



SUNSET SONG

by LT. FRANK JOHNSON

Three Acrobatic Fokkers Work Havoc in the Air In This Zooming Yarn Packed with Thrills and Action!

SILENT ORTH flew just to the right rear of the skipper of "A" Flight, which was coming home after a successful mission in German-held skies. The Flight had, in a way, covered itself with glory, and every member of it, to the total of five, was very happy. They had never flown a tighter formation on any homecoming, for it was the first time in ten days they had come home without yawning gaps in their ranks. Baron Rittermeister, commander of the Germans across the line from Brocourt, beyond Mont Sec, had a *flugstaffel* that was businesslike and deadly. Even Silent Orth had had difficulty in getting home on several occasions, and for all his rather blatant belief in himself, sometimes expressed in frank boasting, he was among the best flyers on the Western Front.

And the Flight had just now ground- strafed Rittermeister's drome with everything it had, without losing a plane or a man. It was something to crow over.

THEN, in the midst of a general hilarity, during which pilots waved at one another, shaking hands with themselves in high glee across the abyss which separated the Spads of "A" Flight, Captain Flagg waggled his wings. The smiles left the faces of the Flight. Silent Orth studied his skipper, who was looking back over his right shoulder. Orth whirled about to see what had attracted the attention of the skipper—and stiffened in his pit.

Coming up behind the Flight were three Fokkers. Three Fokkers, ordinarily, would have caused five Spads but little concern; but in the very first view of these Fokkers every member of "A" Flight knew that something unusual, some surprise, was in store for them. And Rittermeister's surprises usually meant more gaps in the winged ranks of the squadron's various flights. A tension settled over the Flight.

The three Fokkers were behaving strangely. They flew almost wing and wing, three Fokkers side by side. Then, all at once, the right Fokker was above its fellows, the left below, so that the three were like stair-steps in the sky. Then the left one rose, while the right one sank down, forming stair-steps in reverse.

Orth whistled to himself. The slipstream caught up the sound and hurled it backward into silence, drowned by the blasting roar of five Hissos. Those three Fokkers appeared to be flown by fledglings who never tried formation flying before, but Orth recognized otherwise, instantly. The changing formation shifted too easily. No Fokker endangered

the wings of the other two, though they came close, as wingtips almost brushed on the rising and falling maneuvers. The three flyers were too precise with their peculiar maneuvers.

They weren't coming on fast. They were coming on, though, with what Orth instantly recognized was deadly precision, openly, making no attempt to hide in the eye of the sun or to come in from the flanks.

And then, when it seemed they would have attacked, when "A" Flight was in the act of breaking formation to repel attack, the three Fokkers did a strange thing. They broke apart. They rolled on the axes of their fuselage. They rose and fell—oddly like porpoises keeping pace with a steamer.

THERE, Orth instantly saw, was flawless flying, for the three did everything exactly in unison, wings almost touching time and again without actually doing so. Strange acrobatics of the sky, such as none in "A" Flight had ever seen before. Here were three flyers whose sense of balancing, whose equilibrium, was perfect to the nth degree. Even his own was not so good, Orth ruefully admitted to himself.

But with each maneuver, even as "A" Flight broke apart to give each member more skyroom, the three Fokkers came closer. Orth studied them carefully, because now they were close enough for him to see the insignia painted on their cockpits. Each Fokker had the tiny figure of a man, nude save for something around his middle, balancing another similarly clad man on his shoulders. The routine stance of acrobats! But why? What had acrobatics to do with war in the air?

"A" Flight was soon to find out in grimness and despair. For now the Fokkers separated, banked away, then swung back and launched themselves, each of the three a separate, desperate, fighting entity, straight into the thick of "A" Flight. Vickers began to flame savagely as "A" Flight answered the attack, answered Spandau lead with Vickers guns. The roaring of Hissos and Mercedes shattered the heavens. The sky became filled with planes which spun and dipped and dived.

THE Germans were mighty flyers, perfect in timing and execution with their guns. Once two Spads were flying directly over each other, with scarcely twenty feet separating them, as one flyer came down to mask a wingmate from the guns of a Fokker. A second Fokker slipped down, eased gracefully, surely, inevitably between the two Spads.

Orth gasped with amazement. The thing was

impossible, yet the German was doing it—flying directly between two Spads which were one above the other, scarcely separated by more than the height of two men, one on the shoulders of the other. The analogy became instantly significant to Orth as he recalled the insignia on the three cockpits of the Fokkers.

