

A "Judge Steele" Story

Judge Steele's hanging blood was hot again—but not against the accused, this time. Even Wardlow Steele could see that Whoa-Mule Goler wasn't a killer! But that just meant that someone else ought to hang!

MUD IN HIS HONOR'S EYE

by Lon Williams



JUDGE Wardlow Steele, boiling mad because of another murder in Flat Creek, strode into a packed court room and stepped grimly onto his judicial rostrum. He stood for a moment, a stalwart, uncouth barbarian, with thick sandy hair, straw-colored mustache and savage blue eyes that moved with searching, hostile inquiry. In a silence that was tense with expectancy, he sat down on a split-log bench and laid his sixgun before him on a puncheon table.

Below sat a crowd of as mean-looking humans as he'd ever seen assembled; bearded gold-diggers taking a holiday; card-sharks and gamblers making their cynical appraisals of law and order; potential cutthroats who'd take no warning from what had happened to cutthroats before them; overconfident fugitives from hangropes and surly dogs who looked up at him from hostile, treacherous eyes. Why Flat Creek

citizens figured a law-court could effectively deal out justice in a society like that was a mystery for which Steele had no answer. Even less could he understand why they figured that he, a plain, ignorant gold-digger himself, was qualified to be a judge.

But a judge he was and, by thunder, every killer-wolf hailed before him would know what it meant to stand in judgment. After one more sweeping, disapproving look, he spat into his sandbox. "Sheriff, call court."

Sheriff Jerd Buckalew, tall, rawboned and poker-faced, pounded with his .45 on an inverted cracker-barrel. "This court's now in session. If anybody's tired of livin', let 'im say it ain't."

A dozen and more hard-faced deputies, standing to right and left, hitched up their gunbelts and nodded their heads in support of Bucky's drawled warning. Other armed men, solemn-visaged, stood along front and side walls, a hint that perhaps Flat Creek did not yet rely wholly upon official methods for enforcement of justice.

Judge Steele glanced at Clerk James Skiffington. "Skiffy, call fust case."

Skiffington rose, thin, solemn and homely. "People versus Sam, alias Whoa-mule, Goler. Charge, first degree murder."

Judge Steele looked down at a split-log bench reserved for transgressors on trial for their lives. His anger swelled and heaved, but not in its usual form and substance. Sitting there alone was as ugly a mortal as he'd ever seen out of captivity; a big, loose-jointed, stubble-faced, stupid baboon with bushy black hair, long face and a mouth as big as a balloon—with a tongue stuck out at one corner. But one quality which stood forth in most of those who occupied that seat of peril was absent here. Sam Goler did not look mean; he looked dumb—but in his countenance was a well of tenderness. There was a gentle trustfulness in him, too, comparable only to that of a friendly dog.

For a moment Judge Steele was filled with doubts for humanity's survival. In his mind's eye he saw wolves streaming down an imaginary mountain, lean ones and fat ones, big and small, but all with gleaming eyes, bared teeth, slavering mouths and bristling backs. Kill them off as one might, those killer-wolves kept coming. Then he gave his straw-colored mustache a couple of vicious jerks; his nostrils dilated. "Sam Goler, what in tarnation have they got you there for?"

Whoa-mule glared upward; his mouth dropped open. "Murder, Judge."

"Do tell! And who did you murder?"

"Murdered Thumbscrew Demarcus, I did. Hung 'im from a hog-pole down by Flat Creek."

Steele glanced hither and yon, searching still for a guilty face. He came back to Whoa-mule. "Last time I saw you, Sam, you was tryin' to lead a balky mule from a corral down at Carriger's livery barn. Why didn't you take a hammer and beat that mule's brains out?"

"What! Me hurt that mule? Why, Judge, he didn't mean no harm. Time I'd twisted his ears and talked to him a minute, he forgot all about bein' balky. I'd hate to think I ain't got no more sense than a mule."

Wade Claybrook, Flat Creek's prosecuting attorney, got up. "Now, if your honor please, this is getting ahead backwards. Defendant is not represented by counsel; he has not entered a plea; a jury has not been empaneled, and witnesses have not been sworn."

Steele contemplated, with poorly-concealed scorn, this stocky redhead with a big, earnest face. "Well, if it ain't man-eater Claybrook, thirstin' for blood, as usual. Well, Wade, what do you propose doing?"

"I suggest, your honor, that defendant enter his plea."

