

Tom was on his way to Anthony. He was alone with Bess, just like on the day of his escape from home. It was evening like it had been then. The sky embellished itself with deep, passionate colours.

Two fat clouds were coloured a deep red by the sun, like two swollen lips. The sky behind was of the deepest blue. The two lone clouds drifted apart, and Tom had a feeling the lips were parting to receive him.

Tom breathed in deeply to prepare himself for the heavenly kiss.

Unfortunately Tom didn't really feel relaxed tonight – he was on a mission. He was riding to Anthony to meet an outlaw, not to get lost beyond the horizon. He wasn't free, and whoever isn't free can't expect to kiss the sky. This sudden realization made him melancholic.

How had it been on the day of his departure from home? Had he felt free then?

Surely not. At that time he had been fleeing into the unknown.

Freedom means personal choices. You cannot make choices in the unknown, because you don't know what there is to choose. You have to take things as they come.

Today Tom was much freer than he had been then, because today he had money, lots of it. Enough to live for many years.

Even before getting to know Jim, and before meeting Nacho, he had had money. But he hadn't had a mission yet.

He had been free, free to let his horse carry him into the setting sun for ever.

But he had lacked this kind of passionate revival that he was yearning for today.

Today it looked as though his mission was hindering him from keeping his appointment with the heavenly kiss. But yesterday he had lacked a signpost telling him where to go.

Every evening Tom could see the last rays of sunlight on the horizon, and yet he still never caught up with the sun. Of course the sun came back every morning, but Tom wouldn't live for ever, after all. One day the sun would rise without Tom being there to see Her anymore... unless he had somehow managed to catch up with Her by then. Maybe one needs a mission to be happy. A mission that somehow entails catching up with the sun.

Any task you undertake restricts your freedom. But what we're yearning for isn't just freedom as such. We want our freedom so that we may be free to reach out for the sun before She sinks for ever. Once we have found a mission taking us closer to the sun, we don't need freedom anymore – we just need the mission.

Tom had taken on a mission because he felt lost. Now he wondered if it was the right mission. If not, it would just be an obstacle to his true yearning. But if it was the right mission, then he wouldn't need any freedom anymore, except for the freedom to accomplish that mission.

And yet, what Tom really wanted was such an ordinary thing – to be someone. This included eventually raising a family. One day the sun would shine on his grave and he wouldn't see Her anymore, but lots of little Toms would go on seeing Her in his place. No morning would ever appear without some descendant of his seeing the sun – Tom would have dissolved in the heavenly kiss.

If that was the true goal, if that was what he needed his freedom for, if that was supposed to be his mission, then what on Earth was he chasing after an outlaw named Nacho for?

Tom was still watching the sky as it was losing its reddishness. Even if Tom hadn't had a mission today, supper still wouldn't have waited for him. Tom felt melancholic. Even without his crazy mission he would still have felt melancholic. It was that kind of melancholic evening, that's all there was to it.

At least, thanks to his mission, he wasn't lost in the void – he had this self-appointed task to fulfill before he could even think of doing anything else. This fact was almost a consolation, because, as long as you can feel yourself moving forwards, there is hope. You cannot know what's coming next. It's only once you've come to a standstill that hope gets lost.

So Tom looked upon his mission as an intermediate goal, and within this framework he moved forwards with fresh hope.

It was still dusk when Tom saw a group of about twenty riders on the horizon.

Of course, it was the reinforcement from Anthony. They were coming to Earlham because of the telegraphic message!

Tom hoped they wouldn't search him, because he carried a lot of money. They could mistaken him for one of the fleeing robbers!

Tom made Bess slow down. The riders approached at great speed.

As Bess saw the other horses come towards her at a gallop, she changed from trotting to walking and finally stopped.

The leader of the group of riders, a tall, gaunt man with a well-combed, silver-grey moustache, spurred his horse on till the last. It was a splendid white horse that had evidently been masterfully trained. Its every slightest move was dictated by its rider. Tom thought to himself that in actual fact this wasn't true obedience. The horse was being steered through its reflexes, like a machine. This wasn't a horse to be trusted with making decisions. Not like Bess.

True obedience also entails some insight. One has to understand what the master wants, and then one tries to reach this goal in the best possible way.

But this horse had no insight – it just obeyed its rider because he didn't leave it any time to have ideas of its own. Besides, it probably didn't even matter to this horse who the rider was, and if it ever lost him, it definitely wouldn't go looking for him. Without its rider this horse was just a horse, well-trained though it may be.

Bess was different. Tom could ride Bess even if he were blind, deaf and paralyzed, because Bess would take care of him. Bess was more than just a horse – she was a friend.

In any case that's definitely what Tom liked to think.

The rider of the white horse spurred the horse on for one more stride and then pulled it to a sudden stop right in front of Tom.

The gaunt man asked Tom: "Did you see or hear anything?"

"Like what?" asked Tom harmlessly.

"The bank in Earlham was robbed."

"I must have left town before that. I didn't know..." said Tom.

"Will you join us?" asked the man.

"No, I have an appointment in Anthony."

The gaunt man looked at Tom contemptfully with colourless eyes, spurred his horse and disappeared at a full gallop, just as he had come. His twenty followers started off behind him once again, though not as elegantly as he just had.

Tom turned his head and looked after them for a moment. They obviously hadn't seen through him. They were looking for Nacho and his gang, and Tom seemed too insignificant for wasting time on.

The leader hadn't even had time to halt progressively. He had stopped his horse in the midst of a canter and blasted off again at a full gallop without a single step of walk or trot. It had been masterfully done. A well-trained horse indeed!

Well, Tom hadn't joined the posse, and he was glad to have nothing to do with such people as those!

He said: "Okay Bess, let's go on." Bess obediently set herself in motion.

When Tom arrived in Anthony, it was night and the half-moon hung in the sky with a silvery glow. Tom got off Bess and walked next to her. He led her to the hotel that they had left early in the morning.

