

THE SKY RAIDER

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MARY HAD LOST COLOR, and Dick was dumbfounded.

Dorothy Curtis confronted them with blazing eyes. It was Mary who saved the situation.

“You don’t understand,” she cried. “I’ve come to you for help. You can help me. And you’ve got to, I swear to you my father’s innocent. My father didn’t do that horrible thing. Oh, if you only could talk to him one minute, you’d know what I say is true!”

“I’ve read the evidence. I believe that.”

Mary’s voice shook. “For God’s sake, help us now! You’ve lost the man you loved. I know you have suffered. I do know, And I love my father—who is innocent.”

The sincerity in her tone, in her face, won the day. The blonde girl faltered, seemed uncertain.

Suddenly she pressed her hands against her eyes, and sobbed the bitter, tearing sobs of unavailing regret. And Mary had put her arms around her, and held her gently, her own face grave with sorrow.

Then there was no longer any question of hostility. Dorothy Curtis lifted her tear-stained face presently.

“I couldn’t help it,” she murmured. “I—I loved him so.”

She looked at Mary, long and steadily, and seemed from that instant to trust her.

“Your father may be innocent,” she said. “I—I had no right to say he was guilty. I’ll help you in any way I can.”

Then they asked her about Lawson, about what people he knew,

about whom he saw, or wrote to.

“He didn’t talk very often about himself. He mentioned Mr. Trent now and then.”

She talked about Lawson freely now, talking tenderly of little things, recalling a stray mannerism, retelling one of Lawson’s adventures. Gradually Dick’s face fell.

“And there’s no one you ever saw him with who could possibly have found out and planned to rob that plane.”

She shook her head. Then, “Wait!” she cried suddenly. “There was someone.”

“Who?”

“A man I never saw. It was that last night. We had gone to a theater together. He stopped in for a moment. We talked about—about the future. Then someone came to the door, asking for him. He answered the ring. He told me there was a man who wanted to see him, and he had said he would be at my apartment that evening. They went into another room and shut the door.”

“Did you hear what they said?”

“No. At least only a word or two. I think the other man said once: ‘You’ll have to! I’ve got to have it, I tell you,’ though I’m not sure. After a little time he went away. Jack came back. He was frowning. He told me it was someone trying to borrow money. He said good night shortly after that, because he had to make that early run.”

“And you’ve no idea who that man could have been?”

“No—that’s all I know.”

Now a little silence fell and all three were thoughtful. It was Dorothy Curtis who suddenly spoke again.

“Oh, I did forget one thing. I don’t know whether it would be of any use or not. When I went into the room later on, I found a small silver flask there. Jack didn’t drink. I know that the other man had left it.”

Dick jumped to his feet. “Have you got the flask still?”

“I don’t know. I had everything shipped home. I have unpacked some things. Do you really think that would be of any use?”

"If we can find that flask, we can find the man who talked to Jack that night. And If we find him, we have found the murderer!"

Dorothy Curtis left Mary and Dick together. She was gone quite a long time. Dick was too restless to sit still. Mary flung out fragments of sentence, which she did not wait to have answered.

Then at last the blonde girl returned. She held out something to Dick.

It was an Inexpensive flask of chased silver. The three heads bent over it. On one side was a deep curved scratch with a dent at the extremity. But there were no other identifying marks.

Dick turned it over in his fingers. He met Mary's glance and smiled.

"I'll go to every jeweler in town as soon as we reach home. This is not an old one, it oughtn't to be hard to find out whom this was sold to!"

Their quest was over. Thus far they had won. But Mary stayed on, talking to Dorothy Curtis. A curious sympathy seemed to have sprung up between the two girls, a strange ending for that meeting which had begun with such undisguised hostility.

In the end Dorothy persuaded Mary to stay over night with her, while Dick went out to find a room in the first hotel. He hugged the precious flask, felt for it in his pocket from time to time as if he feared it would disappear.

He and Mary reached the city where Rand Field was situated on the afternoon of the following day. The stores were still open, but there was not much time left.

They went at once to the largest jewelers in town and asked for the proprietor. Dick produced the flask.

"Can you tell me who purchased that?" he asked.

The proprietor looked at him with amused eyes.

"Not unless I were a magician."

"What do you mean?"

"Flasks of that particular model have been sold by the hundreds. We are not running that line any longer ourselves. But we must have sold several dozen alone in this store during the holidays."

“You mean there is no possible way of tracing this?”

“No way in the world, son?”

The utter finality in the man’s tone told Dick the bitter truth. Once more they were frustrated. Once more they were as far from discovery as they had been at the start of their quest.

Dick put the flask in his pocket. He could not meet Mary’s eyes. He thought she was trying hard not to cry. He took her to her home, and went inside, and sat down there, though he knew of nothing he could say or do to comfort her.

It was useless to go against the jeweler’s words. The truth of what he had said was self-evident.

They heard the sound of the front door being pushed open. Tom Rand came in. Dick had not seen him for several days. His face had undergone a change. He looked dissipated as if he had been drinking wildly in the hopes of forgetting the tragedy that hung over the household.

He stood in the doorway, looking at them. At that moment, he noticed the flask which Dick had put upon the table.

“Well, I wondered where that flask of mine had disappeared to!” he exclaimed.

“What? What’s that?” Mary faltered. “Tommy—is that yours?”

