

HELL IN THE HEAVENS

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The "Slasher" scorned guns! His victims felt the deadly bite of steel darts. The hands of all men were against him but only one dared to attack.



PETE WHEELER HELD A GLASS of *vin rouge* toward the light and admired its color. Then he went further, he investigated its fragrance and taste. All of which was part of a survey on Pete's part. He wanted to see how much a man could hold and still escape court-martial by the new major.

"'S like this!" he told Jerry Butler, across the table in Papa Pineault's estaminet. "Somebody's got to find out what the limit is, see? Major Headache says the first buzzard who comes in stewed gets busted to grease-monkey. Now, how can we tell what degree of intoxic—intox—what degree of drunkenness the major calls stewed, unless we investigate, huh?"

"You're right!" agreed Butler. "Only don't make yourself a martyr."

"Huh! Me a martyr? Don't be silly. I got a plan to fool the major. Wanna hear it?"

"Shoot!"

Pete leaned across the table, upsetting a glass. "Shhh!" he cautioned and looked about. Nobody was near with the exception of Papa Pineault himself.

"Shhh!" he repeated. "You know Major Backache said he'd court-martial the first bird he caught bringing liquor back to the tarmac? You heard him say that?"

"Sure!" agreed Butler. "And one of his damn fool M.P.s cracked his billy over my pocket and ruined my best O.D. pants!"

"Ha-ha!" chortled Pete. "That's just why I figured out this plan. *Look!*"

He unbuttoned the first three buttons on his shirt, found a string that looped around his neck, and gave it a yank. Out came a full size hot water bottle, empty and flat. Pete dangled it before Butler's startled gaze.

"Look at this!" he invited. "Now I'll fill it!"

He unscrewed the stopper. *Gurgle, gurgle!* A quart of Papa Pineault's best and reddest *vin rouge* inflated the hot water bottle's sides. Pete corked it again, squeezing out the air, and then stowed it inside his shirt once more.

"There y'are!" he chuckled. "Let the M.P.s sock me all they want to with their clubs; they won't break any glass. And when I crawl out of my bunk at dawn, I got an eye-opener, see?"

"Yeah, but that'll make the wine taste like rubber, won't it?" demanded Butler.

"What if it does?" asked Pete Wheeler. "Ain't this an age of autos and airplanes? Airplanes, that reminds me, it'll be ten o'clock by the time we get back to the field, and Major Jawache will be on his ear!"

The estaminet was considerably more arid when the two cloud crackers left and headed for the Umpty-third Squadron's base, calling the new major every name but his own. Nobody called him Major Stotesbury, except to his face. For the major had got on the nerves of every buzzard in the Umpty-third.

"Promptness and sobriety, these win battles!" said Stotesbury. "An hour late getting to bed, a drink of cognac before the take-off, little things like these make your nerves unsteady, men!"

"Boloney!" said the Umpty-third, but only in a low whisper. The major was a hard old devil to cross.

"Six men lost to 'The Slasher' in two weeks!" the major reminded them. "Six men! And if you can't beat a Boche who uses such primitive methods when you have Lewis guns, well, it shows something's rotten. Your nerves are shot! It's this drinking!"

THE Umpty-third gritted its teeth over mention of The Slasher. Six fine men lost, four of them down over the trenches or enemy soil. Two others who managed to land their planes near the home tarmac, with cruel steel flechettes piercing their bodies, dying before they could tell how it had happened!

The Slasher! Old-timers told of Boche pilots who flew low over marching infantry during the first year of the war, and tossed out handful after handful of these steel darts. Needle sharp, weighted at the lower portion before tapering to a deadly point, they would plummet downward to strike the helpless foot-sloggers.

Now The Slasher had revived the flechettes and was making hell in the heavens for the Umpty-third. Captain Berger, a veteran in the air and almost an ace, had come winging home twice with the flechettes

stuck in his cowlings. But it had been cloudy when it happened; he hadn't seen The Slasher.

It lacked but a minute of ten when Pete Wheeler and Jerry Butler entered the recreation hall below their quarters, after due inspection by one of the major's M.P.s. There was Stotesbury himself glaring at them; the rest of the Umpty-third was assembled like a bunch of school kids.

"Harrumph!" began Stotesbury. "It's time you came in, gentlemen. I use the term advisedly. No man can stay out and carouse and still shoot straight the next day! Now, as I have been telling the other men, our marksmanship must be improved. I have here the little device which will do it. Follow me, men!"

