



The Gunfighter

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Luke Jackson

Western

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Chapter 1

A jarring ride on hard wooden benches, an endless rattle, scorching cinders that blow in the windows and attack the eyes whenever the train rounds a curve: his train trip West had not been a pleasant one.

"Shut the window," holler half a dozen passengers, several ladies among them. Despite a facade of gentility, the ladies holler the loudest, for they are the most concerned about the appearance of their clothing.

"No," shouts back the fat balding salesman who sits in the seat behind Arthur Marsall. The salesman sweats continuously and the odor of his sweating body is reason enough to keep the window open.

Arthur says nothing. He cares little for his fellow passengers, save one Mary-ellen Mills who sits four seats back en route from St Louis, while the open window represents Arthur's only relief (and that merely partial) from the odor of salesman and the scorching heat of the train. With luck, Arthur can feign sleep until the train has passed through the curve. At worst, some would-be-gentleman, anxious to ingratiate himself with the womenfolk, will slip past Arthur's prone figure and attempt to lower the frame. The man will fail, of course, for the train windows tend to stick fast. He will rouse Arthur from his make-believe slumber and ask for his aid. "It's the women, you see," the man will explain, "messes up their clothes," though the man himself will be rubbing at tearing eyes.

Arthur will lend a reluctant hand. At the exact moment the window comes crashing downward, the train will curve in the opposite direction and Arthur will be left to his own devices to try to force the window up again.

"Avoid the Summer's heat; let the Union Pacific take you through cool Northern breezes." the railroad's brochures promise. But in summer, the train routes across the great North American prairie are pretty much the same: whether south, south-central, central, or north, they are hot, hot, and more hot.

Just as the prairie itself is pretty much the same, dull and more dull, like riding forever through a golden brown meadow. Oh, one will see Indians, and an occasional herd of buffalo, but Arthur suspects the Indians have been hired by the train company—white men with a coat of red-gold paint, and the buffalo are probably some tame herd the railroad keeps just for show.

For two days now, since the train crossed the Mississippi, life aboard has been almost insufferable, hot and dull, a noisy company that Arthur doesn't particularly care for, (and, he suspects, doesn't care much for him), and the endless rattle of the train.

I want to see scenery, thinks Arthur, waterfalls, tall trees, and jagged mountain peaks, new, exciting places. Why did I risk imprisonment if the life around me is going to be as monotonous as it was back home? But all he sees besides the endless brown meadow are the irritated faces of his fellow passengers.

Once in a while, the whistle blows as they slow for a boxcar station in the middle of nowhere: A railroad-owned grain elevator, a few farms, bright green in the sea of golden brown, pigs and chickens by the railroad track, a barking dog,

some geese. Men and women, children too, walking up and down the train aisles selling meals at ruinous prices. But a few minutes later, the trainman hollers "board," and they are off through monotony again.

At that very moment, the candy butcher, a steady affliction since St Louis, comes down the aisle parading his wares: Candy, overcooked corn on the cob; the Sioux-City newspaper—all one page of it; Indian trinkets—useful as souvenirs if one is heading back East, but hardly of value on the prairie, and tea-makings, the candy butcher's best buy—tea leaves, hot water, sugar, lemon, and, sometimes, fresh cream.

Arthur knows them all, has inspected them all two or three times and knows he cannot afford them.

He fingers the coins in his pocket; for despite the heat, he would really like a cup of tea. But his few remaining funds must last until his arrival in the Wyoming Territory, four tedious days and nights away, when he will be able to change bills, he hopes, without being charged a premium.

Candy butchers must be the richest people in creation, he thinks. Even that best buy, a cup of tea, cost of tea-makings and bringing the water to a boil included, must represent something like a four hundred percent profit.

A glance is enough for Arthur, a bookkeeper by trade, to compare the value of the candy butcher's stock at purchase with its appreciated value at the time of sale. The long green fields of corn by the river's edge appear to him as tall rolled-up dollar bills and, the cattle, gazing absently at the passing train, can be priced

automatically at so much on the hoof, so much profit added when the rancher brings them back East for sale.

Only a few short weeks ago, Arthur began to divert his employer's money to an account of his own. Oh not much, just a few dollars here and there, it would have added up, eventually. He'd have had a real stake, in time.

But he hadn't had the time. They had switched managers the previous Thursday without a word of warning. The unctuous Mr. Thompson departed for the head office and a new man was placed in charge, a second cousin once removed, they said, of the President of the line.

"There'll be an audit, of course," the chief clerk told him, looking off abstractly into the distance, as Arthur, knees shaking, halted in mid stride to give his supervisor his full attention. "Nothing to do with us, of course; standard policy when there's a change. Do you mind working a bit late?"

"Not at all," Arthur replied though he meant just the opposite.

If only he'd had another two weeks or even another two days! But he hadn't. He'd had to cut and run.

