

A Texas Tragedy

by An Old Contributor

In the height of the land fever, my friend, Harvey Knight, and I went on a southwestern trip to try our fortune with the rest. Who knew but we might stumble on the site of some future great metropolis, where a few hundreds judiciously invested might make us millionaires by the time we reached our prime? Such things had happened to others; why not to us?

As a general thing we pursued our way in company, but occasionally we would separate for a day or two, agreeing on a place of rendezvous, at which whoever arrived first would wait for the other. Our explorations were thus given a wider scope, at less expense of time than would have been possible had we remained constantly together.

We had hardly crossed the Texas boundary when we began to hear of Reuben Duckwall. Like other travellers through the sparsely settled region, we found it prudent to keep ourselves informed, from time to time, of the various places ahead at which food and shelter might be found.

To the answers to our inquiries one piece of advice was invariably added:

“Stop at Duckwall’s tavern, w’atever time ye git there. Old Reub’s the chap to do the squar’ thing by man an’ beast, an’ besides he’s a man of eddycation.”

“Come,” said Harvey Knight, as we took the saddle one morning, “you push on straight to Duckwall’s, keeping an eye on the face of the country meanwhile, while I take a more circuitous route with a view to inspecting a few of the prophetic towns and cities so plentifully scattered hereabouts.

“And be sure,” said Harvey, as we turned our separate ways, “to put the backwoods Boniface on his mettle by apprising him of what a *connoisseur* your expected friend is in the culinary arts.”

The sun was setting as I drew rein at Reuben Duckwall’s door. There was an air of hospitality and comfort about the huge log cabin in no way belied by the hearty welcome of its owner, as he bade me alight and enter, while he took charge of my horse.

The sound of voices within, in angry discussion, ceased as I crossed the threshold.

The sole inmates of the room were a young man and a young woman, of whom the former was some years the senior.

“You’ll repent this!” was the speech, in the male voice, which my appearance interrupted.

The two stood facing each other with flushed cheeks; and it was some moments before I was favored with the notice of either. At length the young man, the scowl upon whose face added

nothing to its gainliness, ungraciously offered me a seat. His companion, with an abashed look, left the apartment without speaking.

The silence remained unbroken till the host's return. Mr. Duckwall was not the man to leave the ice long unbroken. In less than five minutes we were in unreserved conversation.

When I informed him of my friend's anticipated arrival during the night he looked a good deal concerned.

"How soon do you expect him?" he inquired.

"Between midnight and morning," I answered. "We started together, but his road was much longer than mine."

"Has he much about him in the way of valuables?"

"A gold watch, and a considerable sum of money," I replied.

The landlord's look of concern deepened.

"Is there any danger of robbers?" I asked.

"I think—at least I hope—not, at present," said Mr. Duckwall. "There *was* a desperate gang hereabouts, but the regulators took them in hand, and those who escaped have kept shy ever since."

The young man, who sat moody and sullen during the conversation, I learned was Mr. Duckwall's son; and the girl who had disappeared at my arrival, but who reappeared at supper-time, I was given to understand, later on, was the only survivor of a family of emigrants slain by the savages, the helpless babe having been left, with a fiendish cruelty, to perish in the wilderness, a fate from which it was rescued by a kindly-hearted hunter, who found and carried to his home the little orphan, whom he reared with all a parent's tenderness.

This, as I learned it in the course of the evening, was the story of Ellen Vail, who, her protector being dead, had found employment in the house of Reuben Duckwall.

The fatigue of the day's journey caused me to retire early, and the sleep into which I fell was undisturbed till morning.

The first impression on my waking senses came from the sound of voices beneath my window, which I readily distinguished as the same my entrance had interrupted on the previous evening.

"No, Tom, I can never be your wife," said the girl, in low, distinct tones.

"And why not?" was the passionate response. "Will not *that* tempt you? See, there is money to dress you like a lady, and it's at your service."

“Were it millions, honestly got, and not, as I fear this is, the fruits of crime, it could never lure me into marrying a man I do not love.”

“Be careful how you brave my anger,” returned the other, with ill-repressed rage.

“I have already felt its violence,” the girl answered. “I shall never forget the blow you once gave me in a fit of ungoverned passion. But not even the terror of your fury can influence me in this.”

A fierce imprecation in reply ended the dialogue.

My first inquiry, after rising, was for my friend; and it was with much surprise and alarm that I learned he had not yet arrived.

In the midst of my anxiety a band of armed men on horseback made their appearance.

“What’s the matter, Trimble?” inquired the elder Duckwall of the leader, as the party dismounted.

“A man has been found murdered,” the other answered. “His name, it would appear from papers found on the body, was Harvey Knight, and here’s the bullet that killed him. The doctor, there, cut it out.”

Young Duckwall stepped forward and whispered in Trimble’s ear.

The latter turned upon me quickly, as I stood stunned and speechless at the dreadful news.

“Perhaps you can give an account of your movements last night,” he said, sharply.

“I retired early,” I replied, “and did not leave my room afterwards till a few minutes since.”

“Why,” broke in the elder Duckwall, visibly astonished, “I saw you myself coming in just before daylight, I didn’t see your face, it’s true, for your hat was slouched over it; but the moon was shining brightly, and there was no mistaking the drab overcoat.”

“The overcoat—let’s see it,” said Trimble.

Tom Duckwall hurried to bring it.

Trimble thrust his hand into one of the pockets.

“Here’s a pistol!” he exclaimed, drawing out my revolver. “Is it yours?”

I admitted the fact.

“When was it last fired off?”

“Never since I bought it before startling on my travels.”

“The chambers were all loaded, then?”

“Certainly.”

“And you are sure none of them have since been discharged?”

“I am.”

“How do you account for *this*, then?” the questioner continued, pointing to one of the chambers which was empty and powder-stained.

“And for that?” he added, before I had time to answer, exhibiting a broad blood-stain on one of the coat sleeves.

“And see,” he went on,—“this bullet exactly fits the empty chamber. What do you say, comrades,—guilty or not guilty?”

“Guilty!” they all answered.

“And the penalty?”

“Death!”

I was led forth and bound to the nearest tree. Half a dozen rifles were levelled at my breast. The chief of regulators stood ready to give the fatal word, when the slight form of Ellen Vail rushed between me and my executioners.

“Hold!” she cried. “He is not guilty. There stands the murderer! It was he who entered the house this morning, wearing the stranger’s coat and hat, which he must have taken and returned secretly while the owner slept. I saw and recognized him in spite of his disguise, and in his possession will doubtless be found the evidence of his guilt.”

“Curse her!” exclaimed the accused man; and before his hand could be stayed, the girl lay a corpse at the ruffian’s feet, pierced through the heart by a ball from his pistol.

The next moment the dastard was struggling in the hands of his captors; and a hasty search of his person brought to light a thick roll of bank bills, together with my poor friend’s watch, on which his name was engraved.

I was instantly released, while the double murderer was dragged into the forest out of sight.

A minute later, and a loud report broke the stillness. The heart-broken father covered his face with his hands. His reprobate son had gone to his account.

New York Ledger, September 11, 1880