

# **SIXTH AVENUE MURDER**

Ben Conlon



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DETECTIVE BILL MANNING had just turned into Sixth Avenue when he heard the shots. He had been walking leisurely; after all, even a dick can move leisurely when he's on vacation.

Of course, in a sense, a detective is never on a vacation. So Bill broke into a run, yanked out his Police Positive.

The crowd had collected quickly—as a crowd always does in New York. Bill noticed some of them bending over a prostrate form near the curb.

It was then that he saw the running man.

The running man, in fact, was almost on top of Bill when Bill saw him.

The street was very crowded, and Manning took no chances on hitting an innocent bystander with a bullet. He clubbed down with his gun.

Anybody can miss. Manning missed. And that he had not misjudged that this fellow was one of the stick-up men was proved pretty well when the fellow swung hard with the gun in his hand—it was a little too close for shooting. The gun barrel got Manning on the left temple.

The blow was hard, and quite possibly it struck a nerve. Anyhow, Bill Manning never felt quite so helpless. He sagged to the sidewalk.

He felt paralyzed. In the muscles only. He could still think. And he could still see. He could make out the neon sign over where the crowd was collecting: BAMBERG-SCHALK CORP.—CASH OR CREDIT. It was between seven and eight o'clock, and quite dark enough for the radiant script to be seen plainly.

Bill Manning felt not only helpless; he felt silly. He felt like a man who has had one—or possibly a couple—too many and is making asinine remarks and wonders, all the time, why he is making them.

He saw a rotund, blue-coated figure, gun in hand, hard on the heels of the running man; saw the running man—he was young and thin, and whiplike in his movements—whirl suddenly.

It was all a little hazy; maybe like television, Bill thought, before it was perfected. He could make out color, movement. Somehow, though, not details. The thin man was just a featureless, elongated figure—

Bill Manning could make out sound, too. He heard what seemed to be a brace of shots, saw the blue-coated figure fold at the middle, go into a grotesque gesture, seemingly like a fat man bowing and asking a lady for the next dance.

Then he saw the blue-coated figure pitch forward like a boxer who had been clipped hard on the button.

Manning felt his senses slipping away from him, and at the same time he felt like an awful fool. He was as ridiculous as a cat watching a bird in flight and powerless to follow it through the air. He managed to half raise himself. For an instant, the fleeing thin man was more sharply defined, zigzagging across the street.

"Aw, hell!" Manning said, and at that moment was as calm, as poised, as sane, as he ever was in his life. He took a bead on the fleeing figure, a bead between the freakishly padded left shoulder and the left side of the pinch-back belt that stretched across the bony back.

Bill squeezed the trigger. He knew he saw the pinch-backed figure stagger. He thought he saw him fall. He couldn't be sure. For that's all Bill remembered at the time.

MANNING was shaky when he came out of the hospital, an hour later. He couldn't remember what the intern had told him—something about a blow such as he had received acting like a drug.

The dazed head-nerve had some long scientific name to it. He was all right, the intern said, not really damaged; just wobbly, like a man who is in fairly good shape but has the jitters.

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Captain Straley, in charge of the precinct station, met him as he walked soundlessly along the rubber-covered corridor, drew him to a bench near the elevators.

"Been to the morgue," Straley said, "to look over the body of that young punk you plugged."

"You mean I got him?" Manning asked.

"Through the heart, that's all!" Straley said. "But he had nothing in his pockets—absolutely nothing! Some young reefer-hound on his first job, probably. Hasn't any record; we checked up on his prints.

"It was the older guy that planned the job—the one that got away. Probably had the kid empty his pockets of anything that might tie him up, just in case. Nothing to start from. Tough assignment, this."

"How much did the stick-up birds get?" Manning asked.

"Nothing. But Schalk, the junior partner, was bumped off. Then the guy we're after slugged a panicky customer and shot his way through the crowd collecting in front of the store."

"Seem to remember that a cop was plugged," Manning said.

Straley looked somber, "Yes. Dan Keeney, We were rookies together, years ago. Dan had been directing traffic up the block. He ran down to where the shots were coming from, almost nabbed the main guy. Couldn't shoot at him—too dangerous; too many fools milling around.

