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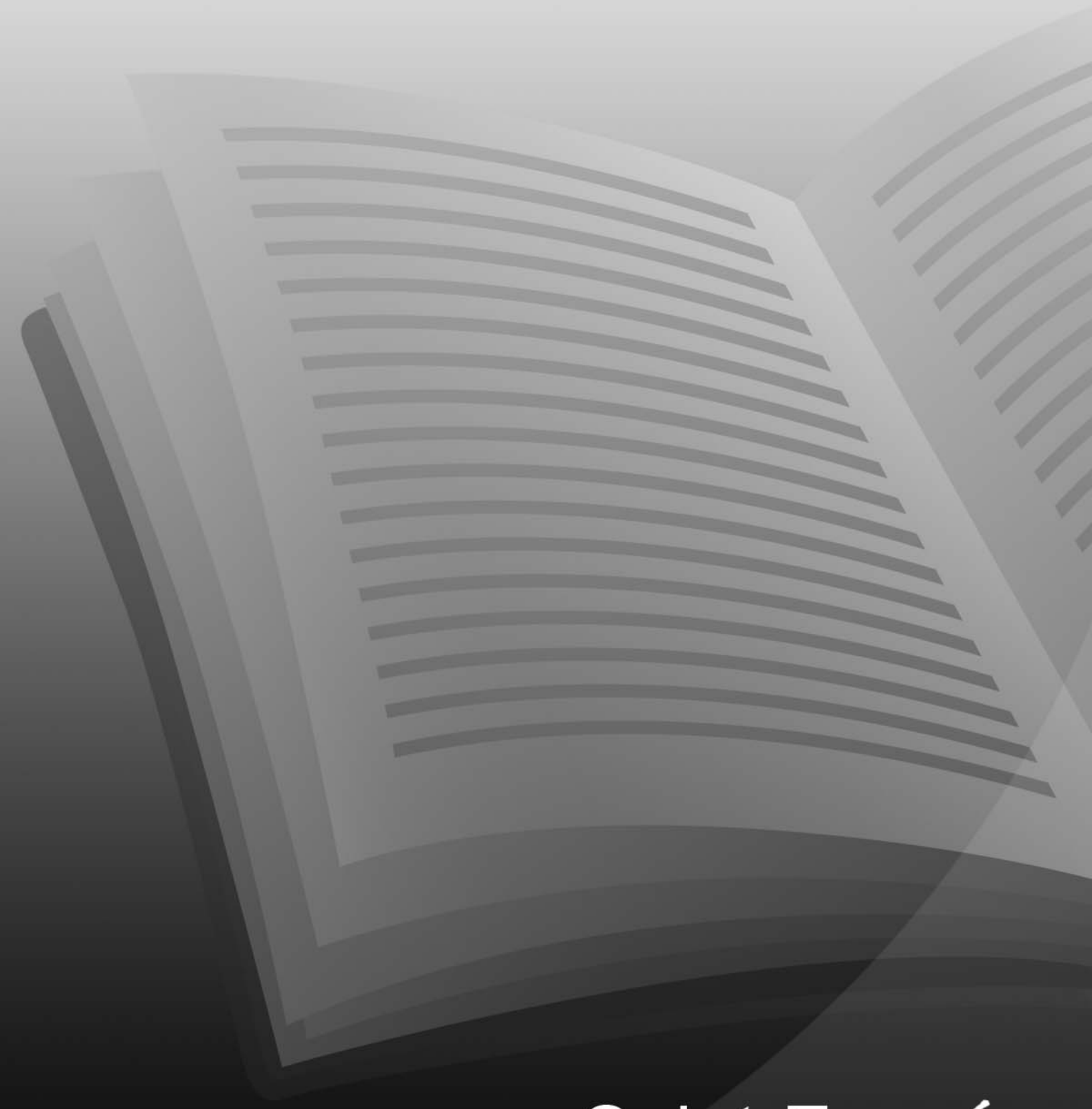

