

ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY

Au centre du désert
Prisoner of the Sand

français/english



Alfa-Veda

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Historic photos December 1935/January 1936
[www.thisdayinaviation.com/30-december-1935-wind-sand-stars/
caudron-simoun-c630-c635](http://www.thisdayinaviation.com/30-december-1935-wind-sand-stars/caudron-simoun-c630-c635) – forums.x-plane.org
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Duell in den Wolken - Der letzte Flug des kleinen Prinzen
Dokumentarfilm | 2008

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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 on this 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..

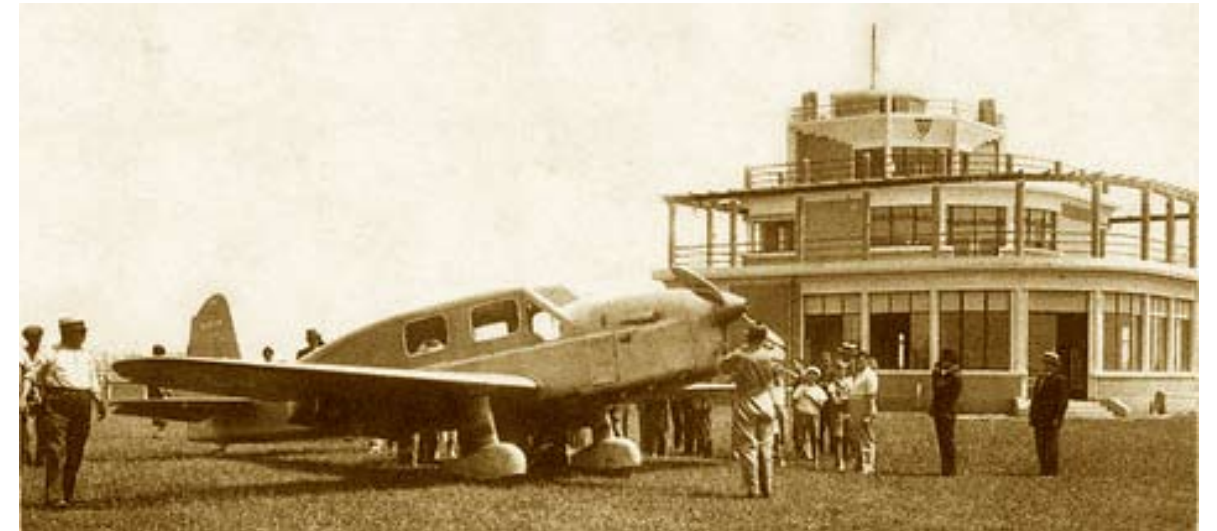


It was cold at the airport, and dark. The Simoon was wheeled out of her hangar. I walked round my ship, stroking her wings with the back of my hand in a caress that I believe was love. Eight thousand miles I had flown in her, and her engines had not skipped a beat; not a bolt in her had loosened. This 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



I put back to Marignane where I drank a cup of coffee while the time lost hurt like a wound.

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 sécrasent 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

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 gaieté 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 reconnaitrai tout à l'heure. Quand je raclerai mon plateau noir à deux cent soixante-dix kilomètres-heure je reconnaitrai 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

plane seems to be drilling its way into a quivering crystal so delicate that the wake of a passing swallow would jar it to bits. I was already skirting the undulations of the hills and had given away almost the whole of my few hundred feet of altitude when I reached the airdrome, and there, shaving the roofs of the hangars, I set down my ship on the ground.

While the tanks were being refilled I signed some papers and shook hands with a few friends. And just as I was coming out of the administration building I heard a horrible grunt, one of those muffled impacts that tell their fatal story in a single sound; one of those echoless thuds complete in themselves, without appeal, in which fatality delivers its message. Instantly there came into my mind the memory of an identical sound - an explosion in a garage. Two men had died of that hoarse bark.

I looked now across to the road that ran along-side the airdrome: there in a puff of dust two high-powered cars had crashed head-on and stood frozen into motionlessness as if imprisoned in ice. Men were running towards the cars while others ran from them to the field office.

“Get a doctor. . . . Skull crushed. . . .”

My heart sank. In the peace of the evening light Fate had taken a trick. A beauty, a mind, a life - something had been destroyed. It was as sudden as a raid in the desert. Marauding tribes-men creep up on silent feet in the night. The camp resounds briefly with the clashing tumult of a razzia. A moment later everything has sunk back into the golden silence. The same peace, the same stillness, followed this crash.

Near by, someone spoke of a fractured skull. I had no mind to be told about that crushed and bloody cranium. Turning my back to the road, I went across to my ship, in my heart a foreboding of danger. I was to recognize that sound when I heard it again very soon. When the Simoon scraped the black plateau at a speed of one hundred and seventy miles an hour I should recognize that hoarse grunt, that same snarl of destiny keeping its appointment with us.

Off to Benghazi! We still have two hours of daylight. Before we crossed into Tripolitana I took off my glare glasses. The sands were golden under the slanting rays of the sun. How empty of life is this planet of ours! Once again it struck me that its rivers, its woods, its human habitations were the product of chance, of fortuitous, conjunctions of circumstance. What a deal of the earth's surface is given over to rock and sand!

But all this was not my affair. My world was the world of flight. Already I could feel the oncoming night within which I should be enclosed as in the precincts of a temple - enclosed in the temple of night for the accomplishment of secret rites and absorption in inviolable contemplation.

Already this profane world was beginning to fade out: soon it would vanish altogether. This landscape was still laved in golden sunlight, but already something was evaporating out of it. I know nothing, nothing in the world, equal to the wonder of nightfall in the air.

Those who have been enthralled by the witchery of flying will know what I mean - and I do not speak of the men who, among other sports, enjoy taking a turn in a plane. I speak of those

est encore nourri de lumière blonde, mais quelque chose déjà s'en évapore. Et je ne connais rien, je dis : rien, qui vaille cette heure-là. Et ceux-là me comprennent bien, qui ont subi l'inexplicable amour du vol.

Je renonce donc peu à peu au soleil. Je renonce aux grandes surfaces dorées qui m'eussent accueilli en cas de panne... Je renonce aux repères qui m'eussent guidé. Je renonce aux profils des montagnes sur le ciel qui m'eussent évité les écueils. J'entre dans la nuit. Je navigue. Je n'ai plus pour moi que les étoiles...

Cette mort du monde se fait lentement. Et c'est peu à peu que me manque la lumière. La terre et le ciel se confondent peu à peu. Cette terre monte et semble se répandre comme une vapeur. Les premiers astres tremblent comme dans une eau verte. Il faudra attendre longtemps encore pour qu'ils se changent en diamants durs. Il me faudra attendre longtemps encore pour assister aux jeux silencieux des étoiles filantes. Au cœur de certaines nuits, j'ai vu tant de flammèches courir qu'il me semblait que soufflait un grand vent parmi les étoiles.

Prévot fait les essais des lampes fixes et des lampes de secours. Nous entourons les ampoules de papier rouge.

- Encore une épaisseur...

Il ajoute une couche nouvelle, touche un contact. La lumière est encore trop claire. Elle voilerait, comme chez le photographe, la pâle image du monde extérieur. Elle détruirait cette pulpe légère qui, la nuit parfois, s'attache encore aux choses. Cette nuit s'est faite. Mais ce n'est pas encore la vraie vie. Un croissant de lune subsiste. Prévot s'enfonce vers l'arrière et revient avec un sandwich. Je grignote une grappe de raisin. Je n'ai pas faim. Je n'ai ni faim ni soif. Je ne ressens aucune fatigue, il me semble que je piloterais ainsi pendant dix années.

La lune est morte.

Benghazi s'annonce dans la nuit noire. Benghazi repose au fond d'une obscurité si profonde qu'elle ne s'orne d'aucun halo. J'ai aperçu la ville quand je l'atteignais. Je cherchais le terrain, mais voici que son balisage rouge s'allume. Les feux découpent un rectangle noir. Je vire. La lumière d'un phare braqué vers le ciel monte droit comme un jet d'incendie, pivote et trace sur le terrain une route d'or. Je vire encore pour bien observer les obstacles. L'équipement nocturne de cette escale est admirable. Je réduis et commence ma plongée comme dans l'eau noire.

Il est 23 heures locales quand j'atterris. Je roule vers le phare. Officiers et soldats les plus courtois du monde passent de l'ombre à la lumière dure du projecteur, tour à tour visibles et invisibles. On me prend mes papiers, on commence le plein d'essence. Mon passage sera réglé en vingt minutes.

- Faites un virage et passez au-dessus de nous, sinon nous ignorerions si le décollage s'est bien terminé.

En route.

Je roule sur cette route d'or, vers une trouée sans obstacles. Mon avion, type « Simoun », décolle sa surcharge bien avant d'avoir épuisé l'aire disponible. Le projecteur me suit et je

who professionally and have sacrificed much to their craft. Mermoz said once, "It's worth it, it's worth the final smash-up."

No question about it; but the reason is hard to formulate. A novice taking orders could appreciate this ascension towards the essence of things, since his profession too is one of renunciation: he renounces the world ; he renounces riches ; he renounces the love of woman. And by renunciation he discovers his hidden god.

I, too, in this flight, am renouncing things. I am giving up the broad golden surfaces that would befriend me if my engines were to fail. I am giving up the landmarks by which I might be taking my bearings. I am giving up the profiles of mountains against the sky that would warn me of pitfalls. I am plunging into the night. I am navigating. I have on my side only the stars.

The diurnal death of the world is a slow death. It is only little by little that the divine beacon of daylight recedes from me. Earth and sky begin to merge into each other. The earth rises and seems to spread like a mist. The first stars tremble as if shimmering in green water. Hours must pass before their glimmer hardens into the frozen glitter of diamonds. I shall have a long wait before I witness the soundless frolic of the shooting stars. In the profound darkness of certain nights I have seen the sky streaked with so many trailing sparks that it seemed to me a great gale must be blowing through the outer heavens.

Prevot was testing the lamps in their sockets and the emergency torches. Round the bulbs he was wrapping red paper.

"Another layer."

He added another wrapping of paper and touched a switch. The dim light within the plane was still too bright.. As in a photographer's dark-room, it veiled the pale picture of the external world. It hid that glowing phosphorescence which sometimes, at night, clings to the surface of things. Now night has fallen, but it is not yet true night. A crescent moon persists.

Prevot dove aft and came back with a sandwich. I nibbled a bunch of grapes. I was not hungry. I was neither hungry nor thirsty. I felt no weariness. It seemed to me that I could go on like this at the controls for ten years. I was happy.

The moon had set. It was pitch dark when we came in sight of Benghazi. The town lay at the bottom of an obscurity so dense that it was without a halo. I saw the place only when I was over it. As I was hunting for the airdrome the red obstruction lights were switched on. They cut out a black rectangle in the earth.

I banked, and at that moment the rays of a floodlight rose into the sky like a jet from a fire-hose. It pivoted and traced a golden lane over the landing-field. I circled again to get a clear view of what might be in my way. The port was equipped with everything to make a night-landing easy. I throttled down my engine and dropped like a diver into black water.

It was eleven o'clock local time when I landed and taxied across to the beacon. The most helpful ground crew in the world wove in and out of the blinding ray of a searchlight, alternately visible and invisible. They took my papers and began promptly to fill my tanks. Twenty

suis gêné pour virer. Enfin, il me lâche, on a deviné qu'il m'émblouissait. Je fais demi-tour à la verticale, lorsque le projecteur me frappe de nouveau au visage, mais à peine m'a-t-il touché, il me fuit et dirige ailleurs sa longue flûte d'or. Je sens, sous ces ménagements, une extrême courtoisie. Et maintenant je vire encore vers le désert.

Les météo de Paris, Tunis et Benghazi m'ont annoncé un vent arrière de trente à quarante kilomètres-heure. Je compte sur trois cents kilomètres-heure de croisière. Je mets le cap sur le milieu du segment de droite qui joint Alexandrie au Caire. J'éviterai ainsi les zones interdites de la côte et, malgré les dérives inconnues que je subirai, je serai accroché, soit à ma droite, soit à ma gauche, par les feux de l'une ou l'autre de ces villes ou, plus généralement, par ceux de la vallée du Nil. Je naviguerai trois heures vingt si le vent n'a point varié. Trois heures quarante-cinq s'il a faibli. Et je commence à absorber mille cinquante kilomètres de désert.

Plus de lune. Un bitume noir qui s'est dilaté jusqu'aux étoiles. Je n'apercevrai pas un feu, je ne bénéficierai d'aucun repère, faute de radio je ne recevrai pas un signe de l'homme avant le Nil. Je ne tente même pas d'observer autre chose que mon compas et mon Sperry. Je ne m'intéresse plus à rien, sinon à la lente période de respiration, sur l'écran sombre de l'instrument, d'une étroite ligne de radium. Quand Prévot se déplace, je corrige doucement les variations du centrage. Je m'élève à deux mille là où les vents, m'a-t-on signalé, sont favorables. À longs intervalles j'allume une lampe pour observer les cadrans-moteur qui ne sont pas tous lumineux, mais la majeure partie du temps je m'enferme bien dans le noir, parmi mes minuscules constellations qui répandent la même lumière minérale que les étoiles, la même lumière inusable et secrète, et qui parlent le même langage. Moi aussi, comme les astronomes, je lis un livre de mécanique céleste. Moi aussi je me sens studieux et pur. Tout s'est éteint dans le monde extérieur. Il y a Prévot qui s'endort, après avoir bien résisté, et je goûte mieux ma solitude. Il y a le doux grondement du moteur et, en face de moi, sur la planche de bord, toutes ces étoiles calmes.

Je médite cependant. Nous ne bénéficions point de la lune et nous sommes privés de radio. Aucun lien, si ténu soit-il, ne nous liera plus au monde jusqu'à ce que nous donnions du front contre le filet de lumière du Nil. Nous sommes hors de tout, et notre moteur seul nous suspend et nous fait durer dans ce bitume. Nous traversons la grande vallée noire des contes de fées, celle de l'épreuve. Ici point de secours. Ici point de pardon pour les erreurs. Nous sommes livrés à la discrétion de Dieu.

Un rai de lumière filtre d'un joint du standard électrique. Je réveille Prévot pour qu'il l'éteigne. Prévot remue dans l'ombre comme un ours, s'élève, s'avance. Il s'absorbe dans je ne sais quelle combinaison de mouchoirs et de papier noir. Mon rai de lumière a disparu. Il for-rait cassure dans ce monde. Il n'était point de la même qualité que la pâle et lointaine lumière du radium. C'était une lumière de boîte de nuit et non une lumière d'étoile. Mais surtout il m'émblouissait, effaçait les autres lueurs.

Trois heures de vol. Une clarté qui me paraît vive jaillit sur ma droite. Je regarde. Un long sillage lumineux s'accroche à la lampe de bout d'aile, qui, jusque-là, m'était demeurée invisible.

minutes of my time was all they asked for, and I was touched by their great readiness to help. As I was taking off, one of them said. "Better circle round and fly over us; otherwise we shan't be sure you got off all right."

I rolled down the golden lane towards an unimpeded opening. My Simoon lifted her overload clear of the 'ground well before I reached the end of the runway. The searchlight following me made it hard for me to wheel. Soon it let me go: the men on the ground had guessed that it was dazzling me. I turned right about and banked vertically, and at that moment the searchlight caught me between the eyes again; but scarcely had it touched me when it fled and sent elsewhere its long golden flute. I knew that the ground crew were being most thoughtful and I was grateful. And now I was off to the desert.

All along the line, at Paris, at Tunis, and at Benghazi, I had been told that I should have a following wind of up to twenty-five miles an hour. I was counting on a speed of 190 m.p.h. as I set my course on the middle of the stretch between Alexandria and Cairo. On this course I should avoid the danger zones along the coast, and despite any drifting I might do without knowing it, I should pick up either to port or to starboard the lights of one of those two cities. Failing them I should certainly not miss the lights of the Nile valley. With a steady wind I should reach the Nile

in three hours and twenty minutes; if the wind fell, three hours and three-quarters. Calculating thus I began to eat up the six hundred and fifty miles of desert ahead of me.

There was no moon. The world was a bubble of pitch that had dilated until it reached the very stars in the heavens. I should not see a single gleam of light, should not profit by the faintest landmark. Carrying no wireless, I should receive no message from the earth until I reached the Nile. It was useless to try to look at anything other than the compass and the artificial horizon. I might blot the world out of my mind and concentrate my attention upon the slow pulsation of the narrow thread of radium paint that ran along the dark background of the dials.

Whenever Prevot stirred I brought the plane smoothly back to plumb. I went up to six thousand feet where I had been told the winds would be favorable. At long intervals I switched on a lamp to glance at the engine dials, not all of which were phosphorescent; but most of the time I wrapped myself closely round in darkness among my miniature constellations which gave off the same mineral glow as the stars, the same mysterious and unwearied light, and spoke the same language.

Like the astronomers, I too was reading in the book of celestial mechanics. I too seemed to myself studious and uncorrupted. Everything in the world that might have lured me from my studies had gone out. The external world had ceased to exist.

There was Prevot, who, after a vain resistance, had fallen asleep and left me to the greater enjoyment of my solitude. There was the gentle purr of my beautiful little motor, and before me, on the instrument panel, there were all those tranquil stars. I was most decidedly not sleepy. If this state of quiet well-being persisted until tomorrow night, I intended to push on without a stop to Saigon.

