# THE MISSIONARY SHERIFF

*BEING*
*INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A PLAIN MAN*
*WHO TRIED TO DO HIS DUTY*

BY
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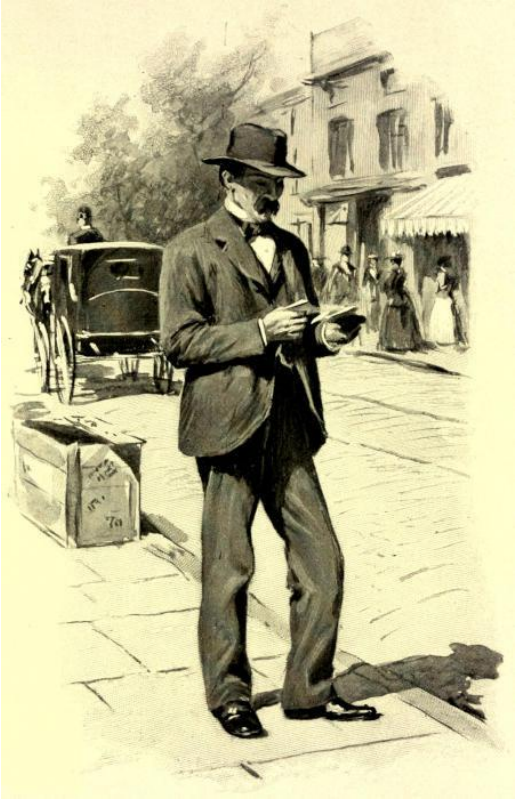

"PICKED UP SOME OF THE SHREDS"

# THE MISSIONARY SHERIFF

Sheriff Wickliff leaned out of his office window, the better to watch the boy soldiers march down the street. The huge pile of stone that is the presumed home of Justice for the county stands in the same yard with the old yellow stone jail. The court-house is ornate and imposing, although a hundred active chimneys daub its eaves and carvings, but the jail is as plain as a sledge-hammer. Yet during Sheriff Wickliff's administration, while Joe Raker kept jail and Mrs. Raker was matron, window-gardens brightened the grim walls all summer, and chrysanthemums and roses blazoned the black bars in winter.

Above the jail the street is a pretty street, with trim cottages and lawns and gardens; below, the sky-lines dwindle ignobly into shabby one and two story wooden shops devoted to the humbler handicrafts. It is not a street favored by processions; only the little soldiers of the Orphans' Home Company would choose to tramp over its unkempt macadam. Good reason they had, too, since thus they passed the sheriff's office, and it was the sheriff who had given most of the money for their uniforms, and their drums and fifes outright.

A voice at the sheriff's elbow caused him to turn.

"Well, Amos," said his deputy, with Western familiarity, "getting the interest on your money?"

Wickliff smiled as he unbent his great frame; he was six feet two inches in height, with bones and thews to match his stature. A stiff black mustache, curving about his mouth and

lifting as he smiled, made his white teeth look the whiter. One of the upper teeth was crooked. That angle had come in an ugly fight (when he was a special officer and detective) in the Chicago stock-yards, he having to hold a mob at bay, single-handed, to save the life of a wounded policeman. The scar seaming his jaw and neck belonged to the time that he captured a notorious gang of train-robbers. He brought the robbers in—that is, he brought their bodies; and "That scar was worth three thousand dollars to me," he was wont to say. In point of fact it was worth more, because he had invested the money so advantageously that, thanks to it and the savings which he had been able to add, in spite of his free hand he was now become a man of property. The sheriff's high cheek-bones, straight hair (black as a dead coal), and narrow black eyes were the arguments for a general belief that an Indian ancestor lurked somewhere in the foliage of his genealogical tree. All that people really knew about him was that his mother died when he was a baby, and his father, about the same time, was killed in battle, leaving their only child to drift from one reluctant protector to another, until he brought up in the Soldiers' Orphans' Home of the State. If the sheriff's eyes were Indian, Indians may have very gentle eyes. He turned them now on the deputy with a smile.

