ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY

Au centre du désert

Prisoner of the Sand

français/english

Alfa-Veda

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry at the Lockheed P-38 Lightning before his last flight in 1944

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Prisoner of the Sand

After three years of life in the desert, I was transferred out. The fortunes of the air service sent me wandering here and there until one day I decided to attempt a long-distance flight from Paris to Saigon. When, on December 29, 1935, I took off, I had no notion that the sands were preparing for me their ultimate and culminating ordeal. This is the story of the Paris-Saigon flight.

I paid my final visit to the weather bureau, where I found Monsieur Viaud stooped over his maps like a medieval alchemist over an alembic. Lucas had come with me, and we stared together at the curving lines marking the new-sprung winds. With their tiny flying arrows, they put me in mind of curving tendrils studded with thorns. All the atmospheric depressions of the world were charted onthis enormous map, ochre-colored, like the earth of Asia.

"Here is a storm that we'll not hear from before Monday," Monsieur Viaud pointed out.

Over Russia and the Scandinavian peninsula the swirling lines took the form of a coiled demon. Out in Iraq, in the neighborhood of Basra, an imp was whirling.

"That fellow worries me a little," said Monsieur Viaud.

"Sand-storm, is it?" I was not being idly curious. Day would not yet be breaking when I reached Basra and I was fearful of flying at night in one of those desert storms that turn the sky into a yellow furnace and wipe out hills, towns, and river-banks, drowning earth and sky in one great conflagration. It would be bad enough to fly in daylight through a chaos in which the very elements themselves were indistinguishable.

"Sand-storm? No, not exactly."

"So much the better," I said to myself, and I looked round the room. I liked this laboratory atmosphere. Viaud, I felt, was a man escaped from the world. When he came in here and hung up his hat and coat on the peg, he hung up with them all the confusion in which the rest of mankind lived. Family cares, thoughts of income, concerns of the heart - all that vanished on the threshold of this room as at the door of a hermit's cell, or an astronomer's tower, or a radio operator's shack. Here was one of those men who are able to lock themselves up in the secrecy of their retreat and hold discourse with the universe.

Gently, for he was reflecting, Monsieur Viaud rubbed the palms of his hands together. "No, not a sand-storm. See here." His finger traveled over the map and pointed out why. At four in the morning Lucas shook me into consciousness.

"Wake up!"

And before I could so much as rub my eyes he was saying, "Look here, at this report. Look at the moon. You won't see much of her tonight. She's new, not very bright, and she'll set at ten o'clock, And here's something else for you: sun-rise in Greenwich Meridian Time and in local time as well. And here: here are your maps, with your course all marked out. And here -"

"- is your bag packed for Saigon," my wife broke in. A razor and a change of shirt. He who would travel happily must travel light.

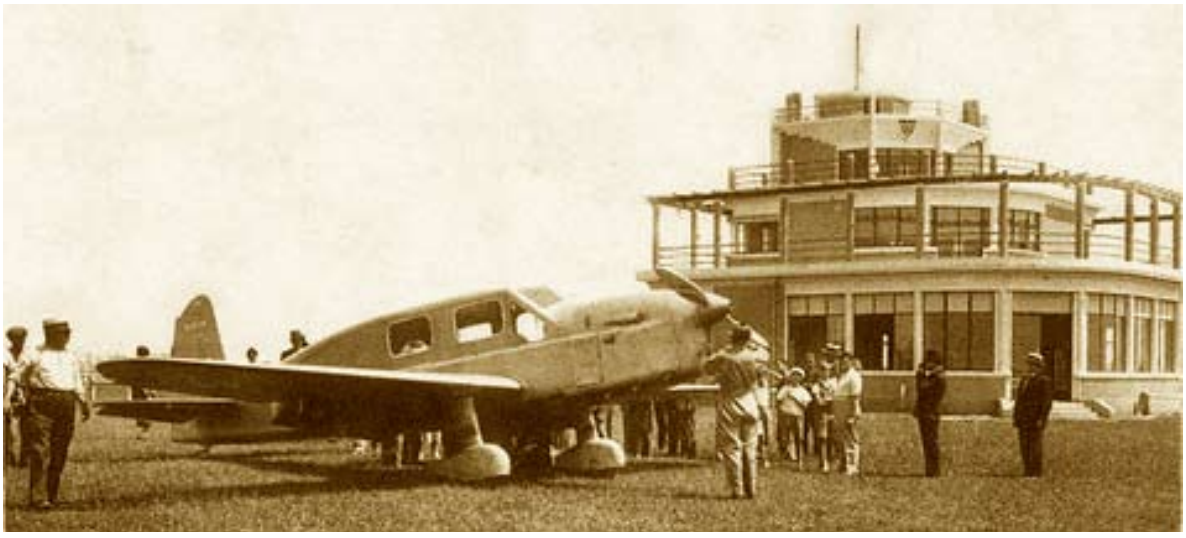
We got into a car and motored out to Le Bourget while Fate spying in ambush put the finishing touches to her plans. Those favorable winds that were to wheel in the heavens, that moon that was to sink at ten o'clock, were so many strategic positions at which Fate was assembling her forces..

