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The Apache Mountain War

by

Robert E. Howard

Some day, maybe, when I'm old and gray in the whiskers, I'll have sense enough not to stop when I'm riding by Uncle Shadrach Polk's cabin, and Aunt Tascosa Polk hollers at me. Take the last time, for instance. I ought to of spurred Cap'n Kidd into a high run when she stuck her head out'n the winder and yelled: "Breck *in*ridge! Oh, *Breck inri dddgggge!*"

But I reckon pap's right when he says Nater gimme so much muscle she didn't have no room left for brains. Anyway, I reined Cap'n Kidd around, ignoring his playful efforts to bite the muscle out of my left thigh, and I rode up to the stoop and taken off my coonskin-cap. I said: "Well, Aunt Tascosa, how air you all?"

"You may well ast how air we," she said bitterly. "How should a pore weak woman be farin' with a critter like Shadrach for a husband? It's a wonder I got a roof over my head, or so much as a barr'l of b'ar meat put up for the winter. The place is goin' to rack and rooin. Look at that there busted axe-handle, for a instance. Is a pore weak female like me got to endure sech abuse?"

"You don't mean to tell me Uncle Shadrach's been beatin' you with that axe-handle?" I says, scandalized.

"No," says this pore weak female. "I busted it over his head a week ago, and he's refused to mend it. It's licker is been Shadrach's rooin. When he's sober he's a passable figger of a man, as men go. But swiggin' blue rooin is brung him to shame an' degradation."

"He looks fat and sassy," I says.

"Beauty ain't only skin-deep," she scowls. "Shadrach's like Dead Sea fruit--fair and fat-bellied to look on, but ready to dissolve in dust and whiskey fumes when prodded. Do you know whar he is right now?" And she glared at me so accusingly that Cap'n Kidd recoiled and turned pale.

"Naw," says I. "Whar?"

"He's over to the Apache Mountain settlement a-lappin' up lickin'," she snarled. "Just a-rootin' and a-wallerin' in sin and corn juice, riskin' his immortal soul and blowin' in the money he got off'n his coon hides. I had him locked in the corn crib, aimin' to plead with him and appeal to his better nater, but whilst I was out behind the corral cuttin' me a hickory club to do the appealin' with, he kicked the door loose and skun out. I know whar he's headin'--to Joel Garfield's stillhouse, which is a abomination in the sight of the Lord and oughta be burnt to the ground and the ashes skwenched with the blood of the wicked. But I cain't stand here listenin' to yore gab. I got hominy to make. What you mean wastin' my time like this for? I got a good mind to tell yore pap on you. You light a shuck for Apache Mountain and bring Shadrach home."

"But--" I said.

"Don't you give me no argyments, you imperdent scoundrel!" she hollered. "I should think you'd be glad to help a pore, weak female critter 'stead of wastin' yore time gamblin' and fightin', in such dens of iniquity as War Paint. I want you to fix some way so's to disgust Shadrach with drink for the rest of his nateral life, and if you don't you'll hear from me, you good-for-nothin'--"

"All right!" I yelled. " *All right!* Anything for a little peace! I'll git him and bring him home, and make a teetotaler outa him if I have to strangle the old son of a--"

"How dast you use sech langwidge in front of me?" she hollered. "Ain't you got no respect for a lady? I'll be #4%*@?-'!d if I know what the &%\$@* world's comin' to! Git outa here and don't show yore homely mug around here again onless you git Shadrach off of rum for good!"

WELL, IF UNCLE SHADRACH ever took a swig of rum in his life it was because they warn't no good red corn whiskey within reach, but I didn't try to argy with Aunt Tascosa. I lit out down the trail feeling like I'd been tied up to a Apache stake with the whole tribe sticking red-hot Spanish daggers into my hide. Aunt Tascosa affects a man that way. I heard Cap'n Kidd heave a sigh of relief plumb up from his belly, too, as we crossed a ridge and her distant voice was drowned out by the soothing noises of a couple of bobcats fighting with a timber wolf. I thought what ca'm and happy lives them simple critters lived, without no Aunt Tascosa.

I rode on, forgetting my own troubles in feeling sorry for pore Uncle Shadrach. They warn't a mean bone in his carcass. He was just as good-natered and hearty a critter as you'd ever meet even in the Humbolts. But his main object in life seemed to be to stow away all the corn juice they is in the world.

