

"SILENT" PETERS —HELL-CAT

by ALEXIS ROSSOFF

He was lean and tall and firm-jawed, this Yank of the Seventy-Seventh Squadron. That was the bunch of cloud-hopping war birds they called the "Hell-cats," and sometimes the "Unholy Dozen." But "Silent" Peters was a lone eagle without a buddie in the squadron. He had a reason for his war—a reason that meant more than life.

OVERHEAD SOUNDED THE SCREAM of the wind past flat wires and struts; the drone and roar of overtaxed engines; the clatter and bark of spitting machine-guns. The air was full of whirling mists and flying scud, damp with the feel of death. Below, there was mud—slimy, filthy stuff that reeked to the heavens with the stench of dead things and noxious chemicals.

And crouched there on the line, five mechanical birds of prey trembled and rocked, impatient to be off lest they be late for the combat above. Scurrying figures mouthed harsh guttural German curses as they sloshed by in the ghostly light of the dawn. Others stood still ankle deep in the mire and stared skyward, anxious for a glimpse of the death-fight above.

A sudden wind-blown rift in the fog curtain and the watchers saw a red plane, with the Imperial eagles of Germany on the underside of its wings, diving and zooming, flying frantically to shake off the gray ship that rode its tail like a shadow. Desperately the pilot locked the red ship into a whistling dive and nosed for the patch of earth that meant safety and life itself. Five—ten—fifteen hundred feet he plunged, with his worried comrades on the field holding their breath to the bursting point. Another red plane started to his aid, but its cold motor balked, coughed and died.

From the doorway of a crazily camouflaged hangar a sobbing Jerry fledgling emptied his Luger at the grim gray pursuer that was swooping into position to administer the coup de grace. Flinging the impotent

gun from his hand he ran madly across the rain puddled ground, only to have the dripping side of a hangar put an end to his headlong flight. Drunkenly he slumped down.

"God!" he said, as burst after burst of scathing machine-gun fire beat against his whirling brain. Faster and faster sounded the chattering bursts; there was a silence of seconds that seemed an eternity; a deafening crash of splintering wood and tearing fabric; and then the triumphant drone of one engine where two had droned before. The groveling Jerry fledgling forced himself to look back to see the flaming wreck of what had been a red Albatross—now just a funeral pyre for the body of his comrade.

It was von Boelke, another crack flyer of the squadron, who found the little Junker fledgling crying his heart out. Tenderly the older man lifted him to his feet, with flitting shadows softening his own hawklike visage.

"It is war, young one. I could wish for no more ideal death myself. Truly a Viking's—to die in combat with a flaming ship to carry me to Valhalla."

Unashamed, the fledgling stood forgetful of his mud-daubed uniform and tear-reddened eyes. "Yes, but did that cursed devil in the gray ship have to kill him? Kill the closest friend I had?"

Bitterly he was about to launch into a tirade, when the quiet tones of von Boelke stopped him with the words unsaid. "Yes, he was within his rights. It is the code of the air. Remember, it might have been the

other way around Again I say, it is war, and to the victor belongs the spoils. The enemy not only fought like a sportsman, he pursued von Elds to his own hangars.”

As if on second thought, von Boelke added: “Some day I hope to have the pleasure of exchanging pleasantries with that pilot” And as though in anticipation, his face took on the look of a killer, and a fanatical light smouldered in his eyes.

Once more himself, the fledgling eagerly hastened to answer. “Bah! You will slay him with the first burst!”

“Perhaps, perhaps,” hissed the older flyer, through lips that hardly moved. “Still, I am thinking that this new war bird of the species Yank will be hard plucking. Do you forget, *Hauptman*, that in the five months our *Jagstaffel* has occupied this secret nest, he was the first of the Allied airmen to seek and find us? The competition will be stiffer from now on. These Americans throw caution to the winds, and they fight for the sheer love of it. I know them well, for I spent eight years in their dynamic United States. In fact, I left only when the call to arms was suddenly sounded.”

Lost in thought, von Boelke strode away.

Twenty minutes later, the gray victor roared, down over the Jerry front lines, its twin guns singing a song of death, while the Jerries stood paralyzed with fear at the daring of this reckless flyer. Above the trench he sped, leaving in his wake a long thin line of twisting, squirming, gray-clad figures that had been men. Seeming to tire of such poor sport, he zoomed into the sky and headed for his own lines, followed by the curses and groans of a badly strafed Jerry sector. Picking out a familial landmark in the shell-pocked earth beneath, he pointed the gray ship into the wind and slid down into a scene of seething activity.

Busy greaseballs hand-rolled their charges out to the new line, where other planes were being groomed and made ready. Groundmen, hammer and saw in hand, crawled over and around the skeletonlike frames of hangars, that when completed would house the war birds and the flying hell-cats that piloted them.

THE seventy-seventh was moving in. They were known as the “Peck’s Bad Boys of the Air,” with the reputation of being short on technique and long on defying every regulation in the book. The squadron was the cause of many gray hairs on the pates of the star-spangled ones back in G.H.Q. They flew their merry way like nobody’s business, and played hell with any Jerry who tried to dispute their intention of going places.

Twelve pilots made up the “Unholy Dozen.” There were five Yanks, bent on paying their country’s debt to that dear France: one Jerry with a personal grudge against the kaiser; three Frogs who were allowed to hang around for no good reason at all; and three Russians who didn’t care what it was all about, just so they ate regular and were allowed the privilege of knocking off a bird whenever the playful spirit behooved them.

