The Free Press Short Story

THE SECRET OF THE SANDS

JOHN SCOTT DOUGLAS

in Olles' face. Bryan Andrews stood

the window, staring up at the moon

see an aeroplane winging its way west

If there's any word, will you let

Sleepy-eyed and half-exhausted.

Silence! Listen, Bryan! Take that two-

seater on the field. Comb the Mojave

along the Sait Lake City route. Platt

may have wrecked his ship in landing."

ned" the ship for many minutes; then,

brake and thrust his control stick for-

pulled back the stick, and the hard-

baked earth of the landing field dropped

Spiraling to gain altitude, he presently

gauges for a minute, he released

ward slightly to bring up the tail.

purring, high-pitched drone.

small farms and orange groves.

slowly zoomed the aeroplane. lav

undulating sea of sand dunes and sage.

looking always for a small dot or two

The desert took on a savage grandeur.

Red crags reared up ahead against an

sandy waste seemed dead, lifeless,

His have dwindled as the man no

his instrument board showed Bryan

Pinally he turned to his short-

hat he was approaching the Nevada

wave set, giving the communication

signal. In a moment the code signal

making known that he was heard came

through his earphones. He clicked out a

message on the keys, giving his approx-

imate position and asking for further

orders. The reply came in two minutes

from McMahon, the day superintendent

northerly course .-- McMahon

Return to L. A. taking a more

Bryan turned northward for nearly ten

miles and then turned, travelling south-

west. His return trip was but a repeti-

tion of the trip out. He was unable to

find any trace of Donald Platt's acro-

McMahon, a short man with a square

iaw, met Bryan when he landed "This

will finish us if it keeps up," he grunted

Three planes vanish in three months'

No wonder our business is falling off!

There were a lot of reporters around

here this morning and you can depend

on it they'll plaster it all over the front

McMahon's prediction proved true

The mysterious disappearance of the

Ploneer Airways' third aeroplane was

front page news. It remained front page

news for nearly a week while the search

for the missing machine continued at

white heat Hope that Donald Platt,

without food or water, perhaps injured,

might remain alive in the Majove Desert

FOR YOUNG AND OLD

B. D. RACHLIN, Acton

SHOES

away beneath him.

cloudless sky, hoping against hope

RYAN ANDREWS, chief pilot of the Ploneer Airways, sat tensely in the office of Superintendent The latter was-making an

litter of reports on his battered mahogany deak, but there was an abstracted known fate of those other two fine airlook in his gray eyes. Several times in men? the past few mirrites, he had reached for the telephone, only to return to the reports again. His old-young face and haggard eyes revealed only too clearly a fear which had been preying on his wordmind and fraying his nerves to the breaking point.

A thin smile now flickered on his gray pitched through the interminable hours lips. He turned impatiently to his of the night, imagining countless fanyoung chief pilot. "No use your waiting tastic solutions to Donald Platt's disaparound, Byran," he snapped, his voice ragged with emotion. "Don Platt isn't due yet for half an hour. He's a good pilot. There's nothing to worry about-

"Martin and Stole are good pilots, too," Bryan reminded the superintendent. Giles sprang to his feet, his lean face twitching. He glared balefully at the sun-bronsed young pilot for a moment, and then started to pace up and down the office like a trapped animal. He paused before an air map, and Bryan maw his eyes following the air trail from Salt Lake City to Los Angeles, the air trail on which, within two weeks, the two pilots, Martin and Stole, had van-

ished. "That's what gets me," said Giles flercely, turning to Bryan. lights all the way! Yet those two fellows disappeared as though the earth had opened up and swallowed them. It's two months to a day that Bartin failed to show up here at the L. A. airport; six weeks for Stole. Night flying's dangerous, sure. But there was no fog. and they were both flying new planes." "Well," said Bryan placatingly, "my friend Don Platt isn't due yet."

"No. Don isn't due yet." Glies dropped into his creaking swivel chair and turned to Bryan, his thin mouth-drawn in a white hard line. "It's not knowing. That's what's eating the heart out of me, Bryan. Not knowing! If we'd found wreckage in the mountains, or on the Mojave Desert, even if we'd known they were having trouble when they left their last stop! But, no! We scour the country for weeks and can't find a trace of 'em. Vanished-completely vanish-

Giles shuddered and flicked the reports with trembling fingers. He wet his lips with his tongue. "Sometimes I feel as if I'm executioner to you fellows! send you out to Salt Lake City, Prisco or Phoenix, and I don't know what I'm sending you out to. Perhapa to your death! Perhaps to whatever fate Martin and Stole met, and I don't know what it

was or why. "Don't think I haven't imagined solu tions to their disappearance. I have, lots of 'em, Bryan. Fantastic things! I lie awake nights trying to drive them out of my head. I sit here at this desk, waiting, waiting, waiting. I think I'll go crasy waiting for the radio operator to give me the reports on the location of the planes. I feel some of my sanity returning when one of my planes reaches its destination. We've beaten the unknown another time."

