

The Frozen Grin

A Johnny Liddell Mystery
BY FRANK KANE



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It was a routine killing, the kind of thing that might happen to anyone mixed up in the call-girl business. But it wasn't routine at all when Lisa came into the case.

THE girl sprawled across the bed, her bare arm crooked languidly over her head. Her thick, coppery hair was a tangle on the black silk of the pillow case.

Johnny Liddell scowled as he stood there beside her, looking down at her.

The black silk sheet had been pushed back, baring her to the waist. Her full, perfectly-molded breasts were firm, shapely.

Liddell growled deep in his chest, nodded to the white coated man from the Medical Examiner's office. He turned away as the black silk sheet blotted out the girl's face. Behind him, Larry Berlinger of the D. A.'s office, a tall man in a rumpled blue suit and grey fedora, stood watching him curiously. "Make her, Liddell?"

Liddell nodded. "Haven't seen her in years." He turned for a last look at the bulge under the sheet. "Used the name Lorraine Daly out on the Coast. Her sweetie tried to put the shake on a client of mine and I wrapped him up for it. He drew a dime store."

The man in the blue suit pinched at his nostrils with thumb and forefinger. "When was that? Can you remember offhand?"

"About '48 or '49."

“He could have served three and gotten the rest off for good behavior,” Berlinger said. “That means he’s out now. What’s his name?”

“Paul Lester. But there’s no sense looking for him. He was killed in an attempted jail break a couple of years back.” He looked around as two men carried in a long wicker basket, wrinkled his nose with distaste. “Can’t we talk about it someplace else?”

The man in the blue suit nodded. “That’s what I was just going to suggest. Let’s go up to the D. A.’s office. He isn’t as pretty as the redhead, but he’s more likely to answer you when you talk to him.”

Larry Berlinger led the way through a door that read *Wilson Deats—District Attorney*. The room beyond had high, beamed ceilings that gave it a peculiar absence of sound, almost like a vacuum. The floor was covered with a thick grey-green carpeting, and the leather of the big armchairs had been polished to a soft patina. One side of the room was covered with a huge bookcase and in the center facing the door a large, highly polished desk dominated the room. A man was sitting behind the desk, his hands folded across his chest, fingertips touching.

“You and Mr. Deats know each other, Johnny,” Berlinger said.

The district attorney nodded, waved Liddell in with a well-manicured hand. His thick, black hair was carefully shellacked into place, high cheek bones accentuated dark liquid eyes, and a thin pencil line mustache separated a full, sensuous mouth from a perfectly chiselled nose.

“Of course, Larry. Liddell and I are old friends.” His voice was low, well-modulated. His smile consisted merely of a twisting upward of the corners of his mouth. The wary expression in his eyes was unchanged. “Come in and sit down, Liddell.”

Liddell got comfortable in a leather overstuffed chair across the desk.

“Liddell made her, Mr. Deats,” Berlinger told him. “She was mixed up in a shakedown case he worked on—on the Coast couple of years back. Used the name of Lorraine Daly then.”

The D.A. twisted a heavy gold ring on his fourth finger. “Haven’t heard from her since?”

Liddell shook his head. “We weren’t exactly intimate. I sent her boy away for a five to ten. Why?”

Deats opened his top drawer, fumbled in the depths, brought out an envelope. "You may have wondered why we asked you to have a look at the body?" He flipped the envelope across the desk. "This was found in her room."

Liddell picked up the envelope, studied it with a puzzled frown. It was addressed "Johnny Liddell, 56 W. 42 Street, New York, N. Y." In the lower left hand corner it was marked "Personal—Urgent." He lifted the flap, found the envelope empty, looked up at the district attorney.

Deats shrugged. "That's how we found it. Addressed and empty." He selected a cigarette from a humidor, fitted it to a holder, tilted it in the corner of his mouth. "We hoped you'd be able to tell us who she is."

Liddell turned the envelope over in his hands, dropped it back on the desk. "I've told you all I know about her." He scowled his bewilderment. "Why would she write to me?"

"The thought of suicide occurred to us. Did you check the medical examiner, Larry?" The man behind the desk turned to Berlinger.

"Not a chance, chief," the man in the blue suit shook his head. "No signs of any hesitation marks and the cut's too deep to be self inflicted on a first try."

Wilson Deats sighed delicately. "There it is, Liddell. Obviously she had something she wanted you to know. The killer got to her first and removed whatever it was." He tapped the cigarette holder against his teeth. "If what was in that envelope was sufficiently important to commit one murder, the killer may feel he has to commit another. He may believe that you know the contents of that letter."

"But I don't. I didn't even think Lorraine Daly knew I was alive."

"I know that, and you know that," the district attorney cut in with a raised hand, "but does the killer? If he doesn't, he may feel he must kill you, too, to protect his secret." He broke off for a moment, seemed to be choosing his words carefully. "Since you have so much at stake in getting this killer before he strikes again, it occurs to me that perhaps you would consider working with us."

