

The Hitchhiker

Lucille Fletcher

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Orson Welles
Ronald Adams
Adams's Mother
Voice of Hitchhiker
Mechanic
Henry, a sleepy man
Woman's Voice, Henry's wife

Girl
Operator
Long-Distance Operator
Albuquerque Operator
New York Operator
Mrs. Whitney

Welles. Good evening, this is Orson Welles . . . (music in) 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 the 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 phosphorescent¹ foolishness that people who don't like ghost stories don't like, then again I promise you we haven't got it. What we do have is a thriller. If it's half as good as we think it is you can call it a shocker, and we present it proudly and without apologies. After all 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—sometimes you want your spine to tingle. The tingling, it's to be hoped, will be quite audible as you listen tonight to *The Hitchhiker*—That's the name of our story, *The Hitchhiker*—

(sound: automobile wheels humming over concrete road)

(music: something weird and shuddery)



Adams. I am in an auto camp on Route Sixtysix just west of Gallup, New Mexico. If I tell it perhaps it will help me. It will keep me from going mad. But I must tell this quickly. I am not mad now. I feel perfectly well, except that I am running a slight temperature. My name is Ronald Adams. I am thirty-six years of age, unmarried, tall, dark, with a black mustache. I drive a 1940 Ford V-8, license number 6V-7989. I was born in Brooklyn. All this I know. I know that I am at this moment perfectly sane. That it is not I, who has gone mad—but something else—something utterly beyond my control. But I must speak quickly. At any moment the link with life may break. This may be the last thing I ever tell on earth . . . the last night I ever see the stars. . . . (music in)

Adams. Six days ago I left Brooklyn, to drive to California . . .

Mother. Goodbye, son. Good luck to you, my boy . . .

Adams. Goodbye, mother. Here—give me a kiss, and then I'll go . . .

Mother. I'll come out with you to the car.

Adams. No. It's raining. Stay here at the door. Hey—what is this? Tears? I thought you promised me you wouldn't cry.

Mother. I know dear. I'm sorry. But I—do hate to see you go.

Adams. I'll be back. I'll only be on the coast three months.

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

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

Mother. 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. Of course not! You'd think I was still seventeen to hear you talk—

Mother. And wire me as soon as you get to Hollywood, won't you, son?

Adams. Of course I will. Now 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 hotdog or a hamburger stand every ten miles . . . *(fade)*

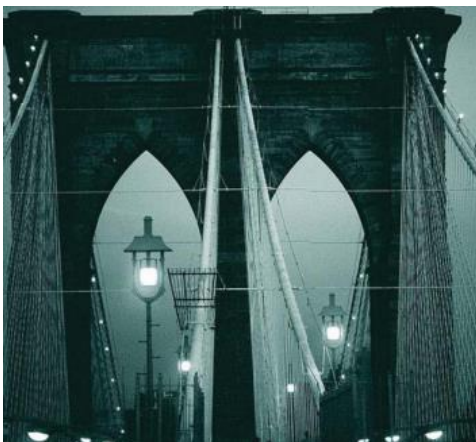
(sound: auto hum)

(music in)

Adams. I was in excellent spirits. The drive ahead of me, even the loneliness, seemed like a lark. But I reckoned without him.

(Music changes to something weird and empty.)

Adams. 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. He stepped off the walk, and if I hadn't swerved, I'd have hit him.



(sound: terrific skidding)

(music in)

Adams. 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.

(music changing)

Adams. It was on the new Pennsylvania Turnpike between Harrisburg and Pittsburgh. It's 265 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 hailed me this time . . .

Voice *(very spooky and faint).* Hall-ooo . . . *(echo as through tunnel)* Hall-ooo . . . !

Adams. I stepped on the gas like a shot. That's lonely country through the Alleghenies, and I had no intention of stopping. Besides, the coincidence, or whatever it was, gave me the willies.³ I stopped at the next gas station.

(sound: auto tires screeching to stop . . . horn honk)

Mechanic. Yes, sir.

Adams. Fill her up.

Mechanic. Certainly, sir. Check your oil, sir?

Adams. No, thanks.

(sound: gas being put into car . . . bell tinkle, et cetera)

Mechanic. Nice night, isn't it?

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

Mechanic. Not a drop of rain all week.

Adams. Hm. I suppose that hasn't done your business any harm.

Mechanic. 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. *(casually)* What about hitchhikers?

