



CHALLENGE OF THE CUCKOOS

by ALEXIS ROSOFF

Boche eyes pierced through the skies, and that band of forgotten buzzards huddled with the only fear they knew— discovery and then return to the rotten disgrace of Blois. But out of that strange group of outcasts came “Limey” Barrow ready to play that shivering game with death on the last hunch that his sweetheart, Lady Luck, would not turn him down. Another sensational yarn of those renegades of the air—the Cuckoos!

AN EXPECTANT HUSH SETTLED on the restless Cuckoos as Johnny Walker’s huge bulk suddenly loomed large in the doorway of the recreation room. Speculative eyes traveled from the big pilot’s inscrutable face to the piece of paper that he held in his hand. Would it be good news or bad? For the past forty-eight hours a sky full of searching Jerry planes and the law of self-preservation had compelled the Cuckoos to remain hidden and inactive in their underground nest, with hair-trigger nerves taut in rebellion. They had been warned by the mysterious G.H.Q. personage in far-off Chaumont who presided over their destinies; told in no uncertain terms of the great price set on their heads by vengeful Imperial Germany. Much to the Cuckoos’ surprise, it had been suggested that they abandon the Nest and wing to safety before it was too late. A glowing word picture had been painted to them over

the wire. Allied G.H.Q., deeply appreciative of the magnificent part the renegade Cuckoos had played in turning Germany’s all-too-recent threatened drive on Paris into a little-hoped-for great Allied victory, were desirous of rewarding the Cuckoos handsomely. As individuals, they were to be decorated, their past violations of military law would be overlooked and forgotten. Former military ranks were to be restored and once again they would take their places in the flying units that general courts-martial had removed them from.

G.H.Q. meant well, but failed to consider the Cuckoos’ odd mental reaction to the offer. It is a natural law that opposites attract and the Cuckoos were just so many prize human opposites. Wrecked and blown to oblivion by the strong winds of military discipline, their troubled flights had ended in that boneyard of washed-out pilots—Blois. There strange

birds met, rubbed wings, confided in each other and found courage to carry on again, helped by the whispered rumors that somewhere out there just beyond the horizon a war bird's paradise, inhabited by renegade angels, existed. In time, vague rumors had grown to joyous reality for a chosen few of the blackbirds—and they became Cuckoos—and were content for the first time during the war in that fighting flock of consolidated opposites.

Mike Forbes—doing the listening hop in the phone room that particular day—had repeated G.H.Q.'s offer aloud as it came over the wire from Chaumont and immediately elected himself a committee of one to answer for the silent Cuckoos crowded about him. No vote had been called for. Worried expressions on their war-bitten faces had portrayed the trend of troubled thoughts as fear of the promised future touched them. The Cuckoos broken up, they—the parts—would be flying into the fog of disgrace and Blois for the second time, before three months elapsed. Of that they were positive. They wanted no honors nor restoration to duty. To be left alone as the Cuckoos was all that they desired.

When the voice of G.H.Q. had had its say, angry mutterings filled the room, but Mike Forbes had quieted them with a wave of his hand. They heard him clear his throat, and inched closer, the better to hear what he said into the mouthpiece, and to choke him into silence if necessary. But Forbes needed no choking. Being a Cuckoo and secure in the knowledge that many kilos and thousands of retreating Jerries were between him and the unknown G.H.Q. high ranker, he had voiced the sentiments of the Cuckoos.

Classified as deserters for having hopped over the horizon from Blois without official sanction they preferred to remain as such. As for the promised decorations, the Cuckoos didn't want any. A talking machine, some new records, a few worth while flying replacements, and a bundle of good American cigarettes would more than repay them.

Those Cuckoos standing within a radius of ten feet heard the explosive, "Damned fools," that came crackling back over the wire and grinned their relief as Mike Forbes had answered mildly, "Yes, sir. Granted. And that's why G.H.Q. had better leave us here. For, only fools rush in where angels fear to tread and right now you'll admit, sir, that there's no angels hankering to spread wings over the Vosges."

It was a jubilant scene that followed. Cuckoos shook hands with each other and demanded of Mike Forbes that he tell them what the G.H.Q. had said.

"He didn't say much and yet he said a lot," Mike had answered. "Just a cross between an angry and a resigned, 'Aw, nuts.'"

One Cuckoo was for destroying the phone then and there. "G.H.Q. is liable to change its mind," he had argued. But the majority had overruled him. Much as the Cuckoos desired to be apart from the world, they still were curious as to what was going on out there. There were dark moments in the dragging hours that ensued when many of them secretly fell to wondering if after all they had been too hasty in rejecting G.H.Q.'s proposition. Germany now was fully convinced that the Cuckoos were not merely Allied propaganda, as Imperial headquarters had first believed, and was determined to prevent a recurrence of the mysterious whirlwind that had suddenly appeared to surprise and annihilate von Bulow's unprepared army in the Vosges. Swift flights of Jerry Fokkers and Albatrosses made their mistakes and flew their gauntlet of continuous archie fire and combative Allied birdmen in desperate but vain attempts to locate the Cuckoos' drome behind the Allied Front.

EVEN Germany's great gatherer of information—the *Nachrichtamant*—failed in the quest for information. Hundreds of captured prisoners of war questioned and threatened by Jerry intelligence officers proved but one thing in the end—they knew less about the Cuckoos than did the *Nachrichtamant*. Baffled, Imperial headquarters would have given much to know right then that the flock of war birds, whom they were so frantically seeking, were actually cooped up, imprisoned, in recently acquired German territory.

Realization of that fact alone is all that kept up the Cuckoos' morale. As one phlegmatic Cuckoo stated to a disgruntled comrade, "Hell, we're famous, so stop beefing. Jerry's promised more Iron Crosses than old Hindenburg himself wears, to the loyal son who can decorate us Cuckoos with the order of the Iron Egg."

"Okay, buzzard," the growling one had admitted. "But another day of this sittin' around like an accident waitin' for a place to happen and I'll be goin' out and askin' some stray Jerry to decorate me."

Inwardly, they were all thinking seriously of doing the same thing about the time Johnny Walker made his timely appearance in the doorway.

"Gorblimey, 'e stands there like a blinking h'owl," "Limey" Barrow complained impatiently as the cards he had been riffling so expertly erupted from strangely shaking fingers. A score of voices demanding that he "spill the oil" eventually stirred Walker into speech.

“Bad news, buzzards,” he rumbled ominously, and then explained. “The skipper just called up, advising us that we’re getting eight new buzzards for the flock. They’ll be coming in pairs, two a day for the next four days.”

“And ’e calls that bad news, buzzards,” Limey Barrow scornfully interrupted, “and we, ’ere, are starving for the sight of a new face.”

A Cuckoo’s big hand over Limey’s mouth silenced the little pilot. Walker grinned his thanks, and continued, “Which means, buzzards, that a flock of decent birds are going to be knocked into the great perhaps without even a fighting chance of ever reaching the Cuckoos’ Nest.”

Every Cuckoo present caught the inference behind Johnny’s words.

“God!” an understanding pilot muttered aloud. “The sky they’ll have to fly through fairly stinks with Jerry planes.”

“And that isn’t the half of it, buzzard,” Johnny added worriedly. “Jerry’s no fool. Much as he’d like to pull out a Cuckoo’s tail feathers on sight, he’d postpone that pleasure if he thought there was a skinny chance that said doomed Cuckoo might lead him to the Cuckoos’ Nest.”

An electrifying oath from an aroused pilot brought the Cuckoos up standing, alive to the danger that threatened.

“Why in hell didn’t you head them off over the phone?” one demanded belligerently.

“Tried to, buzzard,” Walker added without ire, “but the first two had already hopped.”

A badly rattled Cuckoo cursed G.H.Q. and all that it stood for. “A damned war reaching from here to hell,” he raved, “and they got the guts to send us recruits high-tailing through the middle of it. Looks like G.H.Q. wants Jerry to find us.”

Other voices added vitriolic comments—and then Walker took the situation in hand. Quickly, he strode across the floor, his heavy fist thumped against the table top with a crack like the report of a gun, silencing them.

“Call yourselves Cuckoos, winged hellions, and a lot more swell sounding names,” he growled. “Strutting your stuff when the flyin’ is serene but the minute Jerry says ‘boo’ and the scrapping gets tough, you’re just so many scared canaries.”

With an angry snarl, a raging pilot started toward Walker but a restraining hand that gripped his arm pulled him back. “Steady, buzzard,” a calm voice

warned in the raging one’s ear. “Walker’s nursing a wounded arm in a sling.”

The pilot’s anger cooled. Johnny, who had been waiting, ready, relaxed. The deliberately insulting tongue-lashing was getting results. They’d fight anything now.

“You’ll take that statement back of your own accord, Walker, or else have it punched down your throat,” another glowering Cuckoo announced.

“Says you,” Johnny mocked, then conceded. “I’ll retract my accusation, Forbes, when your actions prove otherwise. And until then, I’m inviting punches in the mouth, compre?”

The Cuckoo flushed guiltily, hunched his wide shoulders, only to subside a split second later with an abashed, “Aw, what in hell’s the sense of you and me battling, buzzard. I, for one, admit that I’ve been buzzing around like a haywire June bug, making a lot of noise and going no place. You got something revving up in your brain tank, Johnny, so let’s hear it. I’m apologizing and the rest of these kiwis are listening.”

This, coming from Mike Forbes—whose fistic ability was a legend in the A.E.F.—put an end to threatened hostilities. Lapsing into respectful silence, they crowded around Johnny and he told them bluntly what had to be done.

“Tricks, brains or subterfuge can’t help in a case like this, buzzards,” he announced flatly. “One of us has got to get clear of the nest here and head hell-bent for the Frog drome at Seidon. If the bird that goes is lucky, he’ll get there in time to head off those two replacements before they have a chance to refuel and start winging this way. And if he’s not lucky” Walker paused, blew a significant kiss from his finger tips and added—“we’ll all meet again as angels.”

