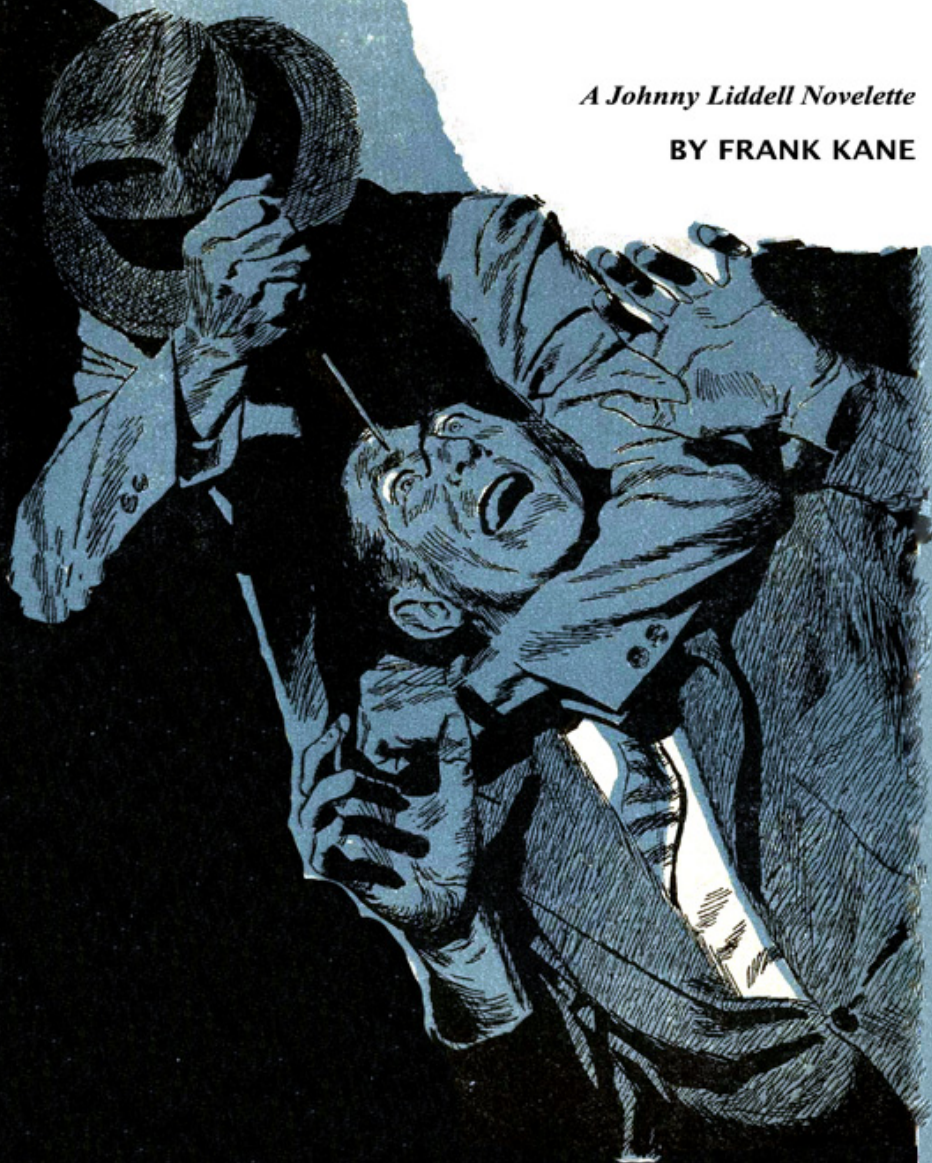


The Icepick Artists

*There was only one trouble with the case
when Liddell took it. The guy he
replaced had just been murdered.*

A Johnny Liddell Novelette

BY FRANK KANE



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The Icepick Artists

There was only one trouble with the case when Liddell took it. The guy he replaced had just been murdered.

A Johnny Liddell Novelette
BY FRANK KANE

The Icepick Artists

BARNEY SHIELDS was worried. It showed in the way he stopped at each store window, studied the stream of blacks and whites that ebbed and flowed the length of 42nd Street between Broadway and Eighth. When he was satisfied no one was paying him any particular attention, he headed for a second run movie house, bought his ticket, and was swallowed up by the dimness inside.

He didn't see the thin man with the wedge-shaped face who lost interest in the job he was doing on his nails, closed his pocket knife and dropped it in his pocket. The thin man walked over from the curb, bought a ticket, followed Shields into the theatre.

Inside, the man stood for a moment until his eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness, then walked over to the center aisle. Barney Shields had the back row to himself, sat right in front of the thin man.

