



FALLING LEAF

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Baron Rapunzel Was the Mystery Man of German Air—And A Tough Bird to Tackle in Combat!

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THERE was grim, tense silence in the mess hall of the Ninth Pursuit Group, to which Silent Orth now belonged.

The face of Captain Hagedorn, the Squadron Commander, was touched with a fine dew of perspiration. His flyers, of whom there were ten, watched him with unwinking eyes. The taut nervous strain under which they all labored could be felt like something tangible.

"I tell you," Hagedorn said, his words tripping over one another as though forced from his lips against his will, "that the man isn't human. I know something of his history, which has the force of legend. He is master of that red Fokker of his. It is as much a part of him as his arms or his legs and he has even more control of it.

"I know of many men who would have sworn, who did swear afterwards, that they filled him full of lead, only to have him cut his motor—cut it dead, mind you!—and go down to a safe landing. He paid no more attention to his attacker, if that one remained alive, than if he hadn't existed."

SILENT ORTH opened his mouth to say something, then closed it tightly. Once, when he had first joined this group, he had talked too much. Now he seldom talked at all, and had grimly, bitterly, earned his sobriquet. But the aura of menace, the feeling of the strange being who was apparently ghostly, not quite human, affected him as it did the others. He could feel it in the shadows which seemed to creep out from the corners of the room like monster cats.

It was a real thing to Orth, for he had seen the eerie combat, late that same afternoon, just when the sun had been swallowed by the western horizon, between the person discussed by Hagedorn and Lieutenant Seahan. Seahan had had a sure win. He had outpointed the enemy on all fronts. The Fokker had cut its motor and, with a perfectly dead stick, had started a crazy flopping down the sky.

Eager to make sure of his kill, Seahan had done the usual and followed his victim down. Within a hundred feet of the ground the enemy's motor had suddenly roared into life and the Fokker's nose had lifted for an infinitesimal moment. Spandau lead had blatted through his propeller arc, and through the heart of Lieutenant Seahan. The Spad had crashed into the trees in flames.

The German had cut his motor again, landed on a field no larger than a handkerchief, rolled his crate under the trees as though they had been planted there

in readiness for him, and had calmly vanished into the woods.

All that the Ninth knew of the German was that his name was supposed to be *Baron* Rapunzel—odd name for a slayer—and that he was the mystery man of German air. There wasn't a flyer anywhere who could compete with him. Even in the days before the war, he had done things with commercial planes. He could fasten a hook on the tip of one of his wings and pick a handkerchief from the ground with it. He would gamble his life that he could land his plane within ten feet of any designated mark on the ground.

EVEN his own people knew as little about him as the world knew about the secrets of Harry Houdini. But that he had run up a score of kills to the number of fifty-one Allied planes, all downed as easily and surely as shooting fish in a barrel, the whole world knew. The Germans moved him from point to point along the front, where he promptly proceeded to raise bloody hell with the Allies. Between Saturdays, he would jump to the Russian or Italian fronts and wreak havoc there, then jump back.

And that he had the Ninth worried—as much because of his activities as because his appearance and continued existence was causing Wing to blast Hagedorn with withering invective—there was no doubting at all.

Silent Orth feared nothing that walked or flew, but even he felt uncomfortable when Rapunzel was mentioned. Especially when he could see the effect of the mere mention of the man's name on his wingmates. But Orth had been too lately in the bad graces of his wingmates to risk his growing popularity by speaking now.

THE EYES of Hagedorn moved along the table. His mouth was open as though waiting for speech which would not come. He wiped the sweat from his face with a hand that trembled. Orth knew that Hagedorn was thinking of some desperate expedient to remove the queer Rapunzel from consideration hereafter, yet being mindful all the time that fifty-one other Allied flyers had tried to do the same thing. Hagedorn was looking for a champion.

His eyes rested longest on Silent Orth. Orth gravely returned the scrutiny. He carefully refrained from showing any eagerness. If he were to be selected—

The eyes of Hagedorn passed Orth, traveled down the row of faces—then came back. Hagedorn nodded

stiffly, his eyes boring into those of Orth. A sigh of relief went around the table. Orth nodded. There were no words. Orth had not offered to volunteer for anything, which act would have been taken as sheer grandstanding—he thought. But he had been selected, as inevitably as Seahan had fallen before a flaming burst from the Spandaus of Rapunzel.