The worst of the whole boiling was “Silent” Peters—every ace in the deck, hating the world, God and life itself. Tall, gaunt and taciturn he was, with the eyes of a saint and the face of a devil, and nothing but hate in his heart. Once, and only once, had he told of his quest—In words that dripped poison—of the man responsible for his warped outlook on life.

“Someday I shall meet up with him. The world isn’t big enough for us two, and I hope that she will be there to see it as I crush the life from his rotten carcass.”

His hands had shot forward, hooked talonlike, as though clasped about the throat of that man—the man who had taken his wife away. No one needed to ask—they knew, for Silent’s “she” had spoken volumes.

This was the man who climbed out of the gray ship and headed for the temporary “Wings” to make his report. Catlike, he made his way mincingly around paddles, acknowledging greetings with a nod of his head. Into the presence of the grim battle-scarred old war-hawk who commanded the hell-brood of the seventy-seventh Silent Peters walked, and as the squadron commander looked up from his papers, the silent one saluted and reported.

“Sir, while doing a solo dawn hop this morning, I sighted an enemy bus, tailed it behind its own lines and shot it down. Following him almost to the ground, I had the good fortune to discover a hidden airdrome and counted five ships. I believe that it is the Gotha nest that has been playing hell in this sector.”

Quickly the S.C. pushed back the papers he had been perusing, and his voice rang with suppressed emotion as he spoke. “Peters, I’m hoping you hit it right. In five months that Jerry outfit has bombed and shot two other squadrons right out of the war. It is no news—they’ve owned the air in this sector and made it miserable for troops up front; blinded our artillery and planted more spies back here than a doughboy has cooties—and that’s some lousy.”

The S.C. was pounding the top of the field desk as he gassed up for his next conversational flight. He studied the pilot at the same time from under his

bushy brows. A wise old owl, the major. He had to be, to think for a float of fighting hawks like the seventy-seventh. He proved it when he was asked: "Peters, there's something in your eyes. Let's hear it."

"Only this, major. It's a one-bird job. It'd be suicide for a squadron to try an' fly over there through all the traps, guns and planes that protect that nest. Of course, we could give the lay to the artillery and have them peg over enough stuff to knock that Jerry *Jagdstaffel* for a bundle of loops, but I can't see it that way." He spoke quietly now, and the pride in his words made the S.C. smooth out the wrinkles in his badly rumpled jacket.

"We're the seventy-seventh, major. An' hell knows we need all the credit we can get to help balance the court martials against us. This scrap is bird business, so I suggest that bein' birds, we handle it ourselves. If it's all the same to you, sir, I'd like to be the hawk, elected to raid the Jerry nest."

Slowly the major extended his hand and Silent grasped it. "You're a queer bird, Peters, but I guess you have your own reason for bein' that way. Hop to it an' good luck. From now on you're on your own."

And with a look on his face that spoke ill for the Jerries, Silent saluted; about faced and cut corners for his own quarters. Alone in his own room, the iron in his soul melted away and he sank down on his bunk, a weary, sadfaced man. Head in hands, he sat there with his thoughts thousands of miles away from the war sounds that surrounded him. One of his groping hands found its way inside his shirt to unfasten the locket pinned there and bring it to light.

Mechanically he opened it and gazed at the face that smiled wistfully back at him. "I was blind, Mae, drunk with success, but I loved you," he whispered.

Dry-eyed now, his fingers toyed with the trinket as his thoughts wandered back to the owner of the face in the picture. They were happy days. He was Bert Peters, the brilliant young engineer who built the great Kroydon Dam, and she was his wife. Then it happened as always. The arrival of the dashing young German engineer, with his military background and continental polish, who was to be his assistant, the introduction to Mae Peters and the strange something that attracted her to the younger man, as blond and smiling as her husband was dark and grim.

Peters spent his days and most of his nights working in the office while the assistant devoted his spare time to entertaining Mrs. Peters. Neighbors gossiped and ugly rumors arose, but Bert, engrossed

with his work, failed to hear until it was too late. The simple note she left explained everything.

*"I can stand no more. Your career it your life.
Good-bye. Mae."*

His world had tumbled about his ears and he chucked it all and went down into the depths. Future, money and reputation he flung away. He drank to forget, but he sobered again hating worse than ever and with the same mad urge in his brain, the urge to seek out and kill the smiling German who had disappeared the same day Mae had left her note. Men shunned and avoided him. They shuddered after looking into his bleak, merciless eyes.

Over the earth he hunted and into the war—not out of patriotism, but only because something told him that here in the world's slaughterhouse he would find the one he sought. Because of that one, he hated all Germans, and killed them with a sense of pleasure.

HIS mental Sight through the past at an end, Silent Peters slowly turned to the turbulent present. Outside was the drone and roar of revving engines. The sinister rumble of the big guns up front contrasted with the cheery laughter and loud voices of his brother pilots, lounging in the nest. Reverently, Silent Peters dosed the locket and returned it to its hiding place.

Over to the window he moved and gazed at the leaden sky. Again he spoke, softly. "It's your birthday, Mae, and I hope you're happy—happy." A convulsive sob shook his frame and he hurled himself back on the bunk, where he buried his face in the blankets.

Not until the exhausts on the throbbing engines glowed cherry red in the murky twilight did he emerge again and head from the nest to partake of a "Bat Breakfast" with the other night flyers. They were the pilots who chose the hours of darkness as the ideal time in which to strut their stuff. Quietly he slid into his allotted place at the head of the table, and nodded to the grinning pilot who faced him across the board!

"Looks like a dud night for flying, Silent. You goin' up?"