An usherette in a maroon uniform coat that was sizes too big detached herself from the shadows against the back wall, came over to whisper to the thin man that there were plenty of seats. The man nodded. She went back to her companion in the shadows.

The thin man looked around, calculated his chances. On the screen, Alan Ladd as Shane was building up to the big fight scene. The half-empty theatre was charged with the anticipation of violence. The little usherette had lost interest in him, was engrossed in her companion. Over near the entrance, a policeman was stealing a smoke, cigarette cupped in his hand. No one seemed to be paying any attention to the thin man.

He leaned against the railing behind the back row, slid his hand inside his coat, tugged the icepick out of its special leather case. He tested the point against the ball of his thumb and was satisfied.

On the screen, excitement was mounting. Shane was standing off five villains, chairs were being broken, bottles smashed.

The thin man reached over the railing, caught the man in the back row in a murderous mugger's grip. Shields gasped, tried to struggle, but couldn't break the hold on his throat. His head was pulled back against the seat. His eyes rolled up to the thin man's face, white and frightened in the half-light.

The thin man aimed for the right eye, jabbed. The blade sank home almost to the handle. Shields' body jerked as the icepick bit into his brain, slumped back. The thin man held the body erect, sank the blade into its chest a dozen times. Shields stopped struggling and went limp.

The fight on the screen had reached its climax; the sound died away suddenly. The thin man straightened up, looked around.

The cop had finished his smoke, dropped the butt to the floor, was crushing it out with his heel. The usherette had her back half turned to him, using her body to shield the frenzied fumbling of her companion's hand in her open coat.

The thin man wiped the icepick blade on the dead man's shirt, then returned it to its leather case under his coat. He walked unhurriedly to the exit and melted into the stream of humanity that was flowing East toward Broadway.

Johnny Liddell leaned on the bar at *Mike's Deadline Cafe* with the ease born of long experience. He lit a cigarette, adding to the grey fog that swirled lazily near the ceiling.

Mike's Deadline, usually packed during the hours when genius was at work in the advertising agencies in the neighboring skyscrapers, was beginning to thin out at 8 o'clock. Only a handful of commuters who had stopped by at 5 "for just one" before heading for Grand Central were still draped over martinis.

Liddell examined his glass, discovered it was empty, signalled for a refill. The man behind the stick made a production of dropping a couple of ice cubes into a glass, drenching them down with bourbon. He separated a quarter and a half from the pile of silver in front of Liddell on the bar, shuffled off to answer a phone that had started shrilling somewhere.

Liddell took a sip of the bourbon, softened it with a touch from the water pitcher.

"It's for you, Liddell," the bartender called from the end of the bar.

Liddell picked up his glass, walked back to the phone.

It was the redhead in his office. She sounded upset.

"You'd better get right up here, Johnny. Lee Devon of Seaway Indemnity is on his way over." She dropped her voice. "Barney Shields, the head of their investigation bureau, was knocked off tonight."

Liddell whistled softly. “How?”

“I don’t know. Devon was down at the morgue. He couldn’t talk much, I guess.”

Liddell nodded. “I’ll be right up, Pinky.”

Lee Devon looked as though he had been jammed into the armchair across the desk from Johnny Liddell. He was fat and soft looking, and kept swabbing off his forehead with a balled handkerchief. His eyes were two startlingly blue marbles that were almost lost behind the puffy pouches that buttressed them.

“Pretty rugged, eh?” Liddell sympathized.

The fat man nodded, his jowls swinging in agreement. “Plenty.” He jabbed at the damp sides of his cheeks with the handkerchief. “You wouldn’t have a drink handy? I could use one.”

Liddell opened the bottom drawer of his desk, brought out a bottle and two paper cups. He tilted the bottle over both, held one out to Devon. “What was Barney working on, Devon?”

“The piers. We’ve been taking a pretty bad lacing on maritime risks lately. Most of it right here on the docks.” He took a swallow from his cup, coughed. “Barney’s been trying to run it down.”

“He keep you up to date on his progress?”

The fat man leaned back in his chair, sighed. “He hadn’t made much. When he had something to report, he telephoned in and I’d meet him in the back row of a movie.”

“He called in today?”

“His girl did. He’d stumbled on something important, he thought. Set the date for 7:30.” Devon drained his cup, crumpled it between his fingers. “When I got there, he was dead.”

Liddell pursed his lips, nodded. “How did he give the reports? In writing or verbally?”

“Verbally. In case they got suspicious and picked him up. He didn’t want anything on him to give him away.”

“Then you don’t know what he had for you tonight?”

The fat man sighed again, shook his head.