Mechanic *(half laughing).* Hitchhikers here?

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

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

Adams. Why?

Mechanic. A guy'd be a fool who started out to hitch rides on this road. Look at it. It's 265 miles long, there's practically no speed limit, and it's a straightaway. Now what car is going to stop to pick up a guy under those conditions? Would you stop?

Adams. No. *(slowly, with puzzled emphasis)* Then you've never seen anybody?

Mechanic. Nope. Mebbe they get the lift before the turnpike starts—I mean, you know—just before the toll house—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. No. *(quickly)* Oh no, not at all. It was— just a—technical question.

Mechanic. I see. Well—that'll be just a dollar forty-nine—with the tax . . . *(fade)*

(sound: auto hum up)

(music changing)

Adams. The thing gradually passed from my mind, as sheer coincidence. I had a good night's sleep in Pittsburgh. I did not think about the man all next day—until just outside of Zanesville, Ohio, I saw him again.

(music: dark, ominous note)

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

(music in)

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 had been waiting there for hours. Then he looked up. He hailed me. He started to walk forward.

Voice (*far off*). Hall-ooo . . . Hall-ooo . . .

Adams. I had stopped the car, of course, for the detour. And for a few moments, I couldn't seem to find the new road. I knew he must be thinking that I had stopped for him.

Voice (*closer*). Hall-ooo . . . Halllll . . . ooo . . .

(*sound: gears jamming . . . sound of motor turning over hard . . . nervous accelerator*)

Voice (*closer*). Halll . . . oooo . . .

Adams (*panicky*). No. Not just now. Sorry . . .

Voice (*closer*). Going to California?

(*sound: starter starting . . . gears jamming*)

Adams (*as though sweating blood*). No. Not today. The other way. Going to New York. Sorry . . . sorry . . .

(*sound: car starts with squeal of wheels on dirt . . . into auto hum*)

(*music in*)

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

(*sound: auto hum up*)

Adams. Hour after hour went by. The fields, the towns ticked off, one by one. The lights changed. I knew now that I was going to see him again. And though I dreaded the sight, I caught myself searching the side of the road, waiting for him to appear.

(*sound: auto hum up . . . car screeches to a halt . . . impatient honk two or three times . . . door being unbolted*)



Sleepy Man's Voice. Yep? What is it? What do you want?

Adams (*breathless*). You sell sandwiches and pop here, don't you?

Voice (*cranky*). Yep. 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. **Voice.** Not at this time of night, mister. My wife's the cook and she's in bed. Mebbe further down the road—at the Honeysuckle Rest . . .

(*sound: door squeaking on hinges as though being closed*)

Adams. No—no. Don't shut the door. (*shakily*) Listen—just a minute ago, there was a man standing here—right beside this stand—a suspicious looking man . . .

Woman's Voice (*from distance*). Hen-ry? Who is it, Hen-ry?

Henry. It's nobuddy, mother. Just a feller thinks he wants a cup of coffee. Go back into bed.

Adams. I don't mean to disturb you. But you see, I was driving along—when I just happened to look—and there he was . . .

Henry. What was he doing?

Adams. Nothing. He ran off—when I stopped the car.

Henry. Then what of it? That's nothing to wake a man in the middle of his sleep about. (sternly) Young man, I've got a good mind to turn you over to the sheriff.

Adams. But—I—

Henry. You've been taking a nip, that's what you've been doing. And you haven't got anything better to do than to wake decent folk out of their hardearned sleep. Get going. Go on.

Adams. But—he looked as though he were going to rob you. Henry. I ain't got nothin' in this stand to lose. Now—on your way before I call out Sheriff Oakes. (*fades*)

(*sound: auto hum up*)

Adams. I got into the car again and drove on slowly. I was beginning to hate the car. If I could have found a place to stop . . . to rest a little. But I was in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri now. The few resort places there were closed. Only an occasional log cabin, seemingly deserted, broke the monotony of the wild wooded landscape. I had seen him at that roadside stand; I knew I would see him again—perhaps at the next turn of the road. I knew that when I saw him next, I would run him down . . .

(*sound: auto hum up*)

Adams. But I did not see him again until late next afternoon . . .

(*sound: of railroad warning signal at crossroads*)

Adams. I had 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 sound of train chugging . . . bell ringing steadily*)

Adams (*very tense*). It was a perfectly airless, dry day. The red clay of Oklahoma was baking under the south-western 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: train chugging closer*)

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 something went wrong with the car. It stalled right on the tracks.

