

*DEAD BLOOD
RUNS PURPLE*

By Frank Kane

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DEAD BLOOD

RUNS PURPLE

By Frank Kane

*(Author of "Sometimes Money Talks"
"Murder at Face Value," Etc.)*

There was a higher-up behind the jewel-snatching racket at the Tropical Club, which culminated in a slashed throat for lovely Marie Marlin. And Johnny Liddell's throat was ripe for the murderer's knife, unless he could sift through the mass of conflicting evidence and nail Number One pronto!

JOHNNY LIDDELL leaned on the bar at the Tropical Club with the grace born of long experience. He fondled a jigger of what the bartender proudly called brandy in his ham-like hand. He was only slightly longer than he was wide, but most of the bulk constituted muscle rather than fat.

Behind him, six bored chorines were pounding out the last few steps of an uninspired routine. The faces of the ringsiders looked ghostly through the pall of smoke that seemed part of the atmosphere of the Tropical.

Johnny Liddell poured the brandy down his throat and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Seen Marie Marlin around tonight, Jack?” he asked the bartender casually.

The man behind the stick scooped up the empty glass, swabbed the bar with a wet rag that left large, greasy circles and shook his head.

“She ain’t due to go on until 12:45.” He indicated a clock on the back bar with a nod of his head. “It’s only 11:30 now.”

Johnny Liddell grunted. “Let’s have another shot of that Brooklyn varnish you call cognac.”

He spilled a handful of silver on the bar. The bartender grinned, showing the yellowed stumps of his teeth. He poured a dark brown liquid from a bottle bearing a foreign label. A few drops spilled over the side of the glass onto the bar. He lifted the glass and swabbed the bar.

“Don’t look now, Johnny, but here comes that female newshawk pal of yours,” he whispered.

Johnny Liddell raised his eyes to see the trim figure of the Trib’s Sally Herley bearing down on him and groaned. Under other circumstances, a chance to have a couple of drinks with her might be intriguing, but tonight—

“Hi, Sherlock,” she greeted him. “Got the solitary drinking habit, eh? That’s bad.”

Johnny Liddell nodded. “With any luck I’d be able to cultivate it, Sal. Get too many interruptions. Where are you heading for?”

The girl shrugged, then grinned, showing a gleaming set of teeth. “No place in particular, Sherlock. I’m never too busy to spend a little time with my friends. Rye and ginger, Jack.”

She leaned over and helped herself to a cigarette from the battered paper pack in front of the private detective. He scraped a match along the sandpaper strip of a box, held it to the end of her cigarette, watched stolidly as she exhaled a long, blue feathery tendril of smoke ceilingward.

“You’re wasting your time shadowing me tonight, Sal,” he told her. “This is strictly social.”

A man in a tuxedo that fit too snugly at the hips and showed obvious signs of padding at the shoulders approached Johnny Liddell.

“Mr. Liddell?” he asked in a low voice. “Miss Marlin would like to see you in her dressing room.”

Sally Herley pursed her red lips. “Marie Marlin, no less. When you go social, you go the whole way.”

Johnny Liddell emptied his glass, slid off the bar stool and chucked her under the chin. “For a little fat guy, I manage to get around,” he grinned.

He followed the tuxedoed man through the crowd to a small, unmarked door that led backstage. Marie Marlin’s dressing room was third one down the unpainted corridor. He knocked.

“It’s open. I’m decent.”

MARIE MARLIN sat on a straight-backed chair in front of a littered make-up table. A brightly colored dressing gown hung carelessly open, revealing much of the reason for the Tropical’s popularity with out-of-town buyers. Her long, metallic red hair hung down over her shoulders, in startling contrast to the whiteness of her skin.

“You the dick the Gardener Agency sent over?” Her voice was unexpectedly harsh.

Johnny Liddell noticed that she had just painted her mouth a striking red and had smeared three fingers doing it.

“Yeah. Johnny Liddell’s the name. Understand you’re having some trouble.”

The girl turned back to the mirror and started working on her eyes with a mascara brush.

“Not yet, I’m not. That’s what I want you for—to see that I don’t have any trouble. Anybody see you come back here?”

Johnny Liddell shook his head. “Only that waiter you sent out after me.”

The girl shrugged. “That’s Mario. He doesn’t matter.”

Johnny Liddell rummaged through his pockets came up with a fresh pack of cigarettes. He stripped it of its cellophane jacket, offered one to the girl.

“Mind telling me what kind of trouble you’re expecting?”

Marie Marlin ran incredibly long, graceful fingers through her thick hair. She shook her head. “I haven’t got time. It’ll keep. I want to see you tonight at my place—Denton Towers. Make it about 2:30.”

Johnny Liddell grunted. “Why didn’t we set the date for there in the first place?” He scratched a wooden match along the jamb of the door and lit it. “I don’t get any particular thrill from hanging around this upholstered sewer.”

The girl swung around and faced him. “You’re getting paid for it, ain’t you?” Her eyes were hard, unblinking. “Besides, I had a reason for having you meet me here.” She pulled open the top drawer of her dressing table, took out a paper-wrapped packet. “I want you to keep that in a safe place for me until I ask for it.”

Johnny Liddell nodded. He fingered the packet curiously.

“Okay,” he said. “Tonight at 2:30. Denton Towers.”

Sally Herley was still perched on the bar stool when he got back. She studied him with a critical eye.

“Well, Casanova. You didn’t hold the royal attention very long.”

Johnny Liddell grinned, then winked. “Don’t tell anybody, but we just arranged the terms for a return engagement.” He ordered a brandy, settled back on his favorite bar stool. “Why don’t you run along now, kid? It’s getting late.”

Sally wrinkled her nose in a grin. “You’re too anxious to get rid of me, Shamus. I think I’d better go along to take care of you.”

GOOD to her word, two hours later, the girl followed Johnny Liddell into a cab in front of the Tropical.

They jumped two lights on Madison Avenue, veered east at 48th street and weaved across town.

“This driver sure is patriotic, Johnny,” Sally gasped. “He makes his tires wear twice as long by taking turns on only two of them.”

Johnny Liddell grunted. “Do what he does. Close your eyes when he comes to a corner.”

