

The Case of Summerfield eBook

The Case of Summerfield by William Henry Rhodes

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Additional Particulars

The following additional particulars, as sequel to the Summerfield homicide, have been furnished by an Auburn correspondent:

Mr. Editor: The remarkable confession of the late Leonidas Parker, which appeared in your issue of the 13th ultimo, has given rise to a series of disturbances in this neighborhood, which, for romantic interest and downright depravity, have seldom been surpassed, even in California. Before proceeding to relate in detail the late transactions, allow me to remark that the wonderful narrative of Parker excited throughout this county sentiments of the most profound and contradictory character. I, for one, halted between two opinions — horror and incredulity; and nothing but subsequent events could have fully satisfied me of the unquestionable veracity of your San Francisco correspondent, and the scientific authenticity of the facts related.

The doubt with which the story was at first received in this community — and which found utterance in a burlesque article in an obscure country journal, the Stars and Stripes, of Auburn — has finally been dispelled, and we find ourselves forced to admit that we stand even now in the presence of the most alarming fate. Too much credit cannot be awarded to our worthy coroner for the promptitude of his action, and we trust that the Governor of the State will not be less efficient in the discharge of his duty.

[Since the above letter was written the following proclamation has been issued. — P. J.]

Proclamation of the Governor.

\$10,000 Reward.

Department of State.

By virtue of the authority in me vested, I do hereby offer the above reward of ten thousand dollars, in gold coin of the United States, for the arrest of Bartholomew Graham, familiarly known as "Black Bart." Said Graham is accused of the murder of C. P. Gillson, late of Auburn, county of Placer, on the 14th ultimo. He is five feet ten inches and a half in height, thick set, has a mustache sprinkled with gray, grizzled hair, clear blue eyes, walks stooping, and served in the late civil war, under Price and Quantrell, in the Confederate army. He may be lurking in some of the mining-camps near the foothills, as he was a Washoe teamster during the Comstock excitement. The above reward will be paid for him, dead or alive, as he possessed himself of an important secret by robbing the body of the late Gregory Summerfield.

By the Governor: H. G. Nicholson,

Secretary of State.



Given at Sacramento, this the fifth day of June, 1871.

Our correspondent continues:

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I am sorry to say that Sheriff Higgins has not been so active in the discharge of his duty as the urgency of the case required, but he is perhaps excusable on account of the criminal interference of the editor above alluded to. But I am detaining you from more important matters. Your Saturday's paper reached here at 4 o'clock Saturday, 13th May, and, as it now appears from the evidence taken before the coroner, several persons left Auburn on the same errand, but without any previous conference. Two of these were named respectively Charles P. Gillson and Bartholomew Graham, or, as he was usually called, "Black Bart." Gillson kept a saloon at the corner of Prickly Ash Street and the Old Spring Road; and Black Bart was in the employ of Conrad & Co., keepers of the Norfolk Livery Stable. Gillson was a son-in-law of ex-Governor Roberts, of Iowa, and leaves a wife and two children to mourn his untimely end. As for Graham, nothing certain is known of his antecedents. It is said that he was engaged in the late robbery of Wells & Fargo's express at Grizzly Bend, and that he was an habitual gambler. Only one thing about him is certainly well known: he was a lieutenant in the Confederate army, and served under General Price and the outlaw Quantrell. He was a man originally of fine education, plausible manners and good family, but strong drink seems early in life to have overmastered him, and left him but a wreck of himself. But he was not incapable of generous or, rather, romantic acts; for, during the burning of the Putnam House in this town last summer, he rescued two ladies from the flames. In so doing he scorched his left hand so seriously as to contract the tendons of two fingers, and this very scar may lead to his apprehension. There is no doubt about his utter desperation of character, and, if taken at all, it will probably be not alive.

So much for the persons concerned in the tragedy at the Flat.

Herewith I inclose copies of the testimony of the witnesses examined before the coroner's jury, together with the statement of Gillson, taken in articulo mortis:

Deposition of Dollie Adams.

State of California, }
County of Placer. } ss.

