

Robert E. Howard



*A Gent from
Bear Creek*

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Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338078063

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1. STRIPED SHIRTS AND BUSTED HEARTS

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IF Joel Braxton hadn't drawn a knife whilst I was beating his head agen a spruce log, I reckon I wouldn't of had that quarrel with Glory McGraw, and things might of turned out different to what they did. Pap's always said the Braxtons was no-account folks, and I allow he's right. First thing I knowed Jim Garfield hollered: "Look out, Breck, the yaller hound's got a knife!" Then I felt a kind of sting and looked down and seen Joel had cut a big gash in my buckskin shirt and scratched my hide trying to get at my innards.

I let go of his ears and taken the knife away from him and throwed it into a blackjack thicket, and throwed him after it. They warn't no use in him belly-aching like he done just because they happened to be a tree in his way. I dunno how he expects to get throwed into a blackjack thicket without getting some hide knocked off.

But I am a good-natured man, and I was a easy-going youngster, even then. I paid no heed to Joel's bloodthirsty threats whilst his brother and Jim Garfield and the others was pulling him out of the bresh and dousing him in the creek to wash the blood off. I got onto my mule Alexander and headed for Old Man McGraw's cabin where I was started to when I let myself be beguiled into stopping with them idjits.

The McGraws is the only folks on Bear Creek besides the Reynoldses and the Braxtons which ain't no kin to me one

way or another, and I'd been sweet on Glory McGraw ever since I was big enough to wear britches. She was the tallest, finest, purtiest gal in the Humbolt Mountains, which is covering considerable territory. They warn't a gal on Bear Creek, not even my own sisters, which could swing a axe like her, or fry a b'ar steak as tasty, or make hominy as good, and they warn't nobody, man nor woman, which could outrun her, less'n it was me.

As I come up the trail that led up to the McGraw cabin, I seen her, just scooping a pail of water out of the creek. The cabin was just out of sight on the other side of a clump of alders. She turned around and seen me, and stood there with the pail dripping in her hand, and her sleeves rolled up, and her arms and throat and bare feet was as white as anything you ever seen, and her eyes was the same color as the sky, and her hair looked like gold dust when the sun hit it.

I taken off my coonskin cap, and said: "Good mornin', Glory, how're you-all this mornin'?"

"Joe got kicked right severe by pap's sorrel mare yesterday," she says. "Just knocked some hide off, though. Outside of that we're all doin' fine. Air you glued to that mule?"

"No'm," I says, and clumb down, and says: "Lemme tote yore pail, Glory."

She started to hand it to me, and then she frowned and p'inted at my shirt, and says: "You been fightin' agen."

"Nobody but Joel Braxton," I said. "'Twarn't nothin'. He said moskeeters in the Injun Territory was bigger'n what they be in Texas."

"What you know about it?" says she. "You ain't never been to Texas."

"Well, he ain't never been to the Injun Territory neither," I said. "'Taint the moskeeters. It's the principle of the thing. My folks all come from Texas, and no Braxton can slander the State around me."

"You fight too much," she said. "Who licked?"

"Why, me, of course," I said. "I always do, don't I?"

This harmless statement seemed to irritate her.

"I reckon you think nobody on Bear Creek can lick you," she sneered.

"Well," I says truthfully, "nobody ain't, up to now—outside of pap."

"You ain't never fit none of my brothers," she snapped.

"That's why," I said. "I've took quite a lot of sass offa them ganglin' mavericks jest because they was yore brothers and I didn't want to hurt 'em."

Gals is funny about some things. She got mad and jerked the pail out of my hand, and says: "Oh, is that so? Well, lemme tell you right now, Breckinridge Elkins, the littlest one of my brothers can lick you like a balky hoss, and if you ever lay a finger on one of 'em, I'll fix you! And furthermore and besides, they's a gent up to the cabin right now which could pull his shootin' iron and decorate yore whole carcass with lead polka-dots whilst you was fumblin' for yore old cap-and-ball pistol!"

"I don't claim to be no gunfighter," I says mildly. "But I bet he cain't sling iron fast as my cousin Jack Gordon."

"You and yore cousins!" says she plenty scornful. "This feller is sech a gent as you never drempt existed! He's a

cowpuncher from the Wild River Country, and he's ridin' through to Chawed Ear and he stopped at our cabin for dinner. If you could see him, you wouldn't never brag no more. You with that old mule and them moccasins and buckskin clothes!"

"Well, gosh, Glory!" I says plumb bewildered. "What's the matter with buckskin? I like it better'n homespun."

