

THE FARMER'S DAUGHTER

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Fragrant spring grass waved in front of her eyes as Mutt glanced around to make sure no railroad cops were in view. The sun was just about to peek up into a cantaloupe sky and the air still clung to the cool of the night as the highball whistle sounded, one short and one long blast, signaling that the train was about to leave the yard. A few minutes later the locomotive huffed by her hiding place sending up a furious cloud of black smoke. She sprang to her feet and started running, running like a jackrabbit with a hound on her tail, running in the same direction as the groaning train and just as fast, closing the distance between herself and the open boxcar she had her eye on. The plaintive whistle blew again as the locomotive labored out of the rail yard and the yellow cars of the Union Pacific picked up speed.

Alongside the front of the car, she matched her pace to the train's, her pack smacking against her back. She planned her mount, knowing that one careless mistake could plunge her under the wheels where she'd lose her life or at the very least a leg or two. She caught hold of the grab bar and swung herself up. She planted both feet firmly on the stirrup, hugging the ladder rungs close to her chest. She heaved a sigh of relief. She had made it!

She must have done this a hundred times already, but each time it was just as thrilling as the time before. The rush, the danger, the feeling of her muscles pitted against the force and speed of the big machine made her feel alive.

But she wasn't safe yet. Hanging on the side of the car, she could be easily spotted, so she climbed up to the top deck, then crawled to the edge and lowered herself over. She pivoted in through the open door with a practiced routine as smooth and graceful as any ballerina's pirouette. She prided herself on this move. Not everybody could do it.

She hopped into a corner and settled down to ride.

On the other side of the car, in the opposite corner, the dark figure of a man crouched in the shadows, motionless.

After a momentary stiffening, she sloughed off her bedroll. As her pulse slowed to normal and her eyes adjusted to the dim light in the car, she saw her companion's face more clearly. He wore a dark hat and a dark brown suit over a white shirt, typical hobo attire. His tie was undone, hanging around his neck alongside his open shirt collar. He half sat, half lay against his bedroll looking her over.

"Morning." He spoke in a gravelly voice forced unnaturally loud to reach her over the clatter of the moving train.

"I hope y'all don't mind sharing," she replied in her practiced timbre. It was meant to sound like that of a young man, a tenor voice, not too high and not too low.

"My ride is your ride, friend."

Sometimes she could tell where a person was from by the way he talked. Riding the trains, she had met people from all over, even from foreign countries. She wasn't sure about this man. All she could tell for sure was that he wasn't from the South. He was a Yankee.

The train curved to the north on a wide arcing track and the rising sun flooded into the interior of the car, illuminating its corners. Her companion had big watery eyes and a thick

stubble over his face. He looked to be about forty-five or fifty, but it was always hard to tell age on these wandering men. They seemed to age faster than most folks.

“Got a smoke?” he asked.

Mutt shook her head. “Don’t smoke.”

“What are you called?” He sat up straighter.

“Mutt.”

“Mutt? Just Mutt?”

“Just Mutt.”

“I’m Frogman.” He lifted his hat. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mutt.”

The faster the train went, the louder it roared, making it impossible to converse from one end of the car to the other, putting an end to their small talk. Mutt linked her hands behind her head and watched the scenery fly by.

After a half hour, Frogman took a chunk of cheddar cheese out of a paper sack and held it up so she could see it. He waved her over. He didn’t look crazy or mean, she decided, and she figured she knew how to recognize crazy and mean by now. She moved to his side of the car as he cut a hunk off the cheese with a pocket knife. He handed it to her and she ate it in one bite.

“Why’re you called Frogman?” she asked. “You pretty good at gigging frogs?”

He shook his head. “It’s because of my eyes. When I open them big, they say I look like a frog.” To demonstrate, he opened his eyes as wide as he could.

Mutt fell into a convulsion of laughter, his face was so comical with his bulging googly eyes.

He chuckled at her reaction. “Why do they call you Mutt?”

She shrugged, thinking about her freckled, turned-up nose and stiff, tobacco-colored hair. Even cut short like it was now, it was hard to tame. “Just because I’m kinda funny looking, I

guess. It's the name my daddy's always called me. It don't bother me none. I got used to it long since."

"You don't seem funny looking to me."

Mutt kept her thoughts to herself, realizing that she might not look so funny to somebody thinking she was a boy. Nowadays, catching a glimpse of herself in a mirror and seeing the round brown eyes of a handsome young man looking back, she sort of liked the way she looked. Looking like a boy wasn't hard for her with her long-limbed, lanky frame and almost no curves. She'd always been thin, but after more than a year on the iron road, she was even thinner. With the right clothes, the right haircut, a few smudges of ash on her chin, she fooled them most of the time. Just like her daddy had always said.

