

JO JORDAN

THE DEVIL'S
OWN PET

A TALE OF THE WILDER WEST

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JD JORDAN

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I've been accused of telling my share of tall tales—I won't deny—but I can assure you, sir, this ain't no bunk. Was the summer of 1855, about a day's ride north of that terrible pueblo, Los Angeles, and I'd already seen the thunderbird twice when that Green Woman showed up.

She—if she even was a she—had come calling on the same generous bounty what drew me from my own ranch to that haunted little lake, Elizabeth. And Mister Faragher spent a sight more than the ten minutes he'd awarded me talking with her in his salon. Seems to me a greenskin should merit as little attention as a Negro when it comes to commerce with a white man of wealth and property. But wasn't my warrant and wasn't my menace what drew either of us into his service so I reckon I'll keep them thoughts my own.

No, sir. But was still my bounty to claim—or lose—so I paced all slow up and down the length of Faragher's porch while she was inside. Brooding, but not fit for tying. And all the while, was this young Indian boy of hers what sat cross-legged by the door, still as a goddamned corpse. His little black eyes fixed on me no matter where I was but never once did his body move more than a breath.

Was something Crow or Cheyenne about him, so I tried some of those tongues. I'd lived proper among them Crow for years back when I was a trapper, so I spoke that tongue as well or better than this here yammering. But the boy didn't respond to me at all. Just watched me, like some raptor on a low perch, sizing me up for a pounce. The only time he moved at all was to stand and rest his hand on the hilt of his little knife just seconds before that Green Woman stepped out onto the porch beside me.

She was a sight shorter than the only other Green I ever saw—a tall drink of water I come across some five years before, when I was scouting the Sierras. No, this Green was maybe half-a-head shorter than me—tall for a woman, all the same—and slender with a wide curve at the waist, like them girls what fill the paintings on saloon walls. She had those big terrible black eyes what make their kind so damned hard to ken and those long antennae, thrice jointed as they reached up well past my hat and on toward them porch rafters. Gave her an un-human height what oft made me to glance up even if her face was tilted low. And her voice was a bit high. High but rough all the same, like the foul scrape of sand under your boot when the thirst takes you and you hear death in all things.

She was dressed same as any ranger or scout might, with a leather hat casting shadow over her face like a veil, those coffee-black eyes somehow the only light on her thin face. And a rifle, long as she was tall, slung behind her, silvered like a mirror with a barrel much too thin to pass slugs like a proper firearm.

She came out the door like to see me, as if she knew I was already waiting on them boards for her, and said plain, “You’re to show me where you’ve seen it, and what you’d done.”

“Am I?” I told her, chaffing under some goddamn unnecessary competition. Was my bounty she was looking to claim.

“Now,” she said, and walked on past me like she knew wherefore, already, that Crow boy one step behind her.

I muttered something regrettable. Then, and after a pace, “Yes, ma’am,” and started after.

I took her about halfway down to the lake, on a clear bluff between the grazing and the forest. Told her how the lake was far deeper than she might reckon, on account of it’s where the earth folded in on itself and made all the shaking what kept me sleeping outside ever when I was in this part of California. Told her, too, how Mister Faragher was just the latest in a long line of Californios what tried to make their claims on Elizabeth’s shores only to be chased away by the thunderbird what hid beneath the water.

“The Devil created the lake as a pen for his pet, the Spaniards and the Indians both say,” I told her. “There’s a door on to Hell, itself, in them depths.”

"Reckon not," she told me, surveying the scene—beautiful what it was—with some dark glass box held out at arm's length. And while I couldn't see nothing to that little glass, she made to frown like it was reporting back some unhappy news.

"Ain't right," she muttered. Then turning, she looked me up and down not unlike how most of them white cow punchers once appraised. "You're old enough. Shouldn't you be warming a rocker, somewhere? Why're you here?"

"Same as you," I told her.

"I doubt it."

"I'm a man what gets things done."

"Clearly," she scoffed.

"I done seen the thunderbird twice, now." I told her. "Bullets done bounce right off of it."

