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Frank Kane's
"DEAD RECKONING"
a Johnny Liddell story



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*A Johnny Liddell
novelette*

**BY
FRANK
KANE**



Liddell felt Maxie's ham sized fist connect and the floor slope upward and slam him in the face. "Nothing personal, shamus," Maxie said and he brought his foot up and aimed the heavy heel at the detective's head.

DEAD RECKONING

JOHNNY LIDDELL was only listening to Russo with half an ear.

The redhead speared to the center of the floor by the spotlight was leaning against the piano. She looked as though she had been poured into the iridescent green gown that seemed to be pasted to her body. Her hair was molten copper, hung down over her shoulders, her skin gleamed a milky white.

When she straightened up to take a bow at the end of the number, her body seemed to flow—as though it was boneless. Every movement was sensuous, suggestive. As she bowed her head to the thunder of applause that rolled toward her from the dimly lit tables, her neckline dipped alarmingly.

The man across the table from Liddell scowled irritably as his eyes followed the magnet to Liddell's attention. Tony Russo wasn't used to people listening to him with half an ear. Not even if he was asking them to do him a favor.

"Look, Liddell. You dig the redhead that much, I'll see you meet her. But right now I want to know. You handle my case for me or not?"

Liddell reluctantly tore his eyes from the redhead, brought them into focus on the man across the table.

"You know I don't hire out my gun Tony."

Russo groaned his frustration. "Who the Hell asks you to hire out your gun? I want to make a hit, I got plenty of boys of my own."

"So why don't you have one of your boys handle it?"

"Because they don't have the one thing I'm trying to hire. Brains."

The redhead had started to sing again. She was leaning against the piano. Her voice was husky, the kind that plays along the spinal column like a xylophone. The lyrics were blue, but she managed to retain an expression of untroubled innocence despite the bursts of laughter some of the lines drew.

Johnny Liddell fought a losing battle to keep his attention on what Tony Russo was telling him, let his eyes wander back onto the floor.

"All right, all right. You can't keep your eyes off the broad. You want to meet me in my office after the show's over?"

Liddell nodded. "You said something about meeting her?"

Russo snorted disgustedly, got to his feet. "I'll have her up there, too." He turned, felt his way through the tables in the darkened room toward the entrance.

When the redhead had finished her number, she smiled at the cascade of applause, shook her head to demands for an encore. She threw kisses at the occupants of the ringside tables, headed for the rhinestoned entrance to the backstage area. She stood for a moment in the spotlight, then the floor went dark. When the lights came up, the floor was empty.

Liddell let his breath out in a soundless whistle, leaned back and fitted a cigarette into the corner of his mouth.

A heavy shouldered man with a head that looked like a cue ball with twisted lumps of scar tissue for eyebrows and a nose flattened against his

face, walked over to where Liddell sat.

“The boss says when you’re ready, I show you to the office.”

Liddell looked up, grinned at the bald headed man. “Hi, Maxie. Long time no see. Working for Russo now, huh?”

Maxie grinned. “Always did, Johnny. Doc Parker fronted as my manager. Tony did all the booking and fixing.” He shrugged heavy shoulders. “I can’t make it any more in the ring, so he gives me a job as his bodyguard.”

“Real generous of him.”

“I got no beef, shamus. So I’m all punched out and maybe punched up. But I ain’t kicking. I had a couple of years I lived real good. Real good. If I didn’t have Russo behind me, I wouldn’t even have had that. I’d be driving a truck or smashing cases on the docks. You know?”

Liddell considered it, nodded. “You could look at it that way,” he conceded.

“You don’t pasture in no field of daisies yourself. You set yourself up as a target for any red-hot who’s coming on too fast for the guy who pays you tab. No?”

The private detective took a last drag on the cigarette, crushed it out. “Maybe you’re right.” He looked around for his waiter, waved him down.

“No tab,” Maxie told him. “The boss picks up the hot.”

Liddell dropped a bill on the table for the waiter. “What is it old age or a scare that’s making Tony so generous.”

The bald headed man managed to look hurt. “You got the boss all wrong, making him out like a hard guy. He’s a real generous guy, Johnny.”

“Sure. With everybody else’s blood.”

Maxie started to retort, shrugged, led the way through the tables toward the small foyer. A small corridor led to the cage of a self service elevator. Maxie waved him in, punched the button marked 3 on the panel. The cage rocked its wheezy way upward, shuddered to a stop on the third floor and the door scraped open. A balcony ran from the elevator to a door marked Private.

The bald headed man knocked three times, the door clicked open.

Tony Russo looked up from the fat panatela he was rolling between his thumb and forefinger, nodded Liddell to a chair across the highly polished desk from him. “Hang around outside, Maxie,” he swivelled his eyes to the bald headed man. “We don’t want to be disturbed.”