As I rode along I racked my brain for a plan to break Uncle Shadrach of this here habit. I like a dram myself, but in moderation, never more'n a gallon or so at a time, unless it's a special occasion. I don't believe in a man making a hawg out of hisself, and anyway I was sick and tired running Uncle Shadrach down and fetchin' him home from his sprees.

I thought so much about it on my way to Apache Mountain that I got so sleepy I seen I was gitting into no state to ride Cap'n Kidd. He got to looking back at me now and then, and I knowed if he seen me

dozing in the saddle he'd try his derndest to break my neck. I was passing Cousin Bill Gordon's barn about that time, so I thought I'd go in and take me a nap up in the hayloft, and maybe I'd dream about a way to make a water-drinker out of Uncle Shadrach or something.

I tied Cap'n Kidd and started into the barn, and what should I see but Bill's three youngest boys engaged in daubing paint on Uncle Jeppard Grimes' favorite jackass, Joshua.

"What air you all a-doin' to Joshua?" I demanded, and they jumped back and looked guilty. Joshua was a critter which Uncle Jeppard used for a pack-mule when he went prospecting. He got the urge maybe every three or four year, and between times Joshua just et and slept. He was the sleepin'est jackass I ever seen. He was snoozing now, whilst them young idjits was working on him.

I seen what they was at. Bill had loaned a feller some money which had a store down to War Paint, and the feller went broke, and give Bill a lot of stuff outa the store for pay. They was a lot of paint amongst it. Bill packed it home, though I dunno what he aimed to do with it, because all the houses in the Humbolts was log cabins which nobody ever painted, or if they did, they just white-washed 'em. But anyway, he had it all stored in his barn, and his boys was smearing it on Joshua.

He was the derndest sight you ever seen. They'd painted a big stripe down his spine, like a Spanish mustang, only this stripe was green instead of black, and more stripes curving over his ribs and down under his belly, red, white and blue, and they'd painted his ears green.

"What you all mean by sech doin's?" I ast. "Uncle Jeppard'll plumb skin you all alive. He sets a lot of store by that there jack."

"Aw, it's just funnin'," they said. "He won't know who done it."

"You go scrub that paint off," I ordered 'em. "Joshua'll lick it off and git pizened."

"It won't hurt him," they assured me. "He got in here yesterday and et three cans of paint and a bucket of whitewash. That's what give us the idee. He kin eat anything. Eatin'est jack you ever seen."

"Heh, heh, heh!" snickered one of 'em. "He looks like a drunkard's dream!"

Instantly a idee hit me.

"Gimme that jackass!" I exclaimed. "He's just what I need to kyore Uncle Shadrach Polk of drinkin' licker. One glimpse of that there jack in his present state and Uncle Shadrach'll think he's got the delerious trimmin's and git so scairt he'll swear off whiskey for life."

"If you aims to lead Joshua to Joel's stillhouse," they said, "you'll be all day gittin' there. You cain't hustle Joshua."

"I ain't goin to lead him," I said. "You all hitch a couple of mules to yore pa's spring wagon. I'll leave Cap'n Kidd here till I git back."

"We'll put him in the corral behind the barn," they says. "Them posts are set four foot deep in concrete and the fence is braced with railroad iron, so maybe it'll hold him till you git back, if you ain't gone too long."

WHEN THEY GOT THE mules hitched, I tied Joshua's laigs and laid him in the wagon bed, where he

went to sleep, and I climbed onto the seat and lit out for Apache Mountain. I hadn't went far when I run over a rock and woke Joshua up and he started braying and kept it up till I stopped and give him a ear of corn to chew on. As I started off again I seen Dick Grimes' youngest gal peeping at me from the bresh, and when I called to her she run off. I hoped she hadn't heard Joshua braying. I knowed she couldn't see him, laying down in the wagon bed, but he had a very pecooliar bray and anybody in the Humbolts could recognize him by it. I hoped she didn't know I had Joshua, because she was the derndest tattletale in the Bear Creek country, and Uncle Jeppard is such a cross-grained old cuss you can't explain nothing to him. He was born with the notion that the whole world was plotting agen him.

It hadn't been much more'n good daylight when I rode past Uncle Shadrach's house, and I'd pushed Cap'n Kidd purty brisk from there; the mules made good time, so it warn't noon yet when I come to Apache Mountain. As I approached the settlement, which was a number of cabins strung up and down a breshy run, I swung wide of the wagon-road and took to the trails, because I didn't want nobody to see me with Joshua. It was kind of tough going, because the trails was mostly footpaths and not wide enough for the wagon, and I had to stop and pull up saplings every few yards. I was scairt the noise would wake up Joshua and he'd start braying again, but that jackass could sleep through a bombardment, long as he warn't being jolted personal.

