

THE SKY RAIDER

WHAT HAS HAPPENED SO FAR:

DICK TRENT, novice in the Air Mail Service, incurs the displeasure of Carmichael, Superintendent of Rand Field, when he flies through the Rocky Mountains in a blinding snowstorm to bring back young Tommy Rand, who is stranded in a drinking in gambling haunt. Old Man Rand, owner of the field, beloved by his men, thanks Dick. Mary Rand, his beautiful daughter, is also grateful to Trent.

The next day in a spectacular flight, Dick sweeps alongside Mary's disabled machine in midair and saves her from a fatal crash. They express their Love and Dick is happily thinking of the future as Lawson, his buddy in the service, tells him he is leaving to marry a beautiful blonde. On his last flight Lawson's plane goes missing. Dick, in searching the country, comes across the burned plane and Lawson's dead body. A package containing \$250,000 in government gold is missing. The only clue to the crime is a heavy Luger pistol used to club Lawson's skull. Mary recognizes the pistol as her father's.

Old Man Rand, questioned, admitted giving the pistol to Lawson. He refuses, however, after talking to his son, Tommy, who has been missing again, to account for his actions during the early morning hours when the crime was committed. When the charred money bag is found in his own furnace Rand is arrested for murder. Dick, along with the other men of the service, is dejected. They all love the old man and know he is innocent. Mary, in hysterics, turns away from Dick, attributing her father's arrest to the pistol he found.

After his next run, Dick sets out to visit the old man in jail, but Rand insists he is willing to pay the penalty. Returning, Dick meets Mary, who asks his forgiveness. Dick takes her in his arms and the two vow to solve the murder mystery to clear her father.

Suspicious of Carmichael, Field Superintendent, who knew of the gold shipment, Dick is later convinced of his innocence, when he intimates Lawson's connivance. Dick recalls Lawson's blonde fiancée. With her initials for a clue they learn she left for Hawaii. Jumping into a plane Mary and Dick come to grief in a field. Continuing by train they locate the girl, Dorothy Curtis, who angrily accuses Mary as the daughter of her fiancée's murderer. Mary assures her of her father's innocence. Asked to help solve the mystery the blonde mentions a mysterious man who talked of money and left a flask in Lawson's room. It belonged to Tommy Rand. Accused by Mary he denies guilt of Lawson's murder, giving Mrs Hamilton as his alibi. Mary calls her up...

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MRS. LOIS HAMILTON WAS A WOMAN in the early thirties, inclined to plumpness, with an air of good-looks that was largely assumption.

Her full mouth had little of beauty in it, Her eyes, very observant and large, were her best features.

She came into the Rand home looking perfectly at her ease, touched Mary's cool cheeks with her lips, waved her hand at Tommy, gave Dick a swift scrutiny.

Then reflecting that she was after all in a household of tragedy, she tried to alter her tone a little, and exchange a rather serious manner for her superficial high spirits.

"I was just about to go out, when you called up. My husband 'phoned me from the office. I really have meant to come in before. It's so dreadful—that whole thing. About your father, I mean. Of course, everything will come out all right in the end. No jury could convict him. He has such a sweet face. But—well, really I don't know what to say to you."

The silence, the feeling of grimness that lurked in the room, dashed even her spirits.

It was evident that Mary did not like the task she had set herself. But she had plenty of courage, as Dick knew by this time. She did not falter.

"Mrs. Hamilton, I have something to ask you. It's—it's not very easy to say."

"What is it, my dear?" the words were flung out lightly, but Mrs. Hamilton's eyes had narrowed a trifle.

"It is about you—and my brother."

"Why—why, my dear child, I do not know what you are talking about. You mean Tommy, here?"

"Yes."

"But what about us? What do you mean?"

"You remember the morning Mr. Lnwson was killed?"

"Yes. About a week ago, wasn't it?"

"Do you remember what you—what you did that evening before that?"

"The evening before? No, I don't think I do. Played bridge, I suppose. Why do you ask?"

"You didn't see my brother that evening?"

"Why, did I? Let me think! Yes—yes, I might have. Did you drop in that evening, Tommy?"

He did not answer. He did not even look at her. His gaze was on the floor.

"What time did Tom leave, do you remember?"

"No, I couldn't say."

"He—he wasn't there in the morning?"

Mrs. Hamilton had stiffened. Her voice was icy. "I'm afraid I don't quite understand."

"I—forgive me for asking these things, only I have to know where brother was the night before Mr. Lawson was killed."

"And you choose to insult me, by way of finding out?" Mrs. Hamilton rose. Her face was scornful. "I assure you I do not keep close watch on your brother's movements. And I don't understand how it is you have come to any such astonishing theory. If it weren't that I knew the trouble you are in. I don't think I should take this quite so good-naturedly. Meanwhile I'll say good-bye."

