



PASS THE WORD ALONG

A Johnny Liddell Novelette

BY FRANK KANE

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Liddell looked down at the body of the girl sprawled on the bed and he knew, one way or another, he'd get the man or men who'd done it.

JOHNNY LIDDELL leaned against the bar in Mike's Deadline, made concentric circles on the top of the bar with the wet bottom of his glass. Although it was only eight o'clock, the Deadline was almost empty. A few commuters who had missed the train after the 6:06 were helping Liddell hold the bar up, planning with dead seriousness to catch the next one to Stamford or Darien.

The bartender stood at the far end of the bar, polishing glasses with a damp rag. He was listening with half an ear to the woes of a faded and slightly blowsy blonde who alternately sipped at her martini and dabbed at her damp nose with a gray white handkerchief.

Liddell drained his glass, signalled for a refill.

The bartender, glad of the reprieve, took a last puff on his cigarette, balanced it on the upturned end of a glass, hustled down to where Liddell stood.

"Hit it again, Charley." He watched while the man behind the stick dumped in some fresh ice cubes, drenched them down with bourbon, then softened it with a touch of water. "What's a guy do for excitement these days?"

Charley grinned lewdly. "You go through your babes too fast, johnny. You ought to save some for a rainy night." He replaced the bottle on the backbar. "It's like that old one about the Chinaman who was walking down

an alley where a dame had done a high dive and landed head first in the garbage can—”

“I know, I know. There’s a lot of good mileage left.”

The bartender’s eyes slid past Liddell to the door. “Say, talking about Chinamen—”

Liddell turned.

In the doorway a slim Chinese girl stood looking around. Her eyes hopped from commuter to commuter and finally landed on Liddell. She started across to where he stood.

Her hair was jet black, straight, cut in a severe Dutch bob that framed the doll-like perfection of her features. Her eyes were dark, liquid, slightly slanted—an effect that was enhanced by expert use of shadowing. Her lips were full, a slash of crimson in the ivory color of her face, were soft looking, inviting. She wore no other make-up.

Her dress was the traditional stand up collar, sheath type cheongsam; the slit up the side exposing a shapely calf as she walked. Her full breasts, jutting against the fragile fabric of the gown, had a gentle motion of their own.

She stepped in front of Liddell, paid no attention to the obvious inventory of her assets being taken by the commuters.

“Mr. Liddell?” the Chinese girl asked.

Johnny nodded.

“Your answering service told me I’d find you here. Can I talk to you?” She looked around, dropped her voice. “Someplace private. It’s rather confidential.”

“It just so happens I maintain a branch office here,” Liddell told her. “The back booth.” He picked up his drink. “Will you have a drink?”

“Dewars and soda,” she told the bartender.

“We’ll be in the back booth, Charley. Bring me a refill when you come.” Liddell motioned for the girl to precede him, followed her to the rear. He waited until she was seated, slid in across from her.

“Now, what can I do for you?”

The girl dug into her oversized purse, brought out a sealed envelope. She slid it across the table. “Keep this for me until Monday.” She looked around. “Put it in your pocket, please.”

Liddell picked up the envelope, turned it over curiously, then slid it into his breast pocket. “Just that? Nothing more?”

“Just that.”

Liddell frowned. “What’s the gimmick?”

“No gimmick. The contents of that envelope are very important to me. I’m afraid I might lose it. If I did, the consequences could be very serious to me.”

“Why not mail it to yourself General Delivery or put it in a vault or—”

“Because I may want it at some hour of the day or night when it wouldn’t be available, and—” She dug into her bag, brought up a small roll of bills. “Naturally, I expect to pay your fee. How much?”

“I didn’t say I was going to handle it for you.”

Concern clouded the dark eyes. “But you will? Please?”

“I don’t even know who you are. Or why you picked me out of all the agencies in the city.”

“Is that important?”

“It could be.”

The girl waited while Charley shuffled up, slid two drinks in front of them, headed back to the bar.

“My name’s Blossom Lee. I remembered your name from a newspaper story I read about you. I was impressed and when I needed someone to turn to, I thought of you.” She consulted the tiny baguette on her wrist. “There’s nothing illegal about this. You’ve got to believe me.” She reached over, laid her hand on his. “Please?”

Liddell sighed, nodded. “Okay. I’ll baby-sit your papers until Monday.”

The girl smiled at him. “Thanks, Mr. Liddell.”

“I always wondered if Chinese girls were different from other girls—”

The smile froze on the girl’s face.

“—but I see they’re not. They can wrap a man around their finger just by saying please.”

Blossom Lee picked up her glass, raised it to her lips. She turned the full force of the slanted eyes on him over the rim. “I’m counting on you to keep that safe.”

“I will. Meanwhile, where can I find you?”

“You won’t have to. I know where to find you.”

