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Big Steal

A Johnny Liddell Novelette

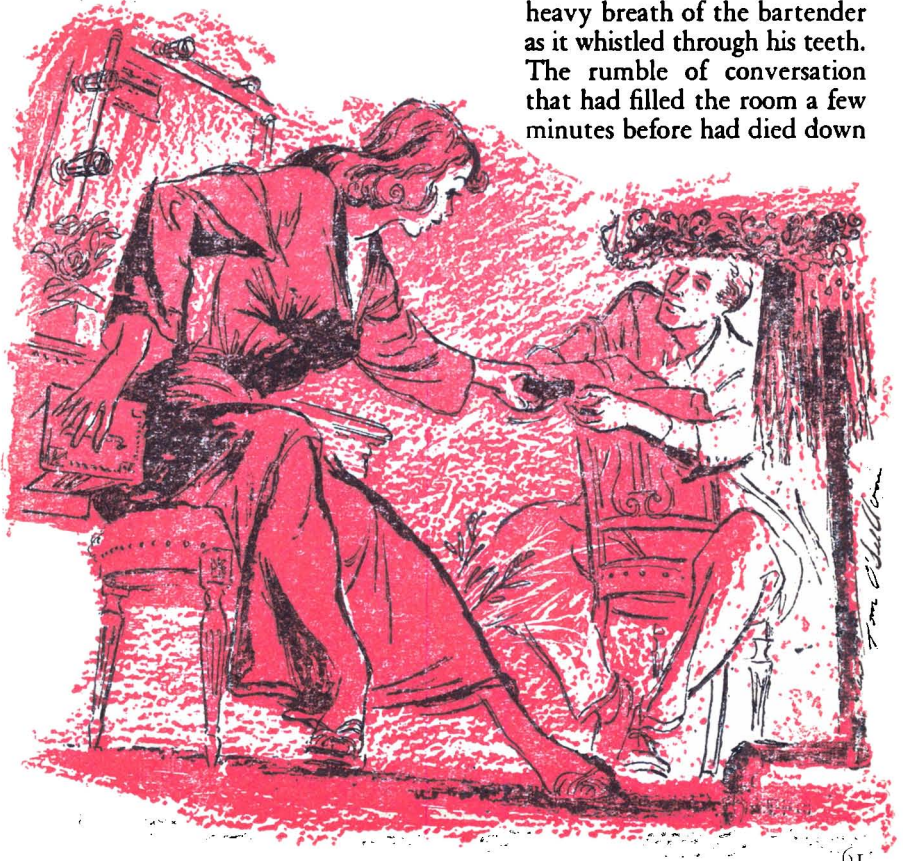
BY FRANK KANE

The girl was in trouble, so she gave Johnny Liddell a package. That put Liddell in trouble, too . . .

THE GIRL at the mike had a husky voice that did things to the spine.

She was tall, redheaded, put together in a way that flowed tantalizingly as she swayed to the rhythm of the music. Her black, décolleté gown clung to her like a wet bathing suit.

At the bar, Johnny Liddell hung a cigarette between his lips, let it dangle there unlighted. He could hear the heavy breath of the bartender as it whistled through his teeth. The rumble of conversation that had filled the room a few minutes before had died down



to a whisper, glasses stopped jingling as she did things to a torchy number.

Suddenly, the song was over, the house lights came up. There was a moment of silence as though the audience was catching its collective breath, then a roar of applause exploded.

Johnny Liddell swung around to the bar, discovered the unlighted cigarette between his lips, dropped it to the floor. The glass in front of him was empty, he signalled to the bartender for a refill.

"Quite a number," Liddell grinned.

"That babe's all woman," the bartender wiped his forehead with his sleeve. "I watch her twice a night seven nights a week and she still does it to me." He reached to the backbar, grabbed a bottle, tilted it over a jigger. He replaced the bottle on the backbar, dumped a couple of pieces of ice into the glass, washed them down with soda.

Liddell dropped a bill on the bar. "Full house you got. She draw them like this every night?"

The bartender pursed his lips, his eyes hop scotched from table to table. "Every night. And all spenders, not a stiff in the place. All big uptown society people." He snagged the bill, headed for the cash register.

On the floor, the redhead was still taking bows. Liddell found a fresh cigarette, lit it. He took a deep drag, blew it through his nostrils in twin streams. He swung around on his barstool, squinted through the

smoke, studied the faces around the dance floor. Some he knew, some he recognized from the Sunday supplements. The bartender was right when he tagged it a top-drawer crowd.

The audience finally let the redhead go. She turned, headed for the backstage entrance. The walk was a production.

The house lights went down, a yellow spot probed through the semi-darkness, picked up the M. C. as he pranced out onto the floor. He was tall and thin, had unbelievably broad shoulders and walked with a peculiar mincing step. Even from where Liddell sat, his teeth looked too white and too even to be real. He fluttered through a couple of off-color jokes that brought a faint ripple of laughter and sang two nasal choruses of a number never destined to become popular as the result of his rendition.

The door to backstage opened and a man in a tuxedo that fitted snugly across the hips, showed signs of ample and expert padding at the shoulders circled the floor, threaded his way through the tables. He walked down the bar to where Liddell sat, stopped at his elbow.

"You're Mr. Liddell?" The voice showed the faintest trace of an accent.

"I'm Liddell." He dropped the cigarette to the floor, got down from the stool.

"Will you follow me?" The man in the tuxedo led the way back

through the tables to the backstage door.

The glitter and the tinsel of the dining room had no counterpart backstage. There was a long, dingy corridor lined with doors. It smelled exotically of one part perspiration, compounded with three parts perfume.

They stopped in front of a door decorated with a peeling gilt star. The man in the tuxedo knocked. "It's Charles, Mona."

"Come in. I'm decent."

The redhead sat on a straight-backed chair in front of a cluttered dressing table. Half a dozen snapshots and telegrams were stuck in the molding of a fly specked mirror over the table. Her thick red hair was hanging down over her shoulders, and she had changed the close fitting dress for a black silk dressing gown. Her face had been wiped clean of make-up, giving it a fresh and youthful look. Her mouth was moist and soft looking.

"Thanks, Charles," she dismissed the man in the tuxedo with a smile, waited until he had closed the door behind him.