(*sound: Train chugging closer. Above this sound of car stalling.*)

Adams. The train was coming closer. I could hear its bell ringing, and the cry of its whistle. Still he stood there. And now—I knew that he was beckoning—beckoning me to my death.

(*sound: Train chugging close. Whistle blows wildly. Then train rushes up and by with pistons going, et cetera.*)

Adams. Well—I frustrated him that time. The starter had worked at last. I managed to back up. But when the train passed, he was gone. I was all alone in the hot dry afternoon.

(*sound: Train retreating. Crickets begin to sing.*)

(music in)

Adams. After that, I knew I had to do something. I didn't know who this man was or what he wanted of me. I only knew that from now on, I must not let myself be alone on the road for one moment.

(sound: Auto hum up. Slow down. Stop. Door opening.)

Adams. Hello, there. Like a ride?

Girl. What do you think? How far you going?

Adams. Amarillo . . . I'll take you to Amarillo.

Girl. Amarillo, Texas.

Adams. I'll drive you there.

Girl. Gee!

(sound: Door closes—car starts.)

(music in)

Girl. Mind if I take off my shoes? My dogs are killing me.

Adams. Go right ahead.

Girl. Gee, what a break this is. A swell car, a decent guy, and driving all the way to Amarillo. All I been getting so far is trucks.

Adams. Hitchhike much?

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

Adams. I should think it would be. Though I'll bet if you get a good pick-up in a fast car, you can get to places faster than—say, another person, in another car?

Girl. I don't get you.

Adams. Well, take me, for instance. Suppose I'm driving across the country, say, at a nice steady clip of about 45 miles an hour. Couldn't a girl like you, just standing beside the road, waiting for lifts, beat me to town after town—provided she got picked up every time in a car doing from 65 to 70 miles an hour?

Girl. I dunno. Maybe she could and maybe she couldn't. What difference does it make?

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

Girl *(laughing)*. Imagine spending your time in a swell car thinking of things like that!

Adams. What would you do instead?

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

Adams *(breathlessly)*. Did you see him too?

Girl. See who? Adams. That man. Standing beside the barbed wire fence.

Girl. I didn't see—anybody. There wasn't nothing, but a bunch of steers—and the barbed wire fence. What did you think you was doing? Trying to run into the barbed wire fence?

Adams. There was a man there, I tell you . . . a thin gray man, with an overnight bag in his hand. And I was trying to—run him down.

Girl. Run him down? You mean—kill him?

Adams. He's a sort of—phantom. I'm trying to get rid of him—or else prove that he's real. But *(desperately)* you say you didn't see him back there? You're sure?

Girl. I didn't see a soul. And as far as that's concerned, mister . . .

Adams. Watch for him the next time, then. Keep watching. Keep your eyes peeled on the road. He'll turn up again—maybe any minute now. *(excitedly)* There. Look there—

(sound: Auto sharply veering and skidding. Girl screams.)

(sound: Crash of car going into barbed wire fence. Frightened lowing of steer.)

Girl. How does this door work? I—I'm gettin' outta here.

Adams. Did you see him that time?

Girl *(sharply)*. 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 to go on living—and I don't see how I will very long driving with you—

Adams. I'm sorry. I—I don't know what came over me. *(frightened)* Please—don't go . . .

Girl. So if you'll excuse me, mister—

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

Girl. Seeing pink elephants all the way? No thanks.

Adams *(desperately)*. I could get you a job there. You wouldn't have to be a waitress. I have friends there—my name is Ronald Adams—You can check up.

(sound: door opening)

Girl. Uhn-hunh. Thanks just the same.

Adams. Listen. Please. For just one minute. Maybe you think I am half cracked. But this man. You see, I've been seeing this man all the way across the country. He's been following me. And if you could only help me—stay with me—until I reach the coast—

Girl. You know what I think you need, big boy? Not a girl friend. Just a good dose of sleep. . . . There, I got it now.

(sound: door opens . . . slams)

Adams. No. You can't go.

Girl *(screams)*. Leave your hands offa me, do you hear! Leave your—

Adams. Come back here, please, come back.

(sound: struggle . . . slap . . . footsteps running away on gravel . . . lowing of steer)

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.

