

Tom felt life boiling and bubbling within himself – he felt more alive than ever! Slowly, almost with awe, he brought his hands - now that they were free - up to his eyes and moved each finger individually.

Tom stood up (yes, he could stand up!) and went over to Bess. He called Bess to a small rock from which he could climb on her back and mounted her.

Well now, where should he go? Nacho and his men had surely discovered his disappearance by now. They would be looking for him by now. But Tom didn't have a weapon yet. At night he would creep up to the wall of the court and get his revolver back, provided it was still lying where Nacho had thrown it so casually on the night of the beating. But there was a long while to go till then, since the day was all fresh – it was morning!

Tom should find something to eat. The strange feeling in his stomach (a feeling of emptiness and queasiness) wasn't exactly hunger, but Tom knew he had to eat in order to survive. So he rode towards the village. There he would eat and hide till the evening. He wanted to make use of today to get back into shape. In the evening he would go and get back his revolver, and the next day he would show himself, so that Nacho's men would come to hunt for him. He would shoot them all, and then the great moment would come when Nacho turned up in person. And then they would be face to face at last!

Tom arrived in the village. He was back among the squat houses once again. Those white cubes out of which a slender plume of smoke was rising into the morning air here and there. It was peaceful and quiet. No one was to be seen anywhere. What should he do? Knock at the nicest-looking door? Did he have any money at all to pay for some food? He put his hand in his pocket – yes, there were some coins there... Nacho obviously hadn't found it necessary to search his unconscious body and to put his hands into Tom's dirty pockets.

Of course the biggest part of Tom's money had stayed in the saddle-bags, and the saddle was lying in the hide-out of Nacho's gang. Tom's skin cringed at the thought of Nacho laying hands on his dollars. But having a few cents was decidedly better than nothing at all, and Tom by far hadn't lost all his possessions – he was conscious and he had his horse!

Nearby there was a door that looked like the entrance to a stable. The door was ajar. A smell of frying eggs and bacon wafted out from the door right into Tom's nostrils, and he felt he could really do with some food. He got off his horse and went over to the door and pushed it open. In front of himself he saw a full manger, and on the other side of the room, without being separated from the stable, there was a table, behind it a comfortable chair, and in the corner there was a fire-place over which the bacon and eggs were bathing in a frying pan in the cheerfully bubbling fat. Else the room was empty. Nobody was around anywhere. A hat stand was standing all forlorn at the door. A poncho was hanging on it, and a hat, so that the hat stand looked just like a person seen from behind.

Tom called Bess into the stable and led her to the manger. Then he approached the fire-place to take the frying pan off the fire. An inconspicuous movement in the corner of his eye made him turn around as if struck by lightning, and his right hand clapped against his right hip where the revolver should have been.

Sunk deep into the chair a small human form was sitting. Tom hadn't noticed it before. Tom could make out the features of an old man with a white beard.

"Good morning," said Tom.

The man answered something that Tom couldn't understand and pointed at the pan with a skinny hand. Tom took the pan off the fire and decidedly put it down next to a

wooden spoon on the table. The old man pointed at the pan and then at Tom. If Tom wasn't mistaken, he was being invited to eat.

The eggs were still much too hot to be eaten since the fat was still bubbling. Tom bent over the pan and blew on the eggs. The old man nodded, stood up slowly and tottered to the door. He went out and disappeared.

Tom shook his head because he couldn't understand all this. But then he pulled the chair to the table and started eating.

After a while he wondered what the behaviour of the old man might mean. Tom obviously belonged to the undoubtedly unpopular gang of outlaws. So why was he being shown such hospitality? Or was the old man going to return with three young men to beat him up once more? Tom discarded this distasteful possibility.

It was much more likely, he told himself, that the old man had seen his wounds and blue marks and thus knew that Tom had been rejected by the gang. For the inhabitants of this village, Tom thought to himself, he was the enemy of the enemy. Tom convinced himself so much of the support of the village people that he soon felt quite homely on the comfortable chair.