"What's the gimmick?" Liddell wanted to know. "Since when does the district attorney's office offer to work with a private eye? Me especially?"

Deats clamped the cigarette holder between his teeth, leaned back, refolded his hands across his chest. "Frankly, Liddell, we feel you can be

very helpful to us in this case. You see, from what little we know of this girl, it's quite obvious that given the opportunity the tabloids will drag a lot of well-known names through the mud. I'd like to avoid that if I can."

"What am I supposed to do? Confess to the murder so you can mark the case closed?"

The district attorney sighed. "Of course not. But there are some aspects of this case that I feel should be investigated confidentially—that is to say unofficially." He reached up, smoothed down the pencil line mustache with the tip of his index finger. "We feel that your connections in the café society set would be extremely helpful to us."

Liddell considered it, nodded. "Sounds reasonable."

"From what you've told us about the girl's background, it could be that she's been blackmailing somebody," Berlinger mused. "She might even be working with a gang and tried to doublecross them—"

"And then all you'd have to do is grab a hood and not have to try to prosecute some society guy, huh?" Liddell grinned bleakly. "It would be much neater all around, wouldn't it?"

"Berlinger didn't mean that," the D.A. said. "But along the same line, Liddell, since you're addicted to violence—"

Liddell cut him off. "I have to work the way I work best." He turned to Berlinger. "What've you got on her since she came East?"

The plainclothesman pulled a battered leather notebook from his hip pocket. "Not much." He wet his forefinger, flipped through the pages, found what he was looking for. "Lived at the Carlson House since May." He rolled his eyes ceilingward, counted on mental fingers. "That's eight months." His eyes rolled back to the notebook. "No known source of income. Plenty of expensive clothes and trinkets, about \$2800 in a bank account." He flipped the notebook shut. "She was last seen at 5:30 this morning when a cabby dropped her off at her place. She was alone. The cleaning woman found her with her throat cut at 11:30." He returned the notebook to his hip pocket. "That's all we've got."

Liddell nodded, pulled himself out of his chair. "Okay, gentlemen. You've got yourselves a boy."

The district attorney managed a fair semblance of a smile, but the worried frown still ridged his forehead as he extended his hand. "Just be careful with that gun of yours," he said.

“I’ve got a license for it.”

“Yes, but not a hunting license.”

Johnny Liddell sat at the end of the oval bar at the Club Intime, stared around. A blonde at the far end of the bar looked interesting. Her shoulder-length hair was the color of a new penny, and her gown was sufficiently low cut to show she had plenty of plenty. Most interesting of all at the moment was the fact that she was alone.

Liddell waved the bartender down for a refill. “Who’s the blonde?”

The bartender glanced down the bar with heavy-lidded, knowing eyes. “A regular. Here every night.” He filled the jigger to the top, capped the bottle, set it on the back bar.

“Alone?”

The bartender grinned. “That’s the way she comes in. That ain’t usually the way she goes out.” He stared down the bar appraisingly. “I’m saving my pennies for a crack at that myself one of these days. Want to meet her?”

Liddell nodded. “Ask her if she’ll have a drink with me.” He watched while the bartender shuffled down to the end of the bar, leaned over, whispered to the blonde. She raised her eyes, looked down the bar to where Liddell sat, seemed satisfied with what she saw, and smiled. Liddell waited until a drink had been set before her, then taking his glass, he walked down to where she sat.

“Thanks for the drink.” Her voice was husky in a way that raised goose pimples along his spine. “Won’t you sit down?”

Liddell hooked a barstool with his toe, pulled it over. “You’re not a New Yorker. Not with that corn belt twang.”

The blonde shook her head. “Albion, Ohio.” Her eyes were a deep blue, packed a terrific wallop when she turned on their full power. “Where are you from?”

“Brooklyn originally,” he grinned. “53rd Street now.” He sipped at his glass, looked around. “One of the reasons I duck this place is it gets so crowded and noisy.”

“I didn’t think I’d seen you around before. But the bartender seemed to know you. He said your name was—” she fumbled, looked helpless. “I’m afraid I forgot.”

“Liddell. Johnny Liddell. What’s yours?”

“Grier. Lisa Grier.” She lifted her glass, took a deep sip, studied him over the rim. “Would you rather go someplace else?”

“My place?”

The blonde raised her eyebrows, pretended to look shocked, missed by a city block. “Say, you don’t waste any time. Whatever gave you the idea you could meet me at a bar in one minute and the next ask me to your place?”

“I was a friend of Lorraine Richards.”

The blonde stopped the glass halfway to her lips. Some of the color drained from her face. She put the glass back on the bar, looked around. “How good a friend?” she dropped her voice.

“I knew her when she was Lorraine Daly.”

