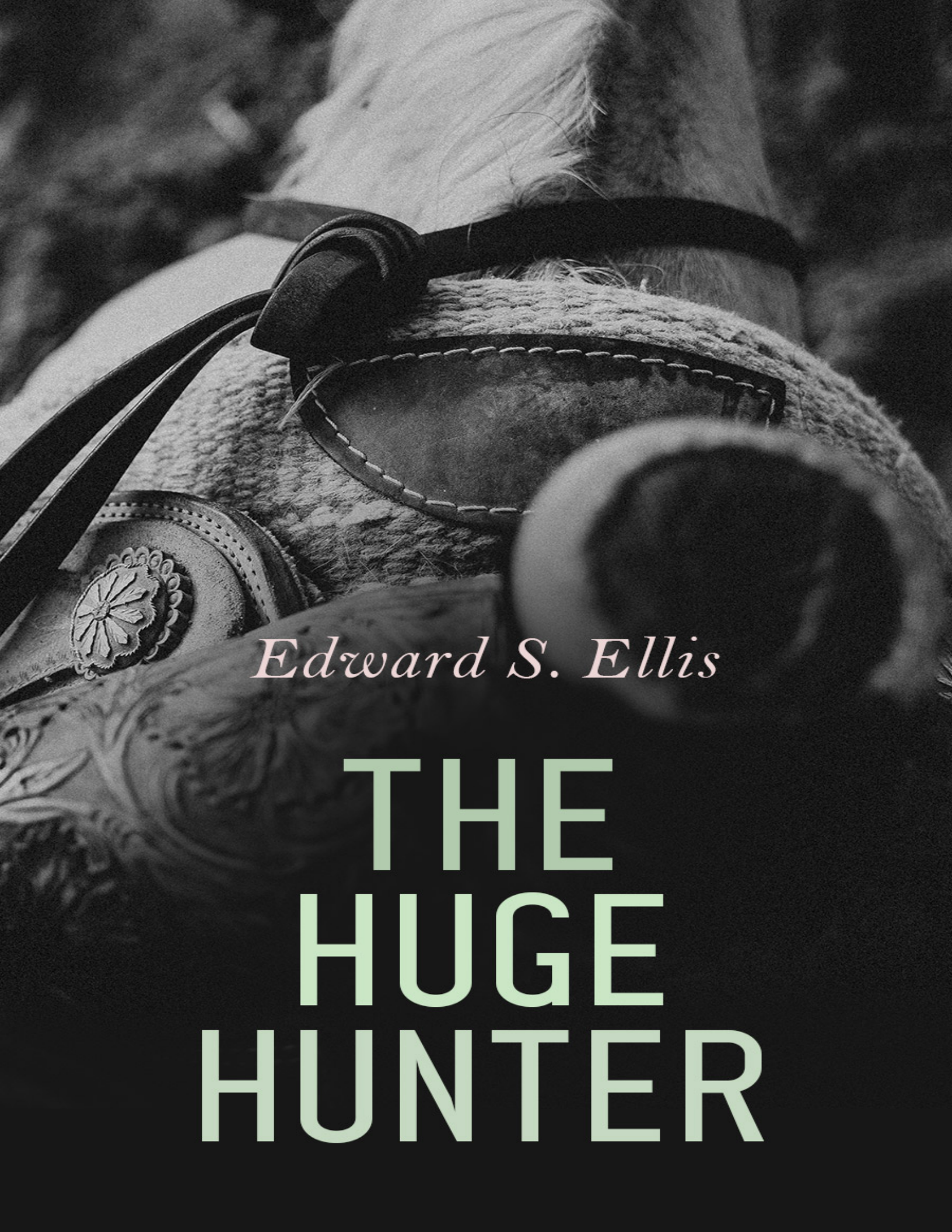




Edward S. Ellis

THE HUGE HUNTER

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Western Novel: The Steam Man of the Prairies

e-artnow, 2022

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EAN 4066338126474

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CHAPTER I. THE TERROR OF THE PRAIRIES.

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'HOWLY vargin! what is that?' exclaimed Mickey McSquizzle, with something like horrified amazement.

'By the Jumping Jehosiphath, naow if that don't, beat all natur'!'

'It's the divil, broke loose, wid full steam on!'

There was good cause for these exclamations upon the part of the Yankee and Irishman, as they stood on the margin of Wolf Ravine, and gazed off over the prairie. Several miles to the north, something like a gigantic man could be seen approaching, apparently at a rapid gait for a few seconds, when it slackened its speed, until it scarcely moved.

Occasionally it changed its course, so that it went nearly at right angles. At such times, its colossal proportions were brought out in full relief, looking like some Titan as it took its giant strides over the prairie.

The distance was too great to scrutinize the phenomenon closely; but they could see that a black volume of smoke issued either from its mouth or the top of its head, while it was drawing behind it a sort of carriage, in which a single man was seated, who appeared to control the movements of the extraordinary being in front of him.