Rapunzel. Rapunzel. *Baron* Rapunzel. It sounded like something from a comic opera, or like a character out of some old German folk tale. And yet the man himself was deadly serious. Orth hesitated for a moment. He knew that in another instant every eye in the place would be staring at him, weighing him, recataloguing him. He rose to his feet, pushed back his chair, and left the mess hall without a word.

Out on the shadowed tarmac he looked toward Germany. Up there to the east, and north, and south, across scores of miles of embattled territory, Germans and Allies hurled hell's fire at one another as they had done day and night since—it sometimes seemed—the world had begun; as they must continue to do until the world ended. Few soldiers believed that the war would end in their generation.

It almost seemed to Orth—so unreal had been the tension in the mess hall, the queer strain of his wingmates' nerves—that the very sky, all laced with the colors of starshells and bursting bombs whose roaring rocked the earth, traced there the name of Rapunzel.

Orth shrugged. His opponent was only human. His bullets had slain a man. Bullets in him could slay him. Orth cared for nothing beyond that. He was not an imaginative man particularly. But he knew that he faced a crisis in his war career. He was on trial, with Baron Rapunzel acting as his judge, jury and executioner.

HE WENT to the hangar which housed his Spad, routed out the sergeant in charge of greaseballs.

"Give my buggy a good going over, Sarge," he said quietly. "I'm taking off after Rapunzel in the morning.

The sergeant's eyes widened, and Orth knew that the nameless tension which held his wingmates had extended to the enlisted men. His own nerves seemed to tighten with the knowledge, as though all at once the whole future of the Ninth rested on his shoulders. He remained with the ground crew until sure that nothing further could be done to the Spad, until the ship was as nearly perfect as it could be made.

IN THE cold gray dawn, Orth was up ahead of his wingmates. A mug of scalding black coffee was ready

for him. His Spad was ticking over at the deadline. He glanced at the sky toward Germany. There was an iciness about it, a black-bluishness, which could be explained by the fact that coming sunrise was at his back.

But even to the unimaginative Orth, that cold sky seemed to symbolize Rapunzel, the wizard of the Fokker, the magician of the Spandaus, the master of the skies.

Not even an eagle or a falcon or a gull could have maneuvered so well without a motor as Rapunzel had maneuvered against Seahan—whom he had slain with contemptuous prodigality of lead.

Orth climbed into his crate, still with his eyes staring speculatively at the east.

"Chocks out!" he snapped. The greaseballs yanked the chocks. Orth took a deep breath. His gray eyes were narrowed. He seemed trying to imbue his Spad with his own determination, his own desire to command the theater of sky in which he was to costar with Rapunzel.

Orth sent his ship scudding down the field, faster and faster. He shoved the stick forward to gain flying speed, to get the tail off. The tail lifted. The crate rocked slightly from side to side. The field fled under him like a river flowing backward. He brought the stick back against his belly and lifted off the field, dropping his right wing almost at once and going into a wild climbing turn. Now that he was off, definitely committed to his venture, he was eager to come to grips with Rapunzel.

Over the trees, which now were a fog-laced ocean of shell-blasted green below him, he pointed his Spad's nose toward the lines. He tripped his Vickers and lead snarled through the arc of his propeller. He nodded his head with appreciation.

And then again, through a strange circumstance, he became conscious of concern over the meeting with Rapunzel: he had simply forgotten to smoke a cigarette before the takeoff, something he had never before overlooked. He gritted his teeth, swore at himself savagely.

"I won't get the wind up," he told himself. "This guy isn't half as good as I am. Of one thing I'm sure; he won't get me as he got Seahan."

Even as the thought came, he knew that Rapunzel wouldn't try the same thing twice in succession. Among other things, he owed his long reign of terror in enemy skies to his ability to outguess his adversaries. He would always do the least expected thing, and when

he did it an enemy went down. But Orth knew that he, Silent Orth, would not be thus outwitted.

OVER the lines, the Germans on the ground let go at him with everything they had. Bullets from Mausers and Mannlichers ripped holes in his wings; one even tore up through the bottom of his cockpit, missing his rudderbar and his feet by the proverbial hair's breadth. But he didn't look down. Lightning never struck twice in the same place. He was soon through the archies. He did not look for Rapunzel at any of the known fields. The man didn't work from any given base. Orth strongly believed that several Fokkers, all of them identical in insignia, numbers and markings, were assigned to the mysterious flyer, who used any number of small clearings as his own private landing field.

