

When winter came, things went badly for the Millers. An illness broke out among the sheep that seemed to take epidemic proportions. It was like a wild fire – each sheep in turn blazed up and died...

Old Miller had called on the doctor as soon as the first sheep got ill, but all the doctor did was to declare the meat unfit to eat. He couldn't tell whether the illness was infectious or not. In spite of this old Miller took all the precautions he could think of. He swept and brushed the stable of the sheep like never before, changed all the straw and burned the old straw. Nevertheless every single one of his sheep got ill and died. He had to burn the body of a sheep almost daily. When the last sheep had died, he got ill himself. The doctor had to come again. He looked at poor Miller for a few minutes, gave him a powder to mix in water and swallow daily (that he had to pay straight away). He said: "It's just a bit of fever."

But as he left he mumbled: "Looks like he caught the illness of his sheep himself...!" The Millers had no money and no income anymore. Mother would have liked to talk about it with Father, but all he said was: "Leave me alone!"

He slept the whole day and didn't want to eat or talk. He just wanted to drink water. That's all he ever wanted, and about every three hours he had to be helped to the latrines. Whichever of these two things he wanted, he would call Mother impatiently, till she hurried to his bed. Later he started vomiting as well, and even though there was little more than water in his stomach, Mother had to work hard to keep his bed clean. She didn't think of mealtimes anymore, and Tom often felt hungry. He strolled through town looking for any kind of work just to earn a few dollars. Apart from occasional little jobs that he was given more out of pity than need he couldn't find anything to do. Nobody had much use for him. In the evening he went home and gave these measly earnings to his mother. Each time she looked at him with deep gratitude, and he saw that the furrows in her round face, that he knew so well, had grown deeper.

Then one evening, as Mother and Tom stood around Father's bed, Father said: "I feel better. I think I may be healing. Surely tomorrow I can get up again."

Tom felt tears coming to his eyes, which took him by surprise.

Mother smiled a little, for the first time in many days.

Father looked up at them. The wild anger had disappeared from his eyes. His voice was little more than a sigh. The times of hoarse shouting were over.

That night he didn't wake up his family. In the morning they found him dead in his bed. He lied there, peacefully embedded in his blankets, his hands on his chest and his eyes shut, ready for the coffin. The doctor was called to ascertain what was certain anyway. Then came the undertaker. He looked at the body and called out delightedly: "How peacefully he's lying there!"

Then he commented: "We don't need to change him. He can be buried in his night-shirt."

Tom had to help the undertaker to lift Father into the coffin. The undertaker held him under the arms, and Tom couldn't do anything but grab the legs of his dead father.

Then he had to help to carry the open coffin out of the house. Father crossed the threshold of his humble little house for the last time. Then the coffin was shoved into the hearse.

Now the way through town to the cemetery began. Tom was in a kind of dream-state from which he only awoke when the coffin, from which his father would never come out again, was nailed shut.

The coffin hit the bottom of the grave, which wasn't even all that deep, with a dull thud, the priest was there to say a few empty words, and then soil was shoveled on top

of it. Finally a wooden cross was hammered into the earth, and with that it was all over.

The hearse drove away empty, and Tom walked home with his mother. They didn't talk.

The whole evening they sat in front of the fire in silence. But when Tom went to bed, Mother came into his room for a moment, said "Good night" and gave him a kiss on the brow. Then she left his room and went to bed herself. After all she was still his mother.

The next morning Tom left the house early. He really had to find work now, else he didn't know what would happen to him and his mother. Nobody had anything for him to do today either, but people were strangely quiet towards him as well, almost as if they felt ashamed. Nobody had been at the funeral. The Millers weren't especially popular in town.

Tom went home in the early afternoon. His mother was sitting at the dining table. Tom could tell that she had been crying. In her hand she held a short letter. The grey envelope lay open on the table – it wasn't a letter of condolence from the looks of it...

"Just what we needed..." she said bitterly.

"What's the matter, Mother?" asked Tom.

"We've been evicted."

"Evicted from what? I don't understand."

