

Trumpeter of the Air Lanes

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The ledger of death showed the passing of the most stately and beautiful of American birds. But they were not all gone

IT WAS a land of one unending horizon. As far as the eye could reach, on every side, stretched the limitless reaches of the muskeg—low, flat and new-born land, an amphibious blend of swamp and sand-bar and steely reach of sea. A treeless land, it lay far up near the roof of the world, beyond the limit of even the juniper and the dwarf spruce, where the upper section of the great Barren Grounds begins to stretch out an arm through unbroken desolation across the Northwest Passage to the Pole.

Here, beyond the frontiers of man's unknown, amid the endless reed-grown sphagnum swamps that fringe the Arctic Sea, was the one domain where human footprints and handiwork had never touched—the last stronghold of the kingdom of birds. A hunter's paradise which yet no hunter had seen, save perhaps the little Innuits, or the wandering Eskimos.

Summer had just come to the muskeg. Between darkness and daylight it came, routing all in a night the last forces of winter—for there is no spring in the Far North. Last night had been dark and ominous with cutting gusts of wind, filled with the threat of sleet and ice; today, from the south and east as the mists began to lift, warm zephyrs came puffing, with a melting, ineffable tenderness, as if earth, air and sun had met in a long, swooning embrace.

Now it was that the countless squadrons of wild birds began to arrive from the Southland. The few flocks of early migrants who had been lingering for days about the icy tidewaters, uttering faint, disappointed cries, flew screaming here and there as they chose their

nesting places. All that day the flocks beat up from the south, filling the sky until all the waterways to the horizon and beyond were filled with birds, nothing but birds. The babel of their myriad voices ran in a watery murmur over the land, filling earth and sky, as they flew and swam, floated, dived, quarreled, fed and courted, in that abandon that comes only where man is never known to stalk.

Toward the end of that day a great hullabaloo swept the miles of feeding flocks over the arrival of the real royalty of the air—four great troops of swans and golden cranes, who migrate as a rule at the same time and fly at the same cloudy height. From high sky the first far, infinitesimal cry of the swans came wafting to earth just as the horizontal rays of the setting sun began to turn from orange to crimson. Their calls came ringing like the faint treble notes of huntsmen's horns, sounded miles and miles away, with now and then a deeper note as of a military trumpet from the giant leaders, as the swan flock tipped majestically earthward, winding down from the clouds as if along some invisible spiral stairway.

In all nature there is no sound more stirring to man, bird or animal, than the trumpeter swan's call, that wild, unearthly trumpet note that comes floating down from the clouds in early spring and fall.

THEIR graceful descent into the waters of the little lake was a sight of beauty, awesome as the flight of angels, their vast wings flashing snow-white against the blue enamel of the sky while the sunset struck a reddish ruby glow from their flawless breasts. Not for an instant did they break their strict wedge-shaped flight formation. As if in homage to the coming of these kings, every flock of birds for miles around sprang suddenly upward in unison as if at a prearranged signal, in screaming, flapping confusion.

The swan flock, unmoved apparently by the turmoil of these common folk, came to anchor in the lake with many tremendous splashings and loud bugling calls and horn notes expressing infinite peace and satisfaction. For a time they swam here and there over the still water, preening their plum-

age and stretching their long necks after their almost nonstop flight from the blue and gold lagoons of far-away Mexico. They rode high and proudly on the water like great white liners amid a lot of dingy colliers.

There were twenty-seven birds in the white flock that had led the northern flight—not the familiar whistlers, but those long-distance kings of the air lanes known as trumpeter swans, the largest and stateliest birds of which the American continent can boast. Each bird had a wing spread of over eight feet, while the great clarion-throated leaders exceeded even that. The pure white of their plumage, radiant and flawless, was balanced and set off with artistic effect by the polished jet black of their bills and legs. Noncombative by nature, only by their great size and an aloof majesty was their kingship among the flocks maintained, though when pressed they were capable of a fierce offensive which even the sea eagle and the fierce gerfalcon had learned to avoid.

