

If ever an accused man looked innocent, this Meetin'-house Joyner did. And Judge Steele wished that that pesty lawyer, French Demeree, were here to defend him. Because Prosecutor Wade Claybrook seemed to be doing his duty with too dangd much of a will.

# FINGER OF THE BEAST

JUDGE STEELE STORY

by Lon Williams

JUDGE WARDLOW STEELE took one stern, discerning glance at Flat Creek's seething courtroom crowd. Immediately he sensed that something was amiss. When there was reasonable certainty of a just hanging, men's faces showed eagerness, excitement, even pleasurable anticipation. When their expressions were glum, worried and restive, belief that a mistake had been made was as evident as if written in an open book.

Judge Steele tugged at his straw-colored mustache. When an innocent man was brought to trial for murder, only one conclusion could be drawn—namely, that he had been framed by some scoundrel lower than a snake. Possibility of such present villainy filled Steele with fury.

He jerked his head vehemently. "Sheriff, call court."

Sheriff Jerd Buckalew, tall, raw-boned and poker-faced, rose and hammered with his forty-five. "Flat Creek's criminal court is now in session; keep that in mind while you've got a mind to keep it in."

Heavily-armed deputies nodded and hitched up their gun belts. Somber-eyed Vigies here and there looked on in quiet readiness to lend a hand, if needed.

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

Skiffington arose, slim, tall and spectral, and shouted harshly, "People *versus* House, alias Meetin'-house, Joyner. Charge, first-degree murder."

Steele looked down at a puncheon bench reserved for men who'd come hither to collect their wages of sin. He discovered instantly convincing cause for congregational uneasiness. A young man sat there, quiet, worried, but in texture a person of

breeding and quality. Here was no murderer, else looks deceived; yet a Flat Creek citizen had been killed and, by thunder, somebody would have to pay for it.

Tense and angry, Steele growled, "Murder, eh? Be-consarned if it ain't time these carnivorous catamounts learned murder don't pay. You got a lawyer?"

A round-faced, middle-sized, immaculately-dressed gentleman with gray hair, stubby mustache and haughty blue eyes got up beside Meetin'-house Joyner. "I am his lawyer, suh. Professor Lexicon Hutto."

Now where in tarnation was Flat Creek's notorious defense lawyer, Demeree from Tennessee? "Consarn you, Hutto, you ain't tryin' to scrounge French Demeree off his roostin' place, are you?"

"I am not, suh," replied Hutto. "Mr. Demeree, with whom I am associated in this case, has business elsewhere momentarily; I trust he will arrive before it is forever too late."

"See hyar, Hutto," Steele growled angrily, "you ain't insinuatn' that this varmint's guilty, are you?"

Hutto coughed shortly. "Well, suh, Your Honor, I wish I could feel that his being innocent would turn out to be of some consequence."

Steele stiffened. Be-consarned if he'd ever learn to let these lawyers alone! They always tied him in a knot. He swung left. "Whar's our man?"

A stocky redhead, intellectual and honorable in appearance and demeanor, rose quietly. "Wade Claybrook, Your Honor. Prosecuting attorney."

Steele eyed him doubtfully for seconds, saw him as a man of variable judgment and fighting spirit. "Claybrook," Steele giped, "you look mighty



The witnesses gazed in terrified consternation as Dan Trew hitt came in behind the determined-looking bloodhound, followed by a triumphant French Demeree.

noble; are you fixin' to admit you've made a mistake in having this young house-dog indicted?"

"Your Honor," replied Claybrook forcefully, "what our grand jury has done I do not question. It is my duty to prosecute; that I shall do. Our grand jury, by indicting this defendant, has declared there is sufficient evidence against him to justify bringing him to trial for murder. A trial he shall have."

Steele grunted and snarled. "Claybrook, thar's just one trouble with your ambition; it's most determined when it's least needed. If you can prove this boy guilty, go to it, but don't count on no help from me."

Claybrook stood his ground. "Neither side

should count on help from Your Honor; a judge should be an umpire, not a partisan."

Steele's nostrils dilated with anger. "Consarn you, Claybrook, any time our side is wrong, you can count on me to say so." He glared down at Meetin'-house Joyner. "All right, you son of adversity, what's your plea?"

