

Be-consarned if bein' a judge wasn't one step away from the looney bin. Here was this horse of a woman bein' tried for murder, and her snivellin' husband settin' there next to her like he was afraid she'd look at him. Trying women for murder was a new twist for Judge Steele.



JEWEL OF GOLD

by Lon Williams

JUDGE WARDLOW STEELE, again in hanging mood, assumed his judgment seat in Flat Creek's crowded court room. Below and back, faces of gold-diggers, gamblers, bullwhackers, muleskinners, and mongrel breeds of unclassified occupations met his roving, savage blue eyes. In upturned faces varied emotions revealed themselves by lines, curves and puckers as hates, cynicisms, morbid curiosities, spites, and restrained, seething enmities toward law and order generally and this clumsy court in particular.

On this occasion, goggle-eyed smirks were more plentiful than common, which indicated prevailing opinions that for once

Judge Steele was going to catch it good and proper. He'd never understood why Flat Creek citizens picked a crude, unlettered golddigger like him to be judge. But judge he was, by thunder, and he'd show 'em that somebody else was going to catch it, that his court justice was just another name for hang rope.

He gave his straw-colored mustache two hard jerks and nodded his shaggy head. "Sheriff, call court."

Sheriff Jerd Buckalew, tall, rawboned and poker-faced, stood up and pounded an inverted barrel with his forty-five. "Court's now in session. Mind your manners, or you won't have none to mind."

Heavily armed deputies, stationed

advantageously, nodded grimly and hitched up their sixguns. Vigies ranged along walls remained motionless, but their hard faces were solemn and determined.

Judge Steele nodded again. "Skiffy, call fust case."

Clerk James Skiffington, a beanpole wrapped in rags, arose, glared through rectangular spectacles and drew his lips down sourly. His voice rose harsh and merciless, "People *versus* Amanda McGavock, alias Tough Mandy, and her husband Swan McGavock, alias Ugly Duck. Charge, first degree murder."

Judge Steele's mouth hardened and tightened. Below, where puncheon space was reserved for blood-letters and thieves, sat a woman as big as a horse, surly, copper-haired, small-eyed, muscle-faced, and as insolent as a cornered wildcat. Beside her sat a small, puny, shriveled, bald-headed worm, his thin, flaxen brows arched, his eyes cast down, resignation stamped upon his submissive countenance and folded, knotty hands.

A woman murderer! Here was something that infuriated Steele beyond measure. He'd always regarded women as only slightly lower than angels. When one turned criminal, she was getting out of her domain, betraying her kind.

"Murder eh?" he growled. "Ain't you encroachin' on man's game presarves more'n you ought?"

Tough Mandy glared back at him. Her voice was as snarling and contemptuous as his had been. "Man's domain! Ha! What man?"

Steele's nostrils curled and distended themselves. "Be-consarned if you don't find out soon enough. You got a lawyer?"

Tough Mandy's mouth turned up at one end. "I got this varmint that calls hisself a lawyer." She gave her head one quick jerk. "Him!"

A tall, lean, thin-faced, black-haired facsimile of man at his worst got up in black suit, white vest and dark four-in-hand necktie. "I am her lawyer, your honor. French Demeree."

Distaste engendered by remembered antagonisms wiped out the judge's recently acquired tolerance, and prompted Steele to spit in his sandbox. "Yeah, Demeree from Tennessee; come West for health and fortune, I believe?"

Demeree nodded with restrained haughtiness. "That is correct, your honor. And both objectives are daily attained, thanks to Flat Creek's passion for law and order."

Steele was sorry to hear that progress report. He swung left more hopefully. "Whar's our man?"

A stocky redhead with dignified and noble bearing arose. "Wade Claybrook, your honor. Prosecuting attorney."

Steele regarded Claybrook's dignity and nobility of expression dubiously. What Flat Creek needed for its prosecutor was a man-eating tiger, not this refined gentleman. Steele couldn't resist digging him gently. "Well, Claybrook. I'm surprised to find a son of chivalry, like you, pickin' on a female."

Claybrook's eyebrows arched microscopically. "If your honor please, justice knows neither sex nor station. Women, as well as men, are amenable to its inexorable demands, once they defy its precepts."