“How about his secretary? Would she know?”

“I haven’t talked to her yet. I came right here from the morgue.” He ran the damp handkerchief across his face again. “We want you to find Barney’s killer, Liddell.”

Liddell swirled the liquor around the paper cup, stared down at it. “How about the police? That’s their job.”

“I’d feel better if you worked on it, too. You know how much pull those dock racketeers have. I wouldn’t rest if we didn’t get the man who did that to him.” He licked at his full lips. “You wouldn’t, either, if you saw him on that slab, Johnny.”

Liddell nodded, tossed off his drink, threw the cup at the waste basket. “Where do I find this secretary of his?”

The fat man fumbled at his pocket, brought out a small memo book. He wet the tip of his finger, flipped through the pages, found the pencilled note he wanted. “Her name’s Lois Turner. She lives at 331 East 38th Street. Apartment 3D.” He closed the book, returned it to his pocket. “You’ll take the case?”

“I’ll take a stab at it,” Liddell nodded. “Is there anything else I should know?”

“Just one thing. Barney Shields was getting a lot of information from one of the union boys. You’ve got to keep him covered.”

“What’s his name?”

The fat man shook his head. “I don’t know if—”

“Look, I’m playing with a marked deck as it is. Don’t stack the cards as well. Who’s the fink?”

“Lulu Monti. He’s one of the organizers.”

“A meatball, eh?”

The fat man stared. “A what?”

“A meatball. A strong arm man,” Liddell growled. “Know where I can find him?”

The fat man shook his head. “Shields kept him well covered. I was the only one that knew Monti was working with us.” He looked worried. “You’ll keep him covered, Liddell?”

Liddell nodded, chewed on his thumb nail. "I'll keep him covered." He snapped back his sleeve, scowled at his watch. "If I'm going to get started on this thing, it might as well be now."

"Where are you going to start?"

Liddell shrugged. "You mean I've got a choice? Apparently the only lead I've got is his secretary, and chances are she doesn't know too much of what he's been doing."

"That's the trouble," the fat man said. "Barney always was a solo. Will you be reporting to us?" He sighed at the necessity for movement, decided it was inevitable, and pulled himself out of his chair with a lugubrious grunt.

"Not until I have something worthwhile to report," Liddell said.

331 East 38th Street turned out to be an old-fashioned residential hotel set almost in the shadow of the Third Avenue El. It had a faded awning that showed signs of having waged a losing battle with time and strong winds. Nobody had bothered to patch the gaping rips that flapped noisily in the evening breeze.

The prim little lobby inside had the requisite number of tired rubber plants, a few chairs obviously not intended to be sat on, and a general air of decay. The impression was borne out by the shabby registration desk and the old man who presided over it. He blew his nose noisily and favored the detective with a jaundiced look.

"Miss Turner. Lois Turner."

The old man stowed the dingy handkerchief in his hip pocket, looked at the fly-specked face of the alarm clock on his desk. "After nine, mister. We don't allow men upstairs after nine."

"Police business," Liddell told him.

The old man sniffed. "How many cops have to see her?" he grumbled. "One left no more'n half hour ago."

"Just tell her Johnny Liddell wants to see her," he cut short the complaint.

The old man started to argue, shrugged. He shuffled to a small office set at the end of the desk, stuck his head in. "Call Turner. Tell her she's got more company. Detective name of Liddell." He waited in the doorway for a

few moments, then shuffled back. “Says for you to go up. It’s 3D.” He stared at Liddell sadly. “Management don’t like men visitors this hour.”

“Good thing I’m not visiting the management, huh?” Liddell followed him to an open-grill elevator at the back of the lobby.

The blonde who opened the door to 3D was tall. Her hair had been clipped short, curled around her head. A blue silk gown managed to cling skin-tight to her curves under the guise of covering them. It was, Liddell noted, a figure worth clinging to, high-breasted, narrow-waisted, long-legged. Her lips were full and moist, her eyes green and slanted.

“What was it about?” The slanted eyes hop-scotched from the broad shoulders to the face approvingly. “I’ve already told the police all I know.”

“I’m not police. I’m a private op. Lee Devon asked me to take over for Barney Shields.”

She stood aside. “Come on in.” She led the way into a surprisingly well-furnished living room. “Lee didn’t lose any time, did he?”

Liddell tossed his hat at a table, walked over to the couch and sat down. “He seemed to think you could give me a hand.”

The blonde walked over to the coffee table in front of the couch, leaned over to pick a cigarette from the humidor. It had a devastating effect on the neckline, confirming Liddell’s conviction that she wore nothing under the gown. “I’d like to, if I can.” She stuck the cigarette between her lips. “Tell me what I can do.”

