

Tom woke up the next morning feeling relaxed and rested, in spite of all the thoughts that had coursed through his mind the evening before. He dressed up quickly, buckled the belt with the holster and slid his revolver into it.

Now he was ready. If he wanted to, he could leave the hotel-room now.

But something still disturbed him: it was his glittering feet. The sparkle of the diamonds on his boots didn't fit in with the general image he wanted to convey. He looked like a big, glistening angel of death, like the glorious avenger of God. Tom didn't want to be that. He wanted to be the lonely cowboy who doesn't want anything from anybody, who goes his own way and only kills you if you stop him from lighting his cigarette.

And yet it would be quite chic if sparkling diamonds suddenly and fleetingly appeared when the lonesome cowboy crosses his legs. People would see that there's more to this guy than meets the eye at first. They wouldn't know what else to expect and would thus treat Tom with respect.

On the other hand, if Tom showed his diamonds openly, everybody would see what there is to see. Everybody would guess that this man shows what he's got, which obviously also means that there isn't more to him than what he shows. In the end effect such a man gains LESS respect.

Whatever you show can never be as impressive as all the things people imagine when you leave them in doubt...

Tom started pulling his trousers out of the boots with the idea of covering the diamonds with the trouser legs. Then they would only show fleetingly when he crossed his legs.

But then he thought something else. Today he wasn't going to play the lonesome cowboy! Today he was going to seek out and kill a dangerous criminal! That doesn't fit in with the cowboy who goes his own way and only kills you if you disturb him.

Today Tom was going to CHALLENGE another man. To do that you have to play with open cards. Making use of hidden weapons is not fair game, and your victory will never be truly respected in that case. Everybody knows that you couldn't play the same trick a second time, so they don't need to give you proper credit for it. They know it doesn't concern them anymore, and so in the end effect you're just a coward.

If you want to be impressive when you challenge someone, you have to play with open cards. Winning while playing with open cards, that's impressive!

So you see, you have to be careful – depending on whether you're the challenger or the challenged one, to maximize the respect you get you have to play with intentionally open cards or seemingly unintentionally hidden cards. It all depends.

And since Tom was going to be the challenger today, he had to show everything he had openly, including his sparkling boots. Sparkling boots mean that you're rich, meaning that you know how to get money, meaning that you're competent, meaning that you're a big-shot.

So Tom stuffed his trouser-legs back into the boots, leaving the sparkling diamonds exposed for everyone to see.

Now Tom was ready to leave the hotel-room.

He went down to the reception-desk. He showed the door-man the placard with the drawing of the man he was looking for. The door-man averted his eyes.

“Where does this man live?”

The door-man looked pained: “Please, sir...”

Tom blew smoke in his face and said: “Just tell me where he lives.”

The door-man looked upwards with scared eyes. “Number four...” he whispered.

Tom rolled up the placard and went back up the stairs. He knocked on door Nr. 4 and stepped aside, so as not to be filled with holes, just in case. It wouldn't have been necessary. The door opened. A girl appeared. A girl who did her best to look younger than she was, and Tom couldn't help being reminded of the whore back home. Tom didn't say anything, but smoke kept pouring from his cigar. He looked down at the girl and noticed that she wasn't wearing terribly much.

The girl just said "Sorry, the master isn't in" and tried to shut the door.

But just before the door fell to it was suddenly held back. A boot was trapped in it.

The girl saw the glittering diamonds and froze with fright.

Now the door smashed open and the girl fell over. Tom was standing in the room, gun in hand.

It was too late: the outlaw was out of the window and running away on the roof. Tom heard the running steps on the shingles. Only the girl was in the room with him, sitting on the floor with a bleeding nose and sniffing.

Tom left the room and ran down the stairs and out into the street. The outlaw was jumping from roof to roof and was just landing on the street next to a horse. He mounted it in a hurry and galloped away.

The distance was too big for Tom's revolver.

Tom untied Bess and led her out into the street. He pulled out the long gun from under the saddle. He leaned the gun on the saddle and aimed very carefully.

