



Suicide

BY FRANK KANE

A Johnny Liddell
short story

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Suicide

Everybody kept telling Liddell it was suicide. But Liddell had different ideas—ideas that led to murder... ..

BY FRANK KANE

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JOHNNY LIDDELL bit off the end of the cigar, spat it in the general direction of the spittoon. He scraped a wooden match on the sole of his shoe, lit the end of the cigar and inhaled deeply.

“Nobody’s convincing me that Johnny Carroll killed himself,” he said flatly. He blew a cascade of dirty white smoke ceilingward.

“You might as well ask me to believe that Stalin became a Capitalist. And I won’t believe it.”

Detective Sergeant Terence Grady grunted.

His cold, grey eyes studied the private dick’s face. “I’ve got to believe the evidence of my own eyes, Johnny,” he said. “He was still warm when we got there. He did the job himself; no question about that.”

Johnny Liddell growled. “He wouldn’t give the world a break like that, Terry. He was mean enough to live forever.”

He tapped a thin film of ash to the floor.

“A guy that has so many birds out gunning for him just naturally doesn’t knock himself off. Just makes no sense.”

The detective sergeant fumbled through his jacket pockets, came up with a paper pack of cigarettes. “This one did, Johnny.”

He hung a cigarette in the corner of his mouth where it waggled as he talked.

“Ever hear of a guy like Johnny Carroll letting anybody stick a rod in his mouth and blowing out his brains? Easy, stands there with his mouth wide

open?”

He lit the cigarette, flipped the burnt match on the table so it fell square into the plate.

“There wasn’t any sign of a struggle; even his clothes weren’t mused or wrinkled.”

“How about the gun? His?”

“It was his,” Terry Grady nodded. “Kept it in the drawer of his table in the library.”

Johnny Liddell digested that bit of information. “That’s where he was found, isn’t it?”

The homicide dick nodded.

“Fingerprints on the gun?” Johnny Liddell asked.

“Just his own,” Grady grinned. “That makes your hunch bat 1,000, doesn’t it, Johnny? Shot through the mouth; no struggle; his own gun and nobody else’s prints on the gun. That sure makes it out a good case of murder.”

Johnny Liddell grunted. “Sure, sure. It sounds screwy, but not as screwy as the idea of Johnny Carroll knocking himself off!” He inhaled deeply, frowned fiercely at an imaginary spot on the ceiling. “Bullet match the gun?”

Detective Terence Grady plucked at a minute crumb of tobacco on his lower lip. “Haven’t got the bullet yet,” he admitted. “Not that it’s important ___”

The frown left Johnny Liddell’s face. “Who says it’s not important?” He scraped his chair back, pulled himself to his feet. “Your whole suicide theory falls to pieces unless you can match up the slug and the rod. Even a homicide dick ought to know that.”

Grady motioned him back into his chair. “Relax, Sherlock. It came from the same gun all right. His doc says—” Johnny interrupted.

“What do you mean his doc? Didn’t the M. E. see him?”

The homicide dick nodded patiently. “Sure, sure. Only his doc, Matthews I think his name is, was there when we got there. Emmy Wilson, Carroll’s secretary, found him and called Matthews right off. His office is in the same building.”

Johnny Liddell applied his tongue to a loose piece of tobacco on the cigar, pressed it back into place. "I didn't know Carroll was doctoring."

"There's a lot of things you don't know, Sherlock," Terence Grady chided. "It seems that Johnny Carroll was doctoring for a cancer of the throat. The doc came in to see him three times a week."

"How bad was the throat?"

The homicide dick shook his head. "It's a funny thing about that. Doc Matthews says it was mostly in Carroll's head. He kept imagining his throat was bad and insisted that the doc keep coming in." He shrugged expressively. "After all, his dough was as good at the doc's bank as any other patient's."

Johnny Liddell screwed his eyes up into a thoughtful scowl. "Then we only have the doc's word for it that Carroll thought he had cancer?"

"Well, I guess Carroll's secretary would back him up on that." He studied the private dick's face. "What's buzzing around in that skull of yours, Johnny?" he asked.

"I don't know," Johnny Liddell admitted. "How's for looking Carroll's apartment over?"

