

THE SKY RAIDER

WHAT HAS HAPPENED SO FAR:

DICK TRENT, novice in the Air Mail Service, incurs the displeasure of Carmichael, Superintendent of Rand Field, when he flies through the Rocky Mountains in a blinding snowstorm to bring back young Tommy Rand, who is stranded in a drinking and gambling haunt. Old Man Rand, owner of the field, beloved by his men, thanks Dick. Mary Rand, his beautiful daughter, is also grateful to Trent.

The next day in a spectacular flight, Dick sweeps alongside Mary's disabled machine in midair and saves her from a fatal crash. They express their love and Dick is happily thinking of the future as Lawson, his buddy in the service, tells him he is leaving to marry a beautiful blonde. On his last flight Lawson's plane goes missing. Dick, in searching the country, comes across the burned plane and Lawson's dead body. A package containing \$250,000 in government gold is missing. The only clue to the crime is a heavy Luger pistol used to club Lawson's skull. Mary recognizes the pistol as her father's.

Old Man Rand, questioned, admitted giving the pistol to Lawson. He refuses, however, after talking to his son, Tommy, who has been missing again, to account for his actions during the early morning hours when the crime was committed. When the charred money bag is found in his own furnace Rand is arrested for murder. Dick, along with the other men of the service, is dejected. They all love the old man and know he is innocent. Mary, in hysterics, turns away from Dick, attributing her father's arrest to the pistol he found.

After his next run, Dick sets out to visit the old man in jail, but Rand insists he is willing to pay the penalty. Returning, Dick meets Mary, who asks his forgiveness. Dick takes her in his arms and the two vow to solve the murder mystery to clear her father . . .

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BUT DICK HAD NO HUNCH, not the slightest. He had said that in the hope of encouraging Mary. He wondered now what she had meant by saying she had a hunch, too.

Sitting in the train on the way back to the western airport he had tried to think who it was she suspected.

For that was all it amounted to. If Old Man Rand were innocent, then someone else must be guilty. Dick thought of everyone, of the most fantastic possibilities, and rejected them all.

He reviewed again the evidence against Rand, the overwhelming array of circumstances that offered no loophole. The murder—done with Old Man Rand's gun; the knowledge that Lawson's plane had carried the money that morning—known by Old Man Rand; the time during which the murder had occurred—a time during which Old Man Rand had declined to explain his whereabouts; and last, the final, damning piece of evidence, the money-sack itself, discovered in the very furnace of Old Man Rand's home!

The state was probably preening itself on an unbeatable case. And against that cumulation of evidence, Dick could offer so far only his mere instinctive belief that Rand was not guilty.

But who was, who was? He asked himself the pointless question, while the train mocked the words in a kind of endless refrain of steel grinding on steel.

HE TOOK OFF with the mail the next morning, and flying in fair weather, reached Rand Field itself about noon.

He had dreamed of a dozen solutions during the night, all equally bizarre! and he was no nearer to any possible plan of action than hours ago, for all that he had kept his thoughts obstinately circling around one center.

He phoned Mary, who suggested that he meet her for luncheon in a downtown restaurant,

They found a table in a sheltered corner where they could talk. Her eyes explored his face with such warm tenderness that for a moment he managed to forget the task to which he had committed himself.

There was strength as well as charm in that oval face of hers; no need to pretend to a girl like that. He gave her the truth simply, telling her he had no idea of how to proceed or where to look.

Somehow she managed to smile. "Then I'll have to tell you, too," she said. "I had no Idea, either. Each of us has been trying to encourage the other."

Their glances met for a moment of appraisal. She was leaning forward, her lips parted, her eyes questioning.

"Why can't we think?" he half protested. "Surely it can't be so impossible to find out . . ."

"Perhaps we haven't tried. You see if we really did, we might—"

But she got no further, "Wait!" he cried. "Just wait!" He put his knuckles to his brow, and frowned as though his life depended on it. Then nodding grimly, he met her tense stare.

"I've got a suspicion," he announced. "There's no real proof, but It's possible."

"Who?" she asked.

But he kept her in suspense a moment longer. "Obviously, it was murder for robbery. We know that much, don't we? To rob that ship, the thief must have known about the Federal Reserve shipment."

