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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"It came screaming down out of the sky."



# A Phantom in the Sky

By DALE CLARK

*A strange tale of an aviator's weird experience in a doomed airplane that fell from the sky*

IT WAS nine o'clock when the doctor's telephone rang.

The doctor uttered a little groan as he put out his hand to the instrument. He was not a young man, and he was very tired. After being out all day with a confinement case in the country, he dreaded a night call. The mountain roads were greasy with cold spring rain.

"You'd better say you can't come," his wife said. "You tell them to call Doctor Evarts, John."

"Hello!" the doctor said.

The voice on the wire leaped and crackled, making a sharp, tinny sound which the doctor's wife could hear.

"All right," the doctor said. "Yes. Right away. Of course."

His wife looked at him with big, reproachful eyes.

"That was Evarts talking," the doctor told her. "There's been an accident, a plane crash-up on Turkey Ridge. He doesn't know how many are hurt or killed. It's probably a two-man job, though."

He got up stiffly and heavily, went into the hall, and put on his overcoat. Silently, the woman lifted the percolator from the table and drained its contents into a thermos flask. She threw a shawl over her head and waddled into the yard and watched the doctor back his muddy little coupé from the garage. She handed the thermos flask through the window.

"Now, don't you drive too fast, John," she said.

The doctor drove as rapidly as he dared. The air was full of a cold mist against which the windshield wiper tended a little black arc of glass. The doctor saw, through the pale, cloudy diffusion of the headlight fan wavering upon the tarnished clay of the road, the slithering track left by Doctor Evarts' machine. Once he glimpsed the red dot of a tail-lamp ahead.

The motor coughed and sputtered on the grades, and the tire chains made a paddling sound in the night.

**H**E STOPPED the car beside a stake-and-runner pasture fence. He crawled over the wet, slippery rail and set off through the cold steam of mist toward a flare of murky torches in the field. He walked fast, stumbling a little with the weight of his instrument bag, and breathing heavily. The air tasted raw in his nostrils and throat; the mist powdered his shaggy coat with tiny drops. The sod was soaked soft, and made a plopping, squishy sound under his large shoes.

A line of men—lean, gaunt mountain men—held drafty pine torches at a little distance from the wreck and its pungent smell of spilt gasoline. The torches flung a red, resinous light.

The doctor looked at the plane. It resembled a squashed beetle. The steel body was badly smashed, but he could see that it had been one of the big, cabin flyers.

Doctor Evarts stood there with a flashlight in his hand, probing its cold white ray into the ruin of the cabin. He was a keen, brisk young man.

The old doctor glanced at the corpses laid in a careful straight row beside the plane. The bodies looked slack and sack-like, with stiff limbs that were somehow shapeless. One of the mountain men was trying to fold the hands upon the chests.

"Let them be, Jed," Doctor Evarts said. "I'll have to go through their pockets, you know."

He was the local coroner.

The old doctor tried not to look at the faces, convulsed with the horror of violence, faces smeared bloodily with contused blood at mouth and nose. They were masks frozen and clotted with the fear of the Angel of Death.

"All?" he asked.

"Oh. Hello, Bryant." The young coroner turned around. "Yes, every one of them. I'm sorry I got you out. I didn't know, of course."

"I suppose there's nothing we can do, now."

"No, there's nothing anyone can do." Doctor Evarts looked up into Bryant's large, tired face, wet with the haze. "You might as well go on home, sir," he said gently. "The rest is just a routine job for me."

"If you don't mind, I will. I've had a hard day."

The old doctor turned away. He had gone a few steps when the man who had been bending over the bodies came up and held a torch past his face.

"It's horrid," the man said. "It's like a judgment by Gawd A'mighty."

"Yes, it's a frightful thing."

"We heard it over beyond the creek," the man muttered. "It came screaming down like the devil whistling out of the sky, and next it smashed as loud as thunder."

"Yes," the old doctor said. "It undoubtedly fell from thousands of feet—to smash like that, steel broken like match-wood."

"It's horrid." The man looked into the night, beyond the little cave of light scooped by the torches. "It makes a man think of things, even if he don't believe in such as them. I could give you a light to the car, Doc."

Bryant smiled. "I don't think I'll see any ghosts, Jep."

But he took the torch in his own hand and went on slowly, wearily, watching for puddles on the wet sod. He had got nearly to the fence when a glitter on the ground refracted the dull, piny light. What he saw was the nicked clasp of a black leather briefcase.

