

Mikael Persson

The Duel

The man in the tower yelled: "Velvet the color of today, a fire at corral number thirty-five and the duel will take place eleven o'clock!"

To be awakened by the howler everyday was getting on my nerves, but today I tried not to think so much on anything but the duel. Although the nightly flea-conferences in my bed and the lousy food in my shabby hotel did everything to get me off focus. But there was no turning back now. I had beaten all opponents but one, and today was the day of the final.

As soon as I had won, I would take the prize money and break for the border. Judge Hotchkiss had promised me amnesty if I won the final, and I was not going to let that chance slip away. Especially not since Dolores had promised to wait for me in El Camiso.

The slowcoach for a waiter banged on my door, asking how I wanted my breakfast.

"Fried!" I hollered. "'Til it ain't movin'!" I added.

After getting rid of the ticks and fleas on my body, I got dressed, had breakfast and went out in the cool morning. The weather of Los Bolas was quite pleasant this time of the year.

I sat down at an empty table in the saloon, ordered a strong, double coffee, and began to prepare myself. I checked the ink-level in both of my pens, and tried them out on a newspaper to make sure they ran smoothly and made nice, even lines. I then put a fresh, white sheet on my sketchpad and hung it in my belt. The clock showed half past ten and I was ready. Being a stranger in town, nobody in the saloon wished me good luck.

I ordered another double coffee, knocked it back in one gulp and left.

A local boy who wanted to show off, approached me right outside the

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/2

saloon.

“Hey Doc! You cain’t win! You’re too dang slow!” he said to my face with a whisky breath.

“But my ink-is dark blue, cowboy!” I retorted, staring at him with a cold grin.

He turned white and backed away, looking like his veins had frozen.

Five minutes later, I reached the site of the duel. It was the sandpit between the stables and Oleson’s hardware store. My opponent smiled confidently, but his smile disappeared when I eyeballed him. I had nothing personal against him, but I needed the prize money.

The crowd cheered, a brass band played a short piece, and then Mayor McClusky stood up and raised his hand. There was a reluctant silence before the Mayor spoke in a loud, high-pitched voice.

“No mo’ bets! Will the duellers please take their places!”

I adjusted the brim of my hat and walked slowly to the place in the sand, marked with an “x”.

My opponent was already at the other x about 15 yards away. He wasn’t smiling.

“On the south side, our local boy: Suntanned Kid! And on the north side, the sturdy stranger: Doc Hooligan!”

The Kid got cheering and I got silence. But that was okay. It would soon be over, either way.

I scratched my nose and made my hands ready.

“You know the rules, boys! Are you ready?! No tricks and don’t start until I’ve counted!”

He raised his hand again.

“One ... Two ... Draw!!”

The hand of the Mayor came down. The Kid and I drew our sketchpads equally fast, but being quicker with my hands, I was a little ahead of him to get the pen. But somehow it got stuck in my bracelet, and fell to the ground! With another quick movement I got my second pen out without anymore trouble. The Kid had already started and was way ahead of me. Although I drew faster than I had ever done, I was finished two seconds after him.

Suntanned Kid raised his pen hand in the air with a victorious smile on his face. I knew the winner wasn't declared until Mayor McClusky had looked at the sketches, but despite that I could almost see the prize money fly away before my periphic vision.

“Quiet please! I said quiet dammit!! Clerk Snoddgrass, collect the sketchpads, please!” the Mayor ordered impatiently. I think the sunlight made him yearn for a long beer and short sleeves. A not entirely sober, elderly man, with big ears and hornrimmed glasses came forward from the side of the stand. His eyes were unfocused and he was humming softly as he slowly trudged through the sand, first collecting Suntanned Kid's sketchpad, and then mine. The Mayor first looked at the Kid's sketch, then he looked at mine, and then at the Kid's again.

Was it amusement I saw in his eyes? In any case, the impatient look in his face was now wiped out. I can't really say why, but that new expression in the Mayor's face made my hope rise. He spoke again, to say his verdict, yet again in his loud high-pitched voice.

“Ladies and Gentlemen! I'm not at all happy about it, but Suntanned Kid must suit himself! I hereby declare Doc Hooligan as the winner! Quiet please! I said quiet!!”

I didn't show that much, but my inside was a swirling nest of shock, surprise and happiness.

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/2

Suntanned Kid was furious. First he looked at me.

“Stop that grinning! And you!” turning to the Mayor, “You know what you are!? You goddamned-...!”

“Watch your mouth, boy!”

“But what d’ya mean I must suit myself?”

“Well son, as we all know, the task for this duel was a drawing of a bull. And well, even if Doc Hooligan was slower, his drawing was of a bull alright. But Kid, your drawing is, as far as I can see, heh heh...not of a bull. It’s a drawing of a ...eh heh heh...a cow!!”

Mikael Persson is an industrial worker who loves to read and write in the English language, and his aim is to make a living on his writing one day. So far eight of his stories have been published in Dream Forge, The Online Cynic Magazine, Long Story Short Magazine and Uptown Books chapbook series.