“But you’ll need a receipt—”

The girl shook her head, smiled. “I trust you.” She set the half full glass down. “I’m afraid I’ve got to run.” She peeled two twenties off the roll in her hand, laid them on the table. “As a retainer.”

Liddell nodded, watched as the girl turned away, headed for the doorway. The effect from the rear was just as satisfying as it had been from the front.

He drained his drink, picked up the refill the bartender had brought. He was sipping on it when the two men entered.

One of them was fat, coatless with dried crescents of sweat under his armpits. The other was a tall, rangy redhead, his face pitted with old acne scars.

The fat man led the way to the bar, ordered two bourbons. While Charley was pouring the whisky, the fat man lowered his voice, leaned over the bar. “Chink broad was just in here. Who’d she talk to?”

The bartender rolled his eyes upward from the drink he was pouring, was about to retort when the redhead showed him the .38 he held half hidden against his left arm. Behind him, down the bar, the commuters were busily re-arranging the time table to make room for “one more.”

Charley’s eyes flicked toward the booth where Liddell sat. The fat man nodded to his redheaded companion, shuffled back to Liddell’s booth.

“Understand you have something belonging to a friend of ours, Mac. Thought we’d save you the trouble of delivering it by picking it up.”

Liddell turned his head and studied him. Damp wet hair was pasted to the fat man’s forehead. His eyes were expressionless black discs countersunken in pads of discolored flesh. His lips were thick, gleaming wet.

“Anything belonging to a friend of yours I wouldn’t touch,” Liddell told him. “Now, suppose you let me enjoy my drink.”

He lifted the glass to his lips, the fat man swung his hand in a short arc, knocked the glass from his hand, smashing it against the wall of the booth. “You don’t want to drink so much, pally. It’s bad for your liver.”

Liddell swore, tried to get to his feet. He was at a disadvantage when the fat man hit him on the side of the neck with a paralyzing chop. He sank back into his seat with a grunt. The fat man reached down, caught him by the lapels and pulled him to his feet. Liddell stood swaying, glassy eyed from the blow.

The fat man started to pat him down, one of the commuters came to life.

“Hey, now buddy. Hold it a minute. You’re not going to—”

The redhead turned around, showed him the .38. The commuter broke off, stared.

“Sit down and shut up,” the redhead grated.

Mutely, their eyes fixed on the gaping muzzle of the .38, the two men found seats.

The fat man found the envelope in Liddell’s breast pocket. He tore it open, satisfied himself as to the contents, stuck it in his back pocket. As Liddell struggled to regain full consciousness, the fat man buried his fist in Liddell’s midsection. The air wheezed out of Liddell’s lungs. He went to his knees, plunged forward on his face.

JOHNNY LIDDELL dropped the cab at the corner of Worth Street, headed for the three street area that makes up New York’s Chinatown. He melted into the crowd of out of towners, of Orientals dressed in occidental zoot suits, of old timers who shuffled placidly and purposelessly under the garish neons that turn Mott Street into noon in the middle of the night.

He watched the faces as they flowed past him. The expressionless features of the Brooklyn laundry man come to Chinatown for a night of fan tan, the little Puerto Rican girl who was specializing in curb service of sex making house calls on the undermanned Chinese, the Chinese girls who speak no English, wear only cheongsams, appear from nowhere as companions of the older, wealthier citizens of the community.

Liddell had almost completed his circuit of all three streets—Pell, Mott and Doyer—before he saw the face he was looking for.

Sammy Ah Lee was in his late twenties, wore his hair long in a slick pompadour. His clothes were of the latest western style, he was addicted to loud neckties, argyle socks. He was handsome in a smooth faced, unblemished way, fancied himself a hand with the ladies. For this proficiency, he was known locally as *Chai Long*—the wolf.

He was leaning against the wall of an apartment house that was old at the turn of the century, working his wiles on a giggling teenager who was apparently buying his line all the way. He happened to glance up as Liddell stopped in front of him, his eyes widened.

Liddell nodded to him almost imperceptibly. Ah Lee bobbed his head in acknowledgment. Liddell continued walking, turned down Worth Street, melted into the shadows of a big warehouse. He lit a cigarette, cupped it in his hand and waited.

In less than five minutes, Sammy Ah Lee walked over to where Johnny stood, joined him in the shadows.

“You sure pick your times, Johnny,” the Chinese complained. “I had something real good going for me there.” He squinted at Liddell in the darkness. “How come the personal visit? The Ameche gone out of style?”

“I couldn’t wait for a phone message to reach you,” Liddell growled. “I’ve got to find a girl. Tonight.”

“I’ve got them all sizes, shapes and colors—”

“A particular girl. About 23, five three or four, stacked. Dutch bob, good features. Calls herself Blossom Lee.”

Sammy Ah Lee scowled in the darkness. “That’s like me going uptown looking for John Smith. That Lee tag’s a phony.” He pursed his lips, considered. “That description doesn’t ring a bell. If there was anything like that on the loose around here, I wouldn’t have missed it.”