"That's what I thought," Steele returned drily. He turned to Tough Mandy. "All right, woman, what's your plea?"

Demeree had remained standing. "If your honor please, defendant Amanda McGavock has a plea in abatement."

"Consarn you, Demeree, I expected you to have some sneakin' trick up your sleeve, but you're springin' it mighty early."

Undaunted, Demeree stated his plea. "This indictment, your honor, recites that defendant Amanda McGavock has a husband named Ugly Duck McGavock. Indeed, they are indicted jointly and are charged with having acted together in commission of a crime. I believe, when evidence has been introduced, it will appear that Mrs. McGavock's husband was present when this alleged murder was committed. Under our law, as it has come down to us through tried and tested centuries, if a woman's husband is present when she commits a crime, it is legally presumed that she did it at his instigation and under his coercion and compulsion. Coercion negatives guilt. Hence, this good woman could, not have been guilty of murder, hence should be discharged."

JUDGE STEELE leaned forward and blinked his hot eyes. "Demeree, that trick has shore got your brand on it." He turned to Claybrook. "Wade, if you let him get away with such lowdown, foul-smellin' trickery as he's proposin', you'll be disgraced through eternity. Stomp his liver out."

Claybrook responded without malice, equally without fear of future retribution. "If your honor please, Mr. Demeree is right in principle."

"Now, see hyar, Claybrook, don't give Axe-face Demeree credit for havin' principles. In my thinkin', he's a clever, connivin' stinker; you just stick to what's law."

Claybrook continued unperturbed, "As I was about to say, your honor; Mr. Demeree has correctly stated a principle of law. But his plea in abatement should be disallowed, because it is premature. Proof has not been introduced to show under what circumstances this killing occurred, and defense counsel is, not permitted to anticipate proof."

For one moment, Steele was proud of Claybrook. "Demeree," he said happily, "your plea in abatement was pulled green. Now, what's your plea—guilty or not guilty?"

Demeree replied coolly, "Not guilty, your honor. But defendant in due course, and in like substance, will renew her former plea."

Steele nodded confidently at Sheriff Buckalew. "Panel a jury, Bucky."

Claybrook desired to be heard further.

"All right, Wade?"

"Swan McGavock should also plead, your honor."

Steele glared at Ugly Duck. "All right, you mouse, what's your plea?"

"His plea is not guilty," said Demeree.

"Are you his lawyer, too?"

"Incidentally, I suppose I am, your honor."

Steele grunted. "Incidentally, eh? Panel a jury, Bucky. Seems to me we're gettin' off mighty slow."

Buckalew jerked his head at Clerk Skiffington. "Call names, Skiffy."

Skiffington called, "George Kilder, alias Killdeer."

A stocky, bearded gold-digger shouldered his way up.

Claybrook eyed him coldly when he had sat down. "Mr. Killdeer, do you have any conscientious scruples against finding a woman guilty of murder?"

"You mean, am I agin it?"

"Yes."

"Not if she's guilty, no-sir."

Demeree spoke from where he stood. "Would you object to finding her guilty of murder, if it meant she'd be hung?"

Kildeer shook his head vigorously. "Shore wouldn't. Fact is, I'd like to see some of Flat Creek's hellish women strung up now and then."

Steele growled ominously. "George Kilder, you express your mind too freely;

come off of thar.”

“Seth Saul-Paul Jeter,” barked Skiffington.

A not her bearded gold-digger scrouged forward and seated himself.

Claybrook, head lowered, stared through pink eyebrows. “Seth Jeter, would you be averse to convicting this woman of murder, if you knew she’d be sentenced to death?”

“If you mean would I be agin seein’ her neck stretched, I wouldn’t. No aversement whatever.”

“Object to him,” said Demeree. “He’s *propter affectum*.”

“Come off of thar,” snapped Steele. His eyes roved menacingly. “Now see hyar, when you ox-brained gold-diggers git called, keep your big mouths shut. Next man, Skiffy.”

“Pyrite Cobb,” Skiffy shouted.

