



The question was: if William Shore had been involved in a conspiracy to rob the stage coach - a robbery which resulted in murder - and had renounced the role, had he nonetheless changed his mind too late?

POINT OF NO RETURN

Judge Steele story
by Lon Williams

WHEN HARD-BRAINED rascals figured they could make money without working for it, by thunder, they then and there became candidates for hangropes. Just now, Judge Wardlow Steele was reluctant host to one of them. This one sat on a bench in Flat Creek's criminal court and nervously awaited proceedings which would decide his fate. He was young, dark-haired,

and good-looking; but Steele eyed him fiercely and without sympathy. Court had been called. Clerk James Skiffington had screeched in his customary loud voice, "People versus William D. Shore, alias Golden Shore, alias Bright-and-eternal Shore. Charge, first-degree murder."

Despite Shore's youth and good looks, Steele put anger and vengeance into his

words. "Murder, eh? Be-consarned if you didn't start mighty young. When a half-ripe baboon commits murder around hyar, it's either because he thinks he's too smart to get caught or because he's too mean to give a whittle-stick. Whar's your lawyer?"

A thin-faced, black-haired, elegantly-dressed, tall gentleman in dark suit, white vest and four-in-hand necktie got up and said impassively, "I am his lawyer, if your honor please. French Demeree."

"Yeah," Steele grouched. "Demeree from Tennessee. It's been so long since you showed up in this court I'd begun to hope you'd gone back whar you come from or reverted to your true nature and got yourself hung. Since you come West for health and fortune, whar's keeping you hyar now?"

"If your honor please," Demeree replied with quiet dignity, "Scripture has it that a prophet is oft-times more honored in distant lands than in his home country. Moreover, being an artist of sorts, I thrive best here where my art is appreciated. And, may it please your honor, there is still another compensating factor for choice of this rugged frontier as my domicile. A lawyer's mission, like that of a physician, is to save life, not to destroy it. If I can look back at sunset and know that here I have been instrumental in saving one innocent man from an unjust hanging, my fellow-men can say of me that I was handed down to eternal rest in peace with my soul. To add another thought. . . ."

"That's enough, by thunder. If anybody ever asks me what it takes to make a lawyer, I'll tell him that fust and foremost it takes an oily tongue." He swung left. "Whar's our man?"

A sturdy, handsome redhead got up with a displeased expression. "Wade Claybrook, your honor. Prosecuting attorney."

Steele lifted his shaggy eyebrows. "What! Don't you want to make a speech, too?"

"If your honor please," Claybrook responded dryly, "I think we should proceed

to business. A defendant is detained here to be tried for murder."

Steele was disappointed. Notwithstanding outward expressions of distaste for flowery words, he secretly enjoyed these brief exhibitions of eloquence. He had often wished in vain that he had been so gifted himself.

He looked down at defendant Shore. "All right, you bright and shining mirage, whar's your plea?"

Demeree had remained standing. "Defendant pleads not guilty, your honor."

Steele repressed his usual sarcastic impulse. "Panel a jury, Bucky."

WITHIN a short time big Sheriff Jerd Buckalew had a jury impaneled. Witnesses were then sworn and escorted to a back room.

"Wade, call your fust witness."

Claybrook got up again. "If I may do so, your honor, I should like to state briefly our charges against this defendant."

"Proceed."

"This indictment," said Claybrook indicating a paper, "charges that defendant was party to a conspiracy to rob a certain stagecoach of its cargo of minted gold, which was being brought to a certain new bank in Flat Creek; that in furtherance of such conspiracy two innocent men were murdered; and that defendant, being one of those who conspired to rob, is guilty of murder—as guilty as were his co-conspirators."

"To which charges," said Demeree, half-rising, "defendant respectfully pleads not guilty. If he was ever a conspirator, which he denies, he renounced that role before any crime was committed."

Claybrook nodded at a deputy sheriff. "Call Howard P. Elson as a witness." While waiting for his witness, he said, "I fear defendant waited until renunciation was too late. He had gone beyond his point of no return."

"As to that, we shall see," said Demeree.

A robust gentleman with copper-colored hair and long sideburns was shown in and seated. He yawned, sighed, and settled back in his chair. His composure was then so full and complete as to suggest a contemptuous feeling toward all except himself.

