

DEUCES WILD

by ALEXIS ROSSOFF

They belonged to the Hell-cat brood, this pair—but they had been brought down by overwhelming odds, and we find them in a German prison camp, far behind the lines. Caged birds—watching, waiting—to escape—to get back somehow to the brood—and ride the clouds—with avenging guns spitting!

ZWEI,” DRONED THE OFFICER, and once more the lash hissed through the air to land with a sickening *twack* on the quivering muscles of the man’s back. A livid, purple welt sprung up, burst, and a thin trickle of blood coursed its way down the white flesh. Ten times the whip rose and fell, but the half-naked man bound to the post never whimpered. Only his clenched white-knuckled hands and thin bloodless lips betrayed his intense suffering.

As the last welt snakily outlined itself across the broad shoulders, the officer barked a command in German to the wielder of the whip, and the beaten man was released. Slowly, deliberately, he picked his O.D. shirt and blouse from the mud, but did not don them. Instead he turned to the officer and addressed him in broken German.

“Sir, do not whip him. He is ill. It will kill him,” he begged frantically, as a struggling group of gray-clad figures made its way through the onlookers. Desperately he pleaded, unmindful of the raw wounds on his own back or of the cold, damp wind that whined about him. “Please, sir, it was all my fault. I planned the escape, not him. Whip me.”

The struggling group drew near. Grunts and harsh gutturals answered the efforts of the fighting, cursing man they were dragging in their midst. But a softer look seemed to glow in the Jerry officer’s eyes, as he regarded the man offering himself as sacrifice for his comrade. Sadly he shook his head.

“I am sorry, but I can do nothing. The military court has found you both guilty of attempted escape, and I am compelled to carry out their findings and sentence.” His words were final.

Hopelessly, the pleader’s shoulders sagged and his eyes filled with tears of despair. He turned to see them

tear the upper garments from the frail, wasted body of his buddy and roughly fasten him to the whipping post. And as they tied him he still continued to mock and curse his sorely tried guards.

The officer stepped forward and read from a paper, as the bound man spit and jeered at him. The reading finished, he called for the non-com who was to administer the punishment; spoke rapidly in a low tone and stepped back. Slowly, almost reluctantly, the non-com moved toward the victim, who laughed in his face and called him a louse.

“Don’t, Joe, don’t,” entreated his buddy, over the shoulder of a Jerry prison guard.

Joe heard, but only ranted the louder. “To hell with them, Pat. They’re a pack of dirty, yellow curs.”

Defiantly he raised his head and stiffened his thin shoulders to meet the blow of the lash. It came, but Joe failed to feel its weight, for a merciful unconsciousness engulfed his poor fever-wracked brain. His knees seemed to melt under him and he slumped forward. Only the post and the bindings kept him erect. Mechanically, the whip went up and down, and Pat’s very soul writhed in agony as he gazed, fascinated, at the whistling lash that only minutes before had bitten into his own flesh. Quickly he brushed his eyes with the back of his hand, for the lash was barely falling through the air and no welts appeared. The sentence had been carried out.

He rushed forward, behind the guards and took Joe in his arms as they released him and started for the desolate barn that housed one hundred of his kind—Allied prisoners of war. He looked up from Joe’s deathlike face into the sad eyes of the Jerry officer, and it was then that Pat understood why the whip had fallen so slowly and the reason that no welts appeared.

Awkwardly, he touched the Junker’s gloved hand

with his own. "Thanks. You're a white bird." The English words meant nothing in the Jerry's ears, but he understood the grateful look in Pat's eyes.

Hours later Joe came back to the land of the living, the war and the prison camp at Doort. "Pat," he whispered, "I fucked it. Fucked it like a dirty yellow pup." Bitterly, he was about to revile himself.

"No, you didn't, buddy. You showed 'em that you're all Yank and a yard wide."

"How is it then that I don't remember getting my ten lashes?"

"You fainted, Joe. You gotta remember that you've been one hell of a sick bird," Pat hastened to explain.

Joe only gazed at the gray bit of sky that showed through a yawning crack in the rotten roof, as he repeated over and over: "Joe Lansing, you're no war bird. You conked out-like a kiwi."

Although the building was crowded no one paid the two Yanks the slightest heed. A bedlam of strange tongues and the stench of unclean humans made the detention pen a place dreaded and shunned by even the Jerry guards themselves. Turbaned Indian Gurkhas; red-fezzed French Colonials and burnoosed Arabs huddled together at one end of the room, sharing the animal heat generated by their own bodies. At the far end, Limeys, Frogs, Anzacs and Canucks buddied off and formulated desperate plans for escape.

"The charged wire is death," one would whisper.

"Better death, than this filthy cesspool," would come the desperate answer.

"But the dogs, the guards and the swamps?" the doubter would continue.

"Bah! Can they be worse than the Jerry dogs that beat and shoot us, merely to amuse themselves? Can the swamps be rottener than the reeking filth and ooze we sleep in here? Stay if you wish. To-night *I* go."

A thousand others had attempted, but none had won through. The innocent looking wire that could sizzle and crackle had claimed its quota. The bleaching bones and dead things that stank in the sucking swamp accounted for others, while speeding bullets and the tearing fangs of vicious dogs answered for the remainder. Even to think of escape meant the whipping post. Spineless informers and stool pigeons, seeking to curry favor, told everything they heard. No prisoner trusted the other, and as Pat was now putting it to his sick buddy, "This madhouse is nothing more than a Tower of Babel, and the hell of it is, that it's even divided against itself. But we're still alive, Joey boy, so buck up an' we'll beat 'em to it yet."

