

THE SKY RAIDER

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AS HE RACED, he thought of the prisoner in the death-house, of Mary and her faith in him, of a thousand conflicting, or incongruous thoughts.

Perez had fixed the gas-gauge. Then Perez was the man who was the agent of the gang.

Carmichael looked up startled, as Dick burst into the office

“I’ve found the man!” Dick shouted hoarsely “Not a clue this time, but the man!”

“Are you right—are you sure?”

“It’s Perez. He fixed the gas-gauge of Lawson’s plane! We’ve got to get Perez—and quick!”

“He’s on the field! But are you sure? By Jove, this is news, Trent!”

They made a plan hurriedly. Dick would cover the right end of the field, Carmichael the opposite side. Perez must be some where in the airport. They must strike swiftly, yet cautiously.

Dick could find no trace of the little man, either in the hangars, or among the isolated groups of mechanics.

Then he saw someone waving . . . Carmichael . . . Carmichael half dragging, half pushing someone along. Perez!

Dick ran forward. He dragged him from Carmichael’s grip. Almost savagely he shook him. The line chief’s eyes rolled. Literally, his teeth rattled.

“You fixed that gas gauge. You fixed it!”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“You fixed it! I know you did! Come across, or I’ll—”

Dick’s hands bit into the little man’s shouldors. He heard Carmichael’s voice, encouraging him, with a kind of violence in it.

“Give him the works, boy? Make him come through with it.”

But Perez had only shut his mouth tightly and glared with a determination which there was no doubting. It was as if he defied torture.

Then Dick said desperately: “You will hang for this, Perez, unless you tell the truth now. You know Old Man Rand had nothing to do with this. Are you going to tell who did—or aren’t you?”

“You’re mad—you’re both mad,” Perez muttered. His face was suffused with his dark blood.

He was game in his own way. Dick could have tortured him, he felt, with no more result. In his own way Perez was victor. And at his wit’s end, wondering what it was that would make Perez break, he suddenly remembered the line chief’s notorious weakness. There was a bare chance.

He dragged Perez roughly to where a waiting plane was being warmed up. In the sudden sound, he could not hear the line chief’s protests. Carmichael had followed. But before Carmichael could question or help him, Dick acted.

He whirled towards the mechanic.

“Yank those blocks!”

With a sudden movement he seized the wiry Perez, swung him off his feet, and literally tossed him into the ship. Leaving Carmichael open-mouthed, he vaulted into the pilot’s cockpit. Almost before Perez could realize what had happened, the plane was in the air.

Dick grimly climbed to 5,000 feet and then throttled his engine. Perez, no longer defiant, but a fearful, cringing figure, turned a sickly face at Dick’s shout.

“Fasten your belt,” Dick commanded curtly.

Perez’s lips were trembling

“What are you trying to do?” he whimpered. But his fumbling fingers hurriedly secured the belt.

Dick gave him no other warning. Suddenly, savagely, he dived. Both

he and Perez were flung up from their seats. Dick hauled the stick back. A tight loop—no, hold him upside down! Sky and ground swiftly changed places, the engine sputtered—died. The uncanny silence was broken by a scream Perez, hanging upside down by his belt, was clutching wildly at the fuselage, after that first glimpse of the ground a mile below.

Dick laughed harshly. The plane died again, then spun dizzily. That was it—make him sick. Now—on his back again.

“Will you tell now?” he cried fiercely.

Perez’s eyes were glassy, but he shook his head. Dick gritted his teeth. There was one last chance—a whipstall, dreaded even by many daring pilots. He gained speed, pointed the nose skyward. Again the ominous quiet as the engine died. The ship stood on its tail, trembling like a live thing, then slid backward. Dick waited, his whole body tense. At last he pulled the stick back.

With a furious, breathtaking plunge, the nose whipped forward from sky to ground. Hurling against his belt, Dick felt the tremendous force that sought to catapult him into space. The blood rushed to his head. For a second all went dark.

Recovering, he carefully eased the ship from that terrific dive and shook the inert form of Perez.

“Had enough?” he rasped. “Will you tell now?”

Crazed by animal fear, a pitiful pretense of a man, some other fear still held Perez captive. He cringed away, still shaking his head mutely.

Infuriated by that obstinate silence, Dick lost restraint.

“You will—damn you! Maybe we’ll both go out this time—but you’ll tell or I’ll got you!”

