

# THE STURGIS WAGER

A DETECTIVE STORY.

By EDGAR MORETTE.

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[Continued.]

### SYNOPSIS.

**CHAPTER I**—Scene of story in New York city. Time, early evening, last day of year. Cable train collides with cab, throwing to ground cabman and passenger also seated outside. Latter disappears; then, inside the cab, body of man shot dead is discovered. Sturgis, reporter, examines cab and surroundings.

**CHAPTER II**—Later that evening, at stag dinner party, Sturgis, in impromptu discussion, maintains reliability of circumstantial evidence. Dr. Murdock, a chemist, wagers in reply \$5,000 to \$100 that from any daily paper he can select an available riddle. Sturgis takes bet.

**CHAPTER III**—Case selected is of two mysterious shots fired that afternoon in or near Knickerbocker bank. Man had been seen running from bank with valise and arrested. Man said he stole valise from bank steps and was shot at. Valise contained nothing of interest.

**CHAPTER IV**—Sturgis secures appointment with Dunlap, president of bank, to visit scene of shooting early next morning, then induces his friend Dr. Thurston to come to his room where he arranges data of the two strange cases.

**CHAPTER V**—From observations made thus far and inductive reasoning thereon reporter has concluded: (1) dead man in cab was bookkeeper about 50 years old, revealing good salary; (2) wound caused by bullet fired at close range; (3) might have shot himself; (4) shooting had not occurred in cab; (5) right arm broken by bullet; (6) instrument; and (7) cabman was drugged, and young man who escaped involved in some way in crime. Cab mystery also noted as possible sequel to bank mystery.

**CHAPTER VI**—Sturgis calls for Sprague, artist friend, to get his company during investigation at bank, but artist has appointment with some fair sister whose portrait he is making.

**CHAPTER VII**—Agnes Murdock (in charge of her father's household since her mother's death) finds her father in his study. She, in reply to a question concerning attentions of a Thomas Chatham, shows her dislike of the persistent suitor. Her father intimates she shall not be further interested.

**CHAPTER VIII**—Miss Murdock's final suitor for portrait is invited to his privilege of calling at her home, which she readily grants. Bellboy brings note for Agnes. This is read with evident annoyance, and she drops it. It remains forgotten when she leaves studio.

**CHAPTER IX**—Promptly at time agreed Dunlap meets Sturgis. After long and careful examination in bank. Reporter in bookkeeper's desk shows two empty cartridges.

**CHAPTER X**—Examination completed. Sturgis questions banker regarding reliability of Argobast, head bookkeeper, then announces Argobast to be a defaulter with Chatham, accountant who has frequently examined condition of books, as accomplice. Message Argobast sent Chatham deciphered from marks on a blotter.

the chair he broke the bookkeeper's wrist. The hammer fell, but the weapon was deflected and the bullet, instead of reaching its intended victim, passed through the upper lobe of Argobast's left lung and out at the back at an angle of about 60 degrees. The bookkeeper was standing not far from the mantelpiece yonder. Do you see that broad black line on the hearth? That was made by the bullet. Its direction and the angle enabled me at once to see that it must have ricocheted into the fireplace; and there, sure enough, I found it in the soot in the bend of the chimney. Here it is."

Dunlap had listened to this narrative with evident interest. But now, recovering from the spell of Sturgis' persuasive conviction, his skepticism regained the ascendancy for a moment.

"Mr. Sturgis, you have missed your vocation," he said, laughing "good naturedly; you ought to have been a playwright. You have a most convincing way of presenting both your facts and your theories. While you are speaking, one is ready to admit the plausibility of every statement you make. But now that you have finished, I have become a hard-headed banker once more, and I beg to submit one or two facts—since we are seeking facts—which it seems to me are enough to demolish all your elaborate structure."

"Go on," said Sturgis; "it goes without saying that any theory is worthless unless it takes into account and explains every existing fact. If there are any in this case which have escaped me—a contingency which is quite possible, for I have no pretension to infallibility—I shall be glad to hear about them; and, naturally, if my conclusions do not tally with the facts, the conclusions must be altered, since facts are absolute."

