

You can't just shoot a whole gang of killers. Not in one go anyway. But you can join the gang and destroy it from within. And maybe learn a lot of things in the process. Tom and Jim reached the town in the evening. Tom went straight to the sheriff's office and asked where he could find some outlaws to shoot. The sheriff answered matter-of-factly that Nacho and three of his men were in the saloon. Nacho was worth ten thousand dollars.

Ten thousand!

Tom and Jim walked to the saloon, leading their horses by the reins.

"I'll get him!" said Tom.

"Hey," said Jim, "but he's worth ten thousand – he has to be a really great outlaw!"

"He won't be my first!" said Tom with conviction.

"But other times they were on their own," said Jim.

"No, they weren't," said Tom.

Jim didn't know what to say anymore. Under a thousand dollars an outlaw is still an ordinary man, even if he keeps a whole town under his spell. If your head is worth more than a thousand dollars, you've got to be a legendary figure. But ten thousand! That's only for historic outlaws, the kind you would learn about in history books a hundred years from now!

And Tom thought he was just going to wipe out such a historic figure! If he managed, he would make it into the history books himself! And if he failed he would just be one of the countless, anonymous victims of the famous ten-thousand-dollar outlaw...

As Tom came to the saloon, he made a plan. The saloon stood at the end of a row of houses and had two big windows on one side. Tom would try to talk to one of the outlaws in front of one of those windows, away from the others. As soon as he had shot the outlaw, he would flee through the window. If nobody recognized him after that, he could repeat the maneuver, and that's how he would kill one outlaw after the other, till he had shot the whole gang.

His idea was that Jim would stand at the entrance with the long gun and intervene if necessary.

Tom led Bess to the first of the big windows. Bess had to stand with her bum against the wall. Instead of tying her up, Tom rolled the reins around the saddle-knob. He stayed with her a little while and patted her spotted nose. She pushed her soft, warm snout against his hand.

When Tom left she knew that something was still going to happen, else he would have loosened the saddle. She knew he would be back in a little moment and that they would ride on. Probably he would bring her a carrot. That's what he usually did when he went into a shop. So Bess stayed there with her bum pointing to the window and waited for her carrot.

Tom pushed his way through the swinging doors of the saloon. Jim waited a little moment and then followed him. Jim didn't feel comfortable. He was afraid of what he might have to do. He told himself that he just felt awkward because he had come into the saloon carrying a long gun and was now standing at the entrance like an idiot, as if he didn't dare to go to sit at one of the tables. He put himself in a corner holding the gun behind himself. Luckily nobody noticed him in the smoky room. He could watch what Tom was doing and told himself that Tom was really very courageous!

Tom spotted the four outlaws straight away. Two of them were standing at the bar, and they had much more space for their elbows than any of the other drinkers, even though the saloon was pretty crowded at this time of day. Two more were sitting at a table next to one of the two side-windows, the one behind which Bess was waiting.

Those two sitting at the table looked like pirates. One of them, the “captain”, had a glass of whisky in front of himself, the other, his body-guard maybe, was drinking from a big jug of beer. Why did Tom think of pirates? Because of the extravagant clothes, of course! Pirates, spending most of their time amongst each other unless they happen to be attacking another ship, can allow themselves to dress as they like. The “captain” was surely Nacho in person. He had an unkempt beard like all his other men too, but he wore the nicest clothes, like a sumptuous uniform. As Tom got closer, he saw that they were worn and dirty. But they still had a theatrical effect. Nacho’s eyes were extraordinary – deep and dark and piercing. His mouth was twisted into the most absurd shape, the shape of a shy, expectant smile. Otherwise the authority radiating from him was like a sour stench, and his brow showed fierce determination.

The child-like twist of his mouth under his piercing, pitiless eyes, was scary. Something as moody as a small child, and yet with the power and authority of a grown man – what can be scarier than that?

Tom walked up to the table with a few quick strides and neatly spat right into the jug of beer.

