

THE SKY RAIDER

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DICK WAS ON THE MORNING RUN. It was no longer unfamiliar or uncertain. He could look back, and recall that first night when he had flown to deliver a letter to Tommy Rand. He remembered the storm and its hazards, the perils through which he had slipped unscathed, by some befriending goddess of luck.

The route was familiar now. But as he flew it this frosty morning that bit his face with its chill and even fought through the sheep-lined coat to his bones, he might quite as well have been flying blind again.

His ship swept across the thin line of a railroad. Looking down, trying to banish his thoughts of Mary's accusation, of the father's ordeal, he saw a train crawling beneath him.

How slowly it moved! And yet inside there were passengers with faces pressed against the windows who imagined themselves covering ground at the best possible speed. Unprogressive people, all of them—like people in the 19th Century England who persisted in using the stagecoach when the railroad had already asserted its superiority.

And looking down still, he could faintly make out the barred windows of the car that was in all probability a mail carrier.

Letters inside of it, and packages, an endless number! Letters from lover to lover, letters from mothers to sons, letters that carried on the business of the world, letters with cheques in them, letters with less welcome bills!

All speeding on their way. Trying to make time. And time—what was that but life? If you saved time, you saved life itself. The age of

man had been increased some ten years by scientific medical skill in the last century. Why, the age of man had been multiplied by the time-saving inventions that enabled him to live many lives in the space of one.

Dick thought of the mail in his own compartment that was now speeding on its way. The train had vanished. It was far behind. Flying as the crow flies, he was cutting down on distance as well as speeding pace. The writers who had trusted their missives to him were luckier than those who had sent theirs by that old-fashioned slowcoach method—the railroad train!

But these thoughts gave place at last to the more insistent ones that crowded his mind. Mary had said she hated him. In his heart he had no blame for her half-hysterical accusations, unreasonable though they were, for he knew the strain under which she was laboring.

But his mind hovered over the plight of Old Man Rand. He must be guilty—everything pointed that way. And yet somehow Dick could not bring himself to believe that was so.

He tried to think of solutions to the problem but his mind was baffled, and he gave up, as he had given up more than once in the past twenty-four hours. If only he could do something! If only there was something to do!

He made a landing at the destination airport before noon, gliding down toward the buildings that looked tiny, and the field that lay stretched below him like a brown postage-stamp.

His mail was received by the waiting truck; the familiar routine was unbroken. Dick reported at the office, strolled to the hangout, found everyone there discussing the Rand case. There had been no further clues. Nothing to disprove the evidence against Old Man Rand. The stolen money had not been located.

Why did he persist in thinking Old Man Rand innocent? Surely it wasn't only affection or desire which caused that? Surely there must be some good reason for that conviction.

And on the heels of the thought there came an impulse. Half an hour later, Dick had boarded a despised train for Starktown, the county seat.

Before the afternoon was half done, he was in the prison city, where Rand was now waiting trial.

He had already heard the name of Rand's lawyer mentioned, and hunted him up.

A white-haired man with a prim, methodical face, named Garrison—an office as old as he was, lined with many dull-looking volumes, an odor of dust and tradition and dreary slowness.

"My name's Trent. I understand you're defending Mr. Rand."

"You are Mr. Richard Trent, the flyer who first found the pistol? I'm glad to see you, sir. I dictated a letter to you only this morning. Wait, I'll call my secretary and have it read to you."

"I can read it later," said Dick bluntly. "I came here to see Mr. Rand himself. I wanted you to get me to him."

The elderly lawyer looked thoughtful. That's not a very easy matter. Of course I could take a message—"

"I want to see him personally."

"Well, next week perhaps—"

"I wanted to see him today."

Mr. Garrison fumbled for his glasses. He had seen many impatient people in his years of practise, but no one quite so impatient, or so determined, as this one.

He considered. Perhaps it was that he realized Dick's importance to the case, a necessary witness whom it would be well to placate. At any rate, he heaved a sigh, and reached for the phone. He talked to mysterious people at the other end, who in turn agreed to call him back.

"The fact is, Mr. Trent," he observed, leaning back and tapping the desk before him with a pencil, "I don't know what to make of Mr. Rand."

"Don't you, sir?"

"I'm utterly convinced of his innocence. I was assigned to this case by the court. He refused to select a lawyer of his own. I have defended murderers in my time. I am not a novice. If Mr. Rand is a murderer, then my fifty years of experience with humanity have gone for nothing!"

And looking as if he had said something very profound, Mr. Garrison

gave a final sharp tap with his pencil and leaned back as if expecting immediate rebuttal.

“When will that call come through?” Dick asked.

Mr. Garrison frowned. “At any moment. I was discussing Mr. Rand with you.”

“Well, I agree with you.”

“But he gives me no help,” the lawyer protested. “He agrees to whatever I suggest. He seems utterly indifferent. Upon my soul, I believe he would as soon plead guilty as not guilty!”

If Dick was expected to comment upon this, the phone saved him. Mr. Garrison looked up with a smile.

“It’s arranged. Go to the prison and ask for Mr. Salter. Tell him you’re the gentleman I phoned about.”

Dick lost no time. He found the grey building with its barred windows, and the high walls surrounding. A civil warden guided him down a tier of cells, paused to unlock one, and stepped inside with Dick next to him.

A man rose from the cot where he had been sitting, a man with a look of infinite patience, such as Mr. Garrison, in spite of his fifty years of experience could never have imagined. But he looked wasted, as if by some inner despair.