Silence, pregnant with emotion, settled on the room. It was Limey Barrow who eventually broke the spell.

“Joimes,” he shrilled in a high nasal voice. “Lay out me flying togs. Believing meself to be the favorite of Dame Fortune, I intend to invite the Old Girl for a joy hop just to prove that she isn’t a fickle jade.”

Still insisting that he be the one to go. Limey was good-naturedly shunted into the background. They liked the little Canadian, and while ready to admit that his red raw fighting guts would probably get him through, that wasn’t the Cuckoo way of doing things.

“Don’t h’l h’always win at cards and dice?” Limey continued to protest.

"Yeah," admitted one of his victims, "but that's not luck. That's what we Yanks describe as 'the quickness of the hand deceives the eye.'"

"Granted, and not," snapped Limey. "But it's luck when you dods don't catch me."

A ROAR of merriment greeted Limey's argument. The tension had snapped. The Cuckoos were themselves once more—ready to dice with doom.

"Let's all cut cards, then," suggested Limey, still confident that his deft fingers would win him the assignment in the end. Thunderously, the suggestion was howled down by Cuckoos who sensed what the little pilot was thinking. But there was no thwarting him. Limey, determined to win the nomination, rolled a fast one off his mental wings.

The picture of outraged innocence, he grieved aloud. "You paint me as a blinking blackbird, but I'll prove to you that I'm Lady Luck's little sweet'art. To the mess 'all," he invited, "and I'll let the Old Girl prove it to you, 'erself. But first, let's call the 'angar and 'ave the crew warm up a bus."

That attended to, they sat wonderingly around the long mess table, slapping at the buzzing flies but never taking their suspicious eyes off Limey, busy among the cook's cans and barrels at the far end of the room. Finally, finding what he had been seeking and scooping up a double handful, he turned to the impatient Cuckoos.

"It's an old Chinese game," he explained as he moved quickly from place to place, allowing a small white mound to trickle from his cupped hands in front of each Cuckoo. "Just sugar," he grinned, "and the buzzard wot eats 'is, is out of the contest, so keep your 'ands in your laps."

Three times he made the trip to the cook's supply shelf before the stage was set, then standing in his own place he spoke to Walker, "Your crippled arm eliminates you, buzzard, so you'll be the judge. The rules are simple. We all 'ave our little pile of sugar. You give the word, 'ready,' and the first pile that a fly makes a landing on, the buzzard wot owns it goes. Fair enough?" They all agreed that it was. Limey sat down with a grin and Johnny gave the word. Nervously, each Cuckoo leaned forward on his stool with eyes staring. A buzzing fly hovered over Mike Forbes' pile for a fleeting instant. Mike, fascinated, held his breath to the bursting point, then hissed a vicious oath as the fly flew off.

Limey, seated directly opposite, laughed softly and taunted. "'E was looking for me, Mike."

As the drama of the strange game seeped into them, their nervousness increased. Men's lives hung in the balance, all depending upon the selection made by a harmless fly. Perspiration broke out on foreheads; jaw muscles bunched.

"God! What a game," a shaky Cuckoo grated as he saw himself for the third time less than one inch from the rendezvous with death that would await the winner. Only Limey Barrow seemed to be enjoying the contest.

"Come to papa, little one," he chuckled. "'E's sitting right 'ere waiting for you."

With a loud buzz, a droning bluebottle dropped down from nowhere to answer the grinning Limey's plea.

"Who's Lady Luck's sweet'art now?" he demanded loudly, pointing to the feasting fly that rested on his sugar mound.

For a moment, the Cuckoos sat as if stunned, following the little pilot's hurried triumphant flight to the door only with their eyes.

"Toodle-oo," he bade over his shoulder. "A love bird wings to an h'appointment with the smiling goddess," and was gone.

"Love bird, hell," muttered a disappointed but admiring Cuckoo. "That little buzzard's all eagle—"

"And a damned swindler, too," came the startling interruption from a redfaced Cuckoo. "This stuff isn't sugar—it's salt, taste it."

Tentative tastes were taken all around the table and a blasphemous growling broke out. The only sugar on the boards rested in front of Limey Barrow's hastily vacated place. Once more the little pilot had proven that his hands were quicker than their eyes. A wild rush started from the room, but Johnny Walker's big frame blocked the doorway.

"Let the little tyke go, buzzards," he intervened. "I admit that he put one over but you can't hate him. He cheated for a chance to end up with altitude minus six feet and a busted prop at his head for a tombstone."

As the meaning of Johnny's words registered, the Cuckoos saw Limey Barrow in a different light. No more was said. As one, they moved along the passage to stand silent in the opening that gave a clear view of the tarmac, yet protected them from any enemy eyes that might be above.

The muffled roar of a kapok'-smothered engine came to them from a near-by, tiny, camouflaged hangar. The canvas back-wall had been raised to escape the fury of the prop wash, and a coverlled

figure could be seen crouching there behind a shielding flap, with field glasses to eyes, scanning the heavens.

Satisfied, the figure ducked back inside. The front wall parted in the middle, and a taxiing Spad that bore no cocarde or identifying number rolled carefully out, picked up flying speed in a short full-gunned rush, and fled the Cuckoos' Nest with the swift flashing flight of a frightened hawk.

Limey Barrow, who had cheated for the right to joust with death in the tilting ground of the sky, was gone.

They saw him slant across a sawtoothed rock barrier in the distance that rimmed their mountain aerie, and sent a flock of makeshift, but none the less earnest, prayers speeding after his tail.

The ground crew expertly removed the telltale wheel tracks that the Spad had left on the tarmac. Pilots went back to their incessant card playing and once more the Cuckoos' Nest was apparently the dried lake bottom that scouting Jerry birdmen saw and believed to be.

LIMEY BARROW, being pulled closer to the war and probable death with each rev of the Spad's prop, was no longer the laughing devil-may-care pilot whom the Cuckoos knew so well.

The windrush of heavy projectiles—going places—and the swirling powder-gas clouds away off to the right and left of the rolling Vosges foothills, changed him to a cagey, iron-feathered bird. There was no comfort for him in the knowledge that the Boche were sullenly retreating all along the Front, being driven back by the jubilant fury of the Allies, for he knew from experience that a retiring army fights with its eyes turned backward. Soon he'd be discovered.

Limey warmed up his guns with a burst or two and backsticked the Spad up to a place in the sun. A Jerry rubber cow, teetering at the end of its cable, invited him but Limey declined the challenge. The safety of the Cuckoos' Nest hinged upon his reaching the French airdrome at Seidon in the shortest possible time. There, at Hell's Hop-off—as the Cuckoos who had won to the paradise of the Nest referred to the Seidon drome—he hoped to find the replacements. All candidates for the outlaw flock, upon quitting Blois, were instructed to refuel and check over their ships at that particular Frog front-line drome. To most of the blackbird pilots it was an incomprehensible waste of valuable time but to the keen quiet officer.

Captain Greb by name, who stayed in voluntary exile at Blois—despite the fact that he was both the creator of the Cuckoos' Nest and responsible for its fighting occupants—the ordered landings at Seidon were no mystery.

“Psychology,” he told himself. Birds suddenly freed from the black hopelessness of Blois were bound to be nervous and jumpy concerning the future. The stop-over at Seidon gave them the opportunity to smoke, pull themselves together and get oriented for the last perilous leg of the flight to the nest.

Limey, with every faculty alert, kept the Spad's tail lined on the fast disappearing Vosges behind and the spinning prop pointed for the thinnest place in the powder clouds ahead. Nearing the dangerous Front that he had yet to hurdle, he spotted a fast moving flight that failed identification. Taking no chances, he ruddered to pass behind them and reached for the ceiling. Continuing to watch, he was startled to see the flight break formation and start in his direction. Haywired by impending danger, he skidded the Spad around in an instinctive desire to high-tail for home. Like a hawk-pursued dove, he began to retrace his course.

Then the big-man's courage that filled Limey's small body asserted itself. He'd cheated for this chance and, damn it all, he'd brazen it out. Hell, wasn't he Lady Luck's sweet' eart?

Half-turned in the seat, he looked back to see a skyful of war birds engaged in a raging bird battle. To save himself, do his duty, or to play a hunch, was the problem confronting him.

With a vicious snap he stickmauled the bus into a steep banking turn and pointed for the scrap. A born gambler, he'd play the hunch. Fate's voice had whispered to him that there, in the midst of the swirling dogfight, he'd find the two embryo Cuckoos he had been seeking. Quickly, the powerful Hisso engine put him into the mad dance of death. Nieuports that flaunted the proud gamecock of France gyrated crazily with green-striped Fokker D-7s on both sides of each careening ship. Pfaltzes and Hals tangled tails with Bristols and Spads. Jerry birdmen were making one last mighty effort to maintain the air supremacy that had been theirs throughout the past week, but the rejuvenated Allies were equally determined that they shouldn't.

Limey went to shooting with a vengeance. He scared a Jerry off a trapped Bristol's tail with a well directed burst, and roared on to make a blazing

descendu of another tricky Jerry who had been lurking for a cold-meat victim on the edge of the fight. A burning, out-of-control Nieuport forced Limey to seek safety and a breather above its plunging path. The first savage exuberance of combat worn off, thought of his mission came back to him. Warily, he circled the battle with restless roving eyes and a thumb ready on the stick trigger.

A chance glimpse of a Spad which bore no markings shooting it out with a vengeful wasp of a Fokker, set Limey's heart to pounding furiously. His hunch had materialized. Well he knew the identity of the Spad. A nameless, numberless ship as indefinite as the mysterious Cuckoos themselves.

A slanting Pfaltz, with flame-tipped Spandaus that hurled a burst of steel through his bus's fuselage, snapped Limey's thoughts back to the important bird business at hand.