"I'm sure they do."

She stuffed that glass back into her long coat and I saw for the first what her right arm wasn't green like the rest of her. Was gray—almost as shiny as her long rifle, truth be told—and crisscrossed with thin creases what made it look more patchwork than cast iron.

She nodded to her boy, who run off without so much as a word passing between them, then turned back to me.

"Reckon I'm supposed to thank you," she said, "But we're done. I ain't got no need for you."

"On account of my being an old Negro?" I snapped at her, ready to fight.

She just looked away. "On account of you being a man."

Now, could be, sir, this is where the story ends. You know those tales. The old ranger stomps off in a huff to collect his partials and heads home to tend his cattle or ferry pilgrims over the peaks. But ain't no piece of this man what takes kindly to any dismissal—neither from a so-called master nor from any immigrant from above. The West is a land of merit, as you've plainly seen. And if a Negro such as me can make himself a hero in this country and show the best qualities of a man in doing, reckon it ain't possible to treat him as less of a man.

So come dark, I took up on a rise not far from the main house, ever keeping that Green in the sights of my own long glass. She lit no fire and

showed no sign of sleeping even as the night dragged on close to morning and the moon tracked its course right past the overhead. But still it was full and bright and gave enough light to see her waiting, some small gray ball bouncing in her metal hand like how a man might toss his knife to pass the hours.

And wasn't long after I took up my spot, sheltered in a copse near the smokehouse, when that Indian boy stepped out of the shadows and sat crossed facing me. I let down my glass and watched him a good while before trying my Crow on him again. The kid said nothing.

"I'm watching her so you're watching me," I asked him. "That the way of it?"

He said nothing. Was more like a pet than a child, he was. Dutiful as a spaniel.

Before long, I was fading as the night began to wane and the sky showed its first hint of purple beyond the mountains. But ain't that what roused me. No, sir. Was this deep rumble, like that of the world bending beneath the lake. Except wasn't no shaking or rattling what followed. Just a deepening of the sound, such that I felt it in my lungs and bones as much as heard it in my ears. Such that I felt my body might all come to pieces and shake down to dust.

But soon as that deep rumble settled in, it ended all sudden with the burst of water and the crash of fire from the center of the lake.

The thunderbird roared into the failing night, its body long and straight, like an arrow, but ending all blunt in a fat teardrop head the size of a wagon. Must've been a hundred feet from end to end and twice as much across its broad flat wings. And they was clear enough you could make out the stars and moon through them as it shot through the dark. But the two bits of that monster I remember clearest of all was the bright flame was roared like a grizzly out its backside, seeming to hurtle in higher and faster into the air. And the mantles what hung like hooks the size of rail engines over the monster's shoulders, hanging like legs too far forward and framing that fat head in great and terrible white light, illuminating whatever lay in its sights.

The thunderbird flew high and fast away from the lake, then banked back like how a condor circles over its prey. But instead of circling high and waiting for something to give up the ghost, this beast swung low

over a mess of Faragher's cattle. Those heifers began their stampede and filled the air with a terrible moaning. But that monster just hung over them, seeming to stop in the sky without so much as a flap of its wings. And quick as those beasts ran, wasn't nothing on earth fast enough to escape that thunderbird. From those bright white shoulders, a wall of light reached down to the grasses and swept over the herd. In an instant, grass was set to kindling and the cattle blacked from skin all the way through to their bones. The beasts burst where the steam of cooked fat exploded out of them. Was one of the worst things I ever saw. If anything were of the Devil, that there's a proper candidate.

But was another light I saw right then. The Green Woman set something on the hill that shot a light straight up to the stars. Like a chimney stack of light. And that thunderbird made a frightening noise at the sight of it. It slid sidelong from that burning field and hung itself over the water, looking down on the Green Woman. The water and the grass trembled beneath it. Even the trees where I sheltered rustled and waved, as though the monster made angry all of Creation.

The Indian boy? He never took his eyes off me. Never one look back for his mistress.

