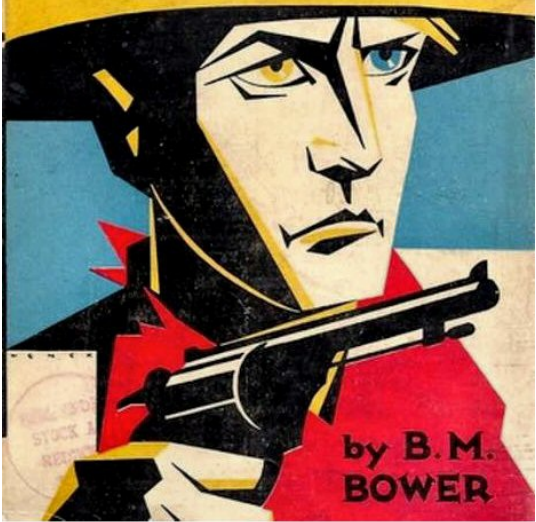


TIGER EYE



by B. M.
BOWER

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Title: Tiger Eye

Author: Bower, B. M. [Bower, Bertha Muzzy] (1871-1940)

Date of first publication: 1930

Edition used as base for this ebook: Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1930

Date first posted: 13 June 2010

Date last updated: 13 June 2010

Project Gutenberg Canada ebook #553

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By B. M. Bower

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Hay-Wire
The Swallowfork Bulls
Rodeo
Tiger Eye

TIGER EYE

By

B. M. BOWER

TORONTO

McCLELLAND AND STEWART

1930

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Published July, 1930

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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TIGER EYE

CHAPTER ONE

[Pg 3]

"DRAW, YOU COYOTE!"

The kid was running away, but he was taking his time about it, and he was enjoying every foot of his flight. Sometimes when a curlew circled and gazed down curiously, with his yellow eyes peering, first one and then the other, the kid would stop dead still in the trail and with his own eyes turned upward to the bird, he would call "Kor-reck?" "Kor-reck?" in playful mimicry. Other times he would pull from his breast pocket a mouth organ worn through to the brass in places where his fingers clasped it, and would polish it gravely on his sleeve, set the tiny pigeonholed edge to his smooth young lips and ripple a few notes to match the meadow lark's song. From that he would slide into "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean," and "The Spanish Cavalier." But at this particular moment the mouth organ reposed in his pocket with his Bull Durham bag, and he was singing:[Pg 4]

"A Spanish cavalier stood in his retreat

And on his guitar played a tune, dear.
The music so sweet he'd oft-times repeat--
'The blessing of my coun-try and you-oo, dear!'"

But for all his leisurely and tuneful progress, the kid was running away, and he had been running for more than a month now. He was running away from several things that had begun to harry him, even at twenty: his father's enemies--such as had outlived straight-shooting old Killer Reeves; but he was not running from the enemies so much as from the impending necessity of shooting them. The kid had no ambition for carrying on the feud and getting the name of being a killer, like Pap. He did not want to kill; he had seen too much of that and it carried neither novelty nor the glamour of adventure. Then, too, he was running away from a girl who had called him Tiger Eye to his face. The kid felt a streak of fire shoot up his spine when he thought of the way she had pronounced the name men called him. Always before he had accepted it just as he would have accepted any other nickname suggested by something in his character or appearance, but she had made it a taunt.

He couldn't change the yellow stare of his[Pg 5] right eye, any more than he could remember not to squint his blue left eye nearly shut when he really meant something. His mother always told him he got that tiger eye at a circus she had visited before he was born. The kid didn't know about that, but he knew he had it and that it was the eye that looked down a gun barrel when he practised shooting; the eye that stared back when somebody tried to give him some of their lip. They didn't, very often; they seemed to expect him to ride with his right glove off and his gun loose in its holster, the way Pap always did.

The kid left off gloves altogether, except when he was working with a rope, but that was so he could play his mouth organ. His gun

never had stuck in its holster and never would--Pap's training had been too severe for such bungling. But the kid never wanted to shoot any one. That was the main reason why he had left home. He had expressed it all in one sentence to his mother when he told her good-by.

"I'll be killing, same as Pap, if I stay around heah." And his mother had nodded in somber agreement and let him go. His mother didn't know about the girl.[Pg 6]

That was nearly six weeks ago. The kid had pointed his pony's nose to the north and never once had he spread his blankets twice in the same camp. He had followed the trail of the wild goose, winging high overhead to its nesting grounds. Rivers, deserts, mountains, plains,--he had crossed them all. He'd be in Canada if he didn't stop pretty soon, he thought. He didn't want anything of Canada; too cold up there. He'd stay down in Montana, where the chinook winds ate the snow right out from under your horse's feet in winter, according to what he had heard. Lots of the boys went up into Montana with the big trail herds and didn't come back; seemed to like the country fine.

It was nice country, all right, and the kid decided that he had about reached the end of his journey. From where the trail approached the edge of a high, wide plateau, which the kid called a mesa, after the fashion of the southern ranges, he had a splendid view of the country spread out below him. Evidently the trail was seeking easy descent to the valley. There were little rolling ridges down there, with grassy flats between and the shine of small streams glimpsed now and then in the open spaces among twisting threads of darker green[Pg 7] which the kid knew would be trees and bushes. He did not see any houses, except within the wide arms of a coulee toward which the road seemed to lead. The kid could look right down into the wide mouth of that coulee and see corrals, the squatly stable

the wide mouth of that coulee and see corrals, the squatty stable and the small house backed up against the red sandstone wall. It looked kind of snug and friendly down there. Maybe he could get a job and stop right there, without looking any farther.

The kid swung his slim body around in the saddle to see if his pack horse was coming right along as he should, and as he did so his buckskin horse squatted and shied violently away from something white fluttering in the top of a soapweed alongside the road. The kid stopped singing, pulled the horse up with a lift of the reins and wheeled him about to make him ride at the thing. Nothing but a piece of white paper--nothing to stampede a horse as trailwise as old Pecos. Make him go right up and stick his nose against it and smell it; teach him not to be afraid of a little paper.

The kid spurred Pecos toward the white flutter, talking to him softly. Twice the horse whirled away. The third time the kid leaned and plucked the paper off the bush and examined the thing as he rode. It seemed to be [Pg 8] a crude yet fairly accurate map of the country lying down below him, between the bench and the river. All the creeks were marked, and at certain points there were little penciled squares, plainly indicating the ranches. Beside each square was a man's name and a brand. And before nearly every name there was an X, made black and distinct with pencil.

The kid spread the paper flat on his saddle horn and got it lined up with the country. Yes, here was the place he was coming to. According to the paper, the ranch was owned by a man named Nate Wheeler and his brand was the Cross O. The kid grinned a little as he folded the paper and put it in his pocket. He was in luck. He could ride right up and call the man by name, just as if he'd heard all about him. It would make a difference, all right. Nate Wheeler wouldn't think he was just some fly-by-night stranger riding through. He'd probably give him work; he would, if he had any.

"Oh-h, it's off to the war, to the war I must go--
To fight for my coun-try and you-oo, dear--"

The kid had a nice voice, soft with that liquid softness which the South gives to its sons. He did not sing very loudly, having no desire[Pg 9] to advertise himself to the country, for he was bashful and would blush if you spoke to him suddenly--that is, in a friendly tone. The other kind brought no flush; only that steady, disconcerting stare of his yellow right eye.

A man was riding toward him, coming out of the wide-armed coulee to the left--the one which the map had identified as Nate Wheeler's place. He could not have heard the kid singing and he did not see the kid at once. The man was riding at a jog trot, his body jerking sidewise at each step the horse took. The kid saw him the minute he came around the bold rock ledge that marked that end of the coulee and he wondered if this might not be Nate Wheeler himself. He'd ask him, anyway, as soon as they met. He'd rather do that than ride up to the house and bone the fellow for a job in front of his wife; there was one, he knew by the skirts and aprons ballooning on the clothesline alongside the cabin. A baby too, if the little pink dresses didn't lie.

Pecos picked his way daintily down into a narrow wrinkle of the hill that swallowed the kid from sight for a good hundred yards, the gravelly road slanting steeply down to the val[Pg 10]ley. Barney, the pack horse, was a little tender-footed behind and came lagging along, favoring his feet where he could; and the kid, glancing back, let him take his time. Barney would catch up anyway, when the kid stopped to talk with this man Wheeler, or whoever he was.

So it was that the two solitary horsemen rode up into sight of each other quite suddenly, fifty yards apart and the slope dropping away

other quite suddenly, fifty yards apart and the slope dropping away on either side. The rancher jerked his horse up as if about to wheel and ride back whence he came. The kid kept straight on. Then the rancher did a most amazing thing. He yanked his gun from its holster, drove the spurs against his horse and came lunging straight at the kid.

"Draw, you coyote! I'm comin' a-shootin'!" he yelled as he rode.

The kid was caught completely off his guard, but he had been trained in a hard school that accepted no excuse for fumbling. The *pow-w* of his forty-five was not a split second slower than the other. He felt a vicious jerk at his hat as his finger tightened around the trigger of his gun. Then he was riding forward to where the man had toppled from his horse. The little pinto shied away and would have started run[Pg 11]ning, but the kid caught it with one sweep of his long arm that gathered in the trailing reins.

He was sitting there on his horse, staring incredulously down at the dead man, when another horseman came galloping down a grassy ridge, no more than a stone's throw away. The kid turned and looked at him hardly along the barrel of his gun.

"Yo'all stop where yo're at," he commanded in his soft drawling voice, and the stranger stopped, throwing up both hands laughingly as he did so. The kid surveyed him critically with his peculiar, tigerish eye, the other squinted half-shut. It gave him a deadly look in spite of his boyishness, but he did not know that.

"That's all right--I'm a friend. Think I'd rode out in sight if I wasn't?" the stranger remarked easily. "I'm riding for the Poole."

CHAPTER TWO

[Pg 12]

THE KID FINDS A FRIEND

Without moving his gaze, the kid tilted his head slightly toward the twisted figure on the ground.

"Yo'all heahd what he said?"

"Yeah, I heard 'im. He had it comin', Kid."

"I aimed to shoot his gun ahm down. I didn't aim to kill him."

"You'd been outa luck, Kid, if you hadn't. He'd'a' got you."

"Plumb crazy," said the kid. "Comin' at me that-a-way."

"Sure was. You from the South?"

"Brazos," the kid answered succinctly.

"Yeah. Well, it's lucky I happened along. My name's Garner. Babe Garner. How come you're ridin' to Wheeler's?"

The kid gave one further look at Garner, decided that he was all right and holstered his gun. He pulled the folded paper from his breast pocket, opened it and tilted it so that the other, riding closer, could see [Pg 12]

"This place over heah was the closest," he explained, pointing a finger at the name and the X. "This Wheelah?"

"Yeah." Babe Garner looked from the paper up into the kid's face. His own steely eyes were questioning, impressed. "You sure as hell don't waste any time. Mind tellin' me your name?"

"Bob Reeves." The kid looked full at Garner, a defiant expression around his mouth. "Folks call me Tiger Eye back home. They gotta be friends to do it, though."

Babe Garner glanced obliquely at the heap on the ground, nodded and looked away, up the road and down.

"Say, you better fog along to my camp with me," he said uneasily. "These damn nesters is shore mean. Let the pinto go. Anybody come along and catch you here, it's fare ye well. What kinda gun you got?"

"Colt forty-five."

"Good. That won't tell nothin' if the nesters get snoopy. Come on, Tiger Eye. I'll see yuh through this."

He wheeled his horse, and led the way back up the hill, and the kid followed without a word. Talking was never his habit and he certainly was not in the mood now for conversa[Pg 14]tion. The damned, dirty luck of it! Having to shoot the first man he saw in the country, the one he was going to strike for a job! Of course, having Babe Garner show up as a friend was sure lucky, but it couldn't offset that other catastrophe. Another thing bothered him; how had he happened to miss, like that? He had aimed at Wheeler's gun arm. How had he shot so far wide that the bullet went through

damn. How had he shot so far wide that the bullet went through Wheeler's head? Killer Reeves' son shooting wide of the mark!

"Pap shoah would peel me foh that, if he knowed about it," the kid thought glumly, again and again. It never occurred to him that his father or any one else would disapprove of the shooting. That would be called a case of "have to." And as he meditated gravely on the necessity of defending himself, he remembered the jerk of his big hat and took it off to see just what had happened.

There it was--a smudged hole right in the middle of the crown. The kid passed one hand over his head and brought it away with a lock of hair the size of his forefinger; a curl, to be exact. Locks of hair were quite likely to stand out from the kid's scalp in half-moons and circles. He was regarding the reddish-yellow curl[Pg 15] soberly, his lips pursed a little, when Babe Garner glanced his way.

"Damn close," Babe commented. "You want to keep your eye peeled hereafter. These nesters'll shoot a man on sight."

"What foh?"

"Cause they're damn' cow thieves and the Poole has called the turn," Babe said savagely. "They hang together like sand burrs to a dog's tail. Us Poole riders is fair game to them. You heard what he hollered."

"Yeah, I heahd."

"That's the nester's war whoop, these days. The Poole has had four men fanned with bullets in the last month. We're needin' riders that can shoot. You come in time."

The kid rode for awhile in silence, his bullet-scarred hat pulled low over his eyes. his fingers absently toying with the reddish curl.

Abruptly he turned his tiger stare on Babe.

"How many men has the nestahs lost?"

Babe hesitated, gave his head a shake, laughed one hard chuckle.

"You know of one, anyway," he said meaningly.

The kid questioned no further but followed silently in Babe's lead. Over a lava bed they[Pg 16] went, where the horses must pick their way carefully but where they left no track. Down along the rim of the benchland, past the head of the coulee marked on the map as Wheeler's. Once, the kid looked down almost upon the roof of the cabin. A woman came out and began pulling the clothes off the line, her back to the bluff. A baby in a pink dress toddled out on the doorstep, sat down violently and began to squirm backward off the step. Wheeler's baby. Only there wasn't any Wheeler, any more. Just a heap of dressed-up bones and meat, back there in the trail.

They swung back from the rim, and the kid saw no more of the cabin and the woman taking clothes off the line, and the baby crawling backward down off the step. Cute little devil. Run to meet his pappy, most likely, and want a ride on the pinto horse.

What devil's luck was it that had made the kid shoot wide, like that? Used to shoot the pips out of cards somebody held out for him--sis would hold cards out for him to shoot, any time. Never had missed that-a-way before. The kid could not understand it. It worried him almost as much as the killing.

Babe Garner had a snug cabin, not to be ap[Pg 17]proached save from one direction, up a bare, steep little ridge to a walled-in basin where two springs bubbled out from the rock wall and oozed away through ferns and tall grasses with little blue flowers tilting on the

tops. Babe made him welcome, stabled the horses and cooked a good meal. He talked of many things, but not again of Nate Wheeler.

The kid did not talk at all, except to reply to direct questions, and never then with two words if one would carry his meaning. He washed the dishes while Babe wiped them, and swept the cabin, corners and all, and upended the broom behind the door as his mother had taught him to do. According to Killer Reeves' wife, boys must learn to cook and keep a house clean in a country where women were few, and the kid was well trained in more things than shooting. When all was done Babe took a paper-bound novel down off a high shelf where many more were piled. He glanced at the kid inquiringly.

"Lots to read if you want it," he offered, lying down on the bed with his folded coat under the pillow for greater height, and his loaded gun close to his right hand. "Make yourself to home, Bob." [Pg 18]

"Reckon I'll take a ride," the kid said quietly, brushing off the stove top with a wild duck's wing. "Aim to get the lay of the land."

"Oh, sure." Babe studied the kid from beneath his lashes. "Want any help? We're pardners from now on--Tiger Eye."

"Don't need he'p right now, thanks," said the kid, flushing with shy gratitude. "Yo'all lay still and read yoah book, Babe. I'll come back."

"Take care of yourself," Babe gave warning and farewell together, still covertly eyeing the kid.

"Shoah will, Babe," promised the kid, and let himself out into the warm, slanting sunlight. Babe got off his bunk and went to the doorwav.

"Give this signal when you come up the trail, Tiger Eye," he directed, and whistled a strain like the cry of some night bird. "Us Poole boys hail each other that way at night. Safer. You hear that call, you know it's a friend."

"Thanks," said the kid, and repeated the signal accurately. "Shoah will remember it, Babe."

"Shore yuh don't want no help?"

"I'll make out, I reckon."

"Well--take care of yourself, Tiger Eye." [Pg 19]

"Shoah will, Babe."

Babe waited in the doorway until the kid came riding by the cabin, his long legs swinging gently with the easy, pacing stride of Pecos. Babe waved his hand and the kid waved back, his mouth smiling in wistful friendliness, his glance not tigerish at all, though there was in it something vaguely disturbing. Babe went back to his bed and his book, but though he stared at the open page he did not read a line for five minutes. He was wondering about the kid.

The kid was wondering too, but not about Babe. He was wondering who would do Nate Wheeler's chores, and he was wondering who would take in the body and who would bury Wheeler. He kept wondering who would tell that woman down there in the coulee that her husband was dead, and who would meet that baby when it toddled out in its little pink dress, and give it a ride on a horse.

CHAPTER THREE

[Pg 20]

"DADDY GO BYE?"

The kid did not ride back the way Babe had brought him. He circled around another way, and so came into the trail from the north instead of the south. He hoped the body of Wheeler had been discovered before now, but it had not. The reddish light of the sun just setting behind a distant mountain range touched the huddled figure with a sanguine glow. The pinto pony, more faithful than most horses, stood there worriedly beside the body, just where the kid had dropped the reins at Babe Garner's suggestion.

As far as the kid could see in either direction, the trail was empty, and the wide valley lay steeped in mellow light, tranquilly aloof from Nate Wheeler's little tragedy. Shoah was an empty country, thought the kid. Nobody stirring around much. 'Peared like a body could lay out all night and coyotes find it before anybody happened along. And again he thought[Pg 21] of the woman pulling skirts and aprons and little pink dresses off the whipping clothesline, while the baby cannily turned around and crawled backward off the doorstep. The kid whirled Pecos abruptly in the trail.

He rode at a sharp lope down the lower slope and around the point of rocks, across the wide mouth of the coulee and up to a gate not far from the house. Nate Wheeler had closed that gate behind him

carefully, as a thrifty rancher should, giving thought to drifting stock. The kid also took time to close the gate before he rode on and dismounted to knock at the cabin door.

A woman's face at the window peered out at him. The kid felt that hot streak of shyness shoot up his spine as her steps came toward the door. But the chill of the message he carried steadied him as the door pulled open three inches--no more--and her thin, worried face showed there in the crack.

"Evenin', Ma'am. Theah's a man layin' back up there a piece in the road. I--is yoah husband--home?" The kid got the words out between gulps at his growing Adam's apple and his face was red to his hatband.

"No, Nate's gone." She opened the door an[Pg 22]other three inches and looked at him unafraid. He was so young and so shy, and his voice had the crooning melody of the South. "He ought to be back any time now. Is it--is the man--"

"Dead, I reckon." A bold statement, but the kid's voice robbed it of harshness.

"Oh!" The woman shrank back a little, but not from the kid. "Is he--do you know who it is?"

"No'm, nevah did see him befoah. A--he was ridin' a black pinto hawse." That would tell her, thought the kid, and looked away.

"Nate! They've got Nate! They said they would--they nailed a warning on the gate--they've killed him!" Then she pulled herself together and came out on the step, closing the door behind her to shut the baby in. The kid could hear the baby's inarticulate urging to be let out. His little fists began beating an indignant tattoo upon the

door.

"Where is he? Is it far? I'll go with you. The murdering devils! How far is it?"

"No'm, yo'all bettah stay right heah. I'll go tote him in, Mis' Wheelah. I'll tote him on his hawse."

Inside, the baby was beating its fists still upon the door when the kid thrust toe in the[Pg 23] stirrup and reined Pecos back up the trail. The mother stood upon the step and watched him go, her hand shielding her eyes from the last direct sunrays. Her face was white and her mouth was grim. The kid did not look back, but he knew she was standing there watching him go, and he knew there was murder in her heart; not for him who brought the message—for the man who had shot her husband.

A bleak sense of being somehow tricked by circumstance swept over the kid. It wasn't fair. He wasn't a killer, he hadn't wanted to kill, but a man lay dead because of the kid's bungling shot. He, who had shot the pips out of cards his own sister held out for him, how had he ever shot so wide that the bullet meant for a man's gun arm had gone through his head? A good six inches off to one side. Not even the amazing suddenness of Nate Wheeler's attack could excuse such shooting as that.

Draw and shoot--and snip the heart out of the ace of hearts six times out of six; or the diamond; or call the pips and pick them one by one, out of a six-spot tacked to a post, and drive in the head of the tack after he had reloaded. Draw and shoot--that was the way Killer Reeves had taught his son. No, sir, not[Pg 24] even the surprise of Nate Wheeler coming at him full belt could ever excuse such shooting as that shot which had killed Nate Wheeler.

Shoah funny, Babe Garner being right there close where he could see and hear the whole thing. Never needed any explaining--just took it for granted the kid only did what he had to do. Never said a word, either, about that poor shooting. Six inches wide of the mark. Pap shoah would turn in his grave if he was to know Tiger Eye couldn't shoot any straighter than that. Shoah white of Babe Garner, though, taking him home with him before the nesters got wise to what he had done.

That little woman standing on the doorstep, shading her eyes with her hand! The baby inside, pounding the door with his fists, wanting to come out! The kid gave his head an impatient shake, trying to drive that picture out of his mind. Shoah hell, the way things happened sometimes.

Getting Wheeler on the pinto, tying him on with his own rope--like toting a deer out of the hills along the Brazos. Like toting Buck Thomas in from that fight Pap and Buck had with the Gonzales boys. The pinto was a little snorty over the dead smell, but gentle. The kid[Pg 25] worked calmly enough, but he worked fast and he did not look straight at Nate Wheeler's face; not once. Damn' shame. Couldn't miss on a deer or a coyote or anything like that--had to go and miss on a man. Babe Garner called it lucky, but the kid couldn't see it that way. Shooting Wheeler's arm down would have done just as well. Better. A damn sight better for the woman and that baby.

She was down by the gate, waiting in the dusk, when the kid came riding up, leading the pinto with its grisly pack. Up in the cabin the baby was hollering its head off, wanting to get out. Mad, that little devil. Shoah had a temper. Bet it wasn't shedding a tear; just yelling at the shut door.

The little woman unfastened the gate, her fingers clinging to the

The little woman unmastered the gate, her fingers clinging to the weathered, strap-worn slick in her husband's hands. Hundreds of openings, hundreds of closings, in daylight and dark, in haste and at leisure, in fair weather and blinding blizzards. And now the buckle must loosen to let the pinto walk through with Wheeler's dead body tied across the saddle like a shot deer--bloody head hanging down on one side, feet in rider's boots with rundown heels dangling a bit stiffly on the other side.[Pg 26] Rope crisscrossed over his back, holding him in place.

She did not speak as the grim burden went through. Just reached out and caught a swaying, inert hand and laid it swiftly against her cheek and let it go. The kid swallowed hard at his young Adam's apple and turned his tiger stare straight ahead, up the trail toward the darkened cabin. Baby in there, hollering like hell. Didn't want to stay alone. Scared of the dark, maybe. Kicking on the door--the kid could hear the thump, thump of the little scuffed shoes as he rode up. Spunky little devil. Few years bigger, he'd go gunning for the man that killed his pappy. Nothing to do now but try and kick the door down, wanting his mother.

Shoah plenty of spunk, though. Spunk like his pappy had, riding straight at a strange rider and yelling "Draw, you coyote!" That took spunk. Didn't know he was meeting up with Tiger Eye, old Killer Reeves' son. Didn't know Tiger Eye Reeves had the name of never missing a shot. Didn't know--didn't know that was the one time Tiger Eye Reeves was due to miss. Hell of a note, missing that one shot!

"I'll go fix the bed for him," the little woman announced dully, coming up as the kid halted[Pg 27] at the doorstep and swung limberly down from the saddle. "I put my washing on the bed till I could get time to sprinkle down the clothes."

Sounded like the kid's mother, always planning her housework. Sprinkle down calico skirts and check aprons and little pink dresses. Roll them tight and cover them up till the irons got hot. Sprinkle the pink baby dresses with tears now, most likely. No need now to push the irons back and cook supper for her man when he got home. Home, all right--but he wouldn't want any supper. Hell of a note, shooting crooked like a damn' Mexican.

The kid was unfastening the rope where the last hitch had been taken in the middle of Nate Wheeler's back. The body had sagged to one side, and the kid lifted it by one arm,--the gun arm, the one he meant to "shoot down." The arm gave limply in his grasp, the bone shattered above the elbow; and the kid froze to an amazed immobility for ten seconds, his mind blank, his fingers groping and testing.

Arm shoah was plugged, all right. Not a doubt in the world about that. Funny the kid hadn't noticed it before. But, then, Wheeler had fallen on that side and his arm had been underneath, and the hole in his head was too[Pg 28] plain to miss seeing. It never had occurred to the kid to look at that arm. Hadn't happened to get hold of it when he loaded him on the pinto, either. Hell, he hadn't missed, after all! Hit the arm right where he aimed, up above the elbow where there was only one bone to bust and no great harm done. Few weeks in a sling, arm good as ever. The kid knew. He'd had a bullet in the arm once, by mistake. Darn fool brother trying to do stunts with cards, the kid fool enough to hold the card.

The kid felt the little heat waves streaking up his spine at the woman's voice from the doorway, and the heat warmed and dissipated that cold lump he had been carrying in his chest. He hadn't bungled that shot, after all. Wheeler must have ducked his head right in line with the bullet. It was an accident--and that made a difference, a important difference to the kid, brotherhood of his skill

ifference; a very great difference to the kid, justly proud of his skill.

He lifted Wheeler's body from the pinto to his own back, shouldering it as he had shouldered many a slain buck. He carried it in and laid it on the bed, now neatly spread with white marbled oilcloth from the table--careful housewife even in her grief, this little woman!--and composed the dead legs in their[Pg 29] worn leather chaps, and the hands primly folded one upon the other across the blue chambray shirt with all the white buttons sewn neatly in place by his wife, who now stood staring down at him with the hot, dry eyes of hate. Hate for the man who had killed her husband. The kid knew, just as well as if she screamed aloud the curses seething within her mind and heart. Quiet kind, she was; the kind his mother always said would take things hard.

She stooped now and picked up the baby and set him astride one bony hip and wiped his nose and cheeks with a corner of her apron. Red-headed little tike, that baby. Red-headed like his pappy. Nate Wheeler had red hair, sandy mustache and yellow splotches of freckles on his cheekbones; his hands were freckled on their hairy backs and his wrists too. Baby had four teeth, two above and two below like a squirrel, only stubby and white. It pointed now to Wheeler and said, "Daddy go bye?" twice, waving its chubby arm toward the bed.

That did something to the woman, kinda. She grabbed the baby's arm down and turned away quick, and sat down on a rocking chair and started moaning and rocking, the baby's face[Pg 30] pressed so close against her shoulder that its little stubby nose was flattened and it kicked like a calf at the branding fire, trying to get loose. Never cried, though. Shoah was a spunky little devil. Reckon he'd be ready to ride at a stranger when he got big enough--ride and shoot, like his pappy. The kid sighed. Pity a baby can't stay little and cute. Nate Wheeler was a little tike once: and now--there on the

and later that Phoebe was a kid and once, and now there on the bed with his hands folded on his chest.

CHAPTER FOUR

[Pg 31]

"THAT'S TO EARMARK YO'ALL"

"Anything yo'all want me to do--milk, or anything like that?" The kid stood by the door with his bullet-scarred hat in his hand, trying to keep the red out of his face.

"No--oh, no--oh, feed the pinto--and feed the team--" The little woman still rocked the baby, speaking jerkily like that between her moaning.

The kid went out and led Pecos and the pinto down to the stable. Pecos, because he never separated himself very far from his horse when he was in strange country. In the stable everything was neat and orderly. Even in the gloom of a dusk fast deepening to night, the kid could see that the stalls were clean. No use wasting hay, though, keeping the horses inside when there was no man to use them. He turned the team into the corral where he heard the gurgle of water running into a trough in one corner from some spring back among the rocks, piped down to water the animals.[Pg 32]

Pecos he led behind the stable, where the rock wall came down sheer, ten feet away. Dark, back in there. Pecos snorted a little, but he'd stand, all right. No use having him out in sight--not in a country where the nesters hollered "Draw, you coyote!" and then started popping it right to you, without waiting to see if yo'all were going to draw. Holler and shoot. That was the way Nate Wheeler had done. More spunk than brains, the kid decided, with youth's readiness to judge.

The chores were soon done; the pinto unsaddled and turned into the corral, the saddle riding an empty manger, because the kid did not know where Nate Wheeler kept it. There were no cows to milk, though there should be, with that baby on the ranch. The kid was finished in ten minutes, and yet he lingered at the stable, hating to go back into the room where that woman sat rocking and moaning and squeezing her baby so tight it kicked.

How about a grave? There ought to be one dug--but maybe she had some particular place picked out in her mind where she'd want it. Women did; his mother, for instance. She always took the say when it came to digging a grave for some of the family. The kid found[Pg 33] a pick and shovel in a little shed by the grindstone, but he only looked at them and stood them back again, shaking his head. Plumb foolish to start digging, unless he knew where to dig. She ought to have the say about that, but he hated to ask her.

Riders coming. Poole men, maybe, after Nate Wheeler. They oughtn't to bother the widow now, the way she was feeling. The kid started running, slipping through the shadows with no noise at all scarcely; running like an Indian, and not with heavy, clumping steps that could be heard a mile. He reached the cabin door and opened it while the riders were still at the gate. In the dark he could not see the woman but he heard the creak of the rocking chair pause and he heard the baby's sleepy little whimper, protesting because she

he heard the baby's sleepy little whimper, protesting because she had stopped rocking.

"Men a-comin' heah, Ma'am. If yo'all don't want 'em--"

"Oh, let 'em come," she answered wearily. "They can't do any more damage. They've got Nate--they ought to be satisfied with that."

She got up and crossed the room, and presently the kid saw her face, dead white in the flare of a match she was drawing across the[Pg 34] lamp wick. She blew out the match and slipped the glass chimney within the little brass guards, working with one hand, the baby drooping over the other shoulder, staring sleepily at the light. Clean chimney, the kid noticed. Clean, with little flecks of lint that disappeared in the heat of the flame. Good housekeeper--Nate Wheeler had a good wife, anyway.

The riders stopped outside the cabin and some one whistled a call--but it was not the night-bird call Babe Garner had taught the kid. Different. This was the first strain of that old war song, "When Johnny Comes Marching Home." The kid's lips puckered thoughtfully and he repeated the strain, standing just inside the closed door. Friends, they must be; that is, friends of the Wheelers. He wouldn't have to dig that grave, after all. The kid was glad, for he hated grave digging. It was a job they always put off onto him at home and he had got so he hated the sight of a pick and shovel. Still, of course, when it was a case of have-to--

He opened the door and the men came in; four of them, one after the other. Shaggy, farmer-looking men, with stubbly cheeks that stuck out on one side with great cuds of to[Pg 35]bacco. The kid felt a vague distaste for them. They better look out where they spit, he warned them mentally. She'd just scrubbed the floor that day and they better be careful.

They halted at sight of him, huddling just within the room instead of scattering, as they ought to have done if they meant to start something. But the kid's hat was off, and though it dangled from his left hand he looked at home there, somehow. Besides, they had got their signal all right. The leader, a tall man with eyes too close together and separated only by a high, thin beak of a nose, glanced around the room and relaxed when he saw the little woman in the chair, rocking her baby to sleep and patting its little pink dress with soothing, stroking motions of her right hand. He did not see what was on the bed, for that was behind the door in the shadow, and the kid stood in the way. The tall man relaxed, dropped his hand to his side.

"We come to tell Nate there's a meetin' over to Hans Becker's place and we'd like to have him go along." He cast another suspicious glance toward the kid and checked what more he would have said. "You better get ready and go too. The women are talkin' about stayin' all[Pg 36] together over there, where it's a big house and plenty of room, till we git the Poole—" He stopped again. "This boy workin' for you?" he asked brusquely.

"He's--been helping me--"

"Oh. I don't call him to mind. Yuh want to look out for strangers. Where's Nate?"

The little woman lifted her hand from patting the baby, and pointed one finger sternly to the corner where stood the bed.

"Sick?" The tall man lowered his voice, scowling a little. The kid sensed that a sick nester would be considered a nuisance.

A headshake was his answer, and the kid did not move. The man's

scowl deepened.

"No time to go on a toot, with the Poole--"

"They got him." Nate's wife spoke in that dull, level tone which the kid hated to hear. "Shot him on the road somewhere. The boy found him and brought him home."