"Well, then," said Dunlap, "assuming, for the sake of the argument,



HE BROKE THE BOOKKEEPER'S WRIST WITH ONE BLOW.

that these various marks which you have called trails were made by the feet of three different people; admitting even that one of these individuals was Argobast, who often stays here after banking hours, I do not see that you have established by any satisfactory evidence your assumption that the other so-called trails are those of Chatham and a stranger. For aught I know to the contrary, they may have been made by some of the bank employes in the discharge of their regular duties. Chatham's coat may have caught on a nail in the telephone closet last week, while he was here in his legitimate capacity of expert accountant. The change of the combination of the safe may be the result of an error; for we have no direct proof whatever that Argobast is a defaulter. And, then, when it comes to your interesting description of the alleged shooting of Argobast, it strikes me that you are entirely carried away by your enthusiasm; for, in your minute description of the path of the bullet, at a certain angle, of which you seem to know the measure almost to the fraction of a second, you overlook several important things. Two shots were fired yesterday in or near the Knickerbocker bank. In, say you, because here is a revolver with two empty cartridge shells; here is a black mark, which may have been produced by the ricochet of a bullet, and here is a shapeless piece of lead, which may be that bullet. As, however, one bullet cannot account for two shots, you are forced at once to assume that Chatham has carried away the second one in the palm of his hand. This is ingenious, very ingenious, but—

"His blood is on the telephone receiver," observed Sturgis, quietly.

"Blood!" exclaimed Dunlap; "why, with the carnage that you have imagined here, there should be oceans of blood. Here is a man, running around with a wounded hand, who leaves a few drops of blood on the telephone receiver, and nowhere else. And here is another man, shot through the lungs—excuse me, through the upper lobe of the left lung—who does not bleed at all. And where is he now? Such a wound as you have given him must, I take it, be fatal, or, at any rate, serious. Yet here is a dead or, at least, a dying man, calmly walking off as if—as if the curtain had fallen at the end of your drama, and the corpse had hurried off to his dressing-room."

"You have forgotten something else," suggested the reporter, smiling.

Dunlap looked at him questioningly.

"You have forgotten the pistol replaced in the drawer after Argobast was shot, and the doors of the bank carefully locked."

"True. No, my dear sir; your elab-

orate theory will not bear an instant's calm examination."

"And yet," rejoined Sturgis, "my conclusions, as far as they go, are absolutely correct. Every objection which you raise is plausible enough, when considered by itself; but we have not to deal with a lot of isolated facts, but with a series of connected events, each of which depends upon and supports all the others. Let me finish my story, and I think you will then be prepared to admit that what seems to you now a flight of fancy on my part, is nothing but a sober exposition of plain, unvarnished facts."

Dunlap, with a deprecating gesture, settled back into his chair once more.

"We left Argobast shot through the left lung—fatally wounded, as you have just remarked. He probably fell like a log; while Chatham, weak from shock, leaned against the door jamb yonder. He had probably stanching his wound with his free hand as he ran; I have been unable to find any traces of blood between the telephone and this spot. On the door jamb, however, the blood left a stain which has not been completely wiped out and which enabled me to judge of Chatham's height. 'X' was, the only one of the trio who knew what he was about at this time. I have a genuine admiration for 'X'; he must be a man of marvelous nerve. Instead of flying panic-stricken from the scene, as any ordinary criminal would have done, he calmly proceeded to protect his retreat and so systematically cover his trail. His first step was to lock the Wall street gate and the inside door. Quinlan had doubtless pulled the outer door to as he ran away, so that 'X' probably thought this also locked. He then, with Chatham's assistance, helped Argobast, who was not yet dead, and who perhaps by this time had regained consciousness, into the cab which was waiting near by in Exchange place, where I found the blood-stains on the curb, as you will remember. After starting off his two accomplices in the cab, he returned to the bank, put away the pistol in its proper place, which, by the way, he seems to have known, and washed up all or nearly all the blood stains. There is a sponge and bucket under the sink in the clerks' room, which were used in this operation. After, as he thought, completely obliterating all traces of the tragedy, he quietly walked off by the Exchange place entrance, locked the door and threw away the key. All this, while Policeman Flynn was chasing Quinlan. You will note that 'X' knowing nothing of the Quinlan episode, was quite justified in believing that the shots had failed to attract any attention outside of the bank. Very likely he was disturbed by the return of the policeman and Quinlan; I cannot otherwise account for his having left the gas burning. Had he had the time, I feel confident that, with his customary thoroughness, he would have turbed it out. As to my minute description of Argobast's wounds, there is nothing remarkable in that. I know that the weapon used by 'X' was your chair, because I found particles of the bookkeeper's epidermis upon one of the legs, which was considerably lessened by the blow. But I know exactly what the wounds were, because I have examined them. I told you that I had seen Argobast yesterday."