I could see the Green Woman was trying to speak over the noise of that monster. But whatever she meant to say, the thunderbird wasn't keen on listening. With a shriek of its own, the winged thing bent toward the Green Woman and let loose with its terrible burning light. All erupted into fire and death about her, like a bonfire burst from the soil.

The thunderbird shrieked again, proud, I think, of its murder. Then spun end-over-end and plunged back into the lake.

Was then the Indian boy moved. He sprang from the copse and sprinted toward his mistress with a speed I ain't never seen from human legs. And I followed close on, quick as I could. Might've been past fifty, sir, and my joints pained with the first hints of rheumatism, but was still a spring in me, I promise you. I've made quite a name for myself in the wild and ain't none of that accomplishment been done sitting.

We run up on what I expected would be a likewise burnt and burst body. But instead, the Green Woman lay curled on the ground in a circle of grass proper cooked dry, but unburnt. She smoked a bit from the leathers of her hat and coat, but nowhere quite so much as from that gray

ball still in her hand—the one I'd seen her tossing before the monster of Elizabeth Lake made to end her.

We carried her up and into the main house. Mister Faragher and a mess of his servants woke to help us fetch water and bandages and else, but that Green Woman just pushed back all the help we offered. She was right fouled up, understand. Her eyes was clouded and was burns on the uncovered bits of her hands and waist—where seems the wind of that thunderbird was strong enough to half undo her. But she only wanted what her Indian boy fetched her from their saddle bags: a bottle of the foulest benzene I ever smelled and a broad flat silver bandage she wrapped around her belly and used in strips to wrap tight her blistered hands.

When all the commotion was done and Mister Faragher had sent his hands away to measure the massacre among his livestock, she called me to sit beside where she lay across one of Faragher's nicer couches.

"Reckon I was too quick in my assuming," she said.

"How's that?" I asked her. "Didn't reckon the thunderbird real?"

She shook her head and cough the littlest bit. A noise like an animal, it was.

"No, Mister Beckwourth," she said. "Reckon I was too quick in dismissing you."

"Pardon me for saying," I told her, "but I ain't your man to dismiss."

She nodded and I noticed for the first time how she was using them insect feelers of hers to watch me as much or more than she used her big coffee-cup eyes, clouded what they were.

"That thunderbird of yours," she started, "It ain't no monster. It's a flying engine. A ship made for the sea between the stars. And it should've done one of two things when it saw me." She sat up a bit, propped on her metal arm. "I'd hoped it would've recognized me and I would've been right pleased to be reunited with one of my own kind. Failing that, I should've expected it would've at least known how to proper kill me."

"But failing both?" I asked her.

"Reckon it's something else, entire," she said.

Was then she called in Mister Faragher and explained he was going to have to readdress his expectations. And he wasn't pleased, I'll point out, at being advised as such. Seems the monster had taken near on a hundred head in that night's attack but the Green Woman just waved

over his anger and with a word, she quieted him—almost as if her word had power enough to close a rich man's mouth same as a slap to the face.

He was going to need to pay me more, she told him, on account that she was going to need my help. And plumb dangerous help, at that. Worth many head of cattle on top of my bounty, she told him. And when he made to argue—struggling, it seemed against some new instinct to shut the hell up—she just lay back on that bully couch and told him.

"It's yours to pay or no," she said. "Just like it's your livestock and household and life what that monster will set aflame if we aren't here to stop it."

And as such, sir, my contract was proper amended.

I'd been there a few weeks and only seen the creature thrice, now, but I still counted us fortunate the monster didn't emerge the next night as the Green Woman was still banged up something terrible all the next day. But with a speed I ain't never seen, she was proper recovered before supper on the second day and by dark we and that queer Indian boy of hers made out to that same copse where I hid two nights before.

We crouched in the dark, there, and watched the almost-full moon shine on Elizabeth's still waters.