"But he made after them. Then the rat you plugged gunned him down. Dan's not dead yet but in some kind of a coma. On his way out. He got it in the guts."

"What hospital?"

"He was bleeding so bad he couldn't be taken any distance. They carried him across the street to some doctor's office upstairs. No use to move him from there, the ambulance surgeon said. The doc says he might come to for a few minutes before he shoves off. That's where you come in, Bill. Here! I got these rushed up from headquarters."

Straley passed over a cardboard folio. Manning knew what it contained. Police photos of suspected gem thieves, mobsters, crooks who had served stretches, lammisters, parolees.

"Grab a cab down there, Bill. Just a chance Keeney might recognize the guy that lammed. If he does, you're on duty. The only fish you'll bring back from that planned fishing trip'll be a can of salmon. If Dan don't come to, forget it. I'll put someone else on it. After all, you're on your vacation."

Captain Straley's eyes were suspiciously moist. He and Dan Keeney had pounded the pavements together as rookies. But Dan, an unimaginative cop, had kept pounding, while Straley was now slated for a deputy inspectorship.

"Anyhow," Straley said, as he got up, "poor Dan'll outrank me in a couple of days."

"Yes," Manning said.

Patrolman Dan Keeney would have an inspector's funeral.

A REMNANT of the crowd still hung around outside the Bamberg-Schalk jewelry store where the stick-up had occurred.

Bill Manning found the doctor's office, next to one of the avenue's amusement arcades, without any trouble. He knew this beat thoroughly; as a rookie, he had pounded this pavement long before the elevated structure had been torn down.

Patrolman Dan Keeney was lying stretched out on a daybed in the dim reception room. Consciousness had returned to Keeney. His blue eyes were very bright. He had been shot full of dope. His mind was clear. His glance flicked eagerly across the photos as Manning shuffled through the mugs of suspects.

Finally, Keeney shook his head a little sadly. "It's none of them, Bill," he said huskily.

Detective Manning continued to shuffle through the mugs of suspects. It wouldn't be long now. Manning knew it. And Keeney knew it. Yet the face of the veteran harness bull showed no fear.

Dan was nothing less than proud of himself. He had been a loyal, old-time cop who had never failed in his duty. He had been on the job when Fate rang the bell. He had lived dully, and was dying gloriously—in harness.

"All I can tell you, Bill, is that the guy that got away was tall, and he had one of them high-built noses on him, like a duke or an earl in the movies."

Bill Manning waited until the end. Then he walked down the dusty stairs. He felt strangely moved by Dan Keeney's passing. He could hear the tinny mechanical piano down in the street-floor arcade grinding out a sentimental tune.

He stopped and looked into the arcade. There was the thwack of rifle shots. Two listless-looking young men

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were firing at cardboard ducks that appeared and disappeared rhythmically at the end of a short target range. An elderly man was turning a handle on a machine that had a sign on it: "Living Pictures of Life in a French Boarding School."

A scrawny young man near the entrance had put a penny in a slot of what was called the Electric Strength Machine. He was grinning and wincing as he clutched a pair of metal handles through which a mild current of electricity was running. The machine was surmounted by a large plaster bust of Atlas, supporting a large globe on his massive shoulders.

Bill Manning always gave such places the once-over. Once he had found a killer lammister peacefully playing a penny pin game.

He started to cross to the Bamberg-Schalk jewelry store when the soft hat was ripped from his head and the quick rata-ta-ta-ta-ta of a Tommy gun drowned out the sentimental music coming from the mechanical piano.

MANNING was across the sidewalk in three great leaps, and into the arcade and behind the massive statue of Atlas with the world on his shoulders. The world that Atlas supported was becoming less of a weight; it was being dissolved into dirty white powder beneath a sleet of machine-gun bullets.

The young men at the shooting gallery decided that they didn't like shooting. The elderly man was no longer interested in living pictures of Life in a French Boarding School. The scrawny youth now sought safety rather than strength, for, with the elderly man and the two target-shooters and some of the other loungers, he was crouching back of the Atlas statue with Bill Manning.

Across the street, Bill could see the mouth of the Tommy gun poked out from a partly opened window on the second floor. There was nothing Bill could do at the moment. He'd had a break—not getting bumped off at the first burst of shots—and he wasn't going to be a fool by running out into that death-sleet.

