



CODE OF THE CUCKOOS

by ALEXIS ROSSOFF

Already the throbbing sky in the distance was heavy with dire promise. It was a grim, spectacular game—the cards were dealt out to a strange group of fighting war birds—as strange as that part of the Front had ever heard of, and the stakes were the now-worthless lives of those men. Johnny Walker winged on to an ominous rendezvous with death. A yarn about an outfit you will never forget!

TWENTY SADDENED CUCKOOS stood with heads uncovered and bowed in the eerie ghost dampness of the new dawn, paying their last respects to all that remained mortal of Jerry Coyne. A sorrowful grease-ball smoothed the surface of the fresh mound while Johnny Walker—his voice husky with emotion—intoned the war-bird benediction. “God, be kind to Jerry Coyne. He was a good scout and our buddy.” The Cuckoos added their earnest “Amen,” and the ordeal was at an end. One more of the flock had gone West to paradise on spirit wings. Who would be the next to follow Jerry Coyne? That was the question.

Already the throbbing sky in the distance was heavy with dire promise. Yesterday it had been the muted mutterings of an aroused giant, but to-day the very ground upon which they stood quaked and trembled as if in fear. Germany’s triumphant Juggernaut was

rolling across France, saying it to the Allies with a million tons of devastating steel, and smashing every one and everything caught in the path into a nameless tangle of smoking red ruin. The Cuckoos read the signs and sounds of death’s approaching whirlwind correctly.

There still remained ample time for them to fly off and chuck it all. Besides, what matter if they should? The Allies were on the run, beating a dogged retreat. Given twenty-four hours in which to establish new lines, they might reform their scattered units and make a stand of it. But German Imperial headquarters, who had planned this push for months, ordered otherwise. There was to be no let up in the pounding; that was, until nothing more remained to be pounded. It was the showdown.

Desperately, Allied leaders resorted to strategy, and failed once more. The great German *Nachrichtament*—

through its many secret sources of information—learned of these carefully planned attacks and saw to it that they were counteracted almost before they could be launched. Germany knew the identity and the strength of the Allied divisions that faced them; knew the weak places in the valiantly fighting line—that strove to defend France—and went through those places. The *Nachrichtament* was doing its particular duty for the Vaterland, and doing it well. German officers of the high command operating in the field never wanted for information. For them the war had developed into a big parade, with the reviewing stand in Paris. Two weeks more, at the most, and it would be all over but the celebrating. Or so they believed, and von Bulow had but to hurl his unexpected thunderbolt of shock troops at the handful of Allies still defending the Vosges sector, destroy them, and report to Field Marshal von Hindenburg that he had reached his objective—which would really mean that he had established liaison with von Gluck on his left and Marshal Stuttgart on his right. The mountainous Vosges had long thwarted Germany's hopes. That was while the Allies had strength to maintain lines on both sides of the almost impenetrable rocky fastness. But Germany's powerful war machine, guided and controlled by its wily brain—the *Nachrichtament*—finally believed that it had discovered a way. Sledgehammer blows delivered at Allied weaknesses turned the tide. Secret agents of the *Nachrichtament* blew up Allied supply bases and ammo dumps. Boche long-range artillery, many kilos deep in Germany, ranged and destroyed Allied rail and transportation arteries with devastating precision, based on figures and facts secured by those same secret agents. Paris was shelled and London bombed from the air by wide-cruising Zeppelins.

Worried whisperings, originating in the closed chambers of nations' capitols found their way out and greatly exaggerated, eventually reached the ears of Tommy, Poilu and Yank still carrying on in the trenches. Their morale wavered. Things changed from just plain gray to the blackness of despair as realization followed ugly rumor. Allied artillery had been silenced, caused by the scarcity of ammo and a greater handicap—no eyes.

Germany's massed jagdstaffels had swept the sky clean of Allied birdmen—and eyes. Tommy, Poilu and Yank, weary at last of fighting a losing battle without the comforting support of artillery, broke. They quit the Front line for the thin safety of the supports.

Germany, eager and alert, leaped after them, turning loose the sustained furies of hell as they followed. The sullen retreat at first gained momentum. Kilos of France held by years of priceless bloodshed, were lost in so many hours. Only the age-old Vosges disputed the right of way with the conquering Boche. Those grim silent hills did much for France in those dark times. Germany's joyous legions swept around the base of the Vosges on both sides, found themselves deep in conquered territory, to be true, but facing a serious military situation. Von Bulow's shock troops, designated to hold the center of Germany's great wall of steel in its planned drive on Paris, had failed to maintain contact. Rushed from the now quiet Austrian Front, they had tried to save valuable time by taking the shorter but little known route over the mountains. It was a long gamble that would have repaid German manifold were it successful. The surprise and daring of that bit of military strategy would have been the final blow to the Allies' fast, waning morale, had it succeeded.

Everything had been in von Bulow's favor. French troops no longer occupied strategic points of vantage in the mountains, They, too, had joined the great retreat. So the *Nachrichtament* had informed von Bulow. Confident he had pushed on with forced marches until he found himself well up with schedule and marking time impatiently, almost on the heels of the efficient German engineers. Bridges had been thrown across chasms, roads hewn and blasted into the sides of cliffs, big-gun emplacements had been laid out for the tractor-drawn steel tubes that were coming up at a more leisurely pace.

On the third, day, scouting patrols of Uhlans out in advance of the main column rode across the center ridge of the Vosges and looked down; not, however, as they expected, into the Agres Valley that appeared on the maps but at a foaming torrent that raced madly over and around a deadly threat of black saw-toothed rocks. Von Bulow raged and fumed, cursed the map makers and the *Nachrichtament* for the first time. The maps showed the nearest body of water—Lake Renard by name—in a position at least five kilos to the northeast of this tumbling mill race that threatened to ruin his plan. It was both astounding and maddening. What had caused the map makers' error? To turn back was impossible—he had come too far. His place in the war lay within hearing distance. That sinister rumbling out there in the Front where the rolling foothills of the Vosges lost themselves in the quaking earth of

the despised France could come only from the heavy artillery of von Gluck and Stutgart—both of whom were putting on a show, a tremendous show, keeping the enemy in front occupied, allowing them no time in which to discover the sudden yawning breach that the Vosges had mysteriously rent in Germany's mighty attack. So the Vosges would be written into history as the savior of France by the historians of the future. Never were they to learn that one man was directly responsible for the blocking of von Bulow's drive on Paris. It is doubtful if the man himself ever realized the part he had played. And if he did, it is probable that he dismissed it all with a grin and a careless shrug of his shoulders in the manner of all Cuckoos.

FOR the man, Captain Greb by rank and name, was a Cuckoo, one of the biggest. It was he who, in order to build the Cuckoos' Nest, had dynamited a natural rock dam and freed the captive waters of Lake Renard, to send them cascading down into the Agres Valley. But to stop Boche drives hadn't been Captain Greb's original intention. It was he who in conjunction with a certain G-2 intelligence colonel had first conceived the idea of forming the Cuckoo squadron. His particular assignment in the war called for occasional visits to Blois—or the boneyard—as the war birds choose to name that dreaded port of unwanted officers. There Captain Greb had learned some surprising facts. Out of the twenty or so sullen pilots being disciplined in the boneyard, not a single one of them had ever been charged with cowardice. To the contrary, it had been belligerence and a constant urge to be fighting that had gotten most of them into trouble. When there hadn't been any Jerries to tangle tails with in the war skies, they'd worked off their combativeness with fists on members of their own respective squadrons. Captain Greb's interest had been aroused, and he'd asked questions, to learn that twelve of the now wingless blackbirds had been credited officially with sixty-five Jerry *descendus*. Greb's mathematical brain juggled the figures and reached a startling conclusion. The A.E.F. was making a mistake in keeping these blackbirds cooped up.

He granted that as individuals they had upset the morale and organization of every squadron which they had ever been parts of, but here at Blois they lived together like so many doves. Greb recalled the old adage, "Birds of a feather flock together," and stirred him-to action.

He sent call after call burning over the wires

and went so far as to pay an unannounced visit to Chaumont and a certain hawk-visaged general whose fingers had a good grip on the strings that pulled the A.E.F. The general had been adamant at first. For his part, pilots that couldn't conduct themselves as officers and gentlemen deserved to rot in Blois. But Captain Greb was persistent; he quoted figures and the general saw the light. Greb's plan was logical. The captain readily admitted that the blackbirds had been a bad influence on the United States air service, but his point was that they had been worse on the jagdstaffels of Germany. He was careful to emphasize the fact that twelve of the former Yank war birds had accounted for sixty-five Jerries. The general, who had learned his soldiering—and soldiers—in the old army, gave in.