And the daring German did even more. To tilt his nose down, meant to court a crash with the Spad below, to take a chance on sliding his tail upward into the Spad above. Yet he did tilt his nose down, did allow his tail to rise, until for a moment it looked as though the three planes would become inextricably welded—and Spandau lead spouted from his guns, straight into the back of the pilot ahead. The American jumped and jerked in his pit.

It had all happened so quickly that even quick-witted Orth hadn't a chance to get in close, in time to save the life of Lieutenant Kelly. The Spad went down with motor full out—and the joyousness of "A" Flight was changed to gloom with the first gap in its ranks.

Nor was the Fokker finished. For no sooner had it loosed its Spandau lead than the Spad above shot forward to get out of danger, passing over the propeller of the Fokker. The Fokker nosed up. Its first bullets went into the topmost Spad just below the motor, from under whose housing spurted instantly a streamer of black smoke shot through and through with orange flames. The bullets fell back along the belly of the Spad's fuselage, as the American pilot shot forward, directly into the line of fire. He actually flew himself into eternity.

INSTANTLY, then, having knocked down two men in as many seconds, the German slid away to the side, his left wing dropping so that he fell like a cleaver thrown from the hand of a giant. Orth dived on him with his guns going full tilt.

The American's teeth were showing as though he snarled, his lips drawn tautly back. His eyes, narrowed until the pupils were almost invisible, were glued to his ring-sight, through which he watched the Fokker ahead, like a hawk. But when his thumb pressed the trip, the back of the enemy pilot was just out of line. He rolled to the left to bring him into line of sights—and the German slid back, easily, safely, surely, leaving Orth nothing but bits of fuselage, the gossamer thin superstructure of the Fokker for target.

The pilot seemed to have timing down to an utter nicety, and though Orth hurled lead at him for a full

minute, almost without cessation, he didn't come within inches. The German always eluded him.

When Orth paused, planning to dive and try from below, the German slid easily to his right, spun around, dived briefly, then came up in a shrieking, wingbuckling climbing turn—to sit on the tail of another Spad. He fired briefly—and the Spad streaked down in flames.

A COLD hand seemed to have settled on the hearts of Captain Flagg and Silent Orth. Five minutes before they had been five men. Now they were two, and apparently not a bullet, of all the scores and hundreds the Flight's Vickers had hurled, had taken effect on the three Fokkers which sported the acrobats on their cockpit sides.

There was something deadly, inevitable, ghastly, about these three Germans. Efficiently, contemptuously, they had slid in and downed their own number in American planes. Now, apparently satisfied, they eased away from Flagg and Orth, and started for home.

Not a German had waved or signaled. They had offered no routine salutes to the fallen. They had merely struck—and were leaving, indifferent to anything Flagg and Orth might do about it.

Orth swore savagely, gestured to Flagg, and spun about to follow the Germans home.

And though both got in close, though both fired until their drums were exhausted, neither was fortunate enough even to make a German flyer turn and look back. There was something uncanny, eerie, about the calm surety of the three.

Neither Flagg nor Orth could get one of them in his ring-sight. Crazy, impossible—but utterly true. It seemed to be a matter of timing.

Both knew, in the last bitter instant while the Germans were slicing down to a landing, that the three could have turned and downed them with ease had they desired.

That they did not, proved something of momentous importance to Orth—that the Germans wished them to get back home to tell what had befallen them.

Flagg signaled for the return to the drome at Brocourt. Orth banked around. They flew wing and wing, and were almost home before either discovered that they flew with motors full out, sitting forward in their pits, as though to urge their crates to speed and more speed, as though subconsciously they fled from a fearful thing beyond any previous experience in the air.

Flagg slowed down a bit. Orth did, too. It wouldn't do to go home like dogs with their tails between their legs. It was bad enough to go home at all, with three blanks in their ranks.

THEY went down to the tarmac. Major Lord came striding across the field, and Orth noticed that his face was dead pale.

"How many, Flagg?" his voice was a rasping thing. The question was superfluous, because he must have seen that three were done, but nobody noticed that. Men didn't notice things when the whole world had gone taut with catastrophe.

"Three, sir," Flagg's voice matched the major's for hoarseness. There was fear in it, fear of the unknown and amazing.

"You met the *Fliedermaüs*?"

