GHOST PLANE

By ARTHUR STRINGER

W.N.U. SERVICE

THE STORY SO FAR: Because he and his partner, Cruger, need the money to keep Norland Airways in business, Alan Slade has agreed to fly a supposed scientist named Frayne to the Anawotto country in search of the breeding ground of the trumpeter swan. Slade's suspicions about Frayne are aroused when he watches the swan-hunter and his partner, Karnell, put their supplies on the plane. They appear to be carrying prospectors' equipment. While in town on an errand Alan goes with Lynn Morlock, daughter of the local doctor, to give first aid treatment to a flyer hurt in a fight. The flyer is Slim Tumstead, who has already lost his license for drinking and who, to Slade's displeasure, appears to know all about Frayne's expedition and about the Lockheed Cruger bought with the money Frayne paid them. During that night the Lockheed is stolen by a masked man who heads north in the plane. Slade, en route to the Anawotto with Frayne and Karnell, runs out of gas and is forced to land near the camp of his prospector friends, Zeke and Minty, whose one interest is gold. Frayne shows no interest in either gold or the black egg-shaped object Minty has just told him is pitchblende.

Now continue with the story.

She lingered on the rock point and looked up at the aerial migration.

CHAPTER VII

"It was for this, I take it, that you came into such empty country," Frayne quietly suggested.

Minty laughed.

"Not on your life, stranger. It's only the good old yellow metal'll ever git me and Zeke steamed up to the boilin' point."

"Of course," said the other. He inspected his nails and snapped shut his knife blade. "But there is more of what you call pitchblende in this territory?"

"Oodles of it," chimed in the quavery-voiced Zeke. "The dang stuff bothers us in our strippin'."

"From what you say," observed Frayne, "I assume it to be some sort of mineral. But I remain unenlightened as to either its use or its value."

Minty, however, was not to be sidetracked.

"If you'd been around Great Bear for a spell," that old sourdough was saying as he reached for the egg of pitchblende, "you'd sure have seen 'em scramblin' for this stuff like a she-bear scramblin' for a honey tree. Goin' down through five hundred feet o' rock for it! And then totin' it three thousand miles to that Port Hope plant where it takes sixty tons o' chemicals to git one gram o' what they want out of it!"

The ornithologist's reaction to that statement seemed perfunctory. He merely shifted back a little from the heat of the stove.

"For this, stranger," pursued the indignant Zeke, "is what they git radium from. And radium's worth just thirty-five thousand smackers a gram."

"But such things, my friends, stand remote from the field of my immediate interest," maintained the quiet-voiced ornithologist.

"Same here," concurred Minty, "seein' it takes million-dollar machin'ry to squeeze a pinprick o' color out of a trainload of ore. And the surface pitchblende in this district, that assay-office sharp reported, ain't as rich in radium as the deep-lyin' Great Bear stuff. What this seems t' have, accordin' to assay, is an overdose o' helium."

"I know what helium is, of course," Frayne admitted with an accruing note of irritation. "But I am not interested in such things."

Slade felt the need of putting in an oar.

"You get more than helium, Minty," he announced, "and more than radium. You get uranium. And, in pitchblende like that, uranium is just about a million times more abundant than radium."

"And what good's uranium?" demanded Minty.

"It's the key," said Slade, "that's going to unlock the new Age of Power."

Frayne's gaze wandered about the cabin.

"You are no longer young," he observed. "Life owes you a little comfort."

"We'll git it, later on," conceded Minty. "And when me and this leather-gulleted old skillet pal o' mine strike Outside you'll sure see us hittin' the high spots."

"That is a possibility which might be easily achieved," observed their quiet-voiced visitor.

"I don't git you, stranger," said Zeke.

"Supposing," pursued Frayne, "somebody should buy you out, pay you well for what claim you have here and take over this camp you have spent so much time and labor in making comfortable."

Slade smiled a little at the manner in which the newcomer once more seemed intent on buying up a right-of-way. But the pilot sat silent, conscious of the covert glance that passed between the two old sourdoughs.

"Who'd be doin' that?" demanded Minty.

Frayne's abstracted smile seemed fortified with some unparaded power.

"I might," he said after a moment of silence.

Slade was not surprised by the prompt hardening of the two weathered old faces. He knew, even before it came, what the answer would be.

"We're sot here," said Zeke, "and we're a-goin' to stick it out to the end."