As always, he did the unexpected; he nosed the Spad down in a dive and thanked his Lady Luck as the searching ghost fingers of enemy tracers slapped harmlessly through the space he would have occupied had he sent the bus up in a book-prescribed zoom. Swooping out far below, he went to trench-hopping over wildly vindictive gray-clad ground troops who filled the air around him with whining steel stuff, driving him back up into his own element. A glance told him that the Allied buzzards were feeding Jerry huge chunks of bitter hell and making him like it. A stricken Fokker staggered out of the fight, hung for an instant, then started down in a flat spin trailing a black funeral plume of oil smoke in its wake. Limey stonily looked away.

OTHER fiercely burning pyres that dotted the earth offered mute testimony that many war birds had shed earthly wings that day, for spirit ones.

Flying a cautious, twisting route through the tumult that still raged on with unabated fury, Limey suddenly happened on a limping Spad. Anxiously, he gunned in close and wing-dressed on it. What he saw brought a sob and a curse welling up into his throat at the same time. The Spad's pilot was done. The shattered goggles, the blood-streaked face, and the man's lifeless arm that dangled outside the cockpit told as much. Torn with anguish Limey helplessly followed the Spad's erratic course, to rave like a madman when a darting Jerry streaked toward the doomed ship.

"God." A moan escaped his lips. "Can't you see that he's dead?"

With reckless decision he turned his own bus in a blind, wire-straining skid that threatened a prop-on collision. The on-coming Jerry strove frantically to avoid a crash with this insane pilot who dared to dispute his right to count coup on a victim that was already in the victory bag. He managed to do so by a matter of inches, only to meet a violent death in the next second from the vagrant wind devils that guided the first Spad into the hurtling Jerry's path.

Limey, half stunned from surprise and the deafening report of the terrific impact that followed, spent the next few moments in an anxious fight to right his own out-of-control ship. When he did find time to look back and down, two planes—one a Spad, the other a Fokker—hopelessly wing-locked, were dropping out of the war and the world.

"A short flight, and a merry one," he soliloquized sadly, then added, "and I'll be seeing you one of these days, buzzard."

A veteran war bird, he had learned to regard death as just one more beautiful adventure. Some day Lady Luck would quit him cold. But until she did— With a guilty start and a muttered "Gorblimey, there's a ruddy war going on 'ere" he settled down to serious flying, only to be jarred loose from his good intentions for the second time in as many minutes. He was staring at, and being stared at in turn, by a white-helmeted pilot in a battle-scarred Spad that was the twin of his own ship—the second Cuckoo replacement.

The pilot was making no pretense of his own puzzlement over Limey's sudden appearance. He, too, had witnessed the violent dusting-off of his late comrade. Those two had come through the Cuckoo-making machinery at Blois, made the hop from the plane supply depot at Le Bourget to Seidon together, and there attached themselves to the French squadron that had just been ordered to take part in this major air offensive. Now one of them had gone on the last long flight into the West.

Limey recovered first and, knowing the solution to the seeming mystery which was evidently worrying the white-helmeted pilot, he began to explain in pantomime. He rapped on his own fuselage that bore no cocarde or identifying mark, then pointed to the other pilot's Spad and ended up by shaking hands with himself. The white helmet nodded in understanding as they both grinned at each other across intervening space.

Limey, quick to note that the swirling bird battle had drifted from beneath them, revved up a plan of

his own. Another forty-five minutes would bring the first graying sky of the fast approaching night. Under its masking protection, he could afford to take a chance and lead this new pilot as far as the Cuckoos' rendezvous over the shell-ripped village of Tulane on the edge of the Vosges. Once there, Limey would comply with the rigid regulations that the Cuckoos insisted upon and carried out for their own protection. He'd wing off and leave the pilot to plot his own course the rest of the way to the nest. If a man was destined to be a Cuckoo, he had but to obey the instructions and flying orders given him when leaving Blois, but if he were a stranger his chances of ever setting tailskid on the hidden drome of the renegade flight were practically nil.

With a wave of his hand, Limey signaled the pilot to follow him. An answering wave gave him the office and he took the lead in a wide climbing turn that put them both above the clouds, far from the epic scrap that was now ending so disastrously for Germany's staffels. Limey had ample time for worried thought as he bugged his bus across the slate of the peaceful evening sky. He was doing the very thing that the Cuckoo brethren had feared—allowing an unsuspecting Cuckoo replacement to come winging through a Jerry-infested air sector. To make matters worse, he was daring to run the same risk himself. Let a roving Jerry pilot happen on either one of them in their unmarked Spads that Germany had learned to recognize—Limey fidgeted nervously at the thought. There would be no combat if the Jerry could avoid it. He'd be gambling for bigger stakes; the chance of tailing them to the much-sought-for Cuckoos' Nest.

Twice Limey hesitated and looked back with his foot resting tight against the rudder bar. There was still time for him to turn and point for the Frog drome at Seidon. Both times a jauntily waved, gauntleted hand saluted him from the cockpit of the accompanying Spad, and he continued on, trying to ease his bothersome conscience with the hope that the big bird battle had drained the sky lanes dry of wandering Jerries for the time being.

A SUDDEN rift in the cloud blanket below revealed the shadow-tipped foothills of the Vosges. Limey signaled his intention by wagging the Spad's wings, and dropped through to orient himself.

Off and a little behind the Spad's left wing lay the twin peaks of Mounts Mimi and Pierre, tipped by the last red rays of the setting sun, grim silent sentinels

blocking all ground approaches to the Cuckoos' Nest. Limey placed their location in his mind for it would be dark when he'd finally attempt to pass between them.

The time was at hand for Limey to part from his new-found comrade. A brief stretch of full-gunned flying and a bit of right rudder put the peaks behind and brought the roofless houses and stark desolation of Tulane below them. Without betraying his intention, Limey put his Spad into a steady, spiraling climb over the village, and grinned good-naturedly as a stolen glance showed the other Spad following him like a shadow. The white helmeted pilot was no pin-feathered fledgling, easy to lose in a sky game of hide and seek. He knew his flying, probably as well as Limey or any other Cuckoo.

Limey regretted the deception he was about to resort to, but orders were orders and the Cuckoos' Nest was only for Cuckoos. Feigning sudden interest in some non-existent object, he leaned over the edge of the cockpit to peer intently at the earth below. From the corner of his goggles, he saw the accompanying Spad fly up awing of his own bus. Excitedly, Limey pointed with his left hand, then made a pretense of warming up the twin guns. The other Spad leaped ahead and nosed earthward in a power dive, its unsuspecting pilot eagerly searching for a supposed enemy.

Seconds later, when the frowning white-helmeted one looked back and up, he was alone in the sky, a neat bit of backsticking and the full-gunned Hisso having carried the grinning Limey above the intervening cloud blanket out of the pilot's sight.

The ruse had worked successfully but Limey felt no elation. His mind was on the dangers that confronted the pilot he had just flown out on. The buzzard had showed himself to be a good flyer possessing plenty of guts, but both were worthless assets when pitted against night flying over strange territory, with the added worry of a fast diminishing fuel supply. Limey had rapped on his own gas tank and interpreted correctly the hollow note it gave forth. Enough fuel left to carry him safely across the saddle between the twin peaks—and home.

An annoying twinge of conscience made Limey change his intention and direction when he was but three minutes' gliding distance from the Cuckoos' Nest. If the white-helmeted pilot somewhere back there was really slated to be a Cuckoo he'd be coming along in a moment or two on his own, by following the flight orders that were put into the hands of all

prospective Cuckoos when leaving Blois. Should it so happen, then there would be no harm in Limey leading the pilot through the last tricky, wind-deviled passage that led to the camouflaged Nest.

Hoping for the best, Limey dropped through to the underside of the cloud ceiling to cruise there in a slow throttled-down, fuel-conserving patrol that covered the distance between the twin peaks. Arriving at the limit—marked by the sombre, sky-piercing height of Mount Mimi—he banked and started back, to fly into a scathing blast of knifing steel that made lacework of the Spad's wings, shot away a flying wire and stirred Limey into a frantic desire to escape. Something warm and sticky filled his left gauntlet; the arm was horribly numb. Panic seized him as the relentless fury of the attack that rode his Spad's tail continued. He was being shot into dead meat. One thought possessed him; to reach the Cuckoos' Nest.

Wildly, he kicked his bus through the sky and breathed a whispered prayer as his crippled ship won a moment's respite for him by darting into the thin safety of the enveloping cloud blanket. Instinctively, he leveled the bus and hurtled blindly through the friendly mist. Leaden hornets no longer snapped at him, and Limey, the gambler and war bird, won the decision over the gutless thing he had threatened to be. His thought revved up with machinelike rapidity. For him to seek a haven now in the Cuckoos' Nest meant the betrayal of the Cuckoos, who were his buddies, to this pursuing enemy.

Stabbing pains coursing through his bullet-creased body convinced him that he was more than half dead anyway. With a fatalistic "What the Hell?" he dispelled the black spots from his eyes by cruelly pounding his wounded arm on the edge of the cockpit. Half mad from the pain, he dived into the open to face the music and fight it out. Fickle Lady Luck would fly off with the victor. Before he realized it, his guns were throbbing a death chant, throwing steel at the blurred outline of a darting Jerry plane that had just dropped from the mist into the clear. Limey laughed crazily. His steel stuff was missing the enemy by yards. A reeling brain and eyes that were weary was the reason.

"So you're quitting me, Old Girl?" he ranted reproachfully at his mythical Lady Luck. "Quitting me for a blinking Jerry. But I'll show you, you damned fickle jade, show you that Limey Barrow never needed your 'elp no time."

With a last mighty effort, he fought his haywire nerves under control and maneuvered the crippled

Spad to meet the winging death flashing in to annihilate him.