He wanted no part in Captain Greb's seemingly insane plan, didn't even want to know about it; but he assured the jubilant captain that he was behind him. Greb asked for no more.

It was Greb who had selected the rock-rimmed fastness of the Vosges for the Cuckoos' Nest that was to be. Night and day he had bossed two Sengalese labor battalions and a regiment of French engineers, mysteriously assigned him by G.H.Q. upon request of a certain general high in the A.E.F. The level bed of Lake Renard—the only level ground area in the Vosges—underwent a great transformation. Captain Greb's dynamite charge had drained it. More dynamite changed the course of the many mountain streams that had fed the lake, and the hot summer sun had dried the surface. Underground tunnels and ramps were laid out, and concreted. It was all very mysterious, but the men who labored asked no questions, for, to them, the war itself was a mystery. They were satisfied and well fed. When they slept, they did so assured that no Boche would descend upon them to disturb their slumbers. At least, they would live longer than their comrades at the Front. The Vosges had been as peaceful as a mountain resort that particular summer. At last all was ready. The French engineers and colonials rolled their packs and marched away with many a reluctant backward glance. Their pleasant secret detail was at an end—and the Boche had learned nothing of it. Unfortunately, for them, the Vosges geographical changes went unrecorded.

But for the tireless Yankee captain who had remained, work was just beginning. He blew up the temporary roads they had constructed, behind them, and relaxed for a moment. The Cuckoos' Nest was as unapproachable now as Gibraltar. A narrow winding

mountain trail that opened into a more traveled road three kilos away—or down to be exact—offered the only means of access from the ground. Two machine guns could hold it against a division and as a last resort, it, too, could be blown up. Greb had then turned a speculative eye skyward. That was the only great threat that remained. A threat or a salvation, all depending upon who the gods of war were favoring at the moment.

By the sky route the Cuckoos would wing to test their fighting tools on Jerry jagdstaffels. From this hidden nest, his brain child, lightning attacks like the rush of doom could be made upon German supply bases and strongholds on Jerry's own side of the war. The blackbirds of the A.E.F. would lives again. Reborn as the Cuckoos, they could do the thing that they did best—fight.

Captain Greb did not linger long with his dreams. What use was a nest without birds? Not a bird himself, yet he knew where the ideal flock could be hatched. No one else wanted them, in fact up to date, the United States had wasted much time and money on their training. But Greb, the efficiency expert of the A.E.F., believed that he knew a way in which to turn that debit to a great credit. Before the week expired, he was once more closeted with the general in Chaumont, making more insane requests. He wanted orders issued banishing himself to exile in Blois. Also there was a certain fire-breathing flying colonel awaiting court-martial for describing the entire united air service as an undernourished brood of weaklings in no uncertain terms. Greb requested that those charges against the colonel find their way to the trash basket and that he be granted a thirty-minute private interview with the fiery old eagle. The general had promised to back Captain Greb, and with no other alternative, he gave in for the second time. Greb got his interview with the flying colonel, and that night the old war eagle, still breathing defiance, spread his wings in a brand new Spad and hopped off for the Cuckoos' Nest. He was to be the skipper of the unruly brethren that would follow. His identity was to be kept a secret, he would be known in the future as Colonel X.

Captain Greb quit Chaumont a short time after and gladly traveled the long trail down to military oblivion and Blois. Once there, he had set to work with unflagging energy. The commanding officer at that port of unwanted men had received strange orders from G.H.Q. He was to cooperate with the quiet little captain at all times.

Greb was assigned to the barracks of the twenty-minute eggs upon his own request. A direct wire from Blois to a certain general's ear in far off Chaumont was placed at his disposal. Bui the C.O. never learned that the wire stretched on from Chaumont to the Cuckoos' Nest in the heart of the Vosges. Greb possessed the happy faculty of making friends. On first sight the twenty-minute eggs had accepted and liked him—especially the aviators. They found in him a sympathetic listener to their troubles. They all lived in hopes of some day getting back into the war. Occasionally they were rushed into service as ferry pilots, flying new ships from the supply depots up to the frontline dromes. But such assignments only had the tendency to make their longing the more acute.

Greb had got the story from Johnny Walker, a giant pilot whose worst fault was a volcanic temper. The following day Walker had received a sudden ferrying detail. That was the last Blois ever saw of him. His comrades had hazarded a guess that Walker had washed out some place, and voiced the fatalistic opinion that Johnny Walker was a lucky buzzard. For wasn't death preferable to being an inmate of Blois?

In the next ten days the barracks of the twenty-minute eggs had lost ten of its star boarders—all of them pilots. Wild gas drum rumors had begun to circulate. A powerful but nameless air squadron had begun to make life miserable for the flying Jerries at the Front. They flew and fought with the reckless abandon of hellions. A happy light had begun to dance in Greb's eyes and his smile was the wider as he rejoiced inwardly, but no word of enlightenment slipped from his knowing tongue. He was the father of the Cuckoos, and proud of them.

Every night he had learned of their latest doings over the direct wire from Chaumont, and in turn instructed the Cuckoo doing wire duty in the distant Cuckoos' Nest to be on the lookout for new recruits that he had sent winging to the flock.

AS TIME passed—and it passes swiftly in a war bird's way of measuring—the Cuckoos grew in numbers, grew in Jerry's respect and greatest of all grew in admiration for each other and pride in the mighty squadron that they were now independent parts of. And independent in every sense of that descriptive word. The cuckoos neither gave nor received orders. They just took it for granted that they were all volunteers and acted accordingly, volunteering to meet each situation as it arose.

The skipper, Colonel X, who billeted by himself, or perhaps sometimes the pilot doing the listening trick in the wire room, would stride into the pleasantly buzzing atmosphere of the underground recreation room. “Buzzards,” he’d announce casually, “just got word from the office that a Jerry circus crossed the line pointing toward Chemay.”

Cards would be turned face down on the table, the stakes left lying in the center, and a general exodus toward the hangars would begin. Engines would roar and planes, singly and in pairs, would hit the sky as soon as they warmed, to gather a few minutes later at seven thousand feet over the abandoned, shell-ripped village of Tulane. There they would quickly take position in the great flying-V that German war birds had learned to recognize and respect. The Cuckoos made it a practice never to take formation over their own Nest, lest enemy eyes discover the location of the secret base. The wings of Colonel X’s Spad, flying out in the point, would waggle, and the Cuckoos would be off full-gunned, winging for Chemay and a tail tangle with the reported Jerry circus.

Hours later, those Cuckoos that still lived, would come high-tailing back, break formation over Tulane, and the card game would be resumed in the recreation room. There had been times when one of the players would call across the room to a sad-faced pilot:

“Come on, buzzard, you were Joe’s buddy. He won’t be back so you play his hand out.”

That was the custom. Hard, iron-feathered birds that they were, they had learned to look at death, and regard the hereafter as just one more adventure in the hectic games that they played.

Those had been their sentiments about departed comrades, that was, until Jerry Coyne’s ticket had been signed for the last long flight into the great beyond. Somehow, Jerry Coyne’s death had been different; it was a case that required talking over. As was his wont, on the evening previous he had hiked off on foot for a bit of leg stretching. Johnny Walker, worrying about the alarming reports coming over the wire to the nest and the obvious signs of German troop movements in the mountains, had asked Jerry Coyne to be careful.

Jerry had grinned, winked broadly and mysteriously whispered, “All bird business isn’t in the air,” and gravely added, “I’ve seen weasels and even snakes rob nests, buzzard.”

Johnny had pondered over Jerry’s words and recalled them again, hours later, when two excited members of the machine-gun crew that guarded the

lone trail to the nest, carried a mortally wounded Jerry Coyne and placed him gently on his own cot to die. One of them explained that they’d heard him calling and tearing at the camouflaged barrier that masked the nest trail from passers-by on the main road. Jerry sobbed out his lifeblood and a bubbling incoherent message as he went West in grieving Johnny Walker’s strong arms.

“Weasels and snakes, Johnny boy, they got me first—at—Marie’s—*buvette*—”

A last wracking cough convulsed his body, and crimson stained his lips—Jerry Coyne was dead. But even as he died, his groping clenched fist found one of Walker’s big hands and opened it. Something rested on Johnny’s palm, but the flyer couldn’t see it for his tears.

