

THE SKY RAIDER

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“WHAT’S ON YOUR MIND, YOUNGSTER?” Lawson has asked the next morning, when Dick had appeared at the flyers’ hangout, exhibiting every possible sign of restlessness.

“Nothing. Not a thing,” Dick had answered, going to the door-way once more to stare out at Rand Field.

Mechanics moved between the sheds, worked on planes; at the company offices there were signs of activity; a plane buzzed overhead like the sound of a gigantic drill. Not a cloud in the frosty, blue expanse of sky.

Dick’s eyes narrowed like a sailor’s as they searched the field. They did not find what they sought.

He did not analyze what it was that Mary Rand meant to him. It was beyond that. Once or twice before he could remember callow episodes in which he had decided he had fallen in love. Now he did not think about love at all. He thought only of that slim figure, built half of his own imaginings, who moved him so profoundly, who stood with her grave smile at the background of all his thoughts.

And Dick was troubled, with a vague sense of melancholy that he could not understand. Love should be a happy, cheerful thing; not this sense of brooding and pain that sprang from no cause save the depths of his desire.

He came back into the warmth of the room, and tried to interest himself in what Lawson was telling him. About the game of course, the aviation game, its unlimited, extraordinary possibilities. Lawson’s heart

was in it, like Old Man Rand's, like everybody who really knew anything of its fascinations. That age-old lure of the sea had found a rival for coming centuries in the uncharted wider sea of the air. This was the forefront of it all, the pioneering, romantic days that might never come again.

A thousand new inventions, improvements, would spring up. Men would conquer as they had always conquered.

And then Dick told Lawson about an idea he had once had, an idea for sky-writing to be done at night with phosphorescent gas.

"For codes and signals, you know, and advertising, too."

Lawson was interested. He asked questions. Dick explained and invented other details as he went on. One or two minor problems to be conquered, a little experimentation—that was all that was needed to make the device practicable.

"I think you've got something," said Lawson quietly. "Why don't you rig up an apparatus? Get hold of a mechanic. I think Carmichael would let you try it out on your plane."

Dick's imagination soared. Lawson's suggestion gave wings to his idea, it would be perfectly possible—he would set to work on it this very week—tomorrow—

He jumped to his feet as a new sound broke upon the silence outside. He ran to the door, forgetting everything. He had missed her! Mary Rand had come to the field as she had promised. She was already taking off in a small red plane at the opposite end of the field. He had missed her! And Carmichael had ordered him to fly back to his post this morning with the ten o'clock mail. He might have to leave before she came down.

He felt unspeakably dejected. What did his fool invention matter? What did anything matter?

Then a vague hope came to him. Perhaps Carmichael would let him go back on a later plane. He would be able to see Mary before he left.

He ran into the Flight Office.

Carmichael looked up with his sleepy smile. With great care, he cut off the end of a cigar and lit it.

“Well, what’s on your mind?” But at that moment there was a confused shouting outside. The next instant, Perez, the little line chief, dashed into the Flight Office.

“Wheel dropped off Miss Rand’s ship,” he gasped. “Fell just as she got off—and she don’t know it! What’ll we do?”

Carmichael’s air of boredom vanished. He jumped up.

“Get some spare wheels,” he commanded, “and get your men out to wave them at her.”

Dick had sprung to his feet. Looking through the window, his face grew suddenly pale.

“She’ll never see them,” he cried. “She’s practicing landings. She’ll come in fast.”

Carmichael’s voice was cold.

“Keep out of this, Trent!”

Paying no attention. Dick pushed by him and raced towards the line.

A fast two-seater was the first ship he saw. He vaulted into the rear cockpit, shouting at a nearby mechanic. As the man grasped the propeller Dick heard Old Man Rand’s voice, husky with fear.

“My God, Carmichael, do something! Put men out so she can’t land!”

Dick’s eyes frantically sought Mary’s ship. At sight of the ominous vacancy where the left wheel should have been he groaned involuntarily.

A glim memory of his training days rose in his mind . . . a pursuit ship landing minus a wheel . . . the crash . . . the cloud of dust that hid the wreckage and a still figure in it . . . And now, Mary—!

“Clear—contact!”

Dick yelled at the mechanic with almost a sob in his voice. Mary had throttled down and was coming in swiftly. He could hear the whine of the wires as the ship slipped earthward.

His own engine roared suddenly before him. The mechanic leaped aside, pulling the wheel blocks. Dick jammed the throttle open, for there was no time to warm up. Mary was starting for a “touch” landing at fast speed—and in twenty seconds more he would be too late.

