



BARON PHANTOMAS

by ALEXIS ROSSOFF

Each day that ghost plane threw its challenge at the Cuckoos. Their guns eagerly ripped the skies for the man who wasn't there. Mystery wings all but rode them out of the sky until that day when they learned the secret carried to them on the wings of death!

TO THE PAIR of worried machine gunners, squatting on their heels in the damp darkness of a French night, the sudden and unexpected appearance of the moon was as good an excuse as any for them to voice the fears which, for the past week, had relentlessly driven them to the verge of hysteria.

For the past seven nights he and his comrade—who now sprawled at his side—had maintained a nerve-wrecking, silent vigil, on the alert for a visit from Germany's dreaded "Baron Phantomas."

"Do you really think that he will fly to-night, *mon camarade*?"

"If he exists at all, it is most certain. To-night, *mon brave*, the moon tells me that we will be given ample opportunity to demonstrate our proficiency in handling machine guns. So draw your sights

fine, comrade, for I will be shooting to bag Baron Phantomas and a war cross for my grandchildren to play with." The young gunner, vainly trying to allay his own fears of the supernatural, licked dry lips and grunted noncommittally. But this flying Baron Phantomas? The gunner shuddered. He had heard men swear that they had seen their tracer and incendiary bullets streak through the baron's green-striped Fokker D-7 without harming either the ghost ship or its occupant.

ASHAMED of his fears, the young gunner lapsed into a painful silence. His was that rare something that made heroes out of cowards. Every nerve in his body urged him to flee while there was still time, but he conquered the desire with a mixed jumble of prayers and curses.

The sky was throbbing red now; alive with the sinister flashings of big guns. The very earth seemed to tremble. Never before had such a show been staged on any Front. The grim prophecy of the red moon was about to be fulfilled. Its appearance in the sky was the signal that unleashed a seething man-made hell of exploding steel and death.

Desperately the young gunner clenched chattering teeth and gripped the ground with shaking hands lest he betray his own fright. Suddenly he was lifted bodily from the ground and subjected to a bone-jarring shaking.

“Blood on the moon. The whole Front gone mad and you lay there sleeping,” a shrill voice screamed in his ears. “Have you no nerves, no fear? I am going insane. Let us escape, comrade. To hell with the Baron Phantomas.”

He shot a quick glance at the misplaced hell that was now the sky and stiffened at sight of what he saw.

A menacing black shadow of a plane was gliding noiselessly over the drome.

“*Le Baron Phantomas*,” croaked the terrified bearded one.

Piously the young gunner made the sign of the cross and struggled fiercely to break the half mad veteran’s grip on his shoulder. He wanted to run, but pride would not permit him to do so.

A last frightened glance he took at the missile-torn, blazing sky above him. For a second his eyes followed, fascinated, the shadowy ghost plane still circling the drome, then he forced himself to look away and back into the ashen, fear-filled face of the cringing veteran. He would have to hurry, lest fate snatch the chance away from him.

Well-aimed Boche H.E. shells were beginning to find the drome. One transformed a canvas hangar into a leaping volcano. Another found the fuel sheds; painted the night bright as day. Half-crazed French peelots, conscious of the silent plane hovering overhead refused to seek escape up there. Slowly, but thoroughly, the creeping barrage ranged across the doomed drome.

The young gunner saw the squat ships on the line stand out clearly for a moment against a roaring background of fire, then disappear into the devouring maw of the holocaust. Men were dying now. That he knew as their agonized screams assailed his ears.

Of the drome that once housed the personnel of the proud Second Escadrille only those two and the scorched, shell-pocked earth remained; still the Boche

were not taking anything for granted. Methodically they continued to peg devastating steel stuff, while over the conflagration *le Baron Phantomas* kept up his uninterrupted ghost patrol. Not a single burst had leaped from his threatening twin guns. It was not necessary. Superstitious French peelots chose to die in the fire rather than cope with this phantom fighter. The silent shadow ship swooped suddenly into the veteran’s vision and a mirthless laugh escaped from between his clenched teeth. Feet leaden with fear carried him back to the machine gun he had deserted. Laughing to mask the frightened chattering of his teeth he sank down behind the weapon.

A WHISTLING burst of bullets leaped skyward from the veteran’s gun. No longer did his hands tremble. He was shooting his best, never allowing the gun’s flame-tipped muzzle to waver for a second from the slow-flying target that so completely filled the gun sights. Unknown to him the young gunner’s weapon had joined his. Now twin lines of tracer streaked through the night leading the way for the more deadly bullets that followed. They found the ghost ship and passed harmlessly through it. The youngster whispered a prayer that lost itself in the mad turmoil raging around him.

The baron had banked the phantom plane and was coming back, flying low. In the dancing reflection of the flames, crackling perilously close to them, they could plainly see the markings on the underside of the ghost ship’s wings; the black Maltese Crosses, the dark stripes circling the fuselage and lastly the overlarge grisly *cocarde* that identified the pilot for who he was—the grinning skull and cross bones of *le Baron Phantomas*.

He passed right above their heads as if taunting them, yet no sound came from the plane, not even the familiar whistle that wind makes as it passes flat wire and strut.

The young gunner swallowed the lump that had arisen in his throat. Expecting death with the next breath, he took a last careful aim at the plane’s belly, squeezed the trigger carefully, then blinked his eyes in startling disbelief. His bullets were lacing through a sky, now strangely empty; the phantom plane had disappeared. A frightened gasp and he lurched to his knees, only to be upset again by the blind lumbering rush of the wildly swearing veteran. Badly befuddled for the moment, the youngster dully watched his crazed comrade race away toward the fiercely blazing

hangars. Slow dawning realization of what the veteran was about to do suddenly galvanized the horrified young gunner into ineffective action. A warning shout, vibrant with terror, sprang from his throat only to lose itself in the smothering thunder of the shelling.

Through wide staring eyes he saw a leaping geyser of flame reach high into the night and burn itself out in a shower of sparks. The veteran was gone in its consuming midst.

A merciful unconsciousness put a temporary end to the young gunner's mental suffering. How long he had lain there, the only living thing in that scene of carnage and desolation, he was never to know. But when his eyes did finally flutter open the first thing that filled them was the sight of a kindly, although very dirty and oilsmearred, face regarding him anxiously. Could it be the dreaded Baron Phantomas? But no, this was a peelot of flesh and blood. The human feel of the leather-coated arm supporting his shoulders and the bite of strong spirits trickling down the young gunner's throat were all very real.

With a fatalistic shrug and a great effort he sat up. The red moon had disappeared, likewise the night, the drome, and the war sick peelots of the Second Escadrille. Everything was gone, even Baron Phantomas. At least that was something to be thankful for.

He essayed a weak laugh and cut it off short as knowledge came to him that he was not alone. He was sitting in the center of a dozen or more silently standing, hawk-faced peelots who made no attempt to mask their frank interest in him. At length one of them spoke to him in passable French.

CHAPTER II GHOST WINGS

THEY WERE THE "CUCKOOS," the interpreter announced. To the peelot's speech the gunner paid little attention. His thoughts were leaping and racing, going haywire, set off by the strange peelot's calm but startling announcement—the Cuckoos. Would miracles never cease. The gunner scrambled to his feet and touched the speaker's chest with trembling fingers as if anxious to assure himself that his hearing had

not played him false. It was too much. He gave away to inherent Gaelic emotion. Great tears dropped down his cheeks, his throat worked convulsively.

"*Le bon Dieu* is truly good," he whispered happily and continued. "It is said in the trenches and on the frontline dromes, *messieurs*, 'when things are darkest for France, God sends *les Coucou*s,' and now you are here. Forgive me, I go insane from joy. I am elated. At last that winged devil, *le Baron Phantomas*, will fly to a reckoning."

Those of the listening Cuckoos who understood French shuffled uneasily in the mud. Words of praise were strange to them. Renegade blackbirds of the A.E.F.—listed as deserters from that port of the damned, Blois—they were more accustomed to hearing themselves described as dicipline haters, disgraces and bums. Johnny Walker began to fire questions with machine-gun rapidity. The Cuckoos, living apart on their hidden outlaw drome in the fastnesses of the distant Vosges, had never heard of Germany's new mystery Baron Phantomas.

They had been winging home from a successful raiding flight on the wrong side of the war when attracted by a chance sight of the smoldering ruins of the Second Escadrille's drome.

By the time the French gunner had exhausted his recounting of the deeds credited to the ghost flyer, each Cuckoo present was harboring a secret wish of his own. Johnny Walker took one look at their jutting jaws, clenched fists and narrowed eyes.

"You and me both, buzzards," he began. "A chance to pull the tail feathers out've this Baron Phantomas that the Froggy here speaks of, is my idea of pleasant diversion."

Eagerly the Cuckoos, all talking at the same time, crowded around the sober-faced Johnny Walker.

They were birds of his feather; hard, bitter men, fighters ready to tackle the devil himself. He sent them hurrying back to their idling ships to take the air for the last short leg of the hop that would carry them to the rendezvous in the Vosges, the "Cuckoos' Nest."

TO THE French gunner, standing by Johnny's side, the Cuckoos' following actions must have seemed very strange. There was neither signal nor formation. Each Cuckoo selected a take-off of his own and bugged over it when he saw his way clear. The passing of a moment found the sky overhead filled with roaring planes, circling and banking in a steady climb for altitude.

Suddenly one leveled out at the top and full gunned

away, flying east. Another winged west. Soon they had all fled over the distant horizon, yet no two pointed in the same direction. Puzzled, the French gunner turned to Johnny Walker and asked:

“They fly where, *mon brave*?”

The question snapped Johnny out of his day dream. For a second he hesitated, then combining a wide grin with a slow mysterious wink, he answered: “They fly to the Cuckoo’s Nest.”

“But—but—” spluttered the gunner.

“I know what you’re trying to say, *comrade*,” Johnny cut him short. “You’re wondering about them winging off to all the points of the compass. Well, that’s because they are Cuckoos, and the cuckoo is a queer bird that makes its nest wherever it lights.”

A friendly slap on the badly bewildered gunner’s shoulder, another mysterious wink, and Johnny Walker swung himself up into the cockpit of his Spad. A loud roar as he poured the hop to the engine, and he was rolling.

With his brain lost in a maze of planning it was only instinct alone that kept him from wandering off of the sky lane that led to the Nest. Worry wrinkles grew deeper in his brow. After all, he knew for a fact what only a veteran few of the Cuckoos surmised. There was a certain officer—Captain Greb by name—who spent his time in voluntary exile at Blois, who would have to be consulted first before the Cuckoos could tackle the problem of Baron Phantomas.

It was Captain Greb who had first conceived the idea of giving blackbird pilots, condemned for hot-headed infractions of regulations to oblivion in Blois, one more chance to redeem themselves. G.H.Q. listened often and long before consenting to a trial for the idealistic captain’s plan, but along with its consent, G.H.Q. had seemed to take a staggering revenge for the many painful hours he had assailed his ears. Point blank they told the captain that he would be held directly responsible for the future actions of the drunken brawlers who had been shorn of their wings. Giving no thought to his own career Captain Greb had accepted the ultimatum.

Johnny Walker, sullen and brooding, had arrived at Blois labeled as a discipline hater. Captain Greb had quietly taken him in hand and one month later. Walker had left the port of the condemned—the first of the Cuckoos who were to follow. Johnny had never forgotten. Captain Greb, who remained back in Blois, became the only law that Walker ever recognized. G.H.Q. and all that it represented, he continued to

despise. But let the quiet little captain voice a request over the wire that led from Blois direct to the Cuckoos’ hidden nest and Johnny Walker saw to it that the wheels of accomplishing the same began to turn at once.

HEAVY with misgiving and fearing the worse for the Cuckoos’ morale should Captain Greb’s permission not be forth coming, Johnny oriented himself and pointed the Spad between the twin sentinel peaks that marked the only safe air approach to the Cuckoos’ Nest. A moment of careful flying brought the Spad through the tricky passage. The camouflaged nest and a distasteful ordeal lay directly beneath his rolling gear. Reluctantly he raced the Spad’s engine in the prearranged signal of the Cuckoos, then cut the switches. As if by magic a coveralled figure popped up out of the ground followed by others. Two of them picked up what appeared from the air to be a great boulder and trotted off to one side with it. A tree was next removed, then smaller rocks and lastly a tangle of brush. Johnny set the Spad down on a perfect landing field that seconds before had seemed part of the deserted wilderness.

He lifted his huge bulk from the cockpit to the ground find stood by as a busy group of grease-monkeys took charge of his bus and quickly rolled it away to its place in one of the tiny camouflaged hangars.

Once more the scene was set for the benefit of all enemy eyes searching from the sky. One by one the ground crew dropped from sight as they returned to their underground shops and quarters.

Johnny lost no time in following their example. Unerringly he headed for a blanket-covered entrance in the rock wall, and ducked low into the passage that led to the concrete cubicles that housed the Cuckoos.