“Except by the redhead,” Liddell amended. “Show her right in.” He rolled his eyes to the man behind the desk. “Right, Tony?”

Russo growled deep in his chest, bobbed his head irritably. “Okay. But no one else.” He waited until the bald headed man had closed the door behind him. “You sure got somethin’ for that broad.”

Liddell grinned. “Sexiest looking babe I’ve seen in a long time.”

Russo swung his chair around, slid back the disguised panel of a built in bar. He grabbed a bottle, two glasses, set them down on the desk. “Sexy?” he grunted. “To her, sex is the number that comes after five and before seven.” He saw the disbelief in Liddell’s eyes. “Sure, she looks good for a fast fling. But with her it’s not sex—it’s either an audition or a request for a pay raise.” He hit his chest with the side of his hand. “Ask Tony. He knows.”

Liddell watched as Tony spilled a generous slug into each of the glasses. He got some ice from the small refrigerator built into the bar, filled the glass with the cubes, pushed one across the desk.

The years had made a change in Tony Russo, Liddell noticed. The lean wolfishness of the days of his climb to head of his pack was blurred by the soft overlay of fat. Flat, lustreless eyes still peered from beneath the heavily veined, thickened eyelids, but the soft, discolored pouches beneath them lessened the menace.

“You wanted help, Tony. What kind of help?”

Russo stuck the unlighted cigar between his teeth, chewed on it for a moment. “This is just between you and me, Liddell.” He squinted at the private detective. “I don’t want nobody having a big laugh on Tony Russo, thinking he’s going soft.”

“Seems to me I heard about a lot of guys who thought that way never broke fifty.”

Russo shrugged. “Rumors.” He grinned, some of the old wolfishness showing through. “Nobody fooled around with Tony in the old days.” The smile faded. “That’s why this is got to be some kind of screwball.”

He pulled a key chain from his pocket, unlocked the top drawer of the desk. He reached in, brought out a packet of letters, tossed them across the

desk. Liddell reached for them.

There were five letters, all in ordinary envelopes, all with Tony Russo's name printed in block letters, none of them were post-marked. Liddell dumped the messages from each of the envelopes, glanced at it. He looked up, grinned at the man behind the desk.

"So somebody says you're due to get hit. So what's new about that? You've had a checkmark next to your name before this."

Russo chewed angrily on the cold cigar. "Sure, but I knew who they were and where they were. You see those notes? You know where I find them? In my bathroom. Under my pillow. On my desk." He yanked the cigar from between his teeth, glared at the soggy end, then bounced it off the waste basket. "Places nobody can get. Nobody."

"How about the guys who work for you?" He nodded toward the closed door. "Maxie, for instance?"

"Why should he? I keep him eating." A thoughtful frown ridged Russo's forehead. His eyes sought out the closed door; he squinted. "I been pretty good to him. What'd a punchy like that do if it wasn't for me keeping him in bread?"

"It doesn't have to be Maxie," Liddell reached over, wrapped his fingers around the damp glass, swirled the liquor over the ice. "Maybe one of the other boys. No guy like to stay Number Two boy all his life. Maybe with you out of the way—"

Russo considered, shook his head. "If I just find the notes here, okay. They maybe sneak in here and leave them. But not in my pad. No one gets into my bedroom, my John—"

There was a discreet knock on the door, it opened. The hairless dome of Maxie popped in. "The redhead, Boss."

Russo's eyes rolled from Maxie to Liddell. They were narrowed in speculation. "Yeah, the redhead." He nodded slowly. "Send her in."

Maxie's head disappeared, the doorway was filled with Woman. She had exchanged the green dress for a more practical model. Her coppery hair spilled down over her shoulders in a metallic wave. The swelling bosom showed over the top of the low cut dress; a small waist hinted at the full hips, long shapely legs concealed by the fullness of her skirt.

As she walked in, she turned the full power of slanted, green eyes on Liddell. They seemed to approve of what they saw. She didn't waste a

glance on the man behind the desk.

“Okay, Liddell, you wanted to meet her. This is Chinchilla Conover. He’s Johnny Liddell, a private eye, Chilly.”

“That a name or a description?” Liddell asked.

“Depends on who’s using it.” The slanted eyes sought out Russo. “Tony says it’s a description. You mightn’t.”

Russo’s face darkened. “I forgot to tell you, Liddell. She don’t only sing. She makes with the funny remarks, too.” He got up from behind the desk, walked around. He made a production out of scooping up the letters and envelopes, tapped them against his fingernail. “I think you told me what I wanted to know, Liddell. Send me a bill.” His eyes never left the redhead’s face.