He lifted the device of which he had spoken. Jerry Butler grabbed Pete as the unsteady flyer was about to crowd closer for a look.

"Hold back, you sap!" hissed Butler. "Want the major to smell your breath? That's just one of the new Lewis camera guns!"

"Yeah, what do we want with it?" asked Pete as he trailed the other flyers out toward a hangar.

"I saw it demonstrated the other day," explained Butler. "One of the swivel chair captains from G.H.Q. was up here to show Major Toothache how it works. Fits right on your Lewis gun instead of the ammunition drum, and takes 97 pictures without reloading. You just aim it at the target and press the trigger. Cross wires show on the film just where your slugs would have hit if you'd been shooting tracers instead of negatives. See?"

"Sure, 's funny, ain't it?" Pete Wheeler rejoined.

They entered the hangar. Somebody held an additional light high while the major himself removed a Lewis drum and slipped the camera in its place. The Umpty-third watched attentively and wished it were back in kindergarten,

"Your shooting has been at fault, else we would have downed The Slasher by now!" Stotesbury declared. He looked around the circle of tanned set faces. Captain Berger, a big blond fellow, grinned across at Pete Wheeler and Pete winked back.

"I realize the training you got at Issoudun wasn't enough," the major went on. "To-morrow when you're back from the patrol, you're going up for target practice. Only you'll maneuver with each other in combat formation, and you'll use these camera guns. I have six of them and a complete outfit for quickly developing the negatives."

He looked at his wrist watch. "Now, men, it's a

quarter after ten. In bed, every mother's son of you and get to sleep. Remember, plenty of sleep and total abstinence may save your life!"

IT SEEMED that Pete Wheeler had been asleep only half an hour when Butler yanked him by a strand of his tousled red hair.

"Hit the deck!" Jerry advised. "I hear your crate warming up!"

"Yeah, now listen to me warm up!" Pete yawned. He ducked his head beneath the cover. *Gurgle, gurgle!* "Not bad these rubber cocktails when it comes to lining your inner tubes!" he told Jerry upon emerging. "Want a shot?"

"No, never could drink before breakfast," the other said. "Climb into your clothes and shake it up. You're late."

"Well, the major said get plenty of sleep!"

Dawn had come out of the east, chill and cloudy. A half dozen gray Spads were lined up, their props whirling, cold motors spitting and choking. Pete Wheeler covered his red thatch with a helmet, bundled into his leather coat, and strode across the dewy ground to his bus.

Berger was alongside. He waved a hand in greeting.

"Wheeler, we're flying in pairs today!" he said. "Looking for The Slasher. You know he always attacks single planes or pairs, never a formation."

Pete Wheeler nodded and yawned. One more eye opener wouldn't do him any harm, but he couldn't very well take a snort now.

"I got a hunch maybe we'll find this Slasher bird!" said Berger. "I can see through his scheme, just like they use bayonets in the trenches! Cold steel strikes terror to men's hearts. Destroys their morale! That's what the Boche is trying to do, destroy our morale!"

"Yeah, guess you're right!" admitted Pete as he threw one long leg into the cockpit.

"Sure I'm right!" Berger went on. "It's a damn creepy sort of proposition. I don't mind saying it's getting on my nerves!"

"You need some of Papa Pineault's nerve tonic!" murmured Pete.

"Well, here's luck, Pete. Stick with me. We're heading northeast, and I hope we meet The Slasher!"

"Same here!" Pete answered mildly, but his voice

was drowned out as Berger gunned his engine. The captain's Spad quivered; mechanics drew the chocks. She rolled forward, gaining speed. Pete jazzed his throttle, threw up his hand. His own ship started across the tarmac, zoomed toward the gray sky.

He looked back as the field dropped away. There was Butler and Farnham, flying east; Jones and McKennon, going southeast. Only a vague attempt to find The Slasher, the unseen. Pete shuddered as he wondered who would find him, who would return. Then Berger kicked his ship toward the north, climbing all the while, and Pete followed suit, hanging on the captain's tail.

He scanned the war-scarred land below, then remembered with a start that the enemy he sought would not be found in that direction. Men could not hurl flechettes upward. Peering into the gray above he saw Berger answered the captain's wave, and settled the ship into a steady flight close under the cloud ceiling.



