

TIGER EYE

BY E. M. BOWER

THIRD INSTALLMENT

The kid's name was Bob Reeves, but back home on the Brazos they called him Tiger Eye, because one eye was yellow—the eye with which he sighted down a gun-barrel. His other eye didn't want to kill. If he stayed home he would have to carry on his father's feud, so he headed his horse, Pecos, northward and encountered Nate Wheeler, who drew his A5 and fired just as Tiger Eye did. The kid didn't want to kill Nate, only to cripple him, but his aim must have been wild, for Wheeler dropped from his horse. Babe Garner came riding up. Wheeler was a "nester," he said, and had it coming to him. Tiger Eye rode to Wheeler's cabin to notify the dead man's widow.

The kid breaks the news of Nate's death to his widow and then goes out and brings in his body, discovering that he had not missed his shot to disable Wheeler but had broken his arm, while another shot had killed the man. A gang of strangers rides up. One of them insults Mrs. Wheeler by coupling her name with the stranger. The kid gets a hole in each of the ears of Gorham, who hurled the insult, making his escape in the confusion. He lays in wait for the party and finally sees the men drive off with Wheeler's widow and child. He trails them quietly.

He followed the wagon to Becker's ranch and saw the men gathered there, and knowing the signal, he softly whistled the first two bars of "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," and so got by the man on guard at the gate. The room would not hold all the men gathered there, and some stood outside in the dark and talked and smoked. Drank, too, from bottles that went from hand to hand until they were emptied and thrown away.

The kid did not talk. He kept his mouth shut and his ears open, like old Killer Reeves always had advised. When the gathering showed signs of breaking up, he melted into the shadows so quietly he never was missed, and presently he rode past the unsuspecting guard at the gate and went his way.

The kid-unsaddled Pecos, rubbed him dry and went whistling up the path to the cabin. It was warm and reeked with the smell of coal oil fumes and stale cigarette smoke. Babe's paper novel lay open, face down on the table, only two or three pages left unread at the back.

"I damn near saddled up and took out after yuh, Tiger Eye," he said querulously. "These are shore bad times to be ridin' around alone. Nester see yuh—well, you oughta know."

"Shoah do, Babe."

"Have 'any trouble? If it's a fair question."

"Not to call trouble. Trailed some nesters to Sam Becker's ranch. Had a meetin' theah. Right smart gatherin'." They aim to call the Pecos men into a trap. Some talk of drivin' cattle into Oxbow Bend. Pecos men'll go theah and half the Pecos will be cached in the pass.

"Yeah?" Babe looked startled. "Say, that might've drawn the Pecos riders out, at that, if they didn't know it was a frame-up. We been watchin' our chance to get 'em in the set, the damn' cow thieves! Say, you got no call to take a chance like that," Babe frowned as the kid's exploit recurred to him. "F'y they'd caught yuh there, they'd 'a' strung yuh up in a holy minute. Don't yuh take another chance like that, Tiger Eye."

The kid did not say anything to that.

"Say, you goin' to promise me yuh won't take no more chances like that?" Babe pressed the point. "You got something more under your hat than what you told me. Damn you, Tiger Eye, what more you been doin' tonight?"

The kid turned and looked long at Babe over his cup. His yellow eye was curiously softened.

"I been hearin' talk about Nate Wheeler," he said finally, and blinked when he saw how Babe failed to repress a start. "I been findin' out I didn't shoot so wide. I aimed to hit his gun arm down, and that arm shoah was hit, just like I aimed it would be."

"Yeah?" Babe's eyes took on a hard, watchful look.

"I heahd mgn say it was a rifle bullet hit him in the haid," the kid drawled softly. "I reckon yo'all thought he was goin' to shoot me. I shoah am much obleeged to yo'all, Babe."

Babe Garner stared, then laughed shortly and turned away.

"Yo're welcome, Tiger Eye." He turned and began thumping pillows with savage energy. "Which side the bed you want? Me, I like to lay on the edge, where I can roll out quick."

"Just lay wheah yo'all feels the best, Babe," grinned the kid, swallow-

ing the last of the coffee. "I'm sleep'n sound tonight, no mattah wheah I lay my haid."

