



THE CUCKOO'S NEST

by ALEXIS ROSOFF

Into the hell of forgotten men, otherwise known as Blois, plunged that king bird of the war brood, "Wild Bill" Barry. The shell-ripped, battle-torn world heard no more of him officially he was listed as a deserter—but from that moment a new bird sprouted wings out of the stench of Blois. And that new war bird was part of the lousiest, stinkin'est outfit of bums that ever slashed the belly out of an enemy crate. A yarn that will shoot a hotter fusillade of thrills and excitement into you than the Hell-cats!

IN PLAIN WAR-BIRD LANGUAGE, "Wild Bill" Barry's wings had been clipped. Wing H.Q. had tired of his escapades at last, and ordered him back to Blois and flying oblivion in that dreaded boneyard, of washed-out pilots. Colonel Boland—the wise Old Man of the twenty-seventh pursuit, and Bill Barry's all-too-recent squadron commander—had done his damndest to prevent the clipping. He had warned and pleaded, cajoled and punished, to no avail. He could not make the wild pilot see the light.

"Damn it to hell, Barry," the Old Man would grumble. "Do you think this ruddy war is a one-man affair? A game originated just for your pleasure?"

Barry would fidget and squirm like a schoolboy under the Old Man's tongue-lashing, promise to mend his ways, and one hour later he'd be standing in the middle of a wrecked estaminet—of his own wrecking—with blood on his face, and a mocking

curse on his lips, inviting the world in general to step up and trade punches with him. He grew so arrogant that even the buzzards of his own outfit turned props down on him, and administered the old silent treatment. They talked around, past and behind him, but never of or to him.

The morning he disobeyed orders by dropping out of patrol formation to shoot down a high-flying, two-seated picture-taking Rumpler and its escorting Pfaltz, he got stony indifference and blank looks from his brother buzzards, and a scorching bawling-out from the Old Man, as a reward.

Two days later, he recklessly lifted a cold Spad off the tarmac to go to the assistance of a returning spy planter that was catching hell—and a fuselage full of probing steel—from two green-striped Fokker D-7s, riding its tail with a vengeance. Wild Bill knocked the first Fokker out of the war and the world with

a splintering burst through its floor boards, that crucified the Jerry pilot in the cockpit, as he forced the balky Spad up under it. Then a bulged cartridge silenced his guns. Disgusted, he tried to pound it out with the wooden mallet that most pilots carried for just such emergencies. He abandoned that action after two or three half-hearted blows, to put into execution a crazy plan that had revved up suddenly in his brain. The remaining Fokker had given up its tail-riding of the fleeing spy planter, to bank around and come corkscrewing up after him. Looking down from where his Spad hung on its prop, Wild Bill saw the Jerry turn, felt the wind-slap of Spandau bullets pass his ears, and settled down to do some serious flying. Far down on the drome, speeding dust plumes told him that other Spads were coming to his assistance. Also he caught a glimpse of the hurtling spy planter bugging toward the billowing hangars for a landing.

"Gutless louse," Bill hissed after the bouncing plane. "Flew out've a scrap to save his own tail."

Deliberately he let the Spad drop in a dizzy vrrille, compelling the Fokker's pilot to change direction. Bullets no longer stitched holes in the Spad's wings as it whirled out of the Jerry's gun sights. Wild Bill pulled out of the vrrille. Had he kept in it for another thousand feet, safety would have been assured him in the form of two full-gunned Spads, cleaving up into the higher reaches.

But that wasn't Wild Bill's way. Anything he started he finished. The Fokker came winging for him again, and he sought a moment's respite from its blasting hail of lead by bluffing the Jerry into a tail-chasing game of *Kurvenkrampf*. Around and around they went in ever-narrowing circles. A contest of engines, with Bill's Hisso the winner. Inch by inch, it pulled the Spad's riddled empennage out of line with the Jerries' spitting guns.

A Spad flashed by, followed by another to take pounce positions above the circling flight. Growling threats in his throat, Wild Bill shook a huge fist up at the two eager pilots, warning them to keep out. It was his scrap.

And the worried Jerry roaring around on the opposite side of the circle saluted him for his sportsmanship. Bill merely grunted, and apparently signed his own death warrant by calmly allowing the Jerry to see him pound at his jammed guns with the mallet. Like a flash, the Jerry darted out of the *Kurvenkrampf* in a calculated S turn that should bring the Fokker back to a prop-on meeting with the

defenseless Spad. He had nothing to fear from the Yank's guns, while a well-aimed burst from his own Spandaus would settle the issue.

According to the book, the Jerry figured correctly. But Bill Barry had always scoffed at books, as he did this time. For as the Jerry started to S-turn, Wild Bill skidded the Spad around, strained every wire in the bus, and lost a skyful of altitude. But a tight left rudder and a wide-open throttle got it right back for him—and a lot more. He leveled out with only a thin streak of daylight separating his spinning prop from the Fokker's tail. And the chagrined Jerry, with no guns to fear, made the deadly mistake of letting him stay there.

To Wild Bill, it was a lucky break, but to the watching pilots in the hovering Spads, Bill's act was suicide. They saw him close in on the Jerry a foot at a time, judging the Fokker's speed and matching his own to it. At last, only inches separated them, and the frightened Jerry turned in his seat to see a slashing prop cut through his Fokker's tail sections, severing the rudder and control wires like so much paper and string.

Despairingly he clutched the useless stick that wobbled loosely in his hand, and prepared to meet the smashing death that would be his in another minute. If only he could be certain that the mad Yank, who had deliberately amputated his tail, had wrecked himself in doing so, dying would be easier. But even that small satisfaction was denied him, for as his careening ship, now just a plaything of the winds, leveled out before starting on its last dizzy plunge, he opened his eyes to see a hooded, goggled pilot staring at him from the cockpit of a battered volplaning Spad. Its propeller was gone, and its engine was still. Wild Bill had cut the switches the instant his prop had shattered and disappeared in space.

HIS desperate plan had materialized, and there was his victim, waving at him. "Cripes," he thought, "a game one, that Jerry, a regular war bird." Wild Bill swallowed the lump in his throat, waved back with a hand that was leaden, and averted his eyes. The doomed Fokker had fallen out of the sky.

He brought his own crippled bus in with a dead-stick landing that was a masterpiece of stick mauling, and dropped to the ground, to hurry across the tarmac to where the Pyrene brigade was doing its best with the fiercely blazing washout that had been the Fokker.

"The Jerry pilot?" he asked of a sweating coveralled figure. A stab of the coveralled one's grimy finger in

the direction of the fire was the answer. A snarling "Yellow dogs," twisted Wild Bill's lips, and he ducked his head to plunge recklessly into a billowing cloud of black oil smoke. In a minute he came staggering out again with the smouldering, moaning pilot in his arms.

Gently he laid the horribly burned Jerry on the ground and slapped the fire from his own flying togs. The clanging meat wagon skidded to a stop, and the sawbones came running toward Bill, attracted by his smoke-blackened, blistered face and hands.

"Not me, doc. Him!"

The medico nodded and dropped to his knees to examine the dying Jerry, as Wild Bill, unmindful of his own burns stood silently by, ready to lend a hand if needed.

"Not a chance," whispered the doctor. "He's delirious, calling for his mother. Any of you men here speak German. If there is, you can make things easier for this lad."

An uncomfortable shuffling and whispering broke out. The man that volunteered would be in for a lot of kidding when it was all over. The dying pilot moaned, and Wild Bill's gorge rose. With a suddenness that left them stunned, he turned on the watchers.

"Get to hell out've here, you spineless mutts," he growled. "Afraid you'll lose your military status should you help a dying enemy." Savagely he lashed out with a punch that knocked Captain Renfrow cold. "Beat it, you bellyaching bums before I slay the pack of you."

Slowly they backed away, officers and enlisted men alike, from the menace of the devil light that danced in his eyes. "In ten minutes," he threatened, "I'm goin' to break the back of every punk remaining in this vicinity."

Defiantly, he spun around on a heel, and the growl went out of his voice as he squatted down to face the sad-faced doctor across the mumbling Jerry. "I'm ready, doc," he announced softly. "What do I do for this kid?"

Those that dared to look back saw Wild Bill, the black bird of the twenty-seventh pursuit, sitting on the ground with his big arms clasped around the dying pilot. But they couldn't see the tears that trickled down his blackened cheeks or hear the sob in his husky voice, as he crooned, "*Mutter's Bub-chen.*"

And with those soft words from a hard man's lips, soothing the pain of his tortured body, the Jerry smiled peacefully and went West.

It was Bill who placed the body in the meat wagon

and was standing looking after it with unseeing eyes, when he felt a hand touch his shoulder. Slowly he turned with a tightly clenched fist, ready to confront a strange smiling pilot who inquired, "May I ask to whom I am indebted for saving me a short time back?"