He jammed the throttle open, his face working fiercely. Something in Perez seemed to break. His bloodshot eyes bulged from his dark face.

“No—no!” he cried frenziedly. “I’ll tell. I’ll tell now!”

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DICK'S HEART LEAPED. He headed swiftly for the ground. He had won!

He landed and taxied to the end of the line. A small group gathered, drawn by his amazing performance. Carmichael, hurrying up, ordered them back to work.

"Trent, have you gone crazy?" he demanded. "Are you trying to kill yourself?"

Dick laughed shortly.

"Look at him. He broke—he'll tell now."

Perez was a sorry sight. His sworthy face was sickly, mottled. His lips worked convulsively, but no words came.

Carmichael nodded grimly.

"Good work, But time's short—take him into the office. We'll make the beggar talk."

Half supporting, half dragging the trembling Perez, Dick followed into the Flight Office. Carmichael locked the door.

"Now then—let's have it," he said harshly, "Trent, get his story down."

Perez wet his lips once or twice.

"What do you want?" he mumbled.

"You fixed that gauge to read full on an empty maintank, didn't you?" demanded Carmichael.

"Yes," said Perez sullenly.

"And you gave Lawson just enough gas to bring him down where they killed him?" snapped the superintendent "That right?"

Perez caught Dick's threatening eyes on him. He shivered.

"Yes, that's so," he said in a low tone.

Carmichael leaned across the table. His eyes transfixed the line chief.

"Look at me, damn you! Now—who killed Lawson?"

His voice was like the springing of a trap. A hush fell. Dick stiffened nervously. Perez sat as though turned to stone. The office clock ticked noisily in the stillness.

"I—I can't tell," whispered Perez. The words were wrung from him.

Dick leaped up.

"Let me at him, Carmichael. This time I'll—"

With an inarticulate cry, Perez shrank away.

"For God's sake," he whined, "don't take me up there again! It'll kill me!"

Carmichael's eyes were cold.

"Who killed Lawson?" he repeated. "Who got that money?"

Panic seized the little line chief.

"Don't ask me that—I can't tell—it wasn't Rand. That's all you want. It wasn't Rand."

"You swear that?"

"Yes—yes. I swear it. He didn't know." His fingers clutched at the table edge. "I saw him give the pistol to Lawson. He is innocent."

"Then who did it?" Carmichael shot at him. "You know who framed that job—spit it out—give me the names!"

But Perez seemed to change in that instant. A maniacal gleam shone from his eyes. His voice rose in a shout as he glared at the superintendent.

"Let me alone—I've told you all I can. You can kill me! What do I care!"

Even Dick, hating the man for his ugly part in Lawson's murder, feeling almost a savage lust to tear the truth from him, knew that for the moment further questioning was useless. Some unknown fear had given Perez a courage like that of a cornered rat. His lips were sealed.

Carmichael seemed to realize this at the same time. He turned with a shrug to Dick.

"We're wasting time, Trent. Get his name on that paper. You'll have to make speed with it to the Governor."

Perez signed without protest, though his fingers shook so that the pen tore through the paper.

"I'll radio the Governor you're coming," Carmichael said quickly. "As for this rat—the police will make him squeal soon enough!"

Dick gazed for one instant of elation at the statement, the precious document that would save a human life, that would free Old Man Rand, clearing his name and the Air Mail.

"It's four now," Carmichael told him briefly. "You can make it by six. Good luck!"

A violent, erratic knocking drowned Dick's reply.

He flung upon the door, and then stopped back, startled. Mary Rand stood there, swaying as though she would fall. Her face was drawn, her eyes wild.

"Dick—oh, Dick! . . . I can't bear it!" she burst out. "When I think of it . . . only a few hours . . . my father."

Her voice had risen hysterically.

"But it's all right, Mary!" Dick cried. "Mary! Look at me, I tell you!"

She did not seem to understand, or even hear.

"You promised me," she cried. "You said you would save him."

Dick caught her by the shoulders and forced her to calmness.

"He is saved, Mary! I have a signed confession. I'm taking it to the Governor. But there's no time to lose. I can't stop to explain. Ask Carmichael—he'll tell you everything!"

He gave a quick, significant look of pleading at Carmichael. The superintendent nodded that he understood. Dick dashed for his ship, shouting to a mechanic to start the engine.

Three minutes later he was in the air.