

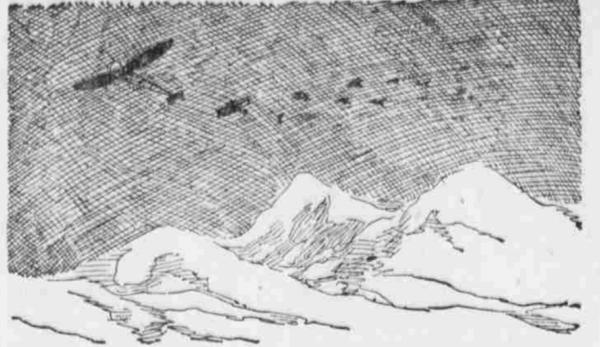


The Flying Man

by Harry Irving Greene

Author of "The Lash of Circumstance," "Barbara of the Snows"

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SYNOPSIS.

Professor Desmond of the Peak observatory causes a great sensation throughout the country by announcing that what appears to be a satellite is approaching at terrific speed. Destruction of the earth is feared.

CHAPTER II.—Continued.

"No, Miss Fulton, nothing more than I have already announced." Silence had fallen at his appearance, abrupt and almost breathless, a silence that came so suddenly that it left mouths open and half uttered words lingering upon lips, but already the spell was rapidly dissipating and a dozen tongues trembling in their eagerness. Then the storm of questions broke. From every side and all at once came exclamations, greetings and swift inquiries as the guests came pressing eagerly forward upon him, but Doris imperiously waving them back silenced them until she had formally presented him to those present whom he had not heretofore met. That over, however, the vocal outburst came again in questions thick and fast, some serious and filled with thought, some frivolous, some nonsensical, yet each tinged with the peculiar intonation of highly strung nerves, for despite their doubts restlessness was strong upon them. For a moment he tried to answer them serially.

"And is there really no hope for us, professor—no hope at all of escaping your sky dragon?"

"Yes, madam. Always where there is life there should be hope."

"I understand that you have stated that this strange wanderer is about the diameter of this state, and appears to be a body complete in itself rather than a giant fragment torn from some mass. Now how do you explain—"

"I beg your pardon, sir. I make no attempt to explain."

"You said it was apparently coming from out of the center of space. I had always thought that we were in the exact center of space."

"And so we are, madam. So, also, is everywhere else."

"And you have no consolation whatever to offer us?"

"Yes. If one must die I think it preferable to perish in a collision of worlds rather than by a microbe."

"And you are certain it will annihilate us—destroy us this very evening?"

"I can only hope that my fears are wrong and that you will perish by the microbe after all." He raised his hand appealingly.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please grant me mercy. At present I have nothing to say that you have not already heard. And if you will only be patient a few hours! For if I am correct and we are standing upon the verge of eternity, what matters an attempted explanation at this time? And if I am wrong and we escape, tomorrow will certainly have its tale to unfold." He stepped backward a pace, bowing, and Judge Fulton taking him by the arm turned upon his guests.

"If you will pardon the professor and myself for a few moments while I show him about the place. It is his first visit here, you know." Despite

their protests that Desmond belonged to them the elder pair wandered away together among the trees, leaving the others in little clusters to resume their speculations or once more take up their lighter talk and restless wanderings.

For the second time that evening Alan found himself temporarily alone with his hostess. She was dressed in pure white—March's favorite color upon her—a quaint heirloom of uncertain history upon her bosom. Her eyes were full of seriousness, her fair skin even a trifle paler than usual as he thought, and her mouth sweetly

grave. For while Doris was beyond all question worried and anxious there was no fear in her voice, look or manner.

"And what do you say about it all—this marvelous forecast?" she smiled as they paused. March loved her, she knew it and sometimes took a woman's advantage of a lover's devotion. "You have always pretended to me that you were so excessively intelligent, you know. I shall not be satisfied until you have settled the whole matter one way or the other." He shook his head helplessly.

"I can say what I think, which is this. I have great respect for Professor Desmond's ability and judgment, yet all mankind is full of error and false reasoning. Therefore, in common with everybody else I can only hope that he is mistaken. By the way, Doris, have I told you yet tonight that I am still in love with you? I really do not remember." She shook her head impatiently.

