

Throughout the night Tom rode west, trotting a good part of the way. A light trot that Bess could maintain for a long time.

Towards morning, when he could barely keep his eyes open, he gave up trotting. In the milky light of dawn he could see that they were still on the road, even though they could easily have lost it in the prairie at night.

Tom didn't remember how he had managed to keep to the road. He didn't remember how long he had been sitting on Bess either, or how long he had walked next to her in the dead of the night. Bess set down one hoof in front of the other like a sleep-walker and followed the sparse hints of the edge of the road of her own accord. Tom passively let himself be shaken from side to side on her back.

In his thoughts, or perhaps it was more of a dream than a thought, he saw the funeral procession once again, the open coffin in which his father was lying comfortably embedded, too dead to notice what was going to be done to him.

Tom had a sudden intuition of deep wisdom: your own funeral is the last one you have to attend!

Tom saw how the lid of the coffin was closed on him. It was Tom himself lying in the coffin now. The world became dark, he didn't see anything. Above himself he felt the lid of the coffin. He scratched at it. Dirt got under his fingernails. Under the dirt there was soft, yielding fur. Tom cuddled up to the fur and his mouth searched for the nipple.

Now he felt himself sliding away. The fur was escaping from him.

He grabbed the mane of his horse and awoke. He was practically hanging from Bess' neck and had almost fallen off!

He was wide-awake now – the sleepiness was shaken off.

Behind him the sun was rising. In front of him, in the pink morning light, a small town was awaiting him, a little nest in the endless prairie. Little wisps of mist were rising up from the ground, as if the earth itself were cooking coffee. With the thought of coffee Tom's spirits rose. He spurred Bess on a bit. Bess' spirits seemed to rise too – she started trotting eagerly towards the new town.

The sun was already standing higher when Tom and Bess got onto the main street of the small town. The first impression of the town, which had been so friendly a moment ago, was gone. The walls of the houses didn't glow in delicate pink hues anymore – from up close and in harsher light they looked grey and run-down.

The streets were still empty.

Tom rode towards the centre of the town, hoping to find the saloon and a guest-room where he could rest. The faces of the houses were still quite cheerful, if you didn't look from too close (the façades were imposing here too, and just like everywhere else the actual buildings behind those splendid façades were little more than sheds), and as he was riding past he saw a curtain move behind a window here and there.

Behind those windows there were people, the inhabitants of this town. Tom reasoned that there was surely a very rich and a very poor family in this town too. Surely the rich man was a cheerful fat guy whom everybody greeted while the poor one had to be an embittered, self-righteous man whom nobody liked, just like Tom's father had been. Surely there was an old sheriff here too who spent his days playing cards in the saloon.

Tom wondered what the townsfolk at home were saying about old Miller and his son Tom. Did they have a bad conscience for not having helped the Millers and thus having forced their son to become a murderer? But how could you possibly have helped the Millers? They were self-righteous and couldn't accept anything from other people, least of all help. Did the townsfolk back home talk about the Millers with

hatred, because their son had shot two men? What were they going to do with Tom's mother who was a lonely widow now? What did Tom's mother herself think of Tom? She would surely become the bitter old widow of the town and not tell anybody what she thought, pretending not to hear what was being whispered behind her back.

Tom got in a gloomy mood, but luckily he was torn out of his fruitless thoughts. A man standing at the corner of a house hailed him: "What are you doing up and about this early? Who are you?"

Tom answered: „My name is Tom Miller and I'm going west to find work.“

There wasn't much point in giving a false name, Tom thought. When the news got here that an outlaw named Miller was wanted, he would be suspected anyway.

The man took a closer look at Tom and obviously decided he didn't look dangerous.

He said: "Sorry that I'm a bit suspicious. Yesterday a group of men came to town.

They live in the hotel over there. Later a mail carrier brought this placard to the sheriff..."

The man unrolled a piece of paper. It was a drawing of a broadly grinning face. The caption said: "Wanted (dead or alive)". Underneath it said: "1'000 \$".

"This man is the leader of the group that rode to town yesterday. I'm sure you understand that I get a panicky feeling about having to nail this placard to the wall."

Tom looked at the face on the drawing, making an effort to memorize the rough, square features, and then he looked at the man who was holding up the drawing. He was young, chewing on a stalk of grass and wearing a small metallic star on his shirt. He was undoubtedly an assistant to the sheriff. He looked friendly.

Tom felt he ought to comment on the outlaw on the picture. But he didn't know what to say. The number under the picture, the one with its three zeroes, fascinated him a lot more than the picture itself.

An unpleasant thought came to him, namely that there might very soon be some money on his head too, but probably not this much.