"Hah!" sneered she. "You oughta see Mr. Snake River Wilkinson! He ain't wearin' neither buckskins nor homespun. Store-bought clothes! I never seen such elegance. Star top boots, and gold-mounted spurs! And a red neckcloth—he said silk. I dunno. I never seen nothin' like it before. And a shirt all red and green and yaller and beautiful! And a white Stetson hat! And a pearl- handled six-shooter! And the finest hoss and riggin's *you* ever seen, you big dummox!"

"Aw, well, gosh!" I said, getting irritated. "If this here Mister Wilkinson is so blame gorgeous, whyn't you marry him?"

I ought not to said it. Her eyes flashed blue sparks.

"I will!" she gritted. "You think a fine gentleman like him wouldn't marry me, hey? I'll show you! I'll marry him right now!"

And impulsively shattering her water bucket over my head she turned and run up the trail.

"Glory, wait!" I hollered, but by the time I got the water out of my eyes and the oak splinters out of my hair she was gone.

Alexander was gone too. He taken off down the creek when Glory started yelling at me, because he was a smart mule in his dumb way, and could tell when thunder-showers

was brewing. I run him for a mile before I caught him, and then I got onto him and headed for the McGraw cabin agen. Glory was mad enough to do anything she thought would worry me, and they warn't nothing would worry me more'n for her to marry some dern cowpuncher from the river country. She was plumb wrong when she thought I thought he wouldn't have her. Any man which would pass up a chance to get hitched with Glory McGraw would be a dern fool, I don't care what color his shirt was.

My heart sunk into my moccasins as I approached the alder clump where we'd had our row. I figgered she'd stretched things a little talking about Mr. Wilkinson's elegance, because whoever heard of a shirt with three colors into it, or gold-mounted spurs? Still, he was bound to be rich and wonderful from what she said, and what chance did I have? All the clothes I had was what I had on, and I hadn't never even seen a store-bought shirt, much less owned one. I didn't know whether to fall down in the trail and have a good bawl, or go get my rifle-gun and lay for Mr. Wilkinson.

Then, jest as I got back to where I'd saw Glory last, here she come again, running like a scairt deer, with her eyes all wide and her mouth open.

"Breckinridge!" she panted. "Oh, Breckinridge! I've played hell now!"

"What you mean?" I said.

"Well," says she, "that there cowpuncher Mister Wilkinson had been castin' eyes at me ever since he arriv at our cabin, but I hadn't give him no encouragement. But you made me so mad awhile ago, I went back to the cabin, and I marched

right up to him, and I says: 'Mister Wilkinson, did you ever think about gittin' married?' He grabbed me by the hand and he says, says he: 'Gal, I been thinkin' about it ever since I seen you choppin' wood outside the cabin as I rode by. Fact is, that's why I stopped here.' I was so plumb flabbergasted I didn't know what to say, and the first thing I knowed, him and pap was makin' arrangements for the weddin'!"

"Aw, gosh!" I said.

She started wringing her hands.

"I don't want to marry Mister Wilkinson!" she hollered. "I don't love him! He turnt my head with his elegant manners and striped shirt! What'll I do? Pap's sot on me marryin' the feller!"

"Well, I'll put a stop to that," I says. "No dem cowcountry dude can come into the Humbolts and steal my gal. Air they all up to the cabin now?"

"They're arguin' about the weddin' gift," says Glory. "Pap thinks Mister Wilkinson oughta give him a hundred dollars. Mister Wilkinson offered him his Winchester instead of the cash. Be keerful, Breckinridge! Pap don't like you much, and Mister Wilkinson has got a awful mean eye, and his scabbard-end tied to his laig."

"I'll be plumb diplomatic," I promised, and got onto my mule Alexander and reched down and lifted Glory on behind me, and we rode up the path till we come to within maybe a hundred foot of the cabin door. I seen a fine white hoss tied in front of the cabin, and the saddle and bridle was the most elegant I ever seen. The silverwork shone when the sun hit it. We got off and I tied Alexander, and Glory hid behind a

white oak. She warn't scairt of nobody but her old man, but he shore had her number.

"Be keerful, Breckinridge," she begged. "Don't make pap or Mister Wilkinson mad. Be tactful and meek."

So I said I would, and went up to the door. I could hear Miz McGraw and the other gals cooking dinner in the back room, and I could hear Old Man McGraw talking loud in the front room.

"'Taint enough!" says he. "I oughta have the Winchester and ten dollars. I tell you, Wilkinson, it's cheap enough for a gal like Glory! It plumb busts my heart strings to let her go, and nothin' but greenbacks is goin' to soothe the sting!"

"The Winchester and five bucks," says a hard voice which I reckoned was Mister Wilkinson. "It's a prime gun, I tell you. Ain't another'n like it in these mountains."

"Well," begun Old Man McGraw in a covetous voice, and jest then I come in through the door, ducking my head to keep from knocking it agen the lintel-log.