The machine-gunner would soon be lamming it. Cops on duty in the district would be investigating the cause of the shots. Bill Manning could go to town then, help to search the old building where the Tommy-gunner was.

It was a rattletrap of a building. This was in the Upper Twenties, heart of the wholesale-florist business. A closed store on the ground floor had a sign lettered on the window: WE SELL RETAIL. FUNERAL WREATHS A SPECIALTY.

In the same building was an open-front cafeteria specializing in cheap hot dogs and five-cent beer. In the cellar, a giant key advertised a locksmith.

A big young cop raced down the street, on the same side as the machine-gunner. The Tommy gun ceased chattering. The elderly man interested in Life in a French Boarding School had stopped a few of the bullets, Bill discovered, and was probably dying and through a blubber of blood was whining for someone to get his wife and children to him

But Bill couldn't bother with him. He raced across the street, up the rickety stairs.

The young cop and another cop and seven or eight civilians had rushed into the front room. The Tommy gun had been dropped on the floor. The Tommy-gunner had lammed. In a corner of the room, a frowsy-looking blonde lay bound and gagged.

Instinctively, Bill Manning whirled out of the room again. He knew the Tommy-gunner wouldn't have dared go down the front stairway. There must be a back stairs.

Bill found it, clattered down it. His Police Positive was ready in his hand. He stumbled through a cluttered, dim passageway. A single dusty globe hanging from the ceiling gave light enough to see the various articles that barred progress—wire frames for funeral designs, clusters of unsold rotting flowers, big stone vases.

A shot blasted out from the rear doorway. Bill fired at the flash. Another shot whizzed past his ear; a third crashed the hanging globe and threw the cluttered hallway into complete darkness.

Banging away, Bill stumbled over things. He didn't have a target, he was firing by guesswork. He sprawled flat on his face over some kind of a stone jar. He could hear shouts, hear the clump of feet coming down the rear stairway after him.

He stumbled out through the doorway, found himself in a smelly old backyard.

From the top of a high board fence there was a dash and a report. Bill Manning fanned out his load of shells, but he wasn't at all certain he had hit the escaping man in such a light.

He was sure he hadn't, a few minutes later, when, with several uniformed cops and plain-clothes men, he searched the alley on the other side of the fence and a couple of near-by cellars. He was having some tough

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breaks tonight.

It wasn't until he turned back into the rickety old building that he felt the burning along his right side. One of the gunman's bullets had grazed his ribs. But he couldn't stop now. He climbed the stairs and turned into the room where he had seen the Tommy gun and the trussed-up blonde.

CAPTAIN STRALEY, several policemen with him, was questioning the girl. Her bonds had been cut, and she was sitting in a sagging chair smoking a cigarette and sobbing softly. The tears had channeled through her make-up and caused her rouge to run. She looked rather grotesque.

"You don't think I had anything to do with it, do you?" she was asking Captain Straley indignantly. "All I know is that about six o'clock, I think it was, there was a knock at the door. I thought it was my boy friend. I had a dinner date with him. I yelled through the door and asked if it was Eddie, and someone yelled back and said he had a telegram for me, and I opened the door.

"Then something hit me over the head—you can see the mark here. When I came to, I was tied up and gagged and over here in the corner. I almost smothered!"

"Did you get a look at the man's face?" Straley asked.

"I didn't see nothing. Not a thing! It all happened so sudden."

She showed the mark on her head. It was about as big as a hen's egg. In looking at the lump, Bill Manning could see that the lady had been born a brunette.

He was very much inclined to believe her story. Whoever had pulled the stick-up at the Bamberg-Schalk store down the block had done some clever planning.

Undoubtedly, he knew the girl had a furnished room in the rundown block and was used to receiving visitors. He had knocked the girl cold, brought in the Tommy gun, probably in some sort of bag, had bound and gagged the girl. And after pulling the stick-up job, he had slipped up the stairway and hidden out peacefully while the police were fine-combing the streets for him.

Probably, he had seen Bill Manning go into the doctor's office across the street and had laid for Bill on his way out. Bill had had a little good luck on that occasion, to balance the very bad luck he had had the rest of the evening.

As Straley's men were about to take the girl away for official questioning, a young patrolman, Casey, who had been searching the yard back of the building came into the room.