A feeling of helplessness settled on him, he wanted to be alone to think. Blindly he rushed for the outside, stumbled across the darkened tarmac, and came to himself as he brought up short against the billowing side of a hangar, damp and cold as the wings of the death that had just shriveled his heart.

Back in the hazy past of their school days, little Jerry Coyne had captained the football team, picked the flaws in the opponents’ defense, called the signals that sent the huge bulk of Johnny Walker crashing through with the ball to victory. Their school days behind them, the same order of things still held good in business life; Jerry did the thinking for the firm; Johnny executed the orders. It remained for the war to break up their partnership. Congress made them both second lieutenants in those first mad days when the United States was working feverishly to send an army to Europe. That was the beginning of the end. Had Jerry been a captain all would have been different. Vested with superior rank, he would have continued to boss Johnny around and undoubtedly kept him on the right path. But unfortunately Jerry was not made a captain. The inevitable happened. Johnny Walker rebelled under the strange lash of new impersonal authority. Captain’s bars or major’s oak leaves meant less than nothing when rage awakened by the officers who wore them consumed him. He manhandled three flight leaders and a squadron commander in a span of as many months. Blois claimed him after that. It would have been the end of all things—including life—for the bitter Johnny Walker but for Jerry Coyne’s unshaken faith in him.

“Buzzard,” Jerry had assured him, “you and I will always be pals, and a little thing like a war isn’t going to break us up. I’ll be seeing you in a couple of weeks.”

True to his prediction, Jerry had followed Johnny into disgrace and Blois. When they met once more there in the port of unwanted men, no questions were asked and no explanations offered. Months later, Johnny got the story from another broken pilot. He learned how the laughing, good-natured Jerry Coyne had changed into a smaller edition of himself. Jerry hadn't succeeded in whipping the three flight leaders and the squadron commander as thoroughly as Johnny had done the job, but at least he had tried and had only laughed when the military court that had tried his case sentenced him to Blois. The A.E.F. might not have understood Jerry Coyne's actions, but Johnny Walker did. And now Jerry was dead.

FUTILELY sobbing in anguish, Johnny Walker beat upon the canvas hangar wall. "Jerry, Jerry," he moaned. "It's my fault for letting you follow me here. But I'll get the weasels and snakes you didn't name. And when I do—" Johnny Walker mouthed a frightful oath and emphasized it with a savage blow of his right fist against the palm of his open left hand. A twinge of pain shot up through his right arm. Dully he unclenched the fist and stared stupidly at the circular bit of metal that had been driven deeply into the flesh by the force of the blow. Slowly it all came back to him. Jerry had placed it in his hand; had wanted him to have it. Therefore, it must be an important link which connected with the enemy who had shot Jerry.

Johnny Walker lived now but for revenge. Quickly he let himself into the hangar and, by the small flickering light of his briquet, examined the tiny metal band. Somewhere, in the past he had seen others like it, but its identity and use evaded his maddeningly. Of only one thing was he certain, the figures and letters stamped deeply into the soft surface were German characters.

Dry-eyed and heart-sick, he sat down on a spare wheel chock to think and plan and await the coming of daylight. Bitterly he reviled his own latent powers of deduction. In the past, Jerry had done the thinking and figuring for both of them, but now he was left to think and act alone. It was plain that Jerry had happened on something big or else why that last grim struggle to reach the Cuckoos' Nest? Others wounded as badly as Jerry Coyne had been would have given up the ghost much sooner. That last mighty effort to impart the information—"weasels-snakes—Marie's—buvette—" he had stammered.

At that moment, Jerry Coyne's spirit seemed to

come close to Johnny Walker as he sat there silent and dejected. From outside the steady strike of metal against earth reached his ears. The Cuckoos were already digging Jerry Coyne a grave.

Johnny lurched to his feet. Each blow of the descending pick in the hands of the digger stabbed his brain.

"Marie's! Revenge! Marie's!" The words rang in Johnny's ears, and he saw the light. Jerry was giving him his orders from the great beyond. Cold resolve to be up and going filled Johnny. He had the courage to go through with the burial ceremony now, and after that—well, Jerry Coyne, gone West, would call the signals, as he had done in life.

Not until the last rough place had been smoothed on Jerry's grave, did Walker betray by any sign that something had snapped within him. "Hop" Bender, one of the veteran Cuckoos, had linked his arm in Johnny's.

"Come on, buzzard, it's all over. Let's go hide a cup of coffee," he had suggested.

Hop saw the tears spring suddenly into Walker's eyes, felt the huge muscles bulge beneath the pilot's sleeve and heard his fiercely whisper. "It isn't all over, Hop. It's just the beginning."

Bender was puzzled, but he adhered firmly to that strict unwritten law of the Cuckoos—"Ask no personal questions." Not until they reached the entrance to the underground mess hall did he speak again.

"Walker," he declared, feelingly, "you spoke of something just beginning. If it was trouble that you were referring to, don't hesitate to call on me, and together we'll finish whatever you start."

Walker thanked him and tried hard to swallow the lump that had welled up in his throat. It was consoling to know that men like the Cuckoos really existed and that he himself was one of the strange brethren.

Hop Bender, branded as a professional gambler, card cheat, and a deserter from Blois, was still man enough to offer to share another's troubles—even though the finish meant death.

Johnny gulped a cup of scalding black coffee, felt better, and began to take an interest in things. He noted the strained silence that hung over the crowded mess hall and wondered at a sudden dull thud that he felt rather than heard. He felt it again, and understanding came to him. It was the steady, regulated pound of near-by artillery.

"Listens bad for us," growled a worried Cuckoo.

"Bad?" echoed "Limey" Barrow across the table.

"Blimey, it stroikes in me brain like the perishing beat of muffled funeral drums coming to me own funeral."

A pilot started to laugh and cut it short as Johnny Walker's cup smashed on the table. A dangerous mad light flickered in his eyes; his words were hard and metallic.

"Muffled—funeral—drums!" he repeated slowly. With an effortless motion he was up, standing.

"Buzzards," he snapped, getting their attention, "Barrow's likening of the Boche's noisy approach to a funeral dirge impresses and arouse me. It is much like a great futuristic pageant. Living men pushing on to a rendezvous with death, following their own funeral drums, mistaking the music for a paeon of victory——"

"Buzzards!" came the unexpected interruption from a worried pilot who had suddenly filled the doorway. Nervously, he glanced down at his own hastily penciled notations upon a piece of paper that he held and cleared his throat. "Just got word over the wire from the skipper in Chaumont that hell's busted loose with a bang. The Boche are chasm' the Allies plumb into the Atlantic Ocean, and I might add that accordin' to the latest line of red pins on the maps that G.H.Q. runs this war with the Cuckoos are now in German territory. The skipper advised us to abandon the Nest while we are still healthy. He seemed surprised when I answered the phone, and insisted that a Boche army must have passed right over us on their surprise march through the Vosges. And he added in closing that we're cut off behind a flaming Front fifty kilos in length."

"Damn!" Johnny Walker exploded, catching and held their attention once more. "Buzzards," he enthused, "when the good Lord saw to it that us lousy bums were given the opportunity to fly again as the Cuckoos, he gave the Allies the biggest break in the war. There they are blinded and without information, believing themselves attacked by a raging hell fifty kilos long, but we know different, despite what the skipper says. No Boche army has crossed the Vosges as yet, and by the Lord Harry no Boche army is going to."

"Says you, buzzard," muttered a worried pilot, and Johnny Walker was on him like a hawk.

"Yes, says me," he snarled. "We're the Cuckoos, ain't we? Well, the Jerry army that can whip us will never be recruited. Besides, numbers don't count in this particular case. They'll be on mountain roads and trails, packed tight and handicapped for the want of elbow room. We'll be in our natural element, the

air." Then, suddenly with long hurried strides, Johnny started for the door.

"Why the mad rush and where to?" inquired the pilot who had scoffed but seconds before.

"I'm just a crazy Cuckoo going to set a flock of Allied know-it-all brass hats straight on a technical supposition that they've already accepted as military fact," enlightened Johnny from outside the mess-hall door. "Follow my tail, buzzards, and you'll hear a tankful. I may be just a no-account flyer in this war, which in the opinion of a lot of coffee-cooling, rocking-chair generals back in G.H.Q. is something to be endured, but by God, I've got sense enough to recognize old man opportunity when he wants to share my cockpit with me."

STOOLS went over with a bang as the Cuckoos fought good-naturedly to be on Johnny's heels as he sped down the narrow passage to the phone room. He was jangling the receiver hook when the closest of the pursuers bounded into the small room. His first vibrant, "Hello," to the unknown speaker on the other end of the wire froze the Cuckoos in their tracks. Silently, they strained forward, trying to make sense of his terse sentences.