Old Man McGraw was setting there, tugging at his black beard, and them long gangling boys of his'n, Joe and Bill and John, was there gawking as usual, and there on a bench nigh the empty fireplace sot Mister Wilkinson in all his glory. I batted my eyes. I never seen such splendor in all my born days. Glory had told the truth about everything: the white Stetson with the fancy leather band, and the boots and gold-mounted spurs, and the shirt. The shirt nigh knocked my eyes out. I hadn't never dreamed nothing could be so beautiful—all big broad stripes of red and yaller and green! I seen his gun, too, a pearl-handled Colt .45 in a black leather scabbard which was wore plumb smooth and the end tied

down to his laig with a rawhide thong. I could tell he hadn't never wore a glove on his right hand, neither, by the brownness of it. He had the hardest, blackest eyes I ever seen. They looked right through me.

I was very embarrassed, being quite young then, but I pulled myself together and says very polite: "Howdy, Mister McGraw."

"Who's this young grizzly?" demanded Mister Wilkinson suspiciously.

"Git out of here, Elkins," requested Old Man McGraw angrily. "We're talkin' over private business. You git!"

"I know what kind of business you-all are talkin' over," I retorted, getting irritated. But I remembered Glory said be diplomatic, so I said: "I come here to tell you the weddin's off! Glory ain't goin' to marry Mister Wilkinson. She's goin' to marry me, and anybody which comes between us had better be able to rassel cougars and whup grizzlies bare-handed!"

"Why, you—" begun Mister Wilkinson in a blood-thirsty voice, as he riz onto his feet like a painter fixing to go into action.

"Git outa here!" bellered Old Man McGraw jumping up and grabbing the iron poker. "What I does with my datter ain't none of yore business! Mister Wilkinson here is makin' me a present of his prime Winchester and five dollars in hard money! What could *you* offer me, you mountain of beef and ignorance?"

"A bust in the snoot, you old tightwad," I replied heatedly, but still remembering to be diplomatic. They warn't no use in offending him, and I was determined to talk

quiet and tranquil, in spite of his insults. So I said: "A man which would sell his datter for five dollars and a gun ought to be et alive by the buzzards! You try to marry Glory to Mister Wilkinson and see what happens to you, sudden and onpleasant!"

"Why, you—!" says Old Man McGraw, swinging up his poker. "I'll bust yore fool skull like a egg!"

"Lemme handle him," snarled Mister Wilkinson. "Git outa the way and gimme a clean shot at him. Lissen here, you jack-eared mountain-mule, air you goin' out of here perpendicular, or does you prefer to go horizontal?"

"Open the ball whenever you feels lucky, you stripe-bellied polecat!" I retorted courteously, and he give a snarl and went for his gun, but I got mine out first and shot it out of his hand along with one of his fingers before he could pull his trigger.

He give a howl and staggered back agen the wall, glaring wildly at me, and at the blood dripping off his hand, and I stuck my old cap-and-ball .44 back in the scabbard and said: "You may be accounted a fast gunslinger down in the low country, but yo're tolerable slow on the draw to be foolin' around Bear Creek. You better go on home now, and—"

It was at this moment that Old Man McGraw hit me over the head with his poker. He swung it with both hands as hard as he could, and if I hadn't had on my coonskin cap I bet it would have skint my head some. As it was it knocked me to my knees, me being off-guard that way, and his three boys run in and started beating me with chairs and benches and a table laig. Well, I didn't want to hurt none of Glory's kin, but I had bit my tongue when the old man hit me with

his poker, and that always did irritate me. Anyway, I seen they warn't no use arguing with them fool boys. They was out for blood—mine, to be exact.

So I riz up and taken Joe by the neck and crotch and throwed him through a winder as gentle as I could, but I forgot about the hickory-wood bars which was nailed acrost it to keep the bears out. He took 'em along with him, and that was how he got skint up like he did. I heard Glory let out a scream outside, and would have hollered out to let her know I was all right and for her not to worry about me, but just as I opened my mouth to do it, John jammed the butt-end of a table laig into it.

Sech treatment would try the patience of a saint, still and all I didn't really intend to hit John as hard as I did. How was I to know a tap like I give him would knock him through the door and dislocate his jawbone?

Old Man McGraw was dancing around trying to get another whack at me with his bent poker without hitting Bill which was hammering me over the head with a chair, but Mister Wilkinson warn't taking no part in the fray. He was backed up agen a wall with a wild look on his face. I reckon he warn't used to Bear Creek squabbles.

