

THE SKY RAIDER

7

THAT MORNING Dick Trent had Jumped out of bed whistling. But his whistle had died away when he glanced out of the window of the mail pilots' hangout and noted with an aviator's eye the grey winter skies and their ominous suggestion of storm.

His fears wore justified when he stepped out of doors. Snow, the slow, setting snow of a blizzard, had already begun to fall, and the wind eddied in treacherous gusts above the hangars.

It was to be Dick's first day in active service for the airmail; he had been scheduled to take off that very night on his maiden flight over the three hundred and fifty mile east run through the Rocky Mountains.

Flying—that was no new experience, no unfamiliar adventure to Dick Trent; but flying for the airmail, a sworn member of the most dramatic service in all the world—this was matter for exultation.

Dick was young enough to exult. He had been signed on by the Rand Air Transport Company the previous week: he had been sworn in by the Post Office Department, and he had flown the route as a passenger by day and by night. And all the time he had been waiting to win his wings in his first mail flight alone.

And now this storm.

He had the news soon enough. As he approached the flight office he saw Lawson, an older pilot who had taken him under his wing since his arrival at the field. Lawson had Just come out of the radio shack, above which the wind snarled through the swaying antennae wires.

"All off for tonight if this keeps on," Lawson said.

“What does Carmichael say?” Dick asked. Captain Carmichael was the superintendent of the big field.

“He says he doesn’t see any use in committing suicide.”

Dick groaned, and the older man gave a short laugh.

“You’re a crazy kid,” he said. “You’d think this was your only chance to fly the mail. You’ll have plenty of chance—don’t worry!”

“I know, but I wanted to take this trip tonight. I don’t mind the storm. I would show Carmichael what I could do. I’d got through all right.”

“When you’ve flown as long as I have,” said Lawson somberly, “you won’t be so sure of what you can do. Why, over your route, if this snow continues, there won’t be a two hundred foot ceiling. And when you come to the pass, The Trap, I mean, if you don’t see two blinkers in line, you’re out of luck. In this weather you couldn’t see even one light.”

“I’ve done blind flying. I’d go by my instruments.”

Lawson laughed good-naturedly, as his level eyes took in Dick’s eagerness, his almost pleading desire to run the risk.

“Well, sit tight then, boy, and maybe the weather will change. It’s some time yet before night.”

From Carmichael himself, the carelessly ironic superintendent, Dick had no better satisfaction; and he wandered off to wait as patiently as he could.

DICK TRENT had been born in an air generation. Years before, he had spent the ten dollar bill his Aunt Martha had sent him on his fifteenth birthday for a ride in an ancient plane that crashed on its very next flight.

His father had found out where the money had gone, and had stormed. His mother had wept. Dick had looked properly penitent, and two weeks later had done it all over again.

He had been drawn to the air as if by instinct, and could no more resist the call of flying than a future Hamlet could have kept away from a local stock company performance.

So in the end, his father ceased storming, and even his mother ceased

to weep, but instead watched him with a smile of happy pride, and some wonder at this strange, happy-go-lucky boy who was her son.

From that time there had never been any question about Dick's career—either in his mind or in any one else's. He had gone straight to the Army Cadet School, specialising in pursuit work. He flew with that uncanny skill which seems instinctive and which men bring to the callings which they love. After graduation, he had obtained a pilot's license and headed straight for the Air Mail.

A movie and a magazine put the day behind Dick in the Western city where the airport was situated. Towards darkness he returned to the field, but with little hope. The storm had indeed increased. It drove sharp flakes against his face stingingly, and under foot several inches had settled. Above there was a profound gloom. Impossible to penetrate.

Even the lights of the field seemed to stream out feebly when he had reached the airport, and the great rotating beacon made a futile attempt to send its warning signal outward through the curtain of snow.

Lawson had gone; everyone had gone. The hangars were white, ghostly, and silent. The line was silent. No sound or droning or thundering engines rose on the air where mechanics warmed up the big birds of the mail service. Only in the flight office itself a light faintly showed.