Broodingly, Bill studied the stranger out of narrowed eyes. "You the bird that blew in with those two Fokkers buzzin' on your tail?"

"I admit the accusations," grinned the pilot.

"Yeah?" growled Bill thickly. "Then maybe you'll also admit why you flew out on me up there after I winged up to help you make an even scrap of it?"

The stranger flushed, then went dangerously white. He started to explain, changed his mind, and blurted out, "Why, you damned loud mouthed—"

That was as far as he got, for Wild Bill's heavy right fist smashed against his mouth, silencing him, while the following left that cracked on the point of his chin, made him lose temporary interest in everything.

And with those punches, trouble flew in for a landing on Wild Bill's tarmac. It didn't take him long to discover that he had punched a colonel—and a G-2 colonel at that. An I.D. officer who could give orders to the star-spangled generals back in G.H.Q. and make those pompous birds like it.

AS THE sad Old Man of the twenty-seventh put it to a sullen, resentful Bill Barry that evening, "I grant that you saved that brass hat's life, son, and by rights he shouldn't have squawked when you decided to claim a little of it by cuffing him on the lug as you did. And were this civy life instead of the crazy war that it is, I am certain that the colonel wouldn't have peeped, for I know that bird; he and I are old friends. But this is the army, and that ends it. It's Blois for you, Barry, and you're a damned lucky boy that it isn't a bobtail."

"I wish it was," muttered Bill doggedly.

The Old Man shook his head wearily. "No you don't, buzzard," he insisted. "Blois may be the making of you."

"Making," growled Bill sarcastically. "Soldiering with a flock of whining conscientious objectors and yellow mutts. Ferrying crates up to the Front for a lot of birds who'll be passing wisecracks." Savagely he pounded a fist into the palm of his other hand. "Hell, I won't be there a week before they'll be trying me for murder."

"That would be bad," grinned the Old Man exasperatingly.

Deliberately he lighted a cigar and exhaled a

startling question along with a cloud of smoke. "Son, did you ever hear of the Cuckoos' Nest?"

"Yeah," admitted Bill gloomily, yet curious as to the colonel's motive. "That's the mythical outfit G.H.Q. invented as a bugaboo for Jerry."

"Correct," grinned the Old Man, "all but for two things. First, there's nothing mythical about the Cuckoos' Nest; and second, G.H.Q. had or has nothing to do with the Cuckoos."

Bill snorted derisively, and the Old Man shrugged. "It's your privilege to believe what you want, Barry," he continued. "So, for no reason at all, I'm telling you that the Cuckoos' Nest really exists, and the Cuckoos are birds much like yourself. Dizzy birds, wise guys, officer baiters, and regulation haters. In general, the lousiest, stinkin'est bums that ever sprouted wings to disgrace the name of the air service. There isn't one of them who hasn't been to Blois, and if G.H.Q. had done the right thing, they'd all be doing life in Leavenworth this minute."

With an air of finality, the Old Man arose from the single stool that adorned Wild Bill's cubicle.

"Colonel," whispered Bill, pleadingly, "I believe what you said, and I'd like, to ask why you bothered yourself to tell me about the Cuckoos' Nest?"

A wide grin split the Old Man's leathery face, and he started a fumbling search of his pockets, with the result that he finally produced a crumpled, sealed envelope. "Almost forgot this," he explained, and his face sobered. "You're going to Blois, son, for slugging a superior officer. And I told you that the cuckoos are all graduates of that hell hole. Bad, tough birds, the whole scurvy flock of them. It was suggested to me last night that perhaps you'd like to take out a stack with them. Should you? I was asked to give you this letter upon receiving your word of honor that you will not open it."

"Colonel, you've got my word right now," ejaculated Bill, with the air of a drowning man grasping at the proverbial straw.

The Old Man handed him the crumpled envelope and instructed, "You'll look up Captain B. W. Greb when you get to Blois and give it to him." Slowly the Old Man's hand went to the blackbird's shoulder. "So long, son," he bade huskily. "I'm damned sorry you have to check out this way, but it's all for the best. You'll be happier in that crazy outfit. No orders to obey, and sock anyone you like, providing you're able."

"Colonel," answered Bill, haltingly, "I've punched my last head, and I've been a louse." He brightened. "Maybe they'll let me come back to you some day."

"Maybe," hazarded the Old Man.

Their hands clasped for an instant, and he started for the door, but hesitated as Bill asked, "May I inquire, sir, as to the identity of the angel who is giving a haywire dodo like me a break?" Suggestively he held up the letter.

For a second the Old Man's brow furrowed in indecision, and then he spoke. "Can't find any reason why it should be a secret, Barry. The man who's plotting your course to the Cuckoos' Nest, is the same one who had your wings clipped—the colonel you cracked on the jaw."

Long after the door had closed behind the Old Man, Bill Barry stood there with his thoughts in a mental vril. He'd like to meet that colonel again. Next time he'd hold out his own jaw and insist that the colonel repay him with interest.

Wild Bill's departure from the twenty-seventh was an uneventful one. A motor cycle chugged along Buzzard's Row, to stop in front of his cubicle. Sadly he came out, closing the door behind him for the last time. The tarmac was strangely deserted, not even a grease-ball to see him off. Bitterly he realized that he was a pilot without a buddy. Forgetful of his promise to the Old Man, he growled a defiant "To hell with 'em," slung his musette bag into the bottom of the side car, and climbed in after it. In an ugly mood, he laughed at Wing H.Q. and operations office as the speeding motor cycle whizzed by.

A bend in the road left twenty-seven's drome behind, and only Blois lay ahead—Blois and a vague promise of something he could not believe to be true. Perhaps after all, he had only dreamed of the Cuckoos' Nest, as every other war bird had done at some time or another.

The Cuckoos, mysterious and unknown—winged hellions who flew and fought when they pleased.

Furtively, his hand stole to the letter in his pocket—it was real enough.

The motor cycle driver leaned over and spoke to him. "Commanding officer's orders, sir, to take you no further than the railhead at Dufee."

With a surprised start, he realized that the motor cycle had stopped by the side of a long French train of box cars. A puffing toy engine was at the head of it, and an officious *Chef de Gare* was bidding him to hurry.

"I'm in no hurry to get where I'm goin'," he muttered, taking his time about quitting the side car. The grinning driver helped him. A wild tooting

of the toy engine's whistle all but shattered his ear drums and he cursed feelingly. Car couplings began to jerk and pound, and he broke into a trot paying very little attention to the accompanying cycle driver's conversation.

"Captain Blythe told me to give you this, sir."

Mechanically Bill accepted the folded sheet of paper. What could Blythe, the adjutant who had ridden him with spurs, be writing? He opened the note and read as he ran, for the train was beginning to move.

"Au Revoir, Wild Bill. We're sorry as hell. And every buzzard in the outfit sincerely wishes you, Happy Landings."

A long line of signatures followed.

Wild Bill's eyes went misty, and he came near missing the train as he dived through the open door of the last box car.

"Hey, soldier," he shouted back to the waving cycle jockey, "tell them that Wild Bill is dead, but that a bird named William Barry hopes to come back to see them all real soon."

A sudden lurch of the tricky car betrayed him, and he landed flat on his back, to lie there grinning happily up at the ceiling.

DAYS later he landed in the cheerless dreary port of unwanted men that was Blois, and took his place in the line of condemned, consisting of broken officers from all branches of the service. In front of him was a trembling dejected infantry captain. "Cowardice under fire," his ticket read. A doctor would have diagnosed the unpardonable crime differently. "Raw nerves in rebellion, caused by sleepless nights, empty belly and the sight of a thousand violent deaths."

A bit farther up the line was an artillery officer, crushed under the heavy cross of inefficiency. A short barrage from his battery's worn-out guns had massacred a Yank infantry detachment in the front lines.

Bill's turn came in time, and he found himself saluting a hard-faced major, who growled, "You're Barry, hey? The tough guy who thinks this war is a gymnasium and all the officers are sparring partners. Well, we'll soften up your toughness here."

"Yes, sir," answered Bill mildly. "I hope that you can."

Wrongly sensing a challenge in Bill's quiet statement, the major went livid. "Is that a challenge?" he demanded.

"No, sir," Bill hastened to assure him. "I'm just a dove from now on. You can kick me from one end of Blois to the other, and I won't even chirp back."

"Oh, yeah?" rumbled the major, puzzled at Bill's seriousness, but still on his guard. "Well, just you try playing that dove role around here, lieutenant, and damned if I don't recommend you for a song-leader's job back in the S.O.S. What in hell do you think we're running here at Blois? A Spanish inquisition? We make men, not break them."