Claybrook eyed him coolly, then asked, "What is your name, sir?"

Elson patted back a yawn. "My name, sir, is Howard P. Elson."

"What is your business?"

"I am a banker, sir. Among my numerous financial responsibilities, I am president of Miners and Merchants Bank, recently organized and opened for business in this city. Unfortunately, due to outrageous lack of law enforcement hereabouts, we had no more than organized and opened when we became disorganized and closed."

Claybrook eyed him momentarily with scorn. "Sir, to what misfortune do you refer?"

"I refer to loss of a gold shipment, sir. I refer to a shipment of minted gold—title to which, unfortunately, had passed to us before its loss."

Claybrook's mouth twisted in odd satisfaction. "Will you relate what measures had been taken to insure safety of your gold shipment?"

Elson yawned again. "Yes, sir. I may say I had planned it cleverly. As is well known, a good many stagecoaches arrive in Flat Creek each day from points east. At Granville Junction, I had instructed express agents to place a gold chest on each departing stage coming this way and on a succession of days. All of those chests were decoys, except one, my intent being to confuse possible thieves and robbers. All of those chests reached Flat Creek safely, except one. As it happened, that one contained our bank's gold—thirty thousand dollars in eagles, double-eagles and half-eagles. Robbers had allowed all other stagecoaches to pass unmolested. This one they raided. They could have known which one to attack only because informed by some

signal from a stagecoach passenger. I might add, they could have known only because they received a signal from that young rascal and cutthroat sitting there." He nodded toward defendant Shore.

DEMEREER rose angrily. "Defendant objects, your honor. That pompous goat posing as a witness was not asked to draw conclusions. Nor is it permissible for a witness to draw conclusions and make senile accusations. I fear his dotage and his side-whiskers have combined to make him an overbearing egotist."

Steele allowed his judicial temperament to lapse. "Demeree, be-consarned if I don't agree with you." He swung toward Claybrook. "Wade, I suggest you keep your witness and his whiskers under better control."

Claybrook sat down. "No more questions."

Demeree came round. "Defendant would like to cross-examine this blowhard, if your honor please."

"Your privilege, Demeree."

Demeree glanced spitefully at the witness. "I believe you said your name is Elson."

"Howard P. Elson, sir."

"Actually it is Howard Pennipincher Elson, is it not?"

"It is, sir."

"I believe you are better known hereabouts as Tightwad Elson, are you not?"

"Now, see here, you impudent, lowborn scum, I don't have to put up with insults from trash I wouldn't wipe my foot on."

Steele swung toward Elson. "See hyar yourself. You keep a civil tongue in your head or, be-consarned, you'll find yourself soaking up slobbers in a horse trough."

He turned to Demeree. "Any more questions?"

"One more, your honor." Demeree cast upon Elson a tormenting eye. "Are you a stockholder in that Miners and Merchants Bank?"

"I can't see that that's any of your

business, sir," snapped Elson.

"I am not promoting my own business," said Demeree. "Justice seems to require that you answer, however."

A growl rose in Steele's throat. "Demeree, you don't have to argue a witness into answering questions. It's a standing order in this court that any man who refuses to answer what's asked him will be hung."

Elson lost composure; he looked scared. "Well, sir," he said, "I do own a small amount of stock."

"But that robbery was of small loss to you, personally; is that correct?"

Elson looked uncomfortable. "I suppose, sir, that is correct."

Demeree returned to his seat. "That is all, your honor."

Claybrook nodded at a deputy. "Show Elson out and bring in Mr. Mole."

A big-mouthed, ugly-faced character in rough clothes and long, uncombed hair was brought in.

Claybrook got up and faced him tolerantly. "Your name, sir?"

"Name's Nicholas Mole."

"Better known as Tater-patch Mole?"

"I reckon so. Yes, sir, I guess that's right. Tater-patch Mole is what I'm mostly called."

Claybrook nodded to his left. "Are you acquainted with a young man named William D. Shore?"

"Yes, sir," said Mole. "That's him right down there. Used to keep his horse at Scrugg Amory's livery barn where I work. He's a right sharp feller, too, with a horse."

"What else is he sharp with?"