It was a strange enough article to find in that pasture, and the doctor made no doubt it had fallen from the plane. He paused, holding the briefcase in his hand, looking back at the wreck. The wind was coming up, with a sullen swish of rain in it that promised more slippery grease upon the road.

He shook his head. "I could as well give it to Evarts in town," he decided aloud.

He flung the torch into a roadside pool, where it expired with a hiss, and dropped the briefcase and his own bag into the seat of the coupé. When he had switched

up the dome light the doctor poured a half-pint of steaming coffee from the flask and drank with a slow, grateful sigh. He noticed, then, that the clasp of the case was undone and that a sheaf of papers written upon in a strong, large hand, had spilled onto the seat.

He picked up the sheets and patted them into order with his careful, surgeon's hands. His eye caught the legend across the upper margin of the first page:

*"To Whom it May Concern——"*

These words, in a rapid, angular, and almost illegible scrawl, had been placed in sharp contrast with the lower, neatly formed characters; placed, he concluded, as an after-thought, for a line had been drawn roughly through an earlier heading, "*Dear H. G.——*"

To whom it may concern—this was not, therefore, a privileged communication.

The doctor glanced down the page; he frowned, and hesitated, and at last polished his eye-glasses and looked through them upon what was written:

**S**AFELY aboard! But what a struggle! I darned near missed the plane, thanks to a most mysterious young man who is now making me frightfully uncomfortable both in body and in mind.

"I was standing under the awning of the Charterse Hotel when I first saw him. The doorman had just called my cab, and I was waiting there with my briefcase in my hand—my luggage had gone on the airport bus an hour before—looking out into the bright glare of the street at a clock on the corner. I had barely forty minutes in which to catch my plane. Then this chap darted past me down the rubber matting to the curb.

"My cab whirled up. And he, as cool as ice, calmly stepped into it, said some-

thing to the driver, and away shot the taxi from under my nose!

"It was pure cheek—in fact, a piece of damned insolence. Of course he knew that was my cab. He couldn't possibly not have known it. He had followed me through the hotel door, you see. What made it a good deal worse, the taxi happened to be the last out of the stand.

"I saw myself flunking that business in Washington tonight. I yelled something to the doorman, who ran out from under the awning, tooting his little nickeled whistle in the most emphatic way. Well, but there was no such thing as a cruising cab in sight.

"I was frantic. The third red light had stopped the traffic when I did one of those simple but inspired things a man will think of when he's absolutely up against it. I ran out into the street and yanked open the door of the first taxi I came to. The gentleman inside it acted very decently; I told him what a devil of a mess I was in, and he surrendered the machine to me. I showed the cabby a five and told him I shouldn't ask any change out of it if he could turn the trick.

"It was narrow. I dashed up to the plane just as the last pieces of luggage were being stowed in by the guard. The motor was turning over and the pilot sat at the controls. And there, squarely in front of me, looking into the cabin, was this young fellow.

"He barred the door, and I tapped his shoulder—for his back was toward me—and said:

" 'If you will step aside, please!' Rather a sharp tone—naturally enough.

"He didn't stir. 'This plane isn't going to Washington, you know,' he said quietly.

"Now, how did he know where I was going? I had my ticket ready in my hand.

But he hadn't turned, or even glanced in my direction.

"I was taken aback. I appealed to the guard, who had just closed the luggage compartment door.

" 'Isn't this the Washington plane?' I asked.

" 'Sure,' the guard said, tearing a snip from my ticket. 'You'd better get into her, too.'

"I spoke to the fellow ahead of me in a pretty keen voice. 'Now, if you're satisfied——'

"He stepped up into the cabin without a word of apology or explanation for this deucedly queer behavior of his, and I followed.

"**T**HE plane was very full, as it always is when Congress has been called into session; the crowd was one of special correspondents and lobbyists, to say nothing of the more ambitious sort of job-seekers. They had taken every seat except the double chair at the back wall. And here this fellow had bunched himself down, his elbows and knees angled out in a way that took up a good deal more space than his fare entitled him to use. He had a soft hat pulled down over his face.

"I waited a minute, thinking he'd make a move to accommodate me; but no. So I said, 'I'm afraid I'll have to share this seat with you, if you don't mind.'

"He didn't look up. 'But I do mind,' he said in a chilly way.