"What?" exclaimed Dunlap; "you mean after he was wounded?"

"Yes," replied Sturgis; "his body is at the morgue now. You might call there this afternoon to identify it, if you choose; but, everything considered, it might be as well not to make the identification public until we are well on the track of Chatham and our friend 'X.'"

### CHAPTER XII.

#### THE BOOKKEEPER'S CONFESSION.

Late that same evening Sturgis returned to his lodgings, after a busy day spent in working upon the Knickerbocker bank case. He was tired and he was perplexed; for, with all his unforgiving energy, his quick intelligence and his plodding perseverance, he had come to a standstill in his investigation. The Evening Tempest had appeared with no further mention of the Quinlan case, and with only a perfunctory report of the cab mystery, no attempt having been made to connect the two, for Sturgis would not consent to publish his evidence until he was sure of complete success in his undertaking.

As he approached the house the reporter saw a light in his window, and inferred that a visitor was awaiting his coming. It was Mr. Dunlap, who, pale and careworn, was striding nervously back and forth in the room, with his hands behind his back and his head bent forward upon his breast.

"Ah, there you are at last!" exclaimed the banker, eagerly; "I have been waiting for you for over an hour."

"Has something new turned up?" asked Sturgis.

"Yes; read that."

"At the same time Dunlap handed the reporter a letter.

"Let me tell you about it first. After leaving you this morning I went to the morgue and saw the body. You were right; it is Argobast's. I had been only half convinced by your evidence; but I now saw that you were probably right in all your other indications, and I became anxious to learn something definite concerning the amount of Argobast's defalcation. As I could not reach the books for some time, I called upon Mrs. Argobast, thinking I might be able to learn something from her. You had not been to her, had you?"

"No," answered Sturgis, gravely; "I did not think it likely she knew much about this matter, as we do, and I shrank from the prospect of revealing to her the fact of her husband's crime and tragic death. I wished, at any rate, to exhaust all other means of obtaining information before resorting to this one."

"Of course, of course," said Dunlap, somewhat impatiently; "the woman is naturally to be pitied; but I could not allow any sentimental consideration to stand in the way of the discharge of my duty to our depositors."

"What did you learn from her?" asked the reporter.

"When I reached the house the maid told me that Mrs. Argobast had spent the previous evening at her sister's house in the country and had not yet come back. I was about to leave, intending to return later in the evening, when the lady herself arrived. Upon learning who I was she seemed somewhat surprised, but invited me in. As we passed into the parlor the maid handed her mistress a letter, stating that it had come by the morning's mail. Mrs. Argobast glanced at the envelope, but did not open it. At my first cautious questions she seemed to be very much surprised. Argobast had announced to her by telegram the previous day that he would be obliged to go out of town for a few days on business. He allowed her to infer that he would soon return, and that his business was connected with the affairs of the bank. She could not understand how it happened that I knew nothing of this trip. 'But,' said she, 'I have just received a letter from him, which will doubtless explain matters.' She evidently knew nothing of her husband's peculation. Thereupon she opened the envelope and took out this letter. I observed her closely. At the first words I saw her cheeks blanch and a look of agony pass over her features as she instinctively pressed her hand to her heart. I knew then that the letter contained some important revelation, and I became anxious to obtain possession of it. When she had done, I could see that she was laboring under a strong emotion; but she controlled herself, replaced the letter in its envelope and said, merely: 'This does not tell me my husband's whereabouts; but I shall doubtless have further news of him in the course of a few days.' I saw that she was attempting to shield his death to her as gently as I could. The first shock seemed to utterly un-

nerve her; but after awhile she became somewhat calmer. 'After all, it is better so,' she said, at last. Then she handed me this letter. There was no further reason for withholding it. Read it now."