"Object," shouted Demeree. "A witness with a glib tongue may not deal in generalities like that."

CLAYBROOK ignored Demeree's objection. "Did William D. Shore have companions when he came with or for his horse?"

"Sometimes he did. Yes, sir. More often

than not he did. Mostly he was with somebody."

"Did you know who his companions were?"

"Yes, sir. Knowed some of them. One was Con Jackson. Another was Bat Munster. Another was Fish Dubany. Another was Ship Benson."

"Did you overhear them talking together? That is, talking with William D. Shore?"

Demeree eased up. "Now, your honor, Mr. Claybrook is preparing to ask what somebody said. He can't do that."

"Demeree," said Steele, "being a lawyer, you ought to know that conspirators can't cook up a conspiracy without talk. That's what a conspiracy is. It's talk. Go ahead, Wade. Ask this witness what was said."

Mole did not wait to be asked. He said, "They was talking sort of low, but I heard 'em. I heard part of it. They was putting up their horses one night. Ship Benson said, 'Bill Shore is to be sent to Granville Junction tomorrow to watch for it. When he's sure that gold is loaded, he'll ride stage with it back to Flat Creek. He'll give a signal to let us know which stage to hit.'"

"Then Bill Shore said, 'Maybe I don't want to ride stage back to Flat Creek. Maybe I don't want no part in this robbery.'"

"Then Bat Munster said, 'You ain't got nothing to say about that. You're just like us. You will do what you're told to do.' That was four days before stage driver Greenbow Larkin and his gun guard Bob Collum was killed by stage robbers."

"Do you know who was boss of this robber gang?"

"No, sir, I don't. There was a boss though; I sure heard 'em talking about a boss."

"That's all," said Claybrook.

Demeree shook his head. "No questions."

Tater-patch Mole was excused, and a young man of alert and superior manner was put in his place. This one had sandy, middle-parted hair, cheeks that looked as if each had

an egg inside it and a chin that in consequence was almost non-existent.

Claybrook eyed him with disgust. "Your name is Thadeus March?"

"It is," said March. "And do you want to know who I think. . . ."

Claybrook cut him off. "I'm not interested in who you think."

"But defendant is," said Demeree, getting up. "I suggest this court go into a thinking session for a spell. What this witness thinks is something mankind ought to find most enlightening."

"It is only what this witness *knows* that is material," said Claybrook. "If Mr. Demeree will please await his turn, he may cross-examine."

"Meanwhile," said Demeree, "we should not be denied a hearing of what this witness thinks. In our day a thinker is rare, indeed. Posterity would never forgive us if we failed to record this thinker's thoughts."

"Now listen here," said March. "I came here to testify as a witness, not to be ridiculed."

Claybrook said, "Apparently you believe you came here to think. I merely asked your name, but you proceeded to ask me if I wanted to know who you think."

"If you lawyers don't quit acting so smart, I'll tell you who and what I think. I'll tell you what I think of both of you in no uncertain terms."

STEELE scowled at Claybrook. "Wade, what in tarnation did you bring this monstrosity in hyar for?"

"I intended to ask him a few questions, if your honor please."

"Then ask them, and never mind what he thinks."

Claybrook puckered his mouth at March and said, "Where do you work?"

"I'm not working anywhere," March answered.

"Where have you worked?"

"I've worked a good many places. But if my thinking is correct, I assume you want to know whether I ever worked at Miners and Merchants Bank."

"Your thinking is correct, sir. Why did you quit working there?"

"Old Sideburns fired me. And for no reason at all. And if you want to know who I think. . . ."

"We do," said Demeree. "By all means."

"If your honor please," said Claybrook, "I suggest that Mr. Demeree refrain from his unnecessary and unwarranted interruptions."

Demeree got up again. "May it please your honor, I should regard it as an unforgivable imposition upon all of us if we never permitted this witness to relate what he thinks."

"Now see hyar, Demeree, that will be enough out of you. Set down and wait your turn."

While Demeree eased down Claybrook said to March, "Sir, I am not interested in what you think; I am interested only in what you know. Are you acquainted with defendant William D. Shore?"

March replied sulkily, "I certainly am."

"Did you ever see him loitering about this bank where you worked?"

