

THE SKY RAIDER

7

FOR SOME LITTLE TIME, Dick stood motionless as if stunned by his own deductions.

He had arrived at his suspicion so swiftly that he felt he must be wrong. Lawson—his friend—lying there dead! So much was fact. The rest was mere surmise.

Who couldn't leap to the immediate certainty that the plane had caught fire, and Lawson, loosening his belt, had been flung to his ironic, unhappy death by the force of the impact?

And yet—that tail skid! It was unmistakable evidence. And the blackened steel compartment which had held that money, and which was now empty!

Dick went over to the body of his friend once more, whitefaced and trembling a little. Death was not a beautiful thing to see, nor was it made any kinder by the memory of those words Lawson had uttered only a few hours previously. Lawson, who had had so much to live for, who was all for quitting the game after this last flight!

Stooping, he forced himself to look. The blow that had crushed in Lawson's skull might have been due to striking a sharp rock, true enough. But, if that were so, how account for the missing money, the telltale tracks that gave up their story to his air-wise eyes?

Could Lawson have planned to take the money himself, come down here to meet a confederate, fallen foul of him, and paid for the quarrel with death? Dick brushed away that fantastic thought with a sense of shame. He wished he had not even thought it. Lawson, with his honest

straightforward heart, was incapable of treachery in little things or big. Lawson was no conspirator: he was the victim, either of some inexplicable accident, or some equally baffling crime.

Dick fought to clear his mind, tried to concentrate and understand. What could have happened?

The first of the mysteries: Lawson had come down. Why? Had he been signalled down? Had he had engine trouble? One of those. It must be.

Lawson had landed on the one possible place between the two grim ranges of mountains where a ship would dare descend.

Dick frowned. Granting that a criminal, possibly leader of a gang, with a brilliant plan, had signaled Lawson down. But would Lawson come down? With all that money in the compartment? That, too, was unthinkable. Could he have been shot down from the ground—crippled enough to make him land? No—he would not have flown that low.

Where had the murderer and his gang gone? They could not be near or he would have seen them from the air.

Back and forth Dick's imagination moved, in a helpless tangle of contradictions that would make no pattern.

But in the end he was certain of his facts—even though he could not explain them.

The plane had certainly landed on the rise or the slope. It had certainly been pushed by some one down the incline until it nosed into the bank. That had not been the work of Lawson. Whose work then? Whose hands had accomplished the murder? Whose lips could explain the missing steps of this puzzle?

Dick returned to the top of the rise. He sat there on a small boulder, trying to reconstruct for the hundredth time a possible solution. A keen detective might not have come to the prompt realization of the plane's change of position. But a detective, he thought ruefully, would have known now where to seek further clues.

It was not enough to say that poor Lawson had been killed here, then dragged down the slope, after his plane had been nosed into the bank and set on fire in the grey dawn. There must be more authentic proof of

this. The disappearance of the money—that was an important factor. Was there anything else to include in the report he would carry back to Rand Field?

As he asked himself that, his eyes fell on the ground not many feet from where he was sitting. A stone seemed to have been recently dislodged there. It stood on end curiously. And next to it, half hidden in the brush and pebbles, lay a black object.

In a bound Dick had raced towards it. A Luger pistol, a 1912 model. There could not be many of those in this part of the world! And Lawson went unarmed. None of the pilots of Rand's company carried guns.

This gun was the gun of the murderer, forgotten and left here—that almost certain flaw that creeps into every grisly plan of death. Left here, and rising now like a fresh and final proof of the tragedy that had occurred.

Dick picked it up, looking at it eagerly in the hope it might have some marks of identification. As he turned it, he suddenly saw that the butt was moist, sticky.

Almost he gave a cry at that discovery. His last doubt vanished. Here was proof positive! With this weapon the life had been crashed out of Lawson's brain. Then the pistol had been flung down and forgotten. The rest he had already divined.

Dick was tense now. He surveyed the region with one sweeping glance. There was no sign of life visible in that barren reach. An abandoned road, over which the woods grew, was vaguely discernible some distance away.

He tramped over to it. There were tire tracks, but whether they were fresh or old, he was not expert enough to say.

He made his decision quickly. He had learned enough. The rest must be in the hands of the police. To let them have the news as speedily as possible was the best course now.

He wrapped the Luger pistol in a cleaning cloth, and returned to his plane. With a short take-off he was climbing above the range that intervened between him and the field. He made the best speed his ship had. In less than half an hour he skimmed down to the airport.

Mechanics and field-workmen were there to help him get out, looking at him curiously. The news of Lawson's disappearance must be known by everyone by this time. But he said nothing, only setting off at a run to the flight office.

He pushed open the door without knocking. Then he halted. Carmichael was not alone, Mary Rand was sitting there restlessly. She looked plainly worried. Her eyes sought Dick's as if to read the message. Even Carmichael had put aside his air of tired amusement as if it were a worn-out pose. They stared, both of them, at Dick's grim face.

"Well?" Carmichael said tersely.

"I found him. He's dead."

"Dead!" It was Mary who spoke, in a kind of whisper, Carmichael's mouth twitched a little.

"A spin?" he asked.

"No," said Dick. "Not that. A murder."

Carmichael half rose from his seat. "What do you mean?" he demanded. "Come on—let's have it."

"The plane's across the next ridge. I found it right away. It landed there safely in that clearing—I don't know why it came down. The marks of the tail skid are plain as daylight. Then someone must have pushed it down a little slope, nosed it into a bank, and set it on fire to make it look like a crash. The money's gone. Lawson's lying there, as if his head had struck against a rock. But I found out what really did that. I've got it here."

Dick unrolled the cleaning cloth, and displayed the clumsy Luger pistol.

For a moment there was silence as all three stared at the weapon with its telltale marks.

