

Contents

Introduction	VII
Night Flight	I

Night Flight

1

BELOW THE AIRCRAFT the shadowy wake of the hills was already sinking into the gold of the evening. The plains were becoming luminous, but with an indestructible light: in this country they do not completely yield up their gold, just as, after winter, they do not completely yield up their snow.

And the pilot Fabien, who was bringing back to Buenos Aires from the far south the mail from Patagonia, could recognize the approach of evening by the same signs that enable one to identify the sea around a port: by the calm, by the light ripples that were only faintly sketched out by the peaceful clouds. He was entering a huge and blessed harbour.

In this calm he could also have imagined himself strolling along slowly, almost like a shepherd. The shepherds of Patagonia move from one flock to another without hurrying, and he was going from one town to another: he was the shepherd of small towns. Every couple of hours he encountered them coming to drink by the banks of rivers or grazing on the plain.

Sometimes, after a hundred kilometres of steppes, more uninhabited than the sea, he passed over an isolated farm,

which seemed to carry off with it behind him, in a great swell of grasslands, its cargo of human lives, and so he greeted this ship by dipping his wings.

“San Julian’s in sight. We’ll be landing in ten minutes.”

The flight-radio operator passed on the news to all the stations on the route.

Over a distance of two thousand five hundred kilometres, from the Straits of Magellan to Buenos Aires, similar stations were placed at regular intervals, but this one gave access to the frontiers of the night, just as in Africa the last conquered village gave access to the mysterious interior.

The radio operator passed a piece of paper to the pilot:

“There are so many storms that the electrical discharges are blocking my headphones. Do you want to spend the night at San Julian?”

Fabien smiled. The sky was as calm as an aquarium and all the stations ahead of them were reporting: “Clear skies. No wind.”

He replied:

“We’ll go on.”

But the radio operator thought that the storms had probably found somewhere to settle, just as a worm finds a spot to settle in a fruit. It would be a fine night, and yet it would be spoilt. He was reluctant to go into a darkness in which things were about to go bad.

As they went down to San Julian with the engine at a slower speed, Fabien felt weary. Everything that made life sweet for human beings was increasing in size for him: their houses, their little cafés, the trees along the paths. He was like a conqueror, on the evening after his conquests, who contemplates the lands of his empire and discovers the humble pleasures of being human. Fabien needed to rest his arms, to feel again his own weight and stiffness. We are enriched by our sufferings and by just being an ordinary man looking through the window at a view which will not change from now on. He would have accepted this tiny village, and after having made his choice, he would be content with what life happened to offer him and would be able to love it. It is limiting in the way that love is. Fabien would have liked to live there for a long time, and enjoy his share of eternity there, for the small towns where he stayed for an hour, and the gardens enclosed within old walls which he passed over seemed to last for all eternity, apart from him. The village rose up towards the plane's crew and opened itself up to them. Fabien thought of friendships, of gentle girls, of the intimate atmosphere of white tablecloths, of everything which one slowly becomes accustomed to for all eternity. And the village was already rushing by, level with the wings, displaying the mystery of its enclosed gardens, the walls of which could no longer defend them. But on landing, Fabien knew that that he had not seen anything except the

slow movement of a few men among the stones. The village guarded, by its very stillness, the secret of its passions, and it refused to yield up its gentleness. To conquer it he would have had to renounce all action.

When the ten minutes of stopover time had gone by, Fabien had to leave.

He turned his head back towards San Julian. It was now no more than a handful of lights, then stars, and only vanishing dust was left to tempt him one last time.

“I can’t see the dials any more. I’ll switch the lights on.”

He touched the switches, but the red lamps of the cabin shed a light onto the instrument needles which was still so diluted in the blue light that it did not colour them. He passed his fingers over a light bulb, but they were barely tinged.

“Too early.”

However, night was coming on, like dark smoke, and was already filling the valleys. They could no longer be distinguished from the plains. But the villages were already lighting up, and they were like constellations responding to one another. And with his finger he also made his navigation lights blink in reply to the villages. The earth was spread with lights sending out their appeals, each house lighting up its own star, in the face of the immensity of the night, like a lighthouse turning towards the sea. Everything which sheltered a human life was now sparkling. And Fabien adored

the way his entry into the night on this occasion was like a slow and beautiful entry into a harbour.

He thrust his head into the cabin. The radium on the instrument needles was starting to glow. The pilot confirmed one number after another and was satisfied. He considered himself to be firmly settled in the sky. He touched a steel rib lightly with his finger and felt that there was life flowing through the metal: the metal was not vibrating but it was alive. The five hundred horsepower of the engine was generating a very gentle current in the plane's fabric, changing its ice-cold quality into velvety flesh. Once more the pilot was experiencing in his flight neither dizziness nor intoxication, but the mysterious workings of living flesh.