Liddell grinned at her. “I’ve got a hunch nobody would ever have to tell you what you can do.”

“I’ve never had any complaints,” she grinned back. She walked over to the kitchen door. Her body moved tantalizingly against the smooth fabric of the gown. When she returned a moment later with a bottle and glasses, the effect from the front was equally satisfying. She set them down on the coffee table, dropped down alongside Liddell, accepted a light for her cigarette. “But if you’re talking about Barney, I don’t think I can help much.” She took a deep drag on the cigarette, let it dribble lazily from half-parted lips.

“You talked to him today?”

The blonde nodded. “He wanted me to ask Devon to meet him in the back row of the movie at 7:30.” She took another drag on the cigarette, removed it from between her lips and studied the charred end with distaste. “When Devon got there, Barney was already dead.”

“You don’t know what he had to report?”

Lois shook her head.

“It sounded important?”

“Very.”

Liddell scowled at the bottle on the coffee table, reached over, poured some liquor in each of the glasses, took one. “Know a guy named Monti?”

The blonde caught her full lower lip between her teeth, chewed it for a moment. “The one they call Lulu? The union goon?”

Liddell nodded. “Shields ever mention him?”

The blonde shook her head. “No more than any of the rest. I guess he was one of the gang Barney was after.”

“Guess again. He was stooling for Barney. I’ve got to get to him.”

The green eyes widened. “You sure of that?”

“Reasonably. Know any way we can catch up with him tonight? Shields never mentioned any contacts or places he hung out?” He smelled the liquor in his glass, tasted it. It tasted as good as it smelled.

The blonde took a last drag on her cigarette, crushed it out in an ashtray. She glanced at the tiny baguette on her wrist. “He might be down at the union hall. Maybe I could reach him there.” She looked up at Liddell. “Suppose I can?”

“I want to see him. Tonight.”

“Suppose he doesn’t want to see you?”

“Tell him who you are. Tell him Barney’s dead and he may be next unless he plays ball.”

The blonde shook her head uncertainly. “I’ll try it. But I’m not too sure it’ll work. That big goon doesn’t scare easily, from what I’ve heard.” She reached over, picked up her glass, took a deep swallow. “Wish me luck.”

She walked across the room, disappeared in the bedroom. Liddell leaned back on the couch, lit a cigarette. After a few moments, the blonde reappeared in the bedroom door. “Jackpot! He was there.”

Liddell pulled himself out of his seat. “How fast can you get dressed?”

The blonde grinned at him. “That depends.”

“On what?”

“On how fast you want me to get dressed.” She raised her hand to her neck, fumbled with the zipper. With a quick motion, she unzipped the front of the gown. Her full, tip-tilted breasts spilled out. “There’s really no hurry. Monti can’t get away until midnight. He’ll meet us then.”

Liddell walked closer to her. He could smell the faint perfume of her body. He slipped his arm around her waist, covered her mouth with his. Her body melted against his, almost unbearably hot.

After a moment, she put the flat of her hands against his chest, pushed herself free. She slid the gown back off her shoulders, stepped out of it. Her legs were long, softly curved. Shapely calves became rounded thighs above the knee. Her high-set hips converged into a narrow waist and a stomach as flat as an athlete’s. She stood in front of him proud, assured of the impact of her loveliness.

Liddell dropped back on the couch, caught her wrist, pulled her down into his lap. She reached up, buried her fingers in his hair, pulled his mouth down to hers. Her lips were soft, eager.

After a moment, he pulled back, breathed hard. “I’m glad there’s no hurry, baby.”

She smiled at him. “We only have two hours,” she told him. She caught his tie, loosened it, unbuttoned his collar. She pulled his face down again.

Several hours later, Johnny Liddell slid the big convertible through the midnight Park Avenue traffic as easily as though it were a baby carriage. Alongside him, the blonde sat quietly, her tight curls ruffled by the breeze. At 93rd Street, he skidded to a screeching stop, drummed impatiently on the wheel, glared at the red light that stared back imperturbably with one eye.

“Do you think Monti will talk, Johnny?” She asked.

“One way or another.”

The light blinked green. The convertible shot forward.

Liddell concentrated on his driving, pushed the car as fast as the traffic would permit. Slowly, the character of the neighborhood changed. Huge, flashy apartment houses gave way to less pretentious apartments, then to tenements. There were fewer chauffeur-driven cars, more jalopies and trucks.

“116th Street, eh?” Liddell glanced at the street signs whizzing by. “Only a few more blocks now.”