"I'm glad you could come, Liddell. I need your help." She studied him frankly, seemed satisfied with what she saw. She reached over to the dressing table, picked up a long silver box, shook out a cigarette. She offered one to the private detective. He took one, smelled it, put it back.

"I prefer tobacco in mine." He

reached into his pocket, brought out one of his own cigarettes. "You're in trouble, you say?"

The redhead leaned forward and accepted a light. "Not yet. That's what I need you for. To see that I don't have any trouble." She let the murky, sweet-smelling smoke dribble from between half-parted lips. "Anybody see you come back here?"

"Just the guy you sent for me."

"Charles? He doesn't matter."

She got up from her chair, walked over to the door, opened it a crack and looked up and down the corridor. Satisfied that nobody was within hearing distance, she closed the door. "I have to talk to you, but this isn't the place to do it. Can you meet me after the last show?"

"I'd like to think it's my fatal charm, but it's business?"

The redhead nodded. "It'll be worth your while."

Liddell grinned. "I'll bet." He pulled over a chair, reversed it and straddled it, resting his elbows on the back. "Can't you give me some idea of what it's all about? Maybe I can put the next couple of hours to good use."

The redhead caught her full lower lip between her teeth, shook her head. "I want you to have the whole picture before you begin. I can't give it to you here." She walked over to where he sat, ran the palm of her hand up his lapel. She wet her lips with her tongue until they glistened. "In this place you never know when someone

might walk in — and I get nervous with an audience.”

Liddell shrugged. “You sold me. Where and when do I meet you?”

“My place. About 3.”

Liddell grinned at her. “It may be unchivalrous to mention it, but I don’t know where your place is.”

“I thought you were a detective?” she chided. “I’m in Marlboro Towers, suite 3D.” She stared at him thoughtfully for a moment. She reached into her pocket, brought up a key. “I don’t usually pass out any keys to my apartment, but you understand. This is business. Besides, I may not be there exactly at 3. You can wait inside.”

Liddell bounced the key on his palm, dropped it into his pocket. “You’ll be all right until 3?”

The redhead nodded. “You’re going to see to that.”

“I am? How?”

She walked over to the dressing table with the same strut she had used on the dance floor. From the top drawer, she took out a paper-wrapped package. “You’re going to mind this for me. Nothing will happen to me while you have that package. It’s sort of like an insurance policy.”

Liddell took the package, turned it over incuriously, dropped it into his side pocket.

“No questions?” She turned the full power of her green eyes on him.

“Not unless you want me to ask them.”

He pushed back his chair and stood up. The redhead ran her incredibly graceful fingers through her hair, stared at him thoughtfully. “You’re quite a man, Liddell. My kind of man, I think.”

“What kind’s your kind, Mona?”

She shrugged. “A man who knows there’s a time and place for everything. Who asks questions when they should be asked — and who knows when to wait for answers.”

“I’m the patient type.”

She grinned at him. “Two hours isn’t so long.” She went over to him, reached up on her toes, pressed her mouth against his. Her lips were as soft and moist as they looked. “That’ll carry you over.”

He tried to slide his hand around her waist but she slid under his arm. “I’ll be expecting you at 3, Liddell.” She leaned back against the edge of the table, looked up at him from under lowered lids. “You won’t be late?”

Liddell grinned crookedly. “Not even if I break two legs.”

2.

The evening breeze flapped the awnings on some of the fancier boites along the avenue, felt good after the closeness of the bar. Liddell checked his watch, found he had two hours to kill, decided it was a good night for walking. He was halfway up the block when a man came up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Don't turn around fast, Liddell," a whining voice told him. "I got a nervous finger." The man took his position at Liddell's right, another man materialized on his left. The man on the right moved a topcoat he had folded over his right arm. The ugly snout of a .45 poked out from under its folds. "Let's walk around the corner. It's a nice night for a ride."

His companion reached into Liddell's jacket, pulled out his gun, dropped it into his pocket. "What's it all about, friend?" Liddell looked the man over. He was thin, undersized, a fact that his carefully built-up shoulders failed to conceal. His hair was thick, black and rolled back in oily waves from his low hairline. He wore it in a three-quarter part, revealing the startling whiteness of his scalp. His thin, bloodless lips were parted in what was intended to be a smile, but there was no trace of it in the eyes that squinted across the high bridge of an enormous hooked nose.

"We're going to a party."

Liddell's eyes dropped to the .45. "You make it hard to refuse. But I'll take a rain check. I'm not dressed for a party."

The thin lips tilted at the corners, the eyes grew bleaker. "You are for this one. It's a come-as-you-are party."

They turned the corner, headed for a car sitting a few feet down the block without lights. The man with the gun signalled for his companion

to get behind the wheel, then he and Liddell slid into the back seat.

"What'd the girl tell you, Liddell?" the hook-nosed man wanted to know. From the tone of his voice, it seemed as though he didn't care whether Liddell told him or not.

"What should she have told me?" Liddell countered.

The man with the gun ignored the question. "Who you working for on this caper? The insurance company?"

Liddell considered it, shook his head. "No one. She gave me hot flushes with that song of hers; I went back to see if I could do myself any good." He shrugged. "From the reception I got, I guess a lot of guys get the same idea." He settled back in the corner, managed to work the package the girl had given him out of his pocket. He could feel the perspiration beading on his forehead as he shoved it down behind the seat.

The hook-nosed man reached out, caught him by the lapel. "What are you squirming about?" His face was a white blur in the interior of the car. The snout of his gun bored into Liddell's midsection.

"I was trying to reach a cigarette."

Hook-nose pushed him away. "Okay. But get it with two fingers. Anything but a cigarette comes out, and I blast the hand off."

Liddell brought up a cigarette, stuck it between his lips. He wiped

the perspiration off his upper lip with the side of his hand. The gunman's lips were twisted in a grin in the flickering light of the match.

"I always thought you private eyes were tough. You look real tough on television," he chuckled. "What're you sweating about?" He jabbed the gun into Liddell's side, was rewarded with a grunt. "On T.V. you'd be taking this away from me. Here, I'll be giving it to you — slug by slug."

