



The Scalp Hunter
Howard, Robert Ervin

Published: 1934

Categorie(s): Fiction, Short Stories, Westerns

Source: <http://gutenberg.net.au>

About Howard:

Robert Ervin Howard (January 22, 1906 – June 11, 1936) was a classic American pulp writer of fantasy, horror, historical adventure, boxing, western, and detective fiction. Howard wrote "over three-hundred stories and seven-hundred poems of raw power and unbridled emotion" and is especially noted for his memorable depictions of "a sombre universe of swashbuckling adventure and darkling horror." He is well known for having created — in the pages of the legendary Depression-era pulp magazine *Weird Tales* — the character Conan the Cimmerian, a.k.a. Conan the Barbarian, a literary icon whose pop-culture imprint can be compared to such icons as Tarzan of the Apes, Sherlock Holmes, and James Bond. Between Conan and his other heroes Howard created the genre now known as sword-and-sorcery in the late 1920s and early 1930s, spawning a wide swath of imitators and giving him an influence in the fantasy field rivaled only by J.R.R. Tolkien and Tolkien's similarly inspired creation of the modern genre of High Fantasy. There is no evidence that Tolkien was influenced by the earlier author, however. A full century after his birth, Howard remains a seminal figure, with his best work endlessly reprinted. He has been compared to other American masters of the weird, gloomy, and spectral, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Jack London. Source: Wikipedia

Also available on Feedbooks for Howard:

- *The Hour of the Dragon* (1936)
- *The Phoenix on the Sword* (1932)
- *The Hyborian Age* (1930)
- *Gods of the North* (1934)
- *Beyond the Black River* (1935)
- *People of the Dark* (1932)
- *A Witch Shall be Born* (1934)
- *The Scarlet Citadel* (1933)
- *Black Colossus* (1933)
- *Queen of the Black Coast* (1934)

Copyright: This work is available for countries where copyright is Life+70.

Note: This book is brought to you by Feedbooks
<http://www.feedbooks.com>

Strictly for personal use, do not use this file for commercial purposes.

The reason I am giving the full facts of this here affair is to refute a lot of rumors which is circulating about me. I am sick and tired of these lies about me terrorizing the town of Grizzly Claw and ruining their wagon-yard just for spite and trying to murder all their leading citizens. They is more'n one side to anything. These folks which is going around telling about me knocking the mayor of Grizzly Claw down a flight of steps with a kitchen stove ain't yet added that the mayor was trying to blast me with a sawed-off shotgun. As for saying that all I done was with malice afore-thought—if I was a hot-headed man like some I know, I could easy lose my temper over this here slander, but being shy and retiring by nature, I keeps my dignity and merely remarks that these gossipers is blamed liars, and I will kick the ears off of them if I catch them.

I warn't even going to Grizzly Claw in the first place. I'm kind of particular where I go to. I'd been in the settlements along Wild River for several weeks, tending to my own business, and I was headed for Pistol Mountain, when I seen "Tunk" Willoughby setting on a log at the forks where the trail to Grizzly Claw splits off of the Pistol Mountain road. Tunk ain't got no more sense than the law allows anyway, and now he looked plumb discouraged. He had a mangled ear, a couple of black eyes, and a lump on his head so big his hat wouldn't fit. From time to time he spit out a tooth.

I pulled up Cap'n Kidd and said: "What kind of a brawl have you been into?"

"I been to Grizzly Claw," he said, just like that explained it. But I didn't get the drift, because I hadn't never been to Grizzly Claw.

"That's the meanest town in these mountains," he said. "They ain't got no real law there, but they got a feller which claims to be a officer, and if you so much as spit, he says you bust a law and has got to pay a fine. If you puts up a holler, the citizens comes to his assistance. You see what happened to me. I never found out just what law I was supposed to broke," Tunk said, "but it must of been one they was particular fond of. I give 'em a good fight as long as they confined theirselves to rocks and gun butts, but when they interjuiced fence rails and wagon-tongues into the fray, I give up the ghost."

"What you go there for, anyhow?" I demanded.