Dick knocked and entered. Carmichael was sitting at his desk, a cigar between his teeth and the copy of an Illustrated French magazine in his hands.

"Well, youngster, what are you doing here?" he asked in his indolent though pleasant voice. His eyes were humorous, but with wrinkles of lazy indifference in their corners.

"I've come to ask you, sir, if you'll let me fly the east run tonight. It's my first assignment."

"I've no objection to your committing suicide," said Carmichael cheerfully. "Naturally that's your affair. But don't expect me to lend you one of Old Man Rand's planes to do it in."

"But listen—I know that I—"

"Look at this one," Carmichael interrupted, holding up the

magazine, with a full page drawing of a slim and sensuous figure, wearing stockings and a picture hat. "Do you read French? It says underneath—"

"Captain, why don't you let me try it?" Dick blurted out.

What Carmichael might have answered was left unsaid. There came a knock at the door. It swung open. Dick saw the lights of a car, and on the threshold two figures in furs, powdered with snow.

They came into the room, and Carmichael rose, smiling with sudden cordially. In a flying instant Dick's eyes surveyed the short, thick-set man who had entered, and knew him. Old Man Rand! Old Man Rand, himself. The veteran of the air mail, the impassioned believer in its destiny, a strong man and yet a kind one.

His bushy eyebrows moved and twitched: he spoke in a gruff, growling voice as if to disguise his own kindliness, but there was no doubting the sincerity of those frosty blue eyes.

The other newcomer was a girl, slim under her furs. She came in delicately, gracefully, smiling a little, and Dick had a sudden impression of someone who was very happy, who liked life and the world and the people in it.

Then he did not look at Old Man Rand any more, though Old Man Rand had long been his hero. He could stare only at the girl, and yet he could not have begun to describe her. All he knew was that she was beautiful, and that there were tones of brown in her eyes and her hair, and that her cheeks glowed with color.

Carmichael was saying something. Dick didn't listen. The girl met his stare rather gravely. Dick had the Impression that she knew all about him in one glance. He wondered if she liked him. He wondered what he could do to make her like him.

Old Man Rand was scowling. He nodded shortly, as Carmichael introduced Dick, and plunged at once into what was on his mind.

"See here, Carmichael, is there a ghost of a chance for the East-bound mail to get through tonight?"

"What do you think, sir?"

Rand gave a short disappointed grunt. "Just what you do, I know it's

pretty bad, But I wanted to get a letter off—to my boy Tom. At the end of the run. You know,”

“Can’t you radio it?” Carmichael asked.

Rand looked uncomfortable. “Well, I’d rather not—in this case.”

“I see.”

Dick’s eagerness made his voice come out in a rush.

“I was just asking Captain Carmichael to let me go. I could get through all right, sir. I know I could.”

Rand turned and looked at Dick as if seeing him for the first time.

“You know the route well enough?”

“Yes—that is, I’ve been over it four times for practice.”

Rand shook his head. “No, it wouldn’t be fair to ask you. The pass might get you.”

“Let me try, Mr. Rand. I’m not afraid of The Trap. I could get through all right.”

“You’d be flying blind half the time.”

“I know that. I’ve had fifty hours of blind flying in the Army.”

Rand looked at Carmichael and Carmichael shook his head slowly. Then the girl stepped forward. She came close to Rand, with a little affectionate movement, and put her hand under his arm.

“Father, I think he’s right. Somehow I think he could do it.”

There was a long pause, while Dick waited. Then Old Man Rand thrust his hand into the pocket of his coat, drew out a letter, and handed it to Dick.

“When can you start?”

“Twenty minutes, sir!” Dick’s voice was sharp with excitement.

“Right! Good luck!”

He was going, he was going! He found himself out on the field, pushing through the blinding snow, towards the hangars. Suddenly something touched him, and he turned. Breathlessly, Old Man Rand’s daughter had come running after him.