THEY droned along until the symphony of the engines would have lulled Pete Wheeler to sleep, had it not been for the whip of the wind in his face. The trenches slipped past underneath, then they were back of the German lines. There was more of wooded ground, less of ruin below. Pete watched with interest.

His Spad cut through a cloud bank, and a filmy mist covered his goggles. He brushed with an impatient sleeve, clearing his vision, lowered the ship's nose a trifle, and then looked around.

Berger had been almost at his wing-tip a moment before. Now he was not to be seen. Pete's heart skipped a beat, then he told himself it was foolish to fear that anything had happened. There had been no snarl of Spandaus, but The Slasher didn't use Spandaus as a primary weapon! Maybe Berger had cut through that cloud and climbed.

Pete looked above. There was the Spad, straight over him. His fears had been groundless. Then Berger's hand reached over the pit coaming. It wasn't exactly a wave of greeting.

Half a dozen steel messengers of death came whistling down through the air, hurtling straight for the trim, little ship below, straight for the unprotected man in the cockpit!

“God!” gasped Pete. It was unbelievable. But it was true. He ducked his head forward, he kicked hard on the rudder bar out of sheer desperation. There was a pinging sound; a slender steel shaft missed his ear by an inch and buried itself in the floorboards. Others passed through the fuselage or whistled by in thin air as the Spad stood on her wingtip.

The Slasher had missed! For the first time in his reign of terror an intended victim had looked up just as he made the motion of throwing his flechettes!

“God! Berger himself!” muttered Pete as the crate sideslipped toward safety. Berger had killed those other men of the Umpty-third, killed the men he ate with, lived with! Pete remembered now, Berger—“almost an ace”—had been near each of them when it happened, but not near enough to down the German.

“And he stuck those flechettes in his own bus to make it look like he’d had narrow escapes!” gritted the redheaded flyer. He suddenly saw scarlet. He had set out to get The Slasher. Now, damn him, he’d get him, whether there were black crosses or tri-color corcardes on his wings!

Pete Wheeler kicked his Spad into level flight, looked up to see Berger veering down upon him, then gave her the gun and backsticked.

It’d be a real fight now; Berger couldn’t pit his flechettes against flaming tracers from Pete’s Lewis gun! The red-headed flyer grinned with white lips. He’d show the treacherous so-and-so!

He jerked the Lewis’ snout upward in its flexible mount and thanked the Lord and the major that the Umpty-third’s ships had been using two guns, a fixed weapon on the upper wing and the Scarff ring mount in the cockpit. He could hair Berger in the cross wires without having to point the Spad’s nose toward him.

“Take that, you lousy—”

Pete jerked hard on the trigger. Nothing happened. There was no leaping chatter of flame from the muzzle, no dry crackle of shots above the roar of his Hisso. He swore, looked at the ammunition drum, and nearly fainted.

The camera gun was still in place! It had been his ship the major used the night before for demonstration.

“Good heavens!” growled Pete. “That’s the major for you! And I’m in a hell of a jam!”

Tac-a-tac-a-tac-a-tac! That was Berger’s Lewis gun. The captain was diving upon him, the fixed weapon spouting a deadly hail. Tracers sizzled past Pete, thundering into his motor cowling, ripping the fabric from his wings.

He rose in his seat in a gesture of defiance. Any of

the slugs might tear through his body. Well, this lousy traitor would know he’d killed a man!

Tac-a-tac-a-tac! “Come on you damn Boche!” shrieked Pete Wheeler.

BERGER, expert at his flechettes, was not so good with a machine gun. He missed the one vital spot, the figure of the gesturing, cursing man in the cockpit below. Missed and swooped above, wondering why Wheeler was not answering his flexible gun. Perhaps the thing was jammed, Berger grinned to himself as the thought struck him. He had to destroy this man who knew his secret, and it would be easy if that gun wouldn’t work and he could stay on top.

He swung the Spad around in a tight bank and fought to keep his altitude advantage. But Pete Wheeler had climbed, and his own synchronized gun was coming into play. He gripped the stick trigger. Lashing streaks shot toward Berger’s crate; the captain’s gun thundered in answer, and Spad battled Spad in a duel to the death.

Pete Wheeler felt the wind of one bullet that ripped past his cheek, smelled the sulphurous smoke in its wake. Then a sharp blow on his shoulder, a red-hot pain that tore through his body, and the gray sky and green world went black. He was falling, twisting over and over, into a void of darkness.