She glanced briefly at the letters, then admired the finish on her long, carefully shellacked nails. “Fan mail, Tony?”

Russo’s hand shot out, the sound when it connected with the side of the girl’s face sounded like a shot. It knocked her sideways. He back-handed her face into position.

Liddell moved fast. He caught Russo by the front of his jacket, pushed him across the room. The cafe owner’s legs tangled with a low coffee table, he spilled to the floor in its wreckage.

“I don’t like guys who work out on girls, Russo. You ought to remember that from the old days.”

Russo’s face was white as he struggled to disentangle his legs from the shattered table. “Maxie,” he roared.

The door popped open, the cue ball head of the ex-pug appeared in the opening. His eyes hop scotched from Liddell to Russo and back.

“Take him,” Russo growled. “Take him good.”

“Tony, wait a minute—” Chilly was massaging the side of her face, still stained with red.

“You stay out of this, you! Nobody pushes Tony Russo around.” He turned back to Maxie. “What are you waiting for? I told you to take him.”

Maxie reached up, took out his upper plate, dropped it into his pocket. Then, hunching his shoulders so that his head was almost lost between them,

he started shuffling toward Liddell. As he slouched forward he licked at his lips with anticipation.

“Take him good, Maxie,” Russo ordered.

Liddell didn't take his eyes off the bodyguard. He kept watching, waiting for an opening.

Maxie moved in with a speed surprising in a man of his size. He shot a hard right at Johnny's face. Liddell swayed out of its path, brought his left up into the bald headed man's midsection. Maxie roared like a stung bear, continued to bore in. He caught Liddell on the side of the head with a ham sized fist that started the lights flashing and bells ringing in Johnny's head. The big paw landed again and Liddell felt the floor slope upward and hit him in the face.

“Stamp him!” Russo ordered.

As Maxie raised his foot, the redhead threw herself at him, her fingers clenched, the nails going for the big man's face. He caught her by the wrists, sent her sprawling across the floor. She lay there, legs askew, dress twisted over her thighs. Maxie licked at his lips, stared at her for a moment.

A moment was all Liddell needed. He forced air into his lungs, shook his head to dispel the fog. As the big man turned his attention back to the man sprawled in front of him, Liddell's head cleared.

“Nothing personal, shamus.” Maxie brought his foot up, aimed the heavy heel at the detective's head and kicked. Liddell rolled over, caught the foot and twisted. Maxie hit the floor with a thump that rattled the glasses on the desk.

Liddell struggled to his feet, watched the snarling, cursing bald headed man pulling himself up. He waited grimly for Maxie to resume the assault.

The bald headed man threw caution to the winds, rushed him. Liddell side stepped, planted his right to the elbow in Maxie's midsection. As the bodyguard toppled over, Liddell brought up his knee, caught him in the face. There was a crunching sound as the man's nose broke again. Liddell chopped down at the exposed back of the other man's neck in a vicious rabbit punch. Maxie hit the floor, face first, didn't move.

Liddell looked up from the fallen man to Russo, who backed away until the wall was at his back. Johnny sneered at him, walked over to the girl, helped her to her feet.

She eyed him with new interest.

“You’re quite a man, Liddell. I never saw anybody stand up to Maxie before and walk away from it.”

“It was nothing. I was flea-weight champ at P.S. 64 in 1929.” He grinned at her. “Besides, I had you on my side. If you hadn’t given me a breather by trying to carve your initials on his kisser, he might have done a pretty good job of changing my face around.” From the corner of his eye, he saw Russo skirt the desk, head for a button on the base of the phone. He reached past the girl, caught Russo by the shirt front, pulled him up on his toes.

Russo’s eyes were white rimmed with fear. “Don’t muscle me, Liddell. You’re not scaring me—”

Chilly grinned. “You could fool me. I can’t tell whether it’s castanets or your teeth. Whatever it is, it’s making pretty music.”

“I’m not forgetting you, either,” Russo told her. “I’ll get you for this and for—”

Liddell’s hand cracked across his mouth, knocked Russo’s head back. A thin trickle of blood ran from the corner of the cafe owner’s mouth.

“I’m leaving you teeth, Tony, just so I’ll have something to work on if I have to come back.” He reached under his jacket, brought out his .45, held it under Russo’s nose. “If I do have to come back, I’m using this to leave you as toothless as the day you were born. You leave her alone. You dig?”

Russo’s eyes seemed to be hypnotized by the yawning muzzle of the .45. He could only nod his head wordlessly. Liddell pushed him, he collapsed into a bundle of arms and legs in the big armchair.

Liddell turned to the girl. “Whose idea was the notes?”