An affirmative nod of the silent one's head was the only reply.

"Cripes, you got nerve. Strange sector, no landin' lights on the home field, an' the whole sky all cluttered up with Pfaltzes, Albatrosses, and Hals. This Jerry flyer von Boelke has been raisin' hell around here lately, too. They tell queer things about that bird. Hell. Silent, you

can't tell me that the old boy with the cloven hoof isn't ridin' with you."

Silent deliberately gulped his coffee, and with the seriousness of a man confirming a great truth, answered: "You're right, Eddie. Me and his Satanic majesty are buddies." A low, harsh laugh, and he pushed away from the table, leaving the wondering Eddie fully convinced that he was a fit candidate for the cuckoo college.

As the door slammed behind Silent, an air of restraint hung over the mess-hall.

"Say what you want," Koslov was speaking, "I'll make it a bit stronger, and bet that Silent and the devil himself are one and the same person."

And the reason of all the conversation, listening outside the door, grinned sardonically as he fired his cigarette and pussy-footed it for the throbbing ships down on the line.

Somehow, as he walked, his mind went back to von Boelke, and the stories of the Jerry's prowess in the air. By some strange quirk his mind connected the man with the German engineer of those old days back in the States. Some of the things they said of von Boelke were characteristic of the man that Silent hunted. He wondered—was von Boelke the man? The name did not matter; names were easily changed.

And a grin of ironic mirth twisted his mouth at the thought. The ways of war were infinitely strange. Von Boelke the man he hunted! And in the air! Well, he would see.

Arriving by the shadowy bulk of his own gray bus, Silent checked over his instrument board and mused to himself. "They call me a devil and give me a chest full of medals for killing human beings, because said human beings did another country a wrong, which makes it legitimate. Yet, if I killed the bird who wronged me, it would be all wrong, and instead of medals, they'd dance me in the air on the end of a rope. Well, when that time comes, as it will, sooner or later, I'll be glad to leave a world as rotten as this."

A quiet voice at his side stopped his thoughts. "Had a hunch you'd be goin' up, sir, so I took a chance and warmed your crate up for you."

Turning to the grease monkey. Silent borrowed a piece of clean waste and wiped his hands. "How did she listen, Connors?" he asked.

"Fine, sir. She's the best little job in the seventy-seventh."

Silent's "Thanks to you," flustered the mechanic and he blurted; "Aw, it's nothin', sir. In fact, it's a pleasure

an' it makes all the other bird herders jealous. You're an ace, sir. An' when this lousy war is *passé* an' I go back to Shamokin, Pa., they'll elect me mayor just on the strength of bein' in the same outfit with you."

It was Silent's turn to flush, due to the barrage of praise. A softer note seemed to sound in his usually cold, metallic voice. "No ace is greater than his mechanic. It's a great feeling when there's a couple of Jerry hornets buzzin' on a fellow's tail, to know that his bus isn't goin' to fall to pieces on him. When the day comes that some Jerry knocks me right out of the world, I'm goin' to see to it that you get my decorations and trophies for your kiddies to cut their teeth on. That's a promise. Let's go."

A sharp "Contact!" and the engine roared. With a rush of wind the gray ship slid into the night, with the earnest prayer of a little Irish greaseball speeding after it.

SILENT poured the hop to her and split the mist blanket to nose through on the topside and into the sky realm of moonglow and starlight. Taking no chances, he grabbed himself twelve thousand feet of altitude on his own side of the line, tripped his machine-guns and gingerly eased four bottles from the pockets of his flying jacket and placed them on the floor of the cockpit within easy reaching distance.

Then he grinned as he settled back to the business of flying. "Ain't no use keepin' you babies any longer than I have to, he thought, careful to keep one goggled eye on the four bottles of concentrated murder that jiggled in time with the roaring engine.

"Damn! There's enough nitro there to knock even a bird as bad as Bert Peters right into heaven an' maybe right through it an' out the other side.' But hell, there wouldn't be any credit in just sendin' one lone bird skyrocketin'. Control yourselves for another three, four minutes, an' papa's goin' to let you bust yourselves under the breeches seat of a whole Jerry *Jagdstaffel*."

A quick glance at his watch and compass, and the roar of the engine sank to a drone as he halved the throttle. Down a long angling chute he ripped, cut the throttle a little more as the whirling mists enveloped him. A split second and he was through. A quick wipe of his goggles on his sleeve and a war picture sprang into reality right under the tip of his right wing.

The secret Gotha nest, teeming with life, revealed itself. Crawling, beetlelike things that were the bombers themselves, were being propelled by tinier antlike figures to their take-off positions; groups of

men, evidently pilots, stood around enjoying their cigarettes; stabbing flashes from the exhausts made Silent feel thankful for the hoods that masked his own. Then he was past, with the scene far a-tail.

Ashamed of his trembling hands and perspiring brow, he clicked his jaws together. "Hell, that gave me a start. What a break! Mister Jerry all set for a nice bombing raid." Again his hands trembled as he thought of what he had just escaped—the escort of fighting planes that was due to arrive overhead any second or the searching finger of a cloud-hunting searchlight that would have called for a death-filled sky of bursting shrapnel and whining steel.

Quickly his mind formulated a plan, a desperate plan, for even as he skidded his bus around, a red rocket sailed earthward out of the clouds. The Jerry escort had arrived. Floodlights snapped on and the field was lighted up bright as day. Two searchlights probed the mists, and a red plane dropped through and disported itself in the glare of its beam.