"I did," said March. "And that's not all. If you want to know who I think was behind that stagecoach robbery, I can tell you."

"Object," said Demeree, rising quickly. "Mr. Claybrook has already disqualified his witness as a thinker. Upon second thought, I agree with Mr. Claybrook that a witness should be permitted to testify as to what he knows, not as to what he thinks."

Claybrook said, "Sir, do you *know* who was boss of that robber outfit?"

"No."

"Do you *know* who planned or instigated that robbery?"

"No."

"But do you *think* you know?"

"Yes."

“Who do you *think* it was?”

“Object!” Demeree shouted indignantly. “Mr. Claybrook can hardly be expected to be fair, but he could at least be consistent.”

“Demeree,” Steele said coldly, “you set down and stay set.”

Claybrook eyed March dubiously for a moment, then he decided to proceed. “Sir, who do you *think* planned and instigated that robbery?”

“I *think* it was old Sideburns.”

“Ah! And do you?”

“I certainly do.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because I saw him in close communion with that dude sitting down there. I saw them like that more than once.”

“To what dude are you referring?”

“Bill Shore.”

“Did you hear anything that was said between them?”

“No. But I sure saw them in close communion.”

“Do you mean you saw them talking to each other?”

“Yes.”

Claybrook sat down. “No more questions.”

DEMEREEREE waited for a nod from Judge Steele then came round and confronted March. “Young man,” he said icily, “you don’t like defendant Bill Shore, do you?”

“Why should I?”

“When Mr. Shore exchanged good mornings with you, what did he call you?”

“He called me by my name.”

“He called you Mr. February March, didn’t he?”

“What if he did?”

“Oh, nothing, nothing.” Demeree went back to his place. “That’s all, your honor.”

March was taken out. For several seconds thereafter, nothing occurred. Then a couple of deputies came in at a back door with a stretcher or legless cot. Lying thereon was a woman. A third deputy followed with a couple

of sawhorses. He placed these in an open space below and in front of Judge Steele. Immediately his companions placed their burden upon them.

Claybrook got up. “If your honor please, this witness is Miss Laney Cue Bentwood. From her waist downward she is paralyzed. Despite that fact, however, her testimony is indispensable. I suggest she be sworn.”

Clerk Skiffington got up and screeched at Miss Bentwood. “Lup your right hand.” When she had extended her right arm upward, Skiffington continued, “Swear-tell-truth-whole-truth-num-but-truth-self-e-God?”

Miss Bentwood said feebly, “I do.”

Judge Steele, as curious as everybody else, leaned, forward and peered down at Laney Cue. She was long and slim, most of her body being covered by a sheet and blankets. She didn’t look much like an invalid to Steele; he thought she looked about as healthy as any woman he’d ever seen. She looked to be about twenty-five years of age, although he was aware that a man or woman lying face upward had a tendency to look younger than when standing.

Demeree was up, waiting for curiosity to subside. He said, “If your honor please, defendant objects to this witness. A man accused of crime and being tried therefore is entitled to be confronted by his accusers. It is apparent that he is not to be here met face-to-face, but is to be accused through a veil of sympathy and prejudicial frailty. Such a proceeding is not merely prejudicial, it is intolerable.”

“If your honor please,” said Claybrook, “this lady’s testimony cannot be dispersed with. She was an eyewitness to what happened to Greenbow Larkin’s stagecoach. She was an eyewitness, also, to defendant’s part in that infamous incident. If she is able to sit in a chair and testify, I admit that she should do so. Whether she can is for your honor to decide.”

Laney Cue Bentwood moaned, “Oh, no. Oh, no. I am in great pain as it is. I cannot sit

up. I cannot.”

Steele nodded at Demeree. “Set down, Demeree. If there’s any prejudice in this situation, by thunder, it’s your client’s hard luck. Go ahead, Wade.” He was more reluctant, however, than outward appearances indicated; be-ensured, it was like letting an unarmed man be shot by an invalid. But there was one thing he was not going to do. If Demeree on cross-examination got rough with her, he would not be stopped—unless he got beyond all bounds of reason and respectability.

CLAYBROOK moved out to where he could look down upon Laney Cue Bentwood’s face. He said, “Miss Bentwood, you are a resident of Flat Creek, are you not?”