“Of course it’s mine! I’d know it anywhere with that scratch in it!” He picked it up, put it into his pocket, and started up the stairs.

Dick and Mary faced each other with startled eyes.

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DICK DID NOT KNOW WHAT TO SAY, or what to do. That revelation, so sharp and unexpected, so dark in its consequences, seemed to have taken away his wits.

Mary's face had gone white.

"Tommy—my brother!"

She whispered as if to herself, though her eyes had not left Dick's face.

"What are we going to do?" she asked dully.

"I don't know," he said helplessly.

As if his own indecision had cleared her mind, she rose. Her voice was very steady now.

"There's only one thing we can do. Find out—find out if it's really true—from his own lips. If it is—!"

She did not finish, but Dick did not doubt the resolve that lay behind her level tones.

"I want you to be with me when I ask him," she said very quietly. He would have been glad to be anywhere else except in this house at the moment, but he could not refuse. He saw her go to the head of the stairs and heard her call Tommy's name.

And presently, while he waited, sick at heart. Tom Rand came down and his sister drew him into the living room.

"What do you want?" he asked uncivilly.

"I want to find out something," Mary said in that same tense, almost monotonous way.

“What about?” He had lifted his head a little defiantly, as intuitively aware of the spirit in that room.

She was thinking hard. “Tommy,” she said at last, “didn’t you tell me two weeks ago that you were terribly in need of money?”

“Yes.”

“And you don’t need money now? You’re all right now?”

“Yes; I fixed that all up.”

“How?” She shot the question at him with a kind of swiftness. He reddened a little.

“See here, I don’t see what right you’ve got to question me—”

“I want to know how!”

He looked sulky now. “I—I won it,” he said in a low voice. “At Von Siechner’s.”

“Von Siechner’s?”

“He runs a gambling place here. It’s nothing much—It’s just a—”

She met his wavering eye. “You are lying to me. I know when you try to lie. You are lying now”

His lower jaw showed an obstinate line.

“All right, then, I’m lying. What are you going to do about it?”

“I’m going to make you tell me the truth. If you won’t, I’ll tell the truth to you.”

In the violence of her emotions, Mary was trembling, trying with desperate efforts to control her shaken nerves.

Dick sat by, ignored by both of them for the moment, yet uncomfortable to the very heart.

“You saw Lawson the night before he died, didn’t you?” Mary went on.

“No. Yes. What difference does it make?”

“You left your flask there. That’s how we found out. We found out everything!”

Unsteadily his hand went back, gripped a chair. He looked genuinely frightened now.

“You didn’t find out anything!” he blustered. “There wasn’t anything to find out.”

“You told Lawson you were in terrible need of money. He refused to help you. You said you wouldn’t stop at anything.”

“I told you I went to Von Siechner’s “

“And I tell you you’re lying.”

“What do you mean by saying that?” He was angry.

Mary’s voice choked in her throat. Only by an effort did she manage to continue.

“Tom, you didn’t go to any gambling house, because father sent word to the town authorities if you were permitted to enter any of them, he would spend every cent and use every ounce of influence to close them down.”

“Von Siechner’s is different. It’s across the boundary line.” Her eyes burned him with contempt. He flung at her with a sudden spirit of perversity. “All right, I didn’t go to Von Siechner’s. I said I was going there, but I didn’t. And I’m not going to listen to you any longer. I’m going to beat it right now.” He turned and started for the door.

She halted him with a cry. “Stop! Stop, I tell you. I’m in earnest, Tom. I know now—I know everything. You tried to get money that night and went to Lawson about It. Then you must have lost your mind. You went out there in the early morning. He came down—I don’t know why. But he did. You killed him with that pistol. Then you came back, and you had the money, and you tried to burn that canvas sack.”

“Are you crazy?” he faltered. “I—I murdered Lawson?” He turned toward Dick. “Did you hear what she said: I killed Lawson! You—you don’t believe that, too, do you?” He swung back to his sister. “I didn’t! I didn’t! I didn’t, I tell you! I wasn’t near the place that morning I could tell you where I really was—”

“Where were you?” That same deadly quiet was in Mary’s tones.

“I’m not going to answer.”

“You can’t answer!”

“I can, but I won’t!”

“You will answer!”

“You can’t make me!”

“The police can and will!”

He took a step back. "Do you mean it? Do you really mean you would call up the police—tell them—tell them all this—?"

"Tommy, from the bottom of my heart, I pity you. But you have done this thing, and you have got to pay for it."

"But I didn't do it, I tell you! Why can't you believe me. I couldn't kill anybody. I'd be afraid to."

"Then why can't you explain where you were that morning?"

"I can, but I don't want to."

"Is that your final answer, Tommy?"

"Yes."

"All right, then."

"What are you going to do?"

"What I said I was going to do!"

Then it was Tommy who cried, "Stop!" who burst out in a voice of weakness and shame and fear. "I—I'll tell you where I was that night, that morning, I was with Mrs. Hamilton—Lois Hamilton. I told her the jam I was in. She lent me the money. I—I stayed there. Now you know."

"How do I know it's true? How can I trust anything you say, Tom?" He met her eyes with a miserable look, and did not protest. Presently she went to the phone.

"What are you going to do?" he cried.

"I'm going to call her up and ask her to come over."

"You can't do that!"

"I've got to," said Mary Rand.