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THE SHERIFFS BLUFF

By Thomas Nelson Page

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I

The county of H—— was an old Colonial county, and even as late as the time of my story contained many Colonial relics. Among them were the court-house and the jail, and, at that time, the Judge and the Sheriff.

The court-house was an old brick edifice of solemn and grayish brown, with a portico whose mighty columns might have stood before a temple of Minerva overlooking the Ægean Sea. With its thick walls and massive barred windows, it might have been thought the jail, until one saw the jail. The jail once seen stood alone. A cube of stone, each block huge enough to have come from the Pyramid of Cheops; the windows, or rather the apertures, were small square openings, crossed and recessed with great bars of wrought iron, so massive that they might have been fashioned on the forge of the Cyclops. Looking through them from the outside, one saw just deep enough into the narrow cavern to see another iron grating, and catch a suspicion of the darkness beyond. The entrance was but a slit letting into a stone-paved corridor on which opened the grinding iron doors of the four small cells, each door a grate of huge iron bars, heavily crossed, with openings just large enough to admit a hand. The jail was built, not to meet the sentimental or any other requirements of a reasonable and humane age, but in that hard time when crime was reckoned crime, when the very names of "gaol" and "prison" stood for something clear and unmistakable.

The Judge of the circuit was himself a relic of the past, for his youth had been cast among those great ones of the earth whose memory had come down coupled with deeds so heroic and far-reaching, that even to the next generation the actors appeared half enveloped and magnified in the halo of tradition. His life had been one of high rectitude and dignity, to which habits of unusual studiousness and a great work on Executors had added a reputation for vast learning, and in his old age both in his manner and his habit he preserved a distance and a dignity of demeanor which lent dignity to the Bar, and surrounded him wherever he went with a feeling akin to awe. Though he had given up the queue and short clothes, he still retained ruffles, or what was so closely akin to them that the difference could scarcely be discerned. Tall, grave, and with a little bend, not in the shoulders but in the neck; with white hair just long enough to be brushed behind in a way to suggest the knot which had once appeared at the back; with calm, quiet eyes under bushy white eyebrows; a face of pinkish red inherited from Saxon ancestors, who once lived in the sun and on the brine, and a mouth and chin which bespoke decision and self-respect in every line and wrinkle, wherever he moved he produced an impression of one who had survived from a preceding age. Moreover, he was a man of heroic ideals, of Spartan simplicity, and of inflexible discipline.

If he had a weakness it was his susceptibility to feminine testimony.

The county was a secluded one—a fitting field for such a judge. And the great meetings of the year were the sessions of the Circuit Court.

The Judge's name was then on every lip, and his passage to the court-house was a procession.

Everyone except those unfortunates who had come under his ban, or might be too far gone in drink to venture into his presence, drew up along the path from the tavern to bow to him and receive his courteous bow in return as he passed with slow and thoughtful step along, preceded by the Sheriff and his deputies, and followed by the Bar and "the multitude."

Whenever he entered the court or rose from the bench the lawyers stood.

If he was impressive off the bench, on the bench he was imposing.

At heart one of the kindest of men, he added to great natural dignity a high sense of the loft-iness of a position on the bench and preserved, with impartial and inflexible rigor, the strictest order in his court, ruling bar and attendants alike up to a high accountability.

No one would any more have thought of taking a liberty with Judge Lomax than he would have done it with an old lion. Just one man, possibly, might have thought of it, but he would not have done it—and this was Aleck Thompson, the Sheriff of the county, a jovial man past middle age, a rubicund bachelor, who had courted half the girls in the county and was intimate with more than half the people in the circuit. He was daring even to rashness. He had held the office of Sheriff—not so long, perhaps, as the Judge had sat on the bench, but, at least, since he first stood for the place; and he could hold it as long as he wished it. He was easily the most popular man in the county. He treated everybody with unvarying joviality and indiscriminate generosity, and it was known that his income, though large, was, except so much as was absolutely necessary for his support, distributed with impartial fairness among the people of his county, a part over the poker-table, a part over the bar, and the balance in other popular ways. He had a face that no one could read, and bluffed as well with a pair of treys as with four aces. But he used to say that such a bluff was to be used rarely, and only on important occasions.

