

Frame

Frank Kane

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Frame

A Johnny Liddell novelette

BY

FRANK

KANE



Liddell had it all figured out. But the way it added up, there was only one possible killer: Johnny Liddell.

THE PHONE on the night table started to ring shrilly, discordantly. Johnny Liddell groaned, cursed softly, dug his head into the pillow, but the noise refused to go away. He opened one eye experimentally, peered at the half lowered shade and noted that it was still dark.

He tried to wipe the sleep from his eyes, but it wouldn't wipe away. The phone kept ringing. Finally, he reached out and lifted the receiver off its hook.

"Yeah?" he growled sleepily.

"This is Laury Lane. Come out here right away. That man of yours is going crazy and—" The voice was drowned out by the flat, ugly bark of a shot. The line went dead.

Liddell was suddenly wide awake. And ice cold. He started to jiggle the cross bar on the phone. "Hello. Hello." The only answer was the soft click of a phone being hung up at the other end.

Liddell continued to jiggle the cross bar. The metallic voice of the operator cut in: "What number are you calling?"

"I'm not calling a number. Somebody was calling me. We've been cut off. Can you get them back?"

"I must have the number."

Liddell growled deep in his chest. "Never mind, thanks. They'll probably call back." He tossed the receiver back on its hook, started stuffing his legs into his trousers. He headed for the bathroom, completed the waking-up process by splashing ice cold water into his face, then finished dressing. He shrugged into a shoulder harness, clipped his .45 into place, covering it with a jacket. He was headed for his garage less than ten minutes after the phone had started to ring.

2.

Laury Lane lived in a small colony of two-acre plot estates just outside of Sands Point on Long Island's North Shore. Johnny Liddell headed out Northern Boulevard, making the forty-minute ride in something short of a half hour.

The house itself was set back from the highway and shielded from the road by a row of evergreens. Liddell swung through the stone pillars that supported a rarely-closed iron gate, followed the short winding driveway to the house. There were two other cars parked in front of the garage, on the concrete apron. Liddell left his in front of the house, walked up the two steps to the door.

There were no lights in the hall, but he could see a triangle of yellow light toward the back of the house where it spilled from an open door. He debated the advisability of walking around back, decided to knock.

Almost immediately the door opened and he could make out the bulky figure of a man silhouetted in the opening.

"I'm Johnny Liddell. I want to see Miss Lane."

The door opened wider. "Come on in." The man stepped aside, waited until Liddell had entered, fell in behind him. "Straight ahead to the study."

Liddell followed the darkened hallway to the open door. He stopped at the entrance to the room and looked around. Two men looked at him incuriously. One of them, a tall man in a rumpled blue suit and a battered fedora, grunted, "Who's this, Allen?"

"Name's Liddell. Says he wants to see Miss Lane."

"Be my guest," the man in the rumpled suit grunted. He walked over to where a blanket was draped over a suggestively shaped bulge, pulled it back.

Laury Lane lay on her back, her arm crooked languidly over her head. Her thick blonde hair was a tangle on the thick pile of the rug. Her green eyes were half closed. Her lips, full and inviting, seemed set in a half smile.

A hole midway between her full breasts had spilled an ugly red stain on the white silk of her evening gown.

The man in the blue suit watched the scowl ridge Liddell's forehead. He dropped the blanket back over the girl's face. "You say you're Liddell?"

The private detective nodded, dug into his pocket, brought out a pack of cigarettes and held it up for approval. When the lieutenant nodded, he stuck one in the corner of his mouth where it waggled. "I'm Liddell. Who're you?"

The man in the blue suit pinched at his nostrils with thumb and forefinger. "Murray. Lieutenant in homicide out here. Mind telling me what brings you out this way at this hour?"

"Lane was a client. She wanted to see me."

Murray pursed his lips, considered it. He tugged a dog-eared memo book from his hip pocket, jotted down some notes. "So you just drop by at—" He pushed up his sleeve, consulted his wrist watch—"at two o'clock in the morning?" His eyes rolled up from the notebook to Liddell's face. "Keep kind of late office hours, don't you?"

"Something had happened. She called me to get right out here. Something she wanted to talk to me about."

The homicide man wet the point of his pencil on the tip of his tongue. "What was it that couldn't wait?"

Liddell shrugged. "She didn't say."

"Maybe we can tell you," Murray grunted. He led the way to the french doors that opened onto the back patio. "Put some light out here, Al," he snapped at one of the other men.

Liddell followed him, stared down at the body of a man, sprawled face down on the patio. He knelt beside the body, lifted the hat off its face, swore under his breath.

"Know him?" Murray wanted to know.

Liddell nodded grimly. "One of my boys. Name's Tate Morrow."

"Have you any idea what he was doing out here, or is it customary with your organization to make late calls on clients?"

"Tate was assigned to Lane. He was bodyguarding her." He straightened up, brushed the folds out of his knees. "Any idea of what happened?"

Murray grinned humorlessly. “We thought you might have some idea. Busting out here this way.”

Liddell shook his head. “No ideas.” He took a deep drag on his cigarette, wrinkled his nose in distaste, dropped the cigarette to the patio floor, ground it out. “Could be that Tate heard the shot that got the blonde, came running, and—”

The homicide man snorted. “Why don’t you start levelling? You can see he was headed away from her, not toward her.” He jabbed his hand into his jacket pocket, brought up a small gun, wrapped in a handkerchief. “This was lying right next to her hand. It’s got one bullet fired.” His eyes were bleak, unfriendly. “My guess is that the one in his back will match it.”

“That’s crazy and you know it. Why should Lane shoot the guy who was protecting her? And if she did, who shot her?”

“He did,” Murray snapped. “Show him, Al.”

The other detective walked over, spilled the contents of an envelope into the palm of his hand, held them toward Liddell. “Diamonds. We found them right near his hand, where he dropped them when he fell.” Murray turned his back, walked into the den. “That’s the way we see it,” he said flatly.

“That’s the way you’re supposed to see it. It’s a set-up, can’t you see?” Liddell argued. “You think that babe could get a gun, aim it and bring him down with one shot when she’s wearing a .45 slug for a lavalier?” He caught the homicide man by the arm, swung him around. “That babe was deader than Kelsey the minute that slug tagged her. And my guess is that Tate was dead before that.”