When he had brushed and fed Bess, he quickly went up to Jim's room and knocked.

"Who's there?"

"Tom."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"Come in."

Up till now Jim's voice had been dry, but when Tom had opened the door, Jim asked excitedly: "How was it? What did you do?"

"The gang took me on. The robbery takes place tonight."

"Then what are you doing here? I thought you would attack the gang from the inside. But now you're obviously not with them."

"I was sent to Earlham to attack the bank there as a diversion."

"YOU attacked the bank in Earlham?"

"I just sent a false telegram."

"But what are we to do now? The two of us alone cannot confront Nacho's whole gang!"

"Why couldn't we? We shoot from up here with the long guns. There are fourteen of them. If we are cold-blooded enough, each of us can shoot down seven of them before they can save themselves."

"How could we possibly do that?"

"They will stand on the moonlit street while we lurk up here in our dark rooms."

Jim was only half convinced, but he was ready to try.

Tom went into his own room to get ready. He shoved the bed to the window and with pillows and covers he built some kind of embankment reaching till the window-sill.

He lied down and boxed the embankment into shape till it felt comfortable enough.

Then he shouldered the long gun and looked out of the open window down into the street. The position was strategically just right for a sniper, and Tom felt proud of himself.

He stood up once more and went into the room next door to give some advice to Jim about setting himself up in a similar way.

When he came back he lied down with his gun, intending not to move until he saw Nacho's men.

Time seemed long. The big bank lied still on the other side of the street. The masonry shimmered whitely in the cold moon-light.

The watchful guards appeared at the corner, walked along the building till the other corner and disappeared again. Probably for the fortieth time, which means Tom had been waiting for more than twenty minutes already.

If Nacho didn't hurry, the posse that went to Earlham would be back! Every few seconds Tom peered along the empty street into the distance and then quickly fastened his eyes onto the bank again, which was just lying there like a ship on a windless sea.

But now Tom had seen something at the other end of the street.

He strained his eyes – there were four riders. The horses came along with measured steps. Broad figures were squatting on the horses, wearing their hats even at night.

They had already come a good deal closer when Tom could be sure at last that they were really four of Nacho's men. Tom had seen them in the old church. One of them

in particular Tom remembered well because he was a stout hunchback and his silhouette was unmistakable.

The four men parked their horses in front of the hotel, right under Tom's window. They sneaked towards the bank on foot.

The bank stood somewhat apart from the other buildings – an empty, moonlit expanse separated the last wooden house from the bank made of stones and bricks and mortar. The guards were just disappearing behind the far-off corner when two of Nacho's men ran over to the closer corner where the guards would reappear in about twenty seconds.

And so the four men waited, two of them at the corner where the guards would reappear and the other two in the shadow of the last house of the row of houses across the street from Tom.

Tom watched, feeling tense. In front of his eyes a series of events was unfolding in which he wasn't involved (yet). If Tom decided to be content with just watching without intervening, he would witness the whole thing, and nobody would ever know. Nobody would ever hold it against him that he hadn't intervened (but what about Jim? – he had completely forgotten about him!).

Watching from this first-class seat, Tom might even get a chance to analyze and grasp Nacho's genius! Tom felt strangely detached from what was going to happen down there. The scene of the bank-robbery fascinated him, but he felt just fine as a spectator, comfortably embedded in his cozy hotel room. He had quite forgotten that he was breathing the same air as the four bad men down there.

But then Tom was suddenly torn out of his meditative mood and drawn right into the harshness of the adventure in front of his window as a shot rang out all close to him. And he saw one of the men at the corner of the bank twitch with his whole body and then fall from the darkness into the moonlit street.

The other man from the corner of the bank stepped forward, raised his revolver out of his holster with lightening speed and fired a few shots in Tom's general direction, or rather in the direction from which the rifle shot had come from. The man must have seen the flash from Jim's rifle and was aiming at it (because it had of course been Jim who had fired the first shot). Since Jim didn't shoot back, Tom had to assume he had been hit.

Tom shouldered his gun and aimed at Jim's murderer who was standing at the corner of the bank. But he didn't shoot straight away. He didn't want to give himself away to the other men who were still lurking in the shadow of the last house from the row of wooden houses. He didn't want to make the same deadly mistake as Jim. He knew that the flash from his rifle would be enough for Nacho's men to target and hit him. Since nothing more was happening the men assumed that the danger from the hotel had been successfully dealt with. They had to concentrate on something else anyway, because the guards came running around the corner – they had heard the shots too! The two men who had been waiting in the shadow of the house jumped out into the moonlight while Tom pulled the trigger. As his first victim was staggering at the corner of the bank he turned his gun towards the two men who had just jumped out of the shadows – and who were turning towards him now - and shot once more and yet once more.

All three men fell dead.

Only the guards who had come around the corner of the bank were still standing, and since they hadn't understood what had happened, they shot in the direction of the hotel where Tom's shots had come from. But Tom had nothing to fear from them – their bullets went wide off the mark.

Tom was already wondering whether this was the end of the story when a mighty explosion taught him otherwise. For a split second the sky behind the bank lit up as in broad daylight.

The guards stood there like dummies that had taken root.

Tom felt as if he was glued to his bed, his eyes staring wide.

Several men seemed to be busying themselves at the back of the bank – one could hear them call out to each other. Then there was the sound of horses galloping away and then silence. The bank robbery had succeeded!

Tom was dismayed! It had never occurred to him that the bank could be robbed from BEHIND! Four of Nacho's men were dead, but the ten others had undoubtedly disappeared with the safe!

Tom pushed his bed back into its usual place and got ready for a nap before morning. The next day he would meet Nacho's gang as had been agreed. Till then he wanted to sleep a bit.

Only now did he think of Jim. He went over to Jim's room.

