

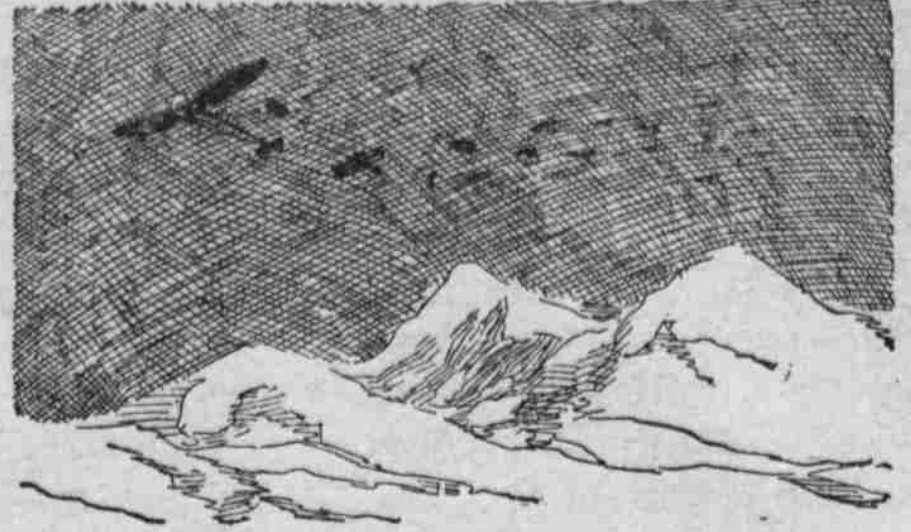


The Flying Man

by Harry Irving Greene

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CHAPTER I.

The Prophecy.

Professor Desmond, astronomer in charge of the Peak Observatory, glanced into the reflectoscope—that wonderful new instrument for scanning the heavens—then withdrew his eye from it and stroked the polished glass gently with a piece of chamouis skin. Then he peered again. Just above the eastern horizon he saw a speck so minute that a layman would not have noticed it at all, yet which caused the scientist to blink and grimace, for he knew that in all reason the speck should not be there, and its presence on the glass irritated his professional eye as though it had been a particle of foreign matter on his own iris instead. For a moment he watched it with a face that second by second grew tenser and more drawn, then springing to his feet he swung the secondary telescope upon it. On either side of him and rising to within a few hundred feet of the observatory were the crests of other peaks, towering, ragged, swimming in the thin air more than a dozen thousand feet above the level of the sea, while below was a dizzy sweep of canyon and gorge that at last smoothed themselves out to the plain upon which stood the city in the very shadow of the mountains. Tense as a man stretched upon a rack he peered through the telescope across the million miles of space that intervened between his eye and the speck, and as he did so the sweat began to burst from his temples in tiny beads. For several minutes he looked, turned from the glass to the reflectoscope again and then began a series of rapid computations, finished them, swung to the long distance telephone and jammed his thumb upon the button labeled "Washington." A moment later he was talking to the head department direct, his voice calm and incisive.

"Hello, Washington! This you, Desmond? This is Desmond of the Peak. There is something coming directly for us from due east and just above my mountain range. I have been observing it for some moments both in the reflectoscope and glass and have made my computations. Its speed is tremendous, its size small—I would say perhaps a quarter of the moon's. It is not a fragment, but rather a complete body, and to all appearances is a small satellite with a circumference of say a thousand miles. How is your eastern weather? Thick! Then you probably will not be able to get a look at it. It is about a million miles away at present and is coming at the rate of perhaps two hundred thousand miles an hour. Unless I am greatly in error it will strike the earth somewhere in this region in about five hours—say about nine o'clock tonight. Of course you understand what that may mean. I have nothing more to say at present." He hung up the receiver without awaiting a reply, sat thought engrossed for a moment, then put his finger upon another button.

"Hello, Associated Press! This is Desmond of the Peak Observatory. A short while ago I happened to notice a foreign body in the reflectoscope that seemed to be approaching us from a comparatively near distance as space distances go. I immediately put the telescope upon it. At that time, which was but a few minutes ago, it was perhaps a million miles away and appeared to be a small satellite. Its speed is tremendous—comet-like—its size perhaps three hundred miles in diameter and a thousand miles around. I am not prepared at this moment to hazard an opinion as to its density other than it is undoubtedly a solid. Furthermore, in all probability it is going to hit us somewhere in this region within a few hours. I leave the information up to you to use or not as you see fit." From the other end of the wire came the incredulous voice of Kelly, the man of the press.

