

THE SKY RAIDER

3

FOR SOME MOMENTS Dick remained where he was without moving, trying to think of a plan. But no inspiration came to his aid. It was useless to ring or knock again. He felt in his pocket for the letter Old Man Rand had asked him to deliver, and tightened his lips with determination.

The next minute a big limousine purred its way down the street and halted before the door. Out of it stepped two men in evening dress. Three women followed. One of the women laughed shrilly, and pushed her escort. He laughed, too, and swayed. It was clear that the whole party had been making a night of it, and meant to wind up in the gambling house. Then Dick's inspiration came. He walked to the nearer man. He was young, round-faced, and his eyes shifted drunkenly.

"Hello!" Dick said, "Dont you remember me?"

"Why—why yes! Thish is—everybody, thish is friend of mine. Can't remember your name, old feller, but friend just the same!"

The other man had rung the bell. The door opened wide. The sullen-faced guardian stood there, bowing now. Dick stepped in, trying to hide himself between the taller man and the women. He was in the hallway.

Beyond, lights streamed through doorways and faint sounds could be heard. Dick wasted no time. He slipped ahead of the party, and hastened down the hall. But a voice angry and dangerous, rose behind him.

"Hey, you!"

Dick paid no attention. He pushed open the door. The lights blinded him. He saw many figures, women, some of them exquisitely dressed,

men of many kinds, standing or sitting around a table, watching a spinning roulette wheel whirr and click out its destiny of dollars.

Where was Tommy Rand? How could he find him when he had never even see him? And there was still another room beyond this, and another. The guard at the door would spot him in the next instant if he stood here.

Dick brushed his hand across his eyes, and strode down the nearest passageway. He found himself standing before an ample bar. A bartender was shaking cocktails. Some men were talking together at the far end.

They looked at him curiously, noticing the flying costume, which he had not changed. Then rapid steps came down the passageway, and the angry doorman confronted him.

“Come here, you!” he barked. And to the bartender: “Charley, this guy tried to crash the door. He may be from the Mapleson crowd. Get him.”

Dick backed against the wall. He felt a sense of menace, of ruthlessness and violence that lurked under this roof.

“I’m only looking for someone I told you,” he declared. “I’m looking for Tom Rand.”

The bartender had come around the bar to join the doorman. There was going to be a fight and a onesided one at that. But from the entrance a cheerful, intoxicated voice asked suddenly.

“Who’s looking for Tom Rand?”

Dick stared at the newcomer, a good-looking chap little more than a boy, younger than himself. He looked careless and good-natured and spoiled. His face was like a weaker copy of the face of Mary Rand.

Tommy Rand himself. It was sheer luck!

“I’ve got a letter for you,” Dick shouted. “From your father.”

“Well, let’s have a drink first. Got to have a drink before I can read any of the old man’s lectures.”

“This letter’s important.”

“A drink’s important, too!”

The bartender had paused, and the doorman looked uncertain.

The latter surrendered with a bad grace. “Didn’t know who you were, see? We gotta be careful all the time.”

He made his way down the passage. Tommy Rand swayed over to the bar, and thumped it.

“Give me some pink-eye, Charley. And some for Mr.—Mr. What’s-his-name.”

“Trent. Dick Trent.”

“Yes for Mr.—for Dick! How are you old boy? Must’ve been pretty thick tonight—wasn’t it?”

“Listen, you better not have a drink now. You’ve got to fly back in the morning.”

“Oh, yes, I have got to have a drink now! And right now! Ever hear of the Sahara desert? Well, it’s in my throat!”

He fumbled for the glass of rye, and poured it down.

Dick could easily feel the boy’s charm. He had that quality most certainly. He had also plainly enough, been used to having his own way. Perhaps the letter might contain something that would bring him to his senses. Dick produced it. Tommy Rand tore it open and glanced at it casually. Then his face did grow serious, and he muttered something under his breath. He pushed the letter over to Dick for him to read.