“You will see that he gets that letter?” she said quickly. “Even if—if you have to look him up—my brother, Tom, I mean.”

“I’ll put it in his hands myself,” said Dick.

“Thank you.” Her voice was very soft. Then she turned.

Ten minutes later Dick’s plane found its voice with a sudden roar. The mail was loaded into the plane. Dick climbed into the cockpit and began to warm up the engine. There were risks and dangers before him. But now they were doubly worth while. Above the thunder of the motor at this moment of starting, there seemed to whisper still the low voice of a girl who had thanked him, who trusted him to take the mail through.

The mechanics pulled the blocks. He reached for the throttle—pushed It open.

He was off on his first mail flight!

2

THE LIGHTED FIELD flashed beneath him and was gone. For a few seconds there was nothing but blackness, while his eyes tried to adjust themselves to this sudden catapulting into the night. Dick riveted his glance on the instrument board, for he knew the folly of trusting his senses in that mad race above an invisible world.

At 500 feet he pushed the stick forward and leveled off hurtling along at more than 100 miles an hour through the snow that cut viciously into his face. Gradually vision returned, so that he could see beyond the red and blue flames spitting furiously from his exhaust stacks. Wiping the snow from his goggles, he cautiously nosed the ship down, holding the course that led to the first beacon, ten miles away.

A white glow appeared suddenly and as quickly vanished. Dick's lips tightened. A little to one side or the other, and he would have missed the light entirely. And he must hold the lights until he was through the pass 70 miles beyond.

Wingtips hidden by the scurrying snow, he fought his way grimly from beacon to beacon. Two more and he would be heading into The Trap—the most treacherous spot on the run, a mountain pass where two pilots had crashed and died in brave efforts to get through.

With startling abruptness, the gloom changed into an uncanny redness, Dick stared down at a red flare, blazing up through the storm from a lonely intermediate field.

“Proceed at own risk—” that was the meaning of the signal. It told of worse weather ahead; it was also an excuse for him to land without

censure. But almost instantly the face of the girl at the airport came before him. He shook his head. He was going through.

He looked at his map. One more beacon and he would plunge into the pass, with its twisting course where a false turn meant disaster.

Four minutes—five—six. Perspiration broke out on him, though the cold was numbing. He had missed the light and was lost.

Somewhere in that sinister gloom lay Mt. Sable, 14,000 feet of towering rock, silently waiting. At any second now its frowning walls might leap out of the murk without warning—and all would end in one terrific crash.

In desperation, he banked steeply to the right, hoping to pivot back and find the missing beacon. To his surprise the driving snow lessened in its fury, and the night seemed strangely calmer. He peered out in a new hope that he could see. Then his hand almost froze to the stick.

For parallel with his left wing was a shadowy darkness that was not the night—a blurred something that flashed by not 100 feet away.

The truth burst out on him. He was in The Trap. But for that sudden turn he would have struck headlong—and the pass would have claimed its third victim.

There was one chance—he must keep that menacing cliff in sight. The instant he lost it he was gone. Foot by foot, he edged closer, ruddering cautiously in as the wall curved away and, kicking hastily outward when it jutted toward him. A quick instinct told him to look ahead. A ledge of rock rose directly in his path. He zoomed over it by a scant margin, his whole body tense. A flurry of snow caught him full in the face so that he was blinded for the second. When he glanced back hastily to the side the mountain was no longer visible.

For half a minute he flew on, expecting at any instant to crash. Yet he dared not turn for fear he would hurl his ship straight into the rocks he sought to miss. Then a heavy, gust of wind caught the plane and tossed it up like a toy, the controls useless.

It was only when the “bump” had passed, leaving the ship in steady air that Dick realized what had happened. He had followed the inner side of Mt. Sable and by a miracle had come through The Trap

unharméd. The rest of his way was clear. He shouted in a sudden rush of pent-up emotion, then noticed for the first time that his fingers were shaking on the stick.

