



Blazing Beamard

by Stanley Webb

Soot hovered on the desert scrub.

Special Agent Bull Wire said, "Ease off the throttle, Smokey."

The train driver complied. "My name's Stanislaw."

The smoke built, layer upon layer, until it smothered Bull's locomotive. The headlight cast a sickly, red glow. The men pulled their wild rags over their noses. Suddenly, broken rails appeared. Stanislaw pulled the brake.

Bull jumped to earth. "Follow me, Smokey."

Stanislaw muttered a curse.

A caboose, burned down to its flatbed, appeared through the murk, then incinerated freight cars. The passenger cars bore naught but greasy ash.

The iron vault car sat on broken axles, its plating sprung, and the gold shipment missing.

Bull growled, "What sort of man are you, Beamard?"

Stanislaw spat. "A murderer in need of hanging!"

"He needs worse than hanging. He's brought the United States Government to its knees for want of gold."

A roaring wind turned the ambient smoke into a cyclone.

Stanislaw asked, "A sirocco?"

Bull drew his revolver. "Beamard's smelled out our gold!"

There came a lightning flash, then a steam explosion.

"My Puffy!"

Stanislaw ran for the locomotive, vanishing into the haze. Then he screamed, his cry whirling skyward. The cyclone became a tornado. Bull threw himself flat. The twister drew up all of the smoke, then reeled toward Superstition Peak.

Bull rose and searched his wrecked 4-4-0. He found the treasury chest gone. Bull weighed the few gold reales in his poke bag.

"I'll get you, Blazing Beamard!"

Across the desert, a pale town loomed. Bull started walking. The town receded as he advanced. Bull realized that it was a superior mirage: a trick of light bending over the horizon. He continued anyway, for the town *was* ahead, somewhere, and he saw no other refuge.

He broke out in clammy sweats. His temples throbbed. Bull cursed Beamard for stranding him. Suddenly, a cramp doubled him over. When he raised his head, his vision swam. Bull wondered where he was and fell prone.

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Sulfurous water quenched his tongue. An Indian leaned above him. Bull reached for the man's water skin.

The Indian withdrew. "Take it easy." The Indian watered him slowly.

Bull croaked, "Where-you-from?"

"My home is nearby."

"In this hell-hole?"

"Living here wasn't our idea."

"Well, I'm glad. I thought I was a goner." Bull rose. "How far to the town?"

"Take my water."

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Hours later, the foot-sore Special Agent reached a town called Nowhere. He limped along Main Street, past the horse trader and the general store, to the saloon.

The pianola within twanged out a dirge, while gloomy men drank. A scar-faced Sheriff watched four whores play poker. The winner, a Chinese girl, listlessly stuffed green-paper promissory notes down her cleavage.

Bull approached the bar.

"What suits your thirst, stranger?"

"Whiskey." He offered a gold bit-of-eight.

The sheriff snatched the *reale*. "Where'd you get this?"

"The mint."

The whores gathered around, wide-eyed. The Chinese girl licked her lips. She smiled at Bull, and opened her bodice. Green paper fluttered to the sawdust.

"Back off," the sheriff said, pushing her away.

Bull said, "Sheriff, I'm a Special Agent. I hereby deputize you and your men to help me apprehend the train robber known as Blazing Beamard."

The sheriff's brow darkened, and the men all looked fearful.

The whore giggled.

Bull asked, "What's funny?"

She replied, "Beamard's not a man!"

"What is he, then?"

"A dragon, not Dragon King or his Nine Sons, but a Western dragon, hungry for gold and human sacrifice."

Bull addressed the room. "I'll pay every man who aids me."

"I'll go," said the whore.

"Gold for every man!"

"I can handle a gun," said the whore.

The sheriff laughed. "You've handled every gun in town!"

Bull asked desperately, "Any man?"

All but the whore turned away.

"Then, I'm alone."

He went down Main Street to the horse trader. A few raw-boned animals milled in the paddock, munching withered grass.

The trader's eyes shifted. "All of my stock is sold."

"I've got gold."

The trader's eyes shone, but then he turned away. "All sold."

Bull went to the general store.

"I need provisions for the trail."

"I'm out of food."

"What's in those barrels?"

"Pig feed."

Bull showed his gold. The storekeeper turned away.

Bull limped out of town.

A masked highwayman confronted him. "Hands up!"

Bull recognized the man's build. "You've turned outlaw, sheriff?"

"You'll anger Beamard, just as this town's regaining a bit of peace. I'll give you one chance to return where you came from."

