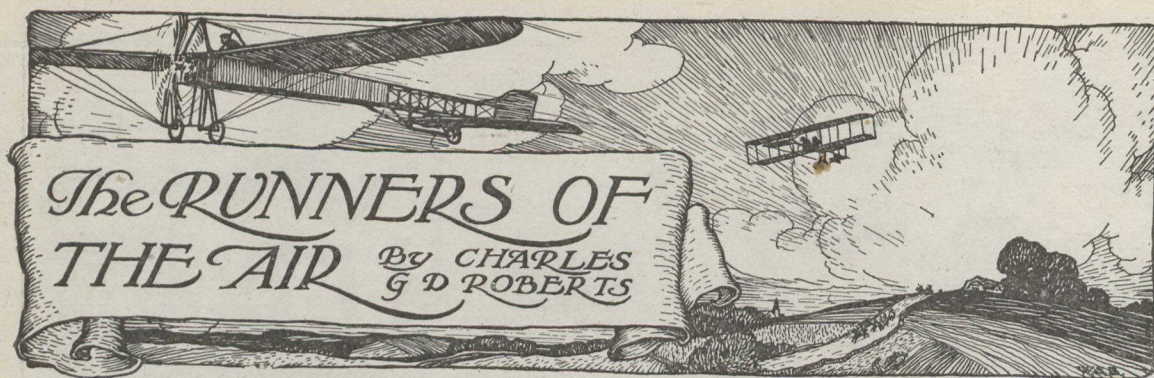




BY-AND-BY, the face of the chequered land below them gradually changed. As landing-places became more scattered and uncertain, the aeroplanes soared to a higher level that they might command a wider choice.

"This is not just the country I'd pick out to fly over," said Count Sergius, "if we were having more wind than we knew what to do with."

Carver, with the glasses, was anxiously scanning the land to either side of their flight.

"Well, there's our wind coming, a bit of a breeze, anyhow, blowing up from sou'-east," he exclaimed. "I see the colour exchanging on the tree-tops as it comes. Do you catch it? A couple of points off to your right there!"

"Yes," answered the Count presently and headed the great dragon-fly to meet it fair in the teeth. "It doesn't look like any sort of a stiff blow, but it's going to make us lose time. There, Andrews has noticed it. He's heading up to it."

"I don't altogether like the looks of that cloud-bank piling up over there," said Carver. "The breeze is coming straight out of it. I should say there's more behind it."

Just then the blue-black pile on the horizon was streaked by a double fork of white flame.

"It's a thunder-squall!" said Sergius, though no sound of thunder came to their ears. The distant rumble was not heavy enough to surmount the throbbing chant of the 'planes. "It will blow itself out, probably, before it gets to us. But all the same, to be on the safe side, we'll work up quickly as we can toward those open fields yonder. Pasture, aren't they?"

"Yes. We'd better get near them," answered Carver. "Ah, Andrews has got it! Now, mind your eyes, Plamenac!"

The biplane was a couple of hundred yards to the southeast of the Antoinette and so caught the breeze first. They saw it lurch abruptly, lift like a blown leaf some fifty feet upon the gust and then, apparently, bear down upon them at appalling speed. In reality, it had merely lost its headway all at once, thus letting the dragon-fly rush up. In the next instant, however, the wind reached the monoplane and checked her way also.

For a second she staggered, then bounded aloft, steadying herself with a convulsive undulation of her wings as Sergius warped the tips sharply against her roll. A moment later, both aeroplanes, the biplane some seconds before the Antoinette, dropped straight downward on even keel some thirty or forty feet, as if a supporting hand had been all at once withdrawn from under them. The next instant they darted forward again at top speed. They were in the lull behind the first gust.

"That was pleasantly exciting!" said Count Sergius.

"Yes, brisk!" agreed Carver. "But if I'm any judge of weather that was only intended for an appetizer. My advice is to get down as soon as we can make a landing and lie low under the lee of the woods till the squall's over."

"Your advice is undoubtedly sound, old boy," responded the Count, "and I only wish I could act upon it at once. However, we're getting ahead pretty well now. That pasture field is drawing nearer rapidly."

A moment more and the wind returned—but this time gently. Gently it began, but it kept steadily increasing in force, till the 'planes, their singing screws boring straight into it, were not advancing more than five or six miles an hour.

Cautiously the battling machines nosed their way downward to the two-hundred-foot level, to be ready to swoop to cover as soon as they should gain that patch of pasture, whose light green gleamed so invitingly a mile or so ahead of them.

"We can handle this wind easily enough," said Sergius, "but I want to get out of it. We're wasting our precious petrol. We're just guzzling it."

Carver was watching the other machine critically. "That Farman's behaving well," he commented. "She's rolling a bit, but doesn't pitch, and she keeps

her speed like a wonder. Why, she's holding us level! Have you full power on, Plamenac?"

"I should say I had!" responded the Count emphatically.

"Well, then, I should say that as long as we're butting into a head wind, we're not going to have to hold back any for Brother Andrews. But I'll be anxious for him if the wind gets corkscrew."

By this time they were come within three or four hundred yards of the field. Suddenly the forest beyond the field and then the field itself were drowned in shadow. Then the blackness swept over the sun. The change was instantaneous and daunting. A few big drops plumped down sharply on the 'planes.

"We're in for it now!" said the American philosophically.

"We're in God's hands still, just the same, old man!" responded Sergius.

"Don't you think you'd better slant her up a trifle?" suggested the other. "We're pretty close to those tree-tops and the first burst of the rain may beat us down."

"Right, as usual!" agreed Sergius and lifted the quivering 'plane.

He seemed to be lifting her right into chaos, for at this moment the purple darkness overhead was torn across by a withering forked flame of blue-white. Upon the instant following blackness burst the thunder, crashing upon them till it seemed as if the aeroplanes must be beaten down by sheer intolerable sound.

