

A Sherlock of the Skies

Rene Mansfield

Popular Electricity, 1912 October

“But I tell you it’s absurd, man! You talk as though Forbes had plunged plumb through to China or was dangling from the Milky Way! He’s somewhere between here and Edgarville, dead or alive, or else he and his plane have been snatched out of the heavens bodily by an unseen hand.”

Ames Mitchell was pacing the brown grass, lifeless and sparse as a mummy’s hair, before Forbes’ hangar. Tall, lean and nervously energetic, he was the direct opposite of the short, stocky Frenchman, of that other type of bird–man, who was sitting on an overturned box beside the vacant, yawning shed.

“Of a surety, Meetchell — of a surety. But remember, my friend, we have searched every foot of ground between here and Edgarville. Not a trace of poor Forbes have we found. We see him start for Edgarville. We know that it is not possible that he go another way, because of the current. There it is. Some freak of combustion, perhaps. Pouf! he is gone — like a bubble. We do not know yet all the tricks of this wireless power. Hélas! I have no hope that we will see Forbes nor the Gull again.”

“Rot!” In the single word flung at Bouvier’s back, hunched into melancholy deprecation, was expressed Mitchell’s faith in his friend’s resourcefulness and immunity from danger, and helpless rage at the circumstances that baffled him.

The incomprehensible fact of the case was that Forbes had started off about noon on the day before, forging straight into the blazing blue of the skies, the nose of the Gull pointed toward Edgarville, 50 miles due east, which he had intended to reach.

There were only three aeroplanes of the ten in private congress there on the remote plains of Texas that were equipped for operation by the wireless transmission of power. One of these was Forbes’ Gull, another the biplane of the English aviator, Baring, and the other Bouvier’s monoplane. Although the wireless control of machinery was far past the experimental stages, the radius of the electro–magnetic waves as a source of power for the motors, so far developed for the aeroplane, was limited. It was for research and practical experiments upon this line that the Ferris Aero–Development Company had offered unusual inducements to aviators of international fame to join their school of aviators in the South, where they had a manufacturing plant and had also constructed a wireless power generating plant.

Guy Forbes had proven easily not only the most intrepid but the most scientifically alert of the little group of aviators. Already he had made several sensational flights in the Gull, and the morning before he had determined to test the value of some improvements he had himself suggested in the generator, setting Edgarville as his goal. When he did not return at the time

he had expected, little concern was felt, although four petrol-driven planes had started over his course, to act, if necessary, as a wrecking crew. Neither they nor the automobiles that followed later had come upon a trace of Forbes or his Gull in all the stretch of 50 miles of prairie.

The thing was mysterious and uncanny. There was no chance of Forbes having suddenly decided to fly in quite another direction, because of the necessity of keeping his engine within the focused waves of electric power.

“By George” — Mitchell bit the words into the cigar he was grinding between his teeth — “if Forbes can’t be found between here and Edgarville he didn’t fly to Edgarville, current or no current.”

He felt that a further search of the Edgarville route would be fruitless and the only course of procedure that suggested itself was a visit to the power plant.

It was as yet a more or less crude sort of shack set up on a sandy little hillock about a half mile from the hangars, its low roof striped with the shadowed tracery of the network of wires that depended from a towering “L” antenna. Mitchell’s long strides brought him speedily to within a stone’s throw of the plant, where he came upon Baring, the English aviator, evidently returning to camp.

“Damn it all, Baring,” he burst out without prelude, “this thing’s got to be cleared up. There’s something mighty funny about this deal ; know it?”

The Englishman, startled, looked at him sharply. “Think so, Mitchell? I’m afraid your nerves are getting away with you. So long. See you later,” was all he said, as he walked on.

Mitchell hurried on to the shack. In the palpitating heat of the bare interior, before the radio-telegraphic controller, sat Quinn, the power operator.

“Got her on today, Quinn? What’s the use? No chance of anybody flying today.”

Quinn looked up impatiently as Mitchell’s lank figure appeared in the door.

“Had a little trouble this morning. Trying out a new generator, that’s all.” Quinn’s tone was not cordial.

“No trouble at this end yesterday, was there?” Mitchell inquired casually.

“Don’t you suppose I’d have said so before now if there was?” returned Quinn.