Now the flight was beginning to seem to me short. Benghazi, the only troublesome night

C'est une lueur intermittente, tantôt appuyée, tantôt effacée : voici que je rentre dans un nuage. C'est lui qui réfléchit ma lampe. À proximité de mes repères j'eusse préféré un ciel pur. L'aile s'éclaire sous le halo. La lumière s'installe, et se fixe, et rayonne, et forme là-bas un bouquet rose. Des remous profonds me basculent. Je navigue quelque part dans le vent d'un cumulus dont je ne connais pas l'épaisseur. Je m'élève jusqu'à deux mille cinq et n'émerge pas. Je redescends à mille mètres. Le bouquet de fleurs est toujours présent, immobile et de plus en plus éclatant. Bon. Ça va. Tant pis. Je pense à autre chose. On verra bien quand on en sortira. Mais je n'aime pas cette lumière de mauvaise auberge.

Je calcule : « Ici je danse un peu, et c'est normal, mais j'ai subi des remous tout le long de ma route malgré le ciel pur et l'altitude. Le vent n'est point calmé, et je dois dépasser la vitesse de trois cents kilomètres-heure. » Après tout, je ne sais rien de bien précis, j'essaierai de me repérer quand je sortirai du nuage.

Et l'on en sort. Le bouquet s'est brusquement évanoui. C'est sa disparition qui m'annonce l'événement. Je regarde vers l'avant et j'aperçois, autant que l'on peut rien apercevoir, une étroite vallée de ciel et le mur du prochain cumulus. Le bouquet déjà s'est ranimé.

Je ne sortirai plus de cette glu, sauf pour quelques secondes. Après trois heures trente de vol elle commence à m'inquiéter, car je me rapproche du Nil si j'avance comme je l'imagine. Je pourrai peut-être l'apercevoir, avec un peu de chance, à travers les couloirs, mais ils ne sont guère nombreux. Je n'ose pas descendre encore : si, par hasard, je suis moins rapide que je ne le crois, je survole encore des terres élevées.

Je n'éprouve toujours aucune inquiétude, je crains simplement de risquer une perte de temps. Mais je fixe une limite à ma sérénité : quatre heures quinze de vol. Après cette durée, même par vent nul, et le vent nul est improbable, j'aurais dépassé la vallée du Nil.

Quand je parviens aux franges du nuage, le bouquet lance des feux à éclipses de plus en plus précipités, puis s'éteint d'un coup. Je n'aime pas ces communications chiffrées avec les démons de la nuit.

Une étoile verte émerge devant moi, rayonnante comme un phare. Est-ce une étoile ou est-ce un phare ? Je n'aime pas non plus cette clarté surnaturelle, cet astre de roi mage, cette invitation dangereuse.

Prevot s'est réveillé et éclaire les cadrans-moteur. Je les repousse, lui et sa lampe. Je viens d'aborder cette faille entre deux nuages, et j'en profite pour regarder sous moi. Prevot se rendort.

Il n'y a d'ailleurs rien à regarder.

Quatre heures cinq de vol. Prevot est venu s'asseoir auprès de moi :

– On devrait arriver au Caire... – Je pense bien...

– Est-ce une étoile ça, ou un phare ?

J'ai réduit un peu mon moteur, c'est sans doute ce qui a réveillé Prevot. Il est sensible à toutes les variations des bruits du vol. Je commence une descente lente, pour me glisser sous la masse des nuages.

- landing on the route, had banked its fires and settled down behind the horizon in that dark shuttering in which cities take their slumber.

Meanwhile I was turning things over in my mind. We were without the moon's help and we had no wireless. No slightest tenuous tie was to bind us to earth until the Nile showed its thread of light directly ahead of us. We were truly alone in the universe - a thought that caused me not the least worry. If my motor were to cough, that sound would startle me more than if my heart should skip a beat.

Into my mind came the image of Sabathier, the white-haired engineer with the clear eye. I was thinking that, from one point of view, it would be hard to draw a distinction in the matter of human values between a profession like his and that of the painter, the composer, or the poet. I could see in the mind's eye those watch-maker's hands of his that had brought into being this clockwork I was piloting. Men who have given their lives to labors of love go straight to my heart.

"Couldn't I change this?" I had asked him.

"I shouldn't advise it," he had answered.

I was remembering our last conversation. He had thought it inadvisable, and of course that had settled it. A physician, that's it! Exactly the way one puts oneself into the hands of one's doctor - when he has that look in his eye. It was by his motor that we hung suspended in air and were able to go on living with the ticking of time in this penetrable pitch. We were crossing the great dark valley of a fairy-tale, the Valley of Ordeal. Like the prince in the tale, we must meet the test without succor. Failure here would not be forgiven. We were in the lap of the inexorable gods.

A ray of light was filtering through a joint in the lamp shaft. I woke up Prévot and told him to put it out. Prévot stirred in the darkness like a bear, snorted, and came forward. He fumbled for a bit with handkerchiefs and black paper, and the ray of light vanished. That light had bothered me because it was not of my world. It swore at the pale and distant gleam of the phosphorescence and was like a night-club spot-light compared to the gleam of a star. Besides, it had dazzled me and had out-shone all else that gleamed.

We had been flying for three hours. A brightness that seemed to me a glare spurted on the starboard side. I stared. A streamer of light which I had hitherto not noticed was fluttering from a lamp at the tip of the wing. It was an intermittent glow, now brilliant, now dim. It told me that I had flown into a cloud, and it was on the cloud that the lamp was reflected.

I was nearing the landmarks upon which I had counted; a clear sky would have helped a lot. The wing shone bright under the halo. The light steadied itself, became fixed, and then began to radiate in the form of a bouquet of pink blossoms. Great eddies of air were swinging me to and fro. I was navigating somewhere in the belly of a cumulus whose thickness I could not guess. I rose to seventy-five hundred feet and was still in it. Down again to three thousand, and the bouquet of flowers was still with me, motionless and growing brighter.

Well, there it was and there was nothing to do about it. I would think of something else, and

Je viens de consulter ma carte. De toute façon j'ai abordé les cotes O : je ne risque rien. Je descends toujours et vire plein nord. Ainsi je recevrai, dans mes fenêtres, les feux des villes. Je les ai sans doute dépassées, elles m'apparaîtront donc à gauche. Je vole maintenant sous les cumulus. Mais je longe un autre nuage qui descend plus bas sur ma gauche. Je vire pour ne pas me laisser prendre dans son filet, je fais du Nord- Nord-Est.

Ce nuage descend indubitablement plus bas, et me masque tout l'horizon. Je n'ose plus perdre d'altitude. J'ai atteint la cote 400 de mon altimètre, mais j'ignore ici la pression. Prévot se penche. Je lui crie : « Je vais filer jusqu'à la mer, j'achèverai de descendre en mer, pour ne pas emboutir... »

Rien ne prouve d'ailleurs que je n'ai point déjà dérivé en mer. L'obscurité sous ce nuage est très exactement impénétrable. Je me serre contre ma fenêtre. J'essaie de lire sous moi. J'essaie de découvrir des feux, des signes. Je suis un homme qui fouille des cendres. Je suis un homme qui s'efforce de retrouver les braises de la vie au fond d'un âtre.

- Un phare marin !

Nous l'avons vu en même temps ce piège à éclipse ! Quelle folie ! Où était-il ce phare fantôme, cette invention de la nuit ? Car c'est à la seconde même où Prévot et moi nous nous penchions pour le retrouver, à trois cents mètres sous nos ailes, que brusquement...

- Ah !

Je crois bien n'avoir rien dit d'autre. Je crois bien n'avoir rien ressenti d'autre qu'un formidable craquement qui ébranla notre monde sur ses bases. À deux cent soixante-dix kilomètres-heure nous avons embouti le sol.

Je crois bien ne rien avoir attendu d'autre, pour le centième de seconde qui suivait, que la grande étoile pourpre de l'explosion où nous allions tous les deux nous confondre. Ni Prévot ni moi n'avons ressenti la moindre émotion. Je n'observais en moi qu'une attente démesurée, l'attente de cette étoile resplendissante où nous devions, dans la seconde même, nous évanouir. Mais il n'y eut point d'étoile pourpre. Il y eut une sorte de tremblement de terre qui ravagea notre cabine, arrachant les fenêtres, expédiant des tôles à cent mètres, remplissant jusqu'à nos entrailles de son grondement. L'avion vibra comme un couteau planté de loin dans le bois dur. Et nous étions brassés par cette colère. Une seconde, deux secondes... L'avion tremblait toujours et j'attendais avec une impatience monstrueuse, que ses provisions d'énergie le fissent éclater comme une grenade. Mais les secousses souterraines se prolongeaient sans aboutir à l'éruption définitive. Et je ne comprenais rien à cet invisible travail. Je ne comprenais ni ce tremblement, ni cette colère, ni ce délai interminable... cinq secondes, six secondes... Et, brusquement, nous éprouvâmes une sensation de rotation, un choc qui projeta encore par la fenêtre nos cigarettes, pulvérisant l'aile droite, puis rien. Rien qu'une immobilité glacée. Je criais à Prévot :

- Sautez vite !

Il criait en même temps :

- Le feu !

wait to get clear of it. Just the same, I did not like this sinister glitter of a one-eyed grog-shop.

“Let me think,” I said to myself. “I am bouncing round a bit, but there’s nothing abnormal about that. I’ve been bumped all the way, despite a clear sky and plenty of ceiling. The wind has not died down, and I must be doing better than the 190 m.p.h. I counted on.” This was about as far as I could get. Oh, well, when I got through the cloud-bank I would try to take my bearings.

Out of it we flew. The bouquet suddenly vanished, letting me know I was in the clear again. I stared ahead and saw, if one can speak of “seeing” space, a narrow valley of sky and the wall of the next cumulus. Already the bouquet was coming to life again. I was free of that viscous mess from time to time but only for a few seconds each time. After three and a half hours of flying it began to get on my nerves. If I had made the time I imagined, we were certainly approaching the Nile. With a little luck I might be able to spot the river through the rifts, but they were getting rare. I dared not come down, for if I was actually slower than I thought, I was still over high-lying country.

Thus far I was entirely without anxiety; my only fear was that I might presently be wasting time. I decided that I would take things easy until I had flown four and a quarter hours: after that, even in a dead calm (which was highly unlikely) I should have crossed the Nile. When I reached the fringes of the cloud-bank the bouquet winked on and off more and more swiftly and then suddenly went out. Decidedly, I did not like these dot-and-dash messages from the demons of the night.

A green star appeared ahead of me, flashing like a lighthouse. Was it a lighthouse? or really a star? I took no pleasure from this supernatural gleam, this star the Magi might have seen, this dangerous decoy.

Prevot, meanwhile, had waked up and turned his electric torch on the engine dials. I waved him off, him and his torch. We had just sailed into the clear between two clouds and I was busy staring below. Prevot went back to sleep. The gap in the clouds was no help: there was nothing below.

Four hours and five minutes in the air. Prevot awoke and sat down beside me. “I’ll bet we’re near Cairo,” he said.

“We must be.”

“What’s that? A star? or is it a lighthouse?”

I had throttled the engine down a little. This, probably, was what had awakened Prevot. He is sensitive to all the variations of sound in flight. I began a slow descent, intending to slip under the mass of clouds. Meanwhile I had had a look at my map. One thing was sure - the land below me lay at sea level, and there was no risk of conking against a hill. Down I went, flying due north so that the lights of the cities would strike square into my windows. I must have overflown them, and should therefore see them on my left.

Now I was flying below the cumulus. But alongside was another cloud hanging lower down on the left. I swerved so as not to be caught in its net, and headed north-northeast. This

Et déjà nous avions basculé par la fenêtre arrachée. Nous étions debout à vingt mètres. Je disais à Prevot :

– Point de mal ?

Il me répondait :

– Point de mal !

Mais il se frottait le genou. Je lui disais :

– Tâtez-vous, remuez, jurez-moi que vous n’avez rien de cassé...

Et il me répondait :

– Ce n’est rien, c’est la pompe de secours...

Moi, je pensais qu’il allait s’écrouler brusquement, ouvert de la tête au nombril, mais il me répétait, les yeux fixes :

– C’est la pompe de secours !...

Moi, je pensais : le voilà fou, il va danser...

Mais, détournant enfin son regard de l’avion qui, désormais, était sauvé du feu, il me regarda et reprit :

– Ce n’est rien, c’est la pompe de secours qui m’a accroché au genou.

III

Il est inexplicable que nous soyons vivants. Je remonte, ma lampe électrique à la main, les traces de l’avion sur le sol. À deux cent cinquante mètres de son point d’arrêt nous retrouvons déjà des ferrailles tordues et des tôles dont, tout le long de son parcours, il a éclaboussé le sable. Nous saurons, quand viendra le jour, que nous avons tamponné presque tangentiellement une pente douce au sommet d’un plateau désert. Au point d’impact un trou dans le sable ressemble à celui d’un soc de charrue. L’avion, sans culbuter, a fait son chemin sur le ventre avec une colère et des mouvements de queue de reptile. À deux cent soixante-dix kilomètres-heure il a rampé. Nous devons sans doute notre vie à ces pierres noires et rondes, qui roulent librement sur le sable et qui ont formé plateau à billes.

Prevot débranche les accumulateurs pour éviter un incendie tardif par court-circuit. Je me suis adossé au moteur et je réfléchis : j’ai pu subir, en altitude, pendant quatre heures quinze, un vent de cinquante kilomètres- heure, j’étais en effet secoué. Mais, s’il a varié depuis les prévisions, j’ignore tout de la direction qu’il a prise. Je me situe donc dans un carré de quatre cents kilomètres de côté.

Prevot vient s’asseoir à côté de moi, et il me dit :

– C’est extraordinaire d’être vivants...

Je ne lui réponds rien et je n’éprouve aucune joie. Il m’est venu une petite idée qui fait son chemin dans ma tête et me tourmente déjà légèrement.

Je prie Prevot d’allumer sa lampe pour former repère, et je m’en vais droit devant moi, ma lampe électrique à la main. Avec attention je regarde le sol.

J’avance lentement, je fais un large demi-cercle, je change plusieurs fois d’orientation. Je

second cloud-bank certainly went down a long way, for it blocked my view of the horizon. I dared not give up any more altitude. My altimeter registered 1200 feet, but I had no notion of the atmospheric pressure here. Prevot leaned towards me and I shouted to him, "I'm going out to sea. I'd rather come down on it than risk a crash here."

As a matter of fact, there was nothing to prove that we had not drifted over the sea already. Below that cloud-bank visibility was exactly nil. I hugged my window, trying to read below me, to discover flares, signs of life. I was a man raking dead ashes, trying in vain to retrieve the flame of life in a hearth.

"A lighthouse!"

Both of us spied it at the same moment, that winking decoy! What madness! Where was that phantom light, that invention of the night? For at the very second when Prevot and I leaned forward to pick it out of the air where it had glittered nine hundred feet below our wings, suddenly, at that very instant . . .

"Oh!"

I am quite sure that this was all I said. I am quite sure that all I felt was a terrific crash that rocked our world to its foundations. We had crashed against the earth at a hundred and seventy miles an hour. I am quite sure that in the split second that followed, all I expected was the great flash of ruddy light of the explosion in which Prevot and I were to be blown up together. Neither he nor I had felt the least emotion of any kind. All I could observe in myself was an extraordinary tense feeling of expectancy, the expectancy of that resplendent star in which we were to vanish within the second.

But there was no ruddy star. Instead there was a sort of earthquake that splintered our cabin, ripped away the windows, blew sheets of metal hurtling through space a hundred yards away, and filled our very entrails with its roar. The ship quivered like a knife-blade thrown from a distance into a block of oak, and its anger mashed us as if we were so much pulp.

One second, two seconds passed, and the plane still quivered while I waited with a grotesque impatience for the forces within it to burst it like a bomb. But the subterranean quakings went on without a climax of eruption while I marveled uncomprehendingly at its invisible travail. I was baffled by the quaking, the anger, the interminable postponement. Five seconds passed; six seconds. And suddenly we were seized by a spinning motion, a shock that jerked our cigarettes out of the window, pulverized the starboard wing - and then nothing, nothing but a frozen immobility. I shouted to Prevot: "Jump!"

And in that instant he cried out: "Fire!"

We dove together through the wrecked window and found ourselves standing side by side, sixty feet from the plane. I said: "Are you hurt?"

He answered: "Not a bit."

But he was rubbing his knee.

"Better run your hands over yourself," I said ; "move about a bit. Sure no bones are broken?"

fouille toujours le sol comme si je cherchais une bague égarée. Tout à l'heure ainsi je cherchais la braise. J'avance toujours dans l'obscurité, penché sur le disque blanc que je promène. C'est bien ça... c'est bien ça... Je remonte lentement vers l'avion. Je m'assois près de la cabine et je médite. Je cherchais une raison d'espérer et ne l'ai point trouvée. Je cherchais un signe offert par la vie, et la vie ne m'a point fait signe.

- Prevot, je n'ai pas vu un seul brin d'herbe...

Prevot se tait, je ne sais pas s'il m'a compris. Nous en reparlerons au lever du rideau, quand viendra le jour. J'éprouve seulement une grande lassitude, je pense : « À quatre cents kilomètres près, dans le désert !... » Soudain je saute sur mes pieds :

- L'eau !

Réservoirs d'essence, réservoirs d'huile sont crevés. Nos réserves d'eau le sont aussi. Le sable a tout bu. Nous retrouvons un demi-litre de café au fond d'un thermos pulvérisé, un quart de litre de vin blanc au fond d'un autre. Nous filtrons ces liquides et nous les mélangeons. Nous retrouvons aussi un peu de raisin et une orange. Mais je calcule: «En cinq heures de marche, sous le soleil, dans le désert, on épuise ça... » Nous nous installons dans la cabine pour attendre le jour. Je m'allonge, je vais dormir. Je fais en m'endormant le bilan de notre aventure : nous ignorons tout de notre position. Nous n'avons pas un litre de liquide. Si nous sommes situés à peu près sur la ligne droite, on nous retrouvera en huit jours, nous ne pouvons guère espérer mieux, et il sera trop tard. Si nous avons dérivé en travers, on nous trouvera en six mois. Il ne faut pas compter sur les avions : ils nous rechercheront sur trois mille kilomètres.