Said witness, being duly sworn, deposes as follows, to wit: My name is Dolly Adams, my age forty-seven years; I am the wife of Frank G. Adams, of this township, and reside on the North Fork of the American River, below Cape Horn, on Thompson's Flat. About one o'clock p. m., May 14, 1871, I left the cabin to gather wood to cook dinner for my husband and the hands at work for him on the claim. The trees are mostly cut away from the bottom, and I had to climb some distance up the mountainside before I could get enough to kindle the fire. I had gone about five hundred yards from the cabin, and was searching for small sticks of fallen timber, when I thought I heard some one groan, as if in pain. I paused and listened; the groaning became more distinct, and

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I started at once for the place whence the sounds proceeded; about ten steps off I discovered the man whose remains lie there (pointing to the deceased), sitting up, with his back against a big rock. He looked so pale that I thought him already dead, but he continued to moan until I reached his side. Hearing me approach, he opened his eyes, and begged me, "For God's sake, give me a drop of water!" I asked him, "What is the matter?" He replied, "I am shot in the back." "Dangerously?" I demanded. "Fatally!" he faltered. Without waiting to question him further, I returned to the cabin, told Zenie, my daughter, what I had seen, and sent her off on a run for the men. Taking with me a gourd of water, some milk and bread — for I thought the poor gentleman might be hungry and weak, as well as wounded — I hurried back to his side, where I remained until "father" — as we all call my husband — came with the men. We removed him as gently as we could to the cabin; then sent for Dr. Liebner, and nursed him until he died, yesterday, just at sunset.

Question by the Coroner: Did you hear his statement, taken down by the Assistant District-Attorney? — A. I did.

Q. Did you see him sign it? — A. Yes, sir.

Q. Is this your signature thereto as witness? — A. It is, sir.

(Signed) Dollie Adams.

Deposition of Miss X. V. Adams.

Being first duly sworn, witness testified as follows: My name is Xixenia Volumnia Adams; I am the daughter of Frank G. Adams and the last witness; I reside with them on the Flat, and my age is eighteen years. A little past one o'clock on Sunday last my mother came running into the house and informed me that a man was dying on the side-hill, from a wound, and that I must go for father and the boys immediately. I ran as fast as my legs would carry me to where they were "cleaning up," for they never cleaned up week-days on the Flat, and told the news; we all came back together and proceeded to the spot where the wounded man lay weltering in his blood; he was cautiously removed to the cabin, where he lingered until yesterday sundown, when he died.

Question. Did he speak after he reached the cabin? — A. He did frequently; at first with great pain, but afterward more audibly and intelligibly.

Q. What did he say? — A. First, to send for Squire Jacobs, the Assistant District-Attorney, as he had a statement to make; and some time afterward, to send for his wife; but we first of all sent for the doctor.



Q. Who was present when he died? — A. Only myself; he had appeared a great deal easier, and his wife had lain down to take a short nap, and my mother had gone to the spring and left me alone to watch. Suddenly he lifted himself spasmodically in bed, glared around wildly and muttered something inaudible; seeing me, he cried out, “Run! run! run! He has it! Black Bart has got the vial! Quick! or he’ll set the world afire! See, he opens it! O my God! Look! look! look! Hold his hands! tie him! chain him down! Too late! too late! oh, the flames! Fire! fire! fire!” His tone of voice gradually strengthened until the end of his raving; when he cried “fire!” his eyeballs glared, his mouth quivered, his body convulsed, and before Mrs. Gillson could reach his bedside he fell back stone dead. (Signed) X. V. Adams.

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The testimony of Adams corroborated in every particular that of his wife and daughter, but set forth more fully the particulars of his demoniac ravings. He would taste nothing from a glass or bottle, but shuddered whenever any article of that sort met his eyes. In fact, they had to remove from the room the cups, tumblers, and even the castors. At times he spoke rationally, but after the second day only in momentary flashes of sanity.

The deposition of the attending physician, after giving the general facts with regard to the sickness of the patient and his subsequent demise, proceeded thus:

I found the patient weak, and suffering from loss of blood and rest, and want of nourishment; occasionally sane, but for the most part flighty and in a comatose condition. The wound was an ordinary gunshot wound, produced most probably by the ball of a navy revolver, fired at the distance of ten paces. It entered the back near the left clavicle, beneath the scapula, close to the vertebrae between the intercostal spaces of the fifth and sixth ribs; grazing the pericardium it traversed the mediastinum, barely touching the oesophagus, and vena azygos, but completely severing the thoracic duct, and lodging in the xiphoid portion of the sternum. Necessarily fatal, there was no reason, however, why the patient could not linger for a week or more; but it is no less certain that from the effect of the wound he ultimately died. I witnessed the execution of the paper shown to me — as the statement of deceased — at his request; and at the time of signing the same he was in his perfect senses. It was taken down in my presence by Jacobs, the Assistant District-Attorney of Placer County, and read over to the deceased before he affixed his signature. I was not present when he breathed his last, having been called away by my patients in the town of Auburn, but I reached his bedside shortly afterward. In my judgment, no amount of care or medical attention could have prolonged his life more than a few days.

