

1946 Mercury Summer Theater of Suspense

“THE HITCHHIKER”

by Lucille Fletcher

Cast: Announcer/Orson Welles/Ronald Adams
Pabst Announcer
Mrs. Adams
Hitchhiker (male)
Gas Station Attendant
Storekeeper
Woman
Hitchhiker (female)
Operator 1
Operator 2
Mrs. Whitney

SFX: Door opening
Rain falling
Car moving
Car motor starting / driving off
Car horns
Car door opening / closing
Money into pay phone
Filters for telephone voices
Dial tone

Announcer/OW: Good evening. This is Orson Welles, your producer of a special series of broadcasts presented by the makers of Pabst Blue Ribbon – the Mercury Theater of Suspense.

Ladies and gentlemen, the element of suspense is so vital to our story tonight, that our sponsors, the makers of Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer, are omitting their usual commercial message during the intermission between the acts so that our play will go uninterrupted from spooky start to spooky finish. Therefore, let's give Ken Roberts his forty-five –second opportunity right now to extol the merits of that blended, splendid, eh, Ken?

Announcer/Pabst: Of that blended, splendid Pabst Blue Ribbon. Those two words tell the whole flavor story. You see, every single drop of Pabst Blue Ribbon is the happy result of blending, the full-flavor blending of never-less-than-thirty-three fine brews. That's right, never-less-than thirty-three fine brews blend their individual taste tones to give you that splendid flavor – not too light, not too heavy – but fresh, clean, sparkling, with the real beer taste coming through just the way you like it. Friends, these days when your dealer is unable to supply you with all the Pabst Blue Ribbon you'd like, please keep on asking, for every single bottle you do get will live up to the same high standards of quality and taste. Yes, every bottle will be, as always, blended, splendid Pabst Blue Ribbon. And now . . . back to Mr. Orson Welles.

Welles: We of Mercury reckon that a story doesn't have to appeal to the heart. It can also appeal to the spine. Sometimes, you want your heart to be warm; sometimes you want your spine to tingle. Well, the tingling will be quite audible as you listen to tonight's classic among radio thrillers. It's author is one of the most gifted of all the writers who have ever worked in this medium, Lucille Fletcher, who also wrote the single greatest radio script ever written, "Sorry Wrong Number". The title of this, her terrifying little tale of gruel for this evening, is another spine-tingler, by name "The Hitchhiker".

Welles/Adams: I'm in an auto camp on Route 66 just west of Gallup, New Mexico. If I tell it, maybe it will help me. It will keep me from going crazy. But I must tell this quickly. I am not crazy now – I feel perfectly well, perfectly well, except I am 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 Ford V8, license number 6V7989. I

was born in Brooklyn. All this I know. I know I'm at this moment perfectly sane, that it is not me that's gone mad, but something else, something utterly beyond my control. But I must speak quickly. At any given 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. (pause) Six days ago I left Brooklyn to drive to California.

Mrs. Adams: Goodbye, Son. Good luck to you, my boy.

Adams: Goodbye, Mother. Here, give me a kiss, and then I'll go.

(SFX: DOOR OPENING. SOUND OF RAIN)

Mrs. Adams: I'll come out with you to the car.

Adams: It's raining. Stay here at the door. Hey, what's this, tears?

Mrs. Adams: Oh, 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: Strangers! 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.

(SFX: CAR MOVING)

Adams (cont): (narrative tone) I was in excellent spirits --- the drive ahead, 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. He stepped off the walk; and if I hadn't swerved --- if I hadn't swerved --- I'd have hit him. I almost did! Almost did hit him. Now 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 maybe one of those fast trucks had picked him up, beaten me to the Skyway, and let him off. I . . . 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 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.

Hitchhiker: (ghostly, echo-like) Hello-o-o. Hello-o-o.

Adams: I stepped on the gas like a shot. 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.

Attendant: Yes, sir.

Adams: Fill 'er up, will you.

Attendant: Check your oil?

Adams: No. Thanks.