Saint-Exupéry

Stacy Schiff

Contents

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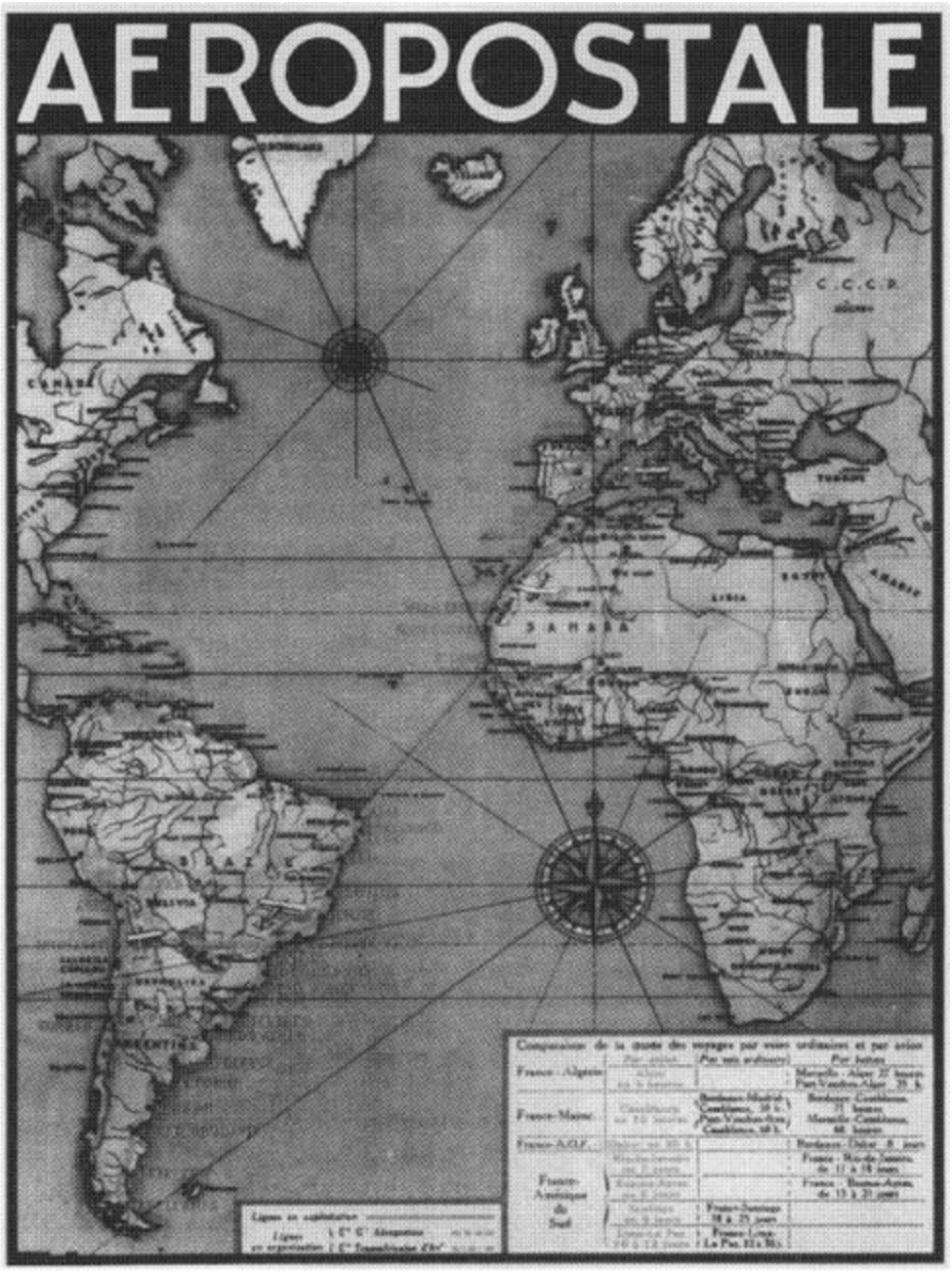
About the Author

A native of the Berkshires in New York State, Stacy Schiff was educated at Phillips Academy and at Williams College. She lives in New York City and in western Canada with her husband and their two children. *Saint-Exupéry*, her first book, was shortlisted for the 1995 Pulitzer Prize. She is a 1996 Guggenheim Fellow.


AEROPOSTALE
C.C.C.P.
SAHARA
BRAZIL
ARGENTINE
Comparaison de la durée des voyages par voies ordinaires et par avion
Par voies ordinaires
Par avion
France - Algérie
Marseille - Alger 20 heures
Port-Vendres-Alger 20 h.
France-Maroc
Bordeaux-Casablanca 31 heures
Marseille-Casablanca 48 heures
France-A.O.F.
Bordeaux-Dakar 8 jours
France - Rio-de-Janeiro de 11 à 18 jours
France - Buenos-Aires de 13 à 21 jours
France-Amérique du Sud
France-Santiago 18 à 25 jours
France-Lima (Le Pas. 11 à 16).

This book was written for Marc de La Bruyère

Saint-Exupéry

A Biography

Stacy Schiff

PIMLICO

Introduction

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The predicament of his birth is summed up by one encyclopedia in two words, “impoverished aristocrat”: Antoine de Saint-Exupéry began his professional life as a truck salesman. By 1929 he had distinguished himself as a pilot and published a first novel. Before another five years had passed he was unemployed, living hand-to-mouth. In 1939 he won both the American Bookseller Association’s National Book Award and the Académie Française’s Grand Prix du Roman for *Wind, Sand and Stars*; he seemed well on his way to a chair at the Académie Française. Five years later his politics—more accurately his lack thereof—made him so much a persona non grata that he lived in disgrace in Algiers, heartbroken and excommunicated, his books censored. That year he became the most famous French writer to go down as a casualty of World War II. He was forty-four years old.

Saint-Exupéry did not so much live fast as die early. Our fascination with him has grown as a result, as it does with all things that end before their time, from the *Titanic* to Marilyn Monroe. The mystery surrounding his death—so neatly presaged in *The Little Prince*, whose hero witnesses forty-four sunsets—has further enhanced the myth. To it have been added the eulogies: Saint-Exupéry’s generation comes to an end only today, when he has been dead for fifty years. Survived by a great number of eloquent friends he has been flattened under the collective weight of their half century of praise. That avalanche has naturally provoked a second

one: those who have labored to remind us that Saint-Exupéry was a man, not a god, have delighted in doing so vitriolically. The detractors have done no more than the keepers of the cult to reveal Saint-Exupéry himself; they have tangled only with the legend, of which the writer is now twice the victim.

Under it all is buried one man, by no means ordinary, but not extraordinary either for the reasons we have come to believe. A pilot of indisputable audacity, Saint-Exupéry was anything but a disciplined flyer. He flew the mails only briefly, less than six years in all. He played a role in the pioneering age of aviation without having been one of its illustrious practitioners; he was more the Boswell of the early days. Relatedly, he was not much dedicated to routine. He displayed a stunning lack of personal ambition, and was a resolute nonjoiner. Disobedience was often to his mind the better part of valor. His friendships were solid but composed of equal parts loyalty and squabbling. His sentimental history is a thorny one. At the same time Saint-Exupéry was a man of tremendous, towering personality, of certain genius. Little of it crept into the tempest-tossed life, however; only a portion crept into the work. He was perhaps at the height of his powers recounting the tale of his near-death by thirst in the Libyan desert at the dinner table, over which his enchanted listeners plainly slumped with sympathetic dehydration. No one who met him ever forgot him.