Now and then some opposition to him would arise and a small headway would be made against him. As, for instance, after he advised Squire Jefford's plump and comely daughter, Mary, not to marry Dick Creel, because Dick was too dissipated. There were some who said that the Sheriff had designs himself on Sam Jefford's buxom, black-eyed daughter, while others held that he was afraid of young Dick, who was an amiable and popular young fellow, and that he did not want him to get too much influence in the lower end of the county. However it was, Mary Jefford not only married her young lover, but sobered him, and as she was young, pretty, and ambitious, and worshipped her husband, Dick Creel at the next election, to use the vernacular, "made considerable show runnin' ag'inst the Sheriff, and give him considerable trouble." Still, Thompson was elected overwhelmingly, and few people believed Mary Creel's charge that the Sheriff had got Dick drunk on purpose to beat him. Thompson said, "Did n't anybody have to *git* Dick drunk—the work was t'other way."

II

The session of the Circuit Court in the "—— year of the Commonwealth," as the writs ran, and "in the sixteenth year of Aleck Thompson's Sheriffalty," as that official used to say, was more than usually important. The noted case of "*Dolittle et al. vs. Dolittle's Executrix*" was tried at the autumn term of the court, and

caused considerable excitement in the county; for, in addition to the amount of property and the nice questions of law which were involved, the two sides had been severally espoused by two sister churches, and nearly half the county was in attendance, either as witnesses or interested spectators. Not only was every available corner in the little village filled to overflowing with parties, witnesses, and their adherents, but during the first week of the term the stable yards and road-sides were lined with covered wagons and other vehicles, in or under which some of those who had not been fortunate enough to obtain shelter in the inn used to sleep, and "Briles's bar" under the tavern did a thriving business.

As the case, however, wore on, and the weather became inclement, the crowd dropped off somewhat, though a sufficient number still remained to give an air of life to the little roadside village.

Certain of these visitors found the bar-room on the ground floor of the tavern across the road more attractive than the court-room, and as evening came the loud talking in that direction told that the visits had not been fruitless.

Perfect order, however, prevailed in the court, until one evening one of these visitors, a young man named Turkle, who had been spending the afternoon at the bar, made his way into the court-room. He was clad in a dingy, weather-stained overcoat and an old slouch hat. He sank into a seat at the end of a bench near the door and, being very drunk, soon began to talk aloud to those about him.

"Silence!" called the Sheriff over the heads of the crowd from his desk in front, and those near the man cautioned him to stop talking. A moment later, however, he began again. Again the Sheriff roared "Silence!" But by this time the hot air of the court-room had warmed up Mr. Turkle, and in answer to the warning of those about him, he declared in a maudlin tone, that he "Warn't goin' to keep silence."

"I got 's much right to talk 's anyone, and I'ma goin' to talk 's much 's I please."

His friends tried to silence him, and the Sheriff made his way through the crowd and endeavored to induce him to leave the court-room. But it was to no purpose. Jim Turkle was much too "far gone" to know what he was doing, though he was in a delightfully good humor. He merely hugged the Sheriff and laughed drunkenly.

"Aleck, you jist go 'way f'om here. I ain't a-goin' to shet up. You shet up yourself. I 'm a-goin' to talk all I please. Now, you hear it."

Then as if to atone for his rudeness, he caught the Sheriff roughly by the arm and pulled him toward him:

"Aleck, how 's the case goin'? Is Mandy a goin' to win? Is that old rascal rulin' right!"

The Sheriff urged something in a low voice, but Turkle would not be silenced.

"Now you see thar," he broke out with a laugh to those about him, "did n't I tell you Aleck wa' n 't nothin' but a 'ol' drunkard? What d' you s'pose the ol' rascal wants me to do? He wants me to go over there to the bar and git drunk like 'im, and I ain't goin' to do it. I never drink. I 've come here to see that my cousin Mandy's chil'ern gits their patrimony, and I ain' a goin' to 'sociate with these here drunken fellows like Aleck Thompson."

The Sheriff made a final effort. He spoke positively, but Turkle would not heed.