It was a swivel chair, worthy of a president. Or maybe it was, in actual fact, just a hair-dresser's or a dentist's chair. In any case it was comfortable, and Tom soon started slumbering in it.

A bit later the old man came back. He said something, but Tom didn't understand. Tom couldn't even make out whether he was speaking English or Spanish. The old man's mumbling didn't seem to form any clearly defined sounds. The old man gave Tom some bread and ham, and Tom slowly ate it, sinking back into his drowse.

The flames in the fire-place were licking at the wood and nibbling at it. The air-draft caused by the fire was roaring like a distant waterfall. Tom let it fill his mind.

Tom spent most of the day in the chair in front of the fire-place. He only stood up a couple of times to go out and urinate or refresh himself at the well. In those cases he always put on the poncho and the hat, so that Nacho's men wouldn't recognize him straight away if any of them were hanging around.

But nothing could be seen or heard of Nacho's band. Tom was suddenly afraid they might all have left. Maybe Nacho thought Tom had gone to denounce them. But Tom discarded this thought straight away – Nacho wouldn't run away from him. That wouldn't be his style. And if it had to come to a fight once more, he was better off here, in this village full of potential hostages, rather than out in the open.

In the evening the old man brought some olives and other fruit. Tom ate them all, even though he didn't like all of them so much. He didn't feel sleepy anymore. Soon he would set out to get his revolver back. And then he would kill off Nacho's gang, laboriously or swiftly, that still remained to be seen...

Tom waited another few hours which seemed very long with respect to the lazy day he had had. His heart was pounding hard as he wondered what the night might hold in store for him!

At about midnight Tom started off on foot. He went slowly, since he had plenty of time. He went the same way as the day when he had first arrived in the village. He wanted to make sure he wouldn't miss the farm where Nacho and his men had set up their headquarters. He found it easily enough, even in the dark. He saw the pasture in which he had lain unconscious, who knows for how long. The cool moonlight shimmered on the wet grass. In the distance Tom saw the dark shapes of the horses which had been Bess' colleagues for a time. Tom looked for the small court in which he had been beaten up so badly. He followed a well-trodden path leading away from the gate of the pasture, and was thinking how his lifeless body must have been

dragged along this very same path in the other direction not so long ago. The thought made him shudder.

At last he reached the wall near which his revolver must be lying. It was a low wall, and Tom saw that it was lit up on its inner side by a flickering yellowish glow. A fire was obviously burning in the court.

Tom slowly raised his eyes above the wall, and quickly lowered his head again – two men were sitting next to the fire in the court and were obviously keeping watch. Tom had to be very quiet!

But how would he ever find the revolver without betraying himself with rustling sounds? Which alternative would rouse less suspicions – continuous, light rustling, or just a quick, careless rustle every once in a while? Tom decided he just mustn't rustle at all and to check out the ground really, really slowly. He could take all night if necessary. After all his life was in the balance.

Tom lied down flat on the ground and started with the job. He couldn't avoid making a crackling sound here and there when his hand moved or broke a twig.

One of the men in the court stood up and started walking up and down. Suddenly he stopped and looked directly in Tom's direction. His right hand went down to his hip. Tom didn't move. His heart was beating so hard that he thought the whole world should hear it.

The right hand of the man came up again, and the face of the man was suddenly lit up by the flare of a match. Then the light went out and the man blew a long cloud of smoke towards the moon and turned away again.

Hissing, but not too loudly, the breath he had held back came out between Tom's clenched teeth.

Tom went on with his job. The man in the court had finally sat down again.

Tom's heart skipped a beat when his little finger grazed something ice-cold. Tom groped for it, trying to keep his excitement under control. It was the revolver!

The matter-of-fact coldness of the metal cooled down Tom's overheated feelings. His fear left him. Tom slowly raised himself and looked over the wall.

The two men were sitting on either side of the fire which was flickering happily. Tom wondered whether he should shoot them. But they were too far apart.

While Tom would shoot one of them, the other one might have time to react. Tom didn't want to make the same mistake as his friend Jim had made.

So Tom slipped away soundlessly. He would save up his grand revenge for tomorrow.