THE Jerry, evidently disdainful of this badly shot-up adversary, threw tactics to the winds and shortened the distance between them with a reckless full-gunned rush. His Spandaus were singing. Another moment would see the end of the Spad and a victory for him. Exultantly, he crouched in his seat. The Spad had staggered and was going down. Streaking tracer no longer leaped out at him from the shimmering haze of its whirling prop. Only one thing marred the Jerry's pleasure. The Spad's pilot still lived. From his higher position, he saw Limey working over the controls, trying desperately to avert a washout landing.

Lady Luck had accepted Limey's defiant challenge of a moment before and was proving to him that he needed her badly. Fighting guts and the will to win, such as Limey possessed, were of no avail in a bird scrap when a pilot is suddenly handicapped by empty fuel tanks. He'd had the Jerry lined beautifully over his gun sights just as the starved engine had gasped its last. With a fatalistic shrug of shoulders and a muttered "I know when I'm whipped. You're the winner, Old Girl," he began to make peace with his God, preparatory to knocking on the pearly gates of the Great Perhaps within the next few seconds. No fear of death or anger at the Jerry hovering somewhere up there, touched him. He'd go West like a Cuckoo; a smile on his lips and peace at last in his war-shriveled heart. His fingering of the controls to keep the Spad from going into a vrille or a slip was purely mechanical. Under different circumstances he would have attempted to stretch a glide to a dead-stick landing on that postage-stamp sized plot of ground that had flashed beneath the belly of his doomed ship. But not now. Let the circling Jerry above see him do so, see the Cuckoos who were bound to come running the instant the Spad's wheels touched that camouflaged drome, and the Cuckoos' Nest would be no more. A skyful of long-thwarted Jerry planes would descend on it like the wrath of God before an hour was spent, to blast it and its iron-feathered inhabitants, Limey's comrades, into oblivion.

Limey cast a farewell glance backward and down at that tiny bit of ground that had meant so much to him and almost fell out of the sky in startled surprise. Men were down there waving up at him; like so many ants they popped out from the hidden entrance that led to the underground living quarters, to mill excitedly

about. Limey groaned in despair. The damned fools, revealing themselves to the Jerry eyes in the sky, and he bent on making the supreme sacrifice that they might carry on in safety. Reason fled him for an instant. He cursed them viciously for the blundering kiwis they were, and then chanced to look up. The mad tirade that poured from his lips cut itself off in the middle and changed to a whispered prayer of hope.

Two planes were circling now where but one had been before. Whirling and darting in wild deadly combat. A Spad that bore no markings, piloted by a familiar white-helmeted pilot, had dropped from nowhere to snatch Limey back from death's portals. The embryo Cuckoo, whom Limey had flown out on, had been making the Nest on his own, when fate had dropped him right on the unsuspecting Jerry's tail. A swift glance had disclosed the situation to the pilot. Limey's fast falling ship, the Jerry poised in a pounce position, ready to make the kill. The white-helmeted one did not hesitate. With twin guns throwing lead, more for effect than execution, he sent his plunging ship between the Jerry and the proposed victim, and had the satisfaction of seeing the Jerry abandon the pursuit of the helpless Spad to cope with the new, more dangerous menace that he offered.

The Jerry was game; a veteran, confident in his ability to hold his own in a man-to-man scrap with any single enemy birdman. So was the white-helmeted pilot.

Limey, thankful now for a new lease on life presented him by the forgiving Lady Luck, changed direction and volplaned his dead Spad toward the barely visible Cuckoos' drome, rapidly losing its identity in the enveloping night shadows. Men no longer moved about down there. He could see the white of strained upturned faces, intent on the grim struggle of hate and death that was disrupting the peace of the gray heavens, and upon which so much depended.

Realization came to the half-delirious Limey when his Spad's wheels were skimming the ground. The white-livered carrion, why didn't they take off and go to the assistance of the white-helmeted pilot, who was staking his life to blind the Jerry eyes that had evidently seen too much? A bonejarring, splintering crash hurled Limey into a black sea of momentary forgetfulness, slashed with a myriad of bursting stars.

He'd cracked up in a washed-out wreck that was a masterpiece of destructiveness. But he lived, urged on by a single brain possessing a single thought. Some

one had to dust off that Jerry up there in the sky. He was fumbling weakly at the imprisoning life belt with his one good hand, when Johnny Walker, exerting all of his prodigious strength, tore a path through the tangled wreckage to clasp him in powerful arms. Painfully, Limey demanded of him, "A ship, buzzard, for God's sake, gimme a ship."

"No use, buzzard," Walker remonstrated gently. "Start another ship skyward and the Jerry'd chuck the scrap and high-tail for home with the news of the Nest. This way there's a chance that the stranger up there will knock the Jerry down."

LIMEY grasped the logic in Walker's argument and subsided only to flare up anew when Johnny sent a pilot running ahead to have the doctor ready. "Ten minutes in the abattoir with the sawbones, buzzard—" Walker began hopefully. That was as far as he got, for Limey protested with both muscle and scathing profanity.

"The hell, you say," he snapped. "I'm going to the abattoir when I see who wins that battle going on up there, and not before, compre?"

Walker compreed. He spread his own fleece-lined coat on the ground and placed Limey on top of it. The doctor, informed of the patient's stubbornness, arrived a moment later, puffing and fuming, but Limey paid him no heed. His ears heard only the combined roar of laboring Hisso and overtaxed Mercedes. His aching eyes strained to follow the ghost-writing of tracers on the dark slate of the sky. Dancing pin points of flame marked the muzzles of spitting machine guns. He felt no pain from the doctor's probing fingers. Twice his eyes closed and he forced them open again. As if from a great distance, he could hear the sawbones diagnosing aloud.

"Bad flesh wound in the arm but no bones broken. Bullet bite along the ribs. Nerve shock and physical exhaustion."

Limey laughed mirthlessly. He was no longer a creature of flesh and blood. Just a damned machine. They'd put him on the blocks, overhaul him, and in a week or two he'd be back in the war, fighting—and for what? Hot rebellion filled him. He struggled to arise against the firm but gentle pressure of a big hand that held him down. Something warm and wet dropped on his face, and the unmistakable sound of a man's smothered sob close by, put an end to his struggle.

Johnny Walker's bull-fiddle voice suddenly rumbled forth in a stunning oath, and Limey shuddering in

horror closed his eyes to shut out the sight of the ghastly tragedy being enacted in the heavens. Crackling guns and racing engines no longer blended in war's wild cacophony. The gods of war, in a cruel mood and tired of so even a contest, had put an end to it, hurled both ships together and sent them gyrating earthward, hopelessly wing-locked.

Limey's lips moved in whispered prayer. Over and over he repented.

"Please, God, no fire. Give them a fighting chance."

When he dared to open his eyes once more, the drome was painfully still. Deserted by pilots and grease balls alike who had raced off into the hills to search hopefully for what they were certain they would not find—both, or at least one, of the late combatants, alive. Only the doctor had remained behind, and to him Limey addressed the question that was troubling his mind.

"Did they ride the thunderbolt, doc?"

"Yes, they rode it," announced the doctor wearily. "There was no fire and they had enough wing spread left to slant them down. The buzzards are hunting them."

Limey laughed harshly, and long. A grim prophecy was in the good doctor's well-meant words, "The buzzards are hunting them." Buzzards, black hungry scavengers winging to feast on two lifeless human birds who had flown and fought for the last time.

A merciful needle in the hand of the understanding doctor brought peace to Limey's sick mind.

The war had changed considerably; the Allies had retaken the Vosges sector, and the Cuckoos were operating on their old flying schedule once more when Limey Barrow's fluttering spirit finally decided to stick around awhile longer in the land of the living. He was blinking absently at the concrete ceiling of the abattoir as Johnny Walker, who had tiptoed into the sick room, discovered the fact.

"Well, of all the lousy goldbricks," Johnny rumbled happily. "Lying there for two weeks with your eyes closed, faking it, while your buddies have been flying double shift."

Limey essayed a grin, and extended a woefully thin white hand that Johnny clutched feelingly.

"Limey, Limey, boy," he choked, too happy for words. "It's good to be having you with us again, you damned old card cheat."

Limey smiled his pleasure, then asked his first question, a troubled, "What happened to the bird who saved my tail that day?"

Waiting for an answer, he saw Johnny's face cloud up, saw the worry lines deepen in the big pilot's features, and then let his own eyes follow Walker's across the room to stop eventually on the placid disinterested face of a man sitting immobile on the side of a cot. "Him?" questioned Limey.

"Him," Johnny answered sadly, and tapped his own head significantly. "He's blotto, Limey. We found him that night, dazed, staggering away from the washout, babbling about the Jerry pilot who was no doubt smashed to a pulp beneath one of the engines. There was nothing more we could do so we set fire to the wreckage and brought this poor buzzard back with us. His credentials say that he's Jimmy Ring, formerly of Blois, and that he was slated to be one of us."

Limey made no comment or offer to thank the pilot who continued to sit with hands clasped between his knees, stonily impervious to what was going on around him. But Limey's eyes were busy, traveling birdlike from his savior's inscrutable mask of a face, to two neatly folded piles of clothing and flying togs arranged along the base of the wall. One he quickly identified as his own and passed it by, the other list belonged to the stricken pilot. On it. Limey's gaze rested longest, especially the helmet.

AT LAST he turned to the puzzled Walker who had been observing him closely, and snapped, "When you go out, buzzard, send the doc. I'm getting up."

"The hell you are," stuttered Johnny in surprise. "Why, you're too weak to walk."

"Then I'll crawl, in that case," Limey testily cut in.

Talking to himself, Johnny surrendered and started out into the passage.

When the sound of Johnny's footsteps had died out, Limey made his first attempt to sit up—and failed. Once more he tried, with the same result, then lay still, calling upon his keen brain to remedy his predicament. He realized that he must be up on his feet before the doctor came in and injected another needleful of forgetfulness into him. Limey had been smitten with a hunch, a hunch heavy with foreboding of danger to come. Gambler that he was, he'd follow it to the end, even death.