The cab skidded to a stop in front of an ornate canopy that announced “Denton Towers.”

“Is this where we’re going?” Sally peered upward at the apparently endless tiers of windows stretching skyward.

“This is where I get out,” Johnny announced. “You’re going home.”

“Nothing doing. Something’s cooking and I smell a good story coming up. Me for that.”

Johnny Liddell put his hand on her shoulder and pushed her gently back on the seat. “All kidding aside, Sal. I couldn’t take you with me if I wanted to. Besides,” he brought the paper-wrapped packet from his side pocket, “you can do me a real big favor.”

Sally Herley was unimpressed. “Here it comes.”

“I was supposed to get this thing into a safe place before I came here,” he told her in a low voice. “Kidding around with you, I clean forgot about it ___”

The girl reporter cocked an eye. “You levelling?”

“So help me, kid. I wouldn’t kid you.” He dug into his pocket, came up with a Yale key. “Here’s the key to my place. Take it up there for me, will you?”

“I will on one condition. If there’s any kind of a yarn on the fire, I get first crack at it.”

Johnny Liddell nodded. “It’s a deal.” He handed her the package and closed the cab door. “The Highland, just off the park,” he told the driver.

As he waved her good-bye from the curb, he could see her through the back window of the cab as she placed her thumb to her nose—and waved back.

MARIE MARLIN had apartment 3A. It was set around the corner from the elevator, off the main corridor. Johnny Liddell rapped

softly at the door. He caught the faint rustle of movement from within, then silence.

He rapped again, then tried the knob. It turned in his hand. He pushed the door slowly open. From the hall he could command a view of the entire living room. It was empty.

Johnny Liddell eased a .45 from its shoulder holster into his fist. He stepped cautiously through the open door, swung it shut with his heel. His eyes covered the room quickly. There were plenty of evidences of a hasty search—desk drawers stood open, papers littered the floor.

The door leading into the bedroom was half ajar. Johnny Liddell crossed the room slowly, pushed the door open, the .45 at ready.

It was a large, ornately decorated room. A yellow light burned feebly in a center socket. Drawers and a cedar chest against a far wall had been ransacked in here, too.

Marie Marlin lay on her back on the pink silk coverlet on the bed. One arm dangled to the floor, the other was thrown across her face, as though to ward off a blow. Her throat had been cut from ear to ear, a dark pool formed on the rug under her head.

Johnny Liddell's eye flashed to the windows. They were all closed. Whoever had made the rustling noise was still in the apartment. The bathroom door was open, offered no hiding place. He settled for the closet near the window.

“Okay, you in the closet. You got a count of three before I start blasting. Come out with your hands way up.”

In the brief silence, Johnny Liddell thought he could hear his heart pounding. His finger tightened on the trigger—

The closet door swung open. A girl stepped out.

She was slight, weighed about an even 100 soaking wet. Her blond hair was piled high on her head, exposing shapely little ears that snuggled close against her head. Her face was drained of all color, she kept her eyes averted from the bed.

“Okay, sister. Out here where I can get a good look at you.”

The girl complied. Her hands were shaking visibly. “Please—put away the gun. I'm not going to run away.”

Johnny Liddell grinned. She didn't look as though she was going to be able to walk, let alone run. He walked across the room, carefully avoiding the slowly congealing puddle near the bed, picked up the telephone.

He dialed the number of police headquarters.

"Hello," he barked. "Lieutenant Stack in Homicide."

When Stack answered, he gave him the facts briefly.

"Yeah," he answered a question. "I'll keep her here for you. Hop to it, will you, Stack?"

HE slipped the .45 back into its shoulder holster and ushered the girl out into the living room. "If I were you I'd start talking and talk fast," he advised. He selected a cigarette and hung it from his lower lip. As he talked it waggled.

"Could I have one of those?" the girl asked. He held the pack out and she speared one with a shaking hand. Johnny Liddell lit it for her and she filled her lungs gratefully.

"How about it, blondie?" he persisted. "Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

The girl turned a pair of clear blue eyes on him. "I'm Alma Woods. I live here. Marie Marlin is—was my roommate."

Johnny Liddell digested that piece of news slowly. "That why you were ransacking the drawers? What were you looking for, Alma?"

The girl hesitated a moment. "I—"

"Don't answer that, Alma," a hard voice cut in from behind Johnny Liddell.

The private dick, cursing himself for leaving the door unlocked, pivoted around, hand streaking toward his right lapel. It froze with the tips of its fingers brushing the butt of the .45. He was looking down the wrong end of a .38 barrel.

"That's smart, buddy." The guy holding the .38 stared at him with unblinking, cold slate-colored eyes. His spotless grey fedora was tilted over one eye, a thin, lipless mouth clenched a cold cigar. "Come over here, Alma. Who is this guy?"

The girl was shivering perceptibly. “I don’t know. He walked in here and pointed a gun at me. Then he called the police—”

Slate Eyes stared balefully at Johnny Liddell. “Called the coppers, eh? I oughta let you have it right here.” He turned his attention to Blondie momentarily. “Did you find it?”

The girl shook her head. “He broke in before I could finish looking.” She shrugged helplessly. “Anyway, I don’t know where she’d hide it.”

Johnny Liddell suddenly decided why Slate Eyes looked familiar. It was a jewel snatch that the Gardener Agency had worked on several years before. Slate Eyes had been in it, even though they hadn’t been able to pin it on him—

“The cops won’t be here for a few minutes. Give a last-minute look around,” the hood ordered. He shifted the cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other.

Johnny Liddell’s mind went tumbling back over the years. Slate Eyes’ name eluded him. Harry Eastman? Harry Ester? Harry Esterbrook! That was it! He studied the hood’s face again. What was the connection between this jewel thief and Marie Marlin’s murder?

For a split second, Slate Eyes’ attention wandered as he stared past Johnny Liddell toward the thing on the bed. The private dick had no time to weigh the consequences. He threw his entire 170 pounds at the gunman in a flying tackle.

He never even saw the blow that floored him. It couldn’t have travelled more than ten inches. He was conscious only of the streams of white hot pain that seemed to split his skull, of the multicolored lights that flashed brightly as the gun butt connected with his skull.