A minute later, he swung the car in a skidding turn off Park Avenue toward Fifth, screeched it to a stop at the curb halfway down the block. He studied the house numbers, compared them to a pencilled notation and pointed to one across the street.

“That’s the number.” He pushed open the car door, stepped out. “You wait here. I think he may talk, if there’s just the two of us.”

He crossed the street, climbed the three stone steps that led to the vestibule, stood there for a moment looking around. An odor compounded of equal parts of Spanish cooking, unwashed bodies and inadequate sanitary facilities assailed his nostrils. He walked through to the inner hall, started up the badly lighted stairs to the second floor.

He struck a match, found a small card alongside the door to the front apartment with the name “Monti” scribbled on it in pencil. He blew out the match, put his ear to the door. There was no sound from the other side. He knocked softly, reached inside his jacket, loosened the .45 in its holster. There was no response from inside the room.

He reached out, rapped his knuckles against the door again. This time when he got no answer, he tried the knob. It turned easily in his hand. He pushed it open, waited. There was a rush of stale air spiced with a smoky, unpleasant smell. Nothing else.

The room itself was in complete darkness. He tugged the .45 from its hammock, transferred it to his left hand. Slowly he walked in, right hand groping along the wall for a switch. He strained his eyes against the wall of darkness, listened for any sound that might betray the presence of another. The only sound in the room was that of his own heavy breathing.

Suddenly, his fingers hit the switch. He snapped it, spilled sudden yellow brilliance into the hallway. At the same moment, he dropped to his knee, brought the .45 into firing position.

A man stood in the doorway to the kitchen, his arms above his head, his thick fingers curled like claws. A gag clenched between his bared teeth cut ridges in the side of his face, his eyes were blank and staring. Two thin wires attached each of his thumbs to opposite corners of the door frame. A dozen or more cigarette burns and the number of small, ugly-looking icepick wounds on his bare chest were evidence that his death had been neither quick nor merciful.

Johnny Liddell walked over to where the dead man hung, put his hand against the side of his arm. It was still warm.

He squeezed past into the kitchen, checked the other rooms, satisfied himself that the killer had left. He walked back to the dead man, was staring at the number of wounds when a voice rang out.

“Hold it, Buffalo Bill.”

Liddell froze.

“Drop the artillery and turn around real slow.”

Liddell let the .45 hit the floor with a thud, turned around. Two uniformed policemen stood in the doorway. The younger cop held a riot gun in his hand, its muzzle pointed at Liddell’s belt buckle. The older covered him with a .38 special.

“Kick the iron over this way,” the older cop ordered. When Liddell complied, he looked past him at the body. “Been having yourself a ball, eh?”

“I just got here,” Liddell grunted.

“Be our guest. Stay awhile. I got a hunch Homicide’s going to want to have a long talk with you.”

“Act your age. This guy’s been stabbed. They’re not making .45’s with pointed ends this season.”

The older cop bent over, picked up the .45, hefted it in his palm. “What’s this for? You wear it just to make your coat hang straight?”

“It’s licensed. I’m a private cop on an investigation for Seaway Indemnity. I’ve got papers in here that say so.” He motioned at his breast pocket.

The two cops exchanged glances; the older walked over to Liddell, stuck his hand into his breast pocket, pulled out his wallet. He riffled through Liddell’s credentials, copied down a few notations in the worn leather notebook he carried in his hip pocket. “I guess he’s okay, Vince,” he told his younger partner. He handed the wallet back to Liddell, scratched the back of his neck. “Know who he is?”

Liddell shook his head. “I was supposed to meet a guy here. A guy named Monti. Lulu Monti. I never saw him, so I don’t know if this is the guy.”

“Looks like it.” The older cop walked over to the body, pointed a thick forefinger at a tattoo on the inside of the arm. “The initials are L.M.” He stared at Liddell curiously. “You didn’t know the guy but you had to see him in the middle of the night. What about?”

“A squeal. He was supposed to finger the guys who were looting cargoes Seaway insured. The company was getting hit too hard and too often.”

“A stoolie, huh?” The cop grinned. “Not a pleasant way to grow old gracefully.” There was a screeching of brakes in the street below. The cop walked to the window, looked down. “Here’s Homicide. It’s their baby now.”

The man who led the Homicide detail didn’t fit the usual pattern of Homicide detectives. He looked more like a fugitive from a Varsity football squad, with his broad shoulders and bristly, crew-cut hair. As he walked in, he was chewing on the stem of a bulldog briar. He nodded to the two uniformed men, flicked a brief glance at Liddell.

“You call in?” he asked.

Liddell shook his head.

“He’s a private cop, Lieutenant. Came here to keep a date with the dead guy. He was here when we got here,” the older cop volunteered.