"Yes, sir," answered Bill, anxious to escape, and gladly stepped away from the major's desk to follow an enlisted orderly in and out a maze of drab wooden barracks.

As they walked along, the orderly scanned the barracks order assignment the major had handed him, and his face lighted up with a friendly grin of admiration.

"The C.O.s put you in with the twenty-minute eggs, lieutenant," he confided. "And you ought to be glad. We classify 'em here. There's canary cottage where the birds with the yellow up their backs roost. And the Ritz. You know the kind, sir. High hat, ninety-nine-day wonders. Too proud to lay down and sleep in the mud with a bunch of regular fellows. But the gang you'll be living with, sir—hell, they're the berries. The kind of officers that we enlisted men'd wade through hell for, and the high rankers hate. Not bad scouts, just the kind that got in the muscle line when God was giving out brains."

A snatch of a ribald ditty pertaining to the morals of a certain French maid from Armentieres came to Bill's ears through a weather-beaten door in front of which the orderly halted. And Bill grinned appreciatively as the singer's bull-fiddle voice cheered him up. "Men don't sing in hell," he reasoned. "Therefore Blois can't be so bad."

His entrance into the comfortable crowded room put an end to the song, and all eyes turned to give him the double O, as the opinion-forming, once-over look of the army was called.

"My god! An angel from hell," a laughing voice shouted as its owner caught sight of Bill's wing ornaments.

"Too bad, too bad," mourned another. "Nine flyers have checked in here during my—*ahem*—convalescence, and they're all gone. Methinks that ferrying new crates up to the Front is a damned unhealthy occupation."

Bill introduced himself and acknowledged

introductions in return. And as the guest of honor, he was given a seat up close to the pot-bellied stove that heated the barnlike structure, and was soon at his ease. But for the strange faces, he might have been back in the mess hall on twenty-seven's front-line drome. These men were no spiritless outcasts. Verbally they fought the war over again, sang the same songs, and growled about the punk chow and sievelike quarters. Only one rule was strictly enforced: a man's past was his own private business not to be inquired about.

The men who billeted in the barracks of the twenty-minute eggs were men who lived in hopes—hopes of some day getting back to a front-line outfit.

The following three days were enjoyable ones for Bill, and then suddenly he soured on it all, as it dawned on him why Blois was rightly called The Hell Hole. It tortured men with an inactivity that was maddening after the hectic, thrill-a-minute hours of front-line soldiering. This sudden enforced peace acted like a chilling shock to war-heated blood. It was a powerful invisible weapon that pounded the foolishness out of headstrong men and left them—soldiers.

In desperation, Bill sought for a means of escape. His thoughts turned to the Cuckoos' Nest, and his hand sought the pocket that contained the crumpled letter. There should be no trouble in locating the officer to whom it was addressed.

"Berg," he began, interrupting that individual's game of solitaire, "you've been here a long time. Have you, by any chance, ever brushed elbows with a Captain W. Greb?"

Berg looked up, shifted the cards to his left hand, and solemnly extended his right to shake Bill's. "Might as well bid you good-by right now," he explained. "Nine playful war birds, like yourself, were assigned to this shack in the past three months. Some of them waited a week, others only an hour, but eventually every damned one of them asked for Captain W. C. Greb. He must be a jinx because once they got an interview with him, we never laid eyes on them again. And always it's the same rumor, simply that they must have been dusted off while ferrying new crates up to the Front dromes, and now here you come proposing yourself for the same kind of a ticket. Take my tip, buddy, and forget this Greb bird."

Berg began a slow riffling of the cards, only to have a determined Bill Barry interrupt him once more.

"Thanks for the advice, Berg, but it means a lot more than a life like mine for me to find that jinx bird,

as you describe him. Being in Blois yourself, you'll understand what I mean. I always prided myself on being pretty much of a man. But it took the army and the war to prove to me that I was nothing more than a brawling bum. Well, I'm hoping for one more chance. My only salvation lies in getting back to the air. But I can't get there if I don't find this Captain Greb. Are you going to help me find him, buddy?"

Resignedly Berg tossed the cards on the table, and leaned close to Bill. "You've found him Barry," he said softly. "You're talking to him. Let's see your credentials."

"But—" began Bill startled.

"No 'buts' to it," dismissed Berg. "Greb, spelled backward makes Berg. Try it for yourself, and then, if you're satisfied hand over the data."

Bill handed over the letter and perched nervously on the edge of his stool as Berg, or Greb, perused its contents.

"No different from the rest," he announced finally, tore the letter into small pieces, and dropped them in a jacket pocket. He motioned Bill to follow him outside, and as they walked along, he explained everything fully.

"To-morrow you will be transferred for pilot duty to the plane supply depot at Le Bourget. It is possible that they will detail you immediately. Every drome up Front is yelling for plane replacements. It is most likely that you will be given a brand new Spad to deliver, with synchronized guns and all the trimmings. I've heard that they are damned swell jobs, Barry." With a sidewise glance, he saw the flame his casual description had kindled in Bill's eyes, and grinned in sympathetic understanding. "Now, there's a possibility," he continued, "that neither you nor the plane may ever reach your destination."

Their walk brought them to the beginning of the restricted area, where Greb seated himself on a convenient overturned road marker and invited Bill to do likewise. "Did you ever do any flying over the Vosges, Barry?" he asked, as he took a folded map from a pocket and spread it out on his knees. Bill answered in the affirmative, and Greb, preoccupied with the map, grunted his satisfaction. "I was hoping you had," he went on, after a while. "Now, here's a spot, designated as Lake Renard, thirty kilos northeast of Boulou. I've been thinking that if you were to get lost with that new Spad you'll be ferrying, and land there, you might find the chance and the activity you've been craving."

"I'd sure like to try it," hazarded Bill, "but there's two strikes on me before I start. Neither I nor any other pilot can land a Spad on water and roll across it, and that spot you're indicating with a finger is sure liquid."

"It was," Greb emphasized meaningly. "But it isn't now. The Frogs maintain that a miracle caused the mountains to move over so that the lake might empty into the Agres Valley. Incidentally, it drowned a couple of thousand Jerries. It may interest you to know, Barry, that the miracle consisted mostly of dynamite. I'm giving you the dope straight, for I was the bird who set off the charge. Why? I won't bother to tell you, but you can bet that it wasn't on account of the couple of thousand Jerries. It was their hard luck that they just happened to be where they were."

"That's okay with me, captain," Bill said enthusiastically. "The whys are your business. Mine is to carry out your instructions."

"Instructions?" Greb repeated innocently. "I have no authority to give you instructions. I merely suggested. I'd be a hell of an officer were I to deliberately order you to steal a plane, and desert."

"I'll remember that, sir," Bill humbly apologized. "And I'll never forget your kindness."

"Maybe you won't call it kindness a month from now, Barry, when the war department lists you as missing," he confided.

"Well, just so long as I know different, it will be all right with me," Bill assured him. "Only one thing interests me right now. What do I do when I get where I'm going and who do I report to?"

"You'll learn all that when you get there," Greb answered, and rose. Bill took the hint. The subject was closed.

ON THE way back to the barracks, he was tempted more than once to inquire about the mysterious Cuckoos' Nest, but didn't. After all he was only a blackbird that had been caged. Under the circumstances, he had no right to question the hand that was freeing him.

Outside the building that housed the twenty-minute eggs, Greb paused and extended his hand with a friendly, "So long, Barry. Happy landings."

Bill clasped it and mumbled a sincere "Thanks, buzzard. I've learned my lesson."

The next morning found him with travel orders to Le Bourget in his pocket, and looking out through the grimy window of a mud-splattered army motor car at

his new home. Long rows of hangars and the sight of planes landing and taking off made his heart pound and his hand itch for the feel of a stick. The C.O. back in Blois had mentioned the possibility of a forty-eight hour pass in Paris, but Bill wanted no recreation other than a hard damp cot on the front line with the muted mutterings of distant big guns for a lullaby.

In one hour's time he went through the red-tape works at Le Bourget and came out at the other end marked, "Available for duty."

A beardless, pink-cheeked pilot—just three weeks out of the training incubator, yet with all the sangfroid of a veteran war bird, immediately elected himself as Bill's guardian angel. From him, Bill learned all the latest empty gas-drum rumors of Le Bourget.

"You'll like it here, buzzard," the youngster confided. "But don't let the Cuckoos get you!"

Surprised, Bill swallowed hard and tried to dismiss the subject with a joke. "Cuckoos never tangle tails with crabbed, iron-feathered birds like I am," he grinned.

"No?" scoffed the youngster. "Well, just listen till I spill you a tank full of info. I've seen a flock of hard-boiled hawks hit this drome in the guise of ferry pilots. They're not here now—just disappeared, that's all. And us fledglings were given to understand that Jerry bagged 'em. Which, says me, is the old bird dust. For Jerry ain't dustin' off birds like them so easy, without using a jagdstaffel, and jagdstaffels are not drifting around over our side of the war, waiting to pounce on lone ferry pilots. Common sense tells me that."