Murray caught the private detective’s hand, lifted it from his arm. “Why should anybody go to all that trouble?”

“The diamonds,” Liddell snapped.

“And then leave without them?” Murray shook his head. “You’re not making sense.”

“You’re making less. You don’t think that handful of little stones is what Tate was guarding, do you? Lane had over \$150,000 worth of unset stones. Where are they?”

The homicide lieutenant looked thoughtful, plucked at his lower lip. “That’s the first I hear of this. Fill me in.”

Liddell found another cigarette, lit it. “Lane was getting ready to retire. Did you know that?”

Murray shook his head, nodded for one of his men to answer a ring at the front door. “I don’t know much about the theatrical crowd. All I know I read in the columns. I thought she was a big star?”

Liddell shrugged. “She’s had her day. But she’s been fading fast for the past couple of years. This year she decided to go back home. She was British, you know.”

“Excuse me.” Murray went over to the door to shake hands with a small man carrying a brown instrument case. They carried on a whispered conversation for a few minutes; then the newcomer went over and pulled the blanket back from the dead woman. Murray walked over to where Liddell was standing. “The medical examiner,” he explained. “So she was going back to Britain. So?”

“She was turning everything she had into cash.” Liddell took the cigarette from between his lips, scowled at the glowing end. “For years she’s been collecting diamonds. They’re easier to hide, and the Treasury boys can’t put them onto an adding machine like they can the contents of a safe deposit box.” He took a last drag on the cigarette, stubbed it out in an ash tray. “She hired us to keep an eye on her until she turned the stones into cash.”

Two men from the M.E.’s office brought in a stretcher. Liddell broke off and watched glumly as they transferred the blonde to the stretcher, strapped her on.

“Whoever killed her knew about the stones. So he tried to make it look as though Tate did the job.”

“Could be,” Murray agreed.

“You’ve got other ideas?” Liddell wanted to know.

The homicide man shrugged. “Just ideas, so far. No proof.” He reached over, picked a thread off Liddell’s jacket and let it float to the ground. “Suppose your boy here did stop one, but his confederate managed to get away with the bulk of it?” He looked Liddell in the eye. “Who knew about the diamonds?”

Liddell scowled. Hard lines joined his nostrils with the end of his mouth, hard lumps formed on his jaw as he clenched his teeth. “Mike Murphy,

Lane's personal manager, for one. It was his idea to hire the agency because the stuff wasn't insured."

"Who else?"

Liddell studied the homicide man's face carefully. "Louis Arms. He was supposed to be the buyer."

"Arms, eh?" Murray raised his eyebrows, pursed his lips. "Anybody else?"

Liddell shrugged angrily. "Not that I know of. Not unless they spread it around."

"Think they were likely to?" Murray sneered.

"No."

The homicide man nodded. "Then that leaves just you and your boy, Liddell." He jabbed his pencil at the private detective. "But you can undoubtedly tell us where you were all evening?"

"In bed."

"Witnesses?"

"This happened to be my off night. I was in bed alone."

Murray squinted, plucked at his lower lip. "But you got a phone call from the Lane girl and she told you to get right out here?"

Liddell nodded. "That's right."

The homicide man walked over to the desk in the corner of the room, lifted the telephone from its cradle. "We don't have dials out here yet, you know. Pretty small time stuff to a big operator like you, I guess." He turned his attention to the phone. "Millie? Ed Murray from Homicide. Say, about an hour ago, do you remember a call Laury Lane made to New York? Number was—" He raised his eyebrows at Liddell.

"Homeyer 5-7236," Liddell grunted.

"Number was Homeyer 5-7236." He waited a moment, then pursed his lips, looked at Liddell from under lowered lids. "You're sure of that?" He nodded, dropped the receiver on its hook. "There haven't been any calls from this number to a New York number tonight."

"Maybe I got the message by ouija board," Liddell growled.

"Maybe you didn't get the message."

“Let me get this straight, Murray. You’re trying to say that I didn’t get a call from Lane, that I came out here to meet Tate and cut up the dame’s diamonds. Then what happened to them?”

Murray grinned bleakly. “Maybe this isn’t the first time you came out tonight. Maybe you got here right after the shooting, picked up as much of the loot as you could find in the dark, hit back to town, stashed it and then came back to put on this injured innocence act.”

“That’s how it is, eh?”

Murray nodded. “That’s how it is. What are you going to do about it?”

“You mean I’ve got a choice? I’m going to find the real killer and hand him to you on a silver platter. You don’t have to worry, though, I’ll label him for you so you’ll know him when you fall over him.”

“And if I decide to take you in and book you?”

“On what? There’s not a judge in the county would hold me on your pipe dream. It’s like you said, you haven’t got a thing but an idea—a screwy idea. I’ll be around if you want to talk to me.”

3.

Mike Murphy lived in the Livermore Arms, an expensive pile of mortar and plate glass overlooking the East River at Beekman Place. Johnny Liddell parked his car out front, plowed across the deep pile rug in the ornate lobby to the desk. A white-haired man in an oxford grey suit with a wing collar made a half-hearted attempt to wipe the boredom out of his eyes as Liddell approached, but didn't quite make it. His teeth were too shiny and too even to be real and Liddell had a passing suspicion about the color in his cheeks.

“Can I help you?” His fingers toyed with the triangle of white linen that peeped from his breast pocket.

“Will you ring Mike Murphy's apartment? Tell him Johnny Liddell must see him immediately.”

“Certainly, sir.” The white-haired man sat down at a small switch-board, plugged in one of the wires. He licked at his lips before he spoke into the mouthpiece, nodded, then pulled the plug from the board. “It's rather late, but he says he'll see you.” He smoothed the hair over his ears with the flat of his hand. “It's the penthouse.”

Liddell nodded, headed for a bank of elevators in the rear of the lobby. He jabbed the button marked *Penthouse*, chafed at the slow progress the cage made upward. The elevator glided to a smooth stop; the doors slid noiselessly open. Liddell crossed the small hall, pushed the buzzer set at the side of the door three times. There was the stuttering of a latch and the door swung open.

Mike Murphy stood in the middle of the room, a glass in his hand. He was tall, his broad tapering shoulders seeming to balance precariously on the slimness of his waist and hips. He wore his thick, black hair long on the sides, plastered back against his head. On top it was a mass of curls. His mouth was smeared with lipstick; his eyes were slightly off focus. He waved Liddell in.