She had started for the door. Tommy had not moved. Mary said, hurriedly:

"That was all I wanted to know. I'm sorry to have bothered you. Only now I know my brother is a murderer."

Mrs. Hamilton had turned suddenly. Some of the composure had gone from her face.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s no use in concealing anything. Everyone will know it by tomorrow. If my brother wasn’t with you, then—then he was there, where Lawson came down to meet his death.”

“But—but that’s impossible.”

“It is the truth. We have every other proof.”

An extraordinary change crossed Mrs. Hamilton’s face. Her mind seemed to be working rapidly. All at once she said in one breath:

“You little fool, you! Do you want to smash his life? Listen, can I count on you to hold your your tongue? Tommy came to my house that night. He left late the next day.”

Then Mary gave a kind of low cry, and whether it was of relief or what tortured emotion, Dick could not say.

Mrs. Hamilton’s face had colored, fine seemed to bite her lip, as if half regretting her impulsive confession. Then all at once, without a word, she literally fled.

Mary was looking at Tommy with a hopeless, agonized look in her eyes. His own face looked furious, bitterly resentful.

“Tommy, forgive me. I—you couldn’t blame me. Only I know, we all know, father is innocent. Dick and I followed the only clue we had. It seemed to lead straight to you. Won’t you please forgive me. I—hated myself for every single word I said to you tonight.”

Still his expression did not change. She went up to him, put her arm around his shoulder, and began to cry. And then he spoke gruffly to her, but his anger had gone, and soon he was pleading with her to stop.

He was serious now. He had taken the position of command.

“It is awful,” he said at last, “I have been trying to think out things myself, but I can’t.” After a pause he went on: “That day father was here, and the detectives were in the place—I’ll never forget. He called me into his study. He asked me where I had been. Well, I’d promised him I wouldn’t go to any more gambling houses. But it was easier to tell him I had, than to tell him the truth. You know I couldn’t say anything about Mrs. Hamilton then. And he looked at me for almost a minute without speaking. I thought he was going to die or something . . .”

Tommy had been talking as if to stir once more memories that puzzled him. His voice had been low in pitch. Suddenly there came a cry from him, a shout.

“Tommy, what is it? Tommy, what’s happened?”

“Why, it’s as clear as daylight! Don’t you see—don’t you see what’s happened?”

“What?”

“Father did just what you did! He thought I was guilty. That’s why he wouldn’t speak, why he wouldn’t defend himself. He was almost sure of it—and when they found the canvas sack in the furnace, he was dead sure! He sacrificed himself for me. He took my place. I haven’t been near him in the jail. I was afraid I couldn’t stand it. I suppose he thinks it’s because I’m ashamed.”

“Tom! Tom, I think you are right!” Dick cried.

“Think? I know I’m right! And listen, I even know why he didn’t want to say where he was himself that morning, unless it was necessary?”

“Why didn’t he?”

“Because he was at Von Siechner’s gambling-place himself waiting for me!”

“But what on earth—what reason could he have had to think you were there?”

“It’s clear as day, I tell you. I told some fellows at the field I was going to Von’s. He must have picked it up. He went there and waited for me. When he asked me later where I had been, and I lied, he jumped to conclusions right away. And listen, he saw some of the money I had—the money I’d borrowed from—from Lois Hamilton. Why, don’t you see? It’s as simple as two and two.”

“Tommy, you have solved it. It’s just what happened,” Mary cried. Then she laughed, half hysterically. “All we have to do is to tell Father the truth about you, get this gambling house man to establish his alibi, and everything is all right.”

Dick got up. He was as nervously exultant as either of the others. “Let’s get hold of this Von Siechner now!” he cried.

And then Mary turned to him, clung to him there before her brother.

“Oh, Dick,” she cried, “we’ve had so many disappointments. Tell me we can’t fail this time. Tell me this time we’re going to win!”

“Of course we are!” he said at that, but somehow her cry, as if born from instinct, left him with a feeling of disquiet.

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IT HAD GROWN DARK. Tommy was the guide of the expedition this time, taking the wheel of his sister's roadster. All three had managed to squeeze together into the front seat.

They drove out of the city limits, took the broad state road for five miles, and then cut off to the right. Another mile, and they came to a remodelled farm-house where lights streamed from the windows.

Other cars were drawn up. The place had a gay, almost a festive air.

They got out and went into the main hallway. Mary hung close to Dick. She was trembling a little now. All the courage she had displayed that afternoon seemed to have oozed out of her. Her sudden helplessness endeared her to Dick, just as latent strength had compelled his admiration.

The hall led to several rooms. One of these was a dining room.

The place might easily have been a mere wayside inn, at the worst a roadhouse. It was hard to believe it was a thriving gambling establishment.

Tommy seemed at home there. He greeted the man who had met him at the doorway in familiar terms.