"You'd make a better boy than a girl," he had complained. "It's a damned shame! Underneath all that grime, there's a real pretty girl in there. I know that's so 'cause you got your mama's eyes. One of these days you're gonna have to change your tune if you're ever gonna get yourself a man. No man's gonna look twice at you with your farm britches and dirty fingernails and the way you hop over fences and never walk through a gate like a lady. If you're fixin' to be an old maid, well, you're going about it all right."

It was fine with Mutt if no man ever looked twice at her. More than fine. *Finer than a frog's hair*, she thought, invoking one of her favorite expressions.

As time went by, she had gotten better and better at her disguise, learning how to walk and talk so nobody'd get an inkling. She imitated the swagger of the young men and the way they sat with their legs stretched out in front of them crossed at the ankles. She even imitated the way they put a hand over their privates while they slept as if protecting themselves from a bogey man.

She didn't mind being a girl, but she had learned soon after leaving home that it was safer not to be a girl traveling alone, especially among lonely, desperate men, many of whom reminded her of her father...and not in a good way. After only two weeks on the road, she had decided on this disguise, and things had immediately gotten easier for her.

Frogman offered her another slice of cheese and she took it. She had last eaten two hours before at a hobo camp near Des Moines where the menu had consisted of bread and sausages, or, as the hobos termed it, "punk and gut." She wasn't yet hungry, but she'd learned not to turn down food when it was offered. You never knew when you'd get your next meal.

"Where you headed, Mutt?"

"I'm catching the Overland to California."

"I'll be stopping off at Omaha, so you'll have the place to yourself after that. But this freight stops at every jerkwater town. Let me give you a tip. If you get off at Columbus, Nebraska, a red ball is coming through that yard at five o'clock tomorrow morning. You catch that and you'll be in Cali in the wink of an eye. The name of that train is Big Charlotte, number 4403. Columbus is a hot yard, though, so be extra careful."

"Much obliged!" said Mutt. She knew that a "red ball" was a through train carrying fruit and vegetables, one of the best ways for a hobo to cover long distances fast. Listening to the old timers was the quickest way to learn how to travel safely, how to get work and where to get food and shelter.

"And watch out for the cinder dicks," Frogman added, referring to railroad police who rode the trains. "They know we favor that freight and they'll be on her too. You might get yourself a comfy reefer to ride in." He smiled to himself. "I know a 'bo named Reefer Charlie. He won't ride anything but a reefer. If he sees an empty reefer sitting in a yard, he'll catch out on

it whether he was going that way or not. Just doesn't want to waste them." He chuckled and snapped his knife shut. Then he took a metal flask from his front pants pocket and held it up to Mutt. "Fancy an eye opener?"

"I never touch it."

"Good for you. You're a good, upright young fella. Just don't go preaching at me and we'll get along fine."

"I ain't no preacher!" objected Mutt.

Frogman raised his flask in a salute and drained it, then tucked it back into his pocket.

"Where do you come from, Mutt?"

"Mississippi."

"I would have guessed some place like that from the sound of you. Alabam, Mississip, Louisiana. Some place like that. Whereabouts in Mississippi?"

"Jenner Springs."

"Don't know it. What kind of place is that?"

Her mind drifted back to the little town where she'd gone to school, surrounded by miles and miles of corn and cotton fields, clear fishing streams and hickory woods. "It's like any other kind of place," she said. "There's a general store, a school, a post office, three churches and four bars."

"Sounds like any other kind of place, as you say."

"It's farming country," added Mutt.

"Is your daddy a farmer?"

"Used to be. Now he lets out a few acres to sharecroppers. He don't farm no more himself. We used to have chickens. We once had hundreds of them. Layers. Not anymore."

“Why's that?”

“My daddy's a good-for-nothin' drunk. He let it all go to hell.”

Frogman raised one eyebrow, revealing a conspicuous amount of white around his eyes, then shook his head. “Seems like a story I've heard before.”

She was sure that was true. There were plenty like her. Dirt poor Southerners. They call it dirt poor because all you got is dirt. Bare Mississippi dirt and a barn with one cow, a handful of chickens and a sagging farmhouse. A mean and worthless father and no mother. She was gone by the time Mutt was six. By the time she was fourteen, the farm lay fallow and they had nothing. Daddy could barely drag himself out of bed most days. Her older brother Ray said Daddy wasn't always so mean and worthless. He used to be a good worker and a decent man. Even went to church on Sundays. She couldn't picture that. That was before Ma died, and Mutt didn't remember much from then.

After Ray left to join the Army, things got a lot worse. So she left too. She hadn't been back and didn't know what had happened to the farm or her father since. Although she had been cold, lonely and hungry plenty of times during the past year, she had never once thought of going home. There was only one thing there she was sorry to leave behind. Her dog Tippy, the little beagle mix she'd had from a pup. It nearly broke her heart to leave him and she'd probably stayed longer than she would have because of him. But she couldn't take a dog on the road. She knew her father would feed Tippy. He'd always treated animals better than he treated people. She just hoped he didn't take it out on Tippy that she'd run away. Just thinking about her little dog caused her to choke up, so she shook the thought from her head.