Flagg stared at his superior in surprise. Orth, who understood some German, interpreted the word to himself. "Flittermice," another name for bats. Bats moved in strange ways. They darted here and there, never were still. Their flights were weird, eerie, strange. The name fitted the flight activities of the three Germans who had flown the Fokkers with acrobats on their fuselage.

"Yes, Major," Orth broke in, "they must be the ones we met."

Lord's face went whiter still.

"I was sure of it. Word came in from the lines that three of our flyers had been downed with amazing ease. Some keen-eyed fellow on a telescope described the insignia on the pit of one of the Fokkers, and I felt sure then."

"Just what," asked Flagg, his voice a monotone, "are they?"

LORD cleared his throat, saying: "Originally they were gymnasts, of a whole line of gymnasts, a sort of dynasty of the theater. For several generations the *Fliedermaüs* have been almost miraculous workers in the field of balancing, trapeze work—from which their name derives—and allied pursuits. They can perform feats of balancing that even the most skilled Japanese—true masters of this sort of thing—cannot do. Now they've simply gone into the air with their stuff.

"Germany has turned them loose against Allied airmen. They are masters of their craft. I saw them perform just once before the war, and one thing one of them did I'll never forget. He stood on the stage with a

stick, about the size of a cigar, in his mouth. His hands were handcuffed behind him. One of his partners tossed a baseball to him from the balcony—all of seventy feet away. He caught the ball on the end of the stick, juggled it a moment, then stopped with his head back, and the ball was spinning on the end of the stick. Such mastery of equilibrium—well, you've had a taste of what it brings into the air. Those three men can almost dodge bullets, because they can tell to a split second when they are going to be fired."

"They didn't even look back at us when we followed them back to Rittermeister's drome," said Flagg dully.

"Didn't need to," said Lord. "Mirrors figure in many of the things they do."

Lord and Flagg started across the tarmac to Headquarters, followed thoughtfully by Silent Orth, whose mind was working at top speed. Gunnery would be no good against the Flittermice, nor would superb airmanship. The three Germans were freaks. They could do things with ships no other flyers could do. Besides, they were master psychologists, through years of dealing with crowds in theaters.

They had proved it by merely downing three flyers when they might as easily have got five.

"Brains and trickery against brains and trickery," said Orth silently to himself, "with all the odds in favor of the Flittermice. But we must find a way. They're weird, peculiar—and we've got to do something that's even more weird and peculiar. If I can figure out something—"

HE ALMOST bumped into the side of the administration building, so absorbed was he in his thoughts. Up to the north, south, and east, sounded the blating roars and whines and shrieks of war, where worms in trenches were dying by bayonet, bullet and bomb. But Orth scarcely heard, because the sounds of war were as commonplace to him now—as to millions of others—as breathing.

He made out his combat report, scarcely hearing the concerned voices of Lord and Flagg as they tried to think up some way to get the three weird flyers before the whole squadron should be destroyed. They were going on the hypothesis that the three Flittermice were invincible, a premise Silent Orth couldn't possibly accept.

Orth went back out onto the tarmac. He looked at his wrist watch. The sun would soon be down, but he hadn't yet captured a good idea. Once a lone German dived on the field, his Spandaus hurling lead

at the slowly walking man. Orth stopped in midstride, watched bullets eat their way across the tarmac directly ahead of him—and then walked on, instantly forgetting the enemy. The bullets had come close, but he had other things, more important, to think about.

THE sun crawled into the west, bathing the sky with red—which became, while he walked, a crimson afterglow. He saw wings against the strange lights, like the wings of monster bats—as friendly and enemy ships flew home or against one another. The effect was inexpressibly ghostly. A song of power—in the endless throbbing beat of Hissos, Benzes, Mercedes—seemed part of the twilight, which already rocked and roared with the ceaseless racketing of guns of all sizes. Guns at sunset—

Orth straightened. His eyes were narrowed. They flashed fire. The glimmering of an idea had come to him. He strode swiftly toward the hangar which housed his Spad. The crate had taken plenty of bullets that day, fired from the Spandaus of the Flittermice, but by now the grease-balls had repaired all damages. Orth went past the sentry, entered the hangar, studied his crate with interest. Then he rummaged through the tool boxes in the rear of the place, finally exclaiming with satisfaction.

He grinned to himself.

When he came out, officers and men were moving across the tarmac for supper to their different mess shacks. Orth entered the mess shack of the officers, now locked in funereal gloom, where three freshly vacant chairs stared at the living as though in mute reproach. Major Lord was already seated, with Captain Flagg at his right. Orth stepped up to Flagg, whispered in his ear.