The kid was scouting along the rim of the Big Bench a day or two later, playing his mouth organ as he rode. Softly, because yo'all had had to be mighty careful nobody down in the valley noticed and took a long shot at you, just for luck. But shucks! Yo'all couldn't hear that mouth organ any farther'n you could flip a rock with your thumb and finger.

Bad country up this way. Nice country, but plumb full of 'ornery no-account cow thieves that wouldn't wait to see if a fellow was all right but would holler, "Draw, you coyote!" and come a-shooting, plumb crazy like.

Punny, though. If Nate Wheeler hadn't come riding and shooting that a-way, the kid wouldn't have met up with Babe Garner. It shoah was worth riding all the way up from Texas to Montana, just to meet up with a fellow as nice and friendly as Babe Garner was.

Shoah was a snaky kinda country, though. The kid didn't know just all the ins and outs of the fuss. The way Babe told it, cow thieves, that let on like they were nesters, had banded together to wipe out the Poole, which was a big

field, minding their manners but wanting to see it all. Something mighty strange, though. And then the kid knew what it was. There weren't any women at that funeral. Nate Wheeler had a wife and baby, but they weren't there, either. Just men, not dressed up in their Sunday clothes, but wearing colored shirts and overalls. Not shaved, either. Looked like they had just stopped by from their work. Plenty of guns, though, and belts full of shells.

The kid stared for two seconds longer and tok the field glasses from his eyes.

Instantly that grim gathering in the coulee receded into the slight movement of vague dots three miles and more away. The scene was gone, wiped out by the distance. Instead, the kid was staring down off the hill at a wagon that came rattling down a long slope directly toward him. The driver was standing up, lashing the horses into a run, with the long ends of the lines which he swung like a flail upon their backs. The wagon was jouncing along over hummocks and a woman with her bonnet off, and her hair flying straight out behind her like the tail of a running horse, was hanging to the seat like grim death.

A man on horseback came tearing

"When I plugged them cabs," he drawled contemptuously. "I shoah thought yo'all was just plumb skunk. I wint I'd known then yo'all was half skunk and half Sidewinder!"

Old man, all right. Her old pappy, shot without a chance in the world to help himself. Didn't even have a k'n on him. Old farmer, by the look of him. Bald-headed and little and old.

The kid investigated his head injury. Didn't seem to be any crack in the skull, but still you couldn't tell, with an old man like him. The kid got up and looked in the wagon. A sack of flour was there, and a box of groceries, all jumbled together, and a demijohn tyns on its side. The kid hoped it held whisky, and reached a long arm for it. Shoah enough—old pappy liked his eye opener when he got up in the morning, and was taking home a jugful. The kid gave him an eye opener now, holding the old mah's head up and tilting the jug to the ashly lips pinched in together in the long beard. Then he poured a little in his palm and rubbed it on the blue lump in the thin gray hair, and after that he trickled a pungent little stream on the bullet wound, front and back. The man's faded blue eyes opened and he stared vaguely up into the kid's face.

"Reckon yo'all reelin' some bettah, suh," the kid said shyly. "Right smaht crack on the haid, but the whisky'll keep down the swellin'." And when the old eyes still questioned, the kid offered further encouragement. Bullet dug its't a trail in yo'all's side, but it ain't deep, no how."

The old man opened his mouth and moved his jaw uncertainly, trying to speak. His eyes never left the kid's face.

"Where's Nellie?" The old man was still dazed, but at least he could speak once more. The kid gave a sigh of relief.

"Why, suh, she—" he turned and looked back toward the hill "—she's comin'. She'll be heah directly, suh."

The drink revived the old man a little, but he seemed to have only a vague idea of what had taken place.

"Team run away," he mumbled. "Threwed me out. Where's Nellie? She was in the wagon when the team run away."

She came, her long yellow hair pulled forward over her left shoulder. Her face was pale and her mouth drooped at the corners, and her eyes were glassy with terror, but the kid thought she was beautiful and he blushed a dark red as he tipped his hat to her.