Joe grinned a sickly little grin and found new strength in his fighting buddy's words. "I wonder what the old seventy-seventh is doing, Pat?"

"Can't say, old-timer, but I know what I hope they're doin', and that is kickin' the hell out of Fritz."

Sensing the change for the better in the sick man, he covered him up with his own coat and rambled on. "Bet if the old outfit knew we were here, they'd fly over an' bomb this imitation of what a Jerry prison stockade shouldn't be, right out of the war. Bet they'll razz the shirt off us when we get back, an' I won't blame them. It even gets me sore. There we were with all of France to fall on an' we gotta go an' do a crash dive right on the chunk where everybody was arguin'. Whose France is it, anyway?"

Joe laughed and Pat's heart did a flip-flop for joy at hearing it. "Call it a crash dive if you want to, Pat, but I think you did a damned neat bit of flyin', an' here's why." Joe hitched himself into a more comfortable position and checked his reasons on his fingers. "Three Fokkers tellin' us the bad news with tracers and we couldn't out-tell 'em—thanks to our two machine-guns that decided not to talk right when we were just pinin' to hear their sweet voices. Next, no longer interested in a one-sided argument, we tried to fly out on the party. Am I flyin' straight?"

"Straight as hell, ol' buzzard," affirmed Pat.

A faint bit of color glowed in Joe's cheeks as he voiced his ideas of why they were two Yank war birds in a Jerry cage. "Pat, we didn't have a chance. They shot the flippers off us. Of course, the bible-backed sky-pilots will say that it was a miracle, but I contend different. The one and only reason that we're sittin' here to-day is that a battle hawk by the name of Pat Burns, and the best stick handler in any bird's war, was doin' his stuff when that bundle of busted wires and sticks—that was a Sopwith—developed a sudden yen to fall out from under us. Thassall."

"Aw, lay off, Joe. You talk like one of them medal pinnin' Frog generals." Joe laughed again at Pat's embarrassment and feeling better, sat up to fire a cigarette prior to continuing his good-natured razzing, only to throw the un-lighted match away and slide down again under the coverings as though to shut out the sight of the decrepit old crone, making her way in and around the whispering groups, shrilly calling her wares and croaking evilly to herself as men stepped aside to let her pass.

"Tobaccos, my pretty ones," she whined. "Needles and thread to mend your beautiful uniforms."

Behind her back a Frenchman blessed himself, while another made the sign of the horns. Catlike, she whirled and spit at the superstitious pair, who tripped over their own feet in their effort to avoid her scathing curses and baleful glances.

"You scum!" she hissed. "May the meat rot from your bones."

Laughing hideously, cursing with one breath and wheedling with the next, she hobbled along at the foot of the tiered bunks until she reached the one upon which Joe lay. Brushing her greasy, matted gray hair back from her eyes with a filthy hand, she studied Pat's broad back.

"Good-day, my fine American gentlemen," she shrilled harshly, and Joe, under the covers, muttered to himself. "Who is it curses Reena?" she questioned. "Hey, spawn of the hell brood, Reena knows ye well, but she forgives, for yours is a mind that is ill."

Pat could feel Joe's body tremble, and his own flesh quivered with revulsion. Her next words startled them both.

"Yank flying creatures of the seventy-seventh squadron!"

Pat gulped twice before he was able to ask: "How do you know that, old woman?"

Evidently pleased with herself she cackled on: "Reena knows all and sees all. Cross my palm with silver, good sir, and I shall tell you of the past." Joe's head shot from under the covers. "To hell with the past, can you tell us of the future?"

"Yea, the future, too, blasphemer. Even to the time that Satan will claim you for his own."

Excitedly, Joe fumbled through his pockets; produced a coin and flipped it to the old hag who deftly clutched it out of the air. Glaring malevolently at the curious spectators who had drawn close, she sent them scurrying out of earshot.

Taking one of Pat's big hands in her own surprisingly strong one, she beckoned the reclining Joe closer. "You, bird of the clipped wings," she hissed at him. "Listen closely, for I shall read both your fortunes in the hand of this one who does not scoff at Reena's powers." And Joe's hair rose on his neck as she started her droning singsong.

"I see two captive birds beating their lives out against the bars of a cage. There is a way out, but they do not see it until it is pointed out to them. They are out of the cage now, but, poor things, they have no wings." Her singsong dropped to a whisper. "Reena sees a nest that harbors an alien brood hidden on solid

ground in the center of the Doort Swamps. Strange birds are gathered there. Little red ones that fly fast, even as those that slashed and captured the two little captives; great gray birds that lay eggs of death. There will be killings and blood. A devil's party." Pat and Joe sat hypnotized by her vibrant whisper. "Perhaps the two little captives might find wings to fit them there." Warily she glared about, "There is a curtain of darkness. Only silver can lift it." Another silver coin flipped from Joe's pocket and she croaked hoarsely. "It is hard to see whether my little captives are carrion or hawks." She paused questioningly.

"Neither, mother," breathed Pat through tight lips. "Eagles."

And Reena's face wrinkled in an evil grin.

"Let down the bars; show us the nest; give us somethin' we can use for claws an' we'll win enough wings to fly to hell and back."

"Not so loud, little eagle. I am fearing that after all you are a cawing crow."

Pat flushed and subsided, as Reena arose. Again she cursed the curious ones; dropped her basket of wares, and as she stooped to recover it whispered in Pat's ear. "Three o'clock to-morrow morning; the far side of the burying ground." A weird, chilling laugh; a blast of cold wind from the open door. "Good-by, my pretty birds. Reena knows all and we shall see what we shall see." Another blood-curdling screech and she was gone.