Attendant: Nice night, ain't it.

Adams: Yes. It hasn't been raining here lately, has it?

Attendant: Not a drop of rain all week.

Adams: Oh no? I suppose that hasn't done your business any harm.

Attendant: No, people drive through here in all kinds of weather. Mostly business, though. Ain't many pleasure cars out on the turnpike this time o' year.

Adams: I guess not. What about hitchhikers?

Attendant: Hitchhikers? Here?

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

Attendant: A guy'd be a fool to start out to hitchhike on this road. Look at it!

Adams: You mean you never see anybody?

Attendant: Naw. Maybe they get a lift before the turnpike starts. I mean, you know, just before the tollhouse. But then it's a mighty long ride. Most cars wouldn't pick up a guy for that long a ride. This is pretty lonesome country here. Mountains and woods. You ain't seen nobody like that, have you?

Adams: Oh, no, no. It's just a technical question.

Attendant: Oh, I see. (pause) Well, that'll be a dollar forty-nine, with the tax.

(SFX: CAR MOVING)

Adams: The thing gradually passed from my mind as a coincidence. I had a good night's sleep in Pittsburgh. I didn't think about the man all the next day until just outside of Zanesville, Ohio. I saw him again! It was a bright sunny 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 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 hailed me. He started to walk forward.

Hitchhiker: (ghostly) Hello-o-o-o. Hello-o-o-o.

Adams: I'd stopped the car, of course, for the detour. For a few minutes I couldn't seem to find the new road. I realized that he must be thinking that I'd stopped for him.

Hiker: Hello.

Adams: No, not just now, I'm sorry.

Hiker: Going to California?

(SFX: CAR STARTING AND DRIVING OFF)

Adams: (calling off) No, no, not today. I'm going to New York. Sorry! Sorry!

Adams (cont.): (narrative tone) 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. Yet, at the same time, I felt, more than ever, unspeakably alone. 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; and though I dreaded the sight, I caught myself searching the side of the road, waiting for him to appear.

(SFX: CAR HORN)

Storekeeper: Yep. What is it? Whatcha want?

Adams: You sell sandwiches and pop here, don't you?

Storekeeper: Yep. We do in the daytime. But we're closed up for the night.

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

Storekeeper: Not at this time of night, Mister. My wife's the cook, and she's in bed.

Adams: Well, now listen. Just a minute ago there was a man standing here, right beside here, and he a suspicious-looking man.

Woman: (from distance) Henry. Who is it, Henry?

Storekeeper: It's nobody, Mother. Just a fellow thinks he wants a cup of coffee. Go back to 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.

Storekeeper: What was he doing?

Adams: Nothing.

Storekeeper: You've been hittin' the bottle – that's what's the matter with you. You got nothin' better to do than wake decent folk out of their hard-earned sleep. Now get goin'. Get on!

Adams: It looked as though he was going to rob you.

Storekeeper: I ain't got nothin' in this den to lose. Now on your way before I call out Sheriff Polk.

Adams: (narrative) 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 rest a little, but I was in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri now. The few resort places there were closed. 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'd run him down. But I didn't see him again until late the next afternoon. 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. He was leaning against a telephone pole. It was 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. 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. The train was coming closer. I could hear its bell, its cry, its whistle crying! Still he stood there. Now I knew that he was beckoning, beckoning me to my death

Well, I frustrated him that time. It started! It worked at last. I managed to back up, but after the train had passed, he was gone; and I was all alone in the hot, dry afternoon.

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 musn't let myself be alone on the road for one minute.

Adams: (calling out) Hello there, hello. Like a ride?

Female Hitchhiker: Whaddaya think? How far ya goin'?

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

F. Hitchhiker: Amarillo, Texas?

Adams: Yeah, I'll drive you there.

F. Hitchhiker: Gee.

Adams: Hop in.

(SFX: CAR DOOR)

F. Hitchhiker: Mind if I take off my shoes? My dogs are killing me.

Adams: No, no, go right ahead.