I was purty close to the settlement when I had to git out of the wagon and go ahead and break down some bresh so the wheels wouldn't foul, and when I laid hold of it, a couple of figgers jumped up on the other side. One was Cousin Buckner Kirby's gal Kit, and t'other'n was young Harry Braxton from the other side of the mountain, and no kin to none of us.

"Oh!" says Kit, kind of breathless.

"What you all doin' out here?" I scowled, fixing Harry with a eye which made him shiver and fuss with his gun-belt. "Air yore intentions honorable, Braxton?"

"I dunno what business it is of yore'n," said Kit bitterly.

"I makes it mine," I assured her. "If this young buck cain't come sparkin' you at a respectable place and hour, why, I figgers--"

"Yore remarks is ignorant and insultin'," says Harry, sweating profusely, but game. "I aims to make this here young lady my wife, if it warn't for the toughest prospective father-in-law ever blighted young love's sweet dream with a number twelve boot in the seat of the pants."

"To put it in words of one syllable so's even you can understand, Breckinridge," says Kit, "Harry wants to marry me, but pap is too derved mean and stubborn to let us. He don't like the Braxtons account of one of 'em skun him in a hoss-swap thirty years ago."

"I don't love 'em myself," I grunted. "But go on."

"Well," she says, "after pap had kicked Harry out of the house five or six times, and dusted his britches with birdshot on another occasion, we kind of got the idee that he was prejudiced agen Harry. So we has to take this here method of seein' each other."

"Whyn't you all run off and git married anyway?" I ast.

Kit shivered. "We wouldn't dare try it. Pap might wake up and catch us, and he'd shoot Harry. I taken a big chance sneakin' out here today. Ma and the kids are all over visitin' a few days with Aunt Ouachita,

but pap wouldn't let me go for fear I'd meet Harry over there. I snuck out here for a few minutes--pap thinks I'm gatherin' greens for dinner--but if I don't hustle back he'll come lookin' for me with a hickory gad."

"Aw, shucks," I said. "You all got to use yore brains like I do. You leave it to me. I'll git yore old man out of the way for the night, and give you a chance to skip."

"How'll you do that?" Kit ast skeptically.

"Never mind," I told her, not having the slightest idee how I was going to do it. "I'll 'tend to that. You git yore things ready, and you, Harry, you come along the road in a buckboard just about moonrise, and Kit'll be waitin' for you. You all can git hitched over to War Paint. Buckner won't do nothin' after yo're hitched."

"Will you, shore enough?" says Harry, brightening up.

"Shore I will," I assured him. "Vamoose now, and git that buckboard."

HE HUSTLED OFF, AND I said to Kit: "Git in the wagon and ride to the settlement with me. This time tomorrer you'll be a happy married woman shore enough."

"I hope so," she said sad-like. "But I'm bettin' somethin' will go wrong and pap'll catch us, and I'll eat my meals off the mantel-board for the next week."

"Trust me," I assured her, as I helped her in the wagon.

She didn't seem much surprised when she looked down in the bed and seen Joshua all tied up and painted and snoring his head off. Humbolt folks expects me to do onusual things.

"You needn't look like you thought I was crazy," I says irritably. "That critter is for Uncle Shadrach Polk."

"If Uncle Shadrach sees that thing," says she, "he'll think he's seein' worse'n snakes."

"That's what I aim for him to think," I says. "Who's he stayin' with?"

"Us," says she.

"Hum!" I says. "That there complicates things a little. Whar-at does he sleep?"

"Upstairs," she says.

"Well," I says, "he won't interfere with our elopement none. You git outa here and go on home, and don't let yore pap suspect nothin'."

"I'd be likely to, wouldn't I?" says she, and clumb down and pulled out.

I'd stopped in a thicket at the aide of the settlement, and I could see the roof of Cousin Buckner's house from where I was. I could also hear Cousin Buckner belling: "Kit! Kit! Whar air you? I know you ain't in the garden. If I have to come huntin' you, I 'low I'll--"

"Aw, keep yore britches on," I heard Kit call. "I'm a-comin'!"

