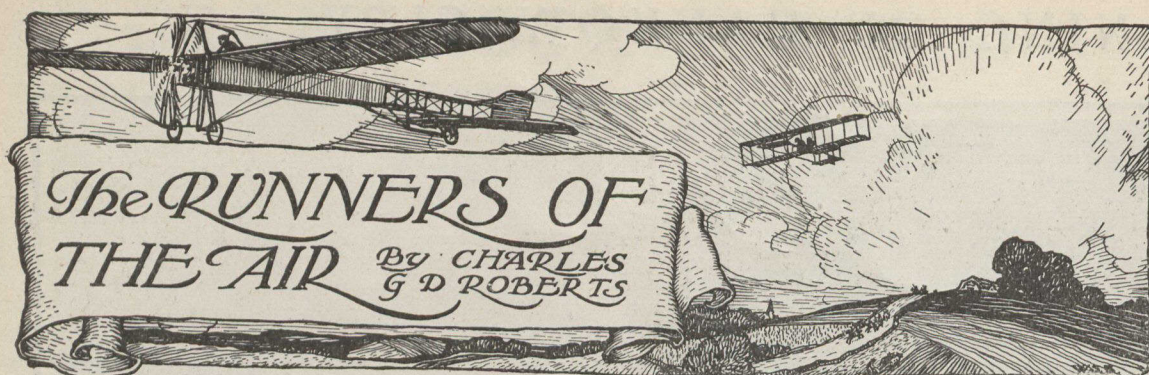




FOR the next hour the landscape never changed, except for the gradual shortening of the shadows as the sun rolled up the blue.

At last the mountains fell away suddenly, as if the plain had engulfed them, and in the distance a spire and a minaret rose to view over the roofs of Zhupche.

It was a rolling country here, a country of low, bare ridges, irregular valleys and patches of dense oak-forest. Carver swept every inch of the land to locate the two white sheets. Suddenly, dead ahead arose the two smokes, from behind a screen of billowy oak grove.

"Your admirable outlaw never fails us, Plamenac!" exclaimed the American, leveling his glasses at the signal.

But the words were hardly out of his mouth when he detected a third smoke. The next instant it curled up dense and emphatic, as if damp straw had been thrown upon the fire.

"Aha! That means 'Go on!'" cried Sergius, slanting the Antoinette sharply upward and at the same time swerving off to the right.

"Keep near enough to see what's the matter!" urged the American.

"We can't afford curiosity!" answered the Count, mounting as steeply as he dared. The great biplane came soaring up after him.

Then from behind the trees rang out three rifle-shots.

They were now about six hundred feet in the air and the smokes were some two hundred yards to their left. They swept beyond the screening groves and saw men running to cover behind the oak trunks.

"There's one of our men down!" said the American in an icy voice. "There he is by the last fire. Swing a bit nearer, Plamenac. I can't stand that! There they are, — them! The uniforms! Among the trees the other side of the field!"

He snatched up the rifle that lay beside him. Involuntarily Count Sergius swung inwards toward the fight, though wisdom urged him to fly. As Carver leveled his weapon, two pale tongues of flames leaped out from behind the trees where the Austrians were hiding. An arm and shoulder came into view beside a great oak trunk. The American's rifle spoke—and again. The arm and shoulder had disappeared. A sharp report came from the other aeroplane.

"Old Ivan's at it again! Well, I winged my man," said Carver coolly, laying down the rifle.

"Yes?" answered Sergius, swinging off again at a sharp angle and climbing steeply. "Well, we can't afford any more of this. Signal Andrews. He's run in too close. He's as bad as you and Ivan. We can't risk our venture in a petty skirmish!"

"That's all right," said Carver. "But I had to even up a bit for that poor fellow down there by the fire. And it wouldn't have looked well to leave our fellows there without a word for luck. There comes Andrews. I'll bet he and Ivan don't like quitting, not one little bit."

Sergius grinned as he bent over the wheel, urging his dragon-fly upward from the danger-level.

"For a respectable citizen of Buffalo, U. S. A., old man, you'd make a very fair Servian bandit," he remarked. "But don't think I enjoy running away any better than you do."

"Darn good thing you made us stop back yonder for petrol," said Carver. "If we hadn't, we'd have been in the soup now for fair!"

"Yes. It was a guidance!" responded the Count gravely.

The machines were now a thousand feet in the air and flying level. Sergius pondered with sharp anxiety over the attack on the post. What did it mean, How much did the Austrians know or even suspect? And how could their suspicions, however grave, have got hold of any accuracy of direction? What did Madame de L'Orme know? And how did she come to know it?

Why did she show such concern as to a peril threatening himself? Was it because the peril threatened Andrews? This latter notion, to his

amazement, gave him a stabbing pang at the heart. He was so surprised that he laughed shortly, there, over the wheel, with the wind of their flight in his teeth. But he felt, somehow, that it was on account of himself, rather than of Andrews, that she was so concerned.

Yet how had she got herself mixed up in it and how had that unspeakable husband of hers found out anything—if he had?

Absorbed in these enigmas, the leagues fled by below without his noting them. The Bosna was reached and thereafter he followed its general course, but cutting chords and tangents to its innumerable curves. At last the river swerved off decisively toward the northwest, while the path of the great adventure lay straight north-west. To the left, at a safe distance, lay the little town of Durventa, on a small river of which he had forgotten the name. Not more than twenty miles away was the Save.

He would breathe freer when he had crossed that tide, for he would be in Slavonia, a tranquil province, where there would be fewer Austrian patrols to trouble his wits about.

His nerves were so strung up by the long, unremitting tension of the flight, he was so engrossed in his thoughts and at the same time so semihypnotized by the prolonged hum of motor and propeller, that he started at the sudden sound of Carver's voice at his ear.

