



HEROES DIE HARD

by **FREDERICK C. PAINTON**

You'll Thrill to this Gripping Drama of Fiendish Treachery and Grim Courage in the Air!

THE DOOR OPENED and a tall young man entered. He was bronzed and broad and his height made the little operations office seem small and stuffy. He emanated that sort of sense of strength, of power.

He stood there, water dripping from his overseas cap, his soaked trench coat. His boots made a squishy sound as he walked.

Dinglebells Hawtry, the kiwi adjutant, looked up from the morning report. Captain J. Bradley Marvin removed his eyes from the political article he was writing for the Greenville Statesman, the newspaper back home in the States.

For a second there was a queer silence. Then Marvin's chair tipped over with a crash, and he surged

to his feet. His plump face became purple, his eyes blazed, and his little mouth worked—but made no sounds.

The newcomer regarded him grimly and touched his hat in a salute.

"Lieutenant Bruce Owen reporting as replacement pilot to the Ninety-Eighth Pursuit Squadron—sir." His voice was low, yet resonant.

Captain Marvin's little pursy mouth still continued to work. He put down a hand to steady himself. "Hawtry," he said at length in a strained voice, "go to Hangar Two and tell Chief Rigger Arnold to commission the new Spad."

Dinglebells nodded and slid out of the office into the dismal rain. The door clicked gently after him.

Marvin's teeth clashed noisily in the silence. "What are you doing here, Owen?" he forced himself to say.

Rage had made a strange change in the plump captain. His round, smooth face, usually disguised by a jolly smile that was part of his stock in trade, now changed. The subtle cruel lines around his mouth and eyes showed. He looked menacing—dangerous.

"I've come, as I told you I would, to put a stop for good to your idea of becoming governor of the state," Owen told him. "You've never been out of my mind, Marvin, never once since I nearly had you indicted for taking bribes from the traction interests. I've had you watched and your mail watched. Here in France and at home. I've read your orders to the political chiefs at home. It was a clever move to resign as lieutenant governor and enlist in the air service where you could be featured in the papers as the famous statesman-ace—only you're not an ace—and you could become the people's hero. You are a hero, aren't you?"

"Damn you for a spy!" growled Marvin.

Owen flung back his head and laughed. "Thanks for the compliment. A clever planner, Marvin. You've pulled every string you know how and have gotten almost every allied medal worth having. The pilots whose victories you claimed to make yourself an ace are dead and can't testify against you. And I can tell you that within the past few days you've received a code cable that told you you would sweep the state in the primaries in February. And winning the gubernatorial nomination in the primaries is tantamount to election."

MARVIN listened like a frozen man to the revelations. "Well," he said in a cracked voice, "I can't be stopped now."

"No?" asked Owen.

"No, by God!" said Marvin. "The people of the state are for me to a man."

"Really?" Owen pulled out a cigarette, straightened it and finally lit it. "Marvin, remember when you had me kicked out of the attorney general's office for trying to be honest? You set out to ruin me, Marvin, because you didn't want an honest lawyer mixed up in state politics. You had me framed with a woman so that I was driven from my state and would have been a fugitive from justice if the woman hadn't died."

"That indictment is still against me. I can't go back until I show you up as a crook." He paused, exhaled a breath of smoke. "Well, you're going to withdraw your name from the primaries and never hold public office."

"You're mad," gasped Marvin. "You haven't a thing on me."

Owen suddenly flung back his head and a roar of pleasant laughter burst from him. He looked at Marvin and laughed again. "You're sure?" he mocked. "I know," thundered Marvin.

"You fool!" said Owen thinly. "Why do you think I got myself transferred to your outfit? Because you've got the evidence I want, to prove you're a crook. Why do you think I came at this time? Because the Germans are on the run; the war's damn near over—will be in sight of a month or less. And if I don't expose you before the war is over, you'll go home a hero—a great big hero, with red lights and brass bands and the governorship presented to you on a platter so you can make millions by robbing the state."

Marvin's face was so black it seemed he might have a stroke. "You swine!" he said thickly; "you'll never—"

The telephone jangled sharply. At the same moment the door opened and Dinglebells returned. Marvin fought for his self-control. Owen merely stood and smoked.

"Answer the phone," ordered Marvin.

Dinglebells took the receiver out of the leather case. "Peanuts talking," he said giving the squadron code name. He listened, leaned tensely forward. "Well, for cry-sake!" he muttered, "on the level?"

HE TURNED swiftly, put his hand over the transmitter. "The Eighteenth Field Artillery calling, sir," he tumbled his words together; "they just saw a Zeppelin over their position—five minutes ago. So low its tail nearly touched the earth. Flying east by northeast."

"That's the one that was *altered* over Paris last night," said Marvin, suddenly calm again.

"Right! The thunderstorm must have blown them off their course. Low visibility keeps them lost. They're trying to reach the front line." Dinglebells was beside himself with excitement. He bellowed thanks into the receiver and hung up for a second, then took the receiver and began to pound the cutoff.

"What are you doing?" cried Marvin.

"Calling Corps," yelled Dinglebells; "lay down a barrage—"

"Get away from that phone," cut in Marvin furiously. He straightened; and suddenly a smile came over his face, and he regarded Owen sardonically. "Hawtry," he said officially, "order every ship on the line. Squadron show. We'll get the Zeppelin ourselves."

Dinglebells looked out at the rain. Low mist hung

over the Argonne hills, the Meuse valley, the smashed trees. At sixty feet you couldn't see your hand before your face.

"Fly—in this weather—it's suicidal," he gasped.

"Do as I order," snapped Marvin. He turned to the silent, observant Owen. "You came here to fight, Lieutenant," he said frigidly, "here's your chance. In flying togs and ready to go in five minutes. Hawtry, tell them to put fifty-six-eight-ninety-four on the line for Lieutenant Owen."

OWEN read the triumph on the glance; he knew precisely what it meant. Marvin had been seeking mightily for one sensational exploit to make him the outstanding hero of the State. Owen knew as well as if Marvin had told him, that the crooked politician intended, in some way, to down or to claim credit for downing the Zeppelin.

Owen merely returned the smile and made no comment.

Hawtry said, "Get your duffle and go to the quarters in the farmhouse. We can arrange for you sleeping later."

"Yes," nodded Marvin, smiling easily, "you can sleep—later, Owen."

Dinglebells helped Owen with his bedding roll and service trunk, then ran out to get the planes ready. The moment he was gone Owen seized his black leather coat, goggles and web belt with its service automatic, and hurried through the old farmhouse. He met a pilot dashing around and asked: "Where can I find Lieutenant Boswell?"

"Who—'Skeets'? In there. Hurry, it's a squadron show. And just like that fat jelly-fish Marvin to order us up on a day like this."

OWEN followed the pointed finger. The grim look vanished and he smiled boyishly, happily. He rapped on the door. "What ho, Sherlock Watson—the king stands without," he laughed.

He thrust open the door and was met by a short, red-haired youth who plunged upon him like an avalanche and pummeled his back in an ecstasy of joy. "Bruce, you foolish imitation of a second-hand lawyer!" cried the red-haired one. "I didn't expect you until next week." Solemnly he backed off and shook hands. Affection gleamed in his shrewd blue eyes, and was returned in Owen's gaze.

The friendship between Skeets Boswell and Bruce Owen was rooted deep in their childhood. They had

played high school football together, roomed together at State University, and when Owen came to the capital to work in the attorney-general's office he had found Skeets the star reporter, covering politics for the Tribune. They had roomed together until Marvin's frame-up had driven Owen from the State.

They chattered now swiftly of things long past. Footsteps thudded outside to interrupt the reunion.

"Everybody on the line—emergency," came the yell.

It brought them back to the present. Skeets began to get into his flying 'jam' and adjust a helmet on his head. As he dressed he talked. "I've been the original Sherlock, Bruce," he said. "I've watched Marvin night and day. I've been through his baggage with a fine-tooth comb. But, as I wrote to you, I haven't found a thing that would get us a conviction."