I heard Cousin Buckner subside into grumblings and rumblings like a grizzly talking to hisself. I figgered he was out on the road which run past his house, but I couldn't see him and neither he couldn't see me, nor nobody could which might happen to be passing along the road. I onhitched the mules and tied 'em where they could graze and git water, and I h'isted Joshua outa the wagon, and taken the ropes offa his laigs and tied him to a tree, and fed him and the mules with some corn I'd brung from Cousin Bill Gordon's. Then I went through the bresh till I come to Joel Garfield's stillhouse, which was maybe half a mile from there, up the run. I didn't meet nobody.

Joel was by hisself in the stillhouse, for a wonder, but he was making up for lack of trade by his own personal attention to his stock.

"Ain't Uncle Shadrach Polk nowhere around?" I ast, and Joel lowered a jug of white corn long enough to answer me.

"Naw," he says, "he ain't right now. He's likely still sleepin' off the souse he was on last night. He didn't leave here till after midnight," says Joel, with another pull at the jug, "and he was takin' all sides of the road to onst. He'll pull in about the middle of the afternoon and start in to fillin' his hide so full he can just barely stagger back to Buckner Kirby's house by midnight or past. I bet he has a fine old time navigatin' them stairs Buckner's got into his house. I'd be afear'd to tackle 'em myself, even when I was sober. A pole ladder is all I want to git into a loft with, but Buckner always did have high-falutin' idees. Lately he's been argyin' with Uncle Shadrach to cut down on his drinkin'--specially when he's full hisself."

"Speakin' of Cousin Buckner," I says, "has he been around for his regular dram yet?"

"Not yet," says Joel. "He'll be in right after dinner, as usual."

"He wouldn't if he knowed what I knowed," I opined, because I'd thought up a way to git Cousin Buckner out of the way that night. "He'd be headin' for Wolf Canyon fast as he could spraddle. I just met Harry Braxton with a pack-mule headin' for there."

"You don't mean somebody's made a strike in Wolf Canyon?" says Joel, pricking up his ears.

"You never heard nothin' like it," I assured him. "Alder Gulch warn't nothin' to this."

"Hum!" says Joel, absent-mindedly pouring hisself a quart-size tin cup full of corn juice.

"I'm a Injun if it ain't!" I says, and dranken me a dram and went back to lay in the bresh and watch the Kirby house. I was well pleased with myself, because I knowed what a wolf Cousin Buckner was after gold. If anything could draw him away from home and his daughter, it would be news of a big strike. I was willing to bet my six-shooters against a prickly pear that as soon as Joel told him the news, he'd light out for Wolf Canyon. More especially as he'd think Harry Braxton was going there, too, and no chance of him sneaking off with Kit whilst the old man was gone.

* * * *

AFTER A WHILE I SEEN Cousin Buckner leave the house and go down the road towards the stillhouse, and purty soon Uncle Shadrach emerged and headed the same way. Purty well satisfied with myself, I went back to where I left Cousin Bill's wagon, and fried me five or six pounds of venison I'd brung along for provisions and et it, and drunk at the creek, and then laid down and slept for a few hours.

It was right at sundown when I woke up. I went on foot through the bresh till I come out behind Buckner's cow-pen and seen Kit milking. I ast her if anybody was in the house.

"Nobody but me," she said. "And I'm out here. I ain't seen neither pap nor Uncle Shadrach since they left right after dinner. Can it be yore scheme is actually workin' out?"

"Certainly," I says. "Uncle Shadrach'll be swillin' at Joel's stillhouse till past midnight, and yore pap is ondoubtedly on his way towards Wolf Canyon. You git through with yore chores, and git ready to skip. Don't have no light in yore room, though. It's just likely yore pap told off one of his relatives to lay in the bresh and watch the house--him bein' of a suspicious nater. We don't want to have no bloodshed. When I hear Harry's buckboard I'll come for you. And if you hear any pecooliar noises before he gits here, don't think nothin' of it. It'll just be me luggin' Joshua upstairs."

"That critter'll bray fit to wake the dead," says she.

"He won't, neither," I said. "He'll go to sleep and keep his mouth shet. Uncle Shadrach won't suspect nothin' till he lights him a candle to go to bed by. Or if he's too drunk to light a candle, and just falls down on the bed in the dark, he'll wake up durin' the night some time to git him a drink of water. He's bound to see Joshua some time between midnight and mornin'. All I hope is the shock won't prove fatal. You go git ready to skip now."

I went back to the wagon and cooked me some more venison, also about a dozen aigs Kit had give me along with some corn pone and a gallon of buttermilk. I managed to make a light snack out of them morsels, and then, as soon as it was good and dark, I hitched up the mules and loaded Joshua into the wagon and went slow and easy down the road. I stopped behind the corral and tied the mules.