Jim was lying on his bed facing the window with the gun in front of him. Tom came closer. Jim wasn't moving. Tom bent down over him to see his face. Jim's eyes were staring at the corner of the bank where his victim had stood. Jim had been petrified in the midst of action.

Tom saw the dark hole on his forehead.

Tom remembered that one normally shuts the eyes of a deceased person and smoothes the lines in his face. Then he has to be laid out as though he were peacefully sleeping.

But Tom didn't feel like performing this ultimate duty on his friend's body. Not yet anyway. As Jim was lying there right now he just seemed frozen solid, not dead.

Tom would be able to accept Jim's death and come to terms with it once he had killed Nacho and his whole gang.

For the time being he didn't even feel the slightest premonition of sorrow yet. On the contrary, he almost felt relieved. Jim had been a good comrade, but Tom had to finish the job on his own. He needed to do this alone, alone with Bess.

Tom went back to his room, lied down in bed and even managed to sleep.

When Tom woke up the next morning, the sun was already shining with all its might through the yellowish curtains in front of the window from which Tom had lived through a whole adventure last night.

Tom stood up slowly, sat on the edge of the bed for a while to give his blood time to rise up to his head, then stood up for good and went over to the window.

He pulled the curtains to the side and looked down into the street. Here and there a rider was trotting by, a group of cowboys was strolling to the saloon and a hay wagon was leisurely being drawn along the street – it all seemed unhurried and normal. The bank was standing there on the other side of the street as always. What Tom had been part of at night belonged to another world that didn't fit into the usual way of life of this one. And yet it had all happened right here, and surely there were traces of the alien staging production to be found all over the place – the four dead bodies were surely lying on some boards on top of trestles in the shop of the undertaker somewhere, and the bank must have a great big hole at the back, and of course the money was gone!

But nobody seemed to care. None of this seemed to bother the inhabitants of Anthony all that much. They were events from another world, and although they were strangely bound to this one, they still didn't touch any of the inhabitants personally. Perhaps

they didn't keep their money in the bank anyway, or only the very rich ones did. So they weren't concerned.

Tom moved away from the window and got dressed. He slipped into his richly decorated boots and buckled his belt with the holster hanging from it. Then he felt ready for the new day.

He left his room and briskly walked to the stairs, but as he passed Jim's door he slowed down, sighed imperceptibly and sped up again. He ate a quick breakfast in the dining room, paid for his room for the next few days in advance and went on to the stable. He gave the stable-boy a big tip so that he would take good care of the gelding and of Jim's mule. Then he saddled Bess, led her out of the stable and mounted her. As always when he got ready to be on his way, he felt a tingle of excitement in his belly. A bit of fear was there too, of course. Bess set herself in motion, and Tom left the town in which he had lost his friend Jim.

After an hour-long ride through the heat, he reached the old lonesome church. As soon as he was within reach he pulled his gun and shot at the big bell. The aggressive bark of his revolver made a strange contrast to the sad clang of the old bell which reminded Tom of good old times in his home-town.

The big door at the front of the church opened up, and The Boy appeared in the entrance. Tom dismounted and led Bess into the church. As his eyes got used to the dimness, he tied Bess to the trough and loosened her saddle-belt. The Boy stood next to him, waiting. When he had finished with Bess, Tom followed The Boy who led him through the church to Nacho.

Nacho was sitting in a corner, his legs spread out in front of him, smoking a cigar. He held the cigar between his ring finger and his pinkie, and when he brought it to his lips, his hand almost covered his whole face.

The rest of the gang was nearby, crouching or sitting around their boss.

"Well," said Nacho, "where are the other two?"

"Dead."

Nacho took a long draw on his cigar, and when he finally pulled it away from his mouth, his fingers caressed his face as though they were reluctant to leave it.

"Dead?" he repeated without showing much surprise, and the smoke poured out of his mouth.

Then his eyes lifted themselves to stare straight at Tom. A warning glowered in them. It was the kind of look you wouldn't ever forget.

"Nobody followed you?" he asked.

"No," answered Tom with conviction.

"Okay, then let's go," said Nacho and stood up. All the others immediately followed suit.

A hay wagon was waiting outside behind the church. Two big horses were harnessed to it. A big safe was lying on it, looking incongruous there, a big box of iron. Two of Nacho's men jumped into the seat and set the vehicle in motion. Tom and the other eight men escorted the wagon on horseback.

The wagon left deep tracks behind. The tracks led all the way from Anthony to the ruined church. The twenty men of the posse that had ridden to Earlham were now back in Anthony looking at the hole in the bank. They saw the wooden ramp that Nacho's men had left behind. The ramp led from the hole in the wall over the platform to where the deep tracks began in the sand. The safe had been dragged over the ramp right onto the hay wagon.

They got fresh horses, and now all they needed to do was follow the tracks. They had to lead to Nacho and his gang and the stolen safe sooner or later.

Nacho's gang had no idea that they were already being followed. They were leisurely riding towards a small Mexican village where they intended to hole up for a while till the bank-robbery would be less fresh on everybody's mind. They weren't very fast with the hay wagon and its heavy load. But they didn't expect the posse to be back from Earlham yet, and they counted on the wind to eventually wipe out the tracks. Nacho had personally destroyed the telegraph wires before he and his gang had arrived in Anthony, so that nobody could warn Earlham about what was happening in Anthony. He couldn't guess that the posse would find out that there had been foul-play as soon as they arrived in Earlham where the bank had never even been robbed at all!

It all started with the two last members of the troop somehow feeling they weren't the last. When they looked back, they really seemed to see a cloud of dust in the distance. They told the men in front of them, and soon the rumour reached Nacho's ears: we're being followed!

First Nacho got angry with his men for spreading such a rumour. It occurred to Tom that he might be a bit superstitious, believing that such rumours attract bad luck – just a moment ago they had all been riding along happily and Nacho had been delighting himself with the thought of having robbed the bank in Anthony, while now they were all agitated and nervous, just because two idiots believed they had seen a damn dust cloud.