"Certainly you have—twice—each time we happened to be alone for a moment. And I think it is perfectly absurd of you to make love to me when my head is so full of serious things that I don't hear a word you say about love."

"But you at least heard that much." "It must have been entirely subconsciously and mechanically. You are always making love to me at such ridiculous times and places—for instance when my throat was sore and I could not tell you to stop, and once even in church under your breath when I was trying to listen to a most interesting sermon."

"Call church a ridiculous place?" "Of course not—except as a place to make love in."

"Yet it is the place of all places for the love knot to be tied in. Then why not an ideal place for the weaving of the skein?"

"You should have said, 'the spinning of the yarn.'"

He picked up the handkerchief which she had dropped, inhaled a breath of its faint fragrance and thrust it into his own bosom. "Another keepsake," he grinned. "That is the way I have to get all of them from you—steal them. However, I will admit that 'skein' was not a good word in that case, for it implies a material easily broken and therefore not suitable for permanently binding people together. I should have said it was an ideal place for the forging of the chain—"

"I have no faith whatever in forgers." She turned upon him triumphantly, indicating with her head. "Anyway, here comes Clay Tolliver and now you will be compelled to behave whether or no." Alan glanced aside. To his genuine dissatisfaction he saw the only rival who at all worried him approaching them.

Clay raised the shapely fingers to his lips as he always made it a point to do when he greeted her in March's presence, knowing that it worried his opponent in this affair of hearts and taking much satisfaction from the instinctive knowledge that the act of gallantry made the other squirm inwardly. And squirm inwardly March certainly did, not so much at the act itself as from the fact that Doris seemed rather to approve of it, while should he attempt a similar homage he would appear but as an imitator and therefore ridiculous to himself as well as her. "Good evening, Miss Doris," the newcomer said in his low, smooth voice, his dark eyes soft when they gazed at her, hard as brilliants when they flashed over March. "I have been hoping all day that I might find you looking just as you do this evening."

He turned upon her companion, his rather thin but cleanly cut face expressionless save for the glint of his eyes which Alan had often thought to be the most peculiar he had ever seen. "And I hope you, too, are well, sir." March nodded casually as for a fleeting second their hands and glances met. Clay went on.

"I have to beg your pardon, Miss Doris, for coming here tonight uninvited, but as you know I have been out of town for a week and just came back an hour ago. When I got off the train I learned for the first time that it had been stated by Professor Desmond that a terrible disaster is threatening us, and I immediately came here—not that any mortal could expect to be of any particular physical assistance in case such an inconceivable event should take place, but rather in the hope that I might be of some slight service to you in some other way. Am I to be granted your pardon for intruding?" That Doris was genuinely moved by the speaker's sincerity and thoughtfulness March, watching her, could not doubt.

She flashed him a look of gratitude that March would have paid high for. "Not only are you pardoned, but you are rewarded by my sincere thanks—if that be any reward," she exclaimed impulsively. She dropped a light hand upon the sleeve of each man, smiling from one to the other impartially. "It is difficult to believe that

any harm could come to one who had two such knights at her service. It makes a woman feel almost safe, even at an hour like this." She addressed Clay: "By the way, have you met Professor Desmond?" He told her that he had not.

"Then you must do so at once—that is if Mr. March will pardon us for a few moments while I am introducing you. Father has captured him and has him over yonder. Besides, I want you to tell me something about your trip." So off they went with farewell nods to Alan, walking confidentially side by side, Doris slender but round, seeming to scarcely touch the grass with her white clad feet, Tolliver of good height and though of slender build showing more than one trace of strength and suppleness in his erect form. Left alone, jealous and disgruntled March thrust his hands to the bottoms of his pockets and joined the first stray group he chanced across.