- Ah ! c'est dommage... me dit Prevot.

- Pourquoi ?

- On pouvait si bien en finir d'un coup !...

Mais il ne faut pas abdiquer si vite. Prevot et moi nous nous ressaisissons. Il ne faut pas perdre la chance, aussi faible qu'elle soit, d'un sauvetage miraculeux par voie des airs. Il ne faut pas, non plus, rester sur place, et manquer peut-être l'oasis proche. Nous marcherons aujourd'hui tout le jour. Et nous reviendrons à notre appareil. Et nous inscrirons, avant de partir, notre programme en grandes majuscules sur le sable.

Je me suis donc roulé en boule et je vais dormir jusqu'à l'aube. Et je suis très heureux de m'endormir. Ma fatigue m'enveloppe d'une multiple présence. Je ne suis pas seul dans le désert, mon demi-sommeil est peuplé de voix, de souvenirs et de confidences chuchotées. Je n'ai pas soif encore, je me sens bien, je me livre au sommeil comme à l'aventure. La réalité perd du terrain devant le rêve...

Ah ! ce fut bien différent quand vint le jour !

IV

J'ai beaucoup aimé le Sahara. J'ai passé des nuits en dissidence. Je me suis réveillé dans cette étendue blonde où le vent a marqué sa houle comme sur la mer. J'y ai attendu des secours en dormant sous mon aile, mais ce n'était point comparable.

He answered: "I'm all right. It's that emergency pump."

Emergency pump! I was sure he was going to keel over any minute and split open from head to navel there before my eyes. But he kept repeating with a glassy stare: "That pump, that emergency pump."

He's out of his head, I thought. He'll start dancing in a minute.

Finally he stopped staring at the plane - which had not gone up in flames - and stared at me instead. And he said again: "I'm all right. It's that emergency pump. It got me in the knee."

Why we were not blown up, I do not know. I switched on my electric torch and went back over the furrow in the ground traced by the plane. Two hundred and fifty yards from where we stopped the ship had begun to shed the twisted iron and sheet-metal that spattered the sand the length of her traces. We were to see, when day came, that we had run almost tangentially into a gentle slope at the top of a barren plateau. At the point of impact there was a hole in the sand that looked as if it had been made by a plough. Maintaining an even keel, the plane had run its course with the fury and the tail-lashings of a reptile gliding on its belly at the rate of a hundred and seventy miles an hour. We owed our lives to the fact that this desert was surfaced with round black pebbles which had rolled over and over like ball-bearings beneath us. They must have rained upward to the heavens as we shot through them.

Prevot disconnected the batteries for fear of fire by short-circuit. I leaned against the motor and turned the situation over in my mind. I had been flying high for four hours and a quarter, possibly with a thirty-mile following wind. I had been jolted a good deal. If the wind had changed since the weather people forecast it, I was unable to say into what quarter it had veered. All I could make out was that we had crashed in an empty square two hundred and fifty miles on each side.

Prevot came up and sat down beside me. "I can't believe that we're alive," he said.

I said nothing. Even that thought could not cheer me. A germ of an idea was at work in my mind and was already bothering me. Telling Prevot to switch on his torch as a landmark, I walked straight out, scrutinizing the ground in the light of my own torch as I went. I went forward slowly, swung round in a wide arc, and changed direction a number of times. I kept my eyes fixed on the ground like a man hunting a lost ring.

Only a little while before I had been straining just as hard to see a gleam of light from the air. Through the darkness I went, bowed over the traveling disk of white light. "Just as I thought," I said to myself, and I went slowly back to the plane. I sat down beside the cabin and ruminated. I had been looking for a reason to hope and had failed to find it. I had been looking for a sign of and no sign of life had appeared. "Prevot, I couldn't find a single blade of grass."

Prevot said nothing, and I was not sure he had understood. Well, we could talk about it again when the curtain rose at dawn. Meanwhile I was dead tired and all I could think was, "Two hundred and fifty miles more or less in the desert."

Suddenly I jumped to my feet. "Water!" I said.

Nous marchons au versant de collines courbes. Le sol est composé de sable entièrement recouvert d'une seule couche de cailloux brillants et noirs. On dirait des écailles de métal, et tous les dômes qui nous entourent brillent comme des armures. Nous sommes tombés dans un monde minéral. Nous sommes enfermés dans un paysage de fer.

La première crête franchie, plus loin s'annonce une autre crête semblable, brillante et noire. Nous marchons en raclant la terre de nos pieds, pour inscrire un fil conducteur, afin de revenir plus tard. Nous avançons face au soleil. C'est contre toute logique que j'ai décidé de faire du plein Est, car tout m'incite à croire que j'ai franchi le Nil : la météo, mon temps de vol. Mais j'ai fait une courte tentative vers l'Ouest et j'ai éprouvé un malaise que je ne me suis point expliqué, j'ai alors remis l'Ouest à demain. Et j'ai provisoirement sacrifié le Nord qui cependant mène à la mer. Trois jours plus tard, quand nous déciderons, dans un demi-délire, d'abandonner définitivement notre appareil et de marcher droit devant nous jusqu'à la chute, c'est encore vers l'Est que nous partirons. Plus exactement vers l'Est-Nord-Est. Et ceci encore contre toute raison, de même que contre tout espoir. Et nous découvrirons, une fois sauvés, qu'aucune autre direction ne nous eût permis de revenir, car vers le Nord, trop épuisés, nous n'eussions pas non plus atteint la mer. Aussi absurde que cela me paraisse, il me semble aujourd'hui que, faute d'aucune indication qui pût peser sur notre choix, j'ai choisi cette direction pour la seule raison qu'elle avait sauvé mon ami Guillaumet dans les Andes, où je l'ai tant cherché. Elle était devenue, pour moi, confusément, la direction de la vie.

Après cinq heures de marche le paysage change. Une rivière de sable semble couler dans une vallée et nous empruntons ce fond de vallée. Nous marchons à grands pas, il nous faut aller le plus loin possible et revenir avant la nuit, si nous n'avons rien découvert. Et tout à coup je stoppe : - Prevot.

- Quoi ?

- Les traces...

Depuis combien de temps avons-nous oublié de laisser derrière nous un sillage? Si nous ne le retrouvons pas, c'est la mort.

Nous faisons demi-tour, mais en obliquant sur la droite. Lorsque nous serons assez loin, nous virerons perpendiculairement à notre direction première, et nous recouperons nos traces, là où nous les marquions encore.

Ayant renoué ce fil nous repartons. La chaleur monte, et, avec elle, naissent les mirages. Mais ce ne sont encore que des mirages élémentaires. De grands lacs se forment, et sévanouissent quand nous avançons. Nous décidons de franchir la vallée de sable, et de faire l'escalade du dôme le plus élevé afin d'observer l'horizon. Nous marchons déjà depuis six heures. Nous avons dû, à grandes enjambées, totaliser trente-cinq kilomètres. Nous sommes parvenus au faite de cette croupe noire, où nous nous asseyons en silence. Notre vallée de sable, à nos pieds, débouche dans un désert de sable sans pierres, dont l'éclatante lumière blanche brûle les yeux. À perte de vue c'est le vide. Mais, à l'horizon, des jeux de lumière composent des mirages déjà plus troublants. Forteresses et minarets, masses géométriques à lignes verticales. J'observe

Gas tanks and oil tanks were smashed in. So was our supply of drinking-water. The sand had drunk everything. We found a pint of coffee in a battered thermos flask and half a pint of white wine in another. We filtered both, and poured them into one flask. There were some grapes, too, and a single orange. Meanwhile I was computing: "All this will last us five hours of tramping in the sun."

We crawled into the cabin and waited for dawn. I stretched out, and as I settled down to sleep I took stock of our situation. We didn't know where we were; we had less than a quart of liquid between us ; if we were not too far off the Benghazi-Cairo lane we should be found in a week, and that would be too late. Yet it was the best we could hope for. If, on the other hand, we had drifted off our course, we shouldn't be found in six months. One thing was sure - we could not count on being picked up by a plane; the men who came out for us would have two thousand miles to cover.

"You know, it's a shame," Prevot said suddenly. "What's a shame?"

"That we didn't crash properly and have it over with."

It seemed pretty early to be throwing in one's hand. Prevot and I pulled ourselves together. There was still a chance, slender as it was, that we might be saved miraculously by a plane. On the other hand, we couldn't stay here and perhaps miss a near-by oasis. We would walk all day and come back to the plane before dark. And before going off we would write our plan in huge letters in the sand.

With this I curled up and settled down to sleep. I was happy to go to sleep. My weariness wrapped me round like a multiple presence. I was not alone in the desert: my drowsiness was peopled with voices and memories and whispered confidences. I was not yet thirsty; I felt strong; and I surrendered myself to sleep as to an aimless journey. Reality lost ground before the advance of dreams.

Ah, but things were different when I awoke!

In times past I have loved the Sahara. I have spent nights alone in the path of marauding tribes and have waked up with untroubled mind in the golden emptiness of the desert where the wind like a sea had raised sand-waves upon its surface. Asleep under the wing of my plane I have looked forward with confidence to being rescued next day. But this was not the Sahara!

Prevot and I walked along the slopes of rolling mounds. The ground was sand covered over with a single layer of shining black pebbles. They gleamed like metal scales and all the domes about us shone like coats of mail. We had dropped down into a mineral world and were hemmed in by iron hills.

When we reached the top of the first crest we saw in the distance another just like it, black and gleaming. As we walked we scraped the ground with our boots, marking a trail over which to return to the plane. We went forward with the sun in our eyes. It was not logical to go due east like this, for everything - the weather reports, the duration of the flight - had made it plain that we had crossed the Nile. But I had started tentatively towards the west and had

aussi une grande tache noire qui simule la végétation, mais elle est surplombée par le dernier de ces nuages qui se sont dissous dans le jour et qui vont renaître ce soir. Ce n'est que l'ombre d'un cumulus.

Il est inutile d'avancer plus, cette tentative ne conduit nulle part. Il faut rejoindre notre avion, cette balise rouge et blanche qui, peut-être, sera repérée par les camarades. Bien que je ne fonde point d'espoir sur ces recherches, elles m'apparaissent comme la seule chance de salut. Mais surtout nous avons laissé là-bas nos dernières gouttes de liquide, et déjà il nous faut absolument les boire. Il nous faut revenir pour vivre. Nous sommes prisonniers de ce cercle de fer : la courte autonomie de notre soif.

Mais qu'il est difficile de faire demi-tour quand on marcherait peut-être vers la vie ! Au-delà des mirages, l'horizon est peut-être riche de cités véritables, de canaux d'eau douce et de prairies. Je sais que j'ai raison de faire demi-tour. Et j'ai, cependant, l'impression de sombrer, quand je donne ce terrible coup de barre.

Nous nous sommes couchés auprès de l'avion. Nous avons parcouru plus de soixante kilomètres. Nous avons épuisé nos liquides. Nous n'avons rien reconnu vers l'Est et aucun camarade n'a survolé ce territoire. Combien de temps résisterons-nous ? Nous avons déjà tellement soif...

Nous avons bâti un grand bûcher, en empruntant quelques débris à l'aile pulvérisée. Nous avons préparé l'essence et les tôles de magnésium qui donnent un dur éclat blanc. Nous avons attendu que la nuit fût bien noire pour allumer notre incendie... Mais où sont les hommes ?

Maintenant la flamme monte. Religieusement nous regardons brûler notre fanal dans le désert. Nous regardons resplendir dans la nuit notre silencieux et rayonnant message. Et je pense que s'il emporte un appel déjà pathétique, il emporte aussi beaucoup d'amour. Nous demandons à boire, mais nous demandons aussi à communiquer. Qu'un autre feu s'allume dans la nuit, les hommes seuls disposent du feu, qu'ils nous répondent !

Je revois les yeux de ma femme. Je ne verrai rien de plus que ces yeux. Ils interrogent. Je revois les yeux de tous ceux qui, peut-être, tiennent à moi. Et ces yeux interrogent. Toute une assemblée de regards me reproche mon silence. Je réponds! Je réponds! Je réponds de toutes mes forces, je ne puis jeter, dans la nuit, de flamme plus rayonnante !

J'ai fait ce que j'ai pu. Nous avons fait ce que nous avons pu: soixante kilomètres presque sans boire. Maintenant nous ne boirons plus. Est-ce notre faute si nous ne pouvons pas attendre bien longtemps ? Nous serions restés là, si sagement, à têter nos gourdes. Mais dès la seconde où j'ai aspiré le fond du gobelet d'étain, une horloge s'est mise en marche. Dès la seconde où j'ai sucé la dernière goutte, j'ai commencé à descendre une pente. Qu'y puis-je si le temps m'emporte comme un fleuve ? Prevot pleure. Je lui tape sur l'épaule. Je lui dis, pour le consoler :

- Si on est foutus, on est foutus.

Il me répond :

- Si vous croyez que c'est sur moi que je pleure...

felt a vague foreboding I could not explain to myself. So I had put off the west till tomorrow. In the same way, provisionally, I had given up going north, though that led to the sea. Three days later, when scourged by thirst into abandoning the plane and walking straight on until we dropped in our tracks, it was still eastward that we tramped. More precisely, we walked east-northeast. And this too was in defiance of all reason and even of all hope. Yet after we had been rescued we discovered that if we had gone in any other direction we should have been lost.

Northward, we should never have had the endurance to reach the sea. And absurd as it may appear, it seems to me now, since I had no other motive, that I must have chosen the east simply because it was by going eastward that Guillaumet had been saved in the Andes, after I had hunted for him everywhere. In a confused way the east had become for me the direction of life.

We walked on for five hours and then the landscape changed. A river of sand seemed to be running through a valley, and we followed this riverbed taking long strides in order to cover as much ground as possible and get back to the plane before night fell, if our march was in vain. Suddenly I stopped.

“Prevot!”

“What’s up?”

“Our tracks!”

How long was it since we had forgotten to leave a wake behind us ? We had to find it or die.

We went back, bearing to the right. When we had gone back far enough we would make a right angle to the left and eventually intersect our tracks where we had still remembered to mark them.

This we did and were off again. The heat rose and with it came the mirages. But these were still the commonplace kind - sheets of water that materialized and then vanished as we neared them. We decided to cross the valley of sand and climb the highest dome in order to look round the horizon. This was after six hours of march in which, striding along, we must have covered twenty miles.

When we had struggled up to the top of the black hump we sat down and looked at each other. At our feet lay our valley of sand, opening into a desert of sand whose dazzling brightness seared our eyes. As far as the eye could see lay empty space. But in that space the play of light created mirages which, this time, were of a disturbing kind, fortresses and minarets, angular geometric hulks. I could see also a black mass that pretended to be vegetation, overhung by the last of those clouds that dissolve during the day only to return at night. This mass of vegetation was the shadow of a cumulus.

It was no good going on. The experiment was a failure. We would have to go back to our plane, to that red and white beacon which, perhaps, would be picked out by a flyer. I was not staking great hopes on a rescue party, but it did seem to me our last chance of salvation. In

Eh ! bien sûr, j’ai déjà découvert cette évidence. Rien n’est intolérable. J’apprendrai demain, et après- demain, que rien décidément n’est intolérable. Je ne crois qu’à demi au supplice. Je me suis déjà fait cette réflexion. J’ai cru un jour me noyer, emprisonné dans une cabine, et je n’ai pas beaucoup souffert, j’ai cru parfois me casser la figure et cela ne m’a point paru un événement considérable. Ici non plus je ne connaîtrai guère l’angoisse. Demain j’apprendrai là-dessus des choses plus étranges encore. Et Dieu sait si, malgré mon grand feu, j’ai renoncé à me faire entendre des hommes !...

« Si vous croyez que c’est sur moi... » Oui, oui, voilà qui est intolérable. Chaque fois que je revois ces yeux qui attendent, je ressens une brûlure. L’envie soudaine me prend de me lever et de courir droit devant moi. Là-bas on crie au secours, on fait naufrage !

C’est un étrange renversement des rôles, mais j’ai toujours pensé qu’il en était ainsi. Cependant j’avais besoin de Prévot pour en être tout à fait assuré. Eh bien, Prévot ne connaîtra point non plus cette angoisse devant la mort dont on nous rebat les oreilles. Mais il est quelque chose qu’il ne supporte pas, ni moi non plus.

Ah ! J’accepte bien de m’endormir, de m’endormir ou pour la nuit ou pour des siècles. Si je m’endors je ne sais point la différence. Et puis quelle paix ! Mais ces cris que l’on va pousser là-bas, ces grandes flammes de désespoir... je n’en supporte pas l’image. Je ne puis pas me croiser les bras devant ces naufrages ! Chaque seconde de silence assassine un peu ceux que j’aime. Et une grande rage chemine en moi : pourquoi ces chaînes qui m’empêchent d’arriver à temps et de secourir ceux qui sombrent ? Pourquoi notre incendie ne porte-t-il pas notre cri au bout du monde ? Patience !... Nous arrivons !... Nous arrivons !... Nous sommes les sauveteurs !

Le magnésium est consumé et notre feu rougit. Il n’y a plus ici qu’un tas de braise sur lequel, penchés, nous nous réchauffons. Fini notre grand message lumineux. Qu’a-t-il mis en marche dans le monde ? Eh ! je sais bien qu’il n’a rien mis en marche. Il s’agissait là d’une prière qui n’a pu être entendue.

C’est bien. J’irai dormir.