How could an aviator write, or how could an aviator write as lyrically as did Saint-Exupéry? And how did an aristocrat come to fly as a mail pilot? There was nothing predetermined about either career, and the worlds of letters and aviation were further apart—especially in France in the 1920s—than a man with a foot in each realm might have liked. Generally speaking the two are not professions that go well together. The writer lives with some detachment from experience, which it is his task to recast; a pilot works his

trade with a fierce immediacy, perfect presence. One may reshape events, the other must nimbly accommodate them. For Saint-Exupéry the two careers—and with them the life and the oeuvre—were inextricably bound. His biographer enjoys no greater advantage. Most of his work is journalism, romanticized, but still autobiographical; what is not journalism pure and simple is easily enough decoded. The pages hold little fiction, limited fantasy, a vast sea of fact. And while Saint-Exupéry could be absentminded—six years into his marriage he could not remember his wedding date—he neither reinvented nor muddied the past. He was not untruthful. He put a gloss on things, but he lived, too, for that gloss, for a quixotism that would be his undoing. The fashion in which he shaped the events he faithfully reported ultimately tells us as much about him as do the events themselves. It makes it possible to begin to imagine the truly critical hours of his life, those he spent alone at several thousand feet, moments no biographer can touch.

While the works are true to the life—the author's mind wanders on the page just as it did in the cockpit; a common literary construction for Saint-Exupéry is "over A I was thinking of B"—they do not entirely stand in for the man. They are simple; Saint-Exupéry was not. The anguished writer of petulant, indignant, downtrodden letters is nowhere to be found in the early books. Here, too, the myths have taken their toll: Saint-Exupéry's biographer commits to addressing the provenance of the Little Prince, that disarming visitor from Asteroid B612, and yet to date the chroniclers of his life have pretended that the man who wrote some of the most tender pages of our time had no private life, only a morass of a marriage. It is not easy to understand the Little Prince if one holds too much to the caped crusader of lore; it is at the same time too easy to write off Saint-Exupéry altogether if one takes him only at his written word. It is a richer life than he let on, poorer as it was in all the transcendent qualities that make the literature

soar, so much more earthbound than it appears to have been.

A note on the name, which is pronounced Sant-Exoopairee, with all syllables accented equally: famous men famously change their names. Saint-Exupéry admitted he had "*un beau nom*" and enough attached to it that he forbade two women who shared it—an elder sister and his wife—from publishing under it. (Both ultimately defied him.) Friends and acquaintances were to take liberties even where he did not: after a childhood of nicknames, he was transformed by others into "Saint-Ex," who became the pilot of legend. He himself made only one concession on this front. When the writer settled in New York after the fall of France he authorized his American publisher to insert a hyphen into his name, so as to discourage those who insisted as addressing him as "Mr. Exupéry." I have retained the late-arriving hyphen here; to do otherwise in English leaves an odd impression. "Is he one of the saints of France?" a confused son of Charles Lindbergh asked his mother in 1940. Laughingly Anne Morrow Lindbergh—who had fallen under the Frenchman's spell the previous year—replied that he was indeed, if not in the usual sense of the word.

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A King of Infinite Space
1927–1928

> *The sky has stars—the desert only distance. The sea has islands—the desert only more desert; build a fort or a house upon it and you have achieved nothing.*
>
> Beryl Markham, *West with the Night*

In 1928 Antoine de Saint-Exupéry was as settled as he would ever be. He had no financial worries, no romantic entanglements, no concerns regarding his employment. His home was the Western Sahara, his house a wooden shack that had sailed from France to the desert five years before. On one side it gave on the ocean, which at high tide lapped up against his window; on the other it gave on to the desert. Dwarfed by an impressive-looking Spanish fort with a crenellated wall, the shack was meant to stand guard over an airplane hangar. Otherwise the perfectly flat horizon was obstructed only, occasionally, by the tents of nomads. Saint-Exupéry was twenty-eight years old, and since October of the previous year had been chief of the airfield at Cape Juby. "I have never," he would write fifteen years later, "loved my house more than when I lived in the desert."

His furniture consisted of a plank lined with a thin straw mattress, on which he slept, and a door balanced on two oil

drums, on which he wrote. The former was too short for the six-foot two-inch aviator; for the first months at Cape Juby he extended the bed with a crate that served as his pillow, until a friend suggested he might be more comfortable sleeping in the opposite direction. To his mother, whom he wrote regularly, he sent a list of the remainder of his worldly possessions: a water jug, a metal basin, a typewriter, a shelf of books, a windup gramophone, a deck of cards, and the Aéropostale records, the files of the airline for which he worked. Saint-Exupéry shared his home with four French mechanics and ten Moors, all fellow Aéropostale employees, a marmoset named Kiki, a dog, an outsized cat, and a hyena. For neighbors he counted the inhabitants of the Spanish fort, under the direction of an officious Castilian aristocrat named Colonel de la Peña. The northern coast of what was then the Spanish Río de Oro, an area roughly the size of Great Britain, today the Spanish Sahara, was further populated only by dissident Moors.

There was every reason to think of Cape Juby, today the Moroccan town of Tarfaya, as “the most desolate airstrip in the world.” When its name was mentioned among Aéropostale pilots, a breed known for their sturdiness, the word “neurasthenic” sooner or later came up. The desert had its attractions—the aviator who had prospected the African line would swear to its incomparable beauty and claim the Sahara as his true mistress—but it was generally agreed that Cape Juby was a godforsaken place. A journalist who visited in 1929, just after Saint-Exupéry had left, commented on its “tragic solitude” before he had even landed on the strip of sand that served as the Juby runway. His observation was confirmed on entering the Spanish fort, where he was struck by the malaise of the men, by their “strange silhouettes of beggars or bandits. Their filth was so pronounced it seemed to be make-up. But even more than their slovenliness what was horrifying was their silence.” He assumed this misery to be the work of an evil spell cast by

Colonel de la Peña until a French mechanic enlightened him: “Did you really not know that Cape Juby serves as a Spanish military penitentiary?” Jean Mermoz, probably the most celebrated of French pilots and one renowned for his vigor, lived at Juby for a week in February 1927. He reported that he had never “had so much an impression of a state of siege, of suffocation. The guards were barely distinguishable from the prisoners, their uniforms were in tatters, their espadrilles shredded, they were filthy, idle, silent.” Assisted by two Moors he had recruited as *sous-chefs*, Mermoz spent his week cooking for the French barrack, a revolver in his pocket. He slept fourteen-hour nights, practiced his Spanish, played a good deal of cards, and counted the days, which passed with an exasperating slowness.