But the dust-cloud became more and more distinct, and Nacho's anger gradually directed itself against Tom.

Tom had claimed that nobody had followed him. But the pursuers must have picked up his trail in Earlsham, since there wasn't anybody left in Anthony who could compete with his gang, Nacho was sure of that.

But now wasn't the time to work on Tom – even if he was guilty all by himself, it was still a fact that they were ALL being followed now. Nacho urged them on, but even so, the pursuers kept coming closer. Unlike Nacho's gang they weren't slowed down by a heavy cart – they only had their guns with them!

The way they were going became rougher and rougher. It was no problem for the horses, but it was getting harder and harder to pull along the wagon.

Now the way winded through a group of rock-formations. This was an ideal place for an ambush. The driver of the cart wanted to park it behind a big outcropping of rocks, but Nacho suddenly stopped him: "Leave the wagon with its load out in the open!"

The man obeyed, not quite managing to hide his surprise. Nacho made him pull the wagon back part of the way and started piling up the remaining dynamite under it. He explained his idea: "Our pursuers will think we abandoned the loot. As soon as they assemble around it to check if the safe is still whole, I'll shoot on the dynamite. The explosion will kill some of them, and we'll shoot down the others from behind these rocks in the general mayhem that will follow the explosion."

Some dummy asked if the safe couldn't be damaged by the explosion. Nacho didn't take the time to make a show of child-like expressions disguising his sadism but just answered frankly for once: "The worst that can happen to the safe is that it will open up."

So Nacho and his men left behind their loot as bait and hid behind the rock-formations.

They saw how the silhouettes of riders gradually materialized out of the dust-cloud. After a while that was rather shorter than expected the pursuers were standing there in front of them as living beings of flesh and blood. But they were distrustful of the bait.

They just sat on their horses, at a safe distance, and waited to see if something would happen.

The minutes that passed now seemed very slow.

The boss of the pursuers, the man with the moustaches whom Tom had already met, finally reached a decision: he sent one of his men forward to the abandoned cart.

The man who had been sent was forced to go if he didn't want to be accused of cowardice. But he wondered, quite legitimately, if it could really be called cowardice to avoid a hidden enemy. If the enemy was hidden nearby, the man would just be shot without having had a chance to defend himself. And if the enemy wasn't around, nothing at all would happen, and his deed wouldn't even be considered heroic. It was a game in which you could lose (your life), but you couldn't win...

The man wasn't thinking of death too much. He was still very young. He just thought of the injustice of having been chosen for this invidious mission for no other reason than because he was the most inexperienced member of the posse.

The young man spurred his horse. It wouldn't go. It advanced a few hesitant steps and stood still again. The man dug his heels into the horse's belly. The horse unwillingly advanced some more. The man spurred it ruthlessly. He hid his own indecision behind the ruthlessness towards his horse. The poor animal could feel the indecision and fear of its rider very well, and that's why it was so unwilling. It also felt the spurs – two contradicting messages. It wondered once again, as it often did, about the inconsistency of human beings.

After several laborious seconds the rider and his horse arrived at the abandoned cart at last. The man got off his horse and clambered onto the wagon. There was no movement anywhere, but the man hardly dared to breathe.

He checked out the safe which seemed completely intact. He could hardly believe it – in this safe, directly beneath his hands, almost a million dollars were waiting!

The team of horses harnessed to the wagon were unsuspectingly chasing away flies with their tails. The man climbed into the seat and took the reins. Now all he needed to do was to steer the wagon away from these sinister rock-formations, and his task would be completed and he would be safe!

He lifted the reins and called out: "Yaaah!"

And that's when Nacho pulled the trigger. The bullet went into the midst of the pile of dynamite concealed under the wagon. The brunt of the explosion lifted the wagon up into the air. The horses bolted off, dragging the man by the reins. The remains of the wagon flew around like angry wasps and the safe fell back down with a dull thud, quite intact, into the sand.

The two horses of the team were still galloping away, dragging the young man behind them. The other horse with which the man had come was lying dead on the ground. Before the dust had time to settle, the shooting from the rock-formations started. The pursuers were escaping to all sides, but Nacho's men shot them off their horses. It was easy – their horses had all gone wild and so they couldn't shoot back. They fell like rotten apples.

The man with the grey moustaches had managed to calm his horse, dismounted and stood behind it. He tried to assemble his men around him. With some difficulty he finally managed to get ten men to position themselves behind their horses in front of the evil rock-formations.

Nacho's men now unscrupulously started shooting down the horses. Apart from one horse that bolted off and exposed the man behind it who promptly got shot, this wasn't so easy at all, because the horses could bear several shots before sinking to the

ground, and the men standing behind them were smart enough to make them turn their heads away from the rock-formations where the shots came from.

Furthermore the pursuers were now shooting back. One of Nacho's men lost his index and screamed his head off.

Several of the pursuers were now lying behind their dead horses, but they were tenaciously defending their positions. The battle wasn't evolving much anymore, and Nacho was afraid that one of the pursuers would escape to get reinforcements while the others would stay put and stop Nacho's gang from moving on.

Nacho didn't like this whole situation. He would much rather have finished off all the pursuers with the explosion rather than having to shoot them one by one. Why oh why were people so suspicious nowadays that they wouldn't even approach an obviously abandoned cart?

Nacho worked his way over to Tom who had hardly fired any bullets yet.

"Get yourself a horse and ride out towards the enemy!"

"What??" Tom called out startled, but Nacho didn't repeat his order. Three men came and lifted him up on a horse, and the horse was driven out from among the rock-formations. He heard a heartening voice calling out behind him: "Go! We're covering you!"

The horse galloped towards the pursuers in suicidal fear. Tom felt uncomfortable on this alien horse – the stirrups were far too long for him and he was losing the reins which weren't tied together in the middle. He was badly shaken. He held on to the neck of the horse. The poor horse must have felt that a bob-cat was clinging to its neck.