Bill grinned, and admitted to the youngster that his logic was sound.

"That's the hell of it," mourned the disgruntled pilot. "You, like the rest of them, grant that I'm right, but you won't do a damned thing to give a kid like me a break."

Angry tears filled the youngster's eyes, and Bill discreetly turned his head. "What makes you think that I'm going any place in this war, son?" he asked.

"Hell, I ain't thinking. I know," the youngster went on. "In between jockeying crates up to the Front, I handle the paper work over in the personnel office, and naturally I read over every bird's service record. You're an ace of aces, Barry, with ten *descendus* to your credit, and a flock of court-martials to your discredit. But there's a red question mark on one of the pages in yours, and a signature I can't make out. That's how I know that you are slated to pull a mysterious disappearance. The other birds had the

same credentials written in red.”

Bill squirmed uneasily. This was all news to him. He admitted so on his word of honor, and he made a promise to the boy that if ever he should set wheels on this unknown purgatory where broken war birds were given another chance to win back their lost wings, he'd speak to the skipper on behalf of his new-found friend.

The youngster smiled and voiced both his appreciation and his fears. “It won't do much good, Barry. I lied about my age and they found it out through my dad, who is a colonel somewhere in this cockeyed war. He pulled the wires that let me stay, but he must have yanked them too hard, for the big-shot gents are afraid that I might get my tail feathers plucked should they assign me to a combat group. So I guess I'm doomed to remain a coffee cooler. And there's a girl back home—and everything.” His voice cracked again, and Bill tried to cheer him up.

“Buck up, kid. Bill Barry made you a promise, and he'll keep it.”

Squatting there on an empty gas drum in the sunny lee of a giant hangar, Bill suddenly heard himself being paged, and hurried around the corner to intercept a foghorn-voiced orderly, who informed him, “Commandant's orders, sir. Lieutenant Barry to be down at the line ready to hop off in thirty minutes. There's a Spad—220—to be delivered to the commanding officer of one-four-nine squadron at Myfee.”

“Whew!” whistled Bill in astonishment. “You don't give a bird a chance to get acclimated here.”

“Me?” grinned the orderly. “I got nothin' to do with it, sir. I'm just a high-priced mouthpiece getting thirty bucks a day—once a month.”

Bill caught the hint, grinned, and handed over a few francs with a good-natured laugh. “Thanks, soldier, for the welcome news,” he said.

“I'll drink to your soft landings, lieutenant,” the orderly promised, and trotted off.

The young pilot, having followed Bill at a more leisurely pace, joined him and together they walked down to the line. And there, midst the roaring engines, whirling props and busy grease-balls, Bill spotted the particular Spad—220—that was to be his, and grinned happily. Superstitiously he climbed up on a wing to spit solemnly across the ring sights of the twin Vickers guns for luck. Dropping back to the ground, he became enthusiastic. “Buzzard, she's a wow on wings,” he said to the sad-faced youngster who nodded

knowingly in answer.

A grease-monkey brought a new set of flying togs and helped Bill into the combination while the kid pilot carefully polished the goggles and adjusted them on the soft leather helmet.

“Think I'll be needing clear vision?” Bill inquired lightly, then lapsed into silence when the utterly dejected youngster made no answer. An orderly handed him flight orders, and he made a pretense of reading them. Orders meant nothing to him. His course had already been plotted, straight to the Vosges Mountains and a spot on the mysterious Captain Greb's map that had once been a lake. Playfully he poked the youngster in the stomach, shook hands with him, and climbed up into the cockpit to check the instrument board of the ticking Spad.

“She was only tested yesterday, sir,” an obliging grease-ball shouted up at him.

“Okay,” Bill yelled back, but he went on with his checking nevertheless. “Take nothing for granted, and you'll live to lay eggs on Jerry,” a wise old instructor of his fledgling days had advised him. Bill had never forgotten that bit of advice. Satisfied at last, he gave the gun to the Hiss, signaled the grease-ball to kick away the wheel chocks and waved a flippant farewell in the general direction of the young pilot as the Spad started to go places.

He put six thousand feet of life insurance between himself and a washout with a swift spiraling climb, shot a glance earthward to help orient himself, and let a contrite “Damn” drop from his lips. He'd promised to speak a good word for the kid pilot, and hell's hinges, he didn't even know the youngster's name. Wholeheartedly, he reviled him self for being a dumb dodo.

Le Bourget dropped away behind his tail, and he went to serious flying. Paris floated by beneath his left wing, but failed to hold interest. He was anxious to quit that scene for one that he knew better—stark desolation of the ever-changing Front where half-mad men fought, cursed and died, and won to paradise in a steel-laced flaming hell of their own making.

A FEW hours later he dropped down on the Seidon airdrome to refuel, and learned much of the war that was new, as he waited, from friendly peelots. *Monsieur le Boche* had taken over the sky for his own, and swept it clean. Allied observation balloons had become a rarity; consequently the sorely pressed ground troops were without eyes. “We of the air who still exist, are

thankful for one thing, *mon lieutenant*," a haggard little peelot confided to Bill. "And that is for the assistance of your American Cuckoos. *Mon Dieu*, they are fighters."

Bill tensed, but kept silent as the little peelot continued to talk. "Like angels from hell, they come when the fighting is hottest. No sign do they give, no cocardes adorn their ships. But greatest of all, no fear of the Boche or numbers possess them. They assassinate the enemy Boche, crucify them on their own iron crosses, and then, voila they disappear as they came. Into the sky, they go—these Cuckoos."

"You have seen the Cuckoos, *mon brave*?" Bill asked, guardedly.

"There's none of us that hasn't during these insane days. It was but yesterday that one of them dropped down on this very spot to die, with a kilo. of Boche bullets in his vitals. In answer to our questions pertaining to his identity and organization, he only laughed. But before he went West—as you Yanks say—he gasped out a message, 'Tell the Cuckoos that "Cold Deck" Mason will be waiting for them in hell and to bring along their own cards and dice.' It was a puzzling request, *mon lieutenant*."

"To your French ears, yes, *mon brave*," Bill admitted sadly. "But not to me for I believe that I know the ways of the Cuckoos."

A mechanic interrupted to announce that the Spad was ready. Bill turned to it, and eager peelots scuffled for the privilege of giving him a leg up.

"You are one of them, too," shouted an excited peelot. "That we can see without your confirmation. No markings on your plane; no word from your lips. Cheer, my comrades," he demanded loudly. "Cheer for this Cuckoo, who is a bird of the birds."

Embarrassed and eager to be winging, Bill bent to the controls. He was rolling; then the Spad's tail came up. He saw a wild waving of caps, and a booming, "*Vive les Coucous*," cut through the engine roar to his ears. He had arrived at Seidon, just an ordinary ferry pilot obeying flight orders to refuel there, but he left as a war bird reborn again, a Cuckoo.

The first determined pressure of his foot on the rudder bar made him a deserter in the eyes of the war department, for it turned the Spad away from the Myfee of his orders, and pointed it toward the Vosges and the end of the rainbow—the Cuckoos' Nest.

Steady hours of full-gunned flying brought him up to the war. Looking down at it. It hadn't changed much. Snakelike cracks in the quaking earth. Crawling

lines of men, and then those that lay still, never to crawl again. He saw death's powder-haze canopy slashed by the flame of big guns, and felt the wild rush of heavy projectiles as they passed him.

Savagely he cursed the seething hell below and stopped as suddenly as he began. It was hell to be in it, and hell to be out of it. He knew, and was damned glad to be back. Mechanically he fired a warming burst from his twin guns and grabbed wildly for the stick with both hands as the Spad bounced crazily. Harmless-looking black puff-balls of smoke were bursting all around him. Jerry's anti-aircrafts welcoming him.

"Scared me that time, archie," he acknowledged. "Thought the high command had discovered by this time that you were all bark and no bite."

Veteran that he was, he scorned to seek safety in altitude. Like a hawk on a spree, he sent the Spad on a zigzagging course away from and between the archie bursts. Always they missed, and finally ceased altogether. Right then Bill got ready for trouble, and it came in the shape of two diving Pfaltzes. "Steady, Bill," he growled to himself. "You're shakin' like a haywire engine."

Smoking tracers were searching for him, and he banked steeply to throw them off. To the Jerry pilots, it must have seemed as though he was about to hightail for it. They steepened their dives to head him off, only to see him recklessly skid the Spad around, level off, and dive beneath them, leaving only the space he had occupied as a target for their knifing bullets. He picked up terrific speed in his hurtling plunge, and converted it into the first swift-climbing half of a high loop with a daring piece of backsticking. At the top he half-rolled out of it, and looked down from his superior position. It was his sky now. To get him the Jerries would have to come up into the deadly and direct fire of his guns. Inwardly he hoped that they would.