"Yes, sir, Walker calling from the air nest in the Vosges," they heard him begin. "You've made a mistake, sir. No Boche army has crossed the Vosges. We're not in German territory yet. Something has held them up, but they're still trying like hell."

The listening Cuckoos knew what Johnny meant. The tiny electric bulb hanging over his head was dancing crazily. Von Bulow's human battering ram might be temporarily checked by a raging torrent of water, but his artillery could play its part and von Bulow was seeing that it did. A Cuckoo growled an oath of defiance. An angry muttering filled the phone room. Johnny motioned for silence and went to talking again.

"Yes, sir, I'm positive of what I say, and I know what it means to the Allies. It means that there's a hole big as hell in the center of the Boche attack, inviting the Allies to start a counter-offensive that may be the turning point of the war."

A moment's silence followed; then Johnny fairly shouted back into the mouthpiece. "You're asking can we do anything to hold the Boche a while longer here in the mountains? Hell, sir, we're the Cuckoos. We'll not only hold them a while, we'll keep them here forever. Cripes, we intend to annihilate 'em. Good luck, to you, too, sir."

With a triumphant bang that foretold of excitement to come, Johnny slammed the receiver back on its hook.

“What are we going to do?” demanded a score of impatient voices. Grinning coldly as he elbowed a path to the outside, Johnny answered them.

“Being Cuckoos, you do as you damn well please. For my part I’m going high-tailing and bomb hell out of a certain Boche army that’s coming too close to this nest for my personal comfort.”

To the last pilot, they followed him.

An engine coughed, and others soon added their voices to the mechanical chorus. Dust eddies whirled and danced as front and rear walls of the small camouflaged hangars were raised.

Out on the tarmac, Johnny Walker stood alone, searching the sky. The chance of an enemy war bird happening overhead was slight, but being a Cuckoo had made Johnny cautious. His hand flapped in signal, and a Spad taxied out of a hangar mouth, bugged its way into the wind and left the nest in a low slanting climb that made it hard for the human eye to locate it against the mountainous background of the Vosges. Nineteen of them, Johnny dispatched at ten-second intervals, and then he raced for his own ship. The sweating mechanic who had warmed it gave him a leg up and a well-meant bit of advice.

“Don’t argue the right of way with any mountain, sir. Like the rest, you’re carrying two cases of hand bombs and five pints of nitro.”

Johnny nodded absent-mindedly, did some rapid calculating, then beamed on the waiting grease-ball. Multiplied by twenty—two cases of hand bombs and five pints of nitro—figured to make things damned annoying for a certain German army. A friendly wave of his hand, and he was rolling, going places in the war.

Expertly, he put three thousand feet of life insurance beneath the Spad and then cursed himself as being the father of all the dumb dodo birds. He’d forgotten to notify the skipper. Even forgot to work out a plan of attack with the Cuckoos. Roaring along full gun, with prop pointed for the Cuckoos’ rendezvous over Tulane, he tried to ease his conscience. He had complied strictly with the Cuckoo code—hadn’t ordered or asked the Cuckoos to join him in his proposed attack on the Boche. If they choose to follow this lead, that was their own hard luck.

A black mood was settling on Johnny, caused by thoughts of Jerry Coyne’s fate. Savagely he flared up. To hell with the Allies—he owed them no thanks.

In the first place, if it hadn’t been for their damned straight-laced regulations that had banished both Jerry and himself to Blois, Jerry would probably be alive. The pressure of his left boot against the rudder bar increased. He decided to bank and turn back to the nest, and then to Marie’s tumbled-down mountain hut. The damned French hag, whining there behind the bar in her dilapidated *buvette*, selling gut-twisting booze for outrageous prices to pleasure-starved Cuckoos. He’d choke the truth out of her, if necessary. Make her tell who had murdered Jerry, and why.

Tears that suddenly fogged his vision came close to washing him out of the war and the world. The Spad had swung off the course that led across the low saddle between the twin peaks of Mimi and Pierre. A cloud-piercing barrier of rock loomed up ahead. Johnny sensed rather than saw it. Vagrant wind devils fought him for the mastery of the controls. Dark shadows took the sun glint off his goggles, and Johnny Walker knew fear for the first time in his life. Two cases of bombs and five pints of nitro would give him a swift and welcome death to be sure, but how could he face Jerry in the next world? Jerry would never forgive him for quitting cold, chucking the grim game of life. And to make matters worse, he hadn’t even made an attempt to carry out Jerry’s last orders to get the snakes and weasels. Jerry had called the signals and named the play for him with his last breath.

The circular band of soft metal now resting in Johnny’s pocket was the signal. The final play would be at Marie’s rude *buvette*. Memory’s painful twinges made Johnny Walker the crashing full back of football fame live again, playing the game once more on a new gridiron in the sky. The black mountain he was hurtling toward was the enemy line. In all seriousness Jerry had once told him, “When you can’t go through a line, go over it, hurdle it. Just get where you’re going. That’s the main object of this game.”

Johnny Walker remembered and gathered himself for the test. Bombs and nitro rushing at an immovable force dead ahead. Should they meet, all would be over. One second in which to act!

Back came the stick into Johnny’s belly. Strained wires groaned in protest, and he held his breath in uncertainty as the Spad fought mightily to lift its head into the teeth of a downward air current.

“I’m trying, Jerry,” he whispered fearfully. “Trying, buddy, for you.”

The back of his head thudded against the shock pad; the safety belt slackened around his middle.

He was going up in a corkscrewing climb that left the laboring Spad hanging on its prop. A quick leveling out just as the faithful bus threatened to stall, and Johnny had won. No elation filled him this time—there was no grinning Jerry to punch him enthusiastically and call him “ol’ hoss.”

VOID of feeling, he set about the bird business of orienting himself. There were the Cuckoos circling high up against the sun, waiting for him to lead them to the war he had spoken of. Beyond and below them against the horizon, a yellow, flame-slashed canopy of powder haze told of the titanic struggle going on. The Allies’ wavering line had braced, throwing their all into a last desperate effort to fight off impending disaster, staking thousands of lives on the thin hope of that single sentence—“There’s a hole in the middle of the Boche attack.”

G.H.Q. had flashed the vital information as being authentic to worried front-line commanders who in turn passed it on to the men in the trenches. Because it came from G.H.Q., no one questioned the truth of it. But were it known at the moment that renegade outcast war-birds were alone responsible for the message, there would have been no slowing up in the retreat that had been fast growing into a fatal route.

Johnny Walker, hovering there between heaven and earth realized not at all, and cared less, that his phone conversation from the nest was causing new pages of history to write themselves. Dying men, wars, even the fate of the world itself meant nothing to him as he ruddered his ship in a long slanting climb for the circling Cuckoos. To him it was just a game. The signals had been called, and he’d play it out until the final whistle terminated all tilings. Jerry would have wished it that way.

The Cuckoos welcomed him with an impatient waggle of wings. They had observed and learned much from their high perches in the blue, above and behind the war. Boche rubber cows tugging at cables had the sky for their own. Boche observers in the wicker baskets beneath the swaying gas bags were fully protected by flights of watchful Fokkers, Pfaltze and Hals cruising between them and the few Allied bird-men still operating in the war zone. From the rear, they had nothing to fear, or so the *Nachrichtament*—that knew all—had advised. And such was the Boche observers’ faith in Germany’s mighty intelligence system, that they had eyes for the front only, satisfied in the knowledge that their safety was doubly assured

by von Bulow’s great thunderbolt coming up behind. Nothing human would stop it once von Bulow won free of the tenacious Vosges. Even the Allies had admitted the truth of that, but while von Bulow remained fast in the mountains, the Allies still hoped. In the next two hours, twenty no-account war birds, would settle the issue. Should they fail in their mad mission, von Bulow would win free of the Vosges.

Twenty jubilant Cuckoos went winging joyfully to a scrap that one hundred thousand of their comrades in arms on the ground had been looking forward to with trepidation and dread. Johnny Walker had taken the point of the roaring armada that quickly and enthusiastically formed on his tail. It was his party; therefore, it was his right to lead the invited guests.

With many a regretful backward glance at the inviting swaying rubber cows, they followed his swift climb up to the ceiling and leveled out for a searching back flight over the mountains. There were many of the twenty who wondered at this sudden dispensing with of flight caution and secrecy on Johnny’s part. Flying as they were, they couldn’t ask him why, so they turned their eyes and thoughts to the bird business at hand.

