

LOCK UP YOUR CHICKENS AND DAUGHTERS— H'ARD AND ANDY ARE COME TO TOWN!

Michael Swanwick & Gregory Frost

Michael Swanwick would like us to believe that he “arrived in Philadelphia, a runaway indentured servant in October 1723, munching on an enormous loaf of bread and looking rumped and unkempt, much to the amusement of the beautiful young Marianne Porter, who saw the spectacle from her apartment.

Less than a year later, they were wed. He now divides his work between *Asimov's* and Dragonstairs Press, his wife's 'nanopress' imprint.” His diverting adventures of Post-Utopian con artists Darger & Surplus will be continued next year in *Chasing the Phoenix*, a novel chronicling the events leading to their accidentally conquering China. Greg Frost is the author of eight novels (including *Shadowbridge*, *Lord Tophet*, and *Fitcher's Brides*) and well over fifty short stories of the fantastic. Greg settled in Philadelphia in 1984 in the mistaken belief that he was one of the boys on the Malabar front. Although he soon left, he did not stray far. Over the years he has written various stories (and a “Dickian” novel, *The Pure Cold Light*) set in the city. He now serves as a Fiction Workshop Director at Swarthmore College, is one of the founding members of the Philadelphia Liars Club, and sits on the board of the Philadelphia Writers Conference—so perhaps he *was* in fact on the Malabar front all along. When these not necessarily

reliable narrators turn their talent to creating a spell-binding collaboration, one should probably heed their advice and . . .

LOCK UP YOUR CHICKENS AND DAUGHTERS—H'ARD AND ANDY ARE COME TO TOWN!

It was a hot, blue-sky August day and little dust devils were playing in the street in front of the First National Bank of Nacogdoches when H'ard and Andy pulled into town. Their flivver was coughing and almost out of fuel when one of the new "visible" gas pumps rose up out of the shimmering pavement air ahead of them, topped by a glass tank to show off the golden quality of the gasoline, a big red star, and the word **TEXACO**.

"Now that is a fine sight," Andy commented. "A very fine sight indeed."

H'ard was slouched back in the seat with his hat down over his eyes. With one finger he pushed up the hat just far enough for him to take a squint, then pulled it down again. "Yup."

Pulling the car over to the curb in front of a sundries store, Andy said, "I'm going to get us some gas money. You want anything?"

"Pack of smokes. Chesterfields if they got 'em."

The screen door slammed shut behind Andy, jangling a little bell. Assuming a benevolent smile, he went to the counter, manned by a clerk who looked to be half as old as Methuselah, and said, "A good day to you, sir, and lordy but it is hot! I'd like to buy me some Chester—lord have mercy, are those Cravens? I ain't seen a pack of Craven 'A's since I was knee-high to a gopher, back in the Big Fog Country. You ever been out that way? Normally you don't see the sun one day out of seventeen hundred. When this drought first struck and dried up everything, the children ran and hid because they thought the sky was on fire. Folks got their first good look at how raggedy-ass their homes and farms was and it like to broke their hearts. Put some pressure on a lot of marriages, I'll tell you that. Knew a man had a vacation cottage a little west of town and when the daylight come flooding in, it just plumb wasn't there no more, nor the mountain neither. Turns out it was just a mass of cloud compacted down so dense that the county paved a road over it, sent out a surveyor, and started selling lots. I'll take that pack of Cravens, thank you, and here's a five dollar bill to pay you with."

As the clerk, a little dazed by this torrent of words, counted out four ones and six dimes, Andy went on talking: "Been traveling all my life and still got a stretch to go, all the way south to Beluthahatchie. Now there is a destination. It's a far piece, three station stops beyond Hell. The train that takes you there when you die passes on to West Hell, Ginny Gall, Beluthahatchie, and Diddy-wah-diddy. Good folks don't go to that last place, though. They's low-class people there. And West Hell's just a suburb of Hell, there ain't nothing doing there at all. Saturday night's as dead as Monday morning." He opened his wallet. "Tarnation! Look at all these ones. This thing is so fat I'm like to tilt over sideways when I sit down. Tell you what, old hoss, let me swap you ten singles for a sawbuck, if you'd be that kind."

They exchanged bills. Andy pocketed the ten and returned to his soliloquy: "Now, I'm not saying Ginny Gall is bad or nothing, but the barbeque there is second-rate and that's the plain and simple truth. All the quality folks of Hell go to Belutha-

hatchie for a big night out, and that includes the Head Fella his own self, so you know they don't cut no corners."

"Say," the clerk said sharply. "You're a dollar short. There's only nine ones here."

"Are there? Well, never mind, I'll give you one more and add a ten and you can just give me a twenty instead. That's right perfect, and I thank you muchly."

"Don't forget your cigarettes," the clerk said.

* * *

"Well?" H'ard asked when Andy returned to the car.

"Worked me the short-change, made us ten dollars."

"So where're my Chesterfields?"

"I got you some Cravens instead. Finest Virginia tobacco and a cork tip to boot."

H'ard opened the pack, knocked out a cigarette. Then he bit off the cork tip and spat it out the window. Lighting the ragged end, he muttered, "Hell of a note when a man can't even get a pack of Chesterfields."

"It's a free pack of smokes, what did you expect? Egg in your beer? You certainly do demand a lot from the world for someone who hails from Oklahoma." Andy went outside to crank the car. Then he got back and drove up to the gas pump.

The attendant was a hatchet-faced young man with a rash of pimples across his forehead. "Two dollars and sixty cents," he said when the tank was full. He accepted a five and added, "Exact change only."

"Well, but I don't have anything smaller. I just now traded away all my singles."

"Then you're plumb out of luck, I reckon." The young man made an insolent face and, tucking the bill in his shirt pocket, swaggered away.