Then Mary said, in a shaken, incredulous voice:

"But—but I know that pistol! It's the one my father carries!"

8

THERE WAS FOR A MOMENT an astonished silence. Mary put her own fingers to her lips as if the revelation had escaped her against her will. She raised startled eyes to Dick's face. Carmichael was looking at her with a stupefied gaze. There was a faint moisture on his forehead.

Then suddenly he crashed his fist upon the table. "This is impossible—you're wrong—you must be!"

But Mary shook her head. Her eyes, with their large pupils, looked dark in contrast with her pallor.

"It's my father's pistol, all right. But that doesn't mean anything."

"Of course it doesn't," Carmichael Mild. "Still, I'm Inclined to think we ought not even mention this to the police."

Mary's mouth was firm now. "But why not? We shouldn't conceal anything. My father's innocence is beyond question."

"I meant in order to save him from any annoyance," Carmichael said in explanation, and Mary seemed touched by his desire to shield her father.

"I understand," she said, "but it can do no harm to tell the truth."

Carmichael was silent for a little while. Then he gestured in agreement.

"You might as well go home. I'll handle everything, Miss Rand. I'll let the authorities know right away. And Trent, you've done good work in this. I'm sorry about poor Lawson, though. We'll get the man who did it, all right!" He picked up the phone.

Mary Rand rose and went to the door. Dick followed her. She whispered suddenly:

“Would you mind coming up to the house with me? I want to talk with you.”

Dick followed her outside. A trim roadster was parked there, and Mary took the wheel. They sped towards the city in silence. They could not say what filled their minds, nor could they utter trivial commonplaces.

And to Dick everything seemed unreal. Traffic lights, crowds, store-windows, people moving sedately about their varied businesses and duties—everything as if nothing in the world had ever happened, or ever would happen!

Then suddenly he found Mary’s glance on him for a flying instant, and he turned towards her.

She said quietly: “I seem always to be thanking you. I still have to thank you for what you did the other day when I almost crashed in that plane.”

“I’d do a lot more than that for you.”

She did not answer, she did not seem to have heard. Strange, how her eyes stared so earnestly ahead! But when, almost a minute later, she did speak, her voice was curiously tremulous.

“It’s nice—Dick—to know that you want to help me. I’m telling you the truth, telling you what I feel. I shouldn’t do that, I know, but I can’t help it.”

Then Dick wanted to say a thousand things. And the thousand things were one. He wanted to say only that he loved her; and that was everything. He knew now she liked him, too, and the thought seemed more wonderful than anything he had ever thought before.

He had lived for 25 years, years of many excitements and hopes and adventures, but suddenly they seemed unimportant, as if he had begun to live for the first time, and what, had gone before was as dim as the happenings of a dream.

Now he knew! Beyond all doubt he knew that this was the girl. He knew that some day he would tell her what she herself must know al-

ready—his longing and his love. Her lips—unthinkable delight!—would meet his. He would kiss and hold and protect her. There would be no citadel he would not storm, nor any he would not take.

She broke upon his thoughts with a question.

“Lawson was your friend?”

“The best friend I had at the field. He told me this morning he was quitting. He was going to get married.”

She gave a little exclamation of pity. “That girl—how she will feel! Poor thing, poor thing!”

Dick shook his head. “Lawson wanted to live,” he said. “I’d like to know who killed him!”

“They’ll find out,” she said. “My father always says there’s no detective in the world like a postal inspector.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Another street in silence, and then another, and still another.

“It must have been horrible—finding him there like that,” she murmured.

“It was—and yet I was afraid something had happened as soon as I was ordered out to search.”

The conversation died. Dick felt constrained. In an effort to throw off that impression he abruptly asked:

“Tell me something. Why did you want me to come back with you?”

“Didn’t you want to come?”

“Do you need my answer to that?”

“No,” she said. “No. I—I realise that you—that you—”

“Say It.”

“I can’t.”

“Well, I’ll say it for you. You realize that I want to be with you, don’t you? All the time.”

Her face had grown curiously pale, and then the color returned to her cheeks in a little flood. She looked at him swiftly, looked away again, swerved her car to avoid running down a pedestrian, and gave a laugh that was made of nerves.

“Oh, Dick, I try my best to say silly, meaningless things to you. I’ve

said them all my life. I've known lots of boys. But—you make me serious. I wish you wouldn't! Oh, I don't know what I wish!"

Dick put out his hand in a sudden, impetuous gesture of tenderness. And now he did not wait to tell her what he had thought but to tell her for a long, long time.

"You know I love you, don't you? And you've got to love me! You're—you're wonderful!"

"I'm not wonderful. I'm Just a girl. It's you—it's just you. And—do you realize you're making love to me while I'm driving, and in traffic?"

Dick laughed, and laughed with a joyousness that seemed strange after that morning's sobering experience.

She laughed, too. Only he saw that with a quick movement she had brushed one hand across her eyes, as if tears had lurked there.

Love—they had thought of their love and confessed it, knowing what was, after all, the most important thing in the world. It had not needed moonlight and gardens and faint music to carry them from reality to illusion. Here in the brisk city streets, with a problem that faced them both, they had banished the world and found each other.

"Say, you love me. Mary! Say you love me even if you don't mean it!"

"I do love you, Dick, and I do mean it!"

Poor Lawson! Had he said things and thought things like this about that girl? Dick tried to put Lawson from his mind. After all, there was nothing he could do—nothing except help find the man who had killed Lawson and bring him to justice.

"Will you ask your father about the pistol, Mary. I'd rather not, myself."

"I will, the moment I see him."

"The moment you see him?"

"He wasn't in the house this morning," said Mary Rand, in an altered voice. "I don't know where he's gone."

A sudden disconcerting silence fell between them.