"Come now, Professor, that's good. It would make a fine scare head, but you don't want us to put you on record as saying that, do you?" The listener's brow corrugated.

"Have I been in the habit of sending out false reports?" he demanded sharply, and at the tone of his voice Kelly ceased his silent chuckle.

"No, you never gave us anything before that was not—pardon me—entirely plausible. And of course we all know and appreciate your high professional standing. But this thing is really so remarkable, you know—so very extraordinary! Is it not just possible that you are mistaken as others have been in this direction time and again?"

"I have never prophesied or believed in the probability of such a thing happening before. But my eyes are good, my mind normal, my instruments and mathematics accurate and I cannot doubt such evidence. I thought you might wish to know about it, that's all. Use it or not as you see fit." The voice of the other came

quickly back, the newspaper man's instinct now dominant.

"Certainly I will use it with all the pleasure in the world—well, not exactly with pleasure either. But you know what will happen to you if I scatter that story world wide and it turns out to be a false alarm. I am looking out for you and ourselves at the same time. It will mean that if things don't materialize as you say you will be the laughing stock of the world and thoroughly discredited in your profession. We have had astronomical scares before and you know how they have all turned out—pure bugaboos. And I'd hate to see you ridiculed. You understand my position."

"Perfectly, and I will assume all responsibility for the report. It is good of you to be so interested in my welfare."

"Not at all. I'll have them yelling extras on the streets from Maine to California within an hour. What shall I say it is—a baby planet, moon, satellite—quick now, for I want to get into action."

"Just call it a small body, apparently dense and of great velocity."

"Any idea where it hails from?"

"Not the slightest. It is something heretofore unknown."

"Has it an orbit of its own or is it flying off on a tangent?"

"I cannot tell you. But it is coming straight for us, straight as a stone falls. It will hit the western hemisphere of North America at nine or ten o'clock tonight."

"Will it destroy us?"

"In the absence of precedent it is impossible to state. But the earth will probably know that it has been hit."

"Will it be visible to us at any time?"

"From certain points if the atmosphere is favorable. But it will arrive by dark."

"What can be done? Anything?"

"Nothing at all except wait, and if you are religious pray."

The crash of the newspaper man's receiver at the far end of the wire and the blank silence which followed told Desmond that the other had darted away for the telegraph key, and hanging up his own instrument he wiped his forehead and for a moment sat lost in thought over what he had done. He had staked his jealously guarded professional reputation upon one of the wildest improbabilities known to science, and come what might, it was now too late to recall his actions. Nor would he have done so if he could, for unless he was the victim of some unaccountable hallucination he knew that he was not mistaken, and useless though he had believed it to be to warn the world against a calamity wherein mankind would be as helpless as ants, he had yet considered it to be his duty to possess them with such facts as he had learned. Yet now in the reaction the colossal magnitude and unbelievable wonder of it all dazed him, and he leaned back weakly in his chair with



A Hand Fell Upon His Arm.

his eyes fixed upon the floor as he pondered over his own position. One of three consequences must happen to him. If he was suffering from a delusion he was, as the press man had said, a ruined man, disgraced, discredited; and the jeers of the world would ever ring in his ears, while if he was correct and the impact took place he would either be crushed like a fly beneath a mountain, or surviving by some miracle, find himself among the most famous of men. Verily he was in the hands of a destiny so colossal that all the armies and navies of the world and all its teeming billions of humanity to back them were as impotent as a swarm of gnats to alter it, and arising with the face the color of wet ashes he placed

his things in order with unusual care, as one might who was about to take a long vacation, and with a last look at the beloved instruments so infinitely more delicate than the human senses locked the door and departed, taking his seat upon the little car that ran down the steep cog road to the city below.

He entered the bustling place just as the sun dropping behind the western peaks left the first shadows of evening to steal swiftly across the plain. Scarcely three-quarters of an hour had passed since Kelly of the Associated Press had clashed the receiver into its hook and darted for the telegraph key, but already the howling newsboys were scampering about with the agility of young apes as they gathered their horde of nickels from the shrieked prophecy of the dire death that was hurtling down upon them, fighting for dropped coins as coyotes snap and wrangle over bones, as little mindful of the promised clash of celestial bodies as had two knights of the squared ring challenged each other to pigmy mortal battle. Desmond, watching them, doubted not that they would have stood dauntlessly screeching their wares before the onslaught of a Jupiter, scrambling for the coins in the very shadow of the approaching monster. With a cynical curiosity new to him he scanned the faces of those who purchased the news which he had sent forth to the world, watching them as they read the huge headlines bearing his name, reading in their faces their varied emotions—their open derision, their incredulity, their doubt and in a few cases—their fear. On all sides he heard the comments of those who had purchased the scare head extras.