"Well, don't that just take the cake?" Andy began. "Don't that just fry your shorts? Don't that—"

"Don't get mad," H'ard said. "Get even." He stared at the gas pump long and hard. Then he said, "Let's go."

The flivver pulled out of the gas station and headed down the road.

Behind them, goldfish swam happily in the glass tank of the pump.

* * *

The next town they came to was Paradise Lake. It was ten years overdue for a coat of paint, but at least Main Street was paved. There was a booth restaurant, a five-and-dime Woolworth's, a hotel that had seen better days, and a cluster of other buildings, all in an uneven line and every single one topped with a wooden façade to make them look taller and more prosperous. Those few people idly watching their passing—barefoot children, men in dungarees, women in dresses with faded splotches of color that once were flowers—could have been statues stuck in the dirt for all that most of them moved.

At the end of the row, a little separate from the rest, like the whiskey in-law at a family picnic, was an unpainted clapboard hardware store with the flaking words BAIT and CRAWLERS painted across the plate glass. There was a water pump out front with the handle chained and padlocked so nobody could use it on the sly.

"Stop here," H'ard said. "I got me a yen to go fishing."

The land beyond the shack sloped away to a dry and cracked expanse that, by testimony of a pair of tumbledown docks at its edge, had once upon a time been a lakebed. But all the open water for a hundred miles around had disappeared so long ago that there were children nowadays who'd bray like a donkey if told it used to flow out in the open with no one needing to pump it up from the aquifer. There was no telling how long ago it had dried up.

Three men lounged on a bench on the bait shop porch, and another atop a barrel, looking about as friendly as so many snapping turtles and as immovable as mules.

H'ard got out first and passed indoors without a word. Andy stayed outside. "Might I sit a spell?" he asked, and lowered himself onto the edge of the porch, his back to the men. Nobody spoke.

Five minutes later, H'ard emerged from the store, assembling the parts of a split bamboo fly rod with a cork grip. Andy recognized it for a Montague Rapidan, which was a high-end product for a cheap rod but low-end for an expensive one. Probably it was the best the place afforded. Trailing behind him were a skinny elderly gent with gray muttonchops and a bowler hat who must be the proprietor, and two indoors cronies of no distinguishing features, all talking and gesticulating at once.

"Don't see what the problem is," H'ard commented. "I said I was going to catch me a trout and that's just what I aim to do."

"Mister, there's no *water* in that lake!" the proprietor said.

"It's a poor fisherman who blames the lake," H'ard observed. "Izaak Walton said that. I'll bet you any amount of money you care to name that I pull out a two-pound trout on my first cast."

Andy stood up. "Now be reasonable, H'ard," he pleaded in the tone of a man who had seen this impractical scenario repeated many times. "There ain't no point in riling everybody up. Nobody's going to believe a word you say, anyway. It just stands to reason. These folks can't possibly believe you can pull a trout out of hard-baked mud. Why, that stuff's as hard as concrete!"

"Is your friend simple?" the barrel-sitter asked in a low voice.

"Not as such," Andy replied equally quietly. "But he caught a shell in Belleau Wood during the Great War, and it changed his outlook considerable. Ever since he survived that, he's been convinced he can do anything he puts his mind to."

The idlers exchanged looks and one of them cleared his throat. "Five dollars says you can't," he said decisively.

"You're on, Andy, hold this man's money."

"Oh, this is just ridiculous. These good people are going to line up to take your money away from you. Thank you, sir. They're going to dig out every fin and sawbuck they can find in their pockets to bet against you. You're going to end up betting every penny you have and then some. Two twenties? Well, I reckon we can cover that."

In no time, Andy was holding two fat wads of banknotes.

"I'm going to need some water, though," H'ard said.

"You intend to refill the lake?" The idlers were really hooting now, warming to the possibilities of this entertainment. Nothing this good had happened in Paradise Lake for a long while.

"A tin cup's worth will do."

The hardware store proprietor sent a crony to fetch a cup and solemnly unpadlocked the pump. Some vigorous elbow action later, H'ard strode out onto the dry lakebed, cup in hand. There, he poured the water with great care upon a shallow depression, creating a slick the size of a puddle, as reflective as a mirror and no deeper than a sheet of paper.

By now, in the mysterious manner that news got about in a small town, the number of bystanders had doubled.

H'ard stepped back a number of measured steps, his eye never leaving the slick. Then he took a fly caddy from his shirt pocket and unhooked his favorite lure, which, as Andy knew from long experience, was a Basilisk Hair Caddis. With unhurried care, he tied it to the tapered line. Then, after pumping his casting arm up and down a few times to limber it up, he took the bamboo rod in hand and drew out a loop of line. In one deceptively simple gesture, he made the back cast. The line flew out behind him and to one side. When it was as far back as it was going to go, he made the front cast.

The line floated gently through the air in an arc that was a pure pleasure to behold. The fly dropped down in the very center of the newly created slick spot.

Everybody held their breaths.

A trout exploded up out of the water, hook in mouth. It leaped high in the air, its tail swinging, and landed with a wet slap upon the dry lakebed.

“Sweet merciful Jesus,” someone in the crowd moaned.

H’ard trotted over to the fish, picked it up by the line, cut its throat, and carried it back to the crowd standing on the shoreline. They parted as if beholding the miracle of the loaves and fishes.

Andy had, meanwhile, walked to the flivver and returned. “I’m ready to weigh,” he said. He indicated a set of spring scales as if they’d been sitting in the dirt the whole time. The cash that he had been holding had already disappeared into his pockets. H’ard hung the trout from the hook at the bottom of the scales, then turned away nonchalantly to disassemble his rod.

With a *screech*, the weight indicator lurched downward, stopping at two pounds even.

“I’ll be go to hell,” said the proprietor.

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then Andy laughed merrily.