“Think hard, Sammy. This kid’s in bad trouble. She came to me for help tonight. Two meatballs almost beat my brains out after she left. So they must be on to her. I’ve got to reach her before they do.”

“I’m trying, Johnny,” Sammy complained. “But I don’t make her. I can ask around for you, put out a couple of lines.”

“You’re sure?”

The Chinese nodded. “I know every chick in the area. The straight ones, the Young Willows, even the stuff they buy from catalogues out of Cuba. None of them fit.”

Liddell took a last drag from his cigarette, flipped it toward the gutter. “Okay, Sammy. See what you can do. If you get a line on her, reach me through my answering service. I’ll keep in touch.” He waited until the

dapper Chinese had headed back toward his stamping grounds, then Liddell went looking for a taxicab.

JOHNNY LIDDELL inserted the key into the lock of his apartment door, pushed it open and walked in. A man sat in the chair by the window, legs crossed, settled back comfortably.

Liddell's hand streaked for the .45 in his shoulder holster, froze with his fingers touching the edge of the butt.

The man in the chair grinned at him. "You're slowing down, Johnny." He uncrossed his knees, got to his feet, walked toward Liddell with hand outstretched. "Long time no see."

Liddell grunted at him, accepted his hand. "How'd you get in?"

The other man shrugged. "I don't ask you for your trade secrets." He checked his watch. "You sure keep long hours."

"We've got a lousy union." Liddell headed for the small portable bar, poured himself a slug of bourbon. "Have a drink?"

The other man shook his head. "On duty." He was tall, rangy. His hair had begun to recede at the temples but his face was young in a hard, sunburned way.

"Talk about lousy unions. You Feds have the worst." Liddell tossed off the drink, set the glass down. "Okay. So clue me in. What does Treasury want from me?"

The thin man grinned. "You have something belonging to a friend of ours."

Liddell groaned, "Oh, no. Not you, too."

The smile faded on the thin man's face. "What's that mean?"

"I mean two meatballs used the same approach. Only they got there first with the mostest and got whatever the Hell I was supposed to have."

The thin man walked to the phone, dialed. After a moment, "This is Rex Turner. Something's gone wrong on the delivery. Two men jumped Liddell. You've got to warn Blossom." The voice on the other end sounded agitated. "I don't know how you're going to do it, either. Just do it. If they're on to her, the only safe thing to do is pull her off the case." He slammed the receiver down, stared at Liddell. "I think I'll take that drink."

Liddell spilled two fingers into each of the glasses, held one out to Rex Turner. He watched the Treasury man toss it off in one swallow. “Feel like telling me what’s going on?”

Turner raked his fingers through his hair. “The girl who approached you tonight was one of our girls, working undercover. That envelope contained the names of Chinese smuggled into the country over the past six months. We have more than a sneaking hunch that most of them are Red Chinese agents sent over here to blackmail the local Chinese.”

Liddell looked incredulous. “Why should anybody over here pay them a cent?”

Turner shrugged. “Many of them have families in the old country. Those boys over there can get real unpleasant.”

“So where do I fit in and how come nobody took the trouble to brief me?”

“We didn’t have time. Blossom set up a meet for tonight to turn the list over to one of our boys. She got the feeling she was being followed, called in. Your name popped into my head so I told her to give you the list, figuring I could pick it up here and she wouldn’t have to make any contact with an agent.” He found a cigarette, stuck it between his lips. “Sorry you got a beating—”

“Bumps and bruises are part of the business. They’ll show up on the bill.” He reached over, lifted the T-man’s pack of cigarettes, helped himself to one. “But how about this kid? By now they know what was in the envelope.” He touched a tender spot on the side of his jaw. “Those meatballs are pretty rough.”

“You recognize either of them?”

“No. But I’ll know them the next time we meet. But this girl—”

“The office is making every effort to reach her. If we can only get to her before they do, we’ll ship her out of this district until we close the case—”

“And if you don’t?”

Turner looked grim, shook his head. “Your guess is as good as mine.” He touched a match to the cigarette, drew in a lung full of smoke. “The office will alert all police precincts, and every available op attached to this division will be out trying to find her. All we can do is wait.”

It was almost two o’clock when the call came.

Liddell answered it, held the receiver out to Rex Turner. “For you.” He watched the expression harden on the T-man’s face, the little knots of muscles that formed along the jaw as he took the report.

“We’ll be right there.” He slammed the receiver on its hook. “They found her.” He headed for the door.

“Hey, wait for me,” Liddell growled. “I got an investment in this, too. Remember?”

IT was the kind of a hotel that gives love a bad name. A hot sheet joint that caters to the lowest type of street walkers and their Johns, where a room might turn over four or five times in a night.

The girl lay sprawled across the dingy linens on the bed, her bare arm crooked over her head. The shiny black hair was a tangle on the pillow; her eyes were half-closed, her lips parted in a half smile as though she were on the verge of saying something.