The Vosges below had flattened out into the semblance of so many ant hills, black cracks and nondescript shadows. Brown, greens, and grays blending and meeting in lifeless desolation.

But were they? Those gray patches appeared to be moving. Goggles were quickly wiped, and a wild wagging of wings immediately followed. The Cuckoos had all sighted the same thing at the same instant—the Boche. Antlike figures laboring mightily to bridge the rushing torrent that had halted von Bulow’s drive. Johnny Walker’s keen eyes saw the black-penciled something that reached three-quarters of the way across the silver thread of rushing water, and understood. The Cuckoos’ work was cut out for them. Let that penciled something touch the opposite bank, and all would be lost. Thousands of eager Jerries would swarm across it, dragging their deadly dogs of war and munitions after them. Already big guns emplaced at strategic points in the hills were hurling tons of exploding steel to cover and pave the way for the expected advance.

Johnny gave the anxiously awaited signal—a quick pumping of his gauntleted fist up and down that said, “There’s your party. Enjoy yourselves, and good luck.”

Like so many plunging comets, they dropped earthward. To the staring Boche, below, the sudden

appearance of the planes overhead was both aggravating and disillusioning. It meant more valuable time to be wasted in driving off these crazy birdmen. But the point beyond comprehension was, the *Nachrichtament* had assured von Bulow that he need fear no attack from the air. Germany's jagdstaffels had reported the sky under their control. Worried German officers, studying the arriving planes through powerful glasses, were frankly puzzled. They easily recognized them as Spads, but no *cocardes* or decorations adorned the under surfaces. They clung to the faint hope that the planes might yet identify themselves by some known signal, as a masquerading staffel, flying to work a new surprise on the already sorely pressed Allies. Jerry gunners stood ready behind mobile machine guns and quick-firers. Infantry men were seeking any slight cover that offered, while thousands fingered rifles nervously, and remained where they were. Lashed on by the crackling oaths of *feldwebels* only the engineers busy constructing the bridge labored on, but they did so with eyes turned skyward. All in fatal indecision. Too late, von Bulow's shock troops realized their mistake. Something small and black dropped over the side of a diving Spad that swooped out and screamed across the nearly completed bridge. An exploding hell that maimed, killed and destroyed, leaped up in its wake. Johnny Walker had scored a direct hit.

As hawks on a spree, playing a mad game of follow-the-leader the Cuckoos duplicated Johnny's daring feat. Splintered timbers, huge boulders, and dead Jerries filled the air. A big gun thundered from a nearby rock plateau, and hurled a steel missile of death. Then a vengeful Cuckoo laid a blasting iron egg atop it.

DEATH'S wings might be speeding over the trapped Boche, but there was no chucking it. They were game. They were thousands against twenty, and there still was much to be thankful for. These attacking Spads were not the greatly feared bombers, laying giant explosive eggs. Soon the pilots would exhaust their supply of hand bombs and be compelled to resort to machine guns, or else fly off. Either course presented grave dangers to the Cuckoos. To get the best effect with machine guns, the birdmen would have to fly low through a murderous rifle and machine-gun barrage. True, they would kill many Germans, but sooner or later Boche bullets would find the vitals of those winged hellions. Steadily the strange but deadly battle mounted to a climax. Calling their shots and flying as only the Cuckoos could, they

made a red shambles of the Boche-packed road below. But still the Boche down there fought grimly back. Five Spads suddenly quit the slaughter and went winging to as many different compass points, their pilots in search of bigger game worthy of the last eggs they had to lay. A Cuckoo located a target for his own and dived at it. Bullets made lace patterns in the Spad's wings, but he stuck to his purpose and the air route that followed the mountain road.

The long line of dots that had first caught his attention grew into canvas-covered motor trucks. A flying wire disappeared from before his eyes, carried away by a Boche bullet. Desperately, Jerry machine gunners steel laced the air around him, and then fled for their lives. There was no stopping such a determined madman. They had done their best and failed. The long ammunition train was doomed. It would detonate in the next few seconds.

Those with the courage to look back saw the plane begin to wobble crazily. A bullet had found the pilot when he was but a few feet above his objective, but he died with a triumphant smile on his blood-flecked lips as he forced his fingers to do his last bidding. A pint tin of devastating nitro fell from the dead hand. There was no missing at that point-black range. The whole Vosges seemed to shudder under the impact of the terrible explosion that followed as the ammo train blew up. A hundred avalanches came smashing down from the heights. A gigantic volcano of steel-centered fire reached heavenward. Cuckoos, flying in the vicinity, suddenly stunned by aerial concussion forgot war making and fought instinctively to right out-of-control Spads, and win to a breathing place high above the raging inferno below.

A random fragment of shell casing screaming past his head brought Johnny Walker back to the spine-tingling realization that his badly shocked muscles refused to function. His ship had dived into a choking power-gas cloud that masked a million whining steel demons. Frantically, he tried to yell as a vision of the smashing death to which he was plunging stamped itself on his brain. No sound passed his lips; his vocal cords were paralyzed. He Crouched there in the madly careening cockpit, a living dead man. A leaden hornet snapped by his ear, followed by another. "Yellow! Quitter!" they seemed to say. Savage anger sent the blood coursing hot through his half-delirious numb body. His voice came back with a rush. "It's a lie," he screeched, "and you know it, Jerry. A damned lie. Yes a lie!" he thundered and backsticked viciously.

The engine accepted the challenge without missing a beat. It carried that haywire tangle of strained wires and smouldering fabric from out of the hell of the Cuckoos' making, back up to the higher reaches where the sixteen war-singed Cuckoos who still lived had flocked to take inventory. At the extent of the carnage, they could only guess hidden as it was under a canopy of smoke. But of one thing they were certain. Some of von Bulow artillery had escaped the massacre.

Passing big shells—France bound set the planes to rocking dangerously. To the Cuckoos, thought of further killing that day might have been distasteful, but they were left with no alternative. It was kill or be killed, and the devil take the loser.

Johnny Walker was the first to quit the flock. They watched him go in a wide circling bank, holding a tin of nitro ready in a way that left no doubt as to his intentions. They followed his example. Von Bulow's big guns were hunted out one by one and blown into the hereafter by tight-lipped Cuckoos, anxious to be done with it. So intent were they on their own bird business, that no eyes had followed Johnny Walker's flight. Even had they done so, they would not have believed what they were seeing.

Johnny was taking no part in the gun hunt. As coolly as though on a peace-time patrol, he guided his Spad down to and along the black cliffs that towered on each side of the foaming mountain torrent. Random steel and sharpshooter's bullets whizzed all about but failed to drive him off. Carefully he scanned the rock formations as they passed beneath the Spad's belly. A minute's swift flight found him cruising in a tight circle over the spot where a white, churning cataract fell from the heights and continued on in its uninterrupted torrential way through the gorge. A wing-first dive that terminated when but two hundred feet above the jagged lip of the gorge, satisfied him. The can of nitro sped from his hand, and he was going up again in a full-gunned climb to watch and wait. Half turned in the seat, he looked back and down. A cold grin split his oil-smearred features. The war for that day at least had ended. The churning cataract had been thrown back on itself by the force of the ripping explosion. A great roof of rock came floating up only to crumble and disintegrate like a house of cards, and drop back again with a rumbling thunder. Madly the cataract surged forward once more, broke on the barrier that now blocked its path and divided itself in a five kilo wide rushing search for a new outlet or levels

Full-gunned, Johnny prepared to retrace his

previous flight. This time he noted that well-aimed bullets no longer sought to cut his bird career short. The Boche, willing to gamble their lives in a human combat with steel, were now fleeing in panic before the swift silent rush of drowning water, as it flooded the valley.

Johnny dropped his remaining cans of nitro where he believed they would do the most good, and slanted the Spad for the high places. Von Bulow's mighty battering ram, once destined to hammer at the gates of Paris was now so many individuals knocking humbly upon the pearly gates of the hereafter for admittance.

"Look them over, Jerry," Johnny Walker whispered, his tired eyes turned heavenward. "I'll keep sending them, buddy, and some day the louse who took you from me will be among them."

A stray ray of sunshine, warm as Jerry's smile had been, slipped through a cloud rift to touch him in a friendly sort of way. Johnny Walker saw it as an omen. Jerry was pleased with him.

Once more the deeply grained caution of the Cuckoos came back to him. Here he was streaking back to the hidden nest straight as a homing pigeon when it was possible that those Boche who may have escaped to the doubtful safety of the hills were following his flight. A kick of the rudder bar, and he changed direction, pointing for Tulane. From the rendezvous he would slip in by the back air chute.

