

Tom Edison & His Telegraphic Harpoon

BY JAY LAKE

IN WHICH A

GREAT INVENTOR

MUST DEFEND HIS

COUNTRYMEN

FROM EVIL

Tom Edison stared out the viewport at the rolling hills of the Iowa territory, just within Missouri country. The horizon moved with a lurch-and-swoop not unlike the boats on the Great Lakes in choppy weather, though today's brilliant sun and flawless sky belied the comparison. The steam ram *City of Hoboken* moved like a drunken bear in all weathers, pistons groaning with the pain of metal as the great machine walked the prairies.

Behind him, his printing press chunked through another impression, Salmon Greenberry grunting with the effort. Salmon, Tom's freedman friend and colleague in experimentation and business alike, though they were both barely sprouting beards yet.

Boys in arms, adventuring together across the West. He resolved that he would someday write a book. If one could ever send communications across this benighted country.

“The problem with the telegraph,” Tom said slowly, the idea unfolding even as he spoke, “is that one cannot run the lines west of the Mississippi. Those damnable Indians, or worse, Clark’s Army, just pull the copper down again.”

There was a feshet of ink-odor in his nostrils, and barely audible, the damp tear of a sheet from the stone. Tom’s ears were never the best.

Salmon said something unintelligible, grunting with his labor, then the words segued into meaning. “. . . help what they are. It’s the West, Tom.” There was a familiar warmth in his friend’s voice, in which Tom sometimes to his secret shame found comfort in the clanking, heaving darkness of the steam ram during prairie nights.

Tom snorted away the reverie and Salmon’s suggestion together. “People have been using that excuse since Jefferson’s day. Apologists for spiritualist madness, with no understanding of or interest in Progress. This is a better world than that, amenable to logic and sweet reason.”

Another thunk of the press. Another grunt from Salmon. “As you’ll have it, Tom.”

Though he still had not turned to face his friend, even with his failing ears Tom could hear the grin. He smiled back. Another secret shared.

A shot echoed from above, in the watchman’s post, followed by the clang of valves as the captain shunted power to the turrets.

“Attack,” shouted Salmon.

Tom whirled to help his friend latch down the printing press, then they both grabbed the repeating rifles racked by the hatch of their little work-cabin, heading for battle stations. Tom thought he heard the crackle of distant gunfire, but it might have been his own pulse.

THE WEATHER DECK of the *City of Hoboken* was a good forty feet above the solid Iowa earth. “Deck” was perhaps too

kind a word for what was really just the plank ceiling of the bridge deck below, surrounded by a low railing with built-up firing points for prone riflemen. It was perhaps nine feet wide and twenty feet long, and featured only the watchman’s post, like a preacher’s lectern set amidships with no congregation but the distant horizon and the wheeling sky.

Tom and Salmon took up their firing points on the starboard rail, up top with the other useless supercargo and oddlot apprentices. Those with real worth in a battle manned the boilers, or the turrets, or worked the bridge deck. The *City of Hoboken*’s eight dragoons, eternally dissolute masters of pasteboard wagering, were certainly down in their lower balcony, ready to leap, shoot, or toss grenadoes as circumstances dictated.

The weather watch was for anyone with hands to shoot and nothing else to offer in defense.

“Where?” shouted Salmon. Tom watched his friend, waiting for the other boy’s eyes or rifle barrel to move in response to whatever the deck watch advised.

Then Salmon rolled onto his back, snappy as a scalded cat, and stared skyward.

Oh, no, thought Tom, but he did the same.

Something very big was silhouetted against that perfect prairie sky. It was shaped like a man, without the wings of one of the angels of the mountain West, and appeared to be carrying a cannon.

“What . . . ?” he whispered aloud. Tom had read the dispatches, those that were made available in Port Huron, and Chicago, to a fast-talking young man like himself. Not much was published about angels, but he’d even seen the Brady daguerreotypes from the Battle of St. Louis the previous year.

Angels had wings. Everything that flew had wings. Save one rumored monster





out of the deepest Western mountains.

Tom brought his rifle up to point skyward, stepping it against his body like a boat's mast. He pulled the trigger, thinking, *Nephilim. The great avengers. Nothing can kill a Nephil. And he's above the elevation of any of our big guns.* It was an offense against man and nature, this flying thing, and Tom swore out the measure of his fear. He had not come West to die at the hands of an impossibility.

His shot was the harbinger of a hailstorm of firing, the weather watch loosing its useless bullets at a thing above which laughed in a voice made of thunder, earthquakes and simple, gut-jellying terror.

