



SHE floated. She was badly down by the nose, to be sure, but she floated. The Austrians were arriving all along the river-bank—the tubby gentleman in civilian dress conspicuous among the uniforms. On the opposite shore the Servian guard came down close to the water's edge, and looked on with amazement. It grieved them that they had no excuse to take a hand in the game.

Down the river, the little motor was coming on at a great pace. Up the river—but much farther away—the big motor was also hurrying to the scene of excitement.

"Game's up! Shall we drop the parcels overboard?" suggested Carver.

"Oh," groaned Sergius, "if the dogs hadn't smashed my leg, I could have swum ashore with both parcels."

"I couldn't swim more than half that distance," said Carver, slipping off his shoes as he spoke. "But I'll try it. Give me the other bag. If you make signs hard enough to your friends over on the shore, maybe they'll understand and come to the rescue. Worth trying, eh?" And he threw off his coat.

At this moment the Austrians began firing again. Several bullets struck the plane, but most of the shots, to the amazement of Sergius and Carver, seemed to be directed at the little motor-boat, now almost upon them.

"Gee!" shouted the American, half rising and just saving himself from toppling overboard. "They're friends!"

He sat down again, the bullets kicking up the water all around the plane. Coolly he lifted his rifle. As he fired, the civilian, who had been directing the attack upon the motor-boat, dropped. He fired again, aiming with quick deliberation and a mounted officer rolled from the saddle. Then a shout from Count Sergius distracted him just as he pulled the trigger, and his third shot went wide.

Before he could shoot again, the motor-boat had rounded to between him and his target and was poking her beak up over the drowned wings of the aeroplane. To Carver's amazement, she had hoisted the Servian flag. And then, to his double amazement, he caught sight of Madame de L'Orme, crouched as flat as possible in the bottom of the boat.

"Come quick!" Come quick!" she cried in a desperate voice.

"Gee!" said Carver as he caught the bow of the boat with one hand while he reached to help Sergius with the other. The American followed nimbly, seating himself beside Madame de L'Orme. The boat darted for the Servian shore through a singing swarm of bullets. But having the Servian flag at her stern, she gave the Servian guard the excuse they were craving. Their flag had been assaulted! They opened fire enthusiastically, and the little boat, running under their fire, darted for the mouth of the Drina.

Forgetting her peril, Madame sprang up from her place of safety, ran forward and knelt beside Count Sergius, who lay with his eyes closed. She wrung her hands passionately.

"Oh, where is he hurt? What is it? What is it?" she wailed.

"It's his leg. Can't do a thing till we get him ashore," said Carver, and resumed his deadly practice on the Austrians.

The next moment Sergius opened his eyes. At the sight of Madame's face bending over him, he smiled, grasped her hand and sat up. A glance at the Servian shore, now very close, showed him that the day was won. The pain fled from his face, leaving it alight with solemn joy.

"We have achieved the great quest!" Then, turning his eyes once more to Madame's face, as she knelt bending over him, he went on, "And it is your hand that snatches victory for us at the last! I am glad! You don't know the great thing you have done! I am glad it is your hand."

Madame had been dry-eyed, but now the tears rushed suddenly down her face.

"I've done the only great thing I care about, if

I've helped you, if I've served you!" she sobbed.

The American looked at her, at the distortion of her beautiful face, and puckered his lips in a sudden, vast comprehension.

"And I'd thought all the time it was Andrews!" he muttered.

Then the boat, which had run out of range a few hundred yards up the Drina, poked her nose softly into the bank. Carver, seeing that Sergius had fallen back unconscious, stooped to lift.

"Don't be frightened," he said gently to Madame as she bent to aid him. "It's loss of blood. He'll be all right."

Swarthy men in the Servian uniform came hurrying down the bank to help. The steersman of the motor-boat, the blood dripping from his left sleeve, came forward, grinning with triumph. Madame de L'Orme turned to the other side of the engine, leaned over a huddled heap and gently shook it.

"Poor Andreas!" she muttered. Then she called two of the guards into the boat and pointed to the dead man.

"He has died for his country," she said simply and turned to hurry after the little procession which was bearing Count Sergius up the bank.

CHAPTER XV.

THE FRUITS OF VICTORY.

COUNT SERGIUS did not go to Shabatz. They carried him to the nearest farm-house, not far from the water-side. From Shabatz they summoned the army surgeon of the district to set and dress his leg; while Carver and Madame remained to nurse him.

The American was filled with admiration for the courage and efficiency Madame had shown in her conduct of the rescue. But her reception of his eulogies left him hopelessly bewildered. She repudiated them desperately, crying, "Oh you'd never even speak to me, if you knew!" Then she fled from the room in a passion of tears. Carver stepped outside, took his place by the open window where he could keep his eye upon the patient, and lighted one of his inexhaustible cigars.

"Seem to be just as queer in Serbia as they are in the U. S. A.!" he murmured reminiscently. A few minutes later he mused aloud: "I wonder if she knows it was me potted that tubby boulder who was trying to kill her. If so, she don't seem to bear me any grudge. I wonder if she knows!"