Immediately he was struck by the subtle change which had come over them in the last quarter of an hour of his companionship alone with Doris. Their voices had grown subdued, anxious, strained, with now and then an unnatural laugh that arose unexpectedly as some feminine nerve gave away beneath the suspense. Also he noticed that almost constantly their eyes furtively swept the darkness above. To March it seemed as though the atmosphere of the night was charged with a mysterious oppressiveness. The stillness was that of a cave. Clouds had flung themselves across the sky in a thick curtain and the darkness above was so dense as to seem a solid. Anglo-Saxon of blood, temperament and training, he could walk without a quiver a six-inch steel girder that spanned a canyon hundreds of feet deep and where a loss of nerve or a giddiness meant a plunge to certain death, but now for the first time in his life he was conscious of a strange nervousness and suppressed excitement. The palms of his hands tingled, and once he even caught himself laughing idiotically at a comment which he had not even caught the meaning of. Strange sensations ran up and down his back—an irritating pricking as from a light electric current applied to his spine, and when he chanced to turn and see Doris faintly outlined beneath the trees and in close converse with Tolliver his whole being became set on edge at once and his hands tightened spasmodically. He drew himself together.

"Fool!" he muttered in self anger. He always had been rather proud of his self possession during times when that fine quality was at a premium.

"Are you, too, going to lose your nerve, and even before the first symptoms of danger at that? You are becoming as hysterical as Mrs. Emmonds yonder."

A sound from the one whose name he had just mentioned sent him quickly towards her—a middle aged lady who was crossing the lawn with peals of senseless laughter, her highly strung nervous system breaking beneath the suspense of an impending cataclysm so vast that the very mountains themselves would be but mole hills beneath it. He took her firmly by the arm.

"Mrs. Emmonds!" he exclaimed lightly. "Tell me about it also. It seems to be too good a joke to keep to one's self." She turned a rather vacuous face up at him and laughed again more shrilly than before.

"I am laughing to think how silly I was to be frightened an hour ago over such a ridiculous boy thing as everybody has been chattering about all the evening. As if this earth for which the sun and moon and stars were made could be destroyed by one of those little twinkling things. Look at them!"

She threw her hand upward and Alan followed the movement with his eyes. A ragged rift had been torn in the clouds and through the gap he could see the myriads of the Milky Way, infinitesimal in size, faint in their light as far distant glow worms. Once more her senseless laugh arose.

"And as if the Lord who created this great world out of darkness and then built the rest of creation that we might be able to see by night as well as by day would set two worlds battling at each other like senseless sheep! And besides does not the Bible say that the earth shall be destroyed next time by fire? How silly I was to be afraid of such nonsense. I am as bad as a child who fears that there is a goblin beneath his bed."

Her convulsive peals of merriment had turned all eyes in her direction and a dozen men were now upon their way towards her. Alan was still tugging at her arm.

"Of course, Mrs. Emmonds, quite true—undoubtedly so. I fully agree with you that there can be no danger." He stopped speaking abruptly, the cold goose flesh breaking out all over him, for beneath his feet he seemed to feel the earth shudder like an overdriven engine. Or was it his own nerves after all? He turned his face towards his companions beyond.

One glance told him that they had

felt it also, for in their eyes was a wildness such as he had never before seen in human beings, a fear that no savage horde bearing down upon them with naked weapons could have inspired. Rather it was the grisly terror of those who have wandered far into the evil haunts of the nightmare; the sweating horror of humanity who believe themselves to be at the mercy of the supernatural. Then the earth shudder ceased and they stood staring at each other with faces that were dazed and blanched. Alan suddenly realized that he was supporting the dead weight of a fainted woman and lowered her gently to the grass.

"The first slight convulsion," said a quiet voice, and all eyes turned upon the speaker. It was Professor Desmond, and though his face was pale as well as theirs he was by far the most composed one of those present—



She Was Blown Bodily Into His Arms.

not necessarily by virtue of superior courage although he was a brave man. "And what will come next?" asked a hollow voice. The scientist shrugged his shoulders.

"No person upon earth can tell. But you had best be prepared for more convulsions, perhaps terrific earthquakes that may topple over the very mountains, perhaps violent electrical disturbances, likely enough winds of unheard of velocity—no man can do more than guess, for no man in the world's history ever went through a thing like this. Also it is possible that the approaching body may strike us almost without further physical warning, and that we will have but a few seconds of actual atmospheric or ground disturbances before we are buried beneath a mountain of organic matter."

