



A NEW SERIAL STORY

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

GREGORY NICOLAIEVICH, bandit and patriotic Servian, has taken to Count Sergius Charles de Plamenac, known as Serge Ivanovich, samples of jewels discovered in Austria by the bandit, which they believe will make it possible for Serbia to wage a successful war against Austria. Captain Andrews, of the British Army, a friend of Sergius, calls on them, and the bandit describes how to find a distant hog-pen under which he has hidden the rest of the jewels.

COUNT SERGIUS eyed the rude diagram for a moment, then handed it to the Englishman.

"Yes, Gregory," said he, "I've got it all. I've got it photographed indelibly on my memory, directions, diagram and all. And I know of no safer place to keep this paper itself than in the inviolable pocket of our methodical English friend here. He'll never mislay it. And all the Continental Powers won't be able to take it from him."

"Good!" said the Montenegrin.

Andrews grinned happily, as if contemplating himself in a scrimmage with Kaiser Wilhelm and the Archduke Ferdinand.

"Meantime," continued Count Sergius, "where shall I be able to find you? I take it you'll be getting away from Belgrade at once. Of course! And we must not make any hasty move, since you say the stuff is safe where it is. The thing will take a lot of planning, patient planning and preparation, if there's to be no risk of a slip-up at the last moment."

"All that is what I've come to you for, Serge Ivanovich," said the mountaineer. "Now it's in your hands—the destiny of our people. I'm off to-night. And I'm going straight to Niksich. A letter enclosed to Jacob Baki—your old gossip, the little tailor by the corner of the church—will get me."

"All right," said Sergius. "And I'll send for you the moment things are ripe for a move. Meanwhile—don't you want your tobacco-pouch?"

The outlaw laughed. "I'd like the pouch," he agreed. "It's a keepsake. But I don't need the tobacco; it would be very inconvenient for me and not much use in Niksich just at present. I don't object to a few gold-pieces, however, if you have them by you. I'm a little short for the journey."

Count Sergius picked up the beaded pouch, opened it and held it poised above the blotter.

"Bob," said he, "there are singular virtues, you'll observe, in this Servian tobacco as Gregory carries it."

He emptied the tobacco and spread it out on the green blotting paper.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the Englishman. "Now I see what you two chaps have been driving at all this time."

He picked up the ice-blue stone and examined it with the eyes of a connoisseur, while his companions watched his face for the verdict. Laying it down among the fragrant tobacco without a word, he took up the rose stone and subjected it to a like scrutiny. Then he handed it over to Count Sergius.

"Those two stones," said he, "would make the Great Mogul himself sit up and take notice. He'd pawn his harem for them, and the harems of his subjects as well. Any more such where those came from?"

"Enough to engineer some considerable changes in the Balkans," answered Gregory.

"And you'll have your work cut out, Bob, helping us convert them into currency," said Count Sergius. "One of the first things we do will be to run up to Amsterdam, sell these baubles where we can get fair value and put the cash in the Bank of Holland, where they mind their own business and mind it well."

As he spoke he unlocked a little drawer in his desk, dropped the stones into it and took out two Servian banknotes with half a dozen Turkish gold-pieces. These he handed over to the Montenegrin, who thrust them carelessly into the pocket of his tight trousers.

"That's all I've got by me, my Gregory," said he. "But when more's needed, you always know where to reach me."

"Thanks. I'll get away now," said Gregory, giving his right hand to Andrews, his left to Count Sergius, with a look and manner that made the act almost a sacrament. The most solemn of pledges, of dedications, were in their hearts; but there seemed no need of words.

"Safe journey, Captain!" was all the Englishman said. But Sergius, the intensity of his excitement threatening to break through the mask of his self-control, followed the outlaw to the door, clutching his arm with both hands and seeming to struggle with emotions which he was unwilling to let out. All he said, at last, was the one thing most obvious:

"I can't quite believe it yet, Gregory."

As he spoke, there came the sound of voices, sudden but dim, from below-stairs. The Montenegrin's hand was already on the door-knob. He stiffened like a listening grouse, turned away and stepped up to one of the great panels of wainscoting beside the chimney.

With the quiet words: "I know this house well. This is one of the reasons I got you to take these rooms"—he reached up and pushed hard on the top of the panel. It opened inward, a little stiffly, showing a very narrow passage faintly lighted from the roof.

"This is the safest way for me, Serge Ivanovich." And stepping within, he closed the panel behind him with a click.

Count Sergius turned back into the room with an air of discontent.

"That makes it more unreal than ever, Bob!" he grumbled. "It's too much like make-believe. I wish you'd kick me."

"A bit melodramatic if you like," agreed Andrews, "but after all, since the passage was there, it was only the soundest common-sense for him to make use of it. Don't be unreasonable, Serge. Listen to that row down-stairs!"

What was evidently an excited discussion went on for some minutes.

"Michael's keeping them in play," muttered the Count.

"I fancy our bandit friend can take quite good care of himself," remarked the Englishman in a tone of joyous appreciation.