**P**ROFESSOR HUTTO got up. "Defendant pleads not guilty, Your Honor."

"Think you can make twelve jurors believe he ain't guilty?"

"Suh," Hutto replied pompously, "justice is a blindfolded goddess. She hears not only all that we mortals hear, but also voices from infinity which

are too sublime for our materialistic ears. That which men depose is blended with whisperings of conscience and mercy and distilled as unblemished truth into jurors' souls. If my client is innocent, to those men who shall sit in judgment his innocence will in due time be revealed. I trust Your Honor's question has been answered."

"By thunder, Hutto, my question could've been answered 'yes' or 'no.' Panel a jury, Bucky."

With jury empanelled and witnesses sworn, Claybrook stood. "Call Boaz Welfare, coroner of Flat Creek, as first witness."

Welfare was brought in and seated. He was stout, sandy-haired, round-faced and arrogant.

Claybrook eyed him with cold courtesy. "You are Boaz Welfare?"

Welfare looked down his nose at Claybrook. "I am Boaz Welfare, coroner of Flat Creek. Last Tuesday morning I was called upon to examine a body supposedly killed under mysterious and suspicious circumstances. Thereafter—"

Hutto arose leisurely. "Your Honor, suh, this distinguished gentleman was not called upon to make a speech. I suggest he answer 'yes' or 'no,' except where other answer is clearly indicated."

Steele suppressed an urge to tell Hutto to practice what he preached. "This trial could be done and over with in no time, Hutto, if it warn't for lawyers. As it is, you and Claybrook will make a job of it; go ahead, Mr. Prosecutor."

Claybrook stared at Welfare with disapproval. "You are sometimes called General Welfare, aren't you?"

"I regard that as neither here nor there, sir."

"Your answers to questions certainly have a tendency to be general."

"My time is valuable, sir. If there is something you wish to know, you have to indicate as much and I shall tell you, and not by jumps and starts either."

Steele eyed Claybrook's witness angrily. "See hyar, General; one more exhibition of disrespect like that, and I'll fine you for contempt of court."

Welfare pinked, angry and chagrinned. "Yes, Your Honor."

Claybrook said coldly, "Did you identify this body you were called upon to examine?"

"Yes."

"Was it Shovel-nose Gaffner?"

"Yes."

"Did you ascertain if death had been caused by

external violence?"

"Yes."

"Did you ascertain by what sort of instrument death was caused?"

"Yes."

"Was it an axe?"

"Yes."

"Where was this body located?"

"Yes."

"Do you refuse to answer?"

"No."

"Then answer."

"Yes."

STEELE'S face grew hard. "Consarn you, Welfare, you know how to answer a question. I fine you ten dollars for contempt of court. Bucky, you see it's paid, or let him rot it out in jail."

Rough faces broke into smiles. General Welfare looked furious, but beat.

Claybrook glared at him through pink eyebrows. "Where did you find Shovel-nose Gaffner's body?"

"In his shack in Sarlay Gulch."

"Relate what you did upon finding this body?"

Welfare sulked, then thought better of his situation. "I summoned a coroner's jury, as was my duty. This jury with my help and guidance conducted an inquest; we held that Gaffner had been murdered, motive being robbery."

Claybrook sat down. "No more questions."

Professor Hutto got up. "Your Honor, suh, I should like to cross-examine this witness."

Steele sniffed. "I supposed you would. But proceed."

Hutto squared himself at Welfare. "I gather from your testimony that Shovel-nose Gaffner was murdered with an axe. Why did you reach that conclusion?"

Welfare looked down his nose at Hutto. "Why?"

"Suh, what circumstances led you to believe Gaffner had been murdered with an axe?"

"His head had been pounded into pulp, sir, and a bloody axe lay beside his dead body."

"That is all, suh." Hutto turned to Judge Steele. "If Mr. Claybrook has no objection, Your Honor, defendant consents that Mr. Welfare may occupy a seat in this courtroom."

"No objection," said Claybrook, though puzzled.

There was an unoccupied puncheon inside that sanctum where only lawyers, defendants and court

officials customarily were allowed. General Welfare was directed to sit there. Steele was curious as to why Hutto had made this suggestion; but he regarded it as a chance to learn something, hence permitted it.

