

THE SKY RAIDER

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THE NEXT MORNING Wilson, the mechanic, came to Dick with a problem. More than a problem, an actual physical instrument that had been called into being by Dick's imagination. Dick looked at it with a creator's approving eye.

The apparatus was simple, A tank, not unlike an acetylene gas tank, was connected with flexible tubing at one end and capable of reaching from the cockpit of a plane to the tail. At the other end of the tank was connected a valve controlled by a trigger.

There now remained only the task of filling the tank according to the formula he had devised after talking to a young chemist the previous season, and embellishing it with certain additions of his own. The gas would combine with air a second or two after its release and become phosphorescent.

Before the week was out he had attached it to his plane, squandered, in imagination, the sums it was certain to bring him. He made an arrangement with a friend of his, a pilot named Ted Ericson, who was stationed at Henshaw Field on the Western rim, to receive signals.

Dick worked out the code. He would send the familiar Morse, a short flash for a dot, a long one for a dash.

He tried it out on his next run. Though the gas took an interval to become light, he could see far behind him the ragged flashes of phosphorescence. He had the triumphant thrill of a scientist discovering a new law of physics. It dashed him considerably when Ericson, a big, brawny youth with a spirit of madness and deviltry in him, laughed in his face at their first meeting.

“Don’t ever talk to me about inventions again! All I saw was one long string of light up in the sky. You would need a mind-reader to get that message,”

“I can fix that,” Dick declared, it’s just getting the intervals correctly placed.” But though he worked on the device, and, as he thought, corrected its defects, he did not try it on Ericson immediately. He had been so heartily ridiculed that he hesitated to make a second experiment. Ericson and his pals had, in fact, met him on his second trip by kneeling on the ground before him. When he had come within distance, they had poured ice water down his neck and he had rolled over the field, fighting four of them at a time. The apparatus, in spite of its improvements, remained unused on his ship, and Dick abandoned all immediate hopes of becoming a millionaire by the mere exercise of talent.

Another week had gone by, another week that brought Old Man Rand steadily nearer to his death. Dick would writhe thinking of that injustice, of the law’s horrible clumsiness. But he could do nothing.

And one day going out with Mary for a stroll, they came to a public park and found a bench. Other lovers were there, happy lovers, whose problems were so unimportant, of so little moment.

Beside him Mary sat in one of those moods of baffling perversity that he did not know how to defeat. The street lamps glowed faintly. He saw the beauty of her face, etched in the acid of her own buffering, a strong, yet utterly feminine face, at once helpless and magnificent.

And now she turned to him with a strange fervor in her tones.

“Dick . . . you have done a lot for me. . . . I might have gone mad without you. . . . But I believe in you, Dick. I believe in you above everything. Once you promised me to get through a storm and find Tommy. You did. I knew then you’d do anything you promised, always. That’s why a thought came to me last night. I thought if I could ask you to promise—and I’m half out of my head with worry!—I wouldn’t worry any more.”

“Promise? Promise what?”

Her eyes seemed to burn into his very soul. “Promise me to save my father,” she whispered.

“But, Mary, surely you know—after all, what can I—?”

“Dick, I want you to promise!” Now he met her gaze and held it fast. Then he said at last rather quietly:

“Very well then . . . I promise.”

A little sigh came from her. She said in a far-off voice: “I’d die for you now, Dick, if you wanted me to.”

But he was silent, thinking of her faith in him, his own helplessness, and the promise that he had made.

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IN THE MORNING she would call up, and if he were at the field, he would answer and say:

“No. Nothing now Mary”

And she would talk about happier things, and not mention again the tragedy that stalked between their lives.

What a strange confidence she had in him! What an abiding faith! Almost she seemed to believe that Dick could do what no one else had been able to do.