Cobb shoved his way up and sat down. He answered by shakes and nods, and eleven other prospective jurors followed his example.

Judge Steele leaned back, better satisfied with proceedings. “Witnesses come and be sworn.” When Skiffy had gone through his rigmarole and witnesses had been herded off, Steele nodded at Claybrook. “Call your fust witness, Wade.”

“Call Friendly Waters,” said Claybrook.

FRIENDLY WATERS was ushered in by a deputy sheriff and seated. She was dressed in red calico, flowered by hundreds of small horns of plenty in white. Her small red hat with its one yellow feather rode jauntily upon a mass of brown curly hair. She was still a blue-eyed, unwithered flower, though she probably had been dragged halfway across a continent, through Redskin skirmishes and miserable weather, and housed in a golddigger’s empty, desolate shack.

“Your name?” said Claybrook.

“Friendly Waters.”

“Married?”

“Certainly.”

“How old are you?”

“Consarn you, Claybrook,” snarled Judge Steele. “You’ll ask her age or bust. Ask her what she knows about this murder.”

Claybrook pouted briefly, but rallied. “Mrs. Waters, are you acquainted with Tough Mandy McGavock?”

“I am.”

“Do you live near her?”

“Yes.”

“Object,” said Demeree, rising. “Mr. Claybrook should not ask leading questions.”

Before Judge Steele could assist, Claybrook retreated. “I stand corrected, sir. Now, Mrs. Waters, where do you live?”

“I live with my husband.”

“Where does he live?”

“If your honor please,” said Demeree, getting up again, “this case has nothing to do with her husband, where he lives, or what he does.”

“I withdraw that question,” Claybrook responded quickly.

Steele’s temper was warming rapidly. “Now see hyar, Wade, you don’t have to back up every time Axe-face Demeree objects. Mrs. Waters, whar does your husband live?”

“He lives on Prairie Dog Street, Judge.”

Steele scowled at Claybrook. “Now, Mr. Prosecutor, proceed.”

Claybrook glared at Friendly. “Where does your husband live in relation to where Amanda McGavock lives?”

“Do you mean how close?”

“Yes.”

“Why, our shacks are side by side, not more than three steps apart. Mandy and me used to sit on our doorsteps and gab with each other no end, her tellin’ me all about

how mean Ugly Duck treated her and how hard times was for them back in Missouri where she run a boarding house, and Ugly Duck set up clubs in a bowling alley and gambled away all his money, and hers, too, what he could get of it, and how she'd sat around late at night and nearly cried her eyes out. Why, one time—"

Tough Mandy rose and screamed, "Friendly Waters, shut your mouth."

Judge Steele experienced fury. "Woman, you set down thar and keep quiet, or I'll have you hog-tied and gagged. Sheriff, see she behaves."

Buckalew nodded and several deputies alerted themselves with handkerchiefs and ropes.

Tough Mandy reconsidered her attitude and sat down.

"Just answer my questions, please," Claybrook admonished Mrs. Waters.

"What is your question?" she asked, bewildered.

"Were you at home last Friday?"

"I am at home every Friday."

"Did you, or did you not, hear a conversation between Mandy and her husband about four o'clock last Friday afternoon?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, I did hear a conversation, if you want to call it that. To me it sounded like an awful quarrel. Ugly Duck had just come home from Grizelle Boruff's butcher shop. Most people call him Gristle Boruff. Well, Ugly Duck brought home two cuts of steak that was nearly all bone, and that's what Mandy and Ugly Duck quarreled about. Mandy said—"

"Object," Demeree shouted. "She can't tell what somebody said. Mr. Claybrook knows that hearsay evidence is not admissible."

"I stand corrected," said Claybrook. He glared at Friendly Waters. "You may relate

what happened, but you may not tell what was said. Now proceed."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Tell about their quarrel, but tell it without relating what they said."

"You mean just tell what happened?"

"Yes."

"Well, she yanked him out of there— But before that, she called him names, like green worm, toothless hound-dog, tongueless coyote, backboneless polecat, onion-head, and stinkweed, and then—"

"What did he call her?" asked Claybrook.