"You hurt, Pa?" The girl sank on her knees beside the old man. "Pete shot you, didn't he?" "Pete? Pete who? The horses run away. Guess they throwed me out. Where was we goin', Nellie? Wasn't we goin' some place?"

"We were going home, Pa." She was kneeling there, looking at the blue lump on her father's head, and from there her staring eyes turned to the bullet wound in his side, which the kid had left uncovered ready for further ablutions of raw whisky. "Don't you remember when Pete Gorham took in after us, after Nate Wheeler's funeral, and you remembered you never got your gun back from the bartender before you left town?"

"Pete Gorham! Who's he? I don't remember any—" "The kid's hand left its slow stroking of the horse's sweaty jaw. He walked over and stood beside the kneeling girl, bashful but determined.

"Scuse me," he said diffidently, gun-hand to his hat grim when she looked up. "Did yo'all say Nate Wheeler's funeral taken place yesterday?"

"Why, of course it was—" she checked herself abruptly, one swift, troubled glance going to her father on the ground. "You must be a stranger in the valley if you don't k'n—." She cast a swift, suddenly enlightened glance upward. "Are you one of them Poole rim-riders?"

"I happened to be up theah when Pete Gorham shot yoh pappy," he said, with slow meaning. "I taken it upon myselt to stop Pete befoah he could carry out his plan."

"Well, wasn't you rim riding on the valley?" "I just happened to be theah at the time."

"You're a Poole rider, ain't you?" "Poole! Poole rider!" The old man scrambled to a sitting posture, his face working furiously as memory came back with a rush. "One of them Texas killers, I betcha! Was it you dry-gulched my son, Ed? Where's my gun?" He clawed futilely at his hip, where no gun was holstered.

"No, suh, it wasn't me." The girl gave an involuntary shudder and closed her eyes for a second. "Even if he is a Poole rider, Pa, he—did us a big favor," she said, a little color staining her cheeks. "We've got to be grateful for that."

"Are you the fellow that shot Pete in the ears? They were talking about that yesterday at Nate Wheeler's fume—" she caught herself up, biting her lip.

"Nate Wheeler's funeral," the kid finished softly. "Yes'm, I had the pleasaah of eah-makin' Pete the o'eah evenin'."

"Then you're one of those Texas killers. They said it was a Texas

killer done that. Pa, ain't you able to get in the wagon? I can drive, if you can sit and ride."

"She was in a hurry to get away from him, even though he had saved her from Pete Gorham. Saved her and her pappy's life, and this was all the thanks he got. The kid swung on his heel and gave all his attention to backing the wagon off the buckbush so the team could be turned around.

He worked swiftly, surely, his capable hands never wasting a motion, never uncertain of the thing they should accomplish. The team was restless, wanting to go home, and the kid turned to the girl.

"If yo'all would be so accommodatin' as to come hold these hawes a minute," he said stiffly, "I'd be shoah pleased to tote yoh pappy and lay him in the wagon."

"I k'n walk, dang ye!" the old fellow cried pettishly. But he couldn't, except with the help of the kid's arm under his shoulders, taking all the weight off the wobbly old legs.

"We're much obliged," the girl said constrainedly, after he had lifted the old man into the wagon. "Even if you are a rim rider for the Poole, I want to thank you for—all you've done."

Then she looked at Pete Gorham, who sat cursing beside a sage-bush,

came along and fixed Pete good and plenty.

There was something in her voice that was like her hair. Something like gold. Of course, yo'all couldn't say a voice was yellow, or had a shiny sound, but yo'all could kinda imagine it was like gold. That girl down in Texas—her voice was like a tin pan. Funnny about voices—they say more than words, sometimes. More than a person wants their voice to say. Hers did. Hers said she'd shoah hate to have anything happen to a rim rider.

The kid rode dreamily along, watching the wagon as it bumped over the dim trail in the grass. Watching just in case she might need help or something. Girl like that didn't belong with no nester outfit. She oughta have some big rich cattleman for a pappy and ride around on a nice, genteel horse.

The wagon finally turned into a shallow depression and was seen no more from the rim. The kid marked the place where she lived; marked it with a special significance in his mind.

