

The Quality of Mercy: A Story of the Indian Territory

John M. Oskison

Table of Contents

<u>The Quality of Mercy: A Story of the Indian Territory</u>	1
<u>John M. Oskison</u>	2

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MISS VENITA CHURCHFIELD took up eagerly the fresh, neatly folded copy of the "Sachem" which a small half-breed Indian boy, with the singular little war-whoop that invariably announced his weekly delivery, had just thrown across the picket-fence. Going indoors, she smiled at the three columns of cattle-brands displayed on splotchy black cuts of steers, and was irritated anew that Efferts, the editor, should continue to print them. They occupied a considerable share of the four pages devoted to keeping the little prairie town of Black Oak informed of the world's doings in and outside of that small corner of the Indian Territory.

In spite of the editor's declaration that cattle had made Black Oak, and that the importance of spreading the knowledge of a brand throughout the country was great, the girl thought the "branding-iron page" distastefully provincial. Fresh from a St. Louis school, she had hoped, two years before, on meeting the editor, that he would be a valuable ally in the work of introducing culture — an exceedingly vague something, meant, for one thing, to suppress the unseemly shooting at sign-boards when, on occasion, cow-boys, full-bloods, half-breeds, and whites came in at night to "paint the town." But the editor had preferred to laugh with those who made the place incongruous rather than at them. The cattle-brands held the front page, and "Missouri Bob," the outlaw, continued to fill space as one of Indian Territory's important men.

"I could write editorials on Ruskin and national politics, and cut out the ugly raw news," Efferts had said once; "but nobody would read the paper. Cattle made Black Oak, and they made the 'Sachem,' too."

Miss Churchfield opened the paper at the third, or "local," page. A heading caught her eye, and she began to read:

"Missouri Bob" has a rival. This time it is a man well known to the country — Dalton, the Englishman. Last Monday, about eleven o'clock, he held up the Hon. C. M. Graybill of Kansas City, who was on his way to Fourteen Mile Creek to buy a herd of cattle from old man Bluefeather, the Cherokee. At the Locust Creek crossing a man came suddenly out of a patch of wild-plum bushes, and seizing the horse, covered Mr. Graybill with his gun.

There was no chance for the cattle-buyer to resist, the attack was so unexpected. Robbed of his arms (a pair of handsome pistols), a fine plaited bridle, and \$10,000 in currency that he was taking down to pay for Bluefeather's cattle, Mr. Graybill returned at once to Black Oak and telegraphed the news of his loss to his employers, the Great Western Beef Co.

A full description of the highwayman was furnished to our marshals, and under the leadership of Heck Bunner a posse was sent out to try to intercept him before he got to the Grand River hills, where it is presumed he will be safely hidden by certain characters more friendly to lawbreakers than to officers of the law. Bunner returned to-day (Thursday) without having found a trace of the robber.

How long is this state of affairs to continue? Every lover of order should make it his business to hunt out the desperate characters that infest our country; and now that "Missouri Bob" has a rival in the clever Englishman, who has heretofore borne a fair reputation in spite of the fact that he has never got on, the country has become doubly unsafe.

So far Venita Churchfield read with a growing astonishment. She put down the paper with a gasp, then broke out:

"Impossible! Mr. Efferts must be crazy to print that."

She hurried to a back room, where her mother, a large, shrewd, brown-faced quarter-blood, sat sewing.

"Mother, let me send for Mr. Efferts to come to supper. I must see him."

"What's the matter, dear? Why are you so excited?"

The Quality of Mercy: A Story of the Indian Territory

"Read this!"

Venita thrust the "Sachem" into her mother's hand. The older woman moved to the window and read the long account through carefully, never making a sign, while the girl waited impatiently.

"How do you suppose that awful mistake got into the paper?" The question came explosively.

"It may not be a mistake, dear." Mrs. Churchfield spoke quietly.

"But, mother — why, we've known Mr. Dalton for years, and nothing could be further from my thought of him."

"Well, dear," said the mother, folding the "Sachem" carefully as she spoke, "we have known Mr. Dalton a long time, that's true. He worked for your father in Texas when you were so high." Mrs. Churchfield's brown hand went down almost to a level with her knees. "I've never known the man to do a downright dishonest thing; but his family somewhere — Canada, England, or Australia: I've never known — threw him over. Your father, when he was alive, could trust him, and I've done the same."

Mrs. Churchfield hesitated a moment before going on:

"He pulled you out of a bad scrape once about the time we came up to the Territory. You don't remember; you were too young. It was a matter of getting into a corral ahead of some wild steers, knocking down your playhouse, and grabbing you up on his horse. Since that day I've been more tolerant, I think, than I ought with Mr. Dalton's strange notions."