Claybrook nodded to a deputy-sheriff. "Next witness, Clawson Wilde."

**W**ILDE WAS brought in. He was a medium-sized blond with pudgy face, small blue-green eyes, and vain, self-confident bearing.

"Your name?" asked Claybrook.

In a blustery manner, Wilde answered, "Clawson Wilde."

"Were you acquainted with deceased, Shovel-nose Gaffner?"

"I sure was; Gaffner was one of my best friends."

Hutto popped up. "Your Honor, defendant thinks that statement should be explained. How many 'best friends' does this witness have, Your Honor?"

"See hyar, Hutto, what do you mean by raising such trivial objection as that?" Steele demanded.

"Your Honor, suh, this witness would have our jurors believe he is a man with many friends. In my opinion, judging from his looks, his only friends are night-prowlers, such as coyotes and rats."

"I object to that," stormed Claybrook. "If Mr. Hutto means to impeach this witness, he should wait until cross-examination."

"I apologize to Mr. Claybrook, Your Honor; but I must say that waiting will be an ordeal."

Steele tugged at his mustache. "Claybrook if I could feel that you was on our side, I'd be proud of this fighting spirit you're showing hyar. But proceed."

Claybrook eyed his witness. "Are you also acquainted with defendant Joyner?"

"Indeed, sir. Until he turned out to be a murderer, I—"

"Object," shouted Hutto.

"I object, too," said Claybrook.

"So do I, by thunder," growled Steele. "You answer what's put to you or, be-consarned, I'll have you jailed."

Wilde lost some of his self-confidence; his look became shiftily.

Claybrook asked, "Was defendant Joyner acquainted with deceased Gaffner?"

Wilde put on a bold front. "I'm afraid he was,

sir; too well acquainted, in fact."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because they worked adjoining claims. They also had a falling out. Gaffner accused Joyner of claim-raiding at night and threatened him with a lynching. Joyner got mad, said he'd—"

"Object." Hutto shouted. "He can't tell what somebody said."

Claybrook drew in his chin. "Your Honor, there are exceptions to Mr. Hutto's hearsay evidence rule. What an *accused* person said may be presented as showing murderous intent. This is in accordance with our ancient maxim, *actus non facit reum, nisi mens sit rea*, which means that an act does not make a man guilty, unless he be so in intention. Conversely, if an accused kills with intent to commit murder, it *is* murder."

"Hutto's overruled. Proceed, Mr. Claybrook."

"What did defendant say?" Claybrook asked.

Witness Wilde answered with a knowing look. "Joyner says to me, says he, 'Nobody can accuse me of stealing and live. Shovel-nose or me is going to die, and I ain't meanin' me.' I begged him not to hurt poor old Gaffner, but he says to me, he says, 'Wilde, your begging for Shovel-nose won't do no good. Me and Shovel-nose can't both live.'"

Claybrook sat down. "No more questions."

Hutto got up.

"All right, Hutto. Looks like you've got an uphill job hyar, but you can try."

**H**UTTO CAME round and faced Wilde. "Your name is Clawson Wilde, is it?"

"Sure."

"Sometimes called Hog Wilde?"

"No."

"Do you know what is meant by perjury?"

"Sure I know."

"Then would you still say you're never called Hog Wilde, if I told you I could produce scores of witnesses here who'd swear you are called Hog Wilde?"

Wilde squirmed. "I guess you're right. Maybe sometimes I *am* called Hog Wilde—but not to my face; you can bet."

"Are you sure it's never to your face?"

"Well, maybe a few times, but what of it?"

"Another question, suh; have you ever been convicted of a crime?"

Claybrook rose indignantly. "Now, I object to that. Cross-examination should cross. No questions

were asked on direct examination as to this man's character or reputation."

Steele lost patience with Claybrook. "Now see hyar, Claybrook. This two-legged polecat has just proved hisself a liar. If he's been a jailbird, too, by thunder, let it be shown. Hog Wilde, answer that question."

Wilde twisted, flushed. "Well, I wasn't guilty; I reckon a man can sometimes be put in prison by mistake."