V

Au petit jour, nous avons recueilli sur les ailes, en les essuyant avec un chiffon, un fond de verre de rosée mêlée de peinture et d’huile. C’était écoeurant, mais nous l’avons bu. Faute de mieux nous aurons au moins mouillé nos lèvres. Après ce festin, Prévot me dit :

– Il y a heureusement le revolver.

Je me sens brusquement agressif, et je me retourne vers lui avec une méchante hostilité. Je ne haïrais rien autant, en ce moment-ci, qu’une effusion sentimentale. J’ai un extrême besoin de considérer que tout est simple. Il est simple de naître. Et simple de grandir. Et simple de mourir de soif.

Et du coin de l’œil j’observe Prévot, prêt à le blesser si c’est nécessaire, pour qu’il se taise. Mais Prévot m’a parlé avec tranquillité. Il a traité une question d’hygiène, il a abordé ce sujet comme il m’eût dit : « Il faudrait nous laver les mains. » Alors nous sommes d’accord. J’ai

any case, we had to get back to our few drops of liquid, for our throats were parched. We were imprisoned in this iron circle, captives of the curt dictatorship of thirst.

And yet, how hard it was to turn back when there was a chance that we might be on the road to life! Beyond the mirages the horizon was perhaps rich in veritable treasures, in meadows and runnels of sweet water. I knew I was doing the right thing by returning to the plane, and yet as I swung round and started back I was filled with portents of disaster.

We were resting on the ground beside the plane. Nearly forty miles of wandering this day. The last drop of liquid had been drained. No sign of life had appeared to the east. No plane had soared overhead. How long should we be able to hold out? Already our thirst was terrible.

We had built up a great pyre out of bits of the splintered wing. Our gasoline was ready, and we had flung on the heap sheets of metal whose magnesium coating would burn with a hard white flame. We were waiting now for night to come down before we lighted our conflagration. But where were there men to see it?

Night fell and the flames rose. Prayerfully we watched our mute and radiant fanion mount resplendent into the night. As I looked I said to myself that this message was not only a cry for help, it was fraught also with a great deal of love. We were begging water, but we were also begging the communion of human society. Only man can create fire: let another flame light up the night ; let man answer man!

I was haunted by a vision of my wife's eyes under the halo of her hat. Of her face I could see only the eyes, questioning me, looking at me yearningly. I am answering, answering with all my strength! What flame could leap higher than this that darts up into the night from my heart?

What I could do, I have done. What we could do, we have done. Nearly forty miles, almost without a drop to drink. Now there was no water left. Was it our fault that we could wait no longer? Suppose we had sat quietly by the plane, taking suck at the mouths of our water-bottles? But from the moment I breathed in the moist bottom of the tin cup, a clock had started up in me. From the second when I had sucked up the last drop, I had begun to slip downhill. Could I help it if time like a river was carrying me away? Prevot was weeping. I tapped him on the shoulder and said, to console him: "If we're done for we're done for, and that's all there is to it."

He said: "Do you think it's me I'm bawling about?"

I might have known it. It was evident enough. Nothing is unbearable. Tomorrow, and the day after, I should learn that nothing was really unbearable. I had never really believed in torture. Reading Poe as a kid, I had already said as much to myself. Once, jammed in the cabin of a plane, I thought I was going to drown ; and I had not suffered much. Several times it had seemed to me that the final smash-up was coming, and I don't remember that I thought of it as a cosmic event. And I didn't believe this was going to be agonizing either. There will be time tomorrow - to find out stranger things about it. Meanwhile, God knows that despite the bonfire I had decidedly given up hope that our cries would be heard by the world.

déjà médité hier en apercevant la gaine de cuir. Mes réflexions étaient raisonnables et non pathétiques. Il n'y a que le social qui soit pathétique. Notre impuissance à rassurer ceux dont nous sommes responsables. Et non le revolver.

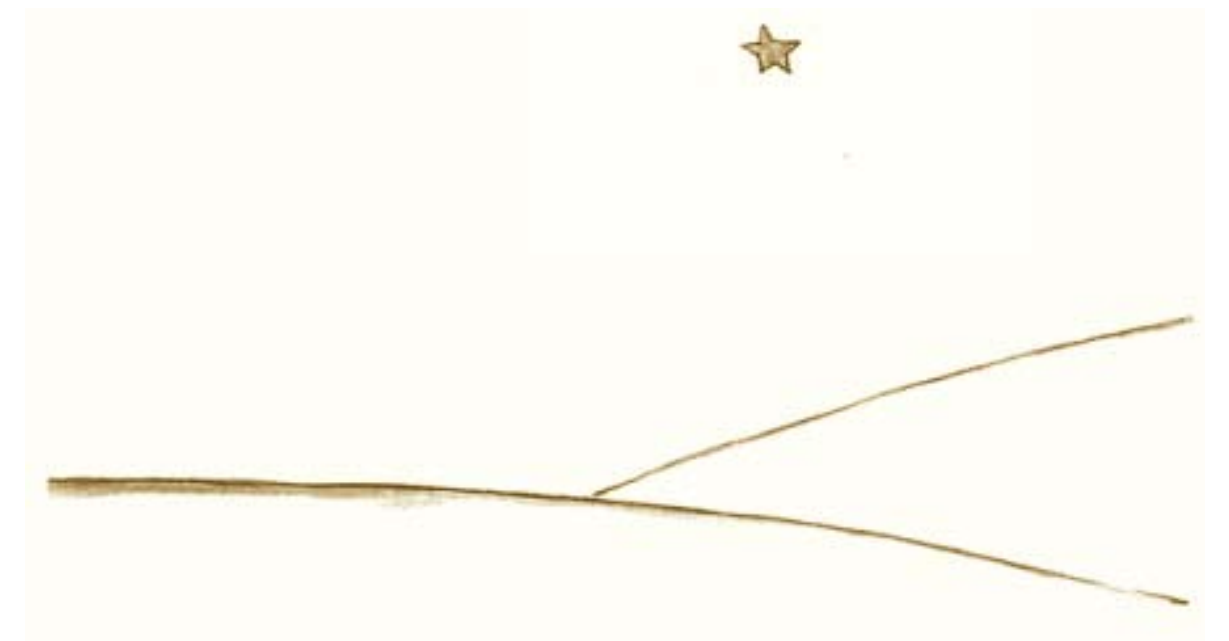
On ne nous cherche toujours pas, ou, plus exactement, on nous cherche sans doute ailleurs. Probablement en Arabie. Nous n'entendrons d'ailleurs aucun avion avant demain, quand nous aurons déjà abandonné le nôtre. Cet unique passage, si lointain, nous laissera alors indifférents. Points noirs mêlés à mille points noirs dans le désert, nous ne pourrions prétendre être aperçus. Rien n'est exact des réflexions que l'on m'attribuera sur ce supplice. Je ne subirai aucun supplice. Les sauveteurs me paraîtront circuler dans un autre univers.

Il faut quinze jours de recherches pour retrouver dans le désert un avion dont on ne sait rien, à trois mille kilomètres près : or l'on nous cherche probablement de la Tripolitaine à la Perse. Cependant, aujourd'hui encore, je me réserve cette maigre chance, puisqu'il n'en est point d'autre. Et, changeant de tactique, je décide de m'en aller seul en exploration. Prevot préparera un feu et l'allumera en cas de visite, mais nous ne serons pas visités.

Je m'en vais donc, et je ne sais même pas si j'aurai la force de revenir. Il me revient à la mémoire ce que je sais du désert de Libye. Il subsiste, dans le Sahara, 40 % d'humidité, quand elle tombe ici à 18 %. Et la vie s'évapore comme une vapeur. Les Bédouins, les voyageurs, les officiers coloniaux, enseignent que l'on tient dix-neuf heures sans boire. Après vingt heures les yeux se remplissent de lumière et la fin commence : la marche de la soif est foudroyante.

Mais ce vent du Nord-Est, ce vent anormal qui nous a trompés, qui, à l'opposé de toute prévision, nous a cloués sur ce plateau, maintenant sans doute nous prolonge. Mais quel délai nous accordera-t-il avant l'heure des premières lumières ?

Je m'en vais donc, mais il me semble que je m'embarque en canoë sur l'océan.



“Do you think it’s me . . .” There you have what is truly unbearable! Every time I saw those yearning eyes it was as if a flame were searing me. They were like a scream for help, like the flares of a sinking ship. I felt that I should not sit idly by: I should jump up and run - anywhere! straight ahead of me!

What a strange reversal of roles! But I have always thought it would be like this. Still, I needed Prevot beside me to be quite sure of it. Prevot was a levelheaded fellow. He loved life. And yet Prevot no more than I was wringing his hands at the sight of death the way we are told men do. But there did exist something that he could not bear any more than I could. I was perfectly ready to fall asleep, whether for a night or for eternity. If I did fall asleep, I could not even know whether it was for the one or for the other. And the peace of sleep! But that cry that would be sent up at home, that great wail of desolation - that was what I could not bear. I could not stand idly by and look on at that disaster. Each second of silence drove the knife deeper into someone I loved.

At the thought, a blind rage surged up in me. Why do these chains bind me and prevent me from rescuing those who are drowning? Why does our conflagration not carry our cry to the ends of the world? Hear me, you out here! Patience. We are coming to save you.

The magnesium had been licked off and the metal was glowing red. There was left only a heap of embers round which we crouched to warm ourselves. Our flaming call had spent itself. Had it set anything in the world in motion? I knew well enough that it hadn’t. Here was a prayer that had of necessity gone unheard.

That was that.

I ought to get some sleep.

At daybreak I took a rag and mopped up a little dew on the wings. The mixture of water and paint and oil yielded a spoonful of nauseating liquid which we sipped because it would at least moisten our lips. After this banquet Prevot said: “Thank God we’ve got a gun.”

Instantly I became furious and, turned on him with an aggressiveness which I regretted directly I felt it. There was nothing I should have loathed more at that moment than a gush of sentimentality.

I am so made that I have to believe that everything is simple. Birth is simple. Growing up is simple. And dying of thirst is simple. I watched Prevot out of the corner of my eye, ready to wound his feelings, if that was necessary to shut him up.

But Prevot had spoken without emotion. He had been discussing a matter of hygiene, and might have said in the same tone, “We ought to wash our hands.” That being so, we were agreed. Indeed already yesterday, my eye falling by chance on the leather holster, the same thought had crossed my mind, and with me too it had been a reasonable reflex, not an emotional one. Pathos resides in social man, not in the individual; what was pathetic was our powerlessness to reassure those for whom we were responsible, not what we might do with the gun.

There was still no sign that we were being sought; or rather they were doubtless hunting for us elsewhere, probably in Arabia. We were to hear no sound of plane until the day after we

Et cependant, grâce à l’aurore, ce décor me semble moins funèbre. Et je marche d’abord les mains dans les poches, en maraudeur. Hier soir nous avons tendu des collets à l’orifice de quelques terriers mystérieux, et le braconnier en moi se réveille. Je m’en vais d’abord vérifier les pièges : ils sont vides.

Je ne boirai donc point de sang. À vrai dire je ne l’espérais pas.

Si je ne suis guère déçu, par contre, je suis intrigué. De quoi vivent-ils ces animaux, dans le désert ? Ce sont sans doute des « fénechs » ou renards des sables, petits carnivores gros comme des lapins et ornés d’énormes oreilles. Je ne résiste pas à mon désir et je suis les traces de l’un d’eux. Elles m’entraînent vers une étroite rivière de sable où tous les pas s’impriment en clair. J’admire la jolie palme que forment trois doigts en éventail. J’imagine mon ami trottant doucement à l’aube, et léchant la rosée sur les pierres. Ici les traces s’espacent : mon fénech a couru. Ici un compagnon est venu le rejoindre et ils ont trotté côte à côte. J’assiste ainsi avec une joie bizarre à cette promenade matinale. J’aime ces signes de la vie. Et j’oublie un peu que j’ai soif..

Enfin j’aborde les garde-manger de mes renards. Il émerge ici au ras du sable, tous les cent mètres, un minuscule arbuste sec de la taille d’une soupière et aux tiges chargées de petits escargots dorés. Le fénech, à l’aube, va aux provisions. Et je me heurte ici à un grand mystère naturel.

Mon fénech ne s’arrête pas à tous les arbustes. Il en est, chargés d’escargots, qu’il dédaigne. Il en est dont il fait le tour avec une visible circonspection. Il en est qu’il aborde, mais sans les ravager. Il en retire deux ou trois coquilles, puis il change de restaurant.



had abandoned our own. And if ships did pass overhead, what could that mean to us? What could they see in us except two black dots among the thousand shadowy dots in the desert? Absurd to think of being distinguishable from them. None of the reflections that might be attributed to me on the score of this torture would be true. I should not feel in the least tortured. The aerial rescue party would seem to me, each time I sighted one, to be moving through a universe that was not mine. When searchers have to cover two thousand miles of territory, it takes them a good two weeks to spot a plane in the desert from the sky.

They were probably looking for us all along the line from Tripoli to Persia. And still, with all this, I clung to the slim chance that they might pick us out. Was that not our only chance of being saved? I changed my tactics, determining to go reconnoitering by myself. Prevot would get another bonfire together and kindle it in the event that visitors showed up. But we were to have no callers that day.

So off I went without knowing whether or not I should have the stamina to come back. I remembered what I knew about this Libyan desert. When, in the Sahara, humidity is still at forty per cent of saturation, it is only eighteen here in Libya. Life here evaporates like a vapor. Bedouins, explorers, and colonial officers all tell US that a man may go nineteen hours without water. Thereafter his eyes fill with light, and that marks the beginning of the end. The progress made by thirst is swift and terrible. But this northeast wind, this abnormal wind that had blown us out off our course and had marooned us on this plateau, was now prolonging our lives. What was the length of the reprieve it would grant us before our eyes began to fill with light? I went forward with the feeling of a man canoeing in mid-ocean.

I will admit that at daybreak this landscape seemed to me less infernal, and that I began my walk with my hands in my pockets, like a tramp on a highroad. The evening before we had set snares at the mouths of certain mysterious burrows in the ground, and the poacher in me was on the alert. I went first to have a look at our traps. They were empty.

Well, this meant that I should not be drinking blood today; and indeed I hadn't expected to. But though I was not disappointed, my curiosity was aroused. What was there in the desert for these animals to live on? These were certainly the holes of fennecs, a long-eared carnivorous sand-fox the size of a rabbit. I spotted the tracks made by one of them, and gave way to the impulse to follow them. They led to a narrow stream of sand where each footprint was plainly outlined and where I marveled at the pretty palm formed by the three toes spread fanwise on the sand.

I could imagine my little friend trotting blithely along at dawn and licking the dew off the rocks. Here the tracks were wider apart: my fennec had broken into a run. And now I see that a companion has joined him and they have trotted on side by side. These signs of a morning stroll gave me a strange thrill. They were signs of life, and I loved them for that. I almost forgot that I was thirsty.

Finally I came to the pasture-ground of my foxes. Here, every hundred yards or so, I saw sticking up out of the sand a small dry shrub, its twigs heavy with little golden snails. The fen-

Joue-t-il à ne pas apaiser sa faim d'un seul coup, pour prendre un plaisir plus durable à sa promenade matinale ? Je ne le crois pas. Son jeu coïncide trop bien avec une tactique indispensable. Si le fénéch se rassasiait des produits du premier arbuste, il le dépouillerait, en deux ou trois repas, de sa charge vivante. Et ainsi, d'arbuste en arbuste, il anéantirait son élevage. Mais le fénéch se garde bien de gêner l'ensemencement. Non seulement il s'adresse, pour un seul repas, à une centaine de ces touffes brunes, mais il ne prélève jamais deux coquilles voisines sur la même branche. Tout se passe comme s'il avait la conscience du risque. S'il se rassasiait sans précaution, il n'y aurait plus d'escargots. S'il n'y avait point d'escargots, il n'y aurait point de fénéchs.

Les traces me ramènent au terrier. Le fénéch est là qui m'écoute sans doute, épouvanté par le grondement de mon pas. Et je lui dis : « Mon petit renard, je suis foutu, mais c'est curieux, cela ne m'a pas empêché de m'intéresser à ton humeur... »



Et je reste là à rêver et il me semble que l'on s'adapte à tout. L'idée qu'il mourra peut-être trente ans plus tard ne gâte pas les joies d'un homme. Trente ans, trois jours... c'est une question de perspective.

nec came here at dawn to do his marketing. And here I was able to observe another of nature's mysteries.

My fennec did not stop at all the shrubs. There were some weighed down with snails which he disdained. Obviously he avoided them with some wariness. Others he stopped at but did not strip of all they bore. He must have picked out two or three shells and then gone on to another restaurant. What was he up to? Was he nurseryman to the snails, encouraging their reproduction by refraining from exhausting the stock on a given shrub, or a given twig? Or was he amusing himself by delaying repletion, putting off satiety in order to enhance the pleasure he took from his morning stroll?

The tracks led me back to the hole in which he lived. Doubtless my fennec crouched below, listening to me and startled by the crunching of my footsteps. I said to him: "Fox, my little fox, I'm done for; but somehow that doesn't prevent me from taking an interest in your mood."

And there I stayed a bit, ruminating and telling myself that a man was able to adapt himself to anything. The notion that he is to die in thirty years has probably never spoiled any man's fun. Thirty years ... or thirty days: it's all a matter of perspective.

Only, you have to be able to put certain visions out of your mind.

I went on, finally, and the time came when, along with my weariness, something in me began to change. If those were not mirages, I was inventing them.

"Hi! Hi, there!"

I shouted and waved my arms, but the man I had seen waving at me turned out to be a black rock. Everything in the desert had grown animate. I stooped to waken a sleeping Bedouin and he turned into the trunk of a black tree. A tree-trunk? Here in the desert? I was amazed and bent over to lift a broken bough. It was solid marble.