"Well, Joe, what's up?" said he.

"The lightning-rod feller wants to see you, as soon as you come back to the jail, he says. And here's something he dropped as he was going to his room. Don't look much like it could be *his* mother. Must have prigged it."

The sheriff examined the photograph, an ordinary cabinet card. The portrait was that of a woman, pictured with the relentless frankness of a rural photographer's camera. Every sad line in the plain elderly face, every wrinkle in the ill-fitting silk gown, showed with a brutal distinctness, and somehow made the picture more pathetic. The woman's hair was gray and thin; her eyes, which were dark, looked straight forward, and seemed to meet the sheriff's gaze. They had no especial beauty of form, but they, as well as the mouth, had an expression of wistful kindliness that fixed his eyes on them for a full minute. He sighed as he dropped his hand. Then he observed that there was writing on the reverse side of the carte, and lifted it again to read.

In a neat cramped hand was written:

"To Eddy, from Mother.

*Feb. 21, 1889.*

"The Lord bless thee and keep thee. The Lord make His face to shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee; the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace."

Wickliff put the carte in his pocket.

"That's just the kind of mother I'd like to have," said he; "awful nice and good, and not so fine she should be ashamed of me. And to think of *him*!"

"He's an awful slick one," assented the deputy, cordially. "Two years we've been ayfter him. New games all the time; but the lightning-rods ain't in it with this last scheme—working hisself

off as a Methodist parson on the road to a job, and stopping all night, and then the runaway couple happening in, and that poor farmer and his wife so excited and interested, and of course they'd witness and sign the certificate; wisht I'd seen them when they found out!"

"They gave 'em cake and some currant wine, too."

"That's just like women. Say, I didn't think the girl was much to brag on for looks—"

"Got a kinder way with her, though," Wickliff struck in. "Depend on it, Joseph, the most dangerous of them all are the homely girls with a way to them. A man's off his guard with them; he's sorry for them not being pretty, and being so nice and humble; and before he knows it they're winding him 'round their finger."

"I didn't know you was so much of a philosopher, Amos," said the deputy, admiring him.

"It ain't me, Joe; it's the business. Being a philosopher, I take it, ain't much more than seeing things with the paint off; and there's nothing like being a detective to get the paint off. It's a great business for keeping a man straight, too, seeing the consequences of wickedness so constantly, especially fool wickedness that gets found out. Well, Joe, if this lady"—touching his breast pocket—"is that guy's mother, I'm awful sorry for her, for I know she tried to train him right. I'll go over and find out, I guess."

So saying, and quite unconscious of the approving looks of his subordinate (for he was a simple-minded, modest man, who

only spoke out of the fulness of his heart), the sheriff walked over to the jail.

The corridor into which the cells of the unconvicted prisoners opened was rather full to-day. As the sheriff entered, every one greeted him, even the sullen-browed man talking with a sobbing woman through the bars, and every one smiled. He nodded to all, but only spoke to the visitor. He said, “I guess he didn’t do it this time, Lizzie; he won’t be in long.”

“That’s what I bin tellin’ her,” growled the man, “and she won’t believe me; I told her I promised you—”

“And God A’mighty bless you, sheriff, for what you done!” the woman wailed. The sheriff had some ado to escape from her benedictions politely; but he got away, and knocked at the door of the last cell on the tier. The inmate opened the door himself.

He was a small man, who still was wearing the clerical habit of his last criminal masquerade; and his face carried out the suggestion of his costume, being an actor’s face, not only in the clean-shaven cheeks and lips, but in the flexibility of the features and the unconscious alertness of gaze. He was fair of skin, and his light-brown hair was worn off his head at the temples. His eyes were fine, well shaped, of a beautiful violet color, and an extremely pleasant expression. He looked like a mere boy across the room in the shadow, but as he advanced, certain deep lines about his mouth displayed themselves and raised his age. The sunlight showed that he was thin; he was haggard the instant he ceased to smile. With a very good manner he greeted the sheriff, to whom he proffered the sole chair of the apartment.

