

A harmless-appearing automobile accident was only a jumping-off point for Detective Stamp Olsen to dive into a

Murder Muddle



By James Howard Leveque

THE BODY lay face down in the mud. A man's body, bent grotesquely in the glare of the flashlight.

Detective Stamp Olsen knelt, caught a limp wrist, held it a moment.

"No pulse," he said dully. "The guy's dead."

A little gray-haired woman standing behind Olsen sobbed convulsively. The

tight circle of men edging the flashlight's rays stood grim-faced, silent.

"It's murder," some one said in a brittle voice.

The circle of faces spread out a little, drew away from a man who stood teetering between two uniformed officers, blubbering into hands cupped over his mouth. His eyes had a vacant, drunken stare.

A maroon sedan, its left side smashed, leaned crazily against a telephone pole near-by.

"Ya got him, didn't ya?" a guttural voice demanded.

But the guy between the cops kept on blubbering, kept on staring at the body in the mud.

A siren whined closer through the night, automobile headlights swung around a corner two blocks away, floodlighted the small clump of men.

"It's the coroner," Olsen said quietly and motioned a path through the group wider with his large, ungainly hands . . .

Chief of Detectives Ulrick eyed the man in the camel's hair coat and said a little angrily: "We'll do what we can to get your nephew the breaks, Mr. Cole, but the evidence seems pretty conclusive."

"Damn the evidence, Ulrick. The whole thing's a frame up, and I'll prove it if it takes every dollar I've got."

Ulrick said slowly: "It was your nephew's car. He was blind drunk, he and the guy his car hit had had a wild, drunken argument not two hours before—"

"That's not absolute proof!"

"No, but it makes reasonable the assumption that after he left the bar, your nephew saw in the glare of his auto lights the man walking home along the side of the road, got the insane idea of plowing into him and going on. So he hit Rayfield, but the car went off onto a soft road shoulder, became unmanageable, crashed from the street into the telephone pole."

Cole looked at Ulrick a long time, said bitterly: "I see I'm wasting my time trying to talk sense with you. Your mind's made up and you think the case is closed. Before I get through, you'll wish it were!"

He turned, slammed out of Ulrick's headquarters office. Olsen, coming in a moment later, stood in the doorway and stared back along the corridor.

"The Deacon," he said, entering the room, "looks sore."

Ulrick frowned, shrugged unhappily. "What did the coroner's inquest show?" he asked.

Olsen perched his large frame on a corner of his chief's desk, one leg braced against the floor, the other dangling, his overcoat billowing around him.

"Nobody actually saw young Cole hit Rayfield. Several heard the car crash against the telephone pole but couldn't locate the exact direction of the sound. It was three A.M.

"When the first witnesses got there, Rayfield was lying in the ditch, Cole was slumped over behind the steering wheel. Maybe drunk, maybe knocked out. They called me, got the dead boy's old mother out of bed. She was there when I arrived."

ULRICK pinched his lower lip with one hand, drummed a letter opener on the desk top with the other.

"It's as close to a pat case of manslaughter as I ever saw," he said meditatively. He went over the known facts at some length, then ended with: "But I've got a feeling."

The telephone rang.

Ulrick answered, said, "For you," and handed the instrument to Olsen.

Stamp said: "Hello . . . Yeah . . . What's that? . . . Talk slower, mister—" He jiggled the hook, listened. He replaced the receiver, said: "Hell, he hung up."

"What's loose?" Ulrick asked.

"The Deacon," Stamp said, rising. "Dead. A guy just found him—lying in a Front Street ditch. Run over by a car."

Ulrick rose swearing, grabbed his hat, stopped, barked an order into an annunciator system.

Outside, they dashed for a P. D. car. Newsboys thrust papers at them, but they knew the news that the headlines

screamed:

ANTI-GAMBLING CRUSADER'S KIN
HELD

"Deacon" Cole Charges Frame-Up
Coroner's Jury Probes Crash

An ambulance shrilled in the fog three blocks away. Ulrick at the wheel, the police car ground into action and, siren open, whipped right onto Court Street and sped the two blocks to Front. They got out.

A crowd was beginning to collect. The squad car Ulrick had ordered unloaded five uniformed cops who took charge of herding the curious. The ambulance pulled up, internes swung out.

But Olsen, seeing the mangled face and body, the camel's hair coat bunched under one side, told himself that Marcus Cole was beyond medical aid.

There was no sign of the car that had struck him.