The ugly, gaping wound in her throat made it improbable that she would ever finish what she had started to say.

Johnny Liddell stared down at her, swore under his breath. He looked over to where a tall, heavy set man in a wrinkled blue suit stood watching him, arms folded across his chest.

“How’d you get it, Mac?”

The man in the blue suit pursed his lips. “A squeal. From the desk. Said this girl and her boy friend were cutting up real bad and he couldn’t get in. He wanted them thrown out.” He permitted himself a grin. “It’d be the first time since I been working this district that anybody could get disorderly in this riding academy.” He unfolded his arms, indicated two empty liquor bottles. “Looks like they did a lot of drinking. And the girl smells like she did her share.” He shrugged. “That’s it.”

Liddell turned to Rex Turner. “A nice job of cover-up. The autopsy will probably show a heavy alcohol content in her stomach, the clerk will stick to his story that she brought a playmate in for games and stuff.”

Turner stared at the body, watched while the men from the coroner’s office covered it with a coarse blanket, lifted it onto a stretcher. “I’ll get them for this, Johnny,” he said in a low, tense voice. “I’ll get them if I have to turn in my tin and put in all my time on it.”

“You’re not geared for that kind of an operation. You’ve played by the book for too long. These are my pigeons.” He walked over to the man in the blue suit. “Clerk give you any kind of a description of the guy?”

The detective dug a leather notebook from his pocket, riffled through it. He scowled in concentration as he deciphered his notes. “Middle aged, maybe fifty. Chinese. Kind of stoop shouldered, carried a paper package.” He nodded at the empty bottles. “Probably the juice.”

“You buy this John bit, Mac?”

The detective replaced the notebook in his pocket, shrugged. “She didn’t do it herself. The clerk’s a taxpayer. Until somebody proves him a liar, I got to buy it.” He squinted at Liddell. “You fixing to prove him a liar, Liddell?”

“Yeah. I’m fixing to prove him a liar.”

“Don’t make book on it. Fletcher—that’s the clerk, Eddie Fletcher—isn’t just around since yesterday. He’s seen plenty of the inside. He’s a tough nut to crack. On this one, I don’t think anybody’s going to crack him.” He looked down at his stubby fingers, clenched and unclenched them. “Not even in the informal way you have with people you’re questioning.” He rolled his eyes up from his fist to Liddell’s face.

One of the tech men, who had been powdering the bottles, checking them for prints walked over to the man in the blue suit. “Don’t expect too much from us, Mac. Bottles been handled plenty, but most of the prints are too smeared to be any good.” He looked around the room, scowled. “Here and there you can pick up a trace of the girl’s prints. The rest aren’t worth a damn.”

The homicide man nodded. “It figured.” He waited until the men from the coroner’s office wheeled the stretcher bearing the dead girl out of the room, turned back to Liddell. “You know how many slashings and killings we get around here? Some nights it’s nothing but roll from the time you check in until it’s time to go off. Always the same—some guy gets mad at the tramp he’s playing house with, carves his initials on her with a knife. Or the broad dents the top of his head in with a bottle. Always the same. No one remembers what the playmate looks like, no one gives much of a damn. They all end up the same place—a slab in the morgue, an open file on the records.” He looked incuriously at Turner. “I know Treasury’s in this because we had a tip to watch for this babe. I don’t know where they fit and I don’t want to. Get smart, shamus. On this one we’re playing out of our league.” He nodded, headed for the door.

Liddell walked back to the T-man. “Guess we might as well get out of this trap, Rex. Nothing we can do for her here.”

“Nothing we can do for her. Period. Three months of hard work all gone down the drain. The mob tipped off to the fact we’re on their tail. And Blossom ends up in a dirty dive with her throat cut.” He swore softly under his breath, spun on his heel, headed out of the room.

Liddell followed him, stopped at the doorway, looked back into the sordid room where the girl died, tried not to think of what must have preceded the killing. He closed the door after him, followed the T-man to the street. He caught up with him on the sidewalk.

“I don’t want any confidential information, Rex. But just one tip. You must know something about the mob behind this. Where they hang out, who calls the signals. Things like that.”

Turner nodded. “Knowing it and proving it is two different things.”

“I don’t have to worry about proof. Not the kind the d.a. would need. That’s where I have the edge.” He brought a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, held it up to the T-man. “Your way, they walk away from it. My way, maybe they don’t. It’s worth a try.”

Turner took a cigarette from the pack, tapped it thoughtfully on the nail of his thumb. “Sandy Masters runs the Chambers Line pier. He does his hiring, his shylocking and every other filthy thing he does from the Harbor Cafe. Blossom Wong was working in his office.” He glanced at his watch. “Less than twelve hours ago, we had the proof to send Sandy Masters to Leavenworth for a long time. Now he’s sitting back, having himself a good long laugh at us.” The T-man had an expression on his face that testified to the bad taste in his mouth. He shook his head, turned and walked down the street.