"Cripes!" muttered Pat. "I'm goin' cold as ice." Joe retched, nauseated from the strain of listening to the strange fortune telling.

"Five minutes more of listening to that old she devil, Pat, and I'd yelled out loud."

But Pat failed to hear. Unconsciously he wiped the hand that Reena had held on the seat of his breeches, while his mind revved up on other thoughts.

"Joe, here's hopin' that old bat isn't as crazy as she sounds. I'm nursing the germ of a good Irish hunch that she isn't. So you'd better grab yourself an armful of shut-eye and I'll bring you your chow. Sooner or later we're, slated to fly this hell coop, but I'm promising this: if she's framin' us up for another lickin' at the whippin' post. I'll choke her to death. So long, buddy, I'm goin' to shove off before this mob of hungry wolves beats me to the slumline."

All that night Pat lay awake, shivering in his flop-hole over the sleeping Joe. Twenty times he scanned his watch and mentally cursed the dragging seconds, the snoring men near by and the Frog who jibbered

and raved in his sleep. Two-thirty came at last and he climbed down.

“Joe, Joe,” he called softly, at the same time placing his hand over the sleeping man’s mouth. “It’s the H-hour, kid. We’re goin’ places.”

Stealthily they pussyfooted across the creaking floor. The Frog jabbered wildly as a blast of raw, damp wind from the opening door struck him. It closed behind them and they were outside. Side by side they strode toward the latrine, down at the far end of the pens. A Jerry sentry in his watch tower saw them enter the filthy bath-house and promptly forgot them. A dog howled dismally and another guard at the far end of the prison enclosure called the hour. In the shadows the two Yanks crouched.

“Set, Joe?”

“All set. Let’s go!” And they went.

Belying their way in the clear and slinking along in the blind spots. Pat tripped and sprawled out on a fresh mound in the mud—a grave that housed all that was mortal of a bird, set free at last of his earthly cage—his hand clutched the board that marked it and he shuddered inwardly.

“You all O.K., Pat?” whispered Joe, as he groped for his fallen comrade and a voice that seemed to come from the grave itself froze them in their tracks.

“Silence you fools!” it hissed. “You are less than fifty meters from a guard.” Slowly the darker shadow in the night took shape and identified itself as Reena. Clutching Joe by the sleeve she cautioned him to take hold of Pat and they tailed after her. A few minutes of sliding and scuttling through the sucking mud and they stopped by another grave. Quickly the old hag bent down and lifted one end of a plank buried under the thin camouflage of mud.

“In, my pretty birds,” she croaked. “At the far end someone awaits you who will lead you through the swamps to the nest of the hell brood.”

Joe dropped into the grave; felt the slimy sides with his hands; found another hole and crawled in on hands and knees. Pat made ready to follow, but Reena’s whispered words stopped him.

“Should you reach your own brood again, give this package into the hands of your commandant. Should you fail destroy it. Good-by, eagle. Reena goes no further.”

Pat took the package; dropped into the hole and looked up. “Good-by, mother, and good luck,” he whispered, and crawled into the passage to follow the scraping sound that was Joe, up ahead. A low laugh

that sounded half human followed him and he settled down to his fastest crawl.

Exhausted and almost suffocated from the dank, foul air in the passage, Joe pushed his head out into the world once more, with Pat right at his heels.

A low voice sounded near by: “Quick, *messieurs!* Delay is death!”

And they followed the voice that floated on ahead of them. Branches whipped their faces. Joe sank to his knees in a clutching substance and the guide came back to help Pat drag him out.

“We shall rest in a few minutes.”

Another painful session of blind stumbling and staggering and they halted at a word from the guide.

“Here we are safe. You may smoke.”

A match flared and three fiery dots. winked in the gloom.

“You are near the center of the Doort Swamp. Ahead of us lies the secret base of the third Imperial *Jagdstaffel*. Since your imprisonment the war has moved closer, and to-day will see the last of the prison camp you have just left. The prisoners will be sent farther back and the buildings, with the exception of one, will be razed. That one will house the headquarters and intelligence unit of the German High Command. They are desperate and sorely pressed. Three other *Jagdstaffels* have been combined and centered here for the purpose of dealing sledge-hammer attacks and raids on new Allied positions, also troops moving up and supply bases, while a sky-dusting squadron will keep Allied planes out of the air.”

Pat’s cigarette glowed brightly and betrayed his excitement. “In other words, you’re trying to tell us that, Jerry intends to hold and blind the Allies, while he reforms and digs in further back?”

Pat’s slow, deliberate speech proved that he was thinking deeply.

“Correct,” answered the guide. “And now we had better be going before the sky starts graying.”

Another long siege of tortuous hiking and slipping and the path under their hobnails grew firmer.

The guide was speaking again. “In front of you is the airdrome. There you will find planes of every description. Here are automatics and grenades. I can do no more for you. It is your part to steal a plane. Once I leave, it will be suicide for you to turn back. There may be death in front of you. *Messieurs*, what is your decision?”

“Give us the gats,” snapped Pat.

“Beat it and thanks,” growled Joe.

And the guide smiled. “Good-speed, *messieurs*.”

I, who am only a spy, despised by even my own countrymen,” and a bitter note crept into his voice, “salute your admirable courage.” And they heard him patter away.

A familiar coughing explosion that grew into a roar and a flashing in the ghost light of the dawn made their blood tingle and their hands grip the butts of the automatics. Catlike they moved into the clear, careful to skirt the queer grotesque shapes that were the hangars.

Footsteps behind them made them dive for cover behind a small shed. A sleepy Jerry mechanic, wrench in hand, plodded by, and Pat promptly cracked him on the skull with the butt of his gun.