"But didn't you hear what he said? Sam admits his guilt; just said he murdered Thumbscrew Demarcus."

"Yes, your honor; but I don't think a guilty plea should be accepted in absence of counsel."

"Maybe you're right, Wade. Sam Goler, you got a lawyer?"

"No, Judge, I ain't got me no lawyer."

"You're that much better off. But we'll git you one; whar's that axe-face French Demeree?"

A tall, sharp-faced specimen of *genus homo* in scissor-tail coat and white vest stood up and several rows back. "Here, your honor."

"Demeree from Tennessee, why ain't you up here plyin' your trade? Can't you see here's a dumb-headed muleskinner who's about to be hung?"

"Your honor, we lawyers consider it unethical to solicit business; Whoa-mule has not asked me to represent him."

"That can be took care of pronto. Sam, do you want Axe-face Demeree for your lawyer?"

Whoa-mule put some stiffness into his

joints. "Sure do, Judge; if I had me a lawyer, maybe they wouldn't hang me for murderin' Thumbscrew."

Demeree came forward and conferred briefly with his client. "Defendant pleads guilty, your honor."

Judge Steele tensed. "What do you mean, guilty? Of course he ain't guilty; you change that plea before it gets cold."

"All right, your honor; not guilty."

"Fine," said Judge Steele. "Now, all you've got to do is prove he ain't."

"With a judge who obviously entertains doubts of guilt, I have hope," said Demeree.

Steele's nostrils spread. "Consarn you, Demeree, you ain't insinuat' nothin', I reckon?"

"No, your honor," Demeree answered, and sat down.

"Panel a jury, Sheriff. Somebody's been murdered, which means some mangy coyote'll hang for it."

WHILE A jury was being empaneled, Judge Steele had his thoughts elsewhere. Here was a situation unlike any that had before confronted him. Wade Claybrook was determined to convict a dim-witted innocent man of murder, and it had to be stopped. Something more than that had to be done, too. Here was a vicious frameup; and among those wild animals back there a murderer looked on, like a crafty beast from a place of fancied security. That murderer had to be discovered and caught—but who was going to discover and catch him?

Then Steele espied what he sought. "Bill Hacker, come up here."

A big six-footer got up, far back. "Coming, Judge." He was broad-shouldered, with dark, deadly looking eyes, a black, close-cut mustache, and a pair of sixguns. He held brief conference with four or five sober-visaged, bearded gold-diggers, then came forward with long, easy strides and took a seat beside Judge Steele.

"Wardlow, what's wrong?"

"Bill, I never was skeered of a fistfight or a gunfight, but there's something afoot here I ain't equal to. Somebody's murdered Thumbscrew Demarcus. It ain't this slow-brained muleskinner, but Claybrook's after his hide anyhow. I got to have help, Bill—not so much to save Sam Goler as to catch whoever done it."

"All right, Wardlow, let's roll a wheel."

Steele straightened. "Witnesses come and be sworn."

Three assembled in front of Clerk Skiffington and held up their right hands. They were Deputy Dan Trehwitt and two others—horse wranglers and stage-hands from Carriger's livery, lean, wolfish bozos, whose meanness stuck out like horns on a desert toad.

Bill Hacker nudged Steele. "Keep an eye on those two, Wardlow. They consider themselves exceptionally clever; their kind will usually underestimate an adversary."

Skiffy held up his own right hand. "Swear-tell-truth-whole-truth-nothin'-but-truth-selpygod. Go to witness room."

As soon as they'd been herded off, there was a commotion as two deputies entered, carrying a shallow, square box. They brought it forward and put it down where court and jurors could see it.

Judge Steele leaned forward. "Claybrook, what in tarnation's that fer?"

"You'll see, your honor. There's more coming."

What Prosecutor Claybrook referred to as *more*, turned out to be a tub of mud. Deputies carried it forward and put it down.

"There you are, Mr. Claybrook," one of them said. He brushed his hands and stationed himself with other deputies on Sheriff Buckalew's right.

In Steele's opinion, here was a bunch of monkey-business. He started to get up, but felt a tug at his sleeve. "This might be interesting, Wardlow," Hacker said.

"Anyhow, let's see how it goes."

"Bill, what'll Claybrook do next? I'd like to turn that mud upside-down on his head."

Claybrook nodded at a deputy. "Call Dan Trewhitt."