The kid stood aside for them, as they rushed to the bed to look at Nate, but no one paid any attention to him. Not then. The tall man brought the lamp and they examined the body rather thoroughly, stooping with their heads almost touching, lifting the arms and turning the body this way and that. They muttered to[Pg 37]gether, but the kid could not hear what they said, because he stayed back, near the foot of the bed. Near the door too. No use letting them block the way out, even if they did think he was working for the Wheelers. He would have been, he reckoned, if things had gone different.

One man went to the wash bench and filled the basin with water.

"There's clean rags on the lower shelf of the cupboard there behind the stove," said Nate's wife, without turning her head or looking any way except straight before her. She knew what was going on, then. The kid let out a careful breath. She wasn't so upset she didn't know, and she wouldn't say anything to give him away. Well, come to think of it, she couldn't. She didn't know anything to tell.

One man held the basin, another the lamp, a third man washed where the tall man told him to. The kid's eyes went again and again to the tall man's face, bent down in the full light of the lamp. Mean looking, that nester. Plumb ornery and mean and tricky. The kid thought that even if the tall man was a friend you wouldn't want to turn your back on him. Just looking at him made yo'all feel like lifting

your hair and showing your teeth like a dog.[Pg 38]

There was a sudden and significant pause in the washing. The tall man leaned over and probed carefully with a finger, then stood up and spat over his shoulder into the shadows. The kid's tiger stare became more fixed and malevolent at that, but he craned his neck to hear what the man was going to say about that hole in Nate Wheeler's head. The tall man did not mention the wound, however. Instead of that, he looked past his companions, fixing his unpleasant gaze on the kid.

"You over there, what's yore name?"

"Bob Reeves," said the kid, looking down at his hat, which was about on a level with every gun butt in the room.

"Reeves--don't know that name. Where you from?"

"Brazos." The kid did not lift his eyes--much. But he got a pretty comprehensive view through his lashes. He saw the three move a little away from the tall man, as if they expected something.

"He brought Nate home to me. And he did the chores." The little woman in the rocking chair, holding the sleep-slackened form of her baby in her arms, stopped rocking and turned her anguished eyes upon the tall man. "He's[Pg 39] been awful nice and accommodating, Pete Gorham."

"Accommodatin'!" The tall man snarled the word like an oath. "Prob'ly one of the Poole's new Texas killers they shipped in! You heard him--he's from the Brazos. That's in Texas. Accommodatin'! Accommodated you, mebby, by killin' Nate. Willin' to take Nate's place, mebby!" The sneer in that sentence was so obvious that the man with the basin spilled half the water while he growled a

remonstrance.

The kid lifted his eyes now, though one was squinted shut and the other was the eye of a tiger. They did not see him draw his gun, but the little woman jumped and caught her baby up against her breast at the shattering roar of the kid's shot.

"That's to earmark yo'all so white folks'll know and walk wide of a skunk," drawled the kid, as the tall man clapped hand to his head. "And that's for spittin' on the floor," he added, on the echo of another shot. "Scuse me, Ma'am--I couldn't stand to see him insult yo'all that-a-way."

No one in that room saw the kid make a hurried move, but the door opened, fanned the acrid haze of powder smoke and, shut with a[Pg 40] bang. Where the kid had stood there was empty space. They looked at one another, and they looked at Pete Gorham, with the blood trickling down each side of his neck from bullet holes bored through the gristly tops of his ears that stood out against the black brim of his hat.

CHAPTER FIVE

[Pg 41]

MOUTH SHUT, EARS OPEN

Once more the kid was running away, but he was not taking any more time than was necessary. He ran lightly, silently, a swift-moving shadow in the gloom. He went so quietly that he did not startle the four horses standing grouped before the cabin and he did not frighten Pecos, when he suddenly appeared in that dark niche behind the stable. He was in the saddle and waiting, peering forth like a fox from its burrow, when he heard the cabin door open, saw a dim shape steal out. Then another, and after a minute one more.

Afraid of him, the way they acted. Afraid he would hide outside in the dark and pick them off one at a time as they came out. That's about their notion of what a Texas killer would be like. That was about the way they would fight--Pete Gorham, anyway. The kid remembered that name and he remembered the place on the map where Pete Gorham had his ranch.[Pg 42] Over across the valley, it was, kind of off by itself. His brand was the IV. Now he would go earmarked the rest of his life. He'd hate the kid for that. Go gunning for him, maybe--but that was all right. Save him the trouble of trying to make out he was a friend. Shoah was a neat trick, and tempting too, with his ears sticking up like a field mouse under his black hat. Shoah made a fine mark, easier than shooting the pips out of cards. The kid gave a sudden boyish laugh at the thought of those ears with their round bullet holes.

The three went in again, slipping in one at a time. The kid grinned again. He'd bet Pete Gorham was the man that stayed inside and didn't come out.

After awhile they came out again, this time with a lantern, one man walking ahead as if he were on guard. The kid didn't know about that lantern. If they went snooping around, and if they looked behind the stable, he might have to shoot somebody. Better not take a

the stable, he might have to shoot somebody. Better not take a chance. So he backed Pecos a step at a time, back and back until they were out beyond the stable. There he could ride around behind the corral and off down toward the gate, away from the trail where a deep little dry gully would hide[Pg 43] it from view. The kid called it an arroyo, after the manner of the South.

There, within sight of the gate--within easy shooting distance too--the kid waited, off his horse so his head wouldn't stick up like a signpost above the bank and tell them where he was. They thought he had ridden away from the ranch, for they went back and forth now with the lantern, the legs of the three men black against the fitful light. The kid watched and saw them hooking the team to the wagon. They were going to take the woman and baby over to Hans Becker's, then. The kid was glad of that.

Half an hour more, while the kid waited with the patience of an Indian in the gully not far from the gate. They drove away from the house at last, coming his way. One man was driving the team, his horse following behind the wagon. The little woman was on the seat beside him. Two riders went ahead. That left one man in the cabin with Nate Wheeler--but the kid would bet the man that stayed wasn't Pete Gorham with the bullet holes through his ears.

Half a mile behind them, he followed the little cavalcade. Easy enough, with the cluck[Pg 44] of the wagon coming faintly through the starlight. The kid wondered if they were afraid he might be on their track. Probably not. His little argument with Pete was kind of personal. One of the men didn't like Pete's remarks any too well. He'd be glad Pete got himself earmarked that-a-way.

Nice and accommodating, the little woman had said. The kid's lips twisted in a smile too bitter for his young face. Shoah, he was accommodating! He was accommodating enough to pack her

husband home and not let him lay out all night--after he'd killed him! Nothing very damn' accommodating about that; but still, the kid was guiltily glad she thought that way of him. He wouldn't want her to know the truth.

And then his thoughts returned in their weary circle to the cruel starting point of his misery. To-night was not like any other night in his life. He had killed a man. Accident or not, a man was dead by his gun hand. Every night of his life, from now on, he would have to go to sleep thinking of that. Tiger Eye Reeves--in Texas they had joshed him and told him his tiger eye was a killer eye, and he had cussed them back and said it wasn't so. They knew[Pg 45] it wasn't, too. But it was true now. Why couldn't he have killed one of those old varmints that hated the Reeves blood, if he had to kill? Why did he have to ride away up here, hundreds of miles, just to fix it so that red-headed little baby would grow up without its pappy?

The kid wondered a good deal about that, on that slow ride to Hans Becker's place. He looked up at the stars and wondered what they thought about the world, anyway. Did they think up there that this was just a speck of light? And if folks lived on the stars like the school books claimed, did they kill folks and wish they had let themselves get shot first?

But a man had to defend his own life. Pap had always hammered that into the kid. Everybody did. The law stood back of yo'all in that. But somehow, to-night, the law and Pap's stern teaching could not comfort the kid.

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

gathered there, and some stood outside in the dark and talked and smoked. Drank, too, from bottles[Pg 46] that went from hand to hand until they were emptied and thrown away.

The kid did not talk, for he knew his Texas drawl would bring him no good. Men up here, they yapped like coyotes, and he couldn't talk like them nohow. So he kept his mouth shut and his ears open, like old Killer Reeves always had advised. And 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 remembered the plain story of the map and cut straight across an arm of the valley on a trail he had not traveled before, until he was sure he had not been followed. Then he swung to the left and climbed over one ridge and followed up a canyon and left that for another bare ridge. After a while, Pecos caught onto the fact that he was getting close to Barney, and began to tilt his ears forward and pull at the bit, wanting to lope up hill after all his travel that day. But the kid made him walk, the blame fool; wanting to bust his lungs on the last mile.

CHAPTER SIX

[Pg 47]

"I DIDN'T SHOOT SO WIDE"

The kid eased himself in the saddle and pulled his mouth organ from his shirt pocket. He polished it gravely upon his sleeve, set its little pigeonholed edge against his young lips and began to play softly while he rode along. He played "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean" three times, with intricate variations of his own invention. Then he played "The Spanish Cavalier", and after he had played that twice, he sang it softly, each note true as a silver bell but so faint a man within pistol shot could not hear one note of the song.

"Say, darling, say, when I am far away-ay,
Sometimes you may think of me, dear!
Bright sunny days will soon pass away--
Remember what I say, and be true, dear!"

The kid was not thinking of any girl in particular while he sang that. He was singing because he felt like singing, and there was a yearn[Pg 48]ing tenderness in the song that seemed to fit his mood.

Twenty yards from the cabin he heard the plaintive cry of a night bird that sounded scared. After a guilty pause he answered it faithfully and rode on.

"Damn you, Tiger Eye," Babe cursed him with exasperated relief, "don't you know I darn near took a shot at yuh?"

"Thought yo'all would be in baid," the kid apologized in his melodious drawl.

"You thought wrong. I been on edge, wonderin' what was keepin' yuh."

"Shoah mighty sorry foh that, Babe."

The kid unsaddled Pecos, rubbed him dry and went whistling up the path. The cabin 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. Babe's gun was thrust inside his waistband just where his hand would drop easiest to the grip. Babe closed the door behind the kid, shutting out the lamplight from any one in the valley, and looked the kid over.

"I damn' near saddled up and took out after yuh, Tiger Eye," he said querulously. "These[Pg 49] are shore bad times to be ridin' around alone. Nester see yuh--well, you oughta know."

"Shoah do, Babe." The kid's eyes were shining with a strange, soft light.

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

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

"Yeah?" Babe looked startled. "Say, that might 'a' drawed the Poole riders out, at that, if they didn't know it was a frame-up. We been watchin' our chance to get 'em in the act, 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 they'd 'a' 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. He had discovered that Babe had made fresh coffee not so long ago, and he was cuddling the

pot with his fingers and trying to judge whether the coffee would be fit to drink without reheating.[Pg 50] He decided that it would, and reached for a cup hanging on a nail beside him.

"Say, you goin' to promise me yuh won't take no more chances like that?" Babe pressed the point.

"Shoah would hate to worry yo'all, Babe," the kid said softly, pouring coffee and not lifting his glance from the dark stream.

"You got something more under your hat than what you told me," Babe charged, hesitating between anger and amusement. "Damn you, Tiger Eye, what more you been doin' to-night?"

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 ahm down, and that ahm shoah was hit, just like I aimed it would be."

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

"I heahd men 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."[Pg 51]

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."

"I'll be right back," he said, and disappeared into the room.

"Just lay wheah yo'all feels the best, Babe," grinned the kid, swallowing the last of the coffee. "I'm sleepin' sound to-night, no mattah wheah I lay my haid."

CHAPTER SEVEN

[Pg 52]

RIM RIDER

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 to be mighty careful nobody down in the valley noticed and took a long shot at you, just for luck. Lead hornets buzzed quite plentiful down where the cow thieves lived, and a man had to be careful how he rode. But shucks! Yo'all couldn't hear that mouth organ any farther'n you could flip a rock with your thumb and finger.

So the kid played "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean" with all those variations he had invented while he rode the long trail from Texas. Any mouth-organ player could play "Bonnie", but nobody played it just like the kid. Same way with the "Mocking Bird." Yo'all had to know mockers before you could play that piece so it sounded like anything at all. The kid could do it. He could start the chorus[Pg 53] same as anybody, "Listen to the mocking bird! Listen to the mocking bird--" and from there on he could trill and warble and

twitter and cheep that old mouth organ for half a mile, Pecos going at a walk with his head swinging low, half asleep.

The kid didn't play the "Mocking Bird" now. You had to have your mind at rest and nothing to do but ride the long trail when you put the mocker into that tune. Couldn't play it worth shucks when you didn't know what minute yo'all might have to quit playing and grab your gun and shoot. So the kid played "My Bonnie" softly, and his eyes glanced warily this way and that as he rode.

Bad country up this way. Worse than down on the Brazos, when Pap and Buck Thomas got to fighting the Gonzales boys. Never knew what minute a Gonzales might try to pot shot yo'all just 'cause you were one of old Killer Reeves' boys. Up here it was worse, because the whole blamed country was out gunning for each other. 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. Well, the kid drew, all[Pg 54] right. No boy of old Killer Reeves could be slow with a gun and keep his hide on his back.

Funny, 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. The kid felt a warm wave of gratitude shoot up his spine at the thought of Babe's fine hospitality and friendship. Couldn't beat that nowhere, not even back home on the Brazos.

Shoah was a snaky kinda country, though. The kid didn't know just all the ins and outs of the fuss, for Babe Garner didn't tell any more than he had to. But he seemed to think the kid ought to be told enough so he wouldn't go riding straight up to a man again in this country.

The way Babe told it, the cow thieves, that let on like they were nesters, had banded together to wipe out the Poole, which was a big Eastern outfit. Babe said the nesters were stealing the Poole blind and the bosses back East wanted it stopped. Babe said the Poole wouldn't stand for no more, and they now looked on all cow thieves same as they did on [Pg 55] wolves,--varmints to be got rid of. Nate Wheeler was gunning for Poole riders, Babe said, and that was why he rode at the kid that-a-way.

Babe said the kid could stay right there in line camp with him and ride for the Poole. He said the kid would be on the payroll because the Poole needed good honest men and Babe would send word to the boss he had one over here. That was shoah white of Babe. Again the kid felt that warm, boyish glow of gratitude.

He played absently, his thoughts dwelling on what Babe had said. Babe seemed to think Poole riders had to be fighters. Reckon he ought to tell Babe he wouldn't kill a man for nobody; he'd seen too much of that back home. But Babe never had asked him yet if he'd kill a man. Babe knew he could shoot and would shoot, and he seemed to kinda take it for granted that meant shoot to kill. The kid hated to lay down on Babe, but it was kinda hard to explain just how he felt about killing. Anyway, Babe never asked him a word about that part. If he did, the kid would tell him straight out where he stood.

Poole riders kinda expected to down a man [Pg 56] for keeps if it came to gun play between them and nesters, the kid reckoned. Babe said ranching was just a blind with the nesters, and they really were outlaws that made a business of robbing and killing and slapping their brands on Poole stuff. Brand the calves and beef the cows, and peddle the meat to butchers in the towns around that stood in with the gang. Babe said the Poole had tried the law and it wouldn't work because the Poole was an Eastern firm and all the

wouldn't work, because the Poole was an Eastern firm and all the nesters and town folks hung together. No jury in the country would convict a cow thief, Babe said.

So the Poole was going to shoot it out with the gang. He said the kid must keep his weather eye peeled and not let any rider get within gunshot of him unless he was a friend and a Poole man. What the kid should do if the man turned out to be a rustler, Babe didn't say. Reckon he thought a man just up from the Brazos would know without any telling. Draw and shoot--and be darn shoah yo'all do it quicker than the other feller. That was the way it was when Nate Wheeler rode at him. If that was a sample of what folks in the valley were like, the kid decided that Babe Garner didn't make the story against the cow thieves half strong enough.[Pg 57]

Riding slowly along the rim of the bench land as he thought things over, the kid stared curiously at the country spread below. Little hills and wide valleys, all covered with grass and flowers, and meadow larks singing on every bush and weed, and a creek running along the bottom of every wrinkle between the hills--all down in there was cow-thief country. All that wide stretch away north to the Missouri was cow-thief country too, according to Babe. Back up here, on what Babe called the Big Bench, was Poole country. Nesters in the low land, Poole in the high country, and the cattle wanting to drift down off the Big Bench into the valley--or being driven where the grass looked green and the winding creeks cool, and only the war between the nesters and the Poole to make the valley bad range for Poole cattle.

That rough country away over there next the river, that was Bad Lands, according to Babe. That was where the cow thieves drove the cattle they stole. Had their little ranches back up here in the coulees and planted oats and wheat and ran their fences where all the best water and grass would be inside. Looked like honest

nesters getting a home fixed up for their families and never harming anybody[Pg 58] but they were all banded together against the Poole, stealing cattle, running off horses, shooting Poole riders on sight.

The kid's job was to ride along up here on the rim, just lazy like, and watch through field glasses for any bunch of cattle being rounded up or driven along in the nester country below. Anything that looked like a round-up down there, or even a bunch of riders going anywhere, the kid was to ride to the top of a small pinnacle, standing back from the rim of the bench, and signal with a little, round looking-glass Babe Garner had given him.

It wasn't much of a job. The kid would rather ride with Babe, wherever it was he had struck out for at daylight. But Babe didn't act like he wanted anybody along. Just gave the kid the field glasses and the little looking-glass and told him where to go and what to do, and to look out no nester went to bouncing bullets around him. Watch the valley and report any movement of men or cattle. Three quick flashes for a bunch of riders, and three, two, one for riders driving cattle. Then one flash if they went toward the Bad Lands, two for the river, three for the Big Bench. Poole headquarters was back somewhere on the Big Bench and[Pg 59] somebody at the ranch would get the signals, Babe said. Easy. Too blamed easy for Tiger Eye Reeves from down on the Brazos.

The kid watched faithfully for awhile, halting Pecos behind boulders while he got off and focused the glasses on this ranch and that ranch and the tranquil range land in between. Quiet as Sunday afternoon in a Quaker village, down there. Chickens walking around hunting grasshoppers in the edge of the grain fields--darn good glasses, that would show you a hen after a grasshopper three, four miles off! These belonged to Babe. The kid hoped he wouldn't be

needing them to-day. He liked Babe Garner. Shoah would hate to have anything happen to him. If any cow thief got Babe--The kid did not follow that thought to its conclusion, but his yellow right eye took on a menacing stare altogether deadly and misleading. They better not touch Babe Garner!

He mounted and rode slowly on to where new vistas presented themselves. Coulees whose high, sheltering arms had heretofore blocked his view lay wide open now to his sight, and the kid once more dismounted and settled himself comfortably on a rock while he inspected[Pg 60] each ranch in turn and compared it with that map of the valley he had found.

Nobody seemed to be stirring in the valley: no riders bobbing around on the levels, nobody working in the fields, no dust cloud showing where cattle were being held in a round-up. Babe had thought there might be some action to-day on account of Nate Wheeler being shot, but there wasn't. Reckon the nesters were laying low; waiting for dark, maybe. Over across there was Nate Wheeler's place, back in its deep coulee. The kid could see the trail down off Big Bench, where he had been riding along down, when Nate Wheeler came spurring straight at him hollering "Draw, you coyote!"

The kid's mouth drooped a little at the corners as the very spot seemed to spring right at him through the powerful glasses. Damn' fool, coming at him that-a-way without waiting to see who he was meeting up with. If all the nesters were like that one, it shoah did pay a man to watch out for 'em.

The kid swung the glasses farther into the coulee and along the trail to the gate, and on up to Wheeler's cabin. There he held them steady, little puckers showing in the skin around his eyes, he squinted so. His lips fell[Pg 61] slightly apart as he watched. No

acquainted so. His lips trembled slightly apart as he watched. No wonder the valley was empty and no nesters were stirring! Having a funeral for Nate Wheeler, that was why. Yard full of wagons and saddle horses, men standing around outside the house, not talking but just standing there, looking sour. Every one packing guns. A Poole man wouldn't stand no show a-tall in that crowd. About as much show as a brush rabbit with a pack of hounds. If they knew who it was shot Nate Wheeler--if they knew it was Babe Garner and Tiger Eye Reeves--hell shoah would be a-popping right soon!

"Nate Wheelah mus' be a right populah man," the kid murmured to himself. But his forehead pulled into deep lines of puzzlement while he gazed. Something about that crowd over there in the coulee nagged at him with a sense of strangeness, but it wasn't the guns, and it wasn't the harsh quiet of the men.

The kid sharpened the focus a little, still gazing with his forehead wrinkled, trying to figure out what was wrong. Now the men were edging back from the door--plain as if he stood in the yard with them he could see all they did; plain as looking at a play on the stage. Fetching the coffin out now. Just a board box[Pg 62] with strap handles nailed on, nesters all stretching their necks like turkeys in a grain 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.

Seemed like he could hear the wagons rattling. Never knew yo'all could bring wagons so close with glasses you could hear 'em rattle. The kid stared for two seconds longer and took 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[Pg 63] 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.

CHAPTER EIGHT

[Pg 64]

PETE GORHAM AGAIN

The kid needed no field glasses to see what happened next. A man on horseback came tearing up over the top of the little ridge. He started shooting, but he didn't hit anything at first and the team came on, leaving the road at the first turn and galloping straight down the slope. The driver didn't seem to care where they went, so long as they kept going.

The horseman spurred closer, still shooting, and at the third shot the

driver made a sudden dive down on one of the horses, rolled off onto the ground and lay still. The team shied violently aside and snagged the front wheels in a big clump of buckbush which they tried to straddle. Right lucky they stopped there--they'd have piled up in a narrow little gully in another ten feet. The girl jumped out and started running for the hill, the man taking after her, yelling at her to stop. But she didn't do it, though. She kept right on along the edge of the wash.[Pg 65]

She was a girl, all right. The kid knew that as soon as she jumped out and started running. She didn't run like a woman, kinda stiff and jerking her shoulders, taking little short steps and maybe hanging to her skirts with one hand, holding them up out of the way. This one legged it for the hill like a boy, her hair loose and waving out behind her like a yellow flag.

The fellow after the girl was trying to catch her before she got in among the rocks where he couldn't ride. He'd have to go it afoot then and she'd have the better chance. It kinda looked as if she might make it all right, especially when she went over that wash in one long jump like a deer and the fellow's horse balked and reared back on the edge. The man yelled again, pulled down with his gun and sent a bullet kicking up the dust right in front of her. That scared her so she stopped, not knowing which way to turn. The fellow didn't shoot again but took down his rope and jumped off his horse.

The kid was waiting, with his blue left eye squinted nearly shut and his yellow right eye open and staring like a tiger, watching till his supper walks a little closer. They kept coming closer and closer, and the kid's gun barrel[Pg 66] jabbed forward and spat its opinion of such doings.

The man was widening his loop as he ran, but he dropped it as his arm ierked down to his side. He wore two guns though. He started

and jerked down to his side. He wore two guns, though. He started to draw a second gun with his left hand, but the kid fired another shot. The man gave a lurch and almost fell. Then he turned and started running off up the slope, ducking this way and that, like a coyote dodging a wolf-hound. Suddenly he sat down right where he was and leaned over sideways, acting kinda sick.

When the kid took another look at the girl, she was lying on the ground all in a heap, like she'd fainted or been shot or something. He watched her for a minute and saw she didn't move, so he went jumping down the bluff like a loosened boulder, bringing smaller stones, gravel and sand along with him and gathering momentum as he came. He wished he could travel airline like his bullets, he could go so much quicker and easier.

Then, just as he was slipping and sliding and digging in his heels to stop himself beside the girl, a shyness seized him and dyed his face a deep crimson. He was plumb sorry for her and he hoped she wasn't hurt, but he hung back and[Pg 67] didn't want to touch her or turn her over to see if she was dead. Her hair was all down over her face, and it was the longest, yellowest hair he had ever seen in his life. One foot was thrust straight out beneath her plaid gingham skirt. The kid thought of a thoroughbred colt when he glanced at her ankle and looked quickly away. Then she gave a deep, gasping sigh and he stepped back a little farther. She had just fainted. She'd be coming to in a minute, and she wouldn't thank him for standing there gawping at her that-a-way.

The kid went on down the hill, a little surprised to see how far the girl had run from the wagon. Maybe he could do something for her pappy; he reckoned it was her old pap driving the horses, because he had long whiskers blowing out to one side of his head when he stood up, pouring the gad to the team. Shoah would be hell if the old man was killed. Fine doings, taking after an old man and a girl

like that!

The kid walked over and stood looking down at the fellow on the ground. The man glared up at him like a trapped wolf. A tall, lean man with a high thin nose and his eyes set too close together, meanness emanating from him like[Pg 68] a visible thing. Both ears were swollen and red, a puckery round hole showing in the outstanding shell of each. The kid eyed those ears with the peculiar and personal interest of one who gazes upon his handiwork and is rather proud of the job.

"When I plugged them eahs," he drawled contemptuously, "I shoah thought yo'all was just plain skunk. I wisht I'd known then yo'all was half skunk and half sidewindah!"

He turned and looked over to where the horses stood panting on the brink of the gully, the wagon tilted perilously over the stout old bush. It seemed as though the man huddled on the ground moved his legs a little; a feeble motion hardly more than a twitching. The kid walked over there and lifted him into the shade of the wagon.

Old man, all right. Her old pappy, shot without a chance in the world to help himself. Didn't even have a gun on him. Old farmer, by the look of him. Bald-headed and little and old. Skinny old neck, wrinkled like an apple that's laid out through a cold snap. Wasn't dead, though. The kid pulled the old man's shirt out of his overalls and took a look at the wound, small and bluish at the back, torn and bleeding[Pg 69] in front. Too far over to one side to do much harm. Reckon it was that knock on his head, right to one side of the bald spot where the hair was thin, that laid him cold.

The kid investigated the head injury, exploring with gentle fingers too wise for a boy. But he had grown up in a harsh school and he had looked upon many hurts in the twenty years that he had lived.

That shot in the side--that wouldn't amount to much. The knock on the head might or might not be serious, the kid thought. Didn't seem to be any crack in the skull, but still you couldn't tell, with an old man like him. Have to wait and see how it panned out.

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 lying 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 man's head up and tilting the jug to the ashy 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[Pg 70] hair, and after that he trickled a pungent little stream on the bullet wound, front and back. Pap always claimed whisky was good for hurts. Kept out blood poison. Carbolic acid or whisky--Pap always favored the whisky.

The kid was thorough. He tilted the jug again to the old man's mouth, and this time there was a definite attempt to swallow the stuff. The man's faded blue eyes opened and he stared vaguely up into the kid's face.

"Reckon yo'all's feelin' 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 itse'f a trail in yo'all's side, but it ain't deep, nohow."

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

"Pete Gorham, he ain't feelin' so peart himse'f," the kid observed mildly, glancing over to where he had left Pete. Abruptly he laid the

midly, glancing over to where he had left Pete. Abruptly he laid the old man down and stood up.

"Yo'all ovah theah, *seddown!*" he called sharply, and went over and sat Pete down without ceremony. He yanked off Pete's suspenders[Pg 71] and tied his feet together with them before he returned to the wagon.

"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." And he bethought him to tilt the jug again to the old man's lips, quick before the girl got there. Women were queer. They'd know there was a jug in the house and they'd sweep all around it, but they made a fuss if their men took a drink of it. The kid had always wondered at the way his mother and sisters acted about Pap's whisky jug.

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. "Throwed me out. Where's Nellie? She was in the wagon when the team run away."

She came, wearily choosing the easiest way through the rocks and brush, her long yellow hair pulled forward over her left shoulder and her fingers moving mechanically with three strands big as a well rope, braiding them together as she walked. Her face was pale and[Pg 72] 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. When she came up he retreated to the nearest horse, which stood with sweaty flanks heaving spasmodically after the run. The kid stood at his head and

pulled the forelock smooth under the brow band while he watched the girl with sidelong glances from under his hat brim.

CHAPTER NINE

[Pg 73]

NELLIE

"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, and you remembered you never got your gun back from the bartender before you left town?"

"Town? What town?" The old man lifted a shaking hand to his head and winced as his fingers touched the lump there. "Horses run away-I remember that. Did we go to town? I can't remember any town we went to, Nellie." [Pg 74]

"You *don't*?" The girl sat back and looked at her father with a puzzled kind of horror. "Don't you remember we went to Nate Wheeler's funeral yesterday, and you read a chapter in the Bible there at the grave over by Hans Becker's house, where they had him?"

"Becker, Becker? No-o, I can't--"

"Well, don't you remember we drove right from the funeral on into Badger Creek, and stayed all night at Uncle Jim's place? And don't you--"

"Jim?" The old man's mental groping was painful to witness. "Jim--kinda remember something about Jim--don't know who he was--"

"Uncle Jim tried to make us stay in town till the Poole outfit is cleaned out. And you wouldn't, because you were afraid they'd steal everything off the ranch. You--were drinking." In spite of her worry and her pity, her voice sharpened at the charge. "You were so mad at Uncle Jim you forgot to go back and get your gun, so when Pete Gorham come after us--"

"Pete Gorham! Who's he? I don't remember any--"

The kid's hand left its slow stroking of the[Pg 75] horse's sweaty jaw. He walked over and stood beside the kneeling girl, bashful but determined.

"Scuse me," he said diffidently, gunhand to his hat brim when she looked up. "Did yo'all say Nate Wheelah's funeral taken place yeste'day?"

The girl stood up. her yellow head iust about even with the kid's

pocket, where the mouth organ stood on end alongside his bag of Bull Durham. The kid's ears turned a slow and angry red under her gaze.

"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 know--" She cast a swift, suddenly enlightened glance upward. "Are you one of them Poole rim riders?"

The kid turned his head and sent a glance back up the hill. It looked pretty high from down here, and the rough ledge formation at the top did much resemble a rim. His eyes turned to the girl and the red slowly faded from his ears and neck.

"I happened to be up theah when Pete Gorham shot yoh pap," he said, with slow mean[Pg 76]ing. "I taken it upon myse'f 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. "If it was you killed my son Ed--"

"No, suh, it wasn't me." The kid's thumbs went instinctively to his gun belt, hooking themselves negligently over the edge; as negligently as a tiger draws its front paws back toward its breast

when it hears a strange sound in the bush. "If I was a killah, Pete Gorham would be daid right now, 'stead of settin' ovah theah with both ahms broke."

Both the girl and her father looked in the direction indicated by the kid's languid left thumb. The girl gave an involuntary shudder and closed her eyes for a second.

"Even if he's 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." [Pg 77]

"Yo'all needn't be," the kid said coldly. "I taken plumb dislike foh that hombre, fu'st time I evah saw him."

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

"Nate Wheelah's funeral," the kid finished softly. "Yes'm, I had the pleasuah of eah-mahkin' Pete the othah 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 that skunk, 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. They wanted to get away from him. Well, he was quite as anxious that they should go.

While the girl was tearing cloth from her petticoat to bandage over

the bullet wound, the old man kept bewailing the loss of his gun. The kid kept his back turned until he knew[Pg 78] that she had finished. Her pap wanted another drink, and the girl didn't want him to have it. Just like a woman. Rode with the jug in the wagon; knew it was there, knew it was full of whisky; and yet she didn't want her old pap to have a drink now when he needed it to brace him for the ride home. Plumb simple, the way women acted sometimes.

The horses refused to back into the scraggy branches of the bush, and only reared and struck at him with their front feet, when he stood with hands on their bridles, trying to force them backwards. The kid calmed them with soft words and a pat or two. Then he unhooked them from the wagon and led them out of the way while he lifted the wagon off the bush with a powerful heave or two. The girl left her father to come and help him cramp the wagon and back it around so it headed up the slope again, but she didn't say a word, and when he went for the horses she returned to her father, her long yellow braid swinging on her shoulders as she walked. The kid caught that detail in a swift glance as he drove the horses to the wagon.

He worked swiftly, surely, his capable hands never wasting a motion, never uncertain of the[Pg 79] thing they should accomplish. The spring seat had jounced loose from its grip on the wagon box and he replaced it with two yanks and a shove that set the clamps in place. The wagon tongue had a splintery crack down half its length, and he sliced off the ends of the long reins and strapped the tongue so that it would hold together for the trip home--wherever that was. He picked up the scattered grocery packages and replaced them in the box, found the old quilt that had been folded to serve as a cushion on the spring seat and refolded it lengthwise, shaking off the dirt it had collected when it fell from the wagon. This must serve as a bed for the old man. Not much better than the bare wagon box,

but it would help a little. 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 hawses a minute," he said stiffly, "I'd be shoah pleased to tote yoh pap ovah and lay him in the wagon."

A hot streak went crimpling up his spine when her hands touched his in taking the lines, and because of it he turned away so that she could not see how red his face was all of a sudden. Burned like fire when he stooped and[Pg 80] lifted the old man up in his arms like a child.

"I kin 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.