The desperate mood of the horse had gotten totally out of control and Tom lost all power over his mount.

He felt he was slipping out of the saddle.

He didn't hear the shots anymore. He only heard the thrumming of the hooves. He saw the ground swishing past under him, and he saw the hooves flying over sand and stones.

Now he saw an angular structure in the corner of his eye. It was coming closer – of course, it was the safe lying in the middle of the battle-field!

He felt how the body of the horse slipped away from him for good and he fell to the ground heavily. He rolled over on the ground once or twice and came to rest against some kind of wall with a thud. When he opened his eyes he saw that he was lying behind the big safe. He quickly pulled in his legs so that they would be protected too. Now he lifted up his head and risked a quick peak over the edge of the safe. His half-crazy horse had been caught by the pursuers. Tom saw the unprotected legs of the men standing behind it. Some other horses were still on their feet too, and the legs of the men standing behind them were just as unprotected. Tom's current position was actually very good for a sniper – since he was close to the ground while Nacho's men were higher up among the rocks, as well as being much further away, he really represented an additional threat to the pursuers!

Whenever the shooting from Nacho's side got the most intensive, Tom quickly lifted his head and his revolver over the edge of the safe and fired a few shots at the legs of the pursuers whose position was now getting untenable.

Tom didn't get properly aware of what he was actually doing here – helping the gang! All he was thinking of was how to get rid of those pursuers.

All of a sudden the following happened: the man with the grey moustaches called out "Chaaarge!" and jumped on his horse. The others – those who were still able to - followed his example. In a narrow formation they came galloping, heading towards

the path through the rock-formations. First it seemed they were going to overrun the safe and Tom. The first horse made a small sideways jump to avoid it. Tom quickly stood up and shot the rider. All he saw of him was a gaping mouth and two staring eyes.

The next two horses galloped past the safe on either side. Tom shot down the two riders, twisted his body like a snake and jumped up at the horses, catching a saddle-knob with each hand. He was now half hanging, half stuck between the bodies of the two galloping horses. Other horses were galloping all around them, but their riders were too busy shooting at the rock-formations to have time to aim at Tom (who didn't represent an immediate threat at this very moment anyway).

Stuck between the two horses, Tom was carried through the narrow passage between the rock-formations. Bullets were whizzing past, but he was well protected between the bodies of the two horses.

A few seconds later he was on the other side of the rock-formations. The shooting had quieted down. Exhausted, his cramped hands finally let go of the saddle-knobs. He fell on the coarse, sandy ground and the two horses galloped past him.

There was sand in his mouth and his face was covered with sores and wounds. He felt so sick that he was going to vomit. But Nacho's men were already running towards him.

"Bravo!" they cried out. „That was great!“

They lifted him onto his feet and held him up. They brought him to a horse and helped him mount. It wasn't Bess, but he was too weak to ask for Bess. For a while he fell into a kind of dreamy senselessness.

When he got back to his senses somewhat, he saw that all of Nacho's men were sitting on horses. Not a single one had died. The pursuers, however, were lying all over the place, and their horses were scattered in the landscape.

Nacho's men had rounded up the two big heavy horses that had pulled the wagon with the safe. They stood side by side and the safe was now secured across their backs. The arrangement didn't look very stable, but it was the best that could be done under the circumstances.

The troop got on its way. Nacho in person was leading the big horses carrying the safe.

Tom saw that Bess was being ridden by a small man with a black beard and dark, shifting, dishonest eyes. Bess was chewing on her mouth-piece. The man pulled on the reins with a jerk and simultaneously pushed his heels into her belly. Bess stopped chewing, lifted her head fearfully and sprang forwards. She contorted her eyes so that Tom could see the whites in them. She was nervous and fearful, but she didn't throw off her rider – she was under his control.

Tom was upset that his faithful Bess would just let herself be submitted so easily. But he himself was sitting on a stranger too. A stranger whose unprejudiced indifference towards its rider seemed almost friendly. This horse wasn't in the least bad-willed towards him, and all he needed to do was to let himself be carried along... There was no need for Tom to be irritated by Bess' lack of faithfulness – after all, he was just as unfaithful, sitting on someone else's horse.

In the evening Nacho and his gang arrived in the small Mexican village. On the way there Tom had admired the multicoloured, well-tended fields. This was the land of simple farmers. Stocky, brown people in white clothes and large-rimmed sun-hats. Nacho led his men through the middle of the village. He seemed to know where he was going. Squat, white buildings of stone with small holes as windows. All the

shutters were being closed loudly as they passed. The street was empty. The only movement to be seen anywhere were the thin plumes of smoke rising from some of the flat roofs. Under these white cubes that were lying around everywhere, forming a village, there was obviously some kind of humble life going on.

A cat on heat, meowing in that typical plaintive and demanding way, suddenly ran across the street in front of the horses – it was the first creature here in this village which obviously didn't mind being seen by Nacho and his men. The poor animal was plagued by its sexual instinct – else it wouldn't have let itself be seen either.

Nacho led his men to a “taberna”. At first Tom didn't realize that it was some kind of restaurant, because it was a square white house like all the others. But all the men dismounted from their horses and walked through the open door, and so Tom followed them.

Inside there was a long table with many chairs and a kind of bar. The men went to the bar first for a drink, then they sat at the table to eat. The host, a small fat man with scared eyes, didn't speak. He just served the food. When the men had eaten enough, they left the “taberna” in a rather boisterous mood.

Some of them had got rather drunk and were hiccupping loudly. They had lost the sinister dignity they otherwise had, and Tom lost the last of his doubts that he could finish them off, every single one of them.