"Yes, I know," said Bruce, himself fastening on his goggles. "That's why I came. You didn't find a thing?"

Skeets Boswell suddenly turned his eyes away, and he hesitated, his lips working. "No, bucko," he said softly, "nothing to connect him with graft."

Owen did not notice the sudden change in his friend's attitude. "Yet it's here," he said; "Marvin is supposed to be broke. But he's getting his hands on money—plenty of it, for he's financing the machine back home that will elect him. Just before the war I know—but it's not evidence—that Marvin got thirty thousand dollars from the traction interests for getting that franchise through. We never could trace the money, you remember. And we haven't yet."

He paced the room thoughtfully. "But it's my hunch that Marvin set up a phoney bank account, used that money to play the rising market under directions. And he's made plenty of money."

SKEETS BOSWELL whistled softly. "I see the dinge in the woodpile," he muttered; "if he's got a phoney bank account he's got a bank book and vouchers in the phoney name. That's evidence enough to hang him—if you can get it. And he hasn't got it with him."

"He must—perhaps in a safety deposit box."

"By heck, I never thought of that," said Boswell. "What a dumbhead."

Another shout came from outside, and he set his goggles. "Well, when I get back, I'll show you the back way into his diggings, and we'll look for the key."

"One minute, sir," boomed a voice from outside.

They locked arms and went to the door. They were crossing the tarmac now. Owen reverted to Marvin. "He's going to be the next governor and senator as sure

as God made little apples if this war ends before we get the goods on him.” He paused, lips curled cynically. “Once the war is over you can never convince people he isn’t a hero and Honest John Bradley Marvin.”

THEY crossed the dripping tarmac to the deadline where the trim orange Spads stood wing to wing, motors idling. As they were halfway across a sudden wild shout rose above the rip of the engines.

“There she is!” screamed some one.

Two machine-guns mounted on artillery wheels cut loose with a terrific roar of sound. Owen turned his eyes upward. Looming out of the mist and slanting rain came a monster gray shape, so huge as to look like another world. It stretched back eight hundred feet until its tail was lost in the mist. Its motors drummed and suddenly filled the earth with din. Cigar-shaped, it seemed to swim on an angle, and it was passing over the southwest part of the tarmac at less than two hundred feet altitude. It was angling into the wind, its huge snout ploughing aside the gray fabric of fog and rain, seeming like a huge gray finger plucking its way through the air.

The enormous size of the monster made Owen gasp. It seemed to fill the sky. And then it went on, swimming, dissolving its grayness into the grayness of the day.

The tarmac went insane from excitement. Pilots forgot their fury at being ordered out on a dangerous flying day and raced for their cockpits, and roared for the chocks to be pulled. Owen and Boswell lost themselves in the wave of emotion.

“Boy, what a target!” yelled Boswell. “Fill me up with incendiaries, MacCarthy, or I’ll tear your Irish hide into six bits.”

OWEN strode swiftly to the ship assigned to him. Before coming to the Ninety-Eighth, he had flown two hundred hours over the front, and had seven victories to his credit. He was not afraid of the weather; he had even forgot Marvin in this sudden desire to burn that huge gas bag and destroy it. And Marvin seemed to ignore him.

“No formation,” howled the Captain. “Every man for himself. General drift east by northeast, and by God, I want that *downed*.”

Yet Owen smiled grimly as he saw Marvin’s face. It was gray; the man had fear, but desire for the public clamor that would come to him with such a victory had overcome it. He perceived that Marvin had his own chocks pulled first.

Boswell got off second, then Owen goosed his own ship out of line, flipped into the wind, and pouring the gun to the twin-banked Hispano-Suiza motor, raced down the field, his wheels half-buried in mud and water. He took the ship off in a climbing turn and was swinging after Boswell when both Skeets and Marvin vanished in the lowering mist.

Owen glanced at his compass and set the course. He climbed to two hundred feet and the race for the lost Zeppelin was on.

The Spad bored into the teeth of the driving rain. The prop sent back a living sheet of water; the wings dripped perfect Niagaras and the little windshield before Owen’s eager face split the water so it ran in torrents. Rain beating on the cherry-red exhaust stacks sent up a hot steam, and the motor exuded a white vapor.

A man’s life hung in the grip of his two hands, but Owen gloried in it. This was life; for the moment he lived and Marvin and his dishonesties seemed very far away.

In less than fifteen minutes the lost Zeppelin was found. Without warning the mist ahead swirled to a bucketing wind and there was the silver bag. Water ballast poured in geysers from it. Its nose pointed upward and its eight propellers smashed the air in a frenzied, magnificent effort to seek in altitude the safety that was denied here. A gallant effort, but too late. Owen palmed open the throttle, and the Spad leaped to the attack.

He had a fragmentary vision of two Spads off to his right also zooming to the attack, but the mist made it impossible to identify which was Boswell. And then he had eyes only for this motorized sausage swimming upward through veils of mist.

HE NOSED up slightly and fired two short bursts to clear his guns, then curved around to the right to come on the dirigible from the stern. Already streaks of flame leaped from the roof of it, and from the engine gondolas as machine-gunners laid down a barrage of bullets to keep off these tiny tiger insects. The Zeppelin had leveled off, and turned with the wind as a last gallant gesture to escape by running.

Owen flung aside his goggles the better to see; he cursed the hot steam from his motor that blocked his vision. Then, pointing the prop at the huge tail fin he drove the Spad at the quarry. The rest of the world was lost to him in gray rain and motor drone. He was the killer now.

Closer came the Zeppelin. Tracer fire began to streak the gray as Parabellum and Spandau guns spewed cupro-nickel slugs at him. The bullets bored through his wings; he lifted a bit to interpose the bag itself between him and the gunners. He saw ape-like figures on the whale-back of the monster and their slugs were flaming across the tail fin. He ducked under them.

The Spad lunged across the sky at a hundred and twenty miles an hour. The Zeppelin seemed to leap at him like a gigantic silver fist. It filled the sky. Two hundred yards away. Then a hundred. Owen's fingers hovered on the stick trips. His narrowed eyes stared through the ring-sight. He had the pointed tail in the center. Fifty yards. Now! His thumbs went home. A vast, terrific joy assailed him as the blue smooth Vickers began to chatter, to tremble.

Racka-ra cka-ra cka-racka!

The triggers hammered. Leaping flame flashed from the guns. Golden streaks of fire leaped across the gulf of air and vanished into the gray hide of the monster.

"BURN, damn you!" he yelled, and held the Spad to its course until it seemed nothing could keep him from smashing head-on into the silver mass. Then abruptly he hauled the stick back into his lap. The Spad, with a human howl of strained motor, slanted up the sky. So close was the Zeppelin that it appeared that the Spad's landing wheels would ride along its back.

For a fraction of time, then, Bruce Owen found himself assailed by a vomiting volcano. Sparks and tracer bullets tore around him in a living mass of flame. His ship was struck fifty times in less than that many seconds. He had a swift glimpse of men crouching there, tracking him with flashing machine-guns. He curved off, side-slipped into a vertical dive and went down the sky a-helling. The slug-struck Spad weaved as he hauled her out of the dive. He looked up, thinly, to see the Zeppelin in flames.

It was still swimming on. Untouched seemingly. Certainly unburned by the eighty slugs he had poured into its hugeness. He was not the first pilot who had seen balloons miraculously survive a rain of incendiaries.

OWEN cursed. "By God," he cried, "have I got to get out and touch a match to it?"

He saw the other two Spads flitting around, finding them by the ferocity of the German fire that

swept them. A deep fury that dissipated all caution seized Owen then. Under certain stimuli life becomes intolerable unless an object is achieved. Owen intended to burn the Zeppelin. Nothing else mattered.