Assuming a poker face that gave no inkling of his troubled thoughts, he turned on his side to meet the unblinking gaze of the silent pilot. For a moment their eyes met and then Limey spoke.

"Buzzard," he began, "they tell me that I'm indebted to you for my life. Should the same be true, you've got

a friend in me who'll go the limit. Limey Barrow never forgets a right nor a wrong—nor a man."

Limey, watching closely despite his casual attitude, saw the lines deepen around the silent pilot's eyes, and the flicker of understanding that gleamed in them. But no word came from the man's lips. When Limey finally spoke again, it was in a different trend.

"I've seen cases like yours before, soldier. Back in base hospital nine. You understand everything that's said but you can't think for yourself. So from now until some shock starts your brain hitting on both banks again, I'll do the thinking for you."

Limey had never been within two hundred kilos of base hospital nine or a mental shock case such as he had professed to know considerable about, but he was playing his hunch, and to say that he had served his purpose. Without changing his tone, he requested, "Hop over here, buzzard, and help me up and into my clothes before that know-it-all sawbones gets here to cramp my style with a mess of dope pills and bum advice."

Keeping up a rapid-fire discourse, Limey's heart pounded exultantly as the silent pilot slowly arose and came toward him, and Limey's sharp eyes missed nothing. The ill-fitting breeches that failed to button around the pilot's waist, and the O.D. shirt stretched to the bursting point across the wide chest. Limey was willing to bet that no quartermaster in the S.O.S. had ever been guilty of issuing such mismated garments to a man of the silent pilot's bulk. It was little things like these that made Limey feel that his superstitious belief in hunches was not in vain.

He groaned as the silent pilot lifted him from the cot and stood him up on trembling legs that threatened to buckle. A moment of reeling agony followed, then Limey's indomitable will won the battle over his weak flesh. With the assistance of the silent pilot who played the role of Limey's dog-robber without complaint, he managed to get into his clothes and was grinning ruefully at the sorry way he filled them when the bucolic doctor came stomping into the sickroom.

"Fly slower, doc, and you'll last a lot longer," Limey admonished soothingly.

The sawbones was furious. He raved, stuttered and predicted the worst for Limey. "Why, you'll die, you damned fool," he exploded at length.

"Granting that you know for certain," Limey agreed, "then what are you making all the ruddy ruckus about. If I'm going to die, what's the difference whether I shove off standing up or lying down?"

Admitting defeat, the doctor disclaimed all responsibility for Limey but managed to preserve some semblance of his professional dignity by insisting that Limey remain grounded. "No flying until I say so," he ordered.

Grinning, Limey acquiesced, "Just as you say, doc. Me and my new boy friend here will find plenty to keep us interested right in the old Cuckoos' Nest."

Both he and the doctor turned suddenly at the hissing sound of the silent pilot's heavy breathing. Limey noticed the clenched fists and the man's unnaturally bright eyes, and smiled.

"My mention of the Cuckoos' Nest must have registered with him, doc," he hazarded aloud.

"Something you said evidently did," the doctor agreed, then added in a lower voice, "A strange case his. No head fractures nor contusions, yet he manifests all the symptoms of both. There isn't a thing that I can do for him."

"Yes, there is, doc," Limey insisted quietly. "You can place him in my charge. It's just a hunch on my part and a desire to square my debt to this buzzard, and I'll wager much money that I restore his mind to him fully before two weeks pass. What do you say, doc?"

"I'll say you're the seventh wonder of the world if you do," the doctor admitted cynically. "But you have my permission to try."

"You hear that, big boy?" Limey asked the silent pilot who gave no visible sign that he had. "Well, remember it anyway, buzzard," Limey continued. "Maybe it means good luck for you—maybe bad. I can't say for sure because I'm just Lady Luck's sweetheart, not her prophet. But anyway, we'll expect the worst and hope for the best."

Limey reached for the silent one's hand and shook it warmly.

THE doctor, more than half convinced that Limey was as balmy in the head as the unfortunate silent pilot, hastily quit the room leaving them to their own resources.

That night Limey entered the mess hall with his arm linked in that of the silent pilot's, to receive the congratulations of the pleased brethren who were careful not to betray, by either action or word, that they saw anything strange in this new alliance of Limey and the silent one. Both pilots were Cuckoos, entitled to buddy off and do as they pleased without explanation. Such was the unwritten law of the flock.

Limey deliberately confined his questions to the

war. How was it going? Had any of the brethren been dusted off? From Nick Wright, volunteer adjutant of the Cuckoos, he learned how Sid Staley and Joe Furness had gone on the last lone one-way flight—West.

Nick Wright's husky voice was little more than a whisper but Limey missed no word of the saddened adjutant's story. Neither did he miss the unconscious play of emotions on the silent one's face, especially when Wright announced that Staley and Furness had taken five Jerries along with them for company. The Cuckoos drank with Limey as he proposed the traditional toast to departed comrades, "They were good scouts, buzzards. Bottoms up!"

Empty cups were returned to the table. Limey, who had been watching closely, wondered if any of the others had noticed that the silent pilot had not taken part in the solemn ceremony. But if they had, they made no mention of it. The silent one's mental condition evidently excused him in their eyes.

With the meal finished, and the bat flyers of the night patrol sitting around enjoying their hop-off cigarettes and exchanging small talk, Limey had ample opportunity in which to study the silent pilot who appeared to be listening with all the intensity of a man starved for news.

Johnny Walker entered the tobacco-reeking mess hall when conversation was buzzing at its height, and Limey quietly left his place at the table, made his way to Walker's side and asked, "Johnny, what's the big idea behind you birds dressing the new replacement up in the cast-off togs that he is wearing?"

Puzzled at Limey's question, Walker's eyes sought out the silent pilot and a contrite "Damn!" escaped Johnny's lips. "Hell, those were the togs he had on when he arrived here at the Nest," he explained.

A satisfied "Oh" and a baffling smile were Limey's only answer.

Walker's curiosity was aroused now, but Limey carefully avoided the subject. "Johnny," he ventured at last, after a minute of talking about nothing in particular, "I'm going to get some shut-eye. When you're turning out the morning-glories for the dawn patrol tomorrow, give me a call at the same time like a good buzzard."

"You're not thinking of going skyroaming with them, are you, Limey?" Johnny parried.

Limey chuckled merrily, and settled Walker's anxiety with a grinning, "Not this Cuckoo, Johnny. I've got to get my legs back first. I'm planning to take

a ground flight over to where the silent one there and the Jerry who gave me hell, cracked up. Where did you say it was, again?"

Johnny, who had learned quite a few of the mysterious Limey's little tricks in the past, winked knowingly and answered, "I didn't say, buzzard, but I don't mind telling you upon receiving your assurance that the old arrangement between you and me still stands."

Limey flushed guiltily, and an uneasy laugh trickled from his lips. He offered his hand to Walker, and spoke guardedly. "The old agreement is still on, Johnny. I'm just working on a cockeyed hunch now but if it materializes you can bet boocoo francs that you'll be in at the death."

Johnny's pugnacious jaw jutted forth in anticipation of the hinted-at scrap to come, and he gave Limey the requested location of the washout.

Limey nodded his thanks, returned to the table, wished the bat flyers the usual "Happy landings," and taking the silent one by the arm, escorted him from the mess hall.

"Funny how those two buzzards suddenly decided to fly double," a Cuckoo spoke his thoughts.

"Nothing funny about it," another, who had heard, explained. "Limey never could stand to have any one ask him questions, and it's a cinch that poor bird he had in tow isn't asking any. Hell, he wouldn't even understand the answers should Limey volunteer to furnish a few."

"Says you!" mocked a cynical pilot. "I've been a Cuckoo for nigh onto three months now and I haven't happened on a scavenger in this scurvy brood yet who could truthfully say that he knew what that damned Limey was talking about or planning to do next."

A general laugh went up, for it was no secret that Limey could talk for a week, leaving his listeners vastly entertained but none the wiser for having listened.

Promising the silent pilot new uniforms and a change of quarters on the morrow, Limey guided him back to the hospital room, bid him good night, then headed down the passageway to his own cubicle that he had not occupied in weeks. Hidden finally from prying eyes behind the closed door of the tiny room, a nervous trembling seized him. It was always that way with Limey. Forthcoming events never failed to herald their approach in this manner.

Exercising a knack that he had mastered after years of training, he forced all thought of the silent pilot, the past and the future, from his brain; undressing and stretching

out on the cot, he was soon sound asleep, not to awaken again until Johnny Walker stripped the blankets off him and growled, "Rise and shine, little Cuckoo. Another day and the same lousy war awaits you."

WITH a sarcastic, "The hell you say?" Limey landed shivering in the center of the floor and hastily piled into the friendly warmth of his clothes.

A short time later, fortified by two scalding cups of strong black coffee, he was up and out on the drome to greet the sun with the first of the morning-glories.

"You hopping with us?" one of them inquired.

Limey voiced a somewhat reluctant, "Nope. Just hanging around to get the feel of it again," and beat a wary retreat from the path of a taxiing Spad. The sight of it, spurning the earth and slanting for the upper reaches, filled him with yearning and pride. A yearning to be up there winging, and pride in the knowledge that he too was a Cuckoo—the fiercest and freest of all the war-bird broods.

He waited patiently in the shadow of a camouflaged hangar until the last of the dawn patrol hit the sky and started to go places. Sending a wish for good luck speeding after their tails, he started swiftly across the field, already being cleared of wheel and tailskid marks by busy grease-balls, and pointed into the pathless wastes of the adjacent hills.

Cursing the physical weakness that made a stumbling nightmare of his slow progress, he arrived breathless and exhausted, to drop down on a narrow ledge far up on the side of Mount Mimi. Close at hand lay the fire-blackened, twisted skeletons of the twin washouts.