Hutto returned to his table. "Your Honor, suh, *quod est criminis loquitur perpetuam memoriam ipso*, which is to say, that which is criminal speaks as a perpetual memorial to itself. Again, *falsus in uno, falsus in omnibus*, meaning, false in one thing, false in all. By those maxims, this witness is not entitled to be believed in anything he has said. I have no more questions and, if there's no objection, I'd suggest he sit there by Mr. Welfare."

Claybrook looked stumped, but shook his head. "No objection."

Steele was more curious than ever. What in tarnation did this Hutto have up his sleeve? "See hyar, Hutto, if I didn't have a suspicion you're on our side, I'd send that lyin' stinker off to jail."

"Your Honor, suh, as to my being on your side, I am convinced that we are both sincerely allied with justice; hence, as devotees of a common divinity we, indeed, march together."

Steele grunted in disgust. "Claybrook, call next witness."

Claybrook nodded. "Call Tillie Beets."

A young woman was brought in and seated. She was slender, normally curved and redheaded. Youthful bloom was still upon her, hence she was pretty and desirable. Blue eyes that flashed defiance suggested she might, also, have been dangerous.

Claybrook confronted her coolly. "Are you Tillie Beets?"

"Yes, I am."

"Sometimes called Sugar Beets?"

"Yes, I am."

"Do you work as a waitress down at Euclid Butterhouse's restaurant?"

Hutto got up. "Your Honor, Mr. Claybrook's questions are slightly leading. Accordingly, defendant mildly objects."

"Claybrook," growled Steele, "you heard that objection. Be-consarned, if you aim to lead, be convincing about it."

Claybrook glared at his witness. "When I ask you a question, answer it 'yes' or 'no.' Don't say, 'yes, I am', or 'yes, I do.' Just say 'yes'."

Tillie's eyes glittered. "When you ask me a question, you ask it any way you please, don't you? Well, I'll answer it any way I please, too." She added angrily, "If you don't like it, don't ask me no questions."

"See hyar, young lady," Steele warned with restrained anger, "you don't talk that way in court. Mr. Claybrook wants to find out what you know about this murder. You just answer his questions; use your own words, but don't use more'n is needed."

"I don't know anything about no murder," Tillie declared warmly.

CLAYBROOK said quietly, "You know more than you think. Now—are you acquainted with defendant, Meetin'-house Joyner?"

"Yes, I am."

Claybrook's face pinked, his jaws knotted. "Why didn't you just say 'yes'?"

"I did say 'yes'."

Claybrook breathed hard for seconds. "Miss Beets, did Joyner try to make love to you?"

"Now whose business is that but mine, if he did or didn't?"

Judge Steele leaned toward her. "Lady, that's a big horse-trough out front, full of water. How'd you like to be took out thar and held under until you blubber?"

"I wouldn't like it."

"Then you'd better answer these questions, real careful and polite."

Tillie looked scared. Her eyes blinked.

Claybrook repeated, "Miss Beets, did Joyner try to make love to you?"

"Yes, he did."

"Did he ask you to marry him?"

"Yes, he did."

"Did he say anything about his not having any money?"

"Yes, he did."

"What did he say?"

"He said he didn't have much right then, but he expected to have plenty before long."

Hutto got up. "Your Honor, suh, defendant objects, unless Mr. Claybrook can show wherein this examination is relevant."

Claybrook squared himself. "I can explain,

Your Honor. Professor Hutto well knows that in making out a case of first-degree murder, it is necessary first to establish a *corpus delicti*—that is, that a murder has in fact been committed. That has been shown by Coroner Boaz Welfare. It is also necessary to show criminal intent, or *men rea*. That has been shown by witness Wilde.”

“Now, suh,” said Hutto, “what Mr. Claybrook means is, that he has *attempted* to show *mens rea* by witness Wilde. By Wilde he has, of course, proved nothing.”

Steele felt his patience getting tight. “Claybrook, why in tarnation is it necessary to pry into this lady’s love affairs?”

“Your Honor,” said Claybrook, “my purpose thereby is to establish motive for murder. This witness, apparently, was more interested in money than in love. So, to win her, Meetin’-house had to have money. Coroner Welfare has testified that his jury held Shovel-nose Gaffner was murdered in pursuit of a robbery motive.”