"Well," he said, mopping off some dried blood, "I was lookin' for you. Three or four days ago I was in the vicinity of Bear Creek, and yore cousin Jack Gordon told me somethin' to tell you."

Him showing no sign of going on, I said: "Well, what was it?"

"I cain't remember," he said. "That lammin' they gimme in Grizzly Claw has plumb addled my brains. Jack told me to tell you to keep a sharp look-out for somebody, but I cain't remember who, or why. But somebody had did somethin' awful to somebody on Bear Creek—seems like it was yore Uncle Jeppard Grimes."

"But why did you go to Grizzly Claw?" I demanded. "I warn't there."

"I dunno," he said. "Seems like the feller which Jack wanted you to get was from Grizzly Claw, or was supposed to go there, or somethin'."

"A great help you be!" I said in disgust. "Here somebody has went and wronged one of my kinfolks, maybe, and you forgets the details. Try to remember the name of the feller, anyway. If I knew who he was, I could lay him out, and then find out what he did later on. Think, can't you?"

"Did you ever have a wagon-tongue busted over yore head?" he said. "I tell you, it's just right recent that I remembered my own name. It was all I could do to rekernize you just now. If you'll come back in a couple of days, maybe by then I'll remember what all Jack told me."

I give a snort of disgust and turned off the road and headed up the trail for Grizzly Claw. I thought maybe I could learn something there. If somebody had done dirt to Uncle Jeppard, I wanted to know it. Us Bear Creek folks may fight amongst ourselves, but we stands for no stranger to impose on any one of us. Uncle Jeppard was about as old as the Humbolt Mountains, and he'd fit Indians for a living in his younger days. He was still a tough old knot. Anybody that could do him a wrong and get away with it, sure wasn't no ordinary man, so it wasn't no wonder that word had been sent out for me to get on his trail. And now I hadn't no idea who to look for, or why, just because of Tunk Willoughby's weak skull. I despise these here egg-headed weaklings.

WELL, I ARROVE IN GRIZZLY Claw late in the afternoon and went first to the wagon-yard and seen that Cap'n Kidd was put in a good stall and fed proper, and warned the fellow there to keep away from him if he didn't want his brains kicked out. Cap'n Kidd has a disposition like a shark and he don't like strangers. It warn't much of a wagon-yard, and there was only five other horses there, besides me and Cap'n Kidd—a pinto, bay, and piebald, and a couple of pack-horses.

I then went back into the business part of the village, which was one dusty street with stores and saloons on each side, and I didn't pay much attention to the town, because I was trying to figure out how I could go about trying to find out what I wanted to know, and couldn't think of no questions to ask nobody about nothing.

Well, I was approaching a saloon called the Apache Queen, and was looking at the ground in meditation, when I seen a silver dollar laying in the dust close to a hitching rack. I immediately stooped down and picked it up, not noticing how close it was to the hind laigs of a mean-looking mule. When I stooped over he hauled off and kicked me in the head. Then he let out a awful bray and commenced jumping around holding up his hind hoof, and some men come running out of the saloon, and one of 'em hollered: "He's tryin' to kill my mule! Call the law!"

Quite a crowd gathered and the feller which owned the mule hollered like a catamount. He was a mean-looking cuss with mournful whiskers and a cock-eye. He yelled like somebody was stabbing him, and I couldn't get in a word edge-ways. Then a feller with a long skinny neck and two guns come up and said: "I'm the sheriff, what's goin' on here? Who is this big feller? What's he done?"

The whiskered cuss hollered: "He kicked hissself in the head with my mule and crippled the pore critter for life! I demands my rights! He's got to pay me three hundred and fifty dollars for my mule!"

"Aw," I said, "that mule ain't hurt none; his leg's just kinda numbed. Anyway, I ain't got but five bucks, and whoever gets them will take 'em offa my dead body." I then hitched my six-guns forwards, and the crowd kinda fell away.

"I demands that you 'rest him!" howled Drooping-whiskers. "He tried to 'sassinate my mule!"

"You ain't got no star," I told the feller which said he was the law. "You ain't goin' to arrest me."

"Does you dast resist arrest?" he said, fidgeting with his belt.

"Who said anything about resistin' arrest?" I retorted. "All I aim to do is see how far your neck will stretch before it breaks."