He descended into a bottomless pit of darkness.

Dead Blood Runs Purple

CHAPTER II

CONSCIOUSNESS seared its way back into his brain. Dimly he made out voices. He tried to raise his head, groaned and let it fall back to the floor.

“Well, well. Sleeping beauty is coming back to life,” a familiar voice boomed in his ears. Johnny Liddell winced, tried opening his eyes.

The familiar voice jangled his supersensitive nerve again. “Take a good look at him, sergeant. There’s one dick that really used his head.”

The sergeant laughed. “Looks like too much wear and tear on the skull, lieutenant.” They both guffawed.

Johnny Liddell’s eyes stopped rolling long enough for him to focus them on Lieutenant Ray Stack. He tried to grin, but the result was more like a horrible grimace.

“Imagine meeting you here, lieutenant,” he croaked.

The homicide dick grinned. “Nice work, Johnny. Think you’re going to live?”

Johnny Liddell made the mistake of trying to nod his head. He groaned. “I’m afraid I will. The dame’s gone, I suppose?”

Stack nodded toward the bedroom. “That one isn’t, but the one you were going to hold for me is.” Lieutenant Stack affected a broad-brimmed, western type hat. His square jaw was chomping noiselessly on a wad of gum and he didn’t miss a beat as he talked. “You’re slipping, Johnny, when a dame can conk you and take a powder.”

Johnny Liddell tenderly massaged the sore spot of the top of his head. Mentally he debated the advisability of holding out on Slate Eyes’ part in the evening’s festivities. He decided against it.

“Right after I spoke to you, I was questioning the girl in here, when some guy slips up behind me and beans me.”

Lieutenant Stack brushed his mustache from the middle outward with the nail of his thumb. “A guy, eh? Know him?”

Johnny Liddell nodded. “I think so. Remember that Walton robbery the agency worked on a couple of years ago?”

Stack nodded. “A jewel job wasn’t it?”

“We thought the guy that pulled that job was a mug named Harry Esterbrook.” Johnny Liddell pulled himself stiffly to his feet, went through the motions of brushing himself off. “He’s the guy.”

The lieutenant’s eyes narrowed. “Esterbrook, eh? Sure of that, Johnny? Murder’s not in his line. He’s too yellow for that.”

A WHITE-COATED representative of the M. E.’s office handed Stack a receipt to sign, which he initialled and handed back.

“That was a pretty nifty dish there, lieutenant, until somebody decided to make hash out of it,” the guy in the white coat grinned.

He signalled to the two men from his office. They rolled the body from the bed onto a stretcher, covered it with a sheet and followed him out.

“Nice guys,” Johnny Liddell grunted. He stepped back to let the stretcher bearers pass. “So long, kid,” he told the covered figure softly. “We’ll pay off for you.”

Stack sat watching him, his jaws methodically crushing the large wad of gum. “You’re pretty sure about Esterbrook, Johnny?” he asked.

Johnny Liddell nodded, then regretted it. “I never forget a face, Stack. His is one I’m going to particularly remember.”

The uniformed copper at the door opened it in response to a knock. A tall, carefully tailored man stood in the hall, a grey Stetson in his hand. He looked around curiously at the sight of the uniformed policeman.

“U’m, Harry Connors of the *Dispatch*,” he told no one in particular. “I have an appointment with Miss Marlin.”

The police lieutenant motioned him in. “Harry Connors, eh? You write that Broadway gossip for your sheet, don’t you?”

Connors nodded. His bright little eyes roamed the room, missing nothing. “Yeah. That’s what I came to see Marie about. She said she had a story for me.”

Johnny Liddell scowled. “She wasn’t kidding.”

The lieutenant regarded the private dick soberly. “I don’t suppose you know what the story was about, do you?” he asked Connors.

The columnist shook his head. “No, I guess it was some stuff for the column. She often came through with some hot stuff.”

“Did you usually get it here or at the club?”

“Here,” Harry Connors grinned. “If anybody saw us with our heads together she would’ve got blamed for everything I printed.” His eyes took in Johnny Liddell. “You’re Johnny Liddell, the private dick, ain’t you?”

Johnny Liddell nodded glumly.

“I don’t want to appear curious, lieutenant,” the columnist grinned, “but is it too much to ask what’s cooking? After all, it’s not usual to come up to keep a date with a babe and find half the police force plus the town’s best-known private dick playing chaperone. Where’s Marie?”

Johnny Liddell cocked one eye as though he were figuring. “Just about now, she’s getting loaded on a nice marble slab down at the morgue.”

The grey Stetson fell from Harry Connors’ fingers, rolled on the floor. He picked it up, dusted it mechanically with the palm of his hand.

“Is that on the level?” he appealed to Stack.

The homicide lieutenant nodded.

“Who did it?” Connors asked. “Got a line on the killer?”

Johnny Liddell ignored the question. “Ever hear of a mug named Esterbrook? Harry Esterbrook?” he countered.

Harry Connors nodded. “I know him slightly. Hangs around several of the clubs. Bit of a petty racketeer, I’d guess.”

“How about this blondie, this Alma Woods?”

“I know her a little, too. She was in the line at the Tropical Club. Lived here with Marie. That’s all I know about her.”

Johnny Liddell grimaced. “Ever hear of her and this Esterbrook teaming up and working together?”

Harry Connors shook his head. “Can’t say I have. She didn’t seem to do much mixing. Sort of played it lonesome.”

Stack stopped chomping away at the wad of gum, shifted it to the other side of his mouth.

“Anything else you’d like to know, Johnny?” he asked.

“Yeah.” The private dick perched his hat carefully on the side of his head. “Where can a guy get a drink around here—and how long is it going to take me to get there?”

CHAPTER III

JOHNNY LIDDELL had the sensation that this was all happening all over again, that it had happened before. Many times before. He tried to remember what had happened.

He had left Stack and the others at Marie Marlin’s. He had entered the lobby to his building—

A pain started somewhere under his left ear and shot to a spot somewhere behind his eyes. He tried opening his eyes.

Sally Herley was bending over him. The rag she held in her hand was dripping onto his jacket. Over her shoulder he could see the face of Lieutenant Ray Stack.