“Come in, come in.” He called over his shoulder. “You can come on out, honey. It’s a friend.”

The door to an inner room opened and a long-legged redhead walked out. Her hair had been loosened and fell over her shoulders in a molten cascade. She had on a blue gown that gave ample evidence she wore nothing under it. As she walked, her breasts traced wavering patterns on the shiny silk of the gown. Her eyes were slanted, green. She looked Liddell over, seemed to like what she saw.

“This is Claire Readon, Liddell. Meet a real live private eye, baby.”

“You should have come earlier. The party was fun.” Her voice was sultry, disturbing.

Murphy waved toward a small portable bar that showed signs of having had a busy evening. “You’ll have to make your own, Liddell. I don’t think I could make it across the room.”

Liddell walked over to the bar, found some ice cubes in a scotch cooler, dumped them into a glass. He spilled two fingers of bourbon over them, swirled it around the glass. “When’s the last time you saw Lane?”

Murphy’s features were marred with an annoyed frown. “Tonight, when I took the stuff out to her.” He took a deep swallow from his glass. “How’s that kid of yours getting along? That blondie can be fun when she—”

“Tate’s dead. So’s Lane.” Liddell smelled his glass, took a swallow. It tasted as good as it smelled.

The other man did a slow double take. He blinked his eyes, shook his head. “Dead? How?”

Liddell shrugged. “Murder. The stones are missing. Looks like it was a heist.”

“Wait a minute.” Murphy put down the glass, walked across the room and disappeared into what was apparently a bathroom. There was a sound of water running. When he walked out, some of the vagueness in his eyes was gone. “When’d it happen?”

“Near as I can judge, around one. She called me, and I heard the shot. By the time I got out there, the cops were all over the place.” He drained his glass, set it down. “They figure it for an inside job.” He looked over at the redhead. “How many people were in on the deal, Mike?”

Murphy shrugged. “Just me and Laury on our end.” He bit at the cuticle on his nail. “Arms, of course. He was buying the stuff.”

“You didn’t leak?”

“Me?” Murphy shook his head emphatically. “Hell, I never even mentioned it to Claire. Did I, kid?”

The redhead squirmed into a more comfortable position on the couch that caused the gown to dip breath-takingly at the neckline. “I still don’t know what you’re talking about.” Her words were softly slurred. “What’s more, I don’t care. I came to this party for fun, not to talk business.”

Murphy ignored her, smoothed some of the wrinkles out of his brow with the tips of his fingers. “This is a hell of a mess. You knew the stuff wasn’t insured?” Liddell nodded.

“The police know about the stones?” Murphy asked.

“Yeah.”

The big man groaned. “Now it comes. The Feds are going to want to know where the dough came from and why it wasn’t declared. What a mess. If she’d only listened to me—”

“I listened to you, Mike. It didn’t do me any good—so far,” the redhead said. “I guess I’m not smart like Laury.”

“You’re something better. You’re alive,” Murphy said. He turned back to Liddell. “It looks like Arms.”

Liddell freshened his drink, took a sip. “Looks like.” He looked from Murphy to the girl and back. “What time did you get the stuff out to her, Mike?”

“Ten-thirty. Eleven, maybe. I got back here in time to pick Red up at the stage door after the show. She’s in the *1954 Revue*.” He frowned as the redhead held her glass out to Liddell for a refill. “Maybe you better take it easy, baby. The cops may be around asking questions.”

The redhead grinned saucily. “Don’t give it another thought, Mike. I’m over eighteen.” She accepted the refill and started to work on it, her eyes giving Liddell the full treatment over the rim.

“You got back here, then, maybe at twelve?” Liddell asked.

Murphy considered, nodded. “Just about.”

“Didn’t leave after that?”

Murphy's eyes narrowed. "Say what you mean. Are you asking me if I was anywhere near Lane's place when it happened? You think I was in on it?"

Liddell shook his head. "Look. There were only four or five people who knew Lane had the diamonds tonight. I'm trying to eliminate as I go along. Got any objections?"

Murphy stared at him sullenly. "I don't like it."

"Maybe Tate Morrow don't like being dead. But he is. How about it?"

"I didn't go out all night."

"Can you prove it?"

"If I have to."

"You have to."

The big man glared at him for a moment, dropped his eyes, shrugged. "There were eight or ten others here with us. Three or four of the other babes in the line at the *Revue* brought their dates up here. The party just broke about a half an hour ago." He looked over at the redhead. "That right, Claire?"

The redhead nodded solemnly. "We've been here ever since show break. Nobody left the place, not even for a paper."

Liddell drained his glass, set it down. "Okay, that's all I wanted to know." The phone started to ring. Murphy lumbered across the room to answer it.

The big man talked for a moment, then held his hand over the mouthpiece. "The cops. They want me to go out to identify Laury." He took his hand from the mouthpiece, talked for a moment and hung up. He wiped the thin film of perspiration off his upper lip, with the side of his hand. "I'm glad you broke the news to me first." He glanced at his watch. "Anything else you want from me, Liddell? I've got to get out there."

Liddell said, "Just one thing. These stones—any way of identifying them?"

The big man shook his head. "They were all loose. She wanted it that way. Some half-smart chiseler told her they were easier to sell and the Government couldn't trace them." He picked a cigarette from a container on the coffee table, fitted it to his lips with shaking hands. "That's why Arms

was so interested. He was getting a buy at the price he was set to pay and the stuff wasn't even hot."

"Did Arms know that you hired the agency to watch over Lane?"

The pinched look was back in Murphy's eyes. "No. I was afraid to tell him, because I was afraid he'd kick over the deal. He didn't want anybody to know about it. Just Laury and me. And him."

"Mighty convenient."

"What do you mean?"

Liddell grinned humorlessly. "Suppose something happened to Laury and you? Then there'd be nobody to say that Laury ever had \$150,000 in unset diamonds, and they wouldn't have cost Arms anything."

Murphy started, the cigarette fell from his slack lips. "You don't think he meant to have us both killed?"