"Don't you dast lay hands on a officer of the law!" he squawked, backing away in a hurry.

I was tired of talking and thirsty, so I merely give a snort and turned away through the crowd towards a saloon pushing 'em right and left out of my way. I saw 'em gang up in the street, talking low and mean, but I give no heed.

They wasn't nobody in the saloon except the barman and a gangling cowpuncher which had draped hissself over the bar. I ordered whiskey and when I had drank a few fingers of the rottenest muck I believe I ever tasted, I give it up in disgust and throwed the dollar on the bar which I had found, and was starting out when the barkeeper hollered:

"Hey!"

I turned around and said courteously: "Don't you yell at me like that, you bat-eared buzzard! What you want?"

"This here dollar ain't no good!" he said, banging it on the bar.

"Well, neither is your whiskey," I snarled, because I was getting mad. "So that makes us even!"

I am a long-suffering man but it looked like everybody in Grizzly Claw was out to gyp the stranger in their midst.

"You can't run no blazer over me!" he hollered. "You gimme a real dollar, or else—"

He ducked down behind the bar and come up with a shotgun so I taken it away from him and bent the barrel double across my knee and threwed it after him as he run out the back door hollering help, murder.

The cowpuncher had picked up the dollar and bit on it, and then he looked at me very sharp, and said: "Where did you get this?"

"I found it, if it's any of your dern business," I snapped, because I was mad. Saying no more I strode out the door, and the minute I hit the street somebody let bam! at me from behind a rain-barrel across the street and shot my hat off. So I slammed a bullet back through the barrel and the feller hollered and fell out in the open yelling blue murder. It was the feller which called hisself the sheriff and he was drilled through the hind laig. I noticed a lot of heads sticking up over window sills and around doors, so I roared: "Let that be a warnin' to you Grizzly Claw coyotes! I'm Breckinridge Elkins from Bear Creek up in the Humbolts, and I shoot better in my sleep than most men does wide awake!"

I then lent emphasis to my remarks by punctuating a few signboards and knocking out a few winder panes and everybody hollered and ducked. So I shoved my guns back in their scabbards and went into a restaurant. The citizens come out from their hiding-places and carried off my victim, and he made more noise over a broke laig than I thought was possible for a grown man.

There was some folks in the restaurant but they stampeded out the back door as I come in at the front, all except the cook which tried to take refuge somewhere else.

"Come outa there and fry me some bacon!" I commanded, kicking a few slats out of the counter to add point to my request. It disgusts me to see a grown man trying to hide under a stove. I am a very patient and good-natured human, but Grizzly Claw was getting under my hide. So the cook come out and fried me a mess of bacon and ham and aigs and pertaters and sourdough bread and beans and coffee, and I et three cans

of cling peaches. Nobody come into the restaurant whilst I was eating but I thought I heard somebody sneaking around outside.

When I got through I asked the feller how much and he told me, and I planked down the cash, and he commenced to bite it. This lack of faith in his feller humans enraged me, so I drewed my bowie knife and said: "They is a limit to any man's patience! I been insulted once tonight and that's enough! You just dast say that coin's phoney and I'll slice off your whiskers plumb at the roots!"

I brandished my bowie under his nose, and he hollered and stam-peded back into the stove and upsot it and fell over it, and the coals went down the back of his shirt, so he riz up and run for the creek yelling bloody murder. And that's how the story started that I tried to burn a cook alive, Indian-style, because he fried my bacon too crisp. Matter of fact, I kept his shack from catching fire and burning down, because I stomped out the coals before they did more'n burn a big hole through the floor, and I throwed the stove out the back door.

It ain't my fault if the mayor of Grizzly Claw was sneaking up the back steps with a shotgun just at that moment. Anyway, I hear he was able to walk with a couple of crutches after a few months.

I emerged suddenly from the front door, hearing a suspicious noise, and I seen a feller crouching close to a side window peeking through a hole in the wall. It was the cowboy I seen in the Apache Queen saloon. He whirled when I come out, but I had him covered.