“Well, I reckon we’ve all had our spot of fun,” Andy said, digging out the money from his pockets. He started handing it back to its original owners. “But I cannot take your money on false pretenses. H’ard here is, as you might well guess from what you just saw, a half-breed water elemental on his mother’s side. Water will simply do whatever he wants. A gift such as his comes along but once in a lifetime and even though he is a bit of a practical joker, which it goes without saying comes from his father’s line, there is simply no way that we can take your money under false pretenses. Here you go, sir. Not that we could not use it—we have a big-ticket engagement in Albuquerque but that is a week away and gasoline prices are ruinous nowadays—but it would be flat-out wrong. No, sir, you only bet three dollars, I was most particular careful to take note of that.”

A laugh of relief gusted through the crowd as banknotes were crinkled back into wallets and socks. H’ard, meanwhile, raised one eyebrow ever so slightly. To which Andy responded with an equally microscopic jerk of his head down the street, where a great bull of a man in a sheriff’s uniform was leaning against a pole of the Woolworth’s arcade, watching the scene intently.

H’ard gave the man only the slightest glance. Then he returned to seeing to his bamboo rod, the two halves of which seemed to twitch in his hand.

“You might as well have this,” Andy said, unhooking the fish and handing it to the hardware store owner. “H’ard pure and simple loves to fish, but ain’t neither of us can stand the taste.”

All the way back to the flivver, the bamboo sticks rattled and shook in H’ard’s hands.

* * *

After they had stopped by the hotel to book a room for the night, the two men went into the Hot Griddle Restaurant, which was almost without customers. On every empty table, the cups and plates were turned upside down. A less than chipper waitress, who looked like she was saving up to someday buy a decent meal for herself, took their dinner orders. Meat loaf with gravy and mashed potatoes, collards on the side, for Andy and chicken fried steak with succotash for H’ard.

“That was never a two-pound trout,” Andy said when the dishes had been cleared away and they were waiting for their coffee. “That fish was a pound and a half, a pound and three-quarters tops. If we’d had to use anybody else’s scales, we would have lost every dollar we had.”

"Can't lose what you don't possess," H'ard replied philosophically.

At that moment, a slim girl with a tremendous mass of red hair and freckles to match slid into the booth alongside Andy, locked eyes with H'ard, and said, "I'm not wearing any underwear."

"Heaven help us," Andy said. "What kind of a way to begin a conversation is that? No how-dee-do, no 'Hi, my name is—,' no big sunny smile that declares as good as words that you hope we might all of us wind up as friends. No, just a bald declarative sentence that combines a complete ignorance of the social niceties with a distasteful disregard for the importance of personal hygiene. I don't know when I've ever felt half so offended this early on in an acquaintanceship."

H'ard grunted. "Let's start over." He extended a big hand across the table. "Name's H'ard. My friend's Andy. What's your name, sweetie?"

The girl took his hand and shook. "It's Jezebel."

"Oh, it is *not*," Andy said. "Nobody's going to believe decent Baptist folk gave their daughter any such ridiculous name as that. I don't believe it, H'ard here don't believe it, and I don't believe you're fool enough to believe for an instant that we believe it neither. Your real name is probably Susan or Ellie or Mildred or something sensible like that."

The girl turned as red as her freckles. "It's Lolly. And you ain't no gentleman for forcing me to admit to it."

"Pleasure to meet you, Lolly," H'ard said. "Now why don't you tell us just what it is you're up to, talking to two strangers on no pretense at all. Not that I object. But I *am* curious."

"I intend to get the hell out of this nothing-happening town."

"Ambition is admirable in a child," Andy said. "Only, exactly how is talking with us going to accomplish that?"

"Gonna hook up with you two. I'll let you pop my cherry in return."

"What in the name of God's little green apples are you talking about, girl? Your lips are moving but listen hard as I might, I don't hear a single syllable of sense coming out from between them."

Lolly scowled. "I don't see what's so difficult to understand. Y'all got a car and I overheard my father saying that you're obviously criminals of some sort or other. We can come to terms. I've got a few heavy petting sessions under my belt and I'm ready to move on to unfettered moral depravity."

"Heaven help us," Andy moaned. "Could this situation get any worse?"

H'ard, who had been listening intensely, said, "Tell me something, little darlin'. What exactly does your daddy do for a living?"

"He's the sheriff."

"Heaven help us!"

"So I reckon you got to cut me in on whatever you got going on here, and promise to take me away with you when you go. Or else I'll tell my father you done to my fair young body what any sensible men *would* have agreed to do just now."

H'ard's eyes shifted away from her and his craggy face sprouted a ghost of a smile. "Well," he said, "no time like the present."

Lolly's head spun around so fast her hair hit Andy in the face. By the time her father was all the way through the door, she'd ducked into the kitchen and fled out the back way.

* * *

"Evening," the lawman said. He was everybody's caricature of a big-bellied, squinty-eyed, snapper-jawed small town bully of a sheriff, but that didn't make him any the less dangerous. "Just came by to caution you boys not to leave town anytime soon."

"My apologies, sir, but who might you be?" Andy asked politely.

"Samuel Cooke. Sheriff Cooke to you boys."

Andy introduced the two of them, using last names he was almost certain had no criminal records attached to them (H'ard nodded so slightly it might be mistaken for a man catching himself from nodding off), then said, "Would it be forward of me to ask you why we're to stay in this fine metropolis of yours?"

"You boys look questionable to me. I wouldn't be surprised if that vehicle of yours is stolen. Gonna telegraph the state your particulars and license number, see if maybe you are of interest to anybody."

"Well, I don't mean to be negative, sir, but I've got to tell you: I just simply do not believe in the telegraph, and that's a fact. New-fangled nonsense device like that is prone to breaking down exactly when you need it most. Why, wires get broke and then all the electricity goes astray and flies helter-skelter all over the place, frightening horses and inconveniencing honest citizens. Fella writes down a two-dollar message and a puff of wind blows the paper right out the window. In all the confusion nobody even remembers who sent the darn thing or what it said. No, sir, put not your trust in machines. One man, one mule, and a leather sack of paper envelopes with a magenta two-cent George Washington stamp and a hand-cancellation on the front does the job best, is what I say. Takes a little longer but a dozen times more sure."

