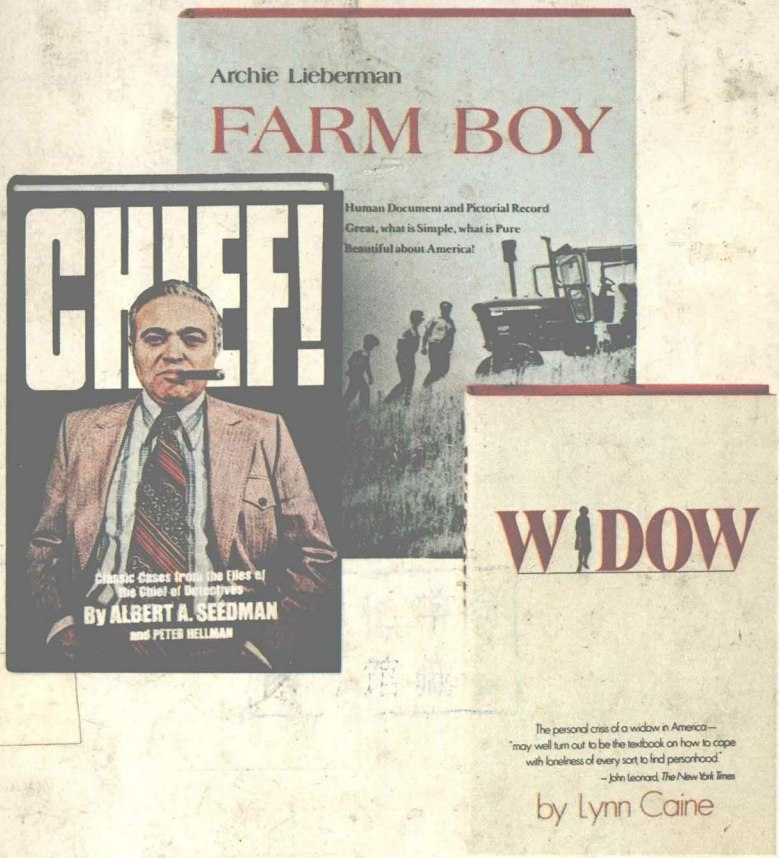
Selections from

TODAY'S NONFICTION BEST SELLERS



Condensed by the Editors of Reader's Digest

Selections from

TODAY'S NONFICTION BEST SELLERS

THE READER'S DIGEST ASSOCIATION
PLEASANTVILLE, NEW YORK
MONTREAL, SYDNEY, CAPE TOWN, HONG KONG

Printed in the United States of America

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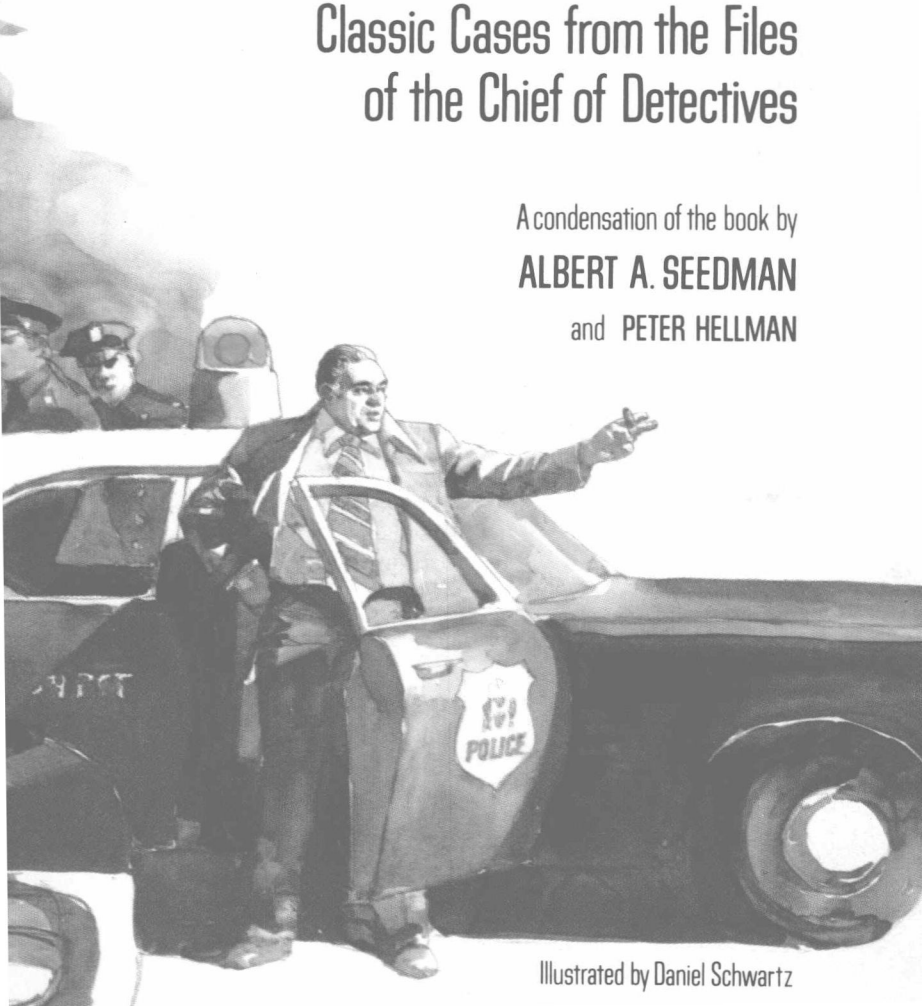
CHIEF!