“Guess the bed will hold me,” said the sheriff, testing his words by sitting down on the white-covered iron bedstead. “Well, I hear you wanted to see me.”

“Yes, sir. I want to get my money that you took away from me.”

“Well, I guess you can’t have it.” The sheriff spoke with a smile, but his black eyes narrowed a little. “I guess the court will have to decide first if that ain’t old man Goodrich’s money that you got from the note he supposed was a marriage certificate. I guess you better not put any hopes on that money, Mr. Paisley. Wasn’t that the name you gave me?”

“Paisley’ll do,” said the other man, indifferently. “What became of my friend?”

“The sheriff of Hardin County wanted the man, and the lady—well, the lady is here boarding with me.”

“Going to squeal?”

“Going to tell all she knows.”

Paisley’s hand went up to his mouth; he changed color. “It’s like her,” he muttered—“oh, it’s just like her!” And he added a villanous epithet.

“None of that talk,” said Wickliff.

The man had jumped up and was pacing his narrow space, fighting against a climbing rage. “You see,” he cried, unable to contain himself—“you see, what makes me so mad is now I’ve got to get my mother to help me—and I’d rather take a licking!”

“I should think you would,” said Wickliff, dryly. “Say, this your mother?” He handed him the photograph, the written side upward.

“It came in a Bible,” explained Paisley, with an embarrassed air.

“Your mother rich?”

“She can raise the money.”

“Meaning, I expect, that she can mortgage her house and lot. Look here, Smith, this ain’t the first time your ma has sent you money, but if I was you I’d have the last time *stay* the last. She don’t look equal to much more hard work.”

“My name’s Paisley, if you please,” returned the prisoner, stolidly, “and I can take care of my own mother. If she’s lent me money I have paid it back. This is only for bail, to deposit—”

“There is the chance,” interrupted Wickliff, “of your skipping. Now, I tell you, I like the looks of your mother, and I don’t mean she shall run any risks. So, if you do get money from her, I shall personally look out you don’t forfeit your bail. Besides, court is in session now, so the chances are you wouldn’t more than get the money before it would be your turn. See?”

“Anyhow I’ve got to have a lawyer.”

“Can’t see why, young feller. I’ll give you a straight tip. There ain’t enough law in Iowa to get you out of this scrape. We’ve got the cinch on you, and there ain’t any possible squirming out.”

“So you say;” the sneer was a little forced; “I’ve heard of your game before. Nice, kind officers, ready to advise a man and pump him dry, and witness against him afterwards. I ain’t that kind of a sucker, Mr. Sheriff.”

“Nor I ain’t that kind of an officer, Mr. Smith. You’d ought to know about my reputation by this time.”

“They say you’re square,” the prisoner admitted; “but you ain’t so stuck on me as to care a damn whether I go over the road; expect you’d want to send me for the trouble I’ve given you,” and he grinned. “Well, what *are* you after?”

“Helping your mother, young feller. I had a mother myself.”

“It ain’t uncommon.”

“Maybe a mother like mine—and yours—is, though.”

The prisoner’s eyes travelled down to the face on the carte. “That’s right,” he said, with another ring in his voice. “I wouldn’t mind half so much if I could keep my going to the pen from her. She’s never found out about me.”

“How much family you got?” said Wickliff, thoughtfully.

“Just a mother. I ain’t married. There was a girl, my sister—good sort too, ’nuff better’n me. She used to be a clerk in the store, type-writer, bookkeeper, general utility, you know. My position in the first place; and when I—well, resigned, they gave it to her. She helped mother buy the place. Two years ago she died. You may believe me or not, but I would have gone back home then and run straight if it hadn’t been for Mame. I would, by —! I had five hundred dollars then, and I was going

back to give every damned cent of it to ma, tell her to put it into the bakery—"

"That how she makes a living?"