The slanted eyes widened, the redhead shook her head. “I don’t know what you mean?”

“You left a trail like a bulldozer through the Everglades, baby. You signed them by leaving them where nobody else could have been.”

Chilly started to deny it, shrugged. “I just wanted to see him squirm. You should have been here, Liddell. It was the only thing that made it possible for me to stay in the same room with him. To watch him squirming and sweating—”

“You’re lying,” Russo roared. “Nobody scares Tony Russo.”

The redhead laughed at him. “He wouldn’t go out. Somebody had to taste his meals. He became practically a hermit. You weren’t scared. Not

much!”

“You know you wouldn’t have gotten away with it. The cops would have tumbled just the way I did—”

“I wasn’t going to kill him. I was just going to watch him shake himself to pieces. Every day he got worse. I wanted revenge. I was getting it. Just watching him fall apart. Watching his boys know it and him knowing they knew he’d gone soft. It was worth it. Every bit of it.”

“You wanted revenge. Revenge for what?”

“My real name is Bauer. Lynn Bauer. That mean anything to you?”

Russo’s eyes widened. “Bauer?”

“Yeah, Bauer. Hank Bauer’s sister.” She turned to Liddell. “Maybe you don’t remember Hank, Liddell. He was Russo’s accountant.”

Liddell nodded. “Committed suicide.”

“He was murdered,” the redhead spat out. “Sure, it was a good job, but I’d been hearing from Hank regularly. He was getting ready to turn Russo’s books over to the Feds. So he had to die.”

“You’re crazy. I should have known there was something phony about you—” Russo stared at her balefully.

Chilly shook her head. “There was nothing phony. I was only a kid when Hank died. But from then on, I worked at being Chilly, the kind of a girl Tony Russo would go for. Just so I could get next to you. And get even for Hank.”

Russo’s voice was low. “Get her out of here, Liddell, and keep her away from me. Anything happens to me, she’ll fry for it. I promise you.”

On the floor, Maxie was groaning his way back to consciousness. Liddell took the redhead by the arm, stepped across Maxie, led her to the door.

“You’ll get my bill in the mail,” Liddell told Russo. He cut off the stream of obscenities by slamming the door behind them.

The pounding on the door sounded like the rattle of a machine gun. Johnny Liddell groaned, started to roll over, collided with the back of a sofa. He opened his eyes, looked around at the unfamiliar furnishings. After a

moment, he identified his whereabouts as Chilly's apartment. The man pounding on the door seemed on the verge of breaking it down.

Chilly peeked her head around the doorway leading to the bedroom. She turned wide, frightened eyes on Liddell.

"Russo's men?" she whispered.

Liddell shrugged. He slid his feet onto the floor. He reached for the holster hung over the back of the chair, tugged out the .45.

"You'd better get into the bathroom. Let me handle it." He waited until she ran for the bathroom door, a sheet wrapped around her, then he crossed to the living room door, unlocked it and pulled it open.

The man in the hallway dropped his eyes to the .45 that was pointed at his middle, then the cold eyes travelled up to Liddell's face.

"Well, fancy meeting you here."

Liddell pursed his lips, let the gun drop to his side. "Come on in, inspector." He stepped aside watched Inspector Herlehy stalk into the room, slammed the door shut in the face of the curious tenants in other flats who lined their doorways in varying stages of undress.

Herlehy stopped inside the room, swung on Liddell, hands on hips. "What are you doing here?" He looked around. "And where's the girl?"

"I've been bedded down out here in the living room. She's sleeping in there. In the bedroom." He nodded toward the bedroom door. The inspector started toward it, Liddell beat him to it, blocked the way. "You haven't shown me that little piece of paper that gives you the right to go barging like this, inspector. Or are you running the Morals Squad now?"

The white haired man studied him with grim eyes, shook his head. "Still Homicide. And if you insist on technicalities, maybe we can provide transportation down to headquarters to discuss this."

Liddell shook his head. "I'll get her out here." He walked into the bedroom, tapped on the bathroom door. "Get decent. Police are here and it looks like trouble."

There was a slight pause, then a muffled, "Be right out."

Liddell picked up his shirt, was shrugging into it when he walked back into the living room. The inspector was on the telephone, just finishing a conversation. He dropped the receiver back on its hook.

“Just calling off an APB on both you and the girl,” Herlehy grunted. “You really went away out this time, didn’t you, shamus?”

“You still haven’t told me what it’s all about.” Liddell complained. He laid the .45 on the coffee table, stuck the tails of his shirt into his waistband.

Herlehy picked up the gun, held the muzzle to his nose, dropped the .45 into his pocket. “That’s right. I haven’t,” the inspector said. “You got anything to tell me?”