The kid had brought the jug along, dangling it awkwardly beside his legs so the girl wouldn't see it if she should happen to look that way. When he had the old man around at the back of the wagon he gave him another swig of whisky, his broad shoulders blocking the girl's view of the reprehensible proceeding. And when the old man's hands reluctantly let go of the wicker-covered jug, the kid poured whisky into one palm and bathed the high lump alongside the bald spot before he corked the jug and lifted him into the wagon. It was not going to be a comfortable trip, but it was the best he could do.

"We're much obliged," the girl said constrainedly, as the kid walked past her to the horses' heads, so that she might safely climb up to the seat. "Even if you are a rim rider for the Poole, I want to thank you for--all you've done."

"Don't mention it," said the kid, in the carefully polite tone his school teacher had taught[Pg 81] him not so many years ago. "It was no

trouble at all."

She looked at him doubtfully, lifted a foot to the hub of the front wheel and hesitated, glancing in upon her father, who was babbling incoherent threats against the Poole riders who had shot his son. Then she looked at Pete Gorham, who sat cursing beside a sagebush, 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.

"That don't make any difference. Pete's part Injun. He'll wait." 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--" From the corner of his eye the kid saw the quick, anxious look she gave him. She took a long breath. "The valley's wise to you rim riders! They--you shouldn't believe all you see."

She seemed to think that was saying more than she dared, for she turned sharply away[Pg 82] and climbed into the wagon. The kid stood back and tilted his hat for good-by and the team lunged forward in little rabbit jumps, until the slope and the girl's firm hands on the lines slowed them down. She could drive, all right. The kid waited until he was sure of that before he turned to other matters.

He went over to Pete Gorham and sacrificed an almost new bandanna and his neckerchief to make bandages, and adjusted them with crude efficiency, while Pete snarled threats and curses.

But the kid didn't care for that. He had so many other things to think about that he scarcely heard what Pete was saying. He removed the suspenders from Pete's ankles, lifted him to his feet and faced him toward the valley.

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

CHAPTER TEN

[Pg 83]

YOUTH WILL DREAM

The kid sat in the shade of a boulder on the rim of the Big Bench, scanning the valley through field glasses that seemed irresistibly drawn to one certain spot no more than half a mile distant. She could drive, all right. That damned pinto was a mean devil--shying at his shadow and always biting at the sorrel, trying to pick a fuss. The girl could handle 'em all right, though. Yellow braid blowing across her shoulders like a great rope of gold shining in the sun--The kid caught himself maundering and moved the glasses away from the team and wagon just dipping into a hollow.

There went Pete Gorham, heading straight out across the valley to some ranch on the other side. Staggered like he was drunk, but the

kid reckoned that two shot arms were enough to make a man feel kinda sick. Bullets through both ears, bullets through both arms--have to start in on his legs next, if Pete tried any more cussedness.[Pg 84]

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. Pap shoah woulda laid Pete out too dead to kick. 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 you'd shot it out. Pete Gorham would shoah get his, some of these days, but the kid didn't want to be the one that did the getting.

Funny about the nesters being wise to Poole rim riders. The kid wondered if the girl meant there was somebody hiding out amongst the rocks, waiting for a pot shot at him. Didn't seem to be--not right along here, anyway. They could have downed him like a rabbit while he was climbing the hill. Would, too, if they had been cached within shooting distance. Funny the girl didn't realize that. Reckon maybe she was just giving him a hint, same as Babe did, so he wouldn't ride along too careless. If the nesters really were wise to the riders on the rim, watching the valley, why didn't they have somebody up here, ready to take a shot at one? If he was a nester and knew the Poole had somebody keeping cases, he shoah would guard the old rim. He'd fix it so they[Pg 85] couldn't come snooping along and see everything that went on down in the valley.

The very silence and emptiness and apparent safeness of the rim troubled the kid. They knew, all right, or the girl wouldn't have told him so--and be so scared to tell. Rim rider--a Poole rim rider. That shoah sounded like they were known and talked about, or the nesters would not have a name to call them by. Didn't bother her any to think of it, either, any more than it did to call him a Texas killer. That's what Pete Gorham had called him too, that time he

killer. That's what Pete Gornam had called him too, that time he earmarked Pete.

The kid abruptly swung the glasses over to where the funeral procession had been starting away from Nate Wheeler's place. 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 to-day for? The kid couldn't see any sense to that. Unless that was what she meant when she said he wasn't to believe all he saw.

Now the coulee across the valley lay empty, open to the sun and the wind, that swayed the tall weeds and bushes. With the glasses he swept a prairie-dog village and saw the fat little rodents running from mound to mound, comically busy with their own affairs, stopping to chitter and gossip while one stood up beside his burrow, keeping watch over the town. Nobody within half a mile of them, that was sure, or there wouldn't be so many out of their holes. The funeral procession was gone. Nate Wheeler's place was deserted.

The kid searched the valley with eyes keen as a hawk's. He glanced up at the sun and made a swift mental calculation. He hadn't spent more than an hour down there at the foot of the hill. A funeral wouldn't go far in an hour. Two miles--three miles, maybe, if the horses stepped right out.

Plumb strange, that was, having a funeral twice for the same man. At Becker's place, yesterday, the girl said. Didn't mean to let that slip, either. Said he was buried right on the ranch. The kid got out his map and looked for Becker's place, then tried to locate it in the valley. All he could see was the crablike claws of a coulee so nearly closed that even from the rim he could not look in upon the ranch. No Poole rider could see what was going on at Becker's--at least,

not from this side of the valley.[Pg 87]

The kid mounted and rode slowly back the way he had come, watching this way and that, mindful of the girl's warning but keeping an eye on the valley too. Especially on the wagon crawling up a long hill, the old man in the back sitting up and trying to steady the jug to his mouth. The kid chuckled boyishly at that performance, and he grinned when the girl finally set the brake and stopped the team, and climbed into the back of the wagon and took the jug away from her pap, arguing furiously with him. The kid's eyes softened when he saw her bite her lips, on the brink of tears.

Darned old fool, what'd he want to go and make her cry for? Must have hit that jug of booze pretty often before the kid looked, because he shoah did act orrey-eyed, waggling his darned old fool head and arguing and gesticulating with his hands. Side couldn't hurt him much, or his head either, the way he acted. Man as old as him oughta have some sense. Getting drunk right in front of his own daughter! Didn't show much respect for her, making her cry like that, after all she'd had to stand for--Pete Gorham trying to kidnap her right in broad daylight that-a-way.

The kid turned away from the vivid panto[Pg 88]mime in the 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 much like that darned stuck-up girl back home that had made fun of his yellow eye. This girl, Nellie, never noticed his eye. Never gave it a second look. Ladylike little thing--and that old rip of a pappy of hers was making her cry! The kid wanted to go down there and give the old man a shock enough talking to, but

down there and give the old man a shoah-enough talking to, but he'd need Pecos and there wasn't much chance of getting a horse down off the hill right along there. Take an hour to catch up with 'em afoot. Longer than that; it was farther than it looked, when you took into consideration all the hills and hollows that would have to be crossed.

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[Pg 89] seen, and maybe they just had a fake funeral to fool any Poole rim rider that happened to be keeping cases. Plumb foolish. Easiest 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. The nesters would never think of a valley man attacking a nester. They'd blame the Poole, and they'd go running after them harder than ever. If he hadn't come along and stopped the thing when he did, Pete would have a fine frame-up on the Poole. Shooting an old man in the back and carrying off the girl would shoah stir things up around here. But Pete didn't make it stick. The kid had come along and fixed Pete good and plenty for a right smart while, and the girl and her pappy knew now just what kind of a skunk Pete was. There'd be a hanging bee, he reckoned, as soon as the nesters found out about it.

Now the girl was up on the seat again, driv[Pg 90]ing, and the jug was up there alongside her, out of the old man's reach. The kid wished he could change places with that jug--and blushed at the

foolishness of the thought. But he watched her, riding along the rim in the direction she was taking, so that he could keep opposite the wagon. He was not afraid of being ambushed from the rocks. He felt very certain he had settled that possibility when he settled Pete Gorham.

Little by little, the kid pieced together the sentences she had spoken. "Are you a rim rider?--Even if he is a Poole rider, he's done us a big favor--" This to her old pappy on the ground. She meant the way he had stopped Pete Gorham. She--when she was going to get into the wagon, she stopped long enough to come right up to him and tell him--Well, maybe she didn't tell him anything much; anything Babe hadn't told him, except that the valley was wise to their rim ridin'. But it was the way she said it. It was the tone of her voice.

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[Pg 91] voice was like a tin pan. Funny 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. Team might run away, or her old pappy might take and fall out of the wagon, the old fool. Girl like that oughta be wearing pretty clothes and sitting in a rocking chair making lace, or playing the organ, or something like that. 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, gentle horse.

But the kid soon changed that imaginary setting for her. If she were

But the kid soon changed that imaginary setting for her. If she were the daughter of a rich cattleman, he wouldn't be her equal. She'd be so far above him he wouldn't even have the right to go and sit in her parlor on Sunday. All he could do would be to tip his hat when she rode by. No, he reckoned she was all right just as she was. Time enough for a silk dress and a nice parlor when--well, when she got into a home of her own. She wasn't so far up in the[Pg 92] world she wouldn't look at a fellow just because he was a cowboy working for wages. Even if he was a Poole rider. Her voice didn't sound as if she'd hate a fellow for that.

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. It wasn't down on the crude map he carried, but he could have ridden straight to her ranch on the blackest night. Over across the valley a fellow might be able to look down into that basin from the rim. The kid's eyes chose a point where he meant to try it, first chance he got.

He got off Pecos and found himself a shady place under a shelving rock and sat down, resting his elbows on his knees that he might hold the glasses steadier. 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 showed above the ridge. One place, where the ridge dipped a little, the kid thought he could make out part of the roof of a building. Might be rocks, but it shoah did look like a roof.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

[Pg 93]

THE FUNERAL ON COTTON CREEK

The shadow of the Big Bench crept farther and farther out into the valley. The kid traced its bold outline dreamily, his gaze wandering here and there, but like a compass needle swinging to the north, always coming back to the line of cottonwoods running up behind the ridge, and to that brown splotch which might be the roof of a house. He wondered if there were hired men on the ranch to do the chores. Nesters didn't hire much help--not if they were honest. Good-looking team and a pretty good harness and wagon, though. No poor trash would have an outfit like that. Maybe there was some fellow there--somebody she liked--

The kid stirred uneasily and let the glasses drop from his eyes. A long, oddly attenuated shadow was sliding stealthily down the rocks beside him, a big hat and a pair of shoulders growing longer as he looked. The kid sprang up[Pg 94] 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. "Saw a leg sticking out from behind the rock and I thought shore they'd got yuh, Tiger Eye. Say, that's the second time you've throwed down on me. You always that quick?"

"Reckon I try to be, Babe," the kid drawled diffidently. "Pap always told me I nevah'd have to be too slow moah'n just once."

"I coulda got yuh that time, though, if I'd wanted to. Any nester want to slip on yuh, he could'a' done it." Babe eyed him curiously. "You been asleep?"

"No. I been watchin' the valley." The kid lifted the glasses by their rawhide thong to show Babe, but he did not lift his eyes to meet Babe's keen studying glance.

"Hunh!" Babe's tone sounded skeptical. "See anything?"

"Saw a fune'l ovah to Nate Wheelah's place."

"You didn't report it to the Poole," Babe[Pg 95] charged grimly. "What was the matter? Paralyzed, so you couldn't git to the pinnacle?"

The kid's yellow right eye took on the curious, cold stare of a tiger. That was because of Babe's rebuke. But the eye softened immediately, and that was because the kid loved Babe.

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

"Doin' what?"

"Shootin' a nestah, suh." Funny, but the kid never had called Babe sir before; but then, Babe never had used just that tone to the kid.

"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."

"You son-of-a-gun!" Babe stepped forward and clapped a hand admiringly down on the kid's shoulder. "I knowed there was some reason why you let that damn' fake funeral get by. I told the boys you had a good reason for not giving the signal. Got you a nester, hunh? I knowed you was the goods, Tiger Eye!"

"Yo'all says it was a fake fune'l, Babe?"

"Shore, it was a fake. One of the boys got wise 't they was goin' to pull off something.[Pg 96] You was sent over here to keep cases, but one of the boys over at the Poole happened to see 'em when they come up on the Bench. Old man, he suspicioned something was wrong about that percession, so he sends us all over to the buryin' ground over on Cotton Creek. That's where they was headin' for. Shore had more mourners than what they figured on!"

"Yo'all didn't fight 'em, Babe?"

"No--shore, we didn't. Ain't p'lite to fire on a funeral, Tiger Eye. But we shore beat 'em to that buryin' ground! Thirty-five punchers was settin' on their horses back on the ridge about a hundred yards away, when that funeral percession come along. There wasn't no grave dug, so we set there and watched 'em dig it.

"They shore acted mournful, Tiger Eye! Them with six-guns and us with rifles laid across our saddles and never sayin' a damn' word. They never, either. But you bet yore sweet life they was thinkin' a-plenty! Nervous as cats. In a damn' hurry too. Didn't dig that grave more'n two feet deep."

"Yo'all shoah they buried Nate Wheelah ovah theah?" The kid was trying to keep his glance away from a certain line of cottonwoods in the valley.[Pg 97]

"Nate Wheeler? Naw, they never buried Nate Wheeler there. Jim Poole's nobody's fool. He saw through their little scheme right off. They buried *something*, all right, because we set up there on the ridge and watched 'em, so they had to. I guess you don't sawvy, Tiger Eye. You're a stranger in the country. It's like this. Right up the creek, about two miles from that burying ground, is the Poole ranch, and it's a good seven miles across to Cotton Creek from here. If they got over on Cotton Creek with a funeral percession, they could sneak on up the creek to the Poole. Seven miles of bald prairie, and four miles under cover. Sawvy now?"

"Shoah do, Babe," said the kid, his thoughts flashing to the girl and what little she had dared to say.

"They thought nobody'd ever think a funeral would turn itself into a raid. They know they're watched, and they know the Old Man is kinda hangin' back and don't want to start nothin'. So they frames up a little su'prise party of their own. They shore had it," Babe chuckled, pulling out his little yellow book of papers. "Nothin' to do but go on and bury what they brought and go off about their business. And that's what they done." [Pg 98]

"Shoah hope yo'all didn't have no trouble, Babe."

"Never had a word of trouble, Tiger Eye. Old Man, he was runnin' this and he won't start nothin'." Babe's eyes veiled themselves suddenly from the kid's questioning stare. "Know what they done, Tiger Eye? They knowed they had to go through with that buryin' or we'd smell a rat. So they did. They buried a coffin full of rifles they aimed to use on us. When they was gone, the old man had us dig up the box and open it."

Babe folded a paper into a trough, sifted in a little tobacco, evened

Babe rolled a paper into a trough, slipped in a little tobacco, evened it with a careful finger tip, rolled it deftly and drew the edge of the paper lightly along the tip of his tongue before he pressed it down and folded up one end. He fished a match from a pocket, flicked his thumb-nail across the head and got a flame, and lighted the cigarette, then snapped the match stub in two and dropped the pieces at his feet. The kid watched him, his mind piecing together certain details of the story which Babe did not know.

"I shore was worried about you, Kid," Babe said finally, drawing a mouthful of smoke. "The Old Man was kinda dubious about you.[Pg 99] But I told him you're on the square and you'd 'a' signaled from the pinnacle if something hadn't happened."

"Shoah would, Babe. That fume'l looked plumb strange to me. I had the glasses awn 'em and I was watchin' to see wheah they went. Then directly I had to get right busy myse'f."

"Where'd that feller jump yuh, Tiger Eye--if it's a fair question?"

"Back down the rim about a mile."

"Unh-hunh. Musta took yuh quite a while." Babe fanned the smoke away from his face while he looked hard at the kid.

"Takes a right smaht while, Babe, to trap a wolf." A strange, implacable look came into the kid's boyish face. Babe looked at him and looked away again.

"Shore. Well, let's go," he said after a silence, and there was a new note of respect in his voice. "I'll tell the Old Man how it was. You done the right thing, Tiger Eye."

CHAPTER TWELVE

[Pg 100]

WHAT BABE DOESN'T KNOW

In the cabin at Cold Spring line camp that evening, Babe Garner lay on his bunk with a novel held before his face, but he didn't turn two leaves in an hour. He was listening to the kid play his mouth organ, and he was wondering a little at the breed of men that came up from the Brazos.

Hard—that's what Babe called the kid. Smooth cheeks and wavy red hair. Always ready to give you a smile for every pleasant word you spoke. Not much to say, but with a voice soft and mellow and full of music. But hard. Hard as nails. Kill a man in the afternoon and sit and play the mouth organ like that all evening. Babe was pretty hard himself, but he wasn't as hard as that.

Over by the stove, with his booted feet cocked up on the hearth, which he had neatly brushed with a wild duck's wing, the kid was playing the mouth organ, his slim browned fingers[Pg 101] cupped and touching the metal where the nickel was worn through to the brass.

He played "Listen to the Mocking Bird" with all the trills and warbles and low mating calls and shrill pipings he had ever heard from the mockers flitting about in the hackberry bushes along the Brazos. He

played "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean" three times, with a haunting wistfulness in the tones that made Babe Garner chew his underlip and think yearningly of a girl he used to know in Wyoming when he was about as old as Tiger Eye.

And then the kid played another tune which he had never cared much about until to-day, and his mind clung to the words until his cheeks were hot to the touch of his fingers:

Come love, come, the boat lies low--
The moon shines bright on the old bayou;
Come love, come--oh, come along with me
And 'll take you down-n-n to Tennessee!

Babe spoke from the bunk, when the kid's dreams could no longer be compassed by the music and he sat staring at the smoky bottom of the dishpan hanging back of the stove--and seeing a girl running toward him, her yel[Pg 102]low hair flying out like a golden pennant behind her.

"Say, Tiger Eye, you shore can make a mouth organ talk!"

"Shoah talks to me, sometimes, Babe," the kid murmured in his soft Texas drawl.

"Time to roll in, though. We got t' be ridin' at dawn."

"Comin' directly, Babe." The kid set one foot on the floor and laid the other across his knee, tugging gently at heel and toe of his Number Six riding boot. Small feet were a mark of the Reeves family on the Brazos. Small feet and keen eyes and a gun hand steady as a rock.

"Moah rim ridin', Babe?" The kid had bethought him of the half-

empty water buckets and was stamping his foot into his high-heeled boot again.

"Why? Yuh like rim ridin', Tiger Eye?"

"Shoah do, Babe."

Hard! Just a kid--twenty last winter, he had said--couldn't even raise more than a little reddish fuzz on his upper lip. But hard! Why, men with half a dozen notches on their gun had more feeling than this kid showed. Play like that on the mouth organ right after--oh, hell! Babe sat up on the edge of the[Pg 103] bunk to pull off his own boots, but instead of doing it right then, he sat staring at the kid's dreamily smiling profile.

"Yuh shore look happy to-night, Tiger Eye."

The kid stood up and stretched his strong young arms to the ridgepole. From his slender middle his leather cartridge belt sagged to the right with the weight of his heavy six-shooter in its holster. His yawn was healthily sleepy but still smiling.

"Shoah feel that-a-way, Babe."

Babe pulled off a boot with a vicious yank and sat holding it in one hand while he eyed the kid.

"Damned if I can see what there is to be happy about, Tiger Eye."

The kid stood with his thumbs hooked inside his gun belt and stared reflectively at Babe while he considered that remark.

"Damned if I can eithah, Babe." He picked up the water buckets and went out into the night.

Babe looked after him, gave a grunt of complete bafflement and dropped the boot with a thud. Hard! A killer that loved to kill! Born in him, most likely! Babe frowned as he turned[Pg 104] back the blankets to crawl in. He liked the kid; but damn it, he was too cold-blooded. Too hard.

"Stahs are shoah big and close to-night, Babe," the kid said later, lifting the lantern chimney in its wire cage to blow out the flame. "'Peahs like yo'all can most reach up and touch 'em with yoah hands."

Babe rolled over and looked at the kid.

"Some folks can easier touch hell fire than stars," he said significantly.

"I'm reachin' foh stahs to-night, Babe." The kid's lips looked tender and smiling still, as he pursed them to blow out the light.

He stood a minute staring dreamily down at the flame. Yellow like her hair. Waving a little--her hair had waves in it too. He blew out the flame with a quick breath and his lips formed a word secretly in the dark. Nellie. The kid blushed and crept hastily over Babe and into his own place against the wall.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TEXAS TRAINING

The air was clean and crisp and drops of dew on the grass winked like diamonds in the sun. The horses had galloped steadily for more than a mile, but now they had settled down to a walk and the reins lay loosely along their necks. Riding so, a habit born of the long trail up from Texas took hold of Tiger Eye. Instinctively his hand went to his breast pocket and pulled out his mouth organ, and he began to play soft snatches of old melodies as he rode.

The music seemed to adapt its rhythm to the footsteps of his buckskin horse Pecos. It timed the easy swing of the kid's slim body in the saddle, and the occasional clink of his iron-bound stirrups against Babe Garner's wooden ones. The tune didn't matter; a medley of this thing and that thing drifting along with his idling thoughts.

Come, love, come--the boat lies low,
The moon shines bright on the old bayou--
[Pg 106]

When the kid played that, he thought of the girl down in the valley behind him. Funny, but she seemed to come right to mind when he played that old song. Reckon her hair must come below her knees when it was unbraided. Nellie. The mouth harp cannily began to warble "Nelly Bly" with a gaspy silence where the high note should have been.

Reckon her old pappy was a rustler, like all the rest of them down in the valley. Leastways, the kid had gathered that Nellie's brother Ed had been shot by a Poole rider, and they shoah seemed to hate the

name of Poole.

Now and then he scanned the great level prairie and the distant mountains still capped with snow, though the horses scuffed through wild flowers down here on Big Bench. Once a spray of wild larkspur caught his eye and he leaned from the saddle and plucked it, and wore it like a cockade at the side of his big gray hat. The blue almost matched his left eye, which he turned half shyly toward Babe.

The kid didn't feel that he knew Babe, even after a week of living with him. Babe always seemed to have a lot on his mind. Laughed quite a lot and joshed a good deal, but if yo'all just looked at his eyes he never seemed to laugh at[Pg 107] all. Gray eyes are like that sometimes. But Babe shore was a fine man and a fine friend, and the kid wasn't the kind to pick flaws in any one he liked.

A coyote going late home from his hunting slid up out of a shallow ditch and halted for a surprised look before he went streaking it across the prairie. Babe drew to shoot, but the pow-w of the kid's forty-five came just as Babe's gun was leaving its holster--and the kid scarcely left off his playing. He put away mouth organ and gun simultaneously as he rode over to where the coyote lay limp in the weeds along the ditch. Babe followed, holding in his horse that didn't like coyotes, dead or alive. He was looking queerly at the kid.

"You always that quick on the draw, Tiger Eye?"

"Shucks, Babe, that wasn't quick. Looked at him a second befo' I thought about shootin'." The kid was off his buckskin, turning the dead animal to inspect its hide.

Babe studied him, a frowning intentness in his gaze. Apparently the bullet hole between the coyote's slant eyes didn't interest Tiger Eye at all. It was the fur he was feeling, wondering if it were worth taking.

He decided that it wasn't.[Pg 108]

"Old he of 'em all," he drawled slightly, as he remounted Pecos and reined him across the ditch.

"Good shot," Babe tentatively praised, glancing back as they rode away.

"Couldn't miss, that close, Babe."

"I've saw fellers that could--flash shot like that," Babe grinned, his sidelong glance watching the kid's face.

"Couldn't around my old pappy; not and keep yoah hide on." The kid got out his mouth organ again. So far as he was concerned, the incident was closed. Shot a coyote--shucks! Not worth talking about.

Babe got out his tobacco and papers and rolled a cigarette as he rode along. He lighted it, blew out the match, broke the stub in two and dropped the pieces to the ground. The kid was watching for that little trick and his eyes twinkled when Babe's fingers went true to form. Almost a week now he had lived with Babe, and never had he seen Babe throw away a whole match stub. Always broke it in two. The kid wondered why, but he didn't ask. Pap shoah had learned him not to ask questions unless he plumb had to.

Far ahead across the level benchland a faint[Pg 109] veil of dust crept slowly toward the north, carried far on the breeze that fanned the kid's left cheek as he rode. Cattle, bunched, and riders driving 'em. The kid got that at a glance, because he knew horses would move faster, and grazing animals wouldn't kick up such a dust. His eyes lingered on the low-hanging dust cloud. Poole cattle, they must be. Reckon maybe Babe was taking him over so he could go to

work on round-up. The kid hoped so, for that was the work he wanted and had come all the way up from the Brazos to find.

He looked at Babe and caught Babe's eyes just sliding away from him. Looking at that tiger eye, the kid reckoned. Must look plumb strange alongside a blue one, and 'peahed like Babe couldn't get used to it somehow. Always eyeing him lately. But the kid didn't mind—not from Babe. He put away his mouth organ, lifted his big hat and ran slim brown fingers through his thick hair that just missed being a flaming red.

"Shoah will enjoy swingin' a rope again, Babe," he said in his soft drawl.

"Swingin' a rope?" Babe's voice had a startled note.

"Er ridin' herd—anything, so it's cows."[Pg 110]

The kid reckoned maybe they wouldn't put a stranger at roping right off. Had their own rope hands, he reckoned. Kinda brash of him to talk like he expected to go right to work as a top hand, yet he knew he could qualify all right, if the Poole only gave him a chance.

Shucks, of course he could swing a lass rope! Learned to throw a loop same time he learned to ride a horse and shoot a gun, and that was so far back the kid couldn't even remember his first attempt. Pap shoah started in early training his boys. Ride and shoot and lass and keep yoah mouth shut, tell the truth and give every man a square deal; the kid had learned his lessons young and he had learned them well. But he couldn't tell Babe that, of course. That would be too much like making his brag, and the kid would bite his tongue off before he did that.

"Yo're ridin' line with me," Babe reminded him shortly. "Old Man

ain't likely to put yuh on round-up."

The kid did not argue the point, but his eyes clung to the slow moving dust cloud, and because his heart was there he unconsciously communicated his desire to the horse. Pecos gave his head a knowing toss and lifted himself into a lope.[Pg 111]

"O-oh, I'm a poah lonesome cowboy an' fah from my ho-ome. An' if yoh don't like me yoh can leave me a-lo-one--"

sang the kid.

"I was headin' for the ranch," Babe called, galloping abreast of him. "But if you want to take a look at the cattle, we can swing that way, I guess. Old Man called us in to report. We'll have to fan the breeze if we ride by the herd."

His tone was not enthusiastic, but the kid took no notice of that.

"Beat yo'all to that line of bresh, Babe," he called, and leaned forward. Pecos ran like a wolf, Babe's horse beating a swift tattoo behind him. At the line of brush that bordered a shallow watercourse, dry save in time of rain or melting snows, the kid set up his buckskin in two stiff-legged jumps and waited for Babe to come thundering up.

"Damn you, Tiger Eye, you got a runnin' start on me!" Babe swore, laughing away the sting of the oath.

"Shucks, Babe, yo'all shoah needs Texas trainin'," grinned the kid. "Hawse needs moah laigs too. This heah Pecos hawse--" he caught himself back from too open a boastfulness. "Runnin' stah't's what I always aim to git, Babe.[Pg 112] He--he kin mighty nigh outrun a bullet, I reckon."

"Yeah, he's fast," Babe conceded, riding down into the gully ahead of the kid. "This old pelter never could run for sour apples. That brown I ride, he's shore a drifter."

"Shoah has got the look of one, Babe," the kid amiably agreed.

Riders were visible now in the fringes of the dust cloud. Riders and a slow-moving river of backs seen dimly as the breeze whipped up the haze. Cattle going to some chosen round-up ground. The kid's eyes glistened at the thought. Dust and the bawling herd, swinging lasso and the blue, acrid smoke of branding iron eating through the hair and searing its mark in the hide. Shouts, laughter, good-humored jibes, and a headlong pace to camp and the steaming Dutch ovens at supper time. Heaped-up plate balanced in your lap, big cup of black coffee in your hand, fragrant steam of it in your nostrils as you blew across the surface to cool it for your thirsty lips.

"I'll ride over and see who's in charge," Babe said suddenly, and struck his horse with the quirt he carried.[Pg 113]

The kid's hand tightened on the reins. A cold weight fell like a lump of iron upon his chest. He didn't know those riders up ahead. They were not the same old boys, with Pap, tall and hawk-eyed, on his big horse, riding here and there, giving his quiet orders. Plumb strangers, these were. Babe knew them, but he didn't. He was just an outsider, and Babe wasn't taking him over to get acquainted.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"JESS IS A TEXAS MAN"

The kid rode along parallel with the herd while he waited for Babe. Just loafing along, to look at him--but every nerve was alive and tingling with a complexity of emotions. The bawling of the cows and the calves, the voices of the riders shouting to one another filled him with a vague but aching loneliness. A man galloped out to meet Babe and the two talked, hands and head making little unguarded gestures now and then. The kid's sidelong glance saw every move they made. They were talking about him, and they seemed to find a right smart lot to say.

Babe finally turned in his saddle and flung out an arm in a beckoning gesture, but the kid kept his face straight ahead and gave no sign that he saw the signal. Babe cupped his hands around his mouth and let out a loud "Ya-a-hoo!" But the kid rode straight on and paid no attention. Three times Babe called, then[Pg 115] came galloping over to where the kid lounged in the saddle, hands clasped on the horn and body swaying with the lazy grace of a panther as he rode.

"Hey, Tiger Eye! Y' asleep?"

The kid slid over so that his dangling foot might find its stirrup, and yawned as he looked at Babe.

"Yo'all got me outa baid befo' daylight, Babe."

"Come on over and meet Jess Maikel."

"Come on over and meet Jess Marker."

The kid patted back another yawn and sent a languid glance toward the rider who was loitering along, plainly expecting them.

"Ain't impawtant, is it, Babe?"

"Hell, no!" Babe gave him a studying look. "Thought you wanted to meet the boys. You said--"

"Said I'd plumb enjoy swingin' a lass rope. Nevah said I was achin' to meet anybody, though."

"Hunh." Babe swung in alongside, eyeing the kid with that inscrutable, sidelong glance of his. "Rode over there to see if Jess'd had any trouble with the rustlers. Some talk of their getting back up on the Bench and laying for Jess and his crew, and I kinda wanted to[Pg 116] know if he'd saw anything of 'em." Babe scowled as if he resented having to explain. "Be hell for the Poole if they take a notion to raid a round-up this far from the valley."

"Reckon it would, Babe." The kid's Texas drawl was soft and friendly, but the yellow eye had its tiger look. That was because Babe Garner had lied. They had not talked about rustlers from the valley; they had talked about him. The kid wondered what they had found to say that took so long.

"Jess is wagon boss," Babe further explained. "Good man to know. Might put you on, when this trouble with the nesters is settled."

"When do yo'all think it's going to be, Babe?"

"When there ain't any more nesters left in the valley." Babe's smile left no mystery in his meaning.

"Take a heap of killin', Babe."

"Not so much. They'll take the hint and move out when they find they can't buffalo the Poole. Well, yuh goin' over and say hello to Jess?" Babe's eyes were coldly scrutinizing the kid, though his lips were smiling.

"Reckon I bettah make shoah of my job, first. And if yo'all want me line riding ovah on the rim, I'd shoah love to stay with yo'all." [Pg 117]

"Jess is a Texas man." Babe remarked in too casual a tone. "Thought maybe you might know him. Don't the name mean anything, Tiger Eye?"

The kid laughed a lazy chuckle and pulled out his mouth organ again, wiping it on his sleeve.

"Shucks, Babe, names don't nevah mean anything to a Texas man. Not up No'th. Plumb easy to lose yo'all's Texas name awn the trail."

"Did you?" It was a bold question to ask in those days, but the kid shook his head in good-natured denial while he drew the mouth organ idly across his lips.

"Ain't wore my name only twenty yeahs, Babe. No call to change it yet."

Babe accepted the reproof and said no more, though his eyes stole another sidelong glance at the kid. In unspoken agreement they touched spurs to their horses and went galloping steadily across the flowered prairie at right angles to the herd, toward a timbered butte that seemed to mark the northern boundary of the Big Bench. This way lay the headquarters ranch of the Poole, which was in reality a firm of Eastern capitalists dabbling in range investments.

The Poole owners never saw their cattle.[Pg 118] John Poole, president of the Poole Land and Cattle Company, gave orders from his New York office and expected to see the result translated into columns of figures on the balance sheets. So many cattle, so many miles of range, so many men drawing so much money for their work. This sum for cost of operation, that sum deducted for normal loss, and the investment paying a certain percentage to the shareholders. If the losses rose, the profits dropped in direct ratio. Winter blizzards, drouth that parched the range, the depredations of wolves and mountain lions and coyotes had their place in the books of the New York office and were called Normal Loss. But when the calf tally dwindled out of all proportion to adverse weather conditions, John Poole sat up in his office chair and dictated a letter to his superintendent. Rustlers or disease or whatever the cause, this alarming shrinkage must stop right there.