It was cold at the airport, and dark. The Simoon was wheeled out of her hangar. I walked round my ship, stroking her wings with the back of my hand in a caress that I believe was love. Eight thousand miles I had flown in her, and her engines had not skipped a beat; not a bolt in her had loosened. This was the marvel that was to save our lives the next night by refusing to be ground to powder on meeting the upsurging earth.

Friends had turned up. Every long flight starts in the same atmosphere, and nobody who has experienced it once would ever have it otherwise: the wind, the drizzle at daybreak, the engines purring quietly as they are warmed up; this instrument of conquest gleaming in her fresh coat of "dope" - all of it goes straight to the heart.

Already one has a foretaste of the treasures about to be garnered on the way - the green and brown and yellow lands promised by the maps; the rosary of resounding names that make up the pilot's beads; the hours to be picked up one by one on the eastward flight into the sun.

There is a particular flavor about the tiny cabin in which, still only half awake, you stow away your thermos flasks and odd parts and over-night bag; in the fuel tanks heavy with power; and best of all, forward, in the magical instruments set like jewels in their panel and glimmering like a constellation in the dark of night. The mineral glow of the artificial horizon, these stethoscopes designed to take the heartbeat of the heavens, are things a pilot loves. The cabin of a plane is a world unto itself, and to the pilot it is home.



Friends had turned up.

The magical instruments set like jewels in their panel and glimmering like a constellation in the dark of night.

I took off, and though the load of fuel was heavy, I got easily away. I avoided Paris with a jerk and up the Seine, at Melun, I found myself flying very low between showers of rain. I was heading for the valley of the Loire. Nevers lay below me, and then Lyon. Over the Rhone I was shaken up a bit. Mt. Ventoux was capped in snow. There lies Marignane and here comes Marseille.

The towns slipped past as in a dream. I was going so far - or thought I was going so far - that these wretched little distances were covered before I was aware of it. The minutes were flying. So much the better. There are times when, after a quarter-hour of flight, you look at your watch and find that five minutes have gone by; other days when the hands turn a quarter of an hour in the wink of an eye. This was a day when time was flying. A good omen. I started out to sea.

Very odd, that little stream of vapor rising from the fuel gauge on my port wing! It might almost be a plume of smoke.

"Prevot!"

My mechanic leaned towards me.

"Look! Isn't that gas? Seems to me it's leaking pretty fast."

He had a look and shook his head.

"Better check our consumption," I said.

I wasn't turning back yet. My course was still get for Tunis.

André Prévot and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in front of his Simoon.

I took off, and though the load of fuel was heavy, I got easily away.

I looked round and could see Prevot at the gauge on the second fuel tank aft. He came forward and said: "You've used up about fifty gallons."

Nearly twenty had leaked away in the wind! That was serious. I put back to Marignane where I drank a cup of coffee while the time lost hurt like an open wound. Flyers in the Air France service wanted to know whether I was bound for Saigon or Madagascar and wished me luck. The tank was patched up and refilled, and I took off once more with a full load, again without mishap despite a bit of rough going over the soggy field.