The door to the bedroom opened, the redhead walked out, tying a blue silk robe around her waist. Her eyes sought Liddell’s questioningly.

“What is it, Johnny?”

Liddell shrugged. He nodded to Herlehy. “This is Inspector Herlehy of Homicide. Best I can guess is he’s working for Doc Kinsey on his time off.”

“How long you been here, Miss Conover?”

Her eyes sought Johnny’s again, “since about 2. We left the club and came right here—”

Herlehy turned to Liddell. “And you?”

“I’m with her, inspector. You going to tell us what happened?”

Herlehy raked at his white hair. “Tony Russo was gunned out tonight in his office. Shot through the back of the head.” He turned frosty blue eyes on the girl. “He’d been getting some notes, threatening to kill him. Know anything about them?”

The girl caught her lower lip between her teeth, started to answer, was waved to silence by Liddell. “Sure, she knows all about them. She sent them. But Russo was alive when we left him and I haven’t left her since.”

“That’s true, inspector. He was alive when we left,” Chilly put in. “I—was scared, so I asked Johnny to stay here with me in case Russo tried something.”

Herlehy squinted at Liddell. “But you slept out here, you said.”

“I’ll still testify that she didn’t leave me tonight.”

“It’s not good enough, Johnny. The d.a.’s smart enough to see that any alibi like that is self-serving. It not only gives her one, but it gives you one, too.”

“Why should I kill the bum?”

Herlehy stared at a discolored bruise on the private detective's jaw. "Maybe because he set one of his goons on you and worked you over."

"That goon was eating the carpet when we left. I had nothing against Russo. He owes me money, matter of fact. Why should I kill him?"

"We're not saying you did. But we are saying your friend here might have. I'll have to take you both downtown."

Liddell started to protest, read the message in the older man's eye, shrugged. "You're making a big mistake, inspector."

"I hope you didn't make a bigger one—killing that rat."

Johnny Liddell sat in the ante-chamber of the assistant district attorney assigned to homicide. He wondered in which of the other ante-chambers they were holding the redhead. He hadn't seen her since the policewoman had taken charge of her at headquarters.

He shifted uncomfortably on the hard wooden bench, checked his wristwatch. It was almost 10 o'clock when the assistant d.a. pulled open his door, walked out into the ante-chamber.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Liddell." Maury Levin had had plenty of contact with the private detective in the ten years he'd put in as an assistant. Now that he was within grabbing distance of the Big Boss' office, Levin wasn't about to make any enemies. Certainly not one who'd been so helpful to his boss on numerous occasions and whose help Levin himself might conceivably need some day soon. "Had to check you out."

"And?"

Levin shrugged, raised his hands, palms upward. "Clean. Ballistics cleared your gun, we don't have any motive that would stand up in court. You're free to go."

"And the girl?"

Levin pursed his lips judiciously. "That's a different story, Johnny. The Big Boss wants her held. She had motive, she had opportunity, she had everything."

"I tell you she wasn't out of my sight all night."

"I know you and I trust you. The Grand Jury doesn't. They're going to want a lot more than your word when those letters are read in court and the

Jury hears about her brother.” He squinted at Liddell. “If you were to come up with another suspect—” he shrugged. “You know my door is always open to you, Johnny.”

“What about my gun?”

“Property clerk will give you a release on it.”

Liddell swung on his heel, stamped out of the office. As soon as the door had slammed behind him, Inspector Herlehy joined Levin in the doorway to the ante-room. The assistant d.a. turned a worried look on the white haired man. “I hope he realized the license he has for that gun isn’t a hunting license.”

Herlehy shook his head. “He will. He wants the killer alive. Just like we do. If we start digging into Russo’s set-up, there’ll be plenty of heat for a cover-up. Nobody ever invented enough heat to stop Liddell.”

Johnny Liddell dropped the cab at the entrance to the morgue, just across the street from the pile of bricks and acres of glass windows that go to make up Bellevue Hospital. This is the last Port of Call for the fashionable suicide from Beekman Towers as well as for the pitiable bundle of rags that slept away its life in a Bowery doorway. Here they sleep, side by side, the one whose passing rated 96 point headlines in the tabs and the one whose passing was completely unnoticed except by those who demanded its removal from their doorway as a nuisance.

Liddell walked down the short stairway to the old fashioned elevator cage. He rode it to the basement, clanged back the heavy door, walked to the door stencilled “Examining Room”. He knocked, pushed open the door. A thin little wisp of a woman sat behind the desk. She nodded toward an unmarked door. “The doctor’s expecting you inside.”

Inside the other room, two white frocked men were leaning over a half covered body on a sandstone examining table. The older of the two straightened up, nodded to Liddell as he joined them.