The superintendent was an old range man named Walter Bell and he was growing rich at managing the Poole. How he was doing it does not concern us now, but at any rate he wanted to keep his job. He replied to that letter and he didn't beat around the bush. The[Pg 119] nesters, he said, were rustlers in reality and were stealing the Poole blind. John Poole replied that Bell must know what medicine to use on rustlers, and Bell wrote back that he did, but it would cost some money. John Poole had built railroads in his time and he was not afraid of high initial costs, so he wrote Bell to damn the expense but to clear the range of all cow thieves.

So Bell went quietly and methodically to work, hiring men skilled in the fine art of administering leaden pills as required, with no talk or fuss about it. Already the nesters in the valley were learning to ride carefully, with loaded rifles across their thighs, and to hint darkly at Texas killers on the Poole payroll, when Tiger Eye Reeves rode up the long trail from the Brazos, dreaming his dreams and playing his

the long trail from the Brazos, dreaming his dreams and playing his mouth organ as he came.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

[Pg 120]

THE POOLE

A brown line in the prairie marked where a wagon road lay along the northern edge of the Big Bench to a point where it dipped suddenly into a grassy hollow. The timbered butte rose boldly up from the level land beyond like a huge green fist laid upon the prairie with one green finger pointing toward the east. That, Babe said, was Cotton Creek. They swung into the trail and rode through a low haze of dust kicked up by other galloping horses and not yet settled. The kid's quick glance took in every detail with a young eagerness to see new places, and yet with a wariness as instinctive as the sharp-eyed watchfulness of any wild thing. If he never rode this way again, he would always remember just how the butte thrust up from the level floor of the prairie and how Cotton Creek ran straight away to the east.

"We lost time," said Babe. "Some of the boys got in ahead." [Pg 121]

The kid said nothing. He put away his mouth organ and pulled his

The kid said nothing. He put away his mouth organ and pulled his big hat half an inch lower over his straight dark brows. He had forgotten the wild larkspur tucked under the leather band. It still stood straight and unwilted, vivid against the gray. He looked as though he were going to see his girl, with a flower in his hat and a half smile on his lips.

Saddled horses stood in the shade of a big cottonwood tree, some still breathing quickly from hard riding, others resting a leg while they dozed. These awakened with a start as the two rode into the unfenced yard. Lean riders perched on the top rail of the nearby corral or squatted on boot heels against the fence, smoking and talking in desultory fashion of this thing or that. The kid felt them eyeing him as he swung down from Pecos and followed Babe, but they didn't smile at the sight of him. The kid tilted his head in response to a nod or two, and took his place at one side of the group--the right side, which left his gun arm free and gave him a clear path to his horse.

The kid didn't consciously take that position, any more than a wolf consciously seeks a high point to scan new territory before he ventures into it. It was born in his blood, forced[Pg 122] into the plastic brain stuff of his childhood, taught him in the growing years when Killer Reeves had an eagle eye always open for fool tricks in his sons. These men were strange to the kid. Yo'all just never did take a chance with plumb strangers.

Babe left him, going on to the house, where he knocked on a door. Without turning his head, the kid knew which door, and he knew that a girl opened it and let Babe in. Babe touched his hat but he didn't take it off when he went into the house, and for that he fell a notch in the kid's esteem. Babe shoah never did show his manners that time, but the kid reckoned maybe folks up North had different ways.

Sly eyes watched the kid, but nobody said much. When they did, some voices had the slow drawl of the South and they slurred vowels and dropped r's in a way so familiar to the kid that he could almost forget how far he was from the Brazos. But there were two that had the flat tone of the North, and these presently fell into amiable dispute over the date and circumstance of a killing ten years old and over the line in Canada. Plumb foolish to argue over a thing like that, the kid thought, though[Pg 123] he listened with the others. Plumb foolish, but safe, since the killer was caught and hanged long ago.

Of the trouble with the nesters down in the valley no one spoke a word, though that subject lay large in the foreconsciousness of every man present. The kid wondered if these men with the look and tone of the South were the ones the nesters called Texas killers. They might be, though no face there was known to him. Texas was a big place. He didn't know all the killers within its borders. The Poole didn't need to send south for killers, the kid thought sardonically. He reckoned there were plenty in Montana.

The two with the flat voices rambled on, gossiping of range matters and drawing maps of creeks and canyons and trails in the dust at their feet, and arguing over the distance from this place to that. Foolish talk, seeing the places were all away up yonder in Canada and nobody had any call to ride that way. The kid watched them pointing and wagging their heads, and his lips curled in disdain. The others--four of them, lean and tanned and saying little--smoked and listened. Texas men don't talk unless they got something to say. The[Pg 124] kid felt a faint glow of pride in them because they were his breed of men.

Babe was a long time in the house. 'Peared like he must have a right smart to say to the Old Man. The kid's feet grew tired, standing there leaning against the fence, but he didn't sit down. Yell all don't

ere leaning against the fence, but he didn't sit down. To all don't feel much like hunkering down on your heels less'n yo'all know the folks you're setting with. Pap never did--and Pap was the kid's law and gospel of the range. Anyway, Babe would come along back any minute now.

Another man rode up, some foreman or other. He told them to feed their horses and stay for dinner, and the group stirred and went off to attend to their mounts. The kid loosened the saddle on Pecos and Babe's horse, slipped off their bridles and turned them into the corral. He took more time about it than the others did, and he did not join them again in the shade of the cottonwood by the corral, but sat on the log frame of the manger over at the far side of the corral where the horses were nosing and chewing and tossing hay in their search for the tenderest spears.

He could still see the group through the corral poles, but the men over there didn't seem to take any notice of him, so after a bit he began[Pg 125] playing on his mouth organ, breathing softly into it and smothering the sound with his hands. Pecos reached over and poked the kid's big hat to one side with his nose, a long wisp of hay dangling from his mouth, but his master only fended off further nudges with his elbow and went on with his serenade.

"Listen to the mocking bird--listen to the mocking bird!" played the kid, with soft warblings and twitterings between the strains of music. 'Peahed like there weren't any songbirds up North. Not like the old mockers down on the Brazos. No birds up this-a-way that could sing worth shucks. Meddalark--but yo'all couldn't rightly call those few chirpings a song. That old mocker in the hackberry bushes by the spring at home--lawdy, how he could talk! Come a full moon, and the mosquitoes humming and the frogs a-croaking all up and down the medder creek, and that mocker singing in the hackberry bushes--

The kid blinked his long lashes very fast for a minute, and sat up straight, slipping his mouth organ into his breast pocket. Babe's voice calling out some careless remark to the foreman came to him at last, and over at the log house beyond the cottonwood some one was pounding on a tin pan to say dinner was ready.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

[Pg 126]

THE KID MEETS JESS

Men were already splashing at the wash basin on the bench outside the door when the kid came up, and he stood back and waited his turn, a bashful boy among hard-faced men whose minds seemed wholly engrossed with the business of going fresh-washed and sleekly combed to their dinner. Babe emptied his basin with a fling of soapy water into the bushes at the end of the house, gave the basin to the kid and went inside. But he stopped just inside the door and stared back over his shoulder at the kid, for all the world as if he were expecting something.

The kid dipped water from the big bucket standing there—gently, lest the splash should drown some little sound he ought to hear; some little sound Babe was listening for, there inside the door. He

dipped in his hands, washed his face and wiped it on a clean edge of the roller towel, every sense alert, every nerve taut.[Pg 127]

Somebody coming across the yard, walking kinda slow and careful. Hungry men don't walk that-a-way to their dinner. The kid took out his little black pocket comb, unfolded it and leaned to the wavy mirror in its cheap frame. He looked within and with his left hand he drew the comb through his thick, wavy locks that just missed being red. Babe was still standing just inside the door, still looking out at the kid, waiting for him; waiting for something else too.

But even though Babe stood there waiting, he jumped when the kid whirled and fired. Even though he was looking, he did not actually see the kid draw his gun. All Babe could have sworn to afterwards was that the kid stood bent a little, combing his hair before a looking-glass hung for tall men; and then the kid was facing the other way with a smoking six-shooter in his hand. Babe was pretty quick with a gun himself, but he wasn't so quick you couldn't see him draw.

The kid ducked past the window and then backed slowly, keeping close to the wall. His yellow right eye had the cold glare of a tiger, as he watched the men rushing out to see what had happened. Twenty feet away, a man[Pg 128] steadied himself and reached backward with his left hand, and the kid saw and let him get the gun before he fired again. The man dropped the second gun and stood there, holding two bloody fists out before him, staring from them to the kid.

"Yo'all stop wheah yoah at," the kid said to those at the door, and they halted on the broad step.

"I'll kill yo'all foh this, Tiger Eye Reeves!" raved the man with the bloody fists

"Yo' kain't," the kid replied in his melodious drawl. "Yo'all nevah will shoot no moah, Jess Markel."

"Fer Gawd's sake, Tiger Eye!" cried Babe from the step. "What's it all about? You said you didn't know Jess."

"I nevah did say I don't know Jess Markel. I said men easy drop theah Texas names awn the trail up heah. I nevah did say I don't know that lobo."

"Git 'im, boys!" raved Jess, holding out his two shattered hands. "That's Killer Reeves' youngest boy--and the worst of the lot! Look what he done to me!" Jess was half crying with rage. The kid smiled.[Pg 129]

"I nevah do bust down a hand lessen theah's a gun in it," he said.

"What yuh pull a gun on him for, Jess?" The foreman walked scowling toward the wounded man. "The kid's dead right. You had your guns out when he shot."

"He's Killer Reeves' son, didn't I tell yo'all? His pap killed my pap, that's why."

"Yoah pap nevah did draw quick enough," the kid reminded him. "'Peahs like slowness runs in yo'all's family, Jess. Shootin' in the back's moah yo'all's style."

"He's a damn killer and the son of a killer!" raved Jess.

"I don't nevah shoot a man in the back, like yo'all tried to do," the kid said coldly.

"T E D " " " " " " " " " "

"Tiger Eye Reeves!" said one of the turtive-eyed men on the step, and the kid turned and stared in unblinking rebuke.

"My name's Bob, suh. It's only friends can call me Tiger Eye."

Walter Bell himself came with long, angry steps from the house. The girl was standing on the porch, gazing curiously at the disturbance. Slim little thing with dark hair tied at the back of her neck with a big, wide bow of [Pg 130] ribbon. Dark eyebrows--but the kid was too far away to see the color of her eyes. Walter Bell stopped and looked at Jess Markel's hand, gave a grunt and came striding up to face the kid, who looked mild and harmless enough now, except for that staring tiger eye of his.

"You the fellow that shot my wagon boss?" Bell snapped, his gaze avoiding that yellow eye.

"Yes, suh."

"You've crippled him for life. Know that?"

"Yes, suh. That's what I aimed to do."

"Did, eh? You'll have to show a damn' good reason for that, young man."

"Yes, suh. I was combin' my hair and I saw Jess slippin' up, aimin' to shoot me in the back. Seems like a Markel kain't face a man in theah killin's, nohow. He kain't kill no mo'--lessen he kicks 'em like a mule."

"Jess had both guns out, Mr. Bell," the foreman here remarked, and pointed to the two smeared six-shooters on the ground. "The kid's telling it straight."

"Shore is, Mr. Bell," Babe spoke up, and left the doorstep to go over to the kid. "I was waitin' while he combed his hair. He was lookin' in the glass. I didn't see him draw,[Pg 131] but I saw him shoot. He musta saw Jess comin' at him in the lookin'-glass."

"You didn't see him draw?"

"No. I was lookin' at him, but I didn't see him draw."

"I was comin' from the stable and I saw the whole thing," said the foreman. "Young Reeves was combin' his hair, just as he says. Jess pulled his gun and Reeves, here, whirled and shot. He must have drawn his gun, but I never saw him do it. He sure as hell wasn't combing his hair with his six-gun--"

The group at the mess-house door laughed at that, and Walter Bell turned on Jess.

"You brought it on yourself," he growled. "Come on up to the house and I'll fix you up till you can get to a doctor. And I want the rest of you men to distinctly understand that I didn't hire you to work out your own private grudges against each other. Any more shooting among yourselves, I'll have the one that does it sent up for murder. Reeves, I'll see you at the house after dinner."

"Yes, suh."

"You done right, Tiger Eye," said Babe, as the two lingered outside.

"Shoah tried to, Babe."[Pg 132]

"I thought Jess acted kinda funny, when we was over there at the round-up. He asked me who I had with me, and I said a young feller from down on the Brazos. He wanted your name and I give it to him.

He never said anything, but I suspicioned he knowed yuh or had heard of yuh, just by his looks. But you never let on like you knowed him, so I let it pass." Babe gave the kid that sharp, sidelong look of his. "I was just tryin' to make up my mind whether I oughta tell yuh what I suspicioned about Jess, when the play came off."

The kid drew a long, relieved breath and looked at Babe with the old faith shining in his eyes.

"Shoah glad yo'all told me now, Babe. I plumb knowed there was something passed between yo'all and Jess, up theah on the Bench."

"Well, that was it. You're such a tight-mouthed cuss I kinda hated to butt in--but I guess I needn't 'a' worried. Gosh, you're quick with a gun! Come on and eat, Tiger Eye."

"Shoah will eat with moah appetite now, Babe," said the kid softly, and followed Babe inside.

Men who had ignored him before hitched[Pg 133] themselves along to make room for him on the long bench beside the table. Platters of meat, round enamel basins of potatoes, beans, stewed corn, thick brown gravy came his way faster than he could spoon the food out upon his plate. Sugar and canned milk were pressed upon him.

The kid thanked them for each proffered service and devoted himself strictly to the business of eating. No one mentioned Jess Markel or the shooting or the fact that Killer Reeves and his sons were not unknown to them. They'd do their talking after awhile, when the kid was not there to hear. Just what they would say did not greatly concern him. Tell how Tiger Eye Reeves was counted the fastest and straightest shooter on the whole length of the Brazos, maybe. Tell how his old pap had raised a whole passel of boys in

the saddle, with a six-gun in one hand and a lass rope in the other. Tell how Killer Reeves never went for his gun lessen the other man made the first play, and how he always did get his man first shot. Tell--if they didn't feel too friendly to Jess Markel--how Jess' old pap had got more than one man when he wasn't looking and prepared, and how he tried to get Pap that-a-way, only Pap[Pg 134] saw him out the tail of his eye and whirled and shot true. Tell a-plenty, the kid reckoned; but they wouldn't have anything to say to his face.

"You'll get the job, all right," Babe said in his ear, when the two paused outside in the shade of the cabin to roll and light a cigarette apiece before the kid went up to interview Walter Bell.

Jess, on his way to the stable with the foreman, scowled and turned his face the other way, walking wide of the kid. Both hands were bandaged and carried in a sling before him and he looked sick. The kid's lips tightened a little as Jess passed. Never lie behind another rock, waiting to shoot a man in the back--Jess wouldn't. Never try to slip up on anybody again, combing their hair with their back toward him. Killer--but he never would kill again. Not after those smashed knuckles got well. They'd be stiff as sticks. Jess would lose some of his fingers, the kid reckoned hopefully.

"You done right, Kid." Babe flicked his thumb-nail across a match head, lighted the cigarette and snapped the stub in two pieces before he dropped them at his feet. "He'd 'a' got you and never give warnin'. Damn' sneak--didn't think Jess was that kinda man."[Pg 135]

"If every killah had his hands broke, this would be a right peaceful land, Babe."

Babe shivered in spite of himself.

"I'd as soon be killed as crippled," he said shortly.

"Shucks! Yo'all ain't a killah, Babe. Man's got a right to defend himse'f, I reckon. That's what Pap always said. Yo'all wouldn't shoot a man lessen he come at yoh with his gun out, Babe."

"Shore not." Babe shot a keen glance at the kid. "Come on and talk to the Old Man. Just red tape, but you oughta meet him. He told me he'd put yuh on and let yuh ride rim with me."

"Shoah is mighty fine of yo'all, takin' all this trouble foh me," murmured the kid, his heart pulsing with shy gratitude as he followed Babe up to the house.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

[Pg 136]

INTO THE VALLEY

The kid pulled up on the rim of the Big Bench and stared down into the valley below. It was not the first time he had ridden that way, and the bold lines of the bluffs with the deep coulees creeping back under the rim to hide the ranches from the keen winds of winter looked familiar as a picture that used to hang at the foot of his bed, down home on the Brazos. Like the picture, this view held within it a

certain remoteness, a certain untouchableness which the kid felt but couldn't explain.

A thrill of adventure lay in the fact that every coulee ranch held an enemy of the Poole. The cattle he saw grazing over there in the bottomland might be Poole cattle, rustled when they were sucking calves and branded with the nester's brand. That's what Babe said they were, only the Poole couldn't prove it.

The kid didn't need to take Babe's word for the fact that nesters shore would bush[Pg 137]whack any Poole rider they could catch down there in the valley, because he still carried the smudged bullet hole through his hat crown to remind him.

The kid's gaze wandered over to the coulee where Nate Wheeler had lived. Shoah was a plumb shame, busting up a home that-away, but the kid couldn't see where any one was to blame, save Wheeler himself. Couldn't blame Babe for not knowing this was Tiger Eye Reeves come up from the Brazos. How could Babe know that Tiger Eye Reeves never missed putting a bullet right where he wanted it, any more than he missed his mouth when he lifted a hot biscuit up to bite it? Couldn't blame Babe for thinking the kid shot wild; not then. Now, Babe shoah would know better than to buy in to any of Tiger Eye's shooting.

There were things the kid would like to ask Babe about the valley. That ranch out a ways from the rim, not in the coulee but tucked down behind a low ridge, where the long streak of cottonwoods showed there was a creek--the kid would like to know the name of the folks that lived there. But he couldn't ask, or Babe might kinda suspicion it was the girl, Nellie, that the kid wanted to know about.[Pg 138]

Babe would want to know a lot of things the kid had no intention of

telling. About Nellie's old pap getting hurt, and the kid helping him and Nellie get away from Pete Gorham. Reckon if Babe knew about that time, he might think Tiger Eye had more truck with nesters than he should have, being a Poole man and all.

The kid focused his field glasses on the ridge, but he couldn't see anything but a fence running up along the side. The ranch was over behind, about where the line of cottonwoods quit. Old pappy wasn't feeling right good the other day; seemed like he oughta ride down there and see how the old feller was getting along, anyway. Take it down that draw running out from the Bench, and he could get plumb over to the lower end of the ridge without showing himself. Plumb foolish to follow the trails, but down that draw--shucks! Wouldn't take but a minute to ride down and see how her old pappy was feeling. Babe never need to know a thing about it.

So the kid went down into the valley where the nesters would shoot a Poole rider like a coyote. Babe had told him to ride across the Bench to the river and scout around there for any sign of branding fires or cattle held within[Pg 139] corrals hidden in the thickets. Babe said the kid could lie up on the rim rock with his glasses and find out more about what was going on in the valley than a dozen men riding through the bottomland could do, and the kid was to take a lunch and stay till sundown or after. Babe was going around the other way, so the two would spend the day scanning the river bottom from opposite sides of the valley. They ought to get a pretty fair idea of what was going on down there, taking both sides like that.

The kid felt pretty guilty and mean, going off like this on a side trip of his own, but he didn't feel guilty enough or mean enough to turn back from the quest of Nellie's home and Nellie's last name. Bothered him so he couldn't get her out of his mind--like a song

when you know part of the tune and can't think of the rest of it. He wouldn't have known her first name, even, if her old pappy hadn't called her by it. Reckon he had a right to know what her name was, seeing he had saved her old pappy's life. Hers, too--but the kid shut that thought out of his mind, it swept him into so deadly a rage against Pete Gorham.

It was farther to the ridge than it had looked[Pg 140] through the field glasses. The kid kept to the bottom of the draw, which was rough with rocks sluiced down in spring freshets. These Pecos avoided with dainty steps and a disdainful sniff or two at the worst places. The kid did not hurry him. Pecos knew his business better than most men. He went along, taking plenty of time on the bad stretches and making up for it with a smooth, swift trot when he reached grassy turf as the draw widened.

By the time he reached the lower end of the ridge the kid realized that he was head and shoulders above the level of the valley. But the ridge was friendly and shielded him from view to the south, and the brushy undergrowth along the creek gave protection there. He felt safe enough to give his full attention to the ranch he was approaching.

This was where Nellie lived. Yes, sir, she lived right up this road a piece. The kid's heart thumped so he could feel it, until it occurred to him that she might be away somewhere, when it stopped dead still for a minute. But the heart of youth is a resilient organ. The kid rode forward and unhooked the gate, swinging it open as Pecos sidled through. The horse turned skillfully, pushing the gate shut[Pg 141] with his shoulder as he went up to the post and stopped. The kid had taught Pecos that and he was consciously proud of the trick. His heart was normal when he started on, but it began to beat double time again when he came in sight of the stable and corral and the house sitting back out of the way against the ridge.

and the house sitting back out of the way against the ridge.

The kid was glancing this way and that, to the garden patch, the grove, the corral, the house, looking for a girl with yellow hair so thick the braid was as big around as his wrist right where his shirt sleeve buttoned, and so long the braid hung down to her waist. Wonderful hair! The kid never could forget how it looked flying loose, when she ran from Pete Gorham. Like a banner of gold whipping in the sun. It made a funny kind of lump in his throat now, just to think of the way she looked with all that hair flying loose. Like an angel in a gingham dress, kinda.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

[Pg 142]

KILLER'S WORK

The sharp, venomous crack of a rifle up on the ridge behind the house struck away those thoughts. The kid did not dodge, for he knew the bullet had sped on its way seconds ahead of the sound. He wheeled Pecos off the road and in behind a half-demolished haystack and halted him there, listening. Thinking too, with the thoughts flashing clean and true from his brain trained in the hard school of a killer father. No bullet coming this way, or he'd have heard it. Shooting in another direction--

And then he heard the piercing shriek of a woman. The kid knew that sound bitterly well and a hot crimple went up his spine. His mother had screamed like that, when Brother Ben fell dead in the front yard. With one savage lift of his spurs he jumped Pecos out from behind the stack and went thundering up the road. No need to fear a bullet now from that rifle. Killers don't wait, when a woman raises the[Pg 143] death scream. Killers run for their horse and get away from there quick.

Wailing now, and swift, jumbled words breaking oddly on the high tones.

"Nellie! Come quick! They've got him--They've killed him--Oh, my God! Come and help get him in--They've killed him--Oh, he's dead--"

Too well the kid knew that tragic litany. His mother, his sisters--so had they keened their dead in the old house by the Brazos. His lips pressed their soft curves into a thin line. His twinkling blue eye half closed to let the tiger look through that yellow right eye of his. He stepped limberly down from the saddle and ran and knelt on one knee beside the wailing woman, huddling to her breast the lolling old head of her man, her shaking fingers threading distractedly through his hair that was no whiter than her face.

"Ma'am, take away yoh ahms, till I tote him inside."

She looked up at him blankly, her eyes too full of her tragedy to see aught else. And she cried that they had killed him, cried it again and again.

"I reckon so, Ma'am," the kid said gently.[Pg 144] "If yo'all would leave go till I can get holt--"

Then Nellie came running from somewhere up along the base of the ridge. She had a hoe in one hand, in the other a bucket half filled with yellow kernels of corn. Her checked gingham sunbonnet was hanging on her shoulders, her thick braid of yellow hair was pulled forward over her breast. Even at that tragic moment when she stopped to stare unbelievably, the kid noticed how nearly her hair matched the kernels of corn in the rusty lard bucket.

"You! What've you done? What'd you *do* it for? Ma--oh, Mother, *don't!*"

Pity tore at the kid's heart as he looked at the two of them cowering together, the girl clutching her mother as if by the force of her young arms she would hold her back from the grief there before them. But his voice was gently insistent.

"If yo'all would get her away so I can tote him inside--"

"Come, Mother." Obediently the girl began pulling and coaxing. "We must get him in--You go fix the bed, Mother--"

"Yes--yes, I'll go spread up the bed--"

Like his own mother, when they toted Pap into the house. Leave off her screaming to go[Pg 145] smooth the bedcovers and pat the pillow for the dead that could not feel or thank her for it. Spread up the bed, lay the pillows just so--Nate Wheeler's wife had done that too. A killer crooks his finger on the trigger, and some woman must go pat a pillow for her dead to lay his head upon for the last time. Fight over the brand on a cow or calf, lift a gun and pull the trigger. Yo'all can take the life out of a man easy enough--but yo'all can't never put it back again. Lump of lead no bigger than the end of yoah finger shot into a big strong man--and some woman walks the floor nights, crying and moaning for her dead.

floor nights, crying and moaning for her dead.

The kid ground his teeth together till they ached, and in his heart he cursed all killers. Let them wait until they were able to put the life back into a man before they shot it out of him. Like what the preacher read out of the Bible at all funerals in the Reeves family--funerals enough to imprint the solemn words indelibly on the memory of the kid. "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away--" Killers acted like they had more right than the Lord had. They'd take away life, but they couldn't give it.

With the limp, bony old man sagging a dead[Pg 146] weight in his young arms, the kid went into the house, ducking his head in the doorway so his bullet-bored hat crown could pass in free. They built their doors higher down home, but that was because Killer Reeves bred tall sons like himself and they must have head room as they came and went.

Little, short, old man, this one had been. Tote him in easy as a kid asleep. Lay him on the smoothed bed, put his head on the patted pillow, tuck a folded sheet under his shoulders where the blood seeped out. No use to look at the wound, no use to disturb the chilling body. Little old pappy had been shot in the back when he walked out into the yard. Killer's work. Dry-gulched, they called it up here. Killer waiting behind a rock with rifle ready till his man came along. Then pull the trigger a time or two, look to see if the bullets went straight--and then run for a horse tied somewhere outa sight in the bushes.

The kid's face was bleak and old when he turned from the bed and Nellie's mother kneeling beside it, her arms thrown out and clutching her dead with the tensivity of despair. Nellie was holding herself calm in spite of her horror. Somebody had to, and the girl's slim shoulders[Pg 147] had straightened to the load of

responsibility. The kid saw her in the kitchen, dipping water into the washbasin on the bench beside the back door. But as he went out to wash her father's life blood from his hands, he remembered her words and halted, looking at her strangely.

"What call have yoh got to think I done it?" he demanded. "I'd do anything I could foh yo'all. Shoah wouldn't hahm yoh pappy. He was shot in the back, from somewheah up awn the hill. I was awn the road coming along by the old stack. Yo'all can go look at the hawse tracks and see foh yohse'f."

"I don't have to. I don't know what made me say that, Mr.--I know you didn't do it."

"Reeves," said the kid, flushing a little. "Bob Reeves is my name, Miss--"

"Murray," said the girl, and put up a hand to smooth her hair. "What shall we *do*?" She bit her lips, fighting back tears, and the color crept into her cheeks as she met the kid's grave look.

"I'll stay heah, Miss Murray, while yo'all go foh help. I'd go myse'f, but I couldn't do no good. Some nestah would try and shoot me foh a Poole ridah, I reckon. If theah's a hawse yo'all can ride--[Pg 148]

"I could ride Prince, but he's up in the pasture, and he's awful mean to catch."

The kid nodded, wiping his hands on a clean towel neatly patched in the middle.

"I reckon I can get 'im. My hawse is plumb foolish ovah any ridah but me, or I'd let yo'all take him."

"No, you'll have to be ready to go before any one gets here. Prince is the sorrel with one white eye. Oh, hurry!"

No need to hurry now, though the kid did not tell her so. He rode into the pasture and roped the sorrel with the white eye, found a sidesaddle and put it on with meticulous care. A flush burned his tan cheeks when he held down his hand and she placed her foot in his palm and went up light as a feather lifted on a breeze. He gave her the reins and his quirt that he had braided in the bunkhouse down on the Brazos. She slipped the rawhide loop over her wrist and then she remembered something and pulled it off again.

"No, you'll have to go before I get back and you'll need this," she said.

"Yo'all can keep it," said the kid, the blush darkening under her gaze. "I got anotha one[Pg 149] in camp. Made it myse'f," he added hesitatingly.

The girl looked at him, glanced toward the cabin where her mother was weeping in great, heavy, heartbreaking sobs.

"I'm--we're much obliged, Mr. Reeves. You--you always come when I--when we need help. Promise you won't stay till they come back with me. And--and tell Mother not to tell any one you've been here. The--the neighbors hate Poole riders. They've swore they'll shoot any Poole man on sight if they catch him in the valley. You be careful, won't you, Mr. Reeves?"

"Shoah will," murmured the kid.

"It'll take about an hour. Do you live over at the Poole? You better go right now. They'd kill you, sure, if they caught you here. Mother'll be all right. Promise you'll go!"

"I'm staying with Babe Garner at Cold Spring. I promise to go--but I kain't promise I won't come back."

He watched her ride off at a gallop, her gingham skirt whipping out beside the sorrel's flanks, her yellow braid swinging in the breeze. She shoah was plucky, holding back her tears[Pg 150] for her old pappy that-a-way. The kid thought she was the pluckiest and the prettiest girl he ever had seen. His eyes shone and his mouth relaxed into a softer curve of the lips as he watched her out of sight.

His glance fell then to the trampled dirt under his feet, and the bleak look returned to his face. Her old pappy had fallen right there, where the kid was standing. There was the imprint of his body in the dust, the grim significance of the stained earth, the blurred marks where the woman had knelt. He turned and scanned the ridge. Its side was mostly brushy and with a stunted tree growing here and there, but at the top there was a rough outcropping of brown sandstone with rock slabs tilted this way and that. His eyes went to that point with unerring precision. A man always wants a rock or two in front of him when he's fixing to bushwhack somebody. Reckon that's because he's a coward. Bushes are fine to hide in, but bushes don't stop bullets, and a coward won't take a chance. Don't aim to give a feller a chance to shoot back; but all the same, he wants a rock up in front of him just in case.

The kid was sure the killer had waited behind those rocks; just as sure as if he had seen[Pg 151] him there. But he didn't go up right then to prove it. Right smart of a climb up through the brush. No use rushing up there now, after it was all over. He went into the house instead and stood with his hat in his hand, looking down at the dead man and at the woman huddled on the floor beside the bed. Quieter now, the first storm of grief sweeping on to leave her dulled and apathetic.

The kid tiptoed over to the far side of the room and brought a rocking-chair, set it down beside the bed and lifted her and put her in the chair. Nellie's mother: yellow hair turned gray, blue eyes blurred, flour on her wrists. Mixing pie crust, maybe, or bread, when Death came to her door.

The kid stood looking down at her for a minute, then tiptoed to the big old bureau and pulled a top drawer open. Texas or Montana, it didn't make much difference to a woman. Kept her handkerchiefs and best towels in the top drawer just the same. It seemed to the kid as if he were getting a handkerchief for his mother—or a clean sheet to pull over the family's dead.

Her fingers opened to take the handkerchief but she did not look up at him. Her eyes followed the careful shrouding of the still form on the bed. She watched him tiptoe into the kitchen, open the oven door and take out two berry pies and set them on the clean scrubbed table. No use letting things burn in the oven just because the man they were made for lies dead in the next room. The kid's mother had taught her boys to be thoughtful of little things in the house.

He took the two tin water buckets and followed a path from the back door to a spring, and brought back fresh water, setting the buckets back on the bench without spilling a drop. He took a heavy goblet from the dish cupboard, filled it with cool water and brought it in to Nellie's mother. She looked at him then; looked at him long before she took the glass and drank.

"You're a good boy," she said. "Where you from?"

"Brazos," said the kid, hoping she would not ask too much.

Evidently she thought Brazos was the name of a town, for she let the word pass unchallenged.

"They shot my Ed--that was last month. He laid out all night before he was found.[Pg 153] Now they've killed my husband. I hope they're satisfied. If there's a God in heaven, may He punish the Poole as they deserve! If there *is* a God!" she added bitterly.

"I reckon theah is, Ma'am, only I reckon folks ain't moah impawtent to Him than a bird in a bush." The kid looked out of the window, considering a matter which always stirred him vaguely. "Folks calls theahselves impawtent," he said gently. "But I reckon a motha bird's heart aches too, when a snake eats its little ones."

"You're a good boy. Where's Nellie?" She stared around her.

The kid told her. She did not seem to listen, but returned to her weeping. The kid wished she wouldn't cry like that; she sounded so much like his mother when Pap lay on the bed under a sheet. Killers oughta be made to sit and listen to the widows of the men they shoot in the back. That killer waiting up there behind the rocks--if he could take the suffering he handed out to other folks, and if he had to bear it all himself--but killers don't care. A killer has got no heart. Only Pap, he had a heart big as an ox. Folks just kept on making Pap kill. He didn't want to. After the first fight, when he killed his first man, somebody was always trying to[Pg 154] beat Pap to the draw. He had to go on killing to save himself.