The Juby shack stood 600 miles south of Casablanca and 1,700 miles north of Dakar; Saint-Exupéry barely exaggerated when he wrote to a friend that he was “1,000 kilometers from the nearest bistro.” Water and provisions arrived by sailboat monthly from the Canary Islands; Juby offered no natural harbor, and its tides calmed enough to permit a landing only every four weeks. Its climate is not generally forgiving; temperatures rise to about 100 degrees during the day and the wind blows continuously, which meant that the Juby windsock remained stubbornly horizontal, usually filled by gusts from the northeast. With the wind blew sand, which got into everything; it seasoned most meals, and proved especially pernicious in its invasion of airplane carburetors and fuel supplies. The Western Saharan coast is the world’s most arid, but its air is exceptionally wet, even in the hottest season. Humidity is no friend to an airplane and it was even less so to the airplane of the 1920s: it soaked and inflated the cloth wings, which then separated from their support, and corroded the metal. Aviators can be forgiven for talking about the weather; for them it is a subject of paramount importance. Today pilots consult satellite-generated weather maps, but

in the Spanish Sahara in the 1920s maps were cursory at best and meteorology amounted less to science than to intuition. Years after he had left Juby, Saint-Exupéry would remember having smelled a sandstorm brewing; he was delighted to have learned to decipher the “secret language” of the Sahara, to have “read the anger of the desert in the beating wings of a dragonfly.” Flying in such weather was not nearly as poetic. From a practical aviation standpoint, Cape Juby was no paradise.

It is fair to say that had the mailplanes of the 1920s had a greater range, the French would never have imposed on the relative calm of Cape Juby. The Río de Oro was a misnomer on two counts: it is not a river, and it has no gold.[fn1] The Spanish had set up house in an inhospitable place, but that place happened to be strategically located for a mail line operating between Toulouse, the seat of French aviation, and Dakar, the largest French city in Africa, nearly 3,000 miles to the south. The mailplane of the time, the Breguet 14, flew at a cruising speed of eighty miles per hour and had an extreme range of well under 400 miles. These constraints had led the budding air service to negotiate with the Spaniards for the use of the only two refueling stops available in the Río de Oro, Cape Juby and its southern neighbor, Villa Cisneros, settlements about as far apart as Boston and Washington. When all went well the planes could make their way from Toulouse to Dakar in about fifty-five hours, making stops every 250 to 350 miles and traveling only in daylight; word of their progress traveled up and down the line by radio. The Breguet 14 was not an advanced aircraft: it was powered by a 300-horsepower engine, its propeller was wood, its cockpit open; it had no radio, no suspension, no reliable instruments, no brakes. One pilot observed that the gas gauge more accurately indicated the amount of sand in the conduits than of fuel in the tank. Saint-Exupéry commented that the compass was a

fine invention in theory, but that in practice it resembled a weather vane.

On average, a Breguet 14 broke down every 15,500 miles, which worked out to about one in every five Casablanca-Dakar round-trips. The beauty of an unsophisticated airplane is that it is easy to repair: a hammer, nails, a saw, a block of wood, and glue were said to suffice in order to jerry-rig a Breguet 14 back into service. As Mermoz boasted: “We had created commercial aviation before there were any commercial planes.” If there were more casualties among planes than pilots, it may have been due to a fact another great French pioneer, Louis Blériot, had pointed out years before: “The ability to come crashing to the ground without hurting oneself does not lie in any special cleverness on the part of the pilot. It lies in what one might well term the elasticity of the aeroplane.”

The African run had been inaugurated in May 1925, after which Dakar, the administrative seat of a colonial empire nearly twenty times the size of continental France, received its Casablanca mail in two days. (By sea a letter had taken a week in summer and two weeks in winter.) By the time Saint-Exupéry settled in Juby, the airline had begun to rely on the outposts of the Río de Oro as stepping stones to South America as well. Only when the Breguet 14’s were replaced by Latécoère 26’s, more robust aircraft with more powerful and reliable engines, could the Río de Oro be overflown. Until 1930, when that happened, the French were largely at the mercy of the Spanish, who knew as much; the Río de Oro is an oft-mentioned subject in the Madrid–Quai d’Orsay correspondence of the 1920s. Geography is littered with places that sprang up for reasons of utility and outlived their usefulness. The Breguet 14 and the African mail put Cape Juby on the map; the Latécoère 26 and the South American mail relegated it to oblivion.