"Why not?" Liddell walked over to where the cigarette lay smouldering on the rug, picked it up and crushed it out. "Maybe the killer thought Tate was you and knocked him off without knowing. Maybe right now Arms thinks he's safe, that the only two people who knew about the deal aren't in any condition to do any talking."

"But when he finds out?" Murphy ran his finger around the inside of his collar as though it had suddenly become tight. He dropped into a chair. "What then?"

"He'll probably try to correct his mistake," Liddell said. "But, by then, maybe we'll have him in a spot where he won't be able to."

"What are you going to do?"

Liddell picked up his hat, set it on the back of his head. "I'm going out to Arms' place and have a little talk with him. If I get to him before he finds out you're still alive, I may be able to surprise him into giving himself away."

"You're going out there alone?"

Liddell grinned. "Like to come along?"

The big man shook his head emphatically. "No, thank you."

From the couch came the sound of a soft snore. Liddell walked over, took the empty glass from between the redhead's fingers, threw a knitted

cover over her. The girl stirred slightly, purred softly and curled up into a ball on the couch.

4.

Louis Arms operated the *Casa Demain*, a plush booby trap on the south shore of Long Island. From the outside, it gave no indication of its character, but looked like any large country estate that had been kept up. Shrubs, lawn, trees were all in good condition, only a small brass nameplate affixed to one of the pillars at the gate identifying it as a roadhouse.

Tonight it looked different than it had on the other occasions he had visited it. Without the flattery of a hidden battery of floodlights, it was just a tired old grey-white frame building, sprawling in the darkness. Tonight there were no cars in the parking lot, there was no high-pitched conversation from tuxedoed marks and their evening-dressed companions. Just a tired old grey-white building relaxing with its makeup off.

Johnny Liddell left his car under a big tree a hundred yards off the entrance to the Casa. He cut across the shrubbery and headed for the rear of the building where Arms had his private office. He rapped at the door, waited. After a moment, the door opened a crack. “Yeah?” a voice asked.

“I want to see Arms. Tell him it’s Johnny Liddell.”

The door opened wider; the man stepped aside. “He’s expecting you.”

Liddell walked in, froze as the snout of a gun jabbed into his ribs. He made no attempt to resist as the man at the door relieved him of his .45, expertly fanned him.

“You know your way to the office,” the man told him.

Liddell walked to the door at the end of the corridor marked *Private*, waited while the man with him knocked, then pushed the door open.

Louis Arms sprawled comfortably in an armchair. He waved to Liddell as he came into the room. The man with Liddell pushed him into the room, closed the door behind him.

“Hello, Liddell. You made good time.” Louis Arms’ voice was soft, silky with an elusive trace of the Boston Back Bay where he’d gotten his

start. He was long and loose-jointed. His sandy hair had receded from his brow to the crown of his head, exposing a freckled pate. He had a ready smile that plowed white furrows in the mahogany of his face. It transformed everything about his expression except his eyes. They were cold, wary.

“Murphy?” Liddell wanted to know.

The man in the chair shrugged. “He’s really got the wind up. That ice the broad was selling came from under the carpet. He can’t account for it.”

“That’s his headache,” Liddell growled.

The ready smile was back on Arms’ lips. He shook his head. “It’s yours. He’s going to tell the cops it was all a pipe dream of yours, this story about me buying a lot of undercover ice.”

Liddell’s eyes went bleak. “And you?”

Arms reached out, snagged a cigarette from a table at his elbow. “I didn’t ask you to drag me into it. It’s an out and I’m taking it.” He hung the cigarette in the corner of his mouth, touched a match to it. “A cop named Murray called me about an hour ago. I told him the same thing.”

“Thanks, pal.”

“Look at it my way. I got enough grief without shopping for any. This broad makes me an offer, I take it. I wasn’t in the market to get mixed up in any murder rap.” He took the cigarette from between his lips, rolled it between his fingers. “Get it, Liddell? I don’t want any part of it.”

“What am I supposed to do? Hold the bag? You got the wrong boy, Arms. I lost one of my men in this deal. I don’t stand still for that.”

The cold smile was still pasted on the lean man’s face. “I heard all about how tough you are, Liddell.” The pat smile faded. “Maybe you haven’t heard about me. I’m a guy don’t like to be played for a patsy. By you or anybody else.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning that if there were any diamonds in that place tonight, you got them,” Arms told him bluntly. “Only three people knew about that deal outside of you and your stooge. One of them’s dead, the other was with a mob all night and never went near the place—and me,” he hit his chest with the side of his hand, “I know about me. That leaves you, shamus.”

“That’s what you think, Arms. I told you I wasn’t taking this mess lying down. You’re right about who knew about it, but you forgot one thing.

There's three people I'm sure of—and you're not one of them. The blonde is dead, Murphy's got an iron-clad alibi, and I'm sure about me. In my book, that leaves you." He jabbed his finger at the man in the chair. "And that's where I'm going to pin it."

The man who had let him into the room caught Liddell by the arm, swung him around. He was an inch or two shorter than Liddell, but what he lacked in height, he more than made up in breadth. His face was expressionless, dead-pan. "The boss don't like guys to raise their voices at him, Liddell." His voice was flat. "Don't do it again."

Liddell looked from the dead-pan face to the gun in the man's fist. "Don't count on the gun too much, Junior. I've seen guys take things like that away from guys and feed it to them."

The dead-pan was disturbed by an upward twist at the corners of the mouth. "You sure talk a rough evening." He tossed the gun over to where Arms sat. "Maybe you'd like to live it up?"

He gave Liddell no chance to sidestep his lunge. Automatically, the private detective fell away from it, saved himself the full force of the assault. The guard's shoulder caught him in the side, slammed him back against the door. He stumbled to his feet, found his arm in a lock. He struggled to free it, had the sensation of flying through the air. He slammed against the wall and slid to a sitting position. He stayed there for a moment, shook his head to clear away the cobwebs. The chunky guard stood over him, feet braced.

"How do you like the kid's style, shamus?" Arms' silky voice insinuated itself, seeming far away. "That's judo. Learned it in the Marines."

Liddell braced his feet, slid upright against the wall.

The guard licked at his lips, lunged again. This time, Liddell was waiting. He chopped viciously at the side of the man's neck, heard him gasp. As the guard started to sink, Liddell brought his knee up, caught him in the face, straightened him up. Then he put every ounce of strength behind a right overhand.