I taken the chair away from Bill and busted it over his head jest to kinda cool him off a little, and jest then Old Man McGraw made another swipe at me with his poker, but I ducked and grabbed him, and Bill stooped over to pick up a bowie knife which had fell out of somebody's boot. His back was towards me so I planted my moccasin in the seat of his britches with considerable force and he shot head-first through the door with a despairing howl. Somebody else

screamed too, that sounded like Glory. I didn't know at the time that she was running up to the door and was knocked down by Bill as he catapulted into the yard.

I couldn't see what was going on outside, and Old Man McGraw was chawing my thumb and feeling for my eye, so I throwed him after John and Bill, and he's a liar when he said I aimed him at that rain-barrel a-purpose. I didn't even know they was one there till I heard the crash as his head went through the staves.

I turned around to have some more words with Mister Wilkinson, but he jumped through the winder I'd throwed Joe through, and when I tried to foller him, I couldn't get my shoulders through. So I run out at the door and Glory met me just as I hit the yard and she give me a slap in the face that sounded like a beaver hitting a mud bank with his tail.

"Why, Glory!" I says, dumbfounded, because her blue eyes was blazing, and her yaller hair was nigh standing on end. She was so mad she was crying and that's the first time I ever knowed she *could* cry. "What's the matter? What've I did?"

"What have you did?" she raged, doing a kind of a war-dance on her bare feet. "You outlaw! You murderer! You jack-eared son of a spotted tail skunk! Look what you done!" She p'inted at her old man dazedly pulling his head out of the rooins of the rain-barrel, and her brothers laying around the yard in various positions, bleeding freely and groaning loudly. "You tried to murder my family!" says she, shaking her fists under my nose. "You throwed Bill onto me on purpose!"

"I didn't neither!" I exclaimed, shocked and scandalized. "You know I wouldn't hurt a hair of yore head, Glory! Why, all I done, I done it for you—"

"You didn't have to mutilate my pap and my brothers!" she wept furiously. Ain't that just like a gal? What could I done but what I did? She hollered: "If you really loved me you wouldn't of hurt 'em! You jest done it for meanness! I told you to be ca'm and gentle! Whyn't you do it? Shet up! Don't talk to me! Well, whyn't you say somethin'? Ain't you got no tongue?"

"I handled 'em easy as I could!" I roared, badgered beyond endurance. "It warn't my fault. If they'd had any sense, they wouldn't—"

"Don't you dare slander my folks!" she yelled. "What you done to Mister Wilkinson?"

The aforesaid gent jest then come limping around the corner of the cabin, and started for his hoss, and Glory run to him and grabbed his arm, and said: "If you still want to marry me, stranger, it's a go! I'll ride off with you right now!"

He looked at me and shuddered, and jerked his arm away.

"Do I look like a dern fool?" he inquired with some heat. "I advises you to marry that young grizzly there, for the sake of public safety, if nothin' else! Marry you when *he* wants you? No, thank you! I'm leavin' a valuable finger as a sooverneer of my sojourn, but I figger it's a cheap price! After watchin' that human tornado in action, I calculate a finger ain't nothin' to bother about! *Adios!* If I ever come

within a hundred miles of Bear Creek again it'll be because I've gone plumb loco!"

And with that he forked his critter and took off up the trail like the devil was after him.

"Now look what you done!" wept Glory. "Now he won't never marry me!"

"But I thought you didn't want to marry him!" I says, plumb bewildered.

She turned on me like a catamount.

"I didn't!" she shrieked. "I wouldn't marry him if he was the last man on earth! But I demands the right to say yes or no for myself! I don't aim to be bossed around by no hillbilly on a mangy mule!"

"Alexander ain't mangy," I said. "Besides, I warn't, tryin' to boss you around, Glory. I war just fixin' it so yore pap wouldn't make you marry Mister Wilkinson. Bein' as we aims to marry ourselves—"

"Who said we aimed to?" she hollered. "Me marry you, after you beat up my pap and my brothers like you done? You think yo're the best man on Bear Creek! Ha! You with yore buckskin britches and old cap-and-ball pistol and coonskin cap! Me marry you? Git on yore mangy mule and git before I takes a shotgun to you!"

"All right!" I roared, getting mad at last. "All right, if that's the way you want to ack! You ain't the only gal in these mountains! They's plenty of gals which would be glad to have me callin' on 'em."

"Who, for a instance?" she sneered.

"Ellen Reynolds, for instance!" I bellered. "That's who!"

"All right!" says she, trembling with rage. "Go and spark that stuck-up hussy on yore mangy mule with yore old moccasins and cap-and-ball gun! See if I care!"

"I aim to!" I assured her bitterly. "And I won't be on no mule, neither. I'll be on the best hoss in the Humbolts, and I'll have me some boots onto my feet, and a silver mounted saddle and bridle, and a pistol that shoots store- bought ca'tridges, too! You wait and see!"