Scattered here and there over the muskeg were the remains of broken watch towers of mud and sticks—all that the winter storms had left of the last year's nests of the swans. They stood out boldly along the waterways, in full view of every marauder of the waste, for the trumpeter swan, like the great bald eagle, scorns to hide its nest, and fears no foe of earth or air. The great leader of the flock and his chosen mate swam at once to their old familiar nesting place, on a narrow spit of land that jutted into the lake. Here on the outermost point they had built their nest for nine consecutive years, for the swan, like sensible men and all the more highly evolved animals, takes one mate for life.

They all spread wing and sailed northward in a mighty throbbing rhythm

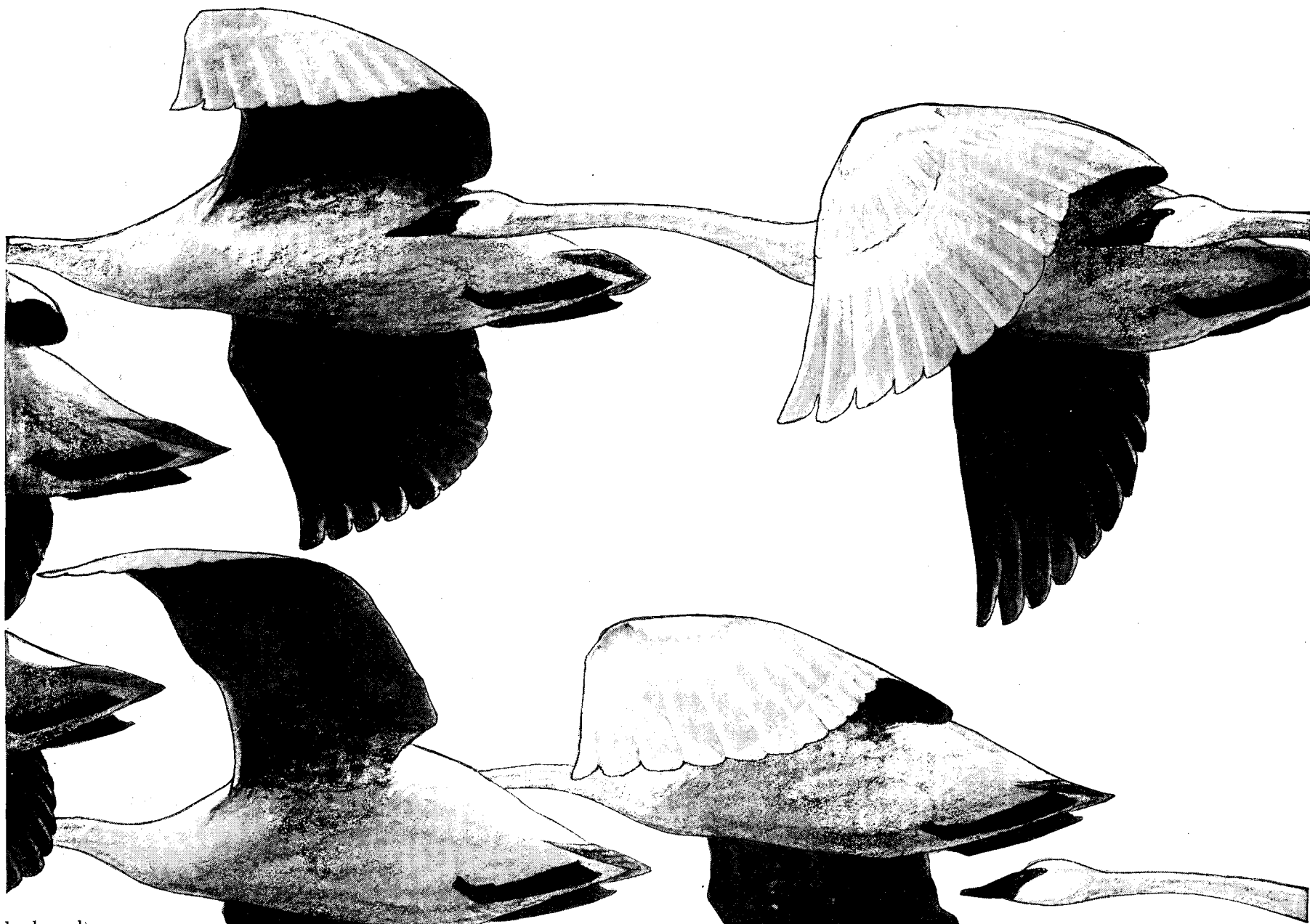
Little was left of their last year's home but the mud foundation, but both birds set diligently to work rebuilding, the male working with the same zeal as his mate—collecting dead sticks, moss and brushwood from all around the lake shore where the winds and floods had driven them.