"If you want our particulars," H'ard said, "just ask."

"All right, I will." Sheriff Cooke folded his arms and waited.

"I, sir, am an adjunct professor in metaphysical studies, currently on sabbatical from Frostburg State College of Thaumaturgy, situated at the head of the beautiful Georges Creek Valley in the great state of—"

The sheriff snorted like a bull. "Stop. I never yet met a college professor that talked anything like you do. As for your friend—I know what you told those gullible souls down by the lake, and I'm going to let you boys in on a little secret: I come from a long line of witch-finders, and I got me a touch of the third eye." Addressing H'ard directly, he said, "Half-breed elemental, my maiden aunt's foot! You are nothing but a common fish wizard."

"No crime in that," H'ard said.

"Whether you doubt our credentials or not, it is a plain and simple fact, sir, that we do have business elsewhere. In Albuquerque, to be precise, where the city fathers have contracted us to meliorate a certain unfortunate natural . . ." Andy's voice trailed off, for the sheriff's ugly mug had just split in a big, mean grin.

"Now it all makes sense," Sam Cooke said. He placed his hands on the table and, leaning forward, said in a low voice, "You boys are intending to run the Dust Giant scam, aren't you?"

"What? No!" Andy cried in alarm. "I don't even know what you're talking about, officer!"

"Well, I'll tell you what. I am going to *let* you run your little grift. In fact, I'm going to help you do it. In return for which, I ask only for half the proceeds and your immediate departure afterward."

"I see three people here," H'ard observed. "One-third would be fairer."

"Half," Sheriff Cooke said, pulling away from the table. "I'll provide you with the dynamite at no additional charge. Oh, and since we're partners now—" he picked up the check and tore it in two—"your meal's on me." Over by the cash register, the waitress looked daggers into his back, but said not a word.

On the way out, the sheriff paused and added, "By the way. If you see my daughter again, tell her she gets the strap tonight for consorting with strangers."

* * *

The next day, H'ard and Andy were the talk of the countryside. Their returning the money lost on a sucker's bet was a magnanimous gesture that particularly impressed those who privately doubted that they themselves would have done as much

under similar circumstances. Furthermore, the revelation of the exceptional nature of H'ard's purported powers was bolstered by rumors that Sheriff Cooke had judiciously planted here and there about town. The upshot of which was that in no time at all, it was a known fact throughout Paradise County first, that the two strangers had the ability to break the drought. Second, that this miraculous talent they perseverely intended to squander upon Albuquerque, an out-of-state city with no known positive qualities whatsoever. And third, that something should be done about this lamentable situation.

After feverish consultation, a committee of the town's civic leaders was deputed to call upon H'ard and Andy. They arrived at the Terminal Hotel (so named because it was located at the end of an interurban spur of the Atchison, Topeka, and El Dorado Railway) in three separate automobiles, scattering dust devils before them, one of which paused to flip them the finger before spinning away, giggling, to join its compeers. There they found the two men, with a maximum of fuss and delay, loading luggage into their flivver.

"Sirs," said the eldest, grayest, most dignified, and by testimony of his collar, only ordained member of the three, "a word with you, if you please."

Andy straightened from the trunk, smiling. "Well, Reverend, my associate and I were just on the verge of setting out to put eighty or perhaps a hundred miles of our journey behind us before nightfall, which I know you will agree is an ambitious undertaking, requiring not only determination and grit but all the free time we can give it. However, being genial souls and courteous to a fault, I can see no reason why H'ard and I should fail to give you and your friends a fair hearing."

"Sure," H'ard agreed.

At this they all ambled into the nearby hotel bar. There, the city fathers introduced themselves as the Reverend Aldis Singletary; Hiram Aloysius Bergstralh, mayor; and F. W. Showalter, undertaker. Sliding behind the bar, Reverend Singletary poured them all a schooner of beer apiece, to establish an amiable tone.

"Sirs, I will get right to the point," Mayor Bergstralh said, when all had wet their whistles. "Word is that you have the power to break the drought that has been oppressing our city, our county, and indeed our beloved state for the past six years. Is this true?"

"Only the Almighty has the power to compel nature to do His bidding, as I am certain the Reverend here will assure you is good, solid Christian doctrine. In normal times, H'ard and I could no more order the heavens to split open and bestow life-giving rain upon your dry fields and empty reservoirs than flap our arms and fly away. Howsomever, not all weather is natural. This drought, for one, surely nobody could mistake it for the work of Divine Providence. No, sirs, what you have here is the doings of a Dust Giant that has settled down into the land itself, and made this county its home. We could not help but note how the cups and glasses in your fine restaurant were inverted. You have already encountered it and have no notion when it will next decide to bury your houses, silt up your doorways, sift in through your every crack and window seam. Such creatures are inhospitable to water and so, by their very presence, they drive it away. Hence, your drought."

"Stands to reason," H'ard amplified.

"But the drought extends across seven states," Rev. Singletary objected. "How could one creature—even one exhibiting the strongest supernatural power—cause all that?"

"The drought extends across seven states *now*," Andy explained. "But if you cast back your memory, you'll find that it started in one region, and spread outward, bit by bit, county by county. Exactly as if—and it is my conviction that this is precisely

how it chanced to occur—a female Dust Giant had a litter, and her cubs proceeded to spread out, each one finding a welcoming environment and settling into it as they come of age.”

“Nevertheless,” H’ard said.

