muller!" He turned. "Dr. Muller, you may get up now. No need for you to remain on the floor any

longer. Dr. Muller!”

Mooshkin said, in a deep growl, “He’s dead.”

The professor had dashed around the big desk and was bending over until he was almost hidden behind it. Beaudry hastened toward him from his switchboard.

Ferentz jerked upward by degrees, face pale and glistening in the smoky yellow light. “He is dead,” he whispered hollowly. “He’s been shot. Through the heart.”

Pandemonium took over. The claim men milled and cursed in near-panic, some stepping over and between the seats to gather around the body, others babbling and pawing at the somber Mooshkin. A few sidled toward the door. With a visible effort the professor pulled himself together and stopped them.

“I’m sorry, gentlemen. No one can be allowed to leave until the police get here. I shall call them at once!”

**L**IEUTENANT McCORKLE, head of the Homicide Squad, stared at Mooshkin with disfavor. “Only you—out of a gathering of thirty men—knew that Dr. Muller had been killed. How?”

Mooshkin leaned against the blackboard, making of his broad back an eraser. “I told you,” he grumbled morosely, “I thought the guy was a pretty good actor when he yelled out and flopped. After the lights came on, I sort of watched to see what he’d do. Well, that’s all.”

“Yes, I know. ‘He didn’t do nothin’.’ You said that.”

“Well, he didn’t. No live guy could lay there for that long without moving a little, you know that. And remember how his feet were? Rolled outward on the heels, sort of? Well, I’ll bet there ain’t a man on earth can lie with his feet like that for

more than a couple of minutes without having ‘em jerk. No sir! Reflex action or something. Try it yourself.”

The lieutenant sighed. Prim, slim, and trim as an undertaker, he turned once more to bend over the collection of firearms on the desk. It was nearing midnight and bed seemed as far away as ever.

“Deduction,” he sneered. “A rough, tough, and nasty character like you pulling a Sherlock Holmes.”

Mooshkin wasn’t listening too closely. He, too, was tired. Also the vague outline of an idea kept eluding him. His eyes wandered vacantly about the lecture room, resting briefly on the group herded into a corner by McCorkle’s assistant, Detective Sergeant Leggett.

Professor Ferentz, Beaudry, and a gangling lad still wearing a long black robe, but now unhooded to show scared features—Phillipson was his name—were apparently having a rough time of it. Leggett’s policy was to get them all talking at once. Then, with that beefy, superior grin, sort out the information he wanted.

Mooshkin wiped his face with the palm of his hand. With the windows still shuttered, the room reeked with varied forms of burning tobacco after three—or was it four—hours. The claim men, their first panic quieted, had settled down to wait with the patience of their kind. Someone had produced a pack of cards. A modest game of blackjack was in progress near the top of the tiered seats. Other small groups smoked and swapped lies in cynical murmurs.

“Deduce me this, Mis-ter Mooshkin,” McCorkle whirled and pointed. “What happened to the gun? You heard the medical examiner say Muller was shot with a .32. Where is it?”

The big man glowered. “I swallowed it. Without water.”

McCorkle looked at him for a long moment. "I'm not trying to pin the murder on you. But I can take you downtown and cool you off for a few days, you know. You're a setup as a material witness."

Whether the lieutenant knew it or not, this was a shrewd thrust. Mooshkin had a morbid dislike for confinement, dating back to the roistering Twenties. A year in a smelly city jail for no other reason than having been so unfortunate as to witness an important gang massacre made this a sizeable chink in the big man's armor. He came erect with a peevish snort and looked at the weapons laid out on the desk.

"The professor and his bunch were the only ones I saw shooting," he said. "Maybe somebody else could have chimed in from the seats, but I didn't see nothing."

McCorkle indicated the guns. "Professor Ferentz says he used that .38, Beaudry the little .22 target revolver, and the youngster in black the old .25 there. Does that check?"

Mooshkin nodded.

"Then these three here were on the claim boys. This one taken from Caldwell was the only .32 in the bunch. And it hasn't been fired—from the look of it—since Custer's Last Stand."

**M**OOCHKIN pounded his hand with a keglie fist thoughtfully. That elusive idea again! If only he could pin it down. "That kid—young Phillipson—he was the only one who left the room. Did you talk to him?"