Arthur touches his money belt. No, he does not have as much cash as he'd like, but there is enough, he hopes, to give him a fresh start, to buy some land, some farm tools, and maybe a few head of cattle.

How many times has he counted these imaginary cattle of his, watched as they put his ranch's brand on the new calves, seen those calves grow in turn into breeding stock And once again, he begins to plant the crop in his mind, to harvest and sell, to reinvest the profits in new land.

"Tea?" The candy butcher wakes him.

Arthur needs a cup of tea: his mouth is parched, his throat cottony, and his head aches from another night of fitful sleep on the bumpy train. If only... if only he'd had another week to plan and prepare his departure. Again he fingers his few remaining coins: "No," he says.

Chapter 2

Arthur Marsall has been in Benton for almost a week. Waiting. And still hasn't figured out what he is going to do for a living or how he is going to pay his hotel bill.

Not that it is much of a hotel, though it is Benton's best and only accommodation—tiny, stuffy rooms with two soiled sheets, a blanket and a hard wooden bed Arthur has to make up himself.

Nothing in the town is as the railway promised. The "rich, lush farmland" is largely stones. The "beautiful scenery"—no denying its existence, not with a line of mountains on the western horizon—cannot take the place of a steady living. For the mountains are only a few million years old and have barely begun to be covered with topsoil. In some places, huge sheets of rock protrude through the ground, and the farmers, a patient lot, mainly from Sweden and Norway though a few are Quakers from England and Germany, simply work around them.

The town itself is little more a strip along the railroad track. "Benton's a big town, as towns go out there." But this isn't very big at all. Say, three blocks long by two blocks wide.

Arthur soon knows each of Benton's six and a half blocks by heart. He walks them steadily each morning and each evening for want of anything else he can afford to do. He knows he has to get a job, if only to pay his continually mounting hotel bill, but what jobs can a man find in the Wyoming Territory if his only skills

are with accounts and ledgers. As for Arthur's dream of owning his own ranch, with a huge, ever-growing herd of cattle, that was just a dream, wasn't it?

Arthur arrived in Benton with little more than the clothes on his back, two clean white shirts, half-dozen fresh collars, and a second pair of shiny corduroys he'd already worn too many days on the train. He has a small stack of bills, the sole proceeds of the embezzlement, but these won't last long. Simple things like shirts and shoes are far more expensive here than in Philadelphia or Chicago.

The white shirts he packed so neatly mark him as a gambler rather than a ranch hand, and have earned him only hard looks. He wore an old faded blue work shirt on the train, a shirt his father had worn before him. Now, washed by hand in the very same water he bathes in, it is all he has left to wear.

With the money Arthur took from the cashier's drawer, he was able to ride first class from Philadelphia to Rock Island, coach from Chicago to St Louis, and then, his "fortune" reduced to a small, half-inch stack of bills, was happy for just any kind of seat on a train.

The candy butcher who came aboard at Iowa City made constant fun of him—"Guy here takes the free cream and sugar, but won't pay for the tea. Says he works for the railroad. Can you imagine?"

Arthur writhed in embarrassment each time he heard the candy butcher's call. Once, Arthur was sitting with Miss Mary-Ellen Mills, a schoolteacher from St Louis, who was on her way to Wyoming to accept a position in Happy Valley, somewhere to the west of his own destination. Lost in conversation, Arthur hadn't noticed the candy butcher creep up on them. "Do you want something, Miss?" the

vendor asked and, when Mary-Ellen indicated Arthur might want something too, continued gratingly, "Not him of course, he hasn't got the cash."

Well, Arthur had worked for the railroad, once, had a future there they told him, though his progress had been slow enough. I'm a pauper, he thinks, unable to buy a girl a cake and a cup of tea—much less buy one for myself. Embarrassment and shame flood through him once again.

If Arthur had little money with him on the train, he has even less by the end of his first week in Benton. His hotel bill, only partly paid, his one bath shared with a pair of pants and his workshirt, and the too few, too small meals devoured more than half of his remaining funds.

The prices in the saloon next door are as high or higher than those on the train. The food is plentiful, good and tasty, but a man can spend almost as much at that plain table as in the finest restaurant in Philadelphia.

Can he afford another, a final beer? The day has been a hot one. His throat is as dusty as his clothes, for he spent the day trudging from store to store, asking unsuccessfully for work. "A beer," he orders, though his heart sinks even as he takes the first refreshing draught. He plucks a final handful of coins from his pocket and slowly, reluctantly places the largest on the counter.

"My treat," says a voice in his ear and the coin is flipped backwards toward Arthur's deadened fingers. "A whiskey and a beer here for the winner," says the voice, "and I'll cover the beer here for my friend as well."

"Thanks," stammers Arthur, and would have babbled on in gratitude. But the cowboy, his name is Fleming, Arthur learns shortly, pushes off with a friendly

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