

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

NOVEMBER, 1942

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What would you think if the ramshackle shade of your first auto took to following you around?

The Ghost of the Model T

By **BETSY EMMONS**

NOBODY would ever have expected Phil Barnes to be haunted, because Phil wasn't the type. Phil was strictly Mr. Average, a nice enough guy, but no imagination. That's why I've had to decide that his story was the real thing. He couldn't have made it up, and it wasn't the kind of yarn you find in anthologies of spook stories. Besides, I saw the ending myself.

Phil and I were on our way up one Sunday morning to the cabin in the Catskills we share with a couple of other guys, using it now and then for hunting or fishing or just to have a man's party, away from our wives. It was warm enough to have the top down, and we were thinking about catching a nice mess of brook trout and broiling them over an open fire. Phil was driving his new car, a cream-colored convertible Flash roadster, with a black top.

We stopped in a roadside diner for ham and eggs, and when we came out we saw that another car had bumped into the Flash from behind. The other car was about the worst-looking I ever saw, a Model T, around fifteen years old. There was a peculiarly rakish curl to the front fender, and a star-shaped breakage in the windshield. The Flash hadn't suffered much—just a dented bumper and a few scratches.

"Isn't that too bad!" I said. "But I don't suppose you could collect from the owner of a jalopy like that, even if it were worth the trouble of suing."

Then I saw Phil's face. It was crumpled up in a way I couldn't describe, and it was a color I don't like to remember. "Calm down, old man!" I told him. "Why get upset about a scratch or two? You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

Phil gave me an awful look. "Don't say that!" he gurgled. And he hurried me into the Flash, glancing back over his shoulder as if he were afraid something was coming after him. I looked back too, but all I could see was the ramshackle Model T by the curb, and I had an impression that it was moving slowly after us, but of course it couldn't have been, because there was nobody in the driver's seat.

Phil stepped on the gas and went about twenty miles in fifteen minutes before he relaxed. I was curious, but Phil's expression had been so scared when he came out of that diner that I didn't like to ask questions. He was the first to speak, and then what he said didn't seem to have anything to do with what had scared him.

"Tom," he asked, "do you remember your first car?"

"I'll say I do! Why, there's never been another one like—"

Phil raised a protesting hand from the steering wheel. "Then you know how I felt about mine. I got it around 1925, when I was seventeen, and I blew the proceeds of a summer's work for it. And gosh, how I loved it!"



"I know," I said sympathetically. "Now, I got mine—"

"It was a sweet little car, too, for those days," Phil went on. "A Model T. I was so proud of it, I used to get up nights and go out to the garage and see if it was still there. You know how a kid can be. Why, I'd pat it like you'd pat a horse. I spent every week-end shining it up and kept it brimful of gas and oil. Every few months I'd have it checked over, just in case."

By this time I was letting Phil talk himself out, though I couldn't see where he was getting. "I kept it six years," he told me. "A long time. But, you know, I was so fond of it I couldn't bear to give it up. You think I'm screwy?"

"Not at all," I said. "I know just how—"

"Why, I felt like it was part of my family! I felt it respond. The wheel practically turned of itself in my hands. I felt that it was fond of me too. I *knew* it was."

"Don't get so excited, Phil," I said. "I get you. But what's this all about?"

Well, he went on to tell me the story. He was working his way up in business, and a good appearance, including a good-looking car, was important in his line of work.

So he finally traded the Model T in, and didn't know what became of it. About that time the company he was working for moved him to Texas. And after he'd been in Texas awhile, he fell in love.

OF COURSE a man in love never knows what has hit him. She was pretty, Phil said, and flirtatious. He was still a young man, and didn't bother to find out what she was really like. But he did notice one thing, that she was pretty much impressed by anything showy. Nice places, good clothes, big cars. So Phil got himself a new car. He didn't mind trading in the one he had at the time, because he'd never

really gotten fond of it, like he'd been of the old Model T.

The new car was a Streamline Special, bright green, with white-walled tires. Phil called the girl up and said, "Look, honey, put on your best clothes. I've got a new car that'll knock your eyes out, and we're going riding." She was thrilled pink. She came into the room all done up in furs and flowers, and said that she just couldn't wait to see the car.

Phil told her to look out the window, and stood back with a big grin waiting to hear her exclaim. But she turned to him and said, very nastily, "If you think that's a good joke, Philip Barnes, just think again. Trying to be so funny! You just get in that old rattletrap and drive away. If you think I'm going out with you in that, you're crazy."

Phil went to the window and saw that another car had come up behind the Streamline Special, where it was the first thing the girl would see. He started to laugh and say, "Why, honey, you're making a mistake."

Then he looked at her again, and saw that her pretty face didn't look pretty with the angry, sullen expression on it. And it occurred to him that she must be mighty dumb, and mighty snobbish. And he thought about the kind of wife a girl like that would make, and made a few pleasant remarks and picked up his hat and drove away in the Streamline Special. A couple of years later, he met Susan and married her, and every now and then he's taken time off to thank his lucky stars he saw through the girl in Texas before it was too late.

"But," Phil finished his story, "before I went away in the Streamline Special, I had a look at the car behind. And, Tom, it was my old Model T! I knew by the way the front fender was bent and the windshield was splintered."

"That's quite a coincidence," I told him.