Jurors leaned forward to hear her answer.

She said, “I am.”

“What business were you engaged in before your injury?”

“I owned and operated a—a trinket shop.”

“Are you acquainted with defendant William D. Shore?”

She turned her head and stared at the defendant. “To my great sorrow,” she moaned, “I am.”

“Where were you when Greenbow Larkin’s stagecoach was attacked and robbed?”

“I was a passenger on Mr. Larkin’s stage.”

“Who else was on it?”

“Willie D. Shore—that vicious creature sitting there.”

Demeree got up. “Defendant objects, your honor. This prone, whiny female has got no right to call people scurrilous names. A horse-trough bath might prove to be a pool of Bethesda or Siloam for her. Though it probably would not improve her skinny legs, it might at least cure her evil tongue.”

That was being a mite rougher than Steele had anticipated. “See hyar, Demeree, you can’t talk that way to a lady.”

“She can’t talk that way about my client, either,” said Demeree. “Her looking like an emaciated scarecrow gives her no license to speak maliciously of this defendant.”

Claybrook intervened indignantly. “Now, your honor, if anybody is being maliciously uncomplimentary, it is Mr. Demeree himself. It should be apparent to everyone who can see her that Miss Bentwood is a beautiful young woman, in nowise emaciated or skinny. But Mr. Demeree’s method and motive are quite understandable; he is aware that this lady’s testimony will put a noose around his client’s neck. He can only prevent that result by discrediting or by excluding her testimony.”

“I insist that it should be both discredited and excluded,” said Demeree.

“It has been ruled otherwise,” said Claybrook with a haughty lift of his eyebrows. He looked down at Laney Cue again. “Miss Bentwood, will you please relate what occurred while you were a passenger on Larkin’s stagecoach?”

“Yes,” Miss Bentwood replied. “But if you will spare me all needless details, I shall appreciate it. May I relate only those final events?”

“Certainly,” said Claybrook.

“Well, we were passing through a place called Lickrock Flat and traveling at a moderate pace when Mr. Larkin’s guard, a man named Robert Collum, was heard to yell, ‘There they come.’ ”

“Who heard him yell?” asked Claybrook.

“Well, I did. Bill Shore also heard him. Riding with us was also a girl, a simple-minded young thing named Kitty Diggles. She heard him, too. We looked out and saw them almost immediately. They were riding down a rocky slope. Nothing happened until they were down on flat ground. Then they began shooting at us. Why he behaved so crazily I don’t know, but Greenbow Larkin put his four horses into a run. His guard began shooting, too.”

“What did defendant Shore do meanwhile?”

“Oh, he pretended to be shooting at those robbers. But he didn’t come within a mile of hitting anybody; he was shooting almost straight up.”

“Did Bob Collum hit any of them?”

“Poor Bob killed two of them.”

“What happened to Larkin and Bob Collum?”

“They were both killed.”

“What happened to your stagecoach?”

“Well, our horses ran wild for almost a mile, then a wheel hit something and our stage turned over. That’s when my back was broken.”

CLAYBROOK remained silent a moment for dramatic effect, then asked, “Miss Bentwood, before that robber attack commenced, had you observed William Shore’s behavior?”

“Oh, yes.”

“What did he do?”

“He’d been looking out as if watching for something or somebody. Then suddenly he took a large white handkerchief from his coat and held it out at a window. Whether he waved it, I don’t know. But it would not have mattered anyhow, because a stiff wind was blowing; anyone at a distance could have seen it fluttering.”

“How soon thereafter did this attack commence?”

“It was just a little while, possibly a minute.”

After a brief pause, Claybrook asked, “Miss Bentwood, prior to appearance of those robbers were you aware that your stage carried a chest of gold coins?”

“Oh, no. I had no idea.” She moaned pitifully and said, “Mr. Claybrook, can’t you spare me now?”

Claybrook backed away. “I believe that will be sufficient. Thank you very much.”

Demeree got up. “If your honor please, I should like to cross-examine this old hag.”

Steele’s blood pressure soared instantly. “Consarn you, Demeree, you knowed better than talk like that.”

“I meant no disrespect to this honorable court,” said Demeree. “I apologize for what may have seemed otherwise.”