MOST were fields on which few flyers, Allied or German would have been able to land. For always the queer German went down to a landing after a kill, on the smallest field available. And always, too, there was such a clearing under him when he engaged an enemy in combat.

Orth began to quarter the sky. He resolved to fly for two hours. His crate held enough gasoline for something like four hours. He wouldn't make the mistake of flying until his gasoline was almost exhausted, thus leaving himself practically at the mercy of Rapunzel.

The sun was now a red disc in the east. Full daylight was almost upon the war torn world. It was time for enemy and Allied airmen to be aloft. Rapunzel, if he came at all, must come soon.

Casually, since he never looked for attack from below, Orth looked over the side, then gasped, while his eyes opened to their widest extent. For under him, coming up like some impossible red fish from the depths of an ocean, was a blood red Fokker.

It was being nursed upward with consummate skill, in a fashion of which Orth knew himself incapable. No need to tell him that the flyer coming up toward him, whose nose was even then swinging into line for a fatal belly shot, was the *Baron* Rapunzel.

Orth saw tracers streak from the German's guns, could almost sense the German's disappointment that he had failed to strike without warning. Had Rapunzel been successful, Orth would have been dead at this moment. He had to work fast. Now that surprise had failed, he realized in the space of a heartbeat that in spite of being out of position—like a prizefighter

fainted off balance—the advantage of altitude was his. So he corkscrewed around, knees gripping the stick, eager hands darting like white snakes to curl around the trips of his Vickers.

His eyes were glued to his ring-sight. He was awaiting his chance. But those same eyes widened with consternation as he saw the behavior of the German in the crossed wires of his ring-sight. For a brief second the German was squarely aligned, but before Orth could trip his Vickers the red Fokker moved ahead, just enough to be out of line. Orth corrected to catch him, only to find that Rapunzel had lifted above his ring-sight.

Orth lifted his plummeting nose to correct, but now Rapunzel was below him. But his fuselage was a fair target, and with an oath of exasperation, Orth let go a long burst, saw his tracers smash into the fuselage, saw bits of fabric and longerons torn from the red ship. But Rapunzel didn't seem to mind, and Orth suddenly recalled that one of the master tricks of this master flyer was to allow his enemies to believe that they had maimed him; then to bag them next moment with a sudden unexpected maneuver, with some superhuman exhibition of skilled flying and marksmanship.

ORTH fumed as he kept on diving. He could fancy the German laughing gutturally in his throat. To Rapunzel of the many kills, this man Orth must be just another foolhardy American who thought himself good enough to try conclusions with the great baron. Orth stilled his guns, angry that he had even loosed them. But he kept his nose on the enemy, watching for Rapunzel's next move. The red Fokker moved along the sky like a living drop of blood in a glass of warm water. The German seemed strangely disinterested in the fight, but Orth was not fooled by his casualness. Rapunzel was most dangerous and deadly when he seemed the least concerned.

ORTH set himself the task of guessing what Rapunzel would do next. He was slanting down on the Fokker at an angle. Rapunzel was moving from left to right across his front. Again Orth watched his ring-sight, trying to bring it to bear on the German; but Rapunzel kept just out of line with a maddening carelessness which he could not have managed better had he himself commanded Orth's ring-sight. Again, in desperation, because he could not bear inaction, Orth loosed a burst from his Vickers, saw the bullets smash into the tail surfaces of the enemy.

Then Rapunzel, in the midst of the burst, made his move. His nose lifted like the head of a deer just shot through the heart. At the same time his right wing lowered. His nose swung around with the speed of a baseball pitcher's arm, so that he swung into position literally to hurl the thunderbolts of his Spandau's wrath straight into Orth's cockpit.

The natural thing would have been for Orth to roll out of prospective line of sights. Maybe Rapunzel expected him to do just that. But, his face very white, his eyes unblinking, Orth did nothing of the sort. He forgot his guns—and banked straight into the nose of Rapunzel's crate.