The guard's head went back as though it were hinged. Liddell sank his left into his midsection to the cuff, stepped back and let the guard fall face forward. He hit the floor with a thud and didn't move.

"That's barroom brawling." Liddell wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "I learned it in McGowan's Saloon on Third Avenue."

Arms sat in the chair, the snout of the gun pointed at Liddell's midsection. The private detective ignored the gun, pulled a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket, lit one. He took a deep breath, exhaled through his nostrils.

"Louis isn't going to like you," the man in the chair grunted. "He learned other things in the Marines. They're much more permanent."

"You're scaring me to death, Arms." Liddell stepped across the guard's body and walked over to where the night club operator sat. "If you're going to pull that trigger, pull it now. Because I'm walking out of here. And from the minute I do, I'm going to spend every second proving that you killed the Lane broad."

Arms' face went white under its tan. The finger on the trigger tightened for a moment, then relaxed. He forced the smile back into place. "Don't worry, Liddell. I'm not messing up my rug." He dropped the gun into his lap. "There are other days and other places. Be smart and don't get under my feet. Or I might have to stamp you flat."

Liddell turned his back on him, walked over to where the guard still lay, breathing noisily. He turned him over, pulled his .45 from the man's jacket pocket and hooked it into his holster. He turned, stared at the man in the chair for a moment. "Okay, Arms. It looks like your pot. Murphy will go along because he don't want the Feds snooping. So you've got aces back to back. But take the advice of an old timer. Don't push your luck too hard on just one pair."

"I've done a little gambling in my time, too, Liddell," Arms drawled. "I've got a few pet rules of my own. Such as, don't bluff when there's no limit on table stakes."

5.

It was almost light when Johnny Liddell got back to the Livermore Arms. He parked his car around the corner and walked to where he could keep an eye on the entrance.

He was on his third cigarette when a cab skidded to a stop at the curb, and the familiar broad-shouldered bulk of Mike Murphy stepped out onto the sidewalk. While the big man was paying the cabby, Liddell walked over to where he stood.

“It took you a long time, Mike,” Liddell told him softly.

The big man started, turned. “You shouldn’t sneak up on people like that, Liddell.” His face was a damp grey in the early morning light. “I’ve had a bad night.”

“Sometimes it gets worse before it gets better.”

“Look,” a hard note crept into the big man’s voice. “Don’t go giving me a hard time. Drop around in the morning, and—”

Liddell pulled his right hand out of his jacket pocket far enough for Murphy to see that it held a gun. “Why put off until tomorrow what can be knocked off tonight?” He flipped his butt at the gutter. “I don’t like people walking out and leaving me in the middle, Mike. You and I have some talking to do.”

Murphy shrugged resignedly. “Okay, come on up.” He turned his back on the gun, led the way through the lobby toward the penthouse elevator. When the car had started upward, he said, “I guess you’ve got a right to be sore, but there was nothing else I could do, Liddell.”

“What am I supposed to do? Laugh it off like the little good sport I am and stand still for the rap?”

“They can’t prove you had anything to do with it. They think it was the kid. This Tate Morrow guy.” Murphy shrugged. “He’s dead. It can’t hurt him. You start a stink and a lot of people get hurt. Me, Arms, you, all of us.”

The car slid to a stop. Murphy led the way to his apartment and opened the door with a key. “Why not let well enough alone?”

Liddell’s smile showed no sign of amusement. “There’s a little thing like a reputation to uphold, pal. And another little thing like paying off for your boys. Or wouldn’t you understand that?”

“Cut it out. Do you think it feels good for me to have to go see Laury stretched out on a slab in a morgue?” Murphy scaled his hat at a chair, walked over to the bar, poured himself a stiff drink and tossed it off. “But that’s no reason why we should foul everybody else up.”

“What’d you tell the cops out there?”

Murphy poured some more liquor into his glass. “I denied that I knew anything about any diamonds. I told them that as far as I knew Laury never even heard of Arms.” He drained the glass, set it down. “I told them I didn’t know of any connection you had with her.”

Liddell showed his teeth in a grim grin. “But when I show them your retainer—”

“It was in cash. One guy’s C-notes look pretty much like another’s.” Murphy dropped into a chair, raked his fingers through his hair. “I know I’m acting like a heel, Liddell, but that’s it.”

“Whose idea was this whole thing?”

The man in the chair looked up, chewed on his lower lips. “Arms. It wasn’t the police that called when you were here. It was Arms. I had to call him back.” He fumbled through his pockets, came up with a cigarette. “The cops had gotten to him and he denied the whole thing. He told me what would happen to me if I didn’t back him up.” His hand shook as he lit the cigarette.

“That’s how he knew I was on my way out, eh?”

Murphy nodded. “After you left, I sent Red home in a cab. I got a call from some hick cop named Murray about a half hour after that. I went right out.” He cupped his cigarette in his hand, took a deep drag. “They had her out at the county morgue. I had to identify her.”

Liddell scowled down at him. “You’re sure nobody but you and Arms was in on this diamond sale? Nobody else? Servants or anybody?”

“Nobody. Arms didn’t want a leak. He wouldn’t even have let me hire you if he’d known.” He got up, paced the room. “Even if he did do it, I can’t

spill. They'd have me as an accessory to Lane's tax evasion for one thing. I was her manager and made out all her returns. And besides, Arms probably has an iron-clad alibi and he'd wait it out until the heat was off and get me for it." He stopped pacing, took a last drag on the cigarette, stubbed it out. "I can't spill."

"Okay," Liddell growled. "Now at least I know where I stand. But I'm telling you just what I told Arms. I'm going to bust this wide open and I don't care who gets hurt. Someplace along the line, the killer must have made at least one mistake. That's all it takes. Just one."

6.

The morgue was in the basement of the new four-story stone courthouse in Carport. Johnny Liddell wheeled his car into the courthouse parking lot, squeezed it between two whitewashed lines that specified, "For Official Use Only." He crossed the courtyard, pushed through a revolving door, followed a stencilled arrow that pointed *To the Medical Examiner's Office*.

The door itself was of frosted glass, bore the legend *Medical Examiner's Office* with *Dr. Harry Mizner* in smaller letters under it. Next to it were two huge metal doors on which were lettered simply *Morgue*.