As soon as I reached the sea I ran into low-hanging clouds that forced me down to sixty feet. The driving rain spattered against the windshield and the sea was churning and foaming. I strained to see ahead and keep from hooking the mast of some ship, while Prevot lit cigarettes for me.

"Coffee!"

He vanished into the stern of the cockpit and came back with the thermos flask. I drank. From time to time I flicked the throttle to keep the engines at exactly 2100 revolutions and ran my eye over the dials like a captain inspecting his troops. My company stood trim and erect: every needle was where it should be.

I glanced down at the sea and saw it bubbling under the steaming rain like a boiling cauldron. In hydroplane this bumpy sea would have bothered me; but in this ship of mine, which could not possibly be set down here, I felt differently. It was silly, of course, but the thought gave me a sense of security. The sea was part of a world that I had nothing to do with. Engine trouble here was out of the question: there was not the least danger of such a thing. Why, I was not rigged for the sea!

After an hour and a half of this, the rain died down, and though the clouds still hung low a genial sun began to break through. I was immensely cheered by this promise of good weather. Overhead I could feel a thin layer of cotton-wool and I swerved aside to avoid a downpour. I

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Au centre du désert

I

Le désert ? Il m'a été donné de l'aborder un jour par le cœur. Au cours d'un raid vers l'Indochine, en 1935, je me suis retrouvé en Égypte, sur les confins de la Libye, pris dans les sables comme dans une glu, et j'ai cru en mourir. Voici l'histoire.

En abordant la Méditerranée j'ai rencontré des nuages bas. Je suis descendu à vingt mètres. Les averses s'écrasent contre le pare-brise et la mer semble fumer. Je fais de grands efforts pour apercevoir quelque chose et ne point tamponner un mât de navire.

Mon mécanicien, André Prévot, m'allume des cigarettes.

– Café...

Il disparaît à l'arrière de l'avion et revient avec le thermos. Je bois. Je donne de temps en temps des chiquenaudes à la manette des gaz pour bien maintenir deux mille cent tours. Je balaie d'un coup d'œil mes cadrans : mes sujets sont obéissants, chaque aiguille est bien à sa place. Je jette un coup d'œil sur la mer qui, sous la pluie, dégage des vapeurs, comme une grande bassine chaude. Si j'étais en hydravion, je regretterais qu'elle soit si « creuse ». Mais je

was past the point where I had to cut through the heart of squalls. Was not that the first rift in the cloud-bank, there ahead of me?

I sensed it before I saw it, for straight ahead on the sea lay a long meadow-colored swath, a sort of oasis of deep and luminous green reminding me of those barley fields in southern Morocco that would make me catch my breath each time I sighted them on coming up from Senegal across two thousand miles of sand. Here as at such times in Morocco I felt we had reached a place a man could live in, and it bucked me up. I flung a glance backward at Prevot and called out: "We're over the worst of it. This is fine."

"Yes", he said, "fine."

This meant that I would not need to do any stunt flying when Sardinia hove unexpectedly into view. The island would not loom up suddenly like a mass of wreckage a hundred feet ahead of me: I should be able to see it rising on the horizon in the distant play of a thousand sparkling points of light.

I moved into this region bathed by the sun. No doubt about it, I was loafing along. Loafing at the rate of one hundred and seventy miles an hour, but loafing nevertheless. I smoked a few leisurely cigarettes. I lingered over my coffee. I kept a cautious fatherly eye on my brood of instruments. These clouds, this sun, this play of light, lent to my flight the relaxation of a Sunday afternoon stroll. The sea was as variegated as a country landscape broken into fields of green and violet and blue. Off in the distance, just where a squall was blowing, I could see the fermenting spray. Once again I recognized that the sea was of all things in the world the least monotonous, was formed of an ever-changing substance. A gust of wind mantles it with light or strips it bare. I turned back to Prevot.

"Look!" I said.

There in the distance lay the shores of Sardinia that we were about to skirt to the southward.

Prevot came forward and sat down beside me. He squinted with wrinkled forehead at the mountains struggling out of their shroud of mist. The clouds had been blown away and the island was coming into view in great slabs of field and woodland. I climbed to forty-five hundred feet and drifted along the coast of this island dotted with villages. After the flower-strewn but uninhabitable sea, this was a place where I could take things easily. For a little time I clung to our great-hearted mother earth. Then, Sardinia behind me, I headed for Tunis.