Except maybe for Nacho. He had drunk a bit too much too, but the effect was different on him. His eyes protruded, the pupils dilated, and his mouth opened a slit. His tongue stuck out a bit in a not very conscious way and lecherously moistened his lips. Tom felt he saw some unfathomable depth of horror in those eyes. The state of intoxication showed more of this man than was visible otherwise, and it was just more of the same, more horror, more danger...

Alcohol reveals hidden feelings. In Nacho's men it was just coarse humour tainted with undifferentiated sexual lust that rose to the surface. But in Nacho himself it was a new kind of threat that started dangerously glistening in his swollen eyes behind half-shut lids.

As always, Nacho demanded absolute obedience. He sat on his horse, which meant for everybody that they had to mount too. Tom tried to get to Bess, but the other man who had been riding her was there first. Tom quickly had to mount the horse he had been riding earlier, because Nacho wouldn't tolerate any delays.

Nacho's gang left the village now and went off to squat in a farm-house nearby. As the men brought their horses into the stables, Nacho knocked at the door of the main part of the building.

The door opened and a scared farmer with a long gun in his arms appeared in the entrance. Nacho brushed the gun aside and entered the house. His men who had finished providing for their horses flowed into the house after him. They made themselves comfortable in the living area and totally ignored the farmer and his wife – the two of them had no chance against ten revolver-toting, tough men, and they knew it.

The Boy and a few others brought the safe into the room. The rest of the evening Nacho and his men spent working out how to break it open. They were all crowded around it, and as some of them were hammering and heaving, others were giving good advice. Tom was happy just to watch.

After several hours they gave up even though the safe didn't appear to have suffered much damage yet. In the end they would still need to dynamite it. The problem was that the explosion might destroy a good part of the bank-notes too.

A fire was kindled in the fire-place and the men threw on wood generously. Tom thought of the farmer who had felled the trees, cut up all that wood and carried it home.

The men laid down to sleep. Tom settled in a corner too. Under himself he felt his saddle with the side-bag full of dollars. His own saddle from Bess' back. He had gotten it back. He felt wonderfully at ease. He was snuggling up into his own intimacy. He experienced himself, his own bodily smell and touching the skin of his forearm with his lips in an almost passionate way. He wondered why that was so. Is one happier in danger than in familiar surroundings? Why is it that you get alienated from yourself in the all too familiar surroundings? Why do you need danger to feel and enjoy your own existence once again?

Tom just had to start philosophizing a bit.

Familiar surroundings also mean static surroundings, because things can only be familiar if we already know them, which means they were there before, hence static. When the static surroundings provide all we need, then we are happy. But when they don't, while at the same time keeping us imprisoned, then we end up losing our will to live. Since static surroundings by definition don't change, we have no hope of ever becoming happy.

But it's different when you live in uncertainty. Even if nothing especially positive has happened yet, you still always have hope, since uncertainty precisely means that nothing is certain which also means that everything is possible.

Uncertainty is very dynamic. You experience yourself with a whole new feeling. A feeling almost like being in love, because it's so full of youthful hope!

Maybe Tom would die, but maybe he would appear triumphantly in Anthony with Nacho's corpse and the undamaged safe! In this adventure everything was possible. With the reward-money Tom would buy himself a nice ranch, then find a wife and start raising a family. And he would provide for his children. He would give them all those things his own parents had failed to give him. He would have a peaceful life, but this time peace wouldn't mean despair, because it would be a happy peace!

The danger-zone in which Tom was now was a bridge to a new life, and that's why he paradoxically felt so hopeful in it.

Tom forgot his sweet feeling of self-love for a second, because he saw something truly astonishing.

Nacho was slumbering in front of the fire with half-closed eye-lids. In the lower corner of his mouth a cigarette was still dangling, but it had long gone out. The Boy, that huge, bell-shaped giant, in whose beer-mug Tom had once spat, went over to Nacho, bent down over him and looked at him. Something like a smile went over his hard, scarred face. The Boy pulled the cigarette out from between Nacho's limp lips and covered him with a coat.

Like a mother!

Even a morose being like The Boy was obviously capable of some kind of solicitousness when he wasn't aware of being watched. Or was it actually some kind of ...love?

Unbelievable!

Maybe Tom should study the social life of these outlaws rather than just shooting them all down and selling their hides...

The Boy lied down too and yawned. Tom turned over on his other side and fell asleep.

He slept peacefully for several hours until he suddenly felt some pressure on his chest. He fought against that pressure, tried to push it away so that he could sleep some more. He felt leather in the shape of a boot. Somebody was stepping on him! Tom's heart-rate accelerated and he woke up. But for a while he pretended still to be half asleep. With the left hand he stroked the boot that was crushing his chest, while the right hand went down to his hip. For an anxious split-second he feared his revolver wouldn't be there, but it was. It felt good to touch its wooden grip. Now the revolver was in his hand and pointing straight up. Above himself he saw the leg sticking out from the boot, and above the leg the wide coat was hanging down, and yet much higher up, sticking out of the collar of the coat was The Boy's head whose face looked as worn and expressionless as the face of a water-logged corpse. Tom's gun was aiming straight at that leaden face, but The Boy ignored it completely. He just whispered: "Nacho wants to talk to you. He's waiting for you in the court-yard."

The whispering tone somehow made The Boy seem trustworthy. Tom lowered his revolver, then he slowly stood up. He put the revolver back in the holster and walked to the door to the court-yard. He opened the old, creaky door and stepped out into the night. The sky was already lightening with the first hints of dawn, but the moon was still gleaming brightly, hanging there like a big, silent, silver gong.

Tom noticed some movement in the dark shadows of a low wall. His eyes turned towards it and he saw the barrel of a revolver waving at him!

Nacho was sitting on the ground, leaning against the wall. In his left hand he held a cigar, in his right the gun. The barrel was pointing at Tom's belly.

Now Tom felt more than saw some movement behind himself – The Boy's hand came round and pulled Tom's gun out of the holster.