A Gotha started to roll down below, ready to start on its mission of death behind the flashing, jagged skies up front. But it failed to leave the ground as a machine—it left in broken pieces. A hurtling gray shape and a hand that tossed a direct hit over the side was the reason. Lower the gray plane swooped, and there was a deafening report on the ground as it sped on. The night was hideous. The Gotha's cargo of bombs exploded: flaming wreckage strewed the ground. A hangar went next and burned fiercely, fed by drums of gasoline and oil.

Once more the darting shadow swooped and the explosion that followed made the others seem puny in comparison as thirty thousand pounds of high explosives burst a ruddy hole in the night.

Dying men and cursing men, searing fire and whining shell fragments turned the night into a seething hell. And in the flame-lit sky, winged, batlike things dived and flitted about as they searched for the cause of it all. The gray plane winging its way through the protecting fog.

Frenzied messages sped over the wires and passed it on its way to the Front—messages that told of the destruction of the hidden base. Cursing Jerry pilots plunged into the fog. Others raced over it and some under it, all hunting for the droning gray ship and the pilot who had put a terrible dent in Germany's flying corps.

Whether it was luck, or the little Irish greaseball's prayer, Silent never knew. He dropped down and

located himself in the middle and over the two flashing, sparkling lines that were the war, while far a-tail the heavens reddened and took on the appearance of a strange sunset. And Silent grinned a cola, bleak grin as he thought of the Gotha nest that wasn't, and the Jerry bombing raid that would never happen.

Satisfied, he kicked the gray bus into the right direction and fed her the gun. Warily he watched a darker spot in the darkness rush toward him. Friend or foe, he took no chances. Catlike, he lined the hurtling, oncoming speck over his sights and crouched down, determined to make the other pilot give him the right of way. But not until the crash seemed inevitable, did the pilot pull back on his stick and lance his way upward, and Silent stood his gray plane on its tail and followed, for his quick eye had seen the three wings that meant an Albatross.

They shot into the clear, almost together, and the Jerry licked his lips in anticipation, for here was the hated enemy he had been pursuing. Disdainful of the Yank, and knowing that his own plane was faster on the climb, he circled rapidly, banked over, and flew on one wing, with Silent watching him out of the corner of his eye as he tried to shorten the distance between his own nose and the Jerry's tail.

But the Yank was being outflown and he knew it. Yet he never swerved. He kicked her around in ever diminishing circles. Steel ripped through his tail sections, and a row of tiny black holes crept up along the side of the fuselage, as the Jerry gained inch by inch.

A vicious snap, and a bullet burned its way across the back of Silent's neck. The line of black holes had reached the cockpit, and Silent decided to do things.

He threw her into a lightning slip—eased off a bit of rudder but held her in the bank and rolled to one side—and the Jerry, mad with the killer lust, fell for Silent's bit of aerobatics, roared past overhead and came around again to meet the zooming death leaping up at the belly of his plane. Silent gave him the works. His first burst splintered the Jerry's floorboards and nailed the pilot to his seat. Out of control, the Albatross bounced in the air and went down, with Silent hovering over it, until he heard the crack—above the sound of his own idling motor—that told him that he was entitled to one more notch on his stick.

Locating the site of the washout in his mind, he decided to call it a tour of duty performed, and go home.

TWENTY minutes later he was picked up by the seventy-seventh's wind cone, illuminated by a small spotlight; hung up there for a second or two while he got his wind direction, and then glided down, to turn his skyhorse over to its particular Man Friday.

Carefully he swung his long legs over the side and climbed out.

"Glad you're back, sir," sounded Connor's welcoming voice out of the dripping gloom. "You were the only one up. The S.C. flashed the dud weather signal right after you hopped off. Any luck, sir?"

"A little. I wonder, Connors, if you could bushkrow a motorcycle for me?"

"You bet your life, sir!" came the laughing voice. "Me an' my buddy salvaged us one of them Limey Victors only this afternoon, and if it's all the same to you, sir, I'd like to try to coax a few kilos out of it, with you holdin' down the sidecar."

"That'll be great, Connors. I'll slip over to Wings an' report. Pick me up over at my quarters in twenty minutes." And the happy greaseball had to hold a handful of waste over his mouth to keep from whooping out loud.

Silent sloshed away in the direction of headquarters, where he found the Old Man. "Beg to report, sir, that I Accomplished my mission."

Slowly the S.C. climbed up on his boot bottoms, and a wild light flickered and danced in his startled eyes as they bored into those of the pilot, standing thoroughly at ease in front of him. "Are you tellin' me that the Gotha nest isn't doin' business at the old stand?"

"Yes, sir. With a hell of a lot of luck, a gallon of good nitro and very little effort, I washed them out."

"Peters!" The Old Man's words came haltingly. "The seventy-seventh is proud of you. You're the best air bronco-buster in this whole dizzy war. Not because there are twenty notches on your stick, or because of your raiding ability, but for the unassuming way you claim credit for your conquests."

Silent didn't melt under the flow of praise. If anything, he hardened. His lips tightened to a thin line and his nostrils dilated. "I seek praise from no one. I kill with a purpose, and I find pleasure in other people's unhappiness." He hissed the words forth, and the astounded S.C. drew back until his back touched the wall, where he steadied himself and regained his composure.

"Peters!" he snapped, biting the name off short. "Hero, ace or whatever you may be, another rotten

utterance like that from you and I'll send you out of the world on the wrong end of a bullet, myself. The seventy-seventh may be an outfit of flyin' hell cats, as they say, but we're not ruthless killers." The old hawk breathed fire as he pounded the desk-top. Scornfully, he tongue-lashed the defiant Peters. "And I thought you were a he-man. Why, you're nothin' but a dirty crawlin' snake—using the war as a cover for your killing."