Arriving at the phone room, he entered and closed the door behind him. A long wait spent in an impatient jangling of the receiver hook and punctuated with choice profanity finally brought Captain Greb to the other end of the wire. Bluntly, as was his wont, Johnny told of the Cuckoos’ discovery; of the devastated French drome and of Baron Phantomas, only to learn in turn that the story was an old one to G.H.Q. and Captain Greb. The solving of the mystery was about to be turned over to G-2. Johnny’s hopes went flying but he stuck to his guns and fired a chance shot.

“Those intelligence birds won’t get to first base in

this game, captain,” Johnny pleaded. “No more than the Frog peelots did. They’ll dig themselves a nice comfortable hole, climb into it and proceed to wait for the baron to strut his stuff in the sky. After that there’ll be reports and more reports and the baron will go right on using the Allies’ sky for a playground, and soon you won’t be able to get one of our pilots to fly within five kilos of the Front. You need fighters in that sector, captain, tough birds that’ll sail into that phantom pilot and give him hell.”

It was the longest speech Johnny Walker had ever attempted. The reaction left him a little shaky and in doubt.

“Are you speaking for the Cuckoos, Walker?”

Captain Greb asked after a short interval of painful silence.

Johnny’s heart pounded furiously. “Yes, sir,” he fairly shouted into the transmitter.

“Such a detail would no doubt mean death for many of you,” the captain warned.

“I realize that, sir,” Johnny accepted without hesitation. “But what does it matter? We’re the Cuckoos, slated to hop off on the last flight sooner or later. I’m thinking that it will be kind of nice to know that life, while a short flight, was a merry one.”

Johnny hunched over the phone now, eagerly waiting for something, and it came—a grudging half-hearted promise from the captain. Many wires would have to be pulled.

With a weary motion, Johnny placed the receiver back on its hook. For a long time he sat as he was, regarding his huge fists. Forty-eight hours of nerve-cracking inactivity in the offing.

THE sudden insistent jangling of a bell later in the day made Johnny bound backward. It was a summons to answer the phone. Captain Greb was calling from Blois. So rare were his calls that they were considered public events by the Cuckoos. The bell kept up its harsh clamor and Johnny leaped for the passage. The race was on. Pilots fought and jostled goodnaturedly for the honor of being the first on his heels.

Reaching the phone room he snatched the receiver from its hook and held up a hand for those crowding the doorway to be silent. “Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Yes—” they heard him repeat with maddening monotony. One Cuckoo cursed softly to himself. “If only Walker would say something else.” They heard his final, “Yes, sir,” waited until he had replaced the receiver and then they piled into the room. Keen eyes scrutinized his face and found

deep lines of impending tragedy and worry written on it. Their hearts pounded the faster. Such a look on Johnny Walker’s face could mean but one thing. Action for the Cuckoos. At least it always had in the past.

Johnny for all his gruffness and assumed hardness loved the Cuckoos. Danger for himself was something to be taken in stride. But danger hovering over the Cuckoos was mental torture.

“Hell’s busted loose,” he announced tonelessly. “All the bombers in Germany accompanied by a pair of high flying Zepps slipped across to our side of the war less than an hour ago. Ammo dumps, the S.O.S., everything all blasted off the map.”

The Cuckoos swore long and feelingly. “What was the matter with our birds?” a pilot demanded to know.

“Nothing the matter with them,” Johnny explained. “The Jerrys sifted through the sky area that up until last night was patrolled by the Second Escadrille.”

Understanding slowly dawned on the Cuckoos. They saw now Baron Phantomas’ real purpose for operating in that particular sector. Pilots would avoid that section of the Front patrolled by the phantom flyer as they would the plague. His very presence there assured Germany’s jagdstaffel safe passage behind the Allies’ lines.

“What’s to be done about it?” a score of voices shouted at once.

Stiffly Johnny lurched to his feet. Ahead of his thoughts, his fingers were already buttoning his jacket, patting his cap into place.

“What’s going to be done about it?” he repeated slowly. Suddenly his wide shoulders squared and the answer boomed forth from the depths of his barrel-like chest. “Why, nothing much. We, the blackbirds of the A.E.F., are going to barge in where good little pilots are afraid to fly. We’re going to stop Germany’s entire air force and in our spare time find out, if we can, what makes Baron Phantomas tick. G.H.Q. wants to know.” The devil light was dancing in Johnny’s eyes now. His voice grew to an ugly roar.

“The lousy biblebacks,” he rumbled. “They told our Old Man back in Blois that they couldn’t give their consent to our taking over that quarter section of a haunted hell legitimately because we’re bums and disgraces. They’re afraid that they might lose their social standing for sponsoring the likes of us. Still they need us just the same. The offer they made our Old Man proves that. Buzzards, G.H.Q. won’t interfere should we decide to fly into that sector of our own accord. They’ll even go so far as to keep all other flying outfits out of there lest we corrupt their morals.”

“That’s good,” a derisive Cuckoo laughed mirthlessly. “Keep them out’ve there. Hell’s bells, G.H.Q. couldn’t chase an outfit into that graveyard with a battery of seventy-fives.”

“Correct,” Johnny snapped. “And now, what do you say, buzzards?”

He didn’t have long to wait. “*Le’s go!*” they yelled back at him.

In high spirits they adjourned to the recreation room. Glasses and cups were quickly filled. Red Finley called for a toast and Johnny mounted to a table top.

“May we not die in vain,” he proposed. A heavy silence settled over the room as they drank, it was bottoms up and the devil take the last man to finish. Followed the splintering crash of their glasses shattering on the concrete floor. The Cuckoos were ready, even to Tombstone Tyler who stood mournfully regarding the tin canteen cup that he still held in his hand. He had been the last to finish.

“Looks like my number is up, buzzards,” he announced solemnly. His face twisted into one of its rare smiles. “Well, it won’t be in vain,” he assured them.

Right through the night they worked, taking no time out until the first gray streaks of dawn tipped the towering peaks of the surrounding Vosges. And then only because the last iron egg had been cradled. The next fifteen minutes would be the hardest; that waiting in suspense. At least three of them would have to be left behind to protect the nest. Hardwick and Stanley, convalescing from bullet wounds received in a recent sky fracas with the Jerries, were certain to remain. Who would be the unlucky number three?

JOHNNY WALKER walked into the messroom and the buzzing of voices ceased. Producing a pack of cards he riffled them and placed the deck on top of a stool. “One buzzard to stay back,” he announced brusquely. “Form in single file and take the top card when it comes your turn. The bird who cuts the low card is the bird who is it—and maybe he’ll be the lucky one in the end,” he added reflectively.

With a scuffling of boots and many impatient admonitions to “close up” the drawing began. Limey Barrow cut a king and emitted a loud whoop. The next Cuckoo grunted his disgust, a four of spades. Johnny, standing to one side, offered a silent prayer and never took his eyes from Tombstone Tyler, treading eagerly on the heels of the Cuckoo in front of him. Johnny gritted his teeth and prayed the harder.

Tombstone had stepped up to the stool; his hand

seemed to hover longer than the others had over the cards. Johnny started to say something; thought better of it and remained as he was. Tyler was moving away with the smile a fixed mask on his face now. He was holding a card up for all to see, the nine of hearts. The drawing was ended. Red Finley, the low man, savagely cursing his luck dropped a three of clubs on the floor and trampled it.

The muffled roar of many warming engines up on the tarmac caused a wild exodus from the room.

Forty minutes of full-gunned flying brought them to Baron Phantomas’ hunting ground. A labor unit working under indirect orders from G.H.Q. had restored some slight semblance of order to the chaos that the Jerries had made of the Second Escadrille’s drome. Shell holes had been filled in and the dead buried. It was more than the Cuckoos expected. They were content. The formation broke up and they went down for precarious bounce landings. It was all so peaceful and quiet. Hard to believe that a phantom plane roamed the sky above or that raiding giant Zepps and Gothas were wont to use the area for a private entrance to France. Johnny, the first to set foot on the ground, was abstractedly searching for a cigarette when the unexpected touch of a hand on his shoulder caused him to grab frantically for his bolstered pistol.

“A thousand pardons, *mon, mon*—”

A French noncom at a loss as to Johnny’s rank, began to apologize, then hesitated.

Johnny, relaxing, pushed the goggles back up on his helmet and admitted: “You gave me one hell of a start, *mon brave*. Lucky for you that you were not the one I expected to see.”

“*Le Baron Phantomas?*” the non-com inquired softly.

CHAPTER IV PHANTOM PEELT

JOHNNY GRUNTED AND LET GO of his pistol butt. Other Cuckoos, eager for news, soon crowded around the Frenchman. The rumors they’d already heard about the ghost pilot weren’t the half of it. No lone peelt could hope to cope with the baron successfully. Of that the noncom was positive. Even an

escadrille or an entire group would have its troubles. The phantom pilot was truly an emissary of the devil.

Johnny let the noncom go on with his gloomy prophesying for a good fifteen minutes. Then noticing that the Cuckoos were showing evident signs of nervousness, he switched the trend of the conversation by asking a few questions of his own. He learned to his surprise that the noncom was in charge of an anti-aircraft battery stationed only a few hundred yards from the drome. Johnny, trying hard to conceal his war-bird contempt for the archies, asked:

“What have you been doing to make things unpleasant for Baron Phantomas?”

The noncom shrugged and showed his teeth before answering. “In the beginning, *mon commandant*, we fired hundreds of rounds at him. And now, well, we just do not bother any more. We learned that to keep on doing so was an outrageous waste of valuable ammunition.”

The more he studied the noncom, the more he disliked the man. The man’s calmness while reciting the deeds of Baron Phantomas was relatively foreign to any other Frenchman with whom Johnny had come in contact.

Johnny resolved to do some investigating on his own account. Should he discover that the battery was keeping its gun silent and seeking cover whenever Baron Phantomas appeared in the sky, he would have a plausible reason for requesting the battery’s removal from the sector. Suddenly looking at his watch, a broad hint that the noncom’s departure would be appreciated, Johnny turned to the Cuckoos. But the noncom was persistent.

“*Mon commandant*,” he interrupted politely. “The name of your organization, please. It will be necessary to incorporate it in my daily report to my headquarters.”

For a full moment Johnny regarded him long and hard, then he made a strange answer that even the listening Cuckoos did not expect. “Tell your headquarters, *mon brave*, tell your comrades—in fact tell every one you come in contact with—that the Cuckoos are here.”

The noncom’s jaw dropped and his eyes opened wide. “*Les Coucous*,” he mumbled, clicked off a shaky salute and hurried away. Johnny, following the noncom with his eyes, grinned and announced with evident satisfaction.

“Guess that jarred the little Napoleon out of his superior calmness.”

“Yeah,” agreed a pilot. “But wasn’t that a risky thing to do?”

“Nope,” Johnny answered slowly. “I figured that angle out and told him who we were on purpose. The whole Front will know that the Cuckoos are here now before twenty-four hours elapse. And what the Front knows Germany will learn in time. I’m nursing a hunch that the Jerries will do a bit of serious thinking before sending her jagdstaffels barging through this sky lane again.”

“Maybe so,” the pilot agreed, “but meantime while the Imperial High Command is doing all that serious thinking, Jerry’ll see to it that our little sojourn in this sector develops into one hell of a hectic vacation.”

“That’ll be swell,” Johnny growled. “It’ll give you birds a belly full of the excitement you’ve been craving. Now I’m worrying about some hot grub and a comfortable place to grab a few winks of shuteye.”

No objections forthcoming, suggestions were called for. Tombstone Tyler made the first and elected himself a committee of one to put it into effect, by simply taking the initiative. Puzzled, they watched him strip off his flying togs and slip an automatic into a side jacket pocket.

“The war never existed that can deprive me of my nourishment,” he grumbled in his old pessimistic manner, then turned to Johnny. “Write me an order on the Frog supply depot over at Myfee for everything we need, skipper.”

“That’s easy enough,” Johnny agreed, “but how about transportation?” Tombstone smiled coldly and significantly patted the pocket that held his automatic. “I’ll provide that item, skipper, on the first road I come to.”

No more questions were necessary. Tombstone’s lone wolf ways were known to be exacting and merciless at times, but they never failed to get results.

Johnny started on the list of supplies, while the Cuckoos lost no time in completing the rest of their operations schedule. The old plan of things was to be continued. Each pilot to service his own ship and fly when he chose to, without orders. Such a schedule in any other squadron might have courted disaster, but the Cuckoos were different. They had their own rigid code and adhered to it. There would be no thought of shirking. The “Bat Flyers” could be depended upon to roam the sky at night while during the day the “Morning Glories” would take up where the Bats left off. One more radical departure from the book of regulations and their simple but effective schedule was

finished. Each plane was to be parked separately from the others rather than all on an established line that would offer a cold meat target for both raiding Jerry birdmen and educated barrages. The Cuckoos did not fight their wars according to Hoyle.