The Green Woman handed me two strange objects. And when she did, we touched for the shortest of moments. But I feel it's worth saying, if you've never seen a Green your own self, that you might expect their skin to be slick or even wet, same as you might a fish or a snake's. But, like them others, her's was rougher than expected. And dry as the Sonora. But she wasn't cold. And was something in her touch which, I ain't ashamed to say, I right liked.

The first she gave me was that same gray ball she'd held on the first night. "Comes from one of those flying engines what brought us to your world back in '49," she said. "Assuming my boy fixed it proper, will protect you same as it did me."

Then she handed me something I ain't seen before. A flat shiny disc a hair bigger than a jar lid.

"And this. This will call the engine to you." She told me. "This is the most important thing. Don't leave this far from you."

I nodded. Was all the stuff of tall tales, that. But I'd seen tall tales come true plenty in my wandering. What can't be, often was.

She seemed lost in thought for a long while after that, watching the water and the sky with them big black eyes, clear again as mirrors enough I could see the moon in her face, reflected like two white pupils. And them antennae of hers watched all else. She never flinched when a dog howled or even once when I swear I could hear a grizzly prowling not a hundred feet off.

And when the night was deepest and a cloud settled between us at that bright moon—and her boy was God knows where—she turned to me like she was seeing me for the first. Not that she seemed to like what she saw. No, sir. A scowl folded her thin lips.

“This ain’t a world for the likes of either of us, I reckon,” she said.

Well I sat up a bit at that. Like I done told you, sir, I’ve been much before that night. A slave, a smith, a fur trader, an Indian fighter, a gambler, and a storekeep. I’ve scouted new passes and guided wagons over the mountains and even been headman among them Crow—my own children still riding the Yellowstone, so far as I know. Maybe I’m as much an alien in this West as the Green Woman but reckon I didn’t share her sentiment.

“No, ma’am,” I told her. “Was born a slave in Virigina and that, there, is a land of monsters. In this here West—be it full of thunderbirds and flying engines or even worse I ain’t seen—at least I’m free.” I looked her square, “Like you said, I’m a man. Goddamn if this ain’t just the world for me.”

She nodded. Then she took that long rifle in her hands and began to prepare it in her way. Was lights and switches and some manner of pictures on it what didn’t make any sense on how they worked or what they might mean to my human eyes, but she seemed comforted at their report.

“When it comes, I’ll only need a minute,” she said.

And I squeezed that gray ball in my hand. It was hard and heavy as cannon shot but smooth and perfect as an egg.

“Is that what I’ll be giving you?”

She met my eyes with her bottomless black ones.

“Reckon we’ll see.”

Then, after a long time watching me, she added, “Don’t run. You won’t be safe if you run. And keep that disc close. It’s the most important thing to me.”

I turned the disc in the re-emerged moonlight, watching the silver

glow play on its facets.

Tall tales. Guess we'd see.

And like to answer my question—and her's—that deep rumble filled all the world again. It shook me so deep and so low, I don't mind telling you, sir, I might've pissed myself proper if it weren't for that Indian boy emerging from the dark when he did, taking me by the hand.

As we left the Green Woman, she was settling that long rifle of hers across a branch, the long glass atop it already reached out to swallow her eye like a photo taker's cowl. But I didn't have time to see her ready herself, further. That boy rushed me through the night to that same hill where the Green Woman stood two nights before. Where the earth still stunk of ash and the wind had taken the burnt grass away, leaving bare dirt gray in the moonlight.

The thunderbird burst from the lake and shot straight up into the night, seeming to aim itself at the moon, its hard white light rising up into the black like the beam from a lighthouse. It shrieked something awful and swung back down toward the earth and set fire to the forest across the water easy as Celestial might light his firecrackers.

The Indian boy stood in front of me, then, and took the disc from my hands. He lay it on the burnt earth between us and looked at it like it was some much-beloved thing. Not a trophy or a prize. But like how a child might look at his mother. Not Lovely. Loved.

The disc shot its column of light into the sky and I heard the monster shriek in answer. But before I could look up from the disc, the boy took my hand one last time and opening his mouth, I hear the Green Woman's voice speak to me across his lips. And her words, they were terrifying. I felt each letter deep in my bones.

