

The Hitchhiker

By Lucille Fletcher



ORSON WELLES:

Personally, I've never met anybody who didn't like a good ghost story. But I know a lot of people who think there are a lot of people who don't like a good ghost story. For the benefit of these, at least, I go on record at the outset of this evening's entertainment with a sober assurance that, although blood may be curdled on this program, none will be spilt. There's no shooting, knifing, throttling, axing or poisoning here. No clanking chains, no cobwebs, no bony and/or hairy hands appearing from secret panels or, better yet, bedroom curtains. If it's any part of that dear old phosphorescent foolishness that people who don't like ghost stories don't like ...

MUSIC:

GENTLY OUT

WELLES:

... then, again I promise you, we haven't got it. Not tonight. What we DO have is a thriller. If it's half as good as we think it is, you can call it a shocker. It's already been called "a real Orson Welles story." Now, frankly, I don't know what this means. I've been on the air, directing and acting in my own shows for quite a while now and I don't suppose I've done more than half a dozen thrillers in all that time. Honestly, I don't think even THAT many. But it seems I do have a reputation for the uncanny. Quite possibly, a little escapade of mine, involving a couple of planets

which shall be nameless, is responsible. Doesn't really matter. Don't think I disapprove of thrillers. I don't. A story doesn't have to appeal to the heart, it can also appeal to the spine. Sometimes you want your heart to be warmed and - sometimes you want your spine to tingle. The tingling, it's to be hoped, will be quite audible as you listen tonight ... to "The Hitch-Hiker." That's the name of our story, "The Hitch-Hiker."

MUSIC:

FOR AN OMINOUS START ... THEN IN BG

SOUND:

(AUTO DRIVES BY)

ADAMS:

I'm in an auto camp on Route 66 just west of Gallup, New Mexico.

If I tell it, perhaps it'll help me -- keep me from going - going crazy. I gotta tell this quickly. I'm not crazy now - I feel perfectly well, except that I'm running a slight temperature.

My name is Ronald Adams. I'm thirty-six years of age, unmarried, tall, dark with a black moustache. I drive a 1940 Buick, license number 6Y175189. I was born in Brooklyn. All this I know. I know that I'm at this moment perfectly sane, that it's not me who's gone mad -- but something else, something utterly beyond my control.

I've got to speak quickly. At any minute the link may break. This may be the last thing I ever tell on earth - the last night I ever see the stars.

MUSIC:

OUT

ADAMS:

Six days ago I left Brooklyn to drive to California.

MRS. ADAMS:

(APPREHENSIVE) Goodbye, son. Good luck to you, my boy.

ADAMS:

(LIGHTLY) Goodbye, mother. Here, give me a kiss. Then I'll go.

MRS. ADAMS:

I'll come out with you to the car.

ADAMS:

Oh, no, it's raining. Stay here at the door.

MRS. ADAMS:

(STIFLES A SOB)

ADAMS:

(LAUGHS) Hey, what's this, tears? I thought you promised me you wouldn't cry.

MRS. ADAMS:

Oh, I know, dear. I - I'm sorry. But I - I do hate to see you go.

ADAMS:

(CHUCKLES, REASSURING) Mother, I'll be back. I'll only be on the coast three months.

MRS. ADAMS:

Oh, it isn't that. It's - it's just the trip. Ronald, I wish you weren't driving.

ADAMS:

Oh, mother. There you go again. People do it every day.

MRS. ADAMS:

I know, but - you'll be careful, won't you? Promise me you'll be extra careful. Don't fall asleep or drive fast or pick up any strangers on the road.

ADAMS:

Gosh, you'd think I was still seventeen, to hear you talk.

MRS. ADAMS:

And wire me as soon as you get to Hollywood ...

ADAMS:

Of course.

MRS. ADAMS:

... won't you, son?

ADAMS:

Of course I will! Don't you worry. There isn't anything going to happen. It's just eight days of perfectly simple driving on smooth, decent, civilized roads with a hot dog or a hamburger stand every ten miles. (FADES)

MUSIC:

FOR A SOMBER TRANSITION, THEN IN BG

SOUND:

(CAR ENGINE IN AGREEMENT WITH FOLLOWING:)

ADAMS:

I was in fine spirits. The drive ahead of me, even the loneliness, seemed like a lark.