FIFTEEN minutes steady flying brought a scene peaceful as a summer afternoon beneath him. The war had passed this sector of the Vosges by. The floor of the valleys showed green. Tossing off altitude, he could make out browsing cattle and an occasional roof that told of a hardy French peasant still clinging to his bit of France. That must be Marie's *buvette* down there where the road described an S turn.

Hard lines crept into Johnny's face. He'd talk with that damned Frog crone before this eventful day passed.

All thoughts of Marie were forgotten the next instant, and Johnny grabbed wildly at a flapping, clawing something that beat at his goggles, blinding him. His gauntleted hand closed on it finally, and he spent the next few seconds in an anxious bit of stickmauling that eventually brought the Spad out of the spin it had gone into. Then he gazed long and intently at the feebly struggling pigeon that he had held on to. "Almost succeeded in whipping an eagle for yourself that time, little fellow," he grinned good

naturedly at the fluttering pigeon, and then his tone changed as he discovered the growing crimson spot on the pigeon's breast. "Poor little fellow," he sympathized. "This war's sure tough on us birds."

Gently he placed the pigeon inside his warm flying jacket and settled to the more serious business of getting the badly limping Spad back to the safety of the nest. As he crossed the saddle of the rock-rimmed fastness, he studied the tarmac below. It was deserted.

With a heavy heart he glided down to a careless landing and continued to sit as he was in the cockpit, reluctant to get out and hear the sad news that was sure to come. A welcoming shout close at hand stirred him and he looked down into the happy face of the grease-ball.

"You're the twelfth in, sir, and I was beginning to worry," the grinning mechanic announced. Johnny smiled sadly as he unfastened his life belt. Twenty had started out, and only twelve had returned.

"Where's everybody?" he inquired as his feet touched the ground.

"Gone balloon-bustin', sir," answered the grease-ball. "They came in laughin', refueled, and hopped off again. A couple of them said that the scrap back there in the hills only put an edge on their appetites."

"And they call themselves Cuckoos," muttered Johnny aloud, starting to walk away. "Damned ostriches, that's what they are, gluttons for punishment."

"About your bus, sir?" the grease-ball called after him. Johnny paused in indecision. He too would have liked to bag a Boche rubber cow, but the business at Marie's had to be attended to first.

"Roll her in and patch her up, bud," he answered over his shoulder, and hurried on.

Straight to the phone room he went, tried to answer a hundred questions shot at him with machine-gun rapidity by the curious Cuckoo who had been left in the nest doing the listening shift. Johnny messed the answers up miserably—his thoughts were on Marie's *buvette*.

Dully he flopped down on a stool and, mechanically jiggled the phone hook. This making a report to G.H.Q. was a distasteful task to Johnny. It suddenly dawned on him that some one at the other end of the wire was shrilling into his ear. Startled, Johnny promptly forgot the elaborate metal report he had been framing, and lapsed into the old routine.

"Walker calling from the nest in the Vosges, sir.

Wishing to confirm my previous report, sir. No Boche army passed through the Vosges and no Boche army ever will as long as the Cuckoos are here." Johnny's voice trembled, and the watching Cuckoo saw his face go gray and a tear start down through the oil grime. Johnny was fighting hard to smother a sob. "Yes, sir," he mumbled into the mouthpiece. "We'll be needing eight new replacements. Eight, eight—"

The effort was too great. Frayed nerves cracked, his head sank forward on folded arms. "Eight of them. God!" he moaned, "Better men than any in all your damned armies and you brass-hat punks called them bums, blackbirds, deserters." Madly, Johnny Walker's fists pounded the table in anguish. A merciful unconsciousness put a temporary end to his suffering, and the strong arms of the sad-faced Cuckoo who had witnessed it all, carried Johnny's limp form over to a cot and laid him gently on it. In two strides, the Cuckoo recrossed the tiny room and recovered the dangling receiver. Then some one on the other end was cursing a blue streak in the language of the old army. The listening Cuckoo grinned his admiration and then interrupted with an electrifying "Hello! The Nest calling. Yes, sir. Some one must have cut you off. Why, no, sir. I've been right here all the time and I'm certain that neither Walker nor myself used the words brass hats or punks. It's impossible, Sir, that you were plugged in by mistake on another conversation." Confident that he had succeeded in covering up Johnny's military crime, the Cuckoo continued to pour soothing words of honeyed innocence into the phone. It was a ticklish job of white lying that he had on his hands, but he handled it admirably. At the suggestion, from the other end of the wire that Walker be put back on the line, the Cuckoo did a lightning piece of thinking and continued to lie beautifully. "Sorry, sir. Walker couldn't wait. It was urgent that he leave the Nest immediately."

He was grinning his relief when a series of amused grunts came over the wire, followed by a growling announcement. "Young man, it is my belief that you are one magnificent liar. But being an old-timer myself, I appreciate the motive for making one of yourself. When Walker—er—returns, tell him that a certain brass-hat punk here in G.H.Q. will break all regulations and see to it that a flock of bums, blackbirds, and deserters are suitably rewarded and decorated, by twelve thankful nations."

At a loss for words, the Cuckoo slowly hung up. "What a guy, what a man, what a white bird!" he

breathed aloud, and swung around to look into the questioning eyes of Johnny Walker.

“Buzzard,” the Cuckoo began, about to test an old formula prescribed for ascertaining the metal perfection of men returning from unconsciousness, “what day is it?”

“What the hell do you care,” growled Johnny. “You’re going no place and got from now on to get there in.”

“Correct,” grinned the pilot in mock seriousness. “The patient is showing signs of an intelligence not possessed before his mental *vrille*.”

“Yeah, maybe I’m two other buzzards,” snapped Johnny, and sat up.

“Maybe you’ll have to be to carry the load of ribboned hardware they’re planning to pin on your chest,” returned the Cuckoo mysteriously, and followed up with the story of all that had happened.

Johnny listened him out, but made no comment. Decorations meant nothing to him, he wanted but one satisfaction. The feel of his fingers around the throat of Jerry Coyne’s murderer.

Suddenly he clutched at the region of his heart. The worried Cuckoo sprang to his side. “You wounded, buzzard?” he demanded solicitously.

Johnny’s answering smile reassured him, and as the Cuckoo watched fascinated, Johnny carefully produced the wounded pigeon from inside his jacket.

“Blimey, it’s a blinkin’ magician you’ve turned out to be,” whispered the awed Cuckoo and lapsed into silence as Johnny told how he had come by the wounded bird. “No wonder he attacked you,” the Cuckoo enlightened when Johnny had finished. “He’s a Boche, a Jerry message carrier. That metal band around his leg tells me that. I learned to distinguish them when I was with the British signal corps in 1915.”

Quickly he reached for the bird. Interested only in the metal band, he did not notice that Walker had gone strangely quiet. Johnny was thinking hard, thinking of another metal band that Jerry had given him, and which now rested in one of his jacket pockets. In a sudden frenzy of excitement, he searched himself, found it and extended it on a trembling palm to the Cuckoo. “Any connection between the two leg bands?” he asked and stood silent as the comparison was made.

“Blimey, they’re from the same covey,” the Cuckoo announced at last. “The one on the bird is numbered C-580, and the other reads C-578, and strike me pink, if here isn’t the message the little Boche was carrying.” He released the tiny capsule it had held fast to the carrier’s leg.

FOR a time, the Cuckoo studied the thin sheet of paper he had extracted from the capsule and then his face split in a wide grin of genuine pleasure. “No code—this,” he announced. “It’s just simple book German, written in haste for a damned good reason, and I’m the buzzard what can read it.” Slowly he translated and read aloud for Johnny’s benefit.

“Agent 400. Relay following message to Imperial field headquarters at once. Failure threatens. Von Bulow’s army has not made contact with us. Why? Imperative that he do so, or else I shall be compelled to order retreat. Enemy has discovered and launched heavy offensive at center of our planned line, designated to be held by von Bulow. Have plans gone wrong? Must know. Stuttgart, commanding field operations.”

“Buzzard, do you get the import of that,” the jubilant Cuckoo inquired.

Johnny nodded, and added disconcertedly. “I’m not interested in world wars right now, buzzard. I’ve got a personal hate of my own that comes first. Compree?”

The Cuckoo didn’t compree, but the black ugly look on Johnny Walker’s face made him announce that he did. He craved no private demonstration of the giant pilot’s anger. A man who thought nothing of cursing out a G.H.Q. general, would have no qualms about destroying just an ordinary war bird.

