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A READER'S JOURNAL

Night Flight
A Novel

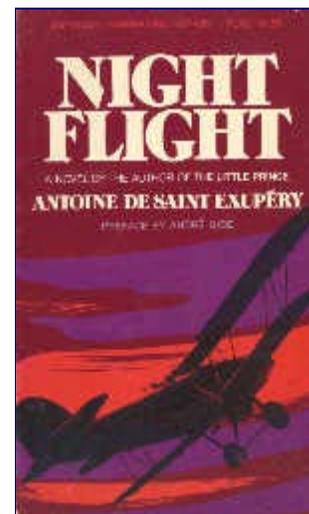
by

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Translated by Stuart Gilbert

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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2008



Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's first novel on flying was Southern Mail and the flying then was only from France to Africa along the northwestern coastline. In this novel we meet Fabien who is flying from the

southernmost tip of South America carrying the mail. St-Ex takes us inside the pilot's head as he imagines himself first as a ship entering a harbor and then as a shepherd moving from one flock to another, only his flocks are small clusters of lights and civilization thousands of feet beneath his wings.

[page 1] Fabien, the pilot bringing the Patagonia air mail from far south to Buenos Aires, could mark night coming on by certain signs that called to mind the waters of a harbor — a calm expanse beneath, faintly rippled by the lazy clouds — and he seemed to be entering a vast anchorage, an immensity of blessedness.

Or else he might have fancied he was taking a quiet walk in the calm of evening, almost like a shepherd. The Patagonian shepherds move, unhurried, from one flock to another; and he, too, moved from one town to another, the shepherd of those little towns. Every two hours he met another of them, drinking at its riverside or browsing on its plain.

Sometimes, after a hundred miles of steppes as desolate as the sea, he encountered a lonely farmhouse that seemed to be sailing backwards from him in a great prairie sea, with its freight of human lives; and he saluted with his wings this passing ship.

With this wingtip salute we climb in the cockpit with Fabien and join him and his navigator/wireless operator in a 5,000 lb hunk of metal with a constant stream of fireworks spraying backwards from its five-hundred-horsepower engine just outside his window. In the rear is his precious cargo destined eventually for France, the Patagonian airmail, the only communication link with the rest of the world for this isolated outpost of humanity. In this cockpit we will be treated to the poetry in motion of St-Exupéry. Likely he'll be sharing with us thoughts he had while flying the night mail himself.

[page 12] But night was rising like a tawny smoke and already the valleys were brimming over with it. No longer were they distinguishable from the plains. The villages were lighting up, constellations that greeted each other across the dusk. And, at a touch of his finger, his flying-lights flashed back a greeting to them. The earth grew spangled with light signals as each house lit its star, searching the vastness of the night a s lighthouse sweeps the sea. Now every place that sheltered human life was sparkling. And it rejoiced him to enter into this one night with a measured slowness, as into an anchorage.

A pilot in those lonely days and nights of solitary flights carrying the mail apparently needed an

imagination to carry him through the otherwise utter boredom which might cut short his lucrative flying career.

Another pilot, Pellerin, brought his ship to a stop at an outpost airport after a particularly harrowed encounter with a cyclone over the Andes. He stays in his cockpit listening, as it were, to the "long echoes of the flight." From the ground, someone yells to him, "Well, aren't you going to get down?"

[page 17, 18] His impulse was to curse them for a lazy crowd, so sure of life they seemed, gaping at the mon; but he decided to be genial instead.

". . . Drinks are on you!"

Then he climbed down.

He wanted to tell them about the trip.

"If only you knew . . . !"

But he doesn't tell them anything more. Instead St-Ex tells us the story of how Pellerin got lost in pitch darkness, dancing amidst gale forces gusts through towering Alpine peaks. In his mind Pellerin think vs, "A cyclone, that's nothing. A man just saves his skin!" But later he tells all to his boss, Rivière.

[page 21] Pellerin began by telling how his retreat had been cut off. It was almost as if he were apologizing about it. "There was nothing else for it!" Then he had lost sight of everything, blinded by the snow. He owed his escape to the violent air currents which had driven him up to twenty-five thousand feet. "I guess they held me all the way just above the level of the peaks."

In the next storm, we follow Fabien carrying the Patagonian mail and flying into a black wall of storm ahead. The navigator has just leaned forward and tapped on Fabien's back, but the pilot did not move.

[page 35] Now the first eddies of the distant storm assailed them. The mass of metal heaved gently up, pressing itself against the operator's limbs; and then it seemed to melt away, leaving him for some seconds floating in the darkness, levitated. He clung to the steel bulwarks with both hands. The red lamp in the cockpit was all that remained to him of the world of men and he shuddered to know himself descending helpless into the dark heart of night, with only a little thing, a miner's safety lamp, to see him through. He dared not disturb the pilot to ask his plans; he tightened his grip on the steel ribs and, bending forward fixed his eyes upon the pilot's shadowed back.

Fabien was too busy flying to respond to his navigator.