"Another high brow says a moon or something is going to drop on us this evening. Guess I'll have to put up my umbrella."

"Bet you twenty to one she misses us."

"Fine bet that. If I won what good would it do me—buried a hundred miles deep?"

"You can't always tell. Those wise boys hit things right once in a million times."

"And just think, Julia. If it hits us it will break up the dance."

"A scheme to sell more yellow newspapers."

"Absurd, impossible, unscientific—"

"He says it is as big as this state."

"Glad the state ain't Texas, then."

From a nearby corner a band of Adventists began to chant to the beating of a drum, seeming to glory in the direful prospect. "He who repenteth in the last hour may yet enter the holy Kingdom. Come ye while yet ye may and be saved, for the end of all earthly things is at hand, woe, woe." Angry, disgusted, amused, Desmond turned upon his heel and started for a nearby hotel that he was accustomed to frequent, but had scarcely taken half a dozen steps when a hand fell upon his arm and he looked up to see the half-serious, half-smiling face of his friend Alan March before him. He paused, saluting.

March slipped the professor's arm beneath his own. "Come along, now, and tell me all about it. Might as well know the worst first as last," he announced as he scanned his friend's face as closely as a physician might scan the features of a patient of whose sanity he was slightly in doubt.

"What was your idea in starting all this excitement anyway—or is the report a canard conjured up by some enemy or practical joking alleged friend of yours?" Desmond shook his head.

"No, it is my own message, and as you will readily appreciate, I have staked my reputation upon its accuracy. If I am wrong I will be the butt of the world, a clown, a buffoon, a lunatic." Despite himself he drew a sigh. It did not seem possible that such a grotesque calamity as he had prophesied could occur in a universe of such perfection, God-made, where each stupendous body of unthinkable space lay balanced to a hair against its countless neighbors of hundreds of millions, yes, hundreds of billions of miles away; where a perfection inconceivable to man seemed to rule through both infinity of time and space. And now that he had had time to ponder over it, it seemed to him that it must all have been a dream, a dream so vivid that he had upon awakening mistaken it for reality. Yet if he had been asleep now, and with his die cast he would stick to it to the last and either go down to disgrace as a false prophet, or in case he survived the cataclysm stand erect and vindicated in the eyes of all mankind. Allan spoke again.

"In common with all who know you I have a huge respect for your scientific attainments, your level headedness and your thorough integrity. Therefore I am convinced that you fully believe that this awful catastrophe will occur to us as you have prophesied. The only element of doubt in my mind is the possibility of your man, no matter how careful or learn-

ed, to err—especially when dealing with infinite distance and the mysterious laws of space. But of course all we can do is wait and see how it turns out. And that makes me think of another matter. Miss Fulton is going to give a little lawn party tonight at their home, Japanese lanterns and all that, and I had intended to be one of the also present. It suggests itself to me that one might as well be out in the open as cooped up somewhere in case your mysterious wanderer arrives, therefore I shall go as I had originally planned."

"By all means. In case there was a collision anywhere hereabouts it would probably make little or no difference where one happened to be. Even if the world withstood the shock, an area as large as several states would be buried miles deep in the debris, and how far beyond that area life would be destroyed no one can say."

"Then I would suggest this. In the face of such an event we might as well be as resigned as people can who half expect to be hit on the head by a world at any moment—especially for the women's and children's benefit. We don't want any panics, at least before we are hurt. Personally speaking, I believe I can make my peace as well when I am mingling with my friends as I could alone in a garret and upon my knees, and I imagine you can do the same. Therefore I wish you to come also. Doris will welcome you, and I have no doubt but that the timid ones will regard you something in the light of a protector and be more at ease. Will you come?"