Straightening up I looked round and saw more black marble. An antediluvian forest littered the ground with its broken tree-tops. How many thousand years ago, under what hurricane of the time of Genesis, had this cathedral of wood crumbled in this spot? Countless centuries had rolled these fragments of giant pillars at my feet, polished them like steel, petrified and vitrified them and imbued them with the color of jet.

I could distinguish the knots in their branches, the twistings of their once living boughs, could count the rings of life in them. This forest had rustled with birds and been filled with music that now was struck by doom and frozen into salt. And all this was hostile to me. Blacker than the chain-mail of the hummocks, these solemn derelicts rejected me. What had I, a living man, to do with this incorruptible stone? Perishable as I was, I whose body was to crumble into dust, what place had I in this eternity?

Since yesterday I had walked nearly fifty miles. This dizziness that I felt came doubtless from my thirst. Or from the sun. It glittered on these hulks until they shone as if smeared with oil. It blazed down on this universal carapace. Sand and fox had no life here. This world was a gigantic anvil upon which the sun beat down. I strode across this anvil and at my temples I could feel the hammer-strokes of the sun.

Mais il faut oublier certaines images...

Maintenant je poursuis ma route et déjà, avec la fatigue, quelque chose en moi se transforme. Les mirages, s'il n'y en a point, je les invente...

– Ohé !

J'ai levé les bras en criant, mais cet homme qui gesticulait n'était qu'un rocher noir. Tout s'anime déjà dans le désert. J'ai voulu réveiller ce Bédouin qui dormait et il s'est changé en tronc d'arbre noir. En tronc d'arbre ? Cette présence me surprend et je me penche. Je veux soulever une branche brisée: elle est de marbre ! Je me redresse et je regarde autour de moi ; j'aperçois d'autres marbres noirs. Une forêt antédiluvienne jonche le sol de ses fûts brisés. Elle s'est écroulée comme une cathédrale, voilà cent mille ans, sous un ouragan de genèse. Et les siècles ont roulé jusqu'à moi ces tronçons de colonnes géantes polis comme des pièces d'acier, pétrifiés, vitrifiés, couleur d'encre. Je distingue encore le nœud des branches, j'aperçois les torsions de la vie, je compte les anneaux du tronc. Cette forêt, qui fut pleine d'oiseaux et de musique, a été frappée de malédiction et changée en sel. Et je sens que ce paysage m'est hostile. Plus noires que cette armure de fer des collines, ces épaves solennelles me refusent. Qu'ai-je à faire ici, moi, vivant, parmi ces marbres incorruptibles ? Moi, périssable, moi, dont le corps se dissoudra, qu'ai-je à faire ici dans l'éternité ?

Depuis hier j'ai déjà parcouru près de quatre-vingts kilomètres. Je dois sans doute à la soif ce vertige. Ou au soleil. Il brille sur ces fûts qui semblent glacés d'huile. Il brille sur cette carapace universelle. Il n'y a plus ici ni sable ni renards. Il n'y a plus ici qu'une immense enclume. Et je marche sur cette enclume. Et je sens, dans ma tête, le soleil retentir. Ah ! là-bas...

– Ohé ! Ohé !

– Il n'y a rien là-bas, ne t'agite pas, c'est le délire.

Je me parle ainsi à moi-même, car j'ai besoin de faire appel à ma raison. Il m'est si difficile de refuser ce que je vois. Il m'est si difficile de ne pas courir vers cette caravane en marche... là... tu vois !

– Imbécile, tu sais bien que c'est toi qui l'inventes... – Alors rien au monde n'est véritable...

Rien n'est véritable sinon cette croix à vingt kilomètres de moi sur la colline. Cette croix ou ce phare...

Mais ce n'est pas la direction de la mer. Alors c'est une croix. Toute la nuit j'ai étudié la carte. Mon travail était inutile, puisque j'ignorais ma position. Mais je me penchais sur tous les signes qui m'indiquaient la présence de l'homme. Et, quelque part, j'ai découvert un petit cercle surmonté d'une croix semblable. Je me suis reporté à la légende et j'y ai lu : « Établissement religieux. » À côté de la croix j'ai vu un point noir. Je me suis reporté encore à la légende, et j'y ai lu : « Puits permanent. » J'ai reçu un grand choc au cœur et j'ai relu tout haut : « Puits permanent... Puits permanent... Puits permanent ! » Ali-Baba et ses trésors, est-ce que ça compte en regard d'un puits permanent ? Un peu plus loin j'ai remarqué deux cercles blancs. J'ai lu sur la légende : « Puits temporaire. » C'était déjà moins beau. Puis tout autour il n'y avait plus rien. Rien.

“Hi! Hi, there!” I called out.

“There is nothing there,” I told myself.

“Take it easy. You are delirious.”

I had to talk to myself aloud, had to bring myself to reason. It was hard for me to reject what I was seeing, hard not to run towards that caravan plodding on the horizon. There! Do you see it?

“Fool! You know very well that you are inventing it.”

“You mean that nothing in the world is real?”

Nothing in the world is real if that cross which I see ten miles off on the top of a hill is not real. Or is it a lighthouse? No, the sea does not lie in that direction. Then it must be a cross.

I had spent the night studying my map - but uselessly, since I did not know my position. Still, I had scrutinized all the signs that marked the marvelous presence of man. And somewhere on the map I had seen a little circle surmounted by just such a cross. I had glanced down at the legend to get an explanation of the symbol and had read: “Religious institution.”

Close to the cross there had been a black dot. Again I had run my finger down the legend and had read: “Permanent well.” My heart had jumped and I had repeated the legend aloud: “Permanent well, permanent well.” What were all of Ali Baba’s treasures compared with a permanent well? A little farther on were two white circles. “Temporary wells,” the legend said. Not quite so exciting. And round about them was nothing . . . unless it was the blankness of despair.

But this must be my “religious institution”! The monks must certainly have planted a great cross on the hill expressly for men in our plight! All I had to do was to walk across to them. I should be taken in by those Dominicans. . . .

“But there are only Coptic monasteries in Libya!” I told myself.

. . . by those learned Dominicans. They have a great cool kitchen with red tiles, and out in the courtyard a marvelous rusted pump. Beneath the rusted pump; beneath the rusted pump . . . you’ve guessed it! . . . s beneath the rusted pump is dug the permanent well! Ah, what rejoicing when I ring at their gate, when I get my hands on the rope of the great bell.

“Madman! You are describing a house in Provence; and what’s more, the house has no bell!”

. . . on the rope of the great bell. The porter will raise his arms to Heaven and cry out, “You are the messenger of the Lord!” and he will call aloud to all the monks. They will pour out of the monastery. They will welcome me with a great feast, as if I were the Prodigal Son. They will lead me to the kitchen and will say to me, “One moment, my son, one moment. We’ll just be off to the permanent well.” And I shall be trembling with happiness.

No, no! I will not weep just because there happens to be no cross on the hill. The treasures of the west turned out to be mere illusion. I have veered due north. At least the north is filled with the sound of the sea. Over the hilltop. Look there, at the horizon! The most beautiful city in the world! “You know perfectly well that is a mirage.”

Le voilà mon établissement religieux ! Les moines ont dressé une grande croix sur la colline pour appeler les naufragés ! Et je n’ai qu’à marcher vers elle. Et je n’ai qu’à courir vers ces dominicains...

– Mais il n’y a que des monastères coptes en Libye.

– ... Vers ces dominicains studieux. Ils possèdent une belle cuisine fraîche aux carreaux rouges et, dans la cour, une merveilleuse pompe rouillée. Sous la pompe rouillée, sous la pompe rouillée, vous l’auriez deviné... sous la pompe rouillée c’est le puits permanent ! Ah ! ça va être une fête là-bas quand je vais sonner à la porte, quand je vais tirer sur la grande cloche...

– Imbécile, tu décris une maison de Provence où il n’y a d’ailleurs point de cloche.

– ... Quand je vais tirer sur la grande cloche ! Le portier lèvera les bras au ciel et me criera : « Vous êtes un envoyé du Seigneur! » et il appellera tous les moines. Et ils se précipiteront. Et ils me fêteront comme un enfant pauvre. Et ils me pousseront vers la cuisine. Et ils me diront : « Une seconde, une seconde, mon fils... nous courons jusqu’au puits permanent... »

Et moi, je tremblerai de bonheur...

Mais non, je ne veux pas pleurer, pour la seule raison qu’il n’y a plus de croix sur la colline.

Les promesses de l’Ouest ne sont que mensonges. J’ai viré plein Nord.

Le Nord est rempli, lui, au moins par le chant de la mer.

Ah ! cette crête franchie, l’horizon s’étale. Voici la plus belle cité du monde.

– Tu sais bien que c’est un mirage...

Je sais très bien que c’est un mirage. On ne me trompe pas, moi! Mais s’il me plaît, à moi, de m’enfoncer vers un mirage ? S’il me plaît, à moi, d’espérer ? S’il me plaît d’aimer cette ville crénelée et toute pavoisée de soleil ? S’il me plaît de marcher tout droit, à pas agiles, puisque je ne sens plus ma fatigue, puisque je suis heureux... Prévot et son revolver, laissez-moi rire ! Je préfère mon ivresse. Je suis ivre. Je meurs de soif !

Le crépuscule m’a dégrisé. Je me suis arrêté brusquement, effrayé de me sentir si loin. Au crépuscule le mirage meurt. L’horizon s’est déshabillé de sa pompe, de ses palais, de ses vêtements sacerdotaux. C’est un horizon de désert.

– Tu es bien avancé! La nuit va te prendre, tu devras attendre le jour, et demain tes traces seront effacées et tu ne seras plus nulle part.

– Alors autant marcher encore droit devant moi... À quoi bon faire encore demi-tour ? Je ne veux plus donner ce coup de barre quand peut-être j’allais ouvrir, quand j’ouvrais les bras sur la mer...

– Où as-tu vu la mer ? Tu ne l’atteindras d’ailleurs jamais. Trois cents kilomètres sans doute t’en séparent. Et Prévot guette près du Simoun ! Et il a, peut-être, été aperçu par une caravane...

Oui, je vais revenir, mais je vais d’abord appeler les hommes :

– Ohé !

Cette planète, bon Dieu, elle est cependant habitée...

Of course I know it is a mirage! Am I the sort of man who can be fooled? But what if I want to go after that mirage? Suppose I enjoy indulging my hope? Suppose it suits me to love that crenelated town all beflagged with sunlight? What if I choose to walk straight ahead on light feet - for you must know that I have dropped my weariness behind me, I am happy now. . . . Prevot and his gun! Don't make me laugh! I prefer my drunkenness. I am drunk. I am dying of thirst.

It took the twilight to sober me. Suddenly I stopped, appalled to think how far I was from our base. In the twilight the mirage was dying. The horizon had stripped itself of its pomp, its palaces, its priestly vestments. It was the old desert horizon again.

"A fine day's work you've done! Night will overtake you. You won't be able to go on before daybreak, and by that time your tracks will have been blown away and you'll be properly nowhere."

In that case I may as well walk straight on. Why turn back? Why should I bring my ship round when I may find the sea straight ahead of me?

"When did you catch a glimpse of the sea? What makes you think you could walk that far? Meanwhile there's Prevot watching for you beside the Simoon. He may have been picked up by a caravan, for all you know."

Very good. I'll go back. But first I want to call out for help.

"Hi! Hi!"

By God! You can't tell me this planet is not inhabited. Where are its men?

"Hi! Hi!"

I was hoarse. My voice was gone. I knew it was ridiculous to croak like this, but - one more try: "Hi! Hi!"

And I turned back.

I had been walking two hours when I saw the flames of the bonfire that Prevot, frightened by my long absence, had sent up. They mattered very little to me now.

Another hour of trudging. Five hundred yards away. A hundred yards. Fifty yards. "Good Lord!"

Amazement stopped me in my tracks. Joy surged up and filled my heart with its violence. In the firelight stood Prevot, talking to two Arabs who were leaning against the motor. He had not noticed me, for he was too full of his own joy. If only I had sat still and waited with him! I should have been saved already. Exultantly I called out: "Hi! Hi!"

The two Bedouins gave a start and stared at me. Prevot left them standing and came forward to meet me. I opened my arms to him. He caught me by the elbow. Did he think I was keeling over? I said: "At last, eh?"

"What do you mean?"

"The Arabs!"

"What Arabs?"

"Those Arabs there, with you."

- Ohé ! les hommes !...

Je m'enroue. Je n'ai plus de voix. Je me sens ridicule de crier ainsi... Je lance une fois encore :

- Les hommes

Ça rend un son emphatique et prétentieux. Et je fais demi-tour.

Après deux heures de marche, j'ai aperçu les flammes que Prevot, qui s'épouvantait de me croire perdu, jette vers le ciel. Ah !... cela m'est tellement indifférent...

Encore une heure de marche... Encore cinq cents mètres. Encore cent mètres. Encore cinquante.

- Ah !

Je me suis arrêté stupéfait. La joie va m'inonder le cœur et j'en contiens la violence. Prevot, illuminé par le brasier, cause avec deux Arabes adossés au moteur. Il ne m'a pas encore aperçu. Il est trop occupé par sa propre joie. Ah ! si j'avais attendu comme lui... je serais déjà délivré ! Je crie joyeusement :

- Ohé !

Les deux Bédouins sursautent et me regardent. Prevot les quitte et s'avance seul au-devant de moi.

J'ouvre les bras. Prevot me retient par le coude, j'allais donc tomber ? Je lui dis :

- Enfin, ça y est !

- Quoi ?

- Les Arabes !

- Quels Arabes ?

- Les Arabes qui sont là, avec vous !...

Prevot me regarde drôlement, et j'ai l'impression qu'il me confie, à contre-cœur, un lourd secret :

- Il n'y a point d'Arabes...

Sans doute, cette fois, je vais pleurer.

VI

On vit ici dix-neuf heures sans eau, et qu'avons-nous bu depuis hier soir ? Quelques gouttes de rosée à l'aube ! Mais le vent de Nord-Est règne toujours et ralentit un peu notre évaporation. Cet écran favorise encore dans le ciel les hautes constructions de nuages. Ah ! s'ils dériveraient jusqu'à nous, s'il pouvait pleuvoir ! Mais il ne pleut jamais dans le désert.

- Prevot, découpons en triangles un parachute. Nous fixerons ces panneaux au sol avec des pierres. Et si le vent n'a pas tourné, à l'aube, nous recueillerons la rosée dans un des réservoirs d'essence, en tordant nos linges.

Nous avons aligné les six panneaux blancs sous les étoiles. Prevot a démantelé un réservoir. Nous n'avons plus qu'à attendre le jour.

Prevot, dans les débris, a découvert une orange miraculeuse. Nous nous la partageons. J'en suis bouleversé, et cependant c'est peu de chose quand il nous faudrait vingt litres d'eau.

Prevot looked at me queerly, and when he spoke I felt as if he was very reluctantly confiding a great secret to me: "There are no Arabs here."

This time I know I am going to cry.

A man can go nineteen hours without water, and what have we drunk since last night? A few drops of dew at dawn. But the northeast wind is still blowing, still slowing up the process of our evaporation. To it, also, we owe the continued accumulation of high clouds. If only they would drift straight overhead and break into rain! But it never rains in the desert.

"Look here, Prevot. Let's rip up one of the parachutes and spread the sections out on the ground, weighed down with stones. If the wind stays in the same quarter till morning, they'll catch the dew and we can wring them out into one of the tanks."

We spread six triangular sections of parachute under the stars, and Prevot unhooked a fuel tank. This was as much as we could do for ourselves till dawn. But, miracle of miracles! Prevot had come upon an orange while working over the tank. We shared it, and though it was little enough to men who could have used a few gallons of sweet water, still I was overcome with relief.

Stretched out beside the fire I looked at the glowing fruit and said to myself that men did not know what an orange was. "Here we are, condemned to death," I said to myself, "and still the certainty of dying cannot compare with the pleasure I am feeling. The joy I take from this half of an orange which I am holding in my hand is one of the greatest joys I have ever known."

I lay flat on my back, sucking my orange and counting the shooting stars. Here I was, for one minute infinitely happy. "Nobody can know anything of the world in which the individual moves and has his being," I reflected. "There is no guessing it. Only the man locked up in it can know what it is."

For the first time I understood the cigarette and glass of rum that are handed to the criminal about to be executed. I used to think that for a man to accept these wretched gifts at the foot of the gallows was beneath human dignity. Now I was learning that he took pleasure from them. People thought him courageous when he smiled as he smoked or drank, I knew now that he smiled because the taste gave him pleasure. People could not see that his perspective had changed, and that for him the last hour of his life was a life in itself.

We collected an enormous quantity of water - perhaps as much as two quarts. Never again would we be thirsty! We were saved; we had a liquid to drink!

I dipped my tin cup into the tank and brought up a beautifully yellow-green liquid the first mouthful of which nauseated me so that despite my thirst I had to catch my breath before swallowing it. I would have swallowed mud, I swear; but this taste of poisonous metal cut keener than thirst.

I glanced at Prevot and saw him going round and round with his eyes fixed to the ground as if looking for something. Suddenly he leaned forward and began to vomit without interrupting his spinning. Half a minute later it was my turn. I was seized by such convulsions that

Couché près de notre feu nocturne je regarde ce fruit lumineux et je me dis : « Les hommes ne savent pas ce qu'est une orange... » Je me dis aussi : « Nous sommes condamnés et encore une fois cette certitude ne me frustre pas de mon plaisir. Cette demi-orange que je serre dans la main m'apporte une des plus grandes joies de ma vie... » Je m'allonge sur le dos, je suce mon fruit, je compte les étoiles filantes. Me voici, pour une minute, infiniment heureux. Et je me dis encore : « Le monde dans l'ordre duquel nous vivons, on ne peut pas le deviner si l'on n'y est pas enfermé soi-même. » Je comprends aujourd'hui seulement la cigarette et le verre de rhum du condamné. Je ne concevais pas qu'il acceptât cette misère. Et cependant il y prend beaucoup de plaisir. On imagine cet homme courageux s'il sourit. Mais il sourit de boire son rhum. On ne sait pas qu'il a changé de perspective et qu'il a fait, de cette dernière heure, une vie humaine.