"I found these, captain," he said to Straley, "but I'm afraid they don't amount to much. Guess they dropped out of the guy's pocket when he was getting over the fence."

As the captain took them from the young cop, Bill Manning glanced over the cop's shoulder. They were blue tickets—stubs, rather—originally from a roll of movie house tickets.

"Don't amount to much' is right," Straley clipped. He turned to Bill Manning. "Suppose old Dan didn't have the slightest idea about the guy that got away?"

Bill Manning grinned a little ruefully. "Only that he was tall and had a big nose, high-bridged."

Straley looked disgusted. "Plenty of tall guys in this town," he remarked. "And certainly a lot of big noses," he added.

"But you know, skipper," Manning reminded the captain, "it might be Coke Meador at that. Description fits him."

STRALEY showed interest, for the moment. Once Coke Meador, mobster chieftain, ex-bootleg king, slot-machine racketeer and numbers-game manipulator, had been a Broadway big-shot. Smooth guy.

"Pretty general description, though," Straley said. "And anyhow, Meador ran through his dough and passed out of the picture. Probably in Miami now, or Chicago, or California—anywhere. Certainly he hasn't been around this town in a long time. And I don't really think Meador'd drop a job like this one."

The blonde was ready for the street now, and Straley started to go out.

"If these had been dance-hall tickets, if he had danced with some moll that he might have blabbed to and that we could question, we might have a slight clue," he said to Manning.

Manning nodded. A movie ticket, usually, would only be of one possible use as a clue: it might be a steer to the section the killer had holed up in. And if the home neighborhood could be placed, bartenders, handbook men, poolroom loungers and habitués of dope-stashes could be paraded by the dead unknown in the morgue or shown the slab photographs.



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Quick recognition of the young reefer-hound might lead to the older killer who had planned the job. But the clue was slight; probably valueless.

"Better go on your vacation, Bill," Straley advised Manning. "The old man down in Centre Street'll raise hell on this. I'm in for a few big headaches."

Detective Bill Manning said nothing.

Yet, as he descended the rickety stairway, an idea hurtled through his brain like a flaming meteor. His glance flicked toward the big sidewalk clock outside the Bamberg-Schalk jewelry store that had been stuck up. The dick pivoted on his feet and raced uptown.

He was breathing a little hard as he drew up before a Sixth Avenue movie theater. The marquee, emblazoned against the skyline, was vivid crimson and yellow.

Manning raced across the street to a cigar store, picked up an open phone on the cigar stand. As he dialed his number, his glance never left the exit of the theater across the street.

"Hello! Cap'n Straley there yet?" he barked, as he got connected with the precinct station. "He just got in? This is Manning. Put him right on. . . . Hello, Captain Straley. . . . Yeah, Manning. I'm in front of the Garbo Theater. Got to give you this fast. Shove a cordon around the entire block. Have 'em keep their eyes peeled for Meador. Got to scram now. S'long!"

He cracked up the receiver, raced back across the street. The crowd was just beginning to pour out of the Garbo Theater. Manning stood to one side of the entrance, watched the crowd.

Up the street he could hear whistles skirl, barring traffic. Sirens blasted their eerie, strident screeches into the night. A prowler car plowed out of the semidarkness of the side street, devouring the shadows with its headlights.

The tall man with the large, highbridged nose—he had been walking naturally, nonchalantly, out of the theater entrance until then—stopped suddenly.

At first, he started to shrink back into the theater entrance. Then he caught a flash of Bill Manning and sidestepped cat-footedly into the midst of the crowd.

Manning circled around fast, tried to corner him into the lobby.

"Up, Meador!" he yelled. "One move, and I'll—"

COKE MEADOR blended more closely with the crowd, grabbed a young girl, held her between Manning and himself. The girl shrieked. Others shrieked as they saw what was happening—Meador had yanked out an automatic.

Its sharp, whiplike crack sent the crowd scattering like a flock of birds that had been shot at. The girl captive shrieked again, her knees buckled. She fainted with fright.

Meador supported her dead weight for an instant, then let her topple and streaked for the corner. Whirling at the curb, he hurled another shot at the chasing Manning. Like the first shot, it missed by inches.