The house was dark and still. I toted Joshua into the house and carried him upstairs. I heard Kit moving around in her room, but they warn't nobody else in the house.

COUSIN BUCKNER HAD regular stairs in his house like what they have in big towns like War Paint and the like. Most folks in the Bear Creek country just has a ladder going up through a trap-door, and some said they would be a judgment onto Buckner account of him indulging in such vain and sinful luxury, but I got to admit that packing a jackass up a flight of stairs was a lot easier than what it would have been to lug him up a ladder.

Joshua didn't bray nor kick none. He didn't care what was happening to him so long as he didn't have to do no work personal. I onfastened his laigs and tied a rope around his neck and t'other end to the foot of Uncle Shadrach's bunk, and give him a hat I found on a pag to chew on till he went to sleep, which I knowed he'd do pronto.

I then went downstairs and heard Kit fussing around in her room, but it warn't time for Harry, so I went back out behind the corral and sot down and leaned my back agen the fence, and I reckon I must of gone to sleep. Just associating with Joshua give a man the habit. First thing I knowed I heard a buckboard rumbling over a bridge up the draw, and knowed it was Harry coming in fear and trembling to claim his bride. The moon warn't up yet but they was a glow above the trees on the eastern ridges.

I jumped up and ran quick and easy to Kit's winder--I can move light as a cougar in spite of my size--and I said: "Kit, air you ready?"

"I'm ready!" she whispered, all of a tremble. "Don't talk so loud!"

"They ain't nothin' to be scairt of," I soothed her, but lowered my voice just to humor her. "Yore pap is in Wolf Canyon by this time. Ain't nobody in the house but us. I been watchin' out by the corral."

Kit sniffed.

"Warn't that you I heard come into the house while ago?" she ast.

"You been dreamin'," I said. "Come on! That's Harry's buckboard comin' up the road."

"Lemme get just a few more things together!" she whispered, fumbling around in the dark. That's just like a woman. No matter how much time they has aforehand, they always has something to do at the last minute.

I waited by the winder and Harry druv on past the house a few rods and tied the hoss and come back, walking light and soft, and plenty pale in the starlight.

"Go on out the front door and meet him," I told her. "No, wait!"

Because all to onst Harry had ducked back out of the road, and he jumped over the fence and come to the winder where I was. He was shaking like a leaf.

"Somebody comin' up the road afoot!" he says.

"It's pap!" gasped Kit. Her and Harry was shore scairt of the old man. They hadn't said a word above a whisper you could never of heard three yards away, and I was kinda suiting my voice to their'n.

"Aw, it cain't be!" I said. "He's in Wolf Canyon. That's Uncle Shadrach comin' home to sleep off his drunk, but he's back a lot earlier'n what I figgered he would be. He ain't important, but we don't want no delay. Here, Kit, gimme that bag. Now lemme lift you outa the winder. So! Now you all skin out. I'm goin' to climb this here tree whar I can see the fun. Git!"

They crope out the side-gate of the yard just as Uncle Shadrach come in at the front gate, and he never seen 'em because the house was between 'em. They went so soft and easy I thought if Cousin Buckner had been in the house he wouldn't of woke up. They was hustling down the road towards the buckboard as Uncle Shadrach was coming up on the porch and going into the hall. I could hear him climbing the stair. I could of seen him if they'd been a light in the house, because I could look into a winder in his room and one in the downstairs hall, too, from the tree where I was setting.

He got into his room about the time the young folks reached their buckboard, and I seen a light flare up as he struck a match. They warn't no hall upstairs. The stairs run right up to the door of his room. He stood in the doorway and lit a candle on a shelf by the door. I could see Joshua standing by the bunk with his head down, asleep, and I reckon the light must of woke him up, because he throwed up his head and give a loud and ringing bray. Uncle Shadrach turned and seen Joshua and he let out a shriek and fell backwards downstairs.

THE CANDLE LIGHT STREAMED down into the hall, and I got the shock of my life. Because as Uncle Shadrach went pitching down them steps, yelling bloody murder, they sounded a bull's roar below, and out of the room at the foot of the stair come prancing a huge figger waving a shotgun in one hand and pulling on his britches with the other'n. It was Cousin Buckner which I thought was safe in Wolf Canyon! That'd been him which Kit heard come in and go to bed awhile before!