THE CAPTAIN MADE a quick, hard turn, taking the *City of Hoboken* toward the dubious shelter of a tree-lined watercourse. After their initial orgy of firing, the weather watch calmed down a little as the Nephil banked above them.

It was definitely carrying a cannon, Tom realized. Something long and sleek, perhaps one of the new Parrott rifles. He couldn't imagine what need a supernatural being would have for such a thing. Supposedly the Nephilim could call lightning from the summer sky and break the backs of angels.

Did he have anything below that would entice it, entrap it, somehow save this day from the bloodbath which was surely coming?

In addition to hosting his half-penny newspaper, *The Trans-Mississippi Monitor*, the *City of Hoboken* was also home to something of a laboratory which Tom had accumulated. The captain tolerated Tom and his equipment in exchange for mechanical services rendered and the cachet of having his own newspaper on board. The prestige of a working press allowed him to charge higher fares for passengers heading for Des Moines, Council Bluffs and other points on the *City of Hoboken's* usual routes Westward toward the distant

riches of the Front Range in the Colorado country.

As part of his laboratory, Tom had on board a store of chemicals, machine tools, and curious items of his own devising. But what could dispatch one of the Nephilim? Legendary as they were, there were no whispered tales of the mighty monsters' defeat in battle.

The attacker circled lower, lazy and slow, following the *City of Hoboken* through the great steam ram's course changes. At least it had not set to killing them yet.

What could he do? Tom ran through a rapid mental inventory of acids, caustic chemicals, electrical jars, sharp tools, mechanisms.

There was the harpoon, he realized. The watchman's post had a pintle mount and a steam valve for that implement — designed originally for fighting off the mastodons, which sometimes crossed the Missouri River to range the Iowa prairies.

He could surely devise a suitable load to burst on impact with the attacker.

Tom handed Salmon his rifle and jumped to his feet. "Bannock," he shouted to the day watch. "We need to unship the harpoon rig. I can fight this thing!"

"You're bugged as a limehouse rat," said the watchman, peering at the Nephilim through a telescope. But as Tom scrambled down the hatch, he saw Bannock whispering into the speaking tube.

TOM WAS TRYING to quickly, very quickly, assemble a caustic load fit to drive off something as great and terrible as a Nephil. Tom didn't believe for a moment that God had sent the terrible creatures to the Mormons, but nonetheless they were here in the world. Even Nephilim had eyes. And he had a number of nasty acids fit to burn even the most resistant membrane. His science would defeat this treacherous superstition.

Then his gaze lit on the Planté-Fauré

battery cell. It was a new device, recently shipped out at great cost from New Jersey. Tom had made some modifications to it by way of accumulating ever more electrical potential, hoping to produce a fearsome spark from the thing as part of his ongoing investigations into the practical applications of such energies.

What would a great electrical discharge do to the flying menace? It might be as good as a strike by lightning.

Tom abandoned his acids and grabbed the loose cable end off a spool of telegraph wire. It was four-stranded copper, coated in gutta-percha then wrapped in sealed hemp yard — the best his limited money could buy, all the way from Buffalo. He dragged the end into the passage, letting the cable unspool, and shouting for Bannock or Salmon to come help as he worked to pass the copper cable up top.

Once the weather watch had hold of the cable, shouting and excited, Tom grabbed a ball-peen hammer and a set of staples, along with his tool bag. He nailed down the loose end off the spool center, allowing himself some slack, then scrambled up the ladder, past the writhing snake that was his cable.

On the weather deck the breeze was stiffer. Cottonwoods swayed around the steam ram as the captain took them further down into the creekbed. Tom knew their search for cover was in vain — the *City of Hoboken* was over four stories tall. Nothing could hide such a magnificent machine, such a stout work of Dame Progress. And certainly not out here on the Iowa prairie, where their pursuer circled high above, a vulture waiting to descend.

He set about lashing the free end of the cable to Bannock's harpoon, again leaving himself slack. A copper point on the head would be perfect, but Tom figured he could make do with the steel.

When the line came up short and the nervous weather watch huddled around him, Tom pulled himself away from his

work on the harpoon shaft.

"It's like this, men," he shouted. He hated speaking, hated rousing men like this — that was the job of officers and shop foremen, not a thinker like himself. Especially when he was the youngest man on the deck.

Salmon gave Tom a big wink.

"That up there's one of the Nephilim!" Tom pointed at the sky. "Some folks say the Mormons raised 'em from a Bible. Some folks say they're Chinee magic, brought across the sea by the Russians. Well, I don't care!" His voice was a bellow now. "It's here a-hunting us, and we're fixing to drive it away. But you each have a part."