"I looked once more around the cabin. 'I don't want your company any more than you want mine,' I snapped, 'but if you'll take the trouble to look, you'll see there's no other place. It just can't be helped.'

" 'Why don't you take the six o'clock machine, then?' he asked.

"All this was preposterous. And he

brought it off in such a firm, quiet, sure manner! It was impossible to think that he had been drinking. He hadn't even that excuse, and yet I didn't feel righteously angry with him, either. It struck me that he was a bit off.

"By the way,' I said, 'this is the Washington plane, and if you didn't know that, quite likely you're on the wrong machine yourself.'

"I don't expect to go that far,' he muttered.

"The plane was starting now. I jammed myself down into the seat, or rather into the small fraction of it he wasn't already occupying, and looked out the window, and then for the first time I saw the fellow's face. And I knew that face. It was the face of Robin Bates!

"It gave me a nasty start—for, of course, he couldn't be. . . . I had seen him, Robin, killed. It happened in the summer of 1918; we were in a dog-fight over the lines, and his crate took fire and went down in a frightful hell of flame and smoke, to crash behind the German trenches.

"But here was his face. Fifteen years, you will say—I could forget. Yes, but Robin had been my very best friend, and in a way more than a friend, though I had known him only a few weeks when it happened. Men 'got' to each other in a hurry in 1918. . . . I have to tell you a bit more. I don't want to make myself out any sort of hero, but I had the luck to get onto the tail of a Fokker which was on Bates' tail, and he thought I'd saved his life. 'I'll do as much for you some day,' he vowed. And he would have, too, if he'd had the chance. Meanwhile he made himself practically my slave.

"Oh, I couldn't have been mistaken! This lad was Robin Bates all over again, in a positively uncanny way. I'll tell you how strongly it impressed me. You've

heard stories about men being shot down over there, and then living through it after all, only without any memory of things? I had a feeling that something of the sort had happened—that he *was* my friend. I touched his sleeve.

"You're not Robin Bates, are you?' I blurted.

"No,' he said. And confound it, the very voice was Robin's, and I felt no end of a fool for not having recognized it before.

"You weren't in the War, were you?' I persisted, though I knew it was silly to ask. The lad wasn't a day over nineteen—he had been in kindergarten when the Armistice was signed.

"War!' he muttered. 'War? No. Nothing like that.'

"Anyway,' I said, 'you must be related to someone I used to know. The resemblance is extraordinary. Are you related to a Bates family?'

"He shook his head. 'My name's Carter,' he said briefly.

"He wasn't to be persuaded to talk, you see. The glummiest and least sociable person alive—to say nothing of his boorishness about the cab and this seat. He's the very opposite of Robin in every way, except, as I say, for the physical resemblance. I look at him now, and it is difficult for me to believe that he *isn't* Robin. It's uncanny. It's almost enough to make one believe in reincarnation or some of those things.

"A MOST extraordinary thing has happened.

"We got out of the plane at Louisville—there is a twenty-minute stop, connecting with a mail train—and walked into a lunchroom on the airport grounds. Carter and I sat at the same table. I must say that he was not exactly unfriendly, but not easy to talk to. I tried everything,

and I should say that he has read none of the modern books, knows nothing of politics, and has not picked up a newspaper in years.

"Well, near the end of the meal—my meal, for he had eaten nothing, merely toyed with his food—he clumsily upset a catsup bottle over my hand and sleeve. That seemed to wake him up a bit. He was very profuse in apologizing, and insisted upon dabbing up the worst of the mess with his handkerchief.

"There's a washroom over behind the booths,' he said. 'You'll have time to clean up a bit. I'm most awfully sorry.'

"I walked into the washroom and took off my coat. Before I had quite cleansed the shirt cuff, I heard the motor gun up in the yard; I put on the coat again and reached for the door. The infernal thing had come locked on the outside.

"I hadn't a moment to lose. I threw up the window and leaped through it and ran to the plane. They had already stowed the mail, and everyone else was in place. The guard asked for my ticket—and I couldn't find my wallet. I thought I'd dropped it in the washroom, and I told the man so.

"He put on an official frown, which became a scowl when we didn't find any purse in the washroom. Someone had picked my pocket. Well, I had an idea.

"There's a chap inside who'll tell you I came in on this ship, and that I had a ticket through to Washington,' I said, and beckoned Carter to the door of the plane.

