

The Miner's Grave or The Lonesome Lover's Grave

c.1870

It was at one [time] my lot to live on a farm at some distance from a flourishing mining town of the Sierras. The road from the town to my home after traversing from some distance a sloping plateau at length crossing the ridge of this plateau descended rapidly winding along the edge of a ravine which gradually narrower and deeper as it approached my home. This ravine at one point made a sharp turn while the road still following it was flanked on both sides by thick groves of pine bushes, which on the side of the ravine only opened sufficiently to enable the sudden descent to be visible and on the opposite side bordered closely upon the road retiring a few feet in but a single spot.

This spot seemed to have been deserted by Nature to barrenness and desolation. Dusty, dry, flowerless, unfertile there was nothing in it which could possibly commend it even to the passerby as a transient resting place, much less to the [2] mourner as the last couch for a lost friend. Yet there in that strangest of all strange spots for such a purpose a mound, a rough-hewn shingle proclaimed the existence of a grave, here lonely and forsaken some one once loved, once full of hope, rested together with the love and hope so long forgotten.

I had often wondered, often wished to know what the mysterious history of this tomb might be, but my wishes had never been satisfied till business had detained me late into one night. I met there a friend a former inhabitant of the place whom I had not seen for years. For old acquaintance sake as it was a clear quiet moonlight evening he consented to walk part of the way home with me. Our conversation, as we sauntered along side by side over the still country road, gradually fell into a mournful strain, and at length the lonely grave ahead of us was mentioned. To my surprise I found that my friend was acquainted with its history having been during his residence in the town an eyewitness to many of the events connected with it.

I wish I could describe the way in which the curious and sorrowful story as he told it to me chimed in with the scene before us, and how every voice of the night which broke the stillness around seemed to chant a sad refrain from the [3] silver-veiled about us to the tale of a blighted heart. An outline of this history is all I can give.

It appears that in 1837 when a very few families had yet appeared in the town, a young man of handsome countenance, quite illustrious as well as quite reticent, arrived suddenly and after a short stay took up a claim near this very road. He lived almost alone and was very seldom seen among the other miners. He always although poor seemed to expect success in his work, and was generally considered quite lucky. It was reported that he desired to be wealthy that he might win the hand of a certain young lady whose father would consent to marriage on no other condition. It was noticed that he sometimes received

letters directed in a female hand about which he would say nothing. The only person whom he appeared to be acquainted with in town was a young fellow by the name of Lewis, a shiftless rascal who was noted chiefly for his wonderful success in gambling. These two so unlike seemed to desire to avoid one another a good but evidently had considerable knowledge of one another. [4]

About two or three years after this arrival the town was excited by the arrival of a new family, consisting of a gentleman a considerable wealth his old maid sister, his daughter a young lady of no ordinary beauty, and his little son.

It was noticed by my friend that about this time the young gambler Lewis, who by a late turn of Fortune's wheel had realized a considerable sum of money, left off his former habits and assumed the characters of a respectable hard working youth, and what was more claimed an acquaintance with the newcomers, renewed a friendship with the old gentleman which he boasted to be of years standing and showed quite plainly to those who watched him that he desired nothing less than the hand of the young beauty.

Meanwhile the reticent miner of the road was often seen in the town and seemed also from a few remarks which he dropped not to be totally unacquainted with the strangers himself. He seemed to avoid the sight of the old gentleman but evidently desired if possible to see the young lady alone. At least my friend was able to judge all this from certain occurrences which space will not permit me fully to narrate. [5]

About this time Lewis was observed to open up a very sudden intimacy with the young miners. He talked with him often, in the hotel barroom on the streets, and even went home with him on several occasions. This intimacy seemed to change the young man's reticence into gloomy silence and his thoughtfulness into dark meditation. While he was oftener seen than formerly, and seemed to be more watchful than ever, he was still less inclined to general society, and even to my friend who had formerly done him some trifling favors and with whom he was on pretty good terms. At last one day he disappeared and search around his cabin revealed only a scrap of writing to this effect — "I depart for a foreign county. I leave my claim to whosoever shall desire it; hoping that the gold he gains from it may not become as coals of fire to him, if he should find that through the faithlessness of one, his hopes of happiness should be like mine forever blasted." Young Lewis disclaimed any knowledge of the [6] cause of this sudden departure but he was more jolly than usual during the next week.