Liddell smoked silently, watched the character of the neighborhood change from densely populated to suburban with longer and longer stretches of unpopulated areas showing up. About forty minutes from the Queensboro Bridge, the car left the paved road, found an old dirt road that headed toward the Sound.

"What's on the program?" Liddell wanted to know.

The hook-nosed man chuckled. "A swim. Only you're not going to know about it."

The car shuddered to a stop and the driver swung around on his seat. "You better find out what he knows first, Hook. The boss is going to want to know what the girl has on her mind. If she's selling out —"

"I know, I know," Hook growled. "You stick to your wheel. Let me take care of my end." He jabbed the gun into Liddell's side. "Out."

"Suppose I don't?"

"Then you get it here. Be my guest." He pulled away from Liddell. "Don't count on us being

afraid to muss up the car. It ain't ours."

Liddell nodded, pushed open the door, stepped out. When the hook-nosed man got up from his seat to follow, Liddell took a long-shot gamble. He caught the door, slammed it shut behind him. He heard the yowl of pain as it collided with the gunman's head, started running.

The sand seemed glued to his feet, made his shoes feel like hundred-pound weights as he sprinted for a clump of trees and underbrush a hundred feet away. His heart was pounding in his chest, his breath coming in gasps as he reached it. From the car came a series of sharp snaps, and slugs whistled over his head, chewed bits out of the tree next to him. He dove down onto his face, lay there.

He could hear Hook cursing shrilly, yelling orders at the driver. Liddell lay still for a moment, then parted the bushes. Hook and the driver were approaching cautiously, guns in hand. Liddell crawled back further into the bushes, pulled himself to his feet behind a tree.

"We split up. You go around that way, I'll go this," Hook snarled at the driver. "He's got no gun and we got to get him."

"The boss ain't going to like it if he gets away, Hook," the driver said.

"He ain't getting away," Hook promised.

Liddell could hear the crashing of branches as the two men pushed

their way into the wooded area. He squeezed back out of sight behind the tree, squinted against the darkness. To his left he could see the driver pushing his way toward him. He moved around the tree, waited.

Suddenly, as the driver came abreast of him, Liddell jumped. He tried to get his arm around the man's throat to cut off any warning, missed. The driver yelled his surprise and struggled. Liddell had his gun hand, twisted it behind the other man's back, pulled him in front of him as a shield.

A bush to the right seemed to belch flame. The man in Liddell's arms stiffened, jerked twice, then went limp. To the right he could hear the crashing of bushes as Hook ran for the car. Liddell let the driver's body slump to the ground, wasted precious minutes fumbling in the dark for the dead man's gun. By the time he found it, he could hear the roar of the car as its wheels spun in the sand. Suddenly, it got traction, roared back toward the road. Liddell pushed his way out of the bushes, squeezed the trigger of his gun until it was empty. In the distance he could hear the roar of the car's motor, the scream of its tires as it skidded onto the road.

He went back to where the driver lay, turned him over on his back, lit a match. One of Hook's shots had caught him in the neck. It left a little black hole above the knot in his tie that had spilled a crimson stream down his shirt.

It only took one.

Liddell consulted the watch on his wrist, groaned when he realized he had less than an hour to reach the redhead. He headed for the road, didn't see another car or a place to telephone for over an hour and a half.

When he finally did reach an all-night drugstore, there was no answer from the redhead's apartment. The girl on the switchboard at Marlboro Towers couldn't remember whether Miss Varden had come in or not. Liddell slammed the receiver back on its hook, cursed vigorously. He dropped another coin in the slot, dialed police headquarters.

3.

It was almost four o'clock when Johnny Liddell left the elevator at the third floor in Marlboro Towers, walked down to the redhead's door. He tried the knob, found it unlocked pushed the door open. A uniformed cop, standing near the window, looked at him with no sign of enthusiasm as he walked in.

"Inspector Herlehy here? I'm Johnny Liddell."

The cop pointed to a closed door. "He's expecting you."

A bed lamp was burning, throwing a pale amber light over the bed. Mona Varden lay on the pink coverlet of the bed. One arm dangled to the floor; the other was thrown across her face, as though to ward

off a blow. Her throat had been cut from ear to ear, and a pool of blood had formed on the rug next to the bed.

Inspector Herlehy of Homicide stood at the far side of the bed, chomping on the ever-present wad of gum. "Your tip came too late, Liddell," he grunted. He nodded to the bed. "She was like this when the boys got here."

Liddell nodded. "No trace of who did it?"

The inspector shrugged. "The lab boys are working at it." He pulled a fresh slice of gum from his pocket, denuded it of wrapper, folded it and stuck it between his teeth. "We thought you might be able to help."

A white-coated representative of the medical examiner's office walked over, stared down at the body and shook his head. "That was a pretty nifty dish until somebody decided to make hash out of it," he said. He handed Herlehy a receipt to sign, waited until it was initialled. "Thanks, Inspector. We'll take her along if you don't need her any more."

Herlehy nodded. He walked over to a window, stared down into the street below. Liddell walked around the bed, watched grimly while two men transferred the body from the bed to a stretcher, covered it with a sheet and walked out. When the door had closed behind them, Herlehy swung around. "Okay, Liddell, suppose you start talking."

"Let's go outside." He led the way into the living room, dropped into an easy chair, fumbled for a cigarette.

"What's your connection with the redhead?" Herlehy wanted to know.

"I never spoke to her before tonight. She contacted the office about six, wanted me to meet her at the club after the twelve o'clock show."

Herlehy pushed his broad-brimmed sheriff-type hat on the back of his head. "That can all be checked."

"Pinky, my secretary, will verify." He took a deep drag on the cigarette, took it from between his lips, lifted a crumb of tobacco from the tip of his tongue. "She wanted help on something. She wouldn't talk there, asked me to meet her here."

"It doesn't make sense," Herlehy growled. "Why didn't she have you meet her before she went to the club — or even here after the show? Why drag you in to that upholstered sewer only to tell you to meet her here?"

"I don't know, she just —" He broke off, snapped his fingers. "Maybe I do at that. Maybe she just wanted to give me the package to hold. That's what it was, the package!"

Herlehy growled. "That clears everything up. What package?"

"It was about so big by so long." Liddell described it with his hands.

"She said it was insurance that she'd be able to meet me."

"Where is it?"