"Are you spyin' on me?" I demanded. "Cause if you are—"

"No, no!" he said in a hurry. "I was just leanin' up against that wall restin'."

"You Grizzly Claw folks is all crazy," I said disgustedly, and looked around to see if anybody else tried to shoot me, but there warn't nobody in sight, which was suspicious, but I give no heed. It was dark by that time so I went to the wagon-yard, and there wasn't nobody there. I guess the man which run it was off somewheres drunk, because that seemed to be the main occupation of most of them Grizzly Claw devils.

THE ONLY PLACE FOR folks to sleep was a kind of double log-cabin. That is, it had two rooms, but there warn't no door between 'em; and in each room there wasn't nothing but a fireplace and a bunk, and just one outer door. I seen Cap'n Kidd was fixed for the night, and then I went in-to the cabin and brought in my saddle and bridle and saddle blanket because I didn't trust the people thereabouts. I took off my boots and hat and hung 'em on the wall, and hung my guns and bowie on the end of

the bunk, and then spread my saddle-blanket on the bunk and laid down glumly.

I dunno why they don't build them dern things for ordinary sized humans. A man six and a half foot tall like me can't never find one comfortable for him. I laid there and was disgusted at the bunk, and at myself too, because I hadn't accomplished nothing. I hadn't learnt who it was done something to Uncle Jeppard, or what he done. It looked like I'd have to go clean to Bear Creek to find out, and that was a good four days ride.

Well, as I contemplated I heard a man come into the wagon-yard, and purty soon I heard him approach the cabin, but I thought nothing of it. Then the door begun to open, and I riz up with a gun in each hand and said: "Who's there? Make yourself knowed before I blasts you down!"

Whoever it was mumbled some excuse about being on the wrong side, and the door closed. But the voice sounded kind of familiar, and the fellow didn't go into the other room. I heard his footsteps sneaking off, and I riz and went to the door, and looked over toward the row of stalls. So purty soon a man led the pinto out of his stall, and swung aboard him and rode off. It was purty dark, but if us folks on Bear Creek didn't have eyes like a hawk, we'd never live to get grown. I seen it was the cowboy I'd seen in the Apache Queen and outside the restaurant. Once he got clear of the wagon-yard, he slapped in the spurs and went racing through the village like they was a red war-party on his trail. I could hear the beat of his horse's hoofs fading south down the rocky trail after he was out of sight.

I knowed he must of follered me to the wagon-yard, but I couldn't make no sense out of it, so I went and laid down on the bunk again. I was just about to go to sleep, when I was woke by the sounds of somebody coming into the other room of the cabin, and I heard somebody strike a match. The bunk was built against the partition wall, so they was only a few feet from me, though with the log wall between us.

They was two of them, from the sounds of their talking.

"I tell you," one of them was saying, "I don't like his looks. I don't believe he's what he pertends to be. We better take no chances, and clear out. After all, we can't stay here forever. These people are beginnin' to git suspicious, and if they find out for shore, they'll be demandin' a cut in the profits, to protect us. The stuff's all packed and ready to jump at a second's notice. Let's run for it tonight. It's a wonder nobody ain't never stumbled on to that hide-out before now."

"Aw," said the other'n, "these Grizzly Claw yaps don't do nothin' but swill licker and gamble and think up swindles to work on such strangers as is unlucky enough to wander in here. They never go into the hills southwest of the village where our cave is. Most of 'em don't even know there's a path past that big rock to the west."

"Well, Bill," said t'other'n, "we've done purty well, countin' that job up in the Bear Creek country."

At that I was wide awake and listening with both ears.

Bill laughed. "That was kind of funny, warn't it, Jim?" he said.

"You ain't never told me the particulars," said Jim. "Did you have any trouble?"

"Well," said Bill. "T'warn't to say easy. That old Jeppard Grimes was a hard old nut. If all Injun fighters was like him, I feel plumb sorry for the Injuns."

"If any of them Bear Creek devils ever catch you—" begun Jim.

Bill laughed again.

"Them hill-billies never strays more'n ten miles from Bear Creek," he said. "I had the sculp and was gone before they knowed what was up. I've collected bounties for wolves and b'ars, but that's the first time I ever got money for a human sculp!"