Stamp said in Ulrick's ear: "I'm leaving it with you. I've got a date with a rat."

He struck off down the cobbled riverside road, hands thrust deep in his ulster pockets, head bent against the drifting fog.

Detective Stamp Olsen was no master mind. Large, awkward in movement, with a square head, pale-blue eyes, a jutting jaw, he gave the impression of never understanding anything. The envious on the force called him a "dumb, lucky Swede," but he had a way of getting things done.

A hundred feet along Front, he turned into a worn path sloping unevenly down the river bank, drew up at a boxlike houseboat moored to stakes driven at an angle into the mud of the shore line.

He called: "Halloo." His voice sounded dead in the fog. No one answered.

He shouted again, pounded his heel upon the unsteady gangplank bridging the gap between boat and bank. He thought he heard a sound, wasn't sure, and called; "This is Olsen, police headquarters. I'm coming aboard."

Instantly a figure, tall, angular, hands hidden behind his back, stood in the black rectangle of the doorway. Two others approached down either side of the cabin, along narrow, warped catwalks. Their hands weren't hidden; they carried double-barreled shotguns. The men's faces held distrust, menace.

Olsen stood on the deck a moment, surveyed the three men. He knew squatters, had dealt with them before. He knew their resentment of organized society, their inborn belief the law was a machine designed by the strong to hound the weak. He knew they could shoot him down, push off into the fog and dispose of him at their leisure.

He said genially: "Stow the artillery, boys. All I want is information."

The guns held steady. The man in the doorway said: "We got no information, buddy."

"The name is Olsen—Mr. Olsen."

"We still got no information."

"In that case, maybe you'd like to hear this: a guy was killed up on the hill just now. Mangled by an auto, maybe."

"Yeah?"

"Only he wasn't killed where he was found. There wasn't any blood on the ground. He was dumped there."

"So what?"

"So if he was dumped, he was dumped by somebody who did it on purpose. So it's maybe murder instead of manslaughter."

"We ain't interested in all this. We ain't left this boat all night."

OLSEN sized up the three carefully, taking his time. Finally he said; “Better come clean, boys. A while ago, one of you guys stood halfway up the river bank watching the police arrive. You’d been there some time because you had got used to having a cigarette in your mouth and forgot to throw it away after we arrived.

“When you puffed, the lighted end flared like a headlight down there in the fog.”

The man in the doorway swore his surprise.

Olsen leaped the three feet into the door, threw his full weight against the man, flung him backward into the dark cabin. The shanty boatman tried to get his hands out front, but Stamp had them pinned back, twisted an automatic free, sent it clattering to the floor.

It was the work of a second to spin him around, face him toward the door just as the two with shotguns rounded onto the front deck, plunged toward the door.

The man in Olsen’s arms cried: “Don’t shoot!”

The others didn’t. They realized they were silhouetted in the door, faded out of it and presently one of them called: “Keep him busy, Rupe!”

Rupe did.

Twisting, kicking, he swung Olsen this way and that, but Stamp held him toward the door as a shield, shouted to the men on deck to throw their weapons in the clear.

They didn’t. Stamp felt the boat moving, realized the others had moved it free of the bank, were poling it into the river current.

He pushed the angular man forward, spun him around, smashed a fist into his jaw, sent him catapulting backward across a bunk, where he lay still.

Olsen reached in an armpit holster, got his revolver, edged toward the door. He

heard a hinge creak back of him, pivoted, saw a head poking in through a rear door.

He fired at it. There was a hoarse scream. Then silence. He waited, tense in the darkened room.

Outside, the fog swirled by, hugging the water. Waves lapped softly against the hull. The deep-throated bellow of a tug sounded. Somewhere in the fog he heard a siren, the high shrill of a police whistle.

Maybe Ulrick had heard the shot, was looking for him. But the shore line was invisible. They’d never find the houseboat in this fog. He knelt, began removing his shoes.

The men outside were strangely quiet, he thought. Even if he’d hit one— Hair rose on the nape of his neck. He’d caught the sound of someone, something moving inside the cabin.

Olsen glanced hastily at the angular man. He was still out cold.

Then he saw it. A tarpaulin. Spread out in a corner. It was moving.

Cautiously, watching both doors, Stamp went over, silently lifted the covering. A girl, bound and gagged with oily waste, looked up at him in mute appeal.

His back to the cabin wall, Stamp removed the gag with his free hand, placed a finger over her lips. The girl lay still. He cut the twine with which she was bound, helped her to a sitting position. Then he rose, moved stealthily to the front deck, peered cautiously around the door jamb.