Terence Grady squeezed out his cigarette on the corner of the wooden-topped table. He had had enough experience with Johnny Liddell's hunches in the past not to run counter to them.

The uniformed man on duty outside Johnny Carroll's apartment saluted smartly as Terence Grady and Johnny Liddell entered. He did not succeed entirely in wiping the boredom out of his eyes.

"Through here in the study." Grady led the way. He stopped in the doorway. "There's where he was, right next to the desk."

Johnny Liddell stared at the chalked outline left by the coroner's men. He transferred his eyes to the ceiling. There was no evidence of a bullet scar in the plaster.

"You said the slug tore through the top of Carroll's head?" he asked. The homicide man nodded. "Then how come no bullet in the ceiling?" Johnny Liddell wanted to know.

Detective Sergeant Terence Grady pushed his fedora back on his head. "Just a freak probably. Maybe by the time it tore through his skull it was spent. We'll find it on the floor someplace."

Johnny Liddell grinned. “Spent? Just going through the top of his head? Not unless he had it reinforced with bullet-proof steel.” He walked over to the chalk-outlined space, stood looking around. “Which way was the body lying?”

Grady stared and then shrugged. “Facing the door, I think. Why?”

Johnny Liddell scowled, stood inside the chalk outline, and faced the door. Then he turned around and looked behind him. “A glass door, eh?” He walked toward the door, examined the glass. “No sign of a hole. It didn’t go through the door, so he must have been facing the bookcase.” He stared for a moment, then nodded his head. “Sure, that would be right. The desk would be at his back—”

The homicide man stared. “I don’t like to be picky, Sherlock, but how about letting a poor working man in on your brainstorm?”

Johnny Liddell ignored him, walked to the desk. “That would mean that wall—the one with the tapestry.”

“What about it?” Grady growled.

“That’s where your bullet probably is. In the wall underneath the tapestry.”

Grady made the tapestry-covered wall in five steps. He pulled aside the tapestry, peered a moment, then grunted. “Right on the head, Sherlock. How’d you guess?”

Johnny Liddell grinned. “Elementary, my dear Watson. Elementary.” He hoisted a thick thigh onto the corner of the desk and watched patiently as the homicide dick pried the misshapen hunk of lead out of the wall with a penknife.

“This still doesn’t change the fact that he knocked himself off.” Grady’s voice wasn’t quite so final. He carried the lead pellet in his palm as though it were priceless.

Johnny Liddell ignored the statement. “How much money did you find around the place?” he asked.

“Just a couple of hundred bucks he had in his pocket. Why?”

Johnny Liddell shrugged. “Just curious.” He fingered the desk furnishings. “How’s chances of seeing this doc you spoke about?”

Terence Grady nodded. “Raftery?” he called. The door opened and the bored-looking cop stuck his head in. “Run downstairs and see if Doc

Matthews is in. Tell him we want to see him.”

The cop saluted, withdrew his head.

Johnny Liddell wandered aimlessly about the room, picking up small objets d’art and replacing them. “How about Carroll’s secretary, Emmy Wilson? Any chance of seeing her for a few minutes?”

“What’s going ’round in that skull of yours, Johnny?” the homicide dick growled. “If you’ve got any ideas, spill ’em, but don’t horse me around. This case is closed as suicide and for my part I’m willing to let it stay like that, unless—”

“Unless I deliver a killer all wrapped up in cellophane and with a pink bow on his hair? Well, maybe I can do that, too.”

Terence Grady stared at the private dick, then shrugged. “I can call Emmy. She’d be here in a few minutes—”

Johnny Liddell nodded. He dropped into a large leather over-stuffed chair while the homicide dick dialed. While Grady was talking to the girl, the door opened and a tall, thin man entered.

“I’m Dr. Matthews,” he said. “Did you gentlemen want to see me?” His eyes had a disturbing habit of twitching as he spoke.

Johnny Liddell nodded, indicated a chair with a toss of his head. The doctor sat on the edge of a chair and waited patiently for Grady to get off the phone. Finally, the homicide dick hung up.

“Emmy’ll be right over,” he told Liddell. Then, turning to the doctor, “Sorry to bother you, doc. Mr. Liddell here thought you might be able to help us out. He wanted to ask a couple of questions.”