"Yeah," said Phil. "Coincidence. Well, next place the company sent me was to Washington, and of course I didn't ever expect to see the old buggy again. But I did."

"Did you?" I asked. I was beginning to suspect what was up by now, though I couldn't really believe that Phil meant it. Phil took a deep breath.

"The first time I saw it," he said, "the time I just told you about, it did me a good turn in my private life. But the second time—well, I'll tell you." He'd been about to close a big order, Phil said, with a guy named W. G. Foxbaum. Foxbaum was an odd bird. He kept a Flit gun of antiseptic in his office and sprayed everything each hour, on account of germs. He had a fixation on the idea of absolute cleanliness. Anyone who wanted an order from Foxbaum had to show up with his pants pressed and his nails manicured, or he didn't stand a chance.

Phil was all set, and he had an appointment with Foxbaum at three o'clock to wind up the details. Foxbaum was as strong on punctuality as he was on neatness, and Phil was planning to be there on time. He'd had his pants cleaned and pressed. He'd had a shave and a manicure and a haircut. He was going down the street, very spruce, with his briefcase in his hand. He was so anxious not to be even half a minute late, because of the way those things counted with Foxbaum, that he was crossing the street against a red light when a car came up from behind and nuzzled him.

"Nuzzled?" I asked.

"Nuzzled," Phil affirmed. And he went on to tell how he'd lost his balance and fallen into a mud-puddle. He dropped the briefcase and it opened and his papers got all splashed with mud and water. So did his nice, clean pants. By the time he'd picked himself up, cursing, he just saw the rear end of the car going around the cor-

ner. But he was sure that it was his old Model T.

"I didn't know whether to take time off to get cleaned up and arrive late, or to arrive on time in the mess I was in," Paul finished. "So I compromised. I got brushed off and straightened out my papers as well as I could, which wasn't very good, and I got to Foxbaum's office only fifteen minutes late and only moderately dirty, and I lost the order. Two weeks later Foxbaum went bankrupt, owing fifty thousand dollars."

I said, "Funny coincidence, huh?"

"Yeah," said Phil. "Too funny. I wrote to the Motor Vehicle Bureau, and they traced the Model T for me. Seems that a year after I'd sold it, the car was sold again to a junk dealer, and as far as they knew it's been standing in a junkyard ever since."

"That's impossible," I said.

"Sure it's impossible," said Phil. "But, did you notice, when we saw the car outside the diner, that it didn't have any license plates? That it was sort of dusty? *That it didn't look as if it belonged to anyone?*"

"Phil," I said, "I see what you're getting at, and I think you're nuts. You figure that car has been—"

"Yeah," said Phil. "That's what I figure. It was junked, and it got out, and it's been following me all over the country. It's found me twice, and both times the company moved me away right afterwards, so it had to start out again. Now it's found me once more, and it's going to follow me. It's fond of me. Tom!" His voice rose in a shrill crescendo. "Tom!" he yelled. "It can't happen! A car can't do that! Can it, Tom?"

"Of course it can't," I said. "Obviously not. You'll never see it again." But there were prickles up and down my spine. Because, though I tried to tell myself it was just Phil's suggestion that made me think

so, it didn't seem to me that there *had* been any license plates on the old Model T parked out in front of the diner.

BY THE time Phil and I got up to the Catskills, he'd calmed down a bit. After a day of fishing, he was quite himself again. He even essayed a word or two of apology. "I guess you thought I was nuts, Tom," he said. "Maybe I am. Of course, you were right. It was just a series of coincidences, and my imagination."

"I'm sure of it," I answered. But I really wasn't sure at all because, as I've said, Phil had no imagination. None at all. And there were points in his story that a man would have needed imagination to make up.

Anyhow, everything was serene when we started back, and even the Sunday traffic on the Storm King Highway didn't bother us. The spring dusk was lovely, and we could hear the fresh noise of waters coming down the slopes. Of course, we didn't pay any more attention than people usually do to the signs which said "Drive Carefully" and "Watch Out for Falling Rocks."

Then everything happened at once.

We were going around an especially narrow, dangerous curve, and another car came up behind us on the outside, forcing us over against the rock wall. Phil cursed under his breath, watching the other car pass horribly close to the steep slope beside us.

"Damn fool!" he said. "Risking his life like that." He wrenched the wheel over. And then the car ahead came suddenly to a stop, making Phil jam his brakes on abruptly. There was barely time for me to experience a sickening flash of realization as to the identity of that other car, when a roaring, gnashing noise sounded above our heads.

And, down upon the road ahead, smashing the other car to a crumpled heap of tin, came a thirty-ton boulder. And then another, and another, streams of boulders of all sizes, enough to crush any car into nothingness and send its occupants to glory.

In a minute, it was all over. The echoes died away, and the mountains again were silent. Phil and I got out and ran to look at the car on the road ahead, the little Model T which had been buried and crushed under the gigantic rocks of the landslide.

Ghost car or not, it would never run again. Phil laid a hand on the battered fender which projected from the wreckage, then straightened up slowly and looked at me. "If it hadn't forced us to stop," he said, "we'd have been in the path of that."

I nodded. Neither of us wanted to talk about it. We peered under the boulders which lay atop the car, into the front seat, searching for a driver, but both of us knew beforehand that there was no driver in the car, and no license plates, nor any signs of human life or ownership.