This was different. This was more like Jess Markel's work, only Jess wouldn't do any more bushwhacking from behind rocks. Time Jess's knuckles got well, he wouldn't be able to pull a trigger. Like he told Babe, the kid still thought it would be a heap better if you could bust the gun hand of every killer. Nellie's old pappy wouldn't be trying to do that now, under a sheet if some one had shot the trigger

laying in there now under a sheet if some one had shot the trigger finger off the skunk that laid up behind the rock. Nellie's brother would be alive too, if it wasn't for some sneaking coward that was able to handle a gun.

The kid turned on the doorstep and leaned his head in at the doorway.

"Good-by, Ma'am," he called softly. "Reckon I'll have to be goin' now."

"Good-by," she answered brokenly. "Look out them Poole killers don't get you!"

"Shoah will," said the kid. Promised Nellie he'd go. Somehow it made a bond between them which the kid would never break. He was going because Nellie made him promise. And he was going to hunt down the killer, because it was Nellie's old pappy he had shot. Nellie[Pg 155] knew he would. Never told her so—but there are some things yo'all don't have to tell. She knew it just as well as if he had made the promise in words.

The kid rode along the ridge to a point where the slope was less steep and sent Pecos scrambling up through the brush to the top.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

EVIDENCE

Insolence leered up at the kid from every boot mark behind the tilted slabs of rock. The killer had not even tried to scuff out his tracks with a sidewise drag of the foot. Like waiting to get a standing shot at a deer--or a rabbit, more like. Wait for the rabbit to hop out of its burrow, then pop him over. No need to be scared of leaving a track or two, shooting a rabbit at its burrow. No need to be scared of tracks when you're shooting a nester before his own door, either. Ride back to the Poole and draw your wages and clean yoah rifle for the next job. Killer don't care if a nester comes prowling around, looking for sign. Let him come over to the Poole and look. These tracks could be matched up over there, more'n likely.

But that don't put the life back in Nellie's old gray-headed pappy. Matching tracks can't put the life back in a man, but it shoah might help to keep life in the next one. Smash this[Pg 157] killer's knuckles with a bullet, and he won't tramp around behind another bunch of rocks so free and careless, waiting to shoot some old man that stepped outside his door.

The kid's eyes went seeking here and there. Killer as careless as this--and as sure of Poole protection--'pears like he might leave some sign more than boot tracks. 'Pears like he might give himself away, so a feller'd know who to go looking for over at the Poole. All those men waiting under the cottonwood--the kid wished now that he had paid more attention to their feet that day. Wasn't boots he was watching from the tail of his eye, though. Faces and gun hands--they were what he had wanted to kinda keep an eye on. Wasn't a face there or a voice that he wouldn't know five years from now, but the feet and the tracks they made--that was another matter.

Been smoking up here too. The kid stopped and picked up a cigarette stub, stared at it frowningly and threw it away. Any man in the country might have made that cigarette for himself. The kid himself might have, so far as that went. He took a step or two and picked up something else; a cartridge--30-30 Win[Pg 158]chester. That didn't tell much, either. All Poole riders toted Winchester rifles, and so far as the kid had noticed they were all the same caliber. His was. So was Babe's. So was the gun Nate Wheeler had in his saddle scabbard. Reckon two thirds of the rifles in the country were 30-30 Winchesters. Made it safer in yoah killings, having a gun like all the rest.

Not much time left for prowling around--nesters would be coming along pretty quick, and some of them would shoah hurry up here to take a look at the spot where the killer had waited for his chance. Not much gained by coming, either. Boot tracks any man could make, shell out of a rifle any man might carry. Reckon there'd be horse tracks too, down off the ridge somewhere close by. Reckon it would be plumb crazy like to stay and see Nellie when she came riding back that-a-way. Shoah was a pretty rider--

The kid's thoughts halted as abruptly as his body. Even his heart stopped dead still in his chest; or at least it felt as if it had. The blood froze in his veins so that his face had a pinched, old look. He bent stiffly with a slow reluctance, utterly unlike himself, and picked up something here, over here another something, and[Pg 159] he stood up, looking at them in the palm of his hand.

Two pieces of broken match! Two pieces fitting together--match snapped in the fingers and dropped. Babe! Babe, a Poole killer, holed up over in Cold Spring cabin, making out like he was just riding line; keeping cases on the nesters to see they didn't pull off anv dirtv work. Making out like he was iust watching the rim--making

My only worry about making out like he was just watching the film. Making out--hell!

Bushwhacking nesters from behind rocks; that's what he was doing. Playing the kid for a sucker. Lay on the bunk, pretending he was reading storybooks all evening--hell! Lay there planning how he'd go out next morning and dry-gulch some poah devil of a nester, that's what!

Nice and accommodating--"How'll you have yore aigs this mornin', Tiger Eye?" Smiling--"Take care uh yoreself, Tiger Eye!" Babe! Up here, cached behind these rocks, smoking a cigarette and waiting for Nellie's old gray-headed pappy to come limping out of his door. Draw a bead on that little old man's back and pull the trigger, and watch him kick his last--then ride off bold as you please. Ride back to camp a-smiling[Pg 160]--

"What kinda day yuh have, Tiger Eye? Anybody jump yuh or anything?" Fry potatoes and onions and cuss because the onions made his eyes water, and laugh because it looked like he was crying. No tears for Nellie's old pappy, though. "Pour your coffee now, Tiger Eye?--Come and git it, Kid, while it's hot!" Hell and damnation--*Babe!*

Pecos had to use his horse sense and take the full responsibility of getting back up on Big Bench, for the kid just climbed into the saddle--his foot fumbling like a drunken man's for the stirrup--and rode unseeingly away from that hellish spot, where he had seen the fair face of friendship blacken and shrink to a grinning death's-head before him.

He ought to have known, that first day. He ought to have seen that Babe Garner had fired that rifle shot not to save the kid's life, but because he wanted to make certain Nate Wheeler was dead. Because he had meant to kill Wheeler, had waited behind some

Because he had meant to kill Wheeler, had waited behind some rock there on the sidehill until Wheeler came along. Plumb simple. The kid must be losing all the sense he was born with, not to have seen it. Went and thanked Babe for saving his life--loved him for it--like a damn' fool. Babe[Pg 161] laughed up his sleeve and took the thanks, and never explained he was only making shoah of the job.

Up on the Bench there the other day, riding over to talk to Jess Markel. Babe lied and the kid knew he lied--and then had to go and swallow what Babe told him about that talk. Babe more'n likely told Jess all about Tiger Eye Reeves, and helped Jess plan how he could get him. Damn' fool--let Babe lie him blind. A cold-blooded killer like that!

Kill the kid some of these days, more'n likely. Shoah would, if the Poole ever took a notion it would be worth their while to pay Babe for the job. "Have another cup of coffee, Tiger Eye?"--in that damnable, lying, friendly intonation of the voice that would make a feller think he'd go through hell and high water for yo'all!

"Better come to bed, Tiger Eye; we got t' roll out early in the mornin',"--and wait till he got to sleep before he put a bullet through his head--and ride over and collect from the Poole! Or wait till the kid started off to the spring for a bucket of water, and sneak along behind and get him in the back with his rifle, and make the claim some nester come up there[Pg 162] bushwhacking Poole riders. Babe was that kind of a skunk. Babe!

If youth has heights of loyalty and love and blind hero worship, youth also has depths of disillusionment and implacable judgments not to be plumbed by one who has lived and suffered and learned the lesson of tolerance. The kid's body held the rhythm of the leisurely pace which Pecos always took when his master was deep in his daydreaming; his body held the old rhythm, but his soul tore at its

breast and gazed in horror at the devastation wrought by two pieces of broken match. He carried them clenched in his left hand, and twice on that ride he lifted his fingers and looked at the telltale fragments. Once, in a surge of sudden and overwhelming incredulity which chilled again to conviction. Again, when he remembered the look on Babe's face as he stood outside the Poole mess house, watching Jess Markel go by with his bandaged hands.

Babe had lighted a cigarette. He snapped the match in two--like these pieces, here in the kid's palm--and looked at the kid and said he'd rather be dead than crippled like that. And--the kid swallowed a lump in his throat that was still aching there just the same[Pg 163] afterwards--and the kid had told Babe *he* wasn't a killer. And all the while Babe was the lowest kind of a damnable killer, and that's why he had shivered when he looked at Jess' hands. Babe was a killer for the money there was in it, and if his hands were crippled, he'd lose his job of bushwhacking nesters.

Babe shoah would hate it, having his hands busted with bullets. Babe would rather be dead than have that happen to him. The kid's clenched hand rested on the saddle horn and his head was bowed, his cleft chin resting on the soft folds of his silk neckerchief. His eyes were staring at the grass and flowers and the little bright pebbles and patches of sand where Pecos would set his deliberate, daintily assured feet, but what he saw was Babe, in a new and terrible guise.

He was seeing Babe standing by the kitchen table, looking down at his shattered knuckles, and he was hearing Babe say, "Put a bullet through my damn' brain, Tiger Eye! I'd rather be dead than like this." He was seeing Babe crumpled down between the table and the stove, lying on his side, kinda, because he had tried to hang onto the table and so had fallen slantwise. He was seeing a bullet hole

turn bluish[Pg 164] in Babe's forehead, just about where the lock of hair always fell, that he kept pushing back with a swipe of his hand when he talked; his left hand--the kid had always noticed that Babe never pushed back that lock with his right hand.

Always rolled a cigarette with his left hand too. One-handed roll. Not many men bothered to learn it. Killer's tricks. Damn' fool that he hadn't guessed it before. Come all the way up from Texas to get away from killers and from the impending necessity of killing--and here he was, baching with the lowest snake of them all. Eating and washing dishes and playing cards and sleeping in the same bed with one.

The kid laughed with a harsh abruptness that made Pecos snort and duck sidewise, squatting under the saddle as if something had fallen on him from the clouds.

CHAPTER TWENTY

[Pg 165]

THE KID IS NOT SURE

The kid started and looked around like one suddenly awakened from a nightmare. He was on the last slope of the ridge running up to the tiny walled-in basin where Babe's cabin stood snugly sheltered against a split rock, a spring at one side, a stable and

sheltered against a split peak, a spring at one side, a stable and corral on beyond. Beyond the corral, the pasture where extra horses might be left to graze.

As if he had never seen the place before, the kid stared at the snug retreat. The cabin, with its stovepipe braced four ways with hay wire, the top joint standing at a rakish tilt where a gust of wind had left off shaking it. Smoke trailing a blue-gray ribbon that kinked in the breeze. Babe was home, getting supper ready for the kid when he came. Beat it on ahead—took some short cut which he knew. The kid had not seen him—but then, the kid had not seen anything on that ride.

He gave himself a little shake, snapped back[Pg 166] to clear and pitiless thinking. He lifted his head, pursed his stiffened lips and whistled the signal of all Poole riders. Babe pulled open the door and stood there grinning as the kid rode up. The kid grinned back at Babe, but his eyes gave their warning. His blue left eye was squinting and the amber right eye was opened full and had the baleful stare of a tiger stalking his kill.

"Well, yuh made it ahead of the storm," Babe called cheerfully, as the kid swung down at the door. "'Fraid yuh might get caught out, Tiger Eye. Goin' to be a rip-snorter, when it gets here."

The kid turned and looked where a greenish-black cloud mass came coiling up from the southwest. Plumb strange that he hadn't noticed that storm a-coming. Hadn't heard the growl and mutter of thunder, either. Didn't know anything but just that Babe was a paid killer for the Poole and had shot Nellie's little gray-headed old pappy in the back.

"Shoah right smaht of a storm, Babe." And he walked to the door.

"Better pull the saddle while I dish up, hadn't yuh? I'll make the gravy."[Pg 167]

The kid brushed past him and went inside, turning to face Babe.

"What's the matter, Tiger Eye? Anything happen?"

"Yes, suh. Right smaht happened, Babe."

"You look sick. Had a run-in with the nesters?"

"A nestah got killed."

Babe's cold gray eyes scrutinized the kid. He closed the door against a puff of wind, leaned his back against it, his thumbs hooked inside his cartridge belt. The kid's vivid picture of him revised itself in certain details with pitiless accuracy. Babe would not fall between the stove and table. He would topple over toward the bunk, more'n likely.

"Yuh don't want to let that get yuh, Tiger Eye. Yuh done right. They've got it in for Poole riders, and he'd 'a' got yuh if--"

"No, he wouldn't, Babe."

"Who was it, d'yuh know? Or maybe yuh ain't tellin'."

"I know--and I'm tellin' yo'all. It was old Pappy Murray."

"Old Mur--" Babe's eyes flicked open while he stared at the kid.[Pg 168]

"Old Pappy Murray, shot in the back."

"Hunh. Well--" Babe hesitated "--he's a nester and a cow thief. He

had it comin', Tiger Eye."

"He nevah had it comin' in front of his own doah. The killah cached himse'f behind a ledge up awn the hill. Left his boot tracks theah-- and a rifle shell."

"Yeah? Well--"

"Left anotha sign, Babe." The kid's voice was soft, but nevertheless it sounded implacable.

"Yeah? What sign's that?"

"Left this, Babe." He opened his palm.

Babe looked, lifted his glance to the bleak face of the kid, and to that tiger stare of the yellow right eye. Babe's teeth caught at his underlip. His fingers quivered—but they did not go for his gun. They did not dare.

Interruption came. The shrill, whistled signal all Poole riders knew. Babe's eyes searched the kid's face. He turned his back, pulled open the door, answered the call.

"Supper ready, Babe?" The Poole foreman owned that voice. He swung down at the door, laughing that he had ridden hell out of his horse to beat the storm to Cold Spring. Begin[Pg 169]ning to sprinkle; five minutes and she'd be on top of them, howling like a wolf.

"I'll go put up the hawse, Babe, while yo'all make the gravy." The kid spoke at Babe's shoulder and Babe jumped as if he had been struck.

The kid saw and his lip curled as he rode to the corral. Babe would

The kid saw and his lip curled as he rode to the corral. Babe would shoot him in the back, more'n likely--but not while the foreman was there. Foreman seemed a straight, honest man--too straight and honest for the Poole, he thought savagely. Nothing would happen while he was there. Flag of truce.

Babe was stirring gravy in the frying pan when the kid came into the cabin again--stirring with his right hand. Shore, why not? Cards lay as they fell till the foreman left again. Meant to go, all right. Didn't unsaddle his horse--meant to ride on to the Poole soon as he had his supper and the storm was over. Straight, honest man, name of Joe Hale. No killer look about him; his mind went to cattle and calf tally and shipments of beef. Asked about the nesters, about the cattle over this way, and whether they gave much trouble wanting to drift into the valley. Said he was trying to get the Old Man (that was Walter[Pg 170] Bell) to have the company try and buy up all the ranches down in the valley. That would stop the trouble, he thought. Buy out the nesters and have all the valley for the Poole. Make great winter range.

The foreman talked while he ate largely of the supper Babe had cooked. Babe talked too, but not very much. He let the foreman have the floor. Babe didn't eat much, either. Seemed to have lost his appetite. Kept his eyes down, most of the time. Looked at his plate, but kept sending sidelong glances at the kid. Reckon he thought Tiger Eye wouldn't see and read the meaning. Knew damn' well he was trapped. Knew he'd have to face it, soon as Joe Hale was gone. Shoah storming. So dark inside the kid got up and lighted the lamp.

Afterwards he stood there, looking down at the two who still sat at the table; Joe talking away, Babe pretending to listen but poignantly aware of every move the kid made, almost of every breath he drew. The kid knew it. Knew it as a tiger knows what quivers the flesh of

the trembling buck as he pounces; knew as a cat knows what palpitates the sides of the mouse between its paws.

It was not the kid's doing, this interval off[Pg 171] waiting. He didn't like it. He listened to the receding reverberations of the thunder, saw the lightning cut the sky, through the window, knew that the late sun would be out in a little while. Then the foreman would go loping across the drenched prairie and he and Babe would have their settlement.

The foreman emptied his third cup of coffee, wiped his mustache with his handkerchief, hitched the box seat two inches back, and drew his tobacco and papers from his pocket. Soon as he had his smoke going, he would get up and leave. Already he was sending toward the window a calculating glance, mentally noting how the steady downpour had suddenly lessened to a thin drizzle made shining by the sun's rays. Now he was sifting tobacco into the tiny white trough, now he was rolling it. He would get up in a minute and reach for his hat.

The kid backed to the bunk and stood leaning against the wall at its head. Babe wasn't smoking, right then. The kid reckoned Babe must know it would be his last smoke on earth, and he wasn't hankering for it.

The foreman reached thumb and finger into the watch pocket of his vest, groped there, taking his time. Talking about a bog hole that[Pg 172] had caught one of the Poole's best bulls and held him mired overnight. Didn't know but what they'd lose him, after all, because he seemed to have wrenched his back somehow when the boys sank their loops on him and drug him out. Couldn't get up. Had to be tailed up, and then soon as he laid down, he was helpless again.

The kid listened mechanically watching the unlighted cigarette

The kid listened mechanically, watching the unlighted cigarette wabbling between the foreman's hairy lips. Hell, wouldn't he ever get going? Was he aiming to set there all night and gab about mired bulls? That was like Babe. Babe was mired too; mired in his own killings. Down and helpless, and he knew it. And suddenly the kid knew what he was going to do, because he had loved Babe and believed in him. He was going to let Babe draw. He'd give him that much of a start.

Maybe they'd both go together. The kid wouldn't care if they did. Babe didn't know it and he was chewing his lips right now, thinking the kid was going to kill him. He'd feel better if he knew he was going to have his chance to shoot.

The foreman finally drew a match from his pocket, looked at it, used it with little stabbing[Pg 173] motions in the air to point his meaning while he talked to Babe. Gosh, did he always talk that-a-way? It seemed to the kid that half an hour passed before the cigarette was finally lighted. The foreman absently blew out the match, snapped it in two, dropped the pieces on the floor and got up, reaching for his hat.

Babe lifted his head and looked full at the kid. He saw the kid's lips loosen, saw them quiver as the kid's eyes met his with shamed understanding.

The kid sat down on the bunk, his arms resting on his knees and his face bent to the floor. Babe! He would have shot Babe just on the strength of a broken match! If the foreman hadn't come right when he did, he'd have killed Babe Garner--the best friend he ever had in his life.

The foreman spoke to him, got a mumbled reply and went out. Babe went over and took down the dishpan and set it on the stove, dipping water into it from the bucket standing on the bench. He

dipping water into it from the bucket standing on the bench. He opened the firebox, thrust in a stick of wood, pushed the door shut with his foot. Babe! Clearing the table, scraping the plates just as if nothing had happened. Stopping now to make himself a cigarette while[Pg 174] the kid watched him from under his long eyelashes.

"That feller that shot old Murray down in the valley; yuh say he left broken match stubs where he waited, Tiger Eye? Can't go much by that. Lots of fellers in a grass country break their match stubs in two before they throw 'em away. Less danger of fire."

"Shoah seems a right common habit, Babe." The kid got up and went to the door, fumbling for the latch.

"Say, Tiger Eye, feed my horse too, will yuh?"

"Shoah will, Babe." The kid's voice was husky with unshed tears as he went out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

[Pg 175]

"WOMEN ALWAYS CRY"

With his big gray hat far back on his head and his high-heeled boots hooked over the edge of the neatly brushed stove hearth,

Tiger Eye Reeves sat very still, drawing his mouth organ absently across his sober young lips. He was thinking of the murder and of Babe, wondering just where Babe stood and how much Babe knew about it, and how tricky a thing circumstantial evidence may be.

On the bunk over in the far corner Babe lay with his head high and his six-gun beside him where his right hand would drop to it easily, and turned a leaf now and then of a dog-eared book he called Less Mizzerbles. What thoughts went shuttling through Babe's brain would never be tattled by his lips; nor by his eyes, that slid away from a sidelong glance toward the stove just as the kid lowered the mouth organ from his lips and turned his face to the bunk.

"Yo'all plumb shoah ole Pappy Murray was a cow thief, Babe?"[Pg 176]

"Shore he was! Why, hell, I told yuh a thousand times, Tiger Eye, there ain't an honest man in the hull valley. Not a one. Like huntin' coyotes--you know damn' well you don't have to pick and choose the ones that'll pull down a calf if they git a chance. Any coyote's a calf killer. Same with them nesters down there. They're a damn' bunch of outlaws and yuh can't go amiss. Old Murray--Say, how'd you come to know he was shot, if you was off over on the river side of the Bench where I sent yuh?"

"Nevah did ride awn to the river, Babe." The kid's voice was soft and slow, but it held no apology for failing to do what Babe had told him to do. "Got right curious about something in the valley, so I taken a jog down off the Bench to see foh m'se'f."

"Yeah? What was that?"

"Kain't say foh shoah, Babe."

"Had your field glasses, didn't yuh?"

"Field glasses kain't show yo'all what's awn the otha side of a rock ridge, Babe."

"Poole riders'll be shot on sight down there. I told yuh that, Tiger Eye. You was takin' too big a chance."

"No biggah chance than some otha Poole[Pg 177] ridah taken, going down to kill ole Pappy Murray."

"How'd yuh know it was a Poole rider? You didn't see 'im, did yuh?"

"No, suh, I nevah did see him."

The kid went back to his playing and his thinking. "Way down upon the Suanee River, far, far away-y--" that was the creek fringed with cottonwoods, running through the Murray ranch. He seemed to be riding again along the wagon-rutted road through the edge of the grove, his heart thumping because this was the trail that led to the house where Nellie lived. "All the world am sad an' dreary--" He was hearing Nellie's mother wailing and crying beside the bony old man lying dead in his own dooryard with a bullet hole in his back. "Far from the old folks at home--" meant the kid's own mother weeping beside his dead father, away down in Texas.

"How'd you know it was a Poole rider, then?"

Babe flung down his book and sat up, eyeing the kid sharply while he pulled tobacco and papers from his pocket. "Nesters ain't above dry-gulchin' each other if they've got a grudge, and layin' it to the Poole."[Pg 178]

"Nestah wouldn't hit out foh the Bench, aftah he done his killing."

"Which way'd he go when he hit the rim?" Babe held his book of cigarette papers in his hand, unconsciously riffling the leaves without taking one out. His eyes, the color of steel on a frosty morning, were boring into the back of the kid's head.

"Kain't say, Babe. Plumb rocky along the rim."

Babe studied the kid for another ten seconds and gave a grunt that seemed to release a tension within his mind. He pulled out a cigarette paper and creased it into a trough, into which he sifted a little tobacco from a small cloth bag.

"You come into camp here, actin' like you thought I done it," he stated calmly, lighting a match with his thumb-nail and deliberately breaking the stub in two while the kid watched him with an unblinking steadiness in the stare of his yellow right eye. Babe met that stare for the space of one heartbeat and looked away.

"Shoah would hate to think that, Babe." The kid wiped his mouth organ on his sleeve, but he did not raise it again to his lips.

"Shore hate to have yuh, Tiger Eye. Hate[Pg 179] to see yuh throw in with the nesters too." Babe scowled at the smoke spiraling up from his cigarette. "Might as well git this thing cleared up right here, Kid, and be done with it. I don't like the idea of you thinkin' I'm the kinda killer that would lay behind a rock and shoot anybody in the back. 'Nless I had darn good reason for it," he added, as an afterthought.

The kid sat whistling a whispery little tune between his teeth while he looked at the wall where the dishpan hung behind the stove. He wished Babe wouldn't take just that tone. Babe knew he wasn't throwing in with any nesters. 'Peared like Babe was trying to make

an argument.

"You thought I done it, because you found them pieces of match behind that rock, and I've got a habit of breakin' my matches in two. Plenty of men break their match stubs. What made you think I was down there?"

"Nevah said I thought it, Babe."

"You looked it, when yuh come to camp."

"Kain't tell a thing by my looks, Babe. This yallah eye of mine is plumb deceiving, sometimes."

"What gets me, Tiger Eye, is how you come to take it to heart the way you do. Ain't a bigger[Pg 180] cow thief in the country than old Murray. He was bound to get his, sooner or later. 'Nless he was a p'ticular friend of yourn--"

"Nevah was no friend of mine, Babe."

"Well--they say he's got a good-lookin' girl. You seen her?"

"Wasn't no girl theah, Babe, when I rode along to the house. Heard a woman screaming and a-crying like my own mammy cried when Pap was bushwhacked. Killahs don't think about the woman's side of the mattah, I reckon. Right nice little ole lady, making pies for her man. I taken him in an' laid him awn the baid, and I taken two pies outa the oven befoh they got burnt. Killahs don't think of the women, 'pears like."

"Well, neither do the cow thieves think of the women. They know what'll happen. They know, and they take their chance. Same as we do. Hell, a nester wouldn't think of the women if he got a chance to dry gulch a Boole rider. Don't think there wouldn't be women anin'

dy-quick a Poole rider. Don't think there wouldn't be women cryin' around if a Poole rider was to get shot. Joe Hale, he's got a wife and two kids. He breaks his match stubs in two, same as I do--but yuh don't think Joe was down there, layin' for old Murray, do yuh?"[Pg 181]

"No, Babe, I don't think that."

"And as far as the women are concerned--" Babe rose from the bunk, hitching up his trousers' belt as he sauntered over to the water bucket and lifted the dipper with a jangle of tin. "Far as the women are concerned," he repeated, holding the full dipper poised while he looked down at the kid, "they got to take their chance same as the men. There's always women cryin' over some man. There always will be, as long as there's a man to cry over. What yuh goin' to do about it? A man can't set and roll his thumbs all his life, just so his woman won't have cause for tears. They bawl a lot--but they git over it."

"Reckon yo're right, Babe." The kid slipped his mouth organ into his pocket and stood up, his tawny hair six inches nearer the pole roof than was Babe's sleek black head.

"Darn right, I'm right. Course, you're young yet, Tiger Eye, and comin' right from home and losin' yore dad like yuh done, I can see where it would kinda rile you up, happenin' along right at the time when old lady Murray was takin' on. It ain't pleasant for nobody. This is war, and war's what Sherman said it was. But you've been so growed up and steady, far[Pg 182] as I've seen, I shore never expected you'd git chicken-hearted over a nester all at once. Course, if it was the old lady and her pies that kinda stirred you up, I can understand that, all right. It's too damn' bad. But I can't see as there's anything we can do about it."

"If every killah was fixed so he couldn't shoot a gun, theah wouldn't be no moah killing, Babe."

Babe finished his drink and jangled the dipper into the bucket. He walked to the stove, lifted the lid, looked in and closed the opening again.

"I'd rather be dead than have my hands smashed the way you smashed Jess Markel's. So would any man that was a man."

"If it was a nestah, Babe--"

"Oh, hell, a nester's different! Bust a nester's knuckles with a bullet any time you feel like it, Kid! But me, I'm liable to need my gun hand some of these days."

"I said killahs, Babe."

"Well, Poole riders have to kill, if they git crowded too hard. You know that, Tiger Eye. Didn't you bump off a nester yourself a few days back, when he was tryin' to git a pot shot at yuh over on the rim?"[Pg 183]

The kid looked down at Babe and a slow smile straightened the curve of his lips.

"No, suh, I nevah did kill that nestah," he drawled. "But I shoah did taken the shoot outa him, Babe."

Babe shivered as if a cold wind had struck his bare flesh, but he didn't say again that he would rather be dead than crippled. The kid knew he thought it, though. Plumb strange Babe would be so scared of having his knuckles stiffened so he couldn't pull a trigger. Babe seemed to think the kid was cruel to do that to a killer. Seemed to think it was all right to shoot the life out of a man.

seemed to think it was all right to shoot the life out of a man, though. Never said a word about that being cruel. The kid's eyebrows came together in a puzzled frown while he studied Babe at the window, peering out into the faint moonlight.

"She's bankin' up again in the west," Babe said, turning restlessly, his voice deliberately cheerful and casual. "I'll go turn the horses in the stable. It's liable to rain all night, by the looks."

"Reckon so, Babe." The kid turned and picked up the two water buckets.

Ten feet from the cabin door they separated, the kid going to the spring just beyond the[Pg 184] house, Babe walking on to the corral. The kid listened to Babe's footsteps, a wistful ache in his breast. Babe was the only friend he had in this new world into which he had ridden so blithely to find life so bitter with murder and hate. Couldn't call Nellie Murray a friend, exactly. Didn't want to, either. Yo'all can't feel friendship for a girl like that. It's got to be something more than friendship, if it's anything at all.

Different with a man. The kid had counted on Babe's friendship and on his being square so a fellow could trust him. But if Babe had waited like a coyote among the rocks and had shot Nellie's old pappy in the back, he was just a mean, lowdown killer and nobody could trust him. A man like that would shoot his best friend in the back if he took a notion.

The kid would have to be mighty certain it was Babe, though, before he would believe it. He'd want stronger proof than that broken match had been. It made him shiver to think how close he had come to shooting Babe just on the strength of a broken match. Now, he didn't believe it--but he couldn't put it out of his mind, either, and the vague distrust hurt like physical pain.[Pg 185]

He stopped and dipped a bucket into the deep little pool of Cold Spring and watched the veiled moonlight glisten on the wavering ripples it made. Nellie's hair was almost the color of that shine in the water; more of a gold color, but shiny and wavy like that. And her old pappy was dead down there in the valley, and her brother was dead, and even if they had been cow thieves like Babe claimed they were, it was mighty hard on Nellie and her mother.

The kid lifted the full bucket out and set it on the ground, reached behind him for the other and tilted it slowly into the broken, gleaming water. It darkened abruptly and he glanced up to see the thin edge of the moon dive deep into the mounting cloud bank. Reckon Nellie was feeling pretty bad, right now. Trying to hush her own tears and comfort her mother, and take all the load on her own shoulders. Nesters swarming all over the ranch by now, most likely. If he should saddle up and ride back down there, they'd shoah kill him if they could. Make more trouble for Nellie, that would. No sense in that. He'd do more good if he stayed away and found out who the killer was.

He lifted the second bucket out with a heave[Pg 186] and went up into the path and so to the cabin. Babe came in, bringing an armful of wood which he pushed under the stove to dry.

"Yuh don't want to let old lady Murray's cryin' worry yuh, Tiger Eye," Babe said abruptly, when they were pulling off their boots. "It's too damn' bad, but it can't be helped. We all got t' go some time."

"I know that, Babe."

"Best not to waste sympathy on a nester. They don't deserve no sympathy; man or woman, they're all tarred with the same stick."

"Who d'yuh reckon done it, Babe?" The kid spoke softly into the darkness, as Babe settled his long length in the blankets.

"Damfino."

"Murray's boy was shot awhile back, too, wasn't he, Babe?"

"Yeah, believe he was. How'd *you* find out so much, Tiger Eye? That was before you come into the country."

"Fellow can heah right smaht if he lays low and listens."

"Uh-huh. Been puttin' your ear to a crack, hunh? Yuh wanta watch out, Kid. That's damn' dangerous, sneakin' down amongst 'em. You stay up on the rim and use your field glasses[Pg 187] more. It ain't what that bunch says, it's what they *do* that the Poole's interested in."

"Nevah taken much of a risk, Babe."

"You keep out of the valley, just the same. 'Bout as safe down there as a rattlesnake den. You hear me, Tiger Eye!"

"I heahs yo'all."

"Well, you heed me too. Ever let 'em git the upper hand, and hell'll be poppin' around here."

"Peahs like hell's been doin' a right smaht of poppin' already, Babe."

"They ain't got the best of the Poole yet. They're scared. We shoot too fast and too straight to suit 'em. And you're the quickest man with a gun that's ever come into the North, Tiger Eye. Honest, I ain't never seen vore equal--and I've saw some pretty gun work in my

never seen yore equal and I've saw some pretty gun work in my time. You're goin' to be valuable to the Poole, once you git over that sympathy of yourn for nester women. You got to cut that out or yuh won't never git *nowhere*."

The kid did not answer that, and presently Babe's breath fell into the slow rhythm of sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

[Pg 188]

UNDER FIRE

The kid's mind jarred back from deep dreaming and he opened one eye to see a yellow streak of sunlight on the cabin wall, high in a far corner behind the stove. By that he knew he had slept late. Usually they were ready to ride out along the rim when the sun showed above the mountains. Babe's side of the bed was empty, but there was no breakfast smell in the cabin and no crackling of fire in the stove. Gone to look after the horses, probably. Babe must have slept late, himself. Must have been Babe shutting the door that woke him.

The kid pulled himself up in bed, knuckling his eyes like a child. He wished he could bring his dream out into the real side of life with him and live that. instead of the lonely routine that made up his day.

Wiping the dishes for Nellie Murray--that's what he dreamed he was doing. They had been having a great time together, talking and laughing, her long[Pg 189] yellow braid swinging on her shoulders when she laughed or moved suddenly, and her eyes shining blue with little crinkles of fun at the corners. It was something of a jolt to come back to this log-walled room, with its one window and the crude makeshift comforts of a line camp.

