

A Double Plea of Guilty
by Judge Clark

That Amos Talburton married the Widow Bamford for her money was firmly believed by everybody but the widow herself. She, poor, simple body, never suspected that day when he took her hand and asked her to be his that he had any other object than the avowed ones of devoting himself to her happiness and being a father to her little boys.

The widow's fortune was in ready money, from all care of which her new husband speedily relieved her; and before the honeymoon was over, Mr. Talburton entered on his paternal duties with an energy which soon convinced Charley and Robbie Bamford how exceedingly loose had been their previous notions of family government.

Mr. Talburton's system was a combination of those of Solomon and Mr. Murdstone, proceeding on the theory that the two most potent instruments for the expulsion of folly from the heart of a child are a rod of correction and the Latin grammar.

The elder boy, Charley, was a warm-hearted, spirited lad; a boy to go through fire and water for those he liked, but with a temper that rebelled against injustice or unkindness.

It soon became a state of common war between Charley and Mr. Talburton. The former grew reckless in his disobedience, and the latter more relentless in his punishments.

Charley's mother ventured to intercede for him once; but her husband read her such a lecture on the sin of inconsiderate mercy that she never dared renew the subject.

Robbie, who was over a year younger than his brother, got along much better. There were two reasons for this: he had his mother's gentle disposition, and secondly, Charley's transgressions were so numerous that they kept Mr. Talburton's attention fully occupied.

At sixteen Charley was a strong and well-grown youth. More than once, after receiving chastisement, he had been heard to mutter threats; and one day he struck back. A violent battle ensued, in which Charley was badly worsted, but not till he had left on his adversary's face divers marks of the fierceness of the contest.

That night the household was aroused by the report of a pistol. Mr. Talburton was found weltering in his blood just outside his study door, and the servants who first reached the scene, as they afterwards testified, found Robbie standing near the body holding a pistol. The gas-light in the hall-way had been turned up, and the wild and dazed expression of the boy's face was plainly visible.

The wounded man died before assistance could be summoned; and terror and fright threw poor Mrs. Talburton into a swoon, which, happily, for a season rendered her unconscious.

The police came and searched the premises. One of the first discoveries made was that Charley's room was vacant. His bed bore traces of having been recently occupied. But Charley himself had not been seen since retiring early in the evening.

Robbie, when questioned, appeared stupefied, and returned no answers. The commission of an act of violence seemed so foreign to his character, that, in spite of appearances, few were disposed to regard him with suspicion. Still it was thought prudent to detain him till the tragedy should be fully cleared up.

Next day the coroner's jury began their investigations. In addition to the facts already recounted, it was shown that immediately after the murder all the outer doors and windows were found closed as usual—a fact which pointed to an inmate of the house as the author of the deed.

A dealer in firearms testified that on the day preceding the night of the murder he had sold the pistol, found with one chamber discharged in Robbie's hand, to Charley Bamford.

At this evidence Robbie started up excitedly and spoke for the first time.

"I tell you my brother is not guilty!" he exclaimed.

"Perhaps, then, you can tell us who is," said the coroner, dryly.

"I *am!*" the boy answered, with the defiant look of one brought to bay.

The case was soon closed, and the jury were not long in returning their verdict that Amos Talburton had come to his death by a pistol shot fired by the hand of Robert Bamford; and the prisoner was immediately committed for trial.

The distracted mother retained me to do what I could for her unfortunate boy; but the task looked like a hopeless one. To all my questioning I could get but one answer. Robbie persisted in asserting his own guilt and the innocence of his brother, whose absence he attributed to his having run away to escape his step-father's cruelty.

When asked as to his possession of the pistol sold to Charley, and the motive of the crime, he fell into his usual silence.

In due time my client was indicted and arraigned to plead. I stepped forward to answer for him, but before I could interpose the boy himself had spoken.

"I plead guilty," he said, in a clear, firm tone.

"No! no!" cried a voice that startled all who heard it; "it is not *he*, but *I*, who am guilty!" and the next moment Charley Bamford stood at his brother's side, encircling him with his arm.

“Was it not I who ran away?” he went on, hurriedly, “and my pistol that was found? Cannot every one see that my poor, dear, generous brother wishes to screen my life at the expense of his own?”

“Do not believe him!” broke in Robbie; “it is he that would sacrifice himself for me.”

“Let the prisoner be remanded,” said the judge, visibly moved at the scene; “and let his brother also be detained. There is something here which requires explanation.”

And within a week the explanation came in a manner least expected.

John Willis, an old servant of the family, was taken suddenly ill, and soon lay at death’s door. Before he died he sent for a clergyman, to whom he told a story which completely cleared up the mystery.

The day before Mr. Talburton was killed, Charley Bamford had offered to sell Willis a pistol, which the latter bought for a few dollars. That night Willis heard a noise as of some one stirring in the house, and slipping from his room, pistol in hand, he saw some one moving stealthily in the lower hall. It was long past the hour at which any of the family were likely to be up. Burglaries had been frequent of late; and acting on the first impulse, and taking the best aim he could, by the dim light, Willis fired.

Seeing the man fall he ran down and turned up the gas, when, to his horror, he discovered that he had slain his master! The pistol dropped from his hand, and hearing the approach of hurrying steps, and fearing to be accused of murder, he concealed himself in the study, from which he did not emerge till others had made their appearance, the first being Robbie, who picked up the pistol.

The strange conduct of the brothers was now fully accounted for. Robbie, who had seen the pistol during the day in Charley’s hands, in view of the latter’s flight, and his relations with his step-father, believed him guilty; and had taken advantage of the appearances against himself to shield his brother.

Charley acknowledged that he had bought the pistol to defend himself against his persecutor in their next encounter; but, changing his mind, he determined to run off to sea, for which he made secret arrangements the same afternoon; and it was from his first voyage that he had just returned on the day of Robbie’s arraignment.

Doubtless it was Charley’s steps, stealing down the stairs, and out at the front door, which latched itself behind him, that had aroused Mr. Talburton and the servant, the former having remained in his study that night to a later hour than usual.

Mrs. Talburton’s grief was greatly mollified by the restoration of her two boys; and this time she is likely to remain a widow.

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