But I reckoned without him.

Crossing Brooklyn Bridge that morning in the rain, I saw a man - leaning against the cables. He seemed to be waiting for a lift. There were spots of fresh rain on his shoulders. He was carrying a cheap overnight bag in one hand. He was thin, nondescript, with a cap pulled down over his eyes.

I would have forgotten him completely except that just an hour later, while crossing the Pulaski Skyway over the Jersey Flats, I saw him again. At least, he looked like the same person. He was standing now with one thumb pointing west. I couldn't figure out how he'd got there, but I thought probably one of those fast trucks had picked him up, beaten me to the Skyway, and let him off. I didn't stop for him. Then, late that night -- I saw him again.

It was on the new Pennsylvania Turnpike between Harrisburg and Pittsburgh. It's two hundred and sixty-five miles long with a very high speed limit. I was just slowing down for one of the tunnels - when I saw him - standing under an arc light by the side of the road. I could see him quite distinctly - the bag, the cap - even the spots of fresh rain spattered over his shoulders. He "Halloed" at me this time.

HIKER:

(GHOSTLY ECHO) Hellooo! Hellooo!

ADAMS:

I stepped on the gas like a shot.

SOUND:

(CAR ENGINE, FASTER)

MUSIC:

OUT

ADAMS:

It's lonely country through the Alleghenies, and I had no intention of stopping. Besides, the coincidences, or whatever it was, gave me the willies. I stopped at the next gas station.

SOUND:

(CAR ... ENGINE SLOWS, BRAKES TO A STOP, SLIGHT PAUSE, HORN HONKS TWICE ... DOOR OPENS)

ATTENDANT:

Yes, sir?

ADAMS:

Uh, fill 'er up.

ATTENDANT:

Certainly, sir. Check your oil, sir?

ADAMS:

No, thanks.

SOUND:

(GAS PUMP ... IN BG)

ATTENDANT:

(OFF) Nice night, isn't it?

ADAMS:

Yes. It hasn't been raining here recently, has it?

ATTENDANT:

Not a drop of rain all week.

ADAMS:

Oh? Oh, I - I suppose that hasn't done your business any harm?

ATTENDANT:

Oh, people drive through here all kinds of weather. Mostly business, you know. There aren't many pleasure cars out on the turnpike this season of the year.

ADAMS:

I suppose not. What, ah - er - ah - What about hitchhikers?

ATTENDANT:

(CHUCKLE) Hitchhikers? Here?

ADAMS:

What's the matter? Don't you ever see any?

ATTENDANT:

Not much. If we did, it'd be a sight for sore eyes.

ADAMS:

Why?

SOUND:

(GAS PUMP ... OUT)

ATTENDANT:

Oh, a guy'd be a fool who started out to hitch rides on this road. Look at it.

ADAMS:

Then - you've never seen anybody?

ATTENDANT:

(CLOSER) No. Maybe they get the lift before the turnpike starts. I mean, you know, just before the tollhouse. But then it'd be a mighty long ride. Most cars wouldn't want to pick up a guy for that long a ride. And, you know, this is pretty lonesome country here, mountains and woods. You ain't seen anybody like that, have you?

ADAMS:

Oh, no. Oh, no, not - not at all. I was just-- Ah, uh, a technical question.

ATTENDANT:

Oh, I see. Well, that'll be just a dollar forty-nine, with the tax.

MUSIC:

FOR A SOMBER TRANSITION, THEN IN BG

ADAMS:

The thing gradually passed through my mind as sheer coincidence. I had a good night's sleep in Pittsburgh. I didn't think about the man all next day until -- till just outside of Zanesville, Ohio. I saw him again.

MUSIC:

AN ACCENT ... THEN IN BG

SOUND:

(CAR ENGINE ... IN BG)

ADAMS:

It was a bright sunshiny afternoon. The peaceful Ohio fields, brown with the autumn stubble, lay dreaming in the golden light and I was driving slowly, drinking it in, when - the road suddenly ended in a detour. In front of the barrier, HE was standing....