Liddell crushed out the cigarette. "I stuck it down behind the cushions in the car they were using to take me for a ride. It's —"

"It's gone," Herlehy groaned. "They've got that car stashed away someplace, and —"

"No. It wasn't their car. They socked it just to take me for a ride. Chance is Hook dumped it as soon as he got to town."

Herlehy motioned the uniformed cop over. "Take this down and phone it right in. I want it out on the wires immediately." He turned to Liddell. "Give him the details."

Liddell scowled in concentration. "It was a dark one — black or dark blue. Looked like a 1953 Lincoln to me. Chances are it has a couple of bullet holes in the back. I emptied a gun at it." He looked at Herlehy. "You get a make from the local cops on the driver?"

Herlehy shook his head. "Not yet. We will. Now, about this guy Hook. You make him?"

"It seems to me I know him from somewhere, but I can't put my finger on it. Give me a couple of hours with the nickname file and I'll make him. I never forget a face, inspector, and in his case it's going to be double in spades."

The uniformed patrolman answered a knock at the door. A tall, carefully tailored man stood in the hallway, a grey Stetson in his hand.

He looked around curiously at the sight of the uniformed cop, raised his eyebrows at the presence of the other two.

"I'm Lee Morton of the *Dispatch*," he told no one in particular. "I have an appointment with Mona Varden."

Herlehy tugged at his earlobe. "Lee Morton, eh? The gossip columnist?"

Morton nodded. His bright little eyes hopped around the room, missed nothing. "Mona Varden called me, said she'd have a real story for me tonight."

"Know what the story was about?" Herlehy wanted to know.

The columnist pursed his lips, shook his head. "She didn't like to talk over the phone. She often had good items for me and I'd pick them up here."

"Why? You were at the club tonight," Liddell told him. "I saw you there."

Morton grinned humorlessly. "I'm there almost every night. It's part of my job. But if Mona were seen talking to me, she'd be blamed for everything I printed." He looked Liddell over dispassionately. "You're Johnny Liddell, aren't you?"

Liddell nodded.

The columnist turned back to the homicide man. "I don't like to appear curious, Inspector, but perhaps it's not too much to ask what's going on? After all, it's not usual to keep a date with a night club

singer to find the police force and the town's best-known private eye playing chaperone. Where's Mona?"

Liddell cocked an eye as if he were figuring. "Just about now they're loading her onto a slab at the city morgue."

The grey hat fell from Morton's fingers, rolled on the floor. He picked it up, dusted it off mechanically with the palm of his hand. "Is that on the level?" he turned to Herlehy.

The homicide man nodded.

"Who did it?" the columnist demanded.

"That's what we're trying to find out, Morton," Herlehy growled. "Right at the moment we've got it narrowed down to nine million people, but by tomorrow maybe we'll be able to eliminate some of them."

4.

Inspector Herlehy slumped in an armchair at police headquarters, watched Johnny Liddell leafing patiently through book after book of pictures. A door opened and a uniformed lieutenant walked in.

"Got something?" Herlehy wanted to know.

"I don't know, Inspector. We ran the nickname cards through, then we ran only the cards of short men. That cut it down to sixteen. From the m.o. file we ran through the known guns who use .45s and we cut it down to three. One's dead,

the other's in Quentin." He tapped a card on his thumb nail. "This one doesn't sound like it."

Liddell looked up from the mug book. "Why not?"

"Never went in for killing. He's been up several times for jewel jobs and stickups. Never used the gun." He looked at the card. "Name's Lou Eastman, nickname's Hook."

Liddell swore softly, snapped his fingers. "I said he looked familiar, inspector. Our agency was on the VanDeventer jewel job about seven years ago, remember? Eastman was up for the job, wiggled free." He walked down the row of cabinets, pulled out a drawer, flipped through the pictures, stopped at one and scowled at it. "That's the guy, inspector. Hook Eastman."

Herlehy nodded to the lieutenant, got up, walked to the wall where a water cooler was mumbling softly to itself, and helped himself to a drink. He crumpled the cup in his fist, threw it at a waste basket. "Sure of that, Liddell? I remember that little rat. I wouldn't figure him for a killer. He's too yellow."

"He ran out, didn't he? It was Eastman, all right."

"Can't hurt to have a talk with him," Herlehy conceded. He walked back to the desk, punched a button on the base of the phone. "Put out an APB on Hook Eastman, suspicion of assault with a deadly weapon. Get his description from Identification." He dropped the re-

ceiver on its hook, chewed on his thumb nail for a moment. "I don't get the connection between a heist artist like Eastman and a babe like Varden with her throat cut."

"Any word on the car?"

Herlehy shook his head. "Not yet. But we'll find it if it's in town. And I can't figure a city rat like Eastman dumping the car in the sticks and making his way back. He wouldn't feel safe unless he could disappear down a sewer or into a subway."

It was almost noon before the car was recovered.

Inspector Herlehy sat sleeping in his desk chair in his office, heels hooked on the corner of his desk, window shades drawn. Johnny Liddell lay sprawled on the big leather couch. When the phone shrilled, the inspector started, dropped his legs from the desk. He lifted the receiver from its hook, held it to his ear, growled into it. After a moment, he replaced the receiver, walked stiffly to the window, opened the blinds, spilled a yellow pool of sunlight into the office. He walked over to the small sink, splashed cold water into his face, dragged a comb through his hair.

Liddell rolled over onto his back, stared around the room. His eyes finally came to focus on the inspector. "What time's it?" he yawned.

"Near noon," Herlehy grunted. He ran the tips of his finger along the stubble on his chin. "Motor Vehicle picked the car up on Canal

Street about an hour ago. Identification's been going over it for fingerprints. No soap."

Liddell slid his legs off the couch, sat up. "What about the package?"

"They found it behind the cushion. It's on its way up." He walked over, sank into his desk chair, stabbed at a button on his desk. When a young patrolman stuck his head in the door, he said tiredly, "Get us a couple of coffees, will you, Ray?"

"One black," Liddell added.

The cop's head was withdrawn. The door closed.

Liddell tottered to the sink, doused his face and hair. He was drying them off on the towel when a knock came on the door and Hennessy of Motor Vehicle walked in. He grinned a hello at Liddell, dropped a familiar brown paper-wrapped package on the inspector's desk. "Right where you said it'd be, inspector."