The doctor nodded jerkily, turned his eyes to Liddell.

“Know Johnny Carroll very well, Doc?” Liddell asked.

The tall, thin man shrugged. “He’s been a patient of mine for some time now. I’ve known him in that capacity.”

“Know what his business was, Doc?” Liddell’s voice was soft. He was apparently interested in a spot inches over the doctor’s head.

The doctor’s eyes twitched. “A gambler, wasn’t he? I mean, I’ve read quite a bit about him.”

Johnny Liddell nodded. “Yeah, a gambler. Ever play the horses, Doc? Or roulette?”

The doctor's eyes roved from Liddell's face to the homicide dick's. He pulled himself erect. "I don't see what this has to do with—"

Johnny Liddell pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, stuck one in his mouth, lit it. "Take it easy, Doc. It'd be easy enough to find out if you owed Carroll any dough—"

The thin man seemed to shrink. He sat down heavily. "Oh, I see. You wanted to know if I owed him any money?" His eyes twitched maddeningly. "Well, matter of fact I did. A couple of hundred dollars—"

Terence Grady got to his feet. "What's going on, Johnny?" He permitted himself to be waved to silence by the private dick.

"What's with this cancer of the throat gag?" Liddell asked.

The doctor raised a shaking hand to his mouth. "Somehow he got the idea he had a cancer. Insisted on being treated. I prescribed an antiseptic spray and tried to talk him out of it. I—I never realized he would—"

Johnny Liddell blew a twin stream of smoke through his nostrils. "Can the act, Doc. You know Carroll never bumped himself."

The doctor's face was ashen as he jumped to his feet. "I don't know what you mean. I examined the body. He'd killed himself. His gun was there beside him!"

Johnny Liddell's voice was lazy. "How do you know it was his gun, Doc?"

"I've seen it before. He always had it near him."

Terence Grady's eyes went from the shaking figure of the physician to the indolent figure of the private dick in the chair. He started to say something, then changed his mind, clamped his lips.

Johnny Liddell solemnly regarded the glowing end of his cigarette. "When was the last time you saw the gun?" he asked.

The doctor rubbed the back of his hand across his lips. "This afternoon. I had been examining his throat. He opened the drawer to get the money to pay me. It was laying there. I commented on it—"

"What then?" Terence Grady's voice was harsh. He was leaning forward with interest. "What then, Matthews?"

The twitching eyes darted from face to face. "I—I picked it up. Firearms have always had a fascination for me—"

“Then you killed him,” Grady accused.

“No, no. I gave the gun to him. He gave me the money, dropped the gun into the drawer and closed it—”

The door opened to admit the head of the bored cop. “The secretary’s here, sergeant. Says you wanted to see her.”

Terence Grady growled under his breath. “Okay, send her in,” he told the cop.

Emmy Wilson reeked of Broadway from her blondined head to the nyloned leg her dress generously exposed. She looked from face to face, nodded at the doctor.

“What goes?” she asked.

“We’re just about to decide who murdered your boss,” Johnny Liddell informed her. His eyes took bold inventory of her obvious assets.

Her eyes became round. “Murdered? You’re kidding. He killed himself. The cops said so.” She turned to Terence Grady. “Is this a gag, Lieutenant?”

“Sergeant,” Grady corrected her sadly.

“But how?” the girl asked.

Johnny Liddell struggled to his feet. “The thing that led everybody to believe that he knocked himself off is the fact that he got shot through the mouth.” He looked at Detective Sergeant Grady. “Sure, Johnny Carroll never would let anybody stick a rod in his mouth. But suppose he didn’t know it was a rod?”

Terence Grady stood up, slid his hand into his jacket pocket. The doctor straightened up in his chair, stared ahead of him.

“If Carroll had stuck the rod into his mouth and had pulled the trigger, then the bullet would have gone through and into the ceiling,” Johnny Liddell continued. “But it didn’t. It went into the wall.” He paused to let that sink in. “Know why? Because Johnny Carroll had his head thrown back when the gun was shoved into his mouth. Thrown back the way it would be if somebody was treating his throat—”

Emmy Wilson jumped from her chair. Her mouth was a round “O” of horror. She looked at Doc Matthews with loathing. “That must have been the way it happened. I knew you hated him. You always hated him—”

The thin form of the doctor seemed to shrink even further in his clothes. He wiped his mouth with his hand, his eyes twitched painfully. “I didn’t. I didn’t, I tell you.”