"It is postmarked at the general post office at five o'clock," said Sturgis; "it was therefore mailed before or during Chatham's visit to the bank. It may have been mailed by Argobast before the scrubbing was done, or perhaps by the chorewoman when she left the bank."

The reporter drew the letter from its envelope and read:

"The Knickerbocker Bank,  
New York, Dec. 31, 1898.

"My Darling Wife: When you receive this letter I shall be far away—a disgraced depositor—and you will be worse than a widow."

"I dare not ask your forgiveness for the trouble I am bringing upon you; for I realize all too clearly the extent of the wrong I have done you. But I feel irresistibly impelled to lay before you in all their nakedness, as I do before my own conscience, the circumstances which have led to my downfall. A knowledge of these may perhaps help you to understand, in a measure, the temptation to which I have succumbed; although I find it hard myself, now that all is over, to realize how I came to yield to it."

"Perhaps you may remember the celebration of my fiftieth anniversary. We were having a most enjoyable evening in the company of the friends whom you had invited to participate in the festivities, when I called upon you. You were obliged to leave our guests in order to receive him in the library. This man lost no time in stating the nature of his business with me. His name was Thomas Chatham; he was an expert accountant, who had been employed at the Knickerbocker bank to examine the books, and he coolly informed me that he had just discovered a serious error in my books—one that had enabled a depositor to overdraw his account by a large amount. At first I refused to believe him, although he submitted copies from the books showing exactly how the blunder had been made. When he intimated that he would wait two hours before the error should be reported to the bank, I indignantly refused to listen to him. He remained perfectly unruffled during our interview and left me at last with the impression that he would wait two hours before handing in his report to the president."

"My first step on reaching the bank the next day was to verify Chatham's statement. Alas! they were only too true. There was the terrible blunder staring me in the face. I could not understand how I had come to make it; but there it was, and nothing could explain it away. I had hoped to give you up to this time, now I saw clearly that I was a ruined man."

"There was only one honorable course open to me—to frankly confess my responsibility for the blunder and take the consequences, whatever they might be. I hesitated, and I was lost. I was lost because I felt that my position was at stake. Would not my error appear inexcusable to the officers of the bank, since I could find no palliation for it in my own eyes? I was 50 years of age, I shrank from the necessity of beginning again at the foot of the ladder which I had so laboriously climbed after a lifetime of conscientious plodding. It would be no easy matter for me to find another position."

"The more I thought the matter over, the more I became convinced that there might be another way out of my trouble. Was it not probable that the depositor who had credited his money to my account was innocent? If so, would he not be willing to repay the amount overdrawn? At the worst, if he should refuse to do this, might it not be possible for me to scrape together enough to make good the deficiency? In this way I could correct the blunder, and no one would be the wiser for it. But what of that man Chatham? Would not his report betray me? I recalled his statement that the nature of his report depended upon myself. What did he mean by that? Probably he would see a price upon his silence. This would add considerably to the amount I should have to repay; but would not this be better, after all, than the loss of my position? At any rate, I should not be any the worse off for leaving to his proposal, whatever it might be."

"That afternoon, as soon as the bank had closed, I called on the address Chatham had given me. He greeted me cordially, and with him was a man whom he introduced as James Withers, the depositor in whose favor my blunder had been made. Had I not been so stupidly misled, I should have been aroused by the strangeness of Withers' presence in Chatham's room. The two men received me pleasantly, and the

aged Withers, even before I could broach the subject, expressed his regret at hearing of the error which had been committed, and assured me of his willingness to reimburse the bank; but—ah! there was an ominous 'but.' He was short of ready money; just then, everything he had wadded up in a promising enterprise which was bound to bring in a magnificent profit in the course of a few days if only he could raise a few paltry hundreds to enable him to hold out a little longer. If he failed to scrape together this small amount, all would be lost. Insidiously and relentlessly they drove me toward the trap they had prepared, and I was weak enough to fall into it. Before the interview was over, I had consented to allow Withers to fill further overdrafts on my account, and I had received his solemn promise to refund, before the end of the week, the entire amount he owed the bank. Then Chatham suggested that it would be wiser to let the second overdraft come from another account. Withers agreed with him and stated that the check could be made in the name of Henry Seymour, a relative of his, who had recently opened a small account with the Knickerbocker bank. I strongly objected to sharing the secret of my infamy with any others; but I finally allowed myself to be overruled by the masterful demands whose clothes I had fallen into."