Herlehy nodded. He picked up the package, turned it over curiously in his hand. Then he broke the string. "Let's see what all the shooting's about." The brown paper wrapper peeled away to reveal a canvas pouch loosely basted at the top. Herlehy ripped the thread with his nail, dumped the contents of the bag on his desk top.

A cascade of diamonds of all sizes flowed onto the desk.

Liddell tossed the towel at its hook, whistled. "I'll be damned."

Herlehy stirred the pile with a

blunt forefinger. "At least it makes sense. It explains where Eastman fits into the picture." He picked up one of the larger stones, held it up to the light, murmured appreciatively.

Hennessy, the man from Motor Vehicle, closed his mouth. It had been hanging open since the diamonds first poured out. "You knew this was there all the time?"

"We weren't sure what was in it," Herlehy said. He scooped the stones back into their bag. "This is the same bag Varden gave you last night?"

Liddell nodded.

Herlehy reached into his drawer, found a rubber band, closed the neck of the pouch, dropped it on his desk top. "Tie this up the same way I do, Johnny?"

"The epidemic of jewel jobs?"

Herlehy nodded. "It figures. Most of the jobs were Cafe Society. Who's in a better spot to finger the jobs? While Varden was strutting around, she could have been in a swell spot to get a slant at the worthwhile ice those rich dames were sporting. Then she signalled somebody —"

"Eastman?"

Herlehy considered it, shook his head. "No, not Eastman. It'd have to be somebody that was there every night or could go there without being conspicuous. Eastman couldn't. As an ex-con, one of the boys on the vice squad would have spotted him if he made the bright lights too often."

"I better be getting back downtown, inspector," Hennessy put in. "Do I tell the boss about this?"

Herlehy nodded. "Tell him to keep it quiet until we get ready to break it."

The patrolman with the coffee passed Hennessy on the way in. He deposited two containers of coffee on the desk.

Herlehy flipped the canvas bag at him. "Take this down to the Property Clerk and get me a receipt on it, Ray," he told him.

Liddell gouged the top out of his container, tasted it, burned his tongue and swore under his breath. "The lab boys didn't come up with anything in Varden's apartment?"

Herlehy shook his head. "Some guy who couldn't sleep saw a man knocking at her door, but it was only Morton, the newspaper guy. We knew about that. Outside of that, a dry well." He stirred his coffee with his finger. "If we could find Eastman and shake out of him who it was that gave him the orders to pick you up —"

"Why don't we work backwards? Who knew I was in to see Varden? Just the headwaiter, the guy she called Charles. He must have tipped Eastman."

Herlehy looked thoughtful. "A headwaiter, eh? He could fit the picture. He's in the club every night. He could be the one Varden signalled to. He —" The inspector scowled, shook his head. "It don't wash. Look, suppose Varden was

lingering for a jewel mob. She decides to doublecross them and hold out a batch of stones for herself. Does it make sense that she'd let the head man know who she was giving them to for safekeeping?"

Liddell pinched his nostrils between thumb and forefinger. "Unless Charles got together with Eastman and decided to doublecross the big shot. Then he could have pulled a triple cross by telling the big shot that Mona was getting ready to pull out."

Herlehy took a swallow of coffee, grunted. "The only way we'll know for sure is to ask them." He drained the container, tossed it at a waste basket. "I've got a call out for both of them. We'll get them — and when we do we'll get a few answers to a few questions."

Johnny Liddell lived in the Hotel Abbott, an old, weather-beaten, grime-darkened stone building that nestled anonymously in a row of similar stone buildings on East 31st Street. The lobby was large, noisy, seemed bathed in a perpetual pink light, the reflection of the huge neon sign to the right of the entrance that identified *The Cowl Room — Cocktails*. The easy chairs spaced throughout the lobby were filled with men who perused their newspapers with a determination undampened by the noise around them.

A short fat man at the cigar counter was trying, with indifferent success, to interest the blonde who

presided over it in his plans for the evening. She looked over his shoulder, waved at Liddell as he came in.

Liddell winked back and headed for the bank of elevators in the rear, but was deterred by a gesture from the immaculate creature behind the registration desk.

"A message for you, sir," he said importantly. He made a production of removing an envelope from a pigeonhole prominently numbered 625. He handed it across the desk, worked hard at a semblance of an urbane smile that missed by miles. "Your friends were disappointed that they missed you." He stood adjusting his cuffs.

Liddell turned the envelope over. It bore the return address of the Hotel Abbott, had "Johnny Liddell" scrawled across the front. He looked up into the clerk's eyes.

"They wanted to leave a message, so I suggested they use our facilities." He dry-washed his hands, bobbed his head.

Liddell slit open the envelope, pulled out a folded sheet of note paper. It was blank on both sides. He growled under his breath, swung the register around, satisfied himself that no new arrivals occupied adjoining rooms or rooms across the hall.

"What'd these friends of mine look like?" Liddell demanded.

"I only saw one. He had a slight accent, and —"

Liddell growled, started away from the desk toward the elevator.

"I hope nothing's wrong, Mr.

Liddell," the clerk called after him. "I hope you get your hope."

The dry-wash was going full speed. "Of course, I didn't give out your room number. I never —"

Liddell stopped, grinned mirthlessly at him. "You didn't give out my room number. You just stick an empty envelope into my box." He turned his back, entered the grillwork elevator cage.

At the sixth floor, he looked both ways, satisfied himself there was no stakeout in the corridor. He walked down to his room, put his ear against the door. There was no sound.

The keyhole showed no signs of being tampered with, but he didn't have to be a locksmith to realize that the lock couldn't put up a respectable struggle with a bent bobby pin. He slid his key in the lock, turned it. He pushed the door open, flattened himself against the wall, waited for some indication that one of his "friends" was inside.

Finally, he applied one eye to the edge of the door.

Charles, the headwaiter at Mona Varden's club sat in Liddell's favorite easy chair facing the door. A fixed smile was frozen on his lips, his eyes stared at Liddell unblinkingly. His throat had been cut expertly from ear to ear.