But this was reality, and the other was just a dream. The kid swung his feet to the floor and reached for his clothes. Babe would expect breakfast to be ready when he came back. Reckon Babe sort of knew he had lain staring up at the roof till the coyotes were yapping for dawn, and that was why he didn't say a word when it was time to get up--just crawled out and went on to feed the horses. Killer or no killer, Babe was right kind and thoughtful that-a-way.

The kid started a fire in the stove, set a kettle of water over the blaze, and washed his face and neck and ears in the tin basin on the bench. He leaned before the crooked little mirror and combed his hair that immediately returned to its unruly waves when the comb had passed. He shoved another stick of wood into the stove, picked up the basin and pulled the door open, to fling the water out upon the ground.[Pg 190]

The basin jerked spitefully in his hand, a round hole cut through its upper side where the water spurted through. From a clump of bushes over by the corral the bark of a rifle tardily followed the bullet. The kid let go the basin and dropped to his knees, then fell forward on his face and lay there with his arms stretched out in front of him. From across the narrow, high-walled slope, the echo of the shot came, sweetened and softened by the distance, and then the morning was still and sunny again, with a meadow lark singing untroubled down by the spring.

The kid's fingers stretched slowly to their slender length, relaxed a little, stretched again, moved this way and that, until they encountered something which they clasped so firmly the knuckles turned white. Babe's foot, Babe, lying there on his face, within a few feet of the door, shot down while the kid lay dreaming that he was wiping dishes for Nellie Murray who had laughed into his eyes. It wasn't the shutting of the door—it was the rifle shot that woke the kid. Babe, shot in front of his door, just as Nellie's old pappy had been shot. Even at that moment, while the kid was taking a firmer grip of that limp foot, he wondered[Pg 191] if Babe was only getting back what he gave old Murray.

The man with the rifle was keeping himself mighty quiet. The kid lifted his head an inch and looked out from under his eyebrows to where the smoke still hung in a thin haze before the clump of service-berry bushes. The killer would have to make a run for it across open ground if he left there. The kid reckoned he wanted to wait awhile and see if the cabin sheltered any one else. Sneaked up there before dawn, and now he couldn't leave till his work was finished.

Woodpile out there was right handy. Unless the shooter stood up and looked over the bushes, he couldn't see what was on the ground in front of the door. Chopping block in the way, and a scatter of dead branches. Couldn't see if a body moved an inch or two. Plumb lucky, that woodpile was.

The kid squirmed backward, dragging Babe by his foot. Slow. Back an inch or two, and wait a minute. Injuns couldn't crawl any slower. Babe groaned at the third pull, and the kid's heart gave a flop and then raced for joy. Babe was alive yet. Something to pull for, now. Babe groaned again, not loud, but kind[Pg 192] of slow and drawn out as if his misery was the dull wearing kind without any sharp

at, as if the misery was the dam, wearing him without any sharp pain to call a man's voice between his teeth. Seemed to hate the pulling. The kid gave the foot a little shake sidewise.

"I'm draggin' yo'all inside the doah, Babe," he muttered, in a tone that would not carry beyond the woodpile. "I'm playin' daid and creepin' slow. Just keep still and he'p a little when I pull, and I'll get yo'all inside directly."

Babe did not answer except with another groan, but he pressed one hand hard on the ground and pushed backward when the kid pulled again, so the kid knew Babe heard and understood all right. The kid hurried after that. He wanted his body all inside the door as soon as possible, and with a last wriggle his tousled damp hair went in past the door jamb. Like a cat he was on his feet then and had Babe inside with one great yank and slammed the door shut.

A bullet cut a splintery path for itself in the thick slabs, but the kid did not care for that. He was hastily pumping a cartridge into the chamber of his rifle when that happened, and he sent a shot through the window and into the clump of service-berry bushes by the cor[Pg 193]ral. He did not expect to hit anything but the bushes, for there was a rock pile back of the thicket. But he served notice that he was getting into action, and the fellow out there had better lie low. Then he turned, picked Babe up in his arms and laid him on the bed.

"Got me in the side," Babe muttered in a husky tone, quite unlike his natural voice. "Stop the bleedin', can't yuh?"

"Shoah will, Babe." The kid's voice was soft and reassuring but his eyes and his mouth were grim. "They taken a shot at me, too, but they nevah touched me. I aim to get right busy with my rifle-gun when I get yo'all fixed up."

"Damn' coyotes--got me when I stepped outside."

"That's what a killah always aims to do," the kid observed drily. "Always aims to down a man at his own doah."

Whether Babe caught the significance of that remark or not, he made no answer to it.

The kettle was boiling on the stove and the kid brought basin and clean dish towels and a bottle of carbolic acid and set them on a box beside the bunk, moving with a sureness and a swiftness as if he had done this thing before and knew exactly how to go about it. He pulled[Pg 194] off Babe's shirt and studied the round, purplish hole on Babe's right side just under the curve of his ribs. He slid his hand under Babe's body and felt his back. He uncorked the bottle of carbolic acid, poured sparingly into the basin of hot water, watched the milkiness spread and stirred the water with his fingers before he dipped in a cloth.

"Ole Pappy Murray wasn't as lucky as yo'all," he mused aloud. "Killah got him in the back, and the bullet went awn through his lungs. Reckon he didn't live a minute."

Babe didn't say anything to that, either. He fainted, which left the kid free and unhampered in his crude surgery.

"I taken out the bullet, Babe," he said calmly, when Babe came back to consciousness. "Wasn't moah'n two--three inches deep. Kain't figure it, lessen it come from ovah across the field. Nevah did come from the berry bushes, or it'd gone awn through. Two men out theah, I reckon."

Babe's fingers moved gently to the bandage. The room reeked of carbolic acid, oddly mingled with the smell of coffee boiling. The kid

carbonic acid, badly mingled with the smell of coffee boiling. The kid brought a cup, lifted Babe's head while he drank.[Pg 195]

"Two, yuh say?"

"Two and likely moah. Shoah was a spent bullet got yo'all down. Hombre in the bushes shot at me; I saw the smoke."

"And me down! They'll git us, Tiger Eye."

"In a pig's eye."

"Git my rifle and--help me on my feet."

"Yo'all lay quiet. I taken charge to-day, Babe." The kid was loading Babe's rifle, and now he placed it on the table, pushing aside the jelly glass of tin spoons and a can of syrup to give plenty of room. The sun was still slanting a beam in through a crack over the door, but it fell now on the back wall instead of the roof. He peered out through the window toward the opposite side of the shallow basin in the faint hope of seeing there the man who had shot Babe. But the low rocky ridge could have concealed half the men in the county. He gave up looking and turned his rifle upon the clump of bushes over by the corral.

Three shots carefully spaced brought a spiteful volley in reply. Babe glowered at two round holes in a log over the foot of the bunk and then twisted his head to look at the kid.

"Git back away from that window! Want to get yore head busted with a bullet?"[Pg 196]

"Ain't cravin' it. Call a few bullets in heah, and he might reckon one laid me low. I'm playing possum from now awn, Babe."

"Yore playin' hell," fretted Babe. "What you doin' now?"

"Aim to cook breakfast now while theah's a chance," the kid replied tranquilly. "Smoke's going up the pipe now. When it quits, theah won't be any moah to-day. Aim to have it lookin' plumb daid around heah later awn."

"It'll look dead enough, all right," Babe muttered.

The kid added more water and more coffee to the big pot, stirred the fire and set the pot in upon the coals where it would boil quickly. This was something more than a sneaking, sunrise attempt to murder them as they left the house. His three shots through the window proved that. The cabin was still under fire and there would be no let-up now. Strong black coffee would come in handy, even if it had to be drunk cold.

"Peah's like the nestahs are aiming to take theah revenge foh ole Pappy Murray," he remarked, while he turned a hotcake expertly in the frying pan.

Babe started swearing and trailed off into[Pg 197] a groan. Later, as the tides of pain swept in upon him, he did a great deal more swearing and groaning. Twice he tried to get off the bunk, but the kid forced him back again and returned to his task.

Playing possum had so far failed to have any effect. A fairly steady stream of bullets came spatting viciously into the cabin, and the table was littered with glass from the window. It worried Babe, who was beginning to talk feverishly.

"What they doin' out there? Sounds like a whole damn' army."

The kid was digging loopholes between the logs, wherever the

chinking invited such effort, and he had every reason in the world to believe they were going to be needed before the day was out.

"Five rifle-guns speakin' out theah," he replied equably, while he gouged at the last hole, which would overlook the path to the spring. "One ovah by the corral's the closest. I'll be ready to say howdy to them hombres directly, Babe."

"Shoot to kill when yuh start in," Babe urged. "Ain't goin' to try bustin' knuckles now, I hope." [Pg 198]

"Kain't see any knuckles to bust, Babe."

The kid's face clouded as he pushed his rifle barrel through the hole between two logs, but his yellow right was as unblinking as a tiger's when it looked down along the sights. He caught a glimpse of gray hat crown among the bushes beyond the spring. He didn't want to kill. Hat crown, head, shoulders below--The kid couldn't see the man he swiftly visioned, but he aimed where a shoulder should be and pulled the trigger. There was a sudden and violent agitation of the bushes and a man went streaking it back toward his more discreet companions. The kid's finger bent again deliberately and the man's swinging right arm jerked upward and went limp at his side. The kid made sure of that before he withdrew the rifle from the hole and crossed the room to another.

"Git anybody?"

The kid did not answer at once. He was squinting toward the little ridge, whence most of the firing had come. The besiegers had a clear view of the cabin and their line of retreat lay open behind them down to the valley. They had the hearts of real killers, the kid thought with a curl of his lips. They weren't taking any chance whatever. [Pg 199]

"Taken the shoot outa one, Babe," he said at last.

"'J kill 'im?"

"Reckon not. Shot his ahm down, 'peahs like."

"F'r God's sake don't go and git chicken-hearted, Kid! They won't show no mercy to *you*. Never mind any nester women bawlin' around—they shore as hell wouldn't bawl if *you* was killed."

"Don't reckon they would, Babe." The kid was aiming at a shiny spot out there on the ridge, where the sun struck a rifle barrel. Back of that shine there crouched a man. The kid couldn't see him, but again he formed a mental picture of the man and sent a bullet across to say howdy to a shoulder—or to the rock that sheltered it from hurt.

"'J git anybody?"

"Kain't say foh shoah, Babe." The kid picked out more chinking and brought the field glasses to bear upon the place. "'Peahs like he's right oneasy, Babe." He swept the glasses slowly along the crest of the ridge, glimpsed other betraying signs and laid the glasses down that he might pick up the rifle again.

"Shoot t' *kill*, why don't yuh?" Babe's voice[Pg 200] was high and querulous. When he turned a strained look upon the kid, his eyes were glassy and had an anxious stare wholly unlike Babe Garner. "Damn their arms and shoulders! You can kill if you want to--anybody that can whirl and bust knuckles the way you busted Jess Markel's can put a bullet through a man's heart, if he wants to."

"Reckon I could, Babe."

"Well, damn it, *do* it, then! When yuh draw a bead on a nester, git 'im *right*. There ain't no come-back from a dead man."

"Every man that's killed has got folks that take up the fight," the kid said patiently. "Take that Murray killin', Babe. Down on the Brazos--"

"We ain't down on the Brazos. The Murrays is fixed *right*, I tell yuh. Nobody left but the old woman and the girl, and if they git flossy about it, they're liable to be served the same way."

The kid's face paled and hardened. "Shootin' *women*--that's not the way of Texas killahs, Babe."

"The hell it ain't! All the killers ain't from Texas, lemme tell yuh. There's just as good men in little old Montana as ever come up the[Pg 201] Chisholm Trail. A nester's a nester. Man or woman, they're goin' to be cleaned out before the Poole's done with it. Old Murray and that damned cow thief of an Ed, they're just the beginnin'." And then Babe gave a crazily reckless laugh and pointed a finger admonishingly at the kid.

"You got 'em out there before yuh, Tiger Eye; any jury in the world would make it self-defence. Yuh don't have to worry a damned bit. Now's your chance--git 'em, kid! Damn it, don't yuh know there's a bounty on nesters? You can collect five hundred apiece for 'em, and no questions asked!"

"That the price on ole Pappy Murray, Babe?"

"Hell, it's the price on *any* damn nester! Didn't the Old Man tell yuh so?"

"Nevah did tell me that, Babe. Mistah Bell taken my name and wheah I'm from and all, and asked right smaht questions. Nevah did tell me anything, 'cepting I was to get my o'dahs from yo'all."

"Damn right, you git your orders from me! I order yuh right now to lay 'em cold! Kill every damn' nester you can draw a bead on, out there! Save goin' after 'em in the valley. Hell,[Pg 202] they're out to kill you, ain't they? You and me both! Git 'em, or they'll git you. Git the damned--" Babe trailed off into a meaningless mumble.

Crazy with fever and fretting because he couldn't stand up and fight, that's what ailed him. That bullet hole was deeper than the kid had said, and though he had really taken out the bullet, he had got it from the back, where it was lodged under the skin.

No use telling Babe he was shot through. A man's mind can take hold of a fact like that and double the danger with worry. No use telling him. No use arguing with him, either. Babe was out of his head. Anything he said now was just fever talk--things he had heard and things he had thought mixed together and expounded as fact. A man was liable to say most anything when he was out of his head that-a-way. Yo'all couldn't believe a thing Babe said.

The kid sighed and gouged at the dried mud and tried to think of something else.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

FEVER TALKS

Four bullets zipping in rapid succession through door and window raised an invisible deadline between the bunk where Babe lay and the loophole over by the stove, where the kid stood watching through the field glasses and locating each rifle that spoke over on a low, boulder-strewn ridge across the narrow pasture. A faint puff of smoke, a glint of sunlight, a hat crown ducking out of sight behind a rock.

"Why, dammit, you come here with the dead list in your pocket!" Babe cried suddenly from the bunk, his sick brain seizing anew upon his grievance. "I knowed you was lyin' when you said you found that map where the wind had blowed it into a bush. You was headin' straight for the nesters with that dead list, and you knowed what you had to do.

"You made a slip-up with me when you said you was goin' to Wheeler's place because Nate Wheeler come first on the map. I like yuh,[Pg 204] Kid, and I've let yuh make out like you're a nice little lad that wouldn't kill a m'skeeter. I ain't never asked no questions, but I ain't a damn' fool. You had the dead list and that was all I needed to know. A man ain't expected to go around shootin' off his mouth about what he's doin'. Nobody wants yuh to advertise yourself.

"But, damn it, you've crippled one of the best shots the Poole has got, and you've been runnin' on me about beefin' old Murray, and yuh claim you won't kill a nester yourself for love er money. Looks pretty damn' scaley to me, Kid--damned if it don't. Looks like

they've got you workin' for 'em. Damn' spy, for all I know."

"Yo'all's just talkin' now, Babe. I kain't pay no mind to fevah talk. Yo'all lay still and calm yohse'f down, Babe."

"Calm myself down! Yeah, like hell I'll calm myself down! I knowed what yuh poured into that bullet hole to eat the hull damned insides outa me. Poured in half a bottle of carbolic, that's what. Eatin' a hole I could ram my fist in. Et into my stomach now; I can taste the damn' stuff."

"That's just the soreness of the hurt, Babe.[Pg 205] Why, I wouldn't do that to yo'all, nohow." The kid turned and looked at Babe, the field glasses dangling in his left hand. Crazy, that's what ailed Babe. Bullet wound a-hurting him and the fever coming up.

"Oh, no--you wouldn't do a thing to me!" Babe's heavy sarcasm weighted the words with venom. "Poison me, that's all. Frame it with your damned nester friends to come and shoot me for yuh. I knowed it when they dropped me outside the door."

Once more the kid tried not to listen. In one ear and out the other--that was the only way to do with fever talk. Plumb foolish, Babe thinking he would pour carbolic acid into a bullet wound. That proved the rest was crazy talk too--about the dead list and all. Babe was shoah a sick man, all right.

He took up Babe's rifle and sent a shot over to where the little blue smoke clouds betrayed the position of the nesters. It wasn't much of a target; whether he wanted to hit a man or not, it was unsatisfactory shooting. He liked to know exactly where a bullet would strike before he pulled the trigger. It worried him now to have to shoot at a puff of smoke which the wind was whipping up away from the rocks.[Pg 206]

"How yuh comin', Kid?" Babe's voice sounded strangely rational after a long silence, as if the fever cloud was lifting from his brain. "Don't let 'em sneak up on yuh, Tiger Eye."

"Theah keeping ovah awn the little rock ridge, Babe. They won't come out in the open, 'peahs like."

"Herdin' us in here till dark. They'll sneak up on us then. You can't expect to stand 'em off after dark. Gimme a drink, will yuh, Kid?"

"Shoah will, Babe." The kid laid down the rifle, picked up the two buckets and ducked crouching across the cabin. "Reckon I'll make me a loophole awn this side the doah," he drawled. "How yo'all feeling now, Babe?"

"Like hell. Like a red-hot iron runnin' through me."

The kid slipped an arm under Babe's neck and raised his head so that he could drink. Babe looked up at him with shamed questioning.

"Guess I was throwin' it into yuh kinda free and promiscuous, awhile ago, wasn't I, Kid? Never had anything knock me out the way this damn' bullet hole has done. Shore you got the bullet out?"

"Shoah did, Babe. This heah's it." The kid[Pg 207] picked it up and rolled it in his palm, while Babe regarded it curiously as a boy would gaze upon a pulled tooth.

"Hunh. Never flattened itself none. Thirty-thirty. Wonder it didn't kill me."

"Right smaht distance ovah to the hill, Babe. Seems right strange to me that it didn't squish me."

me they don't crowd up."

"Foxy, that's why. Herdin' us in here till dark, I tell yuh. They're playin' safe, that's all."

"Man that built this cabin shoah made a pow'ful big mistake," mused the kid. "Window and doah facing out ovah the basin, and no back doah whatevah."

"Facin' south to make it warmer in winter. Wasn't a damn' nester in the hull valley when this cabin was built; that's why there ain't no back door."

"Reckon we all bettah cut anotha doah when this fight's ovah, Babe."

"When this fight's over, we won't need no other door," Babe retorted grimly.

"My old pap always said no fight's ovah till the daid are counted. Kain't count you and me among the daid yet, Babe."

"They will, if something don't break damn' soon. How's the water holdin' out?"[Pg 208]

That meant Babe wanted another drink. The kid filled the tin dipper, hoping Babe would not notice how he had to scrape the bottom of the bucket to do so. He hadn't thought of the water problem, but it loomed rather large now. Couldn't get to the spring while the daylight held, and Babe's thirst was growing. If the nesters stayed where they were, they had him trapped.

About noon, now. Seven hours and more till dark. The horses were tied in the stable. They wanted water too. The kid's mouth tightened at the swift mental picture he had of Pecos standing tied to the log

at the own mental picture he had of it, even standing tied to the log manger, disconsolately nosing at the coarse weeds and stubs he had discarded before. Babe's brown horse too. Barney and Babe's other saddle horse were in the pasture and all right, but those two tied in the stable couldn't eat or drink till he got to them. And the one door and the window were letting in bullets like a sieve. Plenty buried in the cabin walls too, the kid reckoned. Couldn't bore through the tough old logs, at that distance, though they might, if the nesters got closer.

"Plumb lucky foh us, Babe, we've got open ground cleah ovah to that rock ridge," he ob[Pg 209]served, with more cheerfulness than he felt. "They kain't come up on us, long as I'm shooting."

"You wait till it comes dark!"

"Why, shucks, Babe! Yo'all talk as if I'm goin' to set heah and wait till they come poking theah haid in the doah!" The kid stood up and began feeling along the rear wall just under the roof. "Covah up yoh haid, lessen yo'all want yoh eyes plumb full of dirt."

"Think you can git out through the roof?" Babe tried to prop himself on one elbow and watch, but the pain turned him dizzy and sick, and he lay panting and cursing his helplessness.

"Shoah going to try," said the kid grimly.

"They'll shoot yuh like a rabbit!"

The kid shook his head and stepped up on the foot of the bunk where he could bring his full strength into action, prying and pushing at the dirt-covered poles of the roof.

Had the ridge beyond the little flat been higher, the nesters over there would have seen him when, at last, with a final avalanche of

clods and dust on the bunk, his head poked through into the sunlight. But the cabin stood on a little ridge of its own and only from the bluff opposite could one look upon the farther[Pg 210] slope of the roof. The kid made sure of that before he went any farther.

"Kain't see me nohow, lessen I stand up," he called guardedly down to Babe. "Bunched ovah theah in the rocks, 'peahs like."

"Dunno what good it'll do yuh," Babe muttered. "Mebby when they bust in to-night you can drop down outside and make a run for it--but I can't. It's all day with me, anyhow. God, I'm dry! Gimme a drink before yuh go, will yuh, Tiger Eye?"

"Shoah will, Babe. I'll get a bucket of watah directly."

"You stay inside. They'll fill yuh with lead, Kid."

"Nevah will see me, Babe. Gully back of the cabin goes to the spring and beyond."

"That's right. But look out fer snakes, Kid. Rattlers down there. Might better be shot than bit."

"Lawsee, Babe, nevah did see any old woman worry like yo'all!"

The kid laughed and picked up a rifle, thrust it through the nearest loophole and fired three shots, aiming at the likeliest looking retreats over on the ridge. That would keep them minding their manners over there for awhile. No[Pg 211] use giving them any encouragement to leave the ridge and creep closer--at least, not just now, when he was going to be right busy somewhere else.

He poured all the water into one bucket and set it on a box close to the bunk where Babe could reach the dipper if he had to. Yo'all

couldn't tell what might happen in the next hour or so--and it wasn't snake bite the kid was thinking of, either. Glad Babe had reminded him, though. Never would have thought of snakes, with all the other matters on his mind. He could fix that, easy enough. Pull on the old wolfskin chaps and let the rattlers try their teeth on the tough hide and long matted hair. Take mighty long teeth to go through that.

Another thing. That tin water bucket might shine or rattle to warn a nester with sharp eyes and ears. No hurry. Time to make all safe. Whole afternoon to work in.

The kid found a gunny sack under the bunk and covered the bucket with that. He also found a tie rope and fastened it to the pail.

Babe lay with his eyes closed, dozing or in a stupor that was seizing him more often since the heat of the day began. The kid had meant[Pg 212] to send a few shots over to the ridge before he ventured forth, but he hated to waken Babe with the noise, so he kindled a small fire in the stove instead, and let the smoke advertise a live man's presence. An old trick, but so natural a one that so far as he knew it always worked.

Shots from the ridge answered that challenge. The kid waited until the firing ceased, then took his bucket and crawled out through the roof, dropping noiselessly to the ground and sliding at once into the brushy little gully that separated the cabin from the bluff behind it.

From the cabin to the spring was no more than fifty yards, straight across the open ground as the path went. By way of the gully it was twice that distance, because of a brushy point that jutted out toward the bluff. The kid was tempted to scramble up over the point to where the spring lay just beyond, but the thicket would have made rough going and any stir amongst the bushes might attract attention from the ridge. He kept to the gully, going as quietly as he could

among the loose rocks.

It was easy to understand why this gully lay unused and practically unknown. A fringe of wild rosebushes tangled with wild hop vines[Pg 213] grew along the top, the bank was steep and gravelly and the bottom was rough. Not even a cow path dignified it as a passable route to the spring.

The kid did not feel that he was taking any risk, but all his life he had been drilled in caution, so he went sneaking along, keeping close under the bank and stopping every few feet to listen and peer ahead. He could not see any one, and it was so quiet that he could hear a lone mosquito humming over his head. Yet he felt a human presence near him. He stood still and waited two minutes, and his quick eyes caught a quiver in a drooping branch. Some one was hiding in the bushes just above the spring, lying close under cover and watching the cabin and the open flat beyond.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

[Pg 214]

SURPRISE

"Yo'all bettah crawl back outa that brush." The kid spoke with an ominous kind of calm. "Come damn' careful, lessen yoah hungry foh

lead."

Immediately the bushes shook as if swept by a sudden gale. A pair of legs with blue overalls tucked into worn riding boots came squirming backward into view. The kid reached out and grabbed one and gave it a vicious yank, and the form it belonged to came sliding down and landed pretty much in a heap at the edge of the pool. The kid stepped back, his gun sagging at his side and his other hand going up mechanically to claw at his hat.

"Ah--excuse me, Miss Murray," he blurted, crimson to his collar.

Nellie Murray, in her father's clothes, and with her father's gray Stetson tilted over one eye at a most rakish angle, stared up at him with astonished blue eyes.[Pg 215]

"Ah--good evenin'," the kid stammered again. "I hope yo'all will excuse me--"

"I never even *heard* you!" gasped Nellie. "I thought you were in the cabin. Wasn't it you shooting?"

"Yes'm, I reckon it was." The kid was trying not to look at her. He had never before seen a girl dressed up in a man's clothes and he thought she must feel mighty bashful without her long skirts. Shoah did look cute, though. He dared one swift glance from under his hat brim and looked away, guilty but entranced.

But Nellie Murray was not thinking of her appearance. She got to her feet and stood looking at the kid doubtfully.

"How'd you get here?" she demanded, a puzzling frown wrinkling her forehead. "They said if they covered the door and window, they'd have you bottled up, unless they could get you first shot, as

you came out. I heard them talking at the ranch. I couldn't slip away till things settled down and they'd gone."

While she was talking, the tilted hat lifted in a small gust of wind and her thick yellow braid came down off the top of her head. The kid caught the hat and held it while she coiled her hair again and reached for the hat. It[Pg 216] wouldn't go on, with all that hair. She must recoil the braid, tighter and higher on her head.

The kid took off his own hat, compared the two and saw that his was considerably larger. He blushed redder than before when he held it out to her.

"Reckon mine is some biggah," he said shyly.

Nellie looked at her old hat and her eyes filled until her lashes were wet.

"Ed wore it--and then my father. Both gone. I wouldn't want you to wear it, Mr. Reeves. It--seems to be unlucky."

"I shoah would rather take the bad luck than have you do it."

She let him have it then, and she took his hat and wore it. The kid's heart went jumpy as she stood there, so slim and straight in her old pappy's overalls, tucking soft, yellow strands of her hair under his hat. Just standing there so near her brought a lump into his throat.

"I had to dress this way so they wouldn't know who it was, if they saw me," she said, with the first hint of an apology she had given.

"Yo'all should've stayed at home," he told her gently.

"I had to come and warn you if I could. I know you didn't shoot my father, but they'd[Pg 217] kill you just the same. They're out to kill

rather, but they ain't g 217] kin you just the same. They're out to kin any Poole man they can find. And we owed you a favor. So I tried to beat them over here to tell you they were coming, but I almost ran into them on the lower trail and had to ride away around and come down the hill afoot. My horse is back up there, tied to a rock. I never thought it would be so hard to come down off the rim in the dark. I just got this far when the shooting started, and I knew I was too late. I can't get back, either, till dark. They'd see me, sure."

"It shoah was kind of yo'all, but I wish yoh hadn't come, Miss Murray." The kid's face was grave, his eyes more tender than he guessed. "Babe's shot, and I'm aimin' to get him outa heah to-night. I was awn my way to the stable to get the hawses."

"I'll help. I'll go crazy if I don't have something to do."

The kid tried to persuade her to stay under the bank by the spring, but he was secretly glad she wouldn't do it. There wasn't any danger at all, so far as he could see. The stable was off to one side, completely out of the range of firing. To reach it from the ridge the nesters would have to cross an open stretch of level ground where one man had already come to[Pg 218] grief. The kid did not believe they would try it again before dark.

From the spring to the stable there was a well-beaten trail through a chokecherry thicket, and the kid led the way, thrilling to the sound of Nellie Murray's footsteps behind him. The stable door was sheltered from view of the ridge by the small haystack and by the clump of service-berry bushes where the nester had hidden that morning. There really was no danger of being seen at the stable. The kid went quietly to work saddling the horses, while Nellie stood and watched. It was all so simple that the kid almost forgot the rifles over on the ridge. But while the horses were drinking thirstily from the pool, the crackle of more shooting reminded him that the battle

was still going on.

"Reckon I bettah get back to the cabin and answer those shots with a few of my own," he said uneasily to Nellie. "I'll take the watah bucket. If yo'all would follow along with Babe's hawse I'd be much obliged, Miss Murray."

"You aren't going to try and get away down the trail, I hope. You never would make it alive.[Pg 219] They're watching for that. They wouldn't like anything better than to have you try it."

The kid only smiled at her vaguely as he led the way down the gully, with a bucket of water in one hand, Pecos' lead rope in the other, old pappy Murray's dingy gray hat riding precariously on the top of his head, and his eyes and ears alert for rattlesnakes among the rocks. He walked fast, but his thoughts went faster.

Nellie, coming along behind him, with never a whimper of fear for herself, filled him with a great wonder. Made a fellow feel like he could stand up and fight the whole world. Made him feel cheap and no-account, even while he was all happy inside. Made him feel sorry he couldn't be more worth the trouble she was taking.

Shoah complicated matters too, having her along. Going to be bad enough, making a run for it, with Babe. Never planned on having any one else to look after--Nellie Murray, least of all. They'd need another horse, and they'd need somebody that could shoot and hold back the nesters. The kid didn't see how he was going to make it, but it never occurred to him to change his plan. There wasn't any[Pg 220] other plan to change to; not unless he just rode off with Nellie and left Babe--

"Reckon yo'all bettah wait down heah with the hawses." The kid turned and set down the water bucket. "I'll tote Babe out and put him

awn his hawse."

"Through the roof? You can't do it alone. I'll have to help."

The kid looked down at her with a flame in his eyes which she must have mistaken for anger, for she caught him by the arm and stamped her foot at him.

"*I hate* a man that thinks a woman can't do anything but faint and cry when there's danger to meet! Do you suppose I thought I was going to a Sunday-school picnic when I started over here to keep that bunch of boneheads from murdering you? I did it to stop all this killing. I don't care who it is, murder doesn't wipe out murder. But you can't talk to those darned fools and make them see it. They're after Poole blood, and all Mother and I could say didn't do a bit of good. They just think we're soft!"

She was talking so fast the kid could only stand and look at her and wonder at her courage and her beauty and the incredible fact of her being there at all.[Pg 221]

"You've got to have help, and you may as well own it first as last." She must have thought his silence was plain stubbornness, for she gave his arm an impatient shake. "You can't do it without me."

"Yo'all can't go in, Miss Murray. They keep awn shootin' at the cabin. Bullets come th'ough the doah and window like bees into a hive in a plum thicket."

"I wouldn't get hit any quicker than you would." But she let her fingers slip from his arm. "Well, all right--you go on and boost him through, and I'll stay outside and ease him down to the ground. But do be careful, won't you--Bob?"

"Shoah will--Nellie. I kain't say what I want to say," murmured the kid helplessly. "I nevah did see a girl like yo'all--"

He turned abruptly away from her and climbed the steep bank of the gully, his eyes swimming with moisture, so that he could scarcely see where to put his feet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

[Pg 222]

DISASTER

Babe lay with his eyes shut and his face twitching with the pain of his wound, and he did not pay any attention to the clods of dirt that rattled down on the blankets. The kid picked up one of the rifles and began shooting at the ridge, rushing from one loophole to another to make it look as if two men were handling the guns.

He even achieved what might be called positive evidence of that fact, by tying a string to one trigger and with the rifle braced in a loophole firing that gun with his own. Several times he did that, cunningly spacing the shots so close together that the nesters would believe it impossible for one man to handle both guns. Once he achieved the fact of shooting both at exactly the same instant. He was so proud of that he wished Nellie was there to see; or that

Babe was awake so he could tell him. They'd think Babe wasn't hurt so bad he couldn't fight,[Pg 223] and they'd hold off till dark, maybe longer, before they tried to rush the cabin.

The air was thick and acrid with powder smoke. The kid looked at his old silver watch and saw that the afternoon was half gone. No use moving Babe yet. He'd die on the horse before they could get him out of the gully. It would have to be dark when they made it.

Nellie, out there--she must be hungry, hiding in the brush since dawn. Mighty hungry himself, now he got to thinking about grub. The kid reckoned it would be safe to have a little picnic out back of the cabin in the shade, just him and Nellie. Babe was all right. Nothing to do for him but let him lie quiet as long as possible. Asleep, by the look of him. Sleep shoah is a merciful thing when a man's hurt. Better than being awake and talking crazy. Looking at Babe lying there so quiet, the kid could not believe he was a cold-blooded killer. Not the kind of a killer that would shoot an old man in the back. Babe was too big-hearted for that.

The kid wrung out a folded towel in cold water and laid it across Babe's forehead before he crawled out through the roof with a picnic lunch for Nellie. The men on the ridge[Pg 224] would have been astonished to see the two sitting there with their backs to the wall of the beleaguered cabin, feasting contentedly on cold sourdough biscuits, cold bacon and dried blackberry sauce.