On the table, Tony Russo lay on his back, staring up at the overhead light with eyes that would never see again. His hair was wet, dank, washed back from his face. His neck was supported by a notched wood-block. The canvas was rolled down far enough to expose the large x-shaped sutures that signalled the fact that an autopsy was already under way.

“Thanks for letting me see him, doc,” Liddell told the older of the two men. “I wanted to have a look at the wound myself.”

The man in the white smock put his fingers against the dead man’s temple, pushed the head to show a small hole behind the left ear. “Went in there.” He straightened the head, showed a larger, ragged hole under the right jaw. “Came out here. Powder burns at the point of entry indicate the killer was standing right behind him.” He unhooked a clipboard from the side of the table, ran his eyes over the pencilled notations. “Time of death approximately 2 a.m.—give or take fifteen minutes. Gun was a .32.” He rolled his eyes up from the clipboard. “That’s about all we have until the results of the p.m. are posted.”

“Not much doubt about what killed him, is there?”

The white frocked man shrugged, hung the clipboard back on its hook. “If that slug behind the ear didn’t kill him, it’s a cinch it didn’t add to his chances of breaking ninety,” he grunted. He stared down at the grey features of the dead man. “At that, he lasted a lot longer than I’d figure him for. We’ve processed a lot of his friends through here. And even more of his enemies.”

Johnny nodded, started to turn away.

“Funny that when he did get it, he’d get it from a girl, huh Johnny?” the man in white continued.

Liddell turned around. “Chilly Conover?” He shook his head. “She didn’t do it.”

The lab man shrugged. “Sorry. I didn’t know it was like that. But you ought to get her to level with you if you’re going out on a limb for her.”

“Meaning?”

“The gun. It belongs to her. And she was seen going up to Russo’s office around that time.”

“I was in there at the time. He sent for her and—”

“Not this time. The guy who saw her heading for Russo’s office says you were in the lobby making passes at the hatcheck girl. You were there almost twenty minutes. The hatchick will back it up.”

A worried frown etched a V between Liddell’s brows. He nodded. “Thanks for the tip, doc. I’ll do as much some time.”

He turned, walked toward the small hallway leading to the elevator. Some things that had been puzzling him were beginning to get clear. Too clear!

Maury Levin, the assistant d.a., sat behind his heavily piled desk, played with a pencil. His eyes were wary, he wore a worried frown.

“You could really jam me up, Liddell. I’m counting on you playing this one with no curves.”

“Haven’t I always?”

Levin nodded. There was a knock on the door, a uniformed patrolman stuck his head in. “She’s in Interrogation C, Mr. Levin.”

The assistant d.a. nodded, the cop’s head was withdrawn.

“In C, Johnny. You’ve got ten minutes.”

“I’ll only need one, Maury.” He headed for the doorway, slammed the door after him.

Interrogation C was halfway down the hallway between Maury Levin’s office and the double glass doors leading to the Big Boss’ private office. The redhead was sitting on a hard backed wooden chair, twisting her handkerchief nervously between her fingers. She jumped to her feet as Liddell walked in, ran to him.

A policewoman, seated by the screen meshed window, got up, walked to the door. “I’ll be outside, Mr. Liddell. You understand you have only ten minutes.”

Liddell nodded, waited until she had closed the door behind her. Then, as he turned back to the redhead, she tried to find his mouth with hers. He pushed her out at arm’s length, her eyes widened with fear.

“You went up to Tony Russo’s office while I was waiting for you to clean out your dressing room, didn’t you?” Before she could interrupt, he continued. “You used the private elevator, took a gun to make good those crazy threats.”

“No. I—”

“And you used me for a patsy. I was going to be able to swear you were with me every minute.”

The resistance seemed to drain out of the girl. She went limp, he dropped her into the chair.

“You think I killed him, too. You think I’m a—”

“What I think about you doesn’t matter. It’s what the d.a. is going to make a jury think about you that does.”

She shook her head. “I didn’t kill him, Johnny.” She caught at his sleeve. “I won’t lie to you. I did go up there with a gun. I wanted to see him crawl. Just once more.” She shook her head. “But he was too much for me. He took the gun away from me and he told me he’d kill me if he ever saw me again. But I didn’t kill him, Johnny.”

“Anybody see you leave? Maxie or any of his boys?”

Chilly shook her head. “I didn’t see them.”

“So there’s no one can prove Russo was still alive when you left?”

“He was. The first I knew about him being dead was when that policeman broke into my place. You’ve got to believe me, Johnny.” She dropped her hand from his sleeve. “I know I have no right to expect you to help after I held out on you—”

Liddell walked to the door, rapped. The policewoman eyed them with surprise, checked her watch. “You still have eight minutes.”

