

Behind Yellow Shoes

A Short Story by Fred Grove, '37journal

THOMAS Jefferson Stilwell, on the board walk by the brown sandstone building, eyed the faded, fly-specked lettering on the First State Bank window, and wondered when Old Man Harney, who owned the bank and the college and just about all of Wildhorse itself, would have it painted again.

Old Man Harney has mighty big ideas, folks said, as long as they come cheap. That's why Tom's father taught school during the mornings and worked afternoons in the bank, except Sunday and on Saturday, like today, when he was in the bank all day. And why Prairie Hill College amounted to only two rooms over Cook's Hardware & Undertaking, which Old Man Harney really owned and Tobe Cook just ran for him.

Tom turned to go in, but paused, staring at the over-dressed, travel-stained man leaving the bank, a stranger in high-button yellow shoes, derby hat, red and white checkered vest and wrinkled blue trousers. His pale eyes looked a little weary, yet they could cut right through a body, like now.

"What's got you, boy? Ever see a white man before?"

"It's the shoes," Tom stammered, still awed. "Fanciest I ever laid eyes on."

Mumbling something about hick cow towns in Oklahoma, the stranger passed on and Tom went inside, his bare feet noiseless.

Tom's father, wearing black sleeve guards up to his elbows, stood behind the barred teller's window, gazing out the dirty glass at Main Street. He seemed not to have noticed Tom's entrance and Tom let his interest linger on the fascination of the vast safe against the rear wall. He knew it held a heap of money because, once, he'd watched his father work the combination and take out bundled greenbacks and sacks of silver. In a nearby drawer lay an old single-action .45, loaded and cocked, just in case.

Even if Old Man Harney was as tight as the skin on a cactus, it made Tom arch up with pride when he thought of the old banker's trust in his father, even to letting him have a key to the bank.

Tom might have stood there a long time,

so fixed was his father's attention upon the street. His face was troubled, Tom discovered, white around the grimly set mouth. But Miss Pansy Riddle, the full-time teller and bookkeeper, glanced up and said in her precise manner, "Good morning, Thomas."

His father wheeled, his thoughts seeming to break sharply. His face smoothed. "What is it, Tom?"

"Just on my way to the store."

Ewing Stilwell, lean as a young Indian, had the strong wrists and big hands of a much taller and broader man. His face was too old for his years, and there was a faint stoop to his shoulders; his thick hair was as gray as Old Man Harney's at the temples, and his blue eyes, sometimes showing a bitter, never-spoken caution, made Tom wonder if maybe he had lived and seen things he'd never tell until Tom reached man-size.

"Tell your mother I won't be home at noon, and I'll be late tonight," his father said, an almost abrupt dismissal in his voice as Sam Harney came in from the street.

Old Man Harney had a long, unsmiling face, a tall, angular shape, an innocent receding jaw and bargainer's eyes which could be as gauging as a traveling horse trader's, a middle-aged man who never wasted words or money. He paid out a single nod as Tom went outside.

A familiar scene caught Tom's eyes, Sylvester Creeping Bear's band of hound dogs, leaping and wrangling for bits of fresh meat. Creeping Bear tossed them in front of Rheinmiller's Butcher Shop. Tom took a lengthy look as he eased through the noisy pack.

Creeping Bear wasn't as you expected a fullblooded Indian to be, not stately and tall, moving with grace. He was short and broad, made of many layers of fat. He always wore a blue bandanna around his head, and his red flannel shirt hung without shape, like the folds of a tent, tails flapping. His trousers looked rusty with age. Creeping Bear was a loner Kiowa. Every day he rode into town, trailed by his clamoring followers. Even on Sunday, when Rheinmiller's was closed, he loafed on the plank walk at his usual location, in the shade under the wooden awning.

The game of feeding was still going on a little later when Tom, with his groceries, left Wismeyer's Grocery. Now, Wildhorse was a Saturday town and by this hour ranchers and farmers were driving in to trade, their wagons, buggies and saddle horses outnumbering a scattering of high-wheeled, coughing, fuming automobiles. Now and then a team shied.

Next door to Rheinmiller's, in front of the saddle shop, one man stood apart.

Tom recognized him at once, the stranger in the derby and yellow shoes. As Tom stared, the man lifted one foot, then the other, and gave the shoes a vigorous shining on the hind side of those wrinkled-up, slept-in britches. Afterward, he just slouched, picking his teeth with a long-bladed pocket knife, while he sent his contemptuous glance over the ranch families coming and going.