The Spad droned up the sky in a fast zoom, and he curved in to put the huge tail-fin under his ring-sights. At a hundred and fifty yards he tripped the Bowdoin triggers and held them so. The bony cartridge belts slithered into the breeches. Racketing, flashing, the Vickers smashed out the rain of steel, every fourth slug an incendiary one.

Suddenly another ship flashed toward him, veered off, then curved wildly under him and came shooting upward with guns roaring. Owen cursed, but never ceased his own smashing fire. Bigger and bigger became the Zeppelin before him. Longer and longer was the empty web belt that trailed from his Vickers guns.

A quarter of a belt left. Deliberately he eased back on the throttle. Every slug should sew a hole of death in the great monster.

And then, as Owen was climbing the ship up the back of the Zeppelin, a streak of deep red fire raced along its top. For a second the huge dirigible trembled, vibrated. It seemed to distend like a gigantic toad. Along the ridge of its spine the trickling line of flame seemed to ignite into one vast roaring mass of terrific flame.

AND then the whole eight hundred feet of bag opened in one vast outpouring of fire.

It was not really an explosion. There came no sound above Owen's straining motor. But there was a sort of poof, a tremendous displacement of air. The Zeppelin became for one brief second a volcanic crater that spewed a sheet of solid fire high into the heavens.

The blast of hot air and flame caught Owen's Spad and flung him up the sky as a man's breath blows high a thistledown. The Spad literally backed up the sky tail first, rolled over and over like a helpless bug. It hung fractionally over the blood-colored mass of flame. The lower right wing tip, weakened by bullets, cracked abruptly and folded back, hung to the ship by a fractured strut. Gyrating and spinning, the Spad fell down the sky, the motor whine becoming a scream as the ship sought, under Owen's skillful hand, to gain its equilibrium. And then, partly leveled off, it began to fall.

Beneath it the cauldron of flame that was the Zeppelin fell, too, but the ballooning cover, the intense

heat, softened the drop. Owen went by it so closely that the eyebrows burned from his face, the hair on his arm curled, and his lips suddenly dried and cracked and his cheeks blistered.

Out of the intense mass of flame small objects leaped—human beings maddened by pain jumped to quick eternity, some of them small flaming balls of fire. Struts and duralumin girders fell like javelins, smoking through the sky. The Zeppelin was breaking up like matches spilling out of an opened box.

At that moment Owen thanked God for the rain, for otherwise his Spad must have ignited like a torch at the intense heat of this floating bonfire.

He had not time for gratification that the Zeppelin had burned; no time to wonder what had happened to the others. He was too close to the earth. Desperately he fought a spin, peered into the steaming sky to find some place to set down. The whole fight had been waged less than three hundred feet up and suddenly, now, the ground shot out of the mist and he yanked back on the stick and felt tree branches scrape the spreader bar. But the Spad answered, skimmed for a hundred yards or so, and then dipped dangerously as if to spin.

OWEN, acting instinctively, saw the meadow beyond the shell-racked farmhouse, and with the last effort straightened the ship, cut the gun and set her down. He panned, taking off the landing gear on the second bounce. But the ship skidded along on the fuselage and drove its nose between two trees that peeled back the wings but effectually brought the ship to a halt.

Owen took a big breath and climbed out. His eyes sought the sky where, crackling and blazing with a fury that made the sound audible for miles, the Zeppelin was just settling on a grove of trees. It spread a blanket of fire over the grove, and it then burned furiously and the ground around caught fire and the trees became blazing torches. But Owen had little time to watch this awesome bonfire. Death came out of the sky. Like a broken dragon-fly, another Spad dipped down out of the misting sky. It was spinning badly and, still spinning, it hit the ground at the far end of the field. The smash was like the crash of a huge barrel of broken glass falling down cellar steps.

FOR an instant Owen stared. Marvin down! If so, then death had ended the man's ambition for high office. Owen burst into a run, felt his face puffing and blistering as the rain rolled down the scorched skin.

The heat of the Zeppelin was wafted to him as he

bent over the smashed Spad. He took the goggles and helmet from the dead pilot. And then he froze, bent, staggered back. A terrible groaning sob burst from him. "Skeets!" he cried. And again, "Skeets!"

Suddenly he wrenched furiously at the wreckage, burned his hands on the red-hot motor trying to yank it off the poor crushed legs. His breath came in sobs. He mumbled strange words. He wrenched and tore, unaware that American soldiers, attracted by the bonfire and the noise, had come to help him.

"Hang on, Skeets," he kept crying. "We'll have you right, chum."

At last the broken body came clear of the wreckage. Owen knelt over it, agony in his eyes as he saw the twisted torso, the right-angled arms, the legs crushed. His lips were bloody from biting them as he felt for a heart-beat.

He slowly took his crimsoned hand away. He looked around at the soldiers. "They got him," he said. His hands waved in a little gesture of despair. "They got him." He felt of the still warm face, strangely unmarred and at peace. It was hard to believe that Skeets Boswell was down, would never speak again.

"It's tough, fellah, but it's war," said one of the officers gently, and led Owen a little distance away while stretcher-bearers came from the artillery camp and lifted the body to carry it away.

"Yes," mumbled Owen, "war, did you say?"

Then out of the black fog another voice said, "He didn't suffer in the crash, your pal didn't. He was dead before he hit."

"Dead before he hit," repeated Owen dazedly. "Dead—but—"

"A handful of those German slugs must have caught him in the back," said the voice grimly. "He died instantly."

OWEN stood, long legs wide apart, hands clinched. "What did you say?" he fought to clear his head of grief. "Shot in the back?"

"Yeah. You can see the marks on the back of the cockpit. He must have been going away when they caught him."

Suddenly Owen's eyes widened, his mouth tightened. In six swift strides he reached the stretcher. "Put it down," he ordered harshly.

He knelt over the body, gently turned it on its side, and saw the little blued holes in the flesh of the back over the heart and lungs. He saw more. Two slugs, probably slowed up by striking the heavy

wooden framework of the cockpit, had barely buried themselves halfway in the spinal column.

Bruce Owen was able to pick them out with his fingers. He saw now that the body had not bled save at this spot which proved in truth that Skeets had been dead before he hit the ground.

Owen straightened, and a wild, terrible look came into his eyes. He stared at the two slugs, and stared yet again. He took a deep breath and a curse, savage and terrible, burst through his thin lips. Quickly he turned on the artillery officer and his face was such as to make these men look at him curiously. It was black, implacable, terrible.

"Captain," said Owen, "you've got a medical officer over there?" When the officer nodded, Owen went on, "Have him probe and reclaim all those bullets. It is a matter of great importance. Then I'd like transportation to the Ninety-eighth's tarmac."

As he went away to the motorcycle with side-car, Owen looked once upon Skeets Boswell's face. He licked the blood from his own lips. "If you can see anything, Skeets," he muttered, "watch me now." He roared through the rain to the drome.

WHEN he again entered the operations office, Captain Marvin was dictating to Dinglebells.

"... On my third attempt," he was saying, "I fired sixty rounds and the Zeppelin took fire and exploded with a slight sound. It came to earth and burned *en toto*. Pilots Boswell and Owen were killed and—" The slam of the door made him look up into the deep, burning eyes of Bruce Owen.

The brief look of amazement was succeeded by an instant's look of fear as he saw the twisted mouth of Owen, the fierce blaze in the gray eyes. Owen made no sound, but something in his glance told Marvin that if scandal were to be avoided, Dinglebells had better go. He sent him to the hangars on a trivial errand.

Owen stood there, legs wide apart, shoulders hunched, arms slightly crooked with his fists balled.

"Marvin," he said thinly, "you shot and killed Skeets Boswell."

It was the accusation direct. Another man might have been more subtle, but Owen had always been frank—too frank—and it never occurred to him to be otherwise now.

Marvin took a step backward. An expression of supreme astonishment swept his plump face. "What the hell are you saying?" he cried, and if it was acting, it was splendid.

