

The Free Press Short Story

THE SECRET OF THE SANDS

JOHN SCOTT DOUGLAS

RYAN ANDREWS, chief pilot of the Pioneer Airways, sat tensely in the office of Superintendent Hal Giles. The latter was making an elaborate pretense of reading over the latter of reports on his battered mahogany desk, but he was an abstracted man, his eyes were fixed on the floor.

"I'm going home," he said gruffly. "If there's any word, will you let me know, chief?"

"Yes," growled Giles. "If there's any word—"

Bryan went home and went to bed, but sleep was impossible. He tossed and pitched through the interminable hours of the night, imagining countless fantastic solutions to Donald Platt's disappearance, only to reject them as they occurred to him.

Sleepy-eyed and half-exhausted, he was at the office again at six. Giles eyed him with red-rimmed eyes when Bryan demanded if any word had come. "Yes," said Giles sarcastically. "The same word we received from Martin and Stole. Silence. Listen, Bryan! Take that two-seater on the field. Comb the Mojave along the Salt Lake City route. Platt may have wrecked his ship in landing."

Bryan nodded, his firm young jaw set. "O'kay, chief."

He inquired of the mechanic if the ship had been fueled and conditioned for flight. Finding that it had been, Bryan donned his flying togs, and climbed into the rear cockpit. Settling his large body comfortably in the pit, he turned his ignition switch. The motor burst into roaring song. Bryan "gunned" the ship for many minutes; then, studying air, gas, and temperature gauges for a minute, he released his brake and thrust his control stick forward slightly to bring up the tail.

The aeroplane trundled forward with an snarling spasm, which changed to a purring, high-pitched drone. Bryan pulled back the stick, and the hard-baked earth of the landing field dropped away beneath him.

Spiraling to gain altitude, he presently leveled out, noting northward. The crossroads lines of Los Angeles streets dropped behind him to be replaced by small farms and orange groves.

Before long these farms had given way to the foothills, while ahead of him, barely visible in the distance as he slowly zoomed the aeroplane, lay the tawny desert, dotted with blooming sagebrush. Here it was that his interest in the terrain streaming under him began to awaken. His speckled eyes swept the undulating sea of sand dunes and sage, looking always for a small dot or two, small dots—Donald's plane and the ship he had gone to aid.

The desert took on a savage grandeur. Red crags reared up ahead against an azure sky. Still the aeroplane he sought was not visible. Heat rays shimmered into mirages in the hot, dead air. The sandy waste seemed dead, lifeless.

His hope dwindled as the map pinned to his instrument board showed Bryan that he was approaching the Nevada line. Finally he turned to his short-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 approximate position and asking for further orders. The reply came in two minutes from McMahon, the day superintendent.

Return to L. A. taking a more northerly course—McMahon.

Bryan turned northward for nearly ten miles and then turned, travelling southward. His return trip was but a repetition of the trip out. He was unable to find any trace of Donald Platt's aeroplane.

McMahon, a short man with a square jaw, 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 page!"

McMahon's prediction proved true. The mysterious disappearance of the Pioneer 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 Mojave Desert then began to fade. The search was finally discontinued as hopeless.

Meanwhile the pilots watched for any trace of their lost comrades whenever their flights took them over the Mojave. Returning from Salt Lake City one night, a month after Donald Platt had vanished, Bryan noticed a splash of white on the desert. His body stiffened as he stared ahead. Moonlight flooded the earth and he was able to distinguish a man wildly waving a shirt. The man

stood beside an aeroplane which looked suspiciously like the one Donald Platt had flown.

Bryan clicked off a message to Giles, and it flashed into his mind that he was doing precisely what Donald had done. He was unwilling to leave Donald here, however, when all their search had failed to find this spot.

He fed his motor to prevent overloading as the ship whined down toward the grounded aeroplane. It was a Pioneer Airways' ship! Where was the second aeroplane Donald had endeavored to help?

Bryan was too overjoyed at the fact 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" toward it.

Suddenly crossroads tracks in the sand caused his blood to run cold. Bryan first thought that the wheel tracks in the sand were an illusion due to shadows caused by ridges in the sand. No ridges, these! They were the distinct marks left by landing gears and tail skids! They disappeared in a sand dune directly 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 he was limped. Where had he seen that face before? The answer flashed into Bryan's mind. Dirk Pennington! One of the fellows Bryan had known at the training school!

Two men suddenly materialized out of that which appeared to be the sand dune ahead. Their appearance did not particularly astonish Bryan, although their hiding place did. He knew that sand dunes for what it was, a hidden hangar.

All these thoughts raced through his mind in the few instants during which Bryan was "taxiing" toward the limping pilot. His action swiftly followed his thought. His hand leaped to the throttle and the aeroplane roared its warning. The two-seater flew across the ground, gaining momentum.

The two-seater was whirling free in space, and Bryan spiraled above the grounded plane. The two men had 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 pilot violated Giles' twitching at his desk, and sought to relieve his chief's anxiety. He radioed:

Barely avoided trap—think Don Platt may be alive—coming directly to airport—Bryan Andrews.

A little over half an hour later, Bryan was in Giles' office. He fastened out his map on the desk and pointed to a star-point on the desert. He then explained to Giles all that had happened.

Giles' gray eyes burned. "So that's it, eh? A trap! What can be its purpose? Whom was Dirk Pennington working for?"

"We can get my former instructor on the phone," said Bryan grimly. "He'll know."

He looked up the number in the book, and called. "Robert? Sorry if I got you up, old man. This is Andrews calling. It's pretty important or I wouldn't have called you. Can you tell me whom Dirk Pennington is working for? What! He worked for Zedobia Yates? You think he's out of a job now? Thanks a lot."

Bryan placed the telephone back on the

hook, his jaw muscles showing white and strained under his tan. "Get it, chief? Pennington worked for Yates. Yates' company, the Columbia Airways, was about pushed to the wall by us because we kept more regular schedule and had few accidents."

"Sure I get it!" barked Giles. "Yates goes out to see that we have less regular schedules and more accidents than he does. Now we're the outfit that's running close to the wall!"

"Maybe we're jumping to conclusions, chief. I don't like to accuse anyone without plenty of proof. But it looks funny."

"Funny! I'll get the sheriff to run out with a bunch of men and nab those bables who have been wlaying our planes with distress signals. Some one is going to pay for this!"

"Wait a minute," said Bryan quietly. "We can do all you say. But perhaps Don Platt will get hurt if those fellows show resistance. Persuasion is better than force every time! Now if I fly out there and fall into their trap—"

"Then there'll be one more of my men likely to get hurt when the sheriff finally has to go out to rescue you!"

"I don't believe it, chief! You see, I know Dirk Pennington pretty well. He may be weak, but he's not fundamentally bad. It seems better to me to set him on the right track than to send him out to prison for a stretch and have him permanently started wrong. I'd like to

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harm, Dirk?" asked Bryan.

"Rotten! I've felt like a dog every minute of the time! And what you've said about Yates turning against us when we had done his contemptible work file in exactly with what I've reasoned out for myself. We soon realized we were dupes, but we had Martin then and if we set him free, Yates would not pay us. 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 Bryan, with a faint smile. "The three of you are witnesses to what Yates was trying to do. It is up to you to see that the Pioneer Airways gets its reputation cleared before the public. If you'll go (Continued on Page Seven)

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