Johnny Liddell pushed open the frosted glass door and walked into the medical examiner's office. The dank, damp air of the morgue beyond seemed to permeate the room. A painfully thin middle-aged man with a prominent adam's apple looked up from a pile of forms he was filling out. His hair was ruffled; the stub of a cigarette was clenched between his front teeth.

"Dr. Mizner?" Liddell asked.

The thin man shook his head. "I'm his assistant. Can I help you?"

"My name's Liddell. One of my boys was brought in tonight. His name is Tate Morrow. Gunshot."

The thin man scowled, nodded. "Just finished working him up. The doc's in talking with the lieutenant now." He nodded his head toward the morgue. "You can go in if you like."

Liddell nodded his thanks, headed for the white enamelled door set in the back of the office. As he pushed the door open, a blast of hot, carbolic-laden air enveloped him. At the far end of the room, a small group of men were huddled around one of several white examining tables. Liddell recognized the homicide lieutenant he had encountered in Laury Lane's house earlier in the evening.

Lieutenant Murray showed no signs of enthusiasm as the private detective walked up. He muttered something in a low voice that caused his

companion, a short rotund man with a thatch of untidy white hair, to look up.

“You Dr. Mizner?” Liddell addressed the short man.

The medical examiner nodded, studied Liddell curiously. “You were the employer of the dead man?”

Liddell nodded, looked from the M.E. to the homicide man and back. “I thought maybe you might have something to clear the kid. Some evidence that he died before she did or that he didn’t fire the gun? Anything that I can hang my hat on.”

Dr. Mizner nodded. “We’ve got plenty for you, my boy. He was dead before that bullet ever hit him.” He nodded to the canvas covered bulge on the table. “Death was caused by a depressed fracture at the base of the skull.” He picked up a sheaf of papers, riffled through it. “The woman didn’t kill him, either, from the looks of it. We did a dermal nitrate test soon’s we brought her in. Negative.”

“Doesn’t mean a thing,” Murray growled. “Lots of negative reactions show up even after you do fire a gun.”

The M.E. shook his head. “Not in this case. Some guns with a tight breech don’t kick back nitrates, but we did a test on this gun. The test showed positive.” He looked over at Liddell. “I’ve just finished telling the lieutenant that I won’t go along with his theory of the killing.”

Murray growled deep in his chest, glared at Liddell. “Okay, so you prove to me you’re right and I’ll admit I was wrong. I’ve checked both Arms and the girl’s manager, Murphy. They both claim your story about a big diamond deal is for the birds. Got a better story that’ll stand up?”

Liddell shook his head. “Arms threw the fear of God into Murphy. He got him on the phone right after you checked him. They got together on a story.”

“It’s your word against theirs. Can you make it stick?”

Liddell tugged at his lower lip with thumb and forefinger. “I don’t know. The retainer was paid in cash, and Murphy insisted that it be kept just between Tate himself and me. But he did admit the story in front of a witness.”

“Good. Who?”

“His girl. She was at his place when I got there. She’s a redhead from the *1954 Revue*. Her name’s Claire Readon.”

Murray tugged his notebook from his pocket, copied the name into it. “Know where she lives?”

Liddell shook his head. “No, but it shouldn’t be hard to find out. Joe Gates is the press agent for the show. He knows where all the girls live. Sometimes he has to work up a party at a moment’s notice.” Liddell pulled out his wallet, fingered through the cards. “He’s at the Edison Hotel. Has a combination office and apartment there.” He consulted his watch “It’s about 5:10 now. We should be able to get him.”

“Not we. I’ll get him,” Murray growled. He stamped out of the morgue into the M.E.’s office. After a few minutes he was back, his face long.

“Get him?” Liddell wanted to know.

The homicide man nodded. “I got him.”

“He tell you where to reach her?”

Murray nodded. “Bellevue morgue. She was killed by a hit-and-run driver about three o’clock this morning.”

7.

The Hotel Lowell was on an old stone building on a side street off Seventh Avenue on 47th Street. Its facade was dirty and neglected-looking. Inside, the lobby was dingy, lightless and dusty. A couple of discouraged-looking rubber plants were placed around it in an attempt at decoration, and half a dozen chairs were scattered in strategic places in a futile attempt to make it look cozy.

A gaunt, grey-haired old man with a pince-nez on a sleazy black ribbon stood behind the registration desk, looked askance at Johnny Liddell's unshaven chin, deep lines of fatigue.

"Miss Readon has had an accident. She's not here." He stopped picking his teeth, sucked at them noisily. "Matter of fact, I hear she's dead."

"How about a room-mate? Understood she shared a room with another girl in the show." Liddell consulted a pencilled note on the back of an envelope. "Leona Sabell." He looked up. "She in?"

"Who'd you say you were?" the old man demanded.

"Tell her I'm a detective working on her room-mate's accident." He interpreted the look of disbelief in the room clerk's eyes. "A private detective. Insurance."

His disbelief washed out, the old man sat down at a neglected looking keyboard, jabbed in a key, talked into the mouthpiece. He tugged out the key and nodded. "She's in 312." He lost interest in Liddell, went back to an open copy of the *Mirror*.

A blonde opened the door to 312 in response to his knock. She was wearing a hostess gown that clung closely to a figure he considered worth clinging to. Her thick, glossy blonde hair was caught just above the ears with a bright blue ribbon, then allowed to cascade down over her shoulders.

"You the insurance dick?" She looked him over, stood aside and followed him into the small living room.

“Cozy place you’ve got here.” Liddell tossed his hat on an end table.

“It’s a dump and you know it,” the blonde contradicted him. From close up she looked older than she had in the dim light of the hall. The bright table light mercilessly exposed the fine network of lines under her eyes and the losing fight her makeup was waging with the lines at the sides of her mouth. She looked tired. “You didn’t come up here to write the place up for House Beautiful. What’s on your mind?”

“Claire.”

The blonde’s lower lip trembled slightly. “The poor kid. Did they get the one that did it?”

Liddell shook his head.

“What kind of a rat can he be? To hit a kid and let her lay there in the gutter to die like a dog?” she said bitterly.

“I don’t think she was hit there.” Liddell picked up two cigarettes from a cup on the coffee table, lit them, and passed one to the girl. “I’ve had a good look at the place. My guess is she was driven there and dumped.”