A icy chill run down my spine. Now I knowed what had happened to poor old Uncle Jeppard! Scalped! After all the Indian scalps he'd lifted! And them cold-blooded murderers could set there and talk about it, like it was the ears of a coyote or a rabbit!

"I told him he'd had the use of that sculp long enough," Bill was saying. "A old cuss like him—"

I waited for no more. Everything was red around me. I didn't stop for my boots, gun nor nothing, I was too crazy mad even to know such things existed. I riz up from that bunk and put my head down and rammed that partition wall like a bull going through a rail fence.

THE DRIED MUD POURED out of the chinks and some of the logs give way, and a howl went up from the other side.

"What's that?" hollered one, and t'other'n yelled: "Look out! It's a b'ar!"

I drew back and rammed the wall again. It caved inwards and I come headlong through it in a shower of dry mud and splinters, and somebody shot at me and missed. They was a lighted lantern setting on a hand-hewn table, and two men about six feet tall each that hollered and let bam at me with their six-shooters. But they was too dumfounded to shoot straight. I gathered 'em to my bosom and we went backwards over

the table, taking it and the lantern with us, and you ought to of heard them critters howl when the burning ile splashed down their necks.

It was a dirt floor so nothing caught on fire, and we was fighting in the dark, and they was hollering: "Help! Murder! We are bein' 'sassinated! Release go my ear!" And then one of 'em got his boot heel wedged in my mouth, and whilst I was twisting it out with one hand, the other'n tore out of his shirt which I was gripping with t'other hand, and run out the door. I had hold of the other feller's foot and commenced trying to twist it off, when he wrenched his laig outa the boot, and took it on the run. When I started to foller him I fell over the table in the dark and got all tangled up in it.

I broke off a leg for a club and rushed to the door, and just as I got to it a whole mob of folks come surging into the wagon-yard with torches and guns and dogs and a rope, and they hollered: "There he is, the murderer, the outlaw, the counterfeiter, the house-burner, the mule-killer!"

I seen the man that owned the mule, and the restaurant feller, and the barkeeper and a lot of others. They come roaring and bellering up to the door, hollering, "Hang him! Hang him! String the murderer up!" And they begun shooting at me, so I fell amongst 'em with my table-leg and laid right and left till it busted. They was packed so close together I laid out three and four at a lick and they hollered something awful. The torches was all knocked down and trompled out except them which was held by fellers which danced around on the edge of the mill, hollering: "Lay hold on him! Don't be scared of the big hill-billy! Shoot him! Knock him in the head!" The dogs having more sense than the men, they all run off except one big mongrel that looked like a wolf, and he bit the mob often'er he did me.

They was a lot of wild shooting and men hollering: "Oh, I'm shot! I'm kilt! I'm dyin'!" and some of them bullets burnt my hide they come so close, and the flashes singed my eye-lashes, and somebody broke a knife against my belt buckle. Then I seen the torches was all gone except one, and my club was broke, so I bust right through the mob, swinging right and left with my fists and stomping on them that tried to drag me down. I got clear of everybody except the man with the torch who was so excited he was jumping up and down trying to shoot me without cocking his gun. That blame dog was snapping at my heels, so I swung him by the tail and hit the man over the head with him. They went down in a heap and the torch went out, and the dog clamped on the feller's ear and he let out a squall like a steam-whistle.

They was milling in the dark behind me, and I run straight to Cap'n Kidd's stall and jumped on him bareback with nothing but a hackamore on him. Just as the mob located where I went, we come storming out of the stall like a hurricane and knocked some of 'em galley-west and run over some more, and headed for the gate. Somebody shut the gate but Cap'n Kidd took it in his stride, and we was gone into the darkness before they knowed what hit them.

Cap'n Kidd decided then was a good time to run away, like he usually does, so he took to the hills and run through bushes and clumps of trees trying to scrape me off on the branches. When I finally pulled him up he was maybe a mile south of the village, with Cap'n Kidd no bridle nor saddle nor blanket, and me with no guns, knife, boots nor hat. And what was worse, them devils which scalped Uncle Jeppard had got away from me, and I didn't know where to look for 'em.