Owen was holding onto himself with difficulty. "Skeets Boswell died before he hit the ground. The bullets that killed him were fired from a Vickers machine-gun." Owen held out the two slugs and pointed to their needle tips and the stream-line of their flanks. "Vickers slugs, Marvin," he said, thinly, savagely.

"Then I didn't do it," cried Marvin. "I was firing into the bag. I was never close to Boswell. If he—" he suddenly began to sweat and stopped speaking.

A gleam of understanding came into Owen's eyes. "You did kill him," he cried in a low, intense tone. "I see now. You were firing at me. That time—when I was making a second attack, and Boswell swept beside me and underneath. Then's when you got him, Marvin, then—" he lunged across the room and his fingers closed on the fat gullet and tightened. Marvin went backward and to the floor, clawing madly.

"Watch, Skeets," said Owen, and knelt on Marvin's chest.

IT WOULD have been death but for Dinglebells. He had suspected something from the strange actions of the two and had come back. He separated Owen from Marvin with the help of the master mechanic. The latter lay almost unconscious. His tongue was thick when he could speak.

"Put him under arrest—lock and key," he gulped hoarsely. "Charge, striking a superior officer."

As the guards were taking Owen away he saw Marvin hastening toward the hangar. Frantically he wrestled with the guards. "Stop him," he yelled. "He's going to destroy those machine-guns."

"Hold still," growled the sentry. "What of it?"

"You damned fool!" cried Owen. "The grooves inside. They'll prove that the bullets that killed Boswell were fired from those guns."

"You're nuts!" said the guard roughly.

They locked Owen in the farmhouse cellar where there was no light.

ON THE morning of the third day the cellar door opened and Captain Marvin entered. He left the door open. His plump face was calm; he was at his ease.

"Listen, Owen," he said, smiling. "You lost your head the other day when you struck me. But now that I know Boswell was a dear friend of yours, I'm inclined to overlook the offense."

Owen stood up, hands clinched at his side. "What you mean is that a court martial would bring out too

many points against you,” he forced himself to speak calmly.

“If you think that, you’re a fool,” rejoined Marvin evenly. “A court martial wouldn’t disturb me at all. I’ve been confirmed as having shot down the Zeppelin. I’m going to get the Congressional Medal of Honor. I’ve had the moving picture men here, and the story is all over America—or will be.”

“You forget that I shall say you shot and killed Skeets Boswell,” said Owen. He was thinking rapidly, trying to fathom this change of front.

“And I can prove that a lie,” Marvin laughed. “The Germans have a great liking for Vickers guns. It has frequently been the case that they have taken them from captured planes and remounted them. The fact that Boswell was killed with Vickers bullets signifies only that the Germans were using Vickers on that Zeppelin.”

Owen considered the point. He knew now that Marvin had hidden or destroyed the two machine-guns. Definite proof that the bullets in his pocket were fired from Marvin’s guns was lacking—unless the guns could be found. But if Marvin did not fear court-martial and the charge of killing Boswell, what did he fear? Why was he relenting? The man must have another reason for wanting to let Owen free without a trial. He proceeded cautiously.

“Cleverly thought out,” he admitted through a grim mouth.

“Let’s call a truce,” said Marvin, smiling. “The war is going to be over in a few weeks—Austria asked for an armistice yesterday, and the Germans are on the run. We’re moving the squadron forward today. I’ll have you transferred to a soft billet in Paris.”

“You killed Skeets,” said Owen.

“I don’t believe it,” cried Marvin, “but if I did—which I do not admit—then, as God is my witness, it was accidental.”

OWEN’S lips curled, but he said nothing. He had learned that Marvin’s cunning had to be fought with equal cunning.

“If you’ll agree,” said Marvin with illy-suppressed eagerness, “you can go out now—join the afternoon patrol.”

Dimly, in that eagerness, Owen perceived a hidden motive for this action. He pretended not to notice. “If you don’t want to press the charge,” he said carelessly, “you’re the captain.”

He saw an odd look come into the politician’s

eyes, then the man forced a smile. “Then the matter is closed.” He stepped back to let Owen depart.

Owen thought about the politician’s odd behavior all that morning, and it suddenly occurred to him that as long as he was locked up there was no peril. With Owen free, and riding the patrols in a Spad, there was a chance of death. Marvin had failed before to kill him; he was going to try again, more subtly, more cleverly. But how? And why?

He found out the next day.

CAPTAIN MARVIN led a squadron show, twenty-two planes in stepped-V formation. He said, at the take-off, “General reconnaissance. No breaking of formation except on order, and the man who violates the order takes the consequences.”

It was a usual order, and Owen could find no harm in it. He did, however, take extraordinary precautions in looking over his ship. He plucked every brace wire to make sure its strident note bespoke the proper tension. He looked over his smooth blue guns, his motor; in short, he made positively sure that nothing could go wrong in a pinch that would leave him at the mercy of an enemy.

So he was totally unprepared for what followed after Marvin had led the squadron across the barbed wire and into enemy territory toward Stenay. If Owen had noticed anything, it was the rather meandering course that Marvin kept, a zigzagging across the sky that seemed to bespeak mental hesitancy.

And then of a sudden they flushed the Fokkers.

Owen saw them as soon as any one and recognized the obvious trap. Flying at seven thousand feet were three Aviatiks, positive bait. Higher up, flying on the edge of cumulous clouds, was a *jagdstaffel* of fifteen Fokkers. And, sighting through his thumb, Owen saw way up in the sun another layer of Fokkers, how many he could not make out.

He grinned thinly. Marvin’s listless patrol had given the Germans a chance to prepare this trap—something they always did if given any notice at all—hoping that they would pick off a little white meat. Owen looked to his neighboring Spad. The man laughed derisively and put his thumb to his nose, pointing to the high layer. Owen grinned back, relieved.

Then came Marvin’s signal to hold tight formation. He, too, had seen the trap.

“Well,” muttered Owen, “he’s got respect: for his own hide anyway.”

For ten minutes they cruised there in defiance of the Fokkers. Then Owen’s motor began to miss.

THE tachometer needle fell back. Terrific clouds of black smoke jetted from his exhaust stacks. The ship lost speed so that it began to tremble toward a spin. The squadron pulled away from him. Owen cursed and edged the stick forward. Under the impetus of the controls the Spad dove, slanting, unintentionally headed toward the Aviatiks. The Hisso continued to lose revs. No jazzing of throttle or choke could make it pick up. To keep his controls sensitive, Owen was forced to dive the ship.

Then the sky above rained black Fokkers.

They fell onto him, surrounded him, blasted at him with hot guns, and seemed like furious hawks fighting each other for the chance of killing this quarry. Tracer stream criss-crossed in front of him, behind him, whipped into his wings, his struts, his fuselage. Under the fury of the blast the ship seemed likely to be shot out from under him.

Owen knew he was doomed. Marvin's trap had sprung perfectly. Up there the squadron banked, leaving him to death. Yet Owen's clean courage could not let him die like a trapped pigeon. With his motor failing, his ship sagging beneath him, he nosed straight at the Fokker sent to cut off his downward escape.

HE WENT down, blond hair flying in the wind, fearless eyes staring through his ring-sights. He tripped his guns, and let them roar. He held the Spad true as a bullet's flight, and the frantic German felt the rain of slugs, and died with amazing swiftness.

A second tried to intercept him, and madly flung his Fokker out of the way of this dare-devil who deliberately had offered head-on collision. And so Owen went down the sky, curving toward No Man's Land, riding a tail wind, and behind him streaked the Fokkers, and the air was yellow with their tracer fire, and the Spad began to come apart in the air.

No one, not even the raging, impotent flyers of his own squadron, saw Owen's finish. The stricken Spad, chased with a mad hue and cry of Spandau bullets across the sky and down, vanished over the brow of Hill 188. It melted into the broken grays and browns of the Meuse woods. Marvin, as well as two other pilots, saw the flash of a blazing fire, a small orange spot against the dun background. The plane had crashed and burned. The Germans did acrobatics to celebrate the kill.

