

NOT-SO-SILENT NIGHT

L. JAGI LAMPLIGHTER

T IS A TRUE STORY I BE TELLING YE, AND IF ANY SHOULD doubt a word of it, I'll pop him in the kisser!



Rat-tat-tat-tat. The guns rang out in the night.

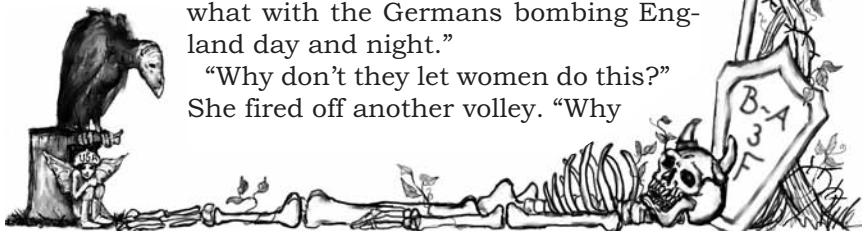
"Stop that, ye wee wench. Ye be scaring the geese now!" I barked, popping me head out of the engine space and into the cockpit.

"Aye and let 'em be scared." Shauna pulled the plane up into a tight Immelman followed immediately by a second one. No easy feat on a cloudy night. Each time she executed the loop and roll with such perfect precision that I wondered if I had overestimated how much rum toddy she had poured down her gullet at the Officers' Christmas Eve party. Even half-bollocksed, she was an ace behind the stick of a plane, me girl was.

"The sergeant will give ye quite the tongue-drubbing if he catches ye wasting ammunition." Leaning me pike against the side of the cockpit, I hopped up onto the dashboard and straightened me green hat with its shiny silver buckle. Then, I wagged me finger at her. "Ye know how hard it is to come by right now, what with the Germans bombing England day and night."

"Why don't they let women do this?"

She fired off another volley. "Why



are women only allowed to ferry planes?"

I thought about that, running a hand over me long red beard, which was neatly tucked into me belt. 'Twas a good thing, too, having a beard to warm the face, for the cockpit was icy cold. Shauna wore leather driving gloves and a ridiculous fluffy hat. Her breath formed cloudy puffs when she spoke.

"Has to do with the nature of men," I said. "What has a man to fight for, if his women and children are not safe at home?"

"Hmmpf," she replied merrily.

I sat down cross-legged on the dashboard. It was narrow up here, but I was not entirely constrained by mundane space. "Besides, ye can't shoot worth a brass farthing."

"Aye, that's true enough." Shauna grinned. She was a big-boned girl with curly ginger hair, the spitting image of her great-great grandmother. ('Twas due to her age, rather than her stature, that I addressed her as "wee".)

"Couldn't hit the broad side of the royal barn on a sunny day," I intoned. "And that's one big barn!"

"Forget the broad side of a barn." Shauna snorted with amusement. "I'd be lucky if I could hit the Atlantic Ocean if I was positioned right dead above it."

"'Tis true." I nodded sagely. "Now, yer brother Paddy, rest his soul, he could shoot, that one could! Sixteen confirmed kills before he went down."

I did not add that five of those planes had been shot down by yers truly. Paddy did not always have time to both fly and shoot, and, well, me people took naturally to weapons. But I would nary speak a word of this to anyone. It would not do for the likes of me to be taking away from an O'Shaughnessy's legend.

She giggled. "But I could fly a Spitfire or a Piper Cub through a needle hole in the dark. Blindfolded if I had to!"

As if to prove it, she performed another Immelmann. I clung to the dash for dear life.

"Whoa, now! 'Tis hardly proper behavior on Christmas Eve," I chided, still grasping the edge of the dashboard with both me hands. "Ye should be home wrapping presents and hanging up stockings. Not flying this big lug of metal God knows where in the middle of the night. If ye had left at noon, we could have been home by now."

"If I had left at noon, I'd have missed the party," Shauna hiccupped. "Beside, my presents are wrapped, and I hung my stocking before I left, right between Mrs. Partridge's and Anna's."

"Still, it ain't right."