Holding the stick forward to gain high speed, Dick paralleled the course of the red plane, now only 300 feet above him. There were no

mechanics to warn Mary at the spot where she would land. If he failed there was no hope!

At 100 miles per hour he hauled back savagely, and zoomed upward at a dizzy angle. Straight into the path of the red plane he sent his roaring ship—one thought in his mind. To frighten her—to scare her with his crazy attack, so that she would not land this time. He knew he was losing all his own speed in that sudden climb. If he stalled at that height—!

He came as close to her as he dared, preparing to kick his rudder to avoid a collision. For one instant Mary's startled eyes met his. The next, her plane swerved violently, and her engine roared as she climbed out of danger.

The next second he was falling, slipping off into the spin he had known was inevitable. With neutralized controls, he waited the crash he was sure must come. The ground seemed to flash up toward him. He saw a group of men below him separate and run frantically in all directions. Then with a quick lurch, his controls took hold, and he was out of the spin, diving at the ground.

Now the stick was back, and his ship was shooting across the field at scarce 30 foot. He looked up dazedly. Mary was spiralling down slowly, leaning out to watch. In a minute he had climbed up alongside, signaling what had happened, edging in close until only a few feet separated the two planes.

As she realized the danger, Mary's face paled, but at Dick's gesture of encouragement she smiled bravely. Motioning her to throttle her engine, he did the same, and shouted across to her.

“Land on the right wheel—right wing low—stall in.”

She nodded, and slowly nosed down. Dick kept as close as he dared, a sudden agony in his brain. What if she lost her nerve at the last second? What if the other wheel collapsed? He felt his heart thumping, pounding with fear for her.

Then the red plane was on the ground, its right wing drooping, while men ran toward it from all sides. For a second it seemed to Dick that all was well, but with a swoop the left wing settled quickly, splintering at its first impact. The nose of the ship plowed solidly into the ground,

tossing Mary forward against the instrument board. The crowd of men surrounding the wreck hid the rest from Dick's anxious eyes.

Landing, he switched off his engine and dashed across the field. Old Man Rand was holding Mary in his arms when Dick pushed through the crowd.

"She's all right, Trent," he said in a whisper of relief and gratitude. "Fainted at the last—but she's not hurt."

"Mary's a plucky girl," said Dick hastily, "She didn't lose her head—that's what saved her."

The airport men began to ply him with questions. Suddenly he wanted to get away from everyone.

Before Rand could halt him, he cut across the field to where the East-bound plane was waiting to carry him out on the mail hop.

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THE TWO-DAY REST AT THE AIRPORT at the opposite end of Dick's run seemed long to him indeed.

More than once he regretted his hasty departure without seeing Mary again, or her father. But he had a healthy discomfort at the thought of their emotional gratitude. He was glad he had saved Mary's life, that was reward enough.

But now he wanted to see her, and the time hung heavy. During the interval he grew better acquainted with Tommy Rand. That spoiled and likable youth seemed to have learned nothing from his previous lesson. He calmly admitted that Duveen's gambling house saw him every evening, and he expected to make a big clean-up by a system of his own. There were other and uglier rumors about Tommy, rumors of sordid love-affairs that were believable enough. Women and Tommy found each other irresistible.

It was on the early morning run when Dick took off for his home field. By his calculations he ought to reach his destination some time in the neighborhood of dawn, and as it was fine weather, he had no difficulty.

Landing and reporting, he strolled over to find Lawson up and ready for his own run on the Western route. Lawson was smoking a cigarette thoughtfully.

Dick was already counting the minutes. He would call the Rand home about ten. It was now barely five. A long time still. Lawson was studying his face quietly. Unexpectedly he said:

“Youngster, we’re pretty good friends. I think I might as well tell you. I’m quitting the game.”

“Quitting the game? But why?” Dick asked.

Lawson grinned. “I’m getting married,” he said.

Dick stared. Quiet, straight-faced old Lawson. Never saying a word. And getting married. It had never occurred to Dick that Lawson could be in love, too. He had said nothing.

“But—but see here—why should you quit the game?”

“She wants me to. I’ve tried to convince her there’s no more danger in flying for an experienced pilot than crossing a street, and that most of the clashes are those of amateurs, playing around without licenses or in condemned planes. But she won’t listen. You know how it is. So—I’m through.”

Lawson was smiling but his eyes smiled as if at someone far away. “This is my last run,” he finished. “I’ve not said anything about it to anyone except you. And anyway it’s going to be a good run—an interesting one.”

“What do you mean?”

