WHEN CRIME WAS RAMPANT
IN A PEACEFUL VALE

The narrative that I am about to relate, with the exception of some minor details, that I may fail to correctly remember or that I perhaps never got correctly, is essentially true but the names of the persons directly connected with it, are fictitious, while those of the innocent bystanders are given correctly. There is nothing incriminating about it but one hesitates to refer to facts that might embarrass our fellow-men and especially is this the case when most of the dramatic persons are dead and gone.

One morning, in the fall of the early seventies, my brother, Casper, happened onto the road that passed our house at a distance of some twenty or thirty rods, when he espied the constable of the town of Montana, come galloping down the highway. “Hi Pete, what’s the hurry?” shouted Casper, as the dignified Constable sped by him. “Can’t stop ‘Cap’: can’t stop; Criminal case”, replied the speeding officer of the law. His curiosity aroused, Casper either asked his neighbor Philip Runkel or went up the road a little ways to Helwig’s store to get the necessary information to help solve this mystery, I do not now remember which but he came home with a tale which ran about as follows:

Murder, bloody murder, had been committed up in Danuser Valley and what was more the body of the victim after having been fouly done away with was consigned to a brush pile and incinerated. While diligent search had revealed neither the bones nor any other charred remains, the fact that young Tony Schlenker, a lad of twelve years or so, was missing and no trace of him could be found remained. The Schlenkers, who had the reputation of being a rather coarse and quarrelsome outfit, had not lived in the community very long and I did not know them. It seems that the boy, who was himself not a saint, caused them a lot of trouble and was often severely chastised. On one such occasion he was either driven from home or ran away, at any rate he arrived at the home of John Schindler, who lived near by and who was also a rather recent addition to the community. Here Tony was given sanctuary and a place to work and stay. This, of course, embittered the Schlenkers and although I do not know of any effort on their part to interfere, it is known that they resented the action of their neighbors. Then the rumor spread that Tony had disappeared and the Schlenkers, all at once, became very solicitous for the welfare of their child. Mrs. Schlenker, after exchanging some hot arguments with Mrs. Schindler, at the latter’s home, was told that Tony had taken a ring, which Mrs. Schindler had left lying on a table and when this was discovered had been soundly whipped. Mr. Schindler, who told him that he ought to report him to the authorities. Her story farther ran that Tony went to bed and in the morning when they investigated they found the bed empty and the bird flown. To this Mrs. Schlenker hotly retorted that more likely, while flogging him, Schindler had killed her darling child and thrown his body into one of the brush piles that he had been burning. With this hypothesis established, in her mind at least, she went to the authorities with her version of the case.

Thus it happened that on that fateful morning, the constable of Montana had to see the justice of peace in the village of Wauumadee.

Both the constable and the Judge were ambitious young fellows, looking ahead to something better than their present official positions. The constable was a young farmer, who dressed a little better than the rest of the boys and withal had a good opinion of himself. The Judge, a married man, had come amongst us, some years previous and being a very good mechanic, had successfully run a blacksmith shop and had his ambition been along that line he might have accomplished something worth while but with a bee buzzing under his hat, telling him that the office of
sheriff would be a fine job, he neglect-
ed his work and spent much of his time
in the neighboring saloons, al-
though he was not a heavy drinker.
It was company he liked and to
swap stories with the boys to make
himself popular. Both were good
fellows at heart and we liked them
both, in a way but that was the way they
were and not the way they want-
ed to be.

Well, on the Monday after we had
heard this startling news, I went to
help our neighbor, Joe, with his
threshing. He together with Matt.
and George, both of whom lived in
Danuser Valley, owned a horsepower
threshing machine. Joe was mar-
rried to Matt's sister and George had
been married to another of Matt's
sisters, who had however died some
time before and now he was married
to John Schindler's sister. When I
came up to the machine, that morn-
ning, Matt. and George were attaching
a new rope to the machine for hold-
ing up the straw stacker. Winking
at George, Matt. remarked, "Do
you think this rope would hold
Schindler?" George who was a very
mild mannered fellow replied, "I do
not know, but I would not mind to
help pulling at the end of it." This,
coming from George, impressed me
rather strongly but on the other hand,
I reasoned that George was some-
what of a wag, anyway.

During the noon hour the mystery
was discussed, at length but some-
what guardedly, for on that day the
"Criminal case" was being tried, in
the village but a mile away. During
the afternoon, while George was
"feeding" the machine, up came Rob-
ert Schindler, John's brother and
stepping up on the feeder board,
started to talk to George. George
kept on feeding, wearing all the
time, his little, crooked smile but
when Robert finally put his arm over
George's shoulders and spoke plead-
ingly, the latter gave Matt. the sig-
nal to relieve him and stepping off
the board went with Robert in his
buggy, to attend court. The idea of
pulling at the end of that rope had
left him, in fact, he had never meant
what he said.

