

The Tiger's Eye: A Jungle Fairy Tale

By L. Frank Baum

This is a fairy tale of POCOFO, which is an island of the South Seas, where the people are black and have never heard of telephones or chocolate caramels.

One half the Island of POCOFO is a dense jungle, filled with wild beasts which devour one another when they cannot get black people to eat. The other half of the island is inhabited by warring tribes of natives who fight and rob each other when they are not hunting the wild beasts. So it is not very peaceful in POCOFO, and I have often wondered how the wee brown children and baby animals manage to grow up where they are surrounded by so many dangers.

But they do grow up, and become strong men and women and fierce beasts. They take their part in the wars and worries of their day.

Once on a time a baby tiger was born in the jungle, and it was found to be blind in one eye. The father and mother tiger loved their baby and were sorry it had but one eye to see with.

"The black people may easily kill our darling," said the mother, "for when they approach it on the blind side it cannot see them."

"The leopards and lions will do the same," added the father tiger, sadly. "We really need three or four eyes, to be able to watch all our enemies, and one eye is no protection for a baby tiger at all."

So they decided something must be done, and resolved to visit a Magic-Maker who lived near the edge of the jungle.

This Magic-Maker had the heart of a beast and the form of a man. He understood the language spoken by the animals and that spoken by the black men, and he served anyone who brought him payment for his magic. So the father and mother tigers took their baby to the straw hut in which the Magic-Maker lived, and told him they must have another eye for their darling one.

"A glass eye?" asked Nog.

"No; one that can see," was the reply.

"That is impossible," declared the Magic-Maker. I have much wisdom, and considerable skill in magic, but I cannot give your baby an eye that will see."

"Is there absolutely no way it can be done?" enquired the mother, in a grieved and disappointed voice.

"Oh, there is one way," said Nog, carelessly. "I could transform myself into an eye that could see; but in that case I would destroy my own form forever and become helpless except as an eye. Therefore, as I said, the thing is impossible."

"It may be from your point of view," growled the father tiger; "but to us it is more important that our baby has the eye than that you continue to live in your present form—an unlovely shape at the best. So we insist upon your transforming yourself into an eye."

Nonsense!" exclaimed Nog, beginning to be frightened. "You don't suppose I'll consent to destroy myself for your foolish whim, do you?"

"Not willingly," admitted the tiger. "But here is the alternative; either you transform yourself into an eye for our child, or I and my dear wife will tear you into shreds."

The Magic-Maker, hearing this dreadful threat, looked around for a way to escape. But the mother tiger was crouched on one side of him and the father tiger upon the other, while the baby tiger was glaring hungrily at Nog with its one eye, as if longing to eat him.

Nog was a wise man. He knew that tigers were merciless and had little respect for Magic-Makers—or anything else, for that matter. So he thought over this uncomfortable alternative and decided it would cause him extreme pain to be torn to shreds by sharp tiger claws and teeth, whereas it would not hurt at all to transform himself into an eye. Moreover, as an eye he would still be alive, with a faint—a very faint—hope that some day he might be saved, whereas to be torn into shreds would kill him in the operation.

“I will have revenge if you make me do this dreadful thing,” he threatened.

“We are determined to make you do it,” declared the father tiger. “What do we care for your revenge?”

Finding escape impossible Nog heaved a deep sigh and transformed himself into an eye. It was just like a tiger’s eye and it hopped into the empty eyesocket in the baby tiger’s face and rolled around with a fierce and wicked expression, for the Magic-Maker was angry because he had been trapped and transformed against his will.

All the way home the baby tiger leaped here and there about the jungle, growling ferociously and never at rest. It even snarled at its mother when she tried to quiet it. And the very next day the child deserted the safety of the lair where it was born and wandered through the jungle in search of prey.

So sharp and far-seeing was the new eye that nothing escaped it, and so fierce was the temper of the wearer that the baby tiger boldly attacked animals twice its own size and defeated them all. It could not devour all the slain, so the bodies of the young tiger’s victims littered all the jungle, and the animals complained bitterly of this awful destruction. One of the laws of the jungle is that no animal may kill except for food, yet here was the baby tiger killing for the wicked sport of murder. The animals straightway condemned the murderer and banded together to destroy the tiger which wore Nog the Magic-Maker for an eye.

But the baby tiger avoided the stronger beasts and conquered the weaker ones. Meantime it grew wonderfully until it became a full sized tiger and a greater terror to the jungle folk than ever. One day it savagely fought its own father, who barely escaped with his life.

By this time the animals had become so angry and annoyed that they declared war upon the lawless tiger. They formed their army in line of battle and hunted the outlaw through the jungle till he was forced to fly to that part of the island where the black people lived.