THE HARBOR CAFE was a grimy, brick fronted two story building set in the shadows of the Brooklyn Bridge, within smelling distance of the Fulton Fish Market. Across the Slip, South Street was lined with ships of all nations tied up at the docks as far as the eye could see. The lights on the Chambers Line Pier indicated that one of its fleet was about to be unloaded.

Johnny Liddell walked into the Harbor Cafe, leaned against the bar. A dozen other men ranged the length of the bar, nervously fingering their beer, casting occasional glances at a door in the rear.

Every so often it would open, a roughly dressed man would come out, carrying a slip of paper, hurry to the door and head across the Slip to the Chambers Line pier. The men at the bar would shuffle nervously, the door would open again and a man would appear in the doorway. He'd look them over, point to one of them. The man indicated would hurry toward the door while the rest turned back to their beer with disappointment.

To Liddell's experienced eyes, it was a hiring session with the men who were behind in their payments or who were slow in kicking back sweating out a night's work, hoping to get the signal that would send them across the street where they were being short ganged, overworked and underpaid. And those who made something of it didn't work at all.

There had been investigations and sporadic attempts at a clean-up. On some of the docks it had worked, on others like the Chambers Line docks it was a token clean-up, with the abuses back the minute the glare of publicity was off.

"How about a drink?" Liddell asked the bartender.

"We're getting ready to close, mister," the man behind the stick told him. "Not serving any more."

Liddell looked up the bar to the glasses in front of the other men. "Make it a bourbon and water."

"You don't hear so good. I just said—"

Liddell reached across the bar, caught the front of the man's shirt, yanked him against the bar with enough force to knock some of his wind out. "You don't listen so good. I said bourbon and water."

The bartender reached under the bar, managed to get his hands on the weighted miniature bat. Before he could raise it, Liddell slashed him across the throat with the side of his hand. The bartender's face turned purple. He staggered back against the back bar, his hands tearing at his collar.

Liddell looked at the other men along the bar. None of them made a move. It was obvious the bartender wasn't in any position to win any popularity contests with his customers. They watched Liddell warily with the look of men who'd long since lost their desire to fight back.

The doorway to the back room opened, a fat man stood in the doorway. "What the Hell's going on out here—" His little eyes hop scotched along the bar, came to rest on Liddell.

“Hello, Fatso,” Liddell told him. “You left without saying goodbye. I figured I at least owed it to you to repay your visit.” He walked toward the man in the doorway, could hear the low murmur of the men who gathered behind him.

The meatball threw himself at Liddell, Johnny sidestepped the rush, brought up a stiff right, which the fat man fielded with his stomach. His eyes rolled back, he went to his knees, gasping for breath. Liddell brought up his knee, caught the fat man under the chin and slammed him back against a table. He rolled over on his face and lay still.

There was a low, excited murmur from the men along the bar. Some of them fingered old scars the fat man had given them and they licked their lips as they stared down at him.

“That meatball was all soft inside. Where’s the redhead?” Liddell walked to the doorway.

A thin little man with a completely bald pate sat at a table under an overhead light. He was completely devoid of hair with the exception of two tufts over his ears. A stubby pipe was gripped between his discolored teeth. He eyed Liddell with no show of belligerence. One of the longshoremen stood before him, his hat in his hand, a few crumpled bills on the table. The redhead, who had been behind the man at the table, walked around it as Liddell stepped in.

“Looking for me, sucker?” His hand disappeared into his jacket, came out with a knife. “Well, you found me.” He started toward Liddell, froze in his tracks at the sight of the .45 that materialized in the private detective’s hand. His eyes flicked uncertainly to the little man at the table, who watched with apparent interest, offered no suggestion.

Liddell walked over to where the redhead stood, knife in hand, its point upward in the approved style of a knife fighter. Liddell brought his gun up, slammed it down on the wrist of the redhead with shattering force.

The meatball screamed his pain as the knife dropped from his nerveless fingers. He started to spew curses at Liddell. The private detective slammed the barrel of the .45 across his mouth, knocked him back against the wall where he slid to a sitting position on the floor.

Liddell turned to the thin man. “You’re Masters.”

The man at the table nodded. He smoothed out the crumpled bills on the table, put them in a box already half filled with currency. He passed a slip

across the table to the longshoreman who took it, and ran from the room, slamming the door behind him.

“I’m Sandy Masters.” There was a faint Scottish burr to his voice. “And who might you be?”

“My name’s Johnny Liddell. Tonight, your meatballs used me for a punching bag. It’s not the first time it’s happened, maybe not the last. If that’s all they did, I could write it off as one of the hazards of my trade.”

Masters clucked sympathetically. “They did more?”