“Arrest him, Sergeant,” Emmy Wilson ordered. Her eyes were hot beds of fire. “He killed Johnny Carroll.”

Detective Sergeant Terence Grady grabbed the thin man by the shoulder. “Let’s go, bud,” he said.

Johnny Liddell’s voice was calm, unhurried. “Why not listen to the end of the story?” He settled one hip on the corner of the desk. Grady let go the doctor’s shoulder, but stood behind his chair. “There was the case of the gun. The doc admits having handled it—”

“But I told you how that happened,” Doc Matthews wailed.

“Sure, Doc. And that’s maybe going to save you from the chair.” He ground out his cigarette in the glass ash tray on the desk. “After all, doc, we wouldn’t want you to burn for a killing that Emmy Wilson did, would we?”

Detective Sergeant Terence Grady’s jaw dropped. New life seemed to come into the doctor’s face.

“Is this a rib?” Emmy Wilson’s white little teeth showed in a snarl. “If it is, I ain’t amused.” She started to get up.

“It won’t work, Emmy,” Johnny Liddell sighed. “It had to be either the doc or you. It ain’t the doc, so it’s got to be you.”

The girl moved like lightning. She was out of her chair and halfway across the room before Grady could yell. When he did, the door opened and the bored-looking copper stuck his head in. The bored look disappeared as he caught two armsful of fighting curves. It took him almost a minute to subdue her.

“Okay, Johnny,” Grady grunted when Emmy had been returned to her chair. “Why?”

Johnny Liddell grinned, offered a cigarette to the doctor who accepted it gratefully. “Like I said, it was either the doc or Emmy. Johnny Carroll could never let anybody else get close enough to shove a rod or anything else in his kisser.” He lit his cigarette, held the match for the doc. “When I found the slug in the wall, I was sure of two things. Johnny had been bumped, and he had been bumped by someone who he thought was taking care of his throat.”

Grady grunted. “Sounds like the doc.”

“That’s what I kept thinking,” Johnny Liddell admitted. “Yet, there are so many better ways a doc can bump a guy off, particularly if he’s going to write the death certificate. Besides, Emmy as Carroll’s secretary would probably do all his throat spraying. And a gun barrel isn’t too different from a spray nozzle. Anyway not too different!”

Doc Matthews leaned forward. “But what decided you?”

“Well, when you admitted that you’d handled the gun, I began to see how it shaped up.”

Detective Grady scratched his head. “I don’t see where that fits. So what if he handled the gun?”

Johnny Liddell tapped a thin film of ash into the glass ash tray. “Because there were no prints on the gun except Carroll’s.” He looked up. “When the killer wiped his own prints off, he wiped everybody else’s off, including the doc’s. The doc had no reason to do that. He’s already admitted handling the gun—and he wouldn’t have done that except that he probably thought we’d found his prints on it. Therefore, it must have been Emmy.”

The girl struggled to her feet. “He had it coming to him,” she screamed. “He’d had it coming from away back.”

Johnny Liddell took a last drag from his cigarette. “Then there was the matter of the money in the drawer—”

“That’s where you’re off the beam, Sherlock,” Grady grunted. “There was no money in the drawer.”

“That’s just what I mean, Watson,” Johnny Liddell countered. “There should have been. A big-time gambler like Johnny Carroll always carried enough cash on hand to take care of an eventuality like when the wrong horse won, and besides the doc saw the money in the drawer. That’s where Carroll paid off from.” He looked at the girl. “When you opened the drawer for the spray, I guess the temptation was too much, eh, Blondie?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Emmy snarled.

“Johnny Carroll standing there with his head thrown back; all you had to do was take the gun instead of the spray, and the money was yours,” he persisted.

The girl got to her feet. She held her arm out to Detective Grady. Her face was twisted in a smile.

“We’re wasting our time here, Sergeant,” she said. “Let’s get on down to the jailhouse where I can see my lawyer. I can’t wait to find out whether it was in a fit of temporary insanity or whether I was defending my honor.”

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.

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[The end of *Suicide* by Frank Kane.]