The year before Saint-Exupéry was stationed at Juby, Charles Lindbergh, who had just flown the Atlantic, noted

that fog and sleet were the mail pilot's two greatest adversaries. He was not acquainted with dissident Moors. The Río de Oro may have been a Spanish colony, but it was a colony consisting entirely of two forts, secure only in that their proximity to the sea facilitated speedy evacuation by boat. The Spanish did not venture far beyond their garrison walls; in a humorous letter to his brother-in-law, Saint-Exupéry wrote that if one strayed more than sixty feet beyond the fort one was shot at. At 150 feet one was killed or sold into slavery, depending on the season. Here again he exaggerated only slightly: months before his arrival two Spaniards had disappeared from the fort walls themselves. It did not take the Moors long to discover the value of a French aviator. The first pilots to be captured were held for ransom; in 1926, two were murdered and a third died from wounds sustained during his captivity. The letters bound for Dakar were opened, and franc notes fell out, and word got out quickly that the mail was a kind of airborne gold mine. Shooting at the planes became commonplace; Saint-Exupéry reported that the aviators were greeted like partridges. (He was also quick to note that the Moors had blessedly bad aim when it came to shooting objects from the sky, an art in which the Sahara offered little practice.) When an engine sputtered in midair it was a different story. There was ample reason for the French aviators to feel nervous about the Moors. They had been told that the head of the airline, Pierre-Georges Latécoère—known to be a very tough businessman—would not pay a ransom and that the Moors would cut them up slowly until the money was paid.

Pierre-Georges Latécoère owned the airline and built the planes, but the problem of the Río de Oro fell squarely to Didier Daurat, his operations director. Daurat is remembered, mostly thanks to the writings of Saint-Exupéry, for his military discipline and his taciturn rigor. He could as well be immortalized for his creativity. In the first years of the airline—well before the advent of radio—he had

equipped Breguet 14’s with carrier pigeons to be released in case of a crash; when the Río de Oro introduced greater dangers he armed the pilots. Then he sent them along the African route in twos, with explicit instructions that the pilot in distress was to facilitate the landing of the escort plane as close as possible to his own. He toyed briefly with the idea of equipping his planes with recordings for the Moors, which might better explain the French enterprise to them; he was convinced he could impress them with the grandeur of the Latécoère vision. Ultimately he arranged for native interpreters to accompany the pilots. Flying majestically along amid the mail sacks, their jewel-encrusted swords snug in their belts, the blue-robed Moors lent a new romance to the mails. They were unusual interpreters in that they were, with a few exceptions, unilingual; their mission was less to translate than to negotiate ransoms.

In 1927, after a number of grisly incidents and aware that the Spanish were lying in wait for one last disaster, Daurat realized he had still not solved the problem of Cape Juby. What he needed at this delicate outpost was an ambassador, someone who could convince the Spanish of the viability of the airline, who could make the French presence in the Río de Oro more palatable, who could manage the Moors. He turned quite naturally to Saint-Exupéry. An aristocratic name would impress the Spanish; it was already clear that the pilot had a certain charm; he was familiar with Juby, after nearly ten months flying the African mails. It has been suggested that Daurat may have been as eager to put Saint-Exupéry to work as an ambassador as he was to put him to work as an aviator. At the time Saint-Exupéry was on sick leave in France from the airline; a bout with dengue fever had left him crippled with joint pains. A hot, dry climate would alleviate his symptoms. He was recalled that fall to Toulouse and dispatched posthaste to Cape Juby, where he arrived on October 19, 1927. His mission was simple: to revive relations with the Spanish

authorities, and “to set off to the rescue of any aviator in danger, at any hour, anywhere in the desert.” He was to be a little bit the Saint Bernard of the Sahara. “The bearers of water in the desert,” he wrote later, “are members of the greatest divinity there is.”

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As often happens in small places, the titles at Cape Juby were large. Colonel de la Peña was known as the inspector general of Cape Juby, though his rule barely extended beyond his fort. Saint-Exupéry was named chief of the airfield, and while he was aware of the modest size of his domain he was pleased with the responsibility the post entailed. It was partly a title that had brought him to Juby in the first place; “de Saint-Exupéry” is a fine aristocratic name, and Didier Daurat gambled correctly on the fact that Colonel de la Peña would be impressed with it. This was ironic, in light of the fact that earlier in the year Saint-Exupéry—never shy about telling anyone how or where to write him—had admonished his mother from Dakar: “Don’t put ‘Count’ on my envelopes.” His title kept him apart, as titles are meant to do, and one thing Saint-Exupéry had always felt, by nature as much as by birth, was painfully apart. He would turn his back on anyone who showed the poor taste to address him as “My dear Count.” This behavior, of course, put him at a distance from another world, one for which his name and his relations if not his fortune—he had none—qualified him.

The beauty of Cape Juby was that, in its utter desolation, its remoteness, it minimized the chilling effect of the *de* which preceded his surname. Saint-Exupéry may himself have seldom noticed his *particule*, but those around him, especially at Aéropostale, could not help but do so: if a *grand nom* stood out anywhere in France in the 1920s it stood out on an airfield. At the same time Cape Juby was

instrumental in making his name. From his colleagues he earned a good deal of respect for the amazing feats he would perform in the desert in 1928. While the pilots of *la Ligne* had always recognized Saint-Exupéry as a creature apart, they now cited his eccentricities instead of his name. For them he may never have been the Count de Saint-Exupéry but he had been *de* Saint-Exupéry; in the words of one Aéropostale mechanic, he was “a little bit our Queen of England.” By the time he left the Sahara his name had shrunk to the more comfortable Saint-Ex. (The name would be abbreviated once again by the Americans during the war, for whom he became “Major X.”) At the same time, the pilot grew into his family name.

When Saint-Exupéry arrived at Cape Juby, at the age of twenty-seven, he had published a story in a magazine, had been excruciatingly unlucky in love, and had flirted with a few careers, none successfully, before beginning to fly the mail the previous year. His letters to his mother, in whom he confided intimately in the correspondence of his twenties, resound with his fears that he would never amount to anything. He worried that he was lazy; he worried that he tired of himself so quickly; that he would not prove his worth; that he would never find a woman to love. It was as clear to him as to anyone that he did not fit in. “I have turned out so differently than I might have,” he wrote plaintively in 1925. “Please try to appreciate me for what I am.” It was clear, too, that he did not quite know yet what that was. He knew what he did not like: any happiness that rendered one immobile, satisfied, sedentary. Already he had a sense that he might take to a life of adventure, but adventure as he would describe it once he was flying over Africa—“a constant need to discover new places, to let my feet carry me along, to be unsure of the next day”—looked like something else altogether in the unemployed or half-committed. He was angry that the family thought him “a superficial, chattering layabout.” He wanted very much to

be taken seriously but could not seem to find the arena in which to prove himself. Before his first trip to Africa, early in 1927, he wrote his mother earnestly that he hoped he would come home “a marriageable man.”