DEMEREER rose impatiently. "If your honor please, all this is irrelevant, immaterial and incompetent. This good woman—this defendant here—has had her share of tribulation, but in spite of all, she has remained a faithful, loyal wife, obedient and devoted to this—" Demeree glanced down at Ugly Duck and added deprecatingly, "—this husband. Let them expose her domestic sorrows, if they must, but she remains a noble woman—a jewel of gold."

"Demeree," said Steele, "you started out with an objection. Now I've got one. What was that about *jewel of gold*?"

"That is Scriptural allusion, your honor," said Demeree placidly.

"I thought so. Now, suppose you go on and quote some more Scripture."

"I fear I do not follow you," said Demeree, arching his eyebrows.

"Thar's more to that jewel of gold Scripture. Let's have it."

Demeree bowed slightly. "Very well, your honor. *As a jewel of gold in a swine's snout, so is a fair woman which is without discretion.* Proverbs, eleven, twenty-two. How is that, your honor?"

"That gets us back in proper proportion," Steele replied tartly. He turned to Claybrook. "Proceed with your case."

"Mrs. Waters, what did Ugly Duck call his wife?"

"Object," said Demeree. "Same reasons."

"If your honor please," said Claybrook, indignant at last. "Mr. Demeree has declared his intention to rely upon an old presumption of coercion, as between husband and wife. I intend—"

"What Mr. Claybrook intends," said Demeree, "is to besmirch this good woman's character and make it appear that she is dominating and coercive."

"Demeree, set down thar." Steele's eyes gleamed savagely. "Thar may be excuse for lawyers in some communities, but they're as useless hyar in Flat Creek as smallpox would be."

Claybrook interceded magnanimously. "If your honor please, Mr. Demeree is within his right in raising proper objections. His defense is that Tough Mandy acted under coercion from her husband, hence cannot be guilty. He has a right to maintain that defense, if he can, and I should like to protest against his being treated unfairly."

Steele's jaw-muscles hardened. "Claybrook, you set down, too. Be-consarned if you ain't more disappointin' than Demeree." When Demeree and Claybrook had seated themselves, Steele turned to witness Waters. "Now, lady, go ahead and tell what Tough Mandy and Ugly Duck said and done to each other."

Friendly gave Judge Steele her smile of warmest admiration. "Well, Judge," she began anew, "they had an awful quarrel at first. Mandy wanted to know why her husband didn't fling them steaks into Gristle Boruff's face and call him a cheatin' scoundrel, and Mr. McGavock kept trying to quiet her. He called her honey-bunch and sugar-lump and pet. 'Now, pet,' he says, 'don't get yourself all bothered. You know, back in

Independence, you had a smotherin' spell; you might have another.'

" 'I wish I was back in Independence' says she. 'I wish I was back before I ever saw you. If I had it to do over, I wouldn't have you on a Christmas tree. Whatever possessed me to marry a pukey little worm like you anyhow?'

"And Ugly Duck says, 'Now, now, honey-bunch, you'll be sorry you're saying them mean things. There was plenty of women besides you I could of married. Why, don't you remember that doll-faced honey-darlin' at Jenny Harrison's eatin' house in Independence? She made eyes at me, she did, and—'

"He didn't get that finished, because Mandy grabbed him, sat down, yanked him across her lap, and blistered him with a batter paddle. He kept saying, 'Now, pet, don't do that. Don't do that, now, sugar-lump.' But she got madder and madder, and finally she got up, grabbed him by his pants and took him crow-hoppin' off toward town.

"I'll show you what a man ought to do," she screamed at him. Last I saw of them, he was begging her not to get excited, because she might have a smotherin' spell, like she had back in Independence."

Judge Steele nodded respectfully. "You've made a good witness, lady. Is thar anything more you'd like to say?"

Claybrook got up valiantly. "Now, your honor, this witness was not brought here to indulge in gossip, but merely to show that Mandy McGavock was impelled by deliberation and malice when she went with her husband to Grizelle Boruff's butcher shop. That, she has shown."

Demeree eased up. "I'd like to cross-examine this witness, your honor."

"All right, Demeree," Steele responded reluctantly.

Demeree came around and confronted Mrs. Waters. "Lady, did you ever quarrel

with Mrs. McGavock?"