The blonde worried her full lower lip between her teeth. “Where’s your place?”

“Marlborough Apartments on 53rd. Apartment 4E.”

Lisa nodded nervously. “I’ll come in about fifteen minutes. I don’t want anyone to see me leaving here with you.”

Liddell nodded, finished his drink, set the glass down. “I’ll be waiting for you,” he said. The girl managed a sickly smile, watched him until he was through the door, then headed for a telephone booth.

The Marlborough Apartments was an old weatherbeaten, grime-darkened stone building nestled almost anonymously in a row of similar stone buildings on East 53rd Street. A small bronze plaque to the right of the entrance was the only clue to its identity.

The lobby was large, noisy, seemed to be bathed in a perpetual pink light, the reflection of a huge neon that hummed to itself and spelled out “The Kangaroo Room—Cocktails.” A short, fat man stood at the cigar counter trying, with no apparent success, to interest the blonde that presided over it with his plans for the evening.

The immaculate little man who worked at the registration desk waved Liddell down as he headed for the bank of elevators. “A message for you, Mr. Liddell.” He made a production of removing a telephone slip from the

pigeonhole marked 4E, handed it across the desk with what he considered to be an urbane smile.

Liddell unfolded the slip, scowled at the message. It read: *Make it my place instead at 9. Hotel Martense, Room 625.* It was signed, *Lisa.*

“Not bad news, I hope,” the man behind the desk said.

Liddell shook his head. “You take this message?” The desk clerk nodded. “Was it a woman?”

The man behind the desk dry-washed his hands nervously, bobbed his head like a cork in a stormy inlet. “She had a voice like a dream.”

“Thanks.” Liddell consulted his watch, found he had an hour to kill, headed for the elevators. At the fourth floor he got off, turned left to Apartment E. He inserted the key, pushed open the door, stepped through.

The arm that caught him around the neck in a mugger’s grip almost cut his wind off entirely. He felt the point of a knife jabbed into his back just above the waist.

“Inside,” the man said. The point of the knife prodded him into obedience. Once in, the door was kicked closed, leaving the room in almost total darkness. “Get your hands up on the back of your head where I can see them.” The arm around his throat was loosened so that Liddell could suck a deep breath into his lungs.

He laced his fingers together on the back of his head, waited.

The other man reached over, relieved him of the gun in his shoulder holster. Liddell pivoted at the waist, catching the other man in the temple with his elbow. The other man cursed, dropped Liddell’s .45, lashed out with the knife. Liddell side-stepped, felt the blade whiz past his cheek. He crouched back against the wall, waited for the next assault.

The only sound in the room was the heavy breathing of the two men. Liddell could feel the perspiration running down the back of his shirt as he strained his eyes against the darkness.

He caught the dull glint of the knife blade. The other man was shuffling in, knife waist high, point up in the manner of the experienced knife-fighter. Liddell kept his eye on the knife hand, circled to the left slowly as the man closed in.

Suddenly, the man with the knife lunged. Liddell chopped down at the wrist with the side of his hand, heard the other man grunt, the knife clatter to

the floor. He bent over to grab the knife, and the other man lashed out with his foot, caught the private detective in the side, knocked him back against the wall.

Before Liddell could scramble to his feet, there was a flurry of running footsteps, the crashing of a window pane. Liddell pulled himself up, snapped the light switch, located his .45 on the floor where it had fallen. He snapped off the light, limped to the window.

He stuck his head out the window. Two stories below the man huddled on the fire escape. There was the vicious spit of a .38 from below. The slug gouged a piece of concrete out of the wall next to Liddell's head, close enough to sting him with splinters. Then there was another shot, and the slug screamed wildly as it ricocheted off a metal step.

Liddell squeezed the trigger on the .45 twice. The man on the step below seemed to straighten up. His body shuddered as the second slug hit him. He tried to raise the .38, but it had suddenly gotten too heavy. His knees folded under him; he toppled over the low guard rail, crashed headlong to the street below. His body hit the alleyway, lay motionless.

There was a muffled pounding on the door. Liddell walked back, threw it open. The hotel detective, a man named Maguire, stood uncertainly on the sill, gun in hand.

“What the hell's going on, Liddell?” he demanded.

Liddell flipped on the light switch. “Must've been a sneak thief.”

The house dick stared at him wide eyed. “Good God, Liddell, you're bleeding.”

Liddell grinned glumly, nodded toward the open window. “You ought to see the other guy.”

Wilson Deats looked ruffled. His index finger worked from center to end on both sides of the pencil-line mustache, without effect. The carefully shellacked hair showed signs of having been raked constantly by nervous fingers.

“I thought it was understood there was to be no shooting, Liddell,” he complained. “If I give out the story that you've been working with my office, do you realize what the newspapers will do to me?”

Liddell shrugged. “What was I supposed to do? Let him carve me?”