He caught a glimpse of one Pfaltz hopping frantically, trying to escape the rifle and machine-gun fire of Allied ground troops. And then Bill saw something else. A long row of black smoking holes that suddenly stitched themselves in his left wing. A buzzing steel hornet thudded into the padded cowl at his side and another whined past his face. A Fokker, throwing steel as it came, darted in at his Spad's blind spot and Bill sideslipped away, only one bullet hole from death. The air was filled with careening planes. His heart welled up in his throat as through his goggles he saw only black Maltese crosses. The French peelots

back at Seidon had spoken the truth. It was Jerry's air.

Grimly a thought came to him and he added, "And my tail." He couldn't even run for it. Desperately he flew, saving himself time and time again by sheer bird instinct alone, where book aerobatics might have trapped him. The thought of a ruinous crash in midair with one of his hovering enemies never entered his head. But that fear did touch the more matter-of-fact Jerries. They slipped out of the path of his lightninglike rushes and left him maneuvering space that was life in itself. Try as they might, they could not center him in their well-planned crossfire. This mad Yank did not fly the way they expected. He rolled out of loops and immediately started another one that carried him higher. Spandau bullets made lace work of his wings as he dropped earthward in dizzy vrilles, but always he pulled out of them and his deadly guns would go to chattering once more. A Pfaltz fell out of the fight, its tank pierced by a stray Spandau bullet that had been intended for the Spad. Bill sent another hurtling headlong into the hereafter with a vicious burst that murdered the Jerry pilot.

Sight of the two planes going down, trailing funeral plumes of black castor-oil smoke stirred the Jerries to savage recklessness, and they flew in on Bill with a vengeance. Crouched low in the cockpit, he coolly selected a Fokker that suddenly filled his ring sights as a target. About to press the stick trigger, his hand froze in indecision. The Fokker lined in his sights had changed to a Spad. It bore no markings, but its guns were going full blast, saying it to a Fokker with tracer and steel.

"Like angels from hell they come, when the fighting is hottest, these Cuckoos." That line ran through Bill's brain, filling him with savage joy. One Spad to his succor? Hell, his eyes had been playing him tricks. The sky was raining Spads. Even the war on the ground paused to witness the titanic bird struggle.

A Spad staggered, belched fire and smoke, but even as its pilot died, he managed to send his doomed ship crashing into a startled Jerry. They went West together in a winglocked tangle of flaming wreckage. A few hectic moments followed, and the Jerries who were left lifted their tails and chucked it, in the face of total annihilation by the deadly guns of these mysterious reckless pilots who dined with death and apparently enjoyed the game.

BILL was all set to pursue a fleeing Pfaltz when three red Very rockets fired earthward in rapid

succession from a Spad perched high in the blue caught his attention. Evidently a rallying signal. Ships were already streaking up to the rendezvous, and he followed. The pilot that had fired the rockets slid in close and hurdled him. He was being looked over. Impassively Bill followed the flight of the bus with his eyes, saw its wings waggle. The leader must have been satisfied with him, for the home flight started and once more Bill tailed on behind, intuition and observation telling him that he had found his sought-for flock—the Cuckoos.

The archies began their futile pounding again, as the war took up where it had left off. The birds had had their fling.

Flying at ceiling altitude, the Cuckoos quit the Front. Then it happened with confusing suddenness. One second Bill had been droning happily along at the right tip of the great V-formation, and the next, he was alone flying aimlessly. The formation had broken up. Spads were winging off singly, and in pairs toward all the compass points. By the time he had breathed a puzzled "What the hell?" and righted his bus, he was alone. The mysterious Cuckoos had rescued and escorted him back to his own side of the way, as they would have any other Allied buzzard in distress. That task accomplished, they were no longer interested.

He grinned good-naturedly. "We'll meet again, buzzards," he prophesied, and kicked the Spad into a wide cruising circle and spent the time in a careful locating of himself on the map. Oriented at last, he pointed the Spad's prop toward the cloud-piercing Vosges. Flying high on half throttle, he was anxiously studying the forbidding-looking wilderness below when the engine gave its first protesting cough, demanding fuel. That settled it for Bill. Expertly he coaxed the last rev out of the Hisso; then the grim battle began. It was his skill against the tricky air currents caused by the jagged hills below. All he asked was a thin chance to stretch out a glide that he might set wheels—or crack up for that matter—on the one stamp-sized bit of flat earth in sight. It looked like mud, and probably was, but that would be a feather bed in preference to squatting down on a saw-toothed mountain peak. Vagrant wind devils put fear in his heart and unaccustomed prayers on his lips. Desperately he carried on. Altitude three hundred feet and a quarter of a mile to go with a hundred-to-one deadstick landing at the end. The least he could expect would be a broken leg. Instinctively, he pulled the pin of his safety belt, then dropped his goggles over

the side. Fifty yards more. He held his breath to the bursting point. The plane staggered across a barrier of small boulders that rimmed the edge of the cleared patch. He'd made it! A series of spine-jarring bounces followed before the Spad rolled to a stop. Weak from the reaction, he sat there in the cockpit trying to collect his woolgathering wits. He could swear that the boulders had moved; were moving.

What he had mistaken for rocks were in reality cleverly camouflaged hangars, just large enough to hold two ships. Coveralled and uniformed figures popped up out of the earth itself and warily approached him. Too weary for effort, he continued to sit as he was, but his roving eyes missed nothing. Machine guns were trained on him, he could see their ugly snouts. He was still stargazing when his bus wobbled violently, and a grinning face appeared over the side of the cockpit to inquire about his health. Bill admitted that none of his arms or legs were missing. The grinning pilot's big hands reached in to help him to the ground.

"Was hoping that you were slated to be one of us," a friendly voice boomed in his ear. "Buzzard, you sure were giving Jerry hell when we horned in on your party," another one exclaimed.

Friendly pilots gripped his hand and introduced themselves in turn. The grinning giant who had lifted him bodily from the cockpit was Johnny Walker, and it was he who laughingly apologized. "Sorry we had to hightail off and leave you back there like we did. Orders," he announced with an accompanying wink. "This drome's only for those who have business here, and those that have business know where to find us. Compree?"

Bill comprehended all but for one thing. "How do you know that I'm not a stranger?" he asked.

"Because a little Cuckoo bird told us to be on the lookout for you even before you hopped off from Le Bourget," Walker explained, then added, "You'll find out all the answers when the next replacement Cuckoo heads for this nest."

Bill gathered the inference that such questions were out of order and lapsed into silence. One thing he was certain of, the Cuckoos were rightly named. For never had a pilot rubbed wings with a stranger outfit. No insignia of rank were visible, and no individual gave orders. The Cuckoos did as they pleased. But Bill soon learned that their pleasure was in doing the right thing at the right time.

His Spad had been hand-rolled from sight into an

empty hangar by four of the Cuckoos. "We run no risk of leaving our crates sitting around for a Jerry to see and get curious about," the grinning Johnny Walker enlightened as he linked his arm in Bill's and steered him toward a blanket-covered opening in the side of a rock-covered mound. "The lobby of the Ritz," he announced with a grandiloquent wave of his hand, and stepped aside that Bill might enter first.

"Ritz is right," marveled the awed Bill as he reached the bottom of a stone-paved decline and stood peering along an electric-lighted passage.

"Nothing like it in this cockeyed war," Walker declared. "Built by a Sengalese labor regiment and a battalion of Frog engineers, who believed themselves to be working on a line of concrete pill-boxes and machine-gun nests. It's our home, buzzard, and Big Bertha herself couldn't blast us out've here."

The longer Bill listened to Walker, the more convinced he became that he would waken soon to find out that he was dead and had arrived in war-birds' heaven. Small dry rooms opened up off the main passage, all furnished alike with cot, stool, and small electric light.

"Only one form of favoritism here," grinned Walker. "The oldest Cuckoo—that is, in point of service—bunks closest to the mess hall and so on down the line. And right now, I don't mind telling you, I sleep so close to the chow parlor that the cook strikes his matches on the soles of my feet each morning."

"According to that, then," mourned Bill, "I'll have to do my sleeping in the lobby."

"Well, it won't be for long," Walker assured him with a friendly prod in the ribs. "Jerry's seein' to it that we Cuckoos don't stick around too long in this war. Two months ago the room that you are going to occupy was mine."

