



CHAPTER XII.

AT MOTHER MARIA'S HOG PENS.

BY the air line, they were now not more than an hour and a quarter's flight from their goal. After a stout breakfast of boiled ham and black bread with unstinted coffee, this seemed nothing. They felt themselves already there. But it was now the time of day when all the world was trafficking, and the country-side full of eyes.

After a brief consultation with Andrews and Carver, Count Sergius decided that they should add a half hour to their journey by flying at first due north, so as to set possible spies on a false trail.

As they climbed once more into their seats, the mountaineer leader said warmly:

"You had better fly as high as you can, Count, while crossing the river."

"Yes," answered Sergius, "we'll keep up, as well out of range as possible, till we come to the wooded country to the north of Brod. Then we'll fly low, so that we may not be seen from a distance. There'll probably be no one in the woods up there who wants to pot us. Anyhow, we'll risk it."

The sudden roar of motors and propellers drowned his concluding words.

This time Sergius and Andrews got off together. With a stupefaction of wonder the mountaineers stood watching, as the great machines circled around and around the field in splendid spirals, climbing like falcons into the blue. Not till they had gained the thousand-foot level was Sergius satisfied.

Then he headed straight away, out across the wide current of the Save, with Andrews a hundred yards behind. In five minutes they were in Slavonia. Ten minutes more and they were over the railway. The long express, coming from Trieste and Agram and bound for Semlin, passed beneath them. To Carver, gazing down, it seemed to crawl like a wounded worm.

Straight ahead, some wooded hills took shape—and the outworks of the crescent range which occupies and breaks up the center of Slavonia. Boldly prodigal of petrol now, Sergius kept climbing the mild air-currents till his height was nearly two thousand feet. From there, everything on earth looked little except his dreams.

Some fifteen minutes more and they were running above the lonely wooded lands. Here they dipped the planes.

At a hundred feet above the tree-tops they checked and then, sinking more gradually, skimmed like herons, close over the green billows of leafage.

"We're taking a big risk, ain't we, Plamenac, flying so low over these woods?" objected the American. "If we had to light suddenly, there'd be no chance to pick out one of those little patches. We'd come down in a tree-top and good-by to us."

"I think we'd better compromise," said Count Sergius, and drove the dragon-fly upward again for a couple of hundred feet.

For the next three-quarters of an hour all went smoothly.

"We arrive! We arrive!" cried Plamenac as Playnitza came into view. "In ten minutes we'll pick up the village. You ought to be able to make it now, Carver, with the glasses."

"I have it," said the American a few minutes later. "Must be it—the only village in sight."

"Yes, there's no other! Mother Maria's, you remember, is just the other side of the long hill beyond the village. We'll have to swing around out of sight and come in from behind, over the woods." And Count Sergius steered sharp to the right. "It would be better, perhaps, to be getting there at night," he went on. "But I'm thinking that every minute counts, after all that's happened."

"Right you are!" agreed the American. "I wouldn't lose a second. It's too late for us to play Brer 'Possum's game!"

At last, as the two great white flyers came droning sonorously over the oak forests, Carver's glass made out the cabin in the hollow, and then the curious gray rock, like a crouching beast, over

which he had so often mused and pondered. There, too, was the one pine tree, towering over its fair companion oaks.

"That's the spot, all right!" he remarked with a hushed thrill in his voice. Such a voice a child might speak with, who saw suddenly an old fairy-tale come true. "Yes, everything's according to specifications. Do you make out any sign of life about the place? Any sign of Gregory? It will be awkward if we've got there ahead of him."

"Plenty of pigs!" answered Carver. And then, after a searching pause, "Yes, yes, strictly according to specifications! There's old Gregory, shading his eyes with his hand and staring at us. He looks quite natural. And there are those excellent and admirable cut-throats, his followers, at least a dozen of them, apparently springing up out of the earth to greet us. Plamenac, you've engineered this thing to a marvel. You're great! It's you ought to be the king of this story-book country, by jing! If I were a Servian citizen, I'd insist upon it."

Count Sergius laughed.

"No, old boy, you'd never get me into that galere. It's a precarious job these days, holding down a throne. But I may find something interesting to do behind the throne."

They came to earth between Mother Maria's cabin and the two nearest trees. Gregory fell on their necks in turn. He was incoherent over the miracle of their having come so soon.

"The hand of God is in it, indeed!" he cried to Sergius. "All night I prayed for it, since I heard that the Austrians were warned. But I did not dare to hope. Oh, my faith was weak and I am ashamed in God's sight! I ought to have known that His hand was in it!"

This outbreak of religious fervor was no surprise to any one. All knew that for the zealous outlaw, religion and patriotism and raiding and insurrection were effectively intermingled.

"His hand has certainly been with us to-day," replied Count Sergius simply.

Hurriedly they ran both aeroplanes down into the hollow under shelter of the cabin, and all of the band, except their chief, resumed their hiding so quickly and quietly that it seemed as if earth had swallowed them.