Satisfied at last with the list of supplies Johnny handed it to Tombstone, who placed it inside his cap and departed with an assuring, "S-long, buzzards. I'll be back in time for dinner."

Puffing in silence on precious cigarettes the Cuckoos watched Tombstone until he disappeared in the general direction of the sinister rumbling. Johnny, conscious of the heavy silence and fearing that the deadly spell of Baron Phantomas was settling on them, turned to Limey Barrow and fired a gruff, "What's on your mind besides your cap, buzzard?"

"Plenty," Limey retorted. "I'm worried. Wondering 'oo's going to cook the grub after Tombstone fetches it."

Johnny laughed heartily and relaxed as his own worries vanished.

"My error, buzzard," he contritely apologized to Limey. "I overlooked the cook in the excitement of hopping off for here, so I guess it's up to me to hightail for the nest and bring him."

Suiting the action to the words, Johnny spun on a heel and froze in the middle of his stride like a man suddenly stricken. An inarticulate exclamation sprang from his throat. Less than fifty feet away stood a German officer, Luger in hand, calmly looking them over. The Cuckoos who had turned with Johnny's cry were equally stunned. The Jerry's nerve was astounding. He was sneering, mocking them. Deliberately he raised the Luger. The movement broke the spell. Cuckoos grabbed frantically for automatics. A gun barked and spurted flame in Johnny's hand. Soon the snarling crackle of small arms threatened to rupture eardrums. No living thing could exist in the face of that concentrated fire from terrific odds, twenty-seven against one. The Jerry should have crumpled at the first salvo, yet he continued to stand as Johnny had first discovered him, smiling at their efforts, coolly withholding his own fire.

A Cuckoo laughed crazily and Johnny realized that his own hand was trembling. He steadied, took careful aim at the Jerry's middle, and squeezed the trigger. The bullet leaped from the muzzle and Johnny hurled the impotent weapon after it.

God, was he going mad? Shooting at figments of his own imagination. Even as he had squeezed the

trigger, he had seen the sneering Jerry officer dissolve into space. Suspiciously, his eyes traveled from Cuckoo to Cuckoo. They too had witnessed the phenomenon. Whitefaced and slack-jawed, seeing nothing out of staring eyes, they stood rigidly on guard with smoking automatics still held at the ready.

JOHNNY, the first to recover, bellowed a command. "It's a trick, buzzards. Search the drome."

Like well trained automatons they moved to obey, but fear in the guise of a mocking Jerry officer rode them with torturing mental spurs. Furiously, Johnny raced from one searching party to the other, tongue lashing and insulting them, hoping to snap them out of it.

"And you're the Cuckoos," he snarled. "Walking around like gutless carrion, with eyes turned backward in your heads. You don't have to stay here if you're afraid. Just hop your ships and beat it. But I'm giving you fair warning. Don't be at the Nest when I get there after dealing with this Baron Phantomas bird."

"Aw, go to hell," an irate Cuckoo growled back at him. "We'll hop our ships when we're damned good and ready. And right now we're not ready. *Compre?*"

The ice thawed in Johnny's veins. He'd made the pardonable mistake of underestimating the Cuckoos. Perhaps the flying phantom, too, might make the same mistake and be forced to pay dearly for having done so.

A short time later, when the search had revealed not so much as a footprint on the spot where the Jerry official had appeared, the pilots, low in spirit, grouped around Johnny's plane.

Johnny gave them a heartening reminder. "So far, buzzards, it's just a Mexican stand-off. The ghost strutted his stuff and we shot up a considerable portion of France. Nobody got hurt, leaving all things as they were in the beginning."

Chuckling, Limey Barrow prepared to quit the group. "I'm going a-flying in search of the phantom," he announced for the benefit of his curious comrades.

"You expecting to bag him. Limey?" some one asked.

"Ell no," the little cuckoo scornfully flung back over his shoulder, "I merely want to thank 'im for the pleasant diversion he created this quiet arftemoon." In a moment other pilots expressed their intention of following Limey's example. Props were spun and engines bellowed. Johnny felt better. During their absence he would have ample time to think and do some investigating.

Another pilot, Bert Rand, volunteered to make

the round trip flight for the forgotten cook. Johnny thanked him and played grease-monkey for Rand's takeoff.

Desiring only to be alone, he anxiously counted planes. Limey Barrow had taken the air first, with a flock of Cuckoos a split second behind, flying daringly for position on his tail. Order miraculously grew out of chaos. A great roaring V formed in the sky and swept majestically away toward Germany. They were on the prowl winging to meet the challenge of a new Front.

Johnny watched them go; saw Bert Rand fly off in the opposite direction, for the Nest, and then brought his eyes back to earth again. But for his own Spad, the field was deserted. A strange loneliness settled on him. He couldn't blame them for taking any excuse to put distance between themselves and the haunted drome. In fact, he damned his own folly few being so eager to be alone) His hand furtively sought consolation in the friendly feel of his automatic.

The damned mystery was getting him just as it had gotten the former luckless tenants of the drome.

The thought dragged his gaze across the field to a row of fresh-made earth mounds, each one marked with a rough hand-made cross of wood. Silent testimony that Baron Phantomas was as deadly as he was mysterious. Well, so were the Cuckoos.

Johnny pulled himself together and started back around his bus.

"Ah *mon commandant*."

JOHNNY felt like driving his fist into the smiling face of the French noncom with whom he had come close to colliding. Fighting himself under control, he angrily demanded:

"How did you get here?"

If the Frenchman noted Johnny's nervousness, he did not betray the fact. Still smiling, he shrugged and cynically answered;

"Not being *le Baron Phantomas*, I walked, *mon commandant*. You being preoccupied did not hear me approach."

Johnny bristled dangerously as the noncom's thinly veiled sarcasm registered on him. He didn't like the Frenchman. He was too silky, too damned much at ease for a man compelled by duty to spend his days in a phantom's playground.

The noncom, probably sensing this, was quick to wipe the smile from his face and retreat beyond Johnny's arms' length.

"A thousand pardons, *mon commandant*," he humbly apologized. "If my short answers offended you."

Johnny's slow wrath was slow to subside. "Your answers mean nothing to me," he growled. "It's the way you come pussy-footing up behind people. After this blow a whistle, or sing a song, but be sure to make some sort of a noise when you set foot on this drome or you're liable to find yourself on the wrong end of a bullet, and I don't mean perhaps."

"I understand, *mon commandant*," the noncom replied, then continued. "Having heard so much of *le Coucou*, I let enthusiasm blind me to the fact that after all they are only human."

"Meaning just what?" Johnny asked. The noncom hesitated before answering. One could never be sure how these Americans might react. "Meaning only this, *mon commandant*," he answered at length. "That like all humans the Cuckoos too have an inborn fear of the supernatural."

Recalling his own jumpy exhibition of nerves, Johnny grudgingly conceded the point. "Granted, *mon brave*," he growled. "But always bear this in mind. The Cuckoos do not fear men or man-made devices."

"It will always be my pleasure to remember your statement, *mon commandant*," the noncom smiled and bowed, and then made known the purpose of his second visit to the drome. "Can it be arranged that your light patrol will give my battery a signal when they are in the air over our position? I will help to avoid embarrassing situations and probable accidents, *mon commandant*."

Johnny did some rapid thinking. Not that the noncom's request was unusual, for such arrangements existed wherever dromes were adjacent to archie batteries. It was the suggestive way in which the noncom had voiced his request that aroused Johnny's war-bird ire. "Probable accidents!" Up to date he had never heard of an archie knocking down a plane. Exercising true Cuckoo caution, Johnny diplomatically avoided committing himself on any point that had not first been taken up with his comrades.

"It's like this, sergeant," he explained. "The Cuckoos do very little night flying but when they do, you will know of it." The noncom smiled his satisfaction, voiced a wish that Johnny visit the French archie battery, then prepared to take his departure. "The Boche sing their evening hymn of hate," he excused himself, and pointed to the reddened, throbbing sky in the distance.

Johnny, long separated from the Front by his sojourn in the mountain fastness of the Vosges, mechanically acknowledged the noncom's salute and turned his eyes and interest to the flaming heavens. The muted muttering of the afternoon had grown suddenly to the heavy thunder of a summer storm. Jerry was certainly putting on a show.

A heavy projectile rushed high over where Johnny was standing with a clattering roar reminiscent of a passing freight train. "Passe," he grinned to himself. This was the kind of a war he liked, where death announced its coming. It was the silent sneaking things he despised.

Scanning the sky, his heart leaped and pounded furiously. A picture-taking Rumpler escorted by a green-striped wasp of a fighting Fokker was droning undisturbed toward Germany. Johnny jumped for his own cold ship, halted, and cursed bitterly. It would take five minutes at least to warm up the Spad. Again he swore feelingly. What was the matter with the French archie battery? Of course there wasn't one chance in a thousand of them registering a direct hit but, the coffee-cooling dogs, they could at least gamble for that one chance.

CHAPTER V SPAD GAUNTLET

JOHNNY CONVERTED A BLISTERING oath into a whoop of joy. Things were happening, and how. A bobbing line of black specks had hopped over the horizon and were sailing into view. They were the Cuckoos, returning like bats out of hell. Fanlike they spread out to head off the two Jerry ships, now climbing desperately in a full-gunned race to win to the thin protection of the overhanging cloud blanket.

Ever shortening the intervening distance, the Cuckoos climbed with them. Johnny grinned coldly in anticipation. The Cuckoos knew all the tricks when it came to cloud fighting. Three of the outlaw brood disappeared into the blanket of mist. They'd come out at the top to cruise there on the alert. The remainder of the Cuckoos came steadily on, following the hurtling flight of a Spad that had darted out into the lead. Tense now, Johnny watched the bird battle draw to a head.

The Jerries ducked from sight into the Clouds. Watching, he held his breath to the bursting point. And then it happened. The Jerries came diving back into view again, driven by a blasting rain of steel from the twin guns of the watchful Cuckoos lurking in the mist-penetrating sunshine above the cloud blanket.

Trapped, the Jerries prepared to give battle. Twin streamers of tracer streaked out from the Spandaus of the Fokker as the Jerry pilot fired a tentative warming burst. Less than four hundred yards away, the leading Cuckoo did the same thing. A spectator, out of the fight, Johnny then saw a startling thing happen. A white puff ball exploded beneath the Cuckoo's Spad and mushroomed into a yellowish powder-gas haze. Where Johnny had only cursed before, he went mad now. His blistering oaths shrilled forth with all the savage intensity of an enraged animal's screech.

The lousy, blundering archie battery was cutting loose at last. Pegging steel stuff up there into a sky fairly cluttered with Cuckoo ships.

Grinding his teeth in fury, Johnny raced over the uneven ground. He'd murder every damned lout of that Frog gun crew. Running full tilt with his eyes turned heavenward, a stone betrayed him. A twinge shot through his ankle and he plunged forward on his face to finally skid to a stop in a slimy mud puddle. He lay there groaning, more at his own helplessness than from pain.

The stinking sons, if only he could lay hands on them. The bellow of overtaxed engines and snarling chatter of singing machine guns was drifting away. That lone archie burst not only upset the Cuckoos' tactical plan; it also gave the sorely pressed Jerries a break and they had been quick to seize it. Feeding the hop to their engines they chucked the bird scrap and streaked for the Front, flying right through the center of the disorganized Cuckoos' line.

The speedy Fokker flew the gauntlet, but the heavier Rumpler was not so fortunate. A Cuckoo changed direction in a breathless wire-straining skid, took up the pursuit and lighted on the hapless Jerry's tail with guns going full blast. His first long vicious burst literally crucified both the Jerry pilot and the occupant of the rear cockpit on their own Maltese Crosses.

Out of control, the doomed Rumpler zoomed up an air hill, fell off on one wing on top, went into a flat spin and dropped earthward with the speed of a falling stone. Johnny looked away. The ground upon which he still sprawled trembled from the terrific impact as the doomed Jerry ship washed out against it.

The fight was over and the Cuckoos had drawn first blood.

Gingerly rising on his one good leg, Johnny watched them toss off altitude with reckless abandon as they raced down, each striving for the honor of the first “happy landing” on the home drome. And as always, Limey Barrow’s dive won the victory. Even before the dust cloud kicked up by his Spad’s dragging tailskid settled again, the little pilot came trotting out of its midst. Limey was going places with balled up fists and fire in his eye. Twice Johnny had to shout before Limey reluctantly changed his course and came toward him. So angered was he that he failed to take notice of Johnny’s injury.

“So ’elp me ’Arriet,” he spat wrathfully. “Hi’m going to cut me a piece of Frog throat. There I was winging along with a Jerry *descendu* right in my ring sight when for no reason at all that blasted Frog archie deliberately puts a ruddy burst right under the belly of my ship.”