They paused in front of the hotel for which Desmond had been bound and he ran his eyes over the face and figure of his friend as he debated as to accepting the invitation, mentally commenting for a moment on the vigorous strength and strong, handsome face of this young civil engineer who was so rapidly winning fame and fortune by his skillfulness and level headed judgment. And as for Miss Doris—he had often thought her to be the prettiest girl he had ever met, Doris of the hazel eyes and wavy chestnut hair, and he really did want to see her again. And while at any other time he would have accepted with alacrity, now with his threat hanging so heavily over them he was uncertain as to whether he could with propriety place himself in their midst. Also, there would be those who—in a friendly manner to be sure—yet who as rank skeptics would be certain to poke ridicule at him, at last until the premonitory disturbances which must to a certainty usher in so momentous an event began. Yet on the other hand to sit alone in some obscure room with four blank walls surrounding him, retreating like an animal to his cave, upon this night which he believed would be the most eventful of any since the dawn of the earth's history, or to wander at random amongst strangers and be pointed out on every side by vulgar fingers and be compelled to run the gauntlet of their derision and abuse seemed still more undesirable. He cleared his throat, still uncertain as to what he should say.

"While I thank you, I cannot promise now as I am uncertain as to just what my movements will be during the next few hours. But I still bear it in mind and if I decide to come I will make my appearance somewhere between eight and nine. In any event, convey my best wishes to the company—especially to Miss Fulton—and tell them all that I sincerely hope that I have suddenly become entirely irresponsible for my sayings. As for you personally, I hope to see you in the near future, whenever and wherever that future may be." He grasped Alan's hand, pressed it for a moment and then walked quickly away, leaving the other gazing after him with meditative eyes. Then with a shrug of his shoulders which might have indicated either doubt or resignation to the inevitable March went his way.

Scarcely had Desmond taken his seat in the dining room of the hotel than he became uncomfortably aware that he was the center of interest of all eyes. A hush fell, several waiters crowded about him and stood staring with open mouths until with a motion of disgust he motioned all save one away. From nearby tables ladies and gentlemen laid down their table implements and gazed at him with little better manners and full as much insolence as had the menials who served them. From several quarters little ripples of laughter arose, half tolerant, half taunting, and he felt the blood rush to his cheeks in full tide as he lowered his eyes to the menu. Anger began to arise within him, not at the servants but at these ignorant though well dressed vulgarians who stared at him so insolently or mocked him to his very teeth, and for the first time in his life he knew how it felt to be one man against a world. And well he knew how unforgetting, how merciless, how cruel they would be forever afterwards should his dire-

warning go the way of all similar ones in the past. And in that moment he felt a resentfulness arise within him such as he had never felt before—a resentful hope that the prophecy would come true regardless of consequences; that these giants of space should meet like two battering rams in a crash which would echo to the stars the accuracy of his judgment, the fulfillment of his prophecy, the verification of his sanity. True, thousands and perhaps millions of lives would be destroyed in the colossal grind, but what of it? They must soon die anyway in the natural order of things, and if the master of space had sent this special thunderbolt against them, that in itself was proof good enough that it was time for them to perish, else the bolt would not have been sent. Then quickly following this came a great flush of shame that colored his cheeks to even a deeper scarlet, and he felt like flaying himself with a lash of scorpions as a penance for his rash of savagery. He grasped the menu card, and scarcely looking at it began to order almost at random. Half way through it a messenger boy burst upon him with a score of telegrams, and forgetful of his dinner he tore them open and began to read. They were from all parts of the city, the country, the state—even the United States. They were from friends and acquaintances. They were from men and women of whose very existence he had never heard. They were from plebeians and millionaires, from ministers and statesmen, from lawyers, doctors, scientists, priests. They derided and they threatened, they upbraided, begged, prayed and implored. In the midst of them he came upon this one sent by the chief at Washington: "Desmond, care Peak Observatory: "Make no more statements to the press regarding threatened collision until you have heard from me further. If your prediction is fulfilled this bureau will be destroyed by an act of the Almighty, if it is not fulfilled the bureau will die of shame. In either case you seem to have settled us."

"HEADMANN, Chief."

His face gone white now, he crushed the mass of sheets into a ball, and, arising, left the room with his dinner a forgotten thing. Walking as though in a trance and seeing the curiosity filled faces about him but mistily he seized a wrong hat and plunged uncertainly into the street, thoughtless of where he should go.

CHAPTER II.

The Collision.