"I'm a lawman with a duty, you should understand that."

The sheriff sighed. "I do, and I'm sorry." He aimed between Bull's eyes.

The Chinese whore stepped from hiding, and shot the gun out of the sheriff's hand.

"Ouch! You've assaulted an officer of the law!"

"The United States Government will pardon her," said Bull. "I guess I do need your help, after all."

"My name is Fang." She whistled for two horses, both loaded with provisions. "Mount up, Bull."

"Where to?"

"Superstition Peak."

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The campfire banged in the night, startling their hobbled mounts.

"They know Beamard's near," said Fang.

"I don't believe in dragons."

"You saw the train wreck; how did a *man* do that?"

"Beamard's genius for invention is superseded only by his cold-hearted greed. I believe he's invented an air-borne pirate ship."

Fang laughed. "Your theory is ridiculous."

Her scoffing stung him. "Have you seen this dragon?"

"No, but I saw his vast shadow, heard his roar, and felt his breath. He razed Nowhere's bank, and flew away with the gold. The sheriff led a posse in chase—that's how he got his scars. Now, he appeases the dragon and notifies Beamard when the gold shipment is due, so the attack occurs far from town."

"With no gold, you trade that funny green paper?"

Fang pulled a note from her bodice. "Fiat money. Each bill represents a piece of Beamard's hoard." She tossed the bill into the fire. "How I crave gold!" Fang eyed Bull's poke.

He blushed. "I'm not that kind of a man."

"May I touch a reale? I promise I'll return it."

Bull relented.

Fang caressed her cheek with the gold, and moaned. "It feels so good!"

His blush heated. "You'd better give that back."

Fang popped the reale into her mouth and swallowed.

"That's government property!" Bull protested.

"Beamard won't have that nugget," Fang said smugly.

Bull opened his mouth for a crude retort, but then saw a huge, black shape rising from Superstition Peak. His flush drained cold.

"He's coming."

The thing rushed down at them. The horses screamed, and one stumbled attempting to flee.

Fang drew her gun. "All dragons have a weakness. We must find Beamard's!"

The dragon grew in perspective, blotting half the sky. Multiple wings propelled the thing, while a vertical tail steered. Dim, red eyes glowed above its snout.

"There!" Fang cried, and fired.

Bull joined her attack, the muzzle flashes lingering in his sights.

The dragon's wings raised a cyclone. Its jaws opened, and blue sparks jumped between its grillwork teeth, coalescing to form a thunderbolt. The lightning struck yards before its targets, but the concussion somersaulted Bull and Fang. Bull landed hard, limbs twitching and jerking against his will.

The dragon's lower jaw scraped the ground. With a steely rattle, a ship's anchor dropped, its flukes digging into the sand. The dragon swayed to a halt.

Bull regained control of his body, and stood, forlornly regarding his empty gun hand. No bones had broken, but he ached everywhere. He looked around.

"Fang?"

She did not reply.

Soldiers marched out of the dragon's iron jaws. Upon his breast, each man wore a badge with a yellow sun. They surrounded Bull, aiming their carbines.

Bull raised his hands. "I'm unarmed."

A large, bearish man descended the dragon's ramp. "I'm Beamard." He spoke with a rough Irish brogue. "You've interfered in my affairs."

"You've robbed my government to poverty."

"A necessity. I emigrated here to make my fortune, and save my starving homeland, but all that America offered me was brutal labor for small reward. With my Fenian brothers, I built this aerial galley, *Lig-na-Baste*, to take what I need. American gold will build a fleet of such vessels, and I will drive the British serpent from Ireland!"

The soldiers escorted Bull into the dragon's mouth. He looked back for Fang, wondering whether she had died in the lightning strike, or deserted him. The jaws ratcheted shut, their iron teeth interlocking. The anchor chain clanked onboard, and the galley teetered skyward. Bull grabbed a rail.

Beamard smirked. "You'll grow accustomed to it."

An overseer took charge of Bull, leading him down a narrow companionway to the galley deck. Dozens of men and women toiled there, shackled to handcar levers. Sweat stained their ragged clothing. The deck echoed with mechanical noise.

Bull said, "The people from the trains, and from Nowhere."

The overseer cuffed his ear, and indicated a lever where one man toiled alone.

"Smokey!"

"My. . . name's. . . Stanislaw!"

The overseer cuffed Bull again. "Adopt your chain!"

Bull cocked his fist but decided to wait, taking the lever opposite Stanislaw.

The overseer went to his station. A voice pipe whistled behind him, then Beamard's command barked from the cone:

"Starboard pumps feather!"