Slade got up from his chair and crossed to the door.

"I'll have a look at my ship," he explained, "before we turn in for the night. And if you two old bushwhackers will rustle us an early breakfast we'll push off at sunup."

But Slade, as he made his way down to the lake front, was troubled by some small voice of uncertainty that refused to articulate itself.

Then his thoughts went to other things. For on the shore point beside the moored plane he saw the huge figure of Karnell, with the hooded pigeon cage beside him.

"Feeding them, I suppose?" Slade questioned as he bent lower.

At the same time that he saw the cage was empty he heard the guttural voice beside him.

"They got away," mumbled Karnell. "They slipped off, before I could stop them."

Slade studied him for a moment.

"That's just too bad," he observed. And in spite of the quick and hostile glance of the other man he was able to laugh a little.

Yet that sense of being enmeshed in movements that were unpredictable returned to him the next morning when, a brief half-hour after his take-off, his passenger barked out an unexpected command to land.

With one hand Frayne held his binoculars poised; with the other he pointed to a lake that lay off to the left, framed in its encircling sprawl of spruce ridges.

"That," he announced, "is where we shall land."

"Why there?" asked Slade.

"I think," said the ornithologist, "I spotted a trumpeter swan."

Slade's one-sided smile seemed an announcement of his doubts as to the truth of that claim. But he remembered Cruger's warning about pilots not being supposed to wonder.

"Okay," said Slade as he turned into the wind and dropped lower. "But you're still a long jump from the Anawotto."

He could hear the mumble of foreign voices as his ship lost headway and drifted slowly in to the shoreline.

He saw the massive-shouldered Karnell wade ashore with an ax in his hand. Two minutes later he could hear the forest stillness ring with the familiar music of an ax blade against tough northern spruce trunks. The sullen giant seemed to know just what was expected of him. In less than half an hour he had his spruce boles trimmed and lashed together in a neatly made landing platform. His movements, Slade observed, were made with the automatic precision one might expect from a military engineer.

Slade sat on a sun-bleached rock and lit a cigarette. He sat there with an achieved air of remoteness, watching the swan-hunter as he made ready to land his equipment. Then the bush pilot's casual gaze wandered out to the empty ridges that ended in an equally empty skyline.

"A nice place to summer," he observed.

Frayne turned and faced him. And when Slade caught the unexpected flash of fire that came from behind the bifocal glasses he realized how some ghostly armistice between him and his passenger had ended. He didn't like the man, and he never would.

"When you are interested in more than engines," that passenger was proclaiming, "you will perhaps learn that uncomfortable localities quite often have undisclosed advantages."

Slade didn't quite know what that proclamation meant. But his smile was condoning as he tossed his cigarette end into the lake and rose to his feet.

"I guess you're right, Doctor," he said with a casualness that carried a note of insolence. "And here's where I pass out of the picture. But before I leave you to your swans' eggs I'd like to tip you off to just one thing. My interest sometimes extends beyond engines."

And this time, apparently, it was the man of science leaning out from the cabin hatch who didn't quite know what the speaker meant.

Lynn could feel spring in the air. Against a softening sky she could see eiders and snow geese, in vees, heading for their breeding tarns between the slowly greening muskegs. Every swale and slough was noisy with mating whistlers and waveys and loons. But that clamorous lovemaking failed to lighten her heart. Even the sight of her father, mooring his plane between two saddlebacks in Iviuk Inlet, failed to take the cloud from her brooding hazel eyes.

"What's on your mind?" questioned the Flying Padre as he joined her on the rock point.

"I'm worried about Alan," she admitted. "We haven't had word about him getting out of that Anawotto country."

The Padre laughed.

"That cloud-wrangler can take care of himself," he proclaimed with slightly forced blitheness. "I've been shooting out messages from Fort Norman to the Pelly, telling him what supplies to fly in as soon as he's free."

"Then why doesn't he come?"

"He's got his work to do, the same as the rest of us," was the Padre's reply to that. "And here's where we get busy. I've got to change the dressing on Ukeresak's leg wound and pull a couple of teeth for his glamour girl of the igloos."

Lynn watched her father as he strode up to their rough-boarded surgery.

But instead of following him she lingered on the rock point and looked up at the aerial migration above her.