"What's goin' on here?" he roared. "What you doin', Shadrach?"

"Git outa my way!" screamed Uncle Shadrach. "I just seen the devil in the form of a zebra jackass! Lemme outa here!"

He busted out of the house, and jumped the fence and went up the road like a quarter-hoss, and Cousin Buckner run out behind him. The moon was just comin' up, and Kit and Harry was just starting down the road. When she seen her old man irrupt from the house, Kit screeched like a scairt catamount, and Buckner heard her. He whirled and seen the buckboard rattling down the road and he knowed what was happening. He give a beller and let *bam* at 'em with his shotgun, but it was too long a range.

"Whar's my hoss?" he roared, and started for the corral. I knowed if he got astraddle of that derved long-laigged bay gelding of his'n, he'd ride them pore infants down before they'd went ten miles. I jumped down out of the tree and yelled: "Hey, there, Cousin Buckner! Hey, Buck--"

He whirled and shot the tail offa my coonskin cap before he seen who it was.

"What you mean jumpin' down on me like that?" he roared. "What you doin' up that tree? Whar you come from?"

"Never-mind that," I said. "You want to catch Harry Braxton before he gits away with yore gal, don't you? Don't stop to saddle a hoss. I got a light wagon hitched up behind the corral. We can run 'em down easy in that."

"Let's go!" he roared, and in no time at all we was off, him standing up in the bed and cussing and waving his shotgun.

"I'll have his sculp!" he roared. "I'll pickle his heart and feed it to my houn' dawgs! Cain't you go no faster?"

Them dern mules was a lot faster than I'd thought. I didn't dare hold 'em back for fear Buckner would git suspicious, and the first thing I knowed we was overhauling the buckboard foot by foot. Harry's critters warn't much account, and Cousin Bill Gordon's mules was laying their bellies to the ground.

I dunno what Kit thought when she looked back and seen us tearing after 'em, but Harry must of thought I was betraying 'em, otherwise he wouldn't of opened up on me with his six-shooter. But all he done was to knock some splinters out of the wagon and nick my shoulder. The old man would of returned the fire with his shotgun but he was scairt he might hit Kit, and both vehicles was bounding and bouncing along too fast and furious for careful aiming.

All to onst we come to a place where the road forked, and Kit and Harry taken the right-hand turn. I taken the left.

"Are you crazy, you blame fool?" roared Cousin Buckner. "Turn back and take the other road!"

"I cain't!" I responded. "These mules is runnin' away!"

"Yo're a liar!" howled Cousin Buckner. "Quit pourin' leather into them mules, you blasted #S%&@*, and turn back! Turn back, cuss you!" With that he started hammering me in the head with the stock of his shotgun.

WE WAS THUNDERING along a road which run along the rim of a sloping bluff, and when Buckner's shotgun went off accidentally the mules really did git scairt and started running away, just about the time I reached back to take the shotgun away from Cousin Buckner. Being beat in the head with the butt was getting awful monotonous, because he'd been doing nothing else for the past half mile.

I yanked the gun out of his hand and just then the left hind wheel hit a stump and the hind end of the wagon went straight up in the air and the pole splintered. The mules run right out of the harness and me and the wagon and Cousin Buckner went over the bluff and down the slope in a whirling tangle of wheels and laigs and heads and profanity.

We brung up against a tree at the bottom, and I throwed the rooins off of me and riz, swearing fervently when I seen how much money I'd have to pay Cousin Bill Gordon for his wagon. But Cousin Buckner give me no time for meditation. He'd ontangled hissself from a hind wheel and was doing a war-dance in the moonlight and frothing at the mouth.

"You done that on purpose!" he raged. "You never aimed to ketch them wretches! You taken the wrong road on purpose! You turned us over on purpose! Now I'll never ketch the scoundrel which run away with my datter--the pore, dumb, trustin' #S%&f!@* innercent!"

"Be ca'm, Cousin Buckner," I advised. "He'll make her a good husband. They're well onto their way to War Paint and a happy married life. Best thing you can do is forgive 'em and give 'em yore blessin'."

"Well," he snarled, "you ain't neither my datter nor my son-in-law. Here's my blessin' to you!"

It was a pore return for all the trouble I'd taken for him to push me into a cactus bed and hit me with a rock the size of a watermelon. However, I taken into consideration that he was overwrought and not hissself, so I ignored his incivility and made no retort whatever, outside of splintering a wagon spoke over his head.