Nacho’s body-guard stood up violently, upsetting the chair on which he had been sitting. His hands were at the buckle of his belt, but he hadn’t drawn his revolver. He was a big rock of a man, wearing a long, heavy coat that gave him the shape of a bell. He wore the belt with his revolver over the coat. His face was stone-hard and scarred. Tom was ready to shoot him. He estimated the angle his gun would have to travel to hit the second man, Nacho.

Nacho vaguely lifted up his head and ever so slightly shook it in his body-guard’s direction. The body-guard obediently stayed still.

Now Nacho turned to Tom. He laid down his cards and said: „Would you like to play?“

There was fake embarrassment in his voice, thinly, very thinly veiling the sinister threat contained in the question.

To his horror Tom saw that the body-guard was slowly pulling out knives and guns from his belt and putting them on the table.

Nacho comfortably leaned back in his chair and said with fake friendliness: “Well, my friend, let’s see how well you do in the continuation of this game. Take off your belt!”

Tom heard his inner voice saying: just draw your gun and shoot them! It’s dead-easy, only Nacho is armed!

But somehow he couldn’t.

He had the same indescribable feeling as that time long ago, when he was standing in underwear in front of the whore. It was the same kind of situation as then. He had somehow got entangled in something, and although he felt it wasn’t going the way he wanted, he still kept going forward instead of trying to disentangle himself.

All he would have had to do then was to tell the whore that she wasn’t quite how he had imagined her and leave. All he had to do now was draw the gun and shoot the two outlaws!

His hand went to the buckle of his belt.

“Draw the gun! Draw the gun, damn you!” his inner voice screamed.

And yet he didn’t.

He loosened the buckle and the belt with the revolver fell to the floor.

Exactly the same action as the one he had performed in the stuffy room of the whore, when he had taken off his underwear.

What for? What the hell for? He wasn't really going to beat up Nacho's body-guard, was he? He was just going to get beaten up himself!

The bell-shaped body-guard was standing in front of him, looking huge in his heavy coat. His face was rather expressionless, but his eyes shone with a kind of greed.

Tom felt tiny and fragile.

The big man came closer. A kind of smile was starting to twist his mouth.

Tom felt his knees getting soft. He looked desperately around himself. There was the big man coming closer and Nacho, calmly smoking a cigarette, watching.

Perhaps Tom could have dived to the floor, grabbed his gun and shot Nacho, who wasn't ready for that, and then the body-guard whose gun was on the table – he wouldn't get it into his hand fast enough either.

But Tom didn't try it. This was supposed to be a fist-fight, not a gun-fight. He strongly felt he couldn't just break the rules.

Now the big man was standing directly in front of Tom and was going to slam into him. But Tom quickly dodged him and hurled himself towards the window.

He threw himself into it with all his might, closing his eyes and pulling his arms against his body.

There was an explosion-like clink of glass, so that his ears almost burst, but he got through and landed on Bess' back.

He threw his arms around her neck and she galloped off in a fright. But soon she felt Tom's body adapting to the rhythm of hers, and she relaxed.

Tom wanted to leave the town, just like this, in the middle of the night, leaving behind his new friend Jim, his pack-horse with all the stuff it carried, and above all his gun that he had left in the saloon!

The thought of not even having his revolver with him made him slow down.

He wasn't just going to flee, like that previous time when he had left his home-town in a big hurry, was he? Not without his revolver!

Tom turned Bess around and rode back into town.

He met Jim in front of the hotel. Jim said: "Ah, here you are! You really gave me a fright! Why didn't you just shoot those guys? What the hell were you thinking when you dropped your gun?"

"I don't know," said Tom.

"Surely you weren't going to beat up The Boy!" said Jim.

"The Boy?" asked Tom.

"That's what they call him. Nacho's first lieutenant or whatever he is."

"He doesn't much look like a boy to me," said Tom.

"Yeah," said Jim, "so why didn't you just shoot him?"