Those relentless wings made her think of the equally relentless advance of the white man, the steady and stubborn northward trek of pioneers in their search for earth's bright-colored metals. It was affecting more than the wild life of the country. It seemed to disrupt both the modes and the mores of the natives, breaking up their tribal traditions and leaving them more and more dependent on the palefaces who took their hunting grounds away from them. Both the Eskimo and the Indian, her work along those scattered littoral villages had taught her, were a perishing people.

Yet she liked these people. They so stubbornly claimed their human right to survive; they stood so valorous in their fight against hunger and cold. They were, she felt, the most courageous people she had ever known. They demanded so little of life that a plug of trade tobacco could make them happy for a week, a mouth-organ could turn a funeral into a fiesta, a bright-colored handkerchief could bring raptness to a sloe-eyed face under its well-oiled locks.

Lynn recalled the expression of the girl Kogaluk, after bringing her aged father, whose hunting days had been ended by blindness, to the Flying Padre. Old Umanak had undoubtedly lost his vision. But a quick examination by the man of medicine had shown that the blindness was due to cataracts which an operation might remove. The Eskimo girl still had faith in the father whom she had to lead about by the hand, like a child.

"Him good hunter," she had said in her hesitating pidgin-English. "Him always good hunter until two winters ago."

"What would you say," questioned Dr. Morlock, "if I flew him out to Fort Smith and brought him back as good a hunter as ever?"

"I say you work good magic," said the daughter of the wilderness.

But difficulties had interposed. Umanak had no wish to enter the devil-bird of the white doctor and be flown away from his people. Rather than be taken away from the friendly fish smell and the husky howls of his home he would prefer remaining with darkened eyes.

"I could patch the old boy up here," the Padre had explained, "if we only had the equipment."

"Then why not get it?"

"How?"

"Perhaps Alan could fly in with it," Lynn had suggested, coloring a little before her father's smile of comprehension.

"So it's Alan you want?"

"I want to see Umanak cured," she had contended. "And I'd stay on, of course, to look after him."

"Then we'll take a chance," the Flying Padre had agreed.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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Household Hints

Galoshes should be stuffed with paper and wrapped separately when storing. The idea is to keep the rubber surfaces from touching as summer's heat will vulcanize rubber.

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If cake is very hard it can be made into a delicious pudding by steaming 30 minutes in double boiler and serving hot with any desired sauce — hard, creamy, foamy or fruit.

• • •

Empty fruit jars should be perfectly dry inside and out before storing. Mold may grow in a jar with moisture inside.

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To wash rayons use mild, lukewarm suds, squeezing them through the material. Don't rub or wring the garment. Iron it slightly damp on the wrong side.

JUST JESTING

In a Way

"So your name is O'Shea. Are you related to Patrick O'Shea?"

"Very distantly. I was my mother's first child, and Pat was the seventh."

Memory Good

"Have you forgotten that $5 you owe me?"

"By no means. Didn't you see me try to dodge into that doorway?"

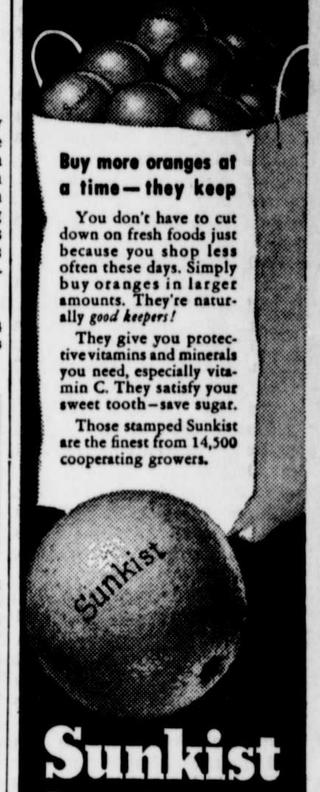
As a rule experience cannot be disposed of at cost price.

Partly So

Caller—Your baby surely is a cute little rascal. Doesn't he take after his father?

Mother—Well, yes, in a way. His father is not so cute but much more of a rascal.

To save shopping trips



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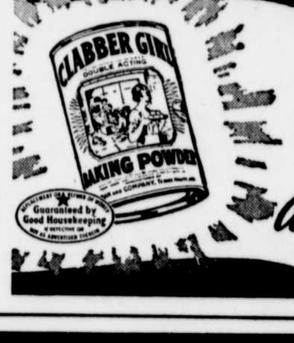

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