Threateningly Silent glided forward with raised fists. The older man laughed in his face. "Also a coward. The truth hurts, does it?"

Slowly the raised fists fell and the anger drained from Silent's face.

The S.C. was speaking again. "Peters, I think I know your story. It's the old one of the eternal triangle. Did you ever give it a thought that perhaps your love of self drove her from you? Two wrongs never made a right, and you can't ease the pain in your heart with the tears of others." The S.C.'s words were kindly now, and a sad light burned in his eyes. "It's your cross. You earned it, but show the world you're a man and able to carry it." The words that followed were hardly louder than a whisper. "Even at I carried mine."

Silent looked up and his eyes asked a mute question.

The slow nod of the grizzled old war bird spoke worlds. "Yes, we were in the same boat, Silent. But a just God gave her back to me after I'd learned my lesson. She's dead now. She died in these arms."

Blindly, Silent moved toward a stool and slumped down with his head on his arms, and sobbed the bitterness out of his heart, while the trite old major moved over to the door and turned the key in the lock.

The chug of a motorcycle, as it arrived and coughed to a stop outside of the door, brought Silent back to the business of war. Calmly, he arose—a different man now—and faced the major.

"You're right, sir, I was a sniveling cad, but you taught me that one doesn't have to hate a bird to fight him. From to-night on, I hate no one. No, not even him."

Mechanically he saluted, turned and plunged out the door, to be accosted by the of the motorcycle.

"I waited at your quarters, sir, and when you didn't show up, I decided to come over here."

"Good boy, Connors."

The happy ring in Silent's voice made the grease-monkey take a second look, just to make sure that he was talking to the right officer,

"Connors, do you think you can find your way to Alons, without piling us up?"

“Yes, sir.”

“O.K. then. Let’s go.” And they pop-popped away, with Silent humming to himself for the first time in years, and Connors firmly convinced that his idol was drunk and nothing else but.

He scorned the roads and went cross-country, bouncing over rocks and skirting holes. It was his night to howl and he did it handsome. Silent grinned and enjoyed it. “We’re you ever real happy, Connors?” he asked between bounces, trying to keep from biting his tongue off.

“Yes, sir, I am right now.” Connors proved it by cursing a blue streak at an extra hard jounce caused him to bite his lip.

Silent laughed. “You’re too good a man to keep on the ground, Connors. You should be in the air.”

“That’s where I’ve been ever since we started this trip. I ain’t touched the seat yet,” came the innocent answer, and Silent showed his appreciation of the grease-monkey’s wit with a broad grin.

“Here we are, sir.” But the flyer continued to sit, even though the machine had skidded to a stop.

SILENT was entirely serious when he spoke again. “Connors, I had you bring me here to-night, hoping to find a certain dead man I’d wanted to see that way. But now it won’t make a bit of difference whether it’s he or not.” And the puzzled Connors could only answer “Yes, sir,” as Silent climbed out.

They hid the motorcycle and started for the center of the shell-torn village, expecting with each step to hear an H.E. arrive and start doing things. They passed crumbling walls that leaned crazily, a shattered church-steeple, and the jagged silhouettes of splintered trees. Over everything was the awful, nerve-wracking silence of war—different from the quiet of a room or even the peaceful stillness of a graveyard—a silence that contained a hidden threat and death.

Connors spied it first, and he gasped an audible “Cripes!” as he stumbled into the broken plane with its shredded fabric flapping in the night wind. As he drew back, Silent moved past him and lifted out the twisted, bloody form of the Jerry pilot he had shot down only a few short hours before. Quickly he laid it down on the ground and slid his hand under the flying jacket and held it over the still heart.

“Is he dead, sir?” came the whispered question.

“Dead before he hit the ground.” Silent wiped the blood from his fingers and half sadly set about his painful duty. He took the identification tag from the

wrist, a ring from the finger, and a leather pocket case from the jacket and straightened up.

“Connors, he was an airman, and we can’t let him lie here to rot. We haven’t the tools to bury him, so I’m going to send him out like I’d want to go myself.” And unknowingly Silent quoted the words that another ace had spoken to the same pilot, now lying cold in death at their feet, for the dog-tag bore the name “*Hauptmann*.” “Truly a Viking’s—to die in combat with a flaming ship to carry me to Valhalla.”

Finding the fuel tank of the wrecked plane buried in the soft mud and using his cupped hands, he sprinkled the wings. Gently he set the dead Jerry in what remained of his cockpit and turned to Catmors. “You’d better start running for the motorcycle. The minute I fire this wreck, every big gun in the sector’s going to range this spot. Have that side-winder of yours turnin’ over, and I’ll be along in a minute.” Connors scrambled away and Silent sadly applied the match.

A tiny trickle of blue grew into a crackling flame. Silent stepped back and stood rigidly at the salute, and it seemed that the Jerry smiled his thanks as his funeral fire roared around him. In the dancing lights and shadows. Silent smiled back and whispered: “I didn’t hate you. You were a war bird, and I know you will understand. It was war. soldier. Good-by.” Turning, he dived into the dripping brush and trotted away with the flames throwing his shadow before him.

A soft whistle sounded and he ran toward it, climbed into the waiting sidecar and was rocked away as the whoosh of a seeking shell overhead reminded him that in a few more minutes he, too, might have joined the Jerry on his flight into the West.

That night he smiled back at the face in the locket tenderly, and went off in a dreamless sleep with it tightly clasped in his hand.