Here the tiger’s plan was to lie hidden by day and prowl over the country at night, killing all with whom he met. The people began to fear this enemy more than all the other animals of the jungle, yet few were brave enough to face the ferocious beast. These few he usually succeeded in killing before the fight was over.

Terror filled all the land and mothers kept their children in the huts so the cruel tiger could not find them.

Titticontoo was the little son of a native chieftain, and some time, if he lived to grow up, would rule a thousand black men himself. He was a pretty child, with sparkling brown eyes and soft hair, and he laughed all day at his play, being joyous of heart and quite happy.

Titticontoo did not know the meaning of clothes. He wore a cloth around his middle, woven of cocoanut fibre, but aside from that his little brown body was bare both night and day. He had no toys, so his only playthings were a small spear and a bow and arrows. With these he learned to skillfully shoot small birds, and so lithe were his muscles that he won every leaping and running contest from the other boys. He swam in the streams as nimbly as a fish. He said little and thought much. All the black people loved him because he was so smiling and cheerful, and Titticontoo loved his people in return and was generous and kind to all.

About the time the fierce tiger made its appearance in the land the boy's mother began to keep him shut up in the hut, fearing he might be killed. And at about the same time a horde of strange warriors from some unknown distant island landed on the coast of POCOFO and began to burn and slay and pillage wherever they went. So all the black men, headed by the chieftain who was Titticonto's father, marched away to fight these strangers, while the women stayed at home to protect the children from the dreadful tiger.

One afternoon, as Titticonto sat upon the floor of the hut playing with his little spear, a fierce growl was heard and suddenly there bounded into the room a great tiger. Its teeth were terrible to look at and its bared claws might well make the bravest shudder. One of its eyes—the left one—rolled with a glare so wicked and cruel that Titticonto's mother screamed and fainted with fear.

The boy, with the spear clutched in his little hand, sat still and looked at his enemy. The tiger snarled and crouched for a spring. Then its lean yellow body shot forward, the dreadful claws extended to clutch and rend its victim.

Titticonto had never been afraid in his life, and he was not afraid now. He knew the tiger was dangerous and realized his mother had fainted and could not help him. So he must do his best to help himself. He set one end of his spear against the ground and pointed the other—the sharp end—at the leaping tiger.

Next moment the beast was upon him. A blow from its sharp claw sent the boy flying against the wall of the hut and tore out his left eye, leaving two livid gashes on his cheek. But the spear pierced the heart of the tiger and it fell dead.

In spite of the burning pain in his eye the brave boy crept forward to examine his fallen enemy. And then a strange thing happened. The eye that had once been the Magic-Maker popped out of the tiger's head and popped into the head of Titticonto, where it took the place of the eye which had been torn out by the tiger's claw. For Nog was still alive, although he was now only an eye, and he realized there was no use in remaining in the head of a dead tiger. He could do many more wicked and vengeful deeds, he thought, if he was in the head of the boy.

Strangely enough, Titticonto's pain began to pass away as soon as the new eye popped into his head. He was glad at first to have the eye to see with, for he did not know it would try to influence him to evil deeds. When his mother recovered from her swoon she found the tiger dead and Titticonto trying to bandage the gashes in his cheek. The eye did not pain him at all now.

All the women in the village, hearing the glad news that the tiger was slain, came running to the hut to congratulate Titticonto upon his bravery; but the boy returned surly and ungracious answers and seemed to have lost his old merry ways and his kindly disposition.

Just then a band of the black men came running into the village to say their chieftain had been defeated and slain by the invaders and telling the women and children to fly to the jungle or they would all be captured and made slaves.

Hearing this Titticonto sprang up angrily and cried out:

"You are cowards—every man of you! How dare you be alive when your chieftain is dead? Follow me, and do not fear, for I will defeat these strangers and drive them from our island."

"You! What can you do—you who are a mere boy?" asked the men, wonderingly.

"I have slain the tiger," replied Titticonto, pointing proudly to the body of the beast.

They were amazed at this masterful feat, and when they looked upon the boy they noticed that his left eye flashed in a cruel and ferocious manner that was terrible to see. So they consented to return to the fight with the boy as their leader, and in spite of his mother's wails and protests Titticonto seized his spear, pulled it from the tiger's heart, and with the blood still dripping from the weapon rushed away to lead his men.

They met the enemy not far from the village, and so bravely and desperately did the boy fight that his black men were encouraged and fought better by his side than they had ever fought before. Presently the strangers who had invaded the island became afraid and started to flee, for they could not bear the awful gleam of the tiger's eye when it was turned upon them.

Titticontoo pursued his foe, killing many with his spear and more with his bow and arrows. And when the strangers reached their boats they hastily tumbled into them and rowed away home; nor did they ever dare to invade Pocofo again.