Stack grinned. “He’s not going to die, Sal. You can’t kill a private dick by pounding him over the head. Got any brandy around?”

The girl nodded, started for the chest of drawers across the room.

Johnny Liddell groaned. “This is getting monotonous.” He tried to pull himself to a sitting position, fell back on the couch.

“Who was it this time, Johnny?” Stack asked.

Sally came back with a jigger filled with a brown liquid. She got her arm under the private dick’s neck, helped him to a sitting position, and poured a warming shot of brandy down his throat.

“I didn’t even see the guy, Stack, and that’s straight.” Johnny Liddell wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “He came up behind me and let me have it.”

“Think it was the same guy?”

Johnny Liddell shrugged his shoulders. “Could be, but I don’t know for sure. All I know is he packs an awful wallop.”

Sally Herley glared at the lieutenant. “Let him catch his breath, lieutenant. That poor head of his has more lumps than a sugar bowl.”

The lieutenant ignored her. “How about letting us in on it, Johnny. What’ve you got that these mugs want?”

Johnny Liddell tenderly touched portions of his head and winced. “The skull they love to touch, I guess.”

Sally Herley snapped her fingers. “Maybe it’s that packet Marie Marlin gave you to mind—” She caught a baleful glare from Johnny Liddell and clapped her hands over her mouth.

Lieutenant Ray Stack pushed his western-style sombrero off the back of his head, glared at the private dick. “Trying to hold out on me, Johnny?” he asked.

Johnny Liddell grinned weakly. “You know me better than that, Stack. It just sort of slipped my mind.”

The homicide lieutenant glared at him. He held out his hand. “Okay. Give.”

Johnny Liddell looked at the girl reporter glumly, then nodded his head. She tapped her way across the room on her high heels, disappeared into the kitchen.

Johnny Liddell fumbled through his pockets fruitlessly, finally accepted a battered cigarette from a pack Ray Stack extended toward him. “Guess they cleaned me out, lieutenant. Even my wallet’s gone.”

S TACK held out a match, and watched the private dick gratefully fill his lungs. “They didn’t get that. We did. It’s down at Identification being tested for prints. Whoever slugged you had it out and was going through it. He must have been scared off and dropped it out front.”

Johnny Liddell sent a stream of blue grey smoke ceilingward. “How’d I get up here to the apartment?”

The lieutenant hung a cigarette from the corner of his mouth where it wagged when he talked. “The super found you stretched out in the lobby. Guess he thought you were out on another tear, so he lugged you up here. It was Sally who found out you’d been conked.”

Johnny Liddell scowled at the glowing end of his cigarette. “How long have I been out?”

“A long time, Johnny,” Stack told him. “I was beginning to get worried.” He reached over to the library table, picked up the private dick’s dented fedora. “That hat of yours probably saved you. It must’ve been an awful wallop.”

Johnny Liddell’s eyes were glued to Sally Herley as she swivel-hipped her way back across the room. He stared at the fresh loaf of bread in her hands.

“What’s the idea of the bread?” he asked.

The girl reporter winked. She slid the bread from its waxed wrapper. “You just don’t have any imagination, Sherlock,” she twitted him. The top half of the loaf of bread lifted off, revealing the packet nestled in a scooped-out portion. “See?”

Stack and Johnny Liddell exchanged bewildered glances.

“Now I’ve seen everything,” the lieutenant murmured. He took the packet, cut the string. “Let’s see what all this shooting’s about.”

The brown paper wrapper peeled off to reveal what looked to be a canvas purse. It was loosely basted across the top. Stack ripped the thread with his fingernail and tipped the purse over Johnny Liddell’s hat.

A cascade of unmounted diamonds of all sizes flowed out into the battered fedora.

Johnny Liddell was the first to speak.

“I’ll be damned,” he said softly.

Lieutenant Ray Stack chewed thoughtfully on the wad of gum that bulged his right cheek out. “This makes sense in more ways than one,” he said. He crushed out his cigarette, stirred the little pile of diamonds with his finger. “It not only explains why they were so anxious to get them back, but it gives us a pretty good idea where Harry Esterbrook fits into this picture.”

The girl reporter closed her mouth. It had been hanging open since the diamonds first poured from the canvas purse.

“I don’t follow all this. What’s this got to do with Marie Marlin?”

Johnny Liddell pursed his lips, cocked one eye at her. “You know that Marie Marlin was murdered tonight?”

“Yes. Lieutenant Stack told me all about it.” She tossed her head angrily. “Wasn’t that a fine thing? Here I sit on my fanny while a first-class murder breaks and they have to send a leg-man out to cover it. Isn’t that just fine!”

“Don’t get peevish, Sal,” the private dick soothed her. “This is a much better story—and you’re in on the ground floor.”

The homicide lieutenant poured the stones back into their canvas sack. “Tie these in the same way I do, Johnny?”

Johnny Liddell nodded. “The epidemic of jewel jobs?”

“Right. Marie Marlin must have been fingering the jobs. Who’d be in a better spot? When she strutted around that floor, she could have gotten a swell slant at the jewelry some of those dames were wearing. She probably signalled to somebody in the club—”

“Esterbrook?” Johnny Liddell suggested.

Stack shook his head. “No. It’d have to be somebody who was there every night. It couldn’t have been Esterbrook. He’s an ex-con. If he hung out there every night, one of our night club squad would have tagged him.”

JOHNNY LIDDELL flipped his cigarette butt in the general direction of a waste basket in the corner. It hit the wall, fell to the floor in a spattering of sparks. “I guess you’re right. By the way, did anybody see anybody going into the Marlin apartment last night?”

Stack denuded another stick of spearmint, added it to the already considerable wad. “Nope. Some guy spotted that columnist guy, Harry Connors, but we already knew about him.”

Sally Herley wailed. “So. You’ve been giving my competition exclusive stuff while you’ve got me cooped up here?”

Johnny Liddell put up his hands placatingly. “Wait a minute, Sal. We’re giving you an exclusive right now, aren’t we?” He pointed to Stack. “All the

lieutenant's got to do is find somebody who spends a lot of his time in the club, and who knew I had the stones—”

He paused, then started to say something but the girl beat him to it.