Mrs. Churchfield seemed to speak regretfully. She did not tell Venita of the secret alarm she had felt at the growing friendliness of her daughter for this cow-boy Englishman, this irresponsible, clever bit of driftwood, who, after all, had served the Churchfields well until the father died, when he had gone to work for Colonel Clarke.

"Mother," said Venita, in a frightened tone, "Mr. Dalton's coming to supper!"

"Is he?" queried Mrs. Churchfield. "Venita dear, I'm very, very sorry for Mr. Dalton. He shouldn't have come so often." It was plain that the mother had seen what the girl had hardly considered — that Dalton was deeply in love with Venita. "However, it is best to get these two men together now."

"But do you think I dare to have them both, after this?" She pointed to the newspaper.

"Dear, Mr. Efferts isn't afraid; and Mr. Dalton isn't going to shoot him. Go on, and send Sammy with your note to Mr. Efferts."

After the chore-boy, a young Cherokee wearing a broad, umbrella-like black hat shoved far down over his ears, had clattered away on a gray pony to the "Sachem" office, Venita took up the paper once more. There was more about Dalton: his history, as far as it was known to the country, was detailed from the time he began to punch cattle for Colonel Clarke to his disappearance from Black Oak in 1890. His reappearance a year later — a month before the robbery of the cattle-buyer — was spoken of as mysterious, and his actions of late as suspicious.

Efferts gladly accepted the invitation from Venita Churchfield. She met him at the door, a well-gowned, tall, rounded girl of twenty, with a dark face and live black eyes. Before going in from the hall she whispered in some agitation:

"Our other guest came in just ahead of you — don't seem surprised." She led the way to the parlor, and before Efferts had time to hesitate was saying: "I believe you know Mr. Efferts, Mr. Dalton."

A tall man, his face bronzed and his light mustache sun-bleached, rose, shifting the opened "Sachem" from his right to his left hand, and came forward to greet Efferts gravely. The editor shook the other's proffered hand, and stepping back, stared frankly. Dalton turned to speak to the girl, dropping the paper on a convenient chair.

For Efferts it was a bewildering moment. Fresh from the press, his words of accusation and denunciation of Dalton stared at him from the newspaper. By every law of probability Dalton should be hiding in the flint-hills of Grand River instead of standing here talking coolly to Miss Churchfield within a block of Marshal Bunner's house.

Venita's mother came in to say that supper was waiting. In the girl's appealing glance as she led the way to the dining-room both men read the demand for a truce, and the "Sachem" story was not referred to. For an hour Efferts puzzled his brain over the mystery. He was a straightforward, practical sort of man, not given to psychological inquiry. He liked Venita Churchfield, and had hoped that he might some day — But so had a dozen others, and it was no strange thing to see a man flash out with unexpected brilliance in the girl's presence.

The Quality of Mercy: A Story of the Indian Territory

Certainly the tall, reserved man Dalton, of whom little more was known than that he undoubtedly was English and self-contained, was showing a rare tact and grace in meeting a situation that to Efferts was frankly puzzling. Venita warmed under the fire of the sun-tanned cow-boy's talk; a faint red surged up to overwhelm the rich darkness of her cheeks.

Going out to the parlor after supper, Dalton whispered to the girl, who beckoned her mother aside. "An executive session, mama," she said.

Alone with the two men, Venita stared in some dismay at the editor's uncompromising, grave face and Dalton's half-humorous, silent one. Suddenly she came between them, seizing an arm of each, and cried out:

"Say something, you men — do something, or I shall go mad!"

Dalton laughed, and Efferts, at the touch, felt the blood surge through his veins, a sensation he had thought impossible to a plodding, worldly country editor of thirty-eight.

"What shall we say?" began Dalton, smiling a trifle nervously.

"Say!" echoed Venita. She took up the crumpled "Sachem" from the chair and held it before her. "Tell me," she went on, "how this horrible mistake got into the paper." She turned to the editor. "Tell me that, Mr. Efferts!"

"Why," Efferts began lamely and conventionally, "I'm sure I don't quite understand. I can only quote the 'Sachem's' motto, 'If it's in the "Sachem," the brand's registered.' Perhaps Mr. Dalton — —"

Then the Englishman broke in:

"I suppose I ought to shoot Efferts where he stands, bind you, Miss Churchfield, to a chair, and shut your mother in the cellar, to bear out the reputation I've acquired. But I'm just going to say that the 'Sachem' was quite correct in its account of the affair at Locust Creek. The only thing omitted was something that Efferts couldn't have known about. It was a personal matter, and doesn't affect my standing in the eyes of the law — or in the judgment of the 'Sachem.' I supposed you'd have the tale from Graybill," — Dalton turned to speak directly to the editor, — "but, you see, one can ride safely enough into town in the dusk when everybody thinks you a hundred miles away." He spoke lightly. "My invitation to supper came to me over there," — he motioned toward the east, where rose the Grand River hills, — "and of course I came" — he stepped nearer to Efferts and repeated for his ear, tensely — "and of course I came."