Liddell walked in, closed the door behind him. The room gave every evidence of a careful search. Drawers were pulled out, their contents spilled on the floor, the pillows on

the couch and in the chairs had been slashed.

He walked over to where the dead man sat, stared at him for a moment. Then he picked up the telephone, dialled police headquarters. He was connected with Inspector Herlehy.

"You can stop looking for Charles, Inspector. I've got him here at my hotel."

"Good," the inspector's voice approved. "Keep him there. I've got some questions to ask that baby."

Liddell nodded, looked over to where Charles sat. "He's not likely to be going any place. If he tries turning his head it'll fall off."

The receiver was silent for a moment. "Dead?"

"Real dead."

Herlehy growled at him. "I'll have a squad up there right away." He slammed the receiver down.

6.

Late that afternoon, Johnny Liddell sat at his desk in his 42nd Street office, stared out across Bryant Park. He swung around at the sound of the inner office door opening, grinned at his redheaded secretary as she came in with a pile of correspondence for signing.

"Better sign these while you can still write," she told him. "Some of it's a week old." She dropped the letters on his desk, helped herself to a cigarette. "See tonight's paper? Lee Morton, the columnist, really

gave you a working over. Said something about the best way to get rid of a client is to let them get murdered. He was wondering what kind of business you'd be going into next."

Liddell grunted, picked up a pen, started signing the letters. "He thinks we're holding out on him." He waded through the pile, pushed them away. "He's a prima donna anyway."

Pinky pursed her lips. "Maybe so. But a guy like that could be real helpful, seems to me. In that job of his he knows all the characters at the club. Don't forget he hangs around there almost every night."

Liddell shrugged. "He's still a prima donna."

The redhead picked up the letters, checked through them. "My feminine intuition tells me you have something more up your sleeve than a hairy arm." Her eyes rolled up from the letters to his face. "You wouldn't look good with your throat cut."

He started to answer, broke off at a sharp knock on the office door. He held his finger to his lips, pulled open the top drawer, brought out a .45. He walked across to the door to the outer office, reached for the knob.

He was almost thrown off balance by the force with which the door was pushed open. A girl ran in, slammed the door behind her, leaned against it.

She was young, blonde. There

was no color in her face, her make-up stood out as garish patches against the color. She wore a well-filled Nile-green sweater and skirt. She looked from Liddell to the redhead and back, reached up, tucked a loose tendril of hair into place with incredibly long, graceful fingers.

She made a desperate attempt to gain control of herself, almost made it. "I've got to see you, Mr. Liddell." She was breathing heavily.

Liddell looked her over, nodded toward the customer's chair. He walked into the outer office, opened the hall door, satisfied himself the corridor was empty. He stuck the .45 into his waistband, walked back into the private office.

"Do I know you?"

The blonde shook her head. "I was Charles' sweetheart. I worked as hat check girl at the club."

Liddell hoisted one hip on the corner of the desk, nodded for her to go on.

She licked at her lips. "It's true? Charles is dead?"

"He's dead all right. Know who did it?"

She shook her head. "All I know is it's just like Mona. They'll be after me next." She fitted a cigarette to the wet red blob of her mouth with a shaking hand. "They're probably after me right now."

Liddell steadied the cigarette, held a light, waited until she had filled her lungs. "Who're they?"

"I don't know."

Liddell stared at her for a moment, walked around behind his desk. "Let's start at the beginning. You were Charles' girl. What's your name?"

"Bea. Bea Clarke." She pulled the cigarette from between her lips, crushed it out. "Don't let them do it to me, Mr. Liddell. Don't let them."

Liddell nodded. "You were in on the jewel jobs?"

The girl licked her lips, nodded.

"Who was the top man in the set-up, Bea?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. God help me, I don't know. Only Mona knew."

"How about Charles?"

"Only Mona."

Liddell drummed on the corner of his desk with the tips of his fingers. "Did you know Eastman? Hook Eastman?"

The girl buried her face in her hands, started to sob. She nodded. "He was part of the set-up. He did the actual stick-up." She raised her tear-stained face. "The head man signalled to Mona which ones were to be taken —"

Pinky brought two glasses and a pint of bourbon in, poured a drink for the girl.

"That figures," Liddell conceded. "Mona couldn't have spotted the real stuff from the floor. We had it backwards." He wrinkled his brows. "Then the big shot was out front quite a bit. Go on. Then what?"

"Mona would get word to me

which ones were to be taken. Charles would take over the checkroom and I'd go out for air. I'd be on the curb when the mark came out. Eastman would be down the street waiting for the signal."

Liddell poured himself a drink. "Suppose there were several women in the party. How would he know which one to take?"

The girl took a deep swallow from her cup, coughed. "I'd fix the left side of my hat. That would mean the woman on the left. If I fixed the right side, it meant the one on my right."

"What happened last night? How come Charles went to my place?"

The blonde licked her lips. "Charles got a call from the boss. He had just left Mona's place and she didn't have any jewels on her. Eastman had just delivered a big batch to her before the midnight show. Charles told him about you being in Mona's dressing room. He figured you'd left them at your place. They went over there —" She dabbed at her eyes. "That's the last I saw of Charles."

"You didn't see who he went with?"

Bea shook her head. "He was going to meet him in front of your hotel. He instructed Charles to come alone."

Liddell got up, paced the room. After a moment he stopped alongside Bea's chair. "You'd better stay under cover for a few days." He looked up to Pinky. "Can you

put her up until I wrap this up, Pink?"

"Sure," Pinky nodded. "But what are you going to be doing in the meantime?"

"First, I'm going to patch up my relations with the press. I think Lee Morton might be more willing to cooperate if I fed him a couple of exclusives."

"Such as?"

Liddell winked at her. "Such as the name of the killer and the head of the jewel ring." He caught Bea by the arm, lifted her out of the chair. "You take Bea along to your place, Pink. I'll be in touch."

When the hall door had closed behind the two girls, Liddell picked up his phone, dialled the *Dispatch*.

"Let me talk to Lee Morton," he told the metallic voiced operator. In a moment, he heard the columnist's voice. "Morton? This is Johnny Liddell."

"What's on your mind? A beef about today's column?" He didn't sound as though he cared one way or the other.

"I've got a thick skin," Liddell assured him cheerfully. "But there's no reason why we can't be friends. We might help each other."