Now he had made a world for himself again. He moved around a bit until he got himself comfortable.

He tapped the switchboard and touched the switches one by one, moved about a bit, leant back more fully and sought the best position to enable him to have a good awareness of the swaying movements of the five thousand kilos of metal held aloft by the shifting night. Then he groped around, fixed his emergency lamp in its place, dropped it, found it again, assured himself that it would not slip down, left it again to tap each lever, got hold of them firmly and trained his fingers to do it blind. Then, when his fingers were familiar with doing it, he allowed himself to switch on a lamp and display the precision instruments in his cabin. On

NIGHT FLIGHT

the individual dials he checked his entry into the night, as though he were diving into it. Then, as nothing seemed to be wobbling, vibrating or shaking at all, and his gyroscope and altimeter remained steady, as well as the revs of the engine, he stretched himself a bit, rested the nape of his neck against the leather back of the seat, and entered that state of profound meditation which characterizes flight, and in which one enjoys a sense of inexplicable hope.

And now, like a watchman in the depths of night, he discovers that night reveals the nature of man: those cries for attention, those lights, that anxiety. That simple star there in the darkness indicates how isolated that house is. And in another it goes out: it is a house concealing the love within it.

Or the boredom. It is a house which ceases to send out a signal to the rest of the world. They don't know what they are hoping for, those peasants with their elbows on their table in front of their lamp. They do not know that their wishes travel so far in the great expanse of night which encloses them. But Fabien discovers them as he comes from a thousand kilometres away, becoming aware of the deep groundswell which raises and lowers his plane, as though it is breathing, and after he has gone through ten storms, which were like countries at war, with moonlit clearings between them, when he finally comes across those lights, one after the other, with a feeling of conquest. Those men

CHAPTER I

think that their lamp glows only for their humble table, but eighty kilometres away from them someone is already being touched by the call put out by that light, as though they are sending it out in desperation from a desert island into the sea.

2

AND SO THE THREE MAIL PLANES, from Patagonia, Chile and Paraguay, returned from the south, the west and the north towards Buenos Aires. Their cargoes were awaited there in order for the Europe plane to leave around midnight.

Three pilots, each of them behind a hood which was as heavy as a barge, and lost in the night, were meditating on their flights and coming down slowly towards the enormous city from their stormy or peaceful sky, like strange peasants coming down from their mountains.

Rivière, who was responsible for the whole network, was walking to and fro on the airfield at Buenos Aires. He remained silent, for until the three airplanes had arrived it would continue to be a day of dread for him. With every passing minute, as the telegrams reached him, Rivière was conscious of being able to snatch something from fate, of reducing the sum of what was unknown and of dragging his crews out of the night and onto the shore.

A worker approached Rivière to communicate a message to him which had come over the radio:

“The mail plane from Chile has signalled that the lights of Buenos Aires are visible.”

“Fine.”

Soon Rivière would hear this plane. The night would have already yielded up one of them, just as a sea, with all its ebb and flow and mysteries, throws up on the beach the treasure it has tossed around for such a long time. And later the other two would be delivered to them by the night.

Then that day would be done with. Then the worn-out crews would go to sleep and be replaced by fresh crews. But Rivière would not have any rest: the mail plane from Europe would, in its turn, fill him with anxieties. It would always be that way. Always. For the first time, the old fighter was surprised to find himself feeling weary. The arrival of the planes would never be the kind of victory which ends a war and opens up an era of blessed peace. In fact, it would only ever be for him but one step preceding a thousand similar ones. It seemed to Rivière that for a long time he had been lifting up a very heavy weight in outstretched arms. It was an effort from which he could not rest nor draw any hope. “I’m getting old...” He was clearly getting old, because he no longer felt himself to be nourished by his work alone. He was surprised to find himself reflecting on questions he had never put to himself before. Yet now this mass of gentle feelings, which he had always brushed aside, came back to assail him with their sad murmurings: an ocean that was lost

to him. "Was the time for all that now so close?" He realized that, little by little, he had put off those things that make human life sweet till old age, "when he would have time for them". As though you would really be able to have the time one day, like something you had earned, at the very end of your life, the time of blessed peace that you had imagined. But there is no peace. And perhaps there is no victory. There is no definite arrival for all the mail planes.