Absent-mindedly, Bill allowed his eyes to travel along the dimly lighted passageway. Fourteen rooms he counted and shuddered violently as the meaning and grim tragedy of that long line of rooms came home to him. Johnny Walker, who had been watching the play of emotion on Bill's face, laughed softly. "Yep," he continued, "we call this passage the fourteen steps to paradise. There has been times when the buzzards have moved up as many as three places in a day. As the Limey buzzards say, 'It's a little bit of all right. A short flight and a merry one.'"

Bill grinned mirthlessly at Walker's grim war-bird philosophy and stepped into the tiny cubicle that was to be his new home. His eyes swept the rough stone

walls and finally came to rest on a long list of penciled signatures. One scrawled hastily, defiantly as if the writer had been answering a challenge. Another had been painstakingly printed.

"Fred Hardy," Bill read aloud and Johnny Walker who had been quietly standing in the doorway heard and volunteered the information.

"Hardy came here, like the rest of us. A tough blackbird and an outlaw, but he died a Cuckoo who took three Jerries with him into the hereafter."

Bill nodded his thanks and continued his reading. Twenty names he counted, then fell to serious thinking. It couldn't be that they had all traveled the fourteen steps to paradise for Johnny Walker's name was there. Bill turned with the question on his lips, but it was left unspoken.

The electric light over his head had flickered out for an instant and lighted up again. Running footsteps passed his door, and some one farther down the passage cursed viciously. Johnny Walker, talking fast and climbing into a set of flying togs at the same time, once more filled Bill's doorway and explained, "The lights going on and off like that, buzzard, is a signal. It means that a flock of flying Jerries has crossed the line and are hell-bent on a mission of ill will."

"That's funny," mumbled the puzzled Bill. "I didn't hear them."

"You and me both, buzzard," grunted Walker, pulling on a leather helmet. "But they flew across just the same. The skipper just shot us the word over the wire, and the Cuckoo on watch down in the phone room pulled the signal switch."

Bill was learning much of his mysterious brethren. Outlaws they might be in name but evidently some one away back in G.H.Q. was not averse to turning the Cuckoos' shortcomings to the Allies' advantage when the situation demanded. Fighters the Cuckoos were and fighters won wars.

THE first protesting cough of a cold engine reached Bill's ears and soon grew into a dull vibrating thunder as other Hissos added their voices to the preparedness chorus. Walker had trotted off, leaving him alone. Suddenly it dawned on Bill that no one had ordered or invited him to join the tail-tangling party with Jerry. Wasn't he one of them—a Cuckoo after all? Angrily he raced along the passage, made the incline in three long strides and bounded out into the open to find the tarmac deserted, yet the familiar stench of burnt castor-oil and roar of warming engines was all around

him. A hurrying grease-ball passed, and Bill joined the man, shouting questions as he kept pace. In short jerky sentences he learned the secret. The Cuckoos took no chances of having their front-line nest discovered by some wandering Jerry war bird. They warmed their ships right in the hangars. It was inconvenient as hell, but perfectly safe with no danger of fire. The hangar walls were kapok-lined, which made them unflammable and at the same time had a tendency to deaden engine noises. Bill followed his guide into the choking, eardrum-shattering atmosphere of a tiny hangar and took a position in a far corner. A quivering Spad strained impatiently against huge wheel chocks as a leather coated pilot, half in, half out of the cockpit fed her the hop. Out of habit, Bill listened intently to the sound of the engine and nodded his head in satisfaction. She was turning over beautifully.

Evidently the critical pilot was of the same opinion, for he swung down to the ground, wiped his hands on a ball of waste and yelled at a grease-ball to fetch his goggles. He was impatiently letting the mechanic adjust them on his helmet when Bill, who had caught a glimpse of his face, stepped out of the shadows and took hold of his arm.

"What's the matter?" he asked of the grinning Walker. "Am I a Cuckoo or just an orphan outlawed by outlaws?"

Walker's grin widened at Bill's pointed question, but his answer was serious enough. "Buzzard, in time your own actions will answer that question. No one gives orders around here; we act of our own accord. We don't have to take part in these bird battles unless we feel like it. We don't have to fly patrols. In fact, we don't have to do a damned thing. We are our own bosses. Yet, I'll bet you *beaucoup* francs that there won't be a buzzard left on this drome in ten minutes,—unless, that is, you decide to exercise your rights."

Bill's face hardened. He was being tested. No anger filled him, merely a cold reserve. "Thanks, buzzard, for the information," he growled. "They clipped my wings once for being a wise guy and acting out of turn. I didn't want the same thing to happen again. Where's my ship?"

Walker's gloved hand landed on Bill's shoulder with a friendly thwack. "That's the spirit," the big pilot beamed. "I'll wager much money that by the time we get back from distributing various rash Jerries over the landscape that you'll be either a Cuckoo in a big way, or else just a name in our private burying ground."

"Thanks again, buzzard," Bill acknowledged quietly.

"But you mentioned some important bird business that's about to take place. Do you want me to walk to where the scrap is going to be, or are you going to tell me where my bus is so that I might fly in a manner becoming to an officer and an outlaw?"

Walker turned, shouted something to a near-by grease-ball, and Bill followed the perspiring mechanic out through the now wide-open hangar mouth. A taxiing Spad blocked their path for an instant and Bill cast an anxious glance after it. A few minutes more, and the Cuckoos would be going places and he would be left behind with a cold ship.

Treading on the heels of his guide, he entered a lighted hangar to find a pair of mechanics giving a final check-up to his own ready Spad. It surprised him, but he wasted no time in asking questions. It must have been as Walker had said—when an emergency arose every Cuckoo flew to meet it; therefore the mechanics played safe and warmed all the ships in sight.

"Sorry, sir," a dirty-faced grease-ball apologized. "Didn't have much more time than to refuel and tighten her up a bit. The engine's a darb, but the rest of her is pretty badly shot up. I wouldn't take any chances with her if I was you, sir."

"I won't—that is, not many," Bill assured the man as he hoisted himself into the cockpit.

He could feel his heart pounding against his ribs. The old fighting urge. Wild Bill was coming back to the war. So he told himself. There'd be Jerries to send down to oblivion and best of all, no one to tell him what to do or when to do it. Savagely he tried to lash himself to the old fighting pitch, and failed. Blois had removed that recklessness from his make-up and substituted caution in its stead. And strangely, as he fingered the controls, the words of the Old Man of two-seven squadron came back to him. "This isn't a one-man war, Barry."

Right there in the cockpit, Wild Bill, the hot-headed renegade, died and William Barry, soldier of the air—and a man—was born.

That was the secret of the Cuckoos' amazing success—teamwork. Perhaps they wouldn't admit it in so many words, but it was true, nevertheless. Twenty or more independent individuals, but when danger threatened they merged into one and became the Cuckoos.

A grease-ball's shout awakened him from his daydreaming, and he grinned sheepishly. A hell of a time to be getting religion with a war waiting just beyond the horizon. A rush of cold air, as the canvas

hangar doors swung open, both cooled and steadied him. The sight of a speeding Spad bugging its way down the take-off stirred him to action. He gave a waiting grease-ball the office to gun and went rolling. Up against the leaden gray of the sky, a great droning V was taking shape as veteran Cuckoos jockeyed into position. He, being a newcomer, would have to tail on be hind. Lazily they circled in a climb for altitude. Or, were they waiting for him? With a daring rush, he quit the earth and was winging. Cuckoos, looking down, grinned appreciation at his exhibition of stick-mauling, but a pop-eyed grease-ball in the doorway of the empty hangar cursed, prayed, and groaned all in the same breath.

"I warned him," he mourned in a gaping squirt-gun's oil-smeared ear, "and there he goes putting that haywire bundle of sticks, rags and engine into a dizzy climb like that. Hell never come back."

"Says you," scoffed the optimistic squirt-gun. "I got me a bale of fronks that says he will. He's a Cuckoo, ain't he?"

"Yeah," agreed the grease-ball, trying to hope for the best, "I'm telling the world he's a Cuckoo, but even the devil himself would have one hell of a time trying to tool that crippled crate through the ether. Why, it's just a flock of bullet holes tied together with some fabric and wire."

"I'm admitting everything you said is okay," persisted the squirt-gun doggedly, "and still my money rides on the Cuckoo's tail. Yeah, even in a race against death."

The wings of the leader, flying far out on the point, wagged when Bill reached position at the right tip of the V and the flying armada turned west. He had plenty of time for thought as they roared along. Here he was attached to a combat group bound for trouble, without even the benefit of instructions. There was a possibility that darkness would set in, and he would be lost, especially should the Cuckoos follow their usual custom of breaking formation and winging for home, each bird for himself, once the fighting was over. And in that case, it would be just too bad for Bill Barry.

Worried at the thought of losing his comrades, he had unconsciously shortened the distance between his own ship and the Spad in front. The pilot up ahead had turned in his seat and was waving him back. Bill flushed guiltily and eased up on the throttle. Damn it to hell, he was flying like a dodo instead of a veteran. With an effort he pulled himself together and put his mind on flying business.