“Quick, Joe. Give me a hand with undressing this bird. I gotta idea.”

Off came the Jerry’s coveralls and Pat climbed into them.

“Make for that bus that’s sparkin’ down there. I’m goin’ on ahead and borrow it from the little boys. So long.”

Joe, watching him as he went, and following at a safe distance, saw him stride into the small circle of light from a floodlight; saw the spanner in Pat’s hand rise and fall twice and waited for no more. Across the intervening distance he raced, heard a wild yell and an explosion that wasn’t engine-made. He skidded around the tail of the plane to see Pat half in the cockpit of a single seater triplaned Albatross, with a Jerry officer on the ground frantically tugging at his pistol holster. A lightning shot from Joe’s gun and the Jerry staggered back, grabbed at his middle and quit the war.

“On the wing, Joe!” screamed Pat above the roar of the engine.

Something snapped by his face as he bent to kick the chocks from under the wheels and he snarled through his clenched teeth as he pulled on the pin of the grenade that he held in his hand. Quickly he hurled it from him and scrambled up on the wing. They were rolling and he chuckled to himself as he caught a glimpse of the warlike grin that split Pat’s face from ear to appetite. Bullets snapped and spat through the fabric. A leaping Jerry clutched for a wing tip and Pat knocked him out of the world on the wrong end of a forty-five, even as he poured the hop to the protesting Albatross.

Up came her tail and she spurned the ground, hung for a split second that drove Joe’s heart into his throat, swept on and up, with Pat stick-handling her like

an old friend. Joe on the wing, without goggles and blinded by the wind rush, saw nothing and cared less as he fought to keep the wing between his own belly and the ground. He was free, going some place in the war and was happy. His heels came up on a line with his head as Pat kicked the Albatross out of the zoom and he wiggled his way closer to the fuselage, hitched into a more comfortable position and settled down for the flight through the air sector controlled by Jerry.

Pat banked her around, fed her the gun and split clouds as he pointed for any part of France still “owned and operated by that country. As he flew he studied the ground below, and grew worried as he made out the thin lines of marching troops and rolling equipment moving in the opposite direction.

“Can’t be that I’m pointing wrong,” he hazarded to himself. “Sure would be one hell of a mess if I piloted this birdie all the way to Berlin.”

Three tiny specks off to his left front drove further thoughts concerning which way was home from his mind. He waggled his wings to attract Joe’s attention, pointed toward the oncoming planes and veered off a little to the right, but they ruddered with him and went into attack formation. Closer now, Pat made them out to be three green-striped Fokkers, and his heart sank as he glanced at the helpless Joe out on the wing. One of the Fokkers zoomed up over him. The Jerry pilot looked down; saw the imperial eagles of Germany on the Albatross wings and Pat clad in the olive-green Jerry flying suit. Satisfied, he waved his hand, signaled his two companions and kept on going.

Long after they were far afield Pat continued to wave his own hand, heavy as lead. “Talk about flyin’ on borrowed wings and false plumage.” And he grinned a sickly grin as he thought of what might have happened had the Jerries discovered him to be a stranger in their flock. “Boy, oh boy, they’d a clawed our tail feathers out by the handful.”

A mechanical glance earthward and he yelled for joy. The war was right below. Powder, gas, haze; stabbing flashes that licked through; greasy yellowish puffs that floated up and above the sullen roar that meant the Yanks’ guns were feeding Jerry a fiery hell of splintering steel and making him like it. A khaki-colored wavering line crawled across the slashed pocked mud flat and Pat yelled again.

“Damned tootin’, the cock-eyed war’s goin’ for a walk.” And Joe looked up at him and grinned.

With the war behind them he kicked the bus to the left and flew parallel with the Front; tossed off a little

altitude and with his first sighting glance picked up the splintered trees and crazily leaning church steeple—all that was left of Alons.

“Five minutes more and you’re home, birdie. A nice new nest and papa’s gonna adopt you, even if I have to use a two-headed coin when I toss Joe to see whose ‘tittle Albatross is ‘oo.”

Talking to the plane and loving her more as each rev of the prop pulled her closer to the seventy-seventh’s drome he failed to see the two ships maneuvering for position on his tail. Something cracked past his ear, a splatter of hot lead bounced off the cowling and burned the back of his hand, a screaming shadow flashed by, spitting death as if went.

Pat got mad as hell. For the shadow was a Spad with the black cat of the seventy-seventh painted on its fuselage. Down pounced the next one and Pat reached for his machine gun, tripped it, and then realized what he was doing. “Hell, I can’t knock off my own buddies!” He slammed the throttle to the Albatross and left there, with the two Spads hot on his tail. Straight for the Seventy-seventh’s wind-sock he pointed, flying two feet to the Spads’ one and almost dragging the ground. The outfit was still doing flying business at the old stand and he dived lower, to glimpse the wild scene his unexpected appearance had caused.

Running men and others, spread out on the ground. One was standing up and shooting with a pistol but he might as well have tried to hit a darting sunbeam. The mobile anti-aircraft unit raced out on the tarmac and two ships rolled down the takeoff. The two Spads were hovering over him but dared not shoot for fear of hitting some of their own men on the field.

Pat sighed with relief, circled the drome, halved the throttle, pancaked, said a prayer. A run over the ground at one hundred and ten per hour with her tailskid high in the air and she rolled to a stop with the prop waving at an empty hangar less than five feet away.

Joe slid off his perch and a diving greaseball, full of patriotism, promptly goaled him.

Pat, looking out over the side, grinned as he saw the oncoming Seventy-sevenths armed with everything from an oilcan to a hand grenade, but a cold circle pressed against the back of his head and a voice that dripped poison wiped the smile from his face.

