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*A Peculiar Little Story Is This*

# THE SWOOPING WIND

By WILFORD ALLEN

**T**HE gray little old man sitting so lonely on the rustic bench under the great oaks interested me. He seemed so out of place there, at first glance; yet as one drew close enough to note the details of his action there was a peculiar, indescribable something about him which one learns to recognize about such places; it is always found in certain types—a rather aimless air of gentle contentment. So I sat down beside him, for I knew he wanted to talk.

“A very pleasant day, sir,” he began at once, politely.

“Yes, indeed,” I responded.

“Rather unusual at this time of year, is it not?”

“Not at all, sir. Not at all. I venture to say that the temperature to-day is about eighty-two degrees, not more than a degree from the normal at this time. And all the meteorological conditions, wind, sky, humidity, all are quite normal, abnormally normal, sir, if I may use the expression.” His assertions, while quite dogmatic, were belied by the gentleness of his voice and expression as he spoke.

“You are well acquainted with the weather here, I see,” I put in.

“Rather,” he smiled. “I ought to

be. Pardon me for speaking without introducing myself, sir. I am William Estrich—Dr. William Estrich. Yes, I know you know me now. And you are——?”

“Charles Fritwell,” I supplied.

“I am certainly pleased to know you, sir,” he assured me, and I knew he spoke the truth. “It is a pleasure to meet someone with whom I can talk as to an equal. These people around here,” with a shrug, “oh, they mean all right, but one really can’t talk to them. I have to do all my thinking myself, and I really miss the exchange of ideas which I should have. Tomorrow I start on my greatest work—but there, I mustn’t bore you with that,” he finished deprecatingly.

I hastened to assure him that I should be most happy to hear him tell of his work, but for the time he had switched off. Then as suddenly he began on another tack.

“Do you know sir, there is something that I must tell you. I have never told anyone before, for—well, they always laugh at me. I know that if another told me I should laugh at him. But I know that you will not laugh. So I will tell you.”

“It is surprising how little the run of people can understand when it is outside of the little whirl of their search for the pleasure of the moment,” I said. “I shall be very interested in listening to you.”

“I knew you would.” He was quiet a minute—several minutes. I had begun to think he had turned off on still another tangent when suddenly his whole manner changed and he turned toward me almost fiercely.

“You know me! You know me!” he repeated huskily. I nodded, for since he had introduced himself I knew him, if not before.

“Yes. You know me. Every educated person does. I am Dr. William Estrich. It is through my studies that we are able to predict the

movement of storms. You were prescient, sir, in grasping as you did without my speaking of it, that I am acquainted with the weather. I should be. For I was born, put into this world, for a purpose, although I was a stupidly long time in learning that fact. And that is what I must tell you.

“I was just a child when it happened the first time. Too young to be expected to realize its meaning; for that matter who would have read the meaning in a single happening?”

“I shall never forget that day; never! We lived in the country, and several of us were on our way home after school, across the fields. Crossing the fields was forbidden to me, for a bull of uncertain—perhaps I should say of certain—reputation made that field his stamping ground. But we were going along, singing or talking or playing in the way of children, and altogether forgetful of danger. I think it was I who saw it first, and it was not fifty yards away, displaying all the symptoms of anger. Suddenly terrified, I screamed and began to run, and the others likewise.

“I think I forgot to say I was the smallest of all, and I was soon out-distanced. The fence was still far ahead, and I lost still more ground by looking over my shoulder continually. It was that which almost was my undoing, for while my gaze was behind me I stepped into a gopher-hole and went down with a turned ankle.

“Providence had been with me up till then, as the bull for some reason, although obviously angry and pursuing us, was not doing so with a great deal of speed. But there I lay, unable to do anything but crawl along, screaming, and the sight seemed to stir the animal into swifter motion.