“I saw it,” Johnny tried to soothe him, “and while it appeared like a deliberate piece of interference, we’d have a hard time trying to prove that it was. French headquarters would hold our Old Man back in Blois responsible for us, so you’d better delay your throat slitting until we’re sure, buzzard, and maybe by that time I’ll be ready to lend you a hand.”

Limey slowly subsided, but it boded ill for any Frenchman unwittingly crossing his path before Limey’s rancor had completely cooled.

FAVORING Johnny’s sore ankle, they made slow progress to where the Cuckoos were gathered. A glance revealed that they were themselves once more. Grinning and razzing each other as their surprise raid on the Front was verbally recounted and refought. From time to time, raiders who had quit the return flight of the flock for short sightseeing tours of their own, came spiraling down to the home port.

On one subject they all heartily agreed; that the Front promised plenty in the way of excitement. Hardly an hour in the air and they had dusted off a Rumpler, strafed a road full of Jerries coming up into the lines, and played a successful sky game of hide and seek with a vengeful Jerry staffel sent up with definite orders to knock them off.

The High Command through an agent of Germany’s powerful all-seeing intelligence system, had received the disturbing information of the Cuckoos arrival at the Front. The Cuckoos were forever offering themselves

as an obstacle for Germany’s militaristic iron heel to stumble upon. This time the High Command, with much at stake, would tolerate no failure. The ultimatum had been sent out—“Crush the Cuckoos. Destroy them.”

And in answer, the wheels of destruction were being set in motion. Long-range guns deep in Germany pointed their deadly snouts in the direction of the Cuckoos’ drome. Full strength jagdstaffels moved close to the Front, while even closer the sinister shadow of Germany’s ghost pilot, Baron Phantomas, waited. All ready to strike for the Vaterland.

Had the Cuckoos so much as suspected what was in store for them, it is most certain that they would not be celebrating as they now were, cheering and racing to meet a heavy laden, lumbering truck that came lurching across the rutted ground toward them. Tombstone Tyler, dust covered and white faced as though from fatigue, was behind the wheel. They cheered him to the echo, and besieged him with questions as he climbed stiffly down to the ground. All of which he ignored.

“Where’s the skipper?” he asked.

It was then that they noticed the automatic in Tombstone’s left hand. Lord, it couldn’t be that Tyler had coldbloodedly bumped off the original driver of the truck. They’d rather have gone hungry than to have anything like that happen.

Johnny limped to the center of the milling group. At sight of him, Tombstone seemed to go to pieces. A violent trembling coursed through his body and the automatic fell from his nerveless fingers. A pilot handed him a drink of water and the shaking ceased.

“Skipper,” he pleadingly began and took a tight grip on Johnny’s arm. “I know that I’m not drunk but I want you to tell me that I’m neither shell shocked or crazy. I know all the buzzards of the flock and everything I’ve done from the time I talked a Limey chauffeur out of this truck and a Frog supply officer out at Myfee out of the load that’s on it. And still there’s something that happened to me about five minutes ago that just couldn’t happen. It makes me believe that I’m going balmy, haywire.”

A wild look crept into Tombstone’s eyes. Johnny seeing it growled an arresting, “Snap out of it, buzzard.”

Tyler groaned, licked his dry lips and hurriedly concluded the story. “I was just turning into this field from the road, when a Jerry officer pops up right in front of me. He’s got a Luger in his fist and I go for mine, at the same time stepping on the gas. I figured

to get him one way or the other. Straight for him rolls the truck and I'm shooting at the same time. At that range, I couldn't miss, skipper. My bullets go plumb through him. I saw them kick up the dirt about twenty feet directly in back of where he stands, and he only laughs at me. The truck careens into and over him. Figuring that the Jerry was done for, I jammed on the brakes and piled out to look." Here in his narrative, Tombstone paused, shuddered and then gulped. "So help me God, skipper, there was no corpse, no nothing, either under the truck or anywheres in sight." No response came from the Cuckoos. Only a heavy silence. Already the vanishing Jerry officer was an old story to them.

"It's just a trick, buzzard," Johnny announced for the badly rattled Tyler's benefit. "We've all seen it now and lived to tell it. So let's dope out a way to trump it."

ASSURED that he wasn't on the verge of going blotto after all. Tombstone felt better. He wasn't afraid of death, but insanity—"My number is up, buzzards," he announced with sudden fatalistic calm. "But before I go West I intend to find out the answer to that Jerry trick."

His vehement declaration was hard for the Cuckoos to believe. Still Tombstone Tyler had never failed his word, yet.

Alive to the swift approach of darkness, they set to unloading the truck with a will. Cases of foodstuffs, drums of fuel and tents. It was sight of the tents that gave Johnny an idea. Voicing it, he was surprised at the alacrity with which the Cuckoos accepted. Evidently the same thought had been in all of their minds—fear of a Jerry night raid. Johnny's plan meant extra hardship, but as Limey Barrow put it, "What's a bit of discomfort to us, buzzards, compared to what Jerry's disappointment will be."

Grumbling good naturedly at their own clumsiness, they finally managed to erect the six tents in the semblance of a straight military line at the far end of the field. Dashing the sweat from his eyes, Limey Barrow shook a fist in the general direction of Germany, and jeeringly invited, "Come on now, you Jerry scavengers, lay your iron eggs and see if we care."

That detail attended to, they called it the end of a hectic day and gathered in a tired, weary group to replenish their appetites with cold rations. In vain Johnny tried to arouse their lagging spirits.

"It's war to-day, soldiers, but tomorrow's another day," he began.

"Yeah, but to-morrow never comes." Tyler's gloomy voice reminded him.

Johnny grinned at the interruption. Tombstone had returned to his old role of joy killer. Cigarettes were lighted and a strained silence, pregnant with uneasiness, followed. Johnny felt rather than sensed it. It was smothering, oppressive. Nervously he tried to probe the surrounding night with ears and eyes. Then slowly the hair on the back of his neck began to rise. Soft, faltering footsteps could be heard approaching. Although doubting his own hearing, Johnny took no chances. Stealthily his hand started for his automatic and then moved faster. Familiar metallic clicks were sounding all around him—the safety catches of automatics being snapped off. The Cuckoos too had heard the footsteps.

With a whispered warning to be quiet, Limey Barrow bellied a snaky way from the group out into the darkness. A nerve-jangling moment followed, then came the unmistakable sound of conflict, fist striking flesh. A hoarse vindictive oath from Limey and a protesting cry of pain, "*Mon commandant*, it is I," as one of the Cuckoos rushed forward.

Even Johnny forgot his sore ankle in the excitement. Limey was still pounding his captive with savage enjoyment and the Cuckoos had to fairly drag him off of the whining victim.

"I got him," Limey triumphantly spluttered. "E was standing there with a ' and cocked over 'is ear, listening."

Aided by the flickering light from a briquet, Johnny leaned close to the captive and emitted an angry growl—the French sergeant of the archie battery again.

"You pest," Johnny hissed. "Thought I warned you to whistle or do something when you're in this vicinity?"

Gently fingering a rapidly swelling eye, the noncom protested, "But that seems so ridiculous, *mon commandant*. This is war."

"Agreed," Johnny cut him short. "But the sooner you learn that we Cuckoos fight our wars different, the better you're health will be."

"Be that as it may, *mon commandant*," the noncom angrily accepted. "Still I shall make a report of this outrage to my superiors."

"Yeah, do that," Limey Barrow suggested out of the darkness. "Also tell them that your crew of Frog misfits came damned close to knocking me out of the sky this afternoon along with making it possible for a Jerry pilot to escape."

"It was desiring to explain that unfortunate

happening that brought me here to-night, *mon commandant*,” The noncom spoke directly to Johnny. “I being absent from my gun position at the time, the men of my detail, sighting your planes without marking or cocardes, and not having been informed as to *les Coucou’s* peculiarity, naturally fired at them. I am sorry, *mon commandant*. It will not happen again.”

“If it does,” the still belligerent Limey growled, “your sleeping beauties will wake up with a flock of iron eggs busting under the seat of their breeches.”

JOHNNY, anxious to avoid trouble with French H.Q., silenced Limey while the once more thoroughly composed noncom merely shrugged. “Not being welcome, I come to your drome no more, *mon commandant*,” he announced. “In the future your wishes will have to reach me by your messenger.”

Johnny cast a glance up at the inky void of the heavens as he received the noncom’s mandate. “That is more than satisfactory, *mon brave*,” he accepted, then added. “The Cuckoos will not fly to-night; we have no petrol.”

The sergeant saluted and walked stiffly away. A pompous figure of outraged dignity. The Cuckoos watched him go and Johnny’s face clouded in a frown. He cursed his jumpy nerves. They’d warped his judgment of the French noncom. The sergeant, while proving himself a pest, evidently meant well and his excuse for his battery’s unexpected bombarding of the Cuckoos had been a plausible one.

Johnny resolved to visit the archie position next day and make amends.

“You told that Frog, skipper, that we were out of fuel.” A Cookoo was speaking to him.

Johnny grinned foolishly. He’d actually forgotten about Tombstone Tyler’s eventful round trip to the supply base. Reminded of it now, he hit upon refueling as the ideal remedy to end the Cuckoos nervous whisperings and restlessness.

Although badly fatigued, they accepted his suggestion that the gas tanks be replenished, without a single dissenting grumble. The task was a backbreaking one that produced many skinned knuckles and painful bruises, but it had the redeeming feature of taking their brooding minds off the eerie darkness and Baron Phantomas. Working in crews of five, they moved from plane to plane, paying not the slightest attention to the flashing heavens nor the fretful muttering of distant guns. To them it had already become just a scene and props in the war’s mad drama.

Acting as chauffeur of the truck, Tombstone was ferrying the last of the loaded fuel drums to the far end of the field where his own Spad was parked, when he chanced to look upward. He almost fell from the seat. The shadowy black bulk of a plane was gliding silently across the drome, plainly outlined against the lighter background of the sky.

Tombstone shouted a warning to his comrades but the shout lost itself in a thudding near by explosion—the archie was going into action. Tombstone killed the truck’s engine and tumbled to the ground to collide with the running figure of Limey Barrow. Excited queries came from all sides out of the darkness. The suddenness of it all had jarred them out of their usual calm efficiency when confronted with a crisis. Their morale was on the verge of cracking, when Johnny’s commanding voice roared through the night.

“Steady, buzzards. Warm up your ships. We’re taking the air.”

Had Johnny gone haywire, too. Ordering pilots to lift their ships from a darkened field that at its best in daylight was a hazardous undertaking.

“Snap into it, buzzards,” he yelled again. “They’ll be shelling this drome in a few minutes.”

Johnny was playing a hunch. Gambling that a French machine gunner’s recounting of the disaster that had befallen France’s Second Escadrille was about to be reenacted. The setting was the same. There was the silent ghost ship cruising above them. There could be no mistaking its identity. The rapid-firing archie proved that. The Cuckoos saw well-placed bursts, that surprised them by their accuracy, explode directly above and beneath the phantom plane. Also one shell that clicked off a direct hit. A remarkable exhibition of gunnery that was totally wasted, for Baron Phantomas continued on with his silent patrolling, steadily circling the drome, never ruddering so much as a yard from his course.

Like the coach of a badly battered football team, Johnny zigzagged across the field, stopping at each warming plane to shout a few words of encouragement and instruction to its nerve-raw pilot. Always it was the same, “Buck up, buzzard. That phantom up there can’t do us any harm. He’s just a screen for the real Jerry attack. Mark my words.” Then trying hard to keep a betraying tremor out of his voice he gave each Cuckoo a dangerous part to play.

“You’ll be the sixth to hop off,” he informed Tombstone Tyler. “Count the exhaust flames and you can’t go wrong. There goes number one now.” Johnny

pointed a shadowy Spad that spit fire as it fled the ground, then added:

“The rendezvous is at ten thousand feet, straight up. Watch for my Very signals.”

A friendly slap on Tombstone’s shoulder, and he sped away in search of the pilot who was to be number seven.

CHAPTER VI THE DEVIL’S STEP-SONS

WHEN THE LAST OF THEM had blended into the night, Johnny staggered on feet that were leaden, in search of his own cold bus. Locating it at last on the now deserted field, he primed the Hisso, spun the prop and climbed wearily up into the cockpit. Mechanically jazzing the throttle as the engine warmed, he had ample time in which to recover his faculties. Dully, he realized that while the baron had mysteriously disappeared from the sky, the archie was still futilely pounding away, probably spotting and accepting each climbing Cuckoo as the phantom flyer. Just one more glaring example of Johnny’s Cuckoo caution going wrong. Bitterly he recalled his telling the French sergeant that the Cuckoos would not fly tonight. Instead of cooperating with the French battery, he had allowed his personal dislike for the noncom to loom as a dangerous obstacle in the path of the Cuckoos’ progress. In the future, should there be one, he would be more considerate.

Easing the gun full out he hopped the wheelchocks and split-aired through the night, hoping for the best, flying blind. Feeling the Spad’s tail come up, he backsticked for the high places and the rendezvous.