“Why do you say that?”

Liddell shrugged. “No sign of skid marks, for one thing. For another, when a car plows into somebody, a lot of dirt is dislodged from under the fender. No dirt. In fact, no signs of a hit-and-run.”

The blonde stood with the cigarette halfway to her lips. “What are you trying to tell me?”

“I think the kid was murdered. Her body was dumped there in an attempt to make it look like a hit-and-run.” He took a deep drag on the cigarette, let the smoke dribble from his nostrils. “She was crossing from north to south on a one way street, yet the fracture is on the left side of her skull.”

“So?”

“The street runs east. If a car tagged her, it would have thrown the right side of her head against the curb.”

“Unless it was going the wrong way on the one-way street.”

“Unless it was going the wrong way on the one-way street,” he conceded. “But my guess is that there was no car.”

“But why should anyone go to all that trouble to kill a kid like Claire? She didn’t have an enemy in the world. Everybody was crazy about her.”

Liddell watched while the girl crossed the room. The tired lines in her face weren't duplicated in her figure. "You were with her last night. Up at Murph's place?"

The blonde nodded. "Four of the other girls and I."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. Murph picked us up at the stage door after the show. We went up to his place. I left the party about two with the rest of the girls. Claire stayed on."

"She didn't leave the party at all?"

The blonde shook her head. "Nobody did."

"You're sure of that?"

"Positive. It was a pretty good party, but nobody left until it broke." She took the cigarette from between her lips, studied the carmined end. "Of course, some of the girls and their dates wandered off into other rooms for awhile, but nobody left."

"Claire wander off?"

The blonde caught her full lower lip. "No more than anybody else. They were in Murph's study for awhile."

"Where's that located in relation to the living room?"

"You're blowing up a dry well, mister." The blonde shook her head. "The study's at the back of the apartment and they would have had to cross the whole living room to get out. I'll swear on anything you want that neither Claire nor Murph left that apartment for even ten minutes."

"How long did Claire know Murph?"

The blonde shrugged. "Six or seven months. She met him at a party over at Lee Stevens' place. There were a lot of radio people there. Claire thought Murph could help her break into radio."

"Why?"

"He was a big wheel in radio until he took over the Lane dame. I guess he'll go back into it. He has a lot of connections. Claire thought he could help her." She took a last nervous drag at her cigarette, then crushed it out. "The poor kid. She wanted so much—and the way she had to end up." She shook her head. "I think you're wrong. There's nobody had any reason to hurt that kid. She never did a thing to a soul."

“Did she ever mention Louis Arms?”

“The hood that runs that joint out on the south shore?”

Liddell nodded.

“Never. I’m sure she didn’t know the guy. Why?”

“I don’t know. I have a hunch Arms could be the guy who had her killed.”

The blonde’s jaw dropped. “You’re crazy. Why would a big shot like Arms knock off a kid that’s hardly got the hayseed out of her ears? This was her first year in town.”

“I don’t know. Arms doesn’t like to leave loose threads hanging around. Maybe Claire was a loose thread.” He reached over, took another cigarette, chain-lit it from the one he held. “She ever mention Laury Lane?”

“Just that Murph was her manager. I don’t think she ever met her. Lane was pretty snooty, you know. Didn’t mix with chorus girls.” She ridged her forehead, regarded him through narrowed eyes. “How would she be a loose end?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that Arms is pretty anxious to keep something pretty quiet. One by one the people who knew about it are waking up dead. Maybe he thought Claire knew about it.”

The blonde shook her head. “I never heard her mention the guy’s name, and she used to spill the works to me. Like I was her old lady or something.” She continued to shake her head. “I never heard her mention his name.”

Liddell got up, walked over, recovered his hat. “Okay, Lee. That’s what I wanted to know. Maybe I’ll be seeing you around.”

The blonde split her soft lips in a grin. “If you don’t, it’s your fault.” She pulled herself up from the couch, paid no attention to the expanse of thigh the open gown revealed. “Do you have to go?”

Liddell nodded. “Yeah. You see, there are only two people left who know what Arms is so anxious to conceal. I’m going to pay a visit to the other one.”

8.

Mike Murphy had aged ten years in ten hours. His hair was ruffled, there were discolored sacs under his eyes and the dark shadow of a beard glinted on his chin as he opened the door to Liddell.

“Liddell! I’ve been trying to reach you. Did you hear about the redhead?”

Liddell nodded, walked into the apartment, closed the door behind him. “I heard. I’m also convinced it was no hit-and-run.”

The big man headed for the bar, found the bourbon bottle empty, settled for some scotch. He tossed it off. “You think it was murder?”

Liddell nodded. “A pretty sloppy murder, at that.”

Murphy nodded, paced the room. “Sloppy or neat, the result’s the same. The kid’s dead.” He stopped, stared at Liddell. “But why? She didn’t know a thing. I told you I didn’t tell her anything.”

“Maybe she overheard or took part in a telephone conversation that made her dangerous.”

Murphy licked at his lips. “You—you think when Arms called here? How could he know she was here?”

Liddell walked over to the bar, helped himself to a drink. “I don’t mean that call.” He drained his glass, set it down. “The earlier call.”

“I don’t follow you, Liddell.”

“I got a call around one or one-thirty. It was a girl. She said she was Lane. Asked me to get out there right away.”

“So?”

Liddell shrugged. “Lieutenant Murray checked the local operator. Lane never made a call to New York that night.” He poured some more liquor into the glass, swirled it around. “Funny, huh?”

“A scream. Sounds like you’re making out a case against yourself. Then you didn’t get a call?”

“I got the call all right. And it’s not me I’m making the case out against.”

“Who then?”

“You. That call was made from right here.”

The big man’s jaw dropped. “You crazy? You said yourself you heard the shot. What are you trying to pull, Liddell?”

Liddell grinned humorlessly. “Shows how dumb I really am. I thought it was a shot.” He looked at Murphy. “That’s what I was supposed to think. That way it set the time of the kill and gave some people an alibi.”

“Look, Liddell,” Murphy growled. “I can account for every minute of my time. From show break at eleven right through to—”

“Nice big place you’ve got here,” Liddell cut him off. “Living room, couple of bedrooms. A study, too?”

The big man’s eyes narrowed. “Get to the point.”

