The Sky Raider

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THE SKIES WERE GRAY THAT MORNING, a vast monotone of dreariness.

Though no one spoke, as if by tacit consent, it was safe to say that not a man on all Rand Field but thought of just one thing.

Today the trial of Old Man Rand was to be formally opened.

Dick had already made his arrangements. He had, bitter thought, been already summoned by the state as one of its most important witnesses. But he had talked to Carmichael, and asked him for leave to attend court from the moment the case opened until it had closed one way or another.

Carmichael had consented readily enough. "If they call me as a witness. I shall have to go," he said moodily with a sensitiveness Dick had not given him credit for. "Otherwise, I shall keep as far away as possible."

As for Dick, he would not have found It hard to be of the same mind, except for Mary. A fear of the outcome ever since that day when hope had been extinguished by the failure of Von Siechnor to recognize Old Man Rand haunted him awake or asleep. He would gladly have kept away from the harrassing cruelties of the courtroom, were it not the fact that he knew Mary counted on him, needed him to stand by during this bitter ordeal.

Von Siechner's inability to establish her father's alibi, she had taken gallantly. But it was plain now that her desperation no longer found outlet in wild hopes. Rather she had become patient and sad, as if she submitted herself to the caprice of fate. But now that Old Man Rand

was trapped, now that he no longer made a secret of his innocence of the crime, the struggle was pitiful indeed

She knew, as Dick knew, and Tommy knew, that an innocent man stood before the law in as deep a mesh of false circumstances as had ever been ravelled.

Today the trial would open. Today Dick, and the Rands, brother and sister, would turn set faces towards a curious, sensation-seeking world.

Dick had packed a few things, looked at the field with an unseeing eye. He knew the thoughts that surged there, the resentment and helplessness of these air mail men at the calamity that had befallen their leader.

Things were at loose ends. The morale of the service was for the moment utterly shattered As he stood there, with brooding eyes, Carmichael came up to him, and dropped one hand on his shoulder. The casual gesture warned him. He had not suspected Carmichael of possessing so much feeling. And he felt that Carmichael was making a kindly effort to take his thoughts off the dark topic, when the superintendent with a forced laugh pointed out Perez to him.

The swarthy little line chief was running up and down like an excited insect. He was heartily cursing some workmen.

"Look at him!" Carmichael execlaimed "That fellow always makes me laugh. Love the ships, knows every splinter of them, and yet never been up in a plane in his life!"

Dick knew the peculiarity of the line chief."I wonder why," he hazarded.

"Scared of them. Scared to doath of them. He'd rather be bound between two wild horses, I believe," Carmichael declared.

It was time to go. Dick thrust out his hand as if indeed he were going on a long journey. Carmichael shook hands, and said nothing. Futile wishes would have been out of place.

So it was that Dick Trent went to the trial of Old Man Rand of the air mail.

The prosecution opened up its case with a rush. Under the lash of a fiery district attorney, anxious to make a great name for himself, Mary winced. She kept her eyes turned unceasingly on her father. Now and

then she would reach for Dick's hand, and cling tight to it, like a person who drowns.

All the familiar evidence was paraded in court. From the pistol to the canvas sack, the chain was forged. Dick had been one of the first witnesses. He had done his best to weaken the state's case, and several of his replies struck home.

The case dragged on, full of bickerings and tense moments, full of long wranglings as to legal procedure, full of the law's delays, and circumlocutions, and follios. Women would hold their breath in the crowded courtroom. Newspaper artists and special writers studied the judge, the defendant, the lawyers for portraiture.

Would it ever end, Dick sometimes wondered. Mary was being gradually tortured before his eyes. Tommy Rand had somehow grown more mature. Unsuspected qualities, endurance, and pluck, and loyalty had pushed their way to the surface of his nature. He did his best to cheer and protect his sister.

The defense's turn came at last. Little Garrison displayed a surprising mental agility. Again and again he hammered home the fact that there was no possible explanation of how Lawson had come to descend in his plane, that there was no way Old Man Rand could have signalled him to descend, that in spite of the efforts of a dozen detectives no trace of the stolon money had been found.

Against the thunder of the state's case those few arguments seemed no louder than a whisper. Garrison trusted most to his summary, his summary of Old Man Rand's long and honorable career, of his character, of the unlikelihood that such a man should commit such a crime.

He spoke quietly, and with real effect. The judge charged the jury, and they withdrew. They were out exactly two hours.

The foreman pronounced the verdict: "Guilty."

A kind of sigh, a sigh as of pent-up suspense relieved at last, ran around the courtroom. The voice of the clerk rose monotonously.

Mary turned her white, stricken face to Dick. Her lips did not move. She was beyond tears, beyond any visible expression of grief. He took her arm and led her from the courtroom.

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THE FIRST SHOCK OF THE TRIAL WAS OVER. That, and the sentencing of Old Man Rand to death, seemed to have proved the climax to Mary's suffering.

Certainly in the months that followed, Dick thought he had never known in his life who had so much of the quality of gameness. A courage that had its source in the unknown springs of her own soul, kept her head high, kept her fighting to the last.

And ordeals had come thronging upon her. The expenses of the case had been heavy, and now there were new expenses. She flung every penny she had in the world in the effort to save her father. Too late to be of any real help, eminent lawyers journeyed from other states to confer with the diminutive Garrison.

The house she had lived in most of her life went under the hammer one morning, and with it all it contained save a few personal belongings. She and Tommy moved into a small apartment in an obscure quarter of the town.

Absurdly sensitive always, she now had reason to be, now had reason to suspect that a casual, appraising glance was a glance of curiosity, or contempt. She was Old Man Rand's daughter, once the veteran of the Air Mail, now a condemned killer in the eyes of the law.

Bitter it was to bear these things. But Dick had kept close to her, forgiving her moods of rebellion, of injustice, knowing well enough she would come to him, before the day was out, to beg his forgiveness. Her nerves were on edge as indeed were those of everyone at Rand Field.

Tom Rand had, however, reacted surprisingly to the calamity that had overtaken his family. Up to the last minute he had apparently believed his father would be cleared, and things would return to old, pleasant, familiar ways. When sentence of death had been passed. Tom went around for a week with dazed, incredulous eyes.

From that stage he had emerged many times more mature, with the seeds of understanding and even strength in him.

That was the only good thing that the whole disaster had created.

As for Dick, he could only suffer for Mary in his heart. His inability to help her gnawed at him. He pondered asleep and awake the possibilities, and could find no loophole for action in any of them.

Old Man Rand was innocent, and Old Man Rand had been sentenced to die!

As the weeks rolled on, the appeals procured by expensive counsel were one by one dismissed or rejected.

And now Mary's money was all gone. The field was scarcely paying for itself. The government contracts could scarcely meet the heavy expenses, and the morale of the organization had suffered through the loss of its chief.

Carmichael had been helpful. He had not changed in spite of the ironic comments which had at first caused Dick to distrust him, Carmichael proved surprisingly thoughtful.

He had done his best to push the service to its most efficient pitch. Then it was he who, to augment finances, had suggested opening the field to the public for paid rides, or "joy hops" as the pilots of the company called them.

The field broke even, but there was no profit. In this extremity Mary had come to Dick.

"I've got to have money; I've got to have It. I've got to retain John Parmenter Graves—he might do something. I—I'd starve myself if that would do any good. Where can I get the money, Dick?"

He was too young, too much an adventurer, to know much about the major problem of life to ninety-nine people out of a hundred. How did people get money? What did they do to become millionaires?

"I'll try to think of something tonight, Mary," he had said helplessly.

He was as uncertain as a man in a labyrinth. Money—how could he get money for her? His people—they had none to spare, or at least no such amount as she now needed. Where else? How else?

There came into his mind the thought that inventions had often produced sizable fortunes. Why couldn't he invent something? All at once he remembered something that had lain at the back of his mind for months, something he had talked about to Lawson one day. That idea of phosphorescent sky-writing! And Lawson—who was shrewd and critical and skeptical—had said it was good.

He knitted his brows fiercely and remembered. The next morning he wandered out into the workroom. It was one of his two-day resting periods. Already the field was full of people who wished the thrill of a first plane ride, and of spectators who preferred to take their thrills vicariously.

Little Perez pushed his way through the crowd, furious at this desecration of the ships he loved and feared. Dick had to grin at the seriousness of the line chief's face.

He found Wilson, a good mechanic, and a quiet, respectful follow, inside the shop. He began to talk to him, hesitantly at first, then more and more confidently. And Wilson listened, and nodded. And nodded again. He picked up a piece of piping and squinted at it.

"Now just suppose, Mr. Trent, you had a piece of piping like this, how could you figure to connect it, without . . . "

"Oh, but wait," Dick interrupted. He was excited, as he explained Wilson was interested in sky-writing! First Lawson, and now Wilson—conservative men both.

THAT NIGHT he tried to tell Mary what he was doing, but whether she was apathetic, or failed to see the possibilities, she did not express any enthusiasm.

He was disappointed.

"But it's all right, Mary. It's a great idea, I tell you!"

"I hope so, Dick."

She was silent again. Her eyes had clouded. He knew she was not listening now. He knew that her thoughts were miles away, in a lonely cell, where the veteran of the Air Mail waited for a fate that now seemed inevitable.