"The next day I took my first step in crime, by making such entries as would insure the honoring of Seymour's check. After that I was completely in the power of these two men. It was not long before I discovered that I had been their dupes. Chatham's accomplice was not the true Withers; for this man, a few days later, made a large deposit, which more than covered his previous overdrafts. The false Withers was Henry Seymour himself."

"As soon as I had committed a felony, it became unnecessary for Seymour to keep up any further pretense of a desire to refund his money. I had helped him to steal, I was now in the meshes of crime as deeply as my accomplices; and, from that time to this they have forced me to act as their agent's-paw. During this period of two years the bank has been robbed in this way of over \$250,000, every cent of which has gone to Chatham and Seymour."

"You can perhaps imagine what a hell my life has been during that time. With prison and disgrace staring me in the face, and with the absolute conviction that exposure must inevitably come sooner or later, I have suffered the torture of the damned. At the bank I have been in a perpetual state of suspense. I have started at every word spoken to me; I have seen suspicion in every glance which has met mine; I have trembled and paled at every approach of one of the officers of the bank. And yet I have not dared to absent myself from my desk for an hour, lest an examination of my books during my absence should reveal my crime. I have been the first to reach the bank in the morning, and the last to leave it at night; I have not even taken the few minutes during the day which would have been required to enable me to obtain a hurried meal. On one pretext or another, during the last two years, I have had to forego my annual vacation. I have dragged myself to my post when I was so ill that I could hardly stand, because I could not afford to have anyone take charge of my books for even an hour. And all that time, with a full realization of my degradation and infamy, I have been forced to continue my frauds, knowing that each one brought me nearer to the inevitable final exposure; but knowing equally well that a refusal on my part to continue my stealing would result in an instant betrayal by my accomplices."

"At last further concealment became impossible. A week ago the yearly examination of the books took place. The expert accountant employed was, as usual, Thomas Chatham, and of course, as usual, his report was entirely satisfactory. It seemed, therefore, as though discovery could be postponed a little longer; when, this morning, we were informed that a change in the system of bookkeeping would be adopted after the 1st of January. I saw at once that all was over. The discovery of my crime in the matter of hours, I must be out of the way before the crash comes or I am doomed. I can already see the felon's stripes upon my back; the clang of the prison gates ring in my ears."

"I have carefully prepared my flight, so that I shall have plenty of time to reach a place of safety. Once there, I shall be free from pursuit; but I shall not, and I shall carry with me to the grave the burden of my sin."

"The most bitter pang in my remorse is caused by the thought of the great wrong I have done you, dear wife. You will now be forced to face the world as a disgraced and unprotected by the one whose duty and whose desire it was to smooth the way for you; but, what is worse, oppressed by the burden of his sin."

"What little money I have left in the savings bank I have transferred to your name. You may use it all with a clear conscience; for every dollar of it was honestly mine. I swear I have never had a single cent of the money I have stolen. It was all given to me by Henry Seymour, and used I know not how."

"As soon as I am settled in the place to which I am going I shall try, as far as lies in my power, to redeem my past by honest labor; and I hope to be able to contribute to your support in the near future."

"Oh! my wife! my darling wife! Would that the past could be blotted out, and that I could once more place my hands in yours, an honest man. Though you may find it hard to forgive me now, perhaps in time you may be able to think gently of him who through all his crime and degradation has remained—

"Your devoted husband,  
"JOHN W. ARBOGAST."

"My safety depends upon your keeping the contents of this letter secret for at least three days. After that time, please send to Mr. Dunlap, president of the Knickerbocker bank, the enclosed papers, which will reveal to him the full extent of my defalcations."

"I do not hesitate to betray Chatham and Seymour; they did not scruple to ruin me. I have sent for Chatham, and I shall give him warning of my intended flight. If he sees fit, he can take such steps as he may choose to escape his own richly deserved punishment."

[To be continued.]

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