“After all, it was self defense,” Larry Berlinger said, from the other end of the desk. “Why do we have to tie this office in at all? Liddell here came back to his room, a sneak thief tried to kill him when he caught him, and Liddell shot straighter. There’re plenty of witnesses to that.”

The district attorney nodded absently. He moved his lips as he tried the statement for size, approved. The familiar smile washed out the worried frown on his face. “Of course. Liddell caught a sneak thief, and—” The smile became strained, then drained off completely. “Eddie Blake a sneak thief?” He shook his head slowly. “The guy’s a big time star, making all kinds of dough, and—”

“He hasn’t got a dime,” Berlinger argued. “He lives up every nickel he gets and he’s always in hock to everybody in town.”

Deats was unconvinced. “Not so broke that he’d try to steal from a private detective.” He pursed his lips, leaned back, touched his finger tips across his chest. “What was he looking for, Liddell?”

“He didn’t mention it,” Liddell deadpanned. “But just as a guess, I’d say he was looking for something connected with that addressed envelope you found in Lorraine Richards’ room.”

“Where’s the connection?”

Liddell shrugged. “Who knows? Lorraine lived well with no signs of support. Sounds like a shakedown racket, no?”

“She was tied up with a guy who went up for shaking down on the Coast,” Berlinger reminded the D.A. “She probably came on East and went into business for herself. You think Blake killed Lorraine Richards, Johnny?”

Liddell shook his head. “Not necessarily. But my guess is that he knew who did.” He pinched at his nose with thumb and forefinger. “He was in it someplace. In it deep enough to be willing to kill to keep the lid on.”

“Lid on what?” Deats growled.

“One of these days you’re going to pick up the newspapers, Mr. D.A., and find out that this café society mob has been organized into the sweetest vice ring you’ve ever stumbled into,” Liddell told him. “They make the pros look like a bunch of amateurs. For a price they’ll deliver anything from a dowager to a deb, and they’ve got enforcers that’ll make the delivery stick.”

Deats sat upright, stared at Liddell. “This a pipe dream?” He looked over to Berlinger. “Well, Larry? You’re head of my confidential squad. How

about it?”

Berlinger looked uncomfortable. “I’ve heard rumors about it, chief, but it’s a pretty tight little circle. Knowing about it and proving anything are two different things.” He squirmed unhappily in his chair. “Besides, there are some awfully big names involved.”

The district attorney’s face turned an angry red. “All the more reason we’ve got to smash this thing—if it exists.”

“It exists all right,” Berlinger told him grimly. “But smashing it won’t be a picnic. Too many big guys been bedding down with those broads.”

Deats groaned, raked clenched fingers through his hair. “All the more reason. Don’t you understand that as soon as the mobs know what’s going on under their nose they’ll move in and take over?” he said. He turned to Liddell. “You think that’s what was in that letter Lorraine Richards addressed to you?”

Liddell shrugged. “It figures. She came on from the Coast, got in the ring up to her neck. But she was a pro enough to recognize the danger of the mobs moving in. When that started to happen, she wanted out and tried to plant enough evidence somewhere that she could hold over their heads.” He made a suggestive motion with his finger from ear to ear. “They found out about it.”

Deats jumped up from behind the desk, paced the office, hands clenched nervously behind his back. “We can’t afford to waste a minute.” He stopped in front of Liddell. “You willing to co-operate?”

Liddell nodded wordlessly.

“Good. This office will back you up a hundred percent in anything you do to clean it up. We’ll put our own men on gathering evidence, but we’ll need someone like you to dig on the inside.”

The Hotel Martense was a pseudo modern pile of brick, concrete and plate glass that looked like a waffle standing on end. Each room had its own wall-sized plate glass picture window and a small balcony, made private by being indented into the grill of the waffle.

Johnny Liddell headed across the lobby to the bank of phones labelled *House Phones*, asked the operator to be connected with 625. The room answered on the fifth ring.

“What is it?” Lisa’s voice was a combination of irritation and sleepiness.

“Liddell. Remember me?”

There was a brief pause at the other end. “What time is it anyway?” Then, an anguished yelp. “My God, it isn’t even 10 o’clock yet. Who’d you say you were?”

“Johnny Liddell. We had a drink at the Club Intime last night.”

“Where’ve you been? I waited half the night for you,” she said. “You must have come by way of Nome.”

“No. By way of the morgue.”

“Anyone I know?”

“Ed Blake.”

The gasp was clear over the wire. “Give me a few minutes to get decent and come up.” The phone clicked onto its hook.

Lisa Grier opened the door herself. Her yellow hair was piled on top of her head, and her face looked as though it had been freshly scrubbed, revealing a small bridge of freckles across her nose. There was a faint blueness under her eyes that complemented their deep blue color. She wore a housecoat of clinging material. She stood aside, watched him with worried eyes as he walked in.

As soon as she had shut the door, “Is Eddie really dead?”