ON THE very day the leader's nest was completed his mate began to lay, lining the cup of the nest with down as she went on sitting. When she was done there were four vast eggs in the nest, full five inches long and a dozen in circumference, colored a dull buff gray. Throughout the long and arduous labor of sitting the male swan, unfailing in devotion and the court etiquette of his royal caste, remained constantly on guard near the nest and became the bringer of food.

At last, five weeks and two days from the laying of the first egg, came a morning when the patient brooding mother heard faint stirrings and tappings, and infinitesimal cries rising from the four warm eggs beneath her breast. From time to time she would lower her head among them to listen with a rapture unequalled by any other mother among birds. Her mate drew close to the nest, wings spread and flapping, but never relaxing his fierce watchfulness for the enemies that never came.

Two hours later the first young cygnet, after long and ordered rapping, split the top off his confining shell, and, thrusting it aside like the lid of a box, struggled forth all damp, bare and blind against his mother's breast. Within the next hour two other eggs hatched in the same manner, and the mother swan was half standing in the nest to give the naked sprawlers room. Furious excitement swept both parent birds all that day. They forgot to feed, and the old male marched up and down, flapping his wings at intervals and stretching himself to his full height to sound a





loud and sonorous trumpet call.

The process of weaning was hurried forward apace by the anxious parent birds, for the Arctic summer is frighteningly short; it waits on no frailties, and the young cygnets had much to gain in strength and wisdom before entering upon the rigors of the long southern flight that fall.

One morning in the third week the mother swan without warning tipped them all gently but firmly over the edge of the nest, where they fell squawking on the damp ground beneath. Then they had their first trip by water. Of course they could swim from the first moment, and it was only second nature for them to imitate their parents by tipping up and thrusting their long necks under water after tempting roots. The next few days were one ceaseless foraging expedition as the family swam up and down the waterways in search of food.

These were days filled with danger for the young ones. The parent birds, as has been said, feared no enemy but man, but they could not keep all the brood constantly under their eyes. Each day fierce hunting goshawks swooped low over the little family, waiting a chance when one of the youngsters should stray to pounce and deliver the fatal stroke of their kind.

For a month danger was held at a distance by the watchful parents. Then came the first lessons in flying. Owing to their increasing bulk, racing and winning against their growing strength, the brood rebelled, as is the usual thing, long after their stiff flight-feathers had grown, at the ordeal of mastering the higher life of the air. But one morning

the parents forced the issue in a clever manner they had learned by chance. Both the old birds, calling insistently to the youngsters to follow, set off in a low skimming flight across a stretch of quaking bog. The brood followed along the ground until they sank belly deep in the swamp mud.

Instinctively then each youngster beat the air desperately with his well-feathered wings until—miracle of miracles—all found themselves wavering upward in their first trial flight. That is, all but the weakest of the four, the timid one of the family. For some reason the development of this little one had been retarded, so that she was no more than two thirds the size of her companions. The instant she sank in the viscous mud terror gripped her and she lay flat, calling pitifully as she sank, until even her wings became mired and flight was impossible! The parent birds did not notice that one of the brood had been left behind until from mid-sky the male swan caught sight of a flashing golden meteor that fell hissing earthward—a great sea eagle, whose prism-binocular eyes had noted the little drama in the bog from a mile high and turned it quickly into tragedy.