I picked up the African continent at Bizerta and there I began to drop earthward. I was at home. Here was a place where I could dispense with altitude which, as every pilot knows, is our particular store of wealth. Not that we squander it when it is no longer needed: we swap it for another kind of treasure. When a flyer is within a quarter of an hour of port, he sets his controls for the down swing, throttling his motor a little - just enough to keep it from racing while the needle on his speedometer swings round from one hundred and seventy to two hundred miles an hour. At that rate of speed the impalpable eddies of evening air drum softly on the wings and the plane seems to be drilling its way into a quivering crystal so delicate that

suis en avion. Creuse ou non je ne puis m'y poser. Et cela me procure, j'ignore pourquoi, un absurde sentiment de sécurité. La mer fait partie d'un monde qui n'est pas le mien. La panne, ici, ne me concerne pas, ne me menace même pas : je ne suis point gréé pour la mer.

Après une heure trente de vol la pluie s'apaise. Les nuages sont toujours très bas, mais la lumière les traverse déjà comme un grand sourire. J'admire cette lente préparation du beau temps. Je devine, sur ma tête, une faible épaisseur de coton blanc. J'oblique pour éviter un grain : il n'est plus nécessaire d'en traverser le cœur. Et voici la première déchirure...

J'ai pressenti celle-ci sans la voir car j'aperçois en face de moi, sur la mer, une longue traînée couleur de prairie, une sorte d'oasis d'un vert lumineux et profond, pareil à celui de ces champs d'orge qui me pinçaient le cœur, dans le Sud-Marocain, quand je remontais du Sénégal après trois mille kilomètres de sable. Ici aussi j'ai le sentiment d'aborder une province habitable, et je goûte une gaîté légère. Je me retourne vers Prévot :

– C'est fini, ça va bien ! – Oui, ça va bien...

Tunis. Pendant le plein d'essence, je signe des papiers. Mais à l'instant où je quitte le bureau j'entends comme un « Plouf ! » de plongeon. Un de ces bruits sourds, sans écho. Je me rappelle à l'instant même avoir entendu un bruit semblable : une explosion dans un garage. Deux hommes étaient morts de cette toux rauque. Je me retourne vers la route qui longe la piste : un peu de poussière fume, deux voitures rapides se sont tamponnées, prises tout à coup dans l'immobilité comme dans les glaces. Des hommes courent vers elles, d'autres courent à nous :

– Téléphonez... Un médecin... La tête...

J'éprouve un serrement au cœur. La fatalité, dans la calme lumière du soir, vient de réussir un coup de main. Une beauté ravagée, une intelligence, ou une vie... Les pirates ainsi ont cheminé dans le désert, et personne n'a entendu leur pas élastique sur le sable. Ç'a été, dans le campement, la courte rumeur de la razzia. Puis tout est retombé dans le silence doré. La même paix, le même silence... Quelqu'un près de moi parle d'une fracture du crâne. Je ne veux rien savoir de ce front inerte et sanglant, je tourne le dos à la route et rejoins mon avion. Mais je conserve au cœur une impression de menace. Et ce bruit-là je le reconnaîtrai tout à l'heure. Quand je raclerai mon plateau noir à deux cent soixante-dix kilomètres-heure je reconnaîtrai la même toux rauque : le même « han » ! du destin, qui nous attendait au rendez-vous. En route pour Benghazi.

II

En route. Deux heures de jour encore. J'ai déjà renoncé à mes lunettes noires quand j'aborde la Tripolitaine. Et le sable se dore. Dieu que cette planète est donc déserte ! Une fois de plus, les fleuves, les ombrages et les habitations des hommes m'y paraissent dus à des conjonctions d'heureux hasard. Quelle part de roc et de sable !

Mais tout cela m'est étranger, je vis dans le domaine du vol. Je sens venir la nuit où l'on s'enferme comme dans un temple. Où l'on s'enferme, aux secrets de rites essentiels, dans une méditation sans secours. Tout ce monde profane s'efface déjà et va disparaître. Tout ce paysage