There were not a great number of professions open to a young aristocrat of Saint-Exupéry’s time, particularly to one who did not like to play by the rules and was therefore excluded from a military or diplomatic future. These were and remain the two standard career tracks for the sons of noblemen; two-thirds of all French aristocratic families today include at least one active officer. In October 1926, the month he joined the airline, Saint-Exupéry wrote only half-humorously to Renée de Saussine, the sister of a close friend whom he was unsuccessfully attempting to court by letter, that he wished he could be “*un beau gigolo*.” It was also one of the options, particularly if one were willing to marry his fortune, which could not have been less the case with Saint-Exupéry. “I wish I were a *‘beau gigolo’* with a handsome tie and a magnificent record collection. I should have trained when I was younger; it’s too late now. And I do regret it. Now that I’m balding it’s not even worth trying,” lamented the pilot.

Even before his hair had begun to thin Saint-Exupéry might have had trouble qualifying for the role. He was a good head taller than most Frenchmen, and awkward, and not handsome by the usual measure. He lumbered around like a bear. His “Mickey-Mouse nose, his black eyes jutting from the sockets, his luminous gaze” made him look almost otherworldly. He paid spectacular inattention to what he wore. What was more, once he had begun flying regularly he would show up at some of the best Parisian addresses with dirt under his nails. His hands were covered with oil; he complained to Renée that he alone found them beautiful. Once in the service of the airline he rather quickly began to turn his back on the world of the manicured, to crack jokes at its expense, a little, at first, out of spite. Within months

he had written to another female friend that he was thrilled with his situation at Aéropostale: “I am delighted that it isn’t a sport for gigolos, but a trade.” To a former teacher he mailed a letter from Dakar: “When my engine coughs over the Río de Oro I consider myself very intelligent to see everything from a new angle, the memories, the hopes, and the circles of little literary gigolos.” Ultimately the vocation to which he had faintly aspired became a code word for his worst nightmare: in his first novel, a pilot walks into a Dakar bar, “a heavy-footed explorer among all these gigolos.” He had a taste for adventure, but had—as Anne Morrow Lindbergh astutely observed—to hurdle the “barriers of breeding, education, and delicatesse” in order to indulge it.

Still, there was the possibility he was making a mistake. He occasionally admitted to thinking himself idiotic for choosing the life he had. Why should he be sweating in the desert, in the land of eternal sand, “when in France there are good, green fields with streams and cows. And in Paris streets crowded with women. So sweet to touch. And the theater, music, pleasure?” Perhaps he was wrong to think that a life of risk counted for something more. After a time at Juby, these doubts plagued him less and less often, though on occasion he still needed to measure his world of high adventure against the potential of domestic bliss he had left behind. A little on the defensive, he responded to a Paris-based friend who had written to announce his impending marriage:

> You’re engaged, you’re happy. . . . All that is sweet, fresh and calm. I receive your news with an eight-day beard, bare feet, black hands. I receive your letter after returning from adventures from which I shouldn’t have returned. . . . I’ve invited several Moorish chieftains over for tea. Here they are. They are greeting me hoarsely. Twenty kilometers from here I would hardly trust them. They are already regally settling on my chairs. I leave you; I return to my life. Your letter; what a breath of fresh air!

Within months of his arrival at Juby, Saint-Exupéry had reported to his mother that he had tamed a chameleon. “It is my role here to tame,” he continued. “It suits me, it’s a lovely word.” He moved on to gazelles, had less luck with a kind of desert sand fox, known as a fennec, which he attempted to domesticate for his sister. He was done in only by the Spaniards’ guard dog, who one night took a vicious interest in his shoulder. He had entirely grasped his mission vis-à-vis the Spanish, the Moors, and the desert; he had also found his calling. To tame (*apprivoiser*) would remain nearly a religious expression for Saint-Exupéry, who seemed to use the word in its larger sense for the first time on January 1, 1927, when he celebrated the New Year alone in an Alicante café. At 2:00 a.m. he sat down to write a letter, again to Renée de Saussine. He had been rejuvenated by a magical flight into the Spanish town and had caught its high spirits, though on paper his high spirits were often tempered with wistfulness. You have tamed me, he told her. “Frankly it’s sweet to let oneself be tamed. Only you will also cost me sad days.” It was a perfect vocation for a young nobleman: Saint-Exupéry described his work in the desert to his brother-in-law as one part aviator, one part ambassador, one part explorer. He had found a twentieth-century equivalent of the life of the troubador, the crusader, the knight-errant. He had, as he wrote his friend Charles Sallès, “tasted of the forbidden fruit . . . experienced the life of the *gentilhomme de fortune*.” He was, in spirit and in deed, a *grand seigneur*, and this entirely by virtue of his personality, even if it had been his name that had landed him in the desert in the first place. Mostly, however, he was remembered by the French mechanics for his kindness, his reserve, and his late-night exuberance, all of which contributed to make Juby a newly popular spot on the African run.