“I’ve an idea,” he said softly, “I don’t wish to tell what it is, for fear it will get out. Please suggest to the major that I be assigned the job of getting those three Fokkers.”

Flagg’s lips twisted.

“You think you can whip those three when they made monkeys of five of us, of whom you were one?”

“I said I had an idea, sir. If it doesn’t work, well, something else will have to be thought of. But I think it will. It’s based on superstition, on man’s fear of what he doesn’t understand. Give me a chance to try it out.”

Flagg nodded, motioning Orth to his place at the table, and whispered for a moment with the major. While waiting for the meal to come on, Lord spoke to the rest of the squadron, explaining just what they faced. He admitted point blank that the three flyers

who had appeared so suddenly among Rittermeister’s flyers were almost unbeatable by average flyers, and added that Silent Orth had an idea that he could do something about it. When he had finished, all eyes were on Orth. “What do you wish to do, Orth?” concluded the major.

“TO FLY alone, at whatever hour of the day or night pleases me, and to report only to you, sir, until I’ve either succeeded or failed in what I have in mind.”

Lord shrugged.

“Go to it,” he said succinctly. “When do you start?”

“Right after chow, sir. I’m going to drop a challenge to the Flittermice, on Rittermeister’s tarmac.”

The mess began to buzz with sarcasm. “That’s very original,” said Lord grimly. “It has never been done before—except by the French, English, Belgian, Italian, American, German, Turkish and Hungarian flyers. It ought to work. It’s so new and unusual.”

Orth flushed a brick red.

“I’m serious, sir. Of course I don’t intend to fight them in the usual way, any more than they fight us in the usual way. Let me try.”

LORD shrugged again. It was plain that he thought the whole thing a little absurd, that Orth was planning some grandstand stunt for his own aggrandizement. The rest of the mess seemed inclined to agree.

They shot gibes at Silent Orth, who ate his supper in silence, ignoring them all. Only Captain Flagg watched Orth with interest. Orth had a way of doing whatever he set out to do, as his long list of descendus amply proved.

When Orth finally pushed back his chair and started for the door. Lieutenant Blackeslee called after him:

“We won’t be satisfied with less than three scalps, Orth!”

It wasn’t a jest, though it sounded like it. The Flittermice were too real, too grim with deadly promise, to be jested about.

Orth paused at the door and looked back.

“I expect to get just that many,” he said.

It was the nearest he had come to boasting for many weeks. The gibes of his wingmates had almost rendered him mute in that regard. There was no real place in the squadron for boasters, a fact which the squadron had swiftly made known. Now they liked Orth because he did things without bragging. Maybe, despite their sarcasm in the present instance,

they believed he would accomplish something. Certainly they must have hoped he would.

Orth had his Spad run out and warmed at the deadline. In a low voice he instructed the sergeant mechanic to have three lanterns lighted, two of them to be held at the far end of the field when the returning drone of his Hisso was heard, the third to be held in the center of the field to show him where to set down his landing gear. The sergeant acquiesced.

Orth stepped into the pit. He had scribbled on a piece of paper, which had been weighted with a bullet. He took off swiftly, rising into the gathering darkness. Over the lines Archies let loose at him with everything they had. His wings rocked with the commotions. Flares blossomed on the ground below. He knew that telephones were jangling, informing Germany behind the lines that a mysterious Spad was en route to the field of Rittermeister. Orth's eyes were slitted as he studied the blackness ahead to pick up the lights—if any—of Rittermeister's field.

IF THERE were no lights, as there probably wouldn't be from the moment Rittermeister got the telephoned warning, Orth would be troubled. He had the flyer's sense of direction, could almost have set his ship down on the enemy tarmac without lights at all.

In fifteen minutes he was over the field, slanting down. The humming of the wing through his wires was a shrill monotone. He grinned as he listened to it—knowing what he planned for tomorrow night.

Over the field, from which came penciled streaks of flames as machine-guns near the hangars let go at him, he dropped his piece of paper. For a while he circled the tarmac, oblivious to the blatting of enemy bracketed guns, waiting to see whether his message had been seen. At the same time he studied the sky above him, guarding against surprise. He wondered what the Germans would think when they read his brief note, which said simply:

“Lieutenant Orth challenges the Flittermice, together or singly, to combat over the Rittermeister drome, at exactly dusk tomorrow evening. Please attend.”