And Marvin, his Spad making a skid turn, headed the squadron back to the Ninety-eighth's tarmac. The squadron landed in silence. Marvin, face grave, started to walk slowly toward the operations office.

Young Chauncey Woods ran after him, face streaming tears. "You let him go, skipper, you let him be killed," he sobbed. "I could have helped. We could have—"

"Quiet!" cut in Marvin in a queer voice. "There was nothing to be done. In war you do not sacrifice your whole command for the sake of one, even if that one's motor fails and he reaches his death through no fault of his own."

"But, God—he burned!" Woods shuddered and nearly had hysteria. "If we had split to save him, the upper layers of Germans would have smashed us. They hoped for that." Marvin turned and moved on. "It's too bad, lad, but that's—war." He patted the sobbing boy's shoulder and Woods shrank from the touch as if it had been a snake's.

Marvin went into his office and himself wrote into the log the brief paragraph that chronicled the end of Flight Lieutenant Bruce Owen. "Motor trouble, attacked by superior force of E. A., crashed and burned."

FATE itself backed Marvin's hand. Two days after he had to report that he had abandoned a flyer to his fate through force of superior enemy aircraft, he single-handedly crashed a Gotha Bomber on its way back from Nancy. The fight occurred at dawn, over the Yank front-line positions. It was as if Marvin had taken the sky for a stage, and invited a million men to witness his heroism.

It was either the same Gotha or of the squadron of Gothas that had—probably accidentally—dropped two bombs on Evacuation Hospital Two. And so the front rang with the courage of this lone-handed fighter. The newspaper correspondents descended in droves from Neuchateau; the movie cameramen took much footage and entitled it: "Hero Downs Huns Who Bombed Yank Hospital."

THE British cited him for the Military Cross, their highest award; and word was sent that the next levee would make Marvin a Chevalier of the Legion d'Honneur. In the excitement of this grandstand act, the abandoning of Owen was forgotten. The governor of the state cabled him that he had called a state holiday and named it Marvin Day. He added—in code—that whatever the State could give was already Marvin's.

And thus, on November 6th, with rumors of peace flying up and down the front, and America

already tricked by a false armistice, Marvin moved his squadron to Vienne-le-Chateau, and took it off on a ground-strafting mission to machine-gun the roads, already jammed with retreating gray hordes of Germans.

The mechanics and the squadron duffle were moved forward by truck; and Marvin and his pilot's personal effects had come up the preceding night by Cadillac.

Hence there was but one man, a chauffeur, on the new tarmac at seven o'clock that morning of November. This man dozed in the rear seat of the car and never saw a ragged, dirty creature slip out of the woods and ease into the shell-racked farmhouse that would be the officers' quarters.

This man stole into the side door unseen and proceeded instantly to the bedding rolls that were piled in the old smelly living room, pending the arrival of the pilots. He gazed over them, and also the small trunks with names painted on them.

It was Captain J. Bradley Marvin's that he unrolled.

Lieutenant Bruce Owen would have been hard to recognize as he bent feverishly to the task of searching Marvin's effects. His face was still blistered and might be scarred; and his leg was hurt, and he had a bad sprain in his right wrist.

He was smiling now in satisfaction that his trick had worked. He had, by burning his own ship after the ground-looped crash, fooled Marvin into thinking he was dead. He had hid three days to keep up the illusion, avoided going to a hospital. The man's vigilance had relaxed. Always he had kept his bedding roll with him, or had his dog-robber watch it. But now Owen had a chance to search it. If evidence of Marvin's dishonesty was here, then Owen could still wreck the politician's scheme.

And it was here. Owen knew it as surely as he knew Marvin had killed Boswell.

HE HAD some ten minutes, he figured, and began to search earnestly through the bedding roll. He was looking for a key.

"Skeets Boswell searched here," he told himself, "but he was not looking for a key. If there had been anything else he would have found it. Marvin is too smart to take valuable papers like phoney bankbooks and vouchers to the front where, if he were killed, the secret would come to light."

He went through the bedding roll and found nothing. Then he forced the lock on the military trunk

and rummaged that. Suddenly he laughed in silent joy. The key was in a chamois bag along with a solitaire diamond ring and a man's heavy gold hunting watch.

Yet it was only a small triumph. Owen straightened, and uttered a small curse. A key, yes, but to what and where? A safety deposit vault in the States—or in Paris. "He must keep it over here," he argued, "but the hell of it is there are many banks in Paris."

He had to find out what bank—or this was useless save as a bluff.

He began again on the trunk and came finally to a small packet of letters neatly held together by a rubber band. Among the letters was a somewhat bent photograph of a girl. Owen stared at it. He seemed to freeze. A moan of utter agony escaped him.

"Edith Harlow!" he muttered. "Good God!"

HOW had Edith Harlow's picture come to be in Marvin's trunk? And the autograph that made him groan: "To Jack with all my love—Edith."

For a moment that seemed to be all eternity, Owen stood there, his brain racing back over those days in Westerley. Edith had never told him why she would not marry him; had never told him of Marvin. She had said, "I'm sorry, Bruce, but I don't love you." And he had never suspected the politician.

It was because she had refused him that Owen had accepted his fate and left Westerley and the State when Marvin framed him. Now Owen understood. Edith had loved Marvin. But why hadn't she said so? At the time Owen proposed there had been no open enmity between him and Marvin. She never knew he was digging to uncover the brewery scandal. Yet, if she loved Marvin, why hadn't she said so?

Feverishly now he began to paw through the letters—letters from her. And boldly he read, his heart hammering at sight of the copper-plate script that she had always written even when chief secretary in the governor's executive office. And the letters told the story.

The story of a girl fooled, of a girl jilted. The story of a hysterical war romance now on the rocks,

And in the last letter Owen got the essential clue: "I got the check on the Paris branch of the National City Bank," he read, "and you cannot imagine how I needed the money. I was really broke. I have left Westerley, my memories are too sad, and I can assure you I'll never ask you to send me any more money."

Clearly Owen saw the future developments. Marvin had a phoney bank account—in the Paris branch of

the National City Bank. By turning over this key to a prosecutor, then legally seizing the vouchers, and calling Edith as a witness, Marvin's guilt as a grafter could easily be proven. Even his record as a hero could not stand the withering heat of this evidence. Owen gradually recovered his wits and stood there, letters and photograph in hand, thinking.

BUT of his mind came the image of Skeets Boswell. Owen was seeing him as they had crossed the tarmac arm in arm, that last day of Boswell's life. Sentences recurred to mind.

Then Owen nodded soberly. "Skeets had searched this trunk," he told himself, "and knew about this picture. That's why he was evasive. He wanted to tell me and didn't. And he died before he could get the courage."

He stood very quietly and other images crossed his mind. Edith on the witness stand identifying a check drawn by some phoney name as one of Marvin's to her. Edith proclaimed in the newspapers as the politician's jilted sweetheart.

He could not destroy Marvin without bringing her into the picture. Yet to let Marvin go on, rob the State, continue his crooked career, was impossible. Yet it would be hard to let Edith suffer for her trust in the politician. It was a terrible dilemma, but Owen must make a decision. He gave a groan and held his head in his two hands. Then suddenly came the rolling thunder of planes winging toward the tarmac. Marvin and his squadron coming home. Swiftly he closed the trunk, strapped the bedding roll. He thrust picture and letters and key into his pocket. And then he sped, still unseen, back to the woods where he crouched in the wet underbrush and racked his brain for a way out of this miserable drama.

THAT night Captain J. Bradley Marvin settled down in his new quarters. They were in a small house at the extreme end of the property which he held alone by virtue of his rank.

"Hope we'll stay here a few days," he grumbled to his dog-robber. "The Germans are running too fast."

"Yes, sir," said the dog-robber, and presently withdrew.