MUSIC:

AN ACCENT ... THEN IN BG

SOUND:

(CAR ENGINE ... SLOWS TO A STOP)

ADAMS:

Let me explain about his appearance before I go on.

I REPEAT:

there was nothing sinister about him. He was as drab as a mud fence, nor was his attitude menacing. He merely stood there - waiting, almost drooping a little, the cheap overnight bag in his hand. He looked as though he'd been waiting there for hours. And he looked up. He hailed me. He started to walk forward.

MUSIC:
OUT

HIKER:
(FROM A DISTANCE) Hellooo! Hellooo!

SOUND:
(CAR ENGINE TURNS OVER BUT WON'T START)

HIKER:
(CLOSER) Hello!

ADAMS:
(NERVOUS, CALLS OUT) No, not just now, sorry!

HIKER:
Goin' to California?!

SOUND:
(CAR ENGINE STARTS)

ADAMS:
No, no, not today! The other way! Going to New York! Sorry!

SOUND:
(CAR DRIVES OFF, TIRES SQUEALING ... ENGINE CONTINUES IN BG)

MUSIC:
IN BG

ADAMS:
After I got the car back on the road again, I felt like a fool. Yet the thought of picking him up, of having him sit beside me, was somehow unbearable. At the same time I felt - more than ever - unspeakably alone.

(AFTER A LONG PAUSE) Hour after hour went by. The fields, the towns, ticked off one by one. The light changed. I knew now that I was going to see him again.

MUSIC:
OUT

SOUND:

(CAR ENGINE ONLY IN BG)

ADAMS:

And though I dreaded the sight, I caught myself searching the side of the road, waiting for him to appear.

SOUND:

(CAR BRAKES, ENGINE SLOWS TO IDLE ... HORN HONKS ... DOOR OPENS)

STOREKEEPER:

(FROM OFF, ANNOYED) Yeah?! What is it?! What d'you want?!

ADAMS:

You sell sandwiches and pop here, don't ya?

STOREKEEPER:

Yeah, we do in the daytime! But we're closed up now for the night!

ADAMS:

I know, but I was wondering if you could possibly let me have a cup of coffee. Black coffee.

STOREKEEPER:

No, not this time of night, mister! My wife's the cook, she's in bed!

SOUND:

(DOOR STARTS TO CLOSE)

ADAMS:

No, don't shut the door! Please! Listen, just a minute ago-- Just a minute ago there was a man standing here, right beside this stand - a suspicious looking man. I - I don't mean to disturb you. You see, I was driving along when I just happened to look and there he was.

STOREKEEPER:

What was he doin'?!

ADAMS:

Well, nothing.

STOREKEEPER:

You've been takin' a nip - that's what you've been doin'! Now, on your way before I call out Sheriff Oaks!

MUSIC:

AN ACCENT ... THEN IN BG

SOUND:

(CAR ENGINE RESUMES DOWN HIGHWAY)

ADAMS:

I got into the car again and drove on slowly. I was beginning to hate the car. If I could've found a place to stop, to rest a little... I was in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri now. The few resort places there were closed. Only an occasional log cabin, seemingly deserted. That's all that broke the monotony of the wild, wooded landscape.

I HAD seen him at that roadside stand. I knew I'd see him again. Maybe at the next turn of the road. I knew that when I saw him next -- I would run him down.

MUSIC:

AN ACCENT ... THEN OUT

SOUND:

(CAR SPEEDS DOWN HIGHWAY)

ADAMS:

But I didn't see him again. I didn't see him until late next afternoon.

SOUND:

(RAILROAD CROSSING ... WARNING BELL RINGS, CONTINUES IN BG ... CAR ENGINE SLOWS TO A STOP)

ADAMS:

I'd stopped the car at a sleepy little junction just across the border into Oklahoma to let a train pass by ... when he appeared across the tracks - leaning against a telephone pole.