Classic Cases from the Files of the Chief of Detectives

A condensation of the book by

ALBERT A. SEEDMAN

and **PETER HELLMAN**



Illustrated by Daniel Schwartz

An oversize cardboard carton lay abandoned on a Brooklyn street; inside it, the body of a murdered girl. Who was she, and why would anyone want to take her life? They were the kinds of questions that Chief Seedman asked himself every day.

Here are some of Seedman's most challenging cases. They range from the little-known "girl in the box" to the spectacular public shooting of Joe Colombo at a rally of his Italian-American Civil Rights League. What they have in common is the Seedman touch: a meticulous attention to detail, and an uncanny knack of knowing where to look for the answers.

And here, too, is the remarkable life story of the skinny, pint-sized kid from Brooklyn who became the toughest and most celebrated of New York's chiefs of detectives.

"Truly a great story about one of the greatest detectives in the world's greatest city. I was enthralled."

—Robin Moore, author of *The French Connection*

Introduction

It is a beautiful Indian summer morning in September 1971. Albert Seedman kisses his sleepy wife, Henny, good-by and walks out the front door of his modest home on Long Island. His chauffeur opens the rear door of the well-polished black Plymouth. As the car heads into the early city-bound traffic, Seedman lights his first cigar of the day and scans *The New York Times*. But after five minutes the paper is in his lap, the cigar is out and, heedless of the crackling police receiver under the dashboard, he is dozing peacefully.

By the time the black car rolls up to the Central Park station house at 8:13, however, Seedman is wide-awake. As he pokes his head inside the station, the sergeant behind the desk straightens up. "Morning, Chief," he says.

"Where is it?"

"Over by Belvedere Lake. You can drive in."

"On a lovely day like this?"

Seedman walks into the park. Dew still clings to the grass and the September sunlight is crisp in the trees. The park seems deserted until, strolling over a knoll toward Belvedere Lake, Seedman suddenly comes upon a swarm of patrol cars and mounted policemen on chestnut horses. Cops are everywhere, prowling the bushes, taking measurements and cordoning off the area with signs that say CRIME SCENE SEARCH AREA. STOP.

A deputy inspector fills Seedman in on the details: a twenty-year-old Puerto Rican man and a seventeen-year-old black girl just up from South Carolina—neither of whom apparently knew better than to be sitting in the park at two a.m.—were accosted by two white men, who grabbed the girl. When the Puerto Rican, Reuben Ortiz, tried to protect her, one of the men pulled out a gun and shot him between the eyes. Then the gunman shot his own accomplice in the throat (he would die in the hospital two weeks later), raped the girl, shot her too, and left her, bound hand and foot, by the lake. Trailing blood, she managed after three hours to hop up to the road, where a patrol car found her at dawn.