Tom's native pride protested. Why, that uppity dude figured he was too good for the likes of Wildhorse folks! Folks that even had their own college! Him an' his yeller shoes!

It happened as Tom stopped to watch Sylvester Creeping Bear lob another piece of meat to his playful hounds. Several leaped together. Somehow snapping jaws missed, the red chunk struck a vaulting nose and went sailing toward the dude's feet.

There was a snarling scramble around the yellow shoes. The man lost balance, steadied himself against the saddle shop window, and Tom glimpsed a sheen of murderous anger.

A yellow-shod foot lashed out. A dog's shrill, yipping pain turned the crowd; everybody froze.

Tom saw the dog roll, hurt, lamed, the dude rushing after, kicking, again and again, viciously. Tom's insides flinched with each kick, with the rising, piteous howls. It exploded through him that the dude intended to kill the dog and nobody was going to stop him.

Tom didn't recall moving, but he was, on numbed legs that didn't seem to track right, trying to get there in time.

A low, wide shape shot out ahead of him. It was Creeping Bear, astonishingly

fast for so much tallow. He darted between man and dog, and with one enormous sweep of his platter-size hand knocked the stranger sprawling. He heaved up immediately, coming for Creeping Bear, a knife flashing wickedly.

"Stop it, Mitch!"

That voice, Tom realized after a moment, belonged to his father.

It also made the dude slow up and look around. The Kiowa took advantage of the interval to pick up the injured dog whimpering at his feet. A quick inspection and his mahogany eyes flashed; he put the hound down and advanced menacingly.

Ewing Stilwell left the crowd to grip the Indian's arm. "Let it go, Sylvester. Take your dogs home."

For a while Tom feared Creeping Bear's stubbornness. The Kiowa glared across, a killing look that seemed to make him look more massive. Finally, with grudging slowness, he turned, retrieved the dog, cradled it, and took his pack down the street.

But matters weren't finished, Tom realized.

"I was just defending myself," the dude was saying. His knife had disappeared. His voice, deep and purring, was meant for the crowd as well as Tom's father. "You saw him start for me after his dogs knocked me down."

"They just brushed you," Ewing snapped. "And you were going to kill him." He started to walk off.

A mockery of hurt entered the lean, dark features. "You calling me a liar, friend? Come back here!" The gaiting voice laid its contempt left and right, picked up when Ewing halted and turned. "Tell me to my face."

Ewing said nothing, but his mouth was a squeezed-in line.

"Looks like you're yellow, friend. Plumb yellow!"

Tom could feel himself drawing in, wanting to hide. All the time it deepened that his father was backing down before the entire town and country folks, too.

Without a word, Ewing made a path through the crowd. Tom followed on heavy feet, seeing men turn away in embarrassment.

Old Man Harney stood outside his bank. "What's the fuss?"

Ewing told him with brief, crisp words. "You know him?" Harney demanded. "Never saw him before."

Tom blinked, opened his mouth, shut it suddenly. Going home, alone, he thought again how his father had called the stranger's name.

At supper, his father seemed to have forgotten the shameful morning. Little was

said until Tom's mother launched forth on her favorite subjects: Wildhorse's growth and prospects for Prairie Hill College; how some day it would have state support.

Laura Stilwell's hair was a solid black, lustrous in sunlight; her eyes that soft brown that seemed like smoke. In them sometimes and in her pleasant voice, Tom sensed a longing for the little town in Kan-

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fred Grove relates that before he got his degree in journalism he tried a little of everything with correspondingly little success—"from selling fly spray to merciful Kansas farmers who sometimes invited me to eat dinner, to, even worse, selling washing machines in Wewoka, and still worse, peddling coffee from door to door in Osage County's oil field towns. After graduating he worked on newspapers in Cushing, Shawnee, Harlingen (Texas), and Oklahoma City. He finally brought his wife and son to live in Norman where he worked as an assistant in O.U.'s public relations office until 1954 when he "retired" to write fiction.

The many people who got to know him in his roustabout days remember a genial, sincere person with an appetite for Oklahoma and Southwestern lore. Much of this lore he developed into the 25 short stories which he has sold to magazines such as *Esquire* and *Bluebook* and his three novels which appear in pocket book editions (*Flame of the Osage*, *Sun Dance*—and a new one—*No Bugles, No Glory*).