LONG before the parents could wing back to the rescue the lone emperor of the northern skyways was flapping upward, bearing a still, limp form in his talons. The swans gave hopeless chase, but dared not go far and leave the remainder of their brood unprotected.

A week later disaster struck another blow at the family. Having conquered fear in their first flight, the youngsters now went to the other extreme—the

fever to show off. Like many a novice in aeronautics, they already hankered for stunt flying. They spent hours a day flapping into the eye of the wind, then volplaning back in great looping arcs to where their parents fed, gabbling and trumpeting with excitement.

It was a gusty day, and the swan brood were at their wind-riding, while the old birds watched. The swiftest of the three persisted in flapping higher and farther than the others in spite of whistled warnings. Caught aloft in a sudden fierce updraft, he was unable to make a landing and was swept many hundred yards down the wind plump into a company of cruel and thieving skuas, fierce, dark, hawklike birds, who among other things are cannibals. A high insensate yelping from a hundred pirate throats told the parent birds the culmination of the youngster's rashness.

With a deep trumpeting challenge, the male swan rose in the air and hurtled down the wind like a projectile, straight into the gray cloud of the meat birds, sprung suddenly from heaven knows where, eddying and screaming in a dark maelstrom about a flapping, tearing tangle on the ground. The center of that tangle was the luckless little swan.

Not until two of their number lay dead, shaken to death in the swan's steellike mandibles, and two others went staggering away dragging broken wings, did the killers withdraw, and then it was only to take up the crueler game of waiting.

The battle was theirs at all events, and well they knew it. All settled on the mud at a safe distance, and, folding their wings about them like old men wrapped in heavy overcoats, they huddled in dense ranks and proceeded to demonstrate the horrible patience the sea has taught them through the ages. Whatever happened, a banquet of meat would presently be laid for them there.

THE cold moon that night looked down on one of those pitiable tragedies of bird life. All through the night the father swan stayed on guard over his helpless little one, pacing up and down and answering now and then the anxious call of his mate by the lake shore hundreds of yards away. There was nothing to be done but watch, while the fluttering of the wounded one grew weaker and finally stilled, but not until twenty-four hours more had passed did the big male leave off his grim and hopeless vigil.

The thin, bitter-sweet melancholy of the Arctic summer drew to a close. There came another day of swift change. A phalanx of dun gray clouds, that seemed to have been waiting just beyond the horizon, spread over the upper sky, turning the gold of the sunlight to a dim sulphur hue. All in a few hours the brooding desolation of autumn had spread over the land.

In a few days (Continued on page 42)

Giant Killer

By ELMER DAVIS

Illustrated by
CORNELIUS HICKS

David begins his triumphant march to power—and Saul trembles

The Story Thus Far:

JOAB, nephew of David though only two years his junior, is sent by his family to bring David back from the armies of King Saul of Israel, in order to herd the sheep. David had been sent with foodstuffs for his older brothers who had enlisted, and he had not returned, much to the annoyance of his brothers, who considered him of no possible use, sitting around playing his harp and singing.

Goliath of Gath at this time is terrifying the Israelites. One evening David, carried away by his imagination, sings a song about conquering the giant. Saul takes him seriously and David finds himself expected to kill Goliath and thereby win Saul's daughter.

Joab and David lie down under the stars. Joab falls asleep but David begins to blame his harp for getting him into this fix and, rising, flings it from him.

During the night Elhanan, private in Saul's army, is returning to his post sadly the worse for wine. He finds himself face to face with Goliath and in a fright loses his balance, accidentally tripping up Goliath who cracks his head against a stone and is killed. Elhanan realizing that he has killed Goliath falls happily into a drunken sleep.

Just before dawn David regrets casting his harp away and rises to reclaim it. Some time later Elhanan wakes up, and sees David marching triumphantly up the hill with the giant's head impaled on his spear. All the army acclaim their deliverer and, hard as poor Elhanan tries to tell the truth, nobody believes him.

II

"I DECLARE I don't know what the world is coming to," said old Jesse querulously. "First one and then the other, going off like this! When I was a young man we had some respect for our parents."

