

THE KENTUCKY VENDETTA

HOW THE FEUD IN ROWAN COUNTY ORIGINATED.

A CHARGE OF HORSE STEALING LEADS TO MANY MURDERS—A TIMID JUDGE AND A CULPABLE COUNTY ATTORNEY.

LEXINGTON, Ky., July 10.—“Kentucky men are the bravest in the world and Kentucky politicians are the biggest cowards” is a remark I have often heard made by ex-District Attorney H. C. Wharton, of that State. To the cowardice of the politicians in power and to the bravery of the participants involved may be ascribed the long and bitter continuation of the vendetta now in progress in several sections of Kentucky. To understand the origin of the terrible trouble in Rowan County, an account of whose horrible condition since August last, when the present feud began, I have already furnished to the readers of THE TIMES, it is necessary to go back a dozen years or more. This county was in that section of the State that contributed largely to the Union Army, three-fourths of the male inhabitants of which wore Federal colors. The war over, the Democrats soon obtained political control of the State, although the quota of white Kentucky soldiers who enlisted in the Union Army was quite double that of the other, or Confederate, side. This is a remarkable fact, for which no acceptable reason has ever been advanced in the presence or within the reading of the writer. It occurred, however, as early as 1868, when the men who fought for their country found their opponents in full political power. As a consequence the ex-loyalists were more or less sore, and in some sections where bright lights lived considerable comment cropped out in the nature of severe criticism. Persons of this class who before the war possessed the right to expect, by reason of their talents and positions, political preferment now naturally grew restless, then critically talkative, finally denunciatory. They were frozen out politically while the other side got everything. In the section in which Rowan County is situated lives an editor—Thomas M. Green, of the Maysville Eagle. He is a brave man, whose integrity, culture, and ability should have entitled him to high recognition. He failed to receive it. This editor was a strong Unionist, and lives in Mason County. Close by is Rowan County, where a young man named Hargis resided. After the war, into which he had gone as a boy, choosing the gray for his uniform, Thomas F. Hargis studied law. He rose rapidly in politics, and became the possessor of several local offices, the State Senatorship among others. At last, when a vacancy occurred in the Court of Appeals by reason of the assassination of Justice John M. Elliott, “the idol of Eastern Kentucky,” at the hands of Tom Buford, Hargis became the Democratic candidate to succeed the dead Judge. The Court of Appeals is Kentucky’s highest judicial tribunal. Its members are elected from four separate districts, and not from the State at large. In the canvass to elect Judge Elliott’s successor a contest of extraordinary bitterness was waged with furious personality. Mr. Green assailed the character of Mr. Hargis, who it had been previously asserted was ineligible on the ground that he had not served as an attorney for the length of time required by the State Constitution to be eligible to a position on the bench of the highest court. It had been declared in a previous political contest of Judge Hargis that the records of the Rowan County Court would prove this, but they had been mutilated at his suggestion or with his knowledge. Heretofore all of this had been a mere local matter, but now it spread throughout the State instead of being confined to the district. The editor’s attacks were ferocious, but notwithstanding his efforts and all other opposition, Hargis was elected. Green now went further than ever, but Hargis refused to sue for libel. At last Green’s denunciation evoked a reply from Hargis in which the epithet liar was used. This gave Green the chance he desired—that of forcing the matter into the courts. He brought suit against Hargis, and the case came up in due time at Louisville, where, after the most remarkable trial in the history of the State, lasting continuously for four months, the jury declared that Hargis was not guilty, thereby deciding that he was eligible to the office he had sought, and in not having been concerned in the mutilation of the records. Every distinguished lawyer of Kentucky was engaged pro or con in this trial, and the jury consisted of 12 Louisville men of unquestionable integrity. Green had been given every fair opportunity to prove his charges and had failed. Pending all of this the entire eastern section of Kentucky became divided into factions—it was Green or it was Hargis, and the feeling thus aroused is only now dying out, Hargis having removed to Louisville, where his ability and excellent social nature are commanding a good law practice.

Among those persons accused of mutilating the Rowan County records was John Martin, a young man addicted to drink on account of business failure. He was County Clerk, but failed of re-election because he was suspected of having mutilated the records in the manner already indicated. This was about four years previous to the trial at Louisville and at a period when much bad blood had been aroused over the accusations against Martin in connection with the record mutilation and a charge of horse stealing, the latter offense occurring in Mason County. Martin fled to Carter County, adjoining Rowan. With his young wife he lived in the house of “old man George Underwood,” next to whom resided Esquire Elijah Holbrook. The last-named man awoke, one morning to find his two favorite horses stolen. Now, of all border offenses nothing so quickly enrages as equine theft.