I then clumb the bluff, making no reply to his impassioned and profane comments, and looked around for the mules. They hadn't run far. I seen 'em grazing down the road, and I started after 'em, when I heard horses galloping back up the road toward the settlement, and around a turn in the road come Uncle Jeppard Grimes with his whiskers streaming in the moonlight, and nine or ten of his boys riding hard behind him.

"Thar he is!" he howled, impulsively discharging his six-shooter at me. "Thar's the fiend in human form! Thar's the kidnaper of helpless jassacks! Boys, do yore duty!"

They pulled up around me and started piling off their horses with blood in their eyes and weppins in their hands.

"Hold on!" I says. "If it's Joshua you fools are after--"

"He admits the crime!" howled Uncle Jeppard. "Is it Joshua, says you! You know dern well it is! We been combin' the hills for you, ever since my gran'datter brought me the news! What you done with him, you scoundrel?"

"Aw," I said, "he's all right. I was just goin' to--"

"He evades the question!" screamed Uncle Jeppard. "Git him, boys!"

"I TELL YOU HE'S ALL right!" I roared, but they give me no chance to explain. Them Grimeses is all alike; you cain't tell 'em nothing. You got to knock it into their fool heads. They descended on me with fence rails and rocks and wagon spokes and loaded quirts and gun stocks in a way which would of tried the patience of a saint. I always try to be as patient with my erring relatives as I can be. I merely taken their weppins away from 'em and kind of pushed 'em back away from me, and if they'd looked where they fell Jim and Joe and Erath wouldn't of fell down that bluff and broke their arms and laigs and Bill wouldn't of fractured his skull agen that tree.

I handled 'em easy as babies, and kept my temper in spite of Uncle Jeppard dancing around on his hoss and yelling: "Lay into him, boys! Don't be scairt of the big grizzly! He cain't hurt us!" and shooting at me every time he thought he could shoot without hitting one of his own offspring. He did puncture two or three of 'em, and then blamed me for it, the old jackass.

Nobody could of acted with more restraint than I did when Dick Grimes broke the blade of his bowie knife off on my hip bone, and the seven fractured ribs I give his brother Jacob was a mild retaliation for chawing my ear like he done. But it was a ill-advised impulse which prompted Esau Grimes to stab me in the seat of the britches with a pitchfork. There ain't nothing which sours the milk of human kindness in a man's veins any more'n getting pitchforked by a raging relative behind his back.

I give a beller which shook the acorns out of the oaks all up and down the run, and whirled on Esau so quick it jerked the pitchfork out of his hands and left it sticking in my hide. I retched back and pulled it out and wrapped the handle around Esau's neck, and then I taken him by the ankles and started remodeling the landscape with him. I mowed down a sapling thicket with him, and leveled a cactus bed with him, and swept the road with him, and when his brothers tried to rescue him, I beat 'em over the head with him till they was too groggy to do anything but run in circles.

Uncle Jeppard come spurring at me, trying to knock me down with his hoss and trample me, and Esau was so limp by this time he warn't much good for a club no more, so I whirled him around my head a few times and threwed him at Uncle Jeppard. Him and Uncle Jeppard and the hoss all went down in a heap together, and from the way Uncle Jeppard hollered you'd of thought somebody was trying to injure him. It was plumb disgusting.

Five or six of his boys recovered enough to surge onto me then, and I knocked 'em all down on top of him and Esau and the hoss, and the hoss was trying to git up, and kicking around right and left, and his hoofs was going *bam, bam, bam* on human heads, and Uncle Jeppard was hollering so loud I got to thinking maybe he was hurt or something. So I retched down in the heap and got him by the whiskers and pulled him out from under the hoss and four or five of his fool boys.

"Air you hurt, Uncle Jeppard?" I inquired.

"#\$%&@*!" responded Uncle Jeppard, rewarding my solicitude by trying to stab me with his bowie knife. This ingratitude irritated me, and I tossed him from me fretfully, and as he was pulling hisself out of the prickley pear bed where he landed, he suddenly give a louder scream than ever. Something come ambling up the road and I seen it was that fool jackass Joshua, which had evidently et his rope and left the house looking for more grub. He looked like a four-laigged nightmare in the moonlight, but all Uncle Jeppard noticed was the red paint on him.

"Halp! Murder!" howled Uncle Jeppard. "They've wounded him mortally! He's bleedin' to death! Git a tourniquet, quick!"