Early the next morning Tom woke up on the comfortable chair and didn't feel sleepy anymore at all. He stood up and put on the poncho and the hat and left the room to refresh himself outside at the well. The hat and the poncho weren't really necessary as a disguise anymore, since Tom had his gun in his holster now. But the day before he had always put them on before leaving the stable, and now he felt it was like some kind of luck-bringing ceremony.

Anyway, he wanted to eat breakfast before hunting down Nacho's men.

As he came back into the room, he hanged up the poncho carefully and set the hat on top, exactly according to the ceremony. Then he settled on the chair once more and waited for breakfast.

Inwardly he smiled about his own superstition, but he also had a strong feeling that he needed to be at peace with himself today, and this feeling wasn't to be laughed at.

Tom hadn't waited long when the door of the stable suddenly burst open and a man hurled himself into the room. He had a revolver in hand and started pumping bullets into the hat-stand.

Tom leaned forward in his chair, his mouth gaping. He couldn't believe it! But then he swiveled round in the chair till he faced the man and gave him a single bullet into his chest.

The man's eyes stared in surprise as he collapsed and died.

Tom stood up and went over to the hat-stand. It stood there unmoved and was not at all deader than before. Tom felt the poncho that he had started to like. He found one of the holes, but else the material was as nicely woolly as before – not much harm done.

Tom went to the door, and as he walked past the body he savoured for a moment his contempt towards this man whom he had tricked without even intending to!

Then he was outside and had to pay attention.

Slowly he walked down the street. He looked neither to the right nor to the left. He stared straight ahead, keeping his eyes still, while paying attention to his peripheral vision. When you do that, your stare looks empty and emotionless – it's the dangerous stare of the gun-slinger.

Tom suspected that Nacho's men would try to shoot him from a window or a rooftop. He was right – suddenly he felt more than saw a movement on his right.

The suspicious spot was about to move out of his field of vision. Tom took a step back while turning right and drawing his gun.

Under the dark opening of a window there was a long, narrow shadow. Some kind of shaft or handle was sticking out of the window, and its shadow had moved a tiny bit over the white-washed wall. That's what had drawn Tom's attention. That thing sticking out must be the barrel of a gun!

Tom didn't stop to think about it – he fired a bullet into the dark hole right above the suspicious, moving shadow.

The man hidden in the shade from the white-washed walls had just straightened himself up to shoot Tom.

He fell forward and his body spilled out of the dark hole that he had wanted to use as an embrasure.

Tom left the body hanging there over the window-sill and walked onwards.

No danger seemed to be lurking anywhere, but a few hundred steps ahead he saw three men step into the middle of the street and block it. They stood there stoutly with their arms crossed. Tom walked onwards unflustered, directly towards them. He stared ahead with his vacant stare as before.

The distance between Tom and the three men became smaller and smaller. When Tom started feeling close enough for shooting, he put half a cigar in his mouth and lit it with a miraculously intact match he had found in his chest pocket.

The three men just stood there. Tom was attentive to the movement of his hips as he walked. They moved back and forth and to either side ever so slightly. His arms swung back and forth casually. Back and forth, back and forth. Another five steps, Tom decided, and he would be able to shoot right on target.

He started counting from five downwards. His hips moved from side to side and his arms swung back and forth.

“Go!” said Tom without moving his lips.

His right hip moved forward and to the right just as his right arm was swinging past. It picked up the revolver in passing.

He hit the first man while his arms were still crossed over his chest. He fell over like a doll.

The second man's arms were already hovering tautly above his revolvers in the symmetrical holsters. The man seemed to want to leap forward, but he missed and landed head-first in the dirt.

The third man tore his arms right above his head as he was hit. The revolver which was already in his hand went flying. He too ended up in the dirt quite unceremoniously.

Tom lifted the barrel of his revolver to his nose and took a quick sniff of the pungent smell of death.

But the intoxicating feeling of triumph subsided rather quickly and Tom felt low. He dragged his feet through the dust towards his victims. He sucked in the smoke from his cigar and bent over one of the bodies so that he could steal some ammunition. He reloaded his gun and stepped over the bodies.