DAN TREWHITT lumbered in. He was Buckalew's biggest officer, almost seven feet up and of at least two hundred-fifty pounds—a kind of big-faced human being who thought with his fists instead of his brain. He eased onto an inverted nailkeg, reserved for witnesses. It creaked under his weight.

"Are you Deputy Dan Trewhitt?" asked Claybrook.

Demeree got up. "Defense admits his identity, your honor; also, that he lives in Flat Creek and is chief deputy to Sheriff Jerd Buckalew. Furthermore—"

"Now, your honor," Claybrook interrupted, "I object to harassment from defense attorney."

"Defense attorney will not harass Mr. Claybrook," said Steele.

Claybrook returned to witness Trewhitt. "Now, sir, what do you see in this square box below you?"

"It's a box of dried mud. Got it from down by Flat Creek myself, with you helpin'. It's—"

"Just answer my questions," said Claybrook. "What else do you see in that box?"

"It's a man's track, right punk-dab a-middle of it. It was in that mud—"

"Just answer my questions. Were you acquainted with Thumbscrew Demarcus?"

"Knowed him since he come to Flat Creek. A miser, he was. Had a claim in Carmody Gulch, but made his pile loanin' a double-your-money interest. Never—"

"Just answer my questions, please. Where did Thumbscrew live?"

"Lived in a shack up by Cleaver Newhall's butcher-shop. Cleaver dressed his

hogs down by Flat Creek. That's where I found Thumbscrew a-hangin' from a hog-pole. Soon's I got wind he'd been hung, I high-tailed it out there, and sure enough—"

Demeree got up. "Your honor, I suggest witness answer Mr. Claybrook's questions."

"Look here, Demeree, you keep out of this." Judge Steele was getting mad; he couldn't see why a witness should answer a question and stop.

He was about ready to put an end to that stop-and-go business, when Bill Hacker leaned toward him. "Let 'em go to it, Wardlow. It will give us more time to look around. There's a murderer somewhere in this court house; we've got to stop him."

"Now," Claybrook resumed, "when you went out to Newhall's meat-yard, and found Thumbscrew hanging from a hog-pole, what did you do?"

"I looked around for evidence, and I sure found some. See that track there in that box? Right under that hog-pole, it was, where Cleaver splashed water in gutted hogs to wash 'em out and it run down and ponded. Plain old Flat Creek gumbo, made dark by hog-blood."

"Will you explain how that footprint was taken up and preserved in this box?"

Demeree got up. "Your honor, defense concedes that it was a remarkable feat of engineering, and that said footprint was duly taken up and preserved, and that this is it. However, defense objects to further questions concerning it for reasons of irrelevancy."

Claybrook's face tightened. "Your honor, I expect to prove that this footprint was not disturbed as to size and shape."

"Defense concedes that, too," said Demeree.

Judge Steele looked down. "How deep is that track?"

"About an inch, your honor," Claybrook answered. He looked at Dan Trewhitt. "Now, Mr. Trewhitt, do you see that tub of mud?"

“Sure do, and it ain’t my first time. I scooped up that mud myself, and it’s like that other—only it ain’t dried.”

“You mean this tub of mud is now of like consistency as the other was when that footprint was made?”

“Sure is; mud for mud.”

Claybrook faced defendant Whoa-mule Goler. “Goler, come over here and put your foot in that tub of mud.”

Goler started to get up, but Demeree shoved him down. Judge Steele started to get up, but Bill Hacker pulled his coat tail. “Leave them alone, Wardlow.”

“If your honor please,” said Demeree, “nobody is required to give evidence against himself.”

Claybrook flushed with anger. “Your honor, nobody is requiring him to give evidence against himself. Immunity from self-incrimination is a personal privilege. Whoa-mule has not claimed his privilege, and Demeree’s protest will not suffice.”

Steele’s anger was rising too. “Sam Goler, do you object to putting your foot in that tub of mud?”

“Why, no, Judge; I don’t mind a bit. Be glad to do it.”

Steele leaned over his puncheon table. “Well, by thunder, *I* mind. But I got an idear that’s wuth tryin’. You stand up out thar, Sam.”

Whoa-mule got up and shuffled out a few feet.

“Now, Dan Trehwhitt,” said Steele, “you stand down thar beside Sam.”

Trehwhitt got down off his nail-keg and stood beside Whoa-mule.

“Now,” said Steele, “Claybrook, you stand out thar, too.”

“I fear your honor is being facetious,” Claybrook objected.