But troubles thick and fast now fell on the heads of the new family. First, the young lady immediately after the disappearance of the young miner began to grow pale and thin and it was whispered that consumption would not leave her very long in this world. Then by a sudden reverse of fortune the old gentleman lost nearly all he possessed, his sister was taken very sick and scarcely recovered alive. The young daughter grew fairer and paler each day, the victim of a settled melancholy, the very shadow of the young beauty who had charmed the town so short a time before, gradually faded before the eyes of her

agonized father. At length at the closing scene, it was said that in a frenzy of grief he asked her dying request and swore that did it cost him his life he would fulfill it. And then she in a scarcely audible voice asked as her only request that they might bury her in the woods in the most barren spot that could be found. And so the despairing heart to which joy could never again come stilled its throbbing 'neath the mound of the lonely grave. [7]

"Have no doubt" concluded my friend, "that the unprincipled Lewis soon found that he had to deal with a rival in the young miner. I have no doubt that the report with regard to this young man who was working so diligently was true and that it was for this young lady's hand that he toiled and that of her affections he was already sure. Doubtless also it was from her that he received those letters. It is quite evident that Lewis used some means to prevail on him to leave the country so that he himself should have a clear field, and it is easy to guess from that scrap of writing that he had made the young lover believe that she whom he loved and toiled for was faithless to him. It is at least comforting to know that Lewis gained nothing by his miserable plot."

Shortly after completing this story bade me goodnight and left me to go on the rest of my journey alone.

The moon had almost reached the zenith and now shone down in unclouded splendor on the forests of pine, as I passed the turn in [8] the road and approached the lonely grave. Very different were my feelings now from what they had been a while before, no longer did I look upon the tomb as simply the last home of some poor miner, now I sat in it the shrine of a buried loveliness, the resting place of a broken heart.

My heart beat unaccountably faster as I approached, I looked and saw in the shadow not far from the grave the figure of a man, wrapped in a heavy cloak, seated upon the ground, his head buried between his shoulders, his face turned toward the grave.

How shall I describe the sensations of that moment. The brook trickling down in the depth of the dark ravine, the mournful hoo-hoo of the owl these sounds alone broke the awful silence and there by that grave that had acquired so touching an interest in my eyes in weird solitude and silence sat that mysterious form. In a moment I controlled myself and stepped forward. Just then he looked up and without any pause, out [9] rang his voice in clear wild tones of the air. "Do you know he said what joy what happiness what love, was once mine, you have heard, you must know, I say do you know what once I might have enjoyed. Yes! but now it all lies buried there. Yes! there!" Two thoughts flashed through my mind and became convictions while this strange speech was being made; one that the hopeful miner the disappointed lover was before me, the other that the man before me was mad. "Yes" he continued starting up "I believed a vile wretch who told me she was faithless, had forgotten me, hated me; and I wrote to her that I believed it, that I never should forgive her in time or eternity and--I killed her, killed her?" His voice had almost risen to a shriek but as he spoke his eye fell on the grave; in an instant his look changed he sank back and was silent

motionless. I had now had time to collect my thoughts. "Sir," I said, "it is not well that you [10] should remain here. To mourn this can do no good. Come with me." He was silent. I felt as if I spoke into the depths of space. "Sir," I said, "it is cold come to some shelter." "Silence, depart," burst forth he, "Do not break the stillness around her last couch. Perhaps I will hear her voice, it will be like music, she will say 'I forgive thee' and in peace I shall die." His voiced ceased; all again was still. I was in no mood to cope with a crazy man and much as I disliked thus to leave him, I could do nothing else. So in silence I went home.

In the morning early again I came to the spot. And there stretched upon the grave the sweet smile of the forgiven of his lip lay the broken-hearted lover and in depth they were united. Then there was a coroner's inquest and a p.m. examination, but no medical skill could ever discover what I knew, and unless the unfortunate father still lives in some foreign land, none but my friend and I mourn over the occupant of the lonely grave.