NO ONE was on the catwalks, no one on the aft deck. There was a small pool of blood near the rear door.

“They slid overboard,” he muttered, “after I winged one.”

The girl was standing in the cabin, rubbing her wrists, watching the unconscious man on the bunk.

“They’re gone,” Stamp informed her.

She nodded, asked; "Where are we?"

For the first time, the strangers of the situation occurred to Stamp. Floating down the river in a houseboat, at the mercy of fog and current, with only a girl he did not know and a potential killer who was unconscious. The girl, he saw, was small, brunette, pretty.

He said: "Somewhere on the river. Wait by the door until I get this guy roped." Then he went over and began trussing the man.

He had finished when he suddenly bent forward, looked puzzled. The man was wearing expensive calfskin shoes. Olsen reached out, unbolted a wooden window, jabbed it open with the heel of his left hand. Light and fog swept in.

Four packages of quarter cigarettes lay on a rough table. Three tailor-made suits hung from nails on the wall.

Stamp said: "This guy's no squatter!"

The girl said: "No. No, he isn't."

"Then who is he?"

"I don't know his name. But he works for Mr. Slug O'Ryan."

"Oh. For Slug."

She nodded brightly.

Stamp said slowly: "I've seen your face somewhere."

"I'm Ruth Millerand."

"Senator Millerand's daughter!"

She nodded, announced a little proudly: "I was kidnapped."

Stamp thought, there's plenty about this picture I don't understand.

Marcus "Deacon" Cole was leader of a faction that was fighting to abolish gambling. He was killed under circumstances planned to appear accidental. His nephew, apparently crashing into young Rayfield while driving drunk, faced manslaughter charges. Both crimes might conceivably be planned by the gambling racket czar.

The czar, as Stamp knew but could not prove, was Senator Millerand.

But here was the senator's daughter saying she had been kidnapped by her father's own henchmen.

Olsen dragged his prisoner off the cot to the rear door of the houseboat. He stepped out on deck, took a long pole to the end of which a flat board had been nailed, and oar braced between stanchion and shoe, sculled in the direction of the sounds of automobile traffic.

It was slow work. The girl chattered on, shivering in the fog, obviously thrilled at her abduction and rescue. Olsen listened, learned that she had heard her father arguing violently behind closed doors in the library of her home the night before, but could not identify the senator's visitor by his voice.

Half an hour later, as she left for a Junior League show rehearsal, two men had sprung at her, throttled her cries, tossed her into the tonneau of a waiting automobile, covered her with a blanket and warned her to keep quiet.

She kept quiet. She had not known where she was being taken. She did not know how long she had been on the houseboat.

A forty-foot cruiser loomed in the mist to starboard, swerved sharply, crept past, her wake causing the deck beneath Stamp to roll. The guy on the floor opened his eyes, looked up at Olsen balefully.

"I don't know nothin'," he offered. "I won't talk an' you can't make me, see?"

Stamp made no reply, kept on sculling the boat toward shore.

REPEATED BLASTS on his whistle brought a cop pounding up through the fog. Stamp explained the situation, found he was way down on lower Riverside Road.

“Take charge of the guy tied up in the boat, Reynolds,” he told the cop.

“Who is he?” Reynolds asked.

“A pal of Slug’s.”

Reynolds caught Olsen’s arm. “Wait a minute, Stamp, wait a minute.” An expression of sudden understanding came to the officer’s weathered face.

“Look, there maybe ain’t any connection but for the past twenty-minutes there’s been a regular parade of Slug’s guys drivin’ up an’ down this road.”

Stamp said, “Hell,” caught the girl’s arm, told Reynolds, “We got a date,” started off.

The picture came into focus: the two who had swum away had reached a telephone, phoned Slug’s hangout. Slug, knowing the girl could probably stick him for a kidnap rap, saw it wouldn’t be healthy if she made a clean getaway. The houseboat had to land. The gang didn’t know where, but by patrolling Riverside Road steadily, they stood an even chance of finding out, of putting the blast on the girl and Olsen.

Reynolds waved his hand, said, “Luck,” and started down the river bank. Olsen and the girl plunged into a fog drift.

They had reached the far side of the cobbled road, were turning into a lumber yard, when a black sedan loomed through the fog.

A heavy voice shouted: “That’s them! That’s Olsen!” Another cried hoarsely: “Get the girl!”

Automatics roared behind them, Olsen clipped, “Duck behind that lumber!” did it himself, drew his revolver and fired twice.