“Facetious or not, by thunder, you git out thar.”

Half a dozen deputies alerted themselves. Claybrook moved out and stood by

Trehwhitt.

“Now, you jurors,” said Judge Steele, “you’re lookin’ at Flat Creek’s Society of Big Feet. I’ll give any man a quarter-eagle who can tell whose feet is the biggest.”

A bearded juror jerked at his whiskers. “All of a size, Judge.”

“Now, by thunder, as you was. But I’ll make you a proposition, Claybrook; you prove that Sam Goler had his foot in whatever shoe made that track and he’ll make a track in your tub. Your method is what I call getting ahead backwards, if you know what I mean.”

CLAYBROOK slapped his puncheon with a paper. “I know what you mean, your honor.” He looked at Dan Trehwhitt and after Trehwhitt was seated again, asked him, “Mr. Trehwhitt, did you arrest Whoa-mule Goler?”

“Sure did, and took him to jail. He confessed too. Said he murdered Thumbscrew—”

Demeree shouted as he rose. “Object, your honor. That statement about a confession should be stricken. A confession can’t be thrown in, like a dead cat by its tail; it’s got to be qualified as a confession first.”

“Mr. Trehwhitt,” said Claybrook, “did defendant Goler make any statement to you?”

“I’ll say he did. Told me—”

“Object,” shouted Demeree.

Bill Hacker nudged Judge Steele. “Demeree is right, Wardlow, but let’s overrule him and give Claybrook as much rope as he wants.”

“Demeree,” said Steele, “you set down and consider yourself overruled for a spell. I’ll handle this my own way.”

Demeree, puzzled, sat down.

“Now, Deputy Trehwhitt,” said Steele, “you just open up and tell everything you know, and don’t stop at nothin’.”

Claybrook objected. “But, your honor—”

"Claybrook, you set down, too."

Claybrook sat down and burned with indignation.

"Proceed, Dan," said Steele.

"All right, I'll tell you how it was. After them fellers told me about seein' Whoa-mule slippin' out of Carriger's livery-barn that night, and after me findin' that big track out there, I figures it was Whoa-mule for a fact. So off I goes to yank him in. Found him in Cooksy Blair's saloon. I gets there just as Whoa-mule is plankin' down a double-eagle and singin' out, 'Come up, everybody; drinks is on me.' "

Demeree started to get up, but eased back down as a couple of deputies moved toward him.

"But Whoa-mule don't buy no drinks for nobody," Trehwitt went on. "I grabs him and his double-eagle, and off to jail it is. While he's a-settin' there in jail on a puncheon, he suddenly opens up and—"

"Object," cried Demeree, rising.

Judge Steele snorted with wrath. "Demeree, I told you to keep out of this."

"But, your honor—"

Steele turned to Sheriff Buckalew, but Bill Hacker headed him off. "Easy, Wardlow; we may need Demeree later."

"Proceed, Trehwitt."

"Well, now, as I was sayin', Judge, this lop-eared Whoa-mule says to me, 'I done it, Dan. I murdered Thumbscrew. I done it by hangin' 'im to a hog-pole. Got his money, too, I did. That double-eagle was money I got off of Thumbscrew.' And I says, 'Whoa-mule—' "

"Hold on there, Trehwitt," said Steele. He leaned to hear what Hacker had to say.

"Ask him, Wardlow, if Whoa-mule's confession was voluntary."

"Trehwitt," said Steele, "how come Sam Goler to open up to you like that?"

"I sure don't know; I guess it was his conscience."

"Didn't you tell him you'd beat his head

off if he didn't confess?"

"No, sir. All I done was tell him what them fellers'd told me, and about that double-eagle, and about that track by Cleaver Newhall's hog-pole.

"And then I says to him, 'Whoa-mule, as I see it, you're a gone-up goose. There ain't nothin' you can do but git on your knees and do some good hard prayin', for you're goin' go hang as sure as sunrise. It might do a little good if you'd come clean and own up to everything; be honest with Judge Steele when you're drug into court, and he might let you off with just a good whuppin'. If you git stubborn like that old balky mule of Carriger's, Judge Steele might turn you over to Bill Hacker's Vigies. You know what that'd mean; it'd mean your eyes would be poppin' out in about six minutes.'

"That done it. But I didn't use no force on him; never choked 'im, nor nothin'."

"Purely a voluntary confession," observed Steele. "I reckon that'll be all from you, Trehwitt, except— Hold it a second." He leaned toward Hacker. "What was that again, Bill?"