To the best of his ability, he answered Johnny’s puzzling questions.

“Yes, the pigeon would live. The freak shot had only grazed it.”

Johnny smiled his pleasure, gazed long and intently upon the Cuckoo’s worried face and finally spoke.

“Buzzard, I can see it in your face that you think I’m balmy, and I don’t mind telling you that you’re more than half right. I am. I’m crazy with grief.”

“Jerry?” asked the Cuckoo in sympathy. Johnny nodded and poured out what was in his mind in a way that left the listening Cuckoo to entertain doubts as to whether Johnny wasn’t all crazy.

“That pigeon and message that you’re holding there are of no value to the Allies the way they are now,” he argued. “Everyone knows by now—with the exception of Germany herself—that von Bulow’s army is not going to come through and help the Vaterland win the war. We, the Cuckoos rubbed von Bulow out of the picture, so I say to give the pigeon a two-hour rest and set him free with his message.”

A slow smile of understanding spread over the Cuckoo’s face. Perhaps Johnny Walker wasn’t as crazy as he had sounded at first.

“Just as you say, buzzard,” the Cuckoo agreed. “And I’m only asking one question. It’s something to do with Jerry, isn’t it?”

Johnny tried to answer, and choked on the words. The Cuckoo’s arm went around Johnny’s shoulders. “I’ll go the limit for you, buzzard,” he assured his grieving comrade. The incident was closed.

At the expiration of two hours, Johnny could be certain that the carrier pigeon would be freed to continue on its interrupted flight.

With a parting handclasp Johnny quit the phone room and hurried along the passage to his own cubicle. There was much to do, including a five-kilo hike to Marie’s *buvette* in the next two hours. Quickly he shed his flying togs, insignias, ornaments—even his identification tag. Such was the strict rule of the Cuckoos. A Cuckoo leaving the confines of the Nest was to carry nothing on his person that would betray the fact that he was one of the much-talked-about mystery pilots. Johnny donned a nondescript uniform, dropped a forty-five caliber automatic into one pocket, a pair of field glasses into another, and started out. He felt more buoyant now that he was going on Jerry’s business.

At the hidden machine-gun pill-box that protected the Cuckoos’ Nest from ground attack, he stopped for a moment to chat with the men of the detail. They had heard the noise of the battle back in the mountains, and were worried. But when he told them how the scrap had gone, they immediately relaxed. Only the sergeant in charge appeared more lugubrious than ever. As he diplomatically put it to Johnny,

“Being attached to the Cuckoos, sir, has it disadvantages as well as honors. Here we have a perfectly good reason in to-day’s victory for a binge, but where are we going to get the necessary ingredients? Three months we’ve been here now, sir, and I might add, truthfully, without a drink. Because we’re just enlisted men, we’re not allowed outside this military area. So it looks as though we’ll have to forswear binges until we all meet again in an old soldier’s home.”

“Maybe not, old-timer,” grinned Johnny. “It comes to me now that this little promenade of mine concerns a visit to a certain *buvette*. There’s a skinny possibility that I might like the place; and if I should, why, I’ll just take over said *buvette* and make a present of it to you boys. And that’s no foolin’.” And with a good-natured “So long, soldiers, I’ll see you at the binge,” he was gone.

Long after his cheery whistle had died out down the road, a slow-thinking buck turned to the sergeant and asked, “You think that bird was kiddin’ us, sarge?”

“Well, now,” hazarded the sergeant reflectively. “If he’d been any other kind of a breed, I’d a said, yes. But that bird’s a Cuckoo and there’s no limit to what them dizzy birds can accomplish. Take that scrap to-day for instance.”

The buck subsided hopefully to daydream of all the wine and cognac he could hold if given the opportunity.

Johnny’s long strides down, the little-traveled mountain road soon put kilos behind him. Marie would accept him as one of the many supposed deserters from the Allied armies that had been seeking a haven in the Vosges of late. Cuckoos, seeking an evening’s recreation at her poorly patronized *buvette* were careful to give the old crone the impression that they were such. Johnny had accompanied Jerry there once before, but the thin vile wine that Marie dispensed had not appealed to his taste. Hence this would be only his second visit. He fell to wondering whether Marie would recall him as Jerry’s comrade of that night. If she did, his plans would have to be changed somewhat. He reached the beginning of the S turn in the road and stopped by an overturned kilo marker to compose himself. Here he would wait and hope for a fleeting hunch to materialize into a tangible link that might connect with Jerry’s murderer.

A moment he stood so, then crossed the road and swiftly climbed the high embankment to sprawl out on its summit, hidden from sight behind a thin growth of mountain scrub. A wide sweeping eye search, aided by the field glasses, and he located the object of his hunt—Marie’s *buvette*. Carefully he studied it at his leisure. The littered yard, the rooting pig, and the half a dozen scrawny chickens. From the uninviting appearance of the establishment, he got the impression that Marie was not interested in building up patronage. His glasses took in everything as they mounted to the roof. The field-stone chimney with the wisp of smoke curling up from it. And at last they rested on a cupolalike structure that squatted in the center of the flat roof; evidently it served as an outlet and ventilator for the stuffy interior of the *buvette*. About to swing his glasses away, Johnny quickly changed his mind. Inside the structure he had caught the flash of a moving object. Understanding came to him like the shock of cold water. Tense and alert he lay there. His hunch was revving up; he was staring

at a pigeon coop. Somehow he felt that Jerry must have discovered it, too, and paid the penalty with his life. The next few minutes would help him to decide definitely whether Marie was just the grasping *buvette* proprietor she professed to be, or something more sinister and dangerous.

QUICK glance at his watch showed four-twenty. Exactly two hours and fifteen minutes ago, he had quit the Nest. With a start he was on his knees, staring through the glasses at a fluttering pigeon that had circled down to light on Marie's roof. There was no mistaking. Johnny had studied the bird's markings closely before he had left the Nest. White breast, brown wings and white tips. Hell, that spot on the breast was a blood stain. Snakelike, he crawled to the edge, slid down the embankment and hit the road at a run. A moment later he noisily entered the yard singing and whistling as if without a care in the world. A deliberate scrape of his boot in the gravel frightened the pig into squealing flight.

"Marie," he called loudly, "make ready! A guest with the francs to pay for it demands wine."

The sudden change from sunlight to the dimness of the *buvette* found him blinking just inside the doorway. "Marie," he bellowed once more, "come, beautiful daughter of two purple camels or, *nom d'un nom*, I shall serve myself and leave no pay."

The sudden clump-clump of wooden sabots overhead, sent Johnny's hand to the automatic in his pocket.

"Coming, *mon brave*," answered the crone's croaking voice from above, and soon she came bowing and whining through the door that separated her living quarters from the *buvette* proper to welcome him.

Johnny tried hard for a glimpse of her face, but the poor light thwarted him. Of one thing he was sure—his sudden arrival had interfered with some important business that Marie had been attending to up in the attic. She led him to a table, and he noticed that she was careful to place him so that the light from the doorway shone directly upon him.

"Fortune smiled on me to-day, Marie," he announced with a laugh. "I found ten dead soldiers of the Boche and as many more of your dearly beloved *poilus*. The fact that they happened to have much money and—er—shall I say—jeweled souvenirs in their pockets was of especial benefit to me."

Marie took the bait. Crablike she scuttled over

to the bar, and returned with a bottle of cognac and glasses. Facing her across the table, Johnny noticed that her hand slopped the liquor as she poured it.

"Then there was a battle," she hissed, as if to convince herself about the truth of some past thought. "Many were killed, and of which side? Tell Maria, *mon enfant*," she wheedled and refilled his empty glass. "I think of my poor sons who are somewhere fighting the cause of France."

Johnny protested that he was hungry and demanded food. But Marie, eager to learn what he knew, bewailed the fact that not so much as a single vegetable was inside her poor home. "But there are chickens outside in the yard," Johnny persisted doggedly.

But Marie met the emergency. "Bah, *mon brave*, they are poor and old as Marie herself," she countered.

Johnny feigned resentment only to rise the next instant with his face turned ceilingward. "Ah, old sweetheart," he exclaimed triumphantly, "my ears tell me that pigeons are mating in your attic, and when pigeons mate, there are squabs." He could not see the effect his innocent-sounding discovery had on Marie, but he could hear her breathing hard.

"Pets of my sons, *mon enfant*," she explained after a long pause. "I would sooner starve than kill one of them. Drink and tell Marie of the battle."