Friendly Waters looked horrified. "Oh, no, I wouldn't dare quarrel with her."

"And you say she has smothering spells?"

"She mentioned smothering spells."

"Did she also mention having had crazy spells?"

"Oh, I reckon she must have done crazy things, all right. She told about coming up through Kansas with a wagon train and how she got mad at some nosey man and turned his wagon over."

Claybrook sprang up. "I object, your honor. Mr. Demeree has not pleaded insanity as a defense."

Steele felt glad suddenly. "Wade, I'm proud to see you showin' fight. Objection sustained. Demeree, go set down."

Demeree obeyed, but only after a hurt look, intended for eyes of jurors who believed in fair play.

"Call Temperance Oatner," said Claybrook.

A SECOND woman witness was ushered in and seated. She was middle-aged, full-bosomed and bright-eyed, her dress of solid blue calico drawn tight around her waist. Her black hat was broad, straight-brimmed and had a crown no bigger than a sawed-off pint cup.

"Your name?" said Claybrook.

"Temperance Oatner," she answered in a high, musical voice.

"Married?"

"Well, of course."

Judge Steele was furious. "Claybrook, quit prying into people's private affairs and ask her what she knows about this murder."

"All right, lady," said Claybrook, "tell what you know."

Mrs. Oatner did not have to study. "It's very little I know about it," she said pleasantly. "I saw Mandy and her husband go past our shack and heard them talking.

She was leading her man by one of his ears and blessing him out for being so puny and easy-going. She said—"

"Object," shouted Demeree. "She can't tell what somebody said."

"That is right, your honor," Claybrook agreed promptly.

"Lady," said Steele, "you go ahead and tell what you saw and heard."

Mrs. Oatner, assured by having power on her side, smiled gently. "Well, Judge, she was lifting on his ear so hard his head was turned over sideways, and he was walking on tiptoe. Mandy said, 'If you had any manhood at all, you'd knock that Gristle Boruff down and stomp his insides out. You're too mealy-mouthed and spineless to whip a cat. But I'll show you. Wait till you see what I do to Gristle Boruff.'

"And Ugly Duck said to her, 'Now, honey-bunch, you're fixin' to do something you'll be sorry for. Don't do anything rash, now, pet. Besides, you have them smotherin' spells, you know.' That's about all I heard, for she was hustling him along, and pretty soon they'd made a turn and gone out of sight."

"No more questions," Claybrook announced abruptly.

"No cross-examination," said Demeree without rising.

"Call Felicity Gray," said Claybrook.

A young woman with gentle, brown eyes and flawless fair complexion was ushered in and seated. Her hat was so tiny as almost to lose itself in a mass of nut-brown hair. From her waspish waistline a skirt of green satin drew downward in tight curves and fell in ample folds round her feet. A similar tightness rounded upward to a softly curving neck upon which hung a necklace of emeralds. She was beautiful and scared.

"Your name?" asked Claybrook, his voice forcibly stripped of all tenderness.

"I am Felicity Gray."

"Married?"

Judge Steele held his peace; he, too, wanted to know her answer. Not that he had hopes with respect to her; he merely felt his oneness with universal man from whom feminine beauty exacted tribute.

"I am married," said Felicity.

Of course! Steele might have known. "Mr. Prosecutor," he said coldly, "ask her what she knows about this murder."

THERE was a lumbering stir suddenly, and Tough Mandy rose and shook her huge fist. "She better mind what she says about me, or I'll take her apart."

Deputy sheriffs moved toward Tough Mandy with their ropes and handkerchiefs. Her eyes bulged at sight of them.

She sat down as suddenly as she had risen.

"Never mind," said Steele sharply, "she'll behave."

Claybrook lowered his head and stared at Felicity Gray. "Were you in Grizelle Boruff's butcher shop last Friday between four and five o'clock?"

Felicity glanced fearfully at Tough Mandy. "Yes, I was, sir."

"Relate what occurred there, as respects Amanda McGavock and her husband."

Felicity turned to Judge Steele, her expression one of fear and inquiry.