Now he was walking down the street again. The revolver was in its holster again, fully loaded, and he had put on his gun-slinger stare again. He was inescapably getting closer to Nacho's headquarters. Soon the main building was right in front of him. He saw the main entrance through which Nacho had penetrated into the farmhouse so shamelessly a few days ago. Tom unerringly steered towards it. He was already crossing the plastered surface in front of the door.

Now the door-handle was within reach of his hand.

It was one of these timeless moments again. Tom half expected his inner voice to say something. It didn't, but he felt its approval.

These thoughts just crossed his mind in a blink. Without a pause he tore the door open and penetrated into the house.

Revolver in hand he burst into a lovely family-scene - Nacho and four of his men were sitting on the ground, peacefully assembled around the safe. Obviously they had been working on it, trying to find a way to pry it open. Tom pointed his revolver at Nacho's brow, and Nacho's face turned white. Even his dark-red lips lost their sheen. Tom hadn't imagined he would ever get to see such a thing.

Nacho knew he would be the first to die if anybody moved. He just wondered how it was possible that Tom suddenly appeared here. He had sent out five of his men to get him! And yet Tom had got through!

Nacho swallowed noisily and thus interrupted the deadly silence. He lifted his eyes to Tom and started talking, his voice barely shaking at all: "What are you going to do, Tom? You stand no chance against the five of us."

Tom answered casually, chewing on his cigar: "If your men care about you enough, then I have a chance."

Nacho asked: "How?"

His voice was steady, but the affected child-likeness was absolutely missing. Tom had already won over that.

Tom answered: "If your men lay down their weapons, I'll drop mine in its holster."

Nacho was about to agree, but The Boy, who normally hardly ever spoke, interrupted him with his deep, colourless voice: "I'll only lay down my gun if Tom unloads his own down to one bullet."

Tom had to admit this was a perfectly sensible suggestion. Once he had shot Nacho with his one bullet, he would be on equal footing with the four remaining members of the gang.

Nacho lowered his head and nodded slowly. It was sensible all right. He just wished nobody had thought of it. It meant that The Boy, his most faithful man, considered it possible that he could lose...

Tom let one bullet after the other glide out of his revolver and drop on the floor, so that all the men could keep count. In the meantime the four men unbuckled their belts and laid them down in a corner of the room.

Tom had let out five bullets from his revolver and so everyone knew there could only be one more left. The one that would kill Nacho unless Nacho killed Tom first.

The Boy was the last to unbuckle his belt, and as he did so, Tom slipped his gun into its holster and let it go. Nacho stood up and his men formed a half-circle around him. Now Tom was standing with a single bullet in his revolver in front of five men of whom only one was armed.

Tom and Nacho were facing each other. They were going to fight it out now. The big moment of which Tom had dreamed so often was here at last!

Nacho held his head to one side. His eyes were rather wide open and very much alive. For the first time Tom noticed that Nacho had quite long eye-lashes. Nacho blinked a few times. His eyes were a bit moist. His big nostrils opened slightly, and quivered, like the nostrils of a horse catching a scent. Tom had never noticed Nacho's big nose before. Nacho's lips were resting silently one against the other. They were old, leathery lips with a few cracks. Wind and weather had worked on them. Tom had never paid attention to these things before.

Nacho laid his right hand across his belly, as if he had a stomach-ache. It was resting only inches from the flat shoulder-holster from which the wooden grip of the big gun was sticking out.

That wooden grip was the only thing Nacho had ever held in his hand lovingly. Nacho stretched out his index and gently caressed the rough, worn wood. But his hand wasn't ready for its leap yet. Perhaps its last.

Tom just stood there like someone filing a just claim.

Nacho stood in front of Tom and looked a bit like a sick child.

How was it possible, Nacho wondered? How was it possible that he should be standing in front of this ordinary-looking kid like this?

He retracted his index, and his hand didn't move anymore, not yet.