The homicide man walked over to the body, studied the wounds with a practiced eye. Then he nodded to the specialists with him to take over. He walked over to the two prowl car men, muttered a few words, studied the notes the cop had made in his leather notebook. After a moment, he handed the book back, walked over to Liddell.

“Your name’s Liddell?”

The private detective nodded.

“I’m Roddy. Lieutenant in Homicide.” He rattled the juice in the stem of the briar. “I’ve heard the inspector speak of you.” He took the pipe from between his teeth, knocked out a dottle of tobacco. “Want to tell me what this is all about?”

Liddell dug into his pocket, came up with a cigarette. “I’m doing a job for Seaway Indemnity. Trying to bust up a pilfering mob that’s costing the company important money.”

Roddy pulled a pouch from his pocket, dipped the bowl of the pipe into it, started packing it with the tip of his index finger. He nodded for Liddell to

continue.

“I was supposed to see this character tonight around midnight. He was stooling for us.” He stuck the cigarette in the corner of his mouth, lit it. “This is the way I found him.”

“Barney Shields used to work for Seaway.” Roddy’s colorless eyes rolled from Liddell to the icepick wounds on the dead man. “He got his with an icepick, too.” The eyes returned to Liddell’s face. “Any connection?”

“Monti was Shields’ stool. I was trying to pick up the threads.” He waited until the homicide man had initialled the DOA form for the medical examiner’s man. “He was practically my only lead.”

Roddy scratched an old-fashioned wooden match with his thumb nail, held it to his pipe. “Too bad you didn’t tell us about Monti earlier. He mightn’t be there now.”

Liddell shrugged. “You’ll have to take that up with Seaway. I just came on the job.” He blew a stream of smoke through his nostrils. “Need me for anything else, lieutenant?”

The homicide man considered it, shook his head. “Not right now. Drop by the office in the morning. The inspector might want to have a little talk with you.”

Liddell nodded. “Okay if I take my gun along with me?”

The older of the two prowl car cops looked to the lieutenant, drew a nod, handed the gun over.

“Don’t forget, Liddell,” Roddy told him. “We’ll expect to be seeing you in the morning.”

Johnny Liddell swerved the convertible to the curb outside Lois Turner’s apartment hotel, turned off the motor, swung around in his seat, stared up the avenue.

“What’s the matter, Liddell? You’ve been looking over your shoulder all the way downtown.”

“Force of habit, I guess.” He reached across her, pushed open the door. “Head for the lobby fast and keep going.”

“Why?” The blonde looked back, saw the black sedan as it swung around the corner a block away. “You think someone is—”

“Maybe I’m buck shy, baby,” Liddell growled, “but I think that heap’s been following us. Do like I say.” He pushed the girl out, started to follow her to the lobby.

The black sedan put on a burst of speed, pulled up abreast of the entrance. There was a dull glint of metal in the car’s back window; then it started to belch flame. Liddell had his .45 in his hand, squeezing the trigger as he started to fall away.

Heavy calibre bullets gouged trenches in the concrete near his head. He brought the .45 up, sat the back window on its front sight. Suddenly a heavy slug hit him in the chest, slamming him back against the ground. The heavy boom of the gun in the car’s back seat could still be heard above the roar of the motor as the car pulled away from the curb, gathered speed.

Liddell lay on his back, was dimly aware of a crowd gathering, of the numbness in his chest, of the re-assuring coldness of the butt of the .45 against the heat of his palm. He tried to get up, fell back weakly.

From somewhere an authoritative voice impressed itself on his consciousness. “Let me through. If that man’s hurt, I can help. I’m a doctor.”

Liddell had a blurred impression of a wedge-shaped face bending over him, white teeth bared in a fixed grin. He caught the movement as the man’s hand dipped under his jacket, came out with the icepick.

Liddell laboriously raised the .45, squeezed the trigger. The dark face dissolved in a flood of red; the icepick clattered to the ground.

Somewhere a woman screamed shrilly as the icepick artist’s body fell across Liddell. A dark cloud moved in, squeezed consciousness from the detective’s mind. He closed his eyes, was swirled into the middle of the blackness.

When Johnny Liddell opened his eyes, a white-faced Lois Turner was bending over him. He tried to move, had the sensation of being nailed to the sidewalk.

“Don’t move, Johnny,” the blonde whispered. “An ambulance is on its way.”

He looked past her to where two policemen stood scribbling in their report books. One held Liddell’s .45 wrapped in a handkerchief.

“He’s alive,” someone in the crowd murmured morbidly. They crowded closer for a better look.

One of the cops strolled over, pushed the crowd back. “Give ’im air,” he ordered. He bent over Liddell. “How you feel, Bud?”