A Jerry .75 couldn’t have caused more excitement than the grinning Silent who pranced into the mess-hall the following dawn and greeted everybody with an embarrassed: “Hello, Buzzards!”

Eddie choked on a piece of bacon and upset his coffee, while the others just sat goggle-eyed. “I crave boocoo chow,” Silent announced. “Gotta little trip to make on the wrong side of the line.” Never once did he mention his previous night’s activities, but there wasn’t a bird there who didn’t know, for the S.C. had told them—told them individually and collectively. In fact, he had been telling them for the second time just before Silent had made his breath-taking entrance.

A dozen bottles made their appearance from nowhere, and when every cup was filled. Edde arose, cup in hand. "Up, you hell-brood," he commanded. And up they went. "Buzzards, not to the ace of aces—to hell with that—but to Silent Peters, our buddy, and one of us. Drink!"

They drank, cheered, whooped and howled, while Silent sat there grinning and sobbing, laughing and crying for sheer joy. And for the second time in five minutes the seventy-seventh conked out, when Silent arose to make a speech.

"Fellows, you've paid me the greatest honor in my whole rotten life. Apologies wouldn't mean a thing. I can only say—forgive me. I've been a damned fool."

As he sat down, they yelled the roof off the nest, for the lone eagle had joined the flock.

Other sleepy-eyed birds wandered in, and what had started out to be just a victory breakfast, developed into the wildest binge that was ever chucked on the Western Front. And the wildest hell-cat—next to Silent himself—was the squadron commander. He drank plenty, did his stuff as befitting an S.C., and beamed at the man who had braced to carry his cross. Noon rolled around and most of the seventy-seventh had rolled under the tables.

Gravely Silent faced the S.C. "Sir, despite the fact that you have declared a binge day, I would like permission to go up. No trouble hunting, just a peaceful mission."

At the S.C.'s quiet "For instance?" he brought a small package from his pocket and laid it on the table, untied it and the mute testimony of his twenty-first notch lay revealed. There was the Identification tag, the ring, and the leather pocket case of the dead German pilot that contained a rosary and a photo of an elderly woman. "Perhaps there might be some one who would like to know. That is why I ask."

"You have it. Hop to it, and good luck."

Silent took his departure from the rollicking binge as quietly as possible and headed for the line, where he consumed two cigarettes while Connors warmed up his gray bus. Idly he constructed a miniature parachute from his handkerchief and some string, and fastened it to the small package. At the grease-monkey's "O. K., sir," he piled in and rolled down the take-off. The rush of wind cleared the alcohol fumes from his brain, and for the first time he hit the air glad that he was alive.

Up Over the Front, he looked down and noticed that things were quiet "Sort of an attitude of watchful waiting, or else they, too, are having a holiday on the

strength of my reformation." And he laughed out loud at the thought, only to bite it off short, surprised that such a cheerful sound had once more originated in his own throat.

Off to the left two Jerry balloons teetered and danced at the ends of their cables. The sun was shining and little wind-blown cloud puffs raced with his droning plane. Silent was contented. Men called him buddy, the old world wasn't so bad, and he was about to do a good deed. Warily he scanned the sky for roaming Jerry battle crates, and nosed down.

An archie flirted with him and he grinned. He dropped his left wing low that he might see the better, and almost fell out of the war, as his startled eyes drank in the results of his previous night's bombing. A pocked and cratered field; flattened piles that had been hangars and shops, and twisted, gnarled things that were Gothas; a few figures moving around and over the wreckage—that was the nest. The Jerries had moved out—those that weren't blown—leaving this particular piece of sky to the flying hellions of the seventy-seventh.

Silent dropped lower and his engine noise sent the Jerry groundmen scuttling away like rabbits. Carefully he tossed the tiny parachute overside. Circling, he saw it float down. A Jerry picked it up and waved his hand in acknowledgement. Silent waved back, poured the hop to his engine and went home, to find the binge getting its second wind.

RANK meant nothing when the seventy-seventh threw a binge. Pilots and plane hostlers drank from the same bottle. Other squadrons sent their congratulations, and G.H.Q. wiped the seventy-seventh's black marks off the slate. A British outfit flew over, brought their own liquor and hopped into the spirit of the thing. Ideas and new aerobatics were talked over, with both S.C.'s proposing a sky day to take place right then and there. Bets were made and both outfits staggered out on the tarmac.

O'Neill took the air for his outfit, and Koslov, the wild Russian, for the seventy-seventh, in a stunting match of follow the leader. The Limey was confident and good, but Koslov was wild and drunk. That evened things. Immelmanns, falling leaves, half-rolls and barrel rolls followed each other with such rapidity that those on the ground got dizzier than ever just from watching.

Koslov matched the British ace spin for spin, and then knocked everyone cold sober with the first

outside loop ever executed before witnesses. They cheered him to the echo when they lifted him from his bus with eyes almost bulging from his head. Later he confided to Eddie that he had gotten the location of the earth and sky mixed and dived when he meant to zoom.

The seventy-seventh also won the egg-laying contest Eddie registered three hits out of five tries on a ground target, using rocks for bombs, against two for his opponent.

The Limeys were down to their underwear, and they even bet that on the next event—balloon bustin'. And the seventy-seventh grinned, for Silent, the deadliest machine-gun shot in anybody's air, was getting his instructions from the judges.

"Remember now," the British S.C. cautioned, "the umpire will release six toy balloons from his ship. Walters,"—addressing the British entry—"you will fire first. One hundred rounds. No more. Then you will come down. Peters, you shoot last."