"A thousand dollars!" he said dreamily.

The sheriff's deputy said: "They're yours if you shoot this man! But don't forget he's not alone!"

Tom answered: „Well, he's probably still sleeping... I'd like to take a nap too, before the day begins. But first I need to rub down my mare and give her some grain. But I don't have much money with me.“

"Come with me to the sheriff. There you can sleep in a prison cell for free. I'll feed your horse. You can pay when you've earned some money."

"I'd be grateful" said Tom and got off his horse.

He helped the young man nail the placard to the saloon-wall, holding it up while he used the grip of his gun as a hammer. When it was done, they went to the house of the sheriff together.

The sheriff was sitting at his table, sipping coffee. He was haggard and his eyes looked extinct. It was obvious that he had barely slept all night. Tom greeted him politely. The sheriff didn't stand up. He scrutinized Tom suspiciously. He looked just like any middle-aged man who had spent half his life occupying a responsible position, but without ever really getting into his own because nothing interesting had ever happened. A true peace-time soldier! He had got used to this quiet life and didn't want it to be any different anymore. His days of aspiring to glory were long over. The arrival of a group of outlaws in his town hadn't done his disposition any good.

"This young man just arrived. He's looking for work" said the sheriff's deputy.

"What's your name?" asked the sheriff.

“Tom Miller” said Tom. “I’d like to give my horse a rub-down, some grain, and then rest a bit. Your deputy offered...”

“No problem with me” mumbled the sheriff. “But leave your gun with me.”

“Eh, my gun?” To Tom this sounded as if he had been asked to undress naked.

“Come on! Leave him his gun” said the deputy to his boss.

The sheriff ignored him. He asked Tom: “Why are you riding at night?”

Tom answered straight out without a wink: “Because it’s cooler at night.”

The sheriff seemed to accept this. “You can keep your gun” he said and turned back to his mug of coffee.

The deputy helped Tom brush and feed Bess. Tom whispered some niceties into Bess’ ear, then he left her and went back into the house where he got a mug of steaming tea. Then he went to lie down on the board in the prison cell. He couldn’t really sleep, but time still somehow went by. In the early afternoon he got up and felt hungry. He strolled over to the saloon. In front of the saloon he paused, because he saw that four unshaved, rough-looking men were coming out of the hotel. He took out a cigarette and started lighting it fastidiously. He was wondering how to kill them. Should he talk to them first and let them pull their guns? The sun was in his back and would perhaps blind them a bit. He had a chance to shoot them all down before they could even aim at him. But the men weren’t coming any closer to Tom.

They were going to the saloon. Their leader, the one with the square head, saw his face on the placard that Tom and the sheriff’s deputy had nailed to the wall there, and he laughed so exaggeratedly that his head almost got split in two. The laughing sounded like the barking of a large, angry dog, deep and mean. The three others laughed too, thin, cowardly and cruel little laughs.

The leader suddenly stopped laughing and signaled to his companions to go away. Obviously he had an errand for them. He himself stepped into the saloon. The three accomplices walked past Tom without paying attention to him. He let them by without undertaking anything.

For Tom this was another of these moments that you can always prolong by another moment, but which still never becomes longer than a moment.

An angel flew by, or who knows what exactly happened. Tom’s feet started to move. He walked over to the saloon, tore the placard from the wall, rolled it up, and then he just pushed his body through the swing-doors with the placard still in his hand.

The man with the square face was standing at the bar, a glass of whisky in front of him. Not so many people were at the bar yet, but there were enough to make it seem natural when Tom put himself quite close to the outlaw. He started fussing with his cigarette again.

He put down the paper roll in front of the outlaw who slowly looked up, mildly surprised. “Have a light?” Tom asked.

The square face looked slightly puzzled. Who was this careless youth who just addressed him like this? Didn’t he know whom he was dealing with?

Tom’s look was vacant, somehow. His mouth slowly twisted into a kind of grin. But his look stayed vacant.

That youth didn’t just behave insanely – he looked it too!

Tom’s look was vacant all right, but he was aware of the other man’s hands. He wasn’t looking at them directly, but he was aware of them. He was paying attention to his entire visual field.

Interestingly he didn’t feel bashful or scared in front of the big man with the square face. He knew he was in mortal danger, but that also somehow made him feel wonderfully detached of the whole thing. There was no need to confer or negotiate

with this man. He wasn't even a man at all. He was just a mortal danger. A poisonous snake or something. There's a technique to kill it. If you master that technique, then you just do it. You kill the snake. That's all. No need to think. No need to feel bashful.