Let the creeping Jerry barrage that had annihilated the Second Escadrille, after the baron had bound than to the earth with fear, come now. This time there would be a different answer.

As the Spad droned on in its steady climb, Johnny’s eyes were only for the earth. Disappointment was growing on him with the passing seconds. His bunch was going awry. Leaping geysers of exploding flame should be disrupting the darkness below, announcing the arrival of Jerry’s devastating but tardy H.E. shells. To-morrow the Cuckoos would razz and kid him for his unfounded fears.

A glance at the instrument board showed the altimeter registering nine thousand feet. Johnny reached for his Very pistol. He’d fire the old rallying signal, keep the Cuckoos cruising awhile, then send them down and to bed. Flying carefully, Very pistol in hand, he was among them in an instant. Johnny, avoiding all chances of hitting a comrade with the fizzing rocket he was about to fire, sent the Spad up higher and peered down over the side of the cockpit. A hurried prayer of thanksgiving sped from his lips. His hunch had not played him false after all.

A giant mushroom of yellow licking fire had suddenly lighted the earth far below. Jerry was hoping to destroy the troublesome Cuckoos as easily as he had the less combative Second Escadrille. And for the Cuckoos there must be no escape. The High Command willed it.

Instead of a barrage, they sent a flight of Gotha bombers. Huge black birds of prey that would go carefully about laying eggs of death and destruction, without the usual fear of interruption or retribution from the twin guns of the vengeful Cuckoos. For the never failing intelligence had passed this information to its Gotha pilots:

“The Cuckoos are without fuel for their planes. They themselves will be quartered in tents at the northeast corner of the field.”

Accurate, deadly information that would have brought doom to the Cuckoos, but for the kindly, although somewhat eccentric, destiny that always guided Johnny Walker’s hunches.

Watching fascinated, Johnny saw the tents catch fire and burn fiercely. And then he saw something else, even as the Cuckoos did. The huge silhouettes of Gothas hovering low over the conflagration calmly pouring their rain of death, making sure for the Vaterland and the High Command.

A wide exultant grin split Johnny’s features as he dropped the Very pistol to the floor of the cockpit. All the signals in the book would have but one meaning to the Cuckoos now. They knew what was expected of them and they set about doing it. They threw caution to the winds and dived in a furious wild attack, with true war-bird hate for those black Jerry vultures.

ONE, two thousand feet Johnny followed in their wake, then swooped out to relieve the strain on his eyes and dived again. He saw the devil dance of green flame flickering on the muzzles of steel-spitting

Vickers, and his own thumb sought for the gun trips. A fleeing bomber looked beneath him and he greeted it with a steel burst of searing shell that found its vitals. A lucky cold-meat shot. The searching ghost fingers of his tracers told him that, even as he catapulted beneath the Jerry to zoom up on the opposite side. At the top he leveled out turned in a sharp bank and started back just to be certain. Where the Gotha had been only a crazily spinning ball of flame gyrated now.

Johnny looked away. Death, even of a cordially hated enemy was not pleasant to look at.

On all sides, vicious tongues of fire burned holes in the night. The Jerries, although surprised, started to make a scrap of it until sight of the unadorned fast winging Spads disporting themselves in the fire glow brought helpless resignation to them. They had done their best, yet here were the Cuckoos alive and flying like avenging demons, when by this time should be so many charred corpses in the raging inferno below.

A second bomber blew up with a terrific detonation that set every fighting ship in the sky to rocking dangerously. It was the beginning of the end. An unforeseen catastrophe that was to jar the heretofore smooth movement of Germany's great war machine.

Johnny picked himself another Gotha and came up beneath it to take a point-blank blast in the teeth from an unsuspected gun that hosed him from a floor trap in the bombers' belly. Luck left him but inches from death as a load of angry leaden hornets buzzed uncomfortably close to his ears. With no time to maneuver, Johnny did the only thing left for him to do. He shot it out with the Jerry.

Bullets thudded into the padded coaming before his eyes; a hot spatter of lead burned his cheek. They were giving each other hell. Something had to break soon—and it was the Jerry. Johnny forgot his relief in the face of a greater peril. His Spad was winging up to an aerial crash. He thought fast and acted faster.

With all the strength of his arms, he jerked the stick back tightly against his stomach and shut his eyes. For a breathless instant that rubbed a year from Johnny's life the Spad hung on its prop. When the obedient but badly abused plane did finally flop over on its back, Johnny was never to know that less than a yard had separated his landing carriage from the trailing edge of the Gotha's wing. And he so unnerved its pilot that the frightened Jerry soon after let the bomber fall an easy victim under the blasting guns of Limey Barrow. Johnny, after many anxious moments, managed to

fight his own bus back under control, but the hell fire within him was quenched for that night.

Climbing high up against the stars he took reconnaissance of the scene below. It appeared as though all of France was marked with blazing pyres. Nine raiding Gothas had come out of Germany. Only one, with a dying Jerry pilot handling its controls, staggered back with the news that caused a pair of giant Zeps to be rolled back into their hangars. Its pilot hazarded an opinion before he died. One that was soon to be whispered wherever Germany's jagdstaffels were wont to gather. "*Kamerads*, fire cannot harm those Cuckoos; it is their natural element. They are the Devil's stepsons."

Johnny, from his perch, watched the jubilant Cuckoos slide down and bug their ways to reckless landings on the flame-lighted field. They were drunk with victory now, but sitting down there with nothing to do but wait and think away the hours before the coming of another dawn would change all that. The flying phantom and the sneering Jerry officer would stalk silently back into their thoughts.

CONSCIOUS of his badly strained ship and the ordeal he would have to face, Johnny took the long route to the drome. Wide circling, slanting spirals eased him eastward and allowed him ample time in which to think. If only something material would happen. Another Jerry air raid would be welcome, or a dozen of them for that matter. Such thoughts seemed heartless and cruel. His comrades, constantly on the go for the past twenty-four hours, were worn out physically. Luck could not fly with the Cuckoos always. Some of them would have to check out for the Great Beyond.

Johnny shuddered at the mental picture, then steeled himself. After all, a fighting death was the war bird's heritage. A swift flight and a merry one. There wasn't a Cuckoo down there in the dancing fire shadows of the drome, he was willing to wager, who wouldn't accept the grim reaper's final embrace any time in preference to the living death that many more visits from Baron Phantomas would ultimately bring them.

He dragged the drome in search of a squat spot. Locating one, he swept on to the far end of the field. Using the smoldering ruins of the tents as a pylon, he banked the Spad around the marker and slanted in to a rough bounce landing. Before the engine ticked its last, the Cuckoos, talking under their breaths and fidgeting

uneasily, were around him. Hurriedly Limey Barrow disposed of the customary formality of reporting:

“A nice bag, skipper. Eight Jerry *descendus*. Nobody pinked on our side.”

Johnny, about to voice his satisfaction, didn’t, for Limey Barrow kept right on talking. “Skipper, there’s no ’okum nor flying tricks to that flying phantom. ’E’s the real McCoy. A ruddy ghost if there ever was one.”

Johnny, at a loss for words, merely grunted a questioning “Yeah?” that immediately brought forth the story from Limey.

“Being the first to ’op off a while back, and in no danger of crashing some other buzzard in the darkness, I was taking my time about sneaking ’eavenwards, but still flying sorta careful like, taking no chances of ’aving that blinking Frog archie battery bust a bomb under my tail. When my needle trembled at three thousand feet I breathed natural once more and threw a look out in front of me.

“There, Gorblimey, skipper, if Baron Phantomas ’imself hisn’t sailing right over my ’elmet. The sight of him like that drove me a bit balmy for a moment. Everything I tried to do went wrong. My guns jammed, my foot slipped off the rudder bar and then to top it all, I backsticked like a damned kiwi.” Limey gulped and shook his head in a puzzled way as he concluded.

“If that ghost ship ’ad been a real one, I wouldn’t be ’ere now. My Spad careened right through the middle of it. I saw its wings with the perishing skull and cross bones on them waver and bulge as the revving prop of my own bus lashed at them. Gorblesa me buttons,” Limey swore feelingly. “I looked right at the baron and ’e wasn’t enough concerned to turn ’is ’ead even. There was no crash nor anything. No more than if I’d barged into a cloud. A split second later I leveled out lovely and looked down, and Lord lumme, there ’e is flying on ’is back, enjoying ’imself. It steamed me up plenty but right about then the merry little bird battle started and took my mind off my work. When I looked again for Baron Phantomas, ’e’s gone; disappeared like a bit of flying scud in the teeth of the wind.”

Johnny stood as if hypnotized. The little pilot’s wild tale was beyond belief. Had any one other than the dependable Limey told it, Johnny would not have hesitated to attribute its origination to a haywire brain. But Limey was normal in every way. His defiant attitude proved that now, as he mistook Johnny’s silence for something else.

“Go ahead,” he invited. “Tell me I’m screwy like

these other dodos did, and see if I care. That’s my story and I’m stuck with it.”

“No one is doubting you, buzzard,” Johnny tried to soothe the irate little pilot. “Your creepy story is so damnably upsetting that it cuts the switches on my think tank, that’s all.”

SLOWLY Johnny’s heavy lower jaw jutted forward as he fought to free his brain from Baron Phantomas’ clammy ghost fingers. “Phantom, hell,” he suddenly blazed. “There’s no such animal and I’ll prove it.”

“How?” a score of hopeful voices demanded.

Johnny was stumped.

“Yeah! Do as I did and you’ll get the same answer,” Limey advised him.

The caustic suggestion didn’t clear up the situation any. Neither did the gray haggard faces and sunken restless eyes of the Cuckoos. Some sort of proof would have to be forthcoming soon, or else—— Johnny shut out further thought of the future. These blackbirds might be renegades, discipline haters and bums to every one else in the war, but to Johnny, they were his buddies. He couldn’t fail them.

“Buzzards,” he called for their attention. “We cried for this graveyard watch, and now that we’ve got it we’re ready to hoist our tails, and hoick for it after twenty-four hours. Why?” Johnny asked, and was answered, “I’ll tell you why!” by a nerve-raw pilot before he himself could go on.

“We’re men, ready to fight it out with anything that walks on two legs—or four for that matter—but we never did profess to be phantom busters.”

The speaker’s announcement met with a growl of approval from the Cuckoos. Johnny smiled to himself. Trouble was in the offing.

“The hell you say,” he reproached the pilot mildly. Then with machine-gun rapidity he fired stinging verbal shots that pierced through Cuckoo skins, to touch them on spots that were quick to react—their courage and *esprit de corps*.

“Tell me,” he demanded, “who can truthfully say that Baron Phantomas—who is melting your guts—isn’t some trick? You are yelling before you’re hurt, like kids in a dark cellar. I’ll wager that if from now on we do intentionally what Limey did to-night by accident—fly right through the middle of his spirit highness—it won’t be long before Baron Phantomas hightails out’ve this sector. If it’s a trick,” Johnny doggedly argued, “Jerry’ll soon call it off when he finds that we don’t bluff easily.”

“And if Baron Phantomas should be a spirit?” a belligerent Cuckoo asked.

Johnny did a startling thing that made shivers run up and down the Cuckoos’ spines. He laughed loud and long. To them it sounded like sacrilege at first. The bodies of dead French peelots were beneath their feet. Ghosts walked the drome and roamed the sky. And this fool had the courage to laugh. Then slowly their admiration grew as his vibrant challenging laugh seemed to dispel the shadows from about them. Set faces relaxed into grins and then only did Johnny subside.

“Sorry, buzzards,” he chuckled as he apologized to the belligerent Cuckoo. “You asked me, what if Baron Phantomas should prove to be a spirit, and it struck me mighty funny. I was thinking that it would upset the dignity of any respectable ghost to have a wild bunch of pilots, like us Cuckoos, barge into him every time he decides to show himself. He’s bound to get sick of it eventually and pass us up like bad news. I know I would if I were a ghost.”

“Skipper, them’s my sentiments, too,” Tombstone Tyler emphatically agreed. “I’m for bustin’ a hole in every danged phantom that tries to share the same sky with us.”

Johnny, weary and almost asleep on his feet had been stalling for time, trying to make them forget; praying for that sullen rumbling of awakening war dogs in the east that would herald the approach of another dawn. It was always the nights that were hardest to endure. And now Tombstone was carrying on for him, gloomy old Tombstone Tyler, condemned by the Cuckoos for a chronic grouch and grumbler.

Johnny had never appreciated the man so much as at this moment. It was problematic if the Cuckoos did even yet. It had always been like this. When things were brightest, Tombstone was dark and forboding, but let shadows darken the Cuckoos’ path and the gloomy pilot could always be depended upon to brighten the way with the reflected light of Johnny’s decisions.