For one blinded second Sergius felt that he was falling, but instinct held the wheel true and a dash of rain full in his face cleared his senses. The rain passed at once, but behind it came a leaping, tortured wind that made the quivering monoplane wallow.

He heard the voice of the American at his ear saying coolly, "A pretty piece of handling, that, by Jing!" and realized that, in some mysterious way, he had steered the machine successfully through the first crash of the conflict.

The thunder leaped and battered and roared above them and the lightning darted over them like a shuttle, but he felt that he held the mastery of the wind in his grip.

"I'm glad the rain doesn't amount to anything. It might have blinded me," he remarked aloud. But he could not hear his own voice at the moment, so naturally he expected no reply from Carver.

Then began a battle with the storm which is impossible of description. The monoplane stood up well, but the biplane swerved and tipped like a ship in distress. It was evident that a landing was necessary, but there were dangers in that also. Sergius and Carver watched their companions with considerable anxiety, if in silence. It was evident that Andrews was trying to land. After considerable manoeuvring, he came down. As he swept along parallel to the ground a sudden squall of wind tipped the machine, one delicate wing touched the ground, and in a flash the Farman doubled up in a heap.

SERGIUS, in the monoplane, watched the struggle and noted the disaster. There was nothing to do but to try the same feat and hope for better luck. Slowly but surely he fought the storm as he glided slowly down. Two men tumbled out of the wrecked biplane and prayed for Sergius' success. The monoplane finally settled down on the wet earth as gently as a bird, glided along and stopped gradually. Success was still with them.

It was a wonderful feat and Andrews and Gregory hastened over to extend their congratulations. Sergius was not to be outdone, and he knew that his friends had done their best.

"Andrews," said the Count, "you put up a great fight. A dozen times I thought you two were gone. I guess my hair turned gray while I was watching you." And he felt his head whimsically.

Gregory turned adoring eyes upon his companion. "He's done more than man can do!" he cried in a sort of exaltation.

The Englishman gave an embarrassed laugh.

"It's a sorry kind of triumph that leaves us wallowing in our gore," said he, gazing sorrowfully at the wreck of his biplane. "Poor old machine, she's a bit clumsy for a tussle like that—gives too much hold to the wind. Now what I call a victory is this of yours, Sergius! Clean and tidy. You've come through that howling hell without a hair turned. And here your Antoinette sits purring as if it had been a picnic."

This speech—a long one for Andrews—relieved the tension.

"It would have been awful defeat," replied Count Sergius, "if we'd had to fight five minutes longer. Our petrol's about done."

"You'll have to take ours," said Andrews. "Gregory and I have been wanting to stretch our legs a bit—eh, Captain?—so we'll walk. And here's your other bag of baubles."

Count Sergius took the momentous leather bag and strapped it securely to his waist as Andrews had had it. "All depends on us two, now," said he, turning to the American.

"Exactly," responded the latter, carefully lighting a cigar. "Now, while you fellows are transferring the petrol—you can't smoke during that process, so I don't offer you my weeds—I'll be giving the motor a look over to see if any of that rain flurry got in where it ought not to."

"How much petrol have you left, Bob?" asked the Count.

"Oh, enough to carry you an hour and a half, anyhow. How much farther have you to go?"

Count Sergius turned questioningly to the mountaineer.

"Another forty kilometers will put you over the Save, just beyond the Drina," answered Gregory. "And that's the place to aim for, if the Austrians should be after you, for they wouldn't dare follow you across just there. We've always got a strong patrol on guard at that point."

Sergius and Carver climbed to their seats, then leaned down to grasp the hands of the two who were being left behind in the enemy's country.

"We'll wait for you at Shabatz," said Count Sergius.

"If all goes well, we ought to make Shabatz tomorrow night or next forenoon," said Gregory. Then motor and propeller broke into their great song and the monoplane, darting forward over the firm turf of the pasture, soared into the air.

CARVER looked back and waved his hand. A moment later he saw Andrews and Gregory hasten to the wreck and fumble in the box behind the seats. Then he turned his attention to the course which Count Sergius was steering.

"I wish you'd pull the peak down farther over my eyes for me," said Sergius. "This light makes it hard to steer."

Carver complied. Then he looked back. Andrews and Gregory were just vanishing into the woods on the extreme right of the field. The wrecked aeroplane, snowy-white in the intense sunshine, looked poignantly solitary in the wide green emptiness of the pasture, the strangest derelict that time had yet recorded.

The white dragon-fly was still climbing into the blue.

"Why so high, now?" questioned the American. "Hadn't we better fly low and not make ourselves so conspicuous?"

"I'm afraid there's no chance of not being seen or heard, in this part of the country," answered Sergius. "The only thing to do is to let them look and be —, and shoot if they want to. We'll fly so high there'll be little danger of them hitting us."

They were clear of the forest now and passing above the outskirts of a straggling village which lined both banks of an extraordinarily crooked little stream.

"In proof that you're dead right, Plamenac," said Carver, scrutinizing the village with his glasses, "there's a squad of our friends squinting up at us now. It looks as if they were going to do more than squint. Let's see—how high are we? Eleven hundred? I could bear to be a bit higher myself. Those beggars might make a hit, you know. And think how inconvenient!"

"From where they are, it's a good three thousand feet," answered Sergius, "and getting more every second."

"There they go, anyhow," remarked the American coolly. The flat crash of the volley rose faintly to their ears, just heard across the drone of the propeller.

"Wasting their ammunition!" he continued after a pause.

"Well," said Sergius, "I'd like it better if they shot worse. Look here ahead, just abaft the screw."

"Gee!" ejaculated the American. A three-inch

(Continued on page 21.)