Nous avons recueilli une énorme quantité d'eau : deux litres peut-être. Finie la soif! Nous sommes sauvés, nous allons boire !

Je puise dans mon réservoir le contenu d'un gobelet d'étain, mais cette eau est d'un beau vert-jaune, et, dès la première gorgée, je lui trouve un goût si effroyable, que, malgré la soif qui me tourmente, avant d'achever cette gorgée, je reprends ma respiration. Je boirais cependant de la boue, mais ce goût de métal empoisonné est plus fort que ma soif.

Je regarde Prévot qui tourne en rond les yeux au sol, comme s'il cherchait attentivement quelque chose. Soudain il s'incline et vomit, sans s'interrompre de tourner en rond. Trente secondes plus tard, c'est mon tour. Je suis pris de telles convulsions que je rends à genoux, les doigts enfoncés dans le sable. Nous ne nous parlons pas, et, durant un quart d'heure, nous demeurons ainsi secoués, ne rendant plus qu'un peu de bile.

C'est fini. Je ne ressens plus qu'une lointaine nausée. Mais nous avons perdu notre dernier espoir.

J'ignore si notre échec est dû à un enduit du parachute ou au dépôt de tétrachlorure de carbone qui entartre le réservoir. Il nous eût fallu un autre récipient ou d'autres linges.

Alors, dépêchons-nous ! Il fait jour. En route ! Nous allons fuir ce plateau maudit, et marcher à grands pas, droit devant nous, jusqu'à la chute. C'est l'exemple de Guillaumet dans les Andes que je suis: je pense beaucoup à lui depuis hier. J'enfreins la consigne formelle qui est de demeurer auprès de l'épave. On ne nous cherchera plus ici.

Encore une fois nous découvrons que nous ne sommes pas les naufragés. Les naufragés, ce sont ceux qui attendent ! Ceux que menace notre silence. Ceux qui sont déjà déchirés par une abominable erreur. On ne peut pas ne pas courir vers eux. Guillaumet aussi, au retour des Andes, m'a raconté qu'il courait vers les naufragés ! Ceci est une vérité universelle.

- Si j'étais seul au monde, me dit Prévot, je me coucherais.

Et nous marchons droit devant nous vers l'Est-Nord- Est. Si le Nil a été franchi nous nous enfonçons, à chaque pas, plus profondément, dans l'épaisseur du désert d'Arabie.

De cette journée-là, je ne me souviens plus. Je ne me souviens que de ma hâte. Ma hâte vers n'importe quoi, vers ma chute. Je me rappelle aussi avoir marché en regardant la terre, j'étais

I went down on my knees and dug my fingers into the sand while I puked. Neither of us spoke, and for a quarter of an hour we remained thus shaken, bringing up nothing but a little bile.

After a time it passed and all I felt was a vague, distant nausea. But our last hope had fled. Whether our bad luck was due to a sizing on the parachute or to the magnesium lining of the tank, I never found out. Certain it was that we needed either another set of cloths or another receptacle.

Well, it was broad daylight and time we were on our way. This time we should strike out as fast as we could, leave this cursed plateau, and tramp till we dropped in our tracks. That was what Guillaumet had done in the Andes. I had been thinking of him all the day before and had determined to follow his example. I should do violence to the pilot's unwritten law, which is to stick by the ship; but I was sure no one would be along to look for us here.

Once again we discovered that it was not we who were shipwrecked, not we but those who were waiting for news of us, those who were alarmed by our silence, were already torn with grief by some atrocious and fantastic report. We could not but strive towards them. Guillaumet had done it, had scrambled towards his lost ones. To do so is a universal impulse.

"If I were alone in the world," Prevot said, "I'd lie down right here. Damned if I wouldn't."

East-northeast we tramped. If we had in fact crossed the Nile, each step was leading us deeper and deeper into the desert.

I don't remember anything about that day. I remember only my haste. I was hurrying desperately towards something - towards some finality. I remember also that I walked with my eyes to the ground, for the mirages were more than I could bear. From time to time we would correct our course by the compass, and now and again we would lie clown to catch our breath. I remember having flung away my waterproof, which I had held on to as covering for the night. That is as much as I recall about the day. Of what happened when the chill of evening came, I remember more. But during the day I had simply turned to sand and was a being without mind.

When the sun set we decided to make camp. Oh, I knew as well as anybody that we should push on, that this one waterless night would finish us off. But we had brought along the bits of parachute, and if the poison was not in the sizing, we might get a sip of water next morning. Once again we spread our trap for the dew under the stars.

But the sky in the north was cloudless. The wind no longer had the same taste on the lip. It had moved into another quarter. Something was rustling against us, but this time it seemed to be the desert itself. The wild beast was stalking us, had us in its power. I could feel its breath in my face, could feel it lick my face and hands. Suppose I walked on: at the best I could do five or six miles more. Remember that in three days I had covered one hundred miles, practically without water.

And then, just as we stopped, Prevot said: "I swear to you I see a lake!"

"You're crazy."

"Have you ever heard of a mirage after sunset?" he challenged.

écœuré par les mirages. De temps en temps, nous avons rectifié à la boussole notre direction. Nous nous sommes aussi étendus parfois pour souffler un peu. J'ai aussi jeté quelque part mon caoutchouc que je conservais pour la nuit. Je ne sais rien de plus. Mes souvenirs ne se renouent qu'avec la fraîcheur du soir. Moi aussi j'étais comme du sable, et tout, en moi, s'est effacé.

Nous décidons, au coucher du soleil, de camper. Je sais bien que nous devrions marcher encore : cette nuit sans eau nous achèvera. Mais nous avons emporté avec nous les panneaux de toile du parachute. Si le poison ne vient pas de l'enduit il se pourrait que, demain matin, nous puissions boire. Il faut étendre nos pièges à rosée, une fois encore, sous les étoiles.

Mais au Nord, le ciel est ce soir pur de nuages. Mais le vent a changé de goût. Il a aussi changé de direction. Nous sommes frôlés déjà par le souffle chaud du désert. C'est le réveil du fauve ! Je le sens qui nous lèche les mains et le visage.

Mais si je marche encore je ne ferai pas dix kilomètres. Depuis trois jours, sans boire, j'en ai couvert plus de cent quatre-vingts...

Mais, à l'instant de faire halte :

- Je vous jure que c'est un lac, me dit Prevot.

- Vous êtes fou !

- À cette heure-ci, au crépuscule, cela peut-il être un mirage ?

Je ne réponds rien. J'ai renoncé, depuis longtemps, à croire mes yeux. Ce n'est pas un mirage, peut-être, mais alors, c'est une invention de notre folie. Comment Prevot croit-il encore ?

Prevot s'obstine :

- C'est à vingt minutes, je vais aller voir... Cet entêtement m'irrite :

- Allez voir, allez prendre l'air... c'est excellent pour la santé. Mais s'il existe, votre lac, il est salé, sachez-le bien. Salé ou non, il est au diable. Et par-dessus tout il n'existe pas.

Prevot, les yeux fixes, s'éloigne déjà. Je les connais, ces attractions souveraines ! Et moi je pense : « Il y a aussi des somnambules qui vont se jeter droit sous les locomotives. » Je sais que Prevot ne reviendra pas. Ce vertige du vide le prendra et il ne pourra plus faire demi-tour. Et il tombera un peu plus loin. Et il mourra de son côté et moi du mien. Et tout cela a si peu d'importance !...

Je n'estime pas d'un très bon augure cette indifférence qui m'est venue. À demi noyé, j'ai ressenti la même paix. Mais j'en profite pour écrire une lettre posthume, à plat ventre sur des pierres. Ma lettre est très belle. Très digne. J'y prodigue de sages conseils. J'éprouve à la relire un vague plaisir de vanité. On dira d'elle : « Voilà une admirable lettre posthume ! Quel dommage qu'il soit mort ! »

Je voudrais aussi connaître où j'en suis. J'essaie de former de la salive : depuis combien d'heures n'ai-je point craché ? Je n'ai plus de salive. Si je garde la bouche fermée, une matière gluante scelle mes lèvres. Elle sèche et forme, au-dehors, un bourrelet dur. Cependant, je réussis encore mes tentatives de déglutition. Et mes yeux ne se remplissent point encore de lumières. Quand ce radieux spectacle me sera offert, c'est que j'en aurai pour deux heures.

Il fait nuit. La lune a grossi depuis l'autre nuit. Prevot ne revient pas. Je suis allongé sur

I didn't seem able to answer him. I had long ago given up believing my own eyes. Perhaps it was not a mirage; but in that case it was a hallucination. How could Prevot go on believing? But he was stubborn about it.

"It's only twenty minutes off. I'll go have a look." His mulishness got on my nerves.

"Go ahead!" I shouted. "Take your little constitutional. Nothing better for a man. But let me tell you, if your lake exists it is salt. And whether it's salt or not, it's a devil of a way off. And besides, there is no damned lake!"

Prevot was already on his way, his eyes glassy. I knew the strength of these irresistible obsessions. I was thinking: "There are somnambulists who walk straight into locomotives." And I knew that Prevot would not come back. He would be seized by the vertigo of empty space and would be unable to turn back. And then he would keel over. He somewhere, and I somewhere else. Not that it was important.

Thinking thus, it struck me that this mood of resignation was doing me no good. Once when I was half drowned I had let myself go like this. Lying now flat on my face on the stony ground, I took this occasion to write a letter for posthumous delivery. It gave me a chance, also, to take stock of myself again. I tried to bring up a little saliva: how long was it since I had spit? No saliva. If I kept my mouth closed, a kind of glue sealed my lips together. It dried on the outside of the lips and formed a hard crust. However, I found I was still able to swallow, and I bethought me that I was still not seeing a blinding light in my eyes. Once I was treated to that radiant spectacle I might know that the end was a couple of hours away.

Night fell. The moon had swollen since I last saw it. Prevot was still not back. I stretched out on my back and turned these few data over in my mind. A familiar impression came over me, and I tried to seize it. I was . . . I was . . . I was at sea. I was on a ship going to South America and was stretched out, exactly like this, on the boat deck. The tip of the mast was swaying to and fro, very slowly, among the stars. That mast was missing tonight, but again I was at sea, bound for a port I was to make without raising a finger. Slave-traders had flung me on this ship.

I thought of Prevot who was still not back. Not once had I heard him complain, That was a good thing. To hear him whine would have been unbearable. Prevot was a man.

What was that! Five hundred yards ahead of me I could see the light of his lamp. He had lost his way. I had no lamp with which to signal back. I stood up and shouted, but he could not hear me .

A second lamp, and then a third! God in Heaven! It was a search party and it was me they were hunting! "Hi! Hi!" I shouted.

But they had not heard me. The three lamps were still signaling me.

"Tonight I am sane," I said to myself. "I am relaxed. I am not out of my head. Those are certainly three lamps and they are about five hundred yards off." I stared at them and shouted again, and again I gathered that they could not hear me.

Then, for the first and only time, I was really seized with panic. I could still run, I thought.

le dos et je mûris ces évidences. Je retrouve en moi une vieille impression. Je cherche à me la définir. Je suis... Je suis... Je suis embarqué ! Je me rendais en Amérique du Sud, je m'étais étendu ainsi sur le pont supérieur. La pointe du mât se promenait de long en large, très lentement, parmi les étoiles. Il manque ici un mât, mais je suis embarqué quand même, vers une destination qui ne dépend plus de mes efforts. Des négriers m'ont jeté, lié, sur un navire.

Je songe à Prevot qui ne revient pas. Je ne l'ai pas entendu se plaindre une seule fois. C'est très bien. Il m'eût été insupportable d'entendre geindre. Prevot est un homme.

Ah ! À cinq cents mètres de moi le voilà qui agite sa lampe ! Il a perdu ses traces ! Je n'ai pas de lampe pour lui répondre, je me lève, je crie, mais il n'entend pas...

Une seconde lampe s'allume à deux cents mètres de la sienne, une troisième lampe. Bon Dieu, c'est une battue et l'on me cherche !

Je crie :

– Ohé !

Mais on ne m'entend pas.

Les trois lampes poursuivent leurs signaux d'appel.

Je ne suis pas fou, ce soir. Je me sens bien. Je suis en paix. Je regarde avec attention. Il y a trois lampes à cinq cents mètres.

– Ohé !

Mais on ne m'entend toujours pas.

Alors je suis pris d'une courte panique. La seule que je connaîtrai. Ah ! je puis encore courir : « Attendez... Attendez... » Ils vont faire demi-tour ! Ils vont s'éloigner, chercher ailleurs, et moi je vais tomber ! Je vais tomber sur le seuil de la vie, quand il était des bras pour me recevoir !...

– Ohé ! Ohé !

– Ohé !

Ils m'ont entendu. Je suffoque, je suffoque mais je cours encore. Je cours dans la direction de la voix : « Ohé ! » j'aperçois Prevot et je tombe.

– Ah ! Quand j'ai aperçu toutes ces lampes !...

– Quelles lampes ?

C'est exact, il est seul.

Cette fois-ci je n'éprouve aucun désespoir, mais une sourde colère.

– Et votre lac ?

– Il s'éloignait quand j'avais. Et j'ai marché vers lui pendant une demi-heure. Après une demi-heure il était trop loin. Je suis revenu. Mais je suis sûr maintenant que c'est un lac...

– Vous êtes fou, absolument fou. Ah ! pourquoi avez-vous fait cela ?... Pourquoi ?

Qu'a-t-il fait ? Pourquoi l'a-t-il fait ? Je pleurerais d'indignation, et j'ignore pourquoi je suis indigné. Et Prevot m'explique d'une voix qui s'étrangle :

– J'aurais tant voulu trouver à boire... Vos lèvres sont tellement blanches !

Ah ! Ma colère tombe... Je passe ma main sur mon front, comme si je me réveillais, et je me

“Wait! Wait!” I screamed. They seemed to be turning away from me, going off, hunting me elsewhere! And I stood tottering, tottering on the brink of life when there were arms out there ready to catch me! I shouted and screamed again and again.

They had heard me! An answering shout had come. I was strangling, suffocating, but I ran on, shouting as I ran, until I saw Prevot and keeled over.

When I could speak again I said: “Whew! When I saw all those lights . . .”

“What lights?”
God in Heaven, it was true! He was alone! This time I was beyond despair. I was filled with a sort of dumb fury. “What about your lake?” I rasped.

“As fast as I moved towards it, it moved back. I walked after it for about half an hour. Then it seemed still too far away, so I came back. But I am positive, now, that it is a lake.”

“You’re crazy. Absolutely crazy. Why did you do it? Tell me. Why?”

What had he done? Why had he done it? I was ready to weep with indignation, yet I scarcely knew why I was so indignant. Prevot mumbled his excuse: “I felt I had to find some water. You . . . your lips were awfully pale.”

Well! My anger died within me. I passed my hand over my forehead as if I were waking out of sleep. I was suddenly sad. I said: “There was no mistake about it. I saw them as clearly as I see you now. Three lights there were. I tell you, Prevot, I saw them!”

Prevot made no comment. “Well,” he said finally, “I guess we’re in a bad way.”

In this air devoid of moisture the soil is swift to give off its temperature. It was already very cold. I stood up and stamped about. But soon a ‘violent fit of trembling came over me. My dehydrated blood was moving sluggishly and I was pierced by a freezing chill which was not merely the chill of night. My teeth were chattering and my whole body had begun to twitch. My hand shook so that I could not hold an electric torch. I who had never been sensitive to cold was about to die of cold. What a strange effect thirst can have!

Somewhere, tired of carrying it in the sun, I had let my waterproof drop. Now the wind was growing bitter and I was learning that in the desert there is no place of refuge. The desert is as smooth as marble. By day it throws no shadow; by night it hands you over naked to the wind. Not a tree, not a hedge, not a rock behind which I could seek shelter. The wind was charging me like a troop of cavalry across open country. I turned and twisted to escape it: I lay down, stood up, lay down again, and still I was exposed to its freezing lash. I had no strength to run from the assassin and under the sabre-stroke I tumbled to my knees, my head between my hands.

A little later I pieced these bits together and remembered that I had struggled to my feet and had started to walk on, shivering as I went. I had started forward wondering where I was and then I had heard Prevot. His shouting had jolted me into consciousness.

I went back towards him, still trembling from head to foot - quivering with the attack of hiccups that was convulsing my whole body. To myself I said: “It isn’t the cold. It’s something else. It’s the end.” The simple fact was that I hadn’t enough water in me. I had tramped too far yesterday and the day before when I was off by myself, and I was dehydrated.

The thought of dying of the cold hurt me. I preferred the phantoms of my mind, the cross,

sens triste. Et je raconte doucement :

– J’ai vu, comme je vous vois, j’ai vu clairement, sans erreur possible, trois lumières... Je vous dis que je les ai vues, Prevot !

Prevot se tait d’abord :

– Eh oui, avoue-t-il enfin, ça va mal.

La terre rayonne vite sous cette atmosphère sans vapeur d’eau. Il fait déjà très froid. Je me lève et je marche. Mais bientôt je suis pris d’un insupportable tremblement. Mon sang déshydraté circule très mal, et un froid glacial me pénètre, qui n’est pas seulement le froid de la nuit. Mes mâchoires claquent et tout mon corps est agité de soubresauts. Je ne puis plus me servir d’une lampe électrique tant ma main la secoue. Je n’ai jamais été sensible au froid, et cependant je vais mourir de froid, quel étrange effet de la soif !