CHAPTER VII JOHNNY WALKER TAKES OVER

WE’RE BIRDS OF A FEATHER, buzzards,” Johnny heard him say. “So let’s flock together, as the rhyme goes. Stop squawking and do as the skipper suggested. The next time Baron Phantomas wings into view. I’ll be just as scared but I’m shutting my eyes, crossing my fingers and sailing into him.”

“All of which is okay with me, Tombstone,” a pilot accepted with a laugh, “but I’m requesting that you don’t shut your eyes, for flying in front of you, as I plan to be doing, your prop is liable to chew my empenngage off.”

Dully, Johnny realized that their wavering spirits were making valiant efforts to rally. They were belittling each other’s flying ability—a sure sign. A few hours undisturbed sleep now would complete the revival. But where was such luxury to be had? Johnny’s searching eyes met defeat in the darkness. The blazing funeral pyres of Jerry birdmen had burned themselves out as had the bomb-wrecked ruins of the Cuckoos’ tents.

Baffled, Johnny’s gaze swept upward. A lone red flare, calling for an artillery barrage, was burning a hole in the distant sky. Sight of it gave Johnny sudden inspiration. He’d completely forgotten about the close-by French archie battery. There, without doubt, in that charmed spot that had twice escaped the hellish fury of Jerry’s wrath, the Cuckoos could find temporary shelter. Emitting a joyful, “Pin back your ear flaps and listen, buzzards,” he bade them crowd around. Briefly he told them of his idea and their answering grunts told him that they approved of it.

“It listens swell,” Tombstone assured him, and then added. “But how about the Frogs? Our reception of their sergeant wasn’t so damned polite if I remember correctly.”

“I’ll fix that up, buzzard,” Johnny hastened to answer. “Just leave it to me.”

“Well for the love of the lord ’Airy, cut the gun on your jaw and do so.” Limey Barrow complained. “I crave me *beaucoup* shut-eye deep down in a elephant-iron covered dugout.”

Johnny laughed at the reprimand and the chorus of assenting “Ayes,” that seconded the motion.

Orienting himself and the probable location of the archie battery in his mind, he strode away into the darkness followed by good-natured reminders to “make it snappy,” and “reserve a room for me, buzzard.”

Luck alone guided his feet past slime-filled depressions, lurking rocks and the grotesque skeletons of shriven trees, to halt him at length on the lip of a deep gully. The sudden snapping of a dried branch beneath his foot caused him to jump and grab for his automatic. He took another tentative step and a snaky strand of barbed wire took a grip on his leather flying jacket. Cursing softly, he tore himself free.

Johnny was most certain that he was not lost, else why the wire entanglement. He blundered noisily into a pile of brush next and held his breath, expecting to hear the whine and smash of sentry’s bullet hunting him. But only the sound of his own thumping heart disturbed the stillness. It was all so strange and mysterious. The nerves—or rather the lack of them—as displayed by these French artillerymen in the war zone was unbelievable. Working around the brush pile, Johnny got down on hands and knees to peer long and intently over the gully’s edge.

In time he recognized the snout of the long sinister tube that was the archie itself. Johnny waited to identify no more. Swapping ends, he slid feet first down the slope to the bottom, and stood up to stare long and intently at a thin crack of light that split the black slope of the opposite bank—the blanket-covered entrance to a dugout.

MAKING no pretense of silence, Johnny sloshed across to it through the mud of the gully bottom, drawing the damp sodden covering aside, he ducked quickly through the low doorway and let the blanket fall behind him. Having stepped from darkness into light, his eyes seemed to be playing him tricks—or was it his ears. Some one was talking softly in fluent German. Johnny had his German-American mother to thank for his knowledge of that language. There could be no mistaking it. Crouched there, pistol in hand, with every muscle alert and hardly daring to breathe, he waited for his eyes to grow accustomed to the light. Meantime the voice continued to drone on.

“It is not possible, *Herr Oberst*.”

Johnny could see the speaker now, sitting with back turned toward him at a field desk, talking into a phone. Johnny’s eyes glittered coldly. The speaker was the

French noncom. And it was apparent to Johnny that he was being submitted to a terrific tongue-lashing from the party on the other end of the wire.

“But *Excellenz*,” the noncom managed to ejaculate at length, “I stake my life that the responsibility for the failure of the All Highest’s plan does not rest upon me. I still insist that they had not fuel, as I reported earlier. Their brainless commandant, who has not the slightest suspicion of me, told me so himself. And even if they did later receive petrol, *Herr Oberst*, their fears of our phantom that flew constantly over their heads, would have kept them cowering on the ground. Of that I am most certain, *Excellenz*.”

Another long interval of silence on the noncom’s part followed, and Johnny did some fast, serious thinking. More than once he was tempted to put a bullet into the spy’s head but in the end, better judgment prevailed. Should he kill the man, the mystery of Germany’s Baron Phantomas would be no nearer a solution than it was at the moment.

Johnny decided to gamble on a long chance. He’d let the spy go right on playing his desperate game, for the time being. But always there would be a pair of seeing yet unseen Cuckoo eyes in the vicinity of the archie nest. The spy was speaking again.

“Yes, *Herr Oberst*, your wishes will be carried out at once.” Johnny heard him say. “I personally will inspect the drome just to make sure that my eyes did not deceive me as from a distance I watched our bombers do a splended piece of strafing. The Cuckoos could not have escaped its fury, *Excellenz*. There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that the disaster that overtook our Gothas came not from the Cuckoos but from the guns of some unkown enemy squadron that happened to be passing over this area. *Herr Oberst*, I hope to phone you a report within the next few hours that will verify my convictions.”

With stealth that belied his huge bulk, Johnny slipped out into the chill night air. Silently he scaled the slippery side of the gully and hurried blindly away Borne distance into the darkness before he halted. A mirthless smile twisted the corners of his mouth. The spy had contemptuously referred to him as being brainless.

“Maybe so,” Johnny growled to himself as he slipped a fresh-loaded clip into the butt of his automatic, “but what I lack in brains I make up in muscle and luck. A tough combination to beat in any bird’s war.” he added in conclusion and started to retrace the course to the dugout as best he could.

Every few paces he stopped to paint the vicinity blue with loud denunciations of France as represented by the particular piece that he was traveling over. It wasn't long until his profane complaining and noisy march produced the desired result.

The cold metallic click of a safety catch being turned to the ready, reached his ears, followed a second later by an equally menacing command to halt. Grumbling and announcing to the world that he was an American aviateur, Johnny complied. Footsteps approached and a flashlight in the hands of an unkept, sleepy-eyed artilleryman played over him from head to foot.

"*Sacre nom de Dieu*," a startled voice exploded out of the darkness as the noncom, white-faced and shaking stepped from behind the sentry. "You, you—" he gulped and clutched at his throat.

"*Oui, mon soldat*, it's me," Johnny grinned disarmingly, and asked, "Who were you expecting to see, the flying phantom?"

"*Nom d'un nom, non*," the non-com made haste to answer. "But seeing you here after that devastating Boche bombardment leaves me unnerved, *mon commandant*. *Sapristi!* you should now be dead."

"Sorry, *mon vieux*," Johnny smiled apologetically, then added in mock seriousness. "We Cuckoos never die, because there isn't even room in hell for birds like us."

"But, *mon commandant*," the noncom beseeched him. "What miracle aided you to escape the annihilation?"

JOHNNY, knowing the real reason for the spy's anxiety assumed a shamefaced mien and lied beautifully. "Fearing a visit from the Boche flying phantom and being fed up on this *sale* war, my comrades and I quit the drome and went in search of a *buvette*. Which answers your question, *mon soldat*, and proves that *le diable* looks out for his own. For while we were absent, *monsieur le Boche* flew over and dropped iron calling cards on our field and in turn were evidently dropped themselves by some passing *escadrille* returning from Germany."

If Johnny noticed the spy's agitation, he did not betray the fact. Yawning suggestively, he sleepily voiced the real reason for his untimely visit to the Archie battery. "My comrades, *mon brave*, having no shelter are desolate from weariness. They must rest or I fear the worst. Another visit from those cursed phantoms now, and they will desert; fly over the horizon as we say in the air service. Is it possible that you can assist me with my dilemma, *mon brave*?"

The pseudo French sergeant, a master actor, nodded his head in mock sympathy but the evil glitter that flickered in his eyes did not escape Johnny. The spy's keen brain was busy planning to convert this gift from fate, in the form of Johnny's request, to the *Vaterland's* advantage. Instantly he became all action. He snarled at the sentry to switch off the flashlight and followed it up with a string of crackling French that sent the man lumbering away. Then he turned to Johnny and explained:

"Sentry duty leaves them like dead men but, *voila*, it is necessary."

Johnny made a mental bet of a month's pay that the so called sentry had been holding down a comfortable cot up until ten minutes previous, and fell in behind the voluble spy. A few strides over a well trodden path brought them to a rough ladder that led down into the gully and the bomb-proof dugout that served the spy as headquarters. Affably, he set a bottle on the desk and invited Johnny to help himself. Johnny accepted with alacrity, meantime using his eyes to good advantage. Concrete walls and floor, a comfortable bed and furniture that would not have been out of place in a chateau.

The spy must have sensed his thoughts for he was quick to supply the information. The dugout was part of an elaborate trench system, constructed before the war by Germans who posed as peaceful Alsatian peasants.

"Those smart ones referred to these pill boxes, *mon commandant*, as their cellars. They are connected up by secret passages and run for many kilos across France. Destroy the flimsy houses above, move in the Boche troops and three fourths of France then would automatically become Germany."

Genuinely interested, Johnny asked a blunt, "What prevented it, *mon soldat*?"

The spy bent lower over a map he was studying. A bitter note crept into his voice as he answered. "The German drive was turned at the Marne and the war went in another direction."

"Lucky for the Allies," Johnny hazarded and poured himself a stiff drink to steady his shaking hands. The spy's carelessly dropped information was startling, almost too gigantic for Johnny to conceive. Before he realized, he found himself asking, "Is there any chance of the war winds blowing this way again, *mon vieux*?"

"Only *le bon Dieu* can say," the spy replied and looked suspiciously in Johnny's direction. Perhaps this stupid aviateur was not so dumb as he professed to

be. Johnny grinned vapidly and greedily downed his drink. “Should that time ever come, *mon soldat*,” he announced, “the Cuckoos are vacating this area *tout de suite*, hell bent for the safe places, leaving this war to the heroes.”

JOHNNY winked owlishly and once more reached for the bottle. Contempt filled the spy. These Cuckoos were only human after all, and very much overrated. The task of destroying them would hardly merit the iron cross that would be his reward for doing so. How the Imperial jagdstaffels had missed doing it long ago was beyond comprehension.

“Pull your chair up, *mon commandant*,” he invited after a long silence that was only broken by the oft repeated sound of bottle clinking against tin cup. Johnny clumsily complied and gazed stupidly at the one visible spot on the carefully covered map, indicated by the spy’s finger.

“Take it away,” he numbed thickly and brushed at the map with a fumbling hand. “Never could unnersthand the damned thinsh. Jush gimme the direction an’ a few markersh a’ my comradeah ’ll find the plash.”

The spy’s face became a devilish mask. This was going to be too easy. “Very well,” he acquiesced, “three hundred meters to the left of this dugout, where the ravine slopes up to the surface, you will find a clump of shell blasted tree stumps, *mon commandant*. Concealed there is a dugout similar to this. An ideal haven for your flying comrades. At night they will be able to sleep without awakening to see *le Baron Phantomas* over their heads.”

Johnny’s chin had sunk to rest drunkenly on his chest, yet his half closed eyes were missing nothing on the map. The Cuckoos drome bore a heavily penciled symbol S-17. The archie emplacement was S-4. The staggered line of concrete pill boxes identified themselves similarly. Then Johnny’s roving glance soon located the haven that was to house the Cuckoos—S-13. He’d remember that one above all others. Thirteen might be an unlucky number for some, but it wouldn’t be for the Cuckoos if he could help it.

“*Merci, mon brave*,” he thanked the spy thickly, made a pretense of getting to his feet and sank back on the chair again with a foolish grin on his face. “I’m tight, tighsh hell,” he announced with a grandiloquent wave of his hand. At once the spy was all concern.

“But your *comrades, les Coucoucs*, they are waiting, *non?*”

“They’re waitin’, yesh,” Johnny grinned, “but I’m too boiled to find my way to them.”

“Ah, *mon commandant*, it will be a pleasure to send a guide for them,” the spy offered.

“Do that, *mon vieux*,” Johnny accepted, and fell drunkenly to the floor as he lurched toward the bottle.

Lying there, he heard the spy express his disgust and walk from the dugout. When the door covering fell back into place, Johnny bounded to his feet. The map got his attention first. It was as he expected, a map similar to those used by commanders of long-range artillery units. Johnny had helped to correct many of them.

Cruising high in the heavens it had been his job to check up on shell bursts fired from far distant Allied big guns into important German postions. Each time a direct hit was registered, he’d signal the Allied observers on the ground, and immediately the range and direction was minutely noted on their maps and given a symbol for future barrages.