“How long you been hoboin'?” she asked Frogman.

“Twenty-three years.”

“That’s a long time!”

“You’re right. It’s quite a stretch.” He leaned against the wall, letting out a sigh. “I’ve seen everything. I’ve done everything. I’ve been a cattle stiff in Texas, a sea stiff in Maine, a timber stiff in Washington and everything in between. I’ve seen the inside of every jug and Sallie on the entire N.P., S.P., Pennsy and the Cough and Snort, just to name a few.”

“Cough and Snort?”

“Oh, you haven’t heard that one, huh? Colorado and Southern Line.”

Mutt liked to listen to the old timers talk. They had a language all their own, and she had made a quick study of it. She knew he was talking about time spent in jails, for vagrancy or trespassing, and Salvation Army shelters. Any hobo who’d been riding for any time at all had seen the inside of a jail cell or two. Mutt had been lucky so far and had avoided being locked up. She’d been arrested once along with a dozen other hobos in a camp near Laramie, Wyoming, but while they were being rounded up to be put in a truck, she’d made a run for it. There had been only two cops, so they couldn’t go after her. Being put in a cell with a bunch of men could be a real problem for Mutt, so she had been far more desperate to avoid jail than the rest of them. Some of these men didn’t mind a jail cell now and then, depending on the town. Those who had been around a while knew what jails to avoid where the grub was foul and they were forced to work in labor gangs for weeks on end. But that wasn’t the case everywhere. Sometimes a few free meals and a dry bed were a welcome respite, especially in winter.

“It used to be easier to get a job when you wanted it,” Frogman said. “Ever since all those farms got blown away, everybody’s been on the move. Whole families are on the road traveling and looking for work. I met a fella last week who used to be a lawyer in New York. He looked no better than you and me, sitting in the jungle with only a ragged pair of trousers, a dusty hat

and a toothbrush to his name. He lost it all in the stock market crash in twenty-nine and lost his business too. He decided to walk away and he's been flipping freights ever since. It's a sight better than suicide, I told him. Some of them jumped out of buildings and killed themselves." Frogman shook his head. "That's what it's like having money and property and things like that. Canopy beds and Chesterfield sofas. You've got a lot to lose. Me, I've got nothing to lose. No home. No family. No Chesterfield. I've got no worries. No, sirree. No worries at all. I've been riding the rails since I was eighteen. About your age."

She did a quick calculation in her head, fixing his age at forty-one, just a touch younger than her father. "I'm seventeen," she said. "I was born in the year of our Lord nineteen twenty-four."

He chuckled. "How long since you left home?"

"It was a year ago March. Thirteen months."

"You should go back home, young fella. You don't want to live like this if you don't have to."

"Can't go home."

"You sure?"

"Sure as shit."

One of the best things about being disguised as a boy, she had decided, was being able to curse. Girls were not allowed to curse. When she had ignored that rule a couple of times back home, she'd suffered the consequences. She'd had her mouth washed out with soap and her behind strap-whipped. Her brother Ray could say what he wanted. He got into his own brand of trouble often enough, but not for cursing. She had pointed out to her father how unfair that was. "Why can Ray say it and I can't?"

He had slapped her face hard, angrier than ever. "I'm gonna be dead and buried before you're ever gonna figure out you're a girl, ain't I? I thank God in Heaven your mama never had to see this, what a foul-mouthed, ornery rascal you turned out to be. I'm gonna tell you this one more time. Ladies do not swear, and believe it or not, Mutt, I'm gonna turn you into a lady yet. If I ever hear that word comin' out of your mouth again, I'm gonna wallop you so hard, you won't be sittin' down for a month of Sundays."

Frogman stretched his legs out straight and asked, "So this is better than home?"

Mutt hesitated, not because she was unsure of the answer, but because she didn't like talking about it. "Yeah."

After a heartbeat or two, she heard his voice, barely audible over the rattle of the car, saying, "That's a shame."

They lapsed into silence for a while and Mutt sat against the side of the car facing the doorway as the morning warmed up. She rested her head on her bedroll and closed her eyes, her body vibrating in tune with the wheels on the rails. The movement of the train must have rocked her to sleep because she woke up with a start to see Frogman standing at the edge of the doorway, facing outward and shooting a yellow stream into the wind where it diffused into a fine spray. After buttoning up his trousers, he stayed where he was, holding fast to the open door and looking ahead.

"Omaha coming up!" he yelled over his shoulder. "Remember what I told you about Columbus."

"Yes, sir," she said, jumping to her feet.

"Good luck to you, Mississippi Mutt." Frogman opened his eyes so wide they looked like two fried eggs, sunny side up, then he laughed and slung his pack over his shoulder. In a few

seconds he was gone. Mutt dashed to the open door to see him standing upright beside the tracks. She waved and watched him recede in the distance. Then she ducked back into the shadows as the train rumbled into the rail yard.