“They killed a girl—”

“But that’d be against the law,” the old man told him. He exposed the discolored teeth in a grin. “Nobody working for Sandy Masters breaks the law.” He took the pipe from between his teeth, knocked out the dottle on the corner of the table. “This girl, now. She wouldn’t be a Chinese girl? Used to work for old Sandy?”

“You know it is. And you couldn’t know unless—”

“Just guessing, I am. But she was bound to come to a bad end, that one.” He dipped his pipe into a leather pouch, started loading the tobacco with the tip of his index finger. “Dishonest, she was. I was fixing to let her go when I found out she’d been stealing my records.”

“You killed her, and—”

The old man shook his head, rattled the juice in the stem of the pipe. “No. I didn’t kill her,” he leaned back. “Neither did any of my boys.”

“You’re a liar. You found out what she was after and you realized she knew too much. You had to kill her.”

“Why? Once my boys had that list back, why should I kill her? I destroyed the proof. Why should I kill her? Killing brings heat, Liddell. I don’t stand for killing. Not if it can be avoided.”

“You’re the only one who had any reason—”

“How about the people whose names were on that list?” The old man scratched a match across the table, touched it to the bowl of the pipe, exhaled a thick blue-grey cloud. “Mind you, what I’m telling you is in strictest confidence. I’d deny it in a minute if you tried to quote old Sandy. I’m just trying to keep you from wasting your time, as it is.”

“You mean these Chinese you’ve been smuggling in from Cuba and South America—”

Sandy Masters managed to look hurt. “Pure rumor.” He sucked away on his pipe, blew smoke at the ceiling. “Somebody’s trying to defame old Sandy.” He rolled his eyes down to Liddell’s face. “Take an old man’s word for it, Liddell. No one can prove a thing. About me, about the way the girl died, nothing. There’s not a shred of proof.” He shrugged. “You may know something. Maybe you suspect a lot more. But you could never prove it.”

Liddell hefted the .45 in his hand. “Maybe I won’t try. Maybe I’ll handle it my way.”

Masters shook his head. “What would that get you? Put you in the death house? How many do you think you’d get before they got you? Not enough to make it worthwhile. Think about it.” He picked up a sheet of paper, ran his eyes down it. “Now if you’ll forgive me, I’ve got to round out my loading crew.”

Against the wall, the redhead was pulling himself to his feet. His mouth was a smashed, bloody pulp.

“Wash your face, get that partner of yours in here,” Masters snapped at him. He watched while the redhead tottered to the door, disappeared through it.

Masters looked up, as though he was surprised to see Liddell still there. “I thought I heard you going.”

“I am. You’ve got me stopped, Masters. I can’t prove a thing,” he conceded. “You didn’t leave me a thing—”

The old man shrugged. “A man doesn’t live this long without—”

“But that’s where you made your mistake, leaving me with nothing to lose. Because when I have nothing to lose—you have everything to lose.” He shoved the .45 in its holster, walked to the door. The crowd of longshoremen parted respectfully, he walked through, didn’t waste a glance at the table where the redhead was trying to force a jigger of whisky into the mouth of the fat man.

The following morning, Rex Turner was already at his desk in the offices of Treasury Intelligence in the Federal Court House when Johnny Liddell walked in. The deep lines on the T-man’s face testified to the fact that he hadn’t even gone to bed. He waved Liddell to a chair, got up and walked over to the water cooler.

“We got the preliminary from the medical examiner, Johnny. Blossom had a heavy concentration of alcohol in her blood. They must have been forcing it into her in water glasses.” He filled a paper cup from the cooler, stared at it, poured it out untouched. “Homicide sympathizes with us, but in the face of the evidence there’s not much they can do about it.” He walked back to his desk, sank into his chair. “And we’re not in a position to tip our hand by making an issue of it.”

Liddell nodded. “I’ve got some cheerful news, too.” He shifted to a more comfortable position. “I had a session with Sandy Masters after I left you.” He held up his hand, exhibited his bruised knuckles. “I met up with the two meatballs who took the list away from me. One of them will be eating through a straw and the other won’t be eating at all for awhile.”

“It must have been fun,” Turner conceded. “But I’ll bet you didn’t get a thing that could help us?”

Liddell shook his head. “Masters claims he had nothing to do with the girl’s death. That the man whose names were on the list killed her.”

Turner grunted. “Same thing.”

“He sat there laughing at me. He had the list back and it was destroyed. The girl was dead and we can’t tie him to it. Just sat there laughing.”

“I could have told you what you were up against,” Turner nodded. “We’ve been trying to pin that slippery old goat for months. And here we are, as empty handed as the day we started.”

“You never saw that list, did you, Rex?”

Turner shook his head.

“Know any of the names likely to be on it?”

“Look, Johnny. Why keep batting your head against the wall? You think you’re going to walk in on these characters and muscle a confession out of them? Look what you’re up against. Even if they beat the murder rap, they still have to face the people who sent them here.”

“So?”