Feathery black puffballs mushroomed up all around them, and Bill grinned. Black archie bursts meant that they were over Germany. A string of flaming onions whooshed harmlessly up through the space that the speeding Cuckoos had just vacated. Bill was himself again. The formation swung sharply north; the puffballs were white now. He cursed softly to himself, and then it dawned on him. Hell, he couldn't blame the Allied gunners down there in the mud. The Cuckoos carried no identifying marks.

Once more the leader's wings waggled, and the Cuckoos went up in a long slanting climb, putting two or three thousand feet more of life insurance between themselves and the archies. Bill nodded his approval of the maneuver. Whoever it was flying out there in the squadron commander's position knew his business.

WAR-BIRD instinct told Bill that the party would be starting soon. The wind rush of heavy projectiles going places in the war, rocked his bus crazily. While in the distance a heavy pall, slashed as if by summer lightning, designated the spot where a gigantic struggle was taking place. Darting specks tumbling and whirling in and out of the haze told that the birds were in it, too. The Cuckoos were climbing again—this time to the ceiling. The red glare of the setting sun would be at their backs, and that was an advantage in any bird battle.

They fairly hurtled along now with throttles wide open. White tracer streaks began darting out on all sides. The Cuckoos were warming their guns, ripping out tentative bursts in anticipation. Bill followed the example. He was ready. Pride filled him. It was great to be a Cuckoo. No kiwis to be looked out for, and ridden herd-on, cramping a veteran's style. These Cuckoos were war-forged battle birds.

The S.C. was signaling. A red Very rocket fizzed itself across the sullen sky, followed by another and another. That used to call for a dive in the old outfit that Bill had been a troublesome part of. Well, it meant the same thing here, too. For a breathless instant the Cuckoos seemed to poise that psychology might play its part in the drama about to unfold.

Jerry pilots with victory in their grasp but seconds before, looked up and fear feathers brushed their spines. They had heard of the Cuckoos from wounded comrades lucky enough to escape the previous furious attacks of the wild birds that now hovered above them.

To the badly whipped and greatly outnumbered French peelots, the sight of that seemingly fire-breath-

ing formation, made so by the blazing sun in the background, was a heavenly sign. From it, they found the courage to fight on. Even the sorely pressed Tommies and poilus down in the mud slits of the quaking earth caught the significance of the Cuckoos' timely arrival, and squatted down on their heels to watch.

An awed Tommy whispered to his chum beside him, "Ruddy angels from up out of 'ell, that's wot they be, Alf." The whisper grew to a thunderous shout by the time it reached the French trenches. "*Vive les Coucou*s from hell."

Majestically they swept down through the heavens in a beautifully executed power-dive. Flame-tipped guns were already singing the death chant. A Jerry Fokker darted out of their plunging path, hung free for an instant, fell off on one wing and started down in a lazy spin, out of the war and the world. A load of Cuckoo bullets had murdered the Jerry pilot in his seat. From then on, it was fight every second and the devil take the one that released his gun trips for a second.

One thing could be said in the favor of the war-hardened pilots of Imperial jagdstaffel nine. They knew that they were beaten; yet they adhered to their code. They had never been known to give quarter, and now with the wind against them, neither would they ask it. They went down fighting, feeling the disgrace keenly. Known on all the Fronts as the Kaiser's shock troops of the air, they had laughed at the orders that had sent them hightailing up to the Vosges to dust off an unknown air squadron that had been interfering with the plans of the Imperial high command in that sector. Jagdstaffel nine had listened to the tale of mysterious doings of the mythical squadron, and smiled. Mystery or legerdemain could not prevail against Spandau bullets. That they intended to prove. For days there had been no sight of the mystery flyers in the tilting ground of the sky and jagdstaffel nine had become careless, confident and reckless with the passing of time. Just to keep their fighting edge sharpened they decided to cross over to the French side of the war and drop a few calling cards on the French airdrome at Seidon. That was their big mistake. Disdainfully they had roared across the Allied front lines, never knowing and caring less that a sunken-eyed, unshaven Yankee lieutenant, who had been living with a telephone instrument under his hand for weeks, announced their passing overhead to a little gray colonel who lived like a hermit on an abandoned farm thirty kilos away. The colonel had listened,

grinned coldly, played a hunch as to the destination of jagdstaffel nine, and put through a phone call of his own over a direct wire that reached the ears of the man on watch in the hidden Cuckoos' Nest. That detail attended to, the little gray colonel had gone into action. From nowhere he summoned a coveralled mechanic. The creaking doors of a dilapidated barn were swung open, and a trim Spad that bore no marking was hand-rolled out into the open.

Fifteen minutes later, the little colonel was in the air flying full-gunned for the Vosges to gather his flock. It was he who had taken the point in the roaring V that was now shooting jagdstaffel nine into just a memory. No Cuckoo had ever, knowingly, laid eyes on his uncovered face. Still they accepted him as their leader, and his word as law—the only law they'd ever obey. When the scrap would be over, he'd visit them back on the home drome, compliment them in that quiet resonant voice of his, and hop off again, not to return until the next emergency arose. He took no part in the actual combat. Even the wildly careening Bill Barry caught an occasional glimpse of that lone Spad perched high against the ceiling and found time between Jerries to wonder about it.

The scrap was an epic while it lasted. Twice Bill shot vengeful Jerries off worried Cuckoos' tails and received like favors in return. He ripped a burst into a waspish green Fokker D-7, saw it skid around to peg a return burst right into his own teeth even as the Jerry pilot died. A Spandau bullet thudded ominously into the head pad alongside his right ear, and he shuddered. It had been close. A ricocheting lead splatter burned his cheek and he tooled his way out of the scrap for a chance to take inventory and orient himself.

The Jerries were becoming hard to find. There was an Allied ship and two Cuckoos for every Jerry that he tried to line in his sights. A dangerous situation. Other Cuckoos must have been of the same opinion, for as he corkscrewed clear of the scrap he found cruising Spads all around him.

Below, the earth was dotted with fiercely blazing pyres, while off his left wing tip, a triumphant French peelot was riding the last green-striped Fokker's tail, saying it to the Jerry and making him like it. Bill turned his head. He was fed up on carnage and killing for the time being. As far as the Cuckoos were concerned, the fight was over. Darkness was setting in.

A YELLOW rocket that burned like an incandescent bulb shot out across the velvet slate of the heavens. The

rallying signal. Going home. Satisfied, Bill backsticked his bus up to the rendezvous. Other Cuckoos passed him and took position. Somehow the great flying V seemed smaller. Rapidly Bill counted. Fifteen. He was positive that there had been twenty in the beginning. But he must have been mistaken. Inwardly he hoped he was. Tragedy wrote itself on his face. One day had passed and already he had ascended five steps of the fourteen steps to paradise. The fight was history. Minutes later, the Cuckoos, following their leader, swung sharply toward the black saw-toothed mass of the Vosges. The last tiny sun devils of the day were dancing on the peaks, welcoming them home.

Dully Bill watched for a moment, brought his eyes back to the Front and cursed loudly and feelingly. He was alone. The Cuckoos were disappearing as they had done once before during that eventful day. The lousy scavengers, making it hard for him. Of course, he still had his chart and all that, but what was the sense of it all? Orders. That was it. He stopped swearing and grinned at his own predicament. Orders were orders, and Bill Barry was the bird who had learned to take them. In fact was beginning to like them, especially the way the S.C. of the Cuckoos gave them. Not much talking but plenty of action.

Removing a glove, he fumbled inside his jacket and brought to light the badly crumpled chart. Lake Renard and Agres Valley. He quickly located both places on the chart and grinned. Things had changed since that map had been printed. Agres Valley was now a lake, while Lake Renard was level ground and the hiding place of the Cuckoos' Nest. A familiar sound reached his ears, and he looked up with a start. A Spad was flying abreast him, wing-dressed on his own badly shot-up bus. No cocardes, no numbers. Doubtless a Cuckoo hanging back to guide him in. They weren't scavengers after all. Airily he waved to the pilot and saw the man make a painful attempt to wave back. The pilot was wounded. The way he slumped forward in the cockpit, and the staggering course that he traveled told Bill that. He anxiously ruddered his own crippled bus in as close as he dared for a close-up look. The pilot was pointing to his chest in pantomime. Wounded and done in. Bill understood. He motioned the pilot to tail on behind and guided his own ship into the leading position.