It was a government report, addressed to Simon Rand, censuring one T. Rand for intoxication, frequent late arrivals with the mail and other acts derogatory to the air mail service. It contained the definite statement that T. Rand’s designation as mail pilot would be revoked if any further offenses of this nature occurred.

“Now I am going to get tight. Good and tight!” Tommy Rand exploded

“But you’ve got to fly the mail in an hour or so, haven’t you?” argued Dick “You’ll get in a jam if you don’t show up. That’s what that letter’s about.”

“I don’t care.” But his eyes looked dark and unhappy.

“Come on! You come on with me,” Dick pleaded.

“Go to hell!” Tommy Rand reached for the second glass and drank that, too.

Then Dick Trent got angry. “You’ll come along, or I’ll take you along!”

For one moment Tommy met his eye defiantly. Then the courage went out of him. He looked sullen.

“All right. I suppose you think you’re a cop, or something.”

Dick caught his arm. Tommy swayed and stumbled. They passed through the main gambling room

“Dropped eight hundred there tonight,” Tommy boasted with a vacant laugh, “And now I’ve got to go and fly with a cop!”

In ten minutes Dick had him on the street. In another ten he found a prowling taxicab. It was close to four in the morning by the time they reached the field. Dick guided Tommy to the office. The night superintendent was still on duty. He looked at Tommy’s bloodshot eyes and unsteady hands.

“He can’t fly.”

“I know it, sir. I wonder if you’ll let me fly for him.”

“Fly for him?”

“Yes, I’ll take the plane back, and he can go as a passenger. When we hit Rand Field, I’ll let them think it was the other way about.”

“But it’s against the regulations.”

“I know that, but if I don’t do this, he’ll get kicked out of the game.”

The superintendent nodded. “All right. I’ll say nothing here. But if anything happens, I’ll have to tell the truth.”

“Nothing will happen “

“Hope not. You are a plucky kid. And I’m glad. After all, he’s Old Man Rand’s son.”

Dick, with Tommy Rand, who protested only that he wanted to sleep, went out to the line. The air was quiet, and the storm was over. Far away the thin line of the dawn was visible on the horizon. The mechanics were wheeling the big plane from the hangar. Dick half lifted, half pushed Tommy into the cockpit. He climbed in himself and took the controls.

The return flight was uneventful. As they neared the airport Dick gave the controls to Tom, who had been sobered by the cold, crisp air. On landing, Tom delayed taxiing to the line.

“Better duck right away,” he said anxiously. “You’re supposed to be at

Trupp Field, you know. I'll get the noon Eastbound pilot to sneak you back."

With a sudden affectionate impulse he held out his hand.

"Thanks," he said, a little shamefaced, "I guess I acted like a fool, but—"

"Forget it," Dick told him, grinning. "I needed the practice!"

As they reached the line he jumped out and made for the pilots hangout. Lawson was the only one there. Dick explained matters briefly.

"That's bad, kid," said Lawson gravely. "You'll have to keep out of sight. They kicked out one chap for doing that last month."

"Just for riding back?" demanded Dick. "Who did it?"

"Carmichael—for being off his post when he needed a reserve pilot," said Lawson. "Take my tip—keep out of sight of Carmichael."

"Inquiring for me, gentlemen?" drawled a cool, indolent voice. They turned quickly. Carmichael had come in from the side entrance and was regarding them from the doorway with his careless, amused eyes.

4

THERE WAS A SLIGHT PAUSE, Carmichael continued to regard Dick with his indolent smile.

“Would you mind telling me how you happen to be here?” he asked carelessly.

“I didn’t get to see much of the route last night,” Dick explained, “So I came back with Tom Rand as a passenger.”

Carmichael looked at him speculatively.

“Of course, young fellow, you didn’t think those regulations I gave you mount anything?” he said in an ironic tone.

“I forgot that one, Captain,” Dick said. “I was going back today, so I’d be ready for my run tomorrow.”

Carmichael’s voice was a little ominous.

“It just happens that Old Man Rand wants a reserve pilot at each field for each run,” he replied emphatically. “That’s one of his pet rules.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Too bad, Trent, but I’ll have to report this.”