It all came to him as he stood there. The spy had but to pick up the phone and put through a call to the German artillery requesting a salvo. Johnny’s hands balled into fists. The plan was simple and yet devilish ingenuous. It revealed to Johnny the source of the perfect barrage that had wiped out the unfortunate Second Escadrille.

Jotting down a few swift notations on a piece of scrap paper, he sought for the phone wires next and found them, they could be tapped, and Johnny could be depended upon to do just that. On the morrow. Tombstone Tyler would carry a requisition for a signal corps field phone back to the supply depot at Myfee.

CHAPTER VIII DUGOUT TREACHERY

JOHNNY’S THOUGHTS FLASHED back to the Cuckoos. Cris Weber spoke German, so did “Gink” Hendrick. Along with himself to take a listening trick at the tapped wire, there would be no time either night or day that the dangerous spy’s plans would not be known to Johnny. A bleak grin lighted his features for a fleeting moment as the thought amused him.

With their usual blind luck, the Cuckoos had

flown blithely into the reddest, hottest, mess of Boche intrigue ever brewed on the Western Front, and they were still alive, although unaware of it all. A worry shadow chased the grin from Johnny's face, What of Baron Phantomas? That was the mystery that was their special mission.

Jerry's short cut Zeppelin route from Friedrichshafen to Paris and London, and monster preparedness program dwindled to nothing when compared to the phantom pilot. His long period of worried thinking almost cost him discovery.

The sucking sound that a boot makes upon being withdrawn from mud, reached his ears and snapped him back into his assumed drunken role. Mumbling to himself he dived for the floor and sprawled there, even as the door covering moved aside to announce the hurried entrance of the nervous spy. Johnny could feel the suspicious eyes of the man boring into him. It was an uncomfortable, crawly sensation. Johnny didn't like it so he rolled over on his back and blinked blearily at the ceiling. Emitting a hollow groan, he sat up. In this position he felt better, for his hand was closer to his automatic ready for a quick draw if necessary.

"Name of a little blue camel," he complained sourly. "An empty stomach plays hell with a man. *Parbleu!* No more than a half dozen drinks do I take and I wake up holding onto the floor, trying desperately to keep from falling off the world entirely. What happened, *mon brave?*"

The noncom shrugged and forced a smile. His suspicion that he had done wrong in leaving Johnny alone in the dugout was not completely allayed. If he were only sure. Nervously his hand hovered over the butt of his pistol. Johnny saw the others movement and the fingers of his right hand hooked ready. Death was looking down in that dugout.

And then it came. An unseen interruption. A blistering, growling American oath from Tombstone Tyler who had slipped and skidded to a stop on top of the guide whom the noncom had sent for the Cuckoos. The tension snapped in the dugout. The Jerry relaxed. After all, his suspicions were unfounded.

"Your comrades arrive, *mon commandant,*" he politely announced, and helped Johnny to his feet just as Tombstone, plastered from heels to helmet with slimy black mud, came growling into the dugout.

Johnny thinking fast, passed him the bottle to silence him. A ticklish situation had arisen. Should Tombstone or any of the Cuckoos who came crowding into the dugout on his heels mention the recent bird

battle that had wiped out the Jerry Gothas there was no telling what might happen. The pseudo noncom was nobody's fool. Four or five bottles gurgled now where but one had gurgled before.

Johnny talked himself hoarse in trying to keep the Cuckoos silent. He hurled verbal bouquets at and heaped a thousand thanks on the noncom. He congratulated him on the quality and quantity of his liquor and was groping for something else to say when Limey Barrow said it for him. "Oo the 'ell is arsking for liquor. It's shut-eye what we crave. When do we sleep and where, buzzards?"

At once the Cuckoos took up the chant. "When do we sleep?"

It was then that the noncom proved himself an admirable host. Bowing and smiling, he invited them to fetch the liquor and follow his lead. It would be an honor for him; a privilege to escort *les Coucoucs*.

THE noncom called for a halt. A cold beam of searching light leaped from a flashlight in his hand and came to rest on a badly torn strip of bagging that hung limply from a framework of roughly hewn logs. An exclamation of satisfaction escaped him and he stepped forward to hold the covering aside.

"Enter, *messieurs,*" he invited. "Your rooms, baths and pleasant dreams await you."

Each Cuckoo touched the smiling noncom's arms and murmured some friendly word as they filed past.

"Gorblimey," Limey Barrow mouthed his pleasure as he came to a weary halt in the center of the large, dry candle-lighted dugout. "Paradise itself cawn't be nicer. Hit's a blinking palace. Blankets and heverything. Hi takes back every narsty remark that I hever made in the past about the Froggies." Jackets and caps were already being tossed in all directions when the noncom took his departure.

Johnny waited a moment then glided swiftly up the the passage to peer out into the night. His unexpected action silenced the Cuckoos. Tombstone was sitting on a blanket with a boot half off when Johnny came slowly back to squat on his heels and motion them into a tight huddle around him. In a voice little louder than a whisper he told them of his findings, his suspicions, and his plans, and the various parts each were to play. His story left them stunned for a moment and then Limey Barrow wailed: "I knew that this cushy nest was too good to be true."

As though on springs, he bounded to his feet and reached for his belt and holster.

“Where are you taking off for?” Johnny demanded, at the same time taking a tight grip on the slack of Limey’s breeches.

“I’m going to do what sooner or later will have to be done, anyway. I’m going to shoot more ’oles than a soup strainer ’as into that ruddy Boche.”

Johnny gently but firmly pulled Limey down to a seat beside him. “Keep your feathers on, buzzard,” he advised. “Fly a little slower and you’ll fly a lot longer, and live to give Baron Phantomas the war bird’s salute yet.”

Limey subsided. Ten minutes later, all were sleeping soundly. Johnny, alone kept guard.

The Jerry was ruthless, gambling his life and those of his equally desperate conspirators that the *Vaterland* might succeed. Eventually he would strike at the Cuckoos. Johnny shivered and hunched his chin lower inside his upturned collar. Twenty times or more he glanced at his watch to make sure that it was going. Each dragging minute seemed an hour before the first gray streak crawled beneath the ragged curtain.

The hour was at hand for Tombstone to start for the supply depot at Myfee. Stiffly, Johnny arose and it took him five minutes of vigorous shaking to thoroughly awaken the sleep-drugged Tyler. Linking his arm in Tombstone’s he walked him up and down the floor.

“You feeling okay, buzzard?” he asked over and over until Tyler finally growled an exasperated, “Yeah, I feel like a pair of hangovers and the breakin’ up of a bad winter.”

Johnny didn’t laugh. He knew that agony of being roughly jarred out of the merciful unconsciousness that passed for sleep in the war. Gently he guided Tombstone to the doorway and gave him his final instructions. “Try not to let them see you now. Drive like hell both ways and for God’s sake get that field phone and wire if you have to beat up the whole French signal corps.

TOMBSTONE flapped his arms to stir up his sluggish blood. “Never failed you yet,” he growled and moved closer to the curtain to peer out through a rent. Then things began to happen with startling rapidity. Tombstone’s shoulders bulged, a snarling oath leaped from his lips as he ripped the door covering from its hangings.

Johnny, coming swiftly up behind the pilot, glanced over his shoulder and his own powerful arms went around Tombstone just as the irate Tyler was in the act

of aiming his automatic at the shadowy form of the Jerry officer who stood sneering at them in the ghost light of the new day. Tombstone struggled fiercely to free himself until Johnny hissed in his ear. “Don’t be a fool, buzzard. We want no witnesses to this.”

Instantly Tyler quieted down. Johnny had released him and was walking showily toward the phantom. Tombstone tried to cry out, to warn him but no sound came from his throat. Even his feet refused to carry him forward. It was terrifying, and yet there was Johnny steadily shortening the distance that separated him from the spectre. Such courage was only born to one man in a million. Tyler did not know that Johnny’s heart was in his throat; that the blood in his veins had turned to water.

The mocking Jerry officer was silently laughing at him, although making no move to use the Luger that he held in his hand. Johnny steeled himself for the final showdown. He gathered his strength, gauged the distance with his eye and hurled himself straight at the phantom in a magnificent flying tackle that he had learned on the football gridiron. Inches away now. He spread his arms wide, and tensed for the expected shock of body meeting body. Savagely he closed them again, on empty space. And yet he hadn’t missed, for his hurtling plunge had catapulted him right through the spectre.

An experience weird enough to crack a man’s brain, but Johnny didn’t have time to go crazy right then. He was too busy trying to break the shock of the fall that would be his in another split second. His hands plowed into the mud, he rolled on a shoulder and came up on his feet. The phantom was gone. Johnny wasn’t surprised. For the first time since setting foot on the haunted drome, his mind was at peace. He’d seen something.

Tombstone was pawing him all over and sobbing huskily. “Good God, buzzard. I never saw anything like it.”

“I did,” Johnny cut him short and answered slowly, “but I can’t recall where. That phantom is a phony, buzzard. When I whizzed through him I had the presence of mind to turn my head for a look. That ghost wasn’t any thicker than a whisper, and he was the same on both sides—all front and no back.” Once again Johnny emphatically declared, “I’m telling you, buzzard, our phantom’s phoney.”

For a moment they both stood in silence and then Tombstone spoke. “Skipper,” he began “after what I saw you do, whatever you say goes with me. If you

told me that the phantom was Kaiser Bill himself, I'd believe it. You said he's a phoney and phoney he is with me. And I can lick any bird that says the Jerry isn't."

Their hands clasped. Tyler clambered up the slope and was soon lost in the mists. A few minutes later a muffled roar of the heavy motor truck's engine came to Johnny's ears. Tombstone Tyler was on his way.

Hours later when he returned with a wide, triumphant grin splitting his leathery face, the Cuckoos were awake and back on the drome busily checking over their ships, while Johnny sat dozing in the warm sunshine on an upended fuel drum. It was all so peaceful. The war seemed miles away.

"I don't like it," Limey Barrow complained as he paused to wipe his hands on a ball of waste. "Hit's the lovely calm before the ruddy storm, like the poets are always raving about."

A soft clod thrown by a grinning Cuckoo struck him behind the ear and he went back to work.

TOMBSTONE, carefully holding a Slicker-wrapped bundle in his arms, trotted over to where Johnny sat. "Had no trouble at all getting the listening apparatus, skipper," he jubilantly announced. "Me and the Frog in charge of the supply depot is buddies. I promised him an autographed strip of wing fabric from the next Jerry crock I count coup on."

Eagerly, Johnny stripped the slicker from the bundle to reveal a regulation field phone set. "Cheap at half the price, buzzard," he grinned at Tombstone. "You should have promised him the whole Jerry ship with its pilot thrown in for good measure."

"Mebbe I'll do just that, skipper, when I find out just how much good this box of talking wires is going to do us."

Johnny's thoughts switched to a more serious vein. The wire leading away from the spy nest had to be located and tapped. A dangerous, back-breaking job that might bring death to the man attempting it and possibly to them all. He looked long and hard at Tombstone, measuring him for the task. Evidently the cadaverous-faced, smoldering-eyed pilot filled the bill, for Johnny began to talk:

"Tombstone, somewhere I heard it whispered that you're part Indian?"

"Just part is right." Tyler, without a trace of a smile stoically assured him, "I dare say about nine tenths, the remaining tenth being a mixture of bobcat and bad medicine."

That was news to Johnny, although he had always

suspected as much. "My reason for asking wasn't a personal one," he quietly explained. "I need a companion, buzzard. One that will crawl on his belly through hell and highwater without squawking. He may get a bullet in his guts or an exploding H.E. shell on the back of his neck for his trouble. But there's one thing that's certain, he'll get no praise or thanks should he live through it. We Cuckoos never do," Johnny bitterly concluded.

Tombstone got down on his hands and knees, carefully rewrapped the field phone and stood up with it in his arms. His teeth flashed in one of his rare grins:

"Let's go places and see people, buzzard," he accepted. The pact was made.

Matching strides, they walked off together, with Tombstone doing the planning and Johnny the listening. They avoided the gully that housed the Archie battery and their own dugout, and traveled a wide circle that brought them around in front of it and up to the edge of a stinking marsh that received them up to the knees.

Tombstone's eyes swept it for a moment then looked at Johnny's huge bulk, but made no comment. His mind was made up. Johnny wouldn't be able to penetrate that wilderness for more than ten feet without sinking. Tombstone would have to go it alone. Methodically he removed his uniform and boots and even his undershirt. Johnny started to protest but Tombstone silenced him.

"We're a team, buzzard. You have your job and I have mine. Mine is to travel a course parallel to that gully until I hit their wire and hook our own onto it. Yours is to remain here and connect up the apparatus. If I tried to do it, I'd probably get my ears burned off."

No more was said. Johnny watched Tombstone smear his body with hands-ful of mud and marvelled. Tyler had also shed his thin veneer of civilization along with his clothes. The pilot was a direct throwback to his savage ancestors.