"You don't need to be afraid of Mandy McGavock," Steele assured her stoutly. "If she gets up again, she'll be trussed and gagged till she can't wiggle or whisper."

Felicity breathed with relief. "Thank you, Judge. Now I'll tell what happened. I was in Mr. Boruff's butcher shop to buy roast beef, when Mr. and Mrs. McGavock entered. Perhaps I should say, when Mr. McGavock was flung in. Following him came Mrs. McGavock."

Demeree rose with determination, fear for his own safety cast aside. "Now, your

honor, this brings us back to where we started. It is now shown that Amanda's husband was present, and this presumption of coercion on his part negatives her guilt. I move for instant dismissal of all charges against my client, Amanda McGavock."

Steele leaned forward, savagery within him leaping at its bonds. "Demeree, by thunder, any man with your gall ought to be rendered into snake oil. What do you mean by makin' such a consarned motion as that, after all that's been said hyar?"

Claybrook interceded courageously. "Your honor, I can explain."

Tight with wrath, Steele faced Claybrook. "It had better be good, Claybrook."

Claybrook proceeded courageously. "In order to bring this matter on to its proper climax, your honor, I should like to ask one more question."

"Ask it."

"Mrs. Gray," said Claybrook, "after their entry into Boruff's butcher shop, did Amanda McGavock and her husband continue together throughout what was being transacted there, and did they leave together?"

Felicity nodded. "Both were there throughout, and they left together."

Claybrook, his noble countenance calm and full of honor, glanced at Steele. "Now, your honor, Mr. Demeree's motion is in order."

Demeree straightened himself. "I commend Mr. Claybrook for his high sense of justice. In response thereto, I renew my motion. It is based upon an age-old principle in our law of domestic relations and criminal liability, namely, that where a wife commits a crime in her husband's presence, there is a presumption that she did it because he compelled her to." Demeree paused to give Judge Steele time to catch up, then continued, "When a person is coerced into doing an act, it is not

a voluntary, nor malicious, nor deliberate act. Therefore, it is not criminal. In view of this legal presumption of coercion, Amanda McGavock cannot legally be convicted of murder, or of any other crime in relation to Grizelle Boruff's death."

Steele turned in sick, forlorn hope toward Claybrook. "All right, Mr. Prosecutor?"

"Though I deeply regret to say it, your honor," Claybrook responded sadly, "Mr. Demeree has spoken correctly. In view of this presumption of coercion, Amanda McGavock cannot legally be convicted."

JUDGE STEELE'S eyes roved desperately, searching—searching. He wiped his forehead with a blue handkerchief. "Claybrook, do you mean to stand thar and tell me I've got to turn that murderin' hippopotamus loose on society, just because of some old moth-eaten presumption of law?"

"I do, sir."

"Then why in tarnation did you bring on this trial?"

Claybrook's forehead wrinkled. "There is still Ugly Duck, your honor."

Blood vessels distended themselves in Steele's forehead. "Mister Prosecutor," he said with every ounce of contempt at his command, "do you mean to stand thar and tell me that it'd be proper to turn that murderin' woman loose and then proceed to put a rope around Ugly Duck McGavock's neck?"

"I certainly do, your honor."

Steele got up slowly. His savage eyes roved desperately. "Bill Hacker, whar in tarnation are you?"

A huge, black-bearded Vigie called back, "Bill had to be out of town, Judge."

Steele sat down. He wiped his face and his hands. He might have known he'd come to a day like this, when he'd bog down and there'd be nobody to roll a

wheel. Why in thunder he ever consented to try being a judge was beyond him. He supposed that every man had to make a fool of himself one way or another, and this had been his way.

But slowly his anger boiled, and resolution drew itself tight and sharp in his head and in his barbarous eyes. Tough Mandy wasn't loose yet. So long as he had his hooks in her, he'd see whether there was any way to hang her or not.

He glared at Demeree, then at Claybrook. "You lawyers set down." He looked at Sheriff Buckalew. "Bucky, if they get up or open their mouths one more time, jail 'em. Be-consarned if we wouldn't be better off if we didn't have no lawyers."