"Listen," said Bryan gently, "you take this thing too hard. We don't hold what happened to Martin and Stole to you You can't help it."

Oiles laughed harahly "How old am I? Twenty-six--twenty-seven I can't remember I wasn't like this two months and a day ago But I tell you it's not knowing-not knowing what happened to those two fine fellows! Not knowing when I'll send another man out to the same fate!" He reached for the telephone again, but the night boy entered at that moment with a dimsy paper

"From Don Plott?" growled Giles. The boy nodded, handed him the sheet, and departed.

Olles took the message in trembling hands and read it. His eyes glowed and the deep lines of his face relaxed slightly as he handed it to Bryan "Pechaps we're getting to a solution now

Bryan read the mresage Ahead of schedule Landing on the Mojave Pilot of grounded plane augnalling distress. Think it may be Martin or Stole-Don Platt

Otles seized his telephone operator," he cried hoarsely then began to fade. The search was ton? Say, try to get Platt Find out finally discontinued as hopeless. if it is Martin or Stole!"

Meanwhile the pilots watched for any Otles rose again and walked to the trace of their lost comrades whenever window He stared out onto the field their flights took them over the Mojave. illuminated by flood lights: then he he-Returning from Salt Lake City one night, turned to his swivel chair, and smiled month after Donald Platt had vanishat Bryan "Din Platt knows his stuff ed. Bryan noticed a splash of white on he muttered "If he thinks it's one of the desert. His body stiffened as he those two fellows, it must be. He must tared ahead. Moonlight flooded the know our planes and our insignia. earth and he was able to distinguish a moon is bright and you can see almost man wildly waving a shirt. The man as well on the desert by moonlight a by sunlight. If a pilot signalled him and the plane looked like ours, Martin or

The telephone rang and Giles reached for it. "What? You can't get Platt? Try again-keep trying!"

An hour went by and the operator's repeated efforts to reach Platt failed.

doing predictly what Donald had done. He was unwilling to leave Donald here. however, when all their search had failed to find this spot.

grounded aeroplane. It was a Pioneer Airwaya' ship! Where was the second

Bryan was too overloyed at the fact funny." ward. Had his best friend met the un-

Buddenly crisscross tracks in the sand caused his blood to run cold. first thought that the wheel tracks i the sand were an illusion due to shadows caused by ridges in the sand. No ridges, "Yes," growled Giles: "if there's any by landing gears and tail skids! They Bryan went home and went to bed, but sleep was impossible. He tossed and ahead. He was entering a trap!

The man who had stood beside the grounded aeroplane was running toward him, shouting something. The man was not Donald Platt; he was too short and on the right track than to send him up worth salvaging in you, Dirk, I wouldn't he limped. Where had he seen that face to prison for a stretch and have him have had the least leniency. But I've before? The answer flashed into Bryan's was at the office again at six. Glies eyed mind. Dirk Pennington! One of the him with red-rimmed eyes when Byran fellows Bryan had known at the training demanded if any word had come. "Yes."

ahead. Their appearance did not pardune for what it was, a hidden hangar.

Bryan nodded, his firm young jaw set. All these thoughts raced through his mind in the few instants during which He inquired of the mechanic if the Bryan was "taxi-ing" toward the limpship had been fueled and conditioned ing pilot. His action swiftly followed his for flight. Pinding that it had been, thought. His hand leaped to the throttle Bryan donned his flying togs, and climband the scroplane roared its warning. ed into the rear cockpit. Bettling his The two-seater flew across the ground, large body comfortably in the pit, he gaining momentum. turned his ignition switch. The motor

The two-seater was wabbling free in burst into roaring song. Bryan "gunspace, and Bryan spirled above the grounded plane. The two men had studying air, gas, and temperature vanished again. The lame youth was still waving the shirt, feebly, it seemed to Bryan, as though he knew his ruse would not work a second time. The aeroplane trundled forward with

The pilot visioned Giles twitching at snarling spasms, which changed to a his desk, and sought to relieve his chief's anxiety. He radioed:

> was in Olles' office. He flattened out his red point on the desert. He then ex-Giles' gray eyes burned. "So that's it eh? A trap! What can be its purpose?

tawny desert, dotted with blooming sage- | for?" bush. Here it was that his interest in

to awaken. His goggled eyes swept the know." Bou up, old man. This is Andrews callsmall dots-Donald's plane and the ship have called you. Can you tell me whom asure sky. Still the aeroplane he sought He worked for Zedobia Yates? You was not visible. Heat rays shimmered think he's our of a job now? Thanks a into mirages in the hot, dead air. The

Bryan placed the telephone back on the

stood beside an aeroplane which looked deak, his jaw muscles showing white suspiciously like the one Donald Pitt had strained under his tan. "Get it. ohief? Pennington worked for Yales.

few accidents."

ing as the ship whined down toward the does. Now we're the outfit that's run-

that Donald Platt was alive to be greatly concerned by the answer to this riddle. His natural caution, however, urged him to land some distance away from the grounded machine; then he "taxied"-to- going to pay for this!"

these! They were the distinct marks left disappeared in a sand dune directly has to go out to rescue you!"

said Giles sarcastically, "the same word we received from Martin and Stole!