"Oh, 'Judge' be damned! You and I know that ol' fellow loves a dram jest 's well 's the best of 'em—jest 's well 's you do. Look at his face. You think he got that drinkin' well-water! Bet yer he 's got a bottle in 's pocket right now."

A titter ran through the crowd, but was suddenly stopped.

A quiet voice was heard from the other end of the court-room, and a deathly silence fell on the assemblage.

"Suspend for a moment, gentlemen, if you please. Mr. Sheriff, bring that person to the bar of the Court."

The crowd parted as if by magic, and the Sheriff led his drunken constituent to the bar, where his befuddled brain took in just enough of the situation to make him quiet enough. The Judge bent his sternest look on him until he quailed.

"Have you no more sense of propriety than to disturb a court of justice in the exercise of its high function?"

Turkle, however, was too drunk to understand this. He tried to steady himself against the bar.

"I ain't is-turbed no Court of function, and anybody 't says so, Jedge, iz a liar." He dragged his hand across his mouth and tried to look around upon the crowd with an air of drunken triumph, but he staggered and would have fallen had not the Sheriff caught and supported him.

The Judge's eyes had never left him.

"Mr. Sheriff, take this intoxicated creature and confine him in the county gaol until the expiration of the term. The very existence of a court of justice depends upon the observance of order. Order must be preserved and the dignity of the Court maintained."

There was a stir—half of horror—throughout the court-room. Put a man in that jail just for being tight!

Then the Sheriff on one side and his deputy on the other, led the culprit out, now sufficiently quiet and half whimpering. A considerable portion of the crowd followed him.

Outside, the prisoner was sober enough, and he begged hard to be let off and allowed to go home. His friends, too, joined in his petition and promised to guarantee that he would not come back again during the term of court. But the Sheriff was firm.

"No. The Judge told me to put you in jail and I 'm goin' to do it." He took two huge iron keys from his deputy and rattled them fiercely.

Turkle shrank back with horror.

"You ain't goin' to put me in thar, Aleck! Not in that hole! Not just for a little drop o' whiskey. It was *your* whiskey, too, Aleck. I was drinkin' yo' health, Aleck. You know I was."

"The Judge won't know anything about it. He 'll never think of it again," pleaded several of Turkle's friends. "You know he has ordered a drunken man put there before and never said any more about it—just told you to discharge him next day."

Turkle stiffened up with hope.

"Yes, Aleck." He leaned on the Sheriff's arm heavily. "He 's drunk himself—I don't mean that, I mean *you 're* drunk—oh, no—I mean *I'm* drunk. Everybody 's drunk."

"Yes, you 've gone and called me a drunkard before the Court. Now I 'm goin' to show you." Thompson rattled his big keys again savagely.

Turkle caught him with both hands.

"Oh, Aleck, don't talk that a-way," he pleaded in a tremulous voice. "Don't talk that a-way!" He burst into tears and flung his arms around the Sheriff's neck. He protested that he had never, seen him take a drink in his life; he would go and tell the Judge so; if necessary, he would swear to it on a Bible.

"Aleck, you know I love you better than anybody in this world—except my wife and children. Yes, better than them—better than Jinny. Jinny will tell you that herself. Oh! Aleck!" He clung to him and sobbed!

His friends indorsed this and declared that they would bring him back if the Judge demanded his presence. They would "promise to bring him back dead or alive at any time he sent for him."

As Turkle and his friends were always warm supporters of the Sheriff, a fact of which they did not fail to remind him, Thompson was not averse to letting him off, especially as he felt tolerably sure that the Judge would, as they said, forget all about the matter, or, if he remembered it, would, as he had done before, simply order him to discharge the prisoner. So, after dragging the culprit to the jail door to scare him well and make his clemency the more impressive, he turned him over to the others on condition that he would mount his mule and go straight home and not come back again during the term. This Turkle was so glad to do that he struck out at once for the stable at what Thompson called a "turkey trot," and five minutes later he was galloping down the road, swinging mightily on his sorrel mule, but whipping for life.

That night Thompson was much toasted about the court-house for his humanity. Several of his admirers, indeed, got into somewhat the same condition that Turkle had been in.