SOUND:
(DISTANT TRAIN WHISTLE)

ADAMS:
A perfectly airless, dry day. The red clay of Oklahoma was baking under the southwestern sun ... yet there were spots of fresh rain on his shoulders. I couldn't stand that. Without thinking, blindly, I started the car across the tracks.

SOUND:
(CARE ENGINE REVS)

ADAMS:
He didn't even look up at me. He was staring at the ground. I stepped on the gas hard, veering the wheel sharply toward him. I could hear the train in the distance now, but I didn't care. Then ...

SOUND:
(CARE ENGINE DIES)

ADAMS:
... something went wrong with the car. [It stalled right on the tracks.]

SOUND:
(TRAIN WHISTLE AND BELL)

ADAMS:
The train was coming closer. I could hear its bell ringing and the cry of its whistle. Still he stood there. Now I knew that he was beckoning -- beckoning me to my death!

SOUND:
(TRAIN ROARS CLOSER ... CAR ENGINE STARTS ABRUPTLY ... CAR, PUT IN GEAR, BACKS UP AS TRAIN PASSES)

ADAMS:
Well ... I frustrated him that time. The starter worked at last. I managed to back up. When the train passed, he was gone. I was all alone in the hot, dry afternoon.

SOUND:

(TRAIN NOISE FADES AWAY)

MUSIC:

GENTLE TRANSITION, THEN OUT

ADAMS:

After that, I knew I had to do something.

SOUND:

(CAR SPEEDS DOWN HIGHWAY)

ADAMS:

I didn't know who this man was - or what he wanted of me. I only knew that from now on -- I mustn't let myself alone on the road for one minute.

SOUND:

(CAR ENGINE SLOWS TO IDLE ... CAR BRAKES)

ADAMS:

(CALLS OUT) Uh, hello there!

SOUND:

(CAR DOOR OPENS)

ADAMS:

Like a ride?

WOMAN:

Well, what do you think? How far are you goin'?

ADAMS:

Uh, where do you wanna go?

WOMAN:

Amarillo, Texas.

ADAMS:

I'll drive you there.

WOMAN:

Gee!

SOUND:

(SHE CLIMBS IN ... CAR DOOR SHUTS .. CAR DRIVES OFF)

WOMAN:

Uh, you mind if I take off my shoes? My dogs are killin' me.

ADAMS:

Go right ahead.

WOMAN:

(RELIEVED) Ohhhh. Gee, what a break this is --

ADAMS:

Hitchhike much?

WOMAN:

Sure. Only it's tough sometimes in these great open spaces to get the breaks.

ADAMS:

Yeah, I should think it would be, though I'll bet you get a good pick up in a fast car, if you did, you could get places faster than, say, another person in another car, couldn't you?

WOMAN:

I don't get ya.

ADAMS:

Well, take me for instance. Suppose I'm - I'm driving across the country, say, at a nice steady clip, about forty-five miles an hour. Couldn't - couldn't a girl like you, just standing beside the road waiting for a lift, beat me to town, or any town, provided she got picked up every time in a car doing from sixty-five to seventy miles an hour?

WOMAN:

I don't know. What difference does it make?

ADAMS:

Oh, no difference. It's just a crazy idea I had sitting here in the car.

WOMAN:

(AMUSED) Oh ho ho, imagine spending your time in a swell car thinkin' of things like that.

ADAMS:

What would you do instead?

WOMAN:

What would I do? If I was a good-lookin' fellow like yourself? Why, I'd just enjoy myself, every minute of the time. I'd sit back and - and relax. And if I saw a good-lookin' girl along the side of the road-- (GASPS) Hey! Look out!

SOUND:

(CAR SWERVES ... TIRES SQUEAL ... CAR CONTINUES DOWN ROAD)

ADAMS:

Did you see him, too?

WOMAN:

See who?

ADAMS:

That man, standing beside the barbed-wire fence.

WOMAN:

I didn't see - anybody. I-- It was nothin' but a bunch o' cows and - and the wire fence.

ADAMS:

No?

WOMAN:

What'd you think you was doin'? Tryin' to run into the barbed-wire fence?

ADAMS:

There was a man there, I tell ya! A thin, gray man with an overnight bag in his hand. And I - I was trying to ... run him down.