“Nevertheless, all this is of merely theoretical interest, gentlemen, compelling to an academic such as myself, less so to others. In practical terms, using H’ard’s tremendous inborn powers over water and my own deep reading into such forbidden tomes as the *Livre d’Eibon*, *The Mysteries of the Worm*, *Al Azif* (a negligible work, to be honest, its reputation notwithstanding), the *Pnakotic Manuscripts*, the *Unpronounceable Cults* of . . . well, they’re unpronounceable. Not to bore you, gentlemen, but the solution to your problem proves to be laughably simple: an exorcism. Now, I am sure that you have tried that already. What sensible man would not? Even if it wasn’t exactly sanctioned by his bishop, he’d . . . I see you blushing, Reverend. But the truth of it is that just as the angels in heaven are organized by rank into Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, and so on down the line, so too do the chaotic powers have their own hierarchy of Fate Demons, Elementals, Gobelines, Incubi and Succubi, Drudes, Cambions, et cetera. A Dust Giant, I am very sorry to have to inform you, is a full-fledged Gobeline, and there are not many human beings who have the inborn fortitude to stand before one without dying instantaneously, usually through spontaneous desiccation.”

“But I can,” H’ard said.

“H’ard is that rare natural exception. Which, gentlemen, and I do apologize if I have gone on rather long here, is why we are urgently required in Albuquerque.”

The mayor cleared his throat. “It just may be that we are interested in contracting your services.”

“Sirs, I don’t know if you are aware of how much money a full-scale exorcism would entail. Now, I know what you’re going to say, that casting out the Dust Demon would pay for itself many times over in the first year alone. And of course you could amortize some of the cost by selling tickets to what is, admittedly, a crowd-pleaser of a spectacle. Heck, some of you might even turn a profit by providing concessions selling wiener sandwiches, ginger beer, helium balloons, and other such gimcrackery. But we cannot in all good conscience charge you less than an exorbitant fee for our services, when the fine city of Albuquerque, withering under the curse of their own demon, is waiting for us to bring them relief. Further, I am here to tell you that exorcising a Dust Giant is not like casting out a garden variety demon or nameless horror, which task could be safely left to the Reverend here, no. It takes a lot out of a man. When H’ard is done with his work, I will have to immediately whisk him off to a sanitarium, where he will lie abed, weak and helpless for months, living on gruel and weak tea like a dry Methodist, and dreaming of the day when he can rear up and tear into a watercress sandwich.”

“It ain’t no fun, I’ll tell you that,” H’ard said.

“So you see, I flat-out don’t think you can afford us. I say that as a friend and someone who genuinely cares for your wellbeing.”

Mayor Bergstrahl looked like a man who had just bit into a sausage sandwich and found a dead mouse. “Exactly how much would it cost to buy your services out from under Albuquerque?”

Andy named a figure.

“Plus expenses,” H’ard added.

“Expenses?” F.A. Showalter, the undertaker, who had been silent up until now, said. “What kind of expenses?”

“Well, first of all,” H’ard said, “we’re going to need bleachers.”

* * *

Three days later, H'ard and Andy were standing before the half-built bleachers when Lolly, sullen as usual, appeared to say, "Got another message for y'all from my sorry excuse for a father. He says to tell you the dynamite and such are in the boot of your car."

"The boot? Surely you must mean in the trunk. What in heaven's name is a well-brought-up Southern girl like yourself doing using a nonsensical Brit word like that? Next thing you know, you'll be getting knackered and gobsmacked and eating bangers and mash or toad-in-the-hole and for all I know parping on the hooter and where will civilization be then, I want to know? The question as good as answers itself."

"Where'd you pick up that word, sweetie?" H'ard asked.

Looking down at the ground, Lolly mumbled, "From a book."

"That's good. Read all the books you can and someday you'll be as smart as Andy."

"I don't *want* to be smart!" Lolly said in a fury. "I want to get the hell out of town. And be deflowered. And lead a life of wealth, adventure, and debauchery." She began to sob.

Both men watched her with interest.

"Not bad," H'ard said eventually. "But it needs work."

"The lack of actual tears gives you away," Andy explained. "It's them little details you got to watch. That's why experienced ladies always dab at their eyes with a delicate lace hankie when they cry. Sometimes they might spit on it on the sly, so as to smear their mascara. Not that a young lady your age should be wearing mascara. But the day is coming."

"Lolly, darlin', have you considered that your life would be a whole lot easier if you weren't all the time fighting with your daddy?" H'ard said.

"You mean being a goody-goody simpering little girlie-girl like he wants? You try doing that yourself sometime, if you think it's such a smart idea."

The two men looked at one another. "You fill her in on the theory, P'fessor," H'ard said. "I'll get her started on the application."

Adopting his gentlest, kindest tone, Andy said, "Listen to me, child. It is a sad but incontrovertible fact that we live in a patriarchal society. Legally, women are treated as being little better than chattel. Your gender is in fact a subject population, bullied and ruled over by outside conquerors, which class of oppressors we may call, for lack of a better term, 'men.' Now, traditionally, the powerless have had only one weapon available to them, and that is deceit. All slaves, from the time of the Old Testament through the ancient Greeks and Romans to the unfortunate years before the War Between the States, have acquired a reputation for having a slippery way with the facts, this being the only sensible response to their situation. What H'ard is telling you is to *lie* to your father. It's the simplest act in the world, it costs not a penny, and there's nothing like it for easing a man's—or woman's—woeful journey through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. I recommend it without compunction. In fact, I am ashamed of your mama for not telling you all this a long time ago."

"My mother died when I was a baby."

"Oh," Andy said. He started to say something more, but then clamped his mouth shut again.

H'ard took over the conversation. "Tell your daddy we got his message. Then tell him you want to go shopping for the kind of dresses you hate. Men have got no idea how much women's clothes cost. Easiest thing in the world to doctor the receipts and pocket a dollar or three." He glanced over to Andy. "We'd best see to the banners now. Saturday's coming down on us fast."