“Reach for that gun, Jerry, an’ I’ll blow the can off yer.”

And Pat talked, talked to the field, and everybody

on it in general, for he dared not turn his head to see who had made such a pleasant promise.

“What the hell is the matter with you buzzards?” The gun at his head trembled at that. “Cripes, can’t you even tell brother members of the hell-brood when you see them?”

The gun left his head and two bearlike arms wrapped themselves around his body and lifted him clear of the cockpit. “Pat, you moth-eaten old scavenger,” boomed a loud voice in his ear, followed by a long string of garbled explosions that were choice profane remarks in Russian and French.

Then Pat knew who held him. “Koslov, you mangy old hellcat!”

The rest of the Seventy-seventh skidded to a stop, took one look and joined the back-slapping, laughing, cursing reception committee. Someone set off the siren and brought the Old Man of the outfit tumbling out of Wings, where he had been snoozing calmly midst all the excitement. He met the milling crowd halfway, with fire in his eye and sucking wind as he gulped for words. They opened a passage and pushed the cause of it all within range of the S.C.’s glare.

He took one look at his two returning flying hellcats and the glare changed to a gawping goggle. Sadly he wagged his head. “And after me sending your folks nice letters tellin’ them how you both died aces an’ here you come sachtin’ back, upsettin’ the whole war as usual. Aces! Aces, hell! You’re a pair of flyin’ deuces, an’ deuces wild at that.”

The roar of applause that greeted the old hawk’s sally drowned out the shriek of the siren. Some war bird yelled for a binge and the rest of the flock took up the chant: “We, wanna binge, we wanna binge.”

The Old Man was wavering, even though the dogs of war growled menacingly less than seven kilos away. But Joe saved the situation by holding up his hand for quiet.

“Buzzards,” he began, “this is no time for chuckin’ a binge. Pat an’ I appreciate the honor an’ all that, but our return means nothin’. First of all we’ve got a little debt to pay. You birds don’t know it, but we were tied to a whipping-post and lashed by our little Jerry playmates.”

Joe’s statement was a good shot and timely placed, for the Seventy-seventh forgot all about a binge. Hard lines came in their faces.

“Who did and where?” shouted one.

“Lead us to the place,” growled another. “An’ we’ll lash ‘em to a prop an’ spin ‘em to death.”

Joe stopped the growls with: "That's the spirit, buzzards, but first we have to talk it over with the major here. You birds don't know what you're lettin' yourselves in for. There's enough Jerry *Jagdstaffels* over there in a nest to just naturally ruin the war for the Allies."

"That's swell," interrupted O'Malley, the Irishman. "That's just enough to make the Seventy-seventh an ace squadron. Let's fly, hell-cats."

The Old Man's eyes softened as he said a quick little prayer for the safety of every hard-drinking, court-martialed, fighting, cloud-bustin' stick-straddler that made up the hell-brood of the Seventy-seventh—his outfit. He cleared his throat preparatory to relieving Joe of his unwanted duty as speech-maker.

"Men, we'll have that binge you're howlin' for—"

"We don't want no binge," came the growled interruptions, but the major continued serenely on. "As I was sayin'; we'll have that binge exactly one hour after we help our flyin' deuces to pay their debt, and for the honor of the Seventy-seventh I want you to outdo yourselves—in both cases."

The hell-cats crowed themselves hoarse and broke away to sharpen their spurs and dream of the promised war business.

Alone with the S.C. in his nest the pair of deuces—as he had named them—told their stories and Pat turned over the package that Reena had intrusted to him.

"Didn't have time to tell you about it, Joe," apologized Pat as he watched the S.C. break the seals and start reading. As he read on the hair tried to push the cap off his head. He came to the end, glanced over it again, pounded the desk top with his fist and bounced up on his foot bottoms, cursing a blue streak. Noting the anxious expressions on the faces of the deuces he spoke rapidly in a high, unnatural tone.

"This is a consolidated report from all the Allied agents behind Jerry's lines. Due to the unexpected changing of the war Front, it was impossible to get it through to our intelligence. Needless to say, it is about three days late and almost too late. It means this: Jerry is about to launch a major offensive; his slow retreat of the last week has been only a blind to mask the real drive. The point of attack and zero hour is known only to the Jerry High Command, and not until four hours before will they pass that information to the field generals and subordinates. I'm requested to do two things; put this packet into the hands of our star-spangled gents back in G.H.Q. and to send one of you

two birds back to the prison camp from which you escaped, to hang overhead and take a flash message from the ground."

The Old Man paused and groaned as they both chorused together: "I'll go, sir."

"You'll both get a chance to go somewhere. G.H.Q. is sixty kilos from here. Ground travel is out of the question. Joe, you're elected to fly this message through. I can't wire it, for even wires have a habit of branching off into Jerry ears. Pat, it's you for the Morse message at the prison camp." A heavy silence hung over the nest. Joe was disappointed and he showed it. "Wish you'd let some other bird make the hop to G.H.Q. and send me with Pat, sir."

"Sorry, Lansing, I know you're buddies an' all that, but the answer is: two jobs flyin' behind Jerry's lines would attract attention, while a two-seated Sop would be too slow. A Jerry'd give you a twenty-minute start and poke his nose under your tail before you reached your own lind Buck up! The stakes are big, and I'm bankin' on my pair of deuces to give the Allies a pat hand." Joe grinned and reached for Pat's hand and the Old Man, who knew his flock, threw his arms around both their shoulders.

"Lansing, you will have to hop right away, and Burns, you'd better get some sleep 'cause you'll be struttin' your stuff from eleven till dawn. So, good luck to you both and get the hell out of here. I'm a busy man."