"How do you figure to help me?" the receiver demanded.

"I might have a nice juicy story for you. Exclusive."

There was no change in the expression in the columnist's voice. "And when might this change of operation take place?"

Liddell grinned. "You're a suspicious sort of guy. Just to prove my good faith, I'll give you one to start off. Bea Clarke, the sweetie of the headwaiter that was killed in my apartment, is giving herself up to the police tonight at 10."

The columnist's voice was cautious. "So?"

"She'll spill the whole set-up on the jewel jobs. How they were fingered, who did the heist, everything."

Morton sounded more interested. "Now you're beginning to perk. No one else in on it?"

"No one else. You get it exclusive. We can even arrange for her to turn herself into you."

"You got a deal, Liddell." There was a change in Morton's voice. "I'll make it up to you. What's the other scoop?"

"I know where to lay my hands on positive proof of who killed Mona Varden. I'm willing to turn him over to you, too. Bea spilled it without knowing how important it was —"

The columnist's voice cracked with impatience. "What is it?"

"I'll do better than tell you. I'll show it to you. It's in Mona's flat. I'm on my way. Want to come?"

"Don't move. I'll pick you up at your office."

7.

Lee Morton drove a Caddy, a '54 convertible, with all the skill of an

expert. He wove the big car through the heavy East Side traffic and pulled up at the Marlboro Towers exactly twelve minutes after leaving Liddell's office.

Liddell led the way to the elevator, got off at Mona Varden's floor. He looked up and down the hallway, opened the door with a key he took from his jacket pocket. The door opened noiselessly. He motioned the columnist in and closed the door after them.

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

"You see, in order to see whether or not anyone on that bed was dead, you'd have to lean over. What's the most natural thing? You hold onto the frieze to keep your balance? Right?"

Morton considered it, nodded. "It sounds all right."

"Check. Okay, now our killer probably thought he was being very smart and wiped off all prints." He flicked the light at the frieze. "But the chances are a hundred to one, he never remembered sticking his fingers into that frieze. His prints there will hang him."

"The police know about this?"

Liddell shook his head. "Not yet. I just wanted to look it over before I called Herlehy. Now I'm convinced the killer's prints are in that frieze."

He led the way to the living room. "You hold down the fort. I'll get Bea Clarke and the inspector."

"Why the girl?"

Liddell shrugged. "I have a hunch she was here and found the body. Her prints may be in there. Mine are from leaning over the body. We'll want to eliminate those."

Morton nodded. "You'll be back before Herlehy gets here?"

Liddell considered. "I don't know. I'd better leave him a note of where to have the lab boys check for the prints. Got a pencil?"

He took the copy pencil the newspaperman handed him, picked up the flashlight. "I'll just get an idea of about where to start looking. Then there'll be no delay and you can make your deadline."

He disappeared into the bedroom was back in a few minutes with a folded sheet of paper. "Give that to Herlehy when he gets here."

8.

Twenty-five minutes later, Lee Morton opened the door for Inspector Herlehy and his lab crew.

"Where's Liddell?" Herlehy growled. "I got a hurry-up call to come up here and catch a killer. This better not be one of his hare-brained stunts."

Morton shrugged, held out a folded piece of paper. "He left this for you if you got here before he did."

Herlehy opened the note, read it with a puzzled frown. "Have lab boys check upper right quarter of bed headboard for prints of killer." He looked to the plainclothesmen with a scowl. "How about it, Ed? Your boys check that part of the bed?"

The shorter of the two detectives shrugged. "I guess so. But it won't do any harm to re-check. Why that particular spot?"

Morton snorted. "Liddell has some goofy idea the killer steadied himself with his hand when he leaned over Mona's body."

The plainclothesman considered it, shrugged. "We'll see what we can get off it." He led the way into the bedroom.

Herlehy tugged off his hat, tossed it on the table. "How long'd Liddell say he'd be?"

The newspaperman shrugged. "He didn't say. He said he was going to pick up Bea Clarke, the head-waiter's sweetie. She's turning herself in tonight." he consulted his watch. "In time for my first edition, I hope."

The inspector found a fresh stick of gum, denuded it. "You'll have plenty of news tonight. We picked up Hook Eastman, the gun on the jewel heists. Between him and the girl we should be able to start filling in."

Liddell opened the door with his key, stepped in. He grinned at the inspector. "Glad you got here."

"Where's the girl?" Herlehy demanded.

"She beat me to the punch. She gave herself up an hour ago. Afraid she'd get the same medicine as Charles."

Lee Morton jumped to his feet. "Then every reporter in town'll have it. You promised me an exclusive, Liddell."

"Hold your horses, Morton. I've got a better one for you. I told you I'd turn over the killer and I will." He turned to the inspector. "The boys finished in there?"

"Never mind the boys," Herlehy growled. "How do you plan to hand us the killer. You know who he is?"

Liddell nodded. "He'll identify himself."

The columnist walked over to where Liddell stood. "You can make a fool of the Police Department, Liddell, but I'm not standing still for it. I don't know what you're trying to pull, but you won't get away with it." He tried to push Liddell out of his way. "When I'm through —"

"You're through right now, Buster," Liddell grinned at him grimly. He pushed the columnist back into the room. "That injured innocence act is pretty stale. There's your killer, Inspector."

Herlehy stared from the private eye to the columnist and back. "You nuts? Why should he kill Varden?"

"She was running out on him. She had a shipment of jewels she was supposed to turn over to him, but that was going to be the price of her silence. He killed Charles because he had to reveal his identity to him to find out what Varden did with the jewels. Morton's your Mr. Big, Inspector."

The columnist swung on the Inspector. "Either you get that lunatic out of my way, Herlehy, or I'll hold you just as responsible for this as he is."

The door to the bedroom opened. One of the lab men was about to say something, Liddell cut him off with a wave of his hand.

"You know you're going to have to prove all this, Johnny," Herlehy told him.

"You're damn right he does, Herlehy. You can still get out from under," Morton gaged.

"Get me a damp rag, one of you guys," Liddell called over to the plainclothesmen. They looked to the inspector, drew a nod. One of them disappeared into the bathroom, tossed a wet towel to Liddell.