J’ai laissé tomber mon caoutchouc quelque part, las de le porter dans la chaleur. Et le vent peu à peu empire. Et je découvre que dans le désert il n’est point de refuge... Le désert est lisse comme un marbre. Il ne forme point d’ombre pendant le jour, et la nuit il vous livre tout nu au vent. Pas un arbre, pas une haie, pas une pierre qui m’eût abrité. Le vent me charge comme une cavalerie en terrain découvert. Je tourne en rond pour le fuir. Je me couche et je me relève. Couché ou debout je suis exposé à ce fouet de glace. Je ne puis courir, je n’ai plus de forces, je ne puis fuir les assassins et je tombe à genoux, la tête dans les mains, sous le sabre !

Je m’en rends compte un peu plus tard ; je me suis relevé, et je marche droit devant moi, toujours grelottant ! Où suis-je ? Ah ! je viens de partir, j’entends Prevot! Ce sont ses appels qui m’ont réveillé...

Je reviens vers lui, toujours agité par ce tremblement, par ce hoquet de tout le corps. Et je me dis : « Ce n’est pas le froid. C’est autre chose. C’est la fin. » Je me suis déjà trop déshydraté. J’ai tant marché, avant-hier, et hier quand j’allais seul.

Cela me peine de finir par le froid. Je préférerais mes mirages intérieurs. Cette croix, ces Arabes, ces lampes. Après tout, cela commençait à m’intéresser. Je n’aime pas être flagellé comme un esclave...

Me voici encore à genoux.

Nous avons emporté un peu de pharmacie. Cent grammes d’éther pur, cent grammes d’alcool à 90 et un flacon d’iode. J’essaie de boire deux ou trois gorgées d’éther pur. C’est comme si j’avalais des couteaux. Puis un peu d’alcool à 90, mais cela me ferme la gorge.

Je creuse une fosse dans le sable, je m’y couche, et je me recouvre de sable. Mon visage seul émerge. Prevot a découvert des brindilles et allume un feu dont les flammes seront vite taries. Prevot refuse de s’enterrer sous le sable. Il préfère battre la semelle. Il a tort.

Ma gorge demeure serrée, c’est mauvais signe, et cependant je me sens mieux. Je me sens calme. Je me sens calme au-delà de toute espérance. Je m’en vais malgré moi en voyage, ligoté sur le pont de mon vaisseau de négriers sous les étoiles. Mais je ne suis peut-être pas très malheureux...

Je ne sens plus le froid, à condition de ne pas remuer un muscle. Alors, j’oublie mon corps

the trees, the lamps. At least they would have killed me by enchantment. But to be whipped to death like a slave! . . .

Confound it! Down on my knees again! We had with us a little store of medicines - a hundred grammes of ninety per cent alcohol, the same of pure ether, and a small bottle of iodine. I tried to swallow a little of the ether: it was like swallowing a knife. Then I tried the alcohol: it contracted my gullet. I dug a pit in the sand, lay down in it, and flung handfuls of sand over me until all but my face was buried in it.

Prevot was able to collect a few twigs, and he lit a fire which soon burnt itself out. He wouldn't bury himself in the sand, but preferred to stamp round and round in a circle. That was foolish. My throat stayed shut, and though I knew that was a bad sign, I felt better. I felt calm. I felt a peace that was beyond all hope. Once more, despite myself, I was journeying, trussed up on the deck of my slave-ship under the stars. It seemed to me that I was perhaps not in such a bad pass after all.

So long as I lay absolutely motionless, I no longer felt the cold. This allowed me to forget my body buried in the sand. I said to myself that I would not budge an inch, and would therefore never suffer again. As a matter of fact, we really suffer very little. Back of all these torments there is the orchestration of fatigue or of delirium, and we live on in a kind of picture-book, a slightly cruel fairy-tale.

A little while ago the wind had been after me with whip and spur, and I was running in circles like a frightened fox. After that came a time when I couldn't breathe. A great knee was crushing in my chest. A knee. I was writhing in vain to free myself from the weight of the angel who had overthrown me. There had not been a moment when I was alone in this desert. But now I have ceased to believe in my surroundings; I have withdrawn into myself, have shut my eyes, have not so much as batted an eyelid. I have the feeling that this torrent of visions is sweeping me away to a tranquil dream: so rivers cease their turbulence in the embrace of the sea.

Farewell, eyes that I loved! Do not blame me if the human body cannot go three days without water. I should never have believed that man was so truly the prisoner of the springs and freshets. I had no notion that our self-sufficiency was so circumscribed. We take it for granted that a man is able to stride straight out into the world. We believe that man is free. We never see the cord that binds him to wells and fountains, that umbilical cord by which he is tied to the womb of the world. Let man take but one step too many . . . and the cord snaps.

Apart from your suffering, I have no regrets. All in all, it has been a good life. If I got free of this I should start right in again. A man cannot live a decent life in cities, and I need to feel myself live. I am not thinking of aviation. The airplane is a means, not an end. One doesn't risk one's life for a plane any more than a farmer ploughs for the sake of the plough. But the airplane is a means of getting away from towns and their bookkeeping and coming to grips with reality.

Flying is a man's job and its worries are a man's worries. A pilot's business is with the wind,

endormi sous le sable. Je ne bougerai plus, et ainsi je ne souffrirai plus jamais. D'ailleurs véritablement, l'on souffre si peu... Il y a, derrière tous ces tourments, l'orchestration de la fatigue et du délire. Et tout se change en livre d'images, en conte de fées un peu cruel... Tout à l'heure, le vent me chassait à courre et, pour le fuir, je tournais en rond comme une bête. Puis j'ai eu du mal à respirer : un genou m'écrasait la poitrine. Un genou. Et je me débattais contre le poids de l'ange. Je ne fus jamais seul dans le désert. Maintenant que je ne crois plus en ce qui m'entoure, je me retire chez moi, je ferme les yeux et je ne remue plus un cil. Tout ce torrent d'images m'emporte, je le sens, vers un songe tranquille : les fleuves se calment dans l'épaisseur de la mer.

Adieu, vous que j'aimais. Ce n'est point ma faute si le corps humain ne peut résister trois jours sans boire. Je ne me croyais pas prisonnier ainsi des fontaines. Je ne soupçonnais pas une aussi courte autonomie. On croit que l'homme peut s'en aller droit devant soi. On croit que l'homme est libre... On ne voit pas la corde qui le rattache au puits, qui le rattache, comme un cordon ombilical, au ventre de la terre. S'il fait un pas de plus, il meurt.

À part votre souffrance, je ne regrette rien. Tout compte fait, j'ai eu la meilleure part. Si je rentrais, je recommencerais. J'ai besoin de vivre. Dans les villes, il n'y a plus de vie humaine.

Il ne s'agit point ici d'aviation. L'avion, ce n'est pas une fin, c'est un moyen. Ce n'est pas pour l'avion que l'on risque sa vie. Ce n'est pas non plus pour sa charrue que le paysan laboure. Mais, par l'avion, on quitte les villes et leurs comptables, et l'on retrouve une vérité paysanne.

On fait un travail d'homme et l'on connaît des soucis d'homme. On est en contact avec le vent, avec les étoiles, avec la nuit, avec le sable, avec la mer. On ruse avec les forces naturelles. On attend l'aube comme le jardinier attend le printemps. On attend l'escale comme une terre promise, et l'on cherche sa vérité dans les étoiles.

Je ne me plaindrai pas. Depuis trois jours, j'ai marché, j'ai eu soif, j'ai suivi des pistes dans le sable, j'ai fait de la rosée mon espérance. J'ai cherché à joindre mon espèce, dont j'avais oublié où elle logeait sur la terre. Et ce sont là des soucis de vivants. Je ne puis pas ne pas les juger plus importants que le choix, le soir, d'un music-hall.

Je ne comprends plus ces populations des trains de banlieue, ces hommes qui se croient des hommes, et qui cependant sont réduits, par une pression qu'ils ne sentent pas, comme les fourmis, à l'usage qui en est fait. De quoi remplissent-ils, quand ils sont libres, leurs absurdes petits dimanches ?

Une fois, en Russie, j'ai entendu jouer du Mozart dans une usine. Je l'ai écrit. J'ai reçu deux cents lettres d'injures. Je n'en veux pas à ceux qui préfèrent le beuglant. Ils ne connaissent point d'autre chant. J'en veux au tenancier du beuglant. Je n'aime pas que l'on abîme les hommes.

Moi je suis heureux dans mon métier. Je me sens paysan des escales. Dans le train de banlieue, je sens mon agonie bien autrement qu'ici ! Ici, tout compte fait, quel luxe !...

Je ne regrette rien. J'ai joué, j'ai perdu. C'est dans l'ordre de mon métier. Mais, tout de même, je l'ai respiré, le vent de la mer.

Ceux qui l'ont goûté une fois n'oublient pas cette nourriture. N'est-ce pas, mes camarades

with the stars, with night, with sand, with the sea. He strives to outwit the forces of nature. He stares in expectancy for the coming of dawn the way a gardener awaits the coming of spring. He looks forward to port as to a promised land, and truth for him is what lives in the stars.

I have nothing to complain of. For three days I have tramped the desert, have known the pangs of thirst, have followed false scents in the sand, have pinned my faith on the dew. I have struggled to rejoin my kind, whose very existence on earth I had forgotten. These are the cares of men alive in every fibre, and I cannot help thinking them more important than the fretful choosing of a night-club in which to spend the evening. Compare the one life with the other, and all things considered this is luxury! I have no regrets. I have gambled and lost. It was all in the day's work.

At least I have had the unforgettable taste of the sea on my lips.

I am not talking about living dangerously. Such words are meaningless to me. The toreador does not stir me to enthusiasm. It is not danger I love. I know what I love. It is life.

The sky seemed to me faintly bright. I drew up one arm through the sand. There was a bit of the torn parachute within reach, and I ran my hand over it. It was bone dry. Let's see. Dew falls at dawn. Here was dawn risen and no moisture on the cloth. My mind was befuddled and I heard myself say: "There is a dry heart here, a dry heart that cannot know the relief of tears."

I scrambled to my feet. "We're off, Prevot," I said. "Our throats are still open. Get along, man!"

The wind that shrivels up a man in nineteen hours was now blowing out of the west. My gullet was not yet shut, but it was hard and painful and I could feel that there was a rasp in it. Soon that cough would begin that I had been told about and was now expecting. My tongue was becoming a nuisance. But most serious of all, I was beginning to see shining spots before my eyes. When those spots changed into flames, I should simply lie down. The first morning hours were cool and we took advantage of them to get on at a good pace. We knew that once the sun was high there would be no more walking for us. We no longer had the right to sweat. Certainly not to stop and catch our breath. This coolness was merely the coolness of low humidity. The prevailing wind was coming from the desert, and under its soft and treacherous caress the blood was being dried out of us.

Our first day's nourishment had been a few grapes. In the next three days each of us ate half an orange and a bit of cake. If we had had anything left now, we couldn't have eaten it because we had no saliva with which to masticate it. But I had stopped being hungry. Thirsty I was, yes, and it seemed to me that I was suffering less from thirst itself than from the effects of thirst. Gullet hard. Tongue like plaster-of-Paris. A rasping in the throat. A horrible taste in the mouth.

All these sensations were new to me, and though I believed water could rid me of them, nothing in my memory associated them with water. Thirst had become more and more a disease and less and less a craving. I began to realize that the thought of water and fruit was now less agonizing than it had been. I was forgetting the radiance of the orange, just as I was

? Et il ne s'agit pas de vivre dangereusement. Cette formule est prétentieuse. Les toréadors ne me plaisent guère. Ce n'est pas le danger que j'aime. Je sais ce que j'aime. C'est la vie.

Il me semble que le ciel va blanchir. Je sors un bras du sable. J'ai un panneau à portée de la main, je le tâte, mais il reste sec. Attendons. La rosée se dépose à l'aube. Mais l'aube blanchit sans mouiller nos linges. Alors mes réflexions s'embrouillent un peu et je m'entends dire : « Il y a ici un cœur sec... un cœur sec... un cœur sec qui ne sait point former de larmes !... »

–En route, Prevot! Nos gorges ne se sont pas fermées : encore il faut marcher.

VII

Il souffle ce vent d'Ouest qui sèche l'homme en dix-neuf heures. Mon oesophage n'est pas fermé encore, mais il est dur et douloureux. J'y devine quelque chose qui racle. Bientôt commencera cette toux, que l'on m'a décrite, et que j'attends. Ma langue me gêne. Mais le plus grave est que j'aperçois déjà des taches brillantes. Quand elles se changeront en flammes, je me coucherai.

Nous marchons vite. Nous profitons de la fraîcheur du petit jour. Nous savons bien qu'au grand soleil, comme l'on dit, nous ne marcherons plus. Au grand soleil...

Nous n'avons pas le droit de transpirer. Ni même celui d'attendre. Cette fraîcheur n'est qu'une fraîcheur à dix-huit pour cent d'humidité. Ce vent qui souffle vient du désert. Et, sous cette caresse menteuse et tendre, notre sang s'évapore.

Nous avons mangé un peu de raisin le premier jour. Depuis trois jours, une demi-orange et une moitié de madeleine. Avec quelle salive eussions-nous mâché notre nourriture ? Mais je n'éprouve aucune faim, je n'éprouve que la soif. Et il me semble que désormais, plus que la soif, j'éprouve les effets de la soif. Cette gorge dure. Cette langue de plâtre. Ce raclement et cet affreux goût dans la bouche. Ces sensations-là sont nouvelles pour moi. Sans doute l'eau les guérirait-elle, mais je n'ai point de souvenirs qui leur associent ce remède. La soif devient de plus en plus une maladie et de moins en moins un désir.

Il me semble que les fontaines et les fruits m'offrent déjà des images moins déchirantes. J'oublie le rayonnement de l'orange, comme il me semble avoir oublié mes tendresses. Déjà peut-être j'oublie tout.

Nous nous sommes assis, mais il faut repartir. Nous renonçons aux longues étapes. Après cinq cents mètres de marche nous croulons de fatigue. Et j'éprouve une grande joie à m'étendre. Mais il faut repartir.

Le paysage change. Les pierres s'espacent. Nous marchons maintenant sur du sable. À deux kilomètres devant nous, des dunes. Sur ces dunes quelques taches de végétation basse. À l'armure d'acier, je préfère le sable. C'est le désert blond. C'est le Sahara. Je crois le reconnaître...

Maintenant nous nous épuisons en deux cents mètres.

– Nous allons marcher tout de même, au moins jusqu'à ces arbustes.

C'est une limite extrême. Nous vérifierons en voiture, lorsque nous remonterons nos traces, huit jours plus tard, pour chercher le Simoun, que cette dernière tentative fut de quatre-vingts

forgetting the eyes under the hat-brim. Perhaps I was forgetting everything.

We had sat down after all, but it could not be for long. Nevertheless, it was impossible to go five hundred yards without our legs giving way. To stretch out on the sand would be marvelous - but it could not be.

The landscape had begun to change. Rocky places grew rarer and the sand was now firm beneath our feet. A mile ahead stood dunes and on those dunes we could see a scrubby vegetation. At least this sand was preferable to the steely surface over which we had been trudging. This was the golden desert. This might have been the Sahara. It was in a sense my country.

Two hundred yards had now become our limit, but we had determined to carry on until we reached the vegetation. Better than that we could not hope to do. A week later, when we went back over our traces in a car to have a look at the Simoon, I measured this last lap and found that it was just short of fifty miles. All told we had done one hundred and twenty-four miles.

The previous day I had tramped without hope. Today the word "hope" had grown meaningless. Today we were tramping simply because we were tramping. Probably oxen work for the same reason. Yesterday I had dreamed of a paradise of orange-trees. Today I would not give a button for paradise; I did not believe oranges existed. When I thought about myself I found in me nothing but a heart squeezed dry. I was tottering but emotionless. I felt no distress whatever, and in a way I regretted it: misery would have seemed to me as sweet as water. I might then have felt sorry for myself and commiserated with myself as with a friend. But I had not a friend left on earth.

Later, when we were rescued, seeing our burnt-out eyes men thought we must have called aloud and wept and suffered. But cries of despair, misery, sobbing grief are a kind of wealth, and we possessed no wealth. When a young girl is disappointed in love she weeps and knows sorrow. Sorrow is one of the vibrations that prove the fact of living. I felt no sorrow. I was the desert. I could no longer bring up a little saliva; neither could I any longer summon those moving visions towards which I should have loved to stretch forth arms. The sun had dried up the springs of tears in me.

And yet, what was that? A ripple of hope went through me like a faint breeze over a lake. What was this sign that had awakened my instinct before knocking on the door of my consciousness? Nothing had changed, and yet everything was changed. This sheet of sand, these low hummocks and sparse tufts of verdure that had been a landscape, were now become a stage setting. Thus far the stage was empty, but the scene was set. I looked at Prevot. The same astonishing thing had happened to him as to me, but he was as far from guessing its significance as I was.

I swear to you that something is about to happen. I swear that life has sprung in this desert. I swear that this emptiness, this stillness, has suddenly become more stirring than a tumult on a public square.

"Prevot! Footprints! We are saved!"

We had wandered from the trail of the human species; we had cast ourselves forth from the tribe; we had found ourselves alone on earth and forgotten by the universal migration; and

kilomètres. J'en ai donc déjà couvert près de deux cents. Comment poursuivrais-je ?

