

## The Man in the Green Bow Tie

Challenge #2: Group 2 entry, NYC Midnight Flash Fiction Challenge 2011  
by L.S. Christopher

*On the frontier, only certain types of men are usually seen to wear bow ties –the kind of men that have an education behind them and money in front of them. But is that always the case?*

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Roger tossed his shovelful of mud, then dug the shovel back into the ground so that it stood up on its own and straightened, stretching muscles cramped from hours of digging. Beside him the other digger, Roy, sighed, spat, and did the same. In their current state, fair skin browned by the sun and a layer of honest dirt, someone might have been forgiven for thinking them brothers or even twins – which they weren't. "Ain't takin' no break," Roy warned. "Don't want the boss to start yellin' again."

"He's busy with that architect fella," Roger grunted dismissively. "Bet he ain't never done a lick of work in his life, and he comes out here, tellin' us how to do it."

"Kind of like the boss," Roy pulled a flask out of his pocket and took a swig, then quickly tucked it away again and went back to digging. "Wrap your hands around that shovel and move some mud. I don't like bein' down here."

"Don't recall sayin' I liked it either." Roger started digging again, though, after seeing a man in a brown broadcloth suit walking along the top of the dam. "Here he comes. Boss ain't with him."

Roy glanced up, swiping sweat off his forehead. "Somethin' you needed, Mister Allen?"

The architect, his green bow tie and neat bowler hat marking him as someone more important – and likely better educated – than a local man would be, shook his head, attention fixed on the papers in his hands. "No," he said absently. "I have concerns about all of this mud, though..."

"We're workin' on it," Roger grunted. "This here clay don't shift too easy."

Allen shook his head again. "The amount of mud which appears to have deposited itself at the base of the dam due to the recent rains, I meant." He frowned and tucked his papers into the satchel he was carrying. "I am concerned that the foundation of the dam may have been affected."

Roy shrugged and went back to digging. The architect walked the length of the dam, examining it very closely. Then he climbed down to the base and began to walk along it, heedless of the mud, stopping every few feet to tug on the wooden beams as though checking their stability. He stopped when he reached the diggers. "You men are doing a really fine job here," he observed. "I'm almost sorry I'm going to have to make a mess out of it."

Roger scowled. "You sayin' we did all this diggin' for nothin'?"

"Possibly," was the response. "Are either of you men from around here?" Both diggers shook their heads. "So you did not know that there are a number of small farmsteads downriver which rely upon the flow of water this project has stopped?"

Roy leaned on his shovel. "What are you gettin' at?"

"Mebbe you're the city boy here," Roy said, elbowing him. "He's sayin' this here dam's part of a land grab."

“Well, what’s that to us?” Roy wanted to know. “I do the work I get paid to do, I don’t ask no questions.”

“I grew up on a farm like that,” Roger shot back, scowling. “A few weeks without the river would’ve bled us dry.”

“I am glad at least one of you understands,” Allen said solemnly. He fished in the satchel and pulled out a small stick of dynamite. “As I said, I am sorry to undo all of your hard work...but the plight of the families downriver must take precedence.”

Roy dropped his shovel. “That there’s...you’re gonna blow the dam! Are you out of your mind?!”

“Shut it!” Roger threatened. “I’d never have signed on if I’d known this was a land-grab.” He looked at the architect. “Them farmers hire you?”

“No.” Allen tugged at his tie. “I’ve got my own land around these parts, although it isn’t part of this mess” he added in a more natural voice. “But it doesn’t make sense to let someone run your neighbors out like this – greedy men always want more.”

“So you ain’t really no architect?”

“Oh, I am,” Allen told them, grinning. “We’re not all tie-wearing nancy-boys, you know. And I’ve got the people downriver putting up a better dam that’s also the one the territory’s land office believes to be the approved one.” He eyed them both. “We could use a couple more hands down there, in fact. What do you say?”

“I’m in.” Roger stuck out his hand, and Allen took it. “Don’t hold with no land-grab, people’s got a right to have their own patch of dirt. Roy?”

Roy thought about it, then shrugged. “Yeah, okay. They’re gonna know we was in on it, though.”

“No, they won’t.” Allen had gone back to placing dynamite, and the two diggers followed him. “I’m just setting it, I won’t be the one lighting it – and that’s all you need to know about that.”

Once they reached the end of the dam, the three men climbed up to the top and then walked back to the camp, the diggers sticking with Allen because he’d told them to. Some five minutes later a loud boom followed by a thunderous cracking sound filled the air. Allen sighed and straightened his tie. “With what I just saw I was afraid this might happen, so I pulled these men off the dam,” he called to the panicking job boss who came running up to them demanding an explanation. “I believe I told you earlier that I feared the sliding mud might cause the dam’s foundation to crack and give way.”

The heavy-jowled man stared at him. “But...but that sounded like...”

“Breaking timbers in the base of the dam,” Allen interrupted. “I shall ride downriver to make note of what wreckage I can find for my report, but other than that my job here is at an end.” And with that he brushed past the shocked man, going back into the camp to get his horse; the diggers had responded to the job boss’s demands for more information by quitting in a shower of profanity. Once out of sight of the camp, Allen pulled off the green bow tie and stuck it in his pocket. “Amazing what a fella will swallow just because of how you’re dressed,” he observed to no one. “Somethin’ to remember, I guess...”