They left Lolly behind, her eyes wide with surmise.

* * *

By Friday night, all the dried lakefront accessible from the roadway had been fenced off, the concession stands had been built and decorated with bunting, the bleachers were ready, the tickets and souvenir programs had been printed, and an ostentatiously reluctant Sheriff Cooke had been coaxed into holding H'ard and Andy's fee ready to be paid out to them at the successful conclusion of the exorcism. People from towns around had flocked to Paradise Lake and bought up every available room and set up tents at the edge of town, in order to be early in line for the best seats. Further, a banquet was held in the Terminal Hotel ballroom in honor of the drought-breakers, it being established that immediately after tomorrow's ceremony, H'ard would have to be whisked away to a sanitarium to recover from the ordeal.

After giving and receiving many speeches—H'ard's "Much obliged and I thank you," being by far the shortest—the two men excused themselves early, pleading weariness and a hard day ahead. To resounding cheers, they retired to their room and then, after a judicious waiting period, slipped out the window and down the fire escape.

Arming themselves with a dark-lantern, a pickaxe, two shovels, and the demolition kit Sheriff Cooke had provided, they made their furtive way out onto the dry lakebed. The sky was moonless, cloudless, and thick with stars.

"Right here looks good to me. Insofar as I can see anything in this godless murk, which I purely cannot."

"Not there," H'ard said. He paced off at least a hundred steps more, leaving long behind them the spot where he'd pulled the trout. "Here."

"Why this is smack dab in the middle of the lakebed, where the mud is baked the hardest. It's going to be genuine, backbreaking field-hand labor digging here. Why on earth would you be making difficulties for us like this?"

"Dunno. Got me a feeling. Best you not describe our toil any further."

They set to work. A long, sweaty time later, the hole was done. Cautiously, they lowered the roped-together dynamite sticks and blasting cap into it, attached the detonator wire, and then covered it over again, gently patting the surface flat. Next, they reeled out the wire toward the far shore. From the bleachers, it would probably be unnoticeable. But just in case, they laid it out crooked and irregular, like one of the hundreds of cracks crisscrossing the dried mud. H'ard dribbled a little of the excess dirt from the excavation over the wire here and there, moistening it with water from a canteen he carried at his belt, for further verisimilitude. "There," he said when they reached the crumbling, dry-as-dust reeds directly opposite the bleachers. "If anybody can spot that, then good luck to 'em." He unspooled the last of the wire as he walked through the patch of reeds, disappearing from sight on the far side of them.

Out of nowhere, Lolly said, "What are you two up to?"

Andy shrieked and clutched his heart. "Land's sake! Don't you never sneak up on a man like that, girl! I like to had a coronary, which I imagine would have given you a good giggle at my expense, but which from my own admittedly biased perspective would not have been one bit funny at all. No, ma'am, it would not."

H'ard, who had excellent night vision, stepped out of the reeds and said, "I see you got on an unflattering dress."

"Right as rain, mister, and I like it too!"

"Just a frazz less perky and I believe you've got it."

"Well, hell," Lolly said. "There sure is a lot of nuance to being deceitful."

"Why, of course there is," Andy said. "That's why its practitioners are called confidence artists and not confidence businessmen or confidence housewives or confidence sewing machine repairmen or any such nonsense as that. You certainly don't know much about the world, girl."

"No, I don't. But I'm fixing to change that right now."

After a long, hard silence, Andy said, "That sounds ominous."

"I've been running my feet off carrying messages back and forth between y'all and my alleged father to the point where I reckon I know enough now to put the pair of you *and* him behind bars. I guess you know me well enough to know how much pleasure that would give me. But much as I'd like to stick it to that worthless, no-account sumbidge, I want to get out of this here town even more. So I'm entertaining suggestions. Boys?"

"Well, this is ingratitude put into human form and taught to sass her elders. Here you are, out past curfew, with money in your pocket and a brand-new ugly dress to boot, all thanks to us, and you're thinking of putting the squeeze on two men who were your only benefactors in your time of need. I—"

H'ard held up a hand. "Andy, stop. Lolly, we give in."

"You do?"

"We do?"

"We'll cut you in on the scam. We'll take you with us when we vamoose. You have my sworn word on that. Plus we're going to give you something any young lady your age would give her eyeteeth for."

"What's that?"

H'ard parted the reeds and turned the lantern on them. The narrow beam of light revealed a small plunger box in the shallow gully behind them. "Miss Lolly, we are going to let you blast a honking big hole in your hometown."

There was a moment of awed silence. Then the girl said, "Well, damn."

* * *

Saturday dawned hot and clear. Assorted vehicles began rolling into town by eight. People crowded into the Hot Griddle to watch H'ard and Andy eat their breakfasts as if beholding exotic zoological specimens transported from deepest, darkest Africa to be displayed in an unconvincing simulacrum of their natural habitat.

By eleven the heat was so fierce that the surface of the lakebed rippled like a mirage. The far-off reeds might have been cobras weaving in the air.

The ceremonies began at noon with a marching band and some shopworn-looking floats, resurrected from the local high school's Reunion Day parade, depicting various tableaux from the Bible or the Book of Thoth, which didn't exactly fit the day's theme, but had pretty girls waving from atop them, so everyone agreed that was all right.

Then there were speeches, of which H'ard's, "I thank you and much obliged," was easily the best received. Finally, however, the preliminaries were done. To enthusiastic cheering, Andy then drove the Model T, decked out with dyed turkey feathers and strings of faded pink paper Christmas bells, across the lakebed to the south shore. There, he and H'ard climbed out and strode purposefully back toward the lake's center.

Again, cheers rose up from the crowd, enfeebled by distance but growing as a sense took hold of the assembled that this was *really happening*, that somebody was *finally doing something* about the drought. From so far away the only person identifiable was Mayor Bergstrahl, who wore a straw boater.

