

# THE SKY RAIDER



# 11

THERE WAS A VAGUE MURMUR of protest from Kiely, the friendly Postal Inspector. But the plain clothes man either ignored it or did not hear it.

Old Man Rand showed no resentment, as he slowly crossed the hall. He seemed somehow above the insult, and there was an impressive and even moving dignity in his manner.

“What is it you wish to ask me?” he said without lifting his voice.

“Several things. First of all, where were you between the hours of five and eleven this morning?”

“I decline to answer.”

“Good! Now let me ask you something you may be willing to answer. What would cause a pilot flying a plane to come down, besides an accident?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I mean, could he be signalled down?”

“Yes, that is quite possible.”

“In other words the man who took that plane out this morning and went to his death could have been signalled to come down.”

Police Inspector Grahame grinned broadly now. He was plainly enjoying himself, and it was equally plain he thought he had made a good stroke.

“Unfortunately,” Rand said quietly in answer, “any pilot flying across those ranges would have been too high to notice any man, let alone signals.”

For a moment the Inspector was taken aback. He tried to recover his advantage with a bluster.

“See here, Rand, we’ve got the goods on you! The sooner you come across the better!”

Mary had leaped forward. “How dare you! How dare you talk to my father like that!”

“Keep out of this, young lady.”

It was Rand himself who gently urged her back. She stood close to Dick. Unconsciously her hand sought and found his. He held it fast, and his heart was troubled for her in her unhappiness. Glancing back he saw that Tom Rand had come clown the carpeted stairway and stood in the background, staring with startled eyes at the group that filled the big foyer.

“What else do you wish me to answer?” Rand asked in his imperturbable voice. But Dick saw he was holding his calm only by a profound effort of will. The fingers of the hand he held behind his back twitched and moved unceasingly.

“I am not going to ask you much more. I’m giving you your chance now to come across with the truth. We’ve got all the dope on you. Listen: your company’s facing a deficit, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Rand half whispered.

“And you worked hard to get this shipment, didn’t you? And your gun was the gun that killed hlm? And you can’t account for your whereabouts during the time the murder took place?”

“Everything you say is true. Only your conclusions are wrong.”

“All right. Then I’ll show you something! I had a man inside searching this place this afternoon. Didn’t know that, did you? He didn’t miss anything. He even opened the door of your furnace. Of your furnace, got that? The next time you try to burn something, better chuck it into the fire itself and not on top of the firebox! Things don’t burn on the ridge of a firebox, Mr Rand! Martin, come here!”

One of his men instantly stopped forward. The Inspector took something from his hands and held it out, with a smile of triumph, to Old Man Rand’s startled gaze.

It was a tightly-woven canvas sack, stamped with the initials of the Federal Reserve. Scorched and partially blackened, with its broken seals scarcely decipherable, it required, nevertheless, only a single glance to know it for what it was, the bag that had contained the currency which Lawson's plane had taken on that dawn.

Rand swayed slightly. He moistened his lips.

"You—you found that? Here in my house? In—in the furnace?"

"In the furnace, where you tried to burn it. Now what have you got to say!"

There was a pause of deathly stillness. Almost, Dick thought, he could hear the breathing of every man in that hushed room. Mary's body seemed to press his, to reach out for support, for help.

And he watched, as everyone watched, the changing expressions on Old Man Rand's face.

The veteran pilot looked somehow noble in the half light of the hallway. There was a kind of sadness in his eyes now, as if he reflected upon things no mind could utter, the sad, bitter truths that lie in the background of every consciousness.

And he was thinking. Thinking, as if unaware of these men who watched his every move, like wolves seeking to devour him at the first sign of weakness.

His face grew darker still. Then he lifted his head, and there was a certain pride in his eyes, and a certain sternness. He seemed to have reached a decision at last.

He faced the inspector calmly his voice was measured and deliberate. "I acknowledge that what you say is true."

At these words the room seemed cleared, as if electrically, of the tension that had gripped it. The detective himself gave an inarticulate sound. Kiely turned his head away, and walked to the window. Mary was trembling violently.

"Better come along, Mr. Rand." The Inspector was quieter now. He had won his point. He did not need to bully any further for the moment.

"Very well. I'll get my hat." One of the men moved forward and stood

at his side. While they all watched, Old Man Rand quietly opened the hall closet, found his hat there, and started for the door. He had made no comment, and met no one's eyes.

But Mary suddenly ran forward. "Father! Father, don't let them take you away like this! Tell them you didn't do it! Don't let them!"

He touched her hair, patted her arm, gently disengaged himself, soothed her with his tone, and his words.

"Everything will be all right, Mary. Everything will be all right. You mustn't worry, dear."

The Inspector's men had closed in on him. One of them pushed the door open. They went down the gravel path together surrounding him, and guided him into the car at the curb. It moved out of sight down the street.

Dick's heart was like lead. Old Man Rand—a murderer. Old Man Rand—the confessed perpetrator of that unspeakable crime! It was impossible—and yet it was so.

And Mary was sobbing now, sobbing wildly. Tom Rand had come forward, white-faced and husky of voice. He was doing his best to comfort his sister.

Dick stood there helplessly, wishing that he might somehow banish her grief, yet knowing nothing of what he could do.

Then looking up suddenly, she saw him. "You'd better go," she managed to get out. "You'd better go—I want to be alone. I want to be alone now. I've got to think—I've got to help him."

Dick caught Tom's eye. "I'll call up in the morning. If there's anything I can do, well—you know I'll do it!"

He closed the door behind him and went down the street. His head was whirling with the evening's disclosure.