(sound: lowing of steer up)

Adams. I was in the heart of the great Texas prairies. There wasn't a car on the road after the truck went by. I tried to figure out what to do, how to get hold of myself. 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, (Hall-ooo) when I saw him coming toward me, (Hall-ooo), emerging from the herd of moving steer . . .

Voice. Hall-ooo . . . Hall-oooo . . .

(sound: auto starting violently . . . up to steady hum)

(music in)

Adams. I didn't wait for him to come any closer. Perhaps I should have spoken to him then, fought it out then and there. For now he began to be everywhere. Whenever I stopped, even for a moment—for gas, for oil, for a drink of pop, a cup of coffee, a sandwich—he was there.

(music faster)

Adams. 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 in a little camping spot just inside the border of New Mexico.

(music faster)



Adams. He was waiting for me outside the Navajo Reservation, where I stopped to check my tires. I saw him in Albuquerque where I bought 12 gallons of gas . . . I was afraid now, afraid to stop. I began to drive faster and faster. I was in 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.

(music faster)

Adams. But now he didn't even wait for me to stop. Unless I drove at 85 miles an hour over those endless roads—he waited for me at every other mile. I would see his figure, shadowless, flitting before me, still in its same attitude, over the cold and lifeless ground, flitting over dried-up rivers, over broken stones cast up by old glacial upheavals, flitting in the pure and cloudless air . . .

(music strikes sinister note of finality.)

Adams. I was beside myself when I finally reached Gallup, New Mexico, this morning. There is an auto camp here—cold, almost deserted at this time of year. I went inside, and asked if there was a telephone. I had the feeling that if only I could speak to someone familiar, someone that I loved, I could pull myself together.

(sound: nickel put in slot)

Operator. Number, please?

Adams. Long distance.

Operator. Thank you.

(sound: return of nickel; buzz)

Long-Distance Opr. This is long distance.

Adams. I'd like to put in a call to my home in Brooklyn, New York. I'm Ronald Adams. The number is Beechwood 2-0828.

Long-Distance Opr. Thank you. What is your number?

Adams. 312.

Albuquerque Opr. Albuquerque.

Long-Distance Opr. New York for Gallup. (pause)

New York Opr. New York.

Long-Distance Opr. Gallup, New Mexico calling Beechwood 2-0828. *(fade)*

Adams. I had read somewhere that love could banish demons. It was the middle of the morning. I knew Mother would be home. I pictured her, tall, white-haired, in her crisp house-dress, going about her tasks. It would be enough, I thought, merely to hear the even calmness of her voice . . .

Long-Distance Opr. Will you please deposit three dollars and 85 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: clunk of six coins)

Long-Distance Opr. All right, deposit another dollar and a half.

(sound: clunk of six coins)

Long-Distance Opr. Will you please deposit the remaining 85 cents.

(sound: clunk of four coins)

Long-Distance Opr. Ready with Brooklyn—go ahead please.

Adams. Hello.

Mrs. Whitney. Mrs. Adams' residence.

Adams. Hello. Hello—Mother?

Mrs. Whitney *(very flat and rather proper . . . dumb, too, in a frizzy sort of way)*. This is Mrs. Adams' residence. Who is it you wished to speak to, please?

Adams. Why—who's this?

Mrs. Whitney. This is Mrs. Whitney.

Adams. Mrs. Whitney? I don't know any Mrs. Whitney. Is this Beechwood 2-0828?

Whitney. Yes.

Adams. Where's my mother? Where's Mrs. Adams?

Mrs. Whitney. Mrs. Adams is not at home. She is 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? But—my mother was never nervous . . .

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

Adams. Death of her oldest son, Ronald . . . ? Hey—what is this? What number is this?

Mrs. Whitney. This is Beechwood 2-0828. It's all been very sudden. He was killed just six days ago in an automobile accident on the Brooklyn Bridge.

Long-Distance Opr. (*breaking in*). Your three minutes are up, sir. (*silence*) Your three minutes are up, sir. (*pause*) Your three minutes are up, sir. (*fade*) Sir, your three minutes are up. Your three minutes are up, sir.

Adams (*in a strange voice*). And so, I am sitting here in this deserted auto camp in Gallup, New Mexico. I am trying to think. I am trying to get hold of myself. Otherwise, I shall go mad . . . Outside it is 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 is waiting for me. Somewhere I shall know who he is, and who . . . I . . . am . . .

(*music up*)