If, now, the German blasted him with Spandau lead and killed him, the Spad, out of control, would smash into Rapunzel's Fokker in spite of the best flying skill of Germany's man of mystery. There was only one way for Rapunzel to avoid such a collision, and that was to dive out of danger—and he couldn't dive and keep his guns on Orth.

Orth laughed as he thus scored. The German swooped under him. Orth looked down as his wheels all but raked the German's wings. Rapunzel was looking up and Orth could see that he too was laughing. He paid Orth the tribute of a quickly snapped salute before their wild speed in opposite directions took them kilometers apart in the space of twin heartbeats.

Instantly Orth banked around and roared after his enemy. He was wild for a chance to bring his guns to bear. Rapunzel was going straight away, and Orth wondered what trick he had next in mind. Orth studied the ground below, but could not see it. The trees were too thick. But up ahead there, beyond Rapunzel, who had slowed down as though to allow Orth to come up with him, Orth could see a clearing which still was shadowed by the foggy haze of dawn.

Orth gritted his teeth, understanding the enemy's move. Over that clearing, following the unpredictable routine for which he was famous, Rapunzel intended to have it out. Well, Orth was ready.

HE GLANCED around as he hurtled forward to the wordless rendezvous. The sky seemed empty of planes—but stay! To the east a flight of Albatrosses was droning toward the front. And they were swerving aside slightly in order to be in at the kill when Rapunzel scored again. That they would take part in the coming fight Orth did not believe. German flyers did not interfere with the schemes and tricks

of Rapunzel. Orth could afford to ignore them unless and until he downed the baron, when they would probably descend upon him like avenging hawks, to exact payment for the fall of their man of mystery. Now Rapunzel was circling carelessly above that pocket-handkerchief field. Orth drove straight for the area of sky where again he must try conclusions with the German. He now had no fear. He had proved to himself, at least once, that it was possible to outguess the German. Rapunzel himself had acknowledged this with his snapped salute as they had met and passed. What Orth had done once, he could do again.

HE TRIPPED his Vickers for added confidence in his fighting equipment, and watched Rapunzel warily. He searched the sky below and aloft. Rapunzel might not be above using a decoy, a red plane which the American might be trapped into attacking, only to fall before the sudden attack, from an unexpected quarter, of Rapunzel himself. Orth didn't know the man by sight.

He had seen his face during that snapped salute, but it had been merely a white blur because of their mutual speed.

He studied the flyer, up there ahead. Rapunzel—if it were Rapunzel—was flying in a wide lazy circle. Could it be possible that for once the German was going to fight in the orthodox manner? Was he going to allow Orth to slip into the circle, so that the two would be like a dog chasing his tail, first one and then the other being the tail? Such fights usually ended in a variety of ways. One man cut out and was shot down; one became desperate when nothing of importance happened, or straining nerves could stand the uncertainty no longer, and went wild, and died.

But Rapunzel, as far as his legend went, had never once accorded an enemy the honor of fighting him in the orthodox fashion. Maybe by doing it now he was paying due honor to the man who had—ever so slightly—outguessed him in their first contact. Whatever the plan, whatever the trap Rapunzel was setting, Orth gritted his teeth and resolved to plunge straight into it. If you had your head in a lion's mouth, the safest thing to do was to shove it in so far he couldn't bite you.

Orth was a grim fighting machine as he smashed ahead. His Spad was ready. His guns worked perfectly as Rapunzel, with gaping holes in his fuselage, and weakened longerons, must know by this time. Maybe the great German's pride had been pricked, and he was

out to show this upstart that he could whip him in his own way.

Orth zoomed, then sliced swiftly down to drop into the circle, noting with grim satisfaction that Rapunzel gave him plenty of room to get into position, did not allow him an opportunity to shoot him down from above.

Into the circle Orth fell like a thrown knife. Then he dropped his left wing and smashed full toward the Fokker, who had to drop his own left wing and tighten the circle to escape Orth's lead. Then the chase began, a test of nerve against nerve, Fokker against Spad, which could end only when something broke.

ORTH leaned forward, begged, exhorted his Spad to just one bit more of speed. For fully five minutes—a long time in any sky battle—the two men tried to slay each other. Once or twice Rapunzel came close enough to blast away at Orth's tail assembly with chattering Spandaus, and each time he let his guns go. This only served to add to Orth's confidence, to dispel the belief that Rapunzel was something other than human. And once or twice Orth came close enough to Rapunzel, by a sudden burst of speed which must have surprised the very Spad itself, to send Vickers bullets into the body of the Fokker. But neither the body of Rapunzel nor that of Orth was ever in any great danger from the bullets of his enemy.