# 12

HE AWOKE NEXT MORNING at the hangout with a splitting headache. He had gone to bed as soon as he had reached the field, ignoring the group that clustered around the company office when he arrived.

Their eyes had searched his. They had been anxious for news. But Dick could not bring himself to tell them. They would learn soon enough!

He slept that night a sleep of utter exhaustion, but he was tortured by ugly, though formless, dreams. When he rose he found the sun shining, and cheerfulness like a living thing sang over the field, and in the very air. Cheerfulness in all nature! But no cheerfulness in his heart, as the events of yesterday came slowly back to him.

The morning was a crowded one. The news of Old Man Rand's arrest had been a feature of the daily papers. There was much speculation as to the whereabouts of the money. The field hummed with excited gossip, and with anger and indignation.

The grand old man of the air mail to be accused of a thing like that! Pilots and mechanics and miscellaneous workers, even men who had criticised Rand for his bluff, off-handed ways, were quick to rally now to his support. There was a spirit on that field that morning as if all the world were its enemy.

"He didn't do it! Old Man Rand do a thing like that? He was framed! Yes, that's what it was—framed!"

Remarks like this came to Dick's ears from every side. And looking

back, recalling the weight of evidence, and even Rand's final acknowledgment of guilt, Dick could still not bring himself to believe what must be the truth. The scare-heads that shouted: "RAND CONFESSES" were supported by every logic. But they were denied by instinct and emotion; and in the face of indisputable facts. Dick still clung to an unreasoning faith in his employer's innocence.

There were many developments that day. Poor Lawson's body was brought before the coroner, and his relatives wired. And in the morning Dick had an experience which he was never to forget.

Many people came to the field that day, photographers, sensation-seekers, and others. Among them was a girl, a small frail-looking blonde girl who inquired for Dick.

When she found him, she asked, "You were the man who found the revolver, weren't you? You saw him first."

Dick was in no mood for cross-examination. He gave her a curt affirmative.

"Can't you tell me something?" she pleaded. Her eyes were large and quiet, and she stood very still.

He took her to be a newspaper-writer, anxious for a story, and he was in no mind to report his sensations.

"I can tell you nothing," he said, and started to turn his back.

But she did not move, only staring at him speechlessly with a face that was suddenly full of unutterable woe.

"What's the matter?" he stammered, as a suspicion rose in his mind. The next instant she had verified it.

"We were to have been married in a month," she said, but it was as if she repeated to herself what she had said a thousand weary times.

"Oh, I—I didn't know. I'm sorry. He—he spoke to me about you only yesterday."

She looked at him quite steadily, yet her eyes did not seem to see him, nor her ears to have heard. And while he sought hopelessly for the words that might help her, she herself turned, and went down the roadway, like someone for whom hope is dead forever.

It was then that Dick had called up Mary. He was told she was not

at home. He had a vision of her interviewing police officials, trying to reach her father in his prison cell, trying futilely to combat the enormous engine of the law.

At noon, the last remnants of the tragedy itself appeared on the scene. A big truck arrived with the twisted and charred wreckage of Lawson's plane. By the order of Postal Inspector Kiely this was unloaded in one of the disused hangars, and the doors locked upon it.

In the calamity that had come upon Old Man Rand, poor Lawson's death was almost effaced, except for the few who had known him intimately. Like soldiers in battle, the flyers grieved for and then forgot that one of their number who had met death.

But the arrest of Rand himself was something that was not so easily brushed aside. Not only were their own fortunes tied up with his, but somehow the accusation against him seemed to them like an accusation against the air mail service itself.

So it was that when Carmichael called a general meeting in the hangout, they flocked there in burning indignation.

Dick had called up the Rand home twice since. But Mary was still not to be found. He was worrying about her acutely now, suffering with her because he understood what she must be going through.

He followed the rest into the hangout. The mechanics clustered in a group, some pilots lounged against the wall, the dark face of Perez, the line chief, showed near a window. Carmichael came in, and a silence fell.

He spoke very briefly, but no orator ever commanded a more intent audience.

He characterized the arrest of Rand as unjust and insulting. He urged every man to go through the routine of his work as the best way of serving the man they all loved.

There was no cheering when he was through, but a grim, hard silence that spoke louder than words. And it was evident that the speech had taken effect from the way the men buckled to their work.

Then for the fourth time Dick called Mary Rand. The impassive voice of the butler told him once again she was not at home. He could not believe that this was so. He repeated his name, but with no better

luck. The impulse seized him to go to the house himself. He felt somehow she must be in.

Tomorrow he was due for his mail flight. He must see Mary today if possible.

When he arrived at the Rand house, he noticed how passers-by halted outside, to stare for a moment at the windows before they moved on. They looked at him with undisguised curiosity as he made his way through the gates.

It was a long time before his ring was answered. The butler gravely took his name, and told him to wait.

He waited in suspense. What had he come to say, or to do? To offer his sympathy? She knew she had that already. He had nothing to suggest, no plan of action, only a resentment at the working of fate that had brought about this cataclysm.

He did not know how long he stood there. But suddenly he looked up to find, not the butler, but Mary herself. A changed Mary. With eyes red from weeping, with her dark, soft hair all unkempt, with her face desperate and tragic. She seemed scarcely in her senses as she stared at him. And her voice was scarcely her voice as she cried hysterically:

“I don’t want to see you any more! Don’t you understand? That’s why I wouldn’t come to the phone all day. It’s through you all this happened. It’s through your bringing back that pistol! I—I hate you for what you’ve done!”

The door was suddenly shut. Dick stood for a moment without moving. He went down the path. He felt that he had lost the only thing in the world he had ever wanted.