Hier, je marchais sans espoir. Aujourd'hui, ces mots ont perdu leur sens. Aujourd'hui, nous marchons parce que nous marchons. Ainsi les bœufs sans doute, au labour. Je rêvais hier à des paradis d'orangers. Mais aujourd'hui, il n'est plus, pour moi, de paradis. Je ne crois plus à l'existence des oranges.

Je ne découvre plus rien en moi, sinon une grande sécheresse de cœur. Je vais tomber et ne connais point le désespoir. Je n'ai même pas de peine. Je le regrette : le chagrin me semblerait doux comme l'eau. On a pitié de soi et l'on se plaint comme un ami. Mais je n'ai plus d'ami au monde.

Quand on me retrouvera, les yeux brûlés, on imaginera que j'ai beaucoup appelé et beaucoup souffert. Mais les élans, mais les regrets, mais les tendres souffrances, ce sont encore des richesses. Et moi je n'ai plus de richesses. Les fraîches jeunes filles, au soir de leur premier amour, connaissent le chagrin et pleurent. Le chagrin est lié aux frémissements de la vie. Et moi je n'ai plus de chagrin...

Le désert, c'est moi. Je ne forme plus de salive, mais je ne forme plus, non plus, les images douces vers lesquelles j'aurais pu gémir. Le soleil a séché en moi la source des larmes.

Et cependant, qu'ai-je aperçu ? Un souffle d'espoir a passé sur moi comme une risée sur la mer. Quel est le signe qui vient d'alerter mon instinct avant de frapper ma conscience ? Rien n'a changé, et cependant tout a changé. Cette nappe de sable, ces tertres et ces légères plaques de verdure ne composent plus un paysage, mais une scène. Une scène vide encore, mais toute préparée. Je regarde Prevot. Il est frappé du même étonnement que moi, mais il ne comprend pas non plus ce qu'il éprouve.

Je vous jure qu'il va se passer quelque chose...

Je vous jure que le désert s'est animé. Je vous jure que cette absence, que ce silence sont tout à coup plus émouvants qu'un tumulte de place publique...

Nous sommes sauvés, il y a des traces dans le sable !...

Ah ! nous avons perdu la piste de l'espèce humaine, nous étions retranchés d'avec la tribu, nous nous étions retrouvés seuls au monde, oubliés par une migration universelle, et voici que nous découvrons, imprimés dans le sable, les pieds miraculeux de l'homme.

- Ici, Prevot, deux hommes se sont séparés... - Ici, un chameau s'est agenouillé... - Ici...

Et cependant, nous ne sommes point sauvés encore. Il ne nous suffit pas d'attendre. Dans quelques heures, on ne pourra plus nous secourir. La marche de la soif, une fois la toux commencée, est trop rapide. Et notre gorge...

Mais je crois en cette caravane, qui se balance quelque part, dans le désert.

Nous avons donc marché encore, et tout à coup j'ai entendu le chant du coq. Guillaumet m'avait dit: «Vers la fin, j'entendais des coqs dans les Andes. J'entendais aussi des chemins de fer... »

Je me souviens de son récit à l'instant même où le coq chante et je me dis : « Ce sont mes yeux qui m'ont trompé d'abord. C'est sans doute l'effet de la soif. Mes oreilles ont mieux résisté...

here, imprinted in the sand, were the divine and naked feet of man!

“Look, Prevot, here two men stood together and then separated.”

“Here a camel knelt.”

“Here . . .”

But it was not true that we were already saved. It was not enough to squat clown and wait. Before long we should be past saving. Once the cough has begun, the progress made by thirst is swift.

Still, I believed in that caravan swaying somewhere in the desert, heavy with its cargo of treasure.

We went on. Suddenly I heard a cock crow. I remembered what Guillaumet had told me: “Towards the end I heard cocks crowing in the Andes. And I heard the railway train.” The instant the cock crowed I thought of Guillaumet and I said to myself: “First it was my eyes that played tricks on me. I suppose this is another of the effects of thirst. Probably my ears have merely held out longer than my eyes.” But Prevot grabbed my arm: “Did you hear that?” “What?”

“The cock.”

“Why . . . why, yes, I did.”

To myself I said: “Fool! Get it through your head! This means life!”

I had one last hallucination - three dogs chasing one another. Prevot looked, but could not see them. However, both of us waved our arms at a Bedouin. Both of us shouted with all the breath in our bodies, and laughed for happiness.

But our voices could not carry thirty yards. The Bedouin on his slow-moving camel had come into view from behind a dune and now he was moving slowly out of sight. The man was probably the only Arab in this desert, sent by a demon to materialize and vanish before the eyes of us who could not run.

We saw in profile on the dune another Arab. We shouted, but our shouts were whispers. We waved our arms and it seemed to us that they must fill the sky with monstrous signals. Still the Bedouin stared with averted face away from us.

At last, slowly, slowly he began a right angle turn in our direction. At the very second when he came face to face with us, I thought, the curtain would come down. At the very second when his eyes met ours, thirst would vanish and by this man would death and the mirages be wiped out. Let this man but make a quarter-turn left and the world is changed. Let him but bring his torso round, but sweep the scene with a glance, and like a god he can create life.

The miracle had come to pass. He was walking towards us over the sand like a god over the waves.

The Arab looked at us without a word. He placed his hands upon our shoulders and we obeyed him: we stretched out upon the sand. Race, language, religion were forgotten. There was only this humble nomad with the hands of an archangel on our shoulders.

Face to the sand, we waited. And when the water came, we drank like calves with our faces

» Mais Prevot m'a saisi par le bras :

– Vous avez entendu ? – Quoi ?

– Le coq !

– Alors... Alors...

Alors, bien sûr, imbécile, c'est la vie...

J'ai eu une dernière hallucination : celle de trois chiens qui se poursuivaient. Prevot, qui regardait aussi, n'a rien vu. Mais nous sommes deux à tendre les bras vers ce Bédouin. Nous sommes deux à user vers lui tout le souffle de nos poitrines. Nous sommes deux à rire de bonheur !...

Mais nos voix ne portent pas à trente mètres. Nos cordes vocales sont déjà sèches. Nous nous parlions tout bas l'un à l'autre, et nous ne l'avions même pas remarqué !

Mais ce Bédouin et son chameau, qui viennent de se démasquer de derrière le tertre, voilà que lentement, lentement, ils s'éloignent. Peut-être cet homme est-il seul. Un démon cruel nous l'a montré et le retire...

Et nous ne pourrions plus courir !

Un autre Arabe apparaît de profil sur la dune. Nous hurlons, mais tout bas. Alors, nous agissons les bras et nous avons l'impression de remplir le ciel de signaux immenses. Mais ce Bédouin regarde toujours vers la droite...

Et voici que, sans hâte, il a amorcé un quart de tour. À la seconde même où il se présentera de face, tout sera accompli. À la seconde même où il regardera vers nous, il aura déjà effacé en nous la soif, la mort et les mirages. Il a amorcé un quart de tour qui, déjà, change le monde. Par un mouvement de son seul buste, par la promenade de son seul regard, il crée la vie, et il me paraît semblable à un dieu...

C'est un miracle... Il marche vers nous sur le sable, comme un dieu sur la mer...



in the basin, and with a greediness which alarmed the Bedouin so that from time to time he pulled us back. But as soon as his hand fell away from us we plunged our faces anew into the water.

Water, thou hast no taste, no color, no odor; canst not be defined, art relished while ever mysterious. Not necessary to life, but rather life itself, thou fillest us with a gratification that exceeds the delight of the senses. By thy might, there return into us treasures that we had abandoned. By thy grace, there are released in us all the dried-up runnels of our heart. Of the riches that exist in the world, thou art the rarest and also the most delicate - thou so pure within the bowels of the earth! A man may die of thirst lying beside a magnesian spring. He may die within reach of a salt lake. He may die though he hold in his hand a jug of dew, if it be inhabited by evil salts. For thou, water, art a proud divinity, allowing no alteration, no foreignness in thy being. And the joy that thou spreadest is an infinitely simple joy.

You, Bedouin of Libya who saved our lives, though you will dwell for ever in my memory yet I shall never be able to recapture your features. You are Humanity and your face comes into my mind simply as man incarnate. You, our beloved fellowman, did not know who we might be, and yet you recognized us without fail. And I, in my turn, shall recognize you in the faces of all mankind. You came towards me in an aureole of charity and magnanimity bearing the gift of water. All my friends and all my enemies marched towards me in your person. It did not seem to me that you were rescuing me: rather did it seem that you were forgiving me. And I felt I had no enemy left in all the world.

This is the end of my story. Lifted on to a camel, we went on for three hours. Then, broken with weariness, we asked to be set down at a camp while the cameleers went on ahead for help. Towards six in the evening a car manned by armed Bedouins came to fetch us. A half-hour later we were set down at the house of a Swiss engineer named Raccaud who was operating a soda factory beside saline deposits in the desert. He was unforgettably kind to us. By midnight we were in Cairo.

I awoke between white sheets. Through the curtains came the rays of a sun that was no longer an enemy. I spread butter and honey on my bread. I smiled. I recaptured the savor of my childhood and all its marvels. And I read and reread the telegram from those dearest to me in all the world whose three words had shattered me: "So terribly happy!"



L'Arabe nous a simplement regardés. Il a pressé, des mains, sur nos épaules, et nous lui avons obéi. Nous nous sommes étendus. Il n'y a plus ici ni races, ni langages, ni divisions... Il y a ce nomade pauvre qui a posé sur nos épaules des mains d'archange.

Nous avons attendu, le front dans le sable. Et maintenant, nous buvons à plat ventre, la tête dans la bassine, comme des veaux. Le Bédouin s'en effraye et nous oblige, à chaque instant, à nous interrompre. Mais dès qu'il nous lâche, nous replongeons tout notre visage dans l'eau.

L'eau !

Eau, tu n'as ni goût, ni couleur, ni arôme, on ne peut pas te définir, on te goûte, sans te connaître. Tu n'es pas nécessaire à la vie : tu es la vie. Tu nous pénètres d'un plaisir qui ne s'explique point par les sens. Avec toi rentrent en nous tous les pouvoirs auxquels nous avons renoncé. Par ta grâce, s'ouvrent en nous toutes les sources tariées de notre cœur.

Tu es la plus grande richesse qui soit au monde, et tu es aussi la plus délicate, toi si pure au ventre de la terre. On peut mourir sur une source d'eau magnésienne. On peut mourir à deux pas d'un lac d'eau salée. On peut mourir malgré deux litres de rosée qui retiennent en suspens quelques sels. Tu n'acceptes point de mélange, tu ne supportes point d'altération, tu es une ombrageuse divinité...

Mais tu répands en nous un bonheur infiniment simple.

Quant à toi qui nous sauves, Bédouin de Libye, tu t'effaceras cependant à jamais de ma mémoire. Je ne me souviendrai jamais de ton visage. Tu es l'Homme et tu m'apparais avec le visage de tous les hommes à la fois. Tu ne nous as jamais dévisagés et déjà tu nous as reconnus. Tu es le frère bien-aimé. Et, à mon tour, je te reconnaîtrai dans tous les hommes.

Tu m'apparais baigné de noblesse et de bienveillance, grand seigneur qui as le pouvoir de donner à boire. Tous mes amis, tous mes ennemis en toi marchent vers moi, et je n'ai plus un seul ennemi au monde.





Saint-Exupéry's disappearance

Saint-Exupéry's last assigned reconnaissance mission was to collect intelligence on German troop movements in and around the Rhone Valley preceding the Allied invasion of southern France ("Operation Dragoon"). Although he had been reinstated to his old squadron with the provision that he was to fly only five missions, on 31 July 1944, he took off in an unarmed P-38 on his ninth reconnaissance mission from an airbase on Corsica. To the great alarm of his squadron compatriots, he did not return, vanishing without a trace. Word of his disappearance shortly spread across the literary world and then into international headlines. An unidentifiable body in a French uniform was found several days after his disappearance east of the Frioul archipelago south of Marseille and buried in Carqueiranne in September.



Saint-Exupéry's bracelet (gourmette)

In September 1998, to the east of Riou Island south of Marseille, a fisherman found a silver identity bracelet (gourmette) bearing the names of Saint-Exupéry, his wife Consuelo and his American publisher, Reynal & Hitchcock. The bracelet was hooked to a piece of fabric, presumably from his flight suit. The recovery of his bracelet was an emotional event in France, as it was found far from his intended flight path, implying that the aircraft might not have been shot down.

In May 2000, Luc Vanrell, a diver, found the partial remains of a Lockheed P-38 Lightning on the seabed off the coast of Marseille, near where the bracelet was previously found. The discovery

galvanized the country, which for decades had conducted searches for his aircraft and speculated on Saint-Exupéry's fate. The location of the crash site and the bracelet are less than 80 km by sea from where the unidentified French serviceman was found in Carqueiranne and it remains plausible, but has not been confirmed, that the body was carried there by sea currents after the crash over the course of several days.

In 2008, a French journalist from La Provence, investigating Saint-Exupéry's death, contacted former Luftwaffe pilots who flew in the area of Marseille, eventually getting an account from Horst Rippert. An admirer of Saint-Exupéry's books, Rippert's memoirs expressed both fears and doubts that he was responsible, but he stated in 2003 he became certain he was responsible when he learned the location of Saint-Exupéry's wreckage. Rippert claimed to have reported the kill over his radio, but there are no surviving records to verify this account.

– https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antoine_de_Saint-Exupéry

Dernier vol le 31 juillet 1944

Le 31 juillet 1944 Saint-Exupéry décolle de l'aéroport de Poretta, non loin de Bastia, en Corse. Il vole aux commandes du F-5B-1-LO, bimoteur P-38 Lightning en version reconnaissance aérienne³⁸. Quittant le terrain à 8 h 25 du matin pour une mission de cartographie, il met le cap sur la vallée du Rhône, devant ensuite passer par Annecy et faire retour par la Provence. Sa mission consiste en une série de reconnaissances photographiques afin de tracer des cartes précises du pays, fort utiles au tout prochain débarquement en Provence, prévu pour le 15 août. Il est seul à bord, son avion n'est pas armé et emporte du carburant pour six heures de vol. À 8 h 30, il se signale par son dernier écho radar. La mission démarre. Saint-Exupéry ne revient pas ; le temps de carburant étant écoulé, il est porté disparu.

Longtemps perdue, l'épave de l'avion de Saint-Exupéry a été identifiée en 2003, certifiant de la sorte le lieu de sa mort. Pour autant, en dépit de cette découverte essentielle, les circonstances de cette mort n'ont pu être éclaircies. L'hypothèse la plus probable est que son avion ait été abattu par un chasseur allemand.

En 2000, des morceaux de son appareil sont retrouvés en Méditerranée au large de Marseille, face nord-est de l'île de Riou.

Le 7 septembre 1998, un patron pêcheur marseillais avait remonté dans ses filets une gourmette en argent oxydée par un long séjour sous-marin et sur laquelle était gravée l'identité d'Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.

Les vestiges de l'avion tant recherché sont formellement identifiés grâce à un numéro matricule retrouvé gravé par le constructeur de l'appareil (Lockheed, Californie).

Voilà les dernières lignes d'une lettre adressée à Pierre Dalloz, écrite la veille de sa mort :

« Si je suis descendu, je ne regretterai absolument rien. La termitière future m'épouvante. Et je hais leur vertu de robots. Moi, j'étais fait pour être jardinier. »

En mars 2008, Horst Rippert, un ancien pilote de la Luftwaffe, affirme dans le journal La Provence avoir abattu un avion de type P-38 Lightning, précisément le 31 juillet 1944, dans la zone où se trouvait Saint-Exupéry. En mission pour retrouver un avion ennemi qui survolait la région d'Annecy, Horst Rippert aurait tourné plusieurs minutes au-dessus de la Méditerranée sans rien repérer. Soudain, un avion allié l'aurait croisé, 3 000 mètres au-dessous de lui. Horst Rippert aurait alors tiré et touché l'autre appareil. Ce dernier se serait enflammé et serait tombé à pic dans la Méditerranée.

Horst Rippert, qui admirait l'écrivain, a déclaré : « Si j'avais su qui était assis dans l'avion, je n'aurais pas tiré. Pas sur cet homme. »

– https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antoine_de_Saint-Exupéry

“I deeply regret having killed my beloved friend.”

In an interview, published in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung on 17.03.2008, Horst Rippert, a former longtime sports reporter for the German television ZDF, confessed to having shot down the author of the “little prince” and aviator Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in 1944.

Mr. Rippert, you claim that you shot down Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Is that true?

I was a fighter pilot and had the order to make a reconnaissance flight in the area over Toulon. Then I saw an airplane and recognized by the cockade that it was hostile. I followed it and shot it down.

And all this happened south of Marseille over the sea?

Southeast.

Did you always hunt down enemy planes immediately?

Sure, immediately.

How many kills have you had?

28.

Did you keep track of the shots? Did you note down when and where each one was shot?

Of course I had to state that. We reported it to the ground station by radio: “I hit that and that plane, now it’s going to fall, splat.” But not who was in it!

From what distance did you shoot it down?

Maybe 200 meters. But, of course, I couldn’t see through my glass window of the cabin or through its glass window that it was my friend Exupéry. You can’t see a thing.

Your friend? You had already read books from him at the time?

All of them. He was one of my favorites. Because he wrote so much about flying, too.

On July 31, 1944, there have been many air battles. When did you learn that it was him?

After the end of the war. He was shot down at that day, they said, and around that time. But of course I couldn’t prove that it was me. I just thought: sad, sad, sad...

In 2000, remains of his plane were found in the sea, which in 2004 were clearly identified as the remains of Saint-Exupéry’s plane. Then the connection became completely clear to you?

Yes. I deeply regret having killed the author whom I admired so much.



Lockheed P-38 Lightning



Saint-Exupéry at the Lockheed P-38 Lightning and its remains on the seabed near Marseille.