THE wording of the thing pleased him. It showed a devil-may-care attitude, a contempt for the might of the three Fokker flyers which would certainly gall them, bruise their egotism—of which they must have plenty, else they wouldn't have set themselves up to be a court of last appeal for enemy airmen.

The enemy guns continued to chatter. Perhaps a

few bullets touched his wings, but Orth paid no heed. He saw shadows dash across the tarmac toward the spot where his message had fallen, grinned tightly to himself, and banked away for home. He had no doubt but the enemy would accept the challenge.

They could do no less. The difficulty would be to wait until tomorrow night.

Orth flew home, stalked into the Headquarters building, told Lord and Flagg what he had done.

“I wish to be excused from patrols tomorrow, sir,” he said.

Lord opened his mouth to protest, but Flagg raised a hand.

“Let's play along with Orth for a few hours, sir,” he said.

Lord shrugged, a gesture which might be taken for affirmation.

“And I'd like to suggest that any combat with the Flittermice tomorrow by members of this group be carefully avoided.”

Again Lord agreed, though this time he furnished argument against the suggestion.

“It will look as though we were afraid of them,” he explained.

“Well,” said Orth coldly, “aren't we, sir?”

Lord went red in the face, but finally managed a sheepish grin.

“Maybe,” he said, “and you?”

“Yes, I'm afraid of what they can do to morale, and to replacements,” Orth answered. “I know they're good. But maybe we'll trump their aces, who knows?”

Lord started to protest again, but thought better of it. Orth turned in and slept the sleep of the just.

Next day the Flittermice, avoided by the squadron on patrol, sought the squadron out—and that night there were three more vacancies at the table. Orth didn't blame himself for these, but if, tomorrow night, there were three more—since the Flittermice slew in threes—he would blame himself beyond all others.

DURING the day Orth was very secretive. He worked on his Spad without even the sergeant mechanic being present—and just at dusk, with everything in readiness, and the greaseballs ordered to stand back away from the crate, Orth pulled his own prop, vaulted into the Spad, and moved sluggishly down the field. The whole squadron was out to watch him take off.

“Moves as though he were loaded with bombs,” said Lord uncertainly. “You think he's planning a one-man strafe on Rittermeister?”

Flagg shrugged. He didn't know. Orth finally rose heavily, just in time to avoid the trees at the end of the tarmac. Lord spoke again.

"Didn't you notice a peculiar sound at the last minute, just as he zoomed off the field?"

"I thought so, but I wasn't sure," agreed Flagg. "I wish I knew what he had in mind. Some trick, you may be sure of that, for only a trick will do things to the Flittermice."

They had only half guessed at the reason why Orth had been so careful in taking off. Why he desired to mount into the sky with bare flying speed and no more, only Orth himself knew, and he was holding his breath with anticipation, wondering if his hunch would work out.

THE success of the Flittermice depended on equilibrium, on timing everything to the exactitude of utter perfection. His job was to throw them off their timing, disturb their equilibrium. This done, he knew that he had a chance against the best Germany could produce—even the three Fokker flyers. He grinned to himself in anticipation, knowing well enough that if he were wrong he might well end up grinning on the other side of his face—or dead.

As he sailed over the lines, at an altitude of seven thousand feet, his nose was slanted toward the sky at an angle which gave the motor a job of pulling, which slowed the crate down almost to a crawl, so that it still held flying speed and barely managed to climb gradually. He was aiming to reach somewhere near his ceiling just above the drome of Rittermeister.

Now he could see lights down there, the exhaust flames of three ships.

It was plain that all three flyers were coming up to take him on. He didn't mind that, either. He wished them to, else he'd have to come back for the others; and the success of his scheme depended solely on his ability to spring a surprise which would throw the three out of their sky stride.

Over the drome, watching the three Fokkers climb up to his level, he circled lazily. His Spad behaved a bit oddly on its controls, but that was to be expected under the circumstances. He didn't expect it to behave normally, any more than he would have expected a horse to behave normally had it been hitched to a wagon wrong end foremost.

No projectiles slanted up for him as he circled. Save for the odds of three to one, which Orth accepted gladly, the Germans were taking no undue advantage.

"You buzzards are due for a surprise," Silent whispered into the slipstream, "or else I am."

The second alternative was a possibility, but Orth doubted that it was really probable. He had the utmost faith in his own schemes, all of which had proved successful in the past.