Titticontoo returned with his victorious warriors to the village, where there was great rejoicing. Everyone declared he was the greatest chieftain and the fiercest fighter they had ever known; although he was but a boy.

Yet Titticontoo was strangely silent and ill at ease. He retired from the feasting and merrymaking to his mother's hut, where a great struggle took place in his heart.

Being by nature kind and gentle the boy was alarmed to find himself so cruel and bloodthirsty as he had been in the recent fight. He had begun to hate even his own people, and when his mother entered the hut to speak with him he drove her out in a fit of unreasonable anger.

"I know I am growing wicked and doing unmanly and unjust things," said he to himself; "and I believe it is all because of the tiger's eye which is in my head. I am becoming as fierce as the tiger was, and unless I pluck out this dreadful eye I shall soon be unable to resist its wicked influence. Then my life will be ruined and my people and my friends come to hate me."

Titticontoo realized it would hurt dreadfully to pluck out the eye. He remembered the burning pain he had felt when his own eye was torn out. But after a brief struggle his gentle heart and true manly courage finally triumphed. He suddenly clutched the eye with his fingers, pulled it out and cast it upon the floor. Then he bore the pain courageously and bathed his wound in clear water and bound it up.

I am inclined to think this noble act proved what a great chieftain Titticontoo really was. His good heart saved him from a dreadful fate, for as soon as the tiger's eye was cast away he regained his finer nature and all his old gentleness.

The boy was ill and in pain for several days. Then he slowly recovered and his wound healed. "Titticontoo, the One-Eyed" he was always called after that; but every person on that island grew to love and respect him. He is now known as the greatest chieftain of his race.

Oh; I must tell you what became of the tiger's eye.

For many days, while Titticontoo was ill, the eye lay upon the floor of the hut, and no one dared to touch it. For it glared as fiercely now as ever, since the spirit of old Nog the Magic-Maker was still alive within it. And what do you suppose Nog thought all this time? He knew he had his revenge for being obliged to transform himself into an eye, yet perhaps he wondered anxiously what was to be his future fate.

After a time the boy came and looked at the eye, and its cruel expression made him shudder. He was glad the evil thing was lying there upon the floor instead of being in his own head; but it seemed alive, and he did not know what to do with it.

That night he cast it into the fire; but when the embers had burned away there lay the eye among the ashes, as bright and watchful as ever. Then Titticontoo tried to stamp upon it, but it slipped from underneath his heel and remained uninjured.

The boy knew it would never do to leave the dreadful eye in his hut, where it would glare upon him constantly and watch with its intent gaze every movement he made. So he tied the thing to an arrow and shot the arrow from his bow far into the air, in the direction of the jungle. For it was a tiger's eye, and the jungle was the home of tigers.

The arrow sailed far over the tangled trees and then descended. It struck a dappled deer, glancing past its cheek and putting out the poor creature's left eye. The thing which Titticontoo had tied to the arrow became loosened and rolled upon the ground; but as the deer stood trembling with terror and pain the tiger's eye suddenly popped into the place of the one which had been dislodged, and so the spirit of Nog the Magic-Maker found a new resting place.

It is said the deer is the most timid and harmless of animals, but this creature now seemed inspired by a new and evil nature. It dashed away through the jungle, fighting every beast it met and transfixing its victims upon its sharp horns with wicked glee. And all the while the tiger's eye glared viciously and thrilled the hearts of all who looked upon it with fear and dismay.

Finally the demon deer, panting and exhausted by the desperate war it had waged upon its fellow creatures, reached a pool of water and bent its head to drink.

Aha! That was just what old Nog the Magic-Maker had been looking for. Only one charm would restore him to his natural form: the tiger's eye must first be bathed in fire and then in water. Already Titticontoo had given it the test of fire, and now, as the deer bent over the pool, the eye which contained the spirit of Nog dropped out of the deer's head and fell into the water.

How wonderful these magic charms are! Here in the shallow pool stood the old Magic-Maker himself, while the startled deer screamed at sight of him and dashed into the forest.

The cry was heard by the father tiger, who stalked out of the thicket to find Nog scrambling from the water and grinning an evil grin of joy at regaining his natural form.

"Oh," said the father tiger, clicking his teeth together. "I believe I owe you a debt for destroying my child. Prepare to die, Magic-Maker!"

The yellow body made a spring, but Nog dodged it and sped away through the jungle, trying to reach the safety of his home. The father tiger followed in pursuit, and an interesting race took place. Fear made the old wizard's feet to fly, and the tiger's leaps were long and swift, for his heart was bursting with rage and sorrow.

Near the edge of the jungle a vine tripped Nog and he fell flat upon his face. An instant later the great body of the tiger fell upon the Magic-Maker—and so the story ends.

It is a fairy tale told me by a black man who once lived on that same island of POCOFO.