“John Martin and your boy Jesse did it,” cried old Holbrook.

“You lie,” said old Underwood.

“That settles it,” said the neighbors; but oh no, they were wrong; that began it.

Notice to leave was served on the Underwoods, but the delicate condition of young Mrs. Martin was given as an excuse for not going. War was now on, and this began a strife that has not yet ceased save at intervals. I believe some 30 were “picked off” in the Underwood-Holbrook feud. It lasted over two years, and culminated in the most inhuman and treacherous affair of all. “Old Underwood’s gang” had lived in a log house “fort like” for two years in a state of siege almost constantly. Now an “outsider” would be picked off, and then an insider would bite the dust. I mean by insider an Underwood, and by outsider a Holbrook. One night a shot or two hit Jesse Underwood. He died. Thus was the father childless; all the boys were gone. He sat alone with a grandchild and his old wife, the dead body of his pet boy lying at their feet.

A voice outside said: “We hear Jesse is dead, old man, and if this be true and you show us his corpse we’ll let you alone now.”

The old man grabbed his gun, but the grandchild’s looks and piteous appeals stopped him.

“For God’s sake, husband, let them in. I believe what they say, for you know it was only our poor dead lad they wanted,” begged the wife.

“Open the door, but God knows I’m afeerd to trust ’em,” replied old George.

A crowd of masked men appeared and examined the body.

“He’s done for, sure enough,” exclaimed one of the number.

“Great God!” shouted old Underwood in surprise; “you here?” calling a name.

In an instant the brute fired the two barrels of his shotgun through the body of the defenseless Underwood, who dropped dead in the lap of his granddaughter.

Thus ended the Underwood-Holbrook war. John Martin alone survived on his side.

In August last the same feud broke out again, this time under John Martin as the head of one faction and the Toliver boys the leaders of the other. I have fully described the progress of this feud, which, like the other, has been marked continuously with blood and fire, a dozen lives and four houses having thus far been lost.

This trouble is due directly to politics; those in power can and ought to stop it. The County Judge and the County Attorney are afraid to do their duty. My investigations lead to the belief that Judge Stewart is neutral and just, but highly intimidated. He had to be hunted for by the military, who could scarcely persuade him to issue warrants for the arrest of guilty parties. So far as the County Attorney is concerned, I believe he could long ago have stopped the whole affair of arson and murder, for he is undoubtedly in close confidential and advisory relations with the so-called Toliver faction. Both Gov. Knott and Adjt.-Gen. Castleman know this as well as the writer. Why do they not therefore take notice of it. Their peace policy, by which a pledge to behave was signed by the “living” members of the two crowds, has proved a terrible mistake. It was prompted by the best motives, and now that it is a failure why not force the fight against the outlaws without quarter? A mere constituency of a few thousand votes can affect Attorney Young or Judge Stewart, but the whole State, or at least the General Assembly thereof, votes for aspirants of higher political honors, and the best way to affect this constituency, it seems to the writer, would be to crush out outlawry quickly and thoroughly. This, I believe, Gov. Knott and Gen. Castleman propose to do. They are both acceptable officers to the people, and now that they have the military at the scene of trouble and have effected a dozen arrests it is to be hoped they will never cease their efforts until the last guilty wretch shall be hanged.

The troops at Morehead are in charge of Major L. W. McKee, a young lawyer and State Senator elect. McKee to him: “One of your Lieutenants has offered to go with me to see Miss Sue Martin where she is hiding.”

“I am sorry,” said Major McKee, “but I cannot consent. I keep my men together here, as

bushwhacking is easily done and a shot never misses its mark. Why, Sir, these fellows care no more for a man’s life than a chicken’s.”

“No, indeed,” added Commissary Edward Grant, “not as much, for they can eat the chicken and it’s troublesome to bury the dead.”

County Attorney Young and his friends complain that he is unjustly suspected. If this be true an easy way to prove it exists. Let him promise safety by his friends to those who have been compelled to flee until they can return and testify. Again, the State authorities might indict him through some citizen of Rowan County for inciting murder and get at the truth in this way. If free from factional participation and absolutely neutral Zachary Taylor Young would do his State much good also by asking outside legal talent to aid in the prosecution of the parties now under arrest, his friends included.

Major McKee is doing his full duty. He has a fine sense of exact justice, and under the excellent advisory judgment of Gen. Castleman will render all possible protection to the local authorities. To crush out this feud will ring the death knell of all the balance, for nothing so wholesome can be administered in Kentucky just now as the hanging of the desperadoes who disgrace their State. Them out of the way, and with a few more railroads built, and the remarkable mineral and timber resources of this naturally rich and splendid land will find easy and profitable outlets.

E. F. M.