"And what will happen to the earth itself?"

"Again none can tell. The impact may crush its crust and release vast floods of molten matter. Or the crust may remain intact and the smaller and less dense body—if such be the case—be smashed to powder upon our surface. It even may knock the world from its course, itself to become a lost projectile whirling through space and a menace to other worlds. Or our planet may continue upon its way undisturbed save for the inevitable destruction which must be caused for a great distance around the region actually smitten. It is all but a matter of guess work. Ah—"

Beneath their feet there ran once more the tremor of the earth as it vibrated like the deck of a racing steamship. To their ears, at first almost indistinguishable but ever increasing in volume until it sounded like the drone of a great hive of bees, came a throbbing as of a powerful steam pump. From several blocks distant where lay the region from which Desmond had fled came faint yells of terror and in a nearby stable a horse screamed horribly. Alan dropping upon his knees beside the prostrate woman saw some of his companions throw themselves upon their faces while others quietly sank to a kneeling position with hands clasped and faces lifted. A number of the men remained erect, but these stood staring upward in a dazed manner or walked uncertainly about with hands clenched and faces twitching. Desmond alone of all of them stood like a statue, his arms folded upon his breast, his face raised, his whole poise calm and dignified. A score of yards away Doris stood upright beside Clay with her hand tightly clutching his sleeve. Of all the women she was by far the most composed, neither crying aloud nor weeping silently, while Tolliver was as rigid as the tree against which he leaned and half encircled with his arm to steady himself.

And then from overhead there burst upon their ears a roar low and hoarse

as the voice of a distant but raging sea, a roar that steadily arose to the mighty voice of a Niagara or the roar of a battlefield wherein all human voices were drowned as the cataract or battlefield drowns the squeak of mice. The earth rocked as a cradle, and Alan rising with difficulty to his feet and starting towards Doris with a wild impulse of protection was nearly blown away bodily by a gust of wind that swept by voicelessly in the deafening thunder from above. Recovering his balance he pushed his way forward. Tolliver's arm was about her now, the other hugging the tree, and by the electric lights of the street Alan could see the strange light which blazed in the other's eyes and in that moment would have sworn that Clay was insane. Doris, seeing him coming, wrested herself free from the one who held her and was blown bodily into his arms. Her lips were moving and he knew that she was trying to make herself heard, but not the slightest sound could he catch from her lips. Closely he clasped her, trying in his turn to shout words of encouragement into her ears.

Another blast, spinning them about, nearly blew them apart and they instinctively sank upon the ground side by side, clutching each other and gasping for breath. In a wink the electric lights went out and all became darkness, a cavernous darkness filled with cyclonic winds, earth quiverings, throbbings and a roar so mighty that it seemed to crowd all space. Then the wind ceased and from above there sank upon them a mighty weight, soft and yielding as if they had been buried beneath a great heap of feathers, a weight which nevertheless seemed about to force the blood from their nostrils, and beneath it both man and woman felt their senses reel. Then as the darkness of oblivion came settling upon their brains the pressure gradually grew less, vanished altogether and they found themselves struggling for breath in an absence of air where a moment before their lives were being crushed out by its terrific compression. Gasping like fish upon a bank they threw themselves upon their faces as they fought vainly for breath until with myriads of lights flashing before their eyes consciousness left them and they lay motionless.

The electric lights which for some reason had gone out in the early stages of the disturbances were now burning as brightly as ever again, and from all sides came the sounds of a city temporarily stricken returning to bewildered life, the shouts of men, the cries of women, the barking of dogs, the cackle of fowl. Someone suggested that inasmuch as there must have been considerable loss of life in the tumultuous winds when many of the flimsier buildings must have gone down, it was clearly their duty to try and assist those less fortunate than themselves. Professor Desmond answered him.

"What you have said is undoubtedly true, yet at the same time there may be serious riots as the result of a happening like this. Gangs of vandals are apt to form after great panics while the people are still dazed, and taking advantage of conditions commit all sorts of depredations—as for instance in times of armed attacks upon cities or after great fires or floods. Therefore at such times it is a man's

CHAPTER III.