They went, arm in arm, down to the line, and Joe selected a new experimental bus for his hop. Two nut-twisters were tickling her up.

"What kind of a job is that, Malone?"

One of the mechanics grinned and wiped his face with a handful of waste. "Somebody besides me'll have to christen her, sir. She's just a can full of lightning in a hurry. Spad design with a three hundred horse Hisso special for a ticker."

"Yep," chimed the second mechanic. "Captain Koslov gave her a test hop about an hour ago an' beat his own shadow by about three feet; fastest bus on this side of the war."

"You like her, Joe?" questioned Pat with a deep purpose behind his words.

"Like her? Boy, I'm crazy about her."

"And you don't want the Albatross?" persisted Pat.

"Hell, I wouldn't take her for a gift."

"Boy, howdy," beamed the lover of the Albatross. "I'm wild about that little three-winged hornet. The minute you hop off, I'm goin' to wash all them cultured

Jerry eagles off her carcass an' get St. Ives to paint a nice black pussycat on her instead. Joe, with that bird holding me up, I'll make the trip to the prison camp and back as easy as a kid on a merry-go-round. And as soon as we settle the question with Jerry—as to whom this chunk of air belongs—I'll race you for the championship of the Seventy-seventh. Are you on?"

"On!" said Joe, and their hands clasped.

Joe piled into the cockpit; the S.C. joined them and turned over the package. A roar of the engine, a shouted farewell and Joe went sky-bustin' with all the dope on the war in his jacket pocket.

Pat watched him melt into the clouds and turned away to see about having a black, spitting hell-kitty placed on the wings of his own cloud splitter, and to solo a bunk.

Joe made the trip in record time and slid down on the home field again just as the Bat Patrol was taking off, made up of those night birds who chosen the hours of darkness, as the proper time in which to do their sky-roaming. No duty detail was necessary in the Seventy-seventh. Queer birds, night or day, they sought trouble, found it and liked it. Fighting was their pleasure and they preferred it to a cushy nest on the ground. Therefore, the Old Man never bothered with a schedule.

He'd stand in the door of the nest and boom: "Two birds wanted to knock off a Jerry who's been strafing ground troops over Meines way." Then he'd jump aside just in time to avoid the wild rush of twenty hell-hawks answering the call for two.

Wing headquarters knew it, too. That was why the flying hell-cats always flew in to take over the cloud-dustin' duties in the toughest air sector on the Front.

The Old Man was out on the tarmac watching the take-offs when Joe trotted up to him and reported: "Mission carried out, sir."

"Good work, Lansing, and I don't mind telling you that I've recommended the pair of you for a decoration."

"Thank you, sir." And Joe slid away in search of Pat. He found that worthy stamping himself into his boots.

"Glad you're up, old-timer. Squat while I spill you a lug full. Boy, when I pulled in to G.H.Q. they were sitting around like it was too bad, but one look at the package and they zoomed outa their seats. I found out the name of the bird who wrote the message. Major DeLand, French intelligence. I'm thinkin' that he was the bird that led us through the swamp. Guess he and old Reena worked together.

"Well, anyway, he's hiding around that prison camp, and the minute the Jerry High Command gives the word and the time to attack, he's gonna flash the information to you in the sky—a brave bird, Pat. Bound to get caught and he knows it, from what he wrote in the message. Believe me, I wish I could help him."

"Maybe we can," came the muttered answer, between curses on the lousy bootmaker who made boots size eight and called them tens. "What did you see on your way back?"

"Everything. They must have burned the wires up with instructions during the time I was hanging around the brain center. The roads were solid with motor trucks loaded with shock troops. They're the only hobnail slingers that don't have to hoof it. Rolling guns and guns already set. Boy, the war's gettin' ripe and ready to happen. And methinks that it all depends on whether one certain war bird—not even an ace, just a deuce—brings home the right address for the delivery of said war."

"I'll bring it, kid, and don't forget to be ready, for the minute I land and the Old Man shoots the address, as you call it, over the wire, the Seventy-seventh's goin' over to start a bird war of our own. We'll lead the boys to that Jerry nest in the swamp, but you an' me ain't taking no part in that scrap—"

"The hell we ain't!" exploded Joe.

"Tut, tut, buzzard. Keep your feathers on. As I said, you an' me are taking no part in that bit of bird business. We're fly in' back to the old prison camp. Have you forgotten that there's goin' to be one house still standin' with a lot of smart Jerry generals inside? Well, they're the birds I want to pluck for that whippin' they gave you, Joe"—hastily Pat caught himself—"I mean me."

"Cripes, Pat, that's an idea, but the Old Man will be as ruffled as a wet owl."

"Let 'im!" snapped Pat, and then continued doggedly. "We're deuces, ain't we? Well, in this particular game the deuces are wild. Let's go."

Out they went; packed away a hot meal and loafed in the nest until time for Pat to hop off. Up at the Front the war dogs could be heard as they snarled and barked their nightly challenge to each other. A feeling of something about to happen hung over the usually cheerful nest. Koslov played solitaire—and that was a bad sign. Four others over by the piano tried to harmonize, only to give it up for a bad job when Eddie Forbes accused O'Malley; "Cripes, you're bleating like a goat. Don't it hurt your own ears?"

"Why, bad cess to ye for a pin-feathered kiwi. Oi'm singin' as swate as a lark."

And Eddie looped him when he quipped: "Maybe you're singin' 'em sweet, but them notes are comin' out as sour as hell."

Koslov hurled the cards from him: shoved back from the table and strode over to the pair of deuces. "What's under your wing, buzzards? The pair of you've been sittin' over here cooin' like a coupla doves ever since you came in."