From his seat on the housetop he stared across the rolling hills of Judah, purple in the dusk. A dull buzz of voices came up from the close-packed houses of Bethlehem; sandals padded softly on the unpaved streets; somewhere in the distance a child was squalling.

"Pull your cloak up around your shoulders, Father," Zeruiah commanded. "It's getting cool." Tall and somber, she stood by the parapet, peering down the fading white streak of the northward road. "Something must have happened. If there really was a battle—"

"Eliab would have kept them out of it, don't you worry."

"Have they heard anything more about the battle?"

"Nothing but the story that Jebusite brought from Jerusalem—that Saul had beaten the Philistines and gone back to Gibeah."

"But I can't believe Joab would flatly disobey us."

"Oh, he's always letting David get him into some mischief. The boy has no strength of character. The Lord knows David is bad enough—all this

harp playing. But at least he thinks up his own deviltry. Well, I've got three sons married and settled down and respected in the community; I can't complain if the youngest doesn't amount to anything."

But his stock tapped irritably on the roof tiles. In the stair well appeared a shock of black hair, a pair of burly shoulders; Zeruiah's second son came softly up on the roof, his good-natured face uneasy.

"Mother!" he whispered. "Did you speak to him?"

"Yes. It's all right." Jesse turned about in his chair.

"Abishai!"

"Yes, sir!" Nervously, the boy came forward.

"Your mother tells me you want to marry Tirzah. You're young to be getting married. But Tirzah's a good, sensible girl, and maybe she'll keep you out of mischief. Well, well! I'll speak to her father tomorrow."

"I thank you very much, sir. It's mighty good of you."

"Well, it steadies a young man. I only wish Joab—but, Abishai!"

"Yes, sir?"

"I'll probably have to pay her father fifty head of sheep. So I want you to understand right now that when you want a second wife you'll have to pay for her yourself."

Abishai grinned. "I don't want any wife but Tirzah, sir."

"Oh, they all say that at your age. Then when they begin to get on in the world they want to show everybody that they can support two wives, or maybe three—showing off, that's what it is. I don't know what the world is coming to." He was morosely silent.

"May I go now, sir?" Abishai ventured.

"Off to see your girl? It would look better if you waited till I'd spoken to her father."

"Perhaps so, sir. But, you see, she'll be wanting to hear—I mean, she and I have been sort of talking it over—"

"Well, well, boy—go ahead. When I was a young man there was an etiquette about such matters, but nowadays—"

BUT as Abishai turned there was a disturbance below: a knocking at the street door, the creak of hinges as old Hannah, the servant, opened it; her voice respectful—

"Yes, sir?" Then: "For the land's sake!" A patter of bare feet: twelve-year-old Asahel's voice rose in a squeal of delight. "Joab!"

"Joab, eh?" Old Jesse got up. "And no David. . . . Joab! Come up here and give an account of yourself. You're four days late—"

"Now, Father!" Placidly imperious, Zeruiah cut him off. "Give him a chance to tell his story. He may have—"

She broke off with a gasp; from the



stair well rose a crested helmet, bronzed shoulders; Joab came out on the roof, his sword slapping against his thigh.

"As God lives!" said Jesse. "Where did you get all that flummery?"

Joab looked into his grandfather's eyes—impenitent, confident, proudly elated.

"I took it from a Philistine, sir. In the battle."

"So you had to get in the battle, eh? And David? Where is he?"

"Why—" Joab stared at him. "Why, haven't you heard? . . ."

They all clustered about him as he told the story.

"Heh!" old Jesse chuckled at last. "I always thought that boy had something in him. . . . Going to marry the princess, eh? Well, I don't know that that's so much, but— So he's commander of a regiment already?"

"YES, sir. And Prince Jonathan swore friendship with him—gave him his own sword and armor. Oh, you ought to have heard the women singing when we came back to Gibeah! They mentioned Saul, but it was mostly about David. All playing the tambourine and singing about David—"

"Well, well!" said Jesse comfortably. "Where would these Northerners be