“The headwaiter! The headwaiter at the Tropical Club,” she exclaimed.

Stack looked from one to the other.

“That’s it.” Something of the girl’s excitement had translated itself to the private dick. “He brought me the message that Marie wanted to see me. Far as I know he’s the only one that knew I’d been talking to her.”

“Right.” Sally’s voice broke with the excitement. “Then, after he’d killed Marie and couldn’t find the stones, he remembered about you and came up here to wait for you.”

“Whoa. Whoa. Let’s figure this out,” Stack counselled. “Let’s say Marie Marlin was fingering for a jewel gang. She decides for some reason to cross them and hold out these stones. Would she let the top man know who she was giving them to for safekeeping?”

Johnny Liddell frowned. “But even if the headwaiter was only a member of the gang, he’d tell the big bug anyhow.”

Stack shook his head. “I’m not sure about that. Maybe he was figuring on a double-cross of his own—and maybe he didn’t even know who the big shot was.”

“How about Blondie and Esterbrook?” Johnny Liddell reminded him. “Were they in with him, or were they working a pitch of their own?”

“The only way we’ll ever know that for sure is to ask them,” Stack said. “I’ve got a call out for them. We’ll get them—and when we do, we’ll ask them. Just to ease your mind.”

CHAPTER IV

BUSINESS at the Tropical Club had doubled since the news got out of Marie Marlin’s death and the disappearance of her roommate. Sally Herley’s exclusive, hinting at the connection of the headwaiter with

the events of the night before, caused many out-of-towners to invest the substitute headwaiter with a glamor and a menace that he had never enjoyed in his more placid days as checkroom concessionaire.

Johnny Liddell perched precariously on the edge of his favorite bar stool and studied the alterations in his appearance with a morbid interest.

He barely looked up as Lieutenant Ray Stack slid onto the stool next to him.

“Whiskey and soda for me,” the lieutenant told the man behind the stick. He turned to the private dick. “Well, Johnny. Anybody else playing Ravel’s Bolero on your skull since the last time I saw you?”

Johnny Liddell found nothing humorous in the salutation. He scowled as he emptied his brandy glass.

“Don’t be peevish, Johnny,” the lieutenant grinned. “We’re beginning to make some progress. We’ve definitely established that it was the headwaiter that conked you.” He pulled a brown leather wallet from his inside pocket. “You can have this back now.”

Johnny Liddell pocketed it without examining it. “Found some prints on it, eh? That was mighty careless of him.” He motioned for another brandy, then groaned. “Oh-oh. Here’s that woman again!”

Sally Herley had a new sparkle in her eye. The little sport cap perched on the back of her thick copper-colored hair matched the green in her well-filled sweater.

“Hi, Sherlock. Hi, lieutenant. Well, have you lovely boys cooked up another exclusive for me for tonight? My editor was very—ver-ry happy about last night.”

Stack grinned.

Johnny Liddell closed his eyes in anguish. “Go away, Sal, go away. I can’t bear to hear about anybody being happy today. Be a good girl and go spread cheer into somebody else’s life.”

Sally plopped her bag on top of the bar, winked at the bartender. “He just doesn’t want to admit how glad he is to see me, Jack,” she confided. “Make mine rye and ginger.”

Johnny Liddell sipped his brandy, then emptied his glass. “You got the by-line, and I’m getting the fan mail,” he grunted. “Matter of fact, I’ve got

one fan letter you kids might like to see.” He pulled a yellow telegraph form from his inside pocket. “From my boss.”

Stack smoothed out the wrinkled paper, read it and passed it along to the girl with a grin.

She whistled softly. “You really are in the dog house.”

“Dog house ain’t the word for it,” Johnny Liddell grunted. “Read it to me again, Sal. I’m beginning to feel too good.”

Sally took a deep sip of her drink.

“Congratulations,” she read. “That’s one way of getting rid of a client. Let them get murdered. Swell advertisement for the agency. What kind of business are you expecting to go into next? Signed Ed Gardener.”

Johnny Liddell nodded. “See what I mean? He’s not kidding when he says I’m washed up.”

Sally Herley drained her glass, made wet circles with the bottom of it. “Everything will be all right if we find the killer, won’t it, Johnny?”

Johnny Liddell grinned. “That’s a cinch. All we’ve got to do is find the killer.”

STACK, whose attention had wandered to ogle a barelegged chorine who hurried from the backstage door through the bar to keep a date, returned his gaze reluctantly to Johnny Liddell’s less handsome face. “Maybe we can do that, too,” he offered.

Johnny Liddell nodded. “Maybe we could—only there happens to be three round holes and three square pegs to put in ’em. It just doesn’t make sense—I can’t make it come out right.”

“For instance?”

Johnny Liddell hung a cigarette from the corner of his mouth, offered one to the others. “Let’s take for granted that we’re right and that Marie was the finger girl and Esterbrook did the strong arm stuff. Then Esterbrook couldn’t have been the top man. Why should he lift the stones, then give them to her to give back to him?”

Sally looked puzzled. “We ought to have a drink on that one, Johnny.” She signalled the bartender and indicated the three empty glasses.

Stack ignored the interruption. “I follow that. Your idea is that Marie was the only contact to the top man, and that Esterbrook handed the stones to her to pass along. Right?”

Johnny Liddell moved his elbow off the bar so that the bartender could move the refilled jigger over to him. “Now, we’re already agreed that Esterbrook couldn’t hang out in the club every night like he’d have to if he was going to take Marie’s instructions. I figure that’s where either the headwaiter or Blondie comes in—”

A uniformed page came over. “Lieutenant Stack?”

Stack nodded.

“An important call, sir. Police headquarters they said it was.”

Stack slid off the barstool, dug through his pockets for a quarter, flipped it to the page. “Thanks, son,” he said. He turned to Johnny Liddell. “Here’s where we test that day-dream of yours, Johnny. The call’s from Murray down at my office to tell me they’ve got Esterbrook and Blondie.”

Johnny Liddell watched the lieutenant’s departing back with bleak eyes. He tossed off the brandy, shuddered, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Well, Sal,” he said, “I guess your next exclusive will be the story of Johnny Liddell’s retirement—by request.”