"Leggett will find out what he knows." McCorkle was disinterested. "Anyway, the professor says he dropped the gun he was using before he left. Something none of you noticed, incidentally."

"Uh-huh. And suppose the old goat's covering for him?"

McCorkle looked disgusted. "Why should he? This Dr. Muller was the

professor's close friend and associate, wasn't he?"

"Was he?" Mooshkin grunted.

Sergeant Leggett, his flashy tweed suit rivaling anything to be seen here on the campus, rolled across the room, followed by the three psychologists.

"I can't do much with these here collitch characters, chief. Whacks, the lot of them. Maybe you oughta see what you can do."

"Later," McCorkle nodded. "Did you learn anything about the dead man? Dr. Muller?"

"I placed myself entirely at your disposal for any questioning, lieutenant," the professor began. "The sergeant—"

"Let me tell it, your honor, if you don't mind," Leggett cut in. He drew a deep breath and cocked one chunky thigh over a corner of the desk. "To sum it up—this here Muller was a prince, no less. Came here as an associate professor from some western collitch at the beginning of school last fall. A wonderful guy. Not an enemy in the world."

Leggett slapped his knee. "That's what they start off with, yeah. But then it began to come out. Practically all of our chums had a motive for killing the rat—" He held up a restraining palm to quiet the three who were all trying to talk at once. "Gennelmen, please!"

Mooshkin's thick lower lip twitched as he recognized a burlesque of the professor's pedantic manner.

"First off," Leggett went on, "this Muller was slated to take over the professor's job here when his honor's contract expired. Yeah, and even though the professor tried to laugh it off, he was plenty burned, according to rumors around the collitch. Young Phillipson let me in on that."

"Just a normal reluctance to losing a position one has held for twenty years,"

the professor spoke irascibly. "And I do wish you wouldn't address me as Your Honor!"

"Okay," Leggett grinned.

McCorkle frowned and looked at Mooshkin. "Go on."

Leggett said, "Then the professor says he heard young Beaudry, here, having a helluva battle with the dead guy last week."

Beaudry examined his nails. "I told you that was nothing important. I merely let Dr. Muller know that I did not like his habit of calling me down before his classes. If he wished to correct some action of mine, there was no reason why he couldn't do it privately, was there?"

His handsome eyes burned as he spoke the last words, Mooshkin saw. There was something childlike about the graduate student, in spite of his blue-black beard—which was becoming more and more prominent as the hours fled.

"If you're looking for a motive," Beaudry's lips twisted slightly, "ask Martin Phillipson about the fight he had with Dr. Muller, just this morning."

**L**EGGETT nodded at McCorkle's raised eyebrow. "I got that, chief. The doc was quite a lad with the ladies. These baldy guys sometimes are. Seems he was making passes of a sort at a little chick of Phillipson's. Probably nothing serious, but our boy scout got upset and threatened to tear the doc's head off."

Phillipson reddened but said nothing. He seemed to be genuinely miserable.

"Motives, certainly," Lieutenant McCorkle sighed and straightened, "but not very strong."

Mooshkin said, "I got a hunch this was planned out ahead of time, Lootenant."

"Premeditated? Why?"

"The way the gun disappeared. Whoever shot the guy knew he had to get

rid of the gun, knew it beforehand. Looks like he did, too." There was a triumphant note in Mooshkin's growl.

McCorkle said coldly, "Would you suggest I have the room searched again, Mister Mooshkin?"

The big man shook his head. "Your cops went over it good enough, I guess. But unless this youngster managed to get it out of the room somehow, where did it go?"

Again the thought that had once been so close, and had slipped away before the big investigator could grasp it, seemed on the verge of appearance. Mooshkin stared at the collection of weapons on the desk, an angry grizzly lowering at a possible trap.

"Well," McCorkle spoke incisively, "we're making no gains here. Nothing else to do but take everybody down to headquarters and question you all separately."

Mooshkin started and began to speak. The professor, however, was ahead of him.

"Nonsense," he said sharply. "What can you possibly learn that way? I insist you allow me to call the president of the university. He should know of this."

McCorkle looked a little worried. "I'm sorry, Professor Ferentz. That wouldn't be advisable right now. Later, maybe."

Mooshkin grunted. "I go along with the professor on one thing. Once we leave here, you won't have a snowball's chance of breaking this case, Lootenant."