[page 35] In that obscurity the pilot's head and shoulders were all that showed themselves. His torso was a block of darkness, incline a little to the left; his face was set toward the storm, bathed intermittently, no doubt, by flickering gleams. He could not see that face; all the feelings thronging there to meet the onset of the storm were hidden from his eyes; lips set with anger and resolve, a white face holding elemental colloquy with the leaping flashes ahead.

No one who has not flown or navigated under such conditions could write so vividly about the experience. Obviously St-Ex had done both, and his writing flashed like brilliant lightning bolts as Fabien's plane entered the storm.

Here's an example. Rivière has to fire Roblet because of a mistake he made. Roblet's been in aviation during the twenty years there has been aviation, but "an example has to be made." Roblet refuses to be downgraded to a fitter, so he must go. Rivière dismisses him from his presence even though Roblet resisted going, saying, "No, sir, no. . . And there something more I'd like to say." There would be all of it, except St-Ex takes us inside of Rivière's mind as he walks away from Roblet holding his termination form.

[page 43, 44] Not he, thought Rivière, it wasn't he whom I dismissed so brutally, but the mischief for which perhaps, he was not responsible, though it came to pass through him. For, he mused, we can command events and they obey us; and thus we are creators. These humble men, too, are things and we create them. Or cast them aside when mischief comes about through them.

"There something more I'd like to say." What did the poor fellow want to say? That I was robbing him of all that made life dear? That he loved the clang of tools upon the steel of airplanes, that all the ardent poetry of life would now be lost to him . . . And then, a man must live?

"I am very tired," Rivière murmured and his fever rose, insidiously caressing him. "I liked that old chap's face." He tapped the sheet of paper with his finger. It came back to him, the look of the old man's hands and he now seemed to see them shape a faltering gesture of thankfulness. "That's all right," was all he had to say. "That's right. Stay!" And then — He pictured the torrent of joy that would flow through those old hands. Nothing in all the world, it seemed to him, could be more beautiful than that joy revealed not on a face, but in those toil-worn hands. Shall I tear up this paper? He imagined the old man's homecoming to his family, his modest pride.

"So they're keeping you on?"

"What do you think? It was I who assembled the first plane in Argentina!"

The old fellow would get back his prestige, the youngsters cease to laugh.

As he was asking himself if he would tear it up, the telephone rang.

There was a long pause, full of the resonance and depth that wind and distance can give to voices.

"Landing ground speaking. Who is there?"

"Rivière."

They had found a problem in an electric circuit. Rivière, reminded of the danger that least error can bring to the pilot, navigator, and mail, thinks to himself, "Roblet shall go." Roblet may lose that "ardent poetry of life", but St-Ex will recall it for us forever in his writings.

Rivière reveals to us his innermost thoughts about how he must push his pilots to drive through storms, while one of his pilots who has heeded his exhortations is driving through a storm from which he may never return.

[page 53] No the Patagonian mail was entering the storm and Fabien abandoned all idea of circumventing it; it was too widespread for that, he reckoned, for the vista of lightning flashes led far inland, exposing battlement on battlement of clouds. He decided to try passing below it, ready to beat a retreat if things took a bad turn.

This was a night flight which seemed fated never to see the light of day. We are in the tight compartment of the cockpit with Fabien, our eyes straining into the darkness, striving to make sense of the dimly lit instruments, muscles aching from holding onto the controls of this airplane turned roller coaster in the thundering zephyrs of the clouds.

[page 68] It was as if dead matter were infected by his exasperation; at every plunge the engine set up such furious vibrations that all the fuselage seemed convulsed with rage. Fabien strained all his efforts to control; crouching in the cockpit, he kept his eyes fixed on the artificial horizon only, for the masses of the sky and land outside were not to be distinguished, lost both alike in a welter as of worlds in the making. But the hands of the flying instruments oscillated more and more abruptly, grew almost impossible to follow. Already the pilot, misled by their vagaries, was losing altitude, fighting against odds, while deadly quicksands sucked him down into the darkness. He read his height, sixteen hundred — just the level of the hills. He guessed their towering billows hard upon him,

for now it seemed that all these earthen monsters, the least of which could crush him into nothingness, were breaking loose from their foundations and careering about in a drunken frenzy. A dark tellurian carnival was thronging closer and closer about him.

Rivière knew that, if Fabien didn't make it, he would have to break the news to his wife.

[page 74] Rivière knew all the tenderness of Fabien's wife, the fears that haunted her; this love seemed only lent her for a while, like a toy to some poor child. He thought of Faien's hand which firm on the controls, would hold the balance of his fate some minutes yet; that hand had given caresses and lingered on a breast, wakening a tumult there; a hand of godlike virtue, it had touched a face, transfiguring it. A hand that brought miracles to pass.

But Rivière, Fabien, and Fabien's wife all have to wait throughout this night. Will the Patagonian mail get through to Paris? Will Fabien and his wife be reunited in another joyful embrace? Will Rivière change his mind about letting Roblet go? So many themes to play out, so few pages remaining to go. One can only enjoy to the fullest every page as one enjoys every day, every minute of one's life.

