

THE SKY RAIDER

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STRANGE THAT HE SHOULD NOT HAVE THOUGHT of that before! And yet not so strange either. He might merely be imagining what he wished to believe.

A week or so previously, Lawson had picked up an old suitcase of his in the hang-out.

“Want this, youngster, or shall I just chuck it out?”

It had not been too worn. Dick had said: “Sure, I can use it.”

“Well, you’d better clean it out. There’s shaving powder spilled on the inside, and some junk, I guess.”

Dick had opened it. It was in bad condition, as Lawson said. He made a mental note to clean it out later on, and had not yet done so. And—he was quite sure—inside there had been some scraps of paper, notes, letters perhaps!

He was wide awake, as he flooded the room with light. The suitcase was under his bed. His fingers shook with eagerness as he opened it.

Yes, there were letters there, a crumpled handful. Dick pored over them. The thought of his dead friend hung like a ghost in the background of his mind. Lawson, the best of good fellows, whose papers he was now hunting through in the hopes of linking Lawson himself with the crime.

Obstinately Dick drove his hesitations from his brain. He raced through the papers, discarding them one by one. Receipted bills, a bulletin on commercial flying, some illegible notes about finances scrawled on a bank balance-sheet, a note from a tailor inviting custom, nothing else.

The last letter fell from his hand.

A wave of complete dejection came over him. His hopes had been so high. He stared into the empty suitcase. Then all at once in a side pocket, his eyes saw a tiny scrap. He reached for it. It was the triangular flap of an envelope. It had been torn off. Something was written there, something that had almost been effaced.

Holding it to the light, Dick managed to make out the neat, small letters written in a pale ink:

D. R. C.

147 Crordon Place

Town

It was a girl's hand, Dick judged. His pulses hammered. D. R. C.—and an address! He dared believe his finest was over.

He dressed hurriedly. Dawn had come. It was cold, and a sharp wind raced across the field. The hangars looked bleak and chill in the first light. To the eastward was a glow of the rising sun. A sudden sharp sound burst out, like the rattle of a machine gun. Perez, the swarthy line-chief, was superintending a detail of men that were working over the ship about to take the morning's mail.

All these things Dick saw as if they had no reality. He breakfasted looking at his watch. He must tell Mary his good news. He would not wait much longer.

When he called her and told her what he had discovered, her sleepy voice grew suddenly alert. It trembled a little.

"Dick, you're wonderful! Oh, Dick, what can I say to you?"

"But I didn't do anything. And listen, It may not be the girl. We must be prepared for possible disappointment."

"Come up to the house. Right away. We will start together from here."

ONE HUNDRED and forty-seven Gordon Place proved to be an old brownstone house that had evidently been converted into small apartments.

Dick rang the basement bell. They would have to make inquiries from the janitor. A small boy poked his head up out of the area-way.

"Ma's out."

"Where is your father?"

"Haven't got no father."

"When will your mother be back?"

"About ten o'clock."

"Where's she gone?"

"I dunuo."

"Listen," said Mary, "Isn't there a young lady living here whose last name begins with C?"

The urchin stared at them with round eyes.

"No," he said at last, with flat finality.

When they asked him again, he shook his head repeatedly. There was no hope of getting any information from the boy. There was nothing to do but wait until ten o'clock. They walked up and down the street, impatiently turning minutes into hours. Then at last, a fat, red-faced woman, with a bundle of laundry under her arm, came down the street and started to enter the basement.

Dick halted her with a shout. "We are looking for somebody who lives here," he explained. "Somebody whose initials are D. R. C."

"D. R. C." the janitress repeated vaguely. "Why, you don't mean Miss Curtis, do you? Could it be Dorothy Curtis?"

"Yes. What floor is she on?"

"She's not here any more. She left for San Francisco day before yesterday. She went back to her folks."

"Do you know her address there?"

"Yes, but it won't be any good to you."

"What do you mean?"

"She told me she would be sailing this evening for Hawaii at 7 o'clock. The poor thing had some trouble, I think. She gave up a fine position here all of a sudden."

Mary's voice was unsteady, words came out tremulously.

"We'd like the address just same."

Three minutes later they had the place.

"We'll have to use a plane," Dick said hurriedly. "It's ten o'clock. We

can get there before evening in that new ship they've got at the field."

Mary tightened her fingers on his arm in eagerness and determination.

They drove back to the field at high speed, bursting in on Carmichael at the Flight office.

"We want a ship right away," said Mary breathlessly.

Carmichael looked surprised, but wasted no time in questions. In ten minutes they were on their way in a fast new Corsair. Perez had grumbled, as the plane had not been checked for regular use. But Dick had impatiently overruled him.

The ground swept below in a vivid changing scene—rugged peaks, shadowed canyons, and wooded slopes. The last range was already in sight, both were exulting at success, when without warning the engine's roar cut out dead!