As he rested, Limey studied the tangled mass. Somewhere in its midst, or beneath it, he should find the mortal remains of a pilot. Steeling himself for the ordeal, he arose and began his search of the debris. Powderlike fabric ash made a mess of his clothes and perspiring features, but failed to dampen his ardor. Limey was searching for more than the body of a pilot. His hunch told him that the fate of the Cuckoos depended upon his findings. Doggedly, he stuck to the task.

Into the battered cockpits and under ruined engines he peered but to no avail, and only then did he retire to an inviting rock at the far edge of the ledge to cool off and ponder over the mystery. Removing his cap and dashing the sweat from his forehead, he allowed his eyes to travel from the distant horizon back over the rolling hills of the Vosges, and down into the little valley that peacefully yawned at his feet.

The war had passed it by. Green trees and grass shimmered and blended down there like a great velvet carpet in the sunlight, marred only by a grotesquely sprawled blotch of white.

Limey felt the hair rise slowly on the back of his neck. Suddenly, his heart began to pound furiously, and he slid forward on his stomach to stare down over the edge, fascinated at the white sprawled something.

His birdlike eyes had not played him false. It was a man, or rather the body of a man.

With his hunch lending him strength, Limey went scrambling and falling down the clifflike side of Mount Mimi, one second, tottering on the brink of eternity, the next, racing swiftly over the short shale stretches, but always down. He jumped the last ten feet, landed in a fall-breaking bush with his arms wrapped tightly around his head, and untangled himself finally to stand up and take inventory. A few scratches and barked knuckles, but his legs and arms were intact. Offering a mental prayer of thanks, he slowly approached the body and stood silent, sadly regarding it.

Once more a hunch of Limey's had developed into a stark, blood-chilling reality. Garbed only in a suit of underwear with an oil-smearred white helmet and a shattered pair of goggles still intact on the crushed head, the lifeless body offered a mystery that would have befuddled the analytical brain of a professional detective, but the gruesome discovery was no puzzle to Limey. He was a gambler, willing to stake his all that the answer given him by his hunch was the correct one.

But how was he going to convince others that his hunch was fact? That was the troublesome question confronting him. The Cuckoos, hard bitter men though they were, couldn't be expected to sentence a man to face a firing squad on the strength of Limey's say so. And after all that was the only evidence he possessed—just a hunch.

Half-sick and nauseated, he bent over and removed the helmet with its attached goggles from the crushed head, then began a minute scrutiny of the body. No bullet or knife wounds rewarded his search and for that, at least, he was thankful. Satisfied, he straightened up and did the only thing left for him to do. He covered the body with a mound of brush and small stones that completely hid it from sight, uncovered his head out of respect to a departed war bird, and started back for the Cuckoo's Nest.

It was high noon when he arrived there, and managed

to reach his own cubicle without being seen. Refreshed by a wash and once more clothed in a presentable uniform, he sought for Johnny Walker, and found the big pilot doing a listening trick in the phone room.

Limey wasted no time with preliminaries. He told Johnny of his hunch and the dead pilot that he had found in the valley, and produced from a pocket the white leather flying helmet with the broken goggles as mute testimony.

"Danger has flown into the Cuckoos' Nest for a landing, buzzard," he announced flatly, and waited expectantly.

ASIDE from a telltale tightening of jaw muscles Johnny Walker betrayed no emotion. "I believe you, Limey," he admitted slowly, "but I doubt if the rest of the flock will. Spin them the same yarn and they'll be going around sadlike telling each other that you must have cracked your own head in that last washout of yours."

"Don't I know it?" Limey agreed with anger. "That's why I'm not telling them anything. I'd rather let them see the proof with their own eyes."

"Them's my sentiments, too," the big pilot answered. Then asked, "And what am I supposed to do?"

Limey grinned happily. Johnny Walker was a bird of his own feather, willing to gamble for marbles or lives—his own included. Limey spent the next ten minutes talking fast, with Johnny in the role of interested listener. Anxious that the slower thinking Johnny had missed none of the details, Limey lighted a cigarette, and inquired. "You got the plan down pat, now?"

Walker nodded impatiently, and recited. "Our watches are set alike. You'll have him there at four o'clock. I'm to wear this white helmet and play dead. Is that correct?"

"Correct as hell so far, buzzard," Limey answered, and Walker continued, "Then to-night, when I happen on you two apart from the others, I'm to hand you the key to the tool shed and tell you that you are on guard."

"Great!" Limey enthused. "That's the act. You're letter perfect."

"Mebbe so," the big pilot growled. "But I don't mind adding that it all sounds crazy as hell to me."

"It is, buzzard," Limey admitted readily. "And it's up to you and me to find the devil at the bottom of it, or else—"

He left his fears unsaid. Their hands met and Limey hurried out into the tunnel and the mess hall. The silent pilot was there, eating quietly between Bill Cummings and Slip Farrell. Limey pulled up a stool, sat down facing them across the table, and laughingly demanded that both Bill and Slip spill him the oil about the war.

Slip had knocked down a Jerry Pfaltz for his twelfth *descendu* that morning. But it was Bill who told of his buddy's victory, much to the unusually taciturn Slip's discomfiture.

"There ought to be a law against it," Limey jokingly complained. "With the Cuckoos bagging all the Jerries, what chance has the rest of the Allied buzzards got of ever becoming heroes." From the corner of an eye, he saw the knuckles of the silent pilot's hand stand out white under the skin. Deliberately, Limey kept the conversation in that trend. Allied victories and German defeats, meanwhile covertly noting the effect on the silent one.

Then suddenly, he beamed across at the man. "I'm going to take you hiking this afternoon, buzzard. It may get that conked engine of yours to functioning again. This living like a worm in an underground hospital is getting you nowhere."

"But isn't the sawbones liable to squawk?" well-meaning Slip Farrell interrupted.

Limey snorted and defiantly explained. "Hell, doc's been flying in circles, going no place. I'm responsible for this here buzzard's condition and it's up to me to straighten out his mental course if I can. And I believe I can."

"Okay with us, Limey, and here's hoping you do." Bill Cummings warmly applauded.

Noticing that the silent one had finished eating, Limey passed him a cigarette and with a good-natured "Let's go places and do things, buzzard," arose from the table.

Like some great dog, the silent pilot obeyed. And with Limey acting as his voluble guide, he saw and listened to much of the mysterious Cuckoos' Nest for the first time. The tiny, camouflaged, kapok-lined hangars, large enough only to hold two planes, held his interest. Shapeless masses, strewn carelessly about the flying field, constructed of canvas and sticks and painted to look like huge rocks to any birdman looking down from the sky, was one form of safety insurance for the Cuckoos, Limey explained.

"When you're up there and don't know the trick, this drome looks like an invitation to a damned

bad washout landing at the best, yet it only takes the ground crew about three minutes to change it.” Waxing confidential, Limey boasted, “You haven’t seen the half of it yet, buzzard.” Stopping suddenly, he pointed out a small tin shed barely discernible at the far end of the field. “That,” he announced dramatically, “houses the Cuckoos’ ace in the hole; underground wires run to a battery box there. One little push on its lever and the Cuckoos’ Nest would be just a memory. Right now, you and I are probably standing over a hundred pounds of dynamite.”

Limey sensed rather than saw the tremor that coursed through the silent one’s frame at this startling announcement. It made him think of a hound held on a restraining leash, eager to be freed. He had to exert considerable pressure on the silent pilot’s arm to distract his attention from the tin shed. “Yes,” Limey reminisced aloud. “Should Jerry ever be lucky enough to locate the Cuckoos’ Nest he’ll find little for his trouble. Dynamite sure can raise hell with the scenery.”

KEEPING up a running fire of talk, Limey led the way up into the hills. When they did stop eventually to rest, the Nest was miles behind and Limey made no mention of the fact that he had rested upon the very rock upon which he now sat, only a few hours previous. A look at his watch showed the time to be fifteen minutes before four. Ten minutes’ leisurely walking should bring them to the ledge. From where he was sitting, Limey could see part of the twisted plane skeletons that had withstood the fury of the flames. Idly, he tossed small stones at a boulder in an effort to waste a few moments, moments that would give Johnny Walker ample time in which to set the stage.

They set out again and exactly on the minute of four o’clock, Limey—followed at a few paces by the silent pilot—set foot on the ledge, and paused in well feigned surprise at sight of the familiar wreckage. Showing great interest he was all over and around the charred twisted pile in a moment. Eagerly, he pounced on a frayed strip of fabric that had miraculously escaped the fire and seemed to fall into silent contemplation of it.

“Jerry cloth, or I’m a kiwi,” he exclaimed at length, and offered it to the silent one with a quiet “You brought him down, buzzard, keep this for a souvenir.”

If Limey noticed that the silent one’s hand trembled violently in reaching for the cloth, he made no comment on the fact. The man was shaken, licking

his dry lips repeatedly. Limey went back to his pawing over of the wreckage in an attempt to hide his own nervousness.

He was mechanically examining the charred, splintered remains of a strut when a hoarse electrifying “*Gott!*” galvanized him into action. It had come from the silent one’s lips. Whirling on his feet, Limey saw him crouching on the lip of the ledge like some frightened animal, making queer noises in his throat and staring down into the valley.

Three long strides brought Limey to the silent one’s side to see a strange human figure clothed in underwear and wearing a white flying helmet on its head, slowly get to its knees, then its feet, and stalk stiffly off across the floor of the valley.

A terrified scream changed to a strangled sob in the silent pilot’s throat, “You see it? You see it, too?” he pleaded.

Limey, steeling himself for the part he was about to play, looked long and blankly into the valley, then turned sadly to the cringing silent one, and quietly announced, “There’s nothing down there, buzzard, but rocks and trees.”

“You tell me there is nothing,” the fear-ridden man frantically demanded, “Look there!”