Grumbling at her lack of hospitality, Johnny made a pretense of complying with her wishes. He drank no more. Thanks to the gloom of the room, it was no great feat to toss the drinks—that she steadily poured—over his shoulder without being detected. He talked more thickly and freely as time passed.

It was a fantastic and impossible battle picture that he painted for her special benefit, boasting drunkenly of having witnessed the damn fools killing each other while he enjoyed the spectacle from the protection of a ledge high up on Mount Mimi.

"The Boche swine thought they were clever," he confided. "Came sneakin' through the mountains tryin' to steal a march, but the Allies weren't asleep. For once they acted on the information of their secret agents and sent three French divisions into the Vosges to trap the unsuspecting Boche."

"Did they succeed?" Marie demanded hoarsely.

"Not yet," he gravely assured her, "but they will mebbe to-night, mebbe to-morrow. They sent one division ahead to worry the Boche, while the other two are diggin' in on both slopes of the Agres Valley. The Boche will have to pass through there, an' it'll be just

too bad for them, and goo' luck for me."

His head thumped on the table and he snored. But his hands clenched as he heard Marie's hiss. "*Schwein.*" He came near betraying himself when a stolen glance revealed her slipping silently and swiftly across the floor to disappear into the living quarters. As the door closed behind her, he looked under the table to peer at the pair of sabots she had removed.

"Quietly as his huge bulk would permit, he arose and followed. Something clanked metallically on the other side of the door, followed by the thump of a heavy object that shook the floor under his feet. Johnny waited until all was quiet once more, reached for his automatic, pushed open the heavy door and stepped quickly into the room. A quick glance proved it to be deserted, but an open trap in the floor gave him the answer. About to take a cautious step toward it, he froze in that position. A man was talking down there. Johnny heard the muffled voice, but could not distinguish the words. A hard grin of anticipation lighted his features. Instinct told him that he was close to Jerry's slayers, and that was all that counted for the present. The spying Marie and her intrigues could wait.

A step at a time he eased his way to the opening and looked down into the dimly lighted cellar. The low muffled voice reached his ears plainly now, speaking in German. Getting down on hands and knees, he cautiously ducked his head below the floor level and blinked his eyes in astonishment. But for Marie, the cellar was empty of human occupation. She sat with her back to the steps, ear-phones were on her head, and she was reading from a paper that she held in her hand, and talking into a mouthpiece. Johnny recognized the piece of paper as being similar to the one in the capsule on the carrier pigeon's leg.

Of one point he was convinced. Marie was the vital connection between enemy agents operating in the Allies' lines and Germany's great *Nachrichtament*. No great elations filled him at the importance of his capture. Jerry's slayer was the quarry he sought. He could drop his masquerade now and be brutally frank with the old hag, Marie. Threatened with a firing squad for treachery, no doubt she would break down and clear up the mystery of Jerry's death.

WITH nothing to fear, he dropped the gun back in his pocket and stole quietly down the steps to assume a careless lounging position at the bottom, and wait for Marie to finish her conversation. Her surprise at

finding him there would be to his advantage. As he waited, he fell to wondering at the change of tone in Marie's voice. Her French was shrill and nasal; yet her German was husky and guttural.

Finally she stopped talking, removed the ear-phones, and with her back still toward him arose and returned the phones to a hidden wall receptacle.

"Well, my intriguing beauty, how was his Imperial Highness's health this morning?" Johnny gratingly inquired.

Catlike, she whirled with a hissing gasp of half-fear, half-astonishment.

"Well," he jeered, "I'm waiting for the latest news from Pottsdam."

Slowly she retreated to the wall, striving mightily to regain her control. To bandy words with the narrow-eyed, mocking man, idly standing there enjoying her discomfiture, would avail nothing, but Marie had another and more deadly way of removing people who threatened to cut short her service to the Vaterland. A hand stole into a pocket in her skirt and came out again, holding a menacing Luger that pointed directly at Johnny's quivering middle. Confident of his ability to handle the ancient crone with his hands, he had allowed himself to be caught off guard. Bewildered and stunned, he continued to stand as he was while Marie reviled him. A strange change had come over her. No longer was she bent and crippled. Her taunting laugh was the deep-toned laughter of a man.

"Fool," she snarled, "your American chivalry in dealing with women has cost you your life. If this wasn't war, I could almost spare you for your courtesy to skirts and old age. But already you have seen too much. It must be a virtue that you Americans exercise to a fault. For your important description of what took place to-day in the mountains, I, Captain Henry Maria, thank you on behalf of Germany."

Johnny merely glanced at the wig that the erstwhile Marie, *buvette* keeper, removed from his head. It was too late now to be interested in such things. Death was stalking into the cellar. Johnny saw no mercy in the German's glittering eyes. Soon a bullet would thump into his vitals and it would be over. He had failed.

"And now, *Herr Amerikaner*," continued the German, "I must close your eyes forever as I was forced to for another of your countrymen less than forty-eight hours ago. It is remarkable. He too, refused to use his pistol on an old woman. He tried to escape after I turned the tables on him, but they do not crawl far with my bullets in their bodies."

The German laughed coldly as if in appreciation of his own marksmanship. The Luger steadied in his hand as he took aim. His voice dropped to a feline purr. "You'll probably meet him in hell, *Herr Amerikaner*. His name was Coyne, I believe."

Johnny's muscles contracted spasmodically. His feet left the floor, and he plunged through space with outstretched arms in a lunging flying tackle. The startled German's gun exploded harmlessly. Johnny's arms closed about the man's thighs and catapulted him back against the wall with bone-breaking force. A scream of pain escaped the German's lips, and he fought desperately to get his Luger into play. Twice more it blazed before Johnny's powerful right hand, that closed on the German's wrist like a steel band, forced him to release it. Hammerlike blows to his body and head knocked the fight out of him. Wildly, he pleaded for his life. He'd face a firing squad, anything in preference to a death like this. But if the raging fury that smashed and beat him hard, it only increased the power of his blows. This cold-blooded killer had shot Jerry Coyne and boasted about it.

With an animal-like growl, the berserk Johnny surged to an upright position, with the squirming, praying German held high over his head. For a moment he rocked there on his wide-spread feet, summoning all the strength in his body. A downward sweep of his mighty arms, and the German's twisting body went hurtling against the stone wall. A last scream of terror that ended in a sickening crunch, and Johnny was staring dully at the twitching broken thing on the floor that had been a man. Jerry was avenged.

A pain in his shoulder and something that trickled warm and wet down Johnny's arm to drip off his fingers, warned him that he'd better be getting back to the Nest. Captain Henry Maria's much vaunted marksmanship had failed him when he had needed it the most.

Hours later, he fell rather than climbed across the barrier that masked the Nest trail from the road. A grinning sergeant helped him to his feet, and whistled to a lounging pair of bucks to help him with Johnny's sagging weight.

"Guess you found that *buvette* you were speaking of, sir," the sergeant hazarded politely.

A wan smile lifted the corners of Johnny's mouth. They thought he was drunk, and he saw no reason for disillusioning them. For he was drunk—drunk with satisfaction. The wound in his shoulder was nothing. A couple of days and he's be all okay again.

"Sergeant," he mumbled weakly, "I promised you birds the wherewithal for a roaring binge, and a Cuckoo keeps his promises." Haltingly he gave them the location of the late Marie's *buvette*, and suggested that they awaken and send a squad of their off-duty buddies after the liquor. "One thing more, though," he warned the sergeant. "Warn your men to keep away from there after to-night for to-morrow I'm going to do a bit of egg laying on that place." He slumped in their arms for a moment, and braced again. "Sarge," he inquired, "you know where they buried my—my buddy this morning, don't you? Well, help me up there, like a good scout."

The sergeant did better than that. He had four of his willing men literally carry the half-unconscious Johnny up to the fresh mound where Jerry Coyne slept. He requested that they let him stand alone, and as they stood respectfully in the background with heads uncovered, they heard his low voice.

"I got him, Jerry lad. Sent him to hell the way he deserved. Maybe you can see him from where you are looking down. Good night, Jerry boy."

Strong arms caught Johnny as he conked out, and the blasphemous sergeant swore feelingly in a silent buck's ear.

"Soldier, when they named these birds the Cuckoos, they named them right. They're all crazy as hell. Can you imagine this buzzard, wounded himself, letting on he's drunk for no reason at all, and then coming up here to talk to a dead buddy. No wonder they win wars. They do everything so wrong that they're right. Can you beat it?"

"Hell, you can't even tie it, sarge," agreed the buck, as they gently carried Johnny Walker to the infirmary to be patched up.