Even Dick Creel, who had come to court that day, lapsed from virtue and fell a victim to the general hilarity.

III

The next morning when court was opened, the Judge was even more than usually dignified and formal. The customary routine of the morning was gone through with; the orders of the day before were read and were signed by the Judge with more than wonted solemnity. The Clerk, a benignant-looking old man with a red face and a white beard, took up his book and adjusted his glasses to call the pending docket: the case of "*Dolittle vs. Dolittle's Ex'ex.*," and the array of counsel drew their chairs up to the bar and prepared for the work of the day, when the Judge, taking off his spectacles, turned to the Sheriff's desk.

"Mr. Sheriff, bring in that unfortunate inebriate whom I sentenced to confinement in the gaol yesterday. The Court, while sensible of the imperative necessity of protecting itself from all unseemly disorder and preserving its dignity undiminished, nevertheless always leans to the side of mercy. The Court trusts that a night's incarceration may have sufficiently sobered and chastened the poor creature. The Court will therefore give him a brief admonition and will then discharge him."

The Judge sat back in his large arm-chair and waited benignantly with his gaze resting placidly in front of him, while a deathly silence fell on the crowd and every eye in the courthouse was turned on the Sheriff.

Thompson, standing at his desk, was staring at the Judge with jaw dropped and a dazed look like a man who had suddenly to face judgment. He opened his lips twice as if to speak, then turned and went slowly out of the court-house like a man in a dream, while those left behind looked in each other's eyes, some half scared and others more than half amused.

Outside, Thompson stopped just between two of the great pillars. He rammed his hands deep in his pockets and gazed vacantly over the court-green and up the road.

"What will he do with you! Remove you!" asked two or three friends who had slipped out of the door behind him and now stood about him.

"He 'll put me in jail—and remove me."

"No matter if he says black 's white and white 's black, don't you open your mouth or you 'll get it. It 's much as I can do to keep you out of jail this minute."

"But, Sheriff—! But, Aleck—! Just wait a minute! I don't—"

The next instant he was inside the courthouse and the Sheriff was marching him up the aisle between the upturned faces. He planted him at the bar immediately before the Court, pulling off his hat in such a way as to drag his hair over his face and give him an even more dishevelled appearance than before. Then he moved around to his own desk, keeping his eye fixed piercingly on the astonished Creel's bewildered face. A gasp went over the court-room, and the Bar stared at the prisoner in blank amazement.

The Judge alone appeared oblivious of his presence. He had sat absolutely silent and motionless since he had given the order to the Sheriff to produce the prisoner, his face expressive of deep reflection. Now he withdrew his eye from the ceiling.

"Oh!"

With impressive deliberation he put on his large gold-rimmed spectacles; sat up in his chair; assumed his most judicial expression, which sat curiously on his benignant face, and looked severely down upon the culprit. The court-room shivered and Thompson's round face grew perceptibly whiter; but his eyes, after a single glance darted at the Judge, never left the face of the man at the bar.

The next second the Judge began to speak, and Thompson, and the court-room with him, heaved a deep sigh of relief.

"Young man," said the Judge, "you have committed an act of grievous impropriety. You have been guilty of one of the most reprehensible offences that any citizen of a Commonwealth founded upon order and justice could commit, an act of such flagrant culpability that the Court, in the maintenance of its dignity and in the interest of the Commonwealth found it necessary to visit upon you punishment of great severity and incarcerate you in the gaol usually reserved for the most depraved malefactors. Intemperance is one of the most debasing of vices. It impairs the intellect and undermines the constitution. To the inhibition of Holy Writ is added the cumulative if inferential prohibition of the Law, which declines to consider inebriety, though extreme enough in degree to impair if not destroy the reasoning faculty, in mitigation of crime of the highest — dignity. If you had no beloved family to whom your conduct would be an affliction, yet you have a duty to yourself and to the Commonwealth which you have flagrantly violated. To shocking inebriety you added the even grosser misdemeanor of disturbing a Court in the exercise of its supreme function: the calm, orderly, and deliberate administration of justice between the citizens of the Commonwealth."

"But, Judge—?" began the young man.