"Yes."

"Well, how many people knew about it?"

"Father, of course, and the Federal Reserve people, and—and Captain Carmichael." She paused and met his eyes. He nodded grimly.

"Carmichael! That's who I mean!"

“Carmichael?” she whispered. “Do you really think—?”

“I do!”

“Why? Outside of the fact that he knew about the money, I mean?”

“I don’t know why. I’ve Just never trusted him.”

She sat, silent, thoughtful, for a long while. Then she said, “Dick. I think you may be right. There’s a chance at least. But how—how could we ever find out.”

“There’s one way we can try. He has a house within sight of the field.”

“Yes. I know where it is.”

“Well . . .” He found a cigarette and lit it. “Well, are you game to break in, hunt through his stuff, try to find proof?”

She gave a little shiver, “It’s like being thieves ourselves, isn’t it? Suppose we are wrong, and suppose—well, I mean, suppose someone should find out?”

“Even if we were wrong, it would be better than doing nothing, wouldn’t it? And listen, Mary, I do not think we are wrong. Ever since I came to the field, ever since the first day I saw him—”

“I’m not arguing,” she protested. “I’ll do whatever you say.”

The words rang like a challenge. Dick called for the check, went out to where her car was parked. They drove down the field. They had lunched late. Carmichael would be in his office at this time.

Crossing cautiously through the hedge that walled his small, attractive house, they walked to the porch, tried the front door softly. It was locked. Dick tiptoed around to the side of the house. He found a window that gave under his hand. He wriggled inside and in less than a minute had let Mary in.

When he had said that he suspected Carmichael, he had told the truth. The flight superintendent seemed to him to convey a quality of unscrupulousness. But in breaking into his house, Dick had little hope of discovering anything. What, after all, could there be to discover? Could a man who had contrived the Lawson murder be so reckless as to keep the stolen money or any other evidence near him?

Carmichael’s house was two stories high. Its small, neat, trim rooms had an air of comfort. A bachelor’s eye had studied them for comfort,

and in every corner were easy chairs, thick rugs, tables with pipes and decanters, books Dick had never heard of.

He opened a collarette. It was full of evidence of crime, but of a lesser sort than the one he now hunted.

With Mary at his side he explored the second story. What was he really hunting? Incriminating documents, the money itself? Perhaps neither. Perhaps only the unexpected. Mary was stooping over a drawer, with a feminine delight in exploring the forbidden, while Dlok pulled books out of their shelves and peered behind them, when the unexpected really happened. This was in the form of Carmichael's surprised voice as he said from the doorway:

"Nice of you to drop in on me like this. Find everything you want?"

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THEY WHIRLED to face his ironic, undisturbed eyes, Mary red in the face, Dick with both fists clenched, and a frowning brow.

Neither spoke. It was Carmichael who continued with his air of cynical friendliness.

“Drop down into my library. Maybe I can help you find what you are looking for.”

His lazy composure had them at a disadvantage and Dick knew it. He wondered desperately how to cope with the indifference, with that amused, barbed tongue.

Putting the best front possible on his own detection he sauntered after Caimichael. Mary, with serious face and frightened eyes stood close to him as if counting on him for protection.

“Now then,” said Carmichael, easily selecting a pipe and filling it deliberately, would you mind telling me just what you are going through my things for? I do not ask much—I am a mild man—but I have the right to ordinary curiosity.”

Dick was cornered. The shortest way out he knew was a straight line. He met Carmichael’s gaze firmly and said unhesitatingly:

“Miss Rand and I know her father is innocent. We are trying to find out who the real thief and murderer is.”

Dick had spoken bluntly, feeling that Carmichael would do one of two things. He would possibly show some sign of guilt. Or else he would prove his innocence by his anger.

Carmichael did neither of these. For a moment’s incredulity he did

nothing at all. Then he threw back his head and burst into laughter.

“Well, I’ll be—well, I mean! This is too much!”

Tears of amusement stood in his eyes when he finally recovered himself. “You young fool, you! You think that I—but what makes you think that I am the guilty man?”