"I've pickets out all round," said Gregory. "But every minute here is perilous. There's been something found out, somehow. Come!" and, seizing a spade that stood against the wall, he called to Mother Maria to bring him another and led the way toward the nearest of the two great hog-pens which occupied the center of the field.

The old woman came striding in haste from the cow-shed, a strong, raw-boned figure, with huge kerchief of stout, unbleached linen covering her head and tied beneath her chin and wisps of iron-gray hair straggling out from under it. She curtsied with profound reverence to Count Sergius and then, less profoundly, to Andrews and Carver.

The little party moved quickly toward the pens, Gregory and the old woman leading, while Sergius, Carver and Andrews followed on their heels. As for Ivan, he had disappeared. Hidden under some bush, he was doubtless detailing to thrilled listeners the marvels of his flight.

AT this hour the hog-pens stood open. The swine were away feeding along the edge of the oak forest, herded by Mother Maria's son.

"In this corner!" said Gregory, pointing to a spot in the black mud, rooted by a hundred busy snouts.

"It's a great place to hide a treasure, by Jove!" exclaimed Andrews, his blue eyes sparkling like a boy's.

The American gave one keen stare, then turned away satisfied.

"Come on, Andrews!" he said practically. "We've no time to waste here watching 'em dig. If you'll fill the tanks, I'll be over-hauling the motors. This job ain't off our hands yet by a long chalk! We'd look silly if the Austrians were to happen along and catch us with our tanks unloaded."

"Right you are, old chap!" agreed the English-

man, tearing himself away reluctantly from the sight of the busy spades and striding back toward the cabin.

Count Sergius stood watching, calm now as if they had been digging a post-hole. Among the qualities that made him a leader, he had the brain that does not forget little things while occupied with great ones.

"Have you thought, Gregory?" he asked, "of the position our good mother and her son will be in after this?"

"Yes, surely," grunted Gregory over the unaccustomed spade. "They'd get their throats cut if they stayed here. They'll have to take—to the bush—and follow our men into Servia."

"Have you arranged for any reward for their great and faithful services?" went on Count Sergius. The old woman seemed to pay no attention, as if the conversation had been in another tongue.

"Certainly not!" replied Gregory. "Such services are not bought."

"Naturally. For money could not pay for them. Only the gratitude of our country can reward them," said Count Sergius tactfully.

Then he addressed the old woman. "Mother," said he in the homely speech of the people, "the highest privilege of the Fatherland is to reward its faithful children. You and your son are giving up everything for the Fatherland. The Fatherland must care for you. Captain Gregory will see that you have what you and your son may need for the present. And I want you to come straight to M'latza, where my people will be honored in entertaining you till you have made up your mind where you will have your new home."

Mother Maria had paused in her digging to listen reverently, her gnarled hands, the colour of old wood, resting on the top of her spade. She was struggling to find a reply when Gregory cut her short by urging her on with the work.

"Dig, dig, mother! You can thank Count Sergius at M'latza," said he. "But if you don't hurry now, he'll never get there!"

Sergius laughed, and turned away.

"I mustn't loaf here," said he. "I'll go and have everything ready for an instant start. You'll come back with us, Gregory, of course, instead of Ivan."

"Surely, my Count," said Gregory, thrusting his spade to one side and reaching down into the hole.

Most of Gregory's band had been at the Niksich camp at some time during the past month and so were more or less familiar with the marvel of an aeroplane. But five were outlaws from North Bosnia and knew only what their comrades had tried to tell them.

These five now crept down into the hollow beside the cabin, where Sergius, Andrews and Carver were busy over the great white planes. They seemed to regard the machines as something of divine origin, as a sort of direct bequest from Heaven to Count Sergius for the benefit of Holy Servia.

Smilingly Count Sergius pointed out to them, as he worked, the source of power in the machines and explained how fast and how far they could fly without fresh fuel.

AS the Count was talking, Gregory came briskly down the slope, followed by Mother Maria with the spades. He carried two little leathern bags, corded securely with thongs of leather and heavily sealed.

"It's all here!" said he in a solemn voice, and handed the bags to Sergius with the gesture of a priest serving the sacrament.

Sergius took them and held them for a moment in silence. Every one stood silent and motionless. It was so still for several seconds that the sudden scratching of one of Mother Maria's red pullets in the straw before the cow-shed became a noticeable sound. It stirred a new train of thought in the old woman's brain and her lips worked and she wailed: "Oh, I'm leaving it all! I'm leaving it all! And I'll never find chickens anywhere else to lay like them red ones!"

She dashed the back of her hand across her brave old eyes and hurried into the cabin to collect some of her treasures. Immediately, in a matter-of-fact voice, Count Sergius said:

"We could carry them more conveniently and securely if they were in several small parcels, but I suppose there's no use taking the time now." He handed one of the bags to Andrews, who proceeded to lash it to his belt. Then, after a moment's hesitation, he turned and gave the other bag to the astonished American.

"Take care of it for me, Carver. I don't know any one better able to," said he.

The words were hardly spoken when a rifle-shot, followed instantly by another, resounded from the farther slope of the hill.

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