"You won't run. You'll die to protect me."

And I knew, somehow, I would. And the boy nodded, let go of my hand, and ran into the dark.

My feet was stones, planted parts of the earth every bit as much as the mountains, themselves. My legs were pillars upon which I'd been mounted, like a figure upon a carved pedestal. No amount of whipping at the post ever held me so fast as her words. And in my heart—racing and pumping ice through what was left of my chest and arms and face—I knew I'd never move again if she didn't let me.

In the bright of that signal light, I couldn't see anything of the world around me. Not until the glowing white mantles of the thunderbird emerged from the pitch, their coming heralding a wind like the good Lord's trumpets come Rapture.

A blizzard's wind is what it was—cold and wet off the lake and fierce as any storm. My hat was torn from off my head, my shirt lifted about my chest, and my coat raised a fuss behind me as a sail might in a gale. But I didn't move. I stood firm even as my heart tried it goddamnest to run out of me.

The monster shrieked at me. Engine or beast, its wall of light cast at my feet, ready to burn me through like those cattle. And knowing better—the Lord knows I'd wasted bullets on this creature before—I raised my six shooter and made to snuff out that thunderbird's terrible lanterns with as many pulls of the trigger as the time left me could afford.

Was then, the thunderbird made to kill me.

All about became heat and fire and damnation—a preacher's vision of the underworld if anything on this Earth ever was. But around me, was like a bubble what kept the fire at bay. But not its heat. My hands and face and belly—all those places the wind laid bare—burned like no desert or salt flat I ever felt. Was more like a master's brand except on every bit of me. And I remember screaming so hard my throat felt like it was tearing. But I don't remember hearing nothing over the roar of that firestorm all about.

Then, it was over. Dark come back so sudden I couldn't see else but the burn marks on the back of my eyes, like if you ever looked into a campfire too long then turned to face the night. Except was everywhere.

And I heard this sharp twang, like a hammer striking a rail. Two or three times, I heard it. And with each, was this long thin stripe of light cut through the dark and my burnt vision and—most important—through the body of that terrible thunderbird.

It rose like an animal struck. And it tumbled from where it hung—almost over onto its back—and crashed in the shallows at the edge of the lake, the water spraying so far from under its weight that even the burning grasses about my feet steamed and hissed in the spray.

Still unable to move, I watched the Green Woman hurtle herself down the hillsides on all fours—a wolf descending. With two great bounds she

crossed the bank of the lake and was atop the fallen thunderbird. And with two swift strikes of her metal arm, she punched through its bulletproof skin and ripped open a small room in the things tear-drop head.

By a medley of firelight, moonlight, and the fierce lights still pouring from the thunderbird's mantle, I saw her pull a man—a human man, I mean—from out the head of thing. She tossed him as far as the shore, him screaming all the while as he tumbled through the air. And when he struck the earth, at last, was the Indian boy what pounced upon him.

I couldn't hear what that Crow boy said to the other. Except that it was quick and mean and the other answered back as desperate as man can. Was an Indian, too, he was, though dressed after the fashion of the Chumash I seen in Los Angeles.

But didn't matter, none. Before his mistress had descended from that crashed flying engine, the Indian boy slit the other's throat. In the harsh light from the downed monster, the boy's shadow stretched like a giant's all the way back up to the main house, his small knife longer than the felled beast's wings.

The Green Woman paced about for a spell before the great crashed engine, so much less a monster or bird now than it was on the wing, raining its bright death down upon us. Her shadow, too, was long and withering, but soon the monster's great lights dimmed and went out, flickering like a final, labored breath.

Seeing poorly in the new dark, as I was, I didn't see her approach. She seemed to just pop out of the dark like an animal from a cave. She'd slung her long thin rifle, stooped to pluck up her precious disc, and watched, measuring me.

"You did well," she said.

I tried to reckon if she was galling me.

"Didn't have as much say in the matter as I would've liked."

She actually laughed at that, nodding some and looking back for her boy in the darkness.