A sharp cough from the Sheriff interrupted him and he glanced at the Sheriff to meet a menacing shake of the head.

The strangeness of the scene and the impressive solemnity of the Judge so wrought upon the young man that he began to whimper. He looked at the Judge and once more opened his mouth to speak, but the Sheriff, called, sharply:

"Silence!"

Creel glanced appealingly from the Judge to the Sheriff, only to meet another imperative shake of the latter's head and a warning scowl. Then the Judge proceeded, in a tone that showed that he was not insensible to his altered manner.

"The Court, always mindful of that mercy whose quality 'is not strained, but droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath,' trusts that your recent incarceration, though brief, may prove adequate to the exigencies of the occasion. It hopes that the incarceration of one night in the common gaol may prove in case of a young man like yourself sufficiently efficacious to deter you from the repetition of so grave a misdemeanor, and at the same time not crush too much that generous spirit of youth which in its proper exercise may prove so advantageous to its possessor, and redound so much to the benefit of the Commonwealth. The order of the Court, therefore, is that the Sheriff discharge you from further imprisonment.

"Mr. Sheriff, conduct the young man to the door, caution him against a recurrence of his offence, and direct him toward his home.

"We will now proceed to call the docket."

The court-room with another gasp broke into a buzz, which was instantly quelled by the sharp command of the Sheriff for silence and order in the court.

"But, Judge—" began Creel again, "I don't understand—"

What he did not understand was not heard, for Thompson seized the prisoner before he could finish his sentence, and, with a grip of steel on his arm, hustled him down the aisle and out of the court-room.

A good many persons poured out of the court-room after them and with subdued laughter followed the Sheriff and his charge across the green. Thompson, however, did not wait for them. The young man appeared inclined to argue. But the Sheriff gave him no time. Hurrying him down the walk, he unhitched his horse for him and ordered him to mount.

"But, Sheriff—Mr. Thompson, I 'm darned if I understand what it is all about."

"You were drunk," said Thompson—"flagrantly inebriated. Go home. Did n't you hear the Judge?"

"Yes, I heard him. He 's doty. I might have been drunk, but I 'm darned if I slept in jail last night—I slept in ___"

"I 'm darned if you did n't," said the Sheriff. "The Judge has ruled it so, and so you did. Now go home and don't you come back here again during this term, or you will sleep in jail again."

"That old Judge is doty," declared the young man with a tone of conviction.

"So much the worse for you if you come back here. Go home now, just as quick as you can."

Creel reflected for a moment.

"Well, it beats my time. I 'll tell you what I 'll do, Mr. Thompson," he said, half pleadingly. "I 'll go home and stay there if you will promise not to tell my wife I was in jail."

"I promise you," said Aleck, solemnly. "I give you my word I won't."

"And what 's more," continued Creel, "if you 'll keep anybody else from doing it, I 'll vote for you next time for Sheriff."

"I promise you that, too," said Aleck, "and if anybody says you were there, let me know, and I 'll come up there and—and tell her you were n't. I can't do any more than that, can I?"

"No, you can't do any more than that," admitted Creel, sadly, and, leaning over and shaking hands with the Sheriff cordially for the first time in some years, he rode away in profound dejection.

"Well, I 've got to face Mary," he said, "and I reckon I might as well do it. Whiskey is a queer thing. I must have been a lot drunker than I thought I was, because if the Court had n't ruled it, I would have sworn I slept in that there wing room last night."

"Well, that 's the best bluff I ever put up," said Thompson to the throng about him as he turned back to the court-house.

The Sheriff's bluff became the topic of the rest of the term. Such audacity, such resourcefulness had never been known. Thompson became more popular than ever, and his re-election the following spring was

admitted to be certain.

"That Aleck Thompson 's the smartest man that is," declared one of his delighted adherents.

Thompson himself thought so, too, and his imitation of the Judge, of Dick Creel, and of himself in court became his most popular story.

Only the old Judge moved among the throng of tittering laymen calm, dignified, and unsuspecting.

"If ever he gets hold of you, Aleck," said one of that worthy's worshippers, "there 's likely to be a vacancy in the office of sheriff."

"He 'll put me in jail," laughed Aleck. "Dick Creel says he 's kind o' doty."