"Get hold of Otto, will you Joe? I've got to see him right away."

"But Mr. Von Siechner's upstairs. You Know. It's Impossible to interrupt him." He whispered.

"I don't care if he is taking the bank," Tommy answered loudly. "You get hold of him. This Is Important."

After an interval of evident reluctance, the man made his way upstairs. After a still longer interval, he returned with the proprietor.

Otto Von Siechner was about forty, thin, mustached, with the nose of a hawk. He carried himself with erect military precision, and his voice crackled with the same quality.

Dick could have bet he was an ex-officer, cashiered for some scandal or crime, and picking up a livelihood at a squalid trade.

His eye took in the group, and returned to Tom Rand.

"Well?" he demanded curtly. It was plain enough he did not take the disturbance good-naturedly.

"Listen, Von. I've got to ask you something important. On the morning that that pilot was killed up at the field, did someone come here asking for me?"

The other man reflected. His glassy eye was without expression.

"Yes," he said at last.

"How long did he stay?"

"He was here early. He stayed—waiting, for—several hours."

"Can you describe him?"

"Short. Built strong. Thick brows. Ruddy face. Fifty years old perhaps."

The words rapped out Old Man Rand's description like a police report.

Tommy nodded at each word.

"That was my father, Von. My father who's been charged with the murder. He was here when the murder occurred. Thanks, Von! That's all we wanted to find out. I'll get in touch with you tomorrow."

It was a happy, an almost boisterous trio, that drove homewards. Tommy sang like a boy. Mary sat with closed eyes, her mouth breaking again and again into a smile of utter relief. And Dick held her hand tightly, pressed it speaking, unable to express his joy.

But when they had reached the city, they made their plans.

It was Mary who pointed out that the quicker her father learned the truth, learned that he was shielding his son, who was no more guilty than he was, the kinder it would be.

In the end she and Tom agreed to go to the prison the first thing in the morning.

"I'm taking the first mail hop," Dick said. "I wish I were able to go with you. I wish I could wait outside, and hear how he takes the news."

He was thoughtful suddenly. "And by the way, Tommy, if I were you, I wouldn't say anything about what's happened. There's no use in letting anyone else know yet."

"I won't say a word," Tommy assured him. "What do you think I am, Dick, anyway?"

Irrepressible high spirits they had tonight, these three. And when Dick said goodnight, Mary drifted into his arms for the merest breath of a kiss, and then looking up at him with shining eyes, seemed to tell him of all her love with a look.

HE TOOK the mail out the next morning, and impatient to hear the news, managed to substitute for a reserve pilot the very next day. He was back at Rand field at noon.

When he arrived, he found to his own surprise the field was buying with the new developments of the case. Everyone seemed to know the entire story of Von Siechner's alibi.

He stopped young Humphries and asked him how in the world the news had gotten out.

"Why Tommy Rand told us, of course! It was even in the newspapers here!"

Dick had to smile when he remembered Tommy's earnest promise to keep mum. Not that it mattered one way or the other, of course.

He called up Mary.

"Dick, I'm so glad you're here. So terribly glad you could get back. Listen, Tommy and I and this Mr. Von Siechner are all going to Starktown this afternoon. Mr. Garrison wants to see him. We're driving over in my car. Now you've got to come along,"

It was a drive of sheer happiness. Dick sat with Mary, and in the rumble Von Siechner and Tom Rand conversed in low voices. As far as he could gather, Dick judged they were making bets—on the number of telegraph poles between two points, on the next girl they saw being a blonde, on everything,

But Mary was tolling him what he preferred to listen to far more: how she and Tom had gone to their father, and found him with his

head in his hands. How they had convinced him of Tom's innocence, and how he had then broken down, crying like a child, and saying again and again that nothing else mattered, that he could lift his head again. He had sent for his lawyer, Garrison, and the latter had found him a changed man.

And Dick was warmed by the thought of this happy release, not less by Old Man Rand's personal vindication than by the clearing of the stain against the Air Mail. For he had come to think of Old Man Rand as a symbol of the service and all it stood for.

They reached Starktown in mid-afternoon, and drove to Garrison's office. The fussy little lawyer started out with Von Siechner for the prison and Tom went along,

At the last minute, Mary decided that it would be better for her to remain where she was. Dick had already agreed to wait in the lawyer's office.

They said very little while the minutes went past, only looking at each other with the slow, deep smiles of lovers. And once Mary said:

"Everything's going to be wonderful from now on, Dick."

"From now on," he repeated.

Half an hour later the door was burst open. Mr. Garrison, fumbling with a pince nez, looked vaguely worried. But behind him came Tom, and his face was like the face of a ghost. There was no sign of the Prussian.

"Mary!" he faltered. "Mary, Von Siechner didn't recognize Father! He said he had never set eyes on him before in his life!"