(Signed) Karl Liebner, M. D.

The statement of the deceased was then introduced to the jury as follows:

People of the State of California, }
vs. }
Bartholomew Graham. }

Statement and Dying Confession of Charles P. Gillson, taken in articulo mortis by George Simpson, Notary Public.

On the morning of Sunday, the 14th day of May, 1871, I left Auburn alone in search of the body of the late Gregory Summerfield, who was reported to have been pushed from the cars at Cape Horn, in this county, by one Leonidas Parker, since deceased. It was not fully light when I reached the track of the Central Pacific Railroad. Having mined at

an early day on Thompson's Flat, at the foot of the rocky promontory now called Cape Horn, I was familiar with the zigzag paths leading down that steep precipice. One was generally used as a descent, the other as an

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ascent from the cañon below. I chose the latter, as being the freest from the chance of observation. It required the greatest caution to thread the narrow gorge; but I finally reached the rocky bench, about one thousand feet below the grade of the railroad. It was now broad daylight, and I commenced cautiously the search for Summerfield's body. There is quite a dense undergrowth of shrubs thereabouts, lining the interstices of the granite rocks so as to obscure the vision even at a short distance. Brushing aside a thick manzanita bush, I beheld the dead man at the same instant of time that another person arrived like an apparition upon the spot. It was Bartholomew Graham, known as "Black Bart." We suddenly confronted each other, the skeleton of Summerfield lying exactly between us. Our recognition was mutual. Graham advanced, and I did the same; he stretched out his hand and we greeted one another across the prostrate corpse.

Before releasing my hand, Black Bart exclaimed in a hoarse whisper, "Swear, Gillson, in the presence of the dead, that you will forever be faithful, never betray me, and do exactly as I bid you, as long as you live!"

I looked him full in the eye. Fate sat there, cold and remorseless as stone. I hesitated; with his left hand he slightly raised the lapels of his coat, and grasped the handle of a navy revolver.

"Swear!" again he cried.

As I gazed, his eyeballs assumed a greenish tint, and his brow darkened into a scowl. "As your confederate," I answered, "never as your slave."

"Be it so!" was his only reply.

The body was lying upon its back, with the face upwards. The vultures had despoiled the countenance of every vestige of flesh, and left the sockets of the eyes empty. Snow and ice and rain had done their work effectually upon the exposed surfaces of his clothing, and the eagles had feasted upon the entrails. But underneath, the thick beaver cloth had served to protect the flesh, and there were some decaying shreds left of what had once been the terrible but accomplished Gregory Summerfield. A glance told us all these things. But they did not interest me so much as another spectacle, that almost froze my blood. In the skeleton gripe of the right hand, interlaced within the clenched bones, gleamed the wide-mouthed vial which was the object of our mutual visit. Graham fell upon his knees, and attempted to withdraw the prize from the grasp of its dead possessor. But the bones were firm, and when he finally succeeded in securing the bottle, by a sudden wrench, I heard the skeleton fingers snap like pipe-stems.

“Hold this a moment, whilst I search the pockets,” he commanded.

I did as directed.

He then turned over the corpse, and thrusting his hand into the inner breast-pocket, dragged out a roll of MSS., matted closely together and stained by the winter’s rains. A further search eventuated in finding a roll of small gold coin, a set of derringer pistols, a rusted double-edged dirk, and a pair of silver-mounted spectacles. Hastily covering over the body with leaves and branches cut from the embowering shrubs, we shudderingly left the spot.

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We slowly descended the gorge toward the banks of the American River, until we arrived in a small but sequestered thicket, where we threw ourselves upon the ground. Neither had spoken a word since we left the scene above described. Graham was the first to break the silence which to me had become oppressive.

"Let us examine the vial and see if the contents are safe."

I drew it from my pocket and handed it to him.

"Sealed hermetically, and perfectly secure," he added. Saying this, he deliberately wrapped it up in a handkerchief and placed it in his bosom.

"What shall we do with our prize?" I inquired.