Limey looked in the direction indicated by the silent one’s trembling finger. The weird figure was just entering a thick clump of brush. Once again Limey announced tonelessly. “I see nothing. There is nothing there. Let’s be moving.”

Calmly, he met the half-mad pilot’s suspicious glare and the silent one’s eyes were the first to waver. With a muttered, “Forgive me. I am going insane,” he stepped aside that Limey might lead the way.

Outwardly cool, but inwardly expecting the unnerved silent one to leap on his back, Limey started on the return journey to the Nest. Without slackening the pace, he occasionally spoke over his shoulder, but only the whistling sound of his companion’s heavy breathing answered him. Once more the big pilot had become the silent one.

Darkness had settled by the time they reached the edge of the drome and he took the silent pilot’s arm as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Locating the entrance to the underground quarters by instinct alone, Limey stepped through into the lighted passage with a genuine sigh of relief, and nearly collided with the doctor who was on his way out. Recognition was instantaneous.

“Well, how is your patient coming along?” the

sawbones solicitously inquired, and Limey grinned. "He's not coming, he's right here with me, doc, hiding behind me."

The doctor laughed as the humor in the answer registered on him. For the silent one fairly towered over the diminutive Limey.

"But all jokes aside, doc," Limey continued in a more serious vein. "I think he's about due to come out of the fog. He's still suffering with occasional hallucinations, but he spoke to me to-day."

The doctor was all interest at once. "That is a good sign," he assured Limey. "I'll have another look at him in the morning. To be frank, he appeared so hopeless that I was thinking of having one of you pilots ferry him back to the nearest base hospital."

Limey's earnest "I'm glad that you didn't, doc," closed the incident.

Upon entering the mess hall a short time later, he was inwardly pleased to find it deserted, the bat flyers having already gone to their nightly rendezvous with death. Limey ate ravenously of everything set before him, but his silent companion drank only a cup of coffee. Hunched over the table, he sat lost in his own thoughts.

TINY pin points of devil light dancing in his hard blue eyes made Limey seek confidence in the feel of the heavy automatic pistol that lay ready in his jacket pocket. Intuition warned him that he was about to become the object of the silent one's pent-up emotions. Those deadly eyes were now fastened on him. Limey gave no sign that he was aware of the fact, yet he was prepared. His left hand was within easy reaching distance of a steaming coffee pot, while his right was in the pocket that held the pistol. Another second, and the fight to the death would be on. Limey tensed, ready.

"Well, I'll be damned," a rumbling voice exploded suddenly in the doorway, and Johnny Walker came lumbering into the room. "What's the big idea?" the acting squadron commander of the Cuckoos demanded. "I've hunted this cockeyed drome from fuel drums to hangars for you and here you sit taking your tiffin, like old 'Black Jack' himself."

Limey could only grin happily. He gulped once or twice to clear his throat of the tight feeling and finally managed to ejaculate, "I'm sorry, buzzard. I took the big boy here out for a hike and I plumb forgot that you asked me to go on guard duty to-night."

Johnny, still growling about the double-dyed

dumbness of all the damned Cuckoos, fished a key out of his pocket and handed it over to Limey, with a muttered, "Hope we don't ever have to use it, buzzard."

Limey waited until Johnny had again left the mess hall before speaking to the silent one, who once more had lapsed into a brooding silence. "Sorry, buzzard," he smiled apologetically. "I'll have to be leaving you. Being the custodian of the key for the night, I have to remain in my own cubicle so that in case Jerry should decide to pounce on our Nest I won't have so far to travel across the field to the battery room."

Still smiling, Limey stood up and beckoned the silent pilot to follow him. This time Limey did not take the lead. They walked down the concrete passage abreast of each other and Limey's right hand never left his jacket pocket. He guided his companion to a spare cubicle, told him where his own was located, bid the silent one good night and went whistling off down the passageway. But once in his own room, all the jauntiness fell from him like a cloak. He sank wearily on a stool, to recall with spine-tingling shudders that twice that day he had been close to death. So close in fact, that he was positive he had heard Saint Peter fumbling with the latch on the pearly gates. Still no attack, or so much as an angry word had been aimed his way. After all, it was just imagination on his part, but up to date Limey's hunches had never failed.

With the fatalistic thought that bad things come in threes, he removed his jacket and lay down on the cot to wait the coming of the third event that would complete the unholy trinity of his superstition. At intervals, sounds of footsteps and low conversation outside the door told that the bat flyers were returning from their flight. Dragging minutes made it harder for him to remain awake. Once he caught himself dozing off, and cursed softly under his breath.

The last of the bats had long since hit their cots for the dreamland hop and no sound disturbed the heavy sleeping silence of the Nest. Limey could stand it no longer. He decided to count up to one thousand, then go to sleep. He had drowsily reached two hundred when a cold perspiration broke out all over him. His door was opening slowly, a fraction of an inch at a time. Fear's icy fingers touched Limey's heart. If only the damned door would creak he would have an excuse for demanding to know who was there.

Braced on one elbow he was about to ask, anyway, when the small voice that had often guided his destinies bade him to remain quiet—the voice of Limey's hunch. A dark figure bulked large against the

dimly lighted background of the open doorway for a flashing instant, then all was black and still once more but for the faint sound of a rapid breathing, other than his own, that came to Limey's straining ears. To cry out now would probably mean instant death.

Staring up out of eyes closed to mere slits, he saw a sinister shadow, pregnant with death, bent over him. The marauder had crossed the room with uncanny stealth. Limey also saw something else—the blurred outline of a gun that projected from one of the man's extended hands. A stifled gasp, that he quickly made the forerunner of a series of loud snores, evidently prolonged his life, for the figure retreated swiftly across the cubicle to stand frozen against the white concrete wall. Keeping up a restless rolling and snoring Limey played for time, and breathed easier when the would-be assassin put away the gun and produced, in its stead, a shapeless metallic something that glinted and clicked like a cigarette case.

Limey's hunch was grim reality now, of that he was certain. Those wide sloping shoulders belonged to none other than the silent pilot. He'd heard that cigarette case click before too, in the silent one's hands and had wondered why its owner never smoked any of the cigarettes that it apparently contained. Fascinated, Limey realized that the silent one was approaching his cot again, almost carelessly, as if determined to end his mission quickly.

A BIG hand brushed lightly across Limey's chest, located his heart and paused there. Speechless and horrified, he watched the silent pilot's other hand join its mate and felt something press down hard against his flesh. The faint ringing sound that a tightly wound spring makes when suddenly released, followed—and Limey lay still, hardly daring to breathe.

A hissing exclamation of satisfaction from the silent one's lips sounded loud in the room. Caution no longer guided the strange pilot's actions. His big hand went through Limey's pockets with no more concern than if the wearer were dead. Understanding dawned on Limey in a flash. The silent one really believed that he was dead. He had used some mysterious weapon that Limey had no knowledge of. That it had failed to function was all that mattered to Limey at the moment.

Lady Luck had smiled on him once more.

Playing the part, he allowed himself to be flopped over on his left side; a hand went into his right breeches pocket, closed on the key that both

Johnny Walker and Limey had stressed with so much importance, and was withdrawn.

Talking to himself, the silent one moved quickly to the door, hesitated for a second as if listening, then opened it, stepped quietly out into the passage and closed it softly behind him. But hardly had it closed before it slowly opened again.

Catlike, Limey peered around the casing and along the passageway to see the wide back of the silent pilot disappearing rapidly up the concrete incline that led to the outside. Shaking like a leaf from suppressed excitement, Limey's hand went in search of a cigarette. There was still plenty of time and a short cut with which he was thoroughly acquainted to help him beat the would-be dynamiter of the Cuckoos' Nest to the small tin shed at the end of the drome.

A sudden twinge of pain that shot through his hand brought an involuntary cry of surprise to his lips. A short thick needle had imbedded itself in his flesh. Quickly, he jerked it free and as he sucked the wound, his brain did a swift bit of thinking. That needle had been intended for his heart. Something had blocked its murderous course and left it sticking in the heavy shirt instead. Limey's hand went to the left breast pocket, and a cold smile lighted his face. Complying with the unwritten law of the Cuckoos, that no member of the flock should ever appear on the drome wearing either ribbons or decorations, Limey had always carried his little thought of, but hard-earned, medals in that pocket over his heart. One of them had stopped the deadly needle. An angry desire for a final show-down with the silent pilot stirred him to action. He raced swiftly down the passage taking the opposite direction to that chosen by his would-be killer. In full stride, he reached a narrow entrance that opened up off the main passageway and darted into it without slackening his pace. At the far end of the narrow tunnel would be another little-used opening that led up to the tin sheds, in which the Cuckoos stored fuel, tools and spare engine parts.

Limey's thin face twisted in a hard grin as he raced along. For even should the silent pilot be the first to arrive at the smaller of the tin sheds, he would find only bitter disappointment to repay him for the desperate chances he had taken. For the much talked-of battery room existed only in Limey's imagination, invented by him for no other reason, than to help bring his hunch to a climax.

Puffing hard, he reached the trap door and stopped to regain his breath. At the same time he felt for his

automatic and a trembling weakness seized him—the pistol was back at the cubicle in a pocket of his discarded jacket. Savagely, he cursed his predicament. To go back for the gun was out of the question. With the sudden reckless courage of his war-bird kind, he determined to go through with it, banking his life on the belief that Lady Luck would give him a chance. That was all he hoped for—one thin chance.

His hand, now surprisingly steady, found a cigarette and lighted it. Wraithlike, he opened the door and slid noiselessly through into the semi-gloom of the fuel shed. A few long strides carried him across the floor to the big doors that led out on the moonlit surface of the flying field. A long glance through a convenient opening of his own making told him that he was in time. The heavy padlock on the smaller and close-by tool shed had not been disturbed. A passing bit of cloud-drift, that momentarily blotted out the light of the moon, gave Limey the opportunity he sought. When the cloud had passed, he was crouched behind an empty gas drum, left standing by some forgetful grease-ball outside and resting against the corner of the fuel shed he had just vacated. With a start he realized that he was still puffing on the cigarette and that the silent one was hurriedly and openly approaching across the field. A dangerous man who preferred to shoot obstacles from his path rather than resort to stealth in getting around them.