Mother looked up at Tom. "This land on which we live doesn't belong to us. We've only been renting it. A few days ago the rent was due, and we didn't pay."

"But we couldn't pay!"

"We couldn't."

"Who owns the land?"

Mother hesitated. Finally she said very softly: "The Davidsons."

"The Davidsons!" Tom called out and overturned his chair as he jumped up. "I'll make them pay for this!"

He left the house and ran to the stable. He saddled Bess. Mother rushed after him.

"What are you going to do, Tom? Please don't do it, please!"

"I must!" said Tom resolutely.

"Stay here, Tom, I beg you! Please stay here!"

"I'm going!"

"Tom, stay here! Come back!"

But Tom was galloping down the street to the town. Bess was wearing her saddle and he was wearing his holster with the gun.

Old mother Miller saw him disappearing in a cloud of dust and knew that she might never see her son again.

Tom rode to the saloon. He knew that he would meet old Davidson there. At this time of the day he was always sitting there with a game of cards. Tom wanted to challenge and shoot him.

On the way he got more and more convinced that Davidson was a dirty son of a bitch. It was his fault that Tom's father had died. Father had died out of despair, it was quite clear – when his last sheep had died, he knew that he couldn't pay Davidson anymore and that Davidson would never give him a chance.

Tom also remembered the conversations about the conflicts between North and South. The town hadn't been directly implicated. The Davidsons sympathized with the North, and the Millers (how could it be otherwise in this case?) with the South. In secret Tom had felt more attracted to the North. The northerners were more modern

somehow. They were the harbingers of a new industrial world and they wanted to end slavery.

But right now Tom thought bitterly that it had finally become clear what the northerners really wanted – they only thought about money, they didn't care about poor people like the Millers who were just an obstacle in the path of progress when they couldn't pay up anymore.

Soon Tom saw a confrontation between two worlds, between humaneness and the cold power of industry, in his upcoming fight with old Davidson.

Tom rode up to the saloon. He dismounted and stroked Bess between the ears, where she liked it. He tied her to a post and walked into the saloon, head held high. He had a momentary thought for the whore up in room number four, undoubtedly waiting for her next customer, and shuddered, but today he hadn't come for her. He walked straight to the table where the poker game was taking place. The sheriff, old Davidson and two other men Tom didn't know were sitting there.

"Get up, Davidson!" said Tom.

Old Davidson looked up in surprise. He was going to laugh, but he saw the dangerous sparkle in Tom's eyes and held it back.

"Up I said!" Tom tried to hook Davidson's chair with his foot to pull it away from under him.

Slowly the sheriff got up. "Listen, little one..."

Tom's eyes were on Davidson, but he saw the sheriff too, in the periphery of his field of vision.

He spoke to the sheriff: "Don't move! Sit back down!"

But the sheriff slowly moved in front of Davidson, till he practically covered him.

Davidson discreetly set out to disappear through the back door.

Tom noticed this and got blindingly mad.

His right hand was resting right next to the grip of his revolver. The palm of his hand was already in the shape of the grip. Each finger had taken up its appointed position, ready to wrap itself around the grip with the index curling itself round the trigger. Just a tiny movement more, and it would all be done.

Tom's inner voice was talking again. Did other people have such inner voices too? No, it wasn't just talking, it was SCREAMING at him! But somehow Tom couldn't tell what it was saying. Was it urging him on or telling him to leave it? Who knows? Tom wasn't really in the right state of mind to pay attention to it.

In any case he wasn't a scared little boy anymore. His left hand grabbed the sheriff by the collar to push him aside.

The sheriff snarled: "That's enough!.." He reached for his revolver.

He shouldn't have done that, though. Tom's right hand - that had been resting by his hip so casually - suddenly leaped up, clasp the gun, and fired. Tom's other hand swiftly came on top of the gun and pushed back the hammer, all in one flow of a motion, readying the gun for the next shot.