"Why, nothin', Anton," grinned Pat, the picture of innocence. "Never get excited over your first notch, war bird. Just keep a tight throttle on your warlike disposition. Save it for a couple of hours more." And the wise look in his eyes made Koslov grumble and subside.

"I'm ready to bust. I want action. Another day of this and I'll declare war on myself."

"You'll get it, my gay little Roosian eagle—tanks of it," assured Pat, at the same time nudging Joe as a signal to follow him.

Down on the line Pat inspected his three-winged steed; laughed at the new black-cat insignia, still wet on the fuselage; checked over his instrument board and joked with the nervous Joe.

"So long, kid, remember our appointment." And he slid into the somber sky with Joe's earnest prayer riding his tail. Off on the toughest trip ever taken by a war bird. Over a sector that had a million wide-awake eyes to protect its secret as it made preparations for the titanic effort—with Paris the goal. Joe on the ground gazed skyward, hoping for a fleeting glimpse, as the roar overhead melted into a drone and faded out.

Pat grabbed his altitude over his own field, rather than take a chance of having some Jerry in the trenches hear him and phone back for a welcoming committee. With twelve thousand feet under his rolling gear he pointed for the crimson, flashing sky, at the Front. Again he reached for the sky and kept the nose of the Albatross up until a pain in his chest warned him. Cutting his switches the bus glided across the throbbing war zone like a bit of wind-drift, and with a: "Well, Pat, you're in for it," he went to flying.

Peering into the inky blackness below as he screamed through the night, he visualized the thousand of Jerrys crouched for the jump-off and the big guns ready to hurl their steel missiles of death. Every throb of the engine roared war, war. Pat licked his dry lips and grinned a bleak death-like grin. "We'll give you war, Jerry!"

A worried look took the place of the grin as he

thought: "What if that bird fails to get the dope or they catch him? That's the soldier who should get the credit instead of me. He hasn't got one break in a million. The best he gets is the worst of it."

A glance at the chart, another at his watch. Back again to the instrument board and he kicked the plane into a great circle. "Here's hopin' I don't have to do this ring-around-a-rosy for the rest of the night." A sudden flash of fear that he might be wrong set him to checking up again.

Right then and there Pat Burns voiced his first prayer in years. "It ain't for me, God," he prayed fervently. "It's them poor kids down there in the mud. You can't sit back and see them murdered. Please give them a fifty-fifty break and let me find that he-man who's tryin' to do his bit down below. Amen."

And even as that poor attempt at a prayer rolled from the lips of that worried war bird, a tiny pin-point of light waved frantically in the darkness of the earth. And it was in the earth, for the desperate man who held the flashlight was standing at the bottom of the grave through which Pat and Joe had made their escape. Three times it flashed and went out, and Pat, with the "Amen" still in his throat, looked down and caught it.

Lower he dropped to let the man know that he was there. Leveling out and flying in a tight circle with the engine just idling, he wrote down the meaningless dots and dashes on his chart board. Slowly and deliberately the light winked up at him, long flashes and short ones. A short pause and the light-repeated its message and Pat unknowingly took it down for the second time. The wild waving again, that meant "Good-bye" and Pat tore for home like an eagle on a spree.

One hand was glued to the machine gun, and a look was on his face that meant death for any Jerry or Jerries that tried to prevent his going, but no Jerry night hawk was up at that moment. Later, yes, hundreds of them. This was the calm before the storm. Over the Front, still flashing and throbbing in the same monotonous way, he streaked; hurtled by two wraithlike shapes that dived out of his way. Seconds were precious and he cursed at the groaning overtaxed Albatross for not being able to rip off more than one fifty per hour, with a tail wind helping her along.

The lighted red "T" on the Seventy-seventh's landing field hit his eye as he passed over it. To hell with banking, he skidded around, nosed into the wind and went down in a whistling crash dive that screamed a washout. He kissed and skimmed over the field like

a flitting shadow. Out he tumbled with the chartboard under his arm and raced for Wings.

Men stepped aside and let him pass. The Seventy-seventh was up and on its claws and waiting. The Old Man had promised them a real fight, and they tailed after Pat, who had just leaped through the lighted doorway. Into the trembling hands of the S.C. he shoved the message, who let it fall, cursed and clutched it again before it touched the floor.

Slowly the major studied the dots and dashes, found the key word in his code book. He whistled a long whistle of surprise and jumped for the telephone with the open line to G.H.Q. anxiously awaiting the words he was about to utter.

“Hello, Major Hilton, squadron commander of the Seventy-seventh speaking. Noyens. Five A.M. Right.”

The receiver banged back on the hook and the Old Man pranced across the room to clasp the exhausted Pat in his arms.

“Great piece of flying, boy!” he boomed. “Jerry’s gonna be so busy pickin’ Yanks off his neck at five ack emma, that he’ll wish he’d never planned a surprise party.”

The reaction was too much for Pat and he wavered, but managed to hold off the enthusiastic old battle hawk. Unsteadily he turned and lurched over to the window and turned his face up to the heavens. “God, Pat Burns is thanking you,” he mumbled, rocked, grabbed at the window ledge, missed and sank down on the floor.

The silent war birds of the hell-brood grouped outside the window witnessed his strange actions and growled in chorus—dire threats and promises for Jerry.

Pat came to, with the Old Man holding him in his arms as he squatted on the floor. “There, there. The high altitude plays hell with a bird’s breathin’ apparatus.”

Pat smiled up into the kindly old face of the man trying to excuse his conking out. “Are we going over, major?”

“Going over, hell, we’re waitin’ on you.”