"Ain't the petrol running pretty low?" it inquired. With a sinking of apprehension he looked at the gage.

"We can keep up for twenty minutes more at the outside," he answered. "Less, if anything. The glasses, old man. Where are we?"

"I make out water ahead—bigish water; a lake, maybe," answered the American. "No, it's a river."

"Thank God! It's the Save, and nearer, much nearer than I thought!"

"Ah, yes. And now I make out a little river running into it, just beyond a patch of woods," continued Carver.

"That's the place!" shouted Sergius. "That's the next depot. How far, would you say?"

"Twelve, perhaps. No more. Fourteen, maybe," hesitated Carver. "Hard to judge from this height. I don't believe it's more than fifteen!"

"We'll make it," declared Sergius, putting on top speed and slipping ahead of the other machine.

"By the skin of our teeth!" said the American crisply.

CHAPTER XI.

PATROL AND PETROL.

RAPIDLY they left the biplane behind as they raced against petrol for the river junction. Rapidly the smooth reaches of the Save rose into clear view, shining in the sun. The miles fled, crowding upon the heels of the desperate minutes. At length a long narrow field appeared on the hither side of the woods and about half a mile south of the Save shore.

"Reckon I see the place!" shouted Carver triumphantly. "If that's it, we'll make it safe. Aye! Aye! There's the two sheets. Now for the two smokes! I see somebody moving, but I can't make him out very clearly against the trees. Ah, here come the smokes. They've caught sight of us." And he laid down the glass in his lap to wipe his wind-fretted eyes.

"Yes," said Count Sergius a moment later, "there are the smokes. But, Carver—there are three of them!"

"By —" and Carver forgot to finish his oath in his haste to get the glass back to his eyes.

"The chap I saw lighting the fires is gone," he went on. "Ah, ha! There's why! There come the Austrians; six of them from the other side of the field! What's to be done, Plamenac?"

"There's only one thing to be done," replied the Count coolly, dipping his planes for the long slide down the air. "Our petrol's there. We've got to go and get it!"

The American laughed approvingly. "I love your nerve, my son! How do you propose that we shall work it? Fight or bluff?"

"Whichever may seem most appropriate to the occasion!" replied Sergius, lifting the dragon-fly with a long swoop as he saw that she had been dropping too fast. "How far back are the others?"

"Two miles, maybe."

"They'll be along in good time," said Sergius. "Have your guns ready. But don't shoot, unless it comes to the last pinch. I'll give sweet reasonableness a trial."

"You're Captain!" said the American. "But I couldn't stand any nonsense from them, you know."

"Nör I. Don't worry!" answered Sergius.

As the monoplane came within easy range, dropping fast and making straight for the place where they were standing, the little group of Austrians seemed astonished. They had taken up a position close to the three fires, which were near the center of the field.

At a height of about three hundred feet Count Sergius stopped his motor and planed down at terrific speed, calculating on the impression he would make. At some thirty feet from the ground he lifted her plunging nose, swooped along just above the sod and came gently to rest in front of the awestruck enemy.

The leader of the band, however, regained his self-possession on the instant. He was a ruddy-faced German, tall and massive, with irascible blue eyes and a bristling blonde moustache. He came forward with an authoritative air and addressed his aerial visitors brusquely.

"Your business?"

COUNT SERGIUS, resting in his seat between the wings of the dragon-fly, met the eyes of his interrogator with a look of cold rebuke. After a slight pause, to convey his displeasure, he replied with courtesy:

"Our business is our pleasure," said he. "We are on our way north, on a flight from Montenegro, by far the most ambitious flight yet attempted by aeroplanes, and we have stopped here for a fresh supply of petrol, which was ordered to be left here for us that our journey might not be delayed."

The German laughed rudely.

"You'll find there's no hurry," said he.

"No? May I ask why?"

"Because you are under arrest! There are things the Government wants to know about you, so you'll come with me to Durventa and explain yourself. Come now, climb down out of that machine of yours, and come along. I have no time to waste!"

The conversation had been carried on in German and Carver knew just enough German to catch the drift of it.

"Curse his swinish impudence!" said he. Count Sergius looked back at the sky, to see how near the biplane was. It was not yet so near as he could have wished, but it was already slanting downward.

"Pardon me, Captain, I don't think you quite understand the situation," said he, civil but firm, and with a trace of condescension in his voice. He knew that the fellow before him was not a captain at all, nor a subaltern of any grade, but only a sergeant. Nevertheless, it was more significant to condescend to a Captain than to a sergeant and at the same time the angry-eyed sergeant was flattered in spite of himself.

In order to give both the flattery and the condescension time to sink in, Count Sergius allowed him no opportunity to repeat his rudeness, but continued coldly:

"We are well-known gentlemen, pursuing our diversion without harm or inconvenience to any one whatever. We will show you our passports, of course, if you wish to see them. I am Count Sergius de Plamenac. My friend, here, is Mr. Wesley Carver, a prominent citizen of the United States. And another friend, who is coming as quickly as possible in that aeroplane yonder, is Captain Andrews of the British Army. I think you will see that this is one of those cases in which it would be well not to exceed your duty—Captain!"

Thinking himself mistaken for an officer, the Austrian became better mannered, though not in the least degree diverted from his purpose. He drew himself up and grew ceremonious. Ceremony takes time, and time was what Count Sergius was playing for.

"As I have already had the honour to inform you, Count," said he pompously, "you are under arrest. I don't require your passports. They're nothing to me. You are all of you my prisoners and will come with me to Durventa. You can display your passports there, Count, no doubt, if you like. That's not my affair."

"But, Captain," said the Count softly, "we can not

(Continued on page 24.)