“That’s hell!” he cursed through wan lips. “Hell—in the—heavens!”

His head bobbed on his shoulders, sagged wearily to one side and dangled over the pit coaming. This was all that saved Pete, for the full blast of a screaming prop struck his fevered face and revived him. He saw the green earth plunging up in a mad rush; he grabbed the stick with his good right hand and fought the ship beck into control.

There was a field below, and a wood on its farther edge. Nobody in sight. He eased forward on the stick, nosed the Spad down and touched her wheels. Then he throttled down his Hisso, raised his head with a painful effort and looked skyward. There was Berger, circling for a landing, coming down gracefully a hundred yards away, rolling toward him.

So it was death after all! His shoulder was half-killing him with pain. He unbuttoned his coat, vaguely trying to make himself as comfortable as possible. There was Berger, big and blond, climbing from his ship and his face was like that of a man gone mad. He strode toward the other Spad; Pete saw the gleam of slender steel in his hand.

“So, you’re The Slasher, eh?” croaked Pete through dry lips. “Damn double-crosser!”

“Shut up!” roared Berger. “You can’t die with cold steel in your guts, that’s all! You aren’t man enough! The thought of it puts terror in your heart, just as it will put terror in that of every man in the Umpty-third tonight when I fly back and tell them The Slasher got you!”

“Go on! I can’t get out of the ship! Shoot me, you damn yellow Kraut!”

“I’ll shoot you! Yes, with this! It’s my mark. We’re on German soil, and they’ll find you here, with this in your belly. Look!”

He knocked aside Pete Wheeler’s weakly upraised hand. The steel slashed downward, in. It pierced the pilot’s leather jacket, his clothing. He sagged forward in a dead faint; a crimson stream gushed onto the floorboards. *Herr Hauptmann* Berger observed with a sort of sickened smile, then he strode rapidly to his ship.

“For the Fatherland!” he saluted the dead man in the other Spad.

He gave his crate the gun, lifted her over, the fringe of trees to the south of the field, and sped west, climbing high.

BERGER’S ship was almost over the Umpty-third’s tarmac when something happened to shatter the peace of his mind. It was a smoking hot tracer bullet, and it whizzed over his shoulder and crashed into the glass of his instrument board.

Berger whirled. There was a Spad, swooping down at him like an avenging eagle, and the gun on its upper wing snarled and spat flame.

“Wheeler!” the captain gasped. It was impossible! Dead men can’t fly, and he had ripped Wheeler open with one of his murderous flechettes!

Berger jerked his flexible gun around and pressed the trigger. One short burst of fire ripped out of its muzzle, then his pressure on the trigger relaxed. He

leaped to his feet, a choked cry of pain on his lips, hands clawing at his body. The Spad nosed down, shot earthward and crashed almost on the hangar where it was housed.

Pete Wheeler, weak and tired from the loss of blood, grounded his own crate and sat there awaiting help. It was not long in coming. Major Stotesbury himself led the rush to his side.

“Why, you lunatic!” screamed the major. “You stark, mad murderer! You’re—you’re—Butler, arrest that man!”

“Yes, sir!” said Jerry Butler. He stepped forward. “He’s wounded, sir!”

“By whom were you wounded?” demanded Stotesbury. He glared at Pete Wheeler.

“The Slasher, sir!” answered Pete. “That’s him, there.”

He nodded toward the twisted ruin from which the men were dragging the captain’s body.

“You’re mad, I tell you!” the major flared. “That was Berger’s ship—that’s Berger!”

“Yes, sir!” said Pete Wheeler. “And if you’ll take that damned camera gun off my Lewis and develop the blank-ety-blank films in it, you’ll find a close-up of Captain Berger walking toward my ship with one of his flechettes in his hand.”

The major regarded him with open mouth. For a minute nobody spoke, then they all tried to talk at once.

“Well, for Pete’s sake, get me outa here!” begged the wounded man. “And I want a drink!”

“My God, you’re stabbed in the abdomen!” Jerry Butler exclaimed. “He got you after all—”

“Nope, not me!” Pete retorted cheerfully. “That ain’t my hide it’s sticking in, it’s the hot water bottle. And that ain’t blood on my pants, it’s Papa Pineault’s *vin rouge*, and I wish to God I had a gallon of it, right now!”