Eight frightened men loomed in closer. A voice squawked from the cupola's speaking tube, but even Bannock, the day watch, ignored the captain in favor whatever spectacle Tom was about to put on in the face of life and death.

"Very shortly I'm going below," Tom said in a normal voice. "I'm going to hook this harpoon up to a cell battery. Once I done that, don't nobody but me or Bannock touch nothing here. When I give the word, you all each start shooting again for all you're worth. We must draw that thing down close, so's Bannock can shoot it with my wires. Then . . ." His hands slammed together. "Boom."

There was a ragged cheer. Tom took a simple knife switch from his toolbag and hammered it into the deck next to the hatch coaming. He cut his cable at the taut end, and wired it into the switch, careful to leave the switch open.

"Don't touch nothing," he said, wagging his finger with a significant look at Bannock, then ducked below again.

THE CITY OF HOBOKEN continued to lurch over rougher terrain, swinging back and forth to avoid the Nephil. Tom's footing was challenged in the little cabin, his glassware threatened even stowed within vari-





ous leather-padded racks. He drew on his heaviest insulated gloves, and then with great care proceeded to wire the free end of the cable to the copper terminals of the Planté-Fauré cell.

He was just tightening down the second connection when the great steam ram shook with a noise that Tom felt within his bones. There was a grinding, and the deck canted off true five degrees, then ten.

Somehow the captain got the vessel back on balance, but the stride had changed — Tom could feel the difference. Where had the shot hit?

Only one shot in that Parrott rifle, he thought. Blast and damn that featherless bird, this wasn't how men were meant to live!

He raced back up the ladder, afraid he might already be too late. Had the shot signaled the beginning of the Nephil's attack?

The weather watch were already blazing away, their rifles and muskets wreathing the open deck with smoke as fast the breeze could carry it off. The top of the steam ram already reeked of death, and there had not yet been blood spilled.

"Not yet!" Tom shouted, but his voice was lost in the violent noise. He looked up, around, scanning for the attacker, but between the gunpowder smoke and whatever evolutions it had made through the sky, he could not find the Nephil.

Tom slapped Bannock on the shoulder. The day watch had his harpoon loaded and tracking, swinging the gun on its pintle. "Have sight of it?" Tom asked.

Bannock shook his head.

Then the Nephil rose above the *City of Hoboken's* starboard flank. The muzzle of the Parrott rifle was huge in its arms, a vast, gaping pit of death sweeping the deck as the Nephil grinned. Despite his resolve, Tom screamed as terrified as any child.

IMAGINE A MAN tall as a telegraph pole. His eyes glitter the same bottle-green as the insulators that carry the copper-

cored cables with their burden of living thought and speech. His skin is fair as an Irishwoman's, his hair black as the heart of a Georgia cracker. He is handsome in a way that would make a statue weep, and bring any blooded soldier to his knees. If this man was not terror incarnate, if he did not tower over everyone and everything in his path, he would be worthy of worship.

Instead, he is merely — and utterly — feared.

The Nephil's smile drove the weather watch toward the hatch. Oakey Bill jumped off the port flank, arms flailing, screaming his way into the long, fatal fall in preference to being trapped amid the scrum on deck in view of the leering monster.

Tom shoved Bannock back into the scout's cupola. "Fire it on my call!" he yelled. "Into the chest!"

"I . . ." Bannock was screaming, too.

Facing the Nephil was like facing a city on fire. The force of its will blazed across Tom, Bannock and the rest of the panicked weather watch. Though it was pale as any white man, the Nephil's skin gleamed like moonlight in a graveyard. Tom felt as if he were falling forward into a city, a necropolis, a land peopled by the dying and the dead, an eternal, pallid landscape of lost memory and —

"No!" he shouted. "This is the Age of Reason." Tom grabbed Barley by the shoulders and pulled him from the scout's cupola. He would be damned before he would bow before the evil thing's fearsome aspect. The harpoon could not be so difficult to fire!

"Me," shouted Salmon in his ear.

Tom looked up to see his great, good friend shaking his head and pointing at the harpoon. "No time," he said, then swung the shoulder brace toward the Nephil, which was already rising above the weather deck, cocking its arm to throw the Parrott rifle down upon the steam ram.

The lines were clipped into place, the



pressure gauge showed a full head of steam. Tom flipped over the locking pin, aimed the steel head toward the Nephil's vast chest, and pulled the trigger.