HIS altimeter, as his hooded dashlight revealed, said twelve thousand feet. He snapped off the light, the better to watch the circling wings of the enemy as they rose toward him in tight, wing turning spirals.

They were up, now, to something like eight thousand feet, at a guess. He knew that they, masters of time and space as they had for so long proved themselves, did not worry over his advantage of altitude. They could slide away from any dive he might make and then dart in to get him as he pulled out. The usual routine maneuvers by which other airmen fought and destroyed one another wouldn't apply here. The Flittermice would simply elude any dive—then come in and destroy their foolhardy opponent. They were perfectly willing to grant an enemy any apparent advantage, because in the end it meant nothing at all.

Now Orth judged that the enemy were ten thousand feet aloft, two thousand feet below himself. He tripped his Vickers to make sure that they were in working condition. He wasn't fighting the enemy in the usual way, exactly, but he would need bullets to consolidate his position—which in sky fighting meant, to win his fight. Air fights were fought with wings and won with bullets. "Well, here goes for a try!" said Orth to himself grimly, as he shoved his stick all the way forward.

THE Spad dipped her nose, started swinging, diving down the sky. She didn't dive with her usual speed, even when full out, but Orth knew why and it didn't trouble him. He only hoped that his fittings wouldn't pull free and cause his wings to disintegrate. That contingency would mean certain failure.

He turned his head to the left as though he listened to the even throbbing—mounting to a high, roaring whine—of his Hiss. But it wasn't to the Hiss that he really listened, but to something else—a growing sound which, at the bottom of a two thousand foot dive, would be a sound that would shock and arouse everything that lived within hearing distance.

Even his own field might hear, Orth thought, if he had planned and figured everything out properly.

Now the sound began to grow. The enemy were a

thousand feet under him. He was traveling easily at a hundred and fifty miles an hour—then a hundred and seventy-five, then almost two hundred. His eardrums seemed to be throbbing with the new, awesome, banshee wailing which came from somewhere out front. When the sound grew until he was sure he could hear it above the roaring of his motor, above the roaring of any motors which might be aloft, then he would know that his work and his schemes had been good. He laughed to himself, and the slipstream, the motor drone, and the new, ghastly, savage sound swallowed up his laughter as though it had never been. He glued his eyes on the trio of wings below and watched, while giving his crate every bit of gas she would take.

The wings of his Spad were humming. His flying wires were screaming. The night was a black, awesome sounding board which gave back the shrieking and the screeching. Whether he succeeded or not depended on the next few seconds, and he would be able to tell by the behavior of the wings below him.

ONE moment and they were flying wing and wing, those Flittermice, and he knew that they knew he was coming. Next moment and they had broken apart as though shocked into separate integers by a mighty current of electricity. They were rolling apart, and their flying was sloppy.

Again Orth laughed aloud. Again the ungodly sounds drowned out his laughter. He tried to pick out the crate which, yesterday, had knocked down three of "A" Flight's veterans. He guessed that it was the center ship, because yesterday the killer ship had flown point for the three Fokkers.

He edged aside to bring that center ship under his guns. Then, with a heartfelt shout which was almost a prayer, as his knees gripped the stick and his guns began to chatter in response to the touch of his thumbs on the trips, his Vickers let go. He tried to make out his quarry, to see whether the German managed now to ease tantalizingly in and out of his ring-sight. But the German seemed uncertain, flew like a novice—and Orth, with a yell of satisfaction, knew that his bullets were going straight into the back of the enemy pilot.

THE Fokker, as he yawed right and left to take in the whole crate in his blasting of lead, burst into roaring flames. He saw a figure leave the cockpit and start the long, somersaulting drop toward the Rittermeister

tarmac—the only way the German could keep from roasting.

Orth watched the burning Fokker all but disintegrate before the blasting flames—and then studied the other two ships with great interest. So much depended on what they next did. They should, must, do the proper thing—what in any other circumstances would have been the proper thing, yet which here, because of Orth's Spad, would be the thing inevitably to spell death.

They nosed over, while Orth jumped up and down in his pit with ghoulish glee, and started a smashing dive for the earth. They had tasted of the horror of Silent Orth, had seen their master gymnast shot down in flames, and knew that for them—or at least believed that for them—there was nothing to do but save themselves.

