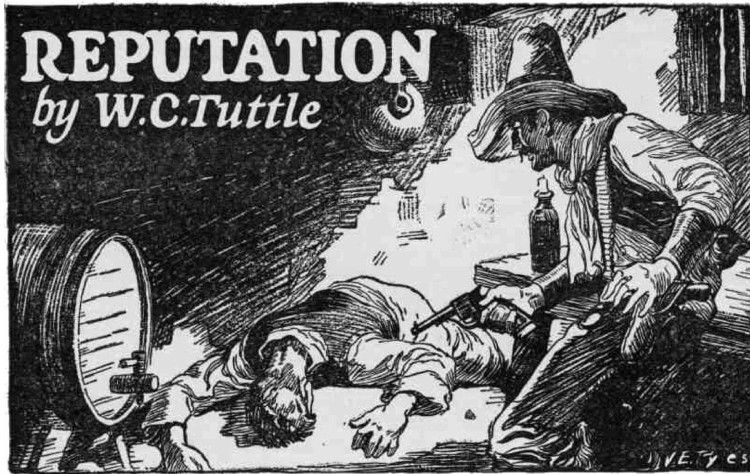


Reputation

by W. C. Tuttle

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Reputation

“*El Tigre! Madre de Dios!*” A man must indeed have the soul of a devil to draw such an exclamation at the mere mention of his name.

“The Tiger! Mother of God!”

We of Santa Ynez, a little handful of folks living in a little mission village, near the Mexican border, knew him only by reputation. But that was enough.

Riders dropped in at the little cantina and over their cups of *tequila* or warm beer would tell us of some new deviltry done by Jeff Tigard, the killer. And Felipe’s hands trembled as he drew the beer, while we laughed at him for being such a coward.

What would the Tiger do in Santa Ynez, we asked each other. There is nothing for him here.

“Who knows, *señores?*” trembled Felipe. “Always the tales come closer to Santa Ynez. Some day he will come.”

“Perhaps to cut off your ears,” laughed Ramon, who is very brave. “I hear that the Tiger strings them on a gold thread and wears them for a girdle.”

“*Diable!*” swore Mendez, whose fierce beard belies his character. “Are we weaklings? One man—bah! Tiger, indeed! The devil may own his soul, but his body is mortal—and mortal man dies.”

Mendez gulped his warm beer and waited for someone to challenge his statement.

It was very warm in the little, one-story adobe cantina; too warm for heated argument, even over the Tiger.

“Mendez speaks true,” nodded Pasquale, who is not a Mexican, but Italian. “Mortal man dies—when he is killed. That is the point, *compadres*. This Tiger will most surely die—when he is killed. More beer, Felipe.”

“But why should the Tiger come to Santa Ynez?” asked Felipe nervously, clattering the mug-bottoms on the rough table-top.

“*Dios!*” swore Mendez angrily. “One might think he had sent you a message, Felipe. You are like a timid hen which hears the rustle of a hawk’s wings in every stirring breeze.”

Ramon laughed softly and drained his mug.

“Why should we have fear of that man? It is true that he has the soul of a devil. Men have told us that he is without a conscience and that he kills men for sport. It must be so.

“But we of Santa Ynez need not fear this man. We live at peace with everyone. Our vineyards are loaded, the hills are dotted with our cattle and horses and there is nothing but good in our hearts. There remains only the fact that Felipe serves his beer too warm.”

Ramon laughed joyously and slapped Mendez on the back.

“Is is not so, *compadre*? We do not fear the Tiger, eh?”

“Fear?” Mendez rumbled deep in his beard. “I fear no man. I am Mendez.”

“And thou art full of warm beer,” stated Pasquale, laughing loudly.

Mendez joined the laugh, even at his own expense, for Mendez was full of beer, which always makes him boastful, but not angry.

It was very hot in Santa Ynez, as I have said before, but that day it was oppressive. The very sky seemed to press down upon the earth. Even the cattle seemed to stand in silent wonder and did not eat.

The piñon pines on the high hills were as black blots against the sky-line, and the cañons seemed to send out faint whisperings to the hills and valleys. Perhaps the cañons knew and were telling that a storm was coming.

But no whispering was needed to tell us that the Storm God was preparing for a ride through the valley of the Santa Ynez. Long lines of cattle were winding their way off the hills, like great jointed serpents, seeking the shelter of the lowlands.

The little street of the village was deserted. Not a horse was tied at the hitch-racks. The bright colors of the adobe houses had faded in that queer light, and were now only a gray.

Gone were the laughing voices of the children, which had filled the street. Even the dogs were in hiding. It was as if a great calamity had fallen, although there was nothing—except fear and caution.

And then, from the westward, high over the tops of the mountains, which look down upon the Pacific, came the cloud; like the belching of a mighty furnace. Swiftly it blotted out the sun, and a semidarkness settled upon the valley. But there was none of the coolness of the night.

At the door of the cantina we watched it come—that cloud. There were Ramon, Mendez, Pasquale, Pancho, a herder, Felipe and myself. None of us had wives to go home to.

We had been intently watching this cloud, but now the whole sky seemed overcast, dropping lower and lower, as if to crush out the world.

A dog started across the street toward us, but stopped, sniffing at the air. A gust of wind stirred the dust at its feet, and, with a whimper, as if of pain, it turned back, leaning sideways in its walk, as if bracing against the wind which had not yet come.

“Let us have beer,” said Mendez softly. “*Madre de Dios!* That dog bracing against a ghost wind makes me weak of the spine.”

“Thou art Mendez,” said Pasquale, as if to remind Mendez of his former boasting.

“But I am not that Mendez. Just now I am sober, and I have no stomach to be sober at a time like this.”

We went into the cantina. I think we were all in need of artificial courage. Felipe lighted the candles which guttered in the draught and cast grotesque shadows on the wall; shadows which danced drunkenly at our every move.

Felipe swore softly at his drawing. “Even the beer is wild tonight. I can not keep it in the mugs.”

“That was ever my greatest trouble,” laughed Mendez. “They are forever becoming empty. Hurry, Felipe, or I shall drink from the spigot.”

The wind was wailing now, and from a distance came the jarring of thunder, like roll of a mighty drum. It was not good to hear. Then the candles paled in the flash of the lightning.

Mendez drained his mug and thrust it back at Felipe.

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