

A Narrow Escape by Judge Clark

“Pshaw!” “Bosh!” “Nonsense!”

With these, and such like exclamations, was greeted my suggestion that, after all, Arthur Graves might be an innocent man—at any rate, that there was still an unsolved mystery in the case.

“Mystery!” sneered Felix Craft, a cheeky young lawyer, who had won my profound dislike at first sight and steadily grown in it ever since; “there never *was* a clearer case. Wasn’t George Singleton’s dead body found in Graves’s room, the breast pierced by two pistol-shots, and the weapon, proved to be the property of Graves, lying near, containing two exploded cartridges? Didn’t the ball found in the body exactly fit the pistol, and wasn’t Graves seen hurrying from the house, pale and agitated, the moment before I chanced to enter his room and discovered the evidence of the terrible deed? Why, my own testimony is enough to hang the villain!”

“It may have been suicide,” I ventured to hint.

Another chorus of “pshaws!” and “boshes!” assailed this suggestion.

“Then why does Graves keep in hiding, as he has done ever since? Innocent men aren’t apt to skulk in that fashion,” was the crushing finisher Felix Craft gave my last surmise.

Not caring to continue a contest in which I was far from feeling I had the strong side, I retreated under cover of the applause which followed Mr. Craft’s irrefutable answer.

Black as the case against Arthur Graves looked, it was not long till it looked blacker. He was discovered concealed in a distant city, disguised and bearing a false name—facts little calculated, certainly, to clear up the dark suspicion under whose shadow he already lay.

Arrested and committed to await his trial, he applied to one after another of the leading lawyers to conduct his defense; but, one after another they declined, pleading the press of other engagements. The fact was, Arthur had little money, and not much reputation was to be gained in the cause of a client for whom nothing could be done, apparently, but to see that he reached the gallows by the legal road.

With many misgivings I accepted a duty which I would gladly have entrusted to abler and more experienced hands. But I had known and esteemed Arthur Graves before this fearful blight had fallen upon him, and did not feel at liberty to withstand his appeal for succor in the hour of extremity.

“One thing I wish you to believe,” he said at our first interview; “I am not guilty of this dreadful charge.”

I think it is a mistake that it is better for a man to confess everything to his counsel. No lawyer wishes to *know* his client’s guilt. The important thing is to be apprised of the worst that can be

proven. The proper deduction to be drawn is then a legitimate subject of argument, and in *that* field, in a fair fight, it is not often that the right is worsted.

I was not sorry that Arthur denied his guilt, for I must have gone half-hearted into the fight had he acknowledged it.

He could tell me little of the facts beyond what I already knew. He and George Single[ton] had been close friends till an unfortunate marriage contracted by the latter, against which Arthur had strongly protested, resulted in a partial estrangement.

Mrs. Singleton's extravagance had soon plunged her husband into serious embarrassments, which, at the time of his death, had reached a crisis seeming to preclude all hope of escape. Nearly a year before, it should be added, he had heavily insured his life for his wife's benefit, and an installment of the premium was soon to fall due.

"My belief," said Arthur Graves, "is that he visited my lodgings that day to talk over his difficulties, but not finding me in, and discovering on the mantel the revolver which I had purchased shortly before, on account of reports published about masked burglars, in a fit of despondency he took his own life. Be that as it may, on returning to my room, and seeing his dead body stretched on the floor, with my own pistol lying near, the foul suspicion to which I must be exposed flashed upon me, and hearing the sound of approaching footsteps, without stopping to reflect, I fled from the house. On the stairway I met Felix Craft, who occupied apartments next to mine. I hurried past without speaking. It was not till after reaching the street, and having gone a considerable distance, that I became conscious of the fatal blunder I had committed. But it was too late then to recall it. The awful deed, with the damning proofs against me, had doubtless already been discovered. Besides, I had been detected in the act of flight. My only hope now lay in concealment, and it was thus that I became a fugitive under an assumed name."

This was Arthur's story, told with an impressive earnestness well calculated to stagger even a lawyer's incredulity. But, as the law then stood, the prisoner's mouth was stopped before the jury. Whatever others might swear against his life, *he* was forced to remain dumb.

The case was pressed the more vigorously, because the insurance company refused to pay the policy, till a verdict of conviction against Arthur Graves should demonstrate that George Singleton had not died by his own hands—a fact which, of course, would discharge them from liability. Mr. Craft was the widow's counsel against the company, and spared no efforts in urging the prosecuting officers to a speedy disposition of the case.

My battles for delay proved unsuccessful, and, with a sinking heart, I witnessed the preliminary steps of a trial, which, I feared could have but one result.

The empaneling of the jury and putting in the evidence for the state, consumed the first day; and when the court adjourned till next morning, I went to my office with the sad conviction that the testimony had fixed the rope about my client's neck too securely for any efforts of mine to remove it.

At a late hour I still sat thinking, growing more and more despondent as I thought.

A knock at the door aroused me. I opened it, and a captain of the police entered.

“A man fell in a fit on the street tonight,” he began. “He was brought to the stationhouse under my charge, and on searching him for papers to ascertain his identity, this, among others, was found. Thinking it but right under the circumstances, that you should see it, I retained it without the knowledge of the gentleman, who speedily recovered and departed for his home.”

A glance at the paper made me bound from my chair.

“Will you leave this in my hands?” I asked, eagerly.

“That would be irregular,” he answered.

“At all events you will have it in court tomorrow?”

“Certainly, if you so desire.”

“Do not fail for the world!” I entreated.

The captain pledged me his word, and left me a happier man than I had been for weeks.

“I wish to recall Mr. Craft for further cross-examination,” I announced, on the reassembling of the court.

The witness came forward, looking rather worn and pale.

“When you entered the room where the deceased body lay, did you observe any letters or other papers?” I asked.

“N—none,” he answered, hesitating visibly.

“You had the misfortune to fall insensible in the street last night,” I continued.

“I had,” he replied.

“You had certain papers on your person at the time, I believe, pray tell me if *that* was one of them?” exhibiting the document already shown me by the captain, who had brought it, according to promise, and handed it to me privately a moment before.

One glance at its contents, and the features of the witness became first livid, and then distorted by the most horrible convulsions. He had fallen in another fit, and had to be carried from the room.

After calling the policeman to show whence the paper had come, and another witness to prove the handwriting, I read it in evidence. It bore the date of the supposed murder, and ran thus:

“MY DEAR WIFE:—I have no longer the means of gratifying your wishes. My resources are exhausted, and nothing is left but despair. In my extremity, I came to consult my oldest and truest friend. I did not find *him*, but found the means of putting an end to a life of misery, and escaping further reproach on your part. Let no one be blamed for my death. It is my own act. Your unhappy husband, GEORGE SINGLETON.”

Of course, my client was acquitted on the spot.

Why Craft should have preserved such a paper is inexplicable, unless he kept it as a menace to compel Mrs. Singleton to make a liberal division of the insurance money, her right to which he could, at any time, defeat by means of her husband's letter.

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