Demeree and Claybrook sat down. Tough Mandy had a smirking snarl on her round, pudgy face. Ugly Duck sat with brows lifted, eyes downcast, hands folded in a peace that defied understanding.

Steele turned in final, desperate hope to Felicity Gray, who was scared half out of her wits. "Lady," said Steele, "I'm going to ask you a few questions. Don't be afraid to answer right up, for nobody is going to hurt you. After Mandy McGavock heaved her husband into Gristle Boruff's butcher shop and followed him in, what did she do next?"

Felicity touched her pretty mouth and tried to swallow. "Judge, I'm sort of confused, and I may not add it up as it was put down, but I'll do my best."

"Nobody could do better," Steele assured her gently.

"Well," said Felicity, "Mandy came in and stared at Mr. Boruff, her eyes with terrible gleams in them. I was too scared to move, though I was standing between her and Mr. Boruff. Then she looked at me and said, 'Move out of my way, you dainty little artificial posey, before I pull all your petals off.' I suppose I moved, though I don't know how I managed, I was so

frightened.”

“Go ahead, lady,” said Steele, comfortingly.

“Well, Mandy ran her hand into an apron pocket and brought out a package. She unwrapped it, and it had two slices of beef in it. She glared at Mr. Boruff and said, ‘Do you call them steaks? Well, do you?’

“Mr. Boruff stared, too. He looked scared, but he said, ‘What’s wrong with them?’

‘Wrong with them?’ Mandy shouted. ‘Maybe they ain’t nothin’ wrong with them. No, they ain’t. And since they ain’t nothin’ wrong with them, you can just eat ‘em.’ She grabbed a piece in her right hand and squeezed it up as much as she could, though that wasn’t much, because it was mostly bone. ‘Yes,’ she cried, ‘if they ain’t nothin’ wrong with it, you can just eat it.’ ”

Felicity paused, shuddered, and looked pleadingly at Steele. “Judge, I don’t think I can go on. It all makes me sort of sick.”

Judge Steele puckered his mouth. “I’m surprised to hear you say that. How did you get to Flat Creek?”

Felicity’s thoughts were wholesomely diverted; her calm returned. “I came with my husband from St. Louis. We went up some river—Missouri, I believe—on a steamboat. It was many miles. Our boat ran aground several times, and twice Indians tried to burn it. Great numbers of them were shot. Finally we got to some place, from where we came on in a long wagon caravan.”

“Any more Indian troubles?”

“Just lots. My husband is a young ex-Army lieutenant—an engineer and quite an Indian fighter. Once I had to load guns for him, and after every fight there were wounded people to take care of. It was some journey, but I guess I was most too busy to get lonesome.”

Steele nodded. “After a trip like that,

you’re not goin’ to let one small murder get you down, are you?”

Felicity bit her upper lip and sighed. “I’ll try not to, Judge. Have you any more questions?”

“You said she was telling Boruff he could eat his own steak.”

“Oh, yes, I was. Well, when she squeezed that steak in her hand, her husband picked himself from where she had flung him and grabbed her arm. ‘Now, pet,’ he said, ‘don’t get yourself excited. Don’t do anything you’ll be sorry for. Besides, you know about them smotherin’ spells.’

“She glared at him a moment and screamed, ‘Shut up!’ ‘Now, honeybunch,’ he begged. ‘Shut up, I said,’ she screamed again. ‘Now, sugar-lump,’ he said. She didn’t scream any more. She just drew back with that fist with its squeezed-up steak and hit him—right on his chin. I think Mr. McGavock must have turned a somersault, for when he landed, he’d somehow swapped ends with himself.”

When Felicity balked, Judge Steele puckered his mouth to shame her.

“You’re not giving up now, shorely?”

FELICITY gathered her strength. “Well, Judge, if I’ve got to go on, I suppose I can. After Mandy had knocked her husband down, she moved slowly toward Mr. Boruff. He began to back away from her, but she moved right on until she had him backed into a corner. Then she grabbed him and crammed that steak into his mouth. ‘Eat it, you cheatin’, swindlin’ thief,’ she screamed. She backed away and put her fists on her hips. ‘Eat it,’ she cried again. “If you don’t, I’ll shove it down your gullet.’