Saint-Exupéry’s technique in the desert was simple. He wasted no time in getting to know the nomads, something

he had long wanted to do, though he had certainly never confessed as much to Didier Daurat. Within weeks of his arrival he was able to report that he was popular with the children of the desert, as he would be popular with children wherever he went; he was also taking Arabic lessons, though he was to be generally less successful with languages. He worked his diplomacy with a good deal of gracious mime and good humor. He offered teas to the chieftains, who reciprocated by inviting him a mile into the desert, to their tents, where no Spaniard had yet ventured. He was secure, he said, because the Moors were getting to know him, more accurately because they were impressed with his seeming fearlessness. He was earnestly fascinated with them, at least at first; they trusted him. In the words of Daurat, Saint-Exupéry's "goodness, his rectitude, his respect for form, custom, and tradition meant he was considered and respected as a sage." At the same time he was more than happy to invite the Spanish officers to the French barrack for dinner—even when, to the dismay of his colleagues, supplies were so low as to endanger the culinary reputation of the mother country—or to oblige them with a game of chess. He was accomplished at card tricks, which Juby allowed him time to perfect. He read a variety of technical manuals and took great pleasure in demonstrating his experiments, physical and metaphysical, for all concerned. He was, in short, a very capable ambassador. His success was immediate; within months of his arrival the Spanish flew the French flag along with their own at the passage of each airplane, and the Moors ran to greet the "great white dervish." Soon, too, he acquired a title that fit. In early 1928 he proudly wrote his sister that the Moors had dubbed him "Captain of the Birds."

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The Aéropostale pilots did not often dress as glamorously as we imagine; they were a motley crew who looked more like an assembly of Samuel Beckett characters than the leather-suited archangels of legend. Saint-Exupéry was no exception and shows up in photographs of Cape Juby in an odd assortment of clothes, usually mismatched and never particularly clean, sporting a wool scarf tied around his waist, a half-beard. He had come as far as one can from the "*beau gigolo*" of his letters. Evidently he took to wearing an old dressing gown that began to resemble a Moorish robe. Tanned and unshaved, he was virtually indistinguishable from the nomads. Henri Guillaumet, the pilot who would become Saint-Exupéry's closest confidant on the airline, told of landing at Juby and being greeted by Saint-Exupéry, "strangely dressed in a seroual and a gandourah." "What are you doing here?" asked Guillaumet, who had evidently not been informed of Saint-Exupéry's new posting. "This is my home," replied the new chief of the airfield, "and tonight you are my guest."

Saint-Exupéry was himself welcomed to his new home by Toto Lauberg, a Toulousian mechanic famous as much for his devotion to *la Ligne* as that to red wine and Pernod, which he found in greater supply than water in the desert. At his side was his pet monkey, who had obligingly learned to share Toto's tastes. "Say hello to the boss, *ma cocotte*," Toto advised Kiki. Toto, who doubled as the Cape Juby cook, repaired the planes making stopovers at Juby; a second mechanic, Marchal, younger and sturdier, made repairs farther from home. Toto reminded Saint-Exupéry of a system the inhabitants of the barrack had ingeniously devised to discourage nighttime visitors; the Spanish relied on fortress walls, so well-guarded that Saint-Exupéry had once nearly met his death at the hands of an overzealous sentry, baffled by the presence of a non-Spanish-speaking caller during a late-night sandstorm. The French barrack counted on a magneto that, powered by a small propeller, electrified the

door handle. Legend has it that Saint-Exupéry took note of the invention but forgot about it come morning, when he brusquely opened the door. The invention did fall out of use after his arrival; in Daurat's words, at Juby "locks and bolts did not interest Saint-Exupéry much, as the magic of his own personality was enough to protect him."

Dinners at Juby, which took place around a long wooden table bordered by a set of mismatched chairs, were nothing short of picturesque, even with the pet hyena banished to the outdoors because of the smell. Henry Delaunay, another Aéropostale pilot, left a priceless portrait of an evening when Juby hosted a full house. To the regulars were added Henri Guillaumet and René Riguelle, who had flown the Dakar mail north that afternoon, and Mermoz and Delaunay, who would continue with it to Casablanca the next morning. The reigning atmosphere was that of a boys' dormitory: Mermoz, dressed only in pantaloons, sits handsomely in the corner, entirely engrossed in a crossword puzzle. Riguelle has tied the Juby dog to the slats of Mermoz's chair, and waits for the meal that is about to appear, guaranteed to activate the hungry animal. Marchal, eager to set the prank in motion, is negotiating with Toto about the order of the courses, a subject about which Toto's sense of propriety is not easily corrupted. Suddenly all attention is diverted by Kiki, who is noisily chomping on a razor blade. Every piece of fruit in sight is propelled in the monkey's direction before Marchal can explain that this is the third time in the course of a week that the animal has worked her cleverness. Meanwhile Toto lobbies for everyone to convey his dinner requests to the Moor who has been recruited as maître d'hôtel. Attila speaks not a word of French, and swaddled in his blue veils looks better suited to do battle with a sandstorm than with a group of boisterous Frenchmen. Guillaumet scribbles word games on the tablecloth, delighting in tripping up Saint-Exupéry, who plays along with grudging humor and induces general hilarity when he

finally informs Guillaumet: “This is id-i-ot-ic.” The evening draws to an end with Saint-Exupéry skillfully hypnotizing Toto while Delaunay tries not to think about what he will do the next morning if the fog rolls in as he follows Mermoz north, which it will.