IV

The Court was nearing the end of the term, *Dolittle et al. vs. Dolittle's Executrix*, with all its witnesses and all its bitternesses, had resulted in a mistrial, and the sister churches were wider apart than ever. The rest of the docket was being daily disposed of.

The Sheriff was busy one day telling his story to an admiring throng on the court-green when someone casually observed that Mrs. Dick Creel had got off the train that morning.

The Sheriff's face changed a little.

"Where is she!"

"Waitin' in the tavern parlor."

"What is she doing here! What is she doing in there!"

"Jest a settin' and a waitin'."

"I 'spect she is waitin' for you, Aleck!" hazarded one of his friends.

There was a burst of laughter, for Squire Jefford's daughter, Mary, was known to be "a woman of her own head."

The Sheriff laughed, too; but his laughter was not as mirthful as usual. He made an ineffectual attempt to keep up his jollity.

"I reckon I 'll go and see Mary," he said at length.

He left the group with affected cheerfulness, but his heart was heavier than he liked to admit. He made his way to the "ladies' parlor," as the little sitting-room in the south wing of the rambling old tavern, overlooking the court-green was called, and opened the door.

On one side of the wood fire, in a stiff, high-backed chair sat a young woman, in her hat and wrap and gloves, "jest a settin' and a waitin'." She was a well-made and comely young woman under thirty, with a ruddy face, smooth hair and bright eyes that the Sheriff knew could both smile and snap. Her head was well set on rather plump shoulders; her mouth was well formed, but was now close drawn, and her chin was strong enough to show firmness—too much firmness, as Thompson mentally decided when he caught its profile.

The Sheriff advanced with an amiable smile. He was so surprised.

"Why, you here, Mary! When did you come?" His tone was affable and even testified pleasure. But Mary did not unbend. She was as stiff as the chair she sat in. Without turning her head she turned her eyes and looked at him sideways.

"Mrs. Creel."

There was a glint in her black eyes that meant war, and Thompson's countenance fell.

"Ah-ur-Mrs. Creel."

"I did n't know as you 'd know me!" She spoke quietly, her eyes still on him sidewise.

"Not know you! Why, of course, I know you. I don't forget the pretty girls—leastways, the prettiest girl in the county. Your father and I——"

"I heard you made a mistake about my husband and Jim Turkle. I thought maybe you might think I was Mrs. Turkle."

There was the least perceptible lifting of her shoulders and drawing down of her mouth, but quite enough to suggest Jenny Turkle 's high shoulders and grim face.

The Sheriff tried to lighten the conversation.

"Oh! Come now, Mary, you must n't get mad about that. It was all a joke. I was comin' right up after court adjourned to tell you about it—and—. It was the funniest thing! You 'd 'a' died laughing if you 'd been here and seen——"

"I heard they was all laughin' about it. I ain't so easy to amuse."

"Oh! Yes, you would, too," began Thompson, cajolingly. "If you 'd seen——"

"What time does Court adjourn!" she asked, quietly and irrelevantly,

"Oh, not for two or three—not for *several* days yet—Probably 't will hold over till well into next week. But if you 'd seen——"

"I mean what time does it let out *to-day*?"

Thompson's face fell again.

"Why—ah—about—ah—Why! What do you want to know for!"

"I want to see the Judge." Her voice was dead level.

"What about!"

"About business!"

"What business!"

"*Co'te* business," with cold irony.

"You don't mean that you 're goin' to——!"

He paused without framing the rest of the question.

She suddenly stood up and flamed out.

"Yes, I am—that 's just what I am goin' to do. That 's what I 've come here for. You may take a liberty with the Judge—he 's doty; but you can't take a liberty with *me*—I 'm Squire Jefford's daughter, and I 'm goin' to show you."

She was facing him now, and her black eyes were darting fire. Thompson was quite staggered.

"Why, Mary! I am surprised at you. Your father's old friend—who has had you on his knee many a time. I am shocked and surprised—and mortified and—astonished—and mortified——"

"You 've done said that one once," she said, icily.

"Why, Mary, I thought we were friends—" he began. But she cut in on him.