“Then the thing happened. Until that time there had not been a cloud in the sky, not a breath of air that I can recall. But at the instant that

the bull began purposely to set after me as I crawled, helpless, along the ground, there was a sudden roar, and from nowhere there was a sudden swoop of wind which enveloped the charging animal in a cloud of whirling dust. In a moment it had gone, and the bull was dashing madly across the field, away from me.

"Now sudden whirlwinds can develop. But naturally they can not develop in such force with such suddenness. They must develop, they can not spring into being in full force without being preceded by the lesser stages of development.

"Now that is that; and you can say, as I would say, that such things might happen, a fortunate coincidence that it happened as it did.

"In fact I forgot the occurrence for years. I next recalled it after the second occurrence, which was even more vivid.

"I WAS past thirty then, in fact I had done much of my work, and was on a trip through the high passes of the Andes, when it occurred. I was engaged, in fact, on a meteorological reconnaissance for my university.

"We had reached the summit of the pass, and seeing a level-topped peak of considerable size to the side, I was on the point of turning toward it. Ahead of us, not more than a quarter of a mile, was a party of about fifteen men, approaching us. My guides seemed a bit worried, and I was on the point of asking them what was the matter when it happened.

"The sky had been cloudless, though in this case there was a strong wind blowing through the pass at our backs. With the suddenness of a clap of thunder I again heard the roar, but where the first time it had seemed to have only terrifying force, this time it was of destructive

intensity, ravening. The sky was as black as though an ash cloud had passed over the sun, and with the roar the wind swooped down. Where we were there was a strong wind. Ahead of us we could not see, then, but after the wind had subsided as suddenly and inexplicably as it had descended, and we went ahead to investigate, we could see the effects of its force. Now, I know, I have calculated the strength of the tornadic winds which in the great plains can drive a splinter of wood through a tree trunk. It is in the neighborhood of four hundred miles an hour. But I tell you that wind, where it struck in force at the spot which had been occupied by the approaching party, did things which no air moving less than thousands of miles an hour could do. Did it, and was gone. And there was no trace left of that party.

"Still, the precise similarity did not show up at once. My guides were terrified, and ran; and I, fearing to be left there alone, went after them with a gun. I was in fact surprised when they returned so meekly at my command, and still more surprised at what they told me.

"The approaching band were robbers; more, they were murderers, and my guides had notified them, in the way they have, beyond understanding, of sending messages ahead in those mountains, that I was coming. In short, it was to be an ambush, and if they had come up to me I should have been dead within a few moments. The swoop of the tremendous wind had seemed to my men like the direct intervention of heaven on my behalf; in fact it was that belief which brought their confession.

"Now you will see the similarity between that occurrence and the first. In each case my life was saved when in the natural order of events it should have been lost."

HE STOPPED speaking, and I thought he had finished, and started some remark about it, but he interrupted me; and whereas his speech before had been controlled, he now surprised me with a vehemence I did not look for in the quiet-natured little man.

"You see now?" He leaned forward and his face worked convulsively. "You see? Each time to save me! Each time it was the wind which saved me! And my life-work was the study of the wind. There could be but one conclusion. I am to make great discoveries in meteorological science, and the elements themselves will protect my life until I have accomplished my work. It must be a great work, to interest nature herself to set aside her laws in my favor. No other man has had that done for him!"

"That is a most fascinating thought," I put in, but he waved me into quietude as he continued.

"But the last time! God!—there, you will forgive me if I seem to blaspheme—if I had my way I'd damn it all for the mockery it is. But I can't! I can't! My God! I'm helpless, just an instrument denied its own life, its own happiness!

"Soon after that second time of which I spoke, I met a girl. You can guess what happened. Temporarily—I told myself it would be only temporarily—my scientific interests were forced into second place, a second place so far out of mind as to be almost nonexistent. For I had already achieved a position in the world. I had already done work which many could not equal in a lifetime, and if I had found the new interest of a real love which should drive that other interest from my heart, well, I could afford to, very well.