The overseer cried, "You heard the captain!"

The prisoners across the chamber altered their rhythm.

Bull leaned toward Stanislaw. "How does this thing work?"

"It's a giant. . . *Montgolfière* hot-air balloon. We're. . . powering. . . the wings. A huge gravity cell. . . collects atmospheric static. . . for the lightning gun."

"We must take this ship."

The overseer shouted, "Enough talk!"

Fang materialized behind the overseer. She struck him with the butt of her gun and stole the keys from the unconscious man.

"How did you get in here?"

"I slipped aboard while they arrested you." Fang snorted with contempt. "Foolish toy dragon!" She set about releasing Bull and Stanislaw and the other prisoners.

Beamard spoke through the pipe. *"Venting hydrogen. Pumps slow."* The ship angled down.

Bull said, "People, let's start this fight!" and pumped faster.

Beamard cried in panic, *"Slow down! Dump ballast!"*

Soldiers hurried into the galley deck, and grappled with the pumps.

The ship angled to rise, but the maneuver proved ineffective. The *Lig-na-Baste* struck earth belly-down, then bounced airborne, only to crash again. Soldiers and prisoners fell inter-tangled, like unsecured cargo in a storm-tossed ship. The *Lig-na-Baste* turned half over, and shuddered to an abrupt stop.

A soldier lurched to his feet, carbine waving at prisoners and comrades alike. Bull ended the man's confusion with a knockout punch and took up the carbine.

"People of Nowhere, revolt!"

Abandoning the resulting melee, Bull, Stanislaw, and Fang scrambled across the tilted deck to the ship's bridge, where Beamard dangled from the command throne's restraining harnesses.

Bull laughed and said, "You're under arrest!"

Beamard freed his harness's latch, and dropped onto Bull. The impact drove Bull to the canted deck, and crushed out his wind. Beamard wrested the carbine away, discarding the weapon to pummel Bull with fisticuffs. Bull tried to block, but his enemy's strength turned his own forearms into bludgeons. Stars filled his eyes.

A pistol spoke. Beamard cried out, and rolled aside, fingers grasping his leg.

Fang's revolver smoked. "Show me the gold."

Bull recovered his feet, and his weapon. "You heard the lady."

"I can't walk!"

"Sure you can, that's just a flesh wound."

Stanislaw kicked Beamard, then jumped with a stubbed toe. "Move, you damn slaver!"

Beamard limped to his feet, and opened the dragon's mouth.

The ship lay on the mountain's plateau. Torches surrounded the landing area, and a few smoldered beneath *Lig-na-Batse's* fabric skin. Men feverishly stamped out the embers. Bunkhouses and a manse stood around the landing field. Irish carbines greeted Bull.

"Tell your men to stand down," he ordered.

Beamard looked truculent. Fang put her gun to his head, and thumbed the hammer.

Beamard gritted his teeth. "Do as he said."

The soldiers lowered their arms.

Stanislaw slapped Beamard's back, and chortled. "Lead on, Macduff!"

Beamard growled, replying, "The line is, 'Lay on!'" but led them inside the manse, and to an iron vault.

Fang panted. "Open it."

Beamard hesitated. "Please, thousands of my kin have starved! This gold is my only chance of repelling the British, and saving the rest—"

"Open it!"

Beamard worked the lock. The tumblers shifted heavily. Beamard opened the squealing door. Raw gold nuggets tumbled out. Sacks of coins lay within, and bags of gold dust, and piled ingots.

Fang snatched a nugget, and stuffed it into her mouth. She gagged for a moment, then swallowed hard. Fang next grabbed a poke bag of dust, and pursed her lips around its opening.

Bull yanked the bag away. "Are you loco, woman?"

Gold dust clung down her chin. Her green-blazing eyes fixed on Bull, and he backed away.

"I am descended of dragons, you ignorant primitive!"

Fang seized an ingot. Her fingers grew hooked claws, scoring the precious metal. Her jaws unhinged to receive the gold bar. Fang moaned ecstatically as the ingot slid down her throat.

Her skin cracked in a diamond-back pattern.

"She's not human," said Stanislaw, retreating.

Fang expanded. Her clothing split and fell away, revealing her new, serpentine physique. Antlers sprouted behind her ears. Membranous wings developed from her ribs. Fang gobbled Beamard's hoard, her spiked tail lashing. Fang's coils filled the vault room.

I thought she said only the western dragons were hungry for gold, Bull thought.