"Where you think you'll git 'em?" she sneered.

"Well, I will!" I bellered, seeing red. "You said I thought I was the best man on Bear Creek! Well, by golly, I am, and I aim to prove it! I'm glad you gimme the gate! If you hadn't I'd of married you and settled down in a cabin up the creek somewheres and never done nothin' nor seen nothin' nor been nothin' but yore husband! Now I'm goin' to plumb bust this State wide open from one end to the other'n, and folks is goin' to know about me all over everywheres!"

"Heh! heh! heh!" she laughed bitterly.

"I'll show you!" I promised her wrathfully, as I forked my mule, and headed down the trail with her laughter ringing in my ears. I kicked Alexander most vicious in the ribs, and he give a bray of astonishment and lit a shuck for home. A instant later the alder clump hid the McGraw cabin from view and Glory McGraw and my boyhood dreams was out of sight behind me.



2. MOUNTAIN MAN

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"I'LL show her!" I promised the world at large, as I rode through the bresh as hard as Alexander could run. "I'll go out into the world and make a name for myself, by golly! She'll see. Whoa, Alexander!"

Because I'd jest seen a bee-tree I'd located the day before. My busted heart needed something to soothe it, and I figgered fame and fortune could wait a little whilst I drowned my woes in honey.

I was up to my ears in this beverage when I heard my old man calling: "Breckinridge! Oh, Breckinridge! Whar air you? I see you now. You don't need to climb that tree. I ain't goin' to larrup you."

He come up and said: "Breckinridge, ain't that a bee settin' onto yore ear?"

I reched up, and sure enough, it was. Come to think about it, I had felt kind of like something was stinging me somewheres.

"I swan, Breckinridge," says pap, "I never seen a hide like yore'n not even amongst the Elkinses. Lissen to me now: old Buffalo Rogers jest come through on his way back from Tomahawk, and the postmaster there said they was a letter for me, from Mississippi. He wouldn't give it to nobody but me or some of my folks. I dunno who'd be writin' me from Mississippi; last time I was there was when I was fightin' the Yankees. But anyway, that letter is got to be got. Me and yore maw have decided yo're to go git it."

"Clean to Tomahawk?" I said. "Gee whiz, Pap!"

"Well," he says, combing his beard with his fingers, "yo're growed in size, if not in years. It's time you seen somethin' of the world. You ain't never been more'n thirty miles away from the cabin you was born in. Yore brother Garfield ain't able to go on account of that b'ar he tangled with, and Buckner is busy skinnin' the b'ar. You been to whar the trail goin' to Tomahawk passes. All you got to do is foller it and turn to the right whar it forks. The left goes on to Perdition."

"Great!" I says. "This is whar I begins to see the world!" And I added to myself: "This is whar I begins to show Glory McGraw I'm a man of importance, by golly!"

* * *

Well, next morning before good daylight I was off, riding my mule Alexander, with a dollar pap gimme stuck in the bottom of my pistol scabbard. Pap rode with me a few miles and give me advice.

"Be keerful how you spend that dollar I give you," he said. "Don't gamble. Drink in reason. Half a gallon of corn juice is enough for any man. Don't be techy—but don't forgit that yore pap was once the rough-and- tumble champeen of Gonzales County, Texas. And whilst yo're feelin' for the other feller's eye, don't be keerless and let him chaw yore ear off. And don't resist no officer."

"What's them, Pap?" I inquired.

"Down in the settlements," he explained, "they has men which their job is to keep the peace. I don't take no stock in law myself, but them city folks is different from us. You do what they says, and if they says give up yore gun, even, why you up and do it!"

I was shocked, and meditated a while, and then says: "How can I tell which is them?"

"They'll have a silver star stuck onto their shirt," he says, so I said I'd do like he told me. He then reined around and went back up the mountains, and I rode on down the path.

Well, I camped late that night where the path come out onto the Tomahawk trail, and the next morning I rode on down the trail, feeling like I was a long way from home. It was purty hot, and I hadn't went far till I passed a stream and decided I'd take a swim. So I tied Alexander to a cottonwood, and hung my buckskins close by, but I taken my gun belt with my cap-and-ball .44 and hung it on a willer limb reching out over the water. They was thick bushes all around the stream.

Well, I div deep, and as I come up, I had a feeling like somebody had hit me over the head with a club. I looked up, and there was a Injun holding on to a limb with one hand and leaning out over the water with a club in the other hand.