Again Orth sent lead hurtling across the abyss to crash into the camelback of the blood red Fokker—and then Rapunzel went into his maneuvering. He suddenly dropped his left wing and sliced for the ground, two thousand feet below.

Orth gasped at the foolhardiness of the man. For no sooner had he dropped out of the circle than the German cut his motor; his stick became visible, slowing down, then stopped altogether. All the German had to hold him up then were his airfoils and his consummate skill with his Fokker.

IN SUCH a manner the man of mystery had broken the hearts—and blasted out the lives—of half a hundred Allied flyers, for here he had proved himself so vastly their master that they knew he could beat them at will. If, using their motors to help them in all the tricks which flyers had perfected, they still could not out-manuever the German, what chance had they when he used his motor? All must have asked themselves that.

Orth gritted his teeth. Rapunzel would never get his

goat, destroy his morale, by any grandstanding of this kind. Nor would Orth be led into the indiscretion of cutting his own motor to prove that he was as good as this master of motorless aerobatics.

He dove on the blood-red Fokker. Now his knees held the stick as before. He peered through his ring-sight, saw Rapunzel looking up, absolutely cool and calm, to watch the diving of Orth's Spad. Again the German kept irritatingly out of line of sights. Orth thought he had him several times within a matter of seconds, but always when his Vickers let go the Fokker was not there to receive the bullets.

Faster and faster Orth dove. Grimly, his jaws ridged of muscle in his determination, he aimed directly at the German's cockpit, only to see the cockpit slip aside, just out of line of sights. He shifted to cover and the German, whose eyes never left the Spad above his head, rose above the line of sights or dropped below it, always a split second ahead of Orth's hail of lead.

Now Orth was quite close to the master. He circled around him. Rapunzel fell like a stone for a bit, with his left wings down. Then he leveled, seemed to stand still in the air—then started that flopping, fluttering fall which airmen knew as the "falling leaf." The Fokker slipped across the sky, caught itself, slipped back, moment by moment coming closer to the ground.

ORTH dove straight over the enemy crate, and held his breath when the Fokker seemed to lift above him. He looked to his left, where the Fokker was at his own level—and saw the enemy's nose come around to command his cockpit. He knew that Rapunzel's last dive had been for the express purpose of causing his prop to start moving by the force of the windstream, in order for the Fokker's motor to catch and put the guns back into action.

Orth dove, sideslipped, got under Rapunzel, and fancied he could hear a burst of harsh laughter over his precipitate rush to escape the consequences of too headlong a dive. At the same time Orth lifted his nose, aiming for a belly shot. But Rapunzel was just too far to his left when his guns would have come into line. *Damn the German!* He was a sky magician! One could have as easily downed with Vickers bullets, the falling leaf Rapunzel was aping. Orth darted up beside Rapunzel, whose mouth was open in soundless laughter—soundless only because the roaring of Orth's own Hisso drowned out the laugh.

NEARER and nearer to the earth they dropped. The

Fokker's propeller was visible, Orth's motor full out for the most part, and yet Rapunzel played with Orth as though the American had been the merest novice at a joy stick. Orth's impotent fury, knew no bounds. He took desperate chances on midair collisions to get a shot at Rapunzel, and always the motorless Fokker evaded his charges with ridiculous ease. Orth snapped a glance at the ground, knowing that he mustn't take his eyes off Rapunzel for more than a split second because the German ace would seize that opportunity to blast him to death. The ground was less than five hundred feet below him.

The end must come soon now or the battle would be drawn.

Orth redoubled his efforts and Rapunzel, without seeming to do so, still avoided his best efforts. They were a hundred feet from the ground. Below this altitude, yesterday, Seaham had died. Orth noted that the German's prop barely moved now. He was even nursing that movement while he outmaneuvered Orth at every point. Orth cursed. He fired several times, always behind, before, above or below his elusive, maddeningly elusive, enemy.