Once in awhile the kid would remember his responsibilities and would crawl reluctantly into the cabin to take a look at Babe and send a few shots across to the ridge. Then he would crawl eagerly out again, and the low murmur of voices and stifled laughter would go on, oblivious to danger and the passing hours.

The kid was holding his mouth organ between his cupped hands,

watching Nellie from the corner of his eyes. He played "The Mocking Bird" softly, with more trills and chirps and warbles than he had ever attempted before in his life, and his booted feet kept time with noiseless tappings on the ground. The basin was very quiet, the shadows were stretching long and lean to the eastward. Nellie sat curling the end of her yellow braid absently around her fingers, her eyes downcast and her lips half smiling.

Listen to the mocking bird, listen to the mocking bird!

The mocking bird is singing all the day--

[Pg 225]

"Dammit, Tiger Eye, why don't yuh shoot to *kill*? What yuh so damn' chicken-hearted for? Damn' cow thieves--"

"Babe's woke up." The kid lowered the mouth organ from his lips, heaving a big sigh as he wiped it on his sleeve and slid it into his pocket. "Plumb outa his haid again. Reckon it's time to be moving, Nellie. Shoah do hate to see this evenin' end. I shoah do."

He sighed again as he rose, hitched up his gun belt and looked gravely down at her.

"We all could get outa heah easy if it was just us two. But I kain't leave Babe. He's been pow'ful good to me, Babe has--"

"Of course, we can't leave him. They'd kill him sure, and there's been too much killing already. We'll make it somehow. I--you can just do *anything*, Tiger Eye!"

"Shoah feel like I could, from now awn," said the kid, looking at her with shy meaning, and started to climb. "We'll make it," he called softly down to her. "We've plumb *got* to make it!"

They did make it. Down the gully, with Babe tied on his horse, insensible to pain or motion. Fifty yards, a hundred, with the rifles on the ridge barking foolishly at the empty cabin.[Pg 226] Rough going among the brush and rocks. The kid walked ahead, leading Babe's horse and steadying Babe's limp body all he could. Nellie stumbled along behind, with the kid's brown horse, Pecos, carrying the water that might save Babe's life. Slow work. There were places where the kid must move rocks before the horses could go on.

The sun went down behind the rim, the daylight was merging into dusk when the kid forced the horses up the steep bank and turned them toward the Big Bench. Nellie's horse was tied to a rock up there. They couldn't go off and leave her horse, even if she didn't need him to ride. The kid knew that, but his heart was growing leaden at the thought of how their trails must part. And who knew when or how they would meet again?

"Say, where do you think you're goin', Tiger Eye?" Babe roused suddenly to consciousness and speech when they stopped beside Nellie's horse, circling the rock anxiously in the starlight.

"Reckon we'll go awn ovah to the Poole, Babe." It was the only thing to do, but the kid's heart was not in it. The trail separated here. Nellie Murray never would ride to the[Pg 227] Poole ranch and Babe could not go to the valley.

"What you goin' to the Poole all of a sudden for?" Babe's voice sharpened. "Think you'll beat me to the bounty? You've got another think comin', Kid. I'll do the collectin' on this one."

"Don't know what yo'all talking about, Babe." The kid glanced uneasily toward Nellie. "I'm totin' yo'all ovah to the Poole, account of that bullet hole in yoh side."

"You're a damned liar!" Babe's voice was abnormally loud and distinct. Nellie, mounting her horse, reined close to listen. "You're goin' to try and gyp me outa my money for old Murray. You can have the pay for gettin' Ed Murray, if you want to be on the grab, but I'll be damned if you're going to collect for the old man!"

"Oh, you--you fiend!" Nellie forced the words out through her clenched teeth. "Paid killers, both of you!"

"Ain't paid yet, but I'm sure as hell goin' to be. Damn' right!" The febrile strength that had upheld Babe for a minute began to ebb. He swayed in the saddle. "Dirty work--and it's money talks, in this neck uh the woods.[Pg 228] Damn right I'll be paid! Tiger Eye ain't goin' to get the best--the best of me--he can't--" His head lolled on his chest then, as his body sagged against the ropes that held him in the saddle.

"You killer!" Nellie jumped her horse toward the kid, whose hand went up mechanically to catch the bridle before he was trampled.

"Yo'all kain't believe that, Nellie. Babe's plumb crazy in the haid, to talk that-a-way."

"Crazy--yes! Crazy enough to let out the truth! A Texas killer! Just a lowdown--sneaking--heartless--killer!"

She had pulled her quirt from the saddle horn, and she struck him across the face; swift, slashing blows which the kid never felt at all, save in the heart of him. He just stood there in the starlight and held the frightened horse quiet, while the quirt he had given her left its mark on neck and shoulder and cheek.

"And I trusted you like a fool--and thought you were good!" With one final blow her arm fell to her side as if in despair at ever wreaking

vengeance upon him. "Shoot *me* now, why don't you? I'll turn my back!"

"Yo'all's crazy as Babe." The soft drawl of [Pg 229] his voice had a chill. "Yoh brothah was shot befo' I evah came into the country. I nevah did kill a man in my life--but I'm plumb tempted to right now, lessen he's daid a'ready."

"Why? Because he gave you away?" Her voice shook with stubborn rage.

"Yo'all knows bettah than that, Miss Murray. Yo'all knows in yoh own mind I nevah hahmed a livin' soul." He leaned forward, staring up into her face with a cold intensity that thrilled her with something like fear. "But that ain't sayin' what I will do f'om now awn," he added sternly.

"Bob! If you didn't--if I knew--"

"Evenin', Ma'am. Yo'all knows the way home."

He loosed the bridle and struck her horse on the rump with the flat of his hand and watched her go, and the thud of hoofbeats on the prairies fell like blows upon his heart. When no sound came back to him, the kid mounted Pecos, took Babe's bridle reins in his hand and rode away into the night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

ON HIS OWN

The kid was pulling out, but he was taking his time about it and he was not leaving anything he owned behind him. With his gray hat set low over the utter misery in his eyes, he stood in the middle of the cabin at Cold Spring and his lowering glance moved slowly around the room, just to make sure that he had not missed any of his possessions. It was not a cheerful looking place. The glass from the one window lay in splintered fragments on the oilcloth table cover, and a few early flies buzzed in and out through the shattered panes, where rifle bullets had buzzed in yesterday. The log walls were scarred with the thin leaden hail that had beaten intermittently against the cabin.

In spite of the broken window and the hole through the sod roof, the air in the room reeked with the stench of stale gun smoke. Empty cartridges lay scattered on the floor, the table, the bunk. Had he been curious about it, the kid could have gathered them up and counted to[Pg 231] see just how many shots he had fired at the low ridge over across the flat little basin. More than he had fired before in a year without hitting anything, he knew without counting.

Hadn't wanted to hit anything. Just wanted to hold off the nesters from crowding up too close. Just keep them off, not knowing how long he would be able to do it or what minute one of those leaden hornets would lay him out dead on the floor--or wounded maybe, the way Babe Garner had been.

The kid swung toward the bunk and looked at the pillow still nested

to the shape of Babe's sleek black head. The muscles tightened along his jaw. Babe wouldn't have liked the look in the kid's eyes just then. Crazy as he had been from fever, Babe would have sensed the deadly quality in the kid's arrested glance, the tiger eye round and staring.

He walked to the bunk, leaning over the side where Babe had lain all these nights, and the loafing times when he lounged at ease there reading "Less Mizzerbles," and listening to the kid playing his mouth organ over by the stove, his booted foot tapping the time on the brushed hearth. Those times were gone--blown out in gun smoke by Babe's own betraying lips.[Pg 232]

He got his own pillow and tucked it savagely under his arm. The nights when he had lain his head down beside Babe's in contented comradeship fairly slapped him in the face now with a bitter contempt for his blind faith. He took another look around, retrieved half a sack of Bull Durham and a book of papers from the shelf where Babe kept his paper-bound novels, flipped up the blankets at the foot of the bunk to make sure none of his was mixed up with Babe's bedding, and went outside, slamming the bullet-scarred door behind him. He was shutting the door on a lot more than an empty line camp, but he wouldn't think of it now.

Well, it had been quite a battle while it lasted. Plenty of powder and lead wasted during the day, but nobody killed. One nester shot through shoulder and arm, and Babe drilled through the middle. Nobody dead. Nothing killed but friendship and the kid's faith in men.

In the beaten path before the door, the kid's two horses stood waiting; Pecos with his reins dropped to the ground, empty saddle and empty stirrups waiting for their master; Barney, knowing he must not move while the work was being done, and the all

must not move while the pack rope hung loose and the all-enveloping tarp[Pg 233] still lay on the ground. The kid finished his packing, tightened the one-man diamond hitch with a foot braced against Barney's paunch for leverage, tucked the rope end under and stepped back, dropping his hands in an unconscious gesture of finality.

As he had done inside the cabin, he stood for a minute or two looking all around him: across to the little rocky ridge where the five nesters lay yesterday, hoping to kill him; down to the right, where the stable stood empty, corral bars flung down beside the yawning gateway.

Plumb strange, how a place begins to look deserted right away after the folks that have lived there move out. Looked already like ghosts would walk in the shadows directly it came night. Ghost of Babe Garner, the kid reckoned--if Babe died from that bullet hole through his liver. Babe better die! The lowdown, lay-behind-a-rock killer! Babe better die, unless he was willing to face the kid and shoot it out when he got well.

The kid had loved Babe. But when the man you think is honest and a square shooter turns out to be the kind of a killer that will hide behind a rock and shoot an old man in the back,[Pg 234] just for the money there is in it and because the Poole has put a bounty on nesters, all the friendship you ever felt for him can turn to hate in the wink of an eyelash.

And when he talks like you're the one that did the killing--when he talks like that right before Nellie, and makes her so crazy mad she starts in quirting you over the head and calling you a killer, just because she's only a girl and can't shoot you down like a dog, it's something worse than hate you feel toward him. Babe had brains sharper than any old he-wolf, but his brains sure weren't working

last night, when he made that talk up there on the Bench.

Most men would have shot Babe right then and there. They wouldn't have cared a damn about his being drilled through the middle and plumb out of his head. But even with the welts of Nellie Murray's quirt on his cheek and the lash of her contempt searing his heart, the kid couldn't pull his gun and send a bullet into Babe Garner, wounded and sagging against the rope that held him tied on his horse. That would be putting himself down on a level with Babe, killing a man that hasn't any chance to shoot back. Had to go on and take Babe to the Poole ranch, same as if he were a friend.[Pg 235]

The kid rolled himself a cigarette, lighted it with a match held steady in his fingers, picked up his rifle where it stood leaning against the cabin beside the door, slid it into the scabbard on his saddle and mounted. Where he was going, he did not know or care.

In the full light of early morning he reined in his horse upon the rim of Big Bench and stared long into the valley. But mostly he looked at the ridge and the tops of the cottonwood trees along the creek that ran through the Murray ranch. For a long while he glowered down at where Babe Garner lay, waiting till he could shoot Nellie's little old pappy in the back.

"Yo' shoah get what yo'all give," the kid muttered, with the corners of his mouth pulled down so that his whole face looked hard and unboyish, and new lines of bitterness carved themselves in the smooth brown skin. "Babe shoah got his needin's and got 'em quick. Nestah's bullets what he plumb called foh--"

His hand went up suddenly to a livid welt across his cheek. The rule didn't seem to work in his own case, though. He hadn't earned that cut of Nellie's quirt. *His quirt, if you came right down to it. Braided in*

cut of Nellie's quilt. His quilt, if you came right down to it. Braided in pride and high[Pg 236] hopes down on the Brazos last winter, before Pap and Ben were shot. Never did think that quilt he had braided would be laid across his own cheek with all the strength there was in a girl's arm. Another half inch and it would have lost him that yellow tiger eye of his--and that, too, would have been something he hadn't earned.

Nellie was sorry for it, though. Sorry the next minute and ready to take it all back, if he had only said the word. But the kid wouldn't say it. Not to save his life would he truckle to anybody; not even to Nellie Murray--

"She nevah will call me a paid killah no moah," he told himself savagely. "She'll heah things about Tiger Eye Reeves that will shoah prove I'm death on killahs. Poole or nestah, it's all the same to me from now awn. She'll know--and she'll know why!"

Awhile longer he sat there on his horse, making his bitter plans while he scowled down at the ridge that hid her home. She had called him a killer. She had quirted him like a chicken-killing dog. That she half repented of it afterwards only added to the slow rage of the kid. Well, all right, he'd prove that he wasn't a killer, and he'd hammer it home to her that it[Pg 237] wasn't because he couldn't kill if he wanted to. He'd show her he was a better man than any of them. Poole killers or valley nesters, he'd herd them and brand them and tame them, till they'd shiver when they heard the name of Tiger Eye!

She'd shiver too. He'd have her eating crow before the summer was over. She'd be ready to go down on her knees to him. He'd show her he wasn't called Tiger Eye for nothing. He'd shoah make that name mean something more than just the color of his eye. They'd remember that old Killer Reeves down on the Brazos was his pap,

and they'd say the father wasn't a patch to the son. Yes, sir, they all better hunt their holes now, Poole killers and nesters! They'd pushed him too far. A shoah-enough tiger was loose on the range, and every man was his meat!

A dash of rain in his face brought the kid out of his vengeful ecstasy. Already the valley was misty with the storm creeping in from the river away to the east. Rain from the east--that meant a long siege of it. Sodden prairie, swollen streams, wet wood for campfires, heavy, water-soaked tarp, clammy blankets that made you shiver through the nights. Even tigers have[Pg 238] to hunt a dry lair when the cold rains come. The kid realized with a slump that he couldn't stand there all day in the rain, gawping at Nellie Murray's ranch and making his brag of what he was going to do. Tiger or not, he had to hunt himself a camp where he could be safe as well as dry, and figure out his plan.

He pulled his hat down over his eyebrows and reined away from the valley rim. To the north there rose a huddle of timbered buttes with deep-set canyons between. Ten miles, no more, from the valley; twelve or fifteen from the headquarters ranch of the Poole. There should be some sequestered little nook in there where he could make his lair.

The kid's fingers lifted again to that welt slanting down across his cheek. One last glimpse he had of the low ridge and the line of cottonwoods down there in the valley, and then the rain blotted the place from his sight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

[Pg 239]

THE TIGER'S LAIR

A wounded animal crawls deep into the most impenetrable thicket he can find, and there tends his hurts in wary silence, lest his enemy find him while he is helpless and cannot fight back. The kid rode straight to the timbered hills called Wolf Buttes, and all that day he wound in and out and around among gulches and canyons and across hidden little valleys, looking for the place he had pictured in his mind as the lair of this particular range tiger.

Water, grass for his horses, not too remote from his hunting ground, yet secure, safe from any danger that might threaten. The rain streamed from his yellow slicker, ran in little rivulets down the neck and hips of his horse. Behind him the steady pluck, pluck of his pack-horse sounded a monotone of patience and loyalty that heartened the kid and somehow steadied his purpose.

Before dark he camped in a thick grove of [Pg 240] young spruces that grew beside a natural meadow, and that night he heard the snarl of a mountain lion and knew that Pecos and Barney were huddled close to camp, afraid to graze out even the length of a picket rope. But it was the season of young things, and he knew the lions walked full fed and only mildly querulous toward strange neighbors. He slept, his quirt-scarred cheek cuddled in the crook of his arm--and dreamed of making love to Nellie Murray. Dreamed that she was going to marry him, and they planned the homestead they would take in Wolfe Buttes somewhere, and how they would

They would take in whole buttes somewhere, and now they would build themselves a ranch with honeysuckle vines all over the cabin. He dreamed of the sweet softness of her lips--and woke to find his mouth pressed against the back of his own hand.

A shamed oath escaped him and he drew back his hand as if a snake had struck at it. It was morning and it was raining with a cold, steady drip on the spruce boughs that sheltered him like a thatched roof. A tiny pool of yellowish rain water lay in the hollow of the tarp that covered his blankets. Pecos and Barney stood backed up against a rain-lashed thicket, rumps to the east wind that whipped their[Pg 241] dripping tails between their legs. Their heads drooped while they dozed, too miserable to lie down and with no dry spot to put their bodies if they had wanted to.

No happy planning with Nellie Murray, this. Another day of hunting a den for the tiger that would be a scourge to all killers. The kid fished blindly under the blankets for his hat, found it and put it on as he sat up. Day before yesterday, Nellie had worn it flirtatiously over her piled-up, yellow hair that made a braid as thick as his wrist. The kid had thrilled to the look in her eyes,--shy yet half daring him to claim the penalty custom says a girl must pay for wearing a man's hat. Hot crimples had gone up his spine, hot blood had surged into his cheeks.

But he hadn't kissed her. He was afraid she wouldn't like it. He lacked the nerve to put her to the test. He wouldn't want her to think he couldn't behave like a gentleman--and so she had whipped him like a yellow cur.

He crawled out of his blankets, buckling his gun belt around him with vicious tugs of the strap. All that foolishness was past and gone. There wouldn't be any more of it, ever. Down on the Brazos there was that girl who had called[Pg 242] him Tiger Eye with her lip

lifted at one corner. If she had been a man, he'd have slapped her down for the intonation of her voice. Didn't take him long to lift his hat and ride off away from her—ride so far he never stopped till he hit Montana. Now it was Nellie Murray, cutting his cheek with the quirt he'd been tickled to death to give her. Served him damn' right. 'Peahs like a man always gets the double cross when he puts any faith in any girl. Oughta have known it before, but he reckoned he knew it now.

At twenty and two months past, the kid could give a cynical lift of the shoulders and say he was through with women—never would mean a thing to him from now on. Tip his hat and ride on past, and never look back over his shoulder.

He stood up tall and full of pride in the man who wouldn't kill because he didn't want to kill. The man who would be feared from the Musselshell to the Canada line. Didn't have to kill to make men afraid of him. They'd look over their shoulder when they spoke his name, and when any one mentioned the Brazos they'd look at each other, thinking that was where Tiger Eye came from.

Over and over again the kid pictured him[Pg 243]self as a scourge of the range—a tiger who would not kill. He did it until he had quite forgotten how he had wakened with his lips pressed against his own hand, thinking it was a girl's mouth he was kissing, and that it kissed back.

All that day it rained in windy gusts, with periods of quiet drizzle between, like his mother's slow tears dripping down over her cheeks when she thought upon her dead. Weeping for him now, he reckoned. She hadn't cried when he left, though. Just hid her face against his neck, while one hand came up to pat him on the shoulder, and then a simple kiss and a moment of watching from the doorway while he rode away.

the doorway while he rode away.

He seemed to see himself through his mother's grave eyes now--the long-legged kid in the big gray hat, six-gun sagging on his right hip, reining Pecos through the wide gateway and giving a yank on the lead rope to bring Barney along. Big pack swaying as Barney ducked and shied at a white chicken that flew out of the weeds beside the post, and the tall kid grinning back at his mother, standing there in the doorway watching him go. The upflung hand with the supple turn of the wrist as if he[Pg 244] were flinging a loop out ahead--"lassing his luck," the kid called that gesture of farewell. Last and youngest of old Killer Reeves' tribe of long-legged sons, hitting out for the North because he wouldn't kill men as his old pap had done.

"An' I shoah kain't be forced into killin' now," he said, at that point in his musings. "They'll be wishin' I did," he added in grim satisfaction.

That afternoon he came upon the place he was hoping to find. A black bear lumbering out of a close-growing thicket brought his glance that way, or even his keen eyes would have missed it. As it was, he rode back and left his horses hidden behind rocks and like a hunting Indian he stole forward afoot to inspect the place before he would venture near.

A rock cabin built of fragments of the cliff it hugged close. Half the roof had fallen in, and a wild currant bush thrust fruit-laden branches out through the open doorway to prove how long it had been since any man claimed it for a dwelling. It was the upended ridgepole with a corner of the roof attached and showing above the bushes that had caught the kid's attention when he looked that way.[Pg 245] Except for that telltale fragment, the cabin was absolutely hidden in the thicket. When he looked beyond, he saw where there had been a corral and a stable, all built of rock cunningly piled for strength and

concealment. There had to be a spring too, of course. He found it, ice cold and crystal clear, in a niche of the cliff that was a part of the back wall of the cabin.

With his wet slicker slapping against his legs, the kid waded through high grass and brush growth and found other things. A rock-walled meadow swelling out like a great fat jug below its narrow neck of a pass not wide enough to let a hayrack through without scraping the wall on either side. Ten thousand years ago it must have been a crater, by the look of it, but now it grew grass belly deep to a horse. The kid climbed upon a boulder and for five minutes he gazed out over this lost paradise. Lost from the world, to be found by him when he needed it most. And as he looked, his eyes grew to have the exulting shine of a boy who has found a secret cave where he can play pirate to his heart's content.

He waded back to the cabin and inspected it with a new feeling of possession, ruthlessly[Pg 246] trampling down the young currant bush to get inside. After awhile he went down and led up the horses.

It took the kid nearly a week to make the place habitable, though he worked furiously from sunrise until it was too dark to see what he was doing. It took him two days to find his way out of the intricate network of canyons to the open range beyond. And then he made the amazing discovery that by following a certain dry watercourse for half a mile, climbing a filled-in place and turning a sharp corner into another narrow canyon that was plugged with an old landslide before it reached the open country, he could reach his camp in less than three miles of riding from the wooded north bank of Cotton Creek.

Like a she-wolf making certain that her new den will be safe for her litter of pups, the kid nosed out the blind trails to his secret lair. He

latter of paper, then he rode out the blind trail to the secret land. He rode first Barney, then Pecos, teaching them all the devious turns and twists to reach that walled canyon from the open country beyond. He rode it in daylight and he rode it at night, letting the horses pick their own trail. He made a grim, boyish game of it, pretending that Poole riders or nesters were after him and crowding[Pg 247] him close, and he must throw them off his trail and vanish in the hills. They would be, some of these days, when the range tiger went on the prowl. Couldn't bank on making his get-away every time without somebody seeing him and taking in after him. And in his heart, the kid knew he wouldn't want it too easy.

An older man would have gone straight about his campaign of vengeance and trusted to luck for making a safe retreat, but the kid was only twenty and all his life he had played Injun in the hills along the Brazos, in between the grilling practice his old pap had given him with rifle and six-gun. Pap had always told him to be mighty sure of what was behind him as well as what was out front. Pap said only a blamed fool would go ahead till he knew the trail behind him was open.

So the kid drilled himself and his horses in the twisted canyons of Wolf Buttes, and let the sword of justice dangle awhile over the unsuspecting heads of the paid killers of the Poole. Let Nellie wonder awhile what had become of him, too. He reckoned it wouldn't hurt her to wonder and guess. Bound to guess plumb wrong, and he'd prove it to her, when he got good and ready.[Pg 248]

While he rode, he practiced the lightning moves his old pap had taught him. Draw and shoot in the wink of an eye, and put the bullet where it was aimed. Only, he emptied the cartridge from his gun for the work when he knew he was absolutely safe. Didn't need to shoot bullets, unless he had something to hit. Keep his wrist supple,

keep hand and eye working quick and sure as his mind. Draw and pull the trigger on an empty shell and know the bullet would have gone straight as the eye could look. Draw and pull, a hundred times a day, a thousand times a day. Range tiger dassent let teeth and claws grow dull. Keep 'em both sharp and ready for work.

His grub was getting low. Now, before men knew they had him to fear and to kill if they could, he rode into Badger with his tarp roped over an empty pack saddle. The kid was not a gambler, but he had the knack of cards and of guessing what the other fellow was going to do, and he wanted more money than he had in his pocket. Wouldn't be working for wages now for awhile, and grub costs money.

So he sat one night in a poker game with three cowboys from over toward the Rosebud and a lucky prospector just in from the Black Hills. Afterwards, they might remember the[Pg 249] tall kid with the reddish hair lying in a heavy wave on his temple when he pushed back his big hat, and the right eye that was yellow and had the queer, steady stare of a tiger. Luck of a fiend, that kid had. Walked out at daylight with his pants bulging at the sides like a pocket gopher packing grass to its burrow. Honest player, though. Never caught him in any funny business. Plain lucky, that kid with the one yellow eye.

He rode out of town at noon, Barney taking careful, nippy steps to balance the big and bulging pack on his back. Pecos, too, carried more than his master that day. Tobacco and five pounds of candy and a songbook and two cartons of cartridges wrapped in the kid's slicker and tied behind the cante. The kid's pockets sagged with six new mouth organs, keys C and D, in bright red pasteboard boxes.

The kid was almost ready now to show Nellie Murray he was neither

The kid was almost ready now to show Nellie Murray he was neither a killer nor a cur to take a licking and crawl off under the brush and whimper over his hurts. He was just about ready to start in taming the killers. Right soon, now, the name of Tiger Eye would send men's glances back over their shoulders and make a prickle go up into the roots of their hair. The range tiger was going on the prowl.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

[Pg 250]

TIGER ON THE PROWL

The kid yawned and eased himself into a more comfortable position on the rock where he was perched. The range tiger was on the prowl, but he was finding the hunting so poor that it was hard to keep his mind fixed upon the quest and nothing else. With the field glasses which he had taken from Cold Spring cabin when he left--borrowed, he gravely stipulated to himself, whenever he handled them; borrowed, to be returned when he had ended the war between nesters and the Poole--he had scanned the valley since an hour after sunrise. He had seen the first upflung ribbon of gray-blue smoke rise over the low ridge that hid the Murray house, and he had caught himself wondering just what would happen if he should ride down there. If he should get off his horse in the dooryard and walk right up and knock on the screen door--

No, he'd be darned and dawgoned if he[Pg 251] would! Though the red welt had healed on his cheek so that the skin felt smooth to his touch, it hadn't healed in his memory. He wouldn't go riding up to her door, not in a thousand years. She might look for him to come, but she'd look a good long time. She could look her eyes out, for all he cared.

But in spite of his supreme indifference to Nellie Murray and all her concerns, he saw when the smoke died down after awhile, and he knew breakfast must be over and the dishes washed. What he did not know was that his eyes had a lonesome look when he took down the glasses for a minute to rest his arms while he surveyed his immediate neighborhood and chose another spot for his inspection.

Air shoah was clear, this morning. The whole valley was like a picture with the paint so fresh it would rub off on your finger. Even without the glasses the kid could have counted the posts in a pasture fence a mile away, if he had wanted to take the time and trouble. Men began to drive out into the fields, to work at one thing and another. In one place they were putting up hay, and the kid could almost hear the strident song of a mower which he watched for a long time as it went round and round a[Pg 252] long strip of meadow beside a creek. He wouldn't have minded driving a mower himself, for awhile. Never did work in a hayfield but one summer, but he liked it fine. He liked the hot sunshine and the unforgettable odor of new hay, and he loved the song of the sickle creeping through the nodding grass.

His gaze followed somewhat wistfully a boy raking hay over in another fenced field. For long minutes he watched the long curved teeth gather the hay into a big loose roll and he waited expectantly for the boy to pull the lever and dump the hay into the stubble. Lazy

cuss. His pappy'd shoah cuff his ears for him if he came along and caught him forgetting to yank that dump lever. He'd shoah hear about that kinda raking when the hay shovelers got to work there. You could feed a critter all winter on what hay that shiftless little cuss was wasting with the rake.

Shoah looked peaceful down there, with everybody working along and minding their own business. Looked like a good country to take up a ranch and live in. Not much like a place where men rode with rifles laid across their laps, ready to shoot the first stranger they met in the road. The men down there in the[Pg 253] hay fields didn't look like they'd crawl up to a cabin before daylight and shoot down the first man that stuck his head out of the door. They didn't look like it, but you shoah couldn't go by the looks, as the kid knew by experience. Nate Wheeler and Pete Gorham had proved that to him. And if anybody thought those farmers down there wouldn't take a day off and make a business of killing cowboys, they oughta take a look at Cold Spring cabin.

Nothing doing down there to-day, though. The kid swept his borrowed glasses slowly from ranch to ranch, then shoved them disgustedly into their case. If he hung around on the rim much longer, he'd be watching the Murray ranch like a darned fool and forgetting what he'd got up before daylight for. He walked over and gave Pecos a rub or two on the nose, picked up the reins and lifted his left foot to the stirrup. He went up into the saddle as unconsciously and as easily as he would step into his own doorway, and wheeled the horse in his tracks.

But he couldn't keep his eyes from sending one last look down into the valley, and he couldn't keep that look from turning toward a certain line of cottonwoods growing along the[Pg 254] far side of a little ridge a mile away. Like a compass needle they swung straight

to their magnetic pole and clung there, until the kid yanked his hat brim down, pretending it was the sun that bothered him. Nothing down there to look at. Nobody down there he'd give two whoops for. As long as they stuck to their hay forks and minded their own business and didn't go gunning after him, he didn't need to give a thought to a dawgoned person down there. 'Specially Nellie Murray.

Might be something doing over toward the Poole headquarters. Might ride over to the ranch and see what he could find out. If he wanted to, he could ride right up to the corral and turn his horse inside and hang around for dinner. They'd think he had been away somewhere and was just coming back to see if he could have his job again. Might pick up some valuable information that way. Might get a line on Babe. Find out whether Babe was dead or alive, anyway. He'd either be dead or just about well by this time. Shot pretty bad--but shucks! He was too mean and ornery to die. Take an ax to kill Babe Garner!

The kid did not hurry, for it was still early and he didn't want anybody at the Poole to[Pg 255] think he had spent the night within easy riding distance of the ranch. Best let them think he had ridden a long ways to get there. Show up about noon, when the riders would be sifting in off the range, and they'd think he rode out from town.

But then he remembered something. If he rode straight across the level bench, the Poole lookout would see him. He'd be spotted before he got halfway across. Couldn't tell who it was, this far off, but they'd shoah have the glasses on him every foot of the way, and somebody'd be riding out to meet him and ask his business. So he kept close to the rim and swung off to the west, toward Cotton Creek that he knew so well he could keep his bearings on the darkest night.

When he struck the road to Badger he turned into it and rode down

off Big Bench and farther along toward town until he came into a rocky draw where hoof tracks did not show. He went up this draw for a quarter of a mile to where it crossed a brushy gulch, and there he turned sharply toward Wolf Buttes. No use riding back to the Poole for two or three hours yet. Might as well range along in the foothills and come down on the Poole ranch[Pg 256] from the opposite direction. Might run onto something. Had a hunch ever since he woke up that something was going to happen to-day--something mighty important and interesting.

Another willow-thicketed gulch showed at his left, and the kid reined into it. Pecos was good at bucking brush by now, and he went at it like a bull moose, with his ears laid flat to his skull and his nose thrust straight out ahead to open a way for his body to follow, pushing the tall pliant willows this way and that, and threading his way sinuously along where the growth was thinnest. The kid leaned forward along the horse's neck and let Pecos make his own trail. It didn't matter much where they went, since he was just prowling around killing time and following a hunch that was really only a vague hope.

It was hot down in that willow growth. Buffalo gnats swarmed in before his face with a malevolent determination to get in his eyes. Twice, Pecos stopped to rest and take great rib-expanding breaths before he went on. They came out finally against a barbed-wire fence, built straight across through the thicket. Good stout posts that looked solid as the teeth in the kid's mouth. Four wires strung so tight they[Pg 257] hummed like a tuning fork when the kid leaned over and gave one a jerk. No fooling with that fence. Cattle proof and storm proof, like the fences the railroads built along their right-of-way.

Pecos turned a deliberately inquiring look back upon his master

and lifted a hind foot to kick a biting horsefly off his belly. Willow thickets and blind trails he was perfectly willing to cope with alone, but barbed-wire fences were out of his line. The kid would have to take charge now and what did he expect a faithful and sweating brown cayuse to do?

The kid did a little preliminary cussing. Plumb strange to find a fence like that over in this part of the country. This wasn't Poole land, and he never heard of any nesters over in this direction. No trails coming up this way, no nothing. Shoah was mysterious.

He neck-reined Pecos to the right, and they followed the fence for half an hour of steady plodding along the narrow lane cut by the fence builders. They came slap up against a sandstone ledge where the last post stood in a hole drilled into solid rock and was set there with cement. And that was plumb strange too. Nothing to do about it, though. Couldn't even ride back along the edge of the willows because[Pg 258] it was just a mess of broken rock and rubble from the steep slope that evidently stood above the ledge.

Once more the kid turned Pecos short around, and rode back along the fence. He crossed a creek bed covered with hot sun-bleached cobblestones with stagnant pools in the hollows. There the fence became a brush and wire barrier higher than the kid's head. No animal bigger than a rabbit could wriggle through there. He rode another half mile or two before he came to the edge of the fence and found it anchored to the other arm of the sandstone ledge.

He went back and found the place where he had first struck the fence and once more Pecos fought his way cannily through the jungle and out into the gulch not far from where he had first entered the willows. He looked a tired and somewhat disgusted horse, but this last excursion was no worse than many others his master had taken in the last month.