The rider and his horse were far away and receding fast. But Tom aligned the sights with care. He wasn't going to miss. The dark silhouette of the rider and the horse were getting smaller and smaller, but they weren't moving to either side. They were moving in the exact same direction as Tom's gun was pointing. Tom's bullet would catch up with them.

Tom gently squeezed the trigger.

The boom was tremendous, then there was utter stillness. The gun let out a thin column of smoke, just like Tom's cigar.

The receding silhouette of the rider on his horse hadn't moved, and yet Tom knew that he hadn't missed.

Ah, but now some movement could be perceived. The shape of the silhouette seemed to be shifting vaguely. The rider was obviously slipping off his horse. Then a dust-cloud rose up from the ground next to the horse. The rider had fallen off.

The horse slowed down and stopped.

Nothing moved where the dust-cloud had risen. The rider must be dead.

Wow! Tom was proud! One single shot!

He sucked on his cigar and was happy. He put away the long gun and kissed Bess on the nose. Then he mounted her and trotted to the body. He was prepared to draw his revolver in case it was necessary.

The bullet had hit the man exactly between the shoulder-blades. Excellent!

Tom lifted the body and dumped it on the horse with which the man had tried to flee and which was just standing near-by, all lost. Holding its reins he mounted on Bess again and rode to the sheriff's place, leading the other horse by the reins.

As the sheriff handed over the thousand dollars to Tom, he said: "That's what I earn in three years, you know. I would be a rich man now if you had shared the job with me!"

Tom answered coldly: "This guy was just waiting for someone who would dare to face him. You had plenty of time to do it before I arrived!"

Tom had never ridden any horse but Bess. It was an old dream of his to ride on a real big one. And, as things stood, he owned a really big horse, a good-natured gelding that he used as a pack-horse. He had a plodding gait and an easy-going manner, although the previous owner had warned him that he could get excited unexpectedly and bolt, so it was better not to let him unattended without tying him up.

Tom found him a bit dull, by far not as intelligent and sensitive as Bess. But he had noticed that even though he seemed so heavy and slow at a walking pace, he was quite a fast trotter. Surely he was comfortable for riding longer distances.

Tom wanted to try riding him today, so he put Bess' saddle on him. In spite of all the saddle bags, it looked small on the back of that big horse. Tom pulled down the left stirrup as far as it went, and yet he still barely managed to put in his left foot. He grabbed a tuft of the gelding's mane and pulled himself up. He didn't manage to throw his right leg over the bum of the horse at the first try and had to start again. The second time he energetically swung himself right into the saddle. Sitting up there he noticed that his foot didn't even touch the stirrup anymore. God, this was a tall horse! Tom set the length of the stirrup, thinking to himself that he was really far off the ground. Then Tom tightened the saddle-belt. Not much tightening was needed. It had already been very tight when he put the saddle on in the first place, because Bess' belt barely fit around this big horse's chest.

Tom felt the large body of the horse between his legs. It gave him a strange sense of power, but also a bit of insecurity – it was a very different feeling from sitting on Bess' slim back!

Now he was ready to go. He pushed his heels into the belly of the horse and steered him onto the street. The gelding plodded along slowly.

Tom wanted to go faster. Tom wanted him to trot. He let his feet slip backwards along the body of the horse and pushed. The horse didn't react – he hadn't even felt anything. Tom was slithering back and forth on the saddle and rubbing with his heels all over the belly of the horse. At the same time he was urgently lisping: "Trot! Trot now!"

The horse didn't understand this. When he was ridden, he just did what he was forced to do. He wasn't used to having to decide things for himself, or to "guess" the intentions of his rider.

Tom should have worn spurs. Then a quick, decided kick of his heels would have done the trick – the gelding would have started trotting automatically.

But Tom had taken off the silver spurs from his expensive boots right after buying them. He didn't want to snub his Bess, not even in a life or death situation. He was convinced he didn't need spurs.

The gelding on which Tom was sitting now didn't understand his sloppy rider. Why was this human messing around so nervously? What the hell did he want?

Tom was gradually getting angry. He was jumping up and down in the saddle and hitting the bum of the horse with the flat of his hand.