Rivière stopped in front of Leroux, an old foreman who was busy working. Leroux had also been working for forty years. And the work used up all his energy. When Leroux went home at about ten o'clock in the evening, or at midnight, it was not a different world which presented itself to him. Nor was it an escape. Rivière smiled at the man who raised his heavy face and pointed to a bluish-coloured axle: "It was very difficult, but I managed to do it." Rivière leant over the axle. He was absorbed in his work again. "We must tell the workshops to adjust those pieces more loosely." He felt with his finger the traces of the jamming, and then looked at Leroux again. At the sight of those severe wrinkles an odd question came to his lips. He smiled at the thought of it.

"Have you been very much concerned about love in your life, Leroux?"

"Oh, love! Well, you know what it's like, sir..."

"You're like me. You've never had the time."

CHAPTER 2

“Not very much really...”

Rivière listened to the sound of the man’s voice, to see if there was any bitterness in the reply. But there was no bitterness. The man felt, when contemplating his past life, the quiet contentment of the joiner who has just polished a good plank: “There, it’s done.”

“There,” thought Rivière, “my life’s done.”

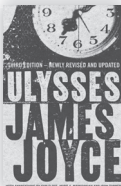
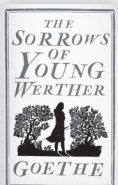
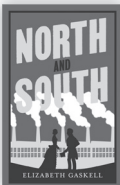
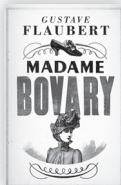
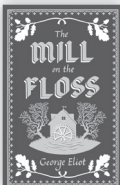
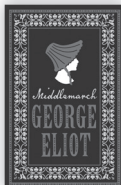
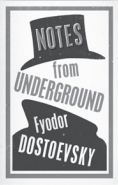
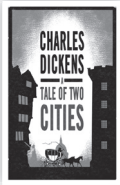
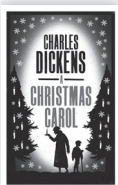
He dismissed all those sad thoughts which had come from his tiredness and made his way towards the hangar, for he could hear the rumble of the plane from Chile.

EVERGREENS SERIES

Beautifully produced classics, affordably priced

Alma Classics is committed to making available a wide range of literature from around the globe. Most of the titles are enriched by an extensive critical apparatus, notes and extra reading material, as well as a selection of photographs. The texts are based on the most authoritative editions and edited using a fresh, accessible editorial approach. With an emphasis on production, editorial and typographical values, Alma Classics aspires to revitalize the whole experience of reading classics.







For our complete list and latest offers

visit

almabooks.com/evergreens

101-PAGE CLASSICS

Great Rediscovered Classics



This series has been created with the aim to redefine and enrich the classics canon by promoting unjustly neglected works of enduring significance. These works, beautifully produced and mostly in translation, will intrigue and inspire the literary connoisseur and the general reader alike.

THE PERFECT COLLECTION OF LESSER-KNOWN WORKS BY MAJOR AUTHORS



ALMA CLASSICS

ALMA CLASSICS aims to publish mainstream and lesser-known European classics in an innovative and striking way, while employing the highest editorial and production standards. By way of a unique approach the range offers much more, both visually and textually, than readers have come to expect from contemporary classics publishing.

LATEST TITLES PUBLISHED BY ALMA CLASSICS

- 398 William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*
- 399 Jules Verne, *A Fantasy of Dr Ox*
- 400 Anonymous, *Beowulf*
- 401 Oscar Wilde, *Selected Plays*
- 402 Alexander Trocchi, *The Holy Man and Other Stories*
- 403 Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*
- 404 Cyrano de Bergerac, *A Voyage to the Moon*
- 405 Jack London, *White Fang*
- 406 Antonin Artaud, *Heliogabalus, or The Anarchist Crowned*
- 407 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*
- 408 James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mobicans*
- 409 Charles Dickens, *Mugby Junction*
- 410 Robert Louis Stevenson, *Kidnapped*
- 411 Paul Éluard, *Selected Poems*
- 412 Alan Burns, *Dreamerika!*
- 413 Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*
- 414 Virginia Woolf, *Flush*
- 415 Abbé Prevost, *Manon Lescaut*
- 416 William Blake, *Selected Poems*
- 417 Alan Riddell, *Eclipse: Concrete Poems*
- 418 William Wordsworth, *The Prelude and Other Poems*
- 419 Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*
- 420 Pablo Picasso, *The Three Little Girls and Desire Caught by the Tail*
- 421 Nikolai Gogol, *The Government Inspector*
- 422 Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*
- 423 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Politics and Literature*
- 424 Matthew Lewis, *The Monk*
- 425 Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*
- 426 Frances Hodgson Burnett, *A Little Princess*
- 427 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*
- 428 Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders*
- 429 Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Vindications*
- 430 Anonymous, *The Song of Roland*
- 431 Edward Lear, *The Owl and the Pussycat and Other Nonsense Poetry*
- 432 Anton Chekhov, *Three Years*
- 433 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Uncle's Dream*