An hour or more later he stopped on the crest of a long ridge and stood with braced legs, completely winded after the steep climb, though the kid had been considerate enough to come up on his own feet.[Pg 259]

He had plenty of time to rest and doze while the wind pleasantly dried his sweaty hide, for the kid sat down with his knees hunched up to brace his elbows, and through the glasses very carefully examined this strange conglomeration of hills and hollows and wild crooked canyons. He had never ridden this far north along Wolf Buttes before, but had kept to the Poole range along Cotton Creek, to where it emptied into a rocky gorge; but now, with that mysterious fence nagging at his curiosity, he wanted to know who lived over in this ungodly country. Dinner at the Poole could wait.

He saw some cattle grazing in little detached groups in the canyon bottoms. He saw a herd of horses--wild broomtails--loafing beside a marshy pool. While he was watching them, they took fright at something and stampeded up a narrow ravine.

The kid moved his glasses a little and saw a horseman just riding out of sight behind a chokecherry thicket. He seemed to be coming down the canyon--at least, the wild horses seemed to think so. The man must have seen the horse herd thundering up that ravine, yet he had not swerved in that direction. The kid[Pg 260] could not see plainly through the scattered grove but he could tell that much.

Field glasses are very good for getting the details of a scene, but they are practically useless for gauging distances and the general topography of a country. The kid lowered the glasses and stared down into the canyon until the rider had passed the place where the horse herd had turned aside. When he came straight on, the kid picked up the bridle reins and led Decca back down the long ridge.

picked up the bridle reins and led Pecos back down the long ridge, keeping well to the north slope out of sight. The range tiger was on the prowl.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

[Pg 261]

NELLIE TAKES THE TRAIL

The kid rode slowly along the canyon bottom, playing his mouth organ as he went, and letting his long legs sway to the rhythm of the tune. He did not seem to have anything much on his mind, but his gun hung loose in its holster and his eyes kept glancing ahead towards a narrow pass in the rocky canyon, where the man must presently appear unless he had turned back.

Pecos tilted his ears forward and wanted to walk faster, but the kid's free hand dropped to the reins and held him back. Some one was riding down through the pass with a rattle of stones and a creak of saddle leather as he came. The kid's eyes lightened with a peculiar gleam but the tune he was playing never missed a note, until a black horse and rider came into view. The kid gave one startled look and the music ceased with a squawk.

Nellie Murray, dressed in her dead broth[Pg 262]er's overalls and blue gingham shirt, with her thick braid of yellow hair sweeping the

blue gingham shirt, with her thick braid of yellow hair sweeping the cantle of her saddle as she rode! She carried her dad's rifle in the crook of her arm, as if she meant to meet danger a little more than halfway, and as the two horses stopped of their own accord, she lifted the rifle midway to her shoulder, then let it down again.

The kid looked at her with that curious, steady stare of his yellow right eye, and his face had the expressionless look of a trained gambler. Cold and hostile and ready for war he looked, but he didn't feel that way. Hot crimples went chasing up his spine, and the back of his neck had a queer tightened feeling, as he stared at her. He would have wheeled Pecos and galloped away down the canyon, only he couldn't run away and give her the right to think he was scared of her. What was she doing, away off here by herself? If she thought he'd be over here and so came gunning for him, she shoah was playing in luck to find him. She still had his quirt hanging on her saddle horn--the quirt he had braided last winter, down home on the Brazos. But she wasn't aiming to use it this time. Meant to use that rifle, he reckoned.[Pg 263]

"Well! I've found one of you, anyway!" she exclaimed, in a tone that was worse than another cut of the quirt. "Where are the cattle?"

"What cattle?"

The kid was conscious of a faint pride that his voice sounded so calm, when his heart was pounding like a trip hammer in his chest.

"Our cattle that you Poole men stole out of our pasture last night. Every hoof we own! I'm going to get them back, if I have to fight every Texas killer in the country."

"Shoah wish yo'all luck, Miss Murray." The kid drew his mouth organ across his lips to stop their quivering. Couldn't let her see how it made him feel to meet her like this and hear her talk once more. He

made him feel to meet her like this and hear her talk once more. He wished she'd take a different tone, though, and not look at him like that. "Texas killahs is mean hombres to fight," he told her in his soft, drawling voice. "This kind up heah wouldn't give yo'all much chance to fight. They most generally don't meet folks if they can help it."

"Well, I've met you," she pointed out grimly.

"I'm a Texas man, all right, but I'm no killah. Told yo'all that befo'."

"Well, that remains to be seen. You're a[Pg 264] Poole man, anyway. You must know where our cattle are."

"Shoah wish I did. The Poole's fighting nestahs, I know that. But they don't steal cattle, Miss Murray."

"Oh, don't they? Walter Bell ought to raise your wages for saying that!"

"He kain't. I'm not working for the Poole."

"No? How long since?"

"Since that night we got Babe outa Cold Spring cabin." The kid could not keep a tenseness out of his voice, but his eyes did not waver before her disbelieving stare.

"I suppose the Poole fired you for poor shooting!"

Her short scornful laugh turned the kid's ears red as if she had slapped them, but he made no answer to the taunt. What was the use? She knew well enough why he had been so careful not to kill any one that day when they were trapped at Cold Spring. The kid remembered how they had talked about this very thing all through that long afternoon when they sat in the shade behind the cabin,

with Babe lying in a stupor on the bunk inside and the nesters firing at the place from a rocky little ridge over across the small basin.[Pg 265]

She remembered it too, he bet. Shoah, she did. Just talking now to keep her mad up. Talking that-a-way because she wouldn't own up she was sorry she quirted him and called him a killer when Babe went crazy and began shooting off his face about him killing her pappy and about Tiger Eye killing her brother Ed. She knew it was a lie. Shoah, she did! She was mad because he wouldn't let her apologize that night, but had hit her horse a lick and started him off home at a high lope, wanted to make him say something about it now, but she could take it out in wanting. Any saying on that subject would have to come from her. There was plenty she needed to say, if she ever wanted to square herself.

So the kid wrapped the bridle reins around the saddle horn and began to roll a cigarette, taking plenty of time and being mighty particular to have the tobacco lie smooth in its little white trough. A man could do a heap of thinking over a cigarette without giving himself away. He could wait till the right words came before he spoke. He could make the other fellow tip his hand--unless the other fellow was a smoker too and reached for the makings. Then it was liable to be a tie. But[Pg 266] Nellie Murray didn't smoke, and the kid felt that he had all the best of it.

"You must know the Poole ran off with our cattle!"

The kid painstakingly moistened the loose edge of his cigarette with the tip of his tongue.

"No, kain't say I do."

"Well. thev did."

When they are:

"Yo'all right shoah it was the Poole?"

"I wouldn't say it if I wasn't sure," she retorted sharply. "None of our neighbors would do it, and besides, I trailed them up on the Bench and over this way. The Poole wants to run us out of the country. You know why, don't you?"

"Kain't say I do, lessen it's because yoah a nestah."

"Oh, of course all the nesters are being made the goats for Walter Bell! He's got to lay the blame somewhere for his stealings. But he's scared to death of us Murrys and he means to drive us out. He's got Ed and Father out of the way, but he's afraid of Mother and me too. You know why, don't you?"

The kid was holding a match flame to his cigarette, and he permitted her a brief look at his eyes--the blue left one squinted half[Pg 267] shut, the yellow right eye wide and inscrutable.

"Kain't blame 'em foh that," he said drily.

Nellie flushed and looked down at the rifle sagging in her grasp.

"It's because old Walt Bell is afraid Mother and I know what Ed found out about the Poole. Ed caught the Poole cowboys stealing Poole cattle, that's why! Some of them--that stand in close with Walter Bell. Joe Hale for one, and Jess Markel for another. He caught them running a wildcat brand on Poole calves, over this way somewhere. He found out a lot, and then he wrote back to the head moguls in New York and told them what was going on." She bit her lip. "That was away last March, and they haven't done a thing about it, though Mother says Ed sent enough proof to put the whole outfit in the pen."

"Shoah had nerve, that boy." The cigarette was lighted but the kid forgot to smoke it. His mind went shuttling back and forth, weaving Nellie's story into certain puzzling fragments of information he had never been able to make anything of. "Shoah did," he repeated, under his breath.

"Of course he had nerve! Too much. He wanted to get the goods on that bunch without[Pg 268] dragging the neighbors into it. He never told them what he was doing, but he told Father."

"Plumb strange yo'all nevah mentioned it, when we talked these things ovah at the cabin. 'Peahs like I wasn't trusted at no time." The kid pulled Pecos away from a friendly nose-rubbing with Nellie's horse.

"I didn't know it then. Mother knew, but they were afraid to talk about it, much. She only told me early this morning, when we found out our cattle were gone. I rode down to the pasture to bring up the cows and there wasn't a hoof in sight. I saw where they'd been driven off, and then when I went to tell Mother, she told me the whole story."

The kid's eyes had the wary look of a half-broken horse that is ready to bolt at the first alarm. She needn't think he was going to forget what she had done to him--not unless she came right out and said she was sorry and asked his forgiveness. Even then, he was not right certain he would forgive her for that quirting. Didn't know as he could ever forgive a thing like that.

But this cattle stealing--no man that was even half a man would ride off and let two[Pg 269] women lose every hoof of stock they owned. 'Peahed like he was plumb obliged to turn in and help her find those cattle. He'd do that much for her mother. Right nice little woman, all alone in the world now. except for Nellie--and it shoah wasn't the

one in the world now, except for home and a clean heart and mother's fault if she had a daughter with a mean temper. He'd get those cattle for Nellie's mother, and he'd make Nellie so dawgoned ashamed of herself she never would be able to face him again without blushing.

The kid let Pecos edge closer to Nellie's horse again and pretended to be studying the problem and not to notice what his horse was up to. Had a funny thumping in the side of his neck, kinda like he was scared. Nothing to do with Nellie Murray though, unless it was just because it made him so mad to see her go on like she hadn't done a darn thing to be ashamed of. Reckon she thought he'd say something about it, but she shoah had another think coming. He wouldn't even be speaking to her if it wasn't for her mother and the fix she was in about the stock.

"Shoah would like to know what yoh mothah said," he observed, in what would have been a cold and formal tone, except that the kid's soft[Pg 270] Texas voice made a pleasing melody whenever he spoke.

"Mother told me Ed was always trying to figure out why the Poole had it in for the nesters, after letting them settle in the valley without making a fuss. Ed did a lot of riding outside the valley. The Poole claimed he was rustling calves, but that's a lie. I know how we got every hoof we owned. We only had forty-two head. Now we haven't got any."

"If yoh brothah got proof--"

"He got enough to put the fear of the Lord into Walter Bell," she declared bitterly. "We don't know whether they saw Ed watching them, or whether the Eastern owners wrote back and told Walt what Ed said about him and his outfit. The Poole certainly must have found out somehow, and it wasn't from any of the valley folks, for

round out somerow, and it wasn't from any of the valley folks, for they don't know it. The Poole started in--dry-gulching, if you know what that means, and I suppose you do, all right." She sent him a quick glance and looked away again when the kid failed to meet her eyes. "Before, it was just mean range tricks--hogging the range and accusing the nesters of rustling calves and killing beef and all that.[Pg 271] But all at once they started killing. Ed was one of the first--"

"If yoh'd give me the brands so I'd know yoh mothah's cattle when I find 'em--"

"I'm not asking you to find them. I'm going to get them myself," she said haughtily, stung to resentment by the coldness of his eyes.

"Peahs like yoh bettah go awn home. Yoh got a right nice mothah. Reckon she needs yo'all mighty bad. If I knew the brands, I'd find her cattle for her."

"Well, it's Reverse E, if you must know. But I couldn't think of troubling you, Mr. Reeves. I intend to get those cattle myself."

"How?"

"Well, how would you?"

"Ride till I found 'em. Might take a week, in heah."

"Don't you suppose I know all that? I came prepared." She slapped a bulky package behind her cantle. "Mother knows I may be out a couple of days. She knows I won't come back without the cattle."

"It's a man's job," the kid said gruffly.

"Well, I'm the man of the family now, so it's my job. So long, Mr.

Reeves!" She gathered[Pg 272] up the reins and tapped her horse lightly with the quirt--just as if it never had been put to a more sinister use--and rode on past the kid with her chin tilted upward and her gaze bent ostentatiously upon a straggling, small herd of cattle feeding over on the farther slope.

"Adios, Miss Murray!" The kid kicked Pecos into a trot and rode on into the rocky pass, playing his mouth organ so loudly he cracked a reed so that the note buzzed like a bee in a bottle.

Dawgone that girl! Meanest temper he ever saw in a human! Still-headed as a mule! Shoah didn't get much satisfaction outa him, going off like that with her nose in the air. Thought he'd foller and say perty please. He'd show her how much he cared for her darned old cattle. Thought she was smart, showing off with that pack on her saddle, trying to make out she was game to stay out till she found her stock. Let her. She'd go and lose herself so bad she wouldn't know which way was straight up.

Serve her dawgoned right if she did. Just because she had the nerve to wear her brother's pants she thought she could take the place of a man on the range. Toting a rifle like a shoah-enough go-getter. She'd go get herself bush[Pg 273]whacked over here, if any of the Poole bunch happened to spot her and didn't get close enough to see she was a girl. If she'd left that yellow braid hanging down her back--a physical pain gripped the kid's chest when he thought how that yellow braid had looked, brushing the cantle of her saddle when she moved her head.

One nearly new mouth organ, key of D, good except for one loosened reed, landed in the middle of a scraggy sagebush thirty feet away. Pecos went with his ears laid flat against his head for an hour, in his anger at the way the kid yanked him around in the trail.

CHAPTER THIRTY

[Pg 274]

THE KID RIDES ALONE

She had ridden nearly a quarter of a mile down the canyon and she did not look back when the kid came pounding up behind and set Pecos on his haunches alongside her. Her rifle was balanced across the saddle in front of her. She had hung her hat on the saddle horn and was rebraiding her hair as a preliminary to coiling it on top of her head, and she had fished a lot of hairpins from a pocket and was holding them endwise in her mouth, the crimped legs bristling out from between her soft, red lips. She gave the kid a sidelong glance and her fingers never faltered in their weaving of the thick strands of long hair in and out. The finished part of the braid was looped over her shoulder and it shone like gold in the sun.

The kid had a sudden and almost uncontrollable desire to lean over and pull those pins from her mouth with his teeth. The plumb craziness of the idea almost made him spur Pecos on down the trail as tight as he could[Pg 275] go--only that would be almost as crazy a thing to do as the other. He ground his teeth together until the muscles stood out upon his jaw, and his eyes glowered straight ahead. And without any intention of saying a word, he fumed himself

ahead. And without any intention of saying a word, he found himself saying a good many.

"I nevah did see a mule as still-headed as yo'all! Go awn home wheah yoh belong, and I'll go aftah yoah mothah's cattle myse'f. And yoh bettah unbraid that haiah and let it fly loose, so any Poole killah that sees yo'all will know what he's aimin' to shoot. Bullets go wheah they're sent, and they don't stop to ask if yoah a man or a woman befo' they hit. You go awn home."

From the corner of his eye he watched to see the effect of that speech. Nellie continued to braid her hair and she kept those fool hairpins in her mouth. Just an excuse so she couldn't talk, the kid thought savagely. She knew better than to try and put up an argument against him. And he had the satisfaction of calling her a mule, anyway.

He rode on ahead of her. Nellie had to hold her horse down to a walk or quit fussing with her hair, and she went right on doing it up on top of her head, so she could get her hat over[Pg 276] it. Didn't act like she was going home. Didn't try to catch up with him, either. The kid got to worrying about what she meant to do, and finally he pulled in behind a ledge and waited for her to come along, so he could give her another piece of his mind. Yet when she rode up she didn't give him a chance.

"If you're bound to hunt our cattle, I guess we better work together," she said cheerfully. "This is awful rough country."

"Go awn home like I told yo'all."

"Oh, forget it!" she snapped. "I'm not going, and that settles it. If you want to get rid of me so bad, hurry up and find our cattle."

"If it wasn't fah yoah mothah, I wouldn't take my hand offah yoah!"

"If it wasn't for you an' mother, I wouldn't turn my hand over for you all!" the kid blurted fiercely.

"Well, nobody asked you to!" Nellie retorted. "You can suit yourself, you know."

"Shoah aim to, Miss Murray," the kid grimly assured her, and loped off down the canyon without once looking back. He kept telling himself she ought to go back home, and that he couldn't do a thing with her along. But he listened for the hoofbeats of the black horse, and when he failed to hear them he slowed to a trot.[Pg 277]

What he meant to do was go back and investigate that fence again, and he wanted to do it alone. Plumb foolish of her to buck all that brush when he didn't even know that there was anything to find out. No law against some rancher building a pasture fence across a willow flat. Reckon it didn't mean a thing, but he'd go take a look to make sure. Shoah didn't want Nellie Murray along, either--snagging her hair on the brush and giving him back talk all the time. Nothing she could do but get in the way.

But his ears were strained, listening for the cluppety-cluppety sound of a galloping horse, and when he didn't hear it, he became suddenly aware of an uncomfortable aching heaviness in his chest. Hungry, he reckoned. By the sun, it was close to noon and he had swallowed a hurried breakfast at dawn. Shoah felt empty now--nothing whatever to do with Nellie Murray. He looked back up the canyon and rode into the willows.

Pecos went at the task savagely, wanting to get it over. At the fence the kid turned and rode toward the dry creek bed where the ground was rough and humpy, gouged with spring freshets and undermined by burrowing small animals.[Pg 278] When he found a spot where the fence went up over a small ridge he dismounted and kicked the

wires loose from three posts, forced them to the ground and anchored them there with a couple of rocks and led his horse across.

From there on he followed the simplest plan that occurred to him. He kept going straight ahead until the willow growth ceased on higher ground and he could see what sort of place it was that had need of a fence like that. And as he emerged from the willows, he saw that he was in a deep, wide coulee such as every ranch in that country seemed to seek because of the shelter and water and the richer soil to be found within the high encircling walls.

Some one was running cattle in here, all right. The edge of the thicket was broken and trampled where stock had pushed in for shelter, and there was cattle sign everywhere. Nothing outa the way in that, he reckoned. Some old mossback farmer stuck away in the hills, trying to make a living. Doing all right at it too, if that fence was any sign. Good grass, when you got beyond the willows. Boggy ground with black soil and a little pond of water in the middle. That's why there were so many willows down below. Nice place, all right, if[Pg 279] it wasn't so far from everything. Good place for a hide-out too, if you had stolen cattle on your hands. Couldn't ask for a better place to work over the brands and let them grow hair.

The kid's nerves began to tingle a little. Pecos was walking with his head up and his ears tilted forward, as if he saw or heard something. Cattle bawling! When the kid turned his head and listened, he could hear it too. Cows, it sounded like. And as he got nearer, he could distinguish the spasmodic, jerky bellow of a calf when the hot iron seared its side.

Shoah would be plumb strange if he rode straight to where the rustlers had Nellie's cattle. Might not be the Poole at all. Might be somebody else hanging out in here, stealing from nesters and

somebody else hanging out in here, stealing from Hesters and Poole both, and letting them blame each other for it. Let 'em kill each other off while the real thief got rich off his stealings. It could be done easy enough, with a place like this.

Shoah would be funny if he was to run right onto her bunch of cattle. She'd think he had a hand in it, maybe. She might say that was why he tried to send her home. Shoah looked like it, the way he rode off and left her and then ducked[Pg 280] into the willows. Be better if he'd let her come along, he reckoned. And somehow his spirits rose a little at the perfectly logical reason he had just discovered for wanting her with him.

The kid lifted his hat and swept the reddish waves of hair back off his forehead, settled his bullet-scarred hat at a careless tilt, pulled his holstered gun into position on his thigh and rode forward with an eager gleam in his eyes. Thoughts of Nellie Murray crept into the back of his mind as the hunting spirit pushed forward and claimed him. Once more the range tiger was on the prowl.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

[Pg 281]

THE TIGER LEAPS

From the pole corral set back in a thin grove of cottonwood and box

alder, a gray dusty cloud rose into the hot sunshine of noon. Within the corral fence a small herd of cattle tramped uneasily round and round, swerving and ducking aside when a cowboy's loop swished out like the vicious flat head of a striking rattler.

A man on guard outside unhooked the chain and swung open the gate to let out a rider dragging a husky bull calf with a white curly-haired face and a fat pink tongue waving out from his slavering mouth as he bawled and fought the rope, his sturdy front legs braced and half sliding through the tramped sand.

But he came out, nevertheless, and the gate slammed shut behind him. Fighting every inch, he made reluctant progress over toward the branding fire, where two calf wrestlers grabbed and threw him on his side with a thump.[Pg 282]

A man lifted a branding iron deliberately out of the blaze, looked at it, waved it to and fro in the air, looked at it again and decided that it was about the right heat, and walked over to the calf lying there, with two sweating cowboys braced and holding him motionless, one half sprawled across his head, the other hanging for dear life to a leg. The man with the branding iron set a foot on the calf's ribs and began to draw a pattern with the heated iron on the heaving paunch. Where the iron limned its range symbol, a thin ribbon of greenish blue smoke rose and wavered into a little cloud. The outstretched legs kicked spasmodically and the sweat streamed down the wrestler's brown cheeks and ran salty as tears into his grimacing mouth, as he braced himself against the struggle. From under the shirt-sleeved arm of the other cowboy burst a plaintive bawling. The man with the iron paused, tilted his head sidewise to survey his artistry, spat a brown stream into the sand and touched a line here and there with the cooling iron.

"Awright," he signalled carelessly, and turned to thrust the iron again into the fire.

It was at that moment that the three of them[Pg 283] and the gate tender discovered that they had a new arrival in their midst. The kid stood there, hipshot and careless, twisting the end of a fresh-rolled cigarette and watching the branding incuriously, as if it were the most commonplace thing in the world.

"Well, I'm damned!" jarred from the slackened mouth of the man with the branding iron, Joe Hale, range foreman for the Poole.

"Howdy, Joe," said the kid, and felt for a match. He nodded to the calf wrestlers, who were on their feet and mopping their perspiring faces with soiled bandannas. As the man at the gate came toward him, the kid's yellow eye changed curiously to the steady stare of a tiger.

Babe Garner! Babe with hollowed eyes and a sallow, indoor tinge to his swarthy face. Babe walking a bit slowly, inclined to pick his way instead of coming along with the swinging masterful stride the kid knew so well. Babe, with a question in his cold gray eyes and a smile on his face, coming over to shake hands. The lighted match in the kid's fingers flickered and threatened to go out, though there was scarcely a breeze blowing across the flat. The kid turned away his head, his two hands cupped before his face.[Pg 284]

"Hell's brass buttons!" cried Babe, swearing his very choicest oath kept for special occasions. "Where the hell did you drop down from, Tiger Eye?"

The calf roper, welcoming any diversion, let himself out of the corral and came trotting over, and the moment for hand-shaking passed.

The kid turned back, his yellow eye fixed on the man who had

The kid was glad of that. He felt mighty still inside and mighty cool and calm, but he didn't believe he could have gone through with any hand-shaking. Not with Babe, anyhow.

"Rain washed me down the canyon, Babe."

"Old Man send yuh over?" Joe Hale tried to make his voice sound casual, but there was an undertone of constraint which he failed to control.

The kid took three slow pulls at his cigarette. Down on the Brazos, men spoke unhurriedly and he had the ways of his people.

"Nevah did see Waltah Bell since that night I toted Babe into the ranch."

"Oh." Joe studied on that. "Thought likely you come from the Poole."

"Awn my way to the Poole, but I done changed my mind!"

"Oh. Kinda outa the way, this calf pasture,[Pg 285] and I just kinda wondered. Want to see me for anything? Wanta go to work again?"

"Much obliged to yo'all. I taken a job of riding, Joe."

"Yeah? Sorry to see yuh quit the Poole."

Polite. Too dawgoned polite to be natural. 'Peahed like Joe was getting kinda suspicious. Babe too. Babe was edging around uneasy like, as if he wanted to get in back of the bunch of them. Had that cold look in his eyes. The kid knew that look now for the killer look. Get around behind and send a bullet into a man's back--that was Babe's stripe. The kid shifted his position a little and looked at Babe.

"Shoah did think that bullet hole would keep yo'all down all summer, Babe," he drawled. "Feelin' right smaht again, 'peahs like."

"Shore played hell with me for awhile, but I'm feelin' purty good now," Babe said, too cheerfully. "Shore owe a lot to you, Tiger Eye."

"Shucks, Babe! Yo' don't owe me nothing to what I owe yo'all."

"What outfit yuh ridin' for now, Kid?" Joe looked up from kicking a half-burnt ember back into the fire.

"Ridin' foh Missus Murray, down in the[Pg 286] valley. Widow woman. Old man that was killed and put the nestahs on the fight the time they shot Babe, that was her husband. The one Babe got the bounty on."

Eyes turned sidewise to meet other guarded glances. Babe's shoulders jerked backward as if from a blow on the chest, but no one spoke.

"Lost some cattle last night," the kid continued, in his purring drawl. "I come out aftah them."

The atmosphere of the Poole men froze for a second. Only Babe, knowing the kid of old, went for his gun and dropped it as the kid's pitiless bullet went crashing through the knuckles of his hand. The hands of the two calf wrestlers went up as if they had been jerked with pulley and rope. The man on horseback clapped spurs to his horse and galloped like mad away from there. Joe Hale knew better than to try a shot. He remembered too vividly how Jess Markel had fared with the kid over at the Poole.

Babe remembered too, and a horror grew in his face as he stared at his numbed and bleeding hand. He'd rather be dead than

crippled--he always had said so--and now his knuckles would be stiff and useless to pull a trigger. But[Pg 287] when he glanced up and saw the kid looking after the fleeing horseman he chanced a shot with his left gun. But the kid didn't seem to need his eyes to tell what was going on. He caught Babe's movement and fired almost without looking.

"Line up with yoah backs this way," said the kid softly to Joe and the two calf wrestlers.

They did so in haste--all but Babe, who had crumpled down limply in the sand, with his bleeding hands crossed above his head and his face hidden in his arms. The kid pulled their guns from the sagging holsters, emptied them of cartridges and tossed them into the bushes behind him. He went over them carefully for knives, and collected four big jack-knives and a treacherous looking dagger which he took from Joe Hale's boot.

This much was simple, and though the kid never had held up a bunch of men before in his life and taken their guns away from them, he had heard plenty of gun fighters talk during fifteen years of eager listening, and he knew how it was best accomplished. The rest was something more complicated, but he followed the simplest plan he could think of at the moment.[Pg 288]

The meekest-looking wrestler worked with trembling haste under the cold stare of Tiger Eye Reeves. When he had tied Joe Hale and the other wrestler to posts ten feet apart and had helped Babe Garner into a shady spot where he would be perfectly safe with his feet tied together, the kid was going calmly about the business of tying his assistant to a third post when Nellie arrived.

Her face was streaked with dust and what looked suspiciously like tears. and her hair had been clawed by the willows until it lay on her

shoulders like a streak of sunshine. She sat on her black horse and watched the kid, and under her direct gaze he felt his ears and his face burn like fire. The kid did not look up, but he knew the exact instant when she turned her head to look at the newly branded calf which now wore a blackened and smarting window-sash brand where yesterday had been a tan-colored Reverse E. She reined her horse over to the corral and stood in the stirrups to look over the fence and inspect the milling herd.

"Well, they're all here, I guess," she remarked to the kid who, ten feet away, was kneeling beside the calf wrestler and was yank[Pg 289]ing the last knot tight. "You made quite a haul, didn't you, Bob?"

"Might be bettah," the kid owned, with a covert glance from under his hat brim. "One got plumb away."

"Well, I told you we ought to work together. But you kept on trying to pick a fight with me, you know. Looks like you got all you wanted of fighting here." She glanced around at the sullen captives. "I hope you're ready to admit now that the Poole outfit are a bunch of cow thieves."

"Shoah am," said the kid, his lips ready to smile the instant he forgot himself and let them go.

"What you going to do now?"

"Reckon I'll go aftah my hawse."

She followed him, riding in silence while the kid went mincing along on his high heels, his spurs gouging up the loose soil at every step.

"I heard you shooting up here, and I ran my horse and the willows just about scalped me," she said, when they were halfway to where

Pecos stood under a cottonwood, with his reins dragging and his head up, watching them anxiously.[Pg 290]

"I was afraid you might be in trouble or something," she said shyly, looking down at the kid's left cheek and biting her lips. "I hurried as fast as I could--in case you needed any help."

"Shoah am obliged to yo'all."

"There's something I've been wanting to say," she went on hurriedly, "only you just won't give me a chance."

"Peahs like I nevah do act the way I feel," said the kid. "Always did want to show yo'all I was a friend."

"I know that. I just want to say that I made an awful fool of myself that night when Babe began to shoot off his mouth about the both of you being Poole killers," she confessed, with a kind of shy defiance. "But it seems to me I had some excuse, with father killed just the day before. And I hadn't any sleep, remember, trying to get to Cold Spring and warn you the neighbors were sending men over to kill you and Babe. And getting trapped that way--and then when Babe said you shot my own brother for five hundred dollars, why--I just simply blew up for a minute."

"Shucks! I nevah did think a word moah about it," the kid declared earnestly, looking[Pg 291] her straight in the eyes. "Nevah paid it no mind at all. Don't just recollect what yo'all said, anyway. I was feeling right mean myse'f about what Babe was talking--saying right out that he killed yoah pappy. Shoah did make me mighty mad to heah that, Nellie."

"Well, I guess I hit you a time or two--I was so excited!"

"Shoah have to hit harder than that to make a man feel it!" The kid's grin made him look about sixteen.

"Well, I just want you to know I'm sorry."

"Yo'all needn't to be."

"I am, just the same. You ought to know I never did class you with the Poole. It's just this ornery temper of mine--"

"Shucks! If yo' call that a tempah, yo'all oughta see mine!" The kid gathered up the reins, mounted and swung alongside her.

"You? Why, Bob Reeves! You know very well I'm the meanest thing on earth! After all you've done, to--to do what I did and--and talk the way I've talked to you, it makes me so ashamed--"

"Aw, hush! When yo'all talk that-a-way, yoh make me feel like batting my haid against a rock! Yo'all don't know how I felt this last[Pg 292] month, thinking I had nothing but hate f'om yo'all--"

"Hate!" cried Nellie Murray, as one who stands aghast before so harsh a word. "Why, if you only knew--" And then she stopped and began to blush furiously, so that the crimson flood rushed up to the band of yellow hair on her temples.

The kid turned and looked at her. Looked until the blush faded and left her pale and trembling, staring hard at her horse's tangled mane.

"If I knew it was love, I--I shoah would be mighty happy and proud," he said under his breath.

Pecos jumped as if a bee had stung him when the kid reached out and gathered Nellie Murray into his arms

and gathered Nellie Murray into his arms.

The kid sat on the ground with his back against a tree and drew his mouth organ across his smiling lips while he tapped the time with his foot.

Come love, come, the boat lies low,
The moon shines bright on the old bayou.
Come love, come, oh come along with me--
I'll take you down-n-n to Tennessee!

[Pg 293]

played the kid, over and over again, while his prisoners sat and listened, and wondered what kind of a man was Tiger Eye Reeves, who could shoot a man in cold blood, capture three others who had thought they were well able to take care of themselves, and then sit all the afternoon playing that darned mouth organ like he hadn't a care in the world.

The kid didn't know or care what they thought about him. The kid was living in a world of his own, where a girl with yellow hair loved him enough to marry him and settle down. Gone into Badger now after help and the sheriff, to come and take this bunch with the evidence of the cattle right there behind them in the corral. Gone to bring a doctor out to fix up Babe's hands. But she'd be back, all right. And when she got here, the kid would take her over to the ranch and they'd tell her mother there was going to be a man in the family that shoah would be right on the job.

He played "Listen to the Mocking Bird," with more warbles and trills and low happy notes than he ever dreamed of putting into the song. The rather bare and desolate ranch where Nellie lived he made a

The rather bare and desolate ranch where Nellie lived he made a paradise in his dreams. Honeysuckle oughta grow up here all right.[Pg 294] He'd send down to his mother and have her get him a pair of mocking birds. Take her and her mother back down to Texas, only Pap's old enemies would want to go on with the feud and he'd have to kill somebody. Reckon the killing was about over, up here. Shoah was a nice country, if folks would just settle down and behave.

The afternoon waned and the Poole men began to swear at the chill and the cramp in their limbs, but the kid never even heard them, he was so busy making plans for the future. Darkness came. He sat there very still, trying to realize the amazing truth that Nellie Murray was going to marry him. She loved him. She said she did.

He was still sitting there, two hours later, when Nellie came with the doctor and the sheriff and half a dozen men, who worried the kid with questions and talk. But that ended, and he was riding away with Nellie, hitting straight for the valley and the ranch his dreams had glorified.

THE END