The horse was getting irritated. He laid his ears back and suddenly reached back with his big head, as if he wanted to catch Tom's leg that was continuously working on his tummy. Tom tore the head back by the reins, which the horse didn't like either, having quite a tough mouth-piece.

Rider and horse were both getting nervous. The big gelding pranced about like an English thoroughbred, and Tom was hitting him with arms and legs like a drunkard warding off a swarm of angry bees.

Then the gelding rose up on his hind legs neighing loudly. Tom felt as though a volcano was erupting under him. He just barely managed to stay in the saddle by holding on desperately to the knob.

The gelding heavily fell back on his front legs and went off at a gallop. Tom tried to catch the rhythm of the gallop and to calm down the horse. But he didn't manage. The horse was changing from one gallop into the other continuously, zigzagging through the country-side. Tom lost his grip. He was bouncing around in the saddle. He pulled on the reins in despair, and the gelding didn't like that at all: he rose up on his hind legs once again, and this time Tom soared through the air.

He fell on the ground heavily and almost lost consciousness. He painfully started raising himself up again, hoping to catch the reins of the gelding before he ran away. He tried to talk to him soothingly, but no sound came. Besides the horse was gone.

Tom was staggering around undecidedly among the bushes, when he noticed a man on a horse behind himself. He turned around and recognized the small tramp from the saloon, the one with whom he had played poker. He was sitting on an old mule.

"I was just going to leave town when I saw you. Obviously you're having some trouble with your horse."

"Leave me alone!" said Tom and was surprised to hear his own voice.

"I can help you catch it again," said the tramp.

"How could you catch my expensive horse with your cheap mule?" said Tom, feeling stupid even as he said it.

"My mule's a good friend," the tramp assured him. "You don't express that in dollars, you know." Then, as an afterthought he added: "If your horse just means money to you, then what do you care? You've got tons more of it in your pocket!"

"That's not the problem," said Tom. "I've just been dishonoured and defeated by that damn horse. It threw me off!"

"I guess it doesn't like you much," said the tramp.

"I don't think it even ever wondered about that," said Tom, "It just doesn't understand me. I guess I'm not clear enough!"

"Well," said the tramp, "you were pretty clear the other day in the saloon."

"Yeah, well the other day it wasn't about working together or co-la-bo-rating, as they say. It was just about clearing the way, that's all."

"Clearing the way? What way? Are you going anywhere in particular?"

"I'm going west."

"What do you want there?"

"I want to find the ocean. I want to dive in there."

"Well, to get there you need a horse. But if you don't get along with people, you won't get along with horses either."

"Who said I don't get along with people?"

"Why, you just said something like that yourself. All people are good for is to clear the way for you."

Tom looked down at his feet. For the second time today he was defeated. Why had he let himself be dragged into this silly conversation?

"Okay, you're right," he said. "I don't get along with people. But I have another horse. She's a shy mare. She's nothing without me. And obviously I'm nothing without her. We're friends like you and your mule."

The tramp smiled and said: "Well, that's fine then. You go west together. She carries you, and you lead her."

He went on smiling quietly for himself and then added: "Well, I'll go and get your other horse for you, the one with whom you don't have such an intimate love-affair."

And with these words he galloped off light-footedly.

Tom sat down on a grass-tuft and felt sick.

Soon the tramp came back, leading the now good-natured gelding by the reins.

“Here’s your runaway. Get back up on him. I’ll hold him for you, so that he won’t bolt again.”

Tom painfully clambered into the saddle once again. All his bones hurt him. Back in the saddle he shivered a little with dread. The tramp handed him the reins.

“What’s your name?” asked Tom.

“Just call me Jim,” said the tramp, “and yours?”

“Tom,” said Tom.

They rode back to town in silence. The big gelding willingly followed the mule. He had always been a good-natured, obedient horse. It had never been his intention to annoy Tom. But there were certain things he couldn’t bear, and somewhere in his placid field-horse brain he felt quite entitled not to have to bear them. He was good-natured and fair, and his master had to have those same qualities. That’s all he asked for.