"Yes—little two-by-four bakery—oh, I'm giving you straight goods—makes pies and cakes and bread—good, too, you bet—makes it herself. Ruth Graves, who lives round the corner, comes in and helps—keeps the books, and tends shop busy times; tends the oven too, I guess. She was a great friend of Ellie's—and mine. She's a real good girl. Well, I didn't get mother's letters till it was too late, and I felt bad; I had a mind to go right down to Fairport and go in with ma. That—*she* stopped it. Got me off on a tear somehow, and by the time I was sober again the money was 'most all gone. I sent what was left off to ma, and I went on the road again myself. But she's the devil."

"That the time you hit her?"

The prisoner nodded. "Oughtn't to, of course. Wasn't brought up that way. My father was a Methodist preacher, and a good one. But I tell you the coons that say you never must hit a woman don't know anything about that sort of women; there ain't nothing on earth so infernally exasperating as a woman. They can mad you worse than forty men."

It was the sheriff's turn to nod, which he did gravely, with even a glimmer of sympathy in his mien.

"Well, she never forgave you," said he; "she's had it in for you since."

“And she knows I won’t squeal, ’cause I’d have to give poor Ben away,” said the prisoner; “but I tell you, sheriff, she was at the bottom of the deviltry every time, and she managed to bag the best part of the swag, too.”

“I dare say. Well, to come back to business, the question with you is how to keep these here misfortunes of yours from your mother, ain’t it?”

“Of course.”

“Well, the best plan for you is to plead guilty, showing you don’t mean to give the court any more trouble. Tell the judge you are sick of your life, and going to quit. You are, ain’t you?” the sheriff concluded, simply; and the swindler, after an instant’s hesitation, answered:

“Damned if I won’t, if I can get a job!”

“Well, that admitted”—the sheriff smoothed his big knees gently as he talked, his mild attentive eyes fixed on the prisoner’s nervous presence—“that admitted, best plan is for you to plead guilty, and maybe we can fix it so’s you will be sentenced to jail instead of the pen. Then we can keep it from your mother easy. Write her you’ve got a job here in this town, and have your letters sent to my care. I’ll get you something to do. She’ll never suspect that you are the notorious Ned Paisley. And it ain’t likely you go home often enough to make not going awkward.”

“I haven’t been home in four years. But see here: how long am I likely to get?”

The sheriff looked at him, at the hollow cheeks and sunken eyes and narrow chest—all so cruelly declared in the sunshine; and unconsciously he modulated his voice when he spoke.

"I wouldn't worry about that, if I was you. You need a rest. You are run down pretty low. You ain't rugged enough for the life you've been leading."

The prisoner's eyes strayed past the grating to the green hills and the pleasant gardens, where some children were playing. The sheriff did not move. There was as little sensibility in his impassive mask as in a wooden Indian's; but behind the trained apathy was a real compassion. He was thinking. "The boy don't look like he had a year's life in him. I bet he knows it himself. And when he stares that way out of the window he's thinking he ain't never going to be foot-loose in the sun again. Kinder tough, I call it."

The young man's eyes suddenly met his. "Well, it's no great matter, I guess," said he. "I'll do it. But I can't for the life of me make out why you are taking so much trouble."

He was surprised at Wickliff's reply. It was, "Come on down stairs with me, and I'll show you."

"You mean it?"

"Yes; go ahead."

"You want my parole not to cut and run?"

"Just as you like about that. Better not try any fooling."

The prisoner uttered a short laugh, glancing from his own puny limbs to the magnificent muscles of the officer.

“Straight ahead, after you’re out of the corridor, down-stairs, and turn to the right,” said Wickliff.