F. Hitchhiker: Oh, gee, what a break this is. Swell car and a decent guy, drivin' all the way to Amarillo. All I've been getting' so far is trucks.

Adams: Hitchhike much?

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

Adams: Yeah, I'd think it would be; but I'll bet, though, if you got a good pickup in a fast car, you could get to places faster than, well, say, another person in another car.

F. Hitchhiker: I don't get ya.

Adams: Well, you take me, for instance. Suppose I'm driving across the country at a nice steady clip of about forty-five 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 that was doing sixty-five or seventy miles an hour?

F. Hitchhiker: I dunno --- maybe she could, 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.

F. Hitchhiker: Oh, imagine spending your time in a swell car thinkin' of things like that.

Adams: What would you do instead?

F. Hitchhiker: What would I do? If I was a good-lookin' fella like yourself, I'd just enjoy myself every minute of the time. I'd sit back and relax; and if I saw a good-lookin' gal along the side of the --- hey!

Adams: Did you see him, too?

F. Hitchhiker: See who?

Adams: That man! Standing beside the barbed-wire fence!

F. Hitchhiker: I didn't see nobody.

Adams: Right there!

F. Hitchhiker: It was nothin' – just a barbed-wire fence. What'd ya think ya was doin' tryin' to run into that barbed-wire fence?

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

F. Hitchhiker: Run 'im down? Ya mean kill 'im?

Adams: I'm trying to get rid of him or at least prove that he's real. But you say you didn't see him back there. You sure?

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

Adams: Well, watch for him! Watch for him the next time, and keep watching. Keep your eyes peeled on the road. He'll turn up again. Maybe any minute now. There! Right there!!!

F. Hitchhiker: No! How's this door work? I'm gettin' outta here.

Adams: (intense) Did you see him that time? Did you see him?

F. Hitchhiker: No, no, I didn't see him that time; and personally, Mister, I don't expect never to see 'im. All I want to do is go on livin', and I don't see how I will very long, drivin' with YOU.

Adams: Look, I'm sorry. I -- I don't know what came over me. Please don't go.

F. Hitchhiker: So, if you'll excuse me

Adams: Please! You can't go! Listen, how'd you like to go to California. I'll drive you all the way to California.

F. Hitchhiker: Seein' pink elephants all the way? No thanks!

Adams: Listen, please, just one minute.

F. Hitchhiker: You know what I think you need, big boy. Not a girlfriend -- just a good dose of sleep. There, I got it now.

Adams: (desperate) No, no, you can't go!

(SFX: SCUFFLE)

F. Hitchhiker: Leave your hands offa me, d'ya hear? Leave your hands off me!

(SFX: CAR DOOR)

Adams: Come back here, please! Come back!

(narrative) She ran from me as if I was some kind of monster. A few minutes later, I saw a passing truck pick her up, and 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. I tried to figure out what to do, how to get a hold of myself. If I could just find a place to rest or even if I could sleep right here in the car --- just a few hours, get some sleep just alongside the road. I was getting my winter overcoat out of the back seat to use as a blanket, just as a blanket ---

Male Hitchhiker: Hello-o-o.

Adams: --- when I saw him coming toward me.

Hitchhiker: Hello-o-o.

Adams: Coming toward me --- emerging from the herd of moving steer.

Hitchhiker: Hello-o-o-o.

Adams: I didn't wait for him to come any closer.

Hitchhiker: Hello-o-o-o.

Adams: Maybe I should have spoken to him then --- fought it out then and there. And now he began to be everywhere. Whenever I stopped even for a minute --- for gas, for oil, for a drink of pop, a cup of coffee, a sandwich --- he was there. I saw him standing outside the auto camp in Amarillo that night when I dared to slow down. He was standing near the drinking fountain at 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 where I bought ten 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. And 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 could see his figure, shadowless, flitting before me, still in its same attitude over the still and lifeless ground, flitting over dried-up rivers, over broken stones cast up by old glacial upheavals, flitting in the pure and cloudless air. I was beside myself, beside myself, when I finally reached Gallup, New Mexico, this morning.