"You see, inspector, I knew I'd have to make the killer expose himself, so I set a trap. I told him the killer had left his prints in the ornamental frieze on top of Mona's bed. No killer could resist the temptation to wipe those prints out. While I was gone, he wiped that grillwork clean."

"Try and prove it," the columnist snarled, "try and prove it."

"Okay, pal." Liddell walked over to where the newspaperman stood, wiped the wet towel across his right hand. The hand turned deep purple.

The inspector stared for a moment. "What's that prove?" he roared.

"Tell the inspector what you found in the frieze, boys."

The shorter of the plainclothesman nodded. "No prints, but the cut out work was filled with the grating of an indelible pencil. Anyone who tried to wipe away any prints would get the dust all over his fingers." He looked at Morton. "The minute you wet those fingers, they turn purple."

The newspaperman swore, rushed at Liddell, threw a punch at his face. His second blow never landed. Liddell caught him flush on the jaw, drove him backward. He was on top of him with an uppercut to the midsection. A hard overhand spun the columnist around, slammed him against the table. Liddell caught him by the shoulder, turned him around and hit him flush with another right hand that knocked him clear over the table. He landed on the other side in a heap, didn't move.

"Don't rough him up," Herlehy growled. "We have special facilities for that downtown. And you better fill me in before he comes to."

"Well, we were both agreed that the killer was the head man of the jewel ring. He had to be someone who could show up in the club every night. Right?"

Herlehy nodded for him to continue.

"As you said, your night club squad would have noticed anyone who showed up every night. But nobody would notice a columnist — it's part of his job to be there."

Herlehy considered it, nodded. "Pretty neat. But why Morton? Why not half a dozen other newspapermen?"

"The way he lived. It's common gossip that the *Dispatch* pays off in glory instead of dollars. Yet, Morton wore the best clothes, drove the most expensive cars. Only a guy with a piece of a juicy racket can live like that."

Herlehy rubbed the side of his jaw with the tips of his fingers. "Why all the killing?"

"Mona figured on getting out and using the jewels to take care of herself. Morton didn't know she'd given me the jewels until after he'd killed her and found they weren't at her place. He called Charles to search my place. Then he realized he had placed himself in Charles' power, so he killed him. Murder is like getting olives out of a bottle. After the first one, they come easy."

Herlehy held up his hand, cut him off. "Why did he come back to the

apartment that night? We wouldn't even have known he knew Varden."

Liddell grinned. "One of his master touches. Remember your boys turned up a witness who described Morton as knocking on Varden's door. We took for granted it was the time he met us there. That's what he wanted us to think. Actually, it was the first time he was there — the time he killed Mona."

Herlehy looked down to where the columnist was moaning his way back to consciousness. He nodded for one of his men to put the cuffs on Morton.

Liddell grinned. "Buying it?"

The inspector nodded. "It was a long shot, but it paid off. Between checking his accounts and what Eastman can tell us we'll make it stick."

Liddell wiped the perspiration off his forehead with his sleeve. "Where can a man get a drink around here? And how soon?"

Herlehy winked at one of his plainclothesmen. "Take Morton in and book him. I'm going to buy Liddell a drink."

Liddell stared at him. "A policeman buying a drink? That's the second most immoral thing I've heard all day."



MUGGED AND PRINTED

MICKEY SPILLANE isn't satisfied with being the creator of Mike Hammer and the top-selling writer in the world today. He's been



branching out, as moviegoers throughout the world know. Not only have two pictures based on his famous novels *I, The Jury* and *The Long Wait* been released nationally, but he's also made his acting debut in the new *Ring Of Fear*. His

latest story for *Manhunt*, *The Pickpocket*, is something of a departure, too. Instead of featuring Mike Hammer, this story stars a new character Spillane has developed: Willie, the reformed pickpocket. We think you'll like him as much as any other Spillane character.

HENRY KANE, whose new complete novel, *Precise Moment*, is featured in this issue, is the famous creator of Peter Chambers. As an ex-



lawyer, Kane's had to do a lot of work with the police and with private eyes, and it's rumored that Chambers may be a composite portrait of several private detectives now operating. In addition to his many appearances in *Manhunt*, Chambers has been fea-

tured in the widely popular novels including *Armchair In Hell*, *Report For A Corpse*, *Halo For Nobody* and others.

HAL ELLSON, author of the best-selling *Duke*, returns this month with the tough and surprising *Six Fingers*. ♦ EVAN HUNTER's novel, *The Blackboard Jungle*, which is being made into an M-G-M movie, will soon be on sale in bookstores. While waiting for the book, take a look at Hunter's *The Scarlet King*. ♦ RICHARD S. PRATHER's newest Shell Scott novel is called *Always Leave 'Em Dying*. His newest Shell Scott short story is called *Crime Of Passion*, in this issue. ♦ RICHARD DEMING's Manville Moon appears in the new Rinehart book, *Whistle Past The Graveyard*. You can also meet Moon in *Death Sentence*, a startling new short story in this issue. ♦ JONATHAN CRAIG is back with another fine and authentic documentary this month. Craig's latest is called *The Purple Collar*. ♦ HAROLD Q. MASUR returns to *Manhunt* with a surprising new story, *Dead Issue*.

CRAIG RICE, the only woman to appear in this all-star issue of *Manhunt*, is also the only detective-story writer ever to appear on the cover of *Time Magazine*,



an honor usually reserved for Presidents, world-famous scientists, and the like. She's the creator of John J. Malone, the lawyer-detective who's appeared in *Having Wonderful Crime*, *Eight Faces At Three*, *The Wrong Murder* (followed, logically enough, by *The Right Murder*), *The Fourth Postman* and other books. Malone's also been featured on radio, TV and the movies and, of course, in many issues of *Manhunt* — though possibly never to such good effect as in the current *Flowers To The Fair*.

FRANK KANE, a familiar figure to *Manhunt* readers, is the author of many novels featuring his tough and knowledgeable private eye, Johnny Liddell. The books in which Liddell's appeared include *Green Light For Death*, *Slay Ride*, *Poisons Unknown* and his latest, *Grave Danger*. Kane's authentic local color, his grasp of police technique and all the important details of homicide investigation, have combined with his writing ability to make such stories as *Big Steal* favorites with readers and critics.