“Can’t tell you. I’ve been told not to. Old Man Rand was here a little while ago just before you got in. He asked me to say nothing.”

Dick wondered what he meant, but half an hour later, watching his friend getting ready for the take-off, he put two and two together. In place of the ordinary mail truck, an armored car had driven up, and guards had transferred a bulky package to the mail compartment of Lawson’s plane.

It was currency beyond any doubt. Old Man Rand had spoken of a test case to persuade the Federal Reserve to send large shipments of cash. This was probably the first experiment.

Dick waved goodbye, and went into the hangout, to bathe and change his clothes. He went into town for breakfast. Would ten o’clock ever come. Perhaps he’d call up Mary long before that. Why wait?

But in the end he made his way back to the field to talk to some of the reserve pilots there, and kill time as best as he could. He had a feeling of shyness about talking to Mary Rand. He wanted to see her

more than anyone in the world, and yet he felt oddly disturbed at the thought.

He had wandered down the field to look at one of the planes, when suddenly Perez, the line chief, came running towards him. The latter was a wiry little man, built like a jockey, with a swarthy, Latin face. He knew his business and knew it well, but he was seldom valuable. He was plainly stirred by something now.

“The superintendent says not to leave the field,” he shouted to Dick. “All the reserve pilots will have to stay within call.”

“Why? What’s happened?”

“Radio message just came through. Lawson hasn’t arrived. He’s probably down in the sticks. Mr. Carmichael is coming right over from his house.”

“Lawson didn’t arrive?” Dick repeated quickly.

But Perez had already gone, making his way towards Carmichael’s small trim house that stood just outside the borders of the field.

Dick found Tim O’Connor, and young Humphries, two of the reserve pilots, in the hangout. They had already heard the news. They discounted it easily by simple proofs—nothing could have happened to Lawson, of course. But Dick had the uneasy feeling that they were waiting in suspense, and were not as convinced as they pretended.

“Hello,” said O’Connor suddenly, “there’s Carmichael’s car going to the office. Come on—let’s find out if there’s any more news.”

The three young men were silent as they strode across to the flight office. The door was shut. Perez, standing outside, whispered and shook his head.

“Wait till he gets through talking on the phone.”

All at once the door opened Carmichael came out. He glanced at the faces, then beckoned Dick inside. Closing the door, he said:

“Trent, you know the news. Lawson hasn’t reached Henshaw Field—no sign of him. I may as well tell you he was carrying a large shipment of cash, over two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, in fact. Take a plane and cover the route at once. Find out what has happened and report to me.”

No time to call up Mary now! But action, with a sense of vague foreboding whipped Dick's nerves. He took off as quickly as possible. He flew as low as possible, scanning the countryside. Except in the valleys there were few traces of the snow that had fallen on his first day.

He was alone in the universe of air. He looked down over the first ridge into the desolate stretch between it and the second range. Then suddenly he saw something that made his heart miss a beat, a something charred and twisted from which came still a faint spiral of smoke. It lay in the only spot where a ship could safely land.

Dick clutched his controls tightly. His fingers felt icy. He spiraled downwards. He forced himself not to look until he had stepped out of his motionless plane. Then he did not need to look twice.

The charred, broken wreckage was Lawson's plane, beyond any doubt. In landing, the wheels had caught in a ditch. And there, flung to the rocks in the crash, lay the body of his friend. Dick knew before he had reached him that the life was out of Lawson forever. A blow on the head from that fall seemed to have crushed in the skull.

Dick knelt beside the body of the dead pilot. Monotonously, dully, he remembered his talk with Lawson only that dawn. Lawson was getting out of the game, going to be married! And this was to have been his last flight. A surge of grief came over Dick's heart.

He rose, trying to master himself, staring with unseeing eyes at the scene of the tragedy.

He returned to his own ship, lying up the slope. He had reached the top of the incline when all at once he bent over, startled. In the half-frozen ground before him was the mark of a tail skid, a fresh made furrow. His own ship had not landed here. But the burned plane lay behind this mark, down the slope!

It was possible—it was more than possible! The plane could have landed here, the tail might then have been lifted and the ship pulled back to the ditch and burned! He ran to the wreck and hurriedly looked for the steel registry compartment in the burnt and twisted mess. Then suspicion turned to certainty. The door had been forced, and the money was gone.

But Lawson—what had really happened to him? Clearly, he had not been pitched out against the rocks, as Dick had thought at first. The ugly truth hammered itself into his brain. The pilot had been dragged to this spot—after a blow from an unknown hand had taken his life!

Lawson had been murdered!