WOMAN:

Run him down? You mean - kill 'im?

ADAMS:

You say you didn't see him back there? You sure?

WOMAN:

I didn't see a soul. And as far as that's concerned--

ADAMS:

Watch for him the next time. Keep watching. Keep your eyes peeled on the road. He'll turn up again. May be any minute now. There, look there!

WOMAN:

(SCREAMS)

SOUND:

(TIRES SQUEALING AS THE CAR SWERVES OFF ROAD AND CLATTERS TO A STOP ... WOMAN PULLS HELPLESSLY AT CAR DOOR)

WOMAN:

(PANICS) How does this door work?! I - I'm gettin' outta here!

ADAMS:

Did you see him that time?!

WOMAN:

No, I didn't see him that time! And, personally, mister, I don't expect never to see him! All I want to do is go on livin'! I don't see how I will very long, drivin' with you!

SOUND:

(COWS MOO ... IN BG)

ADAMS:

Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't-- I - I don't know what came over me. Please, don't go.

WOMAN:

So, if you'll excuse me--

ADAMS:

You can't go! Listen, how would you like to go to California? I'll drive you to California!

WOMAN:

Seein' pink elephants all the way?! No, thanks! Uh uh! Thanks just the same!

ADAMS:

Listen, please, just - just one minute, please!

WOMAN:

You know what I think you need, big boy? Not a girlfriend, just a good dose o' sleep.

ADAMS:

Please!

SOUND:

(SHE OPENS CAR DOOR)

WOMAN:

There, I got it now.

ADAMS:

Now, you can't go, please!

WOMAN:

Leave your hands off o' me, d'ya hear? Leave your hands off me!

SOUND:

(SHE JUMPS OUT OF CAR AND RUNS OFF ... THE COWS CONTINUE TO MOO ... IN BG)

ADAMS:

She ran from me ... as though - I were a monster.

A few minutes later, I saw a passing truck pick her up.

I knew then that I was - utterly alone.

I was in the heart of the great Texas prairies. There wasn't a car on the road after the truck went by. Tried to figure out what to do, how to get a hold of myself.

(A DEEP BREATH) If I could find a place to rest or even if I could sleep right here in the car for a few hours along the side of the road ...

I was getting my winter overcoat out of the back seat to use as a blanket, when - I saw him coming toward me - emerging from the herd of moving steer.

HIKER:

(OFF) Helloo!

MUSIC:

AN ACCENT ... THEN IN BG

SOUND:

(CAR ENGINE STARTS, CAR SPEEDS OFF ... ENGINE CONTINUES IN BG)

HIKER:

(DROWNED OUT BY SOUND) Helloo!

ADAMS:

Maybe I should have spoken to him then. Fought it out, then and there.

For now he began to be everywhere.

Wherever I stopped, even for a moment - for gas, for oil, for a drink of pop, a cup o' coffee, sandwich - he was there!

I saw him standing outside the auto camp in Amarillo that night when I dared to slow down. He was sitting near the drinking fountain of a little camping spot just inside the border of New Mexico. He was waiting for me outside the Navajo reservation where I stopped to check my tires. I saw him in Albuquerque when I bought twenty gallons of gas.

I was - I was afraid to stop now. I began to drive faster and faster. I was - in - in a lunar landscape now -- the great, arid mesa country of New Mexico. I drove through it with the indifference of a fly crawling over the face of the moon.

Now he didn't even wait for me to stop! Unless I drove at eighty-five miles an hour over those endless roads, he waited for me at every other mile. I'd see his figure, shadowless, flitting before me, still in its same attitude, over the cold, lifeless ground -- flitting over dried up rivers, over broken stones cast up by old glacial upheavals -- flitting in that pure, cloudless air.

I was beside myself when I finally reached Gallup, New Mexico, this morning. There's an auto camp here -- cold, almost deserted, this time of year.

SOUND:
(CAR ENGINE SHUT OFF)

ADAMS:
I went inside and asked if there was a telephone. I had the feeling that if only I could speak to someone familiar, someone I loved, I could pull myself together.