Not every evening—or afternoon—was so entertaining. The mail passed through Juby only once every eight days, which left Saint-Exupéry seven days of silence in between. When the visiting pilots arrived they were grilled for news of the world, even before being offered a chance to wash up; they would unload their fabulous tales of *la Ligne*, each of which grew with its retelling, like those, Saint-Exupéry observed, of the Middle Ages. Aside from the regularity of these arrivals and departures—the high points of the week and the only rhythm by which time was measured—there was little routine. Saint-Exupéry occupied himself with his paperwork and flew the airfield’s four planes every morning to rid them of condensation. The months at Juby would inform all of his writing, but it is particularly difficult to divorce the image of the Little Prince alone on his planet, carefully watering his rose every morning, from that of Saint-Exupéry in the Río de Oro, dutifully drying his planes. He played chess with the Spaniards; he wrote letters in which he lobbied for mail and for gramophone records; he. visited the Moors. On occasion he flew the mail to Casablanca. He was acutely aware of his isolation. “Our nearest neighbors,” he wrote in his first novel, *Southern Mail*, “were five to 600 miles away, also trapped by the Sahara, like flies in amber.” “We are as much strangers,” he wrote a friend in January 1928, “one from the other as planets in the solar system.” In a fine mood he would report that he had read, or gone boating, or made a topographical study of the region. When the solitude weighed more heavily he reported: “Let me describe my life: It’s morning, it’s noon, it’s evening. Every day repeats itself, without any events more interesting than these. I read a little; I smoke a

lot; I take walks of about a quarter-mile." It was, he would write time and again, a monk's life.

Saint-Exupéry did not find this altogether disagreeable. He was, by his own admission, frightfully prone to abstraction, and few places favor meditation more than the desert. There was plenty of silence, of which he had for some time claimed a great need, and which he learned to classify:

> There is a silence of peace when the tribes are reconciled, when the cool evening falls. . . . There is a midday silence, when the sun suspends all thought and movement. There is a false silence, when the north wind has died and insects, torn like pollen from the interior oases, arrive to announce the sandstorms from the east. There is a silence of intrigue, when one learns that a faraway tribe is plotting something. There is a silence of mystery, when the Arabs discuss their incomprehensible differences among themselves. There is a tense silence when a messenger is late returning. A sharp silence when, at night, one holds one's breath to listen better. A melancholy silence, when one remembers those one loves.

He wrote repeatedly of his "monk's cell," of his "monkish" life and dispositions, but he did so always with fondness. His religion was the mail, and in his devotion to it he was bound inextricably to his comrades. It was said that for Mermoz "it was impossible to consider an immobile mail bag as anything less than a stalled heart." The zeal was contagious if curious, too. One day Saint-Exupéry cornered Delaunay to ask a question that had clearly been causing him tremendous anxiety: "By virtue of what emotion do we risk our lives, sometimes so casually, to move the mail?" Delaunay was of little help, but his floundering did not deter Saint-Exupéry, who went on, a believing soul who had not necessarily found God. "The mail is sacred," he wrote later, "what is inside has little importance." The isolation, the abnegation, the single-mindedness of Juby were a tonic to a young man undisciplined, a little frivolous, in great need of being needed. "Anyone who has known Saharan life, where everything appears to be solitude and nakedness, mourns

those years as the most beautiful he has lived," he wrote two years before his death.

There was nonetheless a low point, and it began about two months after his arrival, at Christmas. The chief of the airfield spent Christmas Eve listening to the Moors prepare for a war, setting off flares, which illuminated the sky "like opera lights." It would end, he assured his mother cynically, "like all of the big Moorish spectacles, with the theft of four camels and three women." As the provisions were delayed from the Canary Islands, dinner amounted to a less-than-festive banquet of canned foods; the evening proved so melancholic that Saint-Exupéry turned in at ten o'clock. The good news: he had written six lines of a book. "That's a lot," he informed his mother. The New Year began on a similar note, less because of any new crises than because of a lack thereof. Relations with the Spanish were on as even a keel as they would ever be. The mail planes arrived and departed; Saint-Exupéry, feeling the mother hen, greeted and sent on his "chicks" weekly. If an airplane seemed to be late coming in he prepared to set off to the rescue: "I ready myself for great adventure with a certain vanity; but then a far-away hum announces that the plane will come in, announces that life is altogether more simple than I had thought, that romanticism has its limits, and that the lovely persona in which I have dressed myself is somewhat ridiculous." He was meant to be the king of desert repairmen, and yet from early December 1927 until the summer of 1928, when he was on duty, the Latécoère mail planes miraculously made their way to and from Juby, over 750 miles of dissident territory, without incident.

This rhythm altered a little late in February, when Saint-Exupéry reported to Casablanca with an inflammation of the eye. The condition may have resulted from his many hours of desert flying, impossible without dark glasses and dazzlingly bright under any circumstances; it may have been an infection that resulted from an earlier injury and

that flared up with some regularity as he aged. It was clearly painful, though it does not appear to have impeded the pilot—who was not hospitalized in Casablanca—from enjoying himself during his convalescence. The condition would have cut into his desultory reading, of which he seems to have been doing a fair amount at Juby: he asked the pilots always for more technical manuals, for which he had a voracious appetite; by mid-1928 he had read a number of novels, of which he favored Margaret Kennedy's *The Constant Nymph* and Colette's *La naissance du jour* (*Break of Day*). For some time he had traveled with a volume of Baudelaire. It was later said of him that he was more likely to fondle than to read a book, and this habit seems to have been confirmed already at Juby. The wife of the chief of the Agadir airfield, four hours away by air and Saint-Exupéry's closest neighbor, remembered the pilot landing with a plane full of record albums that he would trade for books. He claimed not to be able to sleep at night without a pile by his bedside or on his bed: "He did not actually read them, but the thoughts which kept him company were there, locked in the books like precious medicines in their phials. It was indispensable for him to know they were within arm's reach, should the need for them arise." Saint-Exupéry returned to Juby from Casablanca, evidently cured, toward the end of March. He had missed the passage of the first France/South America mail, along with the dramatic search that ensued when the plane carrying it ran out of fuel fifty miles north of Villa Cisneros.

The first half of 1928 did not go entirely to waste. By the middle of January the six lines Saint-Exupéry had written before Christmas had grown to a hundred pages of a novel, the construction of which was proving difficult, as he was trying to tell his story from several points of view. By July he had completed a manuscript of 170 pages. He claimed not to know quite what to think of it, but hoped to show the manuscript on his return to Paris to André Gide or Ramon