His lips separated, and for a while a thin, transparent veil of saliva hung between them. When the tension became too big, the veil popped soundlessly, and then Nacho's voice rang out, melodiously like in his best times, but this time the sentences weren't cut off in the middle of their melody. Each one faded away gently. That seems to be the difference between real and ironic melancholy.

"Will you tell me now who you are and why you seeked me out?"

The same question again as in that dreadful night, just asked in a different tone. Tom thought up all kinds of stupid excuses – he hadn't seeked out Nacho at all. It was him who had seeked out Tom. But what had happened to Ned and Ted? Why did the posse come back from Earlham so quickly? Who had been shooting on Nacho's men from the hotel? And above all – WHY?

Nacho deserved a proper answer now.

"All I want is to sell your skin."

It was a devastating answer, but it was also the only honest one, and Nacho had deserved it.

After all the terrible things he had done in his life, all the people he had hurt and who had a thousand reasons to want him dead, he was finally going to die for nothing more glorious than a stupid handful of dollars!

Nacho laid his lips one onto the other and said nothing more.

His hand awoke to fresh life. It started moving back and forth across his dirty shirt, preparing to leap.

Tom's eyes narrowed to slits, and now Tom couldn't see the expression on Nacho's face anymore.

Nacho's hand jumped at the grip of his revolver!

Tom's arm twitched.

Nacho's hand was on the grip of the revolver.

Tom's single bullet flew upwards from the region of his hips and broke through

Nacho's brow.

Blood spewed from the hole in Nacho's brow. He jerked back as if he had been hit by a fist.

The Boy was counting on Tom being appalled and sprang towards the corner where all the guns were lying. But Tom forestalled him by diving to the floor and skidding into the heap of guns on his tummy. He drew one of the revolvers from its holster and shot The Boy who was still standing and bending over the guns.

Tom rolled to the side to avoid being squashed under The Boy's huge collapsing body and fired three more shots.

The last three of Nacho's men who were in the midst of hurling themselves at Tom and the pile of guns were held up in mid-flight. They stumbled and fell over each other with open mouths.

Tom delighted in the authority a loaded gun gave him – he decided “Stop!”, and all he needed to do was to pull a little trigger, and the men immediately stopped in their tracks. They stopped with whatever they were doing, even the most emotional, intensive stuff!

But unlike a faithful slave who stands to attention, dead bodies aren't receptive for new orders. You might indeed have the power to make them stop in their tracks, but that's the last order they'll ever obey. After that you can sell their skin, but beyond that they're useless...

So a revolver just gives you the power to clear the way. But once the way is cleared, you have to follow it on your own. If you kill everybody you meet, you'll never be accompanied anywhere by anybody. That's the fundamental loneliness of the gun-slinger.

Tom felt this loneliness very clearly as he started collecting the bodies and piling them up on a hay wagon he had found in the barn. Then he tied a solid rope around the safe and made Bess lug it up a ramp onto the wagon. He shoved the metallic box - that had so stubbornly resisted all attempts to open it and so was still intact - against the dead bodies. Then he fetched the two big horses from the pasture and harnessed them to the wagon, and he tied Bess to the back of it.

He climbed onto the seat and set the horses into motion. He was quite aware of stealing the wagon, but after all he left ten of Nacho's horses behind, and that was surely more than enough to compensate.

He stopped for a moment at the house with the hat-stand. The hat-stand looked like an empty skeleton. Tom quickly dressed it up with the poncho and hat again. He stole some food that had materialized in the room adjoining the stable as if by magic, and then he set off again.

Soon he had left behind the quiet Mexican village with its white houses and brown inhabitants. He reached the ominous canyon where ten outlaws had massacred their twenty pursuers. The bodies on the path looked like old piles of rags. Soon only bones and tatters of clothing would be lying here. Tom led his precious cargo of fresh bodies past the old ones and then through the canyon.

He clearly felt the lonesomeness of the gun-slinger once again – he was in the middle of the traces of worldly occurrences that he alone had survived because he somehow hadn't really belonged into them at all.

He wandered back to Anthony where he would take up his life with Bess and the fat gelding once again.