He yelled and swung at me again, but I div, and he missed, and I come up right under the limb where my gun was hung. I reched up and grabbed it and let *bam* at him just as he dived into the bushes, and he let out a squall and grabbed the seat of his pants. Next minute I heard a horse running, and glimpsed him tearing away through the bresh on a pinto mustang, setting his hoss like it was a red-hot stove, and dern him, he had my clothes in one hand! I was so upshot by this that I missed him clean, and jumping out, I charged through the bushes and saplings, but he was already out of sight. I knowed it warn't likely he was with a

war-party—just a dern thieving Piute—but what a fix I was in! He'd even stole my moccasins.

I couldn't go home, in that shape, without the letter, and admit I missed a Injun twice. Pap would larrup the tar out of me. And if I went on, what if I met some women, in the valley settlements? I don't reckon they ever was a young'un half as bashful as what I was in them days. Cold sweat busted out all over me. I thought, here I started out to see the world and show Glory McGraw I was a man among men, and here I am with no more clothes than a jackrabbit. At last, in desperation, I buckled on my belt and started down the trail towards Tomahawk. I was about ready to commit murder to get me some pants.

I was glad the Injun didn't steal Alexander, but the going was so rough I had to walk and lead him, because I kept to the thick bresh alongside the trail. He had a tough time getting through the bushes, and the thorns scratched him so he hollered, and ever' now and then I had to lift him over jagged rocks. It was tough on Alexander, but I was too bashful to travel in the open trail without no clothes on.

After I'd gone maybe a mile I heard somebody in the trail ahead of me, and peeking through the bushes, I seen a most pecooliar sight. It was a man on foot, going the same direction as me, and he had on what I instinctly guessed was city clothes. They warn't buckskin nor homespun, nor yet like the duds Mister Wilkinson had on, but they were very beautiful, with big checks and stripes all over 'em. He had on a round hat with a narrer brim, and shoes like I hadn't never seen before, being neither boots nor moccasins. He was dusty, and he cussed considerable as he

limped along. Ahead of him I seen the trail made a hoss-shoe bend, so I cut straight across and got ahead of him, and as he come along, I come out of the bresh and throwed down on him with my cap-and- ball.

He throwed up his hands and hollered: "Don't shoot!"

"I don't want to, mister," I said, "but I got to have clothes!"

He shook his head like he couldn't believe I was so, and he said: "You ain't the color of a Injun, but—what kind of people live in these hills, anyway?"

"Most of 'em's Democrats," I said. "But I ain't got no time to talk politics. You climb out of them riggin's."

"My God!" he wailed. "My horse threw me off and ran away, and I've bin walkin' for hours, expecting to get scalped by Injuns any minute, and now a naked lunatic on a mule demands my clothes! It's too dern much!"

"I cain't argy, mister," I said; "somebody's liable to come up the trail any minute. Hustle!" So saying I shot his hat off to encourage him.

He give a howl and shucked his duds in a hurry.

"My underclothes, too?" he demanded, shivering though it was very hot.

"Is that what them things is?" I demanded, shocked. "I never heard of a man wearin' such womanish things. The country is goin' to the dogs, just like pap says. You better git goin'. Take my mule. When I git to where I can git some regular clothes, we'll swap back."

He clumb onto Alexander kind of dubious, and says to me, despairful: "Will you tell me one thing—how do I get to Tomahawk?"

"Take the next turn to the right," I said, "and—"

Jest then Alexander turned his head and seen them underclothes on his back, and he give a loud and ringing bray and sot sail down the trail at full speed with the stranger hanging on with both hands. Before they was out of sight they come to where the trail forked, and Alexander taken the left branch instead of the right, and vanished amongst the ridges.

I put on the clothes, and they scratched my hide something fierce. I thinks, well, I got store-bought clothes quicker'n I hoped to. But I didn't think much of 'em. The coat split down the back, and the pants was too short, but the shoes was the wust; they pinched all over. I throwed away the socks, having never wore none, but put on what was left of the hat.

I went on down the trail, and taken the right-hand fork, and in a mile or so I come out on a flat, and heard hosses running. The next thing a mob of men on hosses bust into view. One of 'em yelled: "There he is!" and they all come for me full tilt. Instantly I decided that the stranger had got to Tomahawk after all, somehow, and had sot his friends onto me for stealing his clothes.

So I left the trail and took out across the sage grass, and they all charged after me, yelling stop. Well, them dern shoes pinched my feet so bad I couldn't make much speed, so after I had run maybe a quarter of a mile I perceived that the hosses were beginning to gain on me. So I wheeled with my cap-and-ball in my hand, but I was going so fast, when I turned, them dern shoes slipped and I went over backwards into a cactus bed just as I pulled the trigger. So I only

knocked the hat off of the first hossman. He yelled and pulled up his hoss, right over me nearly, and as I drew another bead on him, I seen he had a bright shiny star onto his shirt. I dropped my gun and stuck up my hands.