Dick’s face fell.

“Isn’t there some way out?” he begged. “I hate to start out with a bad record.”

“Rand will probably fire you,” said Carmichael cheerfully.

“Fire me!” Dick exclaimed,

Carmichael nodded, his lean face half in shadow.

“I’m afraid so. However, I’ll call the old man personally and do my best for you. Drop over to the office in about ten minutes and I’ll let you know the result.”

When, ten minutes later, Dick walked nervously into the flight office, Carmichael was idly glancing over his papers. He looked up indifferently.

“Well, you may be able to fix it up with the old man. But he wants to see you at his house right away. He’ll probably let you off with a reprimand.”

Dick felt resentful. What difference did an infraction of that rule make? He was to be reprimanded for helping Tom Rand! He had saved Tom from a jam, only to get into it himself.

In his resentment he suddenly decided to tell Old Man Rand what he thought. He’d show how he felt. He wouldn’t take it lying down!

The Rand house was a big Georgian building on a hill, beautifully kept, looking out upon a quiet neighborhood through many polished windows.

Dick rang, and was ushered across, the thick, soft rugs to a heavy door. Old Man Rand’s voice barked: “Come in!”

Rand rose as he entered. He was scowling. “What the devil do you mean?” he demanded “Leaving your post—coming back—taking all that risk—just to help my boy!”

The scowl had gone Rand was smiling instead. And behind the deep, grumbling voice, Dick saw that Old Man Rand appreciated what he had done.

“But how did you find out?” Dick asked

“The first thing Tom did when he came up here a few minutes ago was to tell me what you’d done.”

Then Dick began to grin, too. “Carmichael said he thought you were going to fire me,” he said.

“Did he?” Rand laughed. “Don’t worry about that. That’s just Captain Carmichael’s sense of humor!”

Dick remained a few minutes longer. Rand was talking frankly to him, with the air of one flyer in another, Dick realized the subtle compliment.

“We want more men like you to put the air mail where it belongs. I’m trying right now to persuade the Federal Reserve to let us carry cash in large amounts, instead of limiting us to \$10,000. I hope to make

a test case in a few weeks, perhaps even less. What do you think of the idea?"

Rand did not wait to hear Dick's opinion, but talked on and as he talked, Dick saw something of the idealism that animated him, that gave color to all he did and said.

Presently the older man broke off. "Great Scott, boy, you've had no sleep and I'm holding you here. Get some rest, and come to see us often, when you're at this end of the run."

Dick shook hands. As he closed the door behind him, he saw dimly in the darkness of the hall Mary Rand standing there.

"I wanted to thank you for everything," she said. "I knew you'd get through. Tom told me all you did. You were wonderful!"

Dick stared at her, at the brown cloudy hair, the softly curving throat. He did not know what to answer, or what to say. There was only one thing he could think of to tell her, and that was that she was beautiful.

But he didn't say that. Instead he managed to turn aside her praise with a joke.

"Oh—I'm a little tin hero, all right," he said, grinning.

She regarded him with understanding eyes. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised if you were a hero," she said. "Just because you don't act like one. I can easily imagine your saving someone's life."

"There are a lot of people whose lives I wouldn't save!"

"Would you save mine?"

"Just give me the chance!"

"What'll I do—fall off a cliff, or something?"

They were both smiling now, but suddenly Dick's gaze held hers, and he was silent, as she was silent.

There was a brief, embarrassed pause. Then she said with a forced casualness:

"I think I'll come out to the field tomorrow morning and fly that red Cado plane. I need to practice landings. I haven't flown since I came back from college and I don't want to get rusty."

"I'll be on the lookout for you," he said.

“Will you?” She held out her hand. “Watch me and learn how to fly! See you tomorrow!”

She waved her hand, and graceful as a dancer disappeared up the curving stairway.

Dick Trent watched her go and then made his way out of the house.

He felt vaguely troubled and yet happy, too. He did not know what was the matter. He did not know that he had fallen in love.