Both rivals grinned good-naturedly, shook hands and scampered for their busses. At five hundred feet the ump towed out the first six and Walters dived in. Taking his time and shooting carefully, he knocked off four—a corking average—waved his hand and went down.

Six more targets floated out and Silent pounced; banked around for an angling shot; lined them over his sights and picked off three with the first burst. Quickly he stopped his guns and grinned as he thought: "If I do, those Limeys are goin' to fly home naked as goslings." He shot again, missed completely and slid down to find the sweetest little knock-down and drag-out fight in France taking place.

It all started when a British pilot—long on pride but short on diplomacy—crowed: "There you are. You cawn't win wars flying. It's shooting that counts, and that's what we 'ave, old beans."

Silent dove right into the party with a grin splitting his oil-smeared visage from ear to ear. Merrily he swung left and rights. A Limey fist collided with his nose and the seat of his flying suit kissed the tarmac. Over he rolled; pried two tangled Limeys off his own S.C.; banged their heads together; climbed up on his feet and was promptly knocked down again, but he loved it.

Out of gas, the belligerents declared an *asmistice*. They grinned at each other's battered appearance, shook hands and returned to the nest to pledge their undying friendship in the beverage of that dear France.

Silent, with his right arm linked through that of Walters, his late rival, tenderly fingered a shredded lip and a puffed nose. "Some scrap. I sure enjoyed it," he grimaced.

"'Twas that, matey, and all because you deliberately chucked it to me, up there," grinned Walters, beaming out of his one good eye. Each recognizing the sportsmanship in the other, they laughed aloud and drank to the bad health of the kaiser.

The binge ended a screaming success, with the seventy-seventh seeing their guests off and promising to fly over at the first opportunity.

Only the night patrol went up at dusk, while the others soloed their cots. And it was a good thing that the Jerry *Jagdstaffel* was no longer in the vicinity, for while the night patrol flew long, it also flew crooked, despite the efforts of bleary-eyed pilots to hold to their courses.

Silent was doing Eddie's hop, that worthy being very much passed out. He covered Eddie's sector between Moines and Harcourt, flying on half throttle. "No use in hurrying," he figured. "I've no place to go and all night to get there in."

Two little English Bristol Fighters dropped warily down and looked him over. Thanks to the cold light of a full moon, they departed from their usual habit of shooting first and inspecting afterwards. Silent waved to them as he withdrew his hand from his twin gun, and they melted away.

Over Harcourt three rockets floated up towards him and he instantly grabbed a few more handfuls of altitude. "No use gettin' tangled up with a barrage," he mused. And even up there, close to the ceiling, he felt the rush of the big shells as they raced over to obey the call of the ghostly floating lights. Banking around, he started back and grabbed for his guns as a shadow skimmed across his nose. The shadow came back and grew into a Nieuport which meant a Frog, and he grinned as he rhymed: "When Jerry cat's away, Allied mice will play."

But even as he rhymed and cruised, Jerry, not many kilos away, was building a new nest, gathering a new brood and sharpening his claws as he made ready to once more take over the air. Under the watchful eye of veterans like von Boelke, the Jerry fledglings shed their pin feathers and impatiently bided their time. They learned of the seventy-seventh and the hell-bender who piloted the gray plane, but they were not taught to hate.

Von Boelke himself was otherwise. "We are

sportsmen,” he would say, and his comrades believed him. Even as Silent was winging his way through the night, von Boelke was making ready to prove his statement.

In their new nest, with the war birds gathered around, von Boelke was saying: “I myself shall challenge that enemy pilot in the gray plane to an air duel to be fought over the lines at ten thousand feet, to-morrow at high noon.” His calm speech caused the meeting to seethe with excitement.

“A wonderful plan.” blurted one monocled fledgling. “We shall hover above and pounce on him as he comes up.” And the contempt in von Boeder’s eyes told the hapless Jerry that he was already an outcast.

Silent picked up the seventy-seventh’s landing lights that blinked on and off every thirty seconds, dropped down, reported and added his note to the snores of his brother buzzards. He was a happy man—that is, as happy as a man could be who yearned for a missing loved one.

AT DAWN Peters tumbled out, doused his head with cold water, and greeted Connors with a cheery “High-ho, it’s a short flight and a fast one!” He whistled a tune in an off key as he tramped into the mess-hall. The other birds were talking furiously and all at once, and there was an air of tension about them that meant something was in the wind.

As he entered the talk stopped abruptly, and Silent wondered at once what he had done now. What was the matter?

It was the S.C. who put an end to his racing thoughts. “Peters!” he boomed. “A message for you.” Mechanically, Silent took the folded paper and read it.

“To the pilot of the gray plane: Will you meet me in a duel to the death? Over Moines, between the lines, ten thousand feet, noon to-day. And may the best man win. I will expect you. von Boelke.”

The color rushed back into Silent’s face, and he threw back his head and laughed, and the seventy-seventh laughed with him. But they were grim laughs, that failed to harmonize with his own merry one.

“So that’s why you were sittin’ around like conspirators, and shut up so suddenly when I came in! Buck up, Buzzards. I’ll not only meet him—I’ll beat him, for the honor of the seventy-seventh.” And he laughed again as the hard-eyed old commander dubiously shook his head.

“He’s supposed to be damn good, Peters.”

“What the hell’s the difference?” rollicked Silent as he wolfed his breakfast “Can’t have it said that a Jerry is a better sport than a Yank. It’ll be my hard luck if he’s a better flyer.” And he grinned as if he doubted it.