"Friends!" She spoke with contempt. "You 've had it in for Dick ever since he was a boy." Her voice suddenly broke and the tears sprang to her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

"Why, Mary—no such thing—I assure you—Dick and I are the best of friends—*dear* friends."

Her sniff was more forcible than words. She wiped her eyes and looked at him with freezing contempt.

"I 'm a fool! And I don't want you to be *Mary-in'* me, either. If Dick chooses to let you get him drunk and make a beast and a fool of him and drag him up before the Court like a—a—like that drunkard, Jim Turkle, what don't know how to behave himself seemly in Court, and Circuit Court at that—he may; but I 'll let you know, *I'm* not goin' to do it. I don't mean the Judge to think my husband's a thing like that. I mean to set him right. And I 'll tell him you are nothing but an old gambler who spends your time ruinin' young men, and braggin' as how you can bluff anybody."

"Mary!—ur—Mrs. Creel!" gasped the Sheriff.

She stalked by him wiping her eyes, and marched straight to the door; but the Sheriff was too quick for her. His office, his reputation, everything hung on his pacifying her. He sprang to the door and, standing with his back against it, began to apologize in so humble a tone that even the angry wife could not but listen to him.

He said everything that any mortal could have said, and declared that he would do anything on earth that she might ask.

She reflected, and he began to hope again. When their eyes met, hers were still hard, but they were calmer.

"I know you think you are making a fool of me," she began, and then as he protested she shut him up with a sharp gesture.

"Yes, you do, you think so; but you are not. There is but one thing I will accept in apology."

"What is that!"

"You are to make Dick your deputy."

"But, M——"

"I knew you would n't. Stand aside." She gave a sweep of the arm.

"But, Mary!"

"Stand aside, I say—I 'd rather have you removed anyway."

"But, Mary, just listen——"

"Stand aside, or I will call." She straightened herself and looked past him, as if listening.

"But, Mary, do be reasonable!"

She opened her mouth as if to cry out. The Sheriff threw up both hands.

"Mary, please—For kingdom's sake, don't! What unreasonable creatures women are!"

"You 'd better let women alone. One is as much as you can manage now." She spoke witheringly. "I give you one more chance."

"More than I can manage. You know Dick will get drunk——"

"Not unless you make him. Who was drunk at that barbecue at Jones's Cross Roads last summer!"

"Oh, Mary!"

"Who set up till after Sunday mornin' playin' kyards—. Yes, *gamblin'* the last night of last County Cote!"

"Oh, Mary!—All right. I lay down my hand."

She drew paper and pencil from her little bag and held them out to him.

"Write it down."

"Ain't my word good enough!"

"If you mean to do it, why are you afraid to write it!"

"I 'm not afraid."

"Then write it." She held the paper to him with outstretched arm.

"What shall I write!"

"Write what I say: 'I Aleck Thompson, promise and bind myself if I remain in office for another term to appoint my *dear* friend, Dick Creel!—underscore that—'my first deputy, and to keep him in as long as he keeps sober and attends to his business.' Now sign it."

"What consideration do I get for this!" Thompson looked up from the paper at her ca-jolingly. She met his gaze with a little flash.

"Oh! I forgot the consideration," she murmured, "and I Squire Jefford's daughter, too!

"Write: 'The consideration for the above is the love I bear the aforesaid Richard Creel, and the fear I have that his wife will tell the Judge what a smart Aleck I am.'"

"Mary, you don't want me to write that!"

"Them very words. I little more forgot the consideration."

The paper was written.

She glanced out of the window.

"Now I want a witness. I see the court is broken up."

"Tain't necessary."

"I want a witness, and I 'm goin' to *have* him."

"Who!"

"The Judge."

"Look here, Mary——"

"I 'm goin' to have him. You come and introduce me."

"Mary, are you after all goin' to——"

She met his gaze frankly.

"No—unless you go back on me. If you do, I 'll tell him and show him the paper; and what 's more, I 'll show it all around this county."

A flash of genuine admiration sprang into the Sheriff's eyes.

"Mary, you ought to have been a man, or—Mrs. Aleck Thompson."

The paper was signed and witnessed.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SHERIFFS BLUFF ***

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