

THE RUNNERS OF THE AIR

(Continued from page 8.)

can explain to you is by saying that the officer there is Major X—! I see you understand. Also—and here his voice became almost inaudible, while he bent over his glass to remove an imaginary speck—"also, I would have spat upon that decoration long ago, if I had not loved Serbia too well to put obstacles in the way of my being useful to her!"

"Well, cheer up, old chap!" rejoined Andrews enigmatically. "There are a good many holes in the colander, yuo know."

Which seemingly irrelevant suggestion appeared, indeed, to cheer Count Sergius greatly. The gloom vanished from his face.

For some minutes the two men sat in silence, smoking diligently. At length, along a street below them, in full view, passed an open carriage, in which sat a spare, gray-faced, tired-looking man. In spite of his brilliant escort, he had an air of being surrounded by a solitude. People lifted their hats as he passed, but there was no cheering, no enthusiasm.

Andrews leaned a little forward, studying the gray-faced man with interest. It was his first view of King Peter Karageorgevich of Serbia. Then he turned to the Count with a faint interrogatory lifting of the eyebrows.

Plamenac's face was a mask of languid indifference. But to the Englishman's ear, gliding under the buzz of voices, came the low breathed words: "Karageorgevich!* — Obrenovich!*—Both tarred with the same brush!"

Andrews withdrew his gaze from the landscape, turned his face to his companion and fixed him with a comprehending look.

"Do you know, old chap," said he, with great heartiness, "I find this Serbia of yours amazingly interesting, even more so than I had hoped. You must help me to see a lot of it while I'm here."

"Too happy," responded the Count.

Just then, as they once more lapsed into a pregnant silence, some scraps of excited conversation floated to them from the next table. Two German travellers had a copy of the Berlin Lokal Anzeiger between them and were eagerly discussing (for this was in September, 1909), the flights of Orville Wright at Johannisthal. They were enthusiastic over the heights to which he had flown, but what seemed to impress them most was his flight with their Crown Prince as passenger. That settled the matter. If the Kaiser could trust his heir, the adored of all Germany, to that fragile and flickering machine of the American bird-man, then of a surety

was the conquest of the air achieved. From this feat they passed to that splendid piece of audacity of Latham's, when he flew, in his moneoplane, from Johannisthal to the Tempelhof field, high over the roofs and steeples of Berlin. To them this seemed more convincing than Bleriot's flight across the English Channel—for had it not taken place in Germany and was it not, therefore, a fact indisputable, a bedrock fact, on which they might proceed to build as they would?

IN spite of themselves, shamelessly and as if by a mutual understanding, Plamenac and the Englishman listened to this conversation—the latter with a strained intensity, since he was not at ease with his German. Presently they looked at each other, as if to say, "There's a subject we can talk about." The interchange of glances said even more than that. For, as if the tremendous matter that gripped their minds had endowed them with new keenness of intuition, the thought that flashed upon them simultaneously was, "There's the subject that we must talk about!" And straightway it seemed to both that explanation would be superfluous. Plamenac beckoned to a waiter.

"Kindly bring me a copy of yesterday's Morgenblatter, if you can find one," said he.

The waiter hurried off to find the great Vienna journal.

"I've been intensely interested in this thing for months," said Count Sergius, as the waiter brought the journal and laid it on the table before him.

"So have I," said Andrews.

"Also," went on the Count, "I've been studying the subject theoretically and at the same time practising with home-made gliders of various patterns, in those open, rolling pasture fields behind the house, down yonder at M'latza."

"Jolly place for it!" agreed Andrews. "And, as I remember it, you've got a stretch of level in front, along the river, that would be ripping for a sort of private aviation ground, if you should think of wanting such a thing."

He spoke in an undertone, but Count Sergius lowered his eyelids and ignored the suggestion.

"I had planned to get up to Rheims," he continued, "for the Aviation Week. But some unexpected business here kept me. I was disappointed."

He unfolded the paper as he spoke, and it opened to a rough but thrilling cut of Hubert Latham, in his machine, soaring over the Berlin house-roofs.

"I was there," said Andrews. "It was an eye-opener, I can tell you!"

With unconcealed eagerness the two bent over the paper.

"Our German friends at the next table are unquestionably right," spoke the Englishman again. "The aeroplane has arrived."

"Bob!" said Sergius in a tone of decision, looking up suddenly and glancing around the terrace.

"Yes, old chap?"

"The Aviation Fortnight at Juvisy begins on the 7th. We must be there! And the exhibition in the Grand Palais will be on at the same time. We've got to see that!"

"Yes, old chap!" said the Englishman again, but this time in no voice of interrogation.

"Then," began Count Sergius, "—but there's Madame de L'Orme signing to me to come over to her table. I see she won't be denied. Come along, Bob, and I'll present you, since we'll be leaving Belgrade at once. You'll have to shake hands with Major X—, to be sure! But you're not supposed to know, necessarily, what the white thing on his breast stands for."

"I want to meet her—but not so badly as all that," replied Andrews. "I'll wait here, old chap. Get leave to bring me to call on her when we come back from Paris."

(To be continued.)

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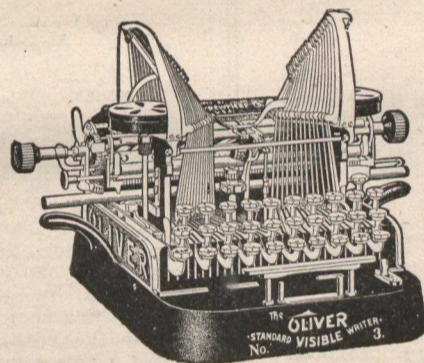
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