“Why, sure, Quinn, sure. But I got to thinking this morning that perhaps you and Forbes were trying to put one over on us. It occurred to me that perhaps Forbes didn’t make for Edgarville after all — you may have switched the current—”

“You saw him start for Edgarville yourself,” interrupted Quinn. “You know perfectly well that we haven’t been able to switch the current anyway from due east since that trouble with the gearing last week. What are you talking about, Mitchell?”

“O, well, Quinn, I’m all knocked out about this thing, I tell you. Say, what was Baring doing around here, anyhow, just now?”

“Search me.”

Obviously Quinn was not conversationally inclined. He had turned to the wireless telegraph apparatus near by and was operating the transmitter busily.

Mitchell, with an unexplainable feeling that Quinn could throw some light on the mystery if he chose, sauntered around to the rear of the shack and looked over sharply, as well as he could, the structure of the aerials. Erected on a huge revolving disk, the L antenna was so constructed that when its angle was automatically set at any degree of the disk a concentration of the electric waves took place which made possible their focalization in any desired direction.

The L was pointed due east as it had stood for several days owing to the accident to the gearing of which Quinn had spoken.

Mitchell saw plainly enough that it would have been impossible to operate the disk in the present condition of the gearing. But suddenly his brows puckered into a puzzled frown. Then he got down on his knees so that he could examine carefully the sandy ground beneath the big disk, the appearance of which had caught his eye.

The entire area of ground within the circumference of the disk was a smooth stretch of sand, perfectly leveled by the winds, with the exception of a little groove that formed an arc of at least 90 degrees faintly traced in the sand near the rim of the disk. Mitchell on his knees saw that it had been caused by the dragging over the sand of a single wire that had somehow become detached from one of the cleat insulators on the under surface of the disk. In places the narrow line was almost obliterated, where it had probably been blurred over by the breeze. Mitchell recalled that the wind had been blowing such a gale the morning before that they had all urged Forbes not to try for Edgarville until sundown. When a freakish calm followed, about noon, that lasted all the afternoon, they had said it was more of "Forbes' luck." If the disk had been revolved those 90 degrees while the wind was blowing at that terrific rate the little groove traced by the dangling wire would have quickly disappeared.

It must then have been revolved after the wind had died down.

It must have been revolved sometime between noon the day before and the moment when Mitchell had noticed the tell-tale tracing, which gave the lie direct to Quinn's statements.

There was a chance that the current had been switched while Forbes was in the air, with or without his knowledge. At least the idea suggested a course of activity for which Mitchell was grateful. Assuming that at some time since the previous noon the current had been directed almost due north, as indicated by the point at which the line in the sand was broken off completely, Mitchell determined to fly low for perhaps 50 miles to the north in the faint hope that Forbes, for unexplained reasons, might have taken that course.

When he returned to camp he said nothing of his purpose, about the hangars, but quietly wheeling his biplane onto the field, rose to perhaps 300 feet and then headed straight north.

For more than 20 miles he flew low over the flat, parched country, becoming more and more miserably certain of the futility of searching this trackless waste of land and air for a clue to the vanished aviator. Sighting what was doubtless a squatter's little cabin, Mitchell volplaned to the ground near by, and jumping from his seat beat a lively tattoo on the sill of the open door. The startled individual who came running from somewhere in the rear, was struck dumb at the sight of the huge creature that had alighted practically on his door sill. Mitchell had twice to ask him if he had seen another such bird in the last 24 hours, or had had any other visitor.

Faith, and he'd never seen such an animal even in his dreams. As for visitors — Mitchell might see for himself the date of the passing of the last one, crudely carved there in the door — a date just eight months previous.

Disheartened, Mitchell climbed into his seat and took wing again, to the bitter disappointment of the squatter. Another 20 miles he flew, and with a forlorn but tenacious hope alighted to make inquiries at another cabin. At first he thought the place had been deserted, but his knock on the sagging, closed door brought forth a red-haired man who stepped outside and closed the door again behind him. He evinced no astonishment at the sight of the biplane and regarded Mitchell coldly.

“Well?”

“See any other bird like that one yonder flying around these parts, partner?” inquired Mitchell. “Or had a visitor since yesterday noon — tall fellow with eyeglasses?”

“No, I ain’t seen one or t’other. Birds like that ’ere ain’t common round here, nor visitors, neither.”