Liddell nodded.

“How?” She made a reasonably good effort to swallow her balled fist. “I was only talking to him last night.”

“He was in my room when I got back there last night. He pulled a knife on me—”

The color drained out of the blonde’s face. “You killed him?”

“Was it supposed to be the other way around?”

“What do you mean?”

“You gave him my address, didn’t you?” He caught her shoulder roughly. “The minute I left you at the bar you called him and told him where I’d be. You set me up for a kill.”

The girl shook her head. “Why should I?”

“Because the minute I mentioned Lorraine’s real name you thought I knew too much. Like Lorraine did.”

“You’re wrong, Johnny. I called Eddie Blake after you left me because I had to. I had to let him know I was busy. We have to keep in touch.”

Liddell released his hold on the girl’s shoulder, watched her glumly as she rubbed it. “Blake handles the girls’ bookings?”

The blonde nodded. When she started to sway, Liddell caught her arm, led her into the sitting room, cleared space on the couch.

“Got any liquor?” he asked.

“In the kitchen cupboard.”

When he returned a minute later with some ice, a bottle and two glasses, she was staring dry-eyed at the wall. He dropped two pieces of ice into each glass, drenched them down with rye. Then, he tapped the girl on the shoulder, handed her a glass. “Drink this. You’ll feel better.”

Lisa put the glass to her lips, took a deep swallow. She coughed, but some of the color came back to her face. “I’m acting like a jerk,” she said, with an effort at a smile. “I always knew something like this would happen. I’m in a tough spot, eh?”

Liddell shrugged. “You’re not exactly in clover.”

The blonde turned the full power of her eyes on him. “Will you help me?”

“If you level with me.”

“I will. I’ll do anything you say.” She slid closer until he could feel the roundness of her thigh against his. “I need somebody strong to hang onto.” She put her hand on his knee, looked into his face. “I’m scared. I’ve been scared stiff ever since it happened to Lorry. You won’t let—anything like that happen to me?”

“Nothing’s going to happen to you.” He waited until the girl had taken another swallow from her glass. “How well did you know her?”

“We used to room together. I was working in the Bandbox as cigarette girl. Eddie Blake introduced me to her.” She leaned her head back against the couch, gave no sign that she knew that the neckline of the gown had plunged breathtakingly. “She had just come on from the Coast. Her husband was dead. Did you know that?”

Liddell nodded. “He was killed in a jail break. Trying to break out of a jail cell I put him into.” He pulled out a pack of cigarettes, lit two, passed one to the blonde. “Go on.”

“We took a little flat on 49th Street. I used to pick up a couple of dollars modeling or doing bits on TV.” She took a deep drag on the cigarette, let the smoke dribble from between half parted lips. “Lorry never worked but she always had money. One day she asked me to fill in on a double date with two of Eddie Blake’s out of town friends.” She shrugged. “I made more money that night than I did in a month of hustling butts. The next afternoon Eddie came to the apartment.”

“Made you a proposition?”

The blonde nodded. “He told me he could keep me busy meeting the best people, going to the best places, wearing the best clothes. All he was asking was 10%.” She made a weary gesture. “I figured why not? Two months later I had my own place.”

“Work out the way you expected?”

The blonde took the cigarette from between her lips, studied the carmined end with a moue of distaste. “Not exactly. I had visions of going out with big, handsome men to fancy places—” she shrugged. “What I should have realized is that big handsome men don’t pay for their girls. They don’t have to. The kind I got—old, fat, disgusting—were pretty hard to take.”

“Why didn’t you quit?”

“And go back to hustling butts?” She shook her head.

“How long have you been working for Blake?”

Lisa wrinkled her forehead. “Seems like years,” she said, “but it’s only been ten or eleven months.”

“Keep in touch with Lorraine?”

“I saw her on and off at parties. Eddie booked a lot of parties.” She emptied her glass, held it out for a refill. “He’s got it so well organized he can deliver almost anyone you want. He’s got a string as long as your arm. Too long.”

“Why?”

“He hasn’t been calling me lately. I’ve had to get my own dates. At the Club Intime and some of the other spots. It’s harder that way.”

“That’s the racket, Lisa. It needs new faces all the time. It gets worse instead of better.” He freshened his drink, leaned back. “Maybe that’s what

happened with Lorraine, too. Maybe Eddie was passing her up on dates. Maybe Lorraine resented it and decided to get even.”

“How?”

Liddell shrugged. “She was no amateur. She helped Blake get set up. Probably recruited most of his girls like she did you. A gal that much on the inside could be dangerous if she got ruffled.”

Lisa shuddered. “You mean Eddie killed her? I can’t believe that. He was just a little man with big ideas and good connections.”

“He tried to kill me.”