That must be Agres Valley below. He was on the right course. Half-turning in his seat he looked back and a groan escaped his lips. The wounded pilot had conked out. Out of control the ship was dropping

earthward with bulletlike speed. Helpless, Bill followed it. Six—seven hundred feet. Then he began to pray. There was a chance, truly a slim one but at least a chance. If the fates would only guide the doomed ship toward the water. Earnestly Bill prayed the louder, the only prayer he remembered. “Now I lay me—” It didn’t fit the occasion, but never was a prayer more sincere.

The falling Spad pulled out of its dizzy plunge, hung for a second, then went into a flat spin. It dropped below the level of the surrounding peaks and veered straight for the body of water that filled Agres Valley. Bill, holding his own breath, exhaled a simple “Thank you, God,” and prepared to risk his own life.

Holding the stick between his knees, he quickly removed goggles, helmet, and gloves. The life belt went next, even though the terrific dive he was in threatened to hurl him out into space. Expertly he estimated the hundred feet or so of altitude that separated him from the washout he had deliberately planned for himself, and cut the engine dead. A neat bit of backsticking swooped the Spad out of its dive. The bus was leveling out, fast losing forward speed. Half crouched in the cockpit, he waited, ready. His Spad was skimming the surface. A giant geyser of water suddenly leaped skyward less than fifty feet in front of him. The other plane had struck. Bill saw it, released his useless controls and stepped up onto his crazily rocking seat, catapulted himself into the freezing water. Lustily he kicked his way to the surface, located himself and struck out for the exact center of an ever widening rippling circle. Reaching it, he dived deep into the mud-clouded depths, made out a tangled mass that reminded him of a stricken octopus and took a hold on it.

His chest ached cruelly, but there was no giving up now. A brother buzzard was in danger of drowning. Hand over hand to the side of the battered cockpit. The wounded pilot was still in it, struggling feebly. Frantically Bill went to work; a great roaring filled his head but one groping hand found what it sought—the life belt that held the pilot fast. With fumbling fingers he found the release pin, pulled it and took a firm grip on the wounded pilot’s shoulders. A desperate heave with the last bit of strength in his body and they were going up together. It seemed an eternity before his head broke the surface, and he tread water, weak and nauseated from the reaction. He could go no farther. Might as well give up and sink. Sooner or later the Jerries would get him anyway. He laughed crazily, changed it to a growl as a fist landed between his eyes. Another blow that smacked loudly on his ear aroused

him fully. His one free hand clenched but he didn’t strike. The pilot he had rescued was coming around, delirious; didn’t know what he was doing. Carefully Bill turned the blindly struggling man so that his face would be above the water, took a new grip on the collar of the loose flying jacket and flopped over on his own back.

They were floating, making progress toward the near-by shore. Bill heard the pilot’s strangling cough, and breathed easier. While there was life, there was hope. Minutes later, bruised and exhausted, Bill sat on a rock listening dully to the ravings of the sick pilot who sprawled at his feet.

It was too dark to see, but Bill was certain that he knew the man, had heard that complaining voice before. It couldn’t have been in the Cuckoos’ Nest, for the Cuckoos never squawked or complained. They were satisfied war birds. Bill’s teeth were chattering from cold. He had to be going, getting some place or else run the risk of them both dying from exposure. With a groan he got to his feet, and tensed. A familiar drone was in the sky. A plane. He held his breath and strained his eyes to the stars. The wounded pilot stopped his mumbling. He, too, must be listening. No Jerry Mercedes, that engine. Bill knew a Hisso’s voice when he heard one. A dark shadow, looming black against the slate gray of the night slipped overhead, and a hoarse shout escaped Bill’s lips. Instantly he knew that it was foolish to do so, but at least it made him feel better.

The ship was flying low. He watched it slide between two peaks that stood out like sentinels against the dark skyline, and energy flowed back into his sore body. He knew those peaks, had passed between them himself earlier in the day. The Cuckoos’ Nest lay just beyond them. It couldn’t be more than three miles at the most from where he now stood. A desperate plan revved up in his mind, and he dropped to his knees beside the now quiet pilot.

“Buzzard,” he inquired anxiously, “can you hear me?”

A fumbling hand found Bill’s face and he smiled happily.

“Don’t talk, just listen,” he cautioned.

For the next few minutes Bill talked rapidly and when he had finished, the wounded pilot sat up, biting his lips to keep from crying aloud at the agony that filled his tortured body.

Bill lifted him to his feet and with his arm supporting the wounded man they started out.

THE following dawn, the watchful machine-gun detail that guarded the only foot approach to the Cuckoos' Nest, sprang silently to their ready guns and crouched down behind them waiting. The sounds of shambling footsteps and voices blended in song had reached their ears.

"Gripes! Must be an army," whispered a nervous gunner with his finger itchy on the trigger.

Again the voices rang out. It was ghastly, nerve-racking. Men singing out there in the brooding silence of the mountains as if in defiance to the muted mutterings of big guns in the distance. It was too much for the gunner. With a snarl he peered across his sights.

"The damned fools singing like that, I'll shoot 'em into meat balls."

The words of the song were intelligible now, amplified and hurled back by the echoes of the grim hills.

"Wings, wings, wings. Above the earth and its rotten things. Wings—"

The singer broke into a sobbing wail. The machine-gun detail went racing down the path. That was the familiar flying hymn of the American air service that they had been listening to.

Breathless, they reached the turn in the path and skidded to a stop. Two bedraggled scarecrows of humans were struggling there in the road before their very eyes; one trying to carry the other on his back, although down, crawling on his own hands and knees.

"Stick it out, buzzard," he'd croak, and then follow it up with a half-mad laugh and then start singing again.

"Wings, wings, wings."

Strong but gentle hands lifted and carried them to the safety of the Cuckoos' Nest.

It was many days before Bill Barry came back to the land of the living, and the war. Quietly he lay on a cot trying to figure out what it was all about. A soft but resonant voice was asking him how he felt.

Twice he tried to answer, "Okay," but the word wouldn't come. He grinned instead and then a weak anger filled him. Who the hell's business was it, anyway, how he felt? A fine way to visit a bird. Standing there in flying togs and not even bothering to remove his goggles.

Bill peered long and intently at the strange pilot but failed to recognize him. The goggled pilot pulled a stool up to the side of the cot and sat down.

"Barry, you don't know me, but I know you—better than you think. I'm your commanding officer, which will suffice for the present."

Bill nodded interestedly and lay back to listen. The goggled one continued, and Bill didn't know whether he was being bawled out or complimented.

"As usual, Barry, you've done a great deed and a bad one to offset it. And for either one of them, I could send you away from this outfit—the Cuckoos. Your part in the bird battle and your undaunted heroism in rescuing a brother pilot, would merit you a decoration were you other than an outlaw, or should I say—a Cuckoo. Now for the wrong deed. Barry, you brought a man to this drome who is not a Cuckoo!"

Weakly Bill tried to sit up, failed but found his voice. "But, but—" he protested and subsided under the gentle pressure of the colonel's hand on his chest.

"Steady, son," the colonel cautioned. "But in breaking the rules of this outfit, you saved one who is dear to me from a horrible death. Barry, shake hands with my son."

It was the colonel who brought the two hands together. Bill found himself looking into the smiling face of the man who occupied the cot next his own. For a moment everything whirled madly before his eyes.

"Well! I'm a lousy son of a so and so," he muttered stupidly. "The kid pilot from Le Bourget who told me his old man was a colonel, and who I was going to speak for should I ever reach the Cuckoos' Nest myself."

Warmly Bill shook the thin hand that he still clutched in his own. "Kid," he apologized, "I forgot to get your name when I flew off that day."

"That's all right, buzzard," the grinning youngster assured him. "You did better than that; you brought me to the Cuckoos' Nest, carried me on your back."

With a puzzled sigh Bill lay back on the pillow and closed his eyes, yet listening to the youngster's story of how he had been ferrying a ship up to a front-line drome when by chance he happened on the epic battle between jagdstaffel nine and the Cuckoos. Unable to resist the temptation, he had horned into the scrap and got a bad bullet crease across the ribs for his pains.

"And to think that the skipper of the Cuckoos was your old man all the time," whispered Bill as if to himself.

The colonel heard and hitched his stool closer. "Barry," he announced seriously, "my boy and you are the only two that really know my identity. He'll keep

it quiet. I'm asking you to do the same. If you don't, I'll have to bobtail you out of this outfit for—er—for striking your commanding officer."

Bill's eyes popped open in surprise. "You know that's not true, sir," he protested.

"But it is, Barry," the colonel insisted.

Bill saw him grin and remove the goggles from his eyes. Would wonders never cease? Bill Barry was staring wide-eyed into the face of the G-2 colonel he had slugged on the jaw that unforgettable day back on old two-seven's drome.

"You got the goods on me, air," he grinned happily. "I'll keep your secret."

Two hands met in a friendly clasp, or was it three? For the smiling youngster had added his to the pact.