“That’s sufficient, Claybrook. Go on with your questions.”

“I have no more questions,” Claybrook announced abruptly and sat down.

**H**UTTO AROSE. “May I cross-examine, suh?”

“Your privilege, Hutto.”

Hutto came round. “So you’re a waitress at Euclid Butterhouse’s restaurant?”

“I said I was.”

“And you’re sometimes called Sugar Beets?”

“I said I was.”

“Now, uh, ahem, are there other candidates for your sugar besides Meetin’-house Joyner?”

“Now see hyar, Hutto,” Steele said furiously, “are you trying to insult this lady?”

Hutto became apologetic. “Suh, that was not quite chivalrous, I admit; permit me to apologize to this sweet child. Now, uh, was any other man a suitor for your affections?”

“Yes, there was.”

“Was this, uh, Clawson Wilde, commonly known as Hog Wilde, also one of your suitors?”

“Yes, he was.”

Hog Wilde leaned forward, made a threatening noise in his throat. Tillie caught his threat. She said quickly, “Mr. Wilde was just a good friend, that’s all.”

“Hmmm,” said Hutto. “I see you are afraid of Hog Wilde. Perhaps I should not endanger your life

by asking further questions.” Hutto returned to his seat.

Steele glared at Tillie. “You set down thar with Wilde and Welfare. You might be wanted again.”

Tillie sat beside Welfare, deliberately placed Welfare between herself and Wilde.

Claybrook nodded to a deputy. “Call Douglas Gelhorn.”

A man of about thirty was brought in. He was strong, good-looking, but of unassuming demeanor.

“Are you one of Sheriff Buckalew’s deputies?” asked Claybrook.

“Yes.”

“What is your specialty?”

“Crime detection.”

“Do you sometimes use bloodhounds in your work?”

Hutto sprang up. “Your Honor, suh, if Mr. Claybrook means to introduce bloodhound evidence, defendant objects. So far, Mr. Claybrook has relied on statements of an inflated and egotistical coroner, an ex-convict and patent liar, and a redheaded, thin-brained shrew. Now, I should like to know if he means to rely in desperation upon testimony of a dog?”

Steele swung on Claybrook. “What do you say to that, Mr. Prosecutor?”

“I suggest that Mr. Hutto kick when he’s spurred, not before,” said Claybrook.

“I stand ready to kick,” declared Hutto.

Claybrook nodded at his witness. “Go ahead, Mr. Gelhorn.”

“Yes, Mr. Claybrook, I sometimes use bloodhounds in tracking down criminals.”

“Relate what you did by way of investigating Shovel-nose Gaffner’s murder.”

“I assume you have reference to my use of Dan Trehwitt’s bloodhound?”

Claybrook nodded.

Witness Gelhorn thought a moment. “I also presume evidence has been presented as to a bloody axe?”

“It has,” said Claybrook.

“Well, in handling that weapon Gaffner’s murderer, of course, left his spoor, or body odor. Our bloodhound caught his spoor from that and promptly led us to Meetin’-house Joyner’s shack and its front door. There he scratched in what appeared to be an effort to enter. His baying en route and at Joyner’s door indicated a strong spoor. Inside this shack, we found Joyner—alone.”

Hutto got up sadly. "Your Honor, suh, defendant begs to be shown upon what authority of law evidence of this dog is introduced."

STEELE was both disappointed and angry. Here was an innocent man who was about to be convicted, and he knew of no legal way in which to stop it. "Claybrook, you've got a job hyar; justify yourself."

Claybrook stood straight and confident. "If Your Honor please, it is not insisted that bloodhound evidence is conclusive of guilt. It is circumstantial only. As to what weight is to be given such evidence, depends upon various elements of which your bloodhound is or is not constituted. I should like to ask Mr. Gelhorn further questions, if I may."

Steele consented grudgingly, "All right, ask 'em."

"Mr. Gelhorn, where did Dan Trehwitt get this bloodhound?"

"I might say first," replied Gelhorn, "that his name is Gabriel. That name was given him because, when he bays, you think doom's-day has arrived. It's a last-trumpet sound, especially for a murderer who has left his scent behind."