There's an auto camp here. It's cold, almost deserted, this time of year. I went inside and asked if there was a telephone. I had the feeling that if I could speak to somebody familiar, somebody that I loved, I could pull myself together.

Operator 1: (through filter) Number pleeyuz.

Adams: Long distance.

Operator 1: Thank you.

Operator 2: (through filter) 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 9970.

Operator 2: (filter) Thank you. What is your number?

Adams: My number? It's 312.

Operator 2: Albuquerque? New York for Gallup. New York. Gallup, New Mexico, calling Beechwood 9970.

Adams: I'd read somewhere that love could banish demons. It was in the middle of the morning. I knew Mother'd be home. I pictured her tall, white-haired in her crisp housedress, going about her tasks. It'd be enough, I thought, just to hear the even calmness of her voice.

Operator 1: Please deposit three dollars and eighty-five cents for the first three minutes. When you have deposited a dollar-and-a-half, please wait until I have collected the money.

(SFX: COINS DROPPING INTO PHONE)

Operator 1: Thank you. Please deposit another dollar-and-a-half

(SFX: COINS DROPPING INTO PHONE)

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

Adams: Hello?

Mrs. Whitney: (filter) Hello, Mrs. Adams' residence.

Adams: Hello, Mother?

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

Adams: Who's this?

Mrs. Whitney: This is Mrs. Whitney.

Adams: Mrs. Whitney? Why, I don't know any Mrs. Whitney. Is this Beechwood 9970?

Mrs. Whitney: Yes.

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

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

Adams: (alarmed) The hospital!

Mrs. Whitney: Yes. Who is this calling, please? Is this a member of the family?

Adams: What's she in the hospital for?

Mrs. Whitney: She's been confined for five days --- a nervous breakdown. Who is this calling?

Adams: Nervous breakdown? My mother doesn't have

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

Adams: The death of her oldest son, Ronald!? Hey! What is this? What number is this?

Mrs. Whitney: This is Beechwood 9970. It's all been very sudden. He was killed six days ago in an automobile accident on the Brooklyn Bridge.

Operator 1: (filter) Your three minutes are up, sir. Your three minutes are up, sir. Your three minutes are up, sir. Sir, three minutes are up.

(SFX: DIAL TONE)

Adams: (narrative) And so, I'm sitting here in this deserted auto camp in Gallup, New Mexico. And so, I'm trying to think. I'm trying to get a hold of myself. Otherwise otherwise, I'll go crazy. 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 and mountains, prairies, desert. Somewhere among them, he is waiting for me --- somewhere. Somewhere I shall know who he is and who I am.

Pabst Announcer: We'll be right back to tell you more about our next Mercury Theater of Suspense, but first, the makers of Pabst Blue Ribbon wish to remind you that though you may not be able to get Pabst Blue Ribbon every time you want it in these days of grain

restrictions, it is well worth your while to keep asking, for every bottle you do get will continue to live up to its name. And speaking of grain restrictions, not a single grain of wheat is being used in the brewing of beer and ale. And the grains being used by breweries are not the grains wanted for famine relief. Now let me repeat: When you do get Pabst Blue Ribbon, you can be sure this truly great beer will be as always the happy blending of never-less-than thirty-three fine brews, as always, blended, splendid Pabst Blue Ribbon. Now here's Orson Welles.

Welles: Next month, ladies and gentlemen, we bring to your radio another Mercury favorite --- we hope a favorite of yours --- you've asked for it many times. An exciting, suspenseful episode of "The Whistler".

Announcer: More than half of our nation's workers make their living in the food industry or a related field. Next week in Chicago, the National Association of Retail Grocers is holding its first post-war convention at which the problems of food distribution will be discussed and new ideas and methods will be worked out to better serve its customers. The makers of Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer salute the grocer who is doing his very best under trying conditions to keep America well-fed. This program came to you through the courtesy of the Pabst Brewing Co. of Milwaukee, Wisconsin --- makers of blended, splendid Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer.