

THE SKY RAIDER

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FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MANY DAYS Dick was jubilant as he flew along. They had saved Old Man Rand! By now Carmichael would have radioed the governor, telling him to wait for the precious statement Dick carried in his jacket.

And perhaps Carmichael would have forced the remainder of the truth from Perez. Not that it mattered, for Perez had been broken, and the police would drag the names of the gang from him sooner or later.

Dick had covered about fifty miles when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw something off to the right. He turned his head. A plane was slowly overtaking him, its engine obviously wide open.

It was a Rand ship. He throttled slightly and waited.

There was a lone figure in the big plane. To his surprise Dick recognized Mary. She was waving, signalling something, but he did not get her meaning. What could be wrong?

He started to close in, but she shook her head, gesturing ahead. That must mean only one thing. The Governor had not believed her story! She was urging him not to fail with the message.

He waved reassuringly but hesitated before speeding up. She had taken a heavy mail ship to catch up, a type she had not flown before. He watched anxiously for she seemed to handle it with difficulty.

Reluctantly, he reached for his throttle. But just then a spurt of dark smoke came from the exhaust of the other plane. More smoke and the ship dropped astern, nosing down into a spiral.

Dick was torn by conflicting emotions. Time was precious, yet not

even on this desperate mission, could he go on with Mary in danger! Could she land that big ship safely? He searched the ground below. There were several clear places. He would see her safely down, then hurry on. He could call the field to help her later.

A thousand feet below, Mary was leveling off to land. Dick banked around for a better view. She would have no trouble for the field was large and open. But sudden consternation gripped him.

At the last moment, when it had almost stopped, the ship had come to grief, apparently as its wheels struck some obstacle. Slowly the tail had come up. The plane was now on its back.

Dick glided down as fast as he could. At that slow speed, a turnover would hardly be serious, but he had to be sure. He swung across the field at 100 feet. Panic seized him as he saw no sign of movement. Mary must be pinned underneath, perhaps seriously hurt.

He landed as quickly as possible, stopping near the overturned plane. Jumping out he dashed across the field. As he stooped down there was a sudden movement under the wing.

The next instant Dick was stupefied to look down the muzzle of an automatic. But the amazement that left him staring helplessly was not at sight of the gun—but at the man whose amused eyes rested on him.

It was Carmichael!

Carmichael's left hand was pressed against the mouth of Mary Rand. He released her now, and emerged from under the plane, leaning against it to watch both of them. Wearily, slowly, Mary got up from her knees.

Carmichael! Dick's mind was still paralyzed. He made a puzzled gesture.

"Rather neat, Trent, getting you down this way," said Carmichael, pleasantly. "Miss Rand was helpful as she was always". Not that it didn't require considerable persuasion to get her into this plane back at the field. Fortunately, no one witnessed our little argument."

Carmichael still grinned. Dick stared. Mary—Mary had been forced into the front cockpit! She had had no controls. Carmichael had crouched down in the rear flown the ship from there, even slitting a hole in the fabric through which to peer out.

Then he had made that trick landing, a landing which, while it crippled his plane, would leave its passengers unhurt, knowing that Dick would land.

Dick looked dazedly at Mary. Her pitiful eyes sought his

“Why, oh why, didn’t you go on?” she half whispered.

Dick shook his head vaguely. Swirling thoughts made a chaos of his brain, a nightmare of this incredible scene. Then, out of that chaos his thoughts took shape. Something seemed to explode in his mind.

“Carmichael—you—you killed Lawson!”

“Uncanny mind you’ve got!” Carmichael exclaimed. “You seem to see everything. My boy, you’ve been throwing away your talents in the Air Mail!”

Dick scarcely heard the scoffing, unruffled voice. His mind was speeding back, trying to reconstruct, trying to put together the pieces of the whole puzzle.

“Not but what I admit,” Carmichael said, dropping his irony, “that I was surprised when you figured out that gas-gauge. That was smart of you, Trent. You gave me a scare. Fortunately, I managed to reach Perez first, and gave him his instructions.”

“And I was right—from the very first!” Dick burst out, unheeding. “You killed Lawson!”

“A regrettable fact,” Carmichael agreed, nodding. His automatic was still leveled, and his eyes had lost none of their awareness. But for the moment he seemed to enjoy tasting his triumph; watching the consternation grow in the faces of Mary and Dick.

“Yes,” he went on, “I admit that wasn’t part of my plans. Robbery, of course! Perez and I fixed it together. I drove out that night to wait for him after Perez fixed the gauge. But I had no notion Lawson was armed. So I had to use a wrestler’s trick I learned out in the East, got him down, and tapped him. I struck too hard. I got the money. I was really upset that morning. I had everything ready. Perez and I were going to jump on a tramp steamer. Then Miss Rand, dear girl, came to the rescue. The moment she pointed out it was the old man’s pistol, I saw the rest!”