"He referred to certain informers as *them fellers*. Ask him who them fellers were."

"Sure, now, Trehwitt," said Steele, "who was them fellers you mentioned back thar as tellin' you who murdered Thumbscrew?"

"Why, it was them other two witnesses, waitin' to testify; Mundy Pitser and Currycomb Birdsong. It was them saw Whoa-mule slippin' out of Carriger's and saw 'im sneakin' in a hour later."

Demeree got up. "If your honor please, I suggest that Pitser and Birdsong do their own testifying."

"Good suggestion, Demeree." Steele nodded at Trehwitt. "You can stand over here with your buddies." He looked down at Sheriff Buckalew. "Bucky, if you ever have any promotions to hand out, you be sure and give one to Dan Trehwitt; he's one in a million." Steele swung left. "Call Mundy

Pitser.”

PITSER was ushered in by a deputy sheriff. He was a whomper-jawed wolf with a forehead as flat as a board. Judge Steele looked him over. Be-consarned if he didn't look mean enough to eat his granny. As self-confident, too, as a man who'd just lifted a horse.

“All right, you skunk,” said Steele, “tell what you know.”

That knocked out some of his self-confidence. He looked both startled and puzzled. “You mean about Whoa-mule murderin' Thumbscrew Demarcus?”

“Oh, murdered 'im, did he?”

“Sure did.”

“Did you see 'im?”

“Well, no, not exactly.”

“Exactly what did you see?”

“Well, me and Curry-comb Birdsong was pretendin' we was asleep down in Carriger's bunk room, when we hear Whoa-mule slippin' out. We look out through a window and watch. It's moonshine, and we see him plain. He's got a piece of rope and a club. We hear him slippin' back in about an hour later. We pretend that wakes us up, so we get up and light a lantern. Whoa-mule's got a funny look on his mug, and there's mud on his shoe. Besides—”

“Which shoe?” asked Judge Steele.

Pitser looked down at Claybrook's box of dried mud. “It was his right shoe.”

“No mud on his other shoe?”

“Well, no. That is . . . not much.”

“And how much was on his right shoe?”

“Plenty.”

“How much is plenty?”

Pitser looked down again. “Well, sort of up its sides; inch, maybe.”

Bill Hacker leaned close. “Wardlow, steal a peep at Pitser's shoes.”

“Pitser,” said Steele, “did you see Whoa-mule with any money?”

“No; that is, none much, except next

morning he showed us a double-eagle. He must've hid it out somewheres.”

“Where did you hide it, Pitser?”

“That's for me to know and you—I mean. What was that question?”

“Pitser, you set down back thar behind Whoa-mule. You may be wanted later.” Steele nodded left. “Call Curry-comb Birdsong.”

Curry-comb came in and took his seat. He resembled an eagle in some shoes, which had old smears of dark mud. “Birdsong, pull your shoes off.”

Curry-comb bounced an inch off his nail-keg. “What fer?”

Steele looked around. “Bucky, witnesses don't ask questions in this court; they answer 'em!”

Sheriff Buckalew nodded, gave his mouth a lefthanded twist and jerked his head. Four deputies marched round and assisted Birdsong with removal of his shoes. Steele admired their efficiency; they laid Birdsong on his face, clamped his wrists between his shoulder-blades, loosened rawhide shoelaces, slipped off both shoes, and replaced Birdsong on his nail-keg, all in about ten seconds.

“Hand 'em to those jurors,” said Steele. “I want 'em to see if they ain't got old mud-smears, like that in Claybrook's tub.”

Jurors crowded together into a couple of knots. “Same kind of mud, Judge,” one of them sang out.

Another shouted, “Hog bristle on this one, Judge.”

Steele looked at Whoa-mule Goler. “Sam, get over thar by that tub of mud.”

Whoa-mule obeyed promptly, his tongue sticking out at a corner of his mouth. “Now what, Judge?”

“Put your right foot in that mud.”

“There you arc, Judge,” said Goler, foot planted dead-center.

“Stand on it.”

Whoa-mule shifted his weight to his right foot. His foot went down—straight on down until it struck bottom. “Now what, Judge?”

“Lift your foot out.”

Whoa-mule lifted his foot out. It brought out a maul-like lump of mud and left a huge, shapeless hole. “Sort of gummy, Judge.”

“You’re right, Sam. Now, you just gum that mud off your shoe and set down again.”