Limey, afraid of betraying his own presence and hardly daring to move, furtively removed the cigarette from his lips and held it cupped in his right hand. Any second he expected to feel a bullet thump into his body. Right then he would have traded five years of his life for a gun. He died a thousand deaths when the silent one stopped within fifteen feet of the gas drum behind which he crouched, and silently contemplated both sheds, as if in doubt as to which was the one that Limey had carefully pointed out to him earlier in the day. The padlock on the smaller shed, plainly visible in the cold light of the moon, must have helped him to decide. For when Limey ventured to look once more, the silent one was standing with his back toward him, fumbling impatiently with the lock.

SHEER desperation urged Limey to do something—anything. Fate was mocking him, had put clue after clue into his eager hands, led him right up to the climax and now was enjoying a good laugh at his expense. A gun in Limey's hand, and there would have been a different ending. He groaned in anguish. What

could he do? To show himself meant instant death, and the silent one would escape in the end, to destroy the Cuckoos at his leisure. Limey thought of trying to summon help and groaned again. No one would believe his story, that the real Cuckoo replacement had been killed and that his body lay in the valley at the foot of Mount Mimi. Even if he produced the corpse and told them of the white flying helmet that had made him suspicious of the silent one from the beginning, he would not be believed. For when the Cuckoos had first found the silent pilot wandering aimlessly in the hills, he wore an American uniform and carried credentials that were correct and in order on his person, which was conclusive proof as to his identity, in their opinions.

The silent one's haste caused the key to fall from his fingers. Limey could hear him swearing as he searched for it. It was then that Lady Luck granted Limey the one thin little chance that he had been praying for. The moon disappeared behind a creeping cloud blanket and the silent one swore the louder. Limey risked everything to quickly puff the burning end of the still lighted cigarette into a glow. Thankful for the welcome darkness and whispering a prayer, he slowly arose to his full height with the cigarette hidden in one hand while the other groped for the tin wall that he stood flattened against.

A sharp sliver of metal cut his finger cruelly but he paid no heed to the pain. Carefully, he adjusted the wet end of the cigarette on that metal splinter, gambled another precious second to make sure that it would hold, then dropped to all fours and crawled rapidly around the shed to the opposite side. The sound of metal against metal warned him that the silent pilot had finally located the key and that he would have to act now or never.

From a position flat on his stomach he snapped out a commanding, deep-throated, "Stick 'em up, you louse," and got the answer he had hoped for. A defiant German oath from the silent one's lips, accompanied by a leaping tongue of gun flame and the deadly slap of a bullet ripping through the tin wall of the shed. Again and again the gun cracked in the silent pilot's hand. He was shooting to kill, and getting more worried as each of his carefully aimed shots failed to bring down this foolish enemy who continued to stand with a lighted cigarette in his mouth. A perfect target. The silent one would have staked his life that he couldn't miss at this short range. It was like shooting at a lighted lantern.

Limey, hugging the ground, safely out of the line of fire, counted the explosions. One more shot and the silent one's gun would be empty. Snakelike, Limey bellied backward until certain that the corner of the shed hid him, then got to his feet and started back around the building. A buzzing steel hornet that passed high over his head as he reached the opposite side brought a fleeting grin to his face. It was his cue to act. A long mocking laugh trickled from his lips, and holding one hand stiffly in front of him as though it held a gun, he stepped into view and walked slowly toward the silent pilot, who stood as if stunned.

"Toss that gun in front of you and get back against the shed," Limey ordered in an ugly voice, then added, "You shot and missed; it's my turn now, you louse."

Recognizing defeat, the silent one obeyed. Limey continued to move slowly forward, recovered the empty automatic from the ground, made a pretense of pocketing it, but didn't. He felt better with the gun in his hand, even though he knew it to be empty. A wind-blown rift in the clouds allowed the moon to shine through, and Limey grinned at the sudden look of terror that contorted the silent pilot's face, and the choking, "You!" that escaped the man's trembling lips.

"Yes, it's me!" Limey acknowledged, and swore softly under his breath as the sound of many voices and running footsteps came to his ears. The Cuckoos, awakened by the shots from the silent one's gun, were coming. Another moment, and they'd arrive, demanding explanations and he had none to offer.

Limey thought fast and spoke faster;

"You hear them? We've been wise to your little game ever since you hit this drome, but we didn't care to stand you up for a firing squad until we found out how you murdered our buddy who was unlucky enough to lock wings with you that night—but I guess I got the answer when you tried the same needle trick on me." He lied beautifully and exulted inwardly as the silent one hotly denied the accusation in a German accented flow of disconnected sentences.

"It is a lie that I murdered my antagonist, your buddy, as you refer to him, that night."

With a great kicking up of gravel, the wheezing doctor was the first to arrive, followed closely by Johnny Walker and the rest of the Cuckoos. Limey began talking in a loud voice, giving the Cuckoos no opportunity to ask questions that might enlighten the silent one and upset his own plans.

"Buzzards, I promised to bring the silent one's memory back to him and I've done it. He's got a story

to tell you, or—" Limey paused dramatically, then continued, "maybe he'd rather have me tell it for him?"

THE offer was just bluff on Limey's part but it succeeded. The silent one bowed stiffly to the curious Cuckoos ringed around him, then made the calm but startling announcement, "Fortune gave me a magnificent opportunity to strike a mighty blow for the Vaterland, and I failed, miserably. Death now will be my just reward instead of my Emperor's congratulations. Regrets are mine, but I know no fear, gentlemen. I am a soldier."

An impatient Cuckoo growled a puzzled, "What in hell is he raving about?" and got an angry warning to cut the gun on his jaw for an answer.

With evident distaste but no reluctance, the silent one told the story of his own failure, reviling himself bitterly like a doomed man cleansing his soul for the last time to a holy confessor. He readily admitted that he had attempted to kill Limey for possession of the key, and his intention to blow up the Cuckoos' Nest. "Such things are ethical in war, gentlemen," he explained with a careless shrug. "But I did not kill your comrade whose courage and flying technique made my air contest with him one to be enjoyed and remembered by me. When we crashed back there in the mountains, he was killed. I discovered the fact after dragging his body from the wreckage. The law of self-preservation then made me do what I did. I removed his uniform and papers and exchanged them for my own. The body and my togs were dropped into the valley. Then you found me. Due to my pronounced German accent it was advisable that I play the role of an amnesia victim. The rest you know, gentlemen."

With a resigned smile his hands went to his pockets. Instantly, strong Cuckoo arms seized him. Having heard the story of the danger that had hovered over them, they were taking no chances. The silent one made no move to resist.

"I am unarmed, gentleman," he assured them. "Search will verify that. Besides you would have nothing to fear from so poor a marksman as I proved myself to be." And he actually smiled at Limey.

Soon the contents of his pockets were emptied into Johnny Walker's cap. A penknife, a pencil, some odds and ends, and a cigarette case. Excited Cuckoos were already discussing the silent one's future.

"He's just a prisoner of war," one insisted.

"Like hell, he is," another scornfully contended and then went on to explain. "He's a Jerry wearing

an American uniform and captured on an Allied drome. The penalty is a firing squad." Limey, who was beginning to feel sorry for the silent one, growled at them to be still. But he hadn't spoken soon enough. The silent one had evidently heard. His teeth flashed in a polite smile, and he quietly announced, "Perhaps I shall decide that question for you, myself. When a man's life is a failure it is best that he end it himself."

An embarrassed silence settled on the Cuckoos. The Jerry had guts. Calmly he asked Johnny Walker for a cigarette. "One of my own, please, if you have no objection."

A premonition of something about to happen set Limey to trembling violently. He took a step forward, then halted in indecision. Walker had innocently opened the case and proffered it. Swiftly the silent one selected a cigarette and then he laughed softly. His speech that followed was aimed directly at Limey. "To you, my successful enemy, who so often spoke of a Lady Luck during our days together, enjoy her smiles while you may, as I, too, once did, but always remember that her frown is death. Perhaps you and I will discuss the lady more thoroughly some day after she had frowned on you, too, in another world where there will be no enemies nor wars."

Once more he laughed softly, and the hand that held the cigarette moved quickly to his heart. A short metallic "ping" sounded.

Limey leaped across the intervening space, but too late. The silent one stiffened, bent slowly at the knees and pitched forward on his face—dead. By his own hand.

Shocked, the Cuckoos stood frozen as they were. Limey's voice, husky with emotion, broke the spell. "A brave man passed, buzzards. A brave man and a soldier."

Willing hands carried the silent one's body into the shed that he had tried in vain to enter in life. In the morning, the Cuckoos would bury him as they would one of their own, for he was one of their own—a brave man and a soldier. What mattered it now if his flag had been different?

Johnny and Limey examined the round white cylinders which the silent one's cigarette case contained, while the remainder of the Cuckoos, now strangely silent, gathered around.

"A spring gun," Johnny explained, as he held one up for them to see. "Capable of propelling a needle halfway through a man."

Unconsciously, Limey's hand went to the medal in his left shirt pocket. Lady Luck had smiled on him.

The Cuckoos started back to their cots, but he tarried behind them. In the moonlight, it was no trouble for him to find a half-smoked cigarette butt that still clung to the tin wall of the fuel shed. Directly beneath it and about on a line with his own chest, six or seven new holes were closely grouped, convincing evidence that again Lady Luck had smiled.

With a devil-may-care shrug, Lady Luck's sweetheart trotted after his brother Cuckoos. It would be time enough to worry when she started frowning. But right now he was enjoying her smiles.