He longed to justify that confidence. It appealed to every imaginative thing in him. But beyond and above that desire was the knowledge that he had pledged his word to do what she wished,

A mad promise certainly. Though now his mind moved through a hundred convincing explanations, a hundred expedients. Those ranged from a general attack on the prison with an army composed of grease boys to a petition to the governor signed by the entire population of the state. His mind, he bitterly reflected, might just as well have been a blank. But he gritted his teeth, thrust his jaw out, swore under his breath. He'd do what he had said he would—somehow, some way!

Day followed day, Dick flew the mail and flew the return course. Nearer, slowly and hideously nearer, came the day when Old Man Rand must pay the last penalty for a crime he had not committed. Dick gnawed his fingers in anguish, and thought, and tossed in his bed at night, and groaned, and arrived nowhere.

Then came the day when he read in his newspaper that Rand

was to die the following day. "Rand's Children Will Say Farewell to Condemned Air Chief."

They were there at the prison today, seeing him, saying things. As if words, futile words, could matter now. And Mary had called him up only this morning and asked him in that same tone he had grown so used to:

"Any news?"

He had answered as he always did, grimly, through his teeth "Not yet!"

Night came down, He called on Mary, pale, frightened, with her eyes looking larger than ever in her worn face. She did not talk of her visit to the prison that day. Dick could not bring himself to ask her. Tommy had taken that night mail out, a flyer still, still dedicated to seeing that the mail went through. What thoughts circled in his brain, far up here speeding under the stars?

And In the morning Mary called again: "Any news?"

And Dick answered through his anguish: "Not yet"

Not yet. and Old Man Rand was to die before midnight.

That the state considered its case was over and done with, now that the governor had refused clemency, was evident. An order, delivered by Postal Inspector Kiely himself, released the burnt wreckage of Lawson's plane.

It had been locked up all those months, an inarticulate and unnecessary witness, in one of the unused hangars. Now the padlocks were opened, and the doors swung wide.

Moodily, half out of his mind even, Dick had wandered across the field to watch the workmen drag out the forlorn mute spectator of Jack Lawson's death.

The men were called to another part of the field. The hangar was empty and its doors wore wide.

Dick stepped inside and stared at the ruin. Here were the twisted longerons, bent cross-frames, tangled control wires, and an indescribable mass of charred and blackened metal!

He stopped half idly and picked up without knowing why, the battered gas-gauge. Glass and dial were gone. Only the stub that supported

the hand and its link remained. Then all at once Dick's senses jumped. That link had been bent! Not by fire or accident!

Even beneath its coating of soot, he made out the teeth marks of pliers. Who had bent it and, more important still, why?

Then his mind worked with lightning rapidity.

That link had been bent to report falsely the amount of gas in the tank.

And with a leap of all his nerves Dick saw now that Lawson had stalled out that fatal morning with only enough gas to carry him beyond the ridge. With his engine dead above that rocky country, Lawson had been forced to land in the only open spot there was for miles. The man who had bent the gas gauge link must have known that well!

Dick's heart seemed to be thumping so loudly that he imagined it audible. The clue at last! The real clue! The final, indisputable proof. The tampered gas-gauge—It made everything clear!

Lawson had been tricked, and had been forced to descend! Lawson was guiltless, as Dick had always suspected. Who, then, was guilty? One man could answer! The man who had been crew chief of 417, Lawson's plane. Who had had charge of that? He racked his brain. In a flash he remembered that that had been under Wilson's care!

Wilson! Wilson, a man whom he had instinctively trusted! Dick went outside. He found him just as he was preparing to leave.

"Wilson!" He could scarcely get the words out for breathlessness. "That plane of Mr. Lawson's—the wreck—who checked it?"

"I always did."

"You did, Wilson? You always did?"

"Yes, every time except—except that last trip."

"Who tested it then. Wilson? Come on, man, I've got to know!"

"Why—why it was Joe Perez, sir, I remember he told me I could go home that day. My wife was sick. He said he'd do everything for me himself."

Perez! Perez, the swarthy line-chief! The man at last! Perez—where was he now?

Dick raced like an arrow for Carmichael's office.