

The Gunfighter

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Breakfast that morning is as early as it had been the day before, though more Spartan, as if Ollie resents even the slight additional expense that Arthur's presence brings. I've got to work smart today, Arthur thinks, or I won't be working at all. "I'll take care of the animals," Arthur volunteers even before breakfast is complete.

"I already have," Ollie replies morosely, "They expects to be fed on time, before we feed ourselves. Something else thee didn't know, Mr. Big City."

Another long, drawn-out pause. Should I just walk on out of here, Arthur asks himself? Get on my horse and ride away? Arthur thinks of the animal as his horse, now, though he knows that Mordecai had been another man's horse once and, if the posse catches up with Arthur, it will be that other man's again. He picks up his breakfast dishes, scrapes the few remaining bits off into the can, then drops the dishes into the bucket of soapy water.

"Well," says Ollie, "let's go fix us a fence."

In picturing Ollie's farm, Arthur had as his basis of comparison the farms of southeastern Pennsylvania near Gettysburg where Arthur grew up. But Ollie's farm is much larger, measured in thousands of acres rather than the several dozen to which Arthur is accustomed. They do not walk to the fence that needs repairs; instead, they saddle up the horses, put the tools in a carrying bag slung alongside, and ride off in an easterly direction.

They ride for more than an hour through long waving fields of corn. Ollie is silent as though brooding on some real or imagined injustice. Occasionally his lips form syllables but no sound emerges. The corn gives way finally to a meadow filled with wild flowers. Arthur can see the mountains, not a range of purple hills

off in the distance, but a tangible living presence, and then the meadow itself ends against a line of tall Douglas firs.

With the mountains in sight, Ollie appears to brighten. Occasionally, he whistles softly to himself. Arthur doesn't know the tune, which sounds far livelier and happier than the man who is producing it. If Ollie is thinking about anything in particular, he doesn't let on to Arthur.

Am I in, wonders Arthur, a member of Ollie's family, or am I just working here for the day? If I work hard enough, will he let me stay?

"This fence didn' fall down by itself." Ollie says.

They'd reached the fence in question after a half hour's ride. Rows of tall corn and summer wheat had hid the fence until they were almost upon it, mute testimony to the hours of grueling toil on the part of the slender Scandinavian and the hired hands who'd planted the crop. But something has gone wrong. Trees line the eastern and western boundaries of the field, but the southern end, at the very limits of Ollie's property, is open to a broad valley that spills endlessly terrace after terrace to the far horizon. The last rows of corn by the fence line have been trampled by a dozen or so horses and the fence itself has been ground down to splinters.

"What happened?" Arthur questions.

"Are ye blind as well as deaf?" Ollie swears. "Someone knocked it down. Morgan's men.

"You see here where someone has taken an axe to the rail... and here the marks of horses' hooves, I don' keep horses out here."

"Someone knocked it down?" Arthur repeats, still questioning. Despite all of Ollie's bad manners and curses, Arthur is trying his best to like the man.

"Yes. And seeing as you're not going to be staying past tomorrow's breakfast, I'll tell you why. Someone is trying to buy this land from me and from all the other farmers around here for two cents on the dollar.

"Someone from town. And I'm not going to sell!"

Arthur nods slowly, sympathetically. These last few sentences are the longest continuous speech he's heard the old man make. Though Ollie's voice began in anger, it ends in weary resignation. He's tired, Arthur thinks, and almost defeated.

Arthur looks again at the marks on the ground. Yes, someone, some persons have attacked this fence. Someone from town, Ollie said. When Arthur thinks of the town, he thinks of Jake Fleming sitting at the Faro table, Jake Fleming who had been his friend and is now his enemy.

Ollie persists in his angry denunciation, but slowly, wearily: "I will not sell. Because they cannot get what they want, they'll make it miserable enough that I am willing to sell. But I'll not be willing, ever!"

The two men get their tools down from the wagon. A dozen or so trees that Ollie felled the previous winter lie by the southwest boundary. These have to be hauled to the fence site, split, then trimmed to serve as crude fence posts. Holes must be dug in the hard clay, and the posts sunk into the ground. The sweat pours down Arthur's back, his muscles ache and yet, in an odd, crazy way, he is glad to be there, glad to be doing something useful with his life, side by side with the man who, for all his rudeness, has at least given Arthur a measure of hope.

The scene in the alley comes back to him. The white-clad gambler lying on the ground, his still smoking cheroot close by. Above him, face clearly illuminated in the lamp light, stands a still dark figure. That isn't me, Arthur pleads to an unseen audience, that isn't me. But it is, it had been. He had forgotten his crime momentarily in the ecstasy of work, but now he remembers once again.

A slight breeze ruffles the leaves nearby, leaving the two men feeling just a bit more comfortable in the heat. A magpie coos and flutters to a stop, hovering in midair for an instant to settle its wings, before it lands atop a newly placed fence post.

"Shh, get away," says Ollie softly, but doesn't bother to wave his arms at the bird.

Again, Arthur feels a strong wave of affection for him.

But the old man will have none of it. "Are ye no paid to work," he snarls, "Or are ye planning to stand about all day, staring?"

He is preparing to launch another stream of curses in Arthur's direction when they hear the sound of horses. Two, three, perhaps as many as four horses coming from the same direction as the riders who had trampled down the fence.

They wait, tools by their side, looking to the south. In another minute, the riders pull to a stop before them on the edge of the line of trees. Ollie's rifle comes up quickly in his hands as he turns to face the strangers: one, two, three of them. But he is sure he heard four horses, yes, four.

The two sides confront one another, the tall, faintly bewildered old man with the rifle and the three hard-looking riders. The riders are the first to speak, too impatient to hold their tongues, or too stupid. Ollie glances sideways at Arthur for confirmation. But . . . Arthur is not there. He has disappeared, skeddaddled at the first sign of trouble.