Meador faded down the side street, into the semishadows. Bill Manning was only a few paces back of him now, racing along like a track man. He leveled his gun, cursed and brought it down again as Meador shot off at a tangent, to plow through children playing on the street—the night was fairly warm, and it was still only a little after nine o'clock.

Manning squeezed out all the speed in his rather long legs. He was closing the gap between Meador and himself. But Meador was desperate. He shoved the automatic back under his left arm, triggered. The muzzle bloomed reddishly. Manning staggered, fell a pace or two back, but then kept doggedly on.

The slug had nicked him in the left shoulder. It didn't affect his good right arm, and now, away from the crowds and the playing kids, he fired for the first time.

Coke Meador went to his knees, but was up fast, limped along a few paces, then dodged into the darkened entrance of a chain-grocery store. He went to his knees again, turned, and—a low, obscure target in the shallow entrance—whanged away at Manning again.

Manning dived low, heard the shot scream over him. From an almost prone position he blazed away, fired two swift shots. There was a howl of pain from Meador.

Another shot from the killer's gun painted a red smear in the gloom. The shot went far wild didn't clear the entrance, in fact, but smashed through the chain-store window, sent plate glass clanging and crashing to the street, followed by a pile of can goods that had been pyramided in the window.

Then Bill Manning was on the killer. He clubbed down with his gun.

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Meador dropped his automatic, made an unsuccessful grab at it. He managed to scramble to his feet, tangled with Manning. Curses ripped out through the blubbing bubbles of scarlet on his lips. The two figures crashed to the sidewalk, writhed and lashed about. Then the detective's gun clubbed down again.

One figure got up from the sidewalk: Bill Manning.

Manning could see the crowd hazily, the crowd gathering around, yelling, shouting. He could see blurry blue uniforms. Then Captain Straley was beside him, holding him up.

Three stalwart cops had Meador on his feet. The killer's pockets were being frisked for extra weapons.

There was some talk that Manning couldn't hear very distinctly, and a little later the clang of an ambulance—

IN the hospital for the second time that night, Detective Bill Manning managed to roll over and, in spite of the pain in his left shoulder, grin at Captain Straley.

"You son of a gun!" Straley said admiringly. "Lucky stiff! You're covered with horseshoes! What happened? You don't mean to tell me you actually ran into that fellow on the street?"

Manning shook his head. "No. He was in the Garbo Theater. Remember that Casey found those blue ticket stubs that Meador dropped from his pocket when he was getting over the high board fence?"

"Yes, but—" Straley looked puzzled. "What the hell's that got to do with it? You don't mean you had me throw a cordon around that block just on a hunch, do you?"

Manning grinned again. "It was more than a hunch, skipper. It came to me—about those tickets, I mean—just after you left with the girl. Don't forget that I pounded the pavements on this beat when you were a sarge. I knew all about the Garbo Theater. Used to talk with the manager and the dame in the box office. I'm quite a movie fan, you know."

"Still don't add up," Straley said.

"Maybe not—yet! But, you see, the Garbo Theater always uses maroon tickets for regular nights, and blue tickets for Filmo nights. Uses a special roll to see how the Filmo game pulls in the crowd, I suppose. And when I saw those blue ticket stubs—they must have represented a steady attendance for several weeks—I figured Meador was after that Giant Filmo prize.

"Nobody'd hit the Giant Filmo prize for weeks; on the marquee it said that the jackpot had climbed to almost seventeen hundred dollars."

"And you figured that Meador—"

"Well, he'd be as sale slipping in there as anywhere, wouldn't he? It would get him off the street, and it's one of those gloomy, old-fashioned movie houses, And Meador was always a hot gambler; that's what broke him in the first place.

"He always played parlays and gambled on long-shots at the track. And the wise guy was sap enough to figure that he might hit that big Giant Filmo dough for getaway money. Did Meador croak, by the way, skipper?"

Captain Straley shook his head. "No. But he will—in the hot seat! Ballistics phoned, when you were just out of the operating room. The slug they dug out of you matches the ones taken from the bodies of Schalk and Dan Keeney."

Straley was smiling. "I don't care now whether the old man sends for me to go down to Centre Street or not. But say, Bill, get better fast and get the hell on your vacation, will you? If you stick around, I'm afraid you'll get my job!"