The girl was sympathetic. “You’re taking it too hard,” she said. “It wasn’t your fault. And besides, if Stack catches Esterbrook and Blondie—”

“Then the case is solved,” Johnny Liddell grunted. “But by the police. Ed Gardener doesn’t count that. He’s going to say I should’ve broken the case myself. After all, she did come to me for help—Hey, here’s Stack back already.”

Sally swung on her stool. “He doesn’t look any too happy for a copper that’s just picked up two murder suspects.”

The lieutenant stamped to the bar, took his glass and drained it.

“We got Esterbrook, Johnny. Just like I said we would. Only—he was dead. Throat cut from ear to ear!”

ALLY HERLEY watched the broad back of Johnny Liddell going through the motions of shaking a cocktail. She stretched luxuriously on the couch

S and yawned.

“See what Harry Connors did to Stack and you in his column this morning, Johnny?” she asked. “He took it as a personal insult that Esterbrook decided to die too late for the early edition.”

Johnny Liddell found two clean glasses behind the curtains over the sink, caught the shaker under his arm and walked over to the couch. He swept two books and a magazine off the low table near the head of the couch and put the shaker and glasses down.

“Can’t say I blame him,” he grunted. “The way you’ve been getting all the breaks in this case it looks like there’s something fishy being pulled.”

The girl grinned. “Can I help it if I happen to be around at the psychological moment?”

Johnny Liddell filled the two glasses. “You know, that guy could probably help us plenty. In that job of his he knows all these characters that hang around the Tropical Club. Don’t forget, he drops by there every night.” He tasted one of the drinks, made a wry face, put it down. “I prefer mine straight.”

Sally Herley’s eyes followed him as he re-crossed the room to the sink where he emptied his glass, then refilled it from a bottle. He dropped into the big chair near the window and draped one leg over the arm.

“My feminine intuition tells me you’ve got something up your sleeve besides a hairy arm,” she said. “Open up. What is it?”

“Soon as I get to know what time it is, I’ll tell you in plenty of time for you to set your watch—”

He was interrupted by a frenzied rat-a-tat on the door. Loosening the .45 that hung in its usual shoulder holster, he pulled himself to his feet. As he turned the latch, he was almost thrown off balance by the force with which the door was pushed inward. A girl ran in and slammed the door behind her.

Johnny Liddell locked the door behind her.

“Well, well. The last time we met, Miss Woods, your boy friend was busy parting my hair with a .38.”

The girl tried to tuck in some stray blonde hairs that had escaped from under her hat. It was a purely automatic gesture. “Is it true? Harry’s dead? Like the papers said?”

Sally Herley sat bolt upright. “Holy Cow! Alma Woods!”

Johnny Liddell nodded, motioned the reporter to silence. “Yes, Alma. Esterbrook’s dead. Know who did it?”

The girl sank into the big chair by the window, buried her face in her hands. Johnny Liddell poured her a stiff drink from the bottle on the sink. She drained it in one gulp.

“Just like Marie, the papers said. Don’t let them do that to me, Mr. Liddell. They’re looking for me. I know they are!”

Johnny Liddell patted her shoulder. “Who’s the top man in this little set-up, Alma?” he asked gently.

The girl raised her tear-streaked face. “I don’t know. God help me, I don’t know. Only Marie knew him—”

“Only Marie knew him, eh? How about Esterbrook?”

“No,” the blonde shook her head emphatically. “He just did the actual stick-up. The head man signalled to Marie which ones were to be taken—”

Sally refilled the girl’s glass.

Johnny Liddell made a face. “Sure. I should’ve known Marie couldn’t spot the real stuff from the floor. Of course somebody had to finger it for her. But then—” A puzzled frown ridged his forehead. He shook his head. “Never mind that now. What happened then?”

The girl took a deep drink from her glass. “Then Marie would tell me which ones were to be taken. I’d wait until the party was ready to leave. Then I’d beat her to the street and be standing on the curb when she came down. Esterbrook would be parked in a car up the street. When the right one came down, I’d fix my hat. That was the signal.”

Johnny Liddell poured himself a drink. “Suppose there were several women in the party. What then?”

The girl’s hand was still shaking as she raised it to her mouth. “I’d fix the left side of my hat. That meant the one on the left side. If I fixed the right side that meant the one on the right.”

Sally Herley leaned back. “Was the headwaiter in on it?”

“Mario? Not really. Marie got a kick out of stringing him along. She used him to signal Esterbrook a couple of times when I wasn’t around.” The girl leaned over and helped herself to a cigarette from a pack on the end table.

Johnny Liddell leaned over with a light. “How about the night Marie was murdered?” he asked softly.

The blonde put the cigarette to her mouth, dragged deeply several times. “I got home that night and found her that way. The only thing I could think of was to call Esterbrook. He told me she must still have the pile of stones he gave her early that night, that we ought to get them before we beat it—”

Johnny Liddell ran a finger reminiscently over one of the still tender bumps on his head. “I have a pretty good idea of what happened from there on in.” He emptied his glass, set it down on the floor at his heel. “This is really going to burn Harry Connors up. If you keep getting scoops like this dumped into your lap, that poor guy’s going to join me on the breadline. Maybe we can get you his job.”

Sally grinned. “No thanks. I’m doing all right in my own shop. A lot better than I could ever do at the *Dispatch*.”

She indicated the white-faced blonde. “What are you going to do with Alma?”

“Hide her out,” Johnny Liddell told her.

“Where?”

The private dick grinned. “At your place.” He got up, crushed out his cigarette butt on the end of the sink. “She sure wouldn’t be safe here. After all, she found out where I lived. Mario was able to lay for me in the lobby. What’s to prevent Mr. Big from looking for her here?”

Blondie shuddered. She turned wide, scared eyes on Sally.

THE girl reporter shrugged. “Maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea. That’s one way of being sure you didn’t drag my exclusive over to the opposition to get him to call off his feud. Okay, Alma. It’s no palace, but it’s home. Let’s go—”

Johnny Liddell let them out, carefully locked the door after them. Then, sitting down at the telephone, he dialed the number of the Dispatch.

“Let me talk to Harry Connors,” he told the metallic-voiced operator. In a moment he heard the columnist’s voice. “Hello, Connors. This is Johnny Liddell.”