Some time later, he throttled his engine and glided into the floodlights of Trupp Field. Mechanics rushed out as he taxied up to the line. His first mail hop was over.

He climbed out of the cockpit, and stretched himself stiffly. The shape of the field, the people coming towards him, under the flaring lights, had an unreal look. What time was it? He did not know. But he felt elated and proud of his adventure, and infinitely sure of himself with the assurance of youth.

Out of those who surrounded him, asking him questions, talking at once, one man caught his attention. The superintendent of the field, a thin, quiet looking man. Dick had met him before when covering the course with Lawson.

“How did they happen to send you out in this weather?” the superintendent demanded.

“I asked them to.”

The older man gave a low whistle. “Don’t see how you got through The Trap!” He glanced upward. The snow was thinning now, and the wind had lost some of its force. “The storm will break before morning. Well, you’re a lucky boy, or a crazy one. Better get some rest.”

“I want to find Tom Rand first.”

“Tommy Rand?” The superintendent’s face clouded. He looked vaguely uncomfortable. He glanced at some of the men around him. “Where’s Tommy?”

“Don’t know, sir.”

“He is to fly back over your route in the morning,” the superintendent told Dick. “You could see him then—though it won’t give you much sleep.”

“I want to see him now. I’ve a letter to him from his father.”

“Well, I can’t help you.” His voice seemed a little annoyed. He turned away.

Dick looked around in perplexity. The car that had driven up for

the mail he had brought had left. Some of the mechanics were moving towards the plane itself. Dick stopped one of them.

“Say, doesn’t anyone know where young Rand is?”

The mechanic gave him a knowing look. “Oh, yes, they know where he is all right.”

“Well, where?”

The man bent closer and grinned. “You ought to find him on Wales street in the town—number one hundred and two.”

The line chief shouted something. He shouted back, and hurried on. Dick found himself standing alone. “Well, why didn’t the superintendent tell me that before?” he thought.

Going toward the offices, he saw an air mail pilot about to drive into the city in his car. Dick asked for a lift.

“Sure. Where to?”

He named the address.

The pilot laughed. “Fly through a storm like this, and then go there? You must eat excitement! However, that’s your business!”

Puzzled by the words, Dick was on the point of confessing his ignorance of what they meant, when the other pilot asked him for the details of his flight. Dick answered questions, until the car drew up on a lonely street in the heart of the town.

“Here you are! Good luck!” the pilot waved his hand and was gone. Dick stared at the doorway before him, a doorway in a basement with a single, dim light burning before it. One hundred and two. That was the number. He rang the bell that was set in the wall.

Then all at once he had the impression that some one was studying him through the opaque glass, glass through which he could not see on his side. But the door remained shut. He rang again, and this time knocked on the glass itself.

At last the door was cautiously opened. A face appeared, sullen, hard, filled with suspicion.

“What do you want?”

“I’m looking for Tom Rand.”

“He’s not here. I never heard of him.”

"They told me at the airport he was here."

"Did they? Well go back and tell them they are crazy."

The door slammed shut.

Dick was angry now. He was convinced the man was lying. But there was no answer to his violent ringing. Presently he turned. A passing policeman had halted to stare at him curiously.

"What's the matter?" the latter demanded.

"I'm trying to get in here. I'm trying to find someone. It's important. Who lives here anyway?"

"Who lives there? You are standing in front of Duveen's, boy, the swellest gambling house in town!"

"Gambling house!" So that was why the superintendent had kept mum!

"Yeh!"

"Well, will you get me in?"

"How long do you think I'd keep my job if I interfered with Jake Duveen? Better run along home!"

The policeman sauntered past. Dick stared helplessly at the dark doorway. But he had promised old Man Rand's daughter he would get that letter through! He had promised her, and she had believed him. He wouldn't give up! He would do something! But what?