“All right, cross-examine.”

Demeree came round and stood over Miss Bentwood. Ferocity gleamed between her eyes and his.

Demeree said, “You are acquainted with a certain banker named Tightwad Elson, are you not?”

“I have met Mr. Elson, yes,” Miss Bentwood replied coldly.

“You have rather studiously cultivated his friendship, have you not?”

She turned her face away from Demeree. A sob came from her throat. “Must I be tortured by this horrible creature?”

“You heard my question,” said Demeree.

She began to weep. In a moment she was hysterical.

Steele growled at Demeree, “You let up thar, by thunder. That’s no way to treat a woman. That’s no way to treat even a well and hearty woman.”

“If your honor please,” said Demeree stubbornly, “while this female is recovering from her hysterics, I should like to put on my own witness. But I’m not through with this creature. I reserve defendant’s right to question her further when she has sufficiently recovered.”

Steele glanced at Claybrook. “Wade, have you got any more witnesses?”

“No, your honor.”

“All right, Demeree. Bucky, have this woman kept in back until she’s called for. Demeree, fetch your witness.”

When Miss Bentwood had been carried out, Demeree nodded at a deputy sheriff. “Bring in Miss Kitty Diggles.”

MISS DIGGLES was a pretty, blue-eyed blonde of somewhere between sixteen and twenty. In Steele's opinion she had been spoiled in her upbringing, for she seemed to regard everybody as her friend; she even smiled pleasantly at him.

Demeree came round to question her. "So your name is Kitty Diggles?"

She looked at him solemnly. "Yes. Isn't it awful?"

Demeree appeared surprised. "You mean Kitty is an awful name?"

"Now, you know what I mean, Mr. Demeree."

"Well, now, if it's *Diggles* you have reference to, I'm sure some fine young man will soon change that. Most any man would be glad to do so."

Claybrook eased up. "If your honor please, this exchange of levity has no relevancy whatever."

"Superficially, Mr. Claybrook is right," said Demeree. "Actually I had in mind reassuring Miss Diggles that she is among friends and may speak freely." Demeree became serious. "Now, young lady, you were a passenger on Greenbow Larkin's stagecoach when it was recently attacked by robbers. Right?"

"Yes, I was, but I hope never to be again."

Demeree nodded. "Who else were passengers?"

"Why, Mr. Shore was one. There he is, sitting right down there."

"Who else?"

"A woman. Her name was Miss Bentwood. Mr. Shore called her Curlicue Bentwood."

"Do you mean Laney Cue?"

"I believe that was her true name, really."

"Did Mr. Shore and Miss Bentwood behave on friendly terms with respect to each other?"

"Oh, my, no. She even shot at him."

Demeree looked abashed. "Not really!"

"She sure did. After she had waved her

handkerchief out of a window and those bandits had come charging down on us, Mr. Shore drew a big gun and before you could say scat shot two of them off their horses. Miss Bentwood drew a little gun from her reticule and aimed it at Mr. Shore's head. But just as she shot, a rock or something bumped us real hard and she missed."

"Then what happened?"

"Well, Mr. Larkin and his guard had already dropped off, both killed by bandits. Nobody was left to drive our horses, so they ran away. They kept running until we turned over and broke loose from them. I guess those robbers thought all three of us were dead. As soon as they found what they were after they took it and hurried off. I heard one of them yell, 'Hurry it up, somebody's coming.' Three deputy sheriffs arrived a few minutes later. I was able to get out by myself, but they had to help Miss Bentwood and Mr. Shore. I guess that's about all."

Demeree said, "I guess that's about enough."

Claybrook got up as Demeree went to his seat.

Claybrook said, "Miss Diggles, are you in love with this young Mr. Shore?"

Kitty looked tenderly at defendant. "Well, I guess it's a little early for us to be in love. But he did say. . . ."

"Just answer my questions, please."

"Hold on thar," snapped Steele. "Lady, what did Bill Shore say?"

Kitty looked round at Steele. She was shy, as one truly in love. "He said. . . . Well, he said he had not meant to come back to Flat Creek anymore but that he'd changed his mind when he learned I was coming to Flat Creek to live with my aunt and uncle. He said he'd been offered a good job with a mining company and meant to take it. He really did ask me to marry him."