"Our prize?" As he said this he laughed derisively, and cast a most scornful and threatening glance toward me.

"Yes," I rejoined firmly; "our prize!"

"Gillson," retorted Graham, "you must regard me as a consummate simpleton, or yourself a Goliath. This bottle is mine, and mine only. It is a great fortune for one, but of less value than a toadstool for two. I am willing to divide fairly. This secret would be of no service to a coward. He would not dare to use it. Your share of the robbery of the body shall be these MSS.; you can sell them to some poor devil of a printer, and pay yourself for your day's work."

Saying this he threw the bundle of MSS. at my feet; but I disdained to touch them. Observing this, he gathered them up safely and replaced them in his pocket. "As you are unarmed," he said, "it would not be safe for you to be seen in this neighborhood during daylight. We will both spend the night here, and just before morning return to Auburn. I will accompany you part of the distance."

With the sangfroid of a perfect desperado, he then stretched himself out in the shadow of a small tree, drank deeply from a whiskey flagon which he produced, and pulling his hat over his eyes, was soon asleep and snoring. It was a long time before I could believe the evidence of my own senses. Finally, I approached the ruffian, and placed my hand on his shoulder. He did not stir a muscle. I listened; I heard only the deep, slow breathing of profound slumber. Resolved not to be balked and defrauded by such a scoundrel, I stealthily withdrew the vial from his pocket and sprang to my feet, just in time to hear the click of a revolver behind me. I was betrayed! I remember only a flash and an explosion — a deathly sensation, a whirl of the rocks and trees about me, a hideous imprecation from the lips of my murderer, and I fell senseless to the earth. When I awoke to consciousness it was past midnight. I looked up at the stars, and recognized Lyra shining full in my face. That constellation, I knew, passed the meridian

at this season of the year after twelve o'clock, and its slow march told me that many weary hours would intervene before daylight. My right arm was paralyzed, but I put forth my left, and it rested in a pool of my own blood.

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“Oh, for one drop of water!” I exclaimed, faintly; but only the low sighing of the night blast responded. Again I fainted. Shortly after daylight I revived, and crawled to the spot where I was discovered on the next day by the kind mistress of this cabin. You know the rest. I accuse Bartholomew Graham of my assassination. I do this in the perfect possession of my senses, and with a full sense of my responsibility to Almighty God. (Signed) C. P. Gillson.

George Simpson, Notary Public.
Chris. Jacobs, Assistant District-Attorney.
Dollie Adams, } Witnesses.
Karl Liebner, }

The following is a copy of the verdict of the coroner’s jury:

County of Placer, }
Cape Horn Township. }

In re C. P. Gillson, late of said county deceased.

We, the undersigned, coroner’s jury, summoned in the foregoing case to examine into the causes of the death of said Gillson, do find that he came to his death at the hands of Bartholomew Graham, usually called “Black Bart,” on Wednesday, the 17th May, 1871. And we further find said Graham guilty of murder in the first degree, and recommend his immediate apprehension.

(Signed) John Quillan,
Peter McIntyre,
Abel George,
Alex. Scriber,
(Correct:) Wm. A. Thompson.

Thos. J. Alwyn,
Coroner.

The above documents constitute the papers introduced before the coroner. Should anything of further interest occur, I will keep you fully advised. Powhattan Jones.

Since the above was in type we have received from our esteemed San Francisco correspondent the following letter:

San Francisco, June 8, 1871.

Mr. Editor: On entering my office this morning I found a bundle of MSS. which had been thrown in at the transom over the door, labeled, "The Summerfield MSS." Attached to them was an unsealed note from one Bartholomew Graham, in these words:

Dear Sir: These are yours; you have earned them. I commend to your especial notice the one styled, "De Mundo Comburendo." At a future time you may hear again from

Bartholomew Graham.

A casual glance at the papers convinces me that they are of great literary value. Summerfield's fame never burned so brightly as it does over his grave. Will you publish the MSS.?

Here ends No. Two Western Classics Containing The Case of Summerfield by W. H. Rhodes an Introduction by Geraldine Bonner and a Frontispiece After a Painting by Galen J. Perrett the Typography Designed by J. H. Nash of this First Edition One Thousand Copies Have Been Issued Printed on Fabriano Handmade Paper Published by Paul Elder and Company and Done into a Book for them at the Tomoye Press in the City of New York MCMVII

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