I SET MEDITATING WHETHER to go back and fight the whole town of Grizzly Claw for my boots and guns, or what to do, when all at once I remembered what Bill and Jim had said about a cave and a path running to it. I thought: I bet them fellers will go back and get their horses and pull out, just like they was planning, and they had stuff in the cave, so that's the place to look for 'em. I hoped they hadn't already got the stuff, whatever it was, and gone.

I knowed where that rock was, because I'd seen it when I come into town that afternoon—a big rock that jutted up above the trees about a mile to the west of Grizzly Claw. So I started out through the brush, and before long I seen it looming up against the stars, and I made straight for it. Sure enough, there was a narrow trail winding around the base and leading off to the southwest. I follered it, and when I'd went nearly a mile, I come to a steep mountain-side, all clustered with brush.

When I seen that I slipped off and led Cap'n Kidd off the trail and tied him back amongst the trees. Then I crope up to the cave which was purty well masked with bushes. I listened, but everything was dark and still, but all at once, away down the trail, I heard a burst of shots, and what sounded like a lot of horses running. Then everything was still again, and I quick ducked into the cave, and struck a match.

There was a narrer entrance that broadened out after a few feet, and the cave run straight like a tunnel for maybe thirty steps, about fifteen foot wide, and then it made a bend. After that it widened out and got to be purty big—fifty feet wide at least, and I couldn't tell how far back into the mountain it run. To the left the wall was very broken and notched with ledges, might nigh like stair-steps, and when the match went out,

away up above me I seen some stars which meant that there was a cleft in the wall or roof away up on the mountain somewheres.

Before the match went out, I seen a lot of junk over in a corner covered up with a tarpaulin, and when I was fixing to strike another match I heard men coming up the trail outside. So I quick clumb up the broken wall and laid on a ledge about ten feet up and listened.

From the sounds as they arriv at the cave mouth, I knowed it was two men on foot, running hard and panting loud. They rushed into the cave and made the turn, and I heard 'em fumbling around. Then a light flared up and I seen a lantern being lit and hung up on a spur of rock.

In the light I seen them two murderers, Bill and Jim, and they looked plumb delapidated. Bill didn't have no shirt on and the other'n was wearing just one boot and limped. Bill didn't have no gun in his belt neither, and both was mauled and bruised, and scratched, too, like they'd been running through briars.

"Look here," said Jim, holding his head which had a welt on it which was likely made by my fist. "I ain't certain in my mind as to just what all has happened. Somebody must of hit me with a club some time tonight, and things is happened too fast for my addled wits. Seems like we been fightin' and runnin' all night. Listen, was we settin' in the wagon-yard shack talkin' peaceable, and did a grizzly b'ar bust through the wall and nigh slaughter us?"

"That's plumb correct," said Bill. "Only it warn't no b'ar. It was some kind of a human critter—maybe a escaped maneyack. We ought to of stopped for our horses—"

"I warn't thinkin' 'bout no horses," broke in Jim. "When I found myself outside that shack my only thought was to cover ground, and I done my best, considerin' that I'd lost a boot and that critter had nigh unhinged my hind laig. I'd lost you in the dark, so I made for the cave, knowin' you would come there eventually, and it seemed like I was forever gettin' through the woods, crippled like I was. I'd no more'n hit the path when you come up it on the run."

"Well," said Bill, "as I went over the wagon-yard wall a lot of people come whoopin' through the gate, and I thought they was after us, but they must of been after the feller we fought, because as I run I seen him layin' into 'em right and left. After I'd got over my panic, I went back after our horses, but I run right into a gang of men on horseback, and one of 'em was that durned feller which passed hisself off as a cowboy. I didn't need no more. I took out through the woods as hard as I could pelt, and they hollered. 'There he goes!' and come hot-foot after me."

"And was them the fellers I shot at back down the trail?" asked Jim.

"Yeah," said Bill. "I thought I'd shook 'em off, but just as I seen you on the path, I heard horses comin' behind us, so I hollered to let 'em have it, and you did."

"Well, I didn't know who it was," said Jim. "I tell you, my head's buzzin' like a circle-saw."