To hear what was being said, men had leaned forward. They were eager to catch every word. That silence suddenly became a hush, for distantly a hound's baying voice drifted to them.

Claybrook, slightly unnerved, said, "Go ahead, Mr. Gelhorn."

Gelhorn, unperturbed, continued. "This bloodhound was given to Dan Trehwitt by a cousin, one Oliver Trehwitt, a deputy-warden at Missouri State Prison. Oliver Trehwitt is an expert trainer. Gabriel was trained by this man." He paused when a distant baying was heard again.

Hutto got up. He trembled slightly; his voice was shaky. "Your Honor, suh, a dog's testimony cannot be based upon training alone."

"That is true," said Gelhorn. "Individual merit, as well as training, must be considered. Also, pedigree." Gelhorn took a binder of papers from his coat pocket. "I have here a certified record, which Mr. Hutto may examine, if he wishes and it is permissible. Gabriel is from a long line of great dogs. He, like his ancestors, has been trained in tracking human beings. Out of over two hundred tries, he has failed three times. Under circumstances then existing, no dog could have

succeeded, for there had been a change of clothing and, in one instance, evidence of use of *aqua ammonia*; in another, of some pungent oil."

Hutto had remained standing. "Now, Your Honor, defendant objects to further statements as to this hound. It is fundamental in our law that a witness may not testify unless he is under oath. Nor may his testimony be considered unless opportunity is given for cross-examination. A dog can neither take an oath nor be cross-examined."

Claybrook also was up. "Now, Your Honor, rules that apply to human beings do not apply to bloodhounds. A human being may have prejudice, hence a motive to testify falsely. That is why he is placed under oath; that is why perjury is made a crime. A bloodhound has no motive to testify falsely, and it is presumed that his testimony is without bias."

"Now, suh," insisted Hutto, "it has not been shown that this Gabriel bloodhound—"

Hutto stopped. A baying so much nearer as to come as a deep-throated howl, floated in upon them. Deathly stillness prevailed.

STEELE'S nostrils dilated. Something was going on here that he had not been made acquainted with. He suspected both Hutto and French Demeree of having a hand in it. Consarn their nerve! "Hutto, whar's your friend Demeree?" he demanded fiercely.

Hutto braced himself. Closer and closer came that last-trumpet sound. "Your Honor, suh, Mr. Demeree stands at yonder door."

Steele shifted his savage eyes. A tall, slender man in black suit, white vest and four-in-hand necktie leaned quietly against a door-facing.

"Demeree," Steele demanded vehemently, "come up hyar and take your place."

Demeree, clean-shaved and dark-haired, came forward and stood beside Hutto. "Yes, Your Honor?"

"What in tarnation's goin' on hyar?"

Demeree nodded Hutto to his seat. "May it please Your Honor, I have been enjoying life as a spectator this past minute or so."

"Well, consarn you, whar have you been?"

"Assuming that you have a right to ask, Your Honor, I shall answer by further questioning this witness."

"Question him."

Demeree waited deliberately until that baying

sound came again. It was ever-nearer; its effect was blood chilling. "Mr. Gelhorn," said Demeree, "my able associate, Mr. Hutto, was about to say it had not been shown that Gabriel had been given free rein, but may have been guided to defendant's door by human agencies."

Gelhorn nodded. "That is a good point, Mr. Demeree. Gabriel, however, was given free rein. He was on a leash, of course, but he was in front, and nobody interfered. There were tracks of men and horses, plenty of them, but it is a strange gift a bloodhound of merit possesses. Once he is made acquainted with a spoor, he can follow it across countless intervening spoor, just as a man, by sight, can follow a familiar figure through a crowd."

Claybrook got up. "I object, Your Honor. I had not finished with direct examination of this witness. Mr. Demeree and Mr. Hutto have undertaken cross-examination out of turn."

"Set down thar," snapped Steele. "Demeree, git after this bloodhound business."

From a few blocks away a baying rose, loud, savage, insistent.

"I fear," said Demeree, "that our time is short. Meantime, I suggest that Mr. Buckalew's deputies keep their eyes on that swine over there who is so aptly called Hog Wilde."

Eyes turned toward Wilde. They beheld a man scared colorless.