WHOA-MULE used his big hands for gumming purposes, then wiped them clean on his britches. He resumed his seat and stuck his tongue out at a corner of his big mouth.

“Now, Sam,” said Steele, “where did you get that double-eagle you had at Cooksy’s bar?”

“Found it in my pocket, Judge.”

Wade Claybrook got up. “Now, your honor, he’s not under oath; what he says—”

“What he says is blessed truth, Claybrook. You set down thar. This case has got plumb out of your hands; thar’s goin’ to be a couple of hangings here pretty soon, and—”

Steele caught a nudge in his ribs.

“Look, Wardlow, heading out.”

Mundy Pitser was almost gone. Before him was an open door. He was two jumps from freedom, when a dozen grim-faced gold-diggers squeezed him beyond hope.

Suddenly there was a noise on Judge Steele’s left. Curry-comb Birdsong yelled and leaped down. Barefooted, he ran with terrific speed. He eluded Pitser’s captors and made a desperate leaping dive for out-of-doors. Yet it was a forlorn hope for Birdsong. A black-bearded giant seized him by an ankle and held him fast.

Steele swung round. “You jurors, stand up and pronounce Sam Goler not guilty.”

Twelve jurors put their heads together and elected one of their number to be foreman. Their foreman, a stocky, bearded

miner, announced their verdict. “Not guilty, Judge.”

“Thank you, gentlemen, for having good sense.”

Bill Hacker took out his pipe and began to fill it with tobacco crumbs. Men were crowding out fast. Hacker struck a match, drew fire into his tobacco.

“Do you want them, Wardlow?”

“Them murderin’ polecats? I’d say I don’t. They was born to be hung; why waste time on ‘em?”

Hacker turned to Sheriff Buckalew. “Bucky, tell Lige Winton I want to see him.”

Buckalew went out a back way. He returned in company with Giant Blackbeard. “Here he is, Bill.”

“Winton, those sneaks are yours, if you want ‘em. Which would you rather do; hang ‘em, or turn ‘em over to Bucky?”

“Whatever you say, Bill.”

Hacker swung round and looked steadily into Wardlow Steele’s savage eyes. “Wardlow, we’re ready to lay down Vigilante justice any time you’re ready to take over. Remember, you’ll always have moral support when you need it, but maybe here’s a case where you won’t need it.”

Steele got up and holstered his sixgun. Tobacco smoke rose at his side, and from a corner of an eye he could see Bill Hacker’s head, a fine head, with thick, black hair, parted on its right side, a noble forehead, high and clean, a face sharply cut and as hard as granite. A great man, this Hacker; if he hadn’t wanted law and order, he’d have gone in for it.

“Bill, by thunder, turn them varmints over to Bucky.”

Hacker glanced at Blackbeard. “All right, Winton, take ‘em to jail; from there on they’re Buckalew’s meat.”

A FEW MINUTES later Wardlow Steele and Bill Hacker were left alone. Judge Steele stepped down and walked back and

forth. "Bill, I agreed to that because I figured it was what you wanted; but in my opinion them skunks ought to been hangin' dead by now."

Hacker smoked thoughtfully, dark eyes lost in distance. "You're right, Wardlow, they ought. But it's better this way. If we'd had nothing but Vigilante justice right now, Whoa-mule Goler would've been hanging dead, and a couple of murderers would've been walking about as free men. It's institutions that live, Wardlow, not men. Long after you and I are gone, there'll be a court here, and men will be brought to justice, as you are bringing them to justice now."

Steele halted his promenade. Absently he drew his sixgun, gave it a twirl round his trigger finger and reholstered it. "Bill, it's you that's bringin' 'em justice, not me. I'm

too ignorant to know east from west. You ought to been judge, 'cause you're educated. If some ox-brained lawyer brought a tub of mud into your court, you'd know what to do with it. Things like that get me stumped."

Hacker knocked his pipe against Steele's sandbox and put it in his pocket. "You're a fine judge, Wardlow; as fine as they come. You're getting to be an old hand, too; and what is more, would-be criminals will learn their lesson someday."

That wasn't so, and Bill Hacker knew it as well as anybody. In his mind's eye, Wardlow Steele could see their ugly faces, snarling faces, murderin' varmints who came on in endless procession. But, by thunder, they'd get their necks stretched; they'd die by hangropes at one end of their procession as fast as they were spawned at its other end.

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