"I couldn't," said Tom, "I couldn't just do it in cold blood."

"Come on, it would hardly have been cold blood!" said Jim.

"Yes it would," said Tom, "Boy was unarmed."

"The hell he was," said Jim.

"Maybe it has something to do with what we discussed on our ride here," said Tom.

"Yes, I see... Maybe..." said Jim. "Anyway, now you know in what sense some people are stronger than you!"

"Where are the outlaws now?" asked Tom.

"They left town," said Jim, "and they left behind your revolver. I got it for you."

"Thanks," said Tom, and they led the horses into the stable.

So Tom could sleep tonight – the outlaws were gone!

But Tom still didn't understand why they hadn't just tried to shoot him. Why this whole matter of dropping guns? He asked Jim what he thought about it.

Jim said: "Obviously they don't want to draw too much attention. That means they're planning something important, something concerning this town. If we stay here, we'll surely see more of them!"

After having brushed down their horses, Tom and Jim went to their rooms.

Tom didn't sleep very well. He had crazy dreams. He woke up early in the morning for no particular reason. He had been dreaming something, something uncomfortable. The atmosphere of the dream was still all around him. He tried to remember what it was, but he couldn't. Thinking about it just seemed to have erased it!

With a vague feeling of dissatisfaction at having left something unfinished, he stood up and drank a mouthful of water from the jug in his room.

It was dawn outside. Tom saw the milky light behind the curtains. He pulled them aside and looked out into the quiet street. He saw the saloon, a group of miscellaneous houses and the bank. The bank was a flat building made of stone, standing all alone on a kind of platform that was also made of stone. Two guards were walking around on the platform. Tom counted the number of seconds they needed to walk around the whole building. About thirty. Tom wondered if they really just walked round and round the whole night. Surely they would sit down to smoke a cigarette in the small hours, when it wasn't so likely anymore that their boss would turn up to see what they were doing!

Tom was just wondering how best to rob such a bank, when the door to his room suddenly opened!

Tom's hand shot down to his hip, where his revolver should have been, and he turned around. Jim came into the room.

He was all dressed and didn't even look sleepy. "Aren't you sleeping?" Tom asked, surprised.

"I was watching the street from my window," answered Jim. Without waiting for Tom's answer he continued: "Get dressed quickly and go out. Your good friend The Boy is out there, hiding in the shadow at the corner of the hotel. Talk to him. Behave naïvely. If necessary, shoot him. But I think it won't be necessary. He will behave himself. He's on a kind of mission for the gang and can't afford to get involved in a gun-fight with you! Try to tag along with him. Perhaps he'll take you to their hide-out!"

"But..." said Tom as Jim was already pushing him out of the room.

Tom quietly opened the hotel-door and slipped out into the dark street. He saw a horse standing in the shadows. Behind it there was a man. Yes, it was The Boy all right!

Tom cautiously sneaked up to him. Then he gathered up all the courage he could muster, stepped into the light and walked up to the outlaw openly. The man was lost in thought, it seemed. Actually he was counting.

"... twenty-one, twenty-two..." he mumbled. He was probably counting the steps of the patrol, just as Tom had done a little while ago!

Tom walked right up to him and said: "Good evening!"

The man just said "Thanks" and went on counting. It had almost sounded friendly.

When he had finished, he suddenly lowered his eyes and looked down at Tom.

"Who are you? What do you want?" His voice had turned nasty, especially compared to the almost sympathetic mumble of a moment ago.

Tom answered straight out: "I wanted to say sorry. For the beer I spat into."

"How did you know I'd be here?" asked The Boy.

“Well, you’re preparing the bank-robbery, aren’t you?” said Tom.

The man’s eyes became wild. Perhaps he was going to knock down Tom. But this time Tom was ready to shoot him. There wasn’t going to be any game of taking off the belts this time! This man was worth about a thousand, dead or alive.

Finally the colossus calmed down.