“I’ll bet the study’s pretty well set up. Ping pong, maybe. Big leather chairs. The works, eh?”

“There a law against being comfortable? What’s the furnishing of my study got to do with it?”

“Everything. Once I learned you’d spent years in radio.” Liddell took a swallow from his glass, watched the other man over the rim. “You know how some sound effects men fake the sound of a shot on a live mike, Murph? They smack leather with a ping pong paddle. It makes a better shot than live ammo.”

The good looks of the big man had disappeared. His lips straightened out into thin, bloodless lines; hard lumps formed at the sides of his mouth. “Go on.”

“You and Claire disappeared into the study for awhile. Some way you got her to make that call, probably told her it was a practical joke. Then you set out to get her drunk. But not drunk enough, because she tumbled to the connection when I popped in here to break the news.”

Murphy’s hand dipped into his jacket pocket. When it re-appeared, he had a snubnosed .38 in his fist. “But why should I kill Lane? She was my meal ticket. Besides, I was forty minutes away. Forty minutes, Liddell.”

“She was already dead when you picked the girls up at the stage door. You didn’t have to go out there. All you had to do was try to establish the time it happened. And you almost got away with it.”

“That’s not what the police think. They’ve got your boy Tate measured for it, and—”

“No more. They know he was sapped before he was shot in the back. You want to know something else? That gun of Lane’s had a faulty breech. It spit back nitrates when it was fired. Lane’s hand gave a negative reaction to the paraffin test. Yours won’t.”

“You haven’t given me a reason why I should kill her,” Murphy grated through clenched teeth. “Go on, show me how smart you are.”

“If I were smart, I would have tumbled long ago. Those diamonds you were supposed to be buying up for her. They were phonies, weren’t they? You knew you had to put up, but it was a cinch either Lane or Arms would spot them. Either way it was curtains. You had to see to it that the diamonds disappeared before the deal went through.” He scowled at the gun in the big man’s hand. “I should have known there was something fishy about the deal when you paid the retainer in cash and made such a big deal about nobody knowing Tate was bodyguarding your client.”

Murphy nodded. “You’re as smart as I thought I was.”

“Why’d you kill the redhead, Murph?”

The big man shrugged. “I had to. Anyway, what’s the difference after you’ve killed once?” He wiped his upper lip with the side of his left hand. “She guessed the phone call was intended to set up a phony alibi. She tried to put the shake on me deeper than I was willing to go. I lost my temper and hit her with a bottle.” He licked at his lips with the tip of his tongue. “All I had to do was get her down to my car and dump her some place where it’d look like a hit-and-run. I’ve carted dames out of here in worse condition. No one paid any attention.”

“And now?”

“The last act. You.”

Liddell watched the finger whiten on the trigger. “A sucker play. You can’t get away with knocking me off. You’ll tip the whole story.”

The big man shook his head, twisted the bloodless lips into a caricature of a grin. “You wouldn’t, I suppose? I’ll get away with it. Too bad you won’t be here to see it.”

“They’ll never buy it.”

“Why not? You came up here, admitted you followed the redhead home and killed her because she heard you admit to me that you killed Lane. It might sound thin, but you won’t be in any condition to contradict it, and—”

The glass filled with liquor left Liddell’s hand, streaked for the big man’s face. Murphy tried to duck away, started squeezing the trigger. Slugs bit chunks of plaster out of the wall near Liddell’s head. Murphy screamed and pawed at his eyes as the raw liquor burned into them. He tried to raise the gun again, but he didn’t get it to firing level.

Liddell moved in relentlessly. He hit the big man’s wrist with the side of his hand. The gun clattered to the floor from nerveless fingers. Liddell slammed his fist against the side of the man’s jaw, sent him reeling backwards. He followed up, back-handed Murphy’s head into position, then took the fight out of him with an uppercut to the midsection.

Murphy went down, trying to catch Liddell around the knees. The private detective sidestepped, kicked him in the face, knocked him flat on his back. The big man lay there, moaning, pink-tinged bubbles forming between his lips.

Liddell walked to the big desk against the wall, dialed the number of the Carport Police Department. After a moment, he was connected with Lieutenant Murray in homicide. Briefly, he outlined the story as he knew it.

He could hear the sound of a sharp intake of breath from the other end. Then, after a moment, “Will he sign a statement?” Murray wanted to know.

“I haven’t asked him yet,” Liddell said. “I have an idea he will, though.”

“Not if he’s in his right mind,” the homicide man told him. “It’s a pretty flimsy story to juice up an electric chair with.”

Liddell grinned. “I’ve got an extra generator up my sleeve. When I hang up, I’m calling Arms and I’m telling him how Murphy tried to frame him for the Lane kill. Arms is a little sensitive about things like that. I’ve got an idea Murphy would prefer the law to Arms and his boys.”

Murray chuckled. “Maybe he would at that. I’ll send a couple of my boys in to pick him up.” There was a click as he broke the connection.

Murphy was moaning his way back to consciousness. Liddell walked over, caught him by the front of his shirt and dragged him to a chair. The agent was no longer dapper. His eyes were watery, the carefully combed hair

hung lankly down over his face. He was sick, breathing noisily through a smashed nose.

Liddell buried his fingers in the man's hair, pulled his head back. "Listen carefully, you rat. I've notified both the cops and Arms. I told them what I know—that you tried to frame Arms for this kill. They're both sending a couple of boys for you. You understand?"

Murphy's eyes stopped rolling. He made a visible effort to focus them on the private detective's face. "You—you told Arms?"

Liddell grinned grimly. "Yeah. Take your pick, pal. If you haven't written out a full statement by the time the homicide boys get here, I'll see to it that they go home without you. I'll bet Arms' torpedoes won't be discouraged that easily."

"Don't throw me to Arms, Liddell." The pink bubbles formed and burst between his lips. "Get me a pen. I'll make a statement. Get me a pen."

"You're damned right you'll make a statement," Liddell growled. "Get on your feet."

Murphy looked up at him, licked his lips, stumbled to his feet. He stood there swaying.

"This is for the kid, Murph." He slammed his fist against the big man's mouth. There was the sound of crunching teeth. The big man went staggering backward and fell across a table.

"You won't be needing teeth where you're going."

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.

Book name and author have been added to the original book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Frame* by Frank Kane]