The sheriff's eyes turned up in their sockets till only the whites were visible, and Tom was so close that he could see the meandering pathways of the tiny veins within the white surfaces as the man collapsed like a heavy bag of potatoes, crashing onto Davidson's empty chair which was right behind him. Davidson, who had been sitting there a moment before, had vanished.

Tom's revolver was pointing at one of the other men in the room. The gun was cocked – at the slightest twitch of his trigger finger, the gun would go off. Tom walked backwards slowly. His gun never stopped aiming at that one man. The bullet

was waiting in front of the hammer. Whoever moved, for whatever reason, that one man in front of Tom's gun would die...

Tom was approaching the swinging doors backwards. Now he felt them behind himself. One last look at the people in the saloon – nobody was moving. Tom leaped backwards and was outside!

Keeping an eye on the entrance of the saloon, he went over to Bess. He tied her loose and wanted to mount when it occurred to him that everybody would come charging out of the saloon as soon as they heard a horse galloping off. They would all aim at Tom's back and shoot him off the horse.

Tom led Bess to the middle of the street, stroking her soft muzzle, then he stood behind her and gave her a little clap on the behind.

“Go!” he told her.

She trotted off. Indeed, one of the men in the saloon had obviously been waiting for exactly that sound, because he appeared in the entrance of the saloon with a gun in his hand. He had no time to regret it, because Tom put a bullet between his eyes.

Bess just went on trotting. Gun shots didn't startle her – she was used to them. She went on in the direction of the cemetery. At the end of the row of houses she would turn and take the path homewards along the lake, because that was the usual walk she did with Tom.

Tom's idea was to go through the row of houses and to wait for her on the other side. For this he chose the house of the sheriff which stood right across the street from the saloon. He knew that nobody was in the sheriff's office, because the sheriff was lying dead in the saloon. He also knew that there was a back door.

Tom walked backwards to the sheriff's house, opened the door behind himself and entered the office. Then he silently closed the door.

Only now he dared to turn around. His heart was beating so hard he could hear it! He was feeling his way through the dusky half-dark when he heard a voice from the jail: “Who are you?”

“I just shot the sheriff” answered Tom. That seemed like the only sensible answer he could give. He wasn't sure that he was still Tom Miller, and besides, his life would be shaped by this deed from now on – from now on he was the man who had shot the sheriff. Perhaps this man had grown out of Tom Miller somehow, but it definitely wasn't Tom Miller anymore.

The man in the jail said: “Won't you let me out? The key's on the sheriff's desk.”

Tom hesitated for just a moment – maybe the prisoner wanted to redeem himself by being the one to catch the dangerous outlaw Tom Miller!

But Tom wanted to keep out of further trouble, so he left the prisoner where he was. He left the office of the sheriff through the back door.

And there was Bess coming towards him. He stroked her nose and mounted. He gently but decidedly steered her around, back in the direction where she had just come from.

“Today we don't go home” he told her, “today we go far, far away. Canter, Bess, canter!”

Bess was a bit reluctant, since this was so unusual, but Tom was very decided, so she gave in and cantered off in the direction she had come from, past the school and the cemetery, on and on, out of town and far, far away.

His horse Bess, the clothes he was wearing, five dollars he had on him and the gun with four more bullets, that was all Tom was taking with him. He had to flee and start a new life elsewhere. He had murdered the sheriff. Why oh why hadn't he just knocked him down instead of shooting him? The sheriff was an honest, elderly man,

and all he had wanted to do was probably to lock Tom up for the night. He hadn't meant any harm.

Of course he couldn't have known what had happened between Tom and Davidson... Tom's anger came straight back – the sheriff had no right to interfere like that! Tom had only been seeking justice!

The sheriff had tried to pull a gun.

That had been his big mistake. It had set in motion a series of well-practiced reflexes within Tom, and that's what had killed him. Tom had had no intention of killing the sheriff, but once his reflexes had been set in motion, it was too late! The sheriff had only himself to blame!

With these thoughts in his mind, Tom raced along the dusty road and was unable to make any kinds of plans for his future.

What was to become of him? He was an outlaw now, bound to be hunted down! Anyone was surely allowed to kill him!