Now Rapunzel, if he played true to form, must strike. But he wouldn't expect Orth to do what he had already done once today—turn squarely into him and dare his guns. And because Orth figured he would not, he gambled his very life on the correctness of his guess, and did exactly that. Even as Rapunzel's motor started to rear, his nose to come around, Orth banked straight into him.

Rapunzel dared not take his hands off his controls to fire. He dove. He cut his gun as Orth hovered over him. The small field, in which Orth knew himself incapable of landing, was right below. He doubted if any man could intentionally land on that field, certainly not with an enemy squarely on his tail.

That Rapunzel had lost his chance to down Orth—and in some small bit had detracted from his own prestige—there could be no doubt. So Orth suddenly cut his own gun, swooped over Rapunzel, just as that worthy's wheels touched the small field, and shouted aloud in the sudden silence:

"I'll be back for you in half an hour!"

THERE was time for no more, because Orth's great speed carried him beyond shouting distance. But he saw Rapunzel, whose Fokker had rolled no more than fifty feet, as though it had almost been endowed with the capabilities of a helicopter, wave his hand in

acknowledgement that he had heard. Then he cut his motor in, just in time, and headed back for his own field.

He uttered a shout of joy as two Albatrosses from the German flight—which had been circling above, watching the strange denouement of the battle—dove down on him. He struck them as a falcon strikes its prey, and he struck them with all the savage, pent-up fury which the *Baron* Rapunzel had instilled into him. But even though he knocked them both down in less than a minute, sending them to the earth in flames; even though he was the first Allied flyer ever to escape the magic of Rapunzel, it was small satisfaction to him. He had still failed to destroy the German. He wanted real satisfaction; he intended to get it; and the sooner the better.

He paid mental tribute to the sportsmanship of the mysterious German by taking it for granted that Rapunzel's nonchalantly waved hand had been an agreement to meet him again. He hadn't turned back to shoot at Rapunzel on the ground because he was determined to get him in the air, and in his own way.

In the last few seconds of the queer combat just staged, Silent Orth believed he had found a way, and the only way, to destroy *Baron* Rapunzel.

BUT that he needed a breathing space, while Rapunzel himself got ready to renew hostilities, he knew very well. He would land, smoke that blasted cigarette, have the bulletholes in his crate patched over, his Spad fully serviced, then go back. And a small bit of food would help, too.

And he knew he needed a bit of calmness. He was raging mad. Rapunzel had made him look like an amateur. That he had done the same with many flyers who had proven themselves by long lists of German kills, didn't detract from the fact as Orth saw it. He hadn't got Rapunzel, which was what Hagedorn and his wingmates expected him to do.

He landed swiftly, rolled almost against the hangars before he stopped. Greaseballs grabbed his wings, spun his crate around under his savagely snapped commands. The sergeant hurried to help him from the pit. He waved the enlisted man away.

"You run into that queer guy?" asked the sergeant.

"You guess," retorted Orth. "I ran into him all right, and he's still kicking, and I could bite the head off a nail—or a greascball sergeant! Get this bus ready the fastest you ever got a bus ready in your life. No German buzzard can make a fool of Silent Orth—"

There he left it. Rapunzel had made him forget, for a moment, that he had resolved never again to talk too much. He stalked across the tarmac to headquarters building, entered, grunted at Hagedorn as his superior looked up with a questioning air, and asked for a combat report. He wrote simply:

"I met Rapunzel. He made me look and feel like a fool. He's still alive."

He shoved his report at Hagedorn, who read it, then looked at Orth.

"This is the biggest report I ever knew a man to make, Orth," he said quietly. "Damn' few men have the guts to admit that they're fools. What's next?"

"Rapunzel," barked Orth. "Within half an hour—twenty minutes. He'll always be next, until he is wiped out—*or I am!*"

ORTH caught himself, bit his lip. Again his anger at Rapunzel, but more at himself, had almost trapped him into verbally blowing up. But he held himself in check, and Hagedorn nodded with approval.

"You're learning, Orth," he said. "Be careful."

"Careful? Careful! Fifty-one Allied flyers have been careful against this Rapunzel. This time I'm going after him determined to be the biggest fool on the Front. It's my only chance."