"No? Have you anything better to suggest, Mis-ter Mooshkin?" McCorkle's voice contained a wealth of sarcasm. The big man knew it was his cue to shut up, but he spoke anyway.

"I got a hunch," he said slowly, "that we oughta have that act put on again. Seems to me somebody might be able to work something out of it."

Leggett guffawed. "I once read a story

like that, too, Fatso. The murderer gets so upset at having to go through the business twice that he breaks down in tears and confesses. Story book stuff!"

McCorkle was looking speculatively at the big man. "Maybe he's got more than that in mind. What's the play, friend?"

Mooshkin shrugged. "Maybe something, maybe nothing. I can't tell until we go through it."

The lieutenant's lips thinned. "Either you tell me what you have in mind, or it's no dice. I'm in charge here, and I'm not taking any more chances. Are you talking?"

Mooshkin shifted his feet in a stamping motion, his habitual gesture of exasperation. "No," he said. "If you want to be an iron skull, go ahead—drag us all downtown."

Unexpectedly, Leggett came to the big man's aid. "Aw, what the hell, chief," he said cheerfully. "Let him put on his show. If nothin' comes of it we can proceed from there." He ran a derisive tongue over smiling lips. "I'd like to see this screwy Wild West show, myself."

The professor stiffened. "My dear sir, the demonstration was a carefully timed and rehearsed psychological experiment."

McCorkle was watching Mooshkin. "Have you any objections to performing the experiment again, professor?"

Ferentz looked doubtful. "Well-I . . ."

"Because it might indicate a guilty knowledge if you had," the police lieutenant finished smoothly. "It just might."

Professor Ferentz said to his two assistants. "Are you young men agreeable?"

Phillipson nodded. "Yes-s . . ."

Beaudry raised both eyebrows in a calculated expression of boredom. "Why not?"

"Very well, then. Let's get it over.

Everyone will take his original place," McCorkle snapped efficiently. "Except Mister Mooshkin. He will kindly consent to take the dead man's place. We want to give our genius a spot where he can see and hear better."

Mooshkin's little eyes lit in triumph. That was it! See and hear. . . Hear!

Quickly he veiled them and padded across to the chair so recently warmed by the dead Dr. Muller. McCorkle, Leggett, and two of the three plainclothes cops were getting the loudly annoyed claim men back in their seats, passing the blank-loaded guns to the three instructors. The third plainclothes man leaned against the door, arms folded, eyes watchful.

THE professor and his two assistants took their places. Crossing the room, Beaudry apparently thought of something and halted in midstride to look sharply at Mooshkin. "If this is a trick—" he started.

"No talk," McCorkle interrupted. To the undergraduate, Phillipson, he said, "You won't need to leave the room. Just come and go as far as the door."

In a remarkably short time the police had the stage set. They placed themselves, then, at strategic intervals along the walls, pressing back against them, Mooshkin noted with sour amusement. Prickles of sweat played across his own forehead.

The hand that Professor Ferentz waved toward Beaudry, when all was ready, shook visibly.

Once again the eerie blue light beat down. Once again Mooshkin heard the professor ask, and the hooded youngster answer, the trite question. When the three produced their weapons, Mooshkin half-closed his eyes and listened with fierce attention to the interchange of shots.

Yes, so far his idea was right. There was a definite rhythm—a kind of pattern—to the reports. The flat *crack!*

*crack!* of the .22 wove in and around the heavier *thwock!* of the .38, the sharp *waang!* of the stubby .25.

Mooshkin stirred uneasily. It was wrong, as he knew it would be, but where? How did it differ from the first enactment? Dammit, he had been so sure he could get it, that—

He had it! The little eyes snapped open, blazing. Mooshkin swung his head.

The killer had known—or had guessed—also. His alert gaze was directed at the big investigator. Each saw recognition in the eyes of the other. The murderer acted. A swift movement of his hand and Mooshkin saw, in the instant before the blue spot was cut off, the bore of the missing .32, aimed directly at his head.

But the big man was also in action. While not particularly fast on his feet, Mooshkin knew what he wanted to do. This gave him a direction and purpose it that made his moves seem lightning-like. Without straightening, he shot from his chair and across the front of the room.

He was diving through the last few feet of darkness when the first shot from the killer's gun flashed past his ear. His beefy shoulder crashed into the gunman's midriff. Two more shots flashed toward the ceiling. Then Mooshkin was wrenching the gun away with one huge paw and lashing out savagely with the other. . . .