“But he didn’t. You killed him.” She leaned over, slid her arm around Liddell’s neck. “That’s why I don’t want you to leave me. Nobody could harm me if you were watching over me.” She raised her moist mouth to his, pressed against him, shuddered deliciously. After a moment, she drew away. “You will take care of me, won’t you?”

Liddell grinned. “It’ll be a pleasure, baby.”

She wrinkled her nose at him, swung her feet up on the couch, laid back in his lap. She caught him by the tie, pulled his mouth down to hers. After a moment, her arms slid around his neck, her nails dug into his shoulder. Her lips moved against his.

The phone on the end table started to jangle. Liddell straightened up, glowered at it.

Lisa made a half hearted effort to pull the robe together over the broad expanse of flesh it revealed, gave it up as a bad try. “You look good in lipstick. My lipstick.” She touched her lips lightly to his, swung her legs off the couch, snagged the phone from its hook.

She held the phone to her ear for a moment, then dropped it back on the hook, stared at it with frightened eyes.

“Who was it?” Liddell wanted to know.

“A man. He says he’s taking over Blake’s operation and that I go with it. He said if I didn’t fall in line I’d get what Lorry got.”

“What’s he want you to do?”

The blonde’s lower lip trembled. “I’m to be at the bar at the Café Lawrence at 8 tonight. They’re going to assign me to a territory.” She raised stricken eyes to Liddell. “They don’t own me. They can’t do that.”

“Café Lawrence, eh?” Liddell mused. “That means Mike Camden. The D.A. is right. The mobs have tumbled and are taking over. Baby, unless we smash this now they’ll own you body and soul and they’ll destroy both.”

“Don’t let them do it, Johnny. Make them let me out.”

Liddell nodded. “You go to the Café Lawrence tonight. I’ll be there.”

The blonde pulled open the drawer of the end table, pulled out a toy-like .25. “This is my resignation. I’m handing it in tonight.”

Liddell took the gun from her hand, tossed it into a chair. “Let me handle it, baby. Those cap pistols sometimes burn. I’ll take care of you.”

“You won’t leave me?”

Liddell shook his head. “Not a chance.”

The blonde slid her arms around his neck. “But it isn’t even noon and I’m not due until 8. Almost eight hours. Don’t you think you’ll be bored?”

Liddell grinned crookedly. “We’ll think of something to do.”

She pressed against him, found his mouth with hers. After a moment he started to pull back. She shook her head frantically, sank her teeth into his lower lip. When she finally drew back, her lips were moist, soft, her eyes glazed.

“I’ve been waiting for you a long time, baby,” she told him huskily.

She slid out of his arms, shrugged her shoulders free of the gown. It slid down past her knees, and she stepped out of it. Her breasts were firm, full, pink tipped; her waist trim and narrow. Her legs were long, tapering pillars; her stomach flat and firm.

Her eyes dropped to her nakedness, rolled up to his face.

“I’ll do my best to make sure you’re not bored, Johnny.”

She slid back into his arms, melted against him. As his lips found her half open mouth her nails dug spasmodically into his shoulders. She emitted little animal cries deep in her chest, quivered uncontrollably.

Liddell kissed her cheeks, her closed eyes, the lobes of her ears. “I’ve got a funny feeling I’m not going to be, baby.”

The blonde chuckled. “I’ve got a funny feeling too, Johnny. And I like it!”

Johnny Liddell leaned on the bar at the Café Lawrence with the ease born of long experience. The dinner crowd was just beginning to filter in. Already a line was forming on the wrong side of the plush rope that extended across the entrance. Every so often there would be a whispered discussion between the headwaiter and a patron on the wrong side of the rope. Invariably it would be ended by a firm shake of the headwaiter's head.

A small four piece orchestra was playing softly, and the hum of conversation rolled outward toward the bar from the dining room. Inside the lights dimmed preliminary to the first floor show of the evening.

Liddell took a swallow out of his glass, glanced casually down the bar to where Lisa Grier sat tensely on the edge of her barstool. A muted buzzer sounded behind the bar. The bartender picked up a telephone from the backbar, muttered into it, nodded, replaced the receiver on the hook. Then, he walked down to where Lisa sat, leaned across the bar, whispered to her. She nodded, threw Liddell a worried look, started toward an unmarked door near the entrance.

Liddell waited until she had closed the door behind her, finished his drink, passed a bill to the bartender. When the man behind the bar shuffled off to ring it up, Liddell dropped his cigarette to the floor, ground it out, headed for the door the blonde had gone through.

A flight of steps led to a small balcony that overlooked the dance floor. A young man in a faultlessly tailored tuxedo was leaning on the decorative railing watching the floor show below.

“Lost your way?” he smiled pleasantly.

Liddell indicated the door marked *Office*.

“I want to see Mike Camden,” he said.