"Relax, Mister Beckwourth," she said. And with her words, my legs come back to life like I'd never used them before. I crumpled to the ground, my hands pained when their burnt skin crunched into the baked dirt.

"We're done, I take it?" I asked her, meaning our arrangement, not

our warrant.

“Not just,” she said, offering me a hand and helping me back to my tingling feet with surprising strength.

Mister Faragher was full of himself when he come out of the main house, whooping about how much money that fallen bird was like to make him. And not just in the traveling shows, but in all the opportunities its manner of killing might afford the army or a proper filibusterer. But the Green Woman dispelled him of that notion right quick, reminding him of their arrangement. One he didn't quite remember until she told him what for. And I could see in his consternation, her voice was useful for more than making a man stand his ground.

By the time the sun come up, Mister Faragher paid her more wages than I've seen in a lifetime. And me, a much smaller portion and a dozen head of cattle—a mess of fine oxen and some bigger heifers the Green Woman pointed out to me. Faragher bitched all the while and the Green Woman just smiled this infectious grin I'll admit I was wearing before the transaction was through. And then she come over to me and parceled out a full half of her own bounty in exchange for those head I'd just won. Seems she needed a team to haul out her prize. Shot through as it was, that flying engine wouldn't be flying any time soon. But float just above the dirt like a skiff on some invisible pond, well that was right likely.

Late in the day, when the oxen was all rigged and the traces in their place, the Indian boy climbed up and sat perch atop that thunderbird like a fly on a buffalo. And that Green Woman strolled over to me with a sudden swing in her hips what made me think on her as a lady to this day.

“Mister Beckwourth,” she began, “You ever crossed the Sierras?”

I tipped my hat at her and smiled. “Why, yes ma'am. There's even a trail through them mountains what bear my name.”

She nodded, looking around at her prize and her boy and the lake with her eyes, those antennae—I'm plumb sure—only ever watching me.

“Then I'd be might obliged if you'd accompany me.”

And how's a man supposed to say no to a lady like that.

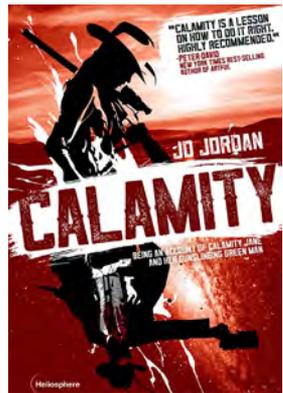
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JD Jordan is the author of the acclaimed scifi-western novel, *Calamity: Being an Account of Calamity Jane and Her Gunslinging Green Man*—and has also been featured in *Creative Loafing*, *The International Journal of the Book*, *Newsweek*, *Paste*, and *Smashing Magazine*. He is also an award-winning graphic designer, design educator, and historian with experience working with some of the biggest agencies and brands in the Southeast. He is currently the design director and co-founder of the design and content agency, J+E Creative (importantshit.co). He is represented by The Zack Company.

JD lives in Atlanta, Georgia with his wife, Ellie, and a whole bunch of kids. He's a huge scifi nerd but, despite the contents of this novel, never purposefully sat down to watch or read a Western until the Green Man rode into his imagination. Now he can't get enough of them.

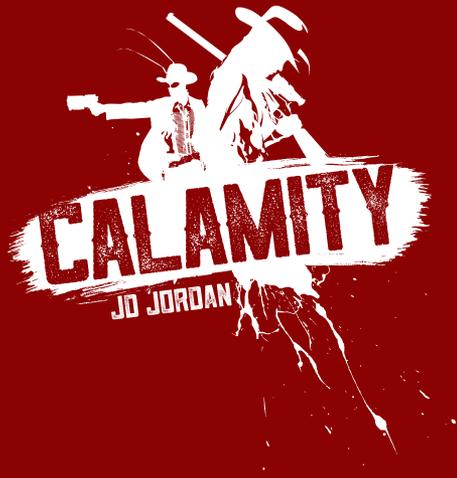
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