Marvin sat alone. He bit the tip off a cigar, rolled the end in his wet mouth and then ignited it thoroughly. Then he began to weigh the day's crop of war news. The French were in Metz. The French were in Sedan. The Germans were suing for peace,

and it looked to Marvin that the war would be over by Thanksgiving at the latest, probably before.

"So," he muttered aloud, "I've got to get ready. The first soldiers home will get all the hero worship. I've got to be on that first boat."

He set himself to thinking what high officers had the influence to get him such a coveted billet. He was still thinking, smoking quietly, when the door silently opened and a ghost stood there and faced him.

A taut, lined face, grimly white, with strange, blazing eyes that held in leash a fury to make a man shrink. The cigar fell from Marvin's pudgy fingers and lay burning on the floor. His chair tilted back, and for a moment it looked as if he would fall. Then he galvanized into action. He came to his feet.

"Owen!" he gasped, and again, "Owen! My God!"

"Yes," Owen's voice came metallic, tensely soft. "I'm not dead, Marvin. You're not seeing a ghost."

"Why— why—" Marvin's voice failed and he ceased to speak.

"I set my plane afire," Owen continued to talk in the low, tense voice. "I wanted you to believe you had won, Marvin, that your handful of carborundum dumped in my gas tank had got me killed."

He paused, but Marvin continued to stare, face drained of color, eyes bulging.

"I wanted you to think I was dead so that I could get these," slowly Owen's hand came from his pocket and he held before Marvin's strained gaze two letters and a safety deposit box key. A choked gasp came from the captain; his mouth hung open and he did not close it.

OWEN took a step forward, a firm step, and once again his legs spread wide apart, his head was sunk between his shoulders and his one fist was doubled so tightly that the knuckles showed whitely. Sweat stood on his forehead, such was the strain of keeping himself from strangling Marvin.

"Why did you jilt Edith Harlow?" he asked thickly. "She didn't have enough money for you, so you blighted her life by throwing her over."

Marvin nodded as if he had expected this. He shut his mouth and his little red tongue came out and licked his pursy lips. "I meant—meant to marry her," he muttered. "But the chance—they told me I could be governor—Senator Watkins' daughter—Janice—I—"

"You mean you're engaged to her—Senator Watkins' daughter?" came Owen's hard voice.

Silently Marvin nodded. "It's announced by now.

I met her in Paris—in the spring—war work. I told Edith—in the last letter.”

Owen’s lips curled. “You filthy swine!” his voice continued low. “Is there anything you haven’t done to promote your own career?”

AT THE word career Marvin flinched. The word brought back to him the meaning of what was going on here. With the war practically over, with his popularity such as to sweep the State almost unanimously, with a career opening that might lead to dizzy heights, here stood a man who could wreck it in five minutes. The thought made him stagger, groan.

“I didn’t know you cared for Edith,” he whimpered.

Owen nodded. Edith was a thoroughbred; not likely she would brag of her other conquests. But it didn’t change matters; not a bit.

“You would have treated her just the same even if you had known,” he said.

Marvin said nothing for a while. His small eyes strayed around the room, his hands opened and shut and he began to tremble.

“Wh-what do you intend to do?” he asked.

There was a momentary silence. Owen had been asking himself that very question all afternoon and he had finally arrived at a decision. Exposure of Edith being jilted by Marvin—he loved her and always would—was impossible. It was equally impossible to let Marvin go on. So now, into the silence of the room, he spoke the decision he had reached.

“You’ve got to die, Marvin,” he said simply.

Marvin took a step backward, stared at Owen. “Me!” he cried weakly; “me—die.”

“It’s the only way,” nodded Owen grimly. “I can’t expose her; and you’ve lived too long anyway.”

A torrent of thoughts rushed upon Marvin. The war was nearly over; might shut down now any day. And this man talked of him, Marvin, dying. The thought made Marvin shrink, caused him to lose his head.

“No,” he half-screamed; “I won’t. You can’t do this. I’ve got too much to live for. The war is nearly over. I’ve lasted. I’ve got a right—”

WITH a raised hand, Owen cut him off. “You can go out there, Marvin, and pretend to die in combat, or you can try to dodge death and I’ll personally kill you. Either way, you’ve got to die. It’s your choice.”

There was another silence then. Through it struck the rumble of the night traffic on the road. Yank

troops moving up. Motor trucks, and guns, and men. And more guns and more men. An olive drab tide pouring forward like a terrific brown flood to overwhelm the Germans with the exultant power of their youth and strength.

“If you go out there tomorrow and dog-fight,” Owen’s voice struck through the silence, “I’ll keep silent about you. No one will ever know. You’ll even be honored. It’s the better way, Marvin, and I suggest it.”

“You’re mad, you cannot mean it.” Marvin’s tongue formed words while he fought for time to think—think how he could avoid this terrible young man who menaced him like Nemesis itself. His face was bluely pale. He took another step backward and sank limply into the chair. His eyes held the same look of horror that a condemned man’s has when the lights dim in the deathhouse.

With everything to live for, he was faced with this! This man Owen was mad. If Marvin could fool him, kill him. At the word his eyes widened, and a mad desire to stamp Owen’s corpse into the ground made him tremble. His thoughts raced.

No one had seen Owen come here; everyone still thought him dead. In the table canvas pocket within inches of his hand was his web belt and Colt automatic.

HE LICKED his lips. “I won’t,” he forced himself to say. “I’ll face exposure first.”

Owen took a step forward and Marvin visibly shrank. But Owen did not make a move to attack. “Marvin,” he said, “I found those Vickers machine-guns—in Falcon Swamp. You dropped a piece of the breech mechanism on the bank near where you heaved them on. The water’s not deep. They can hang you for that.”

“No!” Marvin burst out. “They can’t. It was an accident, I tell you. I was standing off, firing long-range. He ran through my line of fire.”

As he told the lie it suddenly occurred to him that it would not stand the test of a court-martial. Owen must be silenced. He pretended to lose his balance as he leaned forward, the chair tilted. With a speed born of desperation, his hand streaked to the automatic and came out.

“Why—you—” Owen sprang forward.

The automatic ripped out a sheet of crimson flame and sparks. The roar of its explosion sounded thunderous there in the small room. Blood leaped from Owen’s head. He hiccoughed, and almost pitched forward on his face.

Then through the night came the shout: "Corporal of the guard, Post Six!"

There was a running of feet. More shouts, and now the running feet were closer.

The sounds galvanized Owen into action. He had too much at stake to be caught now. There was a side door to this cottage that led to a yard. He swept across the room, opened the door and dashed out into the blackness, and disappeared into the night.

Marvin, for a dazed moment, stared stupidly at the retreating, bloody figure. He held his gun limply in his clenched fist. Then he noticed where Owen's blood had crimsoned the floor. It would never do for them to capture Owen—he knew too much and could tell too much. He would have to explain away the shot and the blood stains.

He seized a small issue knife and without even a wince slashed himself across the palm. The blood dripped and crimsoned the floor.

He was standing, holding the wounded hand, when the guard's knock thundered on the door.

"Come in," called Marvin. A perturbed guard looked in. "Nothing to get alarmed about, Corporal," Marvin said. "I was cleaning my automatic and the damned thing went off. Just a scratch across the hand."

THE corporal muttered something, helped Marvin tie up the gash, and then presently withdrew. The realization that Owen was not dead but running around and still a menace to his safety sickened Marvin. A violent trembling seized him and he wanted to scream and vomit.

ON THE morning of November 10, 1918, Sergeant Mahoney of the Military Police roughly laid hands on a ragged, unshaven man who had been sleeping under a tree along the *route nationale* to Sedan. "By God, I got yuh," he said, shaking him violently. "They been lookin' all over for you, feller."

The sleeping man staggered to his feet. Across his head was a nasty wound. A weird purposeful light shone in his eyes as he looked up at the sergeant.

"Yes, you," said Mahoney as if the man had spoken. "Stealing food and tryin' to steal good soldiers' rifles so's they'll find them on their payroll come the end of the month. Who the hell are yuh, anyway?"