Orth's joy knew no bounds. The two remaining Fokkers were diving even before he was within two hundred feet of them—and Fokkers could dive like falling stones. They began to draw away from him, to widen the distance between him and them. And this was what Orth hoped for, as otherwise he would have been compelled to pull up, or pull out, in order to keep from shooting past them, which would have cost him the ultimate victory he so much desired.

The Germans dropped nose first, and the faster they dropped the faster became the dive of Silent Orth—whose crate was far from silent. The screaming of his ship, louder and more eerie than the wails of all the banshees in Ireland, hammered in his ears until it would have driven even him crazy if he hadn't known whence the sound emanated. But he did, though he had to pinch himself to keep the chills from coursing up and down his spine as he listened. What an eerie sound to shriek out of the night!

In the place of the Flittermice, he himself would probably have done as they were doing—dived for safety at all costs. The unknown was the thing greatest feared of man.

Orth's guns started chattering again, as the two remaining Fokkers started to pull apart, their pilots realizing that while they hung together both were perfect targets for the fury from the black night skies above them. Orth knew he dared not let them separate too widely. If even one of them remained alive after Orth had shot his surprise bolt, that one might easily destroy him, given time to re-orient himself.

Orth couldn't allow that.

AGAIN his Vickers spoke, raking the nearer of the two remaining ships. That his bullets were blasting the Fokker from prop to tailskid he knew the very instant it began to wobble—and he gave her another burst, a long stuttering one. The ship burst into flames as the first had done. No bundle somersaulted out, and Orth knew that he had slain the German in his pit.

Now but one was left—and Orth was diving behind him with undiminished speed—the blasting, shrieking sound of his crate still claiming all the universe. No other crates were coming up to try conclusions with him. The German and Orth had the sky to themselves—at least until the Germans below got over their terror-stricken paralysis. Orth made sure of his third and last enemy with the efficiency of war's trained killers. He swung into line, pointing his crate—and again his Vickers bucked and kicked and jumped on their mounts, while the shrieking of his crate drowned out his motor and guns. To the victim, his bullets must have been ghost bullets fired from phantom guns.

THE third crate burst into flames within five thousand feet of the ground. Other crates were coming off, reaching up for this man who had destroyed, rendered useless, the latest, most promising trick of Rittermeister.

Orth made sure only that no tricks were being played. Then, slowly, surely, to save his wings, he pulled out of a dive already too greatly prolonged—and slanted for home. When he leveled off, throttled down to mere flying speed, no sound could be heard but the throbbing hum of his motor. He looked back to see pursuit too far behind for him to worry about it.

He slid over the lines easily, casually almost. He dropped down to a landing, leveling off, dropping, but never reaching any great excess of speed, for reasons of his own—reasons which kept him smiling in the darknes. His wheels struck, his crate rolled to a stop. Bobbing lanterns came, carried by his wingmates. Lord and Flagg led the field.

“What in God's name happened over there?” yelled the major.

“Nothing,” said Orth grumpily, “but I got the three scalps you wanted.”

“As simple as that, eh? What was that ghastly noise that must have awakened the whole country from Paris to Berlin?”

“Oh,” said Orth, “just something I rigged up to shock the mighty Flittermice out of their poise. I knew that had to be done, or they'd end by getting us all. If it hadn't worked—but it did, thanks be!”

“What worked?” demanded Flagg.

“My music at sunset,” said Orth. “I was afraid some whisper of it might get out, so I didn't let anybody know. Taking off was the worst, because I had to get up flying speed, and if even a whisper-however innocent—had got to the lines, and so into Germany, the enemy would have been expecting something and wouldn't have been surprised. It was necessary for them to be surprised—which they were. That's why I was so slow and careful taking off—in case any of you were interested.”

“Silent Orth goes wordy again,” said Lieutenant Feury. “Maybe, instead of talking, you'd let us in on the secret of taking three scalps at once?”

“Here,” said Orth, “give me a lantern.”

SOMEONE gave him one. He walked to the front of the Spad he had just flown, held the lantern high. His wingmates saw all in and among the struts of the crate, something that looked like a vast spider-web, spun out to gossamer thinness, glistening in the light like silver.

“It isn't anything but piano wire,” said Orth, “but when you're diving at two hundred miles an hour, you ought to hear what a fuss it makes!”

“Suppose,” said Lord, when congratulations—mixed with much friendly sarcasm—were ended, “it hadn't worked after all, and you hadn't startled the gymnasts out of time?”

Orth shrugged.

“Then my friends,” he said, “I had figured out that I'd simply be the main piano player at my own funeral!”