"What happened then quite floored me. He told the guard, in the most innocent fashion possible, that he had never laid eyes on me before! I don't know what I should have done if the manager of the airport hadn't come up. He knew me—for I've traveled the line a good

deal—and was willing to take my check for the rest of the passage.

"I have found a seat, at last, up in the front of the cabin—a passenger got out at Louisville. It seems he had an attack of air nerves; we have been running into an occasional fog bank. (The flying forecast is fair, so it probably won't last long.)

"I glanced back at Carter a moment ago. He looks very young and lonely, there in that big seat.

"I should despise him, but on the contrary, I feel sorry for the kid. Indeed, I rather like him. I suppose that is because of his resemblance to poor Robin Bates.

"I am going back to talk to Carter. It is queer, but I feel a distinct pull toward the chap, as if he were silently calling me. He has acted like a boor all along, but not in a boorish, mean, nasty way. I almost suspect that he isn't responsible for the things he does.

"I look into his empty eyes, and have a feeling that he is but the husk and rind of a man. Something is lacking. The mind, perhaps. Or the soul. . . . One gets the idea that he is wrapped up in a kind of dream, that he is quite alone in a world which he can't at all understand. He seems strangely and hopelessly baffled.

"I am going to ask him some questions. You see, I have a theory to explain the chap:

"I don't know anything about Robin Bates' family. But his father may have been a rounder. He might have had an illegitimate son. That would account for the resemblance.

"THIS is maddening!

"I've just talked to Carter. 'We might as well get acquainted,' I said. 'My name is Pulver. William Pulver.'

"It wasn't much use. He listened to me, vaguely; he was thinking of some-

thing else. I felt rebuffed, and a little hurt, too.

"'You've a down on me,' I said to him then. 'I'm sorry about that. I am, indeed. But I won't trouble you any more.'

"He did a strange thing. He leaned toward me and put his two fingers on my knee. Ah! that was Robin's way, his gesture when he wanted to be awfully emphatic about something.

"'Oh, no!' he said earnestly. 'I've taken quite a chunk of liking to you from the start, really!'

"A chunk of liking! Robin used to say that. I never heard anyone else use the phrase. It gave me a quick, qualmy start.

"'But you didn't want me to sit with you,' I said. 'Why?'

"'I'm blessed if I know,' he said. 'I just had the feeling.'

"And I asked, 'What sort of feeling?'

"He shivered. 'I don't know. A feeling. I don't remember any more.'

"Pitiable! So blankly helpless! It made me sad, it was so like talking to a lost child.

"Carter must have seen the softening of my face, for he took that moment to draw my wallet from his pocket.

"'I'm sorry about this,' he said. 'It seemed the thing to do, at the time. You'll find your money safe in it, and your ticket. I hope they'll refund your check.'

"I took the wallet, and got up stiffly, and left him.

"You see the game? Of course, his 'feelings' are the baldest fakery. He locked me in that washroom, and I'd never have seen the wallet again if I hadn't got on the plane in spite of all! I dare say he leaped into my cab after picking a pocket in the hotel: that was why he didn't want me on this plane in the first place.

W. T.—5

"A thief! Wearing Robin's face, using his voice, his mannerisms, his personality!

"We are getting into a regular soup of fog.

"It's horrible! He's so like Robin!

"I JUST looked back at Carter. He sat there, all twisted, his face afire in a terrible way, his hand clawing.

"I knew what he was doing. I've done it myself. He was fighting the joy-stick of one of those old army crates—fighting it, and trying to kick her nose up! What does that boy know about a 1918 crate?

"I stared out the window. It freezes my blood to write this. We've just skimmed the rim of a mountain ledge. I had only a fleeting glimpse, but I couldn't be mistaken: I've had too many tricks at the stick. There was the ledge, and there was the perfectly natural thing which Carter did: trying to boost the ship, just as you will brake down your foot on the floorboard of a car another man is driving, if he comes up too fast on a light. . . . But how did Carter know? He couldn't possibly have seen that ledge. Not in time. But he knew. I saw it in his face.

"I don't mean that he was afraid. He wasn't. Quite the contrary. His face glowed with a terrible knowledge, as if Death had brushed his shoulder and the touch of Death somehow brought him all alive.

"He is looking at me.

"I am beginning to have an idea about Carter——

"Fog. There is a blanket of fog, and though we have climbed steadily from that ledge, we do not find a ceiling to it. The higher we go, the colder—and there is plenty of the stuff freezing on the wings. A flyer knows the weight and drag of it on the ship.