Practically simultaneously The Boy shoved Tom further into the court-yard and closed the door behind himself. He threw Tom's revolver behind the wall against which Nacho was leaning. Tom stood before Nacho unarmed, and The Boy was standing next to him as a guard.

Tom felt damn stupid – this was the second time he faced these two men unarmed! Why did he let this happen again? Why hadn't he just shot them long ago? He knew he could do it, didn't he? And instead of that he kept standing in front of them without his gun! Why? It was like a bad dream!

Nacho brought his left hand up to his face, sucked air through the cigar, so that it sounded like a kiss, while caressing his nose and chin with his fingers. It was as if he was making love to his hand and to the cigar stuck between his fingers.

After a while his left hand drifted away from his face again, exposing the half-open mouth. Nacho's eyes longingly followed its movement as it floated away, as if it wasn't really part of his own body.

But then Nacho's eyes turned to Tom. They stared at him penetratingly and darkly. "Do you have anything to tell me?" he asked, but the tone of the voice showed it was no real question.

Tom answered back, trying to keep his voice under control: "I have nothing to tell you."

Nacho's eyes slipped away from Tom's fearfully expectant stare. They focused inwards. Dreamily Nacho waited for his left hand that was coming back towards his face with the cigar. He pressed his face into the hand, suckled on the cigar and snuggled against the fingers.

"That's what I feared," he whispered as if to himself. He nodded towards The Boy and looked up at Tom with deep pity in his eyes.

Tom got a mighty punch in his belly. As he bent over in pain, the callous edge of The Boy's huge hand came smashing into the nape of his neck. Tom felt his whole personality inside himself come crashing down and crumbling to dust.

He was lifted up by the collar, and Nacho asked once again, with a somewhat sweeter voice: "Don't you have anything to tell me?"

Tom didn't answer and was hit once again.

Then the question came again in the same tone of voice.

Tom just said: "No."

He was hit again and again, but he only said no, no, no, no, without even being asked.

He didn't feel the blows anymore, and he didn't hear Nacho's voice either.

Finally he was left lying on his back on the ground.

"He is obdurate," said Nacho, "we must try something else."

Now The Boy knelt down beside Tom. Tom saw the leaden face with the evil eyes right in front of him.

"You still don't have anything to tell us?" The Boy himself asked this time. The voice was deep, grainy and without melody.

Tom heard the voice and saw the dirty strands of hair in The Boy's face. But he didn't answer.

The Boy's hands came over Tom's face. Slowly The Boy pressed his thumbs onto Tom's eye-lids.

Tom saw blinding flames in front of himself and he had to scream. The pressure eased, and the flames transformed themselves into flickering, dark-red spots.

"I'll tell you everything... everything..." whimpered Tom. And then he started telling a messy story that he himself didn't remember later on. Anyway, what was there really to tell? That he had shot Ned and Ted? But that wasn't even true, he had only shot Ted. Then why was Ned killed? Who killed him? Ted. And why did Ted kill him? And then why did Tom kill Ted? Because Ted had killed Ned? Tom had wanted to protect Ned, maybe? It all didn't make sense. What about the posse? Did Tom warn the authorities in Anthony? No, of course not. But where did the pursuers suddenly come from? From Earlham where no robbery had ever taken place. But if no robbery had even taken place there, why had they gone to Earlham to start with? The whole thing made strictly no sense, but Tom was talking freely.

Nacho kept interrupting Tom, urged him with questions and slapped him. Tom felt the ash from Nacho's cigar under his nose. He was being held down by The Boy while Nacho was working on him. Nacho's voice was not falsely mild or sweet anymore, and his affected child-like ways had turned to eager sadism.

At some point Tom's eyes cleared, and he saw the wide-open eyes and quivering lips of a totally out-of-control Nacho right above himself.

Next to Nacho's face there was The Boy's head, coarsely carved out of rock, unmoved as always.

Tom was just babbling non-sense that he didn't even understand himself, and he hardly felt how he was being slapped. He knew that Nacho would give up soon. Tom would be shot, probably with more than one bullet, but it would all be over with the first.

Indeed, Nacho gave up. He stood up and made Tom, who was still babbling, shut up with a kick in the temple.

Tom lost consciousness.

Eventually he saw many stars above himself. They were blinking at him in a friendly way from a moist sky. He felt the dew-wet grass on his swollen cheeks. The grass-blades were ticklish but their touch was pleasant. Tom felt that all his surroundings

were distinctly kind and friendly. He was undoubtedly inclined to find everything quite friendly that happened not to be punching him...

It took a while till Tom became aware of his returned awareness and started wondering where he was and why. The beating he had taken came back to him straight away – Nacho's face floated in front of his inner eye and darkened the peacefully star-lit sky. Tom tried to chase away the evil image and to clear his thoughts. He tensed some of his muscles to discover the position his body was lying in. He managed to turn onto his tummy. The weight of his body shifted from his right arm, on which it had been lying, onto his tummy. The blood circulation in the arm started up again, and Tom felt an excruciating pain, as if of a thousand prickling ants. Tom wanted to stretch his arms and move them, but he couldn't, because they were tied together across his back.

Tom wanted to stand up, but without the help of his arms his weakened body wouldn't do it. Exhausted he fell asleep again in the new position he was in. He had confused dreams and woke up again a few hours later with a strange humming in his head. This time he managed to get to his knees. The humming in his head became stronger, and he felt sick. He vomited, and a sparse, nauseous liquid foamed at the edges of his mouth. The stomach-acid hurt on his sore lips. Tom licked his lips clean and spat out the awful juice.

Now he really felt a bit better. He deeply breathed in the night-air and tried to stand up once again, still without managing. At least he could think clearly again. Why had Nacho left Tom alive? There was just one sensible answer – there was still a role for him to play. The role of a dummy, undoubtedly. Perhaps the idea was that Tom should dehydrate and starve, and then his body would be left outside of Anthony, its pockets stuffed full of money. After finding his body, the sheriff would undoubtedly start looking for the rest of the gang nearby...