Mitchell prepared to set off again. The red-haired man reentered the cabin, closing the door again after him.

Just as Mitchell was about to tilt his elevating planes for flight the thought struck him suddenly that it was rather odd that the red-haired man had disappeared, since he had displayed no interest in the aeroplane. It argued that he must have seen one before, otherwise he would have been bent upon investigating what to him must have been a great curiosity.

It also seemed strange that the man should keep his cabin door tightly closed, when the wind, though a hot one, made the terrific heat a little more endurable. Acting on impulse Mitchell jumped from his seat and stealing quickly around to the side of the little cabin looked into the open window. The red-haired man had seated himself at a rough table and was dealing a pack of ragged, greasy cards to the man who, with one leg swathed in clumsy bandages, lay on the bunk up to which the table had been pushed. Mitchell suppressed a yell of joy. The man with the bandaged leg was Forbes!

Running around to the front of the cabin Mitchell burst through the door like a catapult.

“Forbes, old man! I knew you hadn’t cashed in! I knew it. Look here, you—” turning to the squatter who had risen wrathfully, “What’d you tell me that lie for — what do you mean, anyhow — what you trying to do?”

“Why, you see, partner,” the flashing look of anger had been quickly succeeded by an ingratiating gentleness of manner, “’taint every day — ’taint once in a year, scarcely, I get a chanct to deal the pasteboards to anybody but meself. An’ I just couldn’t b’ar to have you take your friend here away. You got no idee how all-fired lonesome I—”

Mitchell turned to Forbes impatiently. “Why didn’t this man try to communicate with us? And where’s the Gull?”

“One at a time, Mitch, please,” smiled Forbes. “I thought some of you fellows would find me sooner or later. Rather expected you sooner, to tell the truth. And 40 miles looked like some walk to our friend here. The Gull? You know as much about her as I do. I left her a couple of hundred feet up in the air.”

“But you started for Edgarville, Forbes. How in the deuce should we have known you’d strike off due north instead of east?”

“Why, man alive, I got a wireless to switch my course almost before I was out of sight of camp. You all knew that?”

“No! By George, we didn’t! Forbes, there’s queer work here, somewhere. Quinn must have sent that message. Why has he kept quiet about it?”

“Does Quinn use the Continental code?”

“No, he doesn’t.”

“The message was sent Continental. I wondered about it at the time.”

“But the Gull, Forbes?”

“I told you — left her 200 feet in the air. Funny thing happened, Mitchell. Can’t account for it. The anaeroid barometer exploded. In no time a little tongue of flame had leaped to the upper plane. I could see the Gull was doomed.

“Half-blind, I managed to get hold of my parachute and swing loose from the crackling machine.

“Donovan, here, dragged me, still unconscious, to his cabin and between us we turned a neat trick in bandaging. He has failed to discover the slightest trace of the Gull — must have burnt to a cinder in mid-air. Funny some of the metal work isn’t lying around, though, eh, Mitchell?”

The question was put lightly, but Mitchell sensed the wary suspicion in Forbes’ tone. Donovan was shuffling his cards with great precision and attention.

“O, Donovan didn’t look very sharp, probably, that’s all — yes, Donovan?”

“My eye sight ain’t what it was — not by a long shot,” replied Donovan, a shade too eagerly. “Now, like es not—”

“Sure.” Mitchell cut him off sharply. “We don’t care about the Gull so long as Forbes is all right. Now, lend a hand, Donovan, while we get him into my machine.”

The squatter was pitifully concerned. “Why, he ain’t no more fit to be moved than a baby. Things is li’ble to set in bad from that there leg o’ his. Better leave him here fer a day or so. I can tend him first class—”

Mitchell drew a revolver from his hip pocket, examined it leisurely and replaced it again.

“You just get over there on the left side, Donovan,” he said quietly, “and do as I tell you. There, how’s that Forbes? All right? Come along, now, Donovan.”

Between them they carried Forbes to the biplane and placed him in the passenger’s seat. In a moment Mitchell was beside him and the plane shot up into the sky, leaving Donovan enveloped in a whirl of dust.

“Why, say, you aren’t headed for camp, old man,” said Forbes presently.

“I know it, Forbes. I’m not going to take you back to camp. I’m heading for El Rosa. I want you to stay there for a few days till I clear this thing up.