“Mr. Boruff was about to choke. He didn’t try to eat it, but took both his hands and pulled it out of his mouth. He was pretty mad then. He stared at her and

snarled. 'You horse,' he said. 'You hogshead of buffalo grease.'

"Once more, she moved slowly toward him. Before he could back into a corner that time, she flung out her left hand and entangled her fingers in his hair. Then, so quick it didn't seem possible, she flung him onto his cutting-block, and ran him through with his own meat knife. 'There,' she said, when she'd finished, 'that'll teach you what kind of steaks not to sell to my husband.'"

Felicity stopped and sat very still, her face ghostly pale.

"Lady, you're fine and brave," said Steele. "This court owes you a debt of gratitude, and I thank you on behalf of everybody concerned. There's just one more question I'd like you to answer, if you will."

Felicity turned her lovely face to Judge Steele. "I'm afraid I can't answer any more, Judge; I'm getting sick."

"Just tell me what Ugly Duck McGavock was doing while Mandy was getting in her work."

"He wasn't doing anything, Judge, except lying on his face, like somebody dead. When Mandy had finished with Mr. Boruff, she walked over and kicked her husband's ribs. When he didn't move, she grabbed him by his coat collar and dragged him out. I suppose he came to, sometime."

"All right," said Steele. "You're excused now." He nodded at a couple of deputies. "Take her back and give her a drink of water, or whatever she wants."

When Felicity had been assisted out, Judge Steele folded his arms and looked first at Claybrook, then at Demeree. His scorn was immeasurable. "Coercion!" he growled. "This court may not always be legal, but it's never going to be stupid."

He swung left. "You jurors fetch in a verdict."

Jurors rose and went out. They filed

back two minutes later. One of their number, a tall, grizzled gold-digger, remained standing.

"She's guilty, Judge. First degree I murder."

"All right, gentlemen. Good work."

Wade Claybrook, pale and uncertain, got up. "What about Ugly Duck?"

Steele looked at his jurors, at their foreman.

"We forgot about him, Judge."

"Fetch in a verdict on him, then."

They filed out and immediately came back.

"Ugly Duck ain't guilty, Judge."

Judge Steele swung toward Sheriff Buckalew. A general stillness settled. For a moment Steele hesitated. Then, remembering Felicity Gray's courage, he said, "All right, Bucky, she's your meat."

Buckalew rose slowly, pallor on his rawboned face. "What must I do with her, Judge?"

Judge Steele crimped his lips, then shouted, "Hang her, by thunder!"

IN A DAZE of horrified unbelief, he watched them surround her and shove her away. She appeared dumb, and offered no resistance. Some sort of moral paralysis had taken hold of Steele, deadened his spirit. He remained where he sat until all were gone, when an awful loneliness gathered upon him. He knew at last what it meant to be a judge, to rely upon himself, upon his own native wisdom, what little there was of it.

In his loneliness he was only vaguely conscious of an outside commotion which had set in. Vaguely he heard a horse spring into sudden, furious action, its hoofs clattering away eastward, toward mountains and gulches and deep canyons. There were shots, too, a tremendous number of them, and those were presently accompanied by sounds of many running

horses.

Then a shadow appeared, entering Judge Steele's deserted courtroom. A big six-footer, wearing a black, shortcut mustache and twin sixguns, strode forward.

"Wardlow, she got away," he announced complacently.

Steele stared, as at an apparition. "Bill Hacker, consarn you, whar have you been?"

"Out of town, Wardlow. I hear you got along fine." Hacker took out his pipe, filled its bowl with tobacco crumbs and fired up.

Steele leaned on an elbow. "Bill, do you mean to stand thar and tell me that murderin' hippopotamus escaped?"

Hacker eyed his pipe quietly. "I'm afraid she got away, Wardlow. She knocked down about six deputies, grabbed a horse and lit out. Her pursuers will shoot up creation, but it's my guess she won't be hit. Last seen, she was heading southeast. That's Indian country, Wardlow, and full of hostiles."

Steele slid down, feeling better. "Well, Bill, all I've got to say is, I'm powerful sorry for them pore Injuns."

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