"So we were married, and on our wedding trip went down along the coast of South America, down the

west side, intending to return up the other side. But we never reached it,

"My God, Fritwell!" the tears stood in his eyes as he turned to me, although his voice did not reach; "Fritwell, I can never forget that night. And that is the reason that in all the years since then I have never been able to concentrate on the work I must do before I am allowed to die. But tomorrow I think I will manage to start again.

"But that night! It was a perfect evening of the Chilean summer, and the soft chords of thrumming Spanish melodies floated over the ship as we sat about or paraded the decks. Inside of the dancing salon there was the gleam of eager faces, alight with color and animation as the dancers swung to the orchestra's strains. We had danced, and were outside, looking over the water, with the stars shining down on us from above and reflected back at us by the smooth black water. We talked low, listening at the same time to each other's voices and to the waltz—it was *Sobre las Olas*, the prettiest piece in the world when a Spanish orchestra plays it over Spanish waters on a summer evening. If there was trouble in the world, we had forgotten it. There was nothing on the boat save joyousness and youth and love.

"We were planning. They always plan on their honeymoon, if it is the real thing. And we were planning softly together, and I was drinking in the musical sound of her voice, more wrapt up in it than in the meaning of her words, when it struck!

"It struck, damn it! It struck! And she knew what it meant to do. For, as all the world seemed to be whirling in the one tremendous swoop of the wind, literally tearing the ship and the sea to pieces and mixing them until only God himself could tell which was sea and which was ship, I tried to clutch her to me. But she struggled to break away, and through

the roar of all the gales that ever blew, concentrated at that one point in that moment, somehow, I can't say how, I heard her words: 'Let me go, Will! Let me go! Can't you see?—don't you know?—you can't have me and your work both. It has come for me. Let me go, oh, let me go!'

"My God! She was right! Right out of my arms it snatched her, and then all was still again. But where there had been a hundred hearts throbbing to life and love, there was now only one, and it was throbbing to hate! It still does. I hate it! I hate it! What do I want of life now? But I can't die. I am its slave."

LATER I spoke of him in the office. "Oh, Estrich? Yes, he is a nice fellow. What he told you is partly true. At least, he was a scientist, and the only survivor of a boat which was lost in a sudden storm with his bride of a few weeks. The rest of it was—well, you could see for yourself he was quite crazy, though harmless."

I did not tell my informant, nor had I told Estrich, of my experience in the Andes the previous year.

We had come to a point in the pass where a cloudburst seemed to have scooped the rock bare of earth, and I noted that my friends crossed themselves. I remarked on it.

"Yes, *Señor*," was the response, "But this is the Place of the Wrath of Heaven!"

"It must of necessity be, then, that there is a legend about this place," I said, expecting to draw out another of the place-tales one meets with.

My friend who was answering laughed nervously. "But for the once I must decline to tell the legend. For you see I believe it, and to your ears should I tell it, it would be unbelievable. You would laugh."

"Do I not know that the tongue of Don Pico speaks nothing but truth?" I answered.

"That is truth. Well, I take the chance. You saw that the ground was swept bare, completely, and perhaps you think a most terrible storm of rain caused it. You would be wrong. It was the wind, *Señor*. And with the dirt it took away twelve men—puff!—and no one ever found a coat from their backs.

"It was fifteen years ago, *Señor*. A scientist, an American, was going over the pass as are we. And his rascally guides thought to arrange an ambush with some robbers, to share the loot.

"But for once, *Señor*, heaven in these degenerate days saw fit to perform a miracle like those of the Good Book. When the meeting was almost at hand—Hand of God! It was dark, though there had been no cloud. And a wind such as never the Andes had seen came and struck the robbers and destroyed even the ground they stood on. And—Hand of God! In the next moment it was clear and quiet, but the robbers were vanished completely. And the guides were changed men, *Señor*. They confessed and were punished; and now they work in the garden of the church at Lima, doing the work of God."