"The pilot can't think of a forced



landing on the mountains in the fog. He has to climb.

"I HAVE gone back to Carter.  
" 'Where did you do your flying?'  
I asked him.

"He shakes his head, he says nothing, he watches me write. He can't read this, it has come on dark, and we are not showing a light inside to wall in the fog against any beacon the pilot might find. Anyway, it is as if the act of putting words on paper has no meaning to Carter.

" 'You've been up before,' I said. 'You've flown quite a bit?'

" 'I don't know,' he said. 'I can't remember.'

" 'Was it so long ago?' I asked.

"Carter gave a little sigh and passed his hand over his face.

"His face! How plainly I see it. Something there is, not a halo the eye can see, but a dark light under the flesh!

" 'You know,' he said, 'you remind me of someone I once knew.'

" 'Who?' I asked, and my blood came throbbing into my temples.

" 'I can't think,' he said.

" 'Was he a soldier?' I asked.

"He did not say anything.

"*A bad pocket!*

"The plane went like a rocket. She went screaming and twisting on her tail, shivering and groaning, with a sound as of hammers beating on her as she fell.

"And I was afraid. It was horrible; not only that I didn't want to die—but to go without a fight, without a chance, in this cabin like a coffin reeling down the sky!

"And Carter. Death was near, and he seemed to feel that. He came all awake, all alive, with the glow leaping up in him like fire behind the dark flesh. I had the notion that the flesh was dissolving in the flame of him.

" 'You don't have to be afraid,' he said. 'It is very easy.'

"He put his hand on my arm. The fingers were immensely strong. They seemed to lift me out of my seat. I had the sensation of floating away from the plane. I could no longer feel the pitch and fall of the ship.

" 'It is not the least bit hard,' he said, and he smiled very sweetly.

"I believed him. I ceased to be afraid in the moment that I felt his hand upon my sleeve.

"IT is terribly important that I throw this out the window at the last. You may say that the plane simply leveled out of the pocket when Carter took my arm. But I did not feel her, and the wrench was like to tear the struts out of her. I know by the way she flies. We are done for. I know—it is not just the fog and the cold and the feel of the ship: it is Carter and the warm shining behind his face.

"I think of Robin. If I had missed the plane, if I had waited for the six o'clock, if that official had refused my check at Louisville——

"Do you see? It would have been a way of the man Carter keeping Robin's promise.

" 'Robin!' I said to him.

"He did not say anything.

"What does a name mean? Here——

"I hear a cracked sound shivering.

"Why do they scream?

"His hand. made let go. write this the last.

"Shrill and twist, all

down          roar  
                  grind  
                  I  
                  Robin——"

THE old doctor put the last, hugely scrawled sheets upon the first, neat ones. He took off his eye-glasses and placed them with an exact and deliberate care inside his coat. He got out of the car, tucking the briefcase under his arm. He slopped across the dark field.

The man Jed was crossing the hands over the quiet chests.

The old doctor asked, "Did you identify them all?"

The coroner straightened his back; he had been stuffing papers into his own kit. "Why—oh, Bryant, you here again? Yes, I've got them ticketed," he said with a trace of professional satisfaction. "They all had purses, billfolds, old envelopes—one thing and another."

Doctor Bryant gave him the briefcase.

"This belongs to one of them. William Pulver?"

"Come here," Evarts said. He took the old doctor's arm. "He looks peaceful, doesn't he? Curious. There isn't a bruise on him. I dare say his heart failed on the way down. Maybe before."

"He seems to mention another chap," the old doctor said. "A man named Carter?"

"There wasn't anyone of that name in the plane."

"Or Bates? Robin Bates?"

"No. We found a man named Baynes," the coroner said.

The old doctor looked at the plane. Inside his big, shaggy coat his body made a little, quick shiver.

"I don't suppose anyone could have jumped from it?"

"Impossible. Not from a plane of this type, in midair," said Evarts. "I happen to be posted on that—I've a brother in commercial flying."

"He would have been a young man," the old doctor suggested. "Bates, I mean. A lad of nineteen, or thereabouts."

"No," said the coroner. "There was no such person in the ship."

"Well. That settles it, I suppose."

The doctor walked away across the pasture. He saw the mist go past him in wind-driven tatters and he listened to the suck and squish under his heels in the soft, wet sod. There was no other sight or sound in the night, only a vague feeling of unseen men passing and repassing in the silence and rain.