As he spoke he examined a memorandum from M.P. Headquarters. "Officer's boots," he read aloud, "civilian's overcoat, age twenty-odd, blond hair—probably a shell-shocked officer. Arrest and detain."

"Yes, that's you," he added. "What's your name and why did yuh turn thief?"

The man rubbed his forehead. "He can't go on," he muttered in a daze, not realizing just what he was mumbling; "he's got to die. Don't you see? That's the only way out."

"Nuts!" said Mahoney; "Nobody's gotta die now, I hope. The war's gonna be over tomorrow at eleven o'clock. Gonna fold right up and quit."

The words had a strange effect on the man. "War—over!" he repeated. "Tomorrow. At eleven." Then his hand shot out and gripped the sergeant's arm until the man squirmed in pain. "It can't stop with him alive," the man said. "By God, no!"

"You're crazier than a hoot owl," snarled Mahoney, angered by the pain. "Get your lunch-hook off me. And come on before I rap this billy around your nut."

He started to take the man by the arm and haul him roughly to where his motorcycle with its sidecar reposed. This was a mistake. Mahoney carried a Colt .45 six-gun issue weapon and he carried it on the left hip, butt foremost, for a swift draw with his right hand. And now this weapon was turned to his prisoner while Mahoney himself raised his long billy club in a threatening gesture.

With a whirlwind movement of his hand, the prisoner whipped the gun from the holster and almost in the same movement drove the muzzle across the M. P.'s head.

Mahoney silently slumped backward, rolled half over and lay senseless. The prisoner looked down at him. There was pity in the gaze, bewilderment.

"He was helping Marvin indirectly and I couldn't stop to explain," he muttered. "Marvin must die. Before the war is over."

He turned and examined the sidecar, found a box of hardtack, a can of tomatoes, a can of monkey meat and a mess-kit. He mixed up the mess in the kit and stuffed it ravenously into his mouth.

And then, ten minutes later, he walked up the road. Three kilometers to the north he came upon two soldiers convoying a bunch of ammunition carts drawn by mules.

"Where would the Ninety-eighth Squadron be?" he asked.

ONE of the men looked curiously at the strained, desperate face. The man sure did look a sight. A soldier going A.W.O.L. from a hospital, he thought; lots of them did it these days.

"Better go back to the hospital, Bud, you look all in."

"No," said the man. "No. The Ninety-eighth Squadron, please."

The soldier with a long, thoughtful face, took the man by the arm and gently headed him down a dirt road. "The Ninety-eighth is back there, Bud. Better go to bed when you get there."

Throwing a hasty thanks, the man walked on. A new spring came to his feet. He was a tireless machine. His head ached dreadfully. The ache pounded in his eyes and he wanted to squeeze his head and squeeze the pain out. But that took time, and he had no time.

HE HEARD the thrum of warning motors—Hispano-Suizas, he knew by the exhaust of them. He quickened his pace, forgot his gnawing hunger, the insatiable craving for drink and warmth and food. Marvin was there. And the war ended this day and Marvin must atone for his sins before it ended.

He came upon a sentry near the west end of the tarmac. The sentry never recognized in this unshaven, bearded, haggard soldier the handsome young lieutenant whom he had once saluted as Bruce Owen.

"What you want?" he snarled.

"I must see Captain Marvin at once," muttered Owen. "He must see me. Now. Important."

The sentry supposed it a message, even if it was a queer-looking messenger. "That shack to the right," he said, pointing.

Owen strode across the grassy tarmac, so smooth and gray and soggy in the morning light. On the deadline he could see Spads warming up, men swarming like monkeys over them. He ignored the sight. Purposely he kept his eyes on the shack. He fingered the gun in his pocket.

No one came out, and he walked in without knocking. Marvin was fastening his helmet. He was whistling and planning. His idea that morning was to make a victorious patrol as far as Metz, and fire off the full loads of his Vickers at precisely eleven o'clock. The last gesture of the war. He knew nothing until a vise-like hand gripped his arm, swung him, and a voice said:

"It's time to hurry, Marvin. The war will be over soon."

Marvin turned and stared into deep-set, burning eyes that seemed to haunt him like a vendetta. He paled, but did not cringe. Ever since Owen had disappeared he had subconsciously feared this. He knew that Owen would return, and each hour had been a horror of waiting. So in a way, Owen's coming was a relief.

He saw the haggard face, the blazing, determined eyes. He could not scream for he realized that he had a desperate man to deal with. A man who talked low, persistently, obsessed with one idea: the idea that Marvin should die.

"You must go out and act like a hero," said Owen. "You must pretend. They may even erect a monument to you, place you on the honor roll. But—you cannot go back alive."

MARVIN shook his head, his mouth trembled. "But—how—" his agile brain worked swiftly. The Germans would not fight on the morning of peace. They would not wish to die. He could go out there—pretend—trick this fool even to the last. He mustered his failing courage.

"You will stay here and wait for the report," he said persuasively.

"I will go and see you die," came the deep-toned reply.

Marvin thought of summoning the guard; calling for help from the pilots. But that might mean Owen would reveal the secret, turn over the key which Marvin had not recovered; tell about the machine-guns hidden in the pond. God, how he wished for the moment that he had been able to kill him.

He found himself being inexorably led to the door. "Tell them to give me a ship," said Owen's deadly voice.

THE grip on Marvin's arm never relaxed; he was marched like a truant child down the field to where the pilots stood around smoking, talking excitedly, asking themselves what they could do in peace to compare with the high adventure they had been living.

They saw Marvin, and the unshaven man, and someone whooped with joy as Owen was recognized. They came to shake his hand and pat him on the back, and they stayed to sorrow over the strangeness of him, at his quiet demeanor. They noticed the wound in his head and put it down to the crash; they saw that he belonged in a hospital. They said so.

Marvin cried out: "A hospital is where he belongs. He wants to fly; he can't. The Germans will get him I—on the last day."

Bruce Owen stood very quietly during this altercation, his only movement to glance at a watch on a pilot's wrist.

Presently he jerked Marvin. "Time to go. It's late," he said.

Owen shoved Marvin to the ship. Half-crazed with

fear, Marvin turned, cried—yet in a low tone: “I won’t go—I can’t. It’s—”

“It’s better to die out there than here,” said Owen gently, yet implacably; “I’ll kill you myself if you don’t go.”

And Marvin knew he meant it. He climbed into the ship. Hope, the eternal flame of which glows in any breast, made him believe that he could trick Owen to the last. Out-fly him and land with the French; pancake behind the German lines. Perhaps shoot down Owen himself. At the thought his eyes blazed.

Owen, disregarding a pilot’s complaint, climbed into the cockpit of the next ship. He called over coldly: “Take off.” Pilots looked at him queerly and finally one, Dan Jarrell, moved forward to prevent Owen from taking off. Deliberately Owen smashed him in the face as he swung up on the wing beside the cockpit. “Go,” Owen called.

And Marvin, face ashen, called for the chocks to be removed, and the two Spads trundled out into the field, picked up speed and sped away. The time was precisely a quarter past ten o’clock. The other pilots trailed along, but they did not change the end.

It was a weird world that the two ships droned above. Artillery was drawn up in open fields firing like mad at any or no target. Every Yank soldier knew that shells not fired off would have to be carted to the rear, and they wanted no loads except cognac to celebrate the victory. The Germans, dogged, fired on to show the world that while an armistice might have been asked, the German army was still courageous.

ON THE right bank of the Meuse Yank soldiers advanced and died within a half hour of life and liberty. Germans fell, choked in blood, who had come out and lasted through the war since 1914, only to have their luck run out at the very end. And over Sedan Von Manteuffel’s *jagdstaffel* took to the skies to shoot down yet another victory while it was legal—while it was glory and not murder.