The columnist's voice lacked any great amount of enthusiasm. "Hello, Liddell. What can I do for you?"

Johnny Liddell grinned. "You've already done plenty with that column this morning. To prove there's no hard feelings, I'm going to do something for you."

Connors' voice still lacked expression. "Maybe I got a little rough on you and Stack today, but you leave me no other alternative. If you persist in playing ball with the *Trib* exclusively I'm going to hit back the only way I know how."

"I'm not beefing, Connors," Johnny Liddell told him. "I'm just calling to prove I want to play ball with you."

Connors nodded into the phone. "That's fine. When does all this cooperation start?"

Johnny Liddell grinned. "You're a suspicious sort of a guy. Maybe you got reason to be. Anyway, I'm starting right now. Alma Woods, Marie Marlin's roommate gives herself up to the police at 10 tonight—in plenty of time to make your early edition."

Harry Connors gasped. "If that's on the level, it's a dream. Who else is in on it?"

"Just you and me. Your paper comes out six hours before Sally Herley's, so you'll beat the pants off her on this one. That'll make up for some of those she beat you on."

There was a vast change in the columnist's voice. "Thanks, Johnny. I'll make it up to you. Anything else?"

Johnny Liddell hesitated for a minute. "I'll probably make an enemy for life for this, but I want to prove to you that I'm levelling with you—"

"What is it?"

"I know where I can lay my hands on positive proof as to the killer's identity. The Woods gal spilled it without realizing its importance—"

The columnist's voice cracked with eagerness. "Let me in on it, will you? What'd she spill?"

"I'm letting you in on the ground floor, Connors. It's over at Marie's flat. I'm going over there now. Want to come?"

"Do I? I'll pick you up in ten minutes and drive you over!"

HARRY CONNORS drove a Buick, a late '42 convertible, with all the skill of an expert. He weaved the big car through the heavy East Side traffic and pulled up at Denton Towers exactly twelve minutes after leaving Johnny Liddell's apartment.

Johnny Liddell led the way to the elevator, got out at the fourth floor. He looked up and down the hall, then inserted a key he took from his jacket pocket. The door opened noiselessly. He motioned the columnist in, and closed the door behind them.

Johnny Liddell produced a flashlight, ran it around the room, came to stop at the bedroom door. He motioned for Connors to follow him and led the way into the room where the body was found. He seemed sure of himself, walked directly to the bottom of the bed. He played the flashlight over the ornamental frieze and bent down to examine it more closely.

He straightened up. "She was right. There are a couple of fingerprints there. The cops missed them in all that ornamental stuff—"

Harry Connors was hoarse with excitement. "How can you be sure they're the killer's, though?"

Johnny Liddell put his finger to his lips, listened for a moment. Then, as if satisfied, he whispered. "My guess is that the killer wiped off all the prints he could find, but he must have missed these. The Woods girl told me that when she found the body, she leaned over to see if Marie was really dead. In order to do that, she grabbed hold of the foot of the bed. I did the same thing myself. So, it's reasonable to believe that the killer did, too—"

"Oh." The columnist shivered. "What do we do next?"

"I'm going out to call Stack, then I'm going over to get the Woods girl —"

"What for?"

Johnny Liddell led the way back to the living room. "There'll be some of her prints and some of mine on that frieze. We'll want to eliminate those. The other prints will be the killer's."

Harry Connors drew a whistling breath through his teeth. "This is the hottest story I've ever handled." He paused a second. "But what'll I tell Stack when he gets here?"

Johnny Liddell grunted. “That’s right. He may get here before I do.” He pushed the fedora to the back of his head and rubbed one of the sensitive spots. “I’ll leave a note for him. Got a pencil?”

He took the copy pencil the newspaperman offered him.

“Sit down here and make yourself comfortable.” He picked out a large easy chair with the beam of the flashlight. “I’m just going in to get an idea of about where on that frieze he can start looking. Like that, we won’t waste any time, and we’ll have the information in time for your deadline.”

“That’s a swell idea. You know, that deadline is only about an hour from now.”

Johnny Liddell grunted. “We’ll make it.” He disappeared into the bedroom and returned a few seconds later with a folded piece of paper. “Give that to Stack when he gets here, will you, Connors. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

The door closed behind him, leaving the columnist with no light save for Johnny Liddell’s flashlight.

CHAPTER V

IT was twenty-five minutes later that the knock came on the door. The columnist opened it to admit the lieutenant and two plainclothesmen.

“What are you sitting here in the dark for, Connors?” the lieutenant growled. “Expect Marie’s ghost to come and tell you who did the job?”

Connors scowled. “Liddell gave me the impression that the lights had been turned off. I never thought to try them.”

Stack grunted. “That crazy private dick and his games. Where is he, anyway?” He turned to one of the plainclothesmen. “Let’s have some light, Hennessy.”

The room was lit up with a sudden brilliance that made the columnist blink.

“He said he had to go someplace lieutenant. He left this note for you.”

Stack took the folded piece of paper, read it. “Prints of killer on ornamental frieze at bottom of bed, third row from top. Going for Alma Woods. Right back. Johnny.” The lieutenant looked at the shorter of the two detectives. “How about it? Was that frieze checked for prints?”

“I thought it was,” the plainclothesman muttered. “We might have missed it.”

Stack growled. “Get it now.”

The plainclothesmen started for the bedroom. Stack dropped into a chair with a sigh, offered a cigarette to the columnist. He refused.

Johnny Liddell used his key to get in. He had Sally Herley and Alma Woods with him. Sally grew white around the lips at the sight of Harry Connors. Alma drew back at the sight of Stack.

“What is this, a double-cross?” Connors roared. “I thought the *Dispatch* got this exclusive?”

“What’s he doing here?” Sally yelled, “I should’ve known better than to trust you, you chiseller!”

Lieutenant Stack got to his feet. “Cut out the yelling. What is this, Johnny? A gag? I don’t see anybody laughing!”

Johnny Liddell wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. “It’s no gag, Stack. And if anybody laughs it won’t be me, because this either makes it—or breaks it!” He looked around. “I know the murderer of Marie Marlin. I don’t know if I can prove it.”