At present he is working on a non-fiction account of the Osage murder cases of the Twenties (Grove is part Osage himself). And as far as he can predict, all his writings will concern this area of the country. He writes: "The University's very fine Phillips Collection, which I use often, is a world of fascinating material. Much of it, I am sorry to say, shows too few writers' thumbprints."

sas, its neat streets and elm trees and yellow wheat fields, where the two of them had lived so long that time while his father was away.

"If the town keeps growing," she said, color coming to her cheeks, "so will Prairie Hill College."

Ewing looked discouraged. "Not unless Mr. Harney loosens up. We need a decent building, we need more than two half-time teachers, we need decent salaries. He wants to run the college on a strict profit basis, the way you'd sell a roll of barbed wire. I try to tell him he is making money indirectly; that he's making money off the bank and his stores as the college brings new people to Wildhorse and its trade area." He made a gesture of futility. "Let's not get our hopes too high for a while."

Her face changed, clouded; for a space Tom saw the same uncertainty grip them. She rose to clear the table, and Ewing said reassuringly to his son, "It's nothing for you to worry about, Tom."

By late evening Tom decided his father had no intention of telling, a sick conclusion Tom carried to bed. He was yet awake when someone knocked at the door. He heard Old Man Harney's dry, prying voice.

"Ewing, you didn't tell me that feller pulled a knife on you this morning. Reason enough to back down, I guess, you being unarmed."

A stillness followed. Tom was upright, straining to hear more.

"A knife—who had a knife?" His mother's voice seemed dragged from her throat. "Ewing, you didn't tell me."

"Didn't want to worry you, Laura. No one was hurt."

"Sorry, Mrs. Stilwell"—Harney was spluttering, for once, in retreat—"I figured you knew all about it. Well, I'll be going now."

Harney's quick boots were going across the yard when Tom's father spoke again. "Laura, Mitch Yeager's in town. He had the knife."

"Oh, no!"

"He kicked one of Creeping Bear's hounds, almost killed it. I thought he was going to finish the old Indian when he interfered. That's how I got into it."

"So he's caught up with us again," Laura Stilwell said dismally.

Tom slipped from his bed to the door. His mother was slumped in a rocker; she kept wadding and unwadding a handkerchief. What shocked him most was the despair he saw in her small, unhappy face.

"One thing," Tom's father said grimly, pacing, "he can't send me back to prison. I served my time. At least I got an education out of it, though I'll need a lot more if Prairie Hill ever grows."

"He wants something." She seemed to

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speaking from an ancient knowledge. "Why else would he come here? He fixed it so you took the blame before." She looked up, pleading. "Ewing, turn him in! He's an outlaw—he's killed men!"

His father stopped, fighting a powerful emotion. "And have him tell Harney an ex-jailbird is working in his bank? No, Laura, we'll have to wait and see. Everything will be all right. Mitch said he was just passing through."

"I don't believe it," she replied firmly.

After church and Sunday dinner, Ewing Stilwell kissed his wife and took up his hat, ignoring the protests in Laura's worried eyes. "Papers to grade," he said, casual about it. "Like last Sunday."

"Come home before dark."

"Soon as I can."

Tom trailed him outside, off the porch. "You're wondering about yesterday," his father said without preliminary. "Why I didn't fight."

"No, sir, I'm not." Tom tried to make it sound convincing, but knew he hadn't. He felt miserable.

His father had that squeezed look around his mouth. "Remember what I told you about using your head instead of guns and knives? That fighting comes last? Well, it's harder that way, but it still holds."

Tom tried to believe his father. Doubt stitched across his mind and then he ran off, hardly saying goodbye.

Tom had to go somewhere, off into the warm, still afternoon. He drifted, losing himself in the silent, black-boled woods, trying to imagine himself as Pawnee Bill, chasing antelope and buffalo, just as the fancy struck him, because Pawnee Bill roamed as he pleased. Somehow, though, the old game didn't hold him today. At eleven, maybe, he guessed he was growing up to be a man, getting old, worrying about things. Was it—and the thought twisted—because he kept thinking about yesterday and how the men had looked at his father?

It seemed better to wander on to town.

Wildhorse looked deserted—was, except for Sylvester Creeping Bear and his mangy dogs lazing in front of Rheinmiller's, and a black touring car, with four men around it, parked on the side street just north of the bank.