"Well," said Bill, "we stopped 'em and scattered 'em. I dunno if you hit anybody in the dark, but they'll be mighty cautious about comin' up the trail. Let's clear out."

"On foot?" said Jim. "And me with just one boot?"

"How else?" said Bill. "We'll have to hoof it till we can steal us some broncs. We'll have to leave all this stuff here. We daren't go back to Grizzly Claw after our horses. I told you that durned cowboy would do to watch. He ain't no cowpoke at all. He's a blame detective."

"What's that?" broke in Jim.

"Horses' hoofs!" exclaimed Bill, turning pale. "Here, blow out that lantern! We'll climb the ledges and get out of the cleft, and take out over the mountain where they can't foller with horses, and then—"

IT WAS AT THAT INSTANT that I launched myself offa the ledge on top of 'em. I landed with all my two hundred and ninety pounds square on Jim's shoulders and when he hit the ground under me he kind of spread out like a toad when you step on him. Bill give a scream of astonishment and when I riz and come for him, he tore off a hunk of rock about the size of a man's head and lammed me over the ear with it. This irritated me, so I taken him by the neck, and also taken away a knife which he was trying to hamstring me with, and begun sweeping the floor with his carcass.

Presently I paused and kneeling on him, I strangled him till his tongue lolled out, betwixt times hammering his head against the rocky floor.

"You murderin' devil!" I gritted between my teeth. "Before I varnish this here rock with your brains, tell me why you taken my Uncle Jeppard's scalp!"

"Let up!" he gurgled, being purple in the face where he warn't bloody. "They was a dude travelin' through the country and collectin' souvenirs, and he heard about that sculp and wanted it. He hired me to go git it for him."

I was so shocked at that cold-bloodedness that I forgot what I was doing and choked him nigh to death before I remembered to ease up on him.

"Who was he?" I demanded. "Who is the skunk which hires old men murdered so's he can collect their scalps? My God, these Eastern dudes is worse'n Apaches! Hurry up and tell me, so I can finish killin' you."

But he was unconscious; I'd squoze him too hard. I riz up and looked around for some water or whiskey or something to bring him to so he could tell who hired him to scalp Uncle Jeppard, before I twisted his head off, which was my earnest intention of doing, when somebody said: "Han's up!"

I whirled and there at the crook of the cave stood that cowboy which had spied on me in Grizzly Claw, with ten other men. They all had their Winchesters p'inted at me, and the cowboy had a star on his buzum.

"Don't move!" he said. "I'm a Federal detective, and I arrest you for manufactorin' counterfeit money."

"What you mean?" I snarled, backing up to the wall.

"You know," he said, kicking the tarpaulin off the junk in the corner. "Look here, men! All the stamps and dyes he used to make phoney coins and bills! All packed up, ready to light out. I been hangin' around Grizzly Claw for days, knowin' that whoever was passin' this stuff made his, or their, headquarters here somewheres. Today I spotted that dollar you give the barkeep, and I went pronto for my men which was camped back in the hills a few miles. I thought you was settled in the wagon-yard for the night, but it seems you give us the slip. Put the cuffs on him, men!"

"No, you don't!" I snarled, bounding back. "Not till I've finished these devils on the floor. I dunno what you're talkin' about, but—"

"Here's a couple of corpses!" hollered one of the men. "He kilt a couple of fellers!"

One of them stooped over Bill, but he had recovered his senses, and now he riz up on his elbows and give a howl. "Save me!" he bellered. "I confesses! I'm a counterfeiter, and so is Jim there on the floor! We surrenders, and you got to perfect us!"

"YOU'RE THE COUNTERFEITERS?" said the detective, took aback as it were. "Why, I was follerin' this giant! I seen him pass fake money myself. We got to the wagon-yard awhile after he'd run off, but we seen him duck in the woods not far from there, and we been chasin' him. He opened fire on us down the trail while ago—"

"That was us," said Bill. "It was me you was chasin'. He musta found that money, if he had fake stuff. I tell you, we're the men you're after, and you got to perfect us! I demands to be put in the strongest jail in this state, which even this here devil can't bust into!"

"And he ain't no counterfeiter?" said the detective.