“You know the price of failure on a job like that. The minute they admit failure, they start living on borrowed time. And when the time comes they don’t die easy. Nothing personal, you understand—just as a warning to the ones who follow them.”

“You didn’t answer me. Know any of the names on the list?”

Turner raked his fingers through his hair. “I could make an educated guess. But I couldn’t begin to guess where you’d start looking.”

“Give me a couple of names.”

The T-man pulled open a drawer, consulted some papers. “We’re almost positive that the man heading this operation for the Commies is a former Hawaiian who went over to them during the Korea operation. His name’s Roger Chan. We have evidence that he’s over here someplace.”

Liddell nodded. “Anything else?”

Turner read through the notes, shook his head. “Nothing positive. They’re landed here, picked up and stashed away until they can get into operation.” He dropped the paper in the drawer, slammed it closed. “They haven’t been landing any lately, and we’ll see to it that they don’t. But the damage was done by the time we came across the operation. Our only hope was to get a complete list of those landed and to move in on them. We blew that one.”

“I’m not so sure.”

The T-man nodded. “They did such a slick job of cover-up that the only way we’ll nail them now will be to catch them standing over a hot corpse with a smoking gun.”

Liddell got up. “Maybe we can arrange that, too.” He got up, walked to the door. “I’ll be in touch. And don’t discount that smoking gun.”

JOHNNY LIDDELL walked down the narrow, twisting Chinatown street, stopped outside a store front, half of whose window had been painted green. Inside, a thin, stoop shouldered man was drawing symbols on a long sheet of yellow paper with a camel’s hair brush. He looked up as Liddell walked in, squinted at him through thick-lensed glasses, went back to his printing as Johnny walked through the bead curtain to the back room.

Sammy Ah Lee was sitting at an enamelled table, picking chunks of food from a steaming pot that sat in the center. He looked up, sucked at his fingers, waved Liddell in.

A girl standing at the stove turned. She had the unnaturally white skin of a girl who spends all her time indoors. Her hair was parted in the center, done in pigtailed on the side; she wore form fitting silk pajamas. Her eyes widened as she recognized him as a white man, rolled to Sammy Ah Lee.

“Lo fan,” she cried in a low, musical voice and ran with a peculiar shuffling motion from the room.

“What’s with her?” Liddell wanted to know.

“She’s not used to seeing white men. She thinks they’re all devils. Won her in a game. Old guy who paid her way here has three more.” He motioned for Liddell to pull up a chair. “You didn’t level with me the other night, Johnny. You didn’t tell me the girl you were looking for was a hustler.” He dug into the pot, brought up a chunk of lobster, popped it into his mouth.

“She wasn’t. She was an undercover girl, working for Treasury.”

Sammy looked at him with humorous scepticism, saw that he was in earnest. “So what’s she doing stoned out of her mind shackled up in a riding academy like that?”

“It was a set-up. To make it look like she was a hustler, so there’d be no heat.” Liddell watched the Chinese digest the information. “You know a character named Roger Chan?”

All expression seeped from the other man’s face. “Never heard of him.” He looked up at Liddell. “Why?”

Liddell looked around, dropped his voice. “Chan was working with Blossom. He’s a plant in the Red Chinese network. I’ve got to get word to him that he’s being fingered.”

“Sorry, Johnny, but this cloak and dagger stuff I don’t dig.”

“A grand. That you dig?”

Sammy Ah Lee licked at his fingers, fought a losing battle, finally bobbed his head. “A grand I dig.” He looked unhappy. “What do I have to do for it?”

“Pass the word around. Chan doesn’t know he’s been fingered the same as Blossom. We don’t know where to reach him, but if we can get word to him fast enough—”

“But what if the word gets into the wrong hands?”

Liddell shrugged. “What harm can it do? They’re already wise to him. It’s a risk, but we’ve got to take it. And we have no time to waste.”

Sammy Ah Lee sucked at his fingers, nodded. “I hope you know what you’re doing, Johnny. I don’t know this Chan character. I just know what I

read about him when he went over to the Reds—”

“He was planted.”

The Chinese shrugged. “If anything goes wrong on this, he’s likely to be planted again. This time for keeps.”

“Nothing will go wrong,” Liddell promised. “Take my word for it.”

BLOSSOM WONG was buried on Tuesday morning.

Roger Chan’s body was found floating in the East River that afternoon, was identified by finger-prints provided by the United States Army. His throat had been cut, his hands were tied behind his back when he was fished out.

Rex Turner walked out of the examining room at the Bellevue Morgue where Chan’s body was stretched out on a slab, his sightless eyes studying the metal shaded overhead light. He picked the telephone up from the desk of the attendant, dialled Johnny Liddell’s number.

“Liddell,” the receiver barked at him.

“This is Rex Turner, Johnny. You get the flash?”

“Which one?”

“We have Roger Chan. They fished him out of the river. He’s been dead for over two days.”