Efferts knew then, in a flash, Dalton's real story. He guessed correctly that the blond Englishman had run away from the fascination of the girl, and had been drawn back to her by a poignant memory. Just why the man had adopted this quixotic course Efferts could not quite understand; and it is certain that Dalton would have found it hard to explain the reason back of his robbery of the cattle-buyer. It was a wild act, a thing done on the impulse. The need for money had seemed peculiarly strong; the comfort and apparent permanence of the Churchfield home at Black Oak, and the reality of the thousands back of the girl and her widowed mother, had baffled him as an unendowed worker with his hands.

Dalton knew it was a twisted point of view, knew that men as poor as he had aspired and won; but it was an impression he could not get rid of that ten thousand dollars would make a vast difference. He tried to say as much.

"I hope you will both believe me when I say that it was a gamble for a big stake — bigger than the purse I knew the man had. I thought that was a possible first step, but it was all wrong. It was childish. I see it now. I can't explain it adequately to both of you. But I trust you to see the foolish impulse. I'd like you to see it, anyway — you, Miss Churchfield." He turned away for a moment with a little gesture, as if brushing away a dream.

Dalton touched Efferts on the arm, and the two stepped aside. The Englishman said:

"Of course you see your duty, Efferts; do it as soon as you like after we leave the house. But — but if you do see how infernally demented I was," — it was hardly necessary for Dalton to turn his eyes momentarily toward the girl, waiting nervously by the piano, — "and want to do a fellow a generous turn, just wait until you can get a telegram to Kansas City. There must be a newspaper there you can reach at this time of evening. Ask if the money I got from Graybill wasn't returned to the Great Western Beef Company. I telegraphed it from Southwest City yesterday."

"Dalton, are you lying to me?"

Efferts looked squarely at the other, but there was no sign of evasion, only a half-contemptuous, half-amused gleam in his eyes, as he answered:

"You've got to telegraph, and the sooner done the better."

"Yes, I've got to telegraph."

The Quality of Mercy: A Story of the Indian Territory

The chore-boy was sent away again, this time to the railroad station, with a question to the Kansas City "Arrow."

And the prisoner, the judge, and the sympathetic jailer waited. Just before ten o'clock the boy returned with the answer. Efferts read it and passed it to Dalton. He glanced at the first half-dozen words and gave the message to Venita Churchfield. She read wonderingly:

Graybill money returned mysteriously — \$10,000. Write us immediately full story.

The matter was explained to Venita Churchfield, and again Dalton drew the editor aside.

"I can't ask you to let me off. I can only say that it will be a mistake to bear too hard on me. I'll go out with you — to Bunner's, if you like. It would be foolish to try to play the daredevil and bolt."

To the girl Dalton said, in a voice far from steady: "I wish I had the courage to tell you what drove me to do this foolish thing; but of course you don't want to hear it, and I must not tell you. You see, I'm still too cowardly to ask for more than your pity!" But the avowal was in his eyes, plain, as he held out his hand. "Good-by," he whispered, and turned hurriedly to join Efferts at the door.

When the two men left the front door and their footsteps crunched down the gravel path together, Venita lingered a moment before shutting them from her sight.

Efferts saw how well the Englishman bore off his broken hope, and Portia's old plea came into his mind. Aside from the bizarre appeal to his sense of the romantic, there was the quality of mercy to be considered. At the gate, beside which Dalton's horse stood tied, head drooping comfortably in the warm spring air, Efferts turned to ask:

"Dalton, if you ride away to-night will you go to Texas?"

"I'll catch the midnight train south from Prairie Switch, the next stop from Black Oak. I'll telegraph you to-morrow from Dennison whatever ten words you name."

"Suppose we make it four — 'The quality of mercy.'"

Efferts held out his hand. Dalton mounted with a swing, then rode near to say:

"You'll have the message, old fellow, and you'll find that one fool has had his lesson — a costly one."

He was gone, the sound of his horse's hoofs fading into the night.

A week later Venita Churchfield read in the "Sachem" this brief paragraph:

The \$10,000 taken by Dalton, the Englishman, from the Hon. C. M. Graybill of Kansas City has been returned to the Great Western Beef Co. Dalton is now in Texas, and not likely to win further laurels in the Territory as a rival of "Missouri Bob."

Venita met the editor at the door, the paper in her hand. She pointed to the paragraph as he came up the steps.

"Yes, it is a brief ending," he said, "to an exciting 'story'; but — "

"I know, dear," the girl whispered, coming up to him and slipping her hand into his; "but he was more foolish than bad. It was right to be generous."

VINITA, INDIAN TERRITORY.