Andy took his handkerchief and swiped at the back of his neck. "I declare, this must be the easiest money we have ever earned. It would be just like shooting ducks in a barrel if the aforementioned waterfowl had previously been duped into assembling the staves and bands of that barrel, jollified into hauling buckets of water until it was full, and then sweet-talked into diving headlong into it immediately after clipping their own flight feathers."

H'ard said nothing, just looked up at the naked sun.

The previous night Andy had explained to Lolly how the event would play out: "H'ard starts out right by the spot where we buried your daddy's whizz-bangers and

then throws back his head and screams in a most astonishing fashion. After which he does his interpretation of the howling dervish dance, while flinging all sorts of colored powders into the air. While all this is going on, I unobtrusively retreat some distance away and then wait. H'ard will be whooping and hollering and carrying on in a manner that will look to be random but will end up right by where I'm standing, which is well away from the explosives.

"Suddenly, H'ard goes still. Not a twitch, not the least motion of any kind. This signifies that he is locked in spiritual combat with the Powers of Hell. I will then raise my arms to the heavens to call upon the Merciful and Almighty to deliver us from the clutches of Drought and Evil. When I do that, I want you to count to five and then push down that plunger. About half the lakebed will then fly up into the sky, looking very much like a Dust Giant being cast out of Paradise Lake. It will be a terrifying sight and the cause of such confusion and chaos that we will easily be able to disappear into the clouds of dust. If we're quick enough, it will look like the demon gobbled us right down and they'll even put a wreath on our marker. Ordinarily, this is when we would leave. However, we must then collect our share of the proceeds from your father, who would be alarmed to see you in our company. So you will skedaddle to the bar in the Terminal Hotel, where we three will rendezvous after that chore is attended to. Thereupon, we will hightail it down the state road so fast and far that by sundown this town will be a distant memory and within a week you wouldn't be able to recall its name, even if you wanted to."

"Got that?" H'ard asked.

Lolly's eyes were bright. "Oh yes," she said giddily. "Yes, I will. Yes."

And that was exactly how it went, at first.

H'ard flung blue powder into the air and, shouting crazy made-up words, began to stomp and hop and dance in great looping circles. In a seeming frenzy, he spun and leaped, hair and face glittering with sweat and the blue powder that fell back upon him in the dead still air. There were several pouches at his belt. He dipped a hand into the one that contained red powder.

Abruptly, a wind out of the south, as hot as the blast from an open oven, buffeted Andy. He took his eyes off H'ard, put a hand across his brow, and squinted through the roiling heat. The distant horizon seemed to be rising slowly into the air.

A second gust of wind hit him, from the east this time. He looked back at H'ard.

H'ard had pulled off his shirt and thrown it into the air. Something gleamed in his right hand as he twirled. Horrified, Andy recognized it as his fish-gutting knife with the hooked blade. H'ard's eyes were completely white, rolled up in his head.

Andy reflexively started forward. But then H'ard swung the knife down once, twice, and an "X" of blood sluiced down his chest. Droplets rained onto the parched earth. Andy froze in his tracks. "What in heaven's name do you think you're doing, you damfool you?" he cried.

From the bleachers came a delayed collective "Ooooooh!"

The wind kicked harder, shoving Andy first one way, then another. A low but powerful rumble, like a highballing freight train coming down the tracks, shook the ground underfoot.

H'ard began chanting again, but the words were *words* this time. Ancient and strange though they were, they sounded familiar to Andy. He'd heard them or something very like them recited by a shaman from some Plains tribe—he could not recall which one exactly because he was distracted by H'ard's voice, grown louder and more resonant than any human's should properly be, and by the screams of the people in the bleachers as they leaped to their feet, pointed in terror at the clouds, ran off in all directions but toward the lake. A straw boater spun up erratically into the sky.

In the south the swelling horizon had become an onrushing wall of certain doom, billowing so high that soon it must inevitably blot out the sun.

H'ard dropped to one knee, stabbed the fishing knife into the ground again and again and again, then sprang up and returned to his whirling, knife held out at arm's length. Andy shrank away just in time to avoid its blade.

Involuntarily, almost as if he were merely a puppet and had no choice but to play his part, Andy flung out his arms. "Dear Lord," he prayed to the deity he had not believed in since the seventh grade, "please spare my half-witted friend from the consequences of whatever idiot notion he has taken into what passes in him for a brain. And if—"

Which was as far as he got before the gust front of the monstrous dust storm struck, turning the whole world orange.

Which was when the center of the lakebed exploded.

Which did not play out as expected.

Having dug down into that packed earth the night before, Andy knew that what the blast should have produced was just about anything but the geyser of water that shot up into the air as if it were trying to punch a hole in the sky. Nor was it natural that the moisture that rained down upon the lakebed, the bleachers, and the fleeing citizens of Paradise County was no heavier than the spray off a waterfall. The bulk of the water hung in the air, where it flowed itself into a shape recognizable as the form of a woman a hundred feet tall.

Andy's skin ran cold. His mouth went dry. He could think of not a word to say. Not one.

H'ard, meanwhile, continued stomping about in circles and slashing and stabbing his knife as though engaged in a life-and-death struggle against the thick dust now engulfing him. Where the giantess's feet touched the ground, water boiled up around them, spreading outward fast. In a quarter of an hour at most, by Andy's reckoning, a man standing where he was now would be completely underwater. It was time to leave. Yet he could only stare in awe as the titanic woman opened her arms wide, as if welcoming the dust storm into them. The air crackled around her and lightning sizzled within the onrushing cloud.

The bleachers were lost to sight now. The town might have been a myth. Andy could see nothing but H'ard before him, and H'ard was flagging, stumbling. He pitched forward and Andy caught him.

H'ard's head collapsed on Andy's shoulder. The knife fell to the ground.