He laughed, relishing every word of his account.

“It was simple enough to sneak that canvas sack into Rand’s house. While you two went into the garden; I slipped down to the cellar, and popped it in the furnace where it wouldn’t burn. That was a clever move, Trent! Give me credit for that. Then all the angles of Heaven worked for me. Blessed if the old man didn’t refuse to offer an alibi! When you and Miss Rand managed to unearth one, I conferred with Von Siechner.”

“You bought him!” Dick exclaimed. “You bought his lie!”

“My dear boy, you could buy Von Siechner’s eyes if you wanted to pay for them. I knew him out Batavia way—years ago.” He broke off. “So now I win, and you lose. A happy ending to a jolly little story, Trent! And you ought to be able to write about me some day. The Sky Raider—the first of them all!” He jerked the automatic in a gesture of command.

“What are you going to do with us?” Dick demanded. Mary, standing at his shoulder, had not spoken. She stared at Carmichael as if at some horror.

Carmichael’s brows went up whimsically. “You mustn’t expect me to take you into my confidence completely,” he said with an air of mock reproof. “However, I can say this. The three of us are going to take quite a little hop. I shall then say a heart-breaking farewell to you. Outside of a little discomfort, neither of you will be harmed.”

“Carmichael!” Dick burst out “Rand is in Starktown prison. He’s going to die tonight unless you prevent it.”

“By the simple process of dying in his place?” Carmichael asked dryly. “Trent, let’s talk of something else! Self-sacrifice has always been a little nauseating to me. Suppose you two get into your plane.”

Still covering them, Carmichael reached one hand toward the door of the express compartment. He unlocked it deftly, and pulled out a bulky package.

“We’d better transfer this little matter to your plane also,” he murmured “Traveling is always expensive. It may come in handy!”

The stolen money! The cynical gleam of relish in Carmichael’s eyes as he uttered his flippancies.

For one instant Dick measured his man. Then with all his force he hurled himself forward. In the impetus Carmichael’s gun went flying

from his hand. Carmichael stooped as if carried off his feet by the suddenness of the attack. A hoarse, inarticulate sound burst from Dick's throat. At the same instant Carmichael's long arms thrust forward and gripped him about the knees.

Even as Dick went pitching head first into the rocks, he knew he had been beaten by another wrestler's trick "learned out in the East." The next moment, a crashing sound seemed to split his head, as he struck the rocks in his fall, and he knew nothing else.

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WHEN DICK CAME TO AGAIN he was in a world of night. Past him rushed the wind, and overhead the stars were thick in the sky.

He was flying through space, flying in his own ship but with Carmichael at the controls.

Difficult to reason it all out, difficult to think clearly on anything at all with his head racked by agony Itself!

Only by a sheer effort of will, refusing even now to give up, could he force himself to consider the predicament into which he had fallen.

Carmichael—Carmichael had admitted everything, explained everything! They had fought. Then that trick—that trick that sent him flying over Carmichael's shoulders! He must have been lifted into the plane. And Mary—what of Mary?

Through dazed eyes he saw her then. In the cockpit in front, her head resting against the fuselage, her eyes closed, as if in final despair. Pitifully, the picture wrenched his heart, drove his senses to a last attempt to gain mastery of a hopeless situation.

Beside Mary, Carmichael grasped the controls, guided the ship through the night towards some unknown destination.

Where were they being taken? And for that matter, why? Too weak to move, Dick shut his eyes, tried to think. Carmichael thought him unconscious still. To let him continue in that error was at least an advantage.

For what reason had Carmichael taken them along? He had the money safe and Perez was waiting for him somewhere. Why did he need to take them with him?

The simple truth came home to him. Indisputably Carmichael was removing all possible witnesses! By what means? Death? It was possible, it was believable. And yet even Carmichael might stop at that. What was it he had said—they would come to no harm?—and something else about discomfort?

In a flash the whole stratagem was clear to Dick. Carmichael was heading for some isolated port, possibly in Mexico itself. Long before he reached it he meant to land Dick and Mary in an inaccessible place, where they might have to face hunger, lawlessness, and a thousand delaying difficulties, before they could regain civilization and give warning. By that time Carmichael and his confederate would be hidden away in some obscure or unguessed quarter of the wide world.

Dick's head still ached miserably. The blood pulsed in it with a steady, unrelieved throbbing, like a myriad trip-hammers. He gritted his teeth, fought his inclination to quit, summoned the last ounce of his will.