Just then, two men started walking south. One, Tom saw with eyes bulging,

was his father. The other that uppity dude, derby hat, yellin' shoes—Mitch Yeager.

A sense of wrongness moved him, sent him on skinny legs behind a water barrel. He could hear the car's motor chugging quietly. The pair left behind had the hood up; they seemed to be tinkering.

He glanced back, a dim suspicion beginning to stir as his father and Yeager turned the corner. Full meaning crashed when they walked to the bank door.

His father, who was supposed to be grading papers in Prairie Hill College over Tobe Cook's Hardware & Undertaking, was letting that dirty Mitch Yeager rob the bank. Yes, it was true! He saw his father unlock the door and enter, Yeager close behind.

Sick at heart, Tom waited numbly.

He was next aware of an explosion inside the bank. A gun booming, its muffled blast seeming unreal on the quiet street, a sound that turned him cold with fear for his father.

Down the walk, Creeping Bear jumped up dazedly and ran lumberingly for the bank, his dogs racing with him.

He'd gone but a few hard, stomping strides when the door came open, flung back, and a figure sprang through. Mitch Yeager. He carried a lumpy sack; in his hand a pistol glinted. He spun as Creeping Bear charged, Yeager's gun hand rising swiftly, chopping, the barrel taking the Kiowa across his upflung arm.

But as Creeping Bear reeled from the blow, he whooped for his dogs. Yeager was free for the moment, until the dogs closed in, leaping, snarling, underfoot. Yeager kicked and cursed. Creeping Bear cried out in guttural Kiowa, lunged back.

Yeager whirled to kill.

Tom jerked at the solid sound and waited for Creeping Bear to buckle. Strangely, he did not. It was Yeager, instead, first his sack dropping and then his pistol, making a hollow whap on the board walk, an instant before Yeager clapped both hands to his chest, twisted half-around and fell.

Movement at the bank door took Tom's eyes. His father was swaying there, still pointing that old single-action.

Tom started across, froze as an automobile snarled around the corner and a man on the running board began firing a pistol. Tom's father was shooting, too. Quite suddenly, without a cry, the man pitched off the car.

Ewing Stilwell kept shooting, pivoting with the car as it ran past. It was roaring out of town, picking up speed, and then it swerved oddly and headed for Cook's Hardware & Undertaking. It bounced high. Tom heard a mighty crash of splintering wood and shattering glass.

This time he ran across. His father stood doggedly braced. And that was the part Tom liked to remember best, even better than the biggest gun battle ever fought in Wildhorse. A real fighting man making his stand, something terrible and great in his father's blazing eyes and blood sopping his shirt and powder-smoke smell around him like a stink. Tom got this, like a picture pasted across his sight, just before his father took a wobbling step and collapsed in Tom's arms . . .

It was very crowded in the small bedroom, and doctor smells enough to make you sick, if a body wasn't already, Tom decided, standing beside the bed with his mother.

Sam Harney was about to leave when Tom's father spoke, a curtness in his voice. "Wait, Mr. Harney, I want to tell you something."

"It can keep till tomorrow," Harney said, an awkward hurry seeming to come over him.

Ewing sat up, pain pinching his haggard face. "This can't."

Harney became Old Man Harney again, all business, figures and ledgers, disapproving. "If it's about the bank holdup, you can't tell me a thing. And neither can Mitch Yeager. He's dead."

"Mitch—so you know about him?"

"I do. Yeager's outlaw pals have been talking their heads off. Yeager's price to keep still was for you to let him rob my bank. You had to take his public insults. You pretended to go along, until you got inside the bank."

"I'm glad it's over," Ewing said, relieved, yet unhappily. "That finishes everything, I guess."

"You mean it's just the beginning," said Sam Harney, breaking into a rare enthusiasm. "Land sakes, Ewing, Wildhorse is proud of you! Mighty proud! I'm proud. You've put us on the map! A professor like you will draw students like a Fourth of July picnic draws flies. I'm erecting a new building for Prairie Hill College. Going to be some big changes in Wildhorse. You wait and see, Mister Full-time Professor!"

"Land sakes!" Tom's mother echoed fretfully, "businessmen have the strangest notions about what draws students. What do you expect my husband to teach—gunslinging?"

Tom saw his father wink at him. "Nope," he smiled. "I'm going to teach Using your Head. Fighting comes last. Right, Tom?"

Tom nodded vigorously. "Fighting comes last," he repeated, proud that his father was a man brave enough to teach that lesson.