The man in the tuxedo looked hurt. “Mr. Camden's too busy to see tourists right now.” He caught Liddell's arm in a surprisingly strong grip. “You leave your table number with the headwaiter, and—”

Liddell brought his fist up from the side of his knee, and the man in the tuxedo fielded it with the pit of his stomach. The air wheezed out of him like a deflated balloon. His eyes glazed, a thin stream of saliva coursing down the side of his chin. As his knees started to sag, Liddell caught him under the arms, eased him to the floor. He looked around, saw no evidence that anyone had noticed.

He tried the knob of the huge glass door, found that it turned easily in his hand. Easing the .45 from its shoulder holster into his hand, he pushed the door open, walked in.

The room beyond was half den, half office. It was a big room with knotty pine panelling and Indian rugs. A comfortable fire hissed and puffed on the hearth of a huge fieldstone fireplace.

Mike Camden was sprawled comfortably in an armchair in front of the fire when he walked in. A white-faced Lisa Grier stood beside his chair.

“Come in, come in and join the party,” Camden said. His voice was silky, smooth with an elusive trace of the Boston Back Bay, where he’d gotten his start. 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 into the mahogany of his face. “Take the man’s gun, Sammy.”

Liddell felt the snout of the gun ram into his ribs, made no effort to resist as the man behind him reached around, relieved him of the .45. When Sammy came into view he was a counterpart of the man on the balcony. This edition was a shade shorter, but what he lacked in height he made up in breadth. As he stepped aside, he kept the muzzle of the snub nose .38 pointed at Liddell’s midsection.

“You didn’t sell me out, Lisa?” Liddell asked softly.

The blonde shook her head. “They saw you through the door.”

Liddell turned around. From inside, he saw that the door was one-way transparent, although laced with a fine steel mesh. Anyone sitting inside the room could see clearly what went on on the balcony.

“That was a real professional job you did on Lewis, Liddell,” Camden told him. “Lewis is supposed to be pretty good. Think so, Sammy?”

The tuxedoed guard growled deep in his chest. “He never could have done it if Lewis expected this joker to jump him.”

“But he did it,” Camden snapped. He turned his full attention to Liddell. “I can use some muscle like yours. Muscle with brains.”

Liddell snorted. “For what? Bouncers? A Mickey Finn in a tuxedo like this character?”

Sammy growled, shuffled toward him.

“Hold it, Sammy,” the night-club owner said. He selected a cigar from a humidor, smelled it, approved. “Okay, Liddell, I’m impressed with how

tough you are. I'm offering you a spot in a new organization I'm setting up. It takes muscles and it takes brains. There's plenty in it for the right guy."

"That what Eddie Blake didn't have?"

A frosty smile tilted the corners of Camden's lips. "A jerk. By knocking him off last night, you just saved me the trouble at some future date. I've taken over his operation. I'm going to make it big time."

Liddell appeared unimpressed. "Big time? A couple of amateur hustlers kicking back 10% is big time?"

"Maybe you don't have as much brains as I gave you credit for." Camden reached down on the floor at the side of his chair, brought up a sheaf of papers. "Here's a record of Blake's operation for the past year. The name of the girl, the name of the guy who hired her, and for how much. Mighty interesting reading, Liddell. Lot of big shots in that list." He dropped the papers in his lap, pulled a pocketknife from his vest, neatly sliced off the end of his cigar. "The take in dollars and cents was peanuts, but the possibilities are endless." He put the cigar in the center of his mouth, rolled it between thumb and forefinger. "That's why I'm taking over."

"Blackmail?"

Camden shrugged. "Let's say we go into the novelty business, selling these big shots home made movies and home made tape recordings. Some of those items go plenty high."

"You can count me out," Lisa Grier said. "I never let myself in for anything like that."

Camden turned to her, stared at her impersonally. His right hand whipped upward in an arc, caught her on the side of the face with a sharp crack, knocked her to her knees. "Nobody's asking you what you'll do and what you won't do. From now on you're part of the organization and you'll do what you're told." He turned back to Liddell. "May take a little time to teach some of these chippies some discipline, but they'll learn. Now, how about you? You in?"

Liddell pinched his nostrils between thumb and forefinger. "How can you be so sure those records are worth the paper they're written on?"

"Blake thought they were. They were kept by one of his babes who was getting ready to yell copper because he was kicking her out." He took a deep puff on the cigar, spilled blue-grey ashes down his shirt front. "She thought they were, too. He had to get them—over her dead body."

“So Blake did kill Lorraine? I suppose you sent him there to do a job on me, too, last night?”

Camden sneered. “I never send a boy to do a man’s job. This chip,” he tossed a contemptuous nod in the direction of Lisa, “was supposed to have you out of the way at her place so Blake could go through your things.”

“Why?”

“Just a precaution. The Richards dame used your name to threaten Blake. He wanted to find out if she’d passed anything over to you.” He took the cigar from between his teeth, examined the thin grey collar of ash at its end. “We try to keep killing down when we start a new operation. Stirrs up too much attention. But,” he rolled his eyes up, peered at Liddell from under lowered lids, “on the other hand we don’t take chances with guys who might know too much. You’re either in, or—” he shrugged.