Liddell grinned at her. “Too long to talk not long enough not to talk.” He turned back to the redhead. “Sit tight until you hear from me.”

Chilly worked at a smile with questionable success. She looked around the room, her eyes coming to stop on the policewoman. “It doesn’t look as if I’m going to have much of a choice.”

An hour later, Johnny Liddell ran up the short flight of steps leading into Stillson’s Gym, dropped a quarter in the turnstile and pushed through. A thick fog of cigar smoke swirled lazily near the ceiling of the room. The heavy smell of liniment and perspiration was something tangible. A low hum of conversation was spiced with the rhythmic chatter of punching bags, the scuffing of skipping feet, the thud of punches on the heavy bags.

Liddell stood in the entrance, looked around. In the center of the floor a huge Negro, wearing ear guards, was boxing listlessly with an old chopping block, sharpening his right. Around the wall, house fighters and prelim boys

were working out on the pulleys, shadow boxing, feinting and weaving or skipping a rope tirelessly.

Johnny walked over to the ring. In the Negro's corner, a fat man, his fedora shoved on the back of his head, a cold cigar clenched in the corner of his mouth scowled as he watched the men in the ring. He wore no coat, dried half-moons of sweat stained the underarms of the shirt he wore. He checked his stopwatch, signalled for an end to the round.

"Get him under a shower," he growled at a rubber. He turned, nodded to Liddell. "Hello, Johnny. Long time." He pulled the cold cigar from between his teeth. "No trouble, I hope?"

Liddell shook his head. "No trouble. I just wanted to have a talk with Maxie Hughes. He usually works out down here, don't he?"

The fat man grunted, returned the cigar unlit to his mouth. He squinted as he glanced around the room, shoved a stubby thumb in the direction of the heavy bags. "Every day. Like clockwork. You'd think the bum was going someplace. Thinks he's still got it."

"He had his day."

The fat man made a face. "With Russo calling the plays? Even I could be champ like that. He says dive, you dive. You don't dive, don't go reading continued stories. You know?" He removed the cigar, spat in a bucket. "Russo makes. He makes good. But a slob like that?" He hunched his shoulders. "Walks on his heels and he ain't got the what-with to buy a decent meal." He glanced back at Liddell. "Say, that what you want to see him about? Russo?"

Liddell considered for a moment, decided to play it straight. "Yeah. They're cooling a client of mine for the job. She says she didn't do it. I figure Maxie might be able to help me clear her."

"I wish you luck." The fat man pulled his fedora down over his eyes. "Anyway, let me know when the collection's being taken. I want in."

"The collection?"

"Yeah. To buy your client a medal for chilling that louse." He turned shuffled in the direction of the showers. Liddell watched him thoughtfully for a moment, then walked over to where Maxie was grunting with every punch he threw at the heavy bag.

The cue-ball head glistened with a thin sheen of sweat; his chest was covered with heavy caracul-like hair. Mounds of muscles sat along his

shoulder line and biceps like knots. He held the big bag to a stop as Liddell walked up, stopped near him. Unconsciously, he touched his gloved hand tenderly to his mashed nose.

“That was a lucky one you hit me with last night, shamus,” he growled. “Real lucky.”

Liddell shrugged. “Like you said, nothing personal.” He dug into his pockets, brought up a pack of cigarettes, held it out to Maxie, drew a shake of the head. “Tough about your boss.”

Maxie shrugged, bit at the knots on his glove, got it open. “I was fixing to go back to the ring anyhow.” He slipped the glove off his hand, flexed his fingers, untied the other glove. “I still got some good years in me.”

“You couldn’t even get a prelim go at St. Nick’s and you know it.” Liddell told him coldly. “You’re not only a has-been. You’re a never-was, Maxie. The only reason you kept winning is because Russo saw to it you did.”

“You’re a liar,” the bald headed man roared.

“You’ve got a glass jaw and a debutante could flatten you with that lard belly—”

Maxie looked around, dropped his voice. His eyes were narrowed, pig-like. “You’re trying to make me mad, shamus. Only I’m too smart to fall for it. Get going and keep going.”

Liddell touched a light to the cigarette. “When you killed him, you killed your only chance to eat regularly—”

“Me kill him?” Maxie shook his head. “The redhead killed him. She kept sending him notes saying she was going to, and she finally did.”

“So you weren’t out cold? You heard Russo accuse her of sending the notes. It gave you an idea, didn’t it, Maxie?”

The battered face twisted into a caricature of a smile. “You going to prove something, shamus?”