The alarming murmurs below-stairs came to an end.

"Michael's probably got them searching the cellar," said Count Sergius.

"Will they look in here?" asked Andrews.

"If they do, they'll be very civil about it, I assure you," answered the Count, grimly. "But I've really no objection. I think, however, I'll leave it to Michael to do the honors here, as well as in the cellar. Save annoyance!"

He unlocked the little drawer, took out the diamonds, sealed them in an envelope and put them in his pocket. "Let's get out, Bob," he continued. "Let's get down to the 'Danilo' and look at some real waiters—German waiters—and drink a real whisky-and-soda."

"You'd better take beer and a Limburger sandwich, old chap," suggested the Englishman, elongating himself lazily from the depths of his chair. "That'll convince you you're not in a Jack-and-the-Beanstalk dream. For myself, I like fairy-stories."

CHAPTER III.

THE TERRACE OF THE CAFE DANILO.

THE Cafe Danilo was high up on the hillside, and its terrace, where Count Sergius and Captain Andrews sat at their little table, gave a clear view of the city and the river.

It is the smartest cafe in Belgrade and the sparkling, excitable throng was frivolous enough, cus-

tomary enough, material enough to bring Count Sergius back, as he desired, to the realities of life.

His visits to Belgrade were frequent, though his Servian estate lay far to the south, on a branch of the Morava, beyond the ancient city of Nisch. To the Englishman, the scene was altogether in keeping with the fairy-tale he had just been listening to in the Count's rooms and in which he now found himself, to his unqualified delight, pledged to play no important part. Far down along the curving shore of the great river the quays of the city were not so busy as a lover of Serbia might have wished. But importance was lent by the picture of a large boat swinging in to one of them—a splendid passenger steamer of the line that plies between Budapest and Rustchuk. Across the broad water, close to the northern shore, moved the squat, black forms of two monitors of the Austrian river fleet, thrusting their way up toward Semlin against the massive tide of Father Danube.

As his eyes rested on these craft and he slowly realized their significance, a contented smile broke over Andrews's lips. Any check to Austria's southward march would mean some schemes thwarted on the banks of the Sprec, also. Yes, the pie was plainly one he had a right, as an Englishman, to put his finger into. The more he dwelt upon it, the broader grew his smile; till presently the voice of Sergius recalled him to his immediate surroundings.

"What is it you are grinning about, Bob? What do you see out there so amusing?"

"Don't you see those two monitors off there by the north bank?" demanded Andrews.

"Yes — them!" assented the Count.

"We will, old chap! That's why I'm grinning!" explained Andrews lucidly.

"Ah, yes, of course, to be sure!" agreed Sergius, tugging at his moustache to disguise the expression that leaped into his face.

"But, by the way," he continued in a lower voice, "I fancy we'd better regard our subjects of conversation as strictly limited while we're here, even though we are talking English. There are many Greeks who come here. And where the Greeks come, you have all languages—and all lies!"

"You might speak more gently, Serge, of a race which produces such enchanting women as those two yonder! They're both Greeks, I take it. Off there to your right, with two men, one a Servian officer with a decoration."

Plamenac turned his head.

"Yes," he assented promptly, "they are both beautiful. But only one of them is a Greek. The one furthest from us, drinking coffee—she's the wife of the Greek Consul here, and the civilian is her husband. The other—and the more enchanting of the two, to my mind—is a Frenchwoman, a true Parisienne, with a fondness for English customs. You see she is drinking tea, like yourself. She's the wife of the biggest wine-merchant here—and has sundry and various good gentlemen—of whom, thank heavens, I'm not one—at her small, American-shod feet."

At this moment Madame de L'Orme turned slightly and her eyes met Plamenac's. A smile of emphatic favor irradiated her face and she bowed conspicuously. Count Sergius returned the greeting somewhat eagerly.

"If you're not one of them, you jolly well ought to be ashamed of yourself!" muttered Andrews. "Introduce me!"

"Not much!" breathed the Count with decision. "She's too enchanting for a candid soul like you, Bob. And you've something else to think about."

AT this moment, apparently after a word from the Frenchwoman, the Servian officer turned half round in his chair and saluted the Count. With marked punctiliousness and a face like a mask, Plamenac acknowledged the salute.

"You don't like him," murmured Andrews.

"I have as little intercourse as possible," answered the Count under his breath and apparently quite occupied in lighting his cigarette; "as little as is politic—with the wearers of that particular decoration."

On the Servian officer's breast glittered a Maltese Cross of white enamel, with golden rays flashing from its center.

"Ah!" muttered Andrews. "So!" Then he let his eyes wander out over the roofs with careful indifference. "I've seen several like that, already, here. And I can't place it. The last time I was here was in 1902—in the days of Alexander and Draga. I saw none of these white-and-gold crosses then."

"For the best of all reasons!" said the Count dryly. "I was no admirer of the peasant dynasty of the Obrenovichs, you may be sure. But—well, there are subjects, as we agreed! The best way I

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