“Small world, isn’t it?” Liddell wanted to know. “Just today we buried Blossom, now we find out the guy who ordered her killed didn’t live to read about it.”

“How do you know he ordered her killed?”

“Sandy Masters told me. Remember?”

Rex Turner growled deep in his chest. “That’s no proof. You couldn’t get him to repeat it and you know it. I don’t suppose you had anything to do with this killing?”

Liddell’s voice had a hurt note in it. “How could I? If you want to check my gun against the bullets—”

“His throat was cut. Just like Blossom’s. Probably by the same guy.” Turner shook his head. “I’m glad he got it, I guess. But I would have preferred to get him alive.”

“Well, we can’t have everything, can we, Rex? By the way, is the story being given to the papers?”

“Already has been. The early edition should have it.”

“Good. Like I promised, Rex. I’ll keep in touch.” There was a click as the connection was broken.

Turner stared at the receiver, grimaced. “I’d like to know how the hell he arranged it,” he growled at nobody in particular.

TONIGHT the Harbor Cafe had a light play. There were only two people standing at the bar as Liddell walked in, ignored the bartender and walked to the door in the rear.

Sandy Masters was frowning at a copy of the “Journal” as the door opened. Behind him, the redhead and the fat man were sitting at another table playing gin. The redhead jumped to his feet, his hand went for his knife.

“Sit down,” Masters told him. “You’re not even used to your new teeth yet and you’ll be having them knocked out.” He laid the paper aside, picked up his pipe. “Now what can we be doing for you tonight, Liddell?”

“I see you’ve been reading the papers. Interesting story about your friend Roger Chan.”

“Never heard of the man.”

“Now where did I get the idea that he was heading the troop of Red agents that’ve been smuggled in lately?”

“You’ve been watching too many of these here television plays,” the old man told him coolly. “You still trying to prove something, Liddell?”

“Not any more.”

Masters frowned slightly, erased it with a smile. He stuck the pipe between his teeth. “What’s that mean?”

Liddell grinned at him. “Suppose I could prove you’ve been smuggling these Chinese in—?”

“Which you couldn’t.”

Liddell nodded. “You’re right. I couldn’t. But I don’t even intend to try.” He scratched a match, held it for the old man. “The worst you’d get for that would be a couple of years—”

Masters sucked deeply on the pipe, blew out the match. “So?”

“This way, Chan’s buddies can never be sure about you, can they? They’ll keep wondering how come a T-girl got planted in your office, how come you never did anything about it—”

“Now, wait—”

“No. You wait. And you keep on waiting. Because in a matter of days, maybe even weeks, they’re going to decide that only one man really knows everything Treasury would like to know.” He grinned as a look of comprehension ridged the old man’s forehead. “They didn’t take any chances with Chan. You know why? The word got around he was working with Treasury.”

“That’s a lie.”

“Sure. But they can’t be sure, can they? Even about you. And right now, they’re probably deciding that they’ve got to be sure.”

Masters licked at his lips, looked at his two bodyguards uneasily.

“I wouldn’t count on them, Sandy. These other boys are no amateurs. And your boys are—”

The fat man growled, started to his feet.

“I told you to stay out of this. Get out of here. Both of you.” Masters waited while the two men shuffled sullenly to the door, slammed it after them. “You want to be a little careful how you talk to them, Liddell. They’re sensitive.”

“I probably won’t be running into them again. You, either. So I thought I’d drop by and say so long.”

“You think you’re scaring old Sandy?”

Liddell shook his head. “Like you said, you’ve been around a long time. You know guys like that have too big a stake to fool around. They got the idea Chan had a big mouth—they made it bigger. From ear to ear.”

The old man got up from his chair, skirted the table, walked to the door. He opened it a crack, looked out, then closed it. “Now, look, Liddell, I’m not saying we couldn’t make a deal—”

“No deal. I don’t want you for a lousy smuggling rap. One way or another you’re to blame for the girl being dead. So you’re going to pay off for it. Not to the law, because like you said we can’t prove a thing. But

Chan's buddies aren't going to ask for proof. They can't afford to take the chance—"

"You're setting me up to get my throat cut," Masters protested.

"You're already set up. The minute word got out that there was some hanky-panky with the Feds, you grew more than one shadow. They're watching and they're waiting. And they'll pick the time and the place. And the method." He walked to the door, opened it. "So long, Sandy."

The little man's bald spot was gleaming with perspiration. "What do you want?"

Liddell studied the little man's face, watched him swabbing at the bald spot with a handkerchief. "The guys that killed the girl."

"I can't do that. You know they'd—"

"I'm not asking you to. It doesn't matter to me whether you finger them or they cut you. As long as someone pays for what happened to her." He started out the door. The old man grabbed Liddell's sleeve and pulled him back, slammed the door behind him.

Sandy Masters stared at Liddell for a minute. Then, "Give me the number and the name of the guy I talk to at Treasury."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Pass the Word Along* by Frank Kane]