"He ain't nothin' but a man-eater," said Bill. "Arrest us and take us out of his reach."

"No!" I roared, clean beside myself. "They belongs to me! They scalped my uncle! Give 'em knives or gun or somethin' and let us fight it out."

"Can't do that," said the detective. "They're Federal prisoners. If you got any charge against them, they'll have to be indicted in the proper form."

His men hauled 'em up and handcuffed 'em and started to lead 'em out.

"Blast your souls!" I raved. "Does you mean to perfect a couple of dirty scalpers? I'll—"

I started for 'em and they all p'inted their Winchesters at me.

"Keep back!" said the detective. "I'm grateful for you leadin' us to this den, and layin' out these criminals for us, but I don't hanker after no battle in a cave with a human grizzly like you."

Well, what could a feller do?

If I'd had my guns, or even my knife, I'd of taken a chance with the whole eleven, officers or not, I was that crazy mad. But even I can't fight eleven .45-90's with my bare hands. I stood speechless with rage whilst they filed out, and then I went for Cap'n Kidd in a kind of a daze. I felt wuss'n a horse-thief. Them fellers would be put in the pen safe out of my reach, and Uncle Jeppard's scalp was unavenged! It was awful. I felt like bawling.

Time I got my horse back onto the trail, the posse with their prisoners was out of sight and hearing. I seen the only thing to do was to go back to Grizzly Claw and get my outfit, and then foller the posse and try to take their prisoners away from 'em someway.

Well, the wagon-yard was dark and still. The wounded had been carried away to have their injuries bandaged, and from the groaning that was still coming from the shacks and cabins along the street, the casualties had been plenteous. The citizens of Grizzly Claw must have been shook up something terrible, because they hadn't even stole my guns and saddle and things yet; everything was in the cabin just like I'd left 'em.

I put on my boots, hat and belt, saddled and bridled Cap'n Kidd and sot out on the road I knowed the posse had taken. But they had a long start on me, and when daylight come I hadn't overtook 'em. But I did meet somebody else. It was Tunk Willoughby riding up the trail, and when he seen me he grinned all over his battered features.

"Hey, Breck!" he said. "After you left I sot on that log and thunk, and thunk, and I finally remembered what Jack Gordon told me, and I started out to find you again and tell you. It was this: he said to keep a close lookout for a fellow from Grizzly Claw named Bill Jackson, which had gypped yore Uncle Jeppard in a deal."

"What?" I said.

"Yeah," said Tunk. "He bought somethin' from Jeppard and paid him in counterfeit money. Jeppard didn't know it was phoney till after the feller had plumb got away," said Tunk, "and bein' as he was too busy dryin' some b'ar meat to go after him, he sent word for you to git him."

"But the scalp—" I said wildly.

"Oh," said Tunk, "that was what Jeppard sold the feller. It was the scalp Jeppard took offa old Yeller Eagle the Comanche war-chief forty years ago, and been keepin' for a souvenear. Seems like a Eastern dude heard about it and wanted to buy it, but this Jackson must of kept the money he give him to git it with, and give Jeppard phoney cash. So you see everything's all right, even if I did forget a little, and no harm did—"

And that's why Tunk Willoughby is going around saying I am a homicidal maneyack, and run him five miles down a mountain and tried to kill him—which is a exaggeration, of course. I wouldn't of kilt him if I could of caught him. I would merely of raised a few knots on his head and tied his hind laigs in a bow-knot around his fool neck and done a few other little things that might of improved his memory.

Loved this book ?
Similar users also downloaded

Robert Ervin Howard

Sharp's Gun Serenade

Robert Ervin Howard

The Hyena

Robert Ervin Howard

The Daughter of Erlik Khan

Robert Ervin Howard

Son Of The White Wolf

Robert Ervin Howard

Cupid From Bear Creek

Robert Ervin Howard

Evil Deeds at Red Cougar

Robert Ervin Howard

Champ of the Forecastle

Robert Ervin Howard

High Horse Rampage

Robert Ervin Howard

The Riot at Cougar Paw

Robert Ervin Howard

Texas John Alden



www.feedbooks.com
Food for the mind