Toward this front, flaming with the last embers of war, flew J. Bradley Marvin. His was a mind bewitched and frozen with terror. Could he stay alive and dodge this desperate avenger who flew sternly at his tail, could he breathe the cool air one-half hour from now, then the heights of fame were his. Before him lay glory and career, respect and honor—if he could live.

And for that future which beckoned with white, lovely hands, he would do anything.

“Anything,” he shouted into the blast of his propeller.

He thought of getting Owen between him and the Germans and claiming an accidental burst had killed the man. But no, he had worked that once. He thought of collision, sweeping off Owen’s top wings with his landing assembly. But the possibility of cracking up within minutes of safety and career made him sweat.

Then the Fokkers made his decision for him.

THE leader saw these lone Spads droning across the heights. He looked at his wrist-watch. Quarter to eleven. The leader, Von Staltz, had nine victories to his credit. One more—either of these—would make ten; he would be a *kanone*, a German ace, with the Iron Cross of the first class, mentioned in dispatches, a hero. An ace!

He had fifteen minutes in which to win undying fame.

He turned his Fokker—D-7—and roared hell-bent across the sky. As he came Marvin saw the answer. Take one burst and then spin down to the carpet and land. He was an ace, a hero, they would take his word that his motor had gone bad.

He nosed straight for the German and behind, grim-eyed and determined, came Owen, to be the eye-witness to the execution he planned. A Fokker, the cover-tail of the leader, Von Staltz, got in his way. Relentlessly Owen bored ahead and the German shrank terrified from this deadly desire for collision and in shrinking away in a turn exposed his flank. Owen’s guns hammered briefly. The Boche pilot coughed out his life, his last memory was that he hadn’t been lucky to last the remaining ten minutes of the war.

Von Staltz swiftly nosed down, then zoomed, and his Spandaus began to chatter. The burst was slightly wide, through the right upper wing. But it was close enough for Marvin. He yanked out the choke, and the Hisso began to miss and backfire and black smoke poured from the exhausts. He nosed down, kicked right rudder and flung over the stick. The Spad began to spin heavily with vibrating wings and a *whooming* sound that told of straining pins.

Owen saw the spitting backfire, the burst of smoke. He shook his head. “He wasn’t hit,” he murmured aloud, unaware that the driving roar of his Hisso drowned the words in his throat.

He nosed over his own ship, grimly prepared to chase Marvin into the ground. He ignored a wild long-range burst from Von Staltz. The two Spads screamed down the sky. Von Staltz suspected the trick.

He glanced over the side of the cockpit, saw that the spinning Spad would have to hit on German soil.

"If I don't bring back his tail numbers," he thought swiftly, "I won't have confirmation."

AND confirmation he must have. He glanced again at his watch. It was eight minutes to eleven. His own stick went out and the Fokker howled down in swift pursuit.

The rest of the *jagdstaffel* started to follow and then ran afoul of the Yank Spads. The Americans fell upon the Fokkers and with each man watching his wrist-watch, began a violent dog-fight.

Marvin went down on the carpet, flattened out of the spin, and with a reckless speed that fishtailing did little to kill, set down on a wide cross-roads flanked by a meadow and a ditch. His ship nosed over in the ditch but Owen, watching intently as he recklessly followed, saw Marvin climb out apparently unhurt.

Owen took to the meadow. He set down in the field going plenty fast.

He flung over the stick so that the right wing dusted the earth and ground-looped. He saved a minute by so doing, and that minute enabled him to catch Marvin.

THE latter, his fat legs twinkling in a desperate run, was making for a German Mercedes truck that had stopped a quarter of a mile up the road to watch these weird proceedings. Von Staltz thundered down, and with a reckless courage landed cross-wind, running straight up the macadamized road.

Marvin flung himself into the ditch screaming, to escape the ravenous whirl of the propeller. Owen side-stepped the wing, then settled down to run, ignoring the German, sensitive only to Marvin out there whose minutes were running out with the war.

He caught Marvin halfway to the truck. The fat politician turned and whipped out his automatic. A blaze of fire blasted from the muzzle. Owen was seen to hesitate, half-turn, and put a hand to his side. But he went on, and Marvin, screaming bestialities, fired again.

Then Owen had him. He braved a point-blank shot that blackened his left cheek with power marks, wrested the gun from Marvin and with one blow knocked him flat to the road.

He bent over Marvin.

"Shall I do it, or will you?" came his low, intense voice.

"No," screamed Marvin. "I'm afraid to die. Look. It's eleven o'clock. You can't—you won't—I cannot."

Out of his cockpit vaulted the German, Von Staltz. He glanced at his watch. It was one minute and fifty seconds to eleven o'clock. A thought ran through his head. He would take this pilot a prisoner; could take both of them. He could hold them until one second past eleven and then turn them loose. He would have confirmation and at the same time make a gallant gesture. He ran swiftly to the two men crouched there in the ditch.

"Surrender!" he yelled in English. "Put up your hands!"

He brought out a Luger automatic pistol and flourished it. The Germans on the truck, seeing him in action, scrambled down and produced Mauser rifles. They, too, began to run, but they did not influence the end of the drama. Marvin, whimpering, grabbed at this last straw.

HE GAVE one convulsive leap. He saw a hope of escape. He darted behind the powerful German.

"I surrender," he babbled. "Save me. He intends to kill me. Murder me." His voice was a retching scream. He cowered down and it was impossible to hit him.

"Drop that gun!" cried Von Staltz, amazed.

Owen weaved there, implacable, grim, masterly.

"Is it eleven o'clock?" he asked.

"*Ein* moment more," cried the German sternly. "It is still *krieg, ja*. You are my prisoners."

"Ah," said Owen. He stepped forward. "I must kill that man. Step aside."

The German saw the determined eyes, knew he had to deal with a man of purpose. He pulled the trigger on the Luger. The pencil of flame and spark aimed straight for Owen, and the American grunted at the impact of the slug. But he did no more than stagger back a step for his balance. He did not fall. A sharp report jerked from the automatic he had taken from Marvin.

Von Staltz yelled in amazement, looked down bewilderedly at the blood on his tunic, the blood that dripped down and stained the ribbon of the Iron Cross reeved through the fourth buttonhole. He raised his gun to fire, but the strength went from his fingers as the soul went from his body. He sat down, groaned once, deeply, and rolled over.

MARVIN screamed in agony. "No, please—oh, God, Owen, I'll—" His voice faltered in his throat. As Owen staggered on, holding his side with his left hand, Marvin, in an amazing burst of strength, lunged across the distance, grappled with his Nemesis.

"I won't—you fool—I'll kill you—" He let the rest of the sentence die in his throat and began to slug at Owen's wounded head with one fist while with the other hand he gripped the wrist of the hand holding the automatic.

And because he was putting weight on Owen's left side, which was paralyzed by the shock of two lead slugs, he succeeded in throwing the young American to the ground. The pistol struck butt on, and bounced out of Owen's grip, and lay a foot or so from both of them. Marvin squealed in joy. He grew mad with an ecstasy of strength, and smashed and pummeled at Owen until he was enabled to wrest free in part and reach out the right hand for the weapon.

HE GOT it, brought his arm around. "Now," he yelled in triumph, "now, damn you, Owen—" He wheeled the muzzle in to blow Owen's brains out. But as the

hand came in, Owen, in a last paroxysm of strength to carry out his purpose, grabbed the arm, bent it savagely.

Too late Marvin saw what would happen. His brain had sent the message to pull the trigger. He did so—looking into the snout of his own gun. The bullet struck him at the base of the nose, and the impact of the .45 slug at such close range did terrible things to his face, lifted the top of his head like a fan, and he toppled over crazily, an inert dead hulk.

Owen twisted slightly and fell partly across the dead German, Von Staltz. As he relaxed he twisted Von Staltz's arm so that the tiny wrist-watch exposed its face to the sky.

With a final tiny tick, the second hand reached eleven o'clock, and a silence came over the world there that had known no silence in four years.

"I kept my word," Owen muttered, and fainted.