Liddell attempted to nod his head, regretted the impulse. The black cloud threatened to move in on him again. He closed his eyes, fought it off.

“Can’t you leave him alone until the ambulance gets here?” he heard Lois say. “I told you everything you have to know. They tried to kill him from a car and then they sent a man with an icepick to finish the job. You have enough witnesses. Ask them. Any of them. They all saw it.”

“Look, lady,” the cop explained patiently. “No matter how many people saw it, a couple of guys turn my beat into a shooting gallery, I got to have some answers when my boss starts asking questions. Now—”

He broke off as the ambulance skidded to a stop at the curb, disgorged a white-coated interne. He shouldered his way through the crowd, walked over to the cop. “Save any for me?”

The cop pointed to Liddell with a pencil. “He’s all yours, doc.”

The interne nodded, knelt at Liddell’s side. He tore open Liddell’s bloody shirt, swabbed the chest dry with gauze, grunted. He looked up at the cop. “What’s supposed to have happened to this guy, Mac?”

The cop shrugged. “Stopped a couple. Some guys in a car—”

“Not this guy.” The interne flipped back Liddell’s jacket, examined the heavy leather holster. “Take a look at this. This took the slug, deflected it.” He scratched at his head. “But where the hell did all the blood come from?”

“You ought to see the other guy,” the cop grunted. He leaned over, stared at Liddell. “He ain’t punctured at all?”

The interne shook his head. “His chest’ll be sore where that slug kicked him, but the worst he’s got’s maybe a cracked rib. Where’s the other guy?”

The cop led the way to another form covered with newspapers. The interne leaned over, took a look, drew the breath in through his teeth. “What’d he try to do? Swallow a cannon?” He dropped the newspapers back over the dead man’s face. “We’re not dirtying up our nice clean ambulance with that. I’ll give you a DOA on him and you can have the meat wagon pick him up.” He pulled the printed form from his pocket, scribbled on it, handed it back to the policeman.

“You’re sure he’s all right, doctor?” Lois wanted to know.

The interne nodded. “Might pay to have some X-rays taken.” He leaned over Liddell. “How’s about coming in with us and getting checked over?”

Liddell shook his head. “I’ll be all right, doc.”

“I’ll take him up to my place. I live right here,” Lois volunteered.

The interne shrugged. “You’re the boss, mister.” He ran his eyes appreciatively over the contours revealed by the blonde’s tight dress. “But,” he said, grinning, “I wouldn’t try anything strenuous for a while, if I were you.”

Johnny Liddell opened his eyes slowly and looked around. The blinds in the room had been drawn, making it dim and cool. He tried to sit up, groaned at the sharp pain that shot through his chest, slumped back on the couch.

“Take it easy, Johnny.” The blonde got up from an armchair across the room, walked over to the couch, sat on the edge of it. “How you feeling?”

“I’ll live.” He took a deep breath, gritted his teeth, pulled himself up. “How long’ve I been sleeping?”

Lois consulted her watch. “A couple of hours. It’s a little before four.” She reached across him, snapped on a light. “That better?”

Liddell grinned crookedly. “All I need now is a transfusion.”

“Bourbon?”

“Bourbon.”

She got up, headed for the kitchen. She had changed from the tight-fitting blue dress to the gown she had been wearing when he first came to the apartment. When she returned with the glasses and ice, the light of the lamp revealed a fine network of lines under her eyes, a tired droop at the corners of her mouth.

She set the glasses down, tried a grin that almost made it. “I sure didn’t think I’d be having a drink with you tonight when I saw you sprawled out on the sidewalk.”

Liddell watched her put the ice in the glasses, fill them half way with bourbon. “Disappointed?”

She stopped pouring, looked up at him through her lashes. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

The detective struggled up on one elbow. “You can’t bat 1.000 all the time, baby. You’re doing all right with two out of three.”

The blonde set the glass down, straightened up. “I still don’t know what you’re talking about. Maybe you should have let them take you to the hospital. You’re delirious.”

“That’s the trouble with killing. You’ve got to keep it up.” He reached over, snagged a cigarette, stuck it in the corner of his mouth where it waggled when he talked. “Was what they paid you worth it, baby?” He didn’t take his eyes off her suddenly white face. “Or did you start thinking that maybe they can’t stop until they get rid of everybody that can put the finger on them—including you?”

She backed away from the couch, her make-up garish blobs against the pallor of her skin. She said nothing.