Seedman climbs down the rocks which slope to the lake. With so many people rushing about, the body of Reuben Ortiz, lying here beside the water under a red-checked vinyl picnic cloth, seems more an afterthought than the center of all this activity.

Seedman motions for the cloth to be raised. He stares down at the body for a long time. Something is bothering him, and it is not the red hole in Ortiz' face.

Finally he turns to the deputy inspector. "Was this guy a fag?"

"As a matter of fact, the girl said he was."

Seedman shakes his head. "What in hell was a guy like this doing with a girl like that?"

In an odd way Seedman does not even see the body. He sees a problem. Instead of the hole in the face, he sees, somehow, the traits of a homosexual. Could this murder be the work of a jealous homosexual lover? Elsewhere the observation might be irrelevant. Here it may help start the investigation toward a solution, which is Seedman's sole purpose in turning up at the scene and involving himself in mechanics his subordinates can otherwise handle.

And Seedman makes other observations. The behavior of the two assailants, as the girl described it, strikes him as abnormal, even by criminal standards. He orders his men to check out everyone who has escaped from East Coast prisons and mental institutions during recent months. Sure enough, the murderer and his accomplice turn out to have fled from a Pennsylvania

prison; and they are placed at the scene of the murder by a pill vial picked out of a nearby bush by Seedman himself.

Of all the men who kissed their wives good-by that morning and went off to work, Albert Seedman was one of the few who went off to a murder. Counting the Ortiz case, it had happened more than a thousand times.

IN THE spring of 1972, after thirty years of service, Albert Seedman retired as the twenty-first chief of detectives of the New York City Police Department. He commanded a force of three thousand detectives—a civil investigative bureau second in size only to the FBI—and was responsible for solving some of the most celebrated and dramatic crimes in recent memory. Because the investigations were directed by Seedman personally, his face appeared regularly on evening TV newscasts.

It was a face and a style the public liked. Seedman didn't say much; he did not smile. Though he usually refused to be photographed with a cigar, his was clearly a face where a cigar would be at home. He wore stylish suits and white-on-white shirts with "Al" embroidered on the cuffs. On his right hand he wore an onyx pinkie ring; on his left, a ring sprayed with tiny diamonds.

In a detective bureau known for men of strong style, Seedman stood out. No detective chief ever had left such an imprint on the department. Nobody had ever looked, barked or carried himself more like a detective chief. But Seedman's legend rested more on performance than on style. Nobody had ever conducted so many investigations with such originality, intensity or success.

Seedman often obtained his solutions from the mundane, seemingly unrelated information that a record-oriented society can provide. Several months after his retirement, for example, he arrived late for a work session on this book. He explained that he had been held up by some Connecticut detectives who wanted help on a case.

"In the woods outside their town they found the skeleton of a man who'd been dead for three months. They figured they'd identify him as soon as his family reported him missing. But it's

been three months—which makes six months since he died—and nobody has claimed him. They don't know what to do."

"What did you tell them?"

"First I asked whether this skeleton showed signs of any dental work. They said no, although the skeleton had crummy teeth. Now, if he'd been wealthy, the man could have afforded to have his teeth fixed. If he'd been poor, welfare would have paid. If he was a union member, their medical plan would have covered it. So this fellow was probably working at a low-paying non-unionized job but making enough to keep off welfare. Also, since he didn't match up to any family's missing-person report, he was probably single, living alone in an apartment or hotel. His landlord never reported him missing, so most likely he was behind on his rent and the landlord figured he had skipped.

"But even if he had escaped his landlord, he would never have escaped the tax man. I told these cops to wait until the year is up. Then they can go to the Internal Revenue Service and get a printout of all single males making less than ten thousand dollars a year but more than the welfare ceiling, who paid withholding tax in the first three quarters but not in the fourth. Chances are the name of their skeleton will be on that printout."

Elementary, Dr. Watson. But no one else had thought of it.

This gift for logical deduction is one part of a great detective's makeup. But if Seedman shared this gift with Sherlock Holmes, he was anything but Holmesian in his total approach to crime detection. He did not work as a loner. Once he had taken in the crime scene with his own eyes, he preferred to move the investigation forward through the three thousand detectives under his command. "If I do my job right," Seedman once explained, "I don't have to do anything. Everyone else is doing it."