Two men suddenly materialised out of that which appeared to be the sand dune ticularly astonish Bryan, although their hiding place did. He knew that sand

Barely avoided trap-think Don Platt may be alive coming directly to airport—Bryan Andrews. A little over half an hour later, Bryan

levelled out, nosing northeastward. The crisscross lines of Los Angeles streets dropped behind him to be replaced by map on the desk and pointed to a starplained to Oiles all that had happened. Before long these-farms had given way to the foothills, while shead of him. barely visible in the distance as he

Whom was Dirk Pennington working "We can get my former instructor on the phone," said Bryan grimly. "He'll

He looked up the number in the book. and called. "Roberts? Sorry if I got ing. It's pretty important or I wouldn't Dirk Pennington is working for? What!

company, the Columbia Ekyways, was about pushed to the wall by us-because we kept more regular schedule and had

"Sure I get iti" barked Gliss. "Yates goes out to see that we have less regular He fed his motor to prevent overflood- schedules and more accidents than he

aeroplane Donald had endeavored to chief. I don't like to accuse anyone without plenty of proof. But it looks

> planes with distress signals. Some one is "Wait a minute," said Bryan quietly.

show resistance. Persussion is better than force every time! Now if I fly out there and fall into their trap-" likely to get hurt when the sheriff finally

We can do all you say. But perhaps

Don Platt will get hurt if those fellows

"I don't believe it, chief! You see, know Dirk Pennington pretty well. may be weak, but he's not fundamentally



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"All right," said Giles.

method, and when it falls, I'll come to your assistance."

Bryan grinned. - Thanks, chief." Half an hour later Bryan was hovering above the grounded aeroplane. There was To evidence of life around it, but as he started to spiral down. Pennington appeared from the sand dune, waving his

Bryan landed and rolled up to the smiling. The two men appeared and walked toward him. Dirk Pennington shifted unegally as the two men- at proached. Bryan recognized them as two other classmates, friends of Dirk's.

"You think you're going to take me prisoner," he laughed. "But you're not."

left here, and the super knows all about this trap." The two young men exchanged significant glances. Dirk Pennington smiled faintly. "It was white of you to tell tu that, Bryan," he said. "But why should

patrolmen instead of alone?" permanently started wrong. I'd like to known you to do many generous things and I'd like to see you getting a fresh start. That applies to you other two

you? Why didn't you come with the

fellows, too. "What do you think it will get you to be waylaying our planes for Zedobia Yates?" Bryan was taking a shot in the dark, but their faces showed surprise and he knew his guess had been good. "He will keep you on until we've been broken. Then what? He'll let you out. What

made you do it?" The three young men shifted unessily. Dirk stared at the ground. "We were all working for Yates," he confessed in a low voice. "He let us out as his business went down hill, due mostly to his refusal to get modern types of planes and equipment. We had been out of work for months and were desperate. He called the three of us in and proposed that we should stop your planes by pretending distress and then taking your pilots prisoners. We didn't want to do the work, but he threatened that he wouldn't give us recommendations and we couldn't get jobs elsewhere. So we waylaid Martin with one of Yates' planes, and used Martin's plane to get assistance from Stole and Platt.

"It was our plans to hold them, and whatever other Pioneer Airways men we could flag down, until the reputation for unreliability caused your company to go out of business."

"Didn't you feel rotten, trying to break s company which never did you any

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narm, Dirk?" asked Bryan. "Rotten? I've felt like a dog every ninute of the time! And what you've said about Yates turning against us when we had done his contemptible work fits Bryan, with a faint smile. in exactly with what I've reasoned out dupes, but we had Martin then and if the Pioneer Airways gets its reputation we set him free, Yates would not pay us. cleared before the public. If you'll go I'm glad-it's all over, and I'll take my

punishment like a man." "Yes." agreed one of the other pilots,

"we'll take our medicine." "Here's the dose I prescribe." said

Win Motion Picture Awards



For his work in "Captains Courageous" and for her work in "The Good Earth," Spencer Tracy and Luise Rainer were awarded the accolades for the best motion picture performances of 1937, by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Thirteen hundred Hollywoodites were present at the banquet where the gold-plated statuettes were presented to the popular stars.

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