Silently the prisoner followed his directions, and when they had descended the stairs and turned to the right, the sheriff’s hand pushed beneath his elbow and opened the door before them. “My rooms,” said Wickliff. “Being a single man, it’s handier for me living in the jail.” The rooms were furnished with the unchastened gorgeousness of a Pullman sleeper, the brilliant hues of a Brussels carpet on the floor, blue plush at the windows and on the chairs. The walls were hung with the most expensive gilt paper that the town could furnish (after all, it was a modest price per roll), and against the gold, photographs of the district judges assumed a sinister dignity. There was also a photograph of the court-house, and one of the jail, and a model in bas-relief of the Capitol at Des Moines; but more prominent than any of these were two portraits opposite the windows. They were oil-paintings, elaborately framed, and they had cost so much that the sheriff rested happily content that they must be well painted. Certainly the artist had not recorded impressions; rather he seemed to have worked with a microscope, not slighting an eyelash. One of the portraits was that of a stiff and stern young man in a soldier’s uniform. He was dark, and had eyes and features like the sheriff. The other was the portrait of a young girl. In the original daguerreotype from which the artist worked the face was comely, if not pretty, and the innocence in the eyes and the timid smile made it winning. The artist had enlarged the eyes and made the mouth

smaller, and bestowed (with the most amiable intentions) a complexion of hectic brilliancy; but there still remained, in spite of paint, a flicker of the old touching expression. Between the two canvases hung a framed letter. It was labelled in bold Roman script, “Letter of Capt. R. T. Manley,” and a glance showed the reader that it was the description of a battle to a friend. One sentence was underlined. “We also lost Private A. T. Wickliff, killed in the charge—a good man who could always be depended on to do his duty.”

The sheriff guided his bewildered visitor opposite these portraits and lifted his hand above the other’s shoulder. “You see them?” said he. “They’re *my* father and mother. You see that letter? It was wrote by my father’s old captain and sent to me. What he says about my father is everything that I know. But it’s enough. He was ‘a good man who could always be depended on to do his duty.’ You can’t say no more of the President of the United States. I’ve had a pretty tough time of it in my own life, as a man’s got to have who takes up my line; but I’ve tried to live so my father needn’t be ashamed of me. That other picture is my mother. I don’t know nothing about her, nothing at all; and I don’t need to—except those eyes of hers. There’s a look someway about your mother’s eyes like mine. Maybe it’s only the look one good woman has like another; but whatever it is, your mother made me think of mine. She’s the kind of mother I’d like to have; and if I can help it, she sha’n’t know her son’s in the penitentiary. Now come on back.”

As silently as he had gone, the prisoner followed the sheriff back to his cell. “Good-bye, Paisley,” said the sheriff, at the door.

“Good-bye, sir; I’m much obliged,” said the prisoner. Not another word was said.

That evening, however, good Mrs. Raker told the sheriff that, to her mind, if ever a man was struck with death, that new young fellow was; and he had been crying, too; his eyes were all red.

“He needs to cry,” was all the comfort that the kind soul received from the sheriff, the cold remark being accompanied by what his familiars called his Indian scowl.

Nevertheless, he did his utmost for the prisoner as a quiet intercessor, and his merciful prophecy was accomplished—Edgar S. Paisley was permitted to serve out his sentence in the jail instead of the State prison. His state of health had something to do with the judge’s clemency, and the sheriff could not but suspect that, in his own phrase, “Paisley played his cough and his hollow cheeks for all they were worth.”

“But that’s natural,” he observed to Raker, “and he’s doing it partially for the old lady. Well, I’ll try to give her a quiet spell.”

“Yes,” Raker responds, dubiously, “but he’ll be at his old games the minute he gits out.”

“You don’t suppose”—the sheriff speaks with a certain embarrassment—“you don’t suppose there’d be any chance of really reforming him, so as he’d stick?—he ain’t likely to live long.”

“Nah,” says the unbelieving deputy; “he’s a deal too slick to be reformed.”