



ALL THE MEN IN THE FORT

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“Excuse me, but I don’t know who I am.”

Emil Sandfort looked up from watering the gardenias. “Well well,” he thought. “What do we have here?”

“You’re busy, I can see that,” the man in his garden went on. “However, there is no one else. It’s early. Everyone must be at work. And I don’t know who I am.”

Sandfort looked the man up and down. “Well well,” he thought again. “He looks respectable enough. His suit looks alright. An office worker perhaps. One really ought to be able to help the poor fellow.” And he stood up, brushed the earth from his knees and extended his hand. “Emil Sandfort,” he said.

The other said nothing.

“Oh yes, yes,” Sandfort said hastily. “How silly of me. You don’t remember. Well, come inside. Come along now.”

Nimbly, he stepped over the gardenias and motioned for the other to follow him. At the door, the man paused for a moment and quietly contemplated the brass plate on the wall. It said Sandfort.

“Sandfort,” said Sandfort, pointing at himself. “That’s me. Now let’s find out who you are. Come along now.” And he led the man inside and sat him down at the kitchen table. “Rosa,” he cried, “will you come and have a look here?”

Rosa appeared instantly from somewhere in the house.
Her face was bright when she entered.

“Rosa,” said Emil Sandfort. “This man does not know who he is.
I shall take him into town, show him around.”

“Marvelous,” said Rosa, locking eyes with their guest.
“I’m sure it’ll turn out alright, won’t it?”

“Yes, it will,” her husband agreed.

“These things blow over,” said Rosa. “Remember when
Nadine forgot herself?”

“Yes. Poor thing.”

“She was fine again next morning.”

“Isn’t she Nadya now?”

“Yes, Nadya.”

They both looked upon their guest with cheer.

“We’ll find you a name. Don’t you worry,” said Mr. Sandfort and
stood up. “Well, we’re off,” he said and kissed his wife. She blew
him back a kiss as they left.

“Good riddance,” exhaled Sandfort once they were out of earshot.
“That woman is the devil.”

“Excuse me?”

“Rosa,” said Sandfort. “She drives me half mad. One of these days,
I tell you. You just wait.”

The other man looked dubious. “I rather thought she was lovely,”
he said. “You must be a lucky man.”

“Oh, I am,” Sandfort hastened. “I am, and she is. Now come, come
along. And do watch the gardenias.”

Almost in complete synchronicity, their feet rose above the flowers.

“Will you look at that,” cried Sandfort. “Twenty years I’ve kept that
yard and the little devils still get away from me.” He bent down and
angrily plucked a flower from the ground. “Twenty years and
I beg you to show me progress. Every chance they get, they get
away from me, the ungrateful bunch.”

“It’s a lovely yard,” the other said drily.

“Thank you,” said Sandfort. “I’m mighty proud of it,
if I may say so.”

They boarded the Sandfort Cadillac and were soon off, down the
main drive, towards the town proper. In their wake, the exhaust
from the Cadillac lingered like a vapor, remained in the air a very
short time, and was gone, too.

“He doesn’t know his name,” said Emil Sandfort.

“Not another.”

“How dreadful.”

□

“Poor boy.”

“Just like Ronald.”

This last comment was made by Mr. Theodore, who ran the town apothecary. Mr. Theodore looked to be at least seventy but wasn't a day over fifty-three.

“Isn't it Reuben now?” asked Sandfort.

“No, it was Reuben last week. It's Ronald now.”

“I heard it was Ron.”

They all turned to look at Mrs Bulwinkle, whose first name was Dolores.

“Just Ron?”

“How dreadful.”

Has anyone heard of such foolishness?”

“No, no, it really says so,” cried Mrs Bulwinkle. “On the door. I just walked by, it says: Ron's Hardware.”

“How awful.”

“It's madness.”

“Where can he go from “Ron”?”

“The Lord protect him.”

□

“Poor boy.”

It was agreed that it was all over for Ron.

“Well, we do have a problem here,” Emil Sandfort reminded them. “This man has lost his name.” And he spread out an arm indicating the other man, as though he were on sale. They all gathered closer, tiptoed round him, casting glances up and down him as if gauging his worth.

“Found him in my yard just now,” said Sandfort.

“How are the tulips?” Mrs Bulwinkle asked.

“They're gardenias now.”

“How wonderful.”

Anger welled up in Emil Sandfort at the thought of the unruly flowers. “Oh, what I will do to you,” he thought.

“Well, let's have a look at him.”

“Strong chin, weak in the eyes.”

“Doesn't he remind you of Matthew?”

“What Matthew?”

“I forget.”

“Coppernickle?”

“Yes, Coppernickle. Thank you.”

□

“Doesn’t look like a Copernickle to me.”

“Certainly not.”

“The ears don’t fit. Ralph Ellison?”

“No, I’ve seen Ralph.”

“Good for him. Such a nice man.”

“Yes, nice.”

“He’ll go far, with a name like that.”

“How can he go wrong?”

The day passed like that. In the evening, a light breeze arrived and rattled their thoughts. When it abided, it was found that Dolores had become Doris, that Alistair was Alfred, that Emil had turned into Ilan, and so forth.

“So it’s Stanford?” asked Mrs Bulwinkle.

“Stanford, yes,” said the former Sandfort. They shook hands.

“Pleased to meet.”

“Bullinger,” she said.

“Is that with a U?”

“Yes.”

□

“Thatcher,” pronounced the former Mr. Theodore.

Before long, their attention again turned to the man in their midst.

“Have him say something,” suggested someone. The idea quickly found favor with everyone.

“But what should he say?”

“Anything.”

“It can’t be anything.”

“No, it can’t be anything.”

“How about: how much wood would a woodchuck chuck?”

“Well, that’s no good.”

All at once, the nameless man spoke up, startling Mr Stanford. “The fort is manned by a battalion of none,” he said in a steady voice.

There was a pause.

“Very good,” someone said.

“Good voice. Strong, determined.”

“Definitely not a Copernickle.”

“No, not a Copernickle.”

□

“Say it again.”

“The fort is manned by a battalion of none,” the man repeated.

“What’s that on his hands!” someone cried.

“Where?”

“Right there, it says something. It says—no, I can’t see it.
Make him show his hand.”

They all craned their necks to get a better look.

“There’s nothing there.”

“I can’t see.”

“Not that one. The other one, the right one.”

They all stared at the hand. Even the other man stared at his right hand. Something was indeed written on it, in careful letters. Then they had read it. All around, the faces fell. Mrs Bulwinkle shuffled her feet, casting her eyes down on the ground. “How awful,” she muttered.

Mr. Thatcher turned his back on them, sat down on the ground, and buried his head in his hands. “What a tragedy,” he said.

“Poor boy.”

“It’s all over.”

“How dreadful.”

□

“Nothing anyone can do.”

“The Lord shine a light on him.”

Mr. Stanford took the other man by the arm. “Is it true?” he asked.

The other man said nothing. Clearly, he was the least upset of them all. And what if he had written something on his hand?

Stanford put a hand on his shoulder and lowered his voice.

“That’s your name?” He spoke softly, quietly, as though the man had become a widower. “Your name is A B?”

Again, the man said nothing. And he said nothing when they all slowly turned round, when Stanford lifted his hand from his shoulder, when he walked away, when they all walked away, when Mrs Bullinger said “How dreadful” one more time, and Mr. Thatcher implored the Lord to be gracious and shine a light down.