Presently Madame reappeared, her emotion brought to hand. Her white face smiled upon him frankly in the twilight, as she passed him to re-enter Plamenac's room. The American stopped her.

"I've a notion that Monsieur de L'Orme had something to do with messing up our expedition this way," he said in his direct fashion, scrutinizing her face with his strange bright eyes.

Madame's mouth hardened for an instant. She looked as if she were on the verge of explaining something. Then she said abruptly,

"Don't let us talk of him. He is dead."

She spoke very clearly and deliberately. Then she passed in to Plamenac's bedside.

"Wonder how she found it out so quick," mused Carver.

About four o'clock next morning Madame got up from her chair and blew out the night-light which stood on the floor beyond the foot of the Count's bed. The surgeon had been there some hours before and dressed the wound, and Sergius was sleeping. Carver, exhausted, was sleeping profoundly on a blanket in the farther corner of the room. Plamenac's voice called to her faintly and she glided back to the bedside.

"What is it? Do you want anything?" she whispered.

"I want you to sit down by me. I want to thank you!"

She obeyed, putting her hand into his craving, outstretched palm as she did so.

"You risked so much—your life—everything—to

save us!" he muttered searching her face with eyes that would not be denied.

She bore that look for a moment, then turned away her face, gently withdrew her hand, and pressed at her throat as if it hurt her to swallow.

"It was all my fault—that you were spied upon," she said at last in a very low voice, keeping her face averted.

She was silent for several minutes, while Sergius gazed at her intensely and the coloured light flooded wonderfully across the bed.

"I can not let you go on thanking me and honouring me," she continued, her voice growing small and unresonant. "I was in the Austrian Secret Service—a spy! At the very beginning, after Gregory's visit to your rooms that day, I became suspicious and gave warning at Vienna. I was sent to Paris to watch you. Oh, I was well, well paid! I worked quite independently of my—husband, and was paid much more than he."

"We detested each other, but had to work together—had to seem to live together. In Paris I—I came to know you better, to know you and Captain Andrews better, and I began to understand how base a thing it was that I was doing. I understood. And I suffered—oh, I suffered! You will believe that, surely! But when I tried to draw back, it was too late—they knew too much."

"When I refused to spy for them any longer, my—Monsieur de L'Orme went on with it. Then—I then I tried to get back into favour with them, so I might find out what they were going to do and warn you. But for that I was too late. They wouldn't trust me again. I could learn almost nothing. But, oh—I did warn you, as well as I could. And just at the last I found out in time. For that, perhaps—you will come to despise me less, some day."

She burned her face in her hands and her shoulders shook with dry, strangling sobs.

After a moment, Count Sergius spoke.

"You were not one of us—you were not a Servian, you know!" he said. "So, you must remember, you were not a traitor!"

She made no answer to this. She kept her face covered; but her sobs gradually ceased, because she had caught no note of scorn in Plamenac's feeble voice. Presently he spoke again:

"I think you have very, much more than made amends to Serbia. Oh, yes—many times over. What you did was *everything*! And was that—was that the only reason you did it—to make amends?"

Neither to this did she make reply.

"Please give me your hand again," he begged, his voice growing feebler. She gave it to him, still keeping her face averted. He tried to pull her toward him—but feebly. She realized how feebly and turned and looked into his eyes. What she saw there told her plainly that it was all the strength he had—that he was trying with all his heart to draw her to him, though his hands were so weak. At his weakness her eyes ran over. "Oh, my dear!" she sobbed, and bending swiftly she gathered his head into her arms.

NEARLY four months later, at a table in the extreme outer corner of the Cafe Danilo, sat Madame de L'Orme, Andrews, Carver and Count Sergius.

In those four months Sergius had slowly recovered. He had been well nursed, the surgeon said, without contradiction from the patient. But the wound had been a nasty one. The Count's crutch was not yet thrown away.

After the affair at the river there had been a bad quarter of an hour between Austria and Serbia, and Austria had tried to bully her little neighbour into an apology for having struck back when her flag was fired upon. Her case, however, when examined, had seemed so palpably bad that she had graciously dropped it at a hint from her sagacious ally on the Baltic.

There had been a nine days' marveling all over the Balkan lands as to the great adventure and the object of it. Songs of "The Runners of the Air" were sung in the mountains. But beyond a whispered, expectant rumour about the recovery of the "Holy Stone" and certain miracles it was going to work for Serbia, nothing of the truth had leaked out. They had close tongues, those admirable bandits of Gregory's.

Carver, forgetting his dream of an Antoinette factory at Toronto in a more exciting version of battles and empire-building in the Balkans, had stayed by Sergius all summer, helping Madame with the nursing.

He loved Sergius with a devoted comradeship which the Count fervently returned and the summer had not seemed long, for he had a new monoplane sent down to him from Mourmelon-le-Grand.

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