All his old detectives agree that Seedman drew more work from them than any other commander they ever had; even more work than they themselves thought they could produce. Gruff, glowering, he railed and cursed at them to do their best, and these proud and rugged men took from him what they would have crammed down the throat of anyone else. They knew that he

cared more for their well-being than glad-hand commanders; he might curse them, but he would never let them down.

Seedman often reminded his detectives that any citizen had the right to expect the theft of his car's hubcaps to be treated as one of the most important cases in the bureau. But to select a handful of cases out of a file of ten thousand for this book required a somewhat different standard. Some, like the town house and Black Liberation Army cases, would seem obvious choices. Yet even these, covered so voluminously in the media, would hardly bear retelling if they could not be shown now in new light. During those investigations, Seedman often sent reporters off happy with the story they got, even though they didn't have the full story at all. It was not trickery on his part but the need to preserve the integrity of the investigation in progress. Now those same investigations can be presented here in all their dimensions.

Other cases, like the Belt Parkway case or the girl in the box, were publicized lightly. But they are a product of the best years of the Detective Bureau. Such cases—and such a reign as Al Seedman's—are not likely to occur again.

1. The Belt Parkway Case

FRIDAY morning, July 7, 1967, 8:40: a dazzler of a day in Brooklyn—not a cloud in the sky, just a hint of breeze blowing in from Sheepshead Bay. On the Belt Parkway, traffic west toward Manhattan is moving well. For several minutes now a detective lieutenant named Vito DeSerio, on his way to work, has been following a yellow Camaro sport coupe driven by a teenage girl. He likes watching the way the soft air swirls her blond hair.

As they pass a spot called Plum Beach the girl begins to drift toward the right-hand lane. DeSerio assumes she'll get off at the next exit. But she keeps drifting . . . drifting. . . . Suddenly, with a crackle and splinter, she is sideswiping bushes at the edge of the parkway. The Camaro's bumper is bashed in, the hood

crumples, and in a tangle of foliage and a hiss of steam the car finally comes to a stop.

DeSerio mashes his brakes, pulls off the highway and runs back to the Camaro. The girl's body is caved over the steering wheel; she is moaning. DeSerio raises her head. The pupils of her eyes are rolled back. He knows, from too much experience, that it is useless to talk to her. He reaches in her bag for her driver's license. She is Nancy McEwen, seventeen years old, from Garden City on Long Island. There is nothing in her wallet and no bracelet on her arm to warn of epilepsy or diabetes. Her body is unmarked. What has happened to her?

A police radio car cruises by and DeSerio flags it down. In fifteen minutes an ambulance arrives to take the girl to Coney Island Hospital. There the doctors try everything, but at 11:15 they declare Nancy McEwen dead. Only then do they discover, hidden by the hair on the left side of her head, a single small bloodless hole.

Thirty minutes later, with the sun hot now on the Belt Parkway, a black Ford sedan pulls alongside the accident-investigation, photo and precinct patrol units already on hand. Albert Seedman, the unsmiling commander of Brooklyn South detectives, gets out and strolls over to the Camaro. At this time he is a broad-shouldered man of forty-nine, hair silvery gray, mouth slightly downturned, eyes cold green. The cops respectfully make way for him.

Seven years earlier, when Seedman was a new staff captain in Brooklyn, he began to show up regularly at crime scenes. Veteran detectives took it for granted that after a brief flurry of such appearances he would, in all but the headline cases, retire to his office. He didn't. Open-and-shut cases, even the major ones, he usually skipped. But a crime with an odd twist, even if it seemed worth barely a blink in a city full of mayhem, would draw Al Seedman to the scene, no matter what the hour. He did not come just to watch. He had demonstrated a curious instinct for discerning a way to solve a baffling crime.

Now, here on the Belt Parkway, Lieutenant Bernie Jacobs, commander of the 61st Detective squad, explained to Seedman

the little they knew about Nancy McEwen. She had been on her way to her summer job at her father's construction firm in Brooklyn. "Geez," said Jacobs, shaking his head. "Who would want to shoot a sweet young kid like that?"

"At forty-five miles per hour," Seedman snapped, "nobody—not the best marksman in the world—could nail that girl with such a perfect shot. The only way would be from a car pulling