He went rapidly yet uncertainly, almost at random. His wrong hat was on wrong end before, his rumpled hair protruded in wisps beneath its rim, his eyes were wet and staring. At every corner the newsboys still shrieked and flaunted their damp wares before the eyes of all who passed, on every hand were straggling groups and solitary individuals with noses buried in



A Messenger Boy Burst Upon Him.

the sheets, while from several quarters came the insistent throbbing of the drums of the Salvationists, the exhorting of the Adventists and the fervent shouts of the self-ordained curbstone preachers as they cajoled or threatened the populace in the name of impending and universal doom to come to them, be blessed and saved, or falling to do so pass on to everlasting torment. Wandering down street after street, frequently turning corners with the zig-zag instinct of the pursued, Desmond for the first time became thoroughly imbued with the magnitude of the movement which his voice had started. He saw men reeling from saloon to saloon and momentarily becoming more drunken upon the strength of his announcement that this would probably be their last night of earthly life. He saw scrub-

women strewing their savings which had been earned upon their calloused knees into the fingers of jeering guttersnipes. He saw wanton women kneeling with tears streaming down their crimson painted cheeks; he saw erstwhile staid men of respectability hurrying into public houses, for what purpose—good or evil—he could only guess. He saw the stolid march of the undisturbed whom nothing short of an earthquake could impress; he saw the satirical smiles of the cynics, the boisterousness of the rockies, the maudlin bewilderment of the weak of mind as they swayed alternately between doubt and despair, and he saw here and there an earnest faced one hurrying silently past or slipping into church or chapel. From somewhere in the city a church bell was booming solemnly, and from this place and that came the sound of voices that discorded in a jumble of rag time and psalms. He saw human nature keyed to its highest pitch and taut as a harp as it sounded its manifold notes of harmony and jangle. He saw the wicked become virtuous and the virtuous wicked, the thief restoring and the erstwhile virtuous thief, while above and around this human bedlam hung the stillness of air such as often precedes a great electrical storm. And this was but one insignificant spot upon the continent! And if this was but a sample, what then was happening in the great cities of the land which were strewn from the Atlantic to the Pacific—what nameless crimes and outrages which must be laid at his door if he had erred. Fortunes gathered together by years of labor would be scattered riotously in one debauch. Murders would be committed, suicides done, souls damned—and out of it all so little good could come. It would have been better, far better, if he had let them die as they had lived, unwarned like those who are stricken in their thoughtlessness. Alternately he berated himself with savage venom or prayed despairingly as he plunged from street into alley and alley into street as he sought by turnings and doublings to escape from the things which haunted him on every side.

He stumbled from a refuge cluttered alley out into the light of a broad thoroughfare, sleekly groomed and bordered by the houses of the city's more fortunate and better class. Here it was quiet and orderly as usual and in his relief at having left the rabble behind he breathed deeply of the fragrant air, straightened his hat and hair and proceeded more leisurely upon his aimless way. Before him he saw a yard generously studded with trees, from the limbs of which pale Japanese lanterns glowed in softly tinted radiance. He paused and glanced about as he collected his thoughts. Yes, it was the residence of Judge Fulton, and this was the lawn party to which March, taking advantage of his own acquaintance with the Fultons, had invited him in the name of Doris. He was near enough now to see the forms that strolled carelessly about or sat upon the summer seats beneath the trees, near enough to even catch a tinkle of laughter from some softly gleaming white throat as the lady responded lightly to the jest of her companion as to the horror so soon to come. He paused in indecision. To return to the lights and sounds from which he had just escaped was unthinkable, while before him, though there was more skepticism than in the rabble, there was also decency and order. For a moment his mind wavered between retreat to some solitary corner and a bold advance to the companionship of those beyond, then with sudden determination he pressed forward, threw open the gate and entered.

March, spying the grizzled head and tall, gaunt form of his friend as he slowly approached up the walk leading to the house, spoke hurriedly into Doris's ear. "It is Professor Desmond—of course you have met him. You know I took the responsibility of inviting him to drop in among us. I thought he might wish to be among friends tonight in case—well, in either case, you know." She smiled in swift acknowledgment, and nowhere could there be found a smile sweeter than Doris's, either in her light or sometimes serious mood.

"I want to thank you for asking him to come. We will make him our lion. I have always admired him, and had I known all this was to happen would certainly have asked him to come, in the hope of somewhat diverting his mind as well as our own. He must be under a greater strain even than the rest of us, for he believes more implicitly than we." She went lightly forward, her hand outstretched, frank welcome shining in her large hazel eyes.

"Professor Desmond—I am delighted to be so honored. Have you any late news to encourage us?" He shook his head with a grave smile as he first bowed over her hand and then straightened up with his usual dignity and raised his eyes over the assemblage.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)