MUSIC:
OUT

SOUND:
(PHONE BOOTH DOOR ... COIN DEPOSITED IN PAY PHONE)

OPERATOR 1:
Your call, please.

ADAMS:
Long distance.

OPERATOR 1:
Long distance? Certainly.

SOUND:
(LONG BUZZ)

OPERATOR 2:
This is long distance.

ADAMS:

I'd like - I'd like to put in a call to my home to Brooklyn, New York. I'm Ronald Adams. Um, the number is Beechwood two-oh-eight-two-eight.

OPERATOR 2:

Certainly. I'll try to get it for you.

SOUND:

(RINGING)

OPERATOR 3:

Albuquerque.

OPERATOR 2:

New York for Gallup.

SOUND:

(A COUPLE OF BEEPS, LINE IS OPENED)

OPERATOR 4:

New York.

OPERATOR 3:

Gallup, New Mexico calling Beechwood two-oh-eight-two-eight.

ADAMS:

I'd read somewhere that love could banish demons.

SOUND:

(COIN DROPS)

ADAMS:

It was in the middle of the morning. I knew mother'd be home. I pictured her tall and white-haired, in her crisp house-dress, going about her tasks. It'd be enough, I thought, just to hear the even calmness of her voice.

OPERATOR 1:

Will you please deposit three dollars and eighty-five cents for the first three minutes? When you have deposited a dollar and a half, will you wait until I have collected the money?

SOUND:
(SIX QUARTERS DEPOSITED IN PHONE, COINS DROP)

OPERATOR 1:
All right, deposit another dollar and a half.

SOUND:
(SIX QUARTERS DEPOSITED IN PHONE, COINS DROP)

OPERATOR 1:
Will you please deposit the remaining eighty-five cents?

SOUND:
(THREE QUARTERS AND DIME DEPOSITED IN PHONE, COINS DROP)

OPERATOR 1:
Ready with Brooklyn. Go ahead, please.

ADAMS:
Hel-Hello?

MRS. WHITNEY:
Mrs. Adams' residence.

ADAMS:
Hello? Hello, mother?

MRS. WHITNEY:
This is Mrs. Adams' residence. Who is it you wish to speak to, please?

ADAMS:
Wha--? Who's this?

MRS. WHITNEY:
This is Mrs. WHITNEY.

ADAMS:
Mrs. WHITNEY? I - I don't know any Mrs. WHITNEY. Is this Beechwood two-oh-eight-two-eight?

MRS. WHITNEY:

Yes.

ADAMS:

W-w-where's my mother? Where's Mrs. Adams?

MRS. WHITNEY:

Mrs. Adams is not at home. She's still in the hospital.

ADAMS:

The hospital?

MRS. WHITNEY:

Yes. Who is this calling, please? Is it a member of the family?

ADAMS:

What's she in the hospital for?

MRS. WHITNEY:

She's been prostrated for five days. Nervous breakdown. But who is this calling?

ADAMS:

Nervous breakdown?! Well, my mother never was nervous--

MRS. WHITNEY:

It's all taken place since the death of her oldest son, Ronald.

ADAMS:

Death of her - death of her oldest son, Ronald? Hey! What's this? What number is this?

MRS. WHITNEY:

This is Beechwood two-oh-eight-two-eight. It's all been very sudden. He was killed just six days ago - in an automobile accident on the Brooklyn Bridge.

OPERATOR 1:

(ABRUPTLY) Your three minutes are up, sir. (PAUSE) Your three minutes are up, sir. (PAUSE) Your three minutes are up, sir. (FADES)

MUSIC:

MOURNFUL ... IN BG

ADAMS:

And so - so I'm sitting here in this deserted auto camp in - Gallup, New Mexico.

I'm trying to think.

Trying to get hold of myself.

Otherwise, I - I'm going to go crazy.

Outside, it's night.

The vast, soulless night of New Mexico. A million stars are in the sky. Ahead of me stretch a thousand miles of empty mesa -- mountains, prairies, desert. Somewhere among them, he's waiting for me. Somewhere I shall know - who he is - and who I am.

MUSIC:

RUMBLES OMINOUSLY TO A FINISH