They swarmed around me—cowboys, from their looks. The man with the star got off his hoss and picked up my gun and cussed.

"What did you lead us this chase through this heat and shoot at me for?" he demanded.

"I didn't know you was a officer," I said.

"Hell, McVey," said one of 'em, "you know how jumpy tenderfeet is. Likely he thought we was Santry's outlaws. Where's yore hoss?"

"I ain't got none," I said.

"Got away from you, hey?" said McVey. "Well, climb up behind Kirby here, and let's git goin'."

To my surprise, the sheriff stuck my gun back in the scabbard, and so I clumb up behind Kirby, and away we went. Kirby kept telling me not to fall off, and it made me mad, but I said nothing. After an hour or so we come to a bunch of houses they said was Tomahawk. I got panicky when I seen all them houses, and would have jumped down and run for the mountains, only I knowed they'd catch me, with them dern pinchy shoes on.

I hadn't never seen such houses before. They was made out of boards, mostly, and some was two stories high. To the north-west and west the hills riz up a few hundred yards from the backs of the houses, and on the other sides there was plains, with bresh and timber on them.

"You boys ride into town and tell the folks that the shebang starts soon," said McVey. "Me and Kirby and Richards will take him to the ring."

I could see people milling around in the streets, and I never had no idee they was that many folks in the world. The sheriff and the other two fellers rode around the north end of the town and stopped at a old barn and told me to get off. So I did, and we went in and they had a kind of room fixed up in there with benches and a lot of towels and water buckets, and the sheriff said: "This ain't much of a dressin' room, but it'll have to do. Us boys don't know much about this game, but we'll second you as good as we can. One thing—the other feller ain't got no manager nor seconds neither. How do you feel?"

"Fine," I said, "but I'm kind of hungry."

"Go git him somethin', Richards," said the sheriff.

"I didn't think they et just before a bout," said Richards.

"Aw, I reckon he knows what he's doin'," said McVey. "Gwan."

So Richards pulled out, and the sheriff and Kirby walked around me like I was a prize bull, and felt my muscles, and the sheriff said: "By golly, if size means anything, our dough is as good as in our britches right now!"

I pulled my dollar out of my scabbard and said I would pay for my keep, and they haw-hawed and slapped me on the back and said I was a great joker. Then Richards come back with a platter of grub, with a lot of men wearing boots and guns and whiskers, and they stomped in and gawped at me, and McVey said: "Look him over, boys! Tomahawk stands or falls with him today!"

They started walking around me like him and Kirby done, and I was embarrassed and et three or four pounds of beef and a quart of mashed pertaters, and a big hunk of white bread, and drunk about a gallon of water, because I was purty thirsty. Then they all gaped like they was surprised about something, and one of 'em said: "How come he didn't arrive on the stagecoach yesterday?"

"Well," said the sheriff, "the driver told me he was so drunk they left him at Bisney, and come on with his luggage, which is over there in the corner. They got a hoss and left it there with instructions for him to ride on to Tomahawk as soon as he sobered up. Me and the boys got nervous today when he didn't show up, so we went out lookin' for him, and met him hoofin' it down the trail."

"I bet them Perdicion *hombres* starts somethin'," said Kirby. "Ain't a one of 'em showed up yet. They're settin' over at Perdicion soakin' up bad licker and broodin' on their wrongs. They shore wanted this show staged over there. They claimed that since Tomahawk was furnishin' one-half of the attraction, and Gunstock the other half, the razeed ought to be thrown at Perdicion."

"Nothin' to it," said McVey. "It laid between Tomahawk and Gunstock, and we throwed a coin and won it. If Perdicion wants trouble she can git it. Is the boys r'arin' to go?"

"Is they!" says Richards. "Every bar in Tomahawk is crowded with *hombres* full of licker and civic pride. They're bettin' their shirts, and they has been nine fights already. Everybody in Gunstock's here."

"Well, le's git goin'," says McVey, getting nervous. "The quicker it's over, the less blood there's likely to be spilt."

The first thing I knowed, they had laid hold of me and was pulling my clothes off, so it dawned on me that I must be under arrest for stealing that stranger's clothes. Kirby dug into the baggage which was in one corner of the stall, and dragged out a funny looking pair of pants; I know now they was white silk. I put 'em on because I didn't have nothing else to put on, and they fitted me like my skin. Richards tied a American flag around my waist, and they put some spiked shoes onto my feet.

I let 'em do like they wanted to, remembering what pap said about not resisting no officer. Whilst so employed I begun to hear a noise outside, like a lot of people whooping and cheering. Purty soon in come a skinny old gink with whiskers and two guns on, and he hollered: "Lissen here, Mac, dern it, a big shipment of gold is down there waitin' to be took off by the evenin' stage, and the whole blame town is deserted on account of this dern foolishness. Suppose Comanche Santry and his gang gits wind of it?"