The car stopped, dark figures emerged, started across the road. Suddenly, from behind the river bank, another gun started barking, splattering slugs into the sedan.

Olsen thought, “I’ll get Reynolds cited for this,” and leaned toward the girl.

“Come on,” he said. “Reynolds can hold out in that trench all day.”

The girl didn’t move.

Stamp looked at her, turned her half over. There was a dark, seeping splotch on her right shoulder. She had been shot down. He turned, emptied his revolver at the sedan, drove the men back into it.

Reynolds had evidently found the automatic in the boat, was pumping away.

Stamp lifted the girl, started carrying her along a narrow canyon formed by tall rows of stacked, seasoning lumber.

Shouldering through the fog with the odor of the wood in his nostrils, Stamp heard scattered shots behind him, the roar of a motor, the whine of a car getting under way.

Two more shots sounded eerily, and Olsen knew Reynolds was safe. He turned left into another canyon, then right and presently heard the muffled clatter of lumber yard activity.

As he appeared out of the fog, his hat mashed on one side of his head, the bleeding girl in his arms, overalled men dropped their tools, stood looking at him speechless.

He said: “Somebody call an ambulance.” A man jumped toward a doorway. Olsen placed his burden on a loading platform, said, “She’s shot,” in answer to questions. He loosened her collar, placed a wad of cotton from a first aid kit some one brought over the wound. It didn’t look bad.

THE girl stirred. “Poor daddy,” she said, her voice a whimper. “My poor daddy.”

Stamp squeezed her small hand in his large clumsy one, said: “Just be quiet, miss. You’ll be okay.”

He shed his overcoat, placed it under the girl’s head. He walked a short distance

away, called several of the men, told them: "I'm Detective Olsen, Headquarters."

"I recognized you, Mr. Olsen."

"I've got to get away in a hurry. Take care of the girl until the ambulance arrives. Tell them it's Senator Millerand's daughter. I'll be up there in an hour. Meanwhile, I need a car, so—"

Driving, he fought to get things straight in his own mind. He found it hard to believe that Senator Millerand, although he controlled the gambling rackets of the city, would stoop to murder—even with Deacon Cole's anti-gambling crusaders clamping down on him. He had never seemed so ruthless a type of man.

It was even harder to understand why the senator would kidnap his own daughter, place her at the mercy of Slug O'Ryan and his rats. Maybe Slug had broken with the senator, was trying to go it alone.

Stamp shook his head on that. Slug didn't have the brains or the guts to manage a city-wide racket. Somebody had to do his thinking for him. Which, Stamp decided, definitely brought the senator back into the puzzle.

Stamp walked up steps to Senator Millerand's front door, pushed a button. The soft tones of an alhambra chime sounded somewhere inside. The door opened, a mulatto butler looked out.

"I'm Detective Olsen. Headquarters. I want to see Senator Millerand," Stamp said.

He noticed the strained, scared look in the butler's eyes. He asked: "What's wrong?"

The servant struggled a moment in obvious indecision, finally blurted: "Senator Millerand, suh. He done went out, said he got to kill a man."

Olsen pushed inside, closed the door, stood in a wide hall.

"What're you talking about?"

"He's been up all night, suh, waitin' fo' Miss Ruth. He say he scared to call the police. He grab the telephone when it rung, listened an' hung up. He say: 'They got Miss Ruth.'

"He put on his overcoat an' hat, catch up his gun, say, 'I got to do somethin' I ain't never did befo'. I got to kill a man,' climb in his car an' left."

As he plowed recklessly through the lifting fog, Stamp swore at himself for not going straight to Slug O'Ryan's hangout instead of to the senator's home.

Those few minutes he had spent there might have prevented a murder.

The car plunged across Broad Street, hit a green light at Boulevard, turned right, pulled in opposite a fire plug. He wrote something on a card, tucked it into the horn button, ran half a square to a one-way side street and turned in.

Midway down the block was a door. On either side, two men, short, slim, cigarettes drooping from their lips, lounged.

Stamp started in past them. They caught his arms. One said: "Just a minute, pal."

Olsen swung. Two long, looping, vicious rights that caught the men flush on their jaws, cracked their heads against the brick building. They slumped to the sidewalk.

Olsen went in the door, up a dark flight of stairs. At a second floor landing he saw nothing. He mounted to the third floor. He heard voices, spotted an anteroom at the rear of the hall through which light seeped. He moved toward it.

