

Down Home Country Magic

Louisa Swann

A weathered red barn leaned to the east, the peak of its roof reaching for the rising sun. Equally weathered fences stretched the opposite direction as if struggling to pull the barn upright. Fields ripe with summer grass spread outward from the barn, cascaded over a small hillock, and wrapped around a white clapboard house complete with porch and swings. Birds twittered in leafy shade trees, bees droned through the flower-laden garden.

Gerold Pinester thought for a moment he'd made a huge mistake and transported himself into some kind of museum painting. That would have been a pretty nasty mistake, especially for a guy about to graduate to post-elementary studies. But the stench of manure and the flies buzzing round Gerold's head convinced him he wasn't in some painting. He looked around and wrinkled his nose in disgust.

Why the American Society of Witches and Warlocks thought anyone with magic potential would keep themselves locked away in a forlorn place like Nowhere, Colorado was anybody's guess. Everybody knew that the place to be for new witches and warlocks was New York City. Where else could you slip in and out of crowds, working little spells here and there, and not get caught? Well, almost not get caught.

Gerold swatted a fly and climbed up to sit on the split rail fence he'd hidden behind. A jagged piece of wood snagged the sleeve of his jacket, tearing the soft leather. He glared at the offending splinter and it smoldered into ash, something he wished he could do to Griffa Wilson, Head Witch. It was her fault he was stuck here. Anyone else would have made him polish broomsticks for a week, but not Griffa. She had decided he needed to get out of the city, a change of pace, she called it. A chance to expand his mind and see a bit more of the world than Times Square and Central Park.

Of course, he could have refused to come, but Griffa had made it clear he wouldn't make it to his post-elementary studies if he failed this particular assignment.

Already he missed the reassuring aroma of engine exhaust, the heavy oil scent of the streets mingled with other city smells – real smells, people smells, like hot dog mustard and burning

chestnuts. Out here you couldn't even smell the air. A guy could suffocate and not even know the reason why. And the smells that did happen along were gross – animal sweat and droppings. Big animal droppings.

Gerold looked over at his mark and groaned. William Robert Hartzig. Didn't sound like a cowboy, but who else would stand around with a horse's foot stuck between his legs? Didn't dress like a cowboy either. Sure he had on jeans, but the T-shirt sporting the words "There ain't no bull like Red Bull" and the faded baseball cap belonged at a tailgate party for some big ball game. A tattoo peeked from beneath the cowboy's left sleeve, then disappeared again as he picked up a tool. The horse stood, head halfway to the ground, eyelids drooping in the midday sun. Horse and cowboy hadn't even noticed he was there.

A fly buzzed Gerold's nose. He brushed it off and looked around. This should be easy. Who would give up a life in New York for the smell of manure and flies? Gerold took a deep breath and stood up on the fence, waving a hand to catch the cowboy's attention. "Yo, William Robert."

The horse's head flew up. William Robert stumbled back with a yelp as the horse kicked out and tried to bolt, scattering tools in all directions. Gerold lost his balance and flapped his arms in a furious attempt not to tumble to the ground. He muttered a hasty levitation spell and managed to lower himself without crashing into the nasty-smelling pile waiting below.

White showed around the edges of the horse's eyes and it reared, shaking its head as the rope tethering it to the fence post snapped taut. William shot Gerold a dark look. He reached out to take hold of the horse's rope, crooned to it in a low, gentle tone. The horse danced around, ears flat against its head, then slowly settled down.

Not a good way to start, Gerold told himself as he straightened his hat, picked a splinter from his hand, and stepped forward. "Hi, William Robert. I'm Gerold."

"Don't you know anything about animals, kid?" William stroked the horse's nose. "Crazy stunt like that could have gotten us both killed." The cowboy wore a disapproving look as he ran his hands over the horse and down all four of its legs.

Leave it to a grownup to make a big deal about nothing. "I need to talk to you," Gerold said.

"Talk's cheap, kid. Horses aren't." William set the bucket upright and started picking up the tools. Gerold's face grew warm. Maybe he needed to be a bit more direct.

"Look. I don't think you know who I am." Gerold puffed out his chest and laid a hand

across his heart. "I am Gerold Pinester, second son in a line of second sons of the house of Pinester."

William grabbed the horse's rear foot and turned his back on Gerold.