Hagedorn shook his head, but was too wise in the ways of men to offer any suggestions or advice. Silent Orth stalked to his hutment after a growled answer to Hagedorn's wish for his good luck. He got his duffel together, as flyers always did before they took off—to make it easier for their stuff to be sent home if they didn't come back—and then went to the mess hall. But food was tasteless, bitter, and Orth swore savagely. If only, as he wished, he could rant and rave, he would feel better; but that was taboo. His only outlet must be Rapunzel. And if on his return, the German avoided him, he wouldn't be responsible for the direction his outbreak might take.

Back to his Spad, now in working order, ready to go once more.

HE TOOK off, heading for the spot where he had last seen Rapunzel. As he flew toward Germany, ignoring archie bursts, ignoring the lines under him because he knew to the second how much time he needed to pass them, he lifted his nose to gain greater altitude. He needed altitude in his new plan. He would out-Rapunzel Rapunzel himself, he told himself, even though the very wording of his thought had a comic

opera sound. But there was nothing comic opera about Rapunzel's bullets, he remembered.

He was flying at seven thousand feet when he spotted the field where Rapunzel had calmly gone down to a landing. There he began to circle lazily, awaiting the appearance of his antagonist. But nothing moved on the field below. He searched the sky, strangely, mysteriously free of German aircraft.

To the north he saw Nieuports moving into German-held sky. To the south a flight of Camels was going home from some mission over German territory. He had the sky to himself—and there was no Rapunzel.

And then, all at once, bullets smashed into his camelback, ripping through his crate, blasting it to shreds. His dash vanished in a shower of glass. His cockpit coaming had great bits taken out of it, as though bitten through by the teeth of an invisible giant. He snatched a look upward over his shoulders—and there was the blood-red crate. Rapunzel had gone above him, hiding in the eye of the sun to await his return, and had all but got him with that burst. The bullets still smashed into his fuselage, aft the cockpit.

Somehow or other, as the Fokker dove on him, he managed to get out of line of sights. At the same time he allowed his Spad to fall out of control, and his own head to loll on the cockpit coaming like that of a man rendered limp by slugs smashing his body to a jelly. He knew that Rapunzel wouldn't be able to see at any distance whether or not he was bleeding.

Rapunzel shot past him, already preparing to nose up for another burst through his floorboards, and Silent Orth made his supreme bid. Quick as a flash, with his Hisso roaring a mad diapason of defiance, he corkscrewed around and was sitting squarely atop Rapunzel before that tricky gentleman could realize what had happened to him.

HIS wheels were almost over the head of the great German, and Orth's nose was aimed at his prop. Two ships could not fly so close together without imminent danger of collision, but Orth courted collision to succeed in his mission. Rapunzel tried to dive, but his tail would strike the Spad above him if he did. He edged to the right. Orth edged with him.

Orth looked over the side, his savage face fairly snarling aloud at Rapunzel. Rapunzel's face was white. The fellow was trying to find a way out of his impossible dilemma, using his famous wits to their uttermost.

Orth grinned savagely. Rapunzel might find the way out, but at the moment, at least, Silent Orth was in the driver's seat. Rapunzel looked up, shrugged, as much as to say:

"Well, it's stalemate. I can't shoot you, you can't shoot me, unless we use our pistols."

BUT Rapunzel didn't draw his Luger. Orth didn't even think of his Colts. This was to be a grim battle of wings against wings, wits against wits, trickery matched against trickery.

Rapunzel deliberately leaned forward, an obvious challenge—which Orth had known was as inevitable as the fact that day follows night, and night day—and cut his switch. Orth was already leaning forward to do the same thing. Without a motor there was no match for Rapunzel on any front, but Orth intended to change all that.

His was the advantage. As their motors died, the only sounds that could be heard was the whining of the wind through their struts, braces and flying wires. Up to their ears, after they had forgotten somewhat the blasting roars of their Mercedes and Hisso, came the roaring of battle on the ground far below.

The two still held their relative positions. Orth, teeth showing in a snarl of determination, glued his eyes to Rapunzel, watching for a trick. Rapunzel tried to slip to one side. Instantly Orth was above him. Rapunzel laughed. His laughter was one of sheer enjoyment.

The great German was laughing at Orth, but even his laughter might be a trick. Orth guessed that this laughter might have caused many another flyer, stung by its ironic hint of superiority, to go wild and lose his advantage. It was as though Rapunzel had been a prizefighter "bulling" his opponent—but Orth had full command of himself and refused to be bulled. Rapunzel lowered his nose. Orth instantly dropped his. Rapunzel banked into a sideslip without his wings coming in contact with the Spad above him.