That was enough. Pat scrambled up, wobbled a bit and made for the door with the S.C. right at his back. The hell-brood saw them and cheered.

“Men, we got a job to do, or should I say a pleasure? In twenty minutes I want every bird in this crazy outfit ready to take the air. It means night flying an’ maybe death for some of us, but we’ve got to be at a certain place just the minute the sky turns gray. Are we going to be there?”

And the: “We are!” that answered the S.C.’s question woke up every snoring greaseball in the outfit. And that was something that nothing less than a Jerry bombing raid could have done.

“What are we going to do for bombers?” yelled a bird at the back of the crowd, and the Old Man put him to scorn.

“The Seventy-seventh needs no bombers. We’ll carry our own. Bottled nitro and grenades. If you’re afraid, carry canned goldfish.”

With a wild yell they were gone. Engines roared, men cursed and joked. The war at the Front took on a new tone. A Very rocket sizzed skyward and the Seventy-seventh started to go places. Every bus able to lift itself off the ground joined the flock. Jerry was reaping the whirlwind of what he had planned to sow.

Grim-jawed Yanks on the ground swept forward, behind a hedge of bayonet points. Allied artillery hammered him into the mud, and as a side attraction the Seventy-seventh was carrying the war right into his backyard and dumping it into his very lap.

The Old Man flew higher over the rumbling road that was his flock. The Jerries below, waiting for the zero hour, heard it, too, and wondered, and it left them with strange misgivings and doubts. The gray mists of dawn chased the night over the edge of the world, and the flock arrived over its destination, with the pair of deuces out in front.

Two Jerries, already in the air, were promptly knocked out of it. A bedlam broke out below, as the hell-brood tossed a bundle of direct hits over the side and followed them down to say it with tracers and grenades.

Explosion after explosion made the dawn hideous as bomb-laden Gothas blew up. Flaming buildings vomited half-crazed Jerries. The flock of hellcats was on a rampage. They added insult to injury by diving down and rolling across the *Jagdstaffel* field, with guns cracking spitefully as they passed, only to take off at the far end and come back. Flames scorched and burned little smoldering holds in their fabric wings, but they dived in again like moths.

With the victory assured, Pat rolled out of the fight and waggled his wings at the darting streak that was Joe. Gliding down on a long angle, they crossed the swamp and picked up the one lone building—all that was left of the late prison camp. They saw a motor car leave the door at their approach and crawl along the ground like a great bug. Joe poured the hop to his Hisso and swooped down. A vicious burst from his

twin guns; the car slithered drunkenly and capsized. No one crawled from beneath it. Joe had paid the Jerry High Command for his ten lashes.

He circled back to see Pat diving straight at the roof of the building. Coming up like the wind, he tripped his guns and prepared to give him a hand.

An earthward glance and his eyes froze with horror, for there against the wall of the building stood a woman and a man, while a Jerry firing squad made ready to send them out of the world.

The Jerry officer went about the business as calmly as though there wasn't any enemy within kilos. Joe cursed at his own helplessness, for to shoot from that height and angle meant death for the condemned couple. Then he kicked his bus into a loop for sheer joy, for Pat had glided down almost touching the slanting roof, his guns singing a song of death that left the firing squad writhing on the ground.

The two captives cut around the corner of the building and dived through the doorway as he came back to finish the job. But further shooting wasn't needed, for only the officer dragged himself along the ground.

Pat picked a spot on the road, dropped down and landed. Gun in hand he piled out and started for the doorway, but a terrific roar overhead made him leap across the last few yards. A man caught him as he plunged through and kept him from falling. Quickly he turned and tossed a glance upward to see the hell-brood dropping out of the sky. Drunk with victory, they dare-deviled their way down. Spins, loops and dives. All in a wild glorious rush. Joe beat them to it by three engine throbs and he scrambled into the building to find Pat shaking hands with Reena and laughing at the top of his voice.

The young man who had only minutes before faced the firing squad stepped forward and grasped his hand. "*Monsieur*, I am very grateful for your timely intervention. I can see that you do not remember me."

"Sure, I remember you. You're the bird who guided us through the swamp. You're—let me see if I can remember the name—you're Major DeLand of the French intelligence," beamed Joe.

Pat snickered; a smile creased old Reena's face and the young man bowed gravely. "*Monsieur*, you have paid me a very great honor. I am only Major DeLand's assistant, Lieutenant Fechet. Allow me to present my superior officer."

Slowly Joe's eyes followed the pointing hand until they rested on Reena, but a very different Reena. The mop of gray-matted hair was in one hand, while the other wiped away the grime and make-up, to reveal the slim, good-looking face of a smiling young man, who whined as he smiled: "Cross my palm with silver, sir."

"Well, I'll be damned!" gawped Joe. "Say—but here, we've got no time to lose. Into those planes you go; the Seventy-seventh's done its work, and it's us for the home drome. Allez oop!"

Up above, the Old Man and his hell-brood still weaved and cavorted, and with Joe and Pat, each with a Frog on his wings, once more in the air the whole bunch put on the fan for home. The Seventy-seventh had finished its own little war for that day.

Greaseballs and mechanics came running when the squadron hit the tarmac. The Old Man and his war birds clustered around Joe's plane, but that particular deuce was interested only in the erstwhile Reena, now revealed as a suave young French officer.

"I don't know whether to apologize or hit you on the chin," Joe was saying, "but I'm laughin' at you anyway. 'Cross my palm with silver,' eh? Well, both those four-bit pieces I crossed your palm with, that day in the pen, were phonies—just lead."

And the whole Seventy-seventh, from the Old Man down, joined in the laugh that followed.