Bull and Stanislaw fired. Their bullets ricocheted from her gilded scales. Fang turned her cat-like eyes upon them, and hissed. The three men fled. The dragon pursued them, bursting the doorway, then snaking through the hall.

Beamard staggered behind Bull and Stanislaw on his injured leg. Suddenly, he shrieked. Bull glanced back at the muffled cry, and saw Beamard's feet kicking from the dragon's throat.

Bull and Stanislaw halted on the veranda. Irish soldiers waited outside.

Fang hit the exit, but the masonry wall stopped her. She groped with her prehensile, forked tongue and snatched Bull. The soldiers shifted their aim to the dragon, and fired. Fang released Bull, and yawned through the doorway. Her throat expelled a ball of fire into the soldiers' formation. The men scattered, trailing smoke and screaming, ammunition bursting in their red-hot carbines.

Bull and Stanislaw bolted down the veranda, then across the yard to the landing field.

With an enraged howl, Fang rammed her way out of the manse, and gave chase, floating like thistledown on a dozen laterally paired wings. Her tiny, clawed feet gouged the earth.

Stanislaw said, "This is one hell of a fix!"

"Can you drive that airship, Smokey?"

"My name's—oh, forget it! Sure I can, if she's not busted."

Beamard's overseer waited in the bridge, horse pistols in each hand. "Back to your chains, Yankees!"

Impact rocked the *Lig-na-Baste*. Fang's head rammed up the ramp. The overseer screamed, and turned his weapons upon the monster, without effect. He lowered his smoking barrels, and stood trembling.

Stanislaw crawled over the ship's control board. "Ah ha!" He yanked a lever.

Gears clicked. The ramp lifted, catching Fang's head. She struggled for a moment, then withdrew.

Stanislaw cried, "Where's the blam-jam ballast dump?"

The overseer pointed.

Stanislaw yanked another lever. There came a waterfall sound, and the ship lurched upward.

Stanislaw thrust his mouth to the voice pipe. "*Folks? I know you've been poorly used, but if you could work those pumps a little longer, I'd sure appreciate it.*"

The overseer said, "I'll encourage them," and ran aft.

Bull looked out through a porthole, squinting against the dawn's light. Fang rose in pursuit, flying as a snake swims. Her wings cracked like thunder.

"Smokey, turn us around so I can shoot her."

Stanislaw peered at a dial, then shook his head. "The lightning gun needs more charge."

Fang released her flames. The attack fell short, but. . .

"She'll burn us out of the sky before it's ready!" Bull remembered what Fang herself had said: *All dragons have a weakness.*"—And I know hers!"

He opened the porthole, and dropped out his poke bag.

Fang's eyes flashed. She veered after the plummeting bag, and snapped up the gold. She brushed the earth, then pulled a hard loop back into the sky. At the top of her arc she rolled, and charged the *Lig-na-Baste* head on.

Stanislaw crowed, "We're loaded!"

The ship opened its jaws.

Fang replied in kind.

Sparks flew between the ship's teeth, massing forward.

Incandescence whirled in Fang's throat, then erupted.

Lightning hurtled from the ship's jaws.

Both shots struck home.

The *Lig-na-Baste's* bow exploded in flames, which rushed back to engulf the whole ship. Her skin burned off, leaving a delicate, glowing framework, twisting down toward earth.

Fang swelled and detonated.

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A Hopi man named Cheauka looked up, startled by thunder from the clear sky. Cheauka had saved Bull's life in the desert, although Bull had never asked his nation or his name. Cheauka watched the *Lig-na-Baste's* fiery lattice flutter down, a half-mile away.

Something wet struck Cheauka's face. He wiped the spot, then shuddered at the blood on his hand.

A heavy object plummeted at his feet. Cheauka jumped back, then stared in wonder at the golden ingot which had dropped from the sky.

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About the Author

Stanley Webb resides on a tiny homestead in upstate New York, near the coastline of Lake Ontario.

Throughout his life, he has worked as a dishwasher, a cook, a video rental clerk, and in the automobile industry. He now lives in early retirement.

Stanley's parents weaned him on *Monster Movie Matinee*. When he attended elementary school, his teachers would have preferred a greater interest in lessons, and less interest in sketching dinosaurs.

Stanley discovered storytelling during kindergarten's mandatory nap sessions. Eventually, he learned to record and polish his tales, and marketed the stories through the United States Postal Service.

Years passed, and his writing skills matured. His work has now found many homes, including the anthologies *Jack Lanterns*, *Death and Decorations*, and an incipient issue of *Weirdbook Magazine*.

Stanley thanks all who have read his stories.

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