"Now, your honor," said Claybrook, "it is quite obvious that this young lady is merely saying what somebody has told her to say."

DEMEREER rose furiously. "That's an insult. That's a lowdown, cowardly, insulting falsehood."

"What she has said is both unreasonable and untruthful," retorted Claybrook. "Her statements are entitled to no credence whatever. They are merely something devised and rehearsed to play up defendant as a hero instead of what he actually is—namely, a bloodthirsty robber and murderer."

"From being a gentleman, such as I have long given him credit for being," said Demeree warmly, "Mr. Claybrook has joined ranks with contemptible scoundrels."

"That's enough," roared Steele. "Any time you lawyers want to lock horns outside this court room, it will be all right with me. But you don't do it in hyar."

Demeree said contritely, "I most humbly apologize to your honor for this unseemly behavior."

"Claybrook," snapped Steele, "question your witness."

"I have no more questions," responded Claybrook, "but I should like to have Miss Bentwood brought back by way of rebuttal."

"Fetch her," said Steele, nodding at Buckalew's deputies.

Kitty Diggles was shown out and Miss Bentwood was carried in and placed as before.

Claybrook advanced and looked down at her face. "Miss Bentwood, during that stagecoach robbery, did you shoot at defendant William Shore?"

Miss Bentwood gasped. "What an absurd question."

"But did you?"

"Of course not. I had no weapon with which to shoot at anybody."

"Did you put a handkerchief or white cloth out and wave it shortly before your stage was attacked?"

"Oh, dear, no. I told you who did it. It was that dreadful Bill Shore."

Claybrook backed to his chair. "That is all, your honor."

Demeree came round leisurely. He had some loose papers which he appeared to be studying. When he was near Miss Bentwood's stretcher he apparently found a question he had intended to ask.

His face and voice softened. "Miss Bentwood, if I have heretofore appeared to be rude, I hope you will overlook it."

She gave no response, except to turn her face slightly away from him.

Demeree said gently, "It may seem unkind, but I trust you will forgive me for insisting upon a few more questions."

She gave him no response.

A paper slipped from Demeree's hands. He soon after missed it, looked for it and discovered it near his feet. Quietly he stooped to pick it up. While in a stooped position he put his right hand under Miss Bentwood's stretcher and suddenly jabbed a stickpin deeply into her bottomside.

Spectators, jurors and others were shocked by a frightful scream. Miss Bentwood bowed her body upward and landed erect off her cot. She stood solidly on both feet and rubbed her right hip at its most rearward point.

After a moment a horrified expression came over her hard face. "My God!" she murmured. "What have I done to myself?"

Then she looked at Demeree, murder in her flashing eyes. "You. . . You beast!" She grabbed bed-clothing from her erstwhile bed. Meanwhile she muttered words of murder.

DEMEREER extended his right hand. On its palm lay a pearl-handled derringer. "Were you looking for this, Miss Bentwood? It was lying under your blanket." An instant before she snatched at it, he withdrew it from her reach.

"Oh, you beast!" she screamed. "If somebody will give me a gun, I'll kill you."

Demeree turned and rejoined his client. When there, he faced Judge Steele. "Your honor, it is not among my duties to apprehend murderers, but I think you are looking at a

female variety of that undesirable species. Mention has been made that Bat Munster and his fellow-robbers had a boss. I think you are also looking at their boss when you look at Curlicue Bentwood.”

While Demeree talked, Curlicue looked for an avenue of escape. She saw what appeared to be an open aisle; she took it at a fast walk.

“Stop her,” Steele roared.

He was pleased when some of his old ex-vigie friends got in her path and overcame her violent and profane attempts to force her way out.

Steele muttered to himself. “Point of no return, by thunder.” He gave his head a sidewise jerk. “You jurors fetch in a verdict.”

After a brief absence they returned. A tall, bony gold-digger remained standing. “Not guilty, Judge.”

Steele accepted their verdict without comment. He accepted it as meaning that in their opinion Golden Shore had not gone beyond his point of no return. But when peaceful citizens got murdered, by thunder, somebody ought to pay for it with his neck. Somebody would, too. Some murdering robbers were running at large who would pay for it yet. There was plenty of time.