Demeree continued, "Mr. Gelhorn, you were summoned as a witness by Mr. Claybrook, were you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"After you received your summons, did you conduct further investigation? If so, describe it."

"Yes, Mr. Demeree. In company with yourself and Dan Trehwitt, I went to defendant Joyner's shack. I had observed without comment that when Joyner's door was opened, Gabriel did not attempt to attack Joyner, but manifested rather surprising indifference. Gabriel's interest was centered on a spot just back of Joyner's doorstep, as if that spoor he followed had there disappeared. But afterwards I got to thinking more about Gabriel's strange behavior. Accordingly you, Dan Trehwitt, and I made a search.

"And sure enough, concealed under Joyner's floor just behind his doorstep we found a big pair of shoes. These, we knew, were too large for Joyner. Our natural conclusion was that a man

other than Joyner had murdered Gaffner and, expecting Mr. Trehwitt's bloodhound would be put on his trail, sought to trick our bloodhound into accusing another. Horse tracks nearby indicated, too, that whoever left those shoes had not only changed shoes, but also had mounted a horse and ridden away."

GELHORN stopped. Two or three blocks distant, terrifying howls moved slowly nearer.

"Proceed quickly," said Demeree.

"A plan formed," said Gelhorn. "Those shoes were carefully wrapped to preserve their scent, which was distinctive enough. I assure you. We had only random notions as to whom those shoes belonged, but we felt fairly certain their owner would attend this trial. It was our plan, effective shortly after court convened, to give Gabriel free rein, let him search for the companion spoor to those shoes in Flat Creek's streets."

"May I add, Your Honor," said Demeree, "that I accompanied Mr. Trehwitt on his latest expedition, that I was present when Gabriel smelled those shoes, also present when he struck a spoor and leaped violently against his leash. It must now be evident to all that he is headed for this courtroom. I trust we have Your Honor's permission for him to enter, for it is a certainty he will point an accusing finger, so to speak, at Gaffner's murderer."

Flat Creek's crowded courtroom filled with gasping, murmuring terror as a huge hound reared into its entrance and a loud, angry baying poured out of its red mouth.

A big deputy-sheriff, almost seven feet tall and weighing easily two hundred-fifty pounds, followed Gabriel in. He halted a moment. "Is it all right, Judge?"

"Come ahead, Trehwitt," Steele shouted.

Steele lowered his eyes then for a quick look at Hog Wilde. What he saw was a revelation. Wilde was pale; his eyes were so wide they seemed distended from their sockets; his hands shook as from palsy.

Gabriel came steadily forward, straining hard, sniffing and baying. Inside that inner sanctum where lawyers, witnesses, judge and officers were gathered, Gabriel turned right and suddenly lunged at Hog Wilde. Trehwitt held him under powerful restraint.

Every person present, including Judge Steele, had risen. Sugar Beets was screaming.

Wilde had got up. He tried to push himself back. "Don't let him git me! Don't let him git me!"

Trewhitt allowed Gabriel to inch closer and to lunge.

Wilde screamed. "No! No! Keep him back! I done it! I done it! I killed old Gaffner. I killed him—I killed him."

Steele nodded at Sheriff Buckalew. "Better get ready to take Hog Wilde out a back way, Bucky."

Buckalew nodded at several deputies.

Trewhitt subdued his bloodhound and took him out. Wilde was so scared and limp, he had to be carried.

Order returned slowly.

Steele looked at Claybrook. "Anything else, Mr. Prosecutor?"

Claybrook got up. "Your prosecuting attorney knows when he's beaten, Your Honor. A directed verdict of not guilty is clearly indicated."

Steele looked at his jurors, all of whom appeared unnerved. "A verdict of not guilty is directed, gentlemen." He turned to Buckalew. "Recess court, Bucky."

Buckalew rose and pounded with his gun. "Court's in recess till one o'clock. Get out quietly."

They got out like an unchained hurricane. When they were gone and Judge Steele sat alone, he discovered that he was too weak to get up.

Be-consarned if this wasn't once when court could better have got along without a judge. He wiped his sweaty face with a blue bandana, at last got life into his legs and slid down onto his feet. Once in a great while this Demeree from Tennessee did something commendable. But, by thunder, he couldn't be depended on to do it every day.

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