“Who would be interested in preventing you from accomplishing your flight to Edgarville that would have broken all wireless records and undoubtedly won for you Ferris’ \$10,000 bonus, besides putting you in the way of entering the International next week as the company’s star, if you had succeeded? Anybody but Baring and Bouvier? I’m not going to tell you more now, but I think you’ll hear from me in the course of a couple of days at the most.”

Having established Forbes with a physician whom he knew at El Rosa, which he was able to accomplish with secrecy since the doctor’s house stood in the center of a large ranch, Mitchell took wing again impatiently. Had Forbes taken notice of his course he would have seen that he flew, not toward camp, but in a bee-line for Donovan’s cabin.

It was late the following afternoon that Mitchell asked Holmes, the president of the company, to call a meeting of the aviators. When they had assembled about the long table in the directors’ room apprehensive of bad news about Forbes, for whom an unremitting search had been kept up, Mitchell took the floor at once, with a gravity that boded ill.

“Gentlemen,” his voice was unsteady — “gentlemen, I have the painful duty of telling you that our search for Guy Forbes is ended. You will never see the Gull again, driven by that fearless, that brilliant — that—” He was scarcely able to go on. When he had his voice again under control he said simply, “I shall try to tell you as briefly as possible what I have learned.

“Yesterday, although it had been accepted that Forbes could have flown in no direction except toward Edgarville, something seemed to prompt me to take a little spurt due north. Twenty — forty miles I flew over that desolate country which is quite uninhabited, losing

hope with every mile. Just when I had made up my mind to turn back, I sighted a little shack where at any rate I determined to make inquiries.

“Gentlemen, it isn’t necessary for me to tell you by what means I made certain discoveries that clear up the mystery of Forbes’ disappearance. Suffice to say that buried in the sand behind that shack I found twisted scraps of metal, and warped, charred bits of woodwork, which is all that remains of Forbes’ biplane.

“The Gull was burned almost to a cinder 200 feet up in the air. It was not an accident, gentlemen. It was a fiendishly conceived plan. I know whose work it was, and I know beyond any question of doubt, who was responsible for Guy Forbes’ horrible death.”

Baring was on his feet in a moment. “I know also! I have had my suspicions from the first. I have evidence to show—”

“It’s a lie! He’s alive and you—” Bouvier’s lips closed with a snap over the words that had burst from him uncontrollably. It was too late.

Mitchell turned upon him savagely.

“Ah, Bouvier, you’ll speak, will you? How do you know Guy Forbes isn’t dead? How do you know it, I say?”

Bouvier’s head fell into his hands, as he sank back into the chair. “O, I tell you everything — I tell you everything,” he muttered. “I can not stand it—”

“I’ll save you the trouble, you contemptible scamp,” cried Mitchell. “Ten thousand dollars, and the company back of you for the International next week — you intended to win out on that proposition by fair means or foul, didn’t you? You knew that if Forbes succeeded in reaching Edgarville day before yesterday your chance of breaking his record was slim.

“You bribed Quinn to leave the generating plant for an hour. You repaired the gearing temporarily, so that after Forbes was well on his way toward Edgarville you were able to swing the L around to the north, after telegraphing him to change his course. Having calculated his speed to a nicety, when you knew him to be in the vicinity of Donovan’s shack, you gave him suddenly the full voltage of the power beam, which, you knew from previous experiment, would kill the engine and in all probability explode the anaeroid barometer. You then shut off the power, swing the L around again, restored the gearing to its former condition and left the rest to Donovan, 40 miles away, who was to remove any evidence of that midair tragedy that might exist. In case Forbes, by some miracle, escaped, Donovan was instructed to hold him prisoner until after the International. Too bad you didn’t discover that tell-tale tracing in the sand, Bouvier. Any details you’d care to add?”

The Frenchman only sat and shook.

“Think you can get out of the country tonight?” inquired Holmes.

Bouvier bowed.

“Then git” said Holmes, forcibly, if inelegantly.

Mitchell had opened the door of a smaller room near by and Guy Forbes himself limped into the room, to be surrounded at once by a group of howling madmen.

“My little trip through the fiery furnace indefinitely postponed, fellows!” he cried above the din. “Ouch! Get away from that leg of mine.”