"Excuse me," Gerold said. He sidled around until he faced the cowboy. The horse switched its tail, the hair stinging as it slapped across Gerold's arm. William took a huge pair of what looked like pliers and started cutting. A long curl of horn-like material dropped to the ground.

Gerold cleared his throat. "I'm a warlock," he announced, standing up straight and waiting for William's reaction.

The cowboy nodded and eyeballed the foot. "You're gonna be a warlock with a sore head if you aren't careful."

"You don't need to get nasty." Gerold took off his hat and scratched his head. There had to be something he could do to get this guy's attention. He crammed the hat back on his head and pointed a finger at the foot. Another layer curled off and flopped to the ground.

William roared and dropped the foot. "What in tarnation?"

"See how easy that was?" Gerold said, his face spread wide in a smile.

The horse took a step and tossed its head, picking up the foot as though it hurt. William ran a hand across his face. "There's too much hoof gone now. She'll be lame for a month before she gets enough grown back."

Gerold stopped smiling. Looked like he'd messed up again. "I was only trying to show you how useful magic can be."

But William wasn't listening. He packed up his tools and moved toward the barn.

"Listen, William Robert . . . Mister William . . . Cowboy Bob." Gerold scurried to catch up. He almost tripped on a rock hidden in the too-green grass. "You have to listen to me."

The cowboy plunked the bucket down on a stump, turned and spat a stream of brown liquid into the grass near Gerold's feet. For the first time, Gerold got a good look at William's eyes. They were blue, a very pale, almost clear ice blue. Gerold blinked and looked again. Nope, they were brown. How could he have . . .?

Suddenly Gerold realized the cowboy was staring at him, waiting. Gerold's face grew hot and he shuffled his feet from side to side. He glanced back toward the horse. "I'm sorry about that, I really am. I can fix it before we go, if you like."

"We aren't going anywhere, kid. And what do you mean, you can fix it?"

Gerold winced. “Like I said, I’m a warlock.” He looked hard at William, but the man’s face didn’t change. “Do you know what a warlock is?”

William leaned down for his bucket. “Warlocks and witches are simply misunderstandings; beings conjured by society to explain away mysterious happenings no one wants to take responsibility for.” The cowboy didn’t sound like a cowboy any more. And the things he was saying . . .

Gerold’s skin crawled like a hundred spiders were creeping over his grave. He glanced over his shoulder. “Don’t you let my father hear you say that. He’ll turn you into something really awful.” He gave himself a shake. “Besides, you’ve got the magic. You just have to learn how to use it, like I did.”

William’s eyebrows dropped low and his eyes grew cold. “There’s enough magic around here, boy.”

“Yes, sir.” Gerold took a step back. He swallowed as William stalked away.

Just who’s in charge here, the hick or the warlock? Gerold asked himself. He couldn’t go back to the Head Witch without that cowboy. His entire future, his career as a warlock depended on his success. Magic was everything. One of the first lessons a young warlock learned. Those who didn’t have magic wished they did. Those who did have it controlled those who didn’t.

He had the magic. He had control. He just had to prove that to the cowboy. Gerold started after William, running to catch up with the man’s long strides.

“You’ve got magic,” Gerold said. His words came out short and clipped as he struggled to catch his breath.

William Robert stopped and looked down at him. “The only magic I need, kid, is what’s in these two hands.”

“That’s what I mean,” Gerold straightened his shoulders.

William shook his head. “You don’t get it, do you? I spent six years in college; got my masters in biological engineering. Went to work for a big company.” He glanced around. “But I couldn’t get this place out of my blood. This is where the real magic is, kid. In the soil, in the animals, in the air that keeps us living.”

Gerold sniffed the air: it smelled weak and thin without exhaust fumes and the other scents of the city giving it strength. He grabbed William’s arm as the cowboy turned away again.

“Griffa, the Head Witch, said you had magic and that you just didn’t know it yet. That’s why

I'm here. I'm supposed to bring you back so you can learn to use your magic."

"You can take your magic back to Griffa and tell her it didn't work again." William spread his arms wide. "Look around you, kid."

Gerold glanced at the barn, the house, the horse. "Nice place," he agreed. "But you should see New York. You'd love it there. There's tons of stuff to do, people everywhere. All kinds of people from all over the world. That's where the Society trains new witches and warlocks. So many weird things happen in New York, no one notices if a few spells go wrong . . .