
A Sheriff I Loved

by Eugene V. Debs

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The type of the average human who functions as sheriff is not of a lovable nature. A sheriff is ex-officio beyond words the official creature who is willing for a paltry fee to serve as the executioner, the legal assassin of a human being, even though that human being be condemned as the lowest, vilest, and most degraded on earth.

But there are exceptions to the rule and beneath the official vesture of the sheriff there may be the soul of a man.

Such an exception was George Eckert, the sheriff of McHenry County, Illinois, in 1895, when I served a sentence of six months in his custody in the county jail at Woodstock.

The sentence resulted from the railroad strike of the preceding year. The farce of a trial had been pulled off in the Federal Court at Chicago. A jury had been denied. The sentence had been arbitrarily pronounced in surrender to the clamor of the mob spirit aroused to such a pitch of insane fury by the capitalist press, bravely backed, as usual, by the capitalist clergy. The appeal to the Supreme Court of the United States, in behalf of which Lyman Trumbull, the friend of Lincoln and the author of the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery, made his personal plea, and also his last one, proved fruitless, as expected. The court confirmed the sentence by evading the issue, as it did a quarter of a century later in the infamous espionage cases.

Fortunately for me and my convicted associates, the filthy, rotten, unspeakably vile and notorious Cook County Jail at Chicago, wherein the anarchists had been hanged and we had been temporarily detained and all but devoured by sewer rats and body lice, was so crowded that the court ordered us transferred to the McHenry County Jail at Woodstock, some 50 miles west of Chicago.

The prejudice and hate engendered by the lies and calumnies of the capitalist press and the pious vassals in the capitalist pulpit were more bitter and relentless than can well be imagined. The farmers of

McHenry County protested even against my being imprisoned there, and it was reported that they would meet the train on which I was to arrive and that a lynching might follow. Heavily guarded, I was thus delivered to George Eckert, sheriff of McHenry County, who met the train at the station and took me into custody. The farmers were there with their threats and mutterings, and with some other sheriff than George Eckert in charge might have attempted their cowardly program.

But George Eckert was a man as well as a sheriff, and he told them, in words they did not fail to understand, that I was his prisoner, and that it was his duty to protect as well as to jail me, and that he proposed to do it.

The would-be lynchers knew George Eckert, and slunk away in the darkness. They knew he would protect me — if necessary with his own life. He was a small man, but a whole one. As a boy he had been all through the Civil War, and he did not fear to face an enemy, even though that enemy happened to be his own neighbor and had helped to put him in office.

This was my introduction to George Eckert. He had read and heard all about me that was false and slanderous and had been led to believe that I was a desperate and dangerous criminal and that I should be treated accordingly. But this did not alter his determination to accord to me the treatment due to any other prisoner in his custody.

That night I slept in a clean cell. The following morning the sheriff came to see me and I had a friendly chat and soon came to a perfect mutual understanding which was never once violated on either side. From that hour George Eckert was my friend and I was his, and though 27 years have passed, not one of them brought its holidays without the exchange of mutual greetings and remembrances.

This morning there came to me the following telegram:

Woodstock, Ill.,
January 28th, 1922.

Eugene V. Debs,
Terre Haute, Indiana.

Father died this morning.

— Georgie C. Eckert.

This sad message came to me from his daughter, the daughter he adored, and I and all of our family feel as if our own household had been stricken by the sorrowful bereavement. Only a few weeks ago while I was in the sanitarium at Elmhurst, Mr. Eckert and his daughter Georgie drove 50 miles on a cold, gusty day to pay me a visit and to comfort me with their sympathy and companionship. The visit was to be the last with my loyal old friend, and I shall never forget how touched at the parting.

George Eckert had been a true friend to me when friendship is possible only in the heart and soul and conscience of a genuine human being. I recalled to him the answer he made to those of his constituents who wanted him to subject me to rough treatment; how kind he and his wife and daughter had been to my wife and family, and how the tears of gladness and regret stood in his eyes as well as mine the day I left his custody and started for home.

When last we exchanged farewells we were clasped in each other's arms.

George Eckert has passed on to his next beautiful adventure, leaving to his friends, his neighbors, and to the world the memory of a man.

May he rest in peace and flowers bloom where he sleeps.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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