A voice there said: "Jeez, Cokie, I thought the boss told you to—"

He never finished. Stamp's fingers were around his throat, closing tighter, tighter. The man tried to get at his gun, couldn't, gradually went limp in Olsen's hands. Stamp eased him to the hall floor.

PAUSING at an inner door around which the artificial light shone, Stamp listened.

“Get this straight, senator,” a heavy voice droned. “Your chips are all cashed an’ you’re leavin’ the game, see?”

Olsen recognized Senator Millerand’s round tones: “You’re wasting time, Slug. I don’t bluff.”

“You’re quitting, or your kid gets the works.”

“And you get the chair.”

“Oh, no, I don’t. You can’t pin it on me. I got influence.”

“The only influence you have ever had was mine.” There was silence before the senator added: “I guessed somebody had put you up to this.

“Well, what I told you last week holds. I argued against fighting the Deacon with violence. Your new employer has evidently advised differently. So you’ve framed Deacon Cole’s nephew, the radio just flashed word you’ve killed the Deacon. You’ve kidnaped my daughter, threatened her bodily harm if I don’t surrender my gambling franchises to you.

“I’m willing to shut all gambling down, Slug. Shut it down tight. But I won’t be frozen out by you or your master mind. I don’t bluff.”

Olsen heard movement, heard O’Ryan say: “Neither does this.”

“Put that gun away, Slug.”

Stamp tensed, revolver forward, left hand poised over the doorknob. “I’m going to put you away, senator. My boys are out now to get your kid and that dumb dick, Olsen. And with you gone—”

“For heaven’s sake—”

Olsen clamped the doorknob, turned it, slammed his shoulder against the door, fell to a knee, all in one motion.

Slug’s face was numbed from surprise. Then he caught his mental balance, swung his automatic and pressed the trigger.

Stamp fired at the same time, creased O’Ryan’s face. He fired again, got Slug’s shoulder, spun him howling backward.

There was a noise behind Olsen, from the hallway door. He turned, saw the man he had throttled weaving to his knees, pawing for his gun. Stamp dived at him, dragged him to his feet, removed the gun, sent him catapulting across a table to fall beside the wounded O’Ryan.

Olsen went over, half lifted Slug. He was a short, squat man with puff adder jaws and a great shock of black hair.

“Okay, Slug. Spill it. Who’s muscling into Millerand’s racket?”

O’Ryan clutched his shoulder, said nothing.

“I can tell it for him,” Senator Millerand said. “He listened to somebody else promise a bigger cut than I was giving him, turned rat on me, started playing with the other side.

“They killed young Rayfield because he knew the plot, framed Deacon Cole’s nephew to make it look like my doing. Cole and his men were set to raise hell, so the Deacon disappeared. To make certain I wouldn’t balk at this pressure, they kidnaped my daughter. It was devilish clever.”

“But who did the master-minding?” Stamp asked.

“Only one man could—” the senator began when Stamp saw it. A door to his left inching open, a hand sneaking out, toward a wall light button.

Olsen got to his feet, leaped at the door.

The light went out. The outflung door caught him on the forehead, he sprawled sidewise against the legs of a man, held on.

He felt blows on the top of his head, lunged, threw the other to the floor. They rolled over and over, swinging viciously, wildly. A shoe caught Stamp under the

chin, sudden pressure thrust him bodily backward.

The shade ripped from the open window. A tall figure stood outlined against the swirling fog before toppling headlong to the street below.

THE LIGHT switched on under Senator Millerand's finger. The four men in the room looked blankly at each other.

The senator shook his head. "The profit," he said, "wasn't worth it."

Slug was ready to talk. Oddly, no one much wanted to listen. They all moved slowly downstairs.

"It was his idea, I tell you," Slug whined. "The vice stink in the papers was a swell blind an' plenty hot to turn the heat on the senator. Rayfield was a rat, an'

framin' young Cole would make the public sore at the senator. He even knocked off the next guy, phoned it in to Mr. Olsen himself so there'd be no muffing the name."

The senator nodded, said: "With Deacon Cole officially dead, it was made to order for the papers and his own plans."

On the sidewalk below, a cop was handcuffing the two lookouts Stamp had kayoed. The cop said: "I got your note in the horn button, Olsen."

Stamp said, "Yeah," led the rest around the corner of the building.

A dark object sprawled half in the gutter, half on the sidewalk. Fog eddied around it.

They grouped silently about the body.

Then Stamp said slowly, sadly, "It's the Deacon, all right."