Dick was red as a beet. Already he felt like a fool. But he stuck to his guns. He said in a voice that was surprisingly assured:

“You’re one of the three men who knew the money was carried in that plane!”

“One of three! What do you mean three? Why I’ll go so far as to say a hundred knew all about it! Do you think a secret like that could be kept? If it could, thieves would go out of business!”

Dick was silent. He knew already he had blundered.

“Why my boy,” Carmichael went on presently after he had taken a puff at his pipe, “that isn’t your reason for suspecting me! Your reason for suspecting me is because you know I’m cleverer than you are, because, above all, it is impossible for you to catalogue or label me. I puzzle you, I say things you don’t understand. Therefore, I am a scoundrel. You are a simple savage. I am civilized. Naturally you distrust me.”

The phone at his elbow rang. He picked it up and answered it.

“What? Oh it’s you Grahame? Say, Grahame, as a Police Inspector, would you mind coming over and arresting me some time when you’ve nothing else to do? That kid Trent—that boy who found the pistol, you know—has aspirations to be a detective. He’s got Miss Rand with him. They accuse me of being I don’t know what! Murder is only the beginning of my crimes . . . What? What was that?”

He burst into another laugh, answered a question jovially put down the receiver and looked at Dick with amused eyes.

And Dick was silent and ashamed. Even Mary’s touch upon his arm could not restore his self-esteem or take away the fact that he had made a fool of himself.

But Carmichael was satisfied. Relaxing, growing more genial, and at the same time moreserious, he growled:

“Sit down you two.” He puffed for a moment while they obeyed

“Now listen: we’re all convinced that Mr. Rand is innocent. Perhaps we all have our theories and you ought not to be blamed. I even have mine!”

He paused and looked at them with one eye cocked. “Mind, I may be no where nnear the truth myself,” he said. “I can only guess. But—here’s my idea. The man who committed tho crime must have known about the money, must have brought the plane down. I know of only one man who could do that—Lawson himself.”

“Lawson?” Dick burst out.

“Lawson—and his confederates, who killed him when the job was done!”

“But—but that’s impossible. Lawson was the squarest shooter, the cleanest, fairest—”

“There, you go again! Judging him as you Judged me—by externals. We are all of us very much alike—we are all of us, whether you believe it or not, capable of the worst crimes in the right circumstances. Even your good friend, Lawson.”

“But what motive—what possible reason—”

“I don’t know. I haven’t the slightest idea. I couldn’t prove a thing. I simply give you my theory for what its worth. And there you are!”

He seemed to have ended the discussion. Mary had made a movement towards the door.

“Drop in again sometime,” said Carmichael genially. “It was nice of you to call.”

“Next time, please be sure and be home, she said lightly, and the appreciative gleam in his eyes told her she had scored.

As for Dick he left crestfallen and much abashed. Mary drove for some moments in silence before she told her thoughts.

“Let’s be fair, Dick. He may be right. Everything he said was sensible about—about Jack Lawson. I hate to believe it, but somehow it’s terribly possible that Lawson was part of the scheme.”

“But how could anyone find out,” Dick objected reufully. “Even Carmichael, whom you now admire so much, says he does not know how.”

“Don’t be childish, Dick. You know I don’t admire him. I’m interest-

ed only in saving my father. I would do anything to do that. And I know you would, too, Dick. It was worth while going there today, after all. At least we gained a really sensible clue. Now the point is, how can we find out whom Lawson saw or talked to, or associated with?"

But he never talked to anyone much—except me. He was an awfully mysterious fellow—no one know anything about him."

"You never saw any of his other friends, did you?"

"Walt!" said Dick. "Wait a second! . . . What about the girl he was engaged to—the one he was going to marry?"

"Dick! That's an inspiration!"

"But the devil of it is," he moaned in reflection. "I dont know her name or where she lives. All I know is what she looks like!"

"But she must have written him letters."

"He used to throw away nearly all his mail. The police found nothing in his lockers."

"Oh, Dick, there must be some way of finding out, there must be! If we could only find that girl, I think we would find out everything else!"

DICK went to sleep that night with his mind still wondering futilely how he could locate the girl whom Lawson had loved.

Towards dawn he woke up. There had come to him a sudden memory, a sudden hope. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and jumped out of bed.