“Hello, Dick,” said Old Man Rand, and his voice sounded weak. “It was nice of you to come to see me. How are you?”

Dick tried to answer, but the words choked in his throat.

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OLD MAN RAND SEEMED TO RECOGNIZE Dick's emotion. Very naturally he began to talk, speaking of the prison routine, of little trivial things so naturally that it seemed hard to believe that the man who sat here was waiting trial for first degree murder.

There was a serenity in Rand's face, a look of resignation in his eyes, that went to the heart.

Dick could stand it no longer. He burst out, in the middle of that aimless talk:

"Oh, Mr. Rand, I came here with a definite purpose! There's no reason why you should trust me, why you should tell me anything—I'm not asking that . . . But I know you didn't commit that murder!"

Rand's face seemed to grow a little stern.

"Let's not talk about it, Dick,"

"But I've got to!"

"I'm willing to pay the penalty."

"But you're not guilty!"

"Dick!" Old Man Rand rose, put his hand on Dick's shoulder. "I want you to do me a favor—the favor I'll appreciate most of all. Let things take their course. I've—I've faced the worst. Nothing can harm me any more."

Dick was looking down. His heart had sunk, and a sense of helplessness and despair came over him. Yet he could not give up entirely, even now.

"But everybody at the airport, all the fellows there, they believe in you, they say you were framed."

“Do they?” An almost wistful smile touched Rand’s mouth. “There’s no way of telling them what I feel for them . . . But I’m grateful. Just say that to them for me. I’m grateful, and wish them luck, every man of them.”

There was in his tone a spirit of complete surrender. It vanquished all of Dick’s secret hopes. Against that strange calm, he had hurled his own furious conviction in vain.

He did not stay much longer. Indeed he had said what he had come to say, and to linger further was too painful.

He said good-bye, and went out into the sunshine and the freedom beyond the stone walls. He had not eaten yet and he dropped into a restaurant. Sitting there, alone, his thoughts reverted moodily to his futile visit. He had come away convinced more than ever of Old Man Rand’s complete innocence. But Old Man Rand himself had checked him from attempting to help him.

Dick wandered over to the station. His train was not due for a long time yet. The waiting-room was bleak and empty. About it there hung a sense of unutterable forlornness. Even the ticket-seller’s window was shut and locked.

While he sat there in a dejection he could not shake off, he saw a girl enter. Then he jumped to his feet. It was Mary. She had probably visited her father just after he did. Now she was returning to her home.

At that moment she saw him, Her eyes wavered and fell away. She murmured a greeting to him rather coldly.

She sat down on the bench across the room. They were both silent. The station clock ticked monotonously. Each were acutely conscious of the other’s slightest movement, and each pretended to be absorbed in profound reflections.

But as the minutes passed, there came suddenly a little sniff from the girl. Dick saw her face towards him, weeping miserably.

“Oh, why are you so cruel to me?” she faltered.

He had crossed the station in a stride. “Cruel to you? Cruel to you? Why, Mary, darling, you wouldn’t even look at me—you hardly spoke to me!”

“But you must have known why! You can’t be so stupid! You must have known I was embarrassed about the way I acted the other night. I had to protect myself by pretending . . . Oh, Dick, forgive me! I was out of my head. I really was! . . . And I’m so unhappy.”

And then, all unexpectedly, his arms were about her, his voice was murmuring low, saying nothing, saying everything. Then he put his lips against hers. So for a little time he held her.

Then her head fell against his shoulder, and she said faintly:

“Dick, don’t ever keep away from me again, no matter how cruel I am to you! . . . I love you, Dick.”

Their interlude of happiness was of necessity short-lived. They could not keep long from the one thought that haunted them both, the thought of the lonely man waiting with patient hands back there behind grim walls.

Dick told her what her father had said to him. A tortured look came into her eyes.

“But we must do something. We’ve got to do something! I know he’s innocent. And I’m all alone. I’ve no one to help me. Tommy’s like a madman. He’s just drinking and drinking all the time. It’s been terrible, I tell you.”

“I want to do something, too, but he discouraged me,” Dick said. “He doesn’t want anyone to help—that’s what makes it hard.”

“He’s got to be helped!”

Dick’s determination came riding back. “You’re right, Mary. I ought to ignore what he says. You and I know he didn’t commit that murder. We ought to try to find out who did.”

“If we only could!”

“Why can’t we? We’d do everything for him. I don’t know why, but I feel confident that just you and I, giving every minute, every thought, never stopping, would succeed.”

Her eyes were wide. She nodded once or twice.

“Dick, you’ve given me courage. Somehow, you make me feel brave. Will you really help?”

“You don’t have to ask me that, Mary!”

"I know, Dick, I know. It's just that I feel almost as if there'd be something sacred about a compact you and I made."

"I'll give you my word. Mary."

She held out her hand, and he took it. They regarded each other almost solemnly.

Then she gave a little sigh. "I'm not worried any more, Dick. We're going to save him."

The whistle of a train broke upon their cars. "That must be mine," she said.

"I've got to go in the opposite direction. I'll fly back from the airport as soon as they'll let me. And as soon as I do—"

"Yes?"

"I don't know. Only, I've got a hunch."

"I've got one, too." The train thundered up the tracks. Lights and sounds, and people peering out. "Good-bye," she said. "I'll be waiting for you." Then she lifted up her face, and for the second time that day he kissed her.