Lieutenant Ray Stack pushed the broad-brimmed sombrero-type fedora to the back of his head, chewed on his gum a little harder and growled. “That’s fine. Who is going to prove it?”

Johnny Liddell took a deep breath. “The killer himself.”

Harry Connors stood up. “Okay. I know when I’m being taken for a ride. This two timing shamus kept me here just long enough so his sweetie could score another beat on Alma Woods’ capture. I’m not forgetting this, gentlemen.”

Stack groaned. “He’s right, Johnny. If you’re ever going to start pulling rabbits out of that hat—now is the time!”

“You asked for it, Stack.” Johnny Liddell walked over to Harry Connors, jabbed him in the stomach with his finger. “Put the cuffs on this guy, Stack. He’s your killer. He killed Marie Marlin because she was running out on him

and he killed Harry Esterbrook because he tried to cross him. Harry Connors is your Mr. Big in the jewel ring.”

Sally Herley’s breath whistled through her teeth. “Johnny! Have you gone crazy altogether?”

“I’ll show you how crazy I am, Stack,” the private dick retorted. “Have one of your men bring me a wet towel from the bathroom.”

STACK gave the order, handed the wet towel to Liddell. “This is your show, Johnny. It better be awful good—or awful funny!”

Johnny Liddell roughly seized one of the columnist’s hands, wiped it with a towel. It turned deep purple.

The columnist growled, struggled to his feet. His first blow caught Johnny Liddell alongside the ear. His second blow never landed. Johnny Liddell caught him flush on the jaw. The columnist staggered, wilted at a hard overhand to the stomach, then folded up under a steaming cross. He hit the floor with a thud and didn’t move.

Lieutenant Stack stepped in. “Don’t rough him up. We’ve got special facilities for that. I hope you’ve got some proof to back this all up?”

Johnny Liddell grinned. “I couldn’t prove it. He had to do it for me.”

Sally Herley was frantic. “Never mind the bows, Sherlock. Take them after the show. We’ve got a paper to put to bed.”

Johnny Liddell bowed, tapped a cigarette on the arm of the chair.

“It had to be somebody who’d be at the Tropical Club every night. Right?” Stack nodded, motioned for him to continue. “As you said, your night club squad would have noticed anybody who spent night after night there—anybody, that is, but a columnist who had a legitimate reason to be there. They never gave him a second thought!”

Stack grunted, looked down at Connors who still lay sprawled over the floor.

Johnny Liddell lit the cigarette, blew out the match. “Then again, Connors was the only one who knew that Esterbrook was trying to cross him. He was here when I mentioned that Esterbrook and Blondie here had teamed up. He saw the place all pulled apart, put two and two together—and got a split throat for Esterbrook—”

Stack looked up. A thoughtful frown ridged his forehead. “One thing I don’t get—why did he show up that night at the apartment. We wouldn’t even have known he was involved.”

Johnny Liddell sent a mouthful of smoke ceilingward. “That was one of his many touches of genius. You remember that your men dug up somebody who reported Harry Connors around there that night.” Stack nodded, started to say something, clamped his jaws shut on his gum. “Well, we took for granted that the time he saw Connors was when we saw him there—”

Sally Herley looked up from the page of notes she was laboriously inscribing. “And it wasn’t?”

Johnny Liddell shook his head. “No. It had to be the time he came here and killed Marie. He knew somebody had seen him, and he figured that if he came back we’d take for granted that’s when he was seen around and not go into it any further. We fell into that one—”

Stack scowled.

Johnny Liddell turned back to the girl reporter. “When I began to suspect him, I asked you in a roundabout way what kind of dough he made at the *Dispatch*. You said it was poor dough, that you were doing better at your job at the *Trib* and didn’t want to change places,” Johnny Liddell reminded her. “Yet, he drives the latest model car, wears plenty expensive clothes. So, he was getting plenty of money from some other source.”

STACK signalled one of the plainclothesmen, whispered something in his ear. The detective reached into an inner pocket, brought out a pair of handcuffs, clicked them on the wrists of the still unconscious newspaperman.

Johnny grinned. “So you’ll buy my theory, eh?”

Stack motioned for him to continue.

“Well, lieutenant, I knew that Connors was the killer but I also knew it was going to be a tough one to prove. So, I laid a little trap. I told him the killer had been careless, that he’d left some prints. It was a wild story, but he fell for it.

“I got him here, and gave him a cock-and-bull story about prints being on the frieze. I was depending on the fact that if he was the guilty one that

he'd have been so excited right after the killing that he wouldn't remember too clearly what he'd done and what he hadn't done."

Stack nodded. "Nice work. Then what?"

"I borrowed his pencil to leave you a note. I'd noticed that Connors, like many newspapermen, used an indelible copy pencil. I made an excuse to get back into the bedroom, then wrote you a note telling you where to look for the prints and left him here alone."

Stack grinned. "Plenty slick, Johnny. You can make Ed Gardener eat crow on the strength of this one."

Sally Herley broke in. "I don't like to cut in on the bouquets but I don't get it. You left him alone. So what?"

Johnny Liddell patted her gently on the head. "Listen closely, my sweet. Here sits a killer. He doesn't remember whether he touched the place I'd indicated in my note or not. What would he do?"

Sally chewed the end of her pencil. "Rub them off as soon as he was alone, I guess."

Johnny Liddell grinned. "Right. And that's why I grated plenty of indelible pencil lead right at that point. When he tried to rub it off, those grains settled on his hands. Because I kept him sitting in the dark, he had no real opportunity to see that it was on his hands, but even if he had it wouldn't have made much difference—he couldn't have washed it off without them turning tell-tale purple—"

Sally Herley jumped to her feet, kissed the private dick on the forehead.

He grinned. "Very nice, but not very nourishing." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "A man sure can raise a thirst doing the Homicide Bureau's work for them. What do I have to do to deserve a drink around here?"

Sally Herley linked her arm in his. "Johnny, this is one time drinks are on the *Trib*. I know the nicest gin mill—and it's got the nicest telephone with connections straight to Sal's City Desk. My editor will be very happy—ver-ry happy about the whole thing!"

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 Blood Runs Purple* by Frank Kane]