No wonder that something like superstitious have filled the breasts of the two men who had ceased hunting for gold, for a few minutes, to view the singular apparition; for

such a thing had scarcely been dreamed of at that day, by the most imaginative philosophers; much less had it ever entered the head of these two men on the western prairies.

'Begorrah, but it's the ould divil, hitched to his throttin 'waging, wid his ould wife howldin the reins!' exclaimed Mickey, who had scarcely removed his eyes from the singular object.

'That there critter in the wagon is a man,' said Hopkins, looking as intently in the same direction. 'It seems to me,' he added, a moment later, 'that there's somebody else a-sitting alongside of him, either a dog or a boy. Wal, naow, ain't that queer?'

'Begorrah! begorrah! do ye hear that? What shall we do?'

At that instant, a shriek like that of some agonized giant came home to them across the plains, and both looked around, as if about to flee in terror; but the curiosity of the Yankee restrained him. His practical eye saw that whatever it might be, it was a human contrivance, and there could be nothing supernatural about it.

'Look!'

Just after giving its ear-splitting screech, it turned straight toward the two men, and with the black smoke rapidly puffing from the top of its head, came tearing along at a tremendous rate.

Mickey manifested some nervousness, but he was restrained by the coolness of Ethan, who kept his position with his eye fixed keenly upon it.

Coming at such a railroad speed, it was not long in passing the intervening space. It was yet several hundred

yards distant, when Ethan Hopkins gave Mickey a ringing slap upon the shoulder.

'Jerusalem! who do ye s'pose naow, that man is sitting in the carriage and holding the reins?'

'Worrah, worrah! why do you ax me, whin I'm so frightened entirely that I don't know who I am myself?'

'Its Baldy.'

'Git out!' replied the Irishman, but added the next moment, 'am I shlapping or dhraming? It's Baldy or his ghost.'

It certainly was no ghost, judging from the manner in which it acted; for he sat with his hat cocked on one side, a pipe in his mouth, and the two reins in his hands, just as the skillful driver controls the mettlesome horses and keeps them well in hand.

He was seated upon a large pile of wood, while near nestled a little hump-backed, bright-eyed boy, whose eyes sparkled with delight at the performance of the strange machine.

The speed of the steam man gradually slackened, until it came opposite the men, when it came to a dead halt, and the grinning 'Baldy,' as he was called, (from his having lost his scalp several years before, by the Indians), tipped his hat and said:

'Glad to see you hain't gone under yit. How'd you git along while I was gone?'

But the men were hardly able to answer any questions yet, until they had learned something more about the strange creation before them. Mickey shied away, as the timid steed does at first sight of the locomotive, observing

which, the boy (at a suggestion from Baldy), gave a string in his hand a twitch, whereupon the nose of the wonderful thing threw out a jet of steam with the sharp screech of the locomotive whistle. Mickey sprung a half dozen feet backward, and would have run off at full speed down the ravine, had not Ethan Hopkins caught his arm.

'What's the matter, Mickey, naow! Hain't you ever heard anything like a locomotive whistle?'

'Worrah, worrah, now, but is that the way the crather blows its nose? It must have a beautiful voice when it shnores at night.'

Perhaps at this point a description of the singular mechanism should be given. It was about ten feet in hight, measuring to the top of the 'stove-pipe hat,' which was fashioned after the common order of felt coverings, with a broad brim, all painted a shiny black. The face was made of iron, painted a black color, with a pair of fearful eves, and a tremendous grinning mouth. A whistle-like contrivance was trade to answer for the nose. The steam chest proper and boiler, were where the chest in a human being is generally supposed to be, extending also into a large knapsack arrangement over the shoulders and back. A pair of arms, like projections, held the shafts, and the broad flat feet were covered with sharp spikes, as though he were the monarch of base-ball players. The legs were quite long, and the step was natural, except when running, at which time, the bolt uprightness in the figure showed different from a human being.

In the knapsack were the valves, by which the steam or water was examined. In front was a painted imitation of a

vest, in which a door opened to receive the fuel, which, together with the water, was carried in the wagon, a pipe running along the shaft and connecting with the boiler.

The lines which the driver held controlled the course of the steam man; thus, by pulling the strap on the right, a deflection was caused which turned it in that direction, and the same acted on the other side. A small rod, which ran along the right shaft, let out or shut off the steam, as was desired, while a cord, running along the left, controlled the whistle at the nose.

The legs of this extraordinary mechanism were fully a yard apart, so as to avoid the danger of its upsetting, and at the same time, there was given more room for the play of the delicate machinery within. Long, sharp, spike-like projections adorned those toes of the immense feet, so that there was little danger of its slipping, while the length of the legs showed that, under favorable circumstances, the steam man must be capable of very great speed.

After Ethan Hopkins had some what familiarized himself with the external appearance of this piece of mechanism, he ventured upon a more critical examination.