“You wana take part?” he asked matter-of-factly.

“Oh yes!” said Tom with conviction.

“Then get your horse and come along!” said the man and got on his own horse.

Tom went to fetch Bess in the stable, quickly saddled her and led her out. He gave her a little bit of sugar to wake her up and mounted her.

He followed The Boy till the end of the town. There The Boy turned around and said: “Go ahead!”

Tom knew perfectly well what that meant. As soon as they were far enough from the town he would be shot in the back.

Naïvely he said: “But I don’t know the way!”

The fat giant had to accept this argument and led the way in silence. He obviously didn’t consider Tom especially dangerous. He would be gotten rid of later. Just as long as he wasn’t left loose – he sure knew too much!

After a long ride the two men arrived at a ruined church standing all forlorn in the landscape. Not much could be seen of the remains of the settling it had once belonged to. Just some stone-walls here and there forming partitions which must once have been the foundations of houses. The Boy drew his revolver and shot at the bell in the church-tower. Tom was surprised that the bell had been left hanging when the church was abandoned... It was surreal, somehow. The shot echoed in the heavy midday-air and the bell clanged sadly.

The heavy door of the church opened up and a man - quite an ordinary one it seemed to Tom, not at all an extravagantly dressed pirate like the ones who had been in the saloon - waved to The Boy and to Tom to come closer. They got off their horses and led them right into the church!

As Tom’s eyes got used to the dim light inside, he saw that a corner of the church had been laid out with straw for the horses. In another corner Nacho and his men were dozing, or rather had been dozing, because now they were awake, leaning their heads on their elbows.

Tom and The Boy left their horses at the feeding trough and walked up to the men.

“I’m bringing a new recruit,” said The Boy.

“I see,” said Nacho and didn’t seem especially interested. “What about the patrol?”

“I counted till thirty,” said The Boy. “Should be possible.”

Nacho stood up and theatrically looked around at his men, like a spoilt child expecting to be patted on the head. As if by chance his glistening dark eyes reached Tom. And as if they were surprised to see him here, they stayed stuck on him.

“What does our new friend say?” he asked sweetly.

Tom was nervous. But he had his gun with him. Yes, it was there in its holster at his hip! Nacho was just a wild animal. There are ways to deal with those. There’s a technique. No need to be nervous!

So Tom forced himself to stare right back at Nacho. He imagined the little hole a bullet from his gun would open up in Nacho’s brow. A little hole that would be smeared shut with blood straight away. Then Nacho’s eyes turning upwards till you would see only the whites of them, and then Nacho falling over backwards...

Tom saw all this clearly in front of his inner eye, and he became dead-calm.

He got a cigar and a match from his breast-pocket. He took his time. He put the cigar in his mouth and lit the match by rubbing it against his thumb, holding it between his index and his middle finger. He held the flame against the tip of his cigar with great care. Holding the match dead-still, he sucked the flame into the cigar. When he had finally exhaled the first swaths of smoke, he answered: "Any bank can be robbed if you go about it methodically."

Nacho gave him a slow, timid smile like a small child who has just been praised, but none of his men would have wanted to be in Tom's place!

"That's just how it is!" he said in a self-pleased tone, but then his voice and expression changed abruptly.

"Tomorrow we rob the bank in Anthony," he said to all present, and it wasn't a proposition. It was an order.

"We hit them in the early morning hours. You all know your jobs. Furthermore, three of you will leave tonight and attack the small bank in Earlham, drawing away the posse from Anthony. Ned, Ted..." (he spat out the two names) "and..."

Nacho turned to Tom. His voice became sugar-sweet, and he smiled with swollen lips, as if he were dying for a kiss.

"...and you, my little friend!"

Tom lifted his eyes from his cigar and mumbled: "Name's Tom."

The fun was over. Nacho was serious again.

"The three of you are leaving tonight to attack the bank of Earlham. Shoot, kill, as much as you can!"