"Well," said McVey, "I'll send Kirby here to help you guard it."

"You will like hell," says Kirby. "I'll resign as deputy first. I got every cent of my dough on this scrap, and I aim to see it."

"Well, send somebody!" says the old codger. "I got enough to do runnin' my store, and the stage stand, and the post office, without—"

He left, mumbling in his whiskers, and I said: "Who's that?"

"Aw," said Kirby, "that's old man Brenton that runs the store down at the other end of town, on the east side of the

street. The post office is in there, too."

"I got to see him," I says. "There's a letter—"

Just then another man come surging in and hollered: "Hey, is yore man ready? Folks is gittin' impatient!"

"All right," says McVey, throwing over me a thing he called a bathrobe. Him and Kirby and Richards picked up towels and buckets and things, and we went out the oppersite door from what we come in, and they was a big crowd of people there, and they whooped and shot off their pistols. I would have bolted back into the barn, only they grabbed me and said it was all right. We pushed through the crowd, and I never seen so many boots and pistols in my life, and we come to a square corral made out of four posts sot in the ground, and ropes stretched between. They called this a ring and told me to get in. I done so, and they had turf packed down so the ground was level as a floor and hard and solid. They told me to set down on a stool in one corner, and I did, and wrapped my robe around me like a Injun.

Then everybody yelled, and some men, from Gunstock, McVey said, clumb through the ropes on the other side. One of 'em was dressed like I was, and I never seen such a funny-looking human. His ears looked like cabbages, and his nose was plumb flat, and his head was shaved and looked right smart like a bullet. He sot down in a oppersite corner.

Then a feller got up and waved his arms, and hollered: "Gents, you all know the occasion of this here suspicious event. Mister Bat O'Tool, happenin' to be passin' through Gunstock, consented to fight anybody which would meet him. Tomahawk riz to the occasion by sendin' all the way to

Denver to procure the services of Mister Bruiser McGoorty, formerly of San Francisco!"

He p'inted at me, and everybody cheered and shot off their pistols, and I was embarrassed and bust out in a cold sweat.

"This fight," said the feller, "will be fit accordin' to London Prize Ring Rules, same as in a champeenship go. Bare fists, round ends when one of 'em's knocked down or throwed down. Fight lasts till one or t'other ain't able to come up to the scratch when time's called. I, Yucca Blaine, have been selected as referee because, bein' from Chawed Ear, I got no prejudices either way. Air you all ready? Time!"

McVey hauled me off my stool and pulled off my bathrobe and pushed me out into the ring. I nearly died with embarrassment, but I seen the feller they called O'Tool didn't have on no more clothes than me. He approached and held out his hand like he wanted to shake hands, so I held out mine. We shook hands, and then without no warning he hit me a awful lick on the jaw with his left. It was like being kicked by a mule. The first part of me which hit the turf was the back of my head. O'Tool stalked back to his corner, and the Gunstock boys was dancing and hugging each other, and the Tomahawk fellers was growling in their whiskers and fumbling with their guns and bowie knives.

McVey and his deperties rushed into the ring before I could get up and dragged me to my corner and begun pouring water on me.

"Air you hurt much?" yelled McVey.

"How can a man's fist hurt anybody?" I ast. "I wouldn't of fell down, only I was caught off-guard. I didn't know he was

goin' to hit me. I never played no game like this here'n before."

McVey dropped the towel he was beating me in the face with, and turned pale. "Ain't you Bruiser McGoorty of San Francisco?" he hollered.

"Naw," I said. "I'm Breckinridge Elkins, from up in the Humbolt Mountains. I come here to git a letter for pap."

"But the stagecoach driver described them clothes—" he begun wildly.

"A Injun stole my clothes," I explained, "so I taken some off'n a stranger. Maybe that was Mister McGoorty."

"What's the matter?" ast Kirby, coming up with another bucket of water. "Time's about ready to be called."

"We're sunk!" bawled McVey. "This ain't McGoorty! This is a derved hillbilly which murdered McGoorty and stole his clothes!"

"We're rooint!" exclaimed Richards, aghast. "Everybody's bet their dough without even seein' our man, they was that full of trust and civic pride. We cain't call it off now. Tomahawk is rooint! What'll we do?"

"He's goin' to git in there and fight his derndest," said McVey, pulling his gun and jamming it into my back. "We'll hang him after the fight."

"But he cain't box!" wailed Richards.

"No matter," said McVey; "the fair name of our town is at stake; Tomahawk promised to supply a fighter to fight O'Tool, and—"

"Oh!" I said, suddenly seeing light. "This here is a fight then, ain't it?"