The door being opened in front, showed a mass of glowing coals lying in the capacious abdomen of the giant; the hissing valves in the knapsack made themselves apparent, and the top of the hat or smoke-stack had a sieve-like arrangement, such as is frequently seen on the locomotive.

There were other little conveniences in the way of creating a draft, and of shutting it off when too great, which

could scarcely be understood without a scrutiny of the figure itself.

The steam man was a frightful looking object, being painted of a glossy black, with a pair of white stripes down its legs, and with a face which was intended to be of a flesh color, but, which was really a fearful red.

To give the machinery an abundance of room, the steam man was exceedingly corpulent, swelling out to aldermanic proportions, which, after all, was little out of harmony with its immense height.

The wagon dragged behind was an ordinary four-wheeled vehicle, with springs, and very strong wheels, a framework being arranged, so that when necessary it could be securely covered. To guard against the danger of upsetting it was very broad, with low wheels, which it may be safely said were made to 'hum' when the gentleman got fairly under way.

Such is a brief and Imperfect description of this wonderful steam man, as it appeared on its first visit to the Western prairies.

CHAPTER II. 'HANDLE ME GENTLY.'

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WHEN Ethan Hopkins had surveyed the steam man fully, he drew a long sigh and exclaimed:

'Wal, naow, that's too had!'

'What's that?' inquired Bicknell, who had been not a little amused at his open-mouthed amazement.

'Do you know I've been thinking of that thing for ten years, ever since I went through Colt's pistol factory in Hartford, when I was a youngster?'

'Did you ever think of any plan!'

'I never got it quite right, but I intended to do it after we got through digging for gold. The thing was just taking shape in my head. See here, naow, ain't you going to give a fellow a ride?'

'Jis' what I wanted; shall I run it for you?'

'No, I see how it works; them 'ere thingumbobs and gimcracks do it all.'

'Johnny, hyar, will tell yer 'bout it.'

The little humpback sprung nimbly down, and ran around the man, explaining as well as he could in a few moments the manner of controlling its movements. The Yankee felt some sensitiveness in being instructed by such a tiny specimen, and springing into the wagon, exclaimed:

'Git eout! tryin' to teach yer uncle! I knowed how the thing would work before you were born!'

Perching himself on the top of the wood which was heaped up in the wagon, the enthusiastic New Englander

carefully looked over the prairie to see that the way was clear, and was about to 'let on steam,' when he turned toward the Irishman.

'Come, Mickey, git up here.'

'Arrah now, but I never learnt to ride the divil when I was home in the ould country,' replied the Irishman, backing away.

But both Ethan and Baldy united in their persuasions, and finally Mickey consented, although with great trepidation. He timidly climbed upon the wagon and took his seat beside the Yankee, looking very much as a man may be supposed to look who mounts the hearse to attend his own funeral.

'When yer wants to start, jist pull that 'ere gimcrack!' said Baldy, pointing to the crook in the rod upon which his hand rested.

'Git eout, naow! do you think you're goin' to teach me that has teached school fur five year in Connecticut?'

There were some peculiarities about the steam man which made him a rather unwieldy contrivance. He had a way of starting with a jerk, unless great skill was used in letting on steam; and his stoppage was equally sudden, from the same cause.

When the Irishman and Yankee had fairly ensconced themselves on their perch, the latter looked carefully round to make sure that no one was in the way, and then he tuned the valve, which let on a full head of steam.

For a second the monster did not stir. The steam had not fairly taken 'hold' yet; then he raised one immense spiked foot and held it suspended in air.

'That's a great contrivance, ain't it?' exclaimed Ethan, contemptuously.

'Can't do nothin' more than lift his foot. Wait till you see more! he's goin' to dance and skip like a lamb, or outrun any locomotive you ever sot eyes on!'

'Bad luck to the loikes of yees, why d' yees go on?' exclaimed the irate Irishman, as he leaned forward and addressed the obdurate machine. 'Are yees tryin' to fool us, bad luck to yees?'

At this instant, the feet of the steam man began rising and falling with lightning like rapidity, the wagon being jerked forward with such sudden swiftness, that both Ethan and Mickey turned back summersets, rolling heels over head off the vehicle to the ground, while the monster went puffing over the prairie, and at a terrific rate. Baldy was about to start in pursuit of it, when Johnny, the deformed boy, restrained him.

'It won't run far; the steam is nearly out.'

'Be jibbers! but me head is caved in!' exclaimed the Irishman, rising to his feet, rubbing his head, and looking at his hand to see whether there was blood upon it.

'Jerusalem! I thought she had upset or busted her b'iler!' said the Yankee, looking around him with a bewildered air.

The two spectators were laughing furiously, and they could scarcely stand the trick which had been played upon them.

'Let your old machine go to blazes!' muttered Ethan. 'If it acts that way, I don't want nothin' to do with it.'

In the mean time the steamer had gone rattling over the prairie, until about a quarter of a mile distant, when it