Court was in session with full
pomp and dignity, in a hall, adjoin-
ing a saloon across the road from the
Judge's blacksmith shop and a not
overly large crowd, considering the
serious aspect of the case, was pres-
ent but then it was threshing time
and in those days, it was business be-
fore pleasure. The trial was con-
ducted, sans prosecuting attorney,
sans attorneys for the defense and
sans any officer but the Judge and
constable, aforesaid. There was,
however, a jury duly impaneled and
the court did all the work that usual-
ly falls to the lot of the attorneys
in the case. Whether or not the jury
was supposed to have final jurisdic-
tion, I know not and I suppose no one
else, connected with the case knew.
The prosecution presented its case,
the star witnesses being the Schlenk-
ers and the constable, who testified
that having diligently searched, he
could find no evidence of human re-
 mains in the ash piles of the burnt
brush, while the testimony of the be-
reaved parents consisted mainly in
abuse of the defendant and the call-
ing down of imprecations upon his
guilty head. Whether there were
any objections made to these proce-
dures, deponent sayeth not. The
story of the defense was given by the
defendant and his wife about as here-
tofore stated. The walloping had
been administered by a belt which
he wore in court and exhibited
to the jury, stating that the buckle
was always in his hand and never
touched the boy. So that was that.
An incident, worth mentioning and
told me by one of the jurors, can not
well be omitted. Before the case
went to the jury, the priest of the
local church who happened to be
present, felt it incumbent upon him-
self to make a few remarks. He ad-
monished the jury to seriously weigh
the fact that a man's life and liberty
were matters not to be trifled with
and that unless there was ample
evidence of guilt no one should be
convicted, especially in a murder
case where the corpus delicti or body
of the victim was not in evidence.
The jury then, I presume in com-
pliance with instructions from the court,
bound the defendant over to the next
term of court and the judge fixed the
bail bond at Five Hundred Dollars.
To sign that bond George was called
away from that threshing machine
and George did it, with a smile. So
the case was disposed of, for the
present and everybody went about
his every day business, awaiting
farther developments at the next term
of court.

Now accompany me to another part
of the county, in fact, in those days
it was a day's journey to get there.
Let us go to Bohri's Valley where
Gottlieb Bohri kept a country store,
tavern, and dance hall. Although
"far from the maddening throngs ign-
oble strife", this hostelry was a
most excellent place to stop for rest
and food, as I myself experienced.
Besides these functions, already men-
tioned, Mr. Bohri was postmaster at
Bohri and also carried the mail from
Fountain City to that place, the con-
tract for that work being, of course,
held by someone else but as Mr.
Bohri had to go after supplies three
times a week anyway, he also carried
the mail and neither Uncle Sam nor
anyone else was any the wiser for it,
nor did it matter. Well, on the reg-
ular mail day Mr. Bohri, as usual,
drove to Fountain City and there he
read in the "Republikaner" an ac-
count of this crime and besides there
was little else talked of, on the
streets. Mr. Bohri being impressed
with the enormity of the crime, on
arriving at home related every detail
of it at the supper table, never
dreaming that he was solving a mys-
tery. After supper he went into the
part of the building, serving as store
and saloon, to dispose of the mer-
chandise he had brought home with
him. After a little while he was fol-
lowed by the boy whom he had hired
a few days previous and on looking
up, saw that the lad wanted to talk
to him.

"Well Tom, what is it?"
"I gotta go home", replied the boy.
"Why, what's the matter with you.
You are doing good work at digging
the potatoes, husking corn and doing
the chores, so why go home?"
The boy persisted that he had to
go home and after being hard press-
ed, blurted out, "I am Tony Schlen-
ker and gotta go home".

"Who is Tony Schlenker?" asked
Mr. Bohri.

"Why the boy that was killed and
burnt up, what you was telling about,
at supper".

"Well what do you want to do at
home?"

"Oh heck, ain't goin' home but I
mean to go up to Waumandee, to tell
them not to hang John Schindler,
'cause he never killed me nor never
burned me up, nor never pounded me
half as hard as they pound me at
home, with a hickory stick. That's
what I want to do".

"Better wait till morning and get
a ride to town and from there out to
Waumandee, Schindler is safe until
court convenes."

"But I don't want them to hang
him. The old folks sure will try to
get them to do it."

"Well wait until tomorrow and I
will give you a couple of dollars, so
you will get to Waumandee, all right,
in time to save Schindler's neck. But
you are certainly a case and fooled a
lot of people, including myself."

So "Tom", again became Tony and
the murder mystery was solved and
the great "Criminal case", was
soon forgotten. I, later on, be-
came fairly well acquainted
with him whom I have chosen
to call John Schindler and found
him to be one of those easy go-
ing, inoffensive fellows who would
not hurt even a cat. Often in re-
viewing this case, have I pondered
what might have happened under dif-
ferent circumstances. Supposing
that instead of ultra-conservative,
level headed people, the members of
that community had been hot head-
ed, impulsive fellows and supposing
farther they had been addicted to the
excessive use of liquor and incited by
some fire eater, had taken the law in
their own hands. What then? I
would then hardly have been induced
to tell this story in a rather humor-
ous vein. It must be farther remem-
bered that about then, stories of the
Vigilantes were fresh in everybody's
mind and that the notion that an or-
ganized body could take the law into its own hands, prevailed very generally. Under such conditions it is a credit to the community that no excesses were committed. Credit is also due to that priest, who although he may not have been posted on proceedings in court, spoke words of wisdom and they bore weight, because he was respected not only by his congregation but by outsiders, as well.