Tom's hand reached out to the face of the man. Without altering his vacant gaze, Tom carefully pulled the man's cigarette out of his mouth. It came with a small "Plop!", as though you were pulling the cork of a bottle. In the perfect silence between the two men you could hear it clearly.

He pushed the glowing tip of the man's cigarette against his own. He pulled hard on his cigarette, drawing the fire into it, then gently let out the smoke so that it enveloped the face of his adversary, which by now was so close that it seemed huge, filling the whole world.

It was one of these timeless moments again. Then Tom saw how the pupils in the eyes of his adversary suddenly contracted. He also registered movement at the bottom of his visual field. His opponent was obviously grabbing his revolver.

Tom lifted his leg and felt his knee make contact with the soft genitals of the man. The outlaw's gun fell to the wooden floor with a thud. The square face strained itself with the effort of a yell that just wouldn't come out.

At last a sound found its way out of the wind-pipe – loud and shrill, like the shriek of a wounded rabbit. It was a short scream, because the man had to catch his breath.

His whole body collapsed and fell to the ground. He writhed and twisted himself there, uttering short shrieks. Tom kicked away the revolver that was lying on the ground. He inhaled the smoke from his cigarette deeply and slowly let it out again.

"Dead or alive?" he asked generously. "You choose!"

„Alive, you fool!“ said a voice behind him.

Behind the bar there was a long mirror. Tom saw in it that three men were standing at the entrance. The three companions of the great outlaw who was at this very moment writhing on the floor. Three men and Tom still had four bullets in his gun. One to spare. Should be okay.

Tom took note of the casual posture of the three men. They weren't afraid. Fine – they wouldn't be prepared. One of them hadn't buttoned up his shirt, and his chest and tummy looked all knotty and hairy. The men didn't credit Tom with the slightest chance. Their arms hung loosely at their sides.

Tom concentrated. The muscles in his right arm tautened imperceptibly. His fingers put themselves in position. A moment went by.

Now!!

A twitch of Tom's arm, and his gun was in his hand while his body twirled on the heels of his boots. His gun hand slapped into the palm of his left hand where it was held fast and fired three times.

Tom lived through the next few tenths of seconds in slow motion.

The first man was hit without expecting it. The bullet went right into his bare chest. The second man already seemed to have wild eyes, and his gun hand was in the vicinity of the grip of his revolver. Tom's bullet shattered the lower jaw of his half-open mouth with a little shower of drool. The third man was already pulling his gun out of its holster when Tom's bullet opened a little key-hole in his brow, right at the bridge of his nose.

The third man's gun fired harmlessly into the ground, then all three of them toppled over each other and through the swinging doors where they cluttered up the entrance to the saloon.

The swinging doors opened and closed, squeaking plaintively...

Tom heard the great outlaw crawling on the floor behind him. He was probably looking for his gun that was still lying nearby somewhere.

He must have found it, because the noise stopped. Tom turned halfway round and shot him. Right into the eye. Some kind of bloody jelly spilled out.

Tom found his holster with the tip of his gun. He dropped the gun into it.

There was silence. Then the barman said:

“Bravo!”

All the other people in the saloon seemed to wake up from their spell, and they started agreeing loudly: “Bravo! Bravo!”

Tom ordered a whisky and poured it down his throat.

He was happy – at last he had found a way of life. He wasn’t mummy’s sunny-boy anymore. He had just become notorious Old Tom, hadn’t he?

His cigarette was still in his mouth, but it had gone out. Tom took a match, rubbed it against the bar and took pleasure in the flame that immediately flared up. He brought the flame to the tip of his cigarette and drew it in. The tip of the cigarette began to glow.

Such an ambiguous thing, this little glow. If you don’t attend to it with loving care, it just goes out. On the other hand, all it needs is to find enough inflammable objects, and it can turn into a roaring fire.

Tom nursed and cherished the little light, exhaling big clouds of smoke. All this smoke was good to see. It wrapped the world into a gentle haze and calmed his nerves. He sipped from his second whisky that the barman had thoughtfully poured him.

The roll of paper was still lying on the bar. It was the placard that Tom had torn from the wall and on which he had seen the square face for the first time. At that time the man had still been alive, and Tom had torn off the placard as a sign that he was taking charge of this case. Tom unrolled the piece of paper to check how much he had earned today. A thousand dollars. Surely there would be a tip for the three others as well.

Tom compared the head on the placard with the head of the corpse. The square features of the face were so characteristic that the similarity was striking.

Tom would keep this placard, as a souvenir. It definitely belonged to him now. If he ever got to own a house, he would hang it up above the mantle-piece.