With that they all deserted the fray, them which was able to hobble, and run to grab Joshua and stanch his bleeding. But when he seen all them Grimeses coming for him, Joshua got scairt and took out through the bresh. They all pelted after him, and the last thing I heard as they passed out of hearing was Uncle Jeppard wailing: "Joshua! Stop, dern it! This here's yore friends! Pull up, dang you! We wants to help you, you cussed fool!"

I turned to see what I could do for the casualties which lay groaning in the road and at the foot of the bluff, but they said unanimous they didn't want no help from a enemy--which they meant me. They one and all promised to pickle my heart and eat it as soon as they was able to git about on crutches, so I abandoned my efforts and headed for the settlement.

THE FIGHTING HAD SCAIRT the mules up the road a ways, but I caught 'em and made a hackamore outa one of my galluses, and rode one and led t'other'n, and lit out straight through the bresh for Bear Creek. I'd had a belly-full of Apache Mountain. But I swung past Joel's stillhouse to find out how come Cousin Buckner didn't go to Wolf Canyon. When I got there the stillhouse was dark and the door was shet, and they was a note on the door. I could read a little by then, and I spelt it out. It said:

Gone to Wolf Canyon.

Joel Garfield.

That selfish polecat hadn't told Cousin Buckner nor nobody about the strike. He'd got hisself a pack-mule and lit out for Wolf Canyon hisself. A hell of a relative he was, maybe doing pore Cousin Buckner out of a fortune, for all he knowed.

A mile from the settlement I met Jack Gordon coming from a dance on t'other side of the mountain, and he said he seen Uncle Shadrach Polk fogging down the trail on a mule he was riding bare-back without no bridle, so I thought well, anyway my scheme for scairing him out of a taste for licker worked. Jack said Uncle Shadrach looked like he'd saw a herd of ha'nts.

It was about daylight when I stopped at Bill Gordon's ranch to leave him his mules. I paid him for his wagon and also for the damage Cap'n Kidd had did to his corral. Bill had to build a new one, and Cap'n Kidd had also run his prize stallion offa the ranch, an chawed the ears off of a longhorn bull, and busted into the barn and gobbled up about ten dollars worth of oats. When I lit out for Bear Creek again I warn't feeling in no benevolent mood, but, thinks I, it's worth it if it's made a water-swigger outa Uncle Shadrach.

It was well along toward noon when I pulled up at the door and called for Aunt Tascosa. Jedge my scandalized amazement when I was greeted by a deluge of b'ilin water from the winder and Aunt Tascosa stuck her head out and says: "You buzzard in the form of a human bein! How you got the brass to come bulgin' around here? If I warn't a lady I'd tell you just what I thought of you, you \$#*&?@! Git, before I opens up on you with this here shotgun!"

"Why, Aunt Tascosa, what you talkin' about?" I ast, combing the hot water outa my hair with my fingers.

"You got the nerve to ast!" she sneered. "Didn't you promise me you'd kyore Shadrach of drinkin' rum? Didn't you, hey? Well, come in here and look at him! He arriv home about daylight on one of Buckner Kirby's mules and it about ready to drop, and he's been rasslin' every since with a jug he had hid. I can't git no sense out'n him."

I went in and Uncle Shadrach was setting by the back door and he had hold of that there jug like a

drowning man clutching a straw-stack.

"I'm surprized at you, Uncle Shadrach," I said. "What in the--"

"Shet the door, Breckinridge," he says. "They is more devils onto the earth than is dreamed of in our philosophy. I've had a narrer escape, Breckinridge! I let myself be beguiled by the argyments of Buckner Kirby, a son of Baliol which is without understandin'. He's been rasslin' with me to give up licker. Well, yesterday I got so tired of his argyments I said I'd try it a while, just to have some peace. I never taken a drink all day yesterday, and Breckinridge, I give you my word when I started to go to bed last night I seen a red, white and blue jackass with green ears standin' at the foot of my bunk, just as plain as I sees you now! It war the water that done it, Breckinridge," he says, curling his fist lovingly around the handle of the jug. "Water's a snare and a delusion. I drunk water all day yesterday, and look what it done to me! I don't never want to see no water no more, again."

"Well," I says, losing all patience, "you're a-goin' to, by golly, if I can heave you from here to that hoss-trough in the backyard."

I done it, and that's how come the rumor got started that I tried to drown Uncle Shadrach Polk in a hoss-trough because he refused to swear off licker. Aunt Tascosa was responsible for that there slander, which was a pore way to repay me for all I'd did for her. But people ain't got no gratitude.

THE END

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