At twelve o’clock the war around Moines seemed to pause as two tiny specks high in the blue, one red and the other gray, hurtled toward each other. Silent arrived first, and circled slowly as he waited for von Boelke to reach his level.

They both scorned the safety of tail-chasing circles. They were air duelists and the prize was life—for one. Von Boelke pegged the first burst, while speeding in a crash dive, but the gray ship slipped and rolled away, and as the red plane flashed past. Silent calmly studied it for a blind angle. Back von Boelke came, slashing and firing—short worrying rushes that kept the gray plane strictly on the defensive. Bullets snapped through its tail sections.

Again the red plane dived, shooting as it passed and shooting as it zoomed back up, leaving a row of tiny splintered holes in the flooring alongside Silent’s leg. Von Boelke must have believed that the best defense was a vicious offense, for his guns never stopped saying it with tracers and steel. Silent hadn’t fired a shot. His was a different system.

The red ship drew away and Silent’s hand reached for his gun and he saw that his rival was having trouble with his goggles. A splatter of hot oil had blurred them and von Boelke frantically clawed them off and hurled them away even as he plunged back into the fight.

Silent could have killed him then, but his finger froze on the trigger. Weakly he clutched the stick as though dazed by a blow. His brain reeled dimly as he realized that a bullet had found him. Another thumped home in his side. He tried to arouse himself, but couldn’t, for the ungoggled face of von Boelke was that of the smiling German assistant engineer he had searched the world over for.

The Jerry dived in for the kill, and through the mists Silent saw him coming. Unconsciously, he squeezed the timer, and his first burst of the battle crashed out almost in von Boelke’s leering face. A pained look of surprise wiped off the leer, the red bus yawed off and went down in a slow flat spin that gained momentum as it went, and Silent, unknowingly, continued to spray the air with steel.

Slowly his brain cleared and he steadied. His gun tac-taced to a stop and his lips drew into a thin line as he instinctively followed the fluttering red thing

down and landed with a crash that washed out his undercarriage. Painfully, he half fell, half climbed out and staggered towards the pile of wreckage that had been the red plane. Madly he clawed with his fast ebbing strength and dragged his enemy from the wreck and sank to the ground with von Boelke.

“What did you do with her?” he hoarsely demanded. “What did you do with her?” But the limp body only slithered around drunkenly as he wildly shook it. Over and over he asked the question with his own face close to the cold, leering features that mocked him.

Von Boelke must have heard even as he was about to enter the city of the dead, for his eyelids fluttered and his lips whispered: “Her? What her?”

The glazed eyes opened and a look of recognition came into them. His labored “Peters! You!” seemed to hold a friendly note. He was going fast and a bewildered look hovered over his face as Silent’s half-mad eyes glared down at him. Von Boelke understood then, and as the life sped out of his body, he stiffened and became the proud Prussian Junker.

“Do I look like a stealer of other men’s wives, you poor blind fool?” he gasped. “No doubt she left you because you treated her like a dog, but she loved you devotedly. It was just a coincidence that we both disappeared at the same time. I went in answer to my country’s sudden call, and it seems that I am making the supreme sacrifice.”

Silent sensed, rather than felt, the tremor that ran through the man he still clasped in his numb arms. Dimly he saw the smile that came over the face.

“Peters, it looks as though our duel ends a draw. Your eyes tell me that you are about to join me in death.”

A shuddering gasp, a convulsive movement and von Boelke winged into the West. And Silent’s words went with him: “Good-by. I’m sorry, my friend!”

And there two Yanks, part of a long thin wave moving forward, found them—victor and vanquished, for Silent still lived on.

DAYS later Silent Peters was still hovering between life and death on a cot in the emergency hospital that was once the Cathedral of St. Francis. A dying boy on his right called for his mother on the other side of the world. A jibbering maniac strapped to his cot, laughed and cursed the phantom Jerries that his poor crazed brain pictured.

Silent lay, too weak to even open his eyes. Only the

slow rise and fall of the blanket that covered his wasted form told that he was alive. But his thoughts were on the little locket that he clutched in his thin right hand. At the foot of his cot, he could hear the sad voice of the overworked doctor.

“A peculiar case. Sister. This chap is one of our greatest aces—Peters.”

The locket fell from his weak fumbling fingers and rolled down on the blanket, where it lay glistening in the light. The nurse picked it up and turned to the doctor.

“May I see you in the corridor a minute, doctor?”

Out of hearing of Silent’s cot, she faced the man of medicine. “He’s the man the girl back in the States has been trying to locate,” the nurse said. “I have a letter from her addressed to him now. It has been over half of France following him. See!” She opened the locket to show the doctor the face of one whom Silent still loved, and who, unknown to him, still loved him.

“A lovely girl,” the doctor said.

“Shall I give him the letter?” asked the nurse. “It will cheer him up, make him get well. It is what he needs.”

“But how do you know?” the doctor questioned. “The letter may contain news that will kill him.”

“I know because I have read it,” the nurse replied.

“So we’re reading patients’ mail now, are we?” he said, but there was a twinkle in his eye that told her he knew—and understood.

“Of course we are—in cases of this sort.” Her eyes were dancing too. “Peters isn’t going to die. All he needs is this letter. It’s good news, and will bring him back to life. It will make him a well man.”

“That’s fine. You have used excellent judgment. Sister. You’ll—”

“I’ll give the letter to him in the morning,” she said. “We can’t afford to lose the man that Peters is—any more than that little girl back in the States can afford to lose him. But there’s no danger—this will be the magic cure.”