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DICK SWORE. Ignition gone. Nothing to do but land. Then he remembered suddenly. He had not followed the route, with its fields at safe Intervals, but had taken a short cut over the worst stretch in that run. He shot a glance downward. There was one small open spot. He could sideslip over the trees—and make it. With his brakes he could stop before he hit the tree at the other end.

But he had no brakes! They had not been connected yet. He groaned. Why hadn't he kept to the route? Nothing meant enough to risk Mary's life like this. Then he pulled himself together.

"It's going to be bad," he told Mary. "Don't forgot to put your arms over your face when we hit!"

He gritted his teeth as the ship neared the ground. If only they had taken the Corsair, with Its 60-mile landing speed.

Then the tree tops were flashing by, and the landing gear was hissing through the topmost leaves as he slid in at a precipitous angle. A savage kick at the rudder, a pull at the stick, and they were leveled off.

Too fast. Too fast—yet he must put the wheels down, for the huge trees at the opposite side were already looming up. A jolt and a swift rumble. They were still racing, almost flying, when he swung the nose around and thrust his arm before his eyes.

There was a rending sound, as the wheels collapsed under the sudden sidewise pressure. Dick's head was flung against the side of the fuselage, then the plane was skidding, tearing along the ground on the lower wind. It stopped in a cloud of dust. Dick sat up dizzily and looked for Mary.

She was white-faced, but she managed somehow to smile.

He helped her out. She clung to him now. A sudden sob broke from her.

"It's all right, dear. It's all right. We got through," he said trying to hearten her.

"It's not that. I'm frightened, Dick. I'm worried—about our reaching that girl before she sails."

He had not thought of that until she spoke. Now his jaw hardened. He glanced around. Through the trees he could make out the faint loom of a farm house. From that direction a man was running now.

"What's happened, Mister? You hurt?"

Dick did not even bother to answer the question.

"Listen, we've got to get to San Francisco in a hurry, it's important. Have you got a car that can take us there?"

"Now?"

"Right away!"

"I could get you there maybe in four or five hours. The roads are bad. You'd better go to Norrisville, and take the train there."

"How long would that take us?"

"Three hours."

Three hours! In three hours it would be too late.

Dick gave a gesture of savage impatience. "See here, we've got to get there right away—before dark, do you understand. A man's life depends on it. Isn't there some way we can make it?"

"None that I know of, Mister."

Dick met Mary's eyes. They were somber now, yet brave, too. They returned his own look, an admission that they had lost."

"What can we do?" she whispered.

"Let's go on. Let's go there. We can have him drive us to Norrisville."

A futile gesture, Dick thought, to carry out their trip, now that it was useless. Yet he could not halt while a vestige of hope remained, while the thought that some un-guessed miracle might save them.

He left instructions with the farmer as to the plane, and sent a wire to Carmichael from the Norrisville station.

The train, a wretched local, crawled like a snail across the landscape that was bathed in the winter twilight. Then Dick lost all sense of time.

He only knew at last that he and Mary dragged themselves out at the station, weary and travel-stained, and took a cab to the address they had noted down that morning.

Even the cab seemed to take hours to reach its destination. Dick looked at his watch. It was nine o'clock. Dorothy Curtis was to sail at seven, the janitress had said. He gnawed his fingers. No use to radio her ship. Impossible to find out that way the delicate and involved questions they had come to ask.

The cab drew up with a jerk before a small suburban house. Dick rang the bell. After quite a long time, the door was opened. Dick stared. The speech went out of him and his heart pounded. He was looking at Dorothy Curtis herself!

Then at last he found his voice. "Do you remember me?" he asked. "You—you spoke to me—"

"I—I'm afraid I don't," she began.

"You spoke to me that day at Rand Field. I was Mr. Lawsons friend."

Her hand gave a little involuntary movement, a start that reflected itself in her widened eyes. She glanced from Dick to Mary quite slowly.

"Come inside," she said.

They stepped into a small living room. Dorothy Curtis, with her fair, frail prettiness, the hurt look in her eyes, told them to sit down.

"We found out you'd gone home," Dick said a little awkwardly. "We tried to reach you before you sailed for Hawaii. But we had a crash—we were afraid we were going to miss you."

"I'm not going to Hawaii," she said. "It-it wouldn't do any good.

But how did you find out I planned to go?"

"The janitress in the place you lived told us."

"Oh, yes. Please forgive me. I don't quite understand who you are."

"I'm Dick Trent. You have probably forgotten. You spoke to me on the field that day. And this is Miss Mary Rand."

The frail looking girl's face suddenly changed. A strange vitality seemed to fill her. She rose to her feet.

“Rand!” she cried. “Are you that man’s daughter—that man who killed him? How dare you come here! I won’t even talk to you!”