The Flying Man.

It was perhaps five minutes later that Alan came into a certain possession of his senses, not fully as one may do who awakens from a faint, but rather with a gradual return to normal understanding through which period he had grotesque dreams, saw visions and seemed to exist for long periods in unfamiliar worlds. Then as full consciousness became his again he sat up. There was a strong wind blowing once more, a gale in fact, but it was now coming steadily instead of in gigantic gusts and the roar from above had diminished to the long, dull rumble of dying thunder. All was yet in darkness so dense that he could not see his hand before his face.

For a moment he sat quietly as his brain tried to grasp the full significance of all that had happened, his name, his whereabouts, the cause of the blackness, the roar and the wind. Ah, he had it now. The collision. It had evidently taken place and he was still alive—Doris! His heart leaped to his throat and he went fumbling over the ground on his hands and knees in blind search for her. His touch fell upon her still lying prostrate, and placing his arm under her he raised her to a sitting position, feeling of her face as he did so. Thank all things she was alive and now even able to move a bit. He drew her gently to him until her head rested against his shoulder where he held her with his arm clasped about her waist. He could feel the deep and rapid pulsing of her bosom and knew that she was breathing spasmodically as though greatly exhausted, realizing for the first time that he, also, was panting as after a severe race. He spoke to her with an effort and after a few fruitless trials succeeded in making himself heard. He asked her if she was much hurt or in pain and she shook her head against his shoulder in a negative.

He became conscious that something to which it seemed he had always been accustomed had suddenly absented itself and for a moment pondered vaguely as to what it could be. Oh, yes, the roar! It was gone now, the earth was steady beneath them and the wind almost dead. What had become of the others of the party? He must see at once. He found that Doris was now able to sit upright without assistance, told her to remain where she was until he returned, and got upon his feet. As he did so he saw a light flicker a short distance away and a moment later the flame of a Japanese lantern revealed the set face of Desmond. Alan went hurrying up to him.

For a moment the professor stared

at the one who had come to him from out of the darkness as though trying to recall a familiar face for the moment forgotten, then he spoke in a low, strange voice like one who talks in his sleep. "Oh yes, I know you now. You are my old friend March. I congratulate you upon your escape. Come with me. There must be other lanterns scattered about and we will need all the light and help we can get in order to search for the missing ones. I have hopes of finding most of them alive." Rapidly they searched the grounds, coming across the forms of their fellow guests at every few steps. Some still remained inert, some were sitting up in a dazed way, while others were already upon their feet directing their way to the will-o'-the-wisp lantern light which flitted about the lawn. In the course of the next few minutes they had also found a dozen of the lanterns which had not been torn to pieces or blown from their fastenings upon the trees, and these they lighted and distributed to the ever increasing searching party. It had been a case of suffocation into insensibility in a partial vacuum which had followed the departure of the great weight, a condition which had only prevailed for a very few minutes, and with the return of the normal quantity of air the victims had quickly recovered with the exception of Mrs. Emmonds. She had been in a faint and breathing but feebly when the crucial moment arrived, and Doctor Raymond, who was among them now, pronounced her dead. Silently they bore her within the house, found the telephone to be unresponsive to their appeals, and leaving two of the women beside her they returned to the lawn. They were still partially dazed and wholly awe stricken and moved about half automatically as though just recovering from an anaesthetic.

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first duty to look out for those nearest and dearest to him. We have quite a number of women here, wives, daughters and perhaps a sweetheart or two, and most of us should remain with them until we know that it is safe to leave them alone. Let me count. I find that there are sixteen ladies and fourteen gentlemen present. Of the latter I should imagine that half might be spared for a scouting party while the rest remained here for the time being as the scouts report that it is safe for the ladies to go upon the streets we can send for carriages, cars or vehicles of some sort and escort them to their homes. Meanwhile I beg of you to restrain your natural anxiety for a brief half hour for the benefit of all concerned. We will now cast the ballot to determine who shall go forth and who shall stay."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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