There was a horrendous shriek as the steam pressure discharged. The shoulder brace of the harpoon slammed into Tom harder than any punch he'd ever taken while a burst of scalding steam enveloped him from the line which sprang free with the shock of the firing.

The Nephil took the harpoon point in its gut. Even through the swirl of steam, smoke and pain, Tom registered the expression of surprise on the monster's face as it dropped the Parrott rifle and grabbed at the shaft which stuck. Somehow the electrical cable held.

But nothing happened.

The Nephil began to laugh, an enor-

mous barking roar like a Missouri cyclone, dark vapors gusting from a mouth that seemed to open wide enough to swallow them all whole.

What had gone wrong? Even within the agony of his steam-scaled face and hands, Tom felt a cold stab of pain and fear in his heart.

Then he realized that he had not arranged to complete the circuit.

Salmon slapped his shoulder again and pointed down. Tom leaned over, blinking away the agony of the steam burns on his face and hands, to see his friend standing over the knife switch stapled to the weather deck.

Tom nodded.

Salmon leaned down, closed the copper blade, and held on even as sparks played through his hair.

The Nephil's laughter changed to an eerie howl. Tom looked up again, his vision growing red — why? he wondered even in that moment — to see sparks pouring from the monster's mouth, its hands, its hair. Far more electricity than could have come from Tom's Planté-Fauré battery cell. The Nephil raged amid a storm of blue, yellow, and green sparks, lightning snakes that writhed along its arms and legs, seared its eyes, set fire to its skin.

I have opened a circuit to Heaven, Tom thought. He collapsed against the edge of the scout's cupola, wracked with pain of his own, wishing he could pass out. That mercy was not offered him, though his sight dimmed to red mist. Even the arrival on the weather deck of the dragoons with their grenadoes and their clattering weapons was not enough to distract him from the pain.

TOM WOKE TO A HAND upon his shoulder. The steam ram was under way once more, he could tell by the gentle swaying in his body. He tried to blink, but his eyes were gummed tight.

A bandage, he prayed.





“Can you hear me, son?” It was the rumbling, patriarchal voice of Captain Brown, the *City of Hoboken’s* master.

“Yes, sir.” Tom paused, gathering his fears. “But I cannot see you, sir.”

The grip tightened. Brown smelled of whiskey and old leather — the cover of a Bible, Tom thought. “We’ll find you a doctor at Council Bluffs, Mr. Edison. Cletis reckons you’ll have your sight back. As for the scars . . .”

Scars? “What?”

“You cannot feel them, son? Your face and hands is burned fierce by the steam.”

Tom felt very little other than the captain’s hand on his shoulder, and that scared him. “Where’s Salmon?”

“Your Negro friend is dead. Kilt by your telegraph gun.”

Salmon had been holding the knife switch closed when the Nephil . . . exploded. The copper wire must have carried some of that extraordinary energy back onto the deck and into his friend. Tom felt his eyes finally, as they filled with tears so warm he must be weeping blood.

“But you kilt one of them monsters, son. You’re a hero.”

Hero. Tom wanted to turn his face to the bulkhead and cry for Salmon. He would never hear that beloved voice again.

But he could not. This was the century of science, and he would be damned and damned again before he would let some Biblical monsters drive America from her West. No other man would ever lose his particular friend this way again. “I will bind the West in chains of copper,” he whispered, “and make her monsters bow to Progress. I swear this.”

“That’s the spirit, son.”

Brown’s hand left Tom’s shoulder, then the captain stepped out through a hatch which clanged shut, already shouting orders.

He could not think on Salmon any further, so Tom set his mind instead to wondering how the so-called telegraph gun

had been so deadly to one of the Nephilim. Could he arrange for bigger Planté-Fauré cells, perhaps mounted on aerostats, to bring the battle to the enemy? The West needed railroads and telegraph and civilization, not the wild anarchy of steam rams and Clark’s Army and avenging angels.

He would pluck the last of the Nephilim from the sky himself, and ground their cousin angels as well. ©

Jay Lake lives and works in Portland, Oregon, within sight of an 11,000 foot volcano. He is the author of over two hundred short stories, four collections, and a chapbook, along with novels from Tor Books, Night Shade Books and Fairwood Press. Jay is also the co-editor with Deborah Layne of the critically-acclaimed Polyphony anthology series from Wheatland Press. His last Weird Tales appearance was “Small Magic” in issue #340. His next few projects include The River Knows Its Own (Wheatland), Madness of Flowers (Night Shade) and Stemwinder (Tor). In 2004, Jay won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. He can be reached via his Web site at www.jlake.com.