Orth dared not even glance at his altimeter, for in that split second Rapunzel might escape him. But he knew that they had dropped fully two thousand feet, as surely locked together as though their wings had been interlaced. It called for consummately skilled flying on the part of both. Now it was stalemate, but even an air current might change all that. An updraft might impale Rapunzel against Orth's undercarriage. A downdraft might drop Orth into Rapunzel's cockpit. They were now more dangerous to each other than they had ever been before.

Realizing this, yet more determined than ever to hold his advantage, Orth felt sweat burst forth from his every pore. But he hung onto his self-control with both hands, figuratively speaking, firmly resolved that this man should not escape him, but wondering what would happen when they reached the ground. He was determined to kill Rapunzel if he had to kill himself at the same time.

THEY spun together, dove together. Rapunzel tried everything he knew, but being above him Orth could see every movement of his hands and feet and beat him to every maneuver. At the completion of each desperate attempt to escape, he was squatted directly above him as before. He almost laughed aloud when he saw the German's right hand lift to wipe the sweat from his forehead. Rapunzel wasn't in danger from bullets, but the strain on him must have been even greater than on Orth. The ground came up.

Rapunzel had managed to nose down enough to get his propeller started, and Orth had nosed down with him, holding his breath when, for a split second, his own prop refused to start moving. Then it did start, again giving him the advantage. He was on even terms with Rapunzel in everything, the only advantage being that his position was the one of command.

BOTH men, when now their propellers were barely moving, nursed them carefully, keeping them in motion. Both knew that a denouement was inevitable. Rapunzel had supreme confidence in himself, because he had tested himself in many battles. Orth—well, Orth couldn't afford to fail and be number fifty-two on Rapunzel's list of kills.

And then, Orth's mouth opened. Now was the time to make his break. In the silence—save for the whispering wires—they could have shouted back and forth to each other. But they had been too intent on the nerve-shattering game they had played to think of hurling insults. And so what Orth next did—as he had hoped and prayed that it would—came as a complete surprise.

He blasted the silence with the most bloodcurdling, most nerve chilling Indian war-whoop ever heard on the European continent. Probably nothing like it had ever been heard. It was somewhere between the squealing of a fighting stallion, the screaming of a condor, and the mad bellowing of a man who simply couldn't hold himself in any longer.

At the same time Orth cut in his motor with a

savage roar, shot past Rapunzel, banked on a dime, and came back. Rapunzel was like a figure in stone, wondering what in God's name had caused that ghastly sound from the sky—but he never lived to find out. For Orth caught him flat-footed, and Vickers lead smashed into and through the German's body, tearing muscle, flesh and bones to bits.

Rapunzel jumped and jerked in his pit. His mouth was open as though he would, in his last seconds of life, have shouted a question. But blood spurted from his mouth before any answer could have reached him.

And his Fokker fell like a stone into a small clearing, mate of so many over which Rapunzel had trapped his scores of enemies. In the clearing the Fokker simply fell apart in the crash. There were no flames. Rapunzel had never started his motor. There was nothing to cause flames.

And then, as though in a dream, his eyes blank as though he could not yet comprehend that he had downed the German terror of the skies, Silent Orth flew home. He flew erratically, as though unable to convince himself that his motor droned again. He

pinched himself to make sure that it hadn't been a nightmare. But by the time he landed and rolled to a stop—knowing by this time that telephones, German and Allied, had already informed the fighting world of the fall of Rapunzel—he was himself again, his lips tightly compressed against any urge to tell his wingmates how he had done it.

AND they were there to slap him on the back and congratulate him. Their relief was tremendous.

It was not until the chorus of congratulations, the sound of palms being mercilessly applied to his back had died away, that Hagedorn managed to ask the question:

"Listen, Silent," he said, "I think we have a right to a detailed description of just how you did it. After all, it's the most important victory in many months—"

Orth hesitated. His eyes were bleak, his face expressionless. He wanted to tell them, but it would sound so much like bragging—and he had ceased to brag. So, at last, he grinned and said: "I reckon, in a way, that I sort' of talked the guy to death!"