Now and then he swept the valley with a perfunctory glance, but most of the time he was staring at the ridge which hid her home. A thin line of cottonwoods ran up along a creek there. There were places where the tops of the trees

sliding stealthily down the rocks beside him, a big hat and a pair of shoulders growing longer as he looked. The kid sprang up like a startled deer, his gun in his hand and pointing straight at the man who stood looking at him. Then suddenly the kid smiled sheepishly and tucked the gun back in its holster.

"Come alive like a rattler, didn't yuh?" Babe Garner grinned. "You been asleep?"

"No I been watchin' the valley." "Huhh!" Babe's tone sounded skeptical. "See anything?"

"Saw a funel' over to Nate Wheeler's place."

"You didn't report it to the Poole," Babe charged grimly. "What was the matter? Paralyzed so you couldn't git to the pinnacle?"

"No, suh, I was right busy soon after," he said mildly.

"Doin' what?" "Shootin' a nestah!"

"Hell! Why didn't yuh say so?" Babe's tone had warmed amazingly. "Some one tryin' to dry-gulch yuh, Tiger Eye?"

"I reckon he was aimin' that-a-way, Babe."

CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

The acreage to winter hay crops such as the barley, oats and vetch mixture has been increased by 100 per cent in Orange County this year. Dairy farmers use the mixture to supplement pasture and for early grazing.

Barber—Have you tried that hair tonic I sold you? Baldy—Oh, yes. Barber—And did you find it brought out the new hair? Baldy—No, but it brought out the old hair, all right.

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"Even if he is a Poole rider," the girl said, "he did us—a big favor."

took her foot down off the hub, and came over to where the kid stood stroking the nose of the horse he was holding by the bridle.

"If you don't kill Pete Gorham, he'll kill you," she said in a fierce undertone.

"Reckon it'll be a right smaht while befo' he's able." The kid did not look at her.

She glanced again toward the querulous murmur of her dad's voice. "You better quit the Poole and get outa the country," she said hurriedly. "The valley folks'll kill you—"

She seemed to think that was saying more than she dared, for she turned sharply away and drove off.

He went over to Pete Gorham, lifted him to his feet and faced him toward the valley.

"Go hunt yo'selt a coyote den and crawl into it," he advised harshly, and started back up the hill, climbing like one in a great hurry.

The kid's lips thinned and straightened when he remembered that girl running for the hill, Pete after her with his rope. Any other man would have shot to kill. But somehow this thing of killing—it was plumb easy to do, but yo'all never could put the life back in a man once yo'd shot it out.

Funnny about the nesters being wise to Poole rim riders.

That funeral was another strange thing. They buried Nate Wheeler yesterday, she said. Then what did they want to carry out a coffin and start another procession today for? The kid couldn't see any sense to that.

The kid turned his glasses on the now-distant wagon and looked for Pete. Might as well make shoah he wasn't trying to trail the girl. No, Pete was going straight across the flat, making a beeline for Becker's coulee, as nearly as the kid could judge. Satisfied, he turned the glasses again upon the wagon.

Shoah was a pretty girl. The kid never had seen such yellow hair in his life. Wasn't must like that darned stuck-up girl back home that had made fun of his yellow eye. This girl, Nellie, never noticed his eye.

He sighed and gave another sweeping glance at the valley. Shoah was a funny thing about that funeral. Reckon they were just trying to fool him with it, like the girl hinted. Maybe they wanted to go all in a bunch somewhere and couldn't figure out any way to keep from being seen, and maybe they just had a fake funeral to fool any Poole rim rider that happened to be keeping cases. Plumb foolish. Easyest way was to send somebody along over here to bushwhack him. The kid gave a sudden grunt of understanding. The nesters had sent somebody, all right. Or they thought they had. They'd sent Pete Gorham. And Pete had kinda got side-tracked, thinking he could kill off that old man and get the girl.

The kid's face darkened at the simplicity of the scheme. Pete had thought he could do it and lay it to the Poole. They'd blame the Poole, and they'd go running after them harder than ever. But Pete didn't make it stick. The kid had

sluggish feeling

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