Johnny helped him on with the shoulder harness that kept the reel of insulated wire in place on his back. Then taking hold of the loose end of the wire Johnny started for a near-by stump to fasten it to. When he looked around again, he was alone. Tombstone had slipped silently into the swamp.

CHAPTER IX LINKS OF INTRIGUE

JOHNNY LAID OUT THE INSTRUMENTS on the slicker and commenced hooking them up. Invariably his eyes traveled to the thin strand of wire running from the stump to nowhere, probably to the end of life's trail for Tombstone Tyler. As long as it squirmed and tightened and gave off a soft buzzing sound, Johnny felt all right.

Finished at last with his assembling of the set, he sat back to worry and wait until, unable to stand the strain longer, he arose and unfastened the wire. It hadn't moved for an age. A tentative tug on it only served to take up the slack. Half sick with misgivings, Johnny jumped for the field phone. He'd cut it in and make a temporary connection.

At least the head piece would magnify any sound that might come from the other end.

His hands fairly flew, and yet he cursed them for their slowness. A snip of the pliers, a few winds of adhesive tape. Then fearing the worst, holding his breath, he clapped on the ear phones, and his heart pounded furiously. He felt like shouting. Old Tombstone had turned the trick. A purring, "But, *Herr Oberst*," was filling his ears. The voice of the pseudo French noncom. The *Herr Oberst*, somewhere in Germany, was growling like an angry bear.

"But these Cuckoos are not to be trifled with longer," the spy was insisting. "They do not fear the phantoms as the others did. Only this morning one of them walked brazenly up to and tried to capture one."

Johnny smiled wickedly. He was on the verge of discovery.

"Bah!" the *Herr Oberst* grunted. "It cannot be as you say. Even I, who understand it all would be startled should I happen to unexpectedly stumble upon the twin ghosts. To-night we teach those fools that our phantoms have teeth. Send the captain, Baron von Hirsch exactly at the twilight hour, to fly over them."

"But, *Excellenz*——"

"Silence," the *Herr Oberst's* voice commanded. "The baron can be depended upon. Is he not a credited ace of aces? Let us only hope that one of their flying fools will take the air against him. If no one of them dares

to, the baron will then proceed to drop a few bombs. Never again will they attempt such familiarities. *Hein?* It is good." The *Herr Oberst* chuckled at the mental picture that he drew for himself, and then concluded, "You, Mueller, will keep your glasses on the proceedings and report to me on the outcome when they are ended."

"Very good, *Excellenz*."

There was a click and then silence. Johnny sat there for a long time like a man in a daze, then chancing to look up, his eyes almost popped from his head, for there, sitting on the edge of the swamp quietly lacing his boots, was Tombstone Tyler. Johnny was all around him in a minute, congratulating, asking questions and telling what had just come hot over the wire.

"Great," Tyler enthused. "I claim the right to pluck that baron's tail-feathers. I'm entitled to the detail and besides——" Tombstone hesitated.

"There's a lot of our buzzards who still entertain the suspicion that Baron Phantomas is really a phantom. And to be frank, I'm still more than half convinced that he is myself. But knowing that this bird who is going to visit us is real, makes it simple for me. I'll be waiting for him and after I shoot his pants off with the flock looking on, they'll all get a yen to do the same for every Jerry thereafter."

Johnny gave his consent and a few instructions. He was planning to remain behind at the phone rather than run the risk of discovery by stretching the wire up to the Cuckoos' dugout. "I'll stay here until midnight and then you guide Gink Hendrick here to give me relief. *Compre?*"

Tombstone saw the sudden shadow that traveled over Johnny's face and he grinned.

"Don't worry, buzzard," he cheered him up. "I'll bag the Jerry baron and you'll get your relief topside up." Johnny watched him go this time, and then settle down to a long tedious spell of sitting with his ears alert inside the head phones. The dead silence threatened to lull him to sleep. Keeping awake was agony. He cut in a long extension wire on the ear pieces and arose with them on his head to pace five paces forward and five back. Slowly the shadows lengthened and the swamp mists rose. The day was done. A sinister flashing in the distant sky told Johnny that the war dogs were singing their evening vespers. His gaze swept across the heavens to stop on a tiny cloud. A splendid hiding place for a war bird on the prowl.

IN THE next breath Johnny dropped flat on his face to the soggy ground. Bitterly he cursed the ear phones that had kept the drone of the powerful Mercedes engine from him until it was over his head. Slowly he turned his eyes skyward and a cold shudder of apprehension coursed through him. A waspish Fokker was speeding up there, pointing true for the Cuckoos' drome. A funeral ship that sported the gruesome cocarde of Baron Phantomas, the familiar grinning skull and crossed bones.

Forgetting his own narrow escape, Johnny stood up with his eyes riveted on the streaking Jerry's tail. Black worry settled on him again. Would Tombstone have time to lift his Spad from the drome and put sufficient maneuvering space under him before the baron got there first or would he be caught coming up to be dusted off by a burst from the diving Jerry's twin Spandaus. Given a cold-meat shot like that, the Captain, Baron von Hirsch, could be depended upon to take full advantage.

The Fokker was lancing earthward in a long slanting dive. Johnny groaned and the next instant was executing the first wild steps of an insane dance as a black speck dropped plummetlike out of the tiny drifting cloud and grew into a vengeful buzzing Spad. Tombstone Tyler had been waiting patiently up there after arranging with Limey Barrow to taxi a cold ship across the field at the first sight of a Jerry plane in the sky.

The baron had fallen for the ruse. So intent was he on adding one more *descendu* to the long list on his silver victory mug that he was trapped before he realized it. Tombstone was riding the Fokker's tail like a hurricane, saying it to the baron with tracer and steel, while Limey Barrow, deciding to take a chance, was recklessly backsticking the cold Spad up to be just flying around in case—

The baron, forced dangerously close to the ground, was trapped and the hell of it was he knew it. Death was singing uncomfortably close to his ears and he wasn't used to it. Always in the past it had been the other way around. A tiny row of black holes were stitching themselves in his Fokker wing. Tombstone's Vickers were going full blast, but he wasn't shooting to kill. A shrewd plan revved up in his cunning Indian mind. He'd force the baron to land. Alive the baron might help to solve the mystery of the flying phantom, while the baron dead would be just one more *descendu* to Tombstone's credit.

Suddenly the baron decided on one last desperate

chance. He skidded the Fokker around, losing much of his precious remaining altitude and started away full gun in a double-banked S turn. It cleared his tail of Tombstone but it carried him head on into a scathing steel burst from the alert Limey's guns. The Fokker's prop disappeared into space and the Mercedes raced madly. With only one thing left for him to do, the baron did it. He cut his switches, waved a hand to the pair of Spads flying close herd on him, and glided, a broken-hearted and bitter war bird, to a safe landing on the Cuckoos' drome.

Johnny, wildly elated and talking to himself, was about to give voice to a joyous whoop when a repeated clicking in the head phones cut it short.

"*Herr Oberst, Excellenz,*" the shrill, half hysterical voice of the pseudo non-com came to Johnny's ears. "*Ach, Gott,* the worst has happened. I saw it with my own eyes. The captain, Baron von Hirsch, did not have a chance. They trapped him like a dove. Downed him. He is dead."

Johnny heard the spy sob and the rumbling roar from the other end as his *Excellenz*, the *Herr Oberst*, raved like a madman, threatening to burst Johnny's ear drums.

"See what your flying phantom has brought us," he screeched at the sobbing Mueller. "Delay; death of a most valued airman; our Zeppelins waiting in the hangars; troops fretting their hearts out as they wait for you to clear the way for them with your insane invention. Bah! I should have known better, Mueller."

The raging *Oberst* fairly screamed into his mouthpiece. "I waste no more time on playthings. Those Cuckoos are men, dangerous enemies, so I wipe them out with men's weapons. A thirty minute barrage of H.E. shells. You have the exact ranges there, Mueller. Call them off to me. Their flying field. *Gott im Himmel!* Give me everything."

"Yes, *Excellenz*, one moment, please."

Johnny waited to hear no more. Death's wings were already flapping over the distant drome. Action was demanded or else the destroying barrage would blast the Cuckoos from the war and into oblivion. Johnny's hand closed on the pair of pliers and he used them just as the spy cleared his throat and announced:

"Here they are, *Herr Oberst*. His *Excellenz*, the chief of artillery will have no trouble in locating these areas to be bombarded on his own general map. S—"

JOHNNY heard the click in his earphones as the jaws of the pliers severed the main wire just beyond his own

connection, silencing the spy not a second too soon. Moving with the speed of light, Johnny's other hand flipped the juice switch over on his own field set. It was his wits now against the magnificent brain of the *Oberst*, who presided over the all powerful German intelligence. His voice came to Johnny like the thunder of a big gun.

"Mueller, you blundering idiot, what is the meaning of this delay."

Johnny steadied himself. It was now or never. "Sorry, *Herr Oberst*," he apologized in his best imitation of Mueller's voice. "The map fell from my desk. The ranges are—" From memory Johnny recited the numerals and symbols he had copied from the pseudo French noncom's map. "S-9, S-10, S-11, and S-12." Those symbols had marked the long line of concrete pill boxes that Germany had planned to occupy. Johnny smiled coldly. All was fair in war. The next would be an ironic jest that Tombstone Tyler would appreciate. Slowly and distinctly he pronounced, "S-4" into the mouthpiece. The numeral of the archie battery and the spy's headquarters. Let the barrage come now.

"That is all, *Herr Oberst*," he concluded.

"Mueller," came the *Oberst's* arresting voice over the wire. "Watch and learn how a soldier fights a war."

"I shall watch faithfully, *Excellenz*," Johnny assured him and hung up.

Slowly, meantime humming to himself, he got to his feet and carefully covered the field set with the clicker. It might come in handy again sometime. Hands in pockets he strode hurriedly away, giving the near-by gully a wide berth.

Before he had traversed fifty yards it came. A deep roar that shook the ground upon which he walked. Another few paces and the quaking of the earth made him stagger like a drunken man. The *Herr Oberst* certainly knew how to order a barrage. Tons of earth, rock and debris were sailing skyward to fall back and be set geysering up once more by the next arriving shell.

In happy reaction, Johnny cried. Great tears of joy coursed down his grimy cheeks. Lady Luck was still championing the Cuckoos' cause.

Coming to an inviting knoll he lay down behind it, to wait until the thirty minutes of searing hell that Jerry was pegging over had spent its fury. Then as suddenly as the barrage had started, it ceased. Johnny arose and trotted toward the billowing mountain of burned powder gas, that marked the end of Germany's hope for a real impregnable foothold in France. Where the gully had been, a great smoking gorge had grown. Germany had spent years in building that elaborate

trench system and but thirty minutes in destroying it again. Trying to shield his smarting eyes, Johnny picked a precarious path over the red ruins and halted in astonishment as the sound of a familiar voice seemed to come up out of the ground between his feet.

"You slimy Jerry snake, scaring the ruddy 'earts out of us with your Gor-blimed moving pictures. I'm going to knock your blarsted prop off."

Johnny waited to hear no more. He saw a hole and jumped into it. Through some whim of the war gods the spy's dugout had escaped the bombardment. Johnny saw two figures struggling over against the far wall and he rushed in to drag the berserk Limey away from the gibbering spy, who hugged a thing of wheels, levers and springs to his chest.

"Away, you swine," he screeched as Johnny reached for it. Slowly Johnny withdrew his hand and shook his head sadly. There was nothing behind the German's eyes. His brain had cracked. Just a madman. "My wonderful invention. You won't take it from me," he screamed. "Its secret shall die with me—me, Eric Mueller—discoverer of screenless projection and natural photography. Lifelike moving pictures without a screen. The whole world at my feet. Money and the good things of life and then, *Ach Gott*, this damnable war. Suffering and hardship, I could endure for the *Vaterland*. But abuse and ridicule from that soulless machine of an *Oberst*. It is too much. I die and the world is the loser."

Before either Johnny or Limey could move, the mystery machine flew from the madman's hands to wreck itself against the wall. Then followed a sickening crunch that made Johnny's stomach squirm. The man had leaped head first after his brain child. Johnny looked at the broken body crumpled on the floor with sorrowing eyes.

"Perhaps it's all for the best," he ruminated aloud. "Firing squads are nasty things."

Limey, who had been busy, silently handed him some strips of film. Holding them up to the light, Johnny smiled. One length showed a tiny Fokker that sported a cocarde of a grinning skull and crossed bones on its wings. The other revealed a likeness of a sneering Jerry officer.

Johnny looked next at the splintered machine and its dead master on the floor. The phantom would fly no more.

He waved Limey to the outside, but paused in the shell-made doorway to look back himself.

"Good-by, Baron Phantomas," he whispered. "May your spirit rest in peace." Turning, Johnny trudged away to join the Cuckoos.