Liddell touched a match to his cigarette, tried to take a deep drag, grunted with pain. “The police will start putting two and two together, too, baby. You’ve made a lot of mistakes.” He leaned back, blew a stream of smoke at the ceiling. “See if I’m right. Barney Shields turned up some important evidence. He managed to get it into your hands to turn over to Devon. Instead, you sold it out to the mob he was investigating, didn’t you?”

The blonde backed up until the table at the far side of the room caught her in the back. She reached down, pulled open a drawer, took out a snub-nosed .38. “Go on.”

Liddell took another drag on the cigarette, rolled his eyes to where the girl stood. “You won’t use that. You might be able to set a man up for a kill, but you haven’t got the nerve to do your own killing.”

“I didn’t know they were going to do that to him,” she protested. “I—I was scared. I realized he’d know I didn’t give the report to Devon. He might even call Devon.”

“So you set up a meet in the back row of the movie. Only you told Barney that Devon wanted to meet him at 7. The guy with the pick kept the date. You had Devon show up a half hour later. Who killed Barney, Lois?”

“The man you killed downstairs. I don’t even know who he is. Just that his name is Denver.” She shook her head. “I didn’t know they’d want to kill you, Liddell. I thought they’d be satisfied with Monti.”

Liddell managed to prop himself up on his elbow. “I sure pulled a bonehead on that one, baby. But so did you. The minute the mob killed Monti I knew it had to be you that tipped them off. When? When you pretended to call Monti?”

The blonde licked at her lips. “I called Denver. He told me to stall you until midnight. I thought it was supposed to scare you off and that’s as far as it would go.”

“Nice stalling,” Liddell grinned humorlessly. “Who were you working for? Who bought the report?”

“I don’t know. The night I got it, I read it. It mentioned Denver. I called him at the union hall and read it to him. He called back and made an offer. No names. Just an exchange of packages. Mine was the report. Theirs was money. Lots of money.” She stared at him. “Why shouldn’t I? Why should I keep on living in this rat trap, scratching for pennies when I could get all that money? Just for one report! Why not?”

“Because it meant men had to die.”

“So what? Shields was on his own. We’re all on our own.” The hand with the gun started to shake. “You think they’ll kill me, don’t you? Well, they won’t. They’ll give me a lot of money for telling them about Monti. They’ll give me a lot.”

“Maybe more than you figure, baby. Those boys don’t leave loose ends laying around. And we’re loose ends. Real loose! You’d better—”

“Shut up.” The blonde’s face was contorted with rage. She crossed the room on the run. The barrel of the gun flashed up, caught Liddell across the side of the head, slammed him back against the couch. A thin trickle of blood ran down the side of his cheek.

Lois stuck the gun in her robe pocket, ran into the bedroom. When she emerged a few moments later, she was fully dressed, carried a small overnight bag. She ran for the door, hesitated with her hand on the knob as she heard Liddell groaning his way back to consciousness. She slammed the door behind her, ran down the hall to the elevator.

Painfully, Liddell pulled himself to his feet. He stood swaying for a moment, tottered toward the door. He reached it just as the elevator started downward. He called after Lois, his voice echoed hollowly down the hall. Doggedly he started for the stairs. He was on the second floor landing when she left the elevator, ran across the lobby toward the street.

Liddell's convertible stood at the curb where he had left it. The blonde pulled his keys from her pocket, threw her bag in the back, slid behind the wheel. She could hear Liddell yelling to her.

She turned on the ignition, jammed her foot down on the starter. There was a shattering blast as the windshield seemed to disintegrate in her face. A bright yellow flame shot from the dashboard, the heavy car seemed to lift from the street, then settled back, a shattered pile of twisted, smoking metal and splintered glass.

Liddell ran out onto the sidewalk, followed by a white-faced night clerk. "Send for an ambulance," he tossed over his shoulder. As he reached the car, he shook his head. "Never mind that ambulance."

Windows were going up in buildings on both sides of the street, heads were appearing cautiously. Somewhere a siren moaned.

The night clerk followed him across the sidewalk, stared at the smashed body of the blonde. "What was it? How did it happen?"

Liddell shook his head wearily. "It was just the boys keeping their word. They paid off in full."

Now that you've finished reading this Johnny Liddell novelette, you'll have discovered that Liddell hasn't even scratched the surface of the waterfront rackets Barney Shields was investigating when he was killed. He's got the person who murdered Barney—but that's only the start of things.

Frank Kane deliberately ended the story at this point. In our Anniversary Issue, coming up next month, Kane will be back with the sequel to THE ICEPICK ARTISTS, a brand-new story about Johnny Liddell, and the real bosses of the waterfront rackets.



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 project using the illustration from the December 1953 *Manhunt* magazine.

[The end of *The Icepick Artists* by Frank Kane]