“Yeah. I’m going to prove Chilly went back there last night with a gun —”

The bald head bobbed delightedly. “The cops already know that. It was her gun that killed him—”

“They also know Russo took the gun away from her and threw her out.” Some of the grin on Maxie’s face faded. “But you didn’t know that, because you weren’t there—where you were supposed to be.”

The eyes were narrowed again. Maxie licked at his thickened lips. “You’re lying.”

Liddell shook his head. “You already had two strikes on you. I made you eat carpet. Russo didn’t like that. When you’re not on the door where you’re supposed to be, and you let the girl get at him again—you struck out.”

The pig eyes darted around the room. “Who’d listen to you? They know you got the hots for the broad and—.”

“The gun was laying there on the desk when he threw you out, wasn’t it?” He blocked Maxie as the ex-pug started to walk away. “But you made two mistakes, Maxie. Two big ones!”

“You’re trying to pull something, Liddell. You don’t make me admit a thing. And you can’t prove anything?”

“I don’t have to, Maxie. Didn’t you know they already gave Chilly the nitrate test?” He shook his head. “Negative.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The nitrate test. It tells whether you’ve fired a gun or not recently. The gun kicks back tiny particles of powder. Then they make a paraffin cast of your hand. If you fired a gun recently, they’ll be there.”

Maxie fought a losing battle to keep his eyes off his right hand.

“It stays for three, maybe four days. Even, if you wash your hands a dozen times. It’ll be there when they check your hand.” He watched the play of emotions on the other man’s face. “You made another mistake, Maxie.”

The pig-like eyes rolled up from the hand to the detective’s face. “Russo was scared of Chilly. He never would have let her get in back of him. You—he had nothing but contempt for you. Always did have.”

“I was a champ.”

“A cheese champ. And he made you. Now he was throwing you to the wolves. Didn’t care if you ended up selling pencils in the lobby at the Garden, did he, Maxie?”

Maxie licked at his lips. “He was a nothing. I was the champ.”

“He never let you forget how you got to be champ, did he, Maxie?” Liddell could feel the perspiration forming in beads on his forehead and upper lip. “When he fired you last night he told you all about it, didn’t he? Laughed at you.”

Maxie wiped his mouth with the back of his arm. “I made him a million. Because I was the champ. I made him a million.”

“And he was going to throw you out.”

Maxie seemed to be focussing his eyes yards behind Liddell’s head. “I told him how it felt to be champ. He laughed at me.” He hit his chest with the side of his hand. “He said I was champ of the tankers. That I never won a fair go in my life.” The eyes came back to Liddell’s face. “That’s a lie. You know it’s a lie.”

Liddell dropped the cigarette to the floor, crushed it out. He put his hand into his jacket pocket. The butt of the gun had a cold re-assuring feel.

“He told me if I was so good to go make it on my own. Then he told me to get out before he had me thrown out.” The absent look was back in the eyes. “He turned and walked away from me. I went after him, you know? Just to reason with him.” He shook his head as though he was having difficulty understanding. “The gun was there. I grabbed it. And that’s all I remember.”

Liddell’s voice was gentle. “Nobody can blame you, Maxie. But you’re going to have to tell them about it. Downtown.” For an anxious moment, his fingers tightened on the butt of the gun.

Then Maxie nodded. “Okay Johnny. If you say so.”

Johnny Liddell sprawled in the chair across the desk from Maury Levin, watched the assistant d.a. read the flimsy, nod at the signature on the bottom. “All signed, sealed and delivered.” He looked over to where Inspector Herlehy stood at the window, staring out into the park below. “You satisfied, inspector?”

Herlehy shrugged. “The confession stands up.” He cast a baleful glare at Liddell. “I’m too smart to ask you how you got it.”

Liddell grinned. “I’ll be glad to explain—”

Herlehy held his hand up. “Never mind. I don’t want to be an accessory to it, whatever it is.” He turned at a knock on the door.

“Come in,” Levin directed.

The door opened, Chilly Conover walked in. Her eyes hop-scotched around the room, came to rest on Johnny. She walked over to him. “I just heard, Johnny. I don’t know how I’ll ever thank you.”

Liddell winked at the assistant d.a., got up, took the redhead by the arm, piloted her to the door. With his hand on the knob, he turned and grinned at the inspector. “Any time you need my help, inspector—”

“Get out before I remember some law I can book you under,” the white haired man roared.

Liddell ushered Chilly into the corridor, followed her and closed the door after them.

Maury Levin sat at his desk, laced his fingers behind his head, stared at the door dreamily. “What a lucky guy! She says she don’t know how she’ll ever thank him.”

Herlehy grunted. “If I know Liddell—she’ll find a way.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Dead Reckoning* by Frank Kane]