At times of crisis, Andy found strength by talking. "H'ard," he said, "I did not at any moment imagine you would need to recuperate in a sanitarium for real, although to be fair I also did not at any moment anticipate that you would tap into the powers of the First Mother, which achievement would be of the greatest anthropological interest to me were it not for the fact that we are in danger of drowning if we don't get our butts in gear." A surge of water ran over the toes of his shoes. He stepped quickly back from it, dragging H'ard after him.

They had to get to the flivver. Assuming they could find it. Andy couldn't actually see the thing in all the dust.

H'ard coughed and drew himself upright. "First Mother?" he muttered. "Wuzzat?"

"Corn Woman," said Andy, "known to some as Selu, Yellow Woman, or Iyatiku, unless of course you're a Zuni, in which case there are eight of her—"

"We catch us any trout?" H'ard asked muzzily. He was barely able to walk at all, but he let Andy tug him away from the pursuing water. Their feet splashed in it now but they seemed to be keeping pace with its growth. H'ard's head turned back toward its source, then craned upward to behold the giant woman pulling the dust storm closer to herself, concentrating its stuff into something almost solid. "Huh."

Andy could see their automobile up ahead, if dimly, its tires yet untouched by the advancing waters. He began to hope that there might yet be a happy ending to this particular story.

“Corn Woman, you say.”

“I expect it’s Iyatiku, as she’s known in particular to come from deep underground.”

“Then who’s the fella?”

Still pushing against the dust and the wind toward their destination, Andy risked one quick look back. The clear water of the giant woman’s naked shape contrasted with the dark dust clouds she embraced. Nevertheless, they did seem to be consolidating into a male form. It was odd that the dust and the water did not repel each other. Opposites, he supposed, attracted. These two, at any rate, certainly seemed attracted to each other. In fact, they . . .

“Lord love a duck!” Andy cried. “Whatever are they doing? And right out in the open too!”

H’ard’s energy was returning to him at an astonishing rate. He took the lead now, flinging open the flivver’s door and shoving Andy behind the wheel. As he turned the crank to get the motor going, the two giants crashed down to the earth, clenched together—away from H’ard and Andy, fortunately—and began to roll around in passionate abandon, with no regard for the town beneath them. Andy heard the sound of buildings collapsing, of cars tumbling down a street as they were washed toward the lake.

“I surely hope Miss Lolly’s not watching this disgraceful spectacle,” Andy commented as he frantically put the car in gear. “It is far too educational by half.”

“Say,” H’ard said. “What happened to my shirt?”

* * *

They were a good three miles down the road when H’ard said, “Uh oh.”

“Uh oh? What do you mean by that? Uh oh indeed. That phrase tells me something is wrong, but I’ll be dogged, flogged, and tied up like a hog if I have the faintest idea what. I swear, sometimes you are taciturn to the point of being one degree off comatose. If there is a less communicative man on the face of this sweet planet, I have not had the honor—”

“Police car.”

Andy looked in the mirror. Sheriff Cooke was just visible through the dust-streaked windshield of his prowler, face red and hands clenched on the wheel. He was a fair piece down the road, but gaining on them rapidly.

“I cannot say that I am favorably impressed that the sheriff would take the time to pursue a personal grudge in the middle of the supernatural destruction of a town that it is his sworn duty to protect. To say nothing of the extremely short gestation period of such primal creatures, which means that within hours he will find himself dealing with an entire litter of—”

“Think you can outrace him?” H’ard asked.

“Oh, that thing can’t catch us,” Andy scoffed. “Anybody can tell just looking at it that it’s a rattletrap that’s fixing to fall apart at the slightest provocation. Any minute now, the radiator is going to explode, the hood is going to go flying off, and all four tires are going to burst at once. That thing is about to throw a rod and go right off the road and into a field where it’ll sink to the axles so deep in the dust that they’ll need a team of plow horses and a blacksmith to pull it out. It’ll be a plain and simple miracle and one that makes men gawk in disbelief that Sheriff Cooke will climb out unhurt.”

Behind them, a gout of white steam blew the hood off the police car while, simultaneously, all four tires disintegrated underneath it. Skewing wildly, it plowed into a cornfield, exploding the ancient stalks into powder.

A mass of flame-red hair surrounding an ungodly lot of freckles popped up over the back seat, causing Andy to shriek and swerve off the pavement.

"How'd you do that? How'd you make that happen to that fat old bastard's car?" Lolly demanded.

"What in the name of all that is righteous are you doing, alone and unchaperoned, in our vehicle, young lady?" The flivver bumped and jolted over fallow farmland. "I am scandalized just being in your presence."

Lolly turned to H'ard. "*You'll* answer my question, won't you?"

H'ard nodded. "Sure." He thought for a moment. "Andy's a scoffomancer." He thought for another moment. Then he shrugged. "That's about it."

"Lord God of Mercy," Andy said when he'd pulled the car back onto the road. "Whatever did I do to deserve this?"

"I took your advice about lying to my patriarchal oppressors," Lolly said. "So instead of waiting in the bar where you solemnly swore you'd meet me, I stowed away in the backseat."

"Right smart of you," H'ard said. "If duplicitous."

"Also," Lolly said, hauling a leather satchel up over the seat and dropping it between the two men, "I took advantage of the dust storm coming on to nab the money my daddy was supposed to share with y'all out of the boot of his police car."

H'ard picked up the satchel, looked inside, held it up for Andy to see. There was a great deal of money within.

"So the way I figure it—" Lolly began.

"Two things," H'ard said, before Lolly could say another word. "Ain't neither of us gonna touch you. Not today, not tomorrow, not ten years from now, not never. You can just put that thought right out of your head. Capisce?"

Lolly folded her arms and pouted. "Well, damnation," she said. "What's the other thing?"

"You ever heard of the badger game? 'Cause I think you'd be right good at it."

"Heaven help us all," moaned Andy.