LEGGETT sighed. "I still don't get it. What made him break down and try to knock off the Moose? Not that I see much wrong with that idea, sometimes," he added, grinning.

McCorkle was a little more friendly, now that he had broken the case. "You might explain, Mooshkin. Just for the record."

Mooshkin didn't look up from the

prisoner, huddled against the electrical panel and stupidly staring at the manacles on his wrists.

"I figured the killer must be one of the three guys actually firing guns here," he said. "The professor, or Beaudry, or the one in the black outfit. But how to find out which one. I almost knew how once or twice, but something else came up and I lost the thought. I did know that if we left here, there wasn't much chance of ever finding out who did it."

"Yeah? Why not?" asked Leggett.

"Probably because the gun was hidden in this room," Lieutenant McCorkle said. "And that's another thing. Where—"

"One thing at a time," Mooshkin growled. He looked up to glare at Caldwell who had patted him on the back. The others were gathered around him, mouths open in awe not quite so satiric as they were pretending. "The only way we could pin the job on the killer was to get him and the gun together again. The smart guy had planned it that way. Maybe he was screwy, like the professor says—"

"I said, my dear sir, it was psychopathic neurosis," Ferentz said. Most of his assurance was regained. "Ah—I had suspected something of the sort once or twice, but—"

"Maybe he was screwy about some things," Mooshkin repeated loudly, looking at Ferentz with active dislike, "but he was wise enough when it came to pulling off the stunt and getting away with it."

"Almost," Caldwell chimed in proudly. "If it hadn't been for us snoopers—"

Mooshkin jerked his elbow and knocked Caldwell back into the crowd. "Anyway, I thought of getting the show put on again. More of a stall than anything else. Until the Lootenant here said something about hearing, seeing and

hearing. Then the idea, the whole thing that I couldn't get before, came to me."

"Well, what was it?" McCorkle asked impatiently.

"This. If the show was put on again, the killer wouldn't dare use the .32—he'd use the one he was supposed to have fired the first time."

McCorkle smiled, a rare thing. "Of course. Why didn't I think of that?"

The professor nodded. "Elementary reasoning."

Leggett laughed and said, "Simple, but what else would you expect from the Moose?"

"Yeah," Mooshkin growled, "simple when I give it out. But I notice none of you thought about it yourselves. Well, so I just listened to the shots, figuring I'd know the kind I didn't hear the first time. It worked out all right."

Leggett said, "I'll say it did. And you nearly got your own brains blown out. Why do you suppose Beaudry shot the doc right out in front of everybody like that, though?"

Mooshkin looked down at the handsome psychology assistant. The killer was looking up with a disdainful pout on his lips. "Ask him," the big man shrugged. "Maybe he got the idea Muller was riding him deliberately, just to show him up in front of everybody, so he wanted to get even by knocking him off the same way. Don't ask me how screwballs think."

Leggett leaned down and hooked a hand under Beaudry's arm. "All right, Mac, on your feet. We're going bye-bye."

McCorkle asked, "One more thing, Mooshkin. Where was the gun? Did my men slip up somewhere when they were searching?"

The big investigator looked around at the apprehensive plainclothes men. "Yeah," he said, "but don't blame them. He hid it in the one place where he knew nobody would mess around too much—cops or anybody else. People who don't know too much about electric stuff steer clear of things like that motor, so they won't get a shock."

Mooshkin's blunt forefinger pointed in back of the panel to a vent in the casing of the largest of the generators. Plain to be seen around the opening were several deep scratches. Mooshkin was careful not to touch the metal.

"The gun was shoved in there. Practically in plain sight, but Beaudry was safe enough during the search. He knew his—"

"Psychology," the bearded little professor cut in. "Sound reasoning. I could have pointed that out, you know."

"Gosh sake, why didn't you, then?" erupted Mooshkin angrily. He turned away in disgust, pushing through the crowd.

"Wait, Fatso," Leggett called after him. "Want a lift downtown? What's your rush?"

Mooshkin turned in the doorway. "I got my own bus. I want to get to a phone. Late as it is I'm going to get that smart partner of mine out of bed, and tell him what's liable to happen the next time he tries to send me to college!"

The door slammed behind him.