Liddell turned his head, looked at the man holding the gun on him, estimated his chances, decided they weren’t very good. The hand that held the .38 was steady as a rock.

Mike Camden stared at him for a moment, grinned frostily. “Take all the time you want to make up your mind, as long as it’s made up by the time I get back.” He pulled his lanky frame out of the chair, nodded at Sammy. “If he tries to pull anything, burn him. I’ll see how Lewis is.” He walked across the room, pulled open the glass door, went out.

The man with the gun licked his lips. “You’re a tough guy, Liddell. You mussed up the kid out there. He’s my kid brother.” His little eyes narrowed. “You heard what the boss man said. *If you try anything—*”

“You’re not forgetting me, Sammy?” Lisa Grier broke in. She was leaning against the wall, her cheek stained an ugly red from Camden’s blow. In her hand she held the ridiculously toy-like .25. “I came here to give in my resignation.”

The gunman’s eyes swivelled from Liddell to the blonde. He swung the gun, snapped a fast shot at her. It hit her shoulder, half swung her around. His second shot caught her squarely, slammed her back against the wall. She pressed her hand to her breast, slid to her knees.

Liddell was on the gunman before he could swing the gun back on him. He deflected it with his left hand, put every ounce he had into a punch that landed under Sammy’s right ear.

The gun fell from the guard's nerveless fingers. Liddell kicked it across the floor. He caught the guard's shoulder, swung him around, planted his left to the elbow in Sammy's midsection. Then, as the guard toppled over, Liddell brought up his knee, caught him in the face. There was a dull, crunching sound as the man's nose broke. Liddell chopped down at the exposed back of the other man's neck in a vicious rabbit punch. Sammy hit the floor face first, didn't move.

Swiftly, Liddell crossed the room to where Lisa sat. Her hand was against her breast in a futile effort to stem the blood that was already seeping between her fingers. Liddell tried to lift her to a chair. She shook her head, managed a smile. "Don't worry about me, Johnny. I told you I was coming here to give him my resignation."

She looked past him to the sheaf of papers on Camden's chair. She made a little grimace of pain, her fingers dug into his arm. "You've got to get rid of those papers, Johnny. They're dynamite."

Liddell looked at her, shook his head. "No, baby, they're evidence. The D.A. doesn't go in for blackmail. He'll give the hot-pants clients a break, but he'll clean up the vice ring." He made her comfortable against the wall, walked over to the armchair. He picked up the sheaf of papers, riffled through them. He stopped, read a few names, whistled soundlessly. He folded the papers carefully, stuck them in his inside pocket.

"Johnny! Johnny!" Lisa called. "Look quick—the door."

Through the glass door, Liddell could see Camden straightening up from an examination of the guard. He looked down at him with contempt for a moment, tried to stir him with the toe of his shoe. Finally, he gave it up with disgust.

Liddell looked around for his gun, realized he couldn't get to it in time. He walked over to the door, waited until the night-club owner's hand was extended toward the knob. Then Liddell yanked the door open suddenly, pulled Camden off balance.

Camden's eyes opened wider when he recognized the private detective. He tried to regain his balance, to go for his gun, but surprise had slowed his reflexes. Before he could get set, Liddell hit him in the stomach with a looping left, followed it with a right to the jaw. Dazed, the night-club owner reeled backwards. Liddell was on top of him relentlessly, gave him no chance to get set. Another right to the jaw sent Camden reeling back further,

staggering through the open door of the office. The low railing of the balcony caught him in the small of the back, gave way with a screech.

Liddell had an impression of a grin frozen on the man's lips as he disappeared over the side.

From below came a long, sustained scream, the orchestra stopped in the middle of a bar. Liddell walked to the edge, looked down.

Mike Camden was spread-eagled across a table. Nearby, a woman in an evening gown seemed transfixed, her clenched fist in her mouth. Her escort pulled her by the arm, rushed her toward the exit. As Liddell watched, the hardier diners started toward the table, congregated morbidly around the body. Near the door, the headwaiter was struggling desperately to get through the crowd that was streaming toward the street.

Liddell turned, walked back into the office. The blonde had fallen away from the wall and was lying on her side, looking up at him with half-closed eyes, half-parted lips. He kneeled down beside her, slid an arm under her head, raised her gently to a sitting position. Her eyes were glazing over fast, the lids starting slowly to close. He bent down, pressed his lips to hers.

They didn't respond. They were already growing cold.

He put her down slowly, walked over to the telephone, took the receiver off its cradle. He dialed the number of the District Attorney's office, kept looking at Lisa while he waited for someone to answer.

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.

A cover has been created for this ebook.

[The end of *The Frozen Grin* by Frank Kane]