And with his tired and aching brain, he thought. He peered over the side and made out familiar landmarks. In another minute they would be passing over Henshaw Field. He thought, keen and clear, to one last strange plan. Was there any hope? He did not know. But if he were to risk it at all he must risk it now. A few moments more, and it would be too late!

He straightened himself. Mary moved slightly. Carmichael with his head thrust out of the cockpit looked down into the abyss.

Keeping his eyes fixed on Carmichael, Dick stealthily moved his arms within the small play offered by the wires that bound him. Two breathless minutes passed. Still Dick was unobserved in what he did.

Now he waited, peering over the side. He saw Field 43, the last intermediate field they would cross.

Then it was that Dick lifted his arm slowly backwards while the wires bit into his flesh. His fingers clawed at and finally grasped the main gas valve. And at that moment Carmichael turned.

Even as Dick held on with a death grip, Carmichael drove a blow against his knuckles with all his force. Dick shut his eyes and hung on. The last drop of gas was drained from the carburetor. The engine sputtered and died.

Now Carmichael, even as he pounded Dick's clenched fingers, had the additional problem of guiding the ship as it glided earthwards. They swept downwards in a long turn toward the boundaty lights of the field, operated by their automatic relay. The field itself lay deserted beneath them.

Carmichael was silent, but his face worked with fury. One final blow and Dick's fingers relaxed. The valve was opened. The engine broke into futile life. But too late! Carmichael had to land now at that low altitude, for they had lost their speed.

Carmichael hurled off and the plane settled to a stop.

With reckless disregard he literally tore the wire from Dick's body.

"Get out!" he ordered them both.

Dick clambered out somehow and stood swaying. Mary clung close to his side. Carmichael pushed them away where he could be heard above the noise of the now idling engine.

The look in Carmichael's eyes was unpleasant to see. Yet his manner had undergone no change.

"What a fool you are, Trent!" he said. "Surely you don't think I intend to be stopped—now?"

He shook his head. "Perhaps I ought to explain what my plans are—or what they wete! I meant to put you down in Mexico, in the mountains, where you might be able to reach your friends in two or three weeks. But now you've interfered with me. You might . . . interfere with me again!"

He shouted but his voice was just barely discernible over the roar of the waiting plane. Yet he had the air of someone confiding an intimate secret.

Dick guessed the dark purpose mirrored in those unscrupulous eyes He fought for time. Ten minutes, five minutes, even a single minute! Could there be any way of delaying him? Had the last plan of all miscarried?

What was he saying? He did not know. Wild, disconnected things. He was pleading. Carmichael could not resist the pleasure of watching Dick's apparent fear.

Mary was trying to comfort him, to encourage him . . . She did not understand. Let her think him a coward! Let her think anything! Only grant him one more minute, and still one more!

Carmichael's hard face had not relaxed. Now as if wearying of the scene his hand that held the automatic tightened around the butt. Did he plan to shoot him down in cold blood? Dick was never to know

For there came from above him a louder din of roaring engines, a din thus far hidden and confused with the sound of their own ship.

Three fast planes swooped from the sky at the far end of the field, landing with reckless swiftness.

Carmichael had whirled. The first of the planes had already leveled off.

A cry of astonishment burst from Carmichael. He stood hesitantly. Then all at once he broke into a run, dashing for his own plane.

Dick stumbled after him, threw his arms around him, carried him to the earth. Carmichael flung him off. Dick caught at his legs. The flight superintendent, with a white face and staring eyes, lifted his pistol.

The next instant it was knocked from his fingers. A pilot, who had jumped from the first pursuit plane, had sprinted towards them. He caught Carmichael in his grip. There was no escaping.

"What is this Dick?" he panted. It was Ted Ericson. "I—I got your sky-writing message all right at Henshaw. It worked this time! S.O.S. and then the code that you would try to land at Field 43."

Mary had come up to where they stood. The two other pilots from Henshaw Field were running up to join them.

In violent, disjointed sentences, Dick poured out the story.

"You've got your hands on Jack Lawson's murderer . . . the money's in that plane . . . I've got a statement that'll free Old Man Rand. We've got to get on to the governor. Right away! There's no time—"

"We'll do it in half an hour!" Ted shouted back. "Time enough, Dick! There's another hour still! . . . And as for this fellow—hey, Joe grab this bird and make it quick! We'll take care of him all right!"

Dick put his arm tenderly around Mary. She was saying something. But it was impossible to hear anything under a shout. He would find

out later. Her eyes smiled at him. She pressed his fingers in trust and love.

Carmichael had not moved. His face was set, almost calm now, as if he saw the futility of struggle.

The career of the Sky Raider was ended forever.

THE END.