A hint of a smile came over Tom's face, a grim smile, but his skin hurt too much for the smile to take shape completely. Nacho had thought it out real nicely, but he had been mistaken about Tom. Tom was going to escape. He would wear out the rope against the edge of some rock somewhere and then he would get back his revolver. And then Nacho would be sorry for having let him live!

Tom couldn't stand up yet, but he was sure it was only a matter of time.

It still seemed odd to him that his escape would be made so easy. But now he saw, in the dim light of dawn, that he was locked up in a pasture surrounded by a fence of thick barbed wire. A man with both hands free would have had a hard time climbing over it. Tom had a sickly feeling when he imagined getting stuck in those barbs!

The sky became lighter by the minute. In the distance Tom saw a few horses waking up and plucking some grass in the pasture. They were Nacho's horses, and Bess was among them too.

Tom wondered why the morning was starting only now, even though he remembered clearly having been beaten up till dawn. The thought startled him that he must have lain unconscious for a whole day and a night, or perhaps even several of them.

Tom must have been in a really critical state. But now he was fully conscious again, and all his wounds would heal. And even if he had lost many millions of brain-cells, he still had enough of them left to finish off Nacho and his gang!

The grazing horses came in his direction by chance. Tom didn't move, so as not to startle them. When Bess was within hearing, he started talking to her. His voice was hoarse, but Bess recognized it. She went on grazing contentedly, but she sharpened her ears and steered somewhat towards Tom. After a little while she stood right in front of him.

She lifted her head from the grass and blew warm air from her wide nostrils into his face. Tom, still on his knees, bent forwards and gave her a kiss on her soft snout. Bess rubbed her brow against Tom's chest till he fell over. When that happened, she sniffed at him a bit surprised. Tom talked to her soothingly, and she lost her concern. She turned away and started plucking grass again nearby.

Tom wondered if there was a way for him to mount Bess. He was sure he would be saved if only he managed to get on her back. But Bess wasn't wearing any saddle and thus no stirrups either, and Tom couldn't use his hands and he couldn't even stand on his feet.

Horses aren't ruminants, but they still lie down sometimes, for relaxing or sleeping. Tom had found Bess lying down in the early morning more than once. He dearly hoped she would lie down now!

Bess seemed to want to eat endlessly, but she didn't go far from her master. As the day got lighter, the juicy grass became less interesting, though. Bess lifted her head a few times, sniffed the air and listened. Suddenly she trotted away, but she soon came back close to Tom. The fresh, new day, breaking anew every day as if it were always the first, fresh and innocent morning of this corrupt world, gave the horses high spirits. Bess lied down and rolled in the grass like a little dog. Her long, muscular legs thrashed about clumsily in the air.

Now Bess was lying on her side, listening. Her back was turned towards Tom. Tom waddled over to her on his knees and laid himself halfway over her. He put one leg across her tummy and let the other one lie on the ground next to her back. He laid his chest and head onto her neck, took a bushel of her mane into his mouth and bit on it hard. Bess didn't quite understand what this was supposed to mean, and in a slight fit of panic she tried to get up. Which she managed, pulling Tom up with her.

Tom was now sitting astride the horse, and even though he was badly bent forward, he felt he would be able to ride a short distance. He held on to Bess' mane with his teeth.

He had a strange feeling in his stomach, but he also felt a tingle of excitement in his testicles.

He still felt a bit dizzy, but he didn't want to postpone his plan too much. He pressed his heels gently into Bess' tummy. She walked off all naturally, without surprise. She hadn't quite understood how Tom had gotten onto her back, but obviously he was there now, so she obeyed him like usual.

Tom was riding across the pasture at a leisurely walk. He pushed his heels back into the ticklish part of her tummy. She started trotting. Tom was badly shaken on her bare back. He couldn't straighten himself up to catch the rhythm of her movements.

Grimly and hoarsely he whispered: "Gallop! Gallop!"

Bess laid back her ears, stretched her neck forward and... blasted off!

A fair distance ahead of them Tom could see the fence of the pasture. Behind the fence there was the open horizon. Tom hoped Bess understood that they were leaving now, and that he meant her to jump over the fence.

Tom had never ridden Bess round and round in a paddock. Surely she must know that their goal lay straight ahead, mustn't she?

But would she be able to clear that high fence with her lame rider? After all it was high enough to discourage such behaviour, since it was precisely meant to pen in the horses!

But it is common knowledge that a well-trained horse will jump much higher with its rider than it ever would left to its own devices (unless it was escaping from something in a panic).

Tom and his horse swept over the grass of the pasture like a gun-bullet. The landscape opened up in front of them, swished past on either side and closed itself again seamlessly behind them.

But the fence still dominated the whole breadth of the view in front of them. Instead of opening up, it just became threateningly bigger, till Tom saw individual spikes in the barbed wire.

Bess was aware of the fence too, and she measured her paces and then sped up to an all-out sprint.

Tom's legs clamped her tightly.

Now they were there – Bess pulled her hind legs far under her rump and gave a tremendous shove. At the same moment, with a superhuman effort, Tom pushed himself up from her back, holding on to her only with his knees and his teeth, and saw the fence flying by underneath.

They landed, Bess lifted up her head and Tom was flung back into a sitting position. His teeth had to let go of her mane. Bess gradually slowed from the all-out gallop to a canter. And when the ground became rocky, Tom managed to slow her down to a walk with his voice. They went on between some boulders till they were out of sight from the pasture, and Tom stopped her with his voice. He bent forward and caught her mane with his teeth once more, and then he slipped off her back. The bristly strands of hair hurt in his mouth, but when he was standing next to her he let go. At first he thought his legs wouldn't support him, but they did. He even managed to set down one foot in front of the other and to walk a few wobbly steps.

With a sigh he sank down next to a big rock and started with the long job of wearing off the rope.