# The pleasure of their company

Richard Bach

“You’ll want to press that little brass plunger there … flood the carburetor before she’ll start.”

It was a month into summer and a minute into sunrise. We stood at the edge of a sixteen-acre meadow, a mile north of Felixstowe on the Ipswich road. David Garnett’s Gipsy Moth was fresh-dragged from her shed, wings unfolded and locked in place, tailskid hidden in grass. Across the field the first birds were coming awake, larks or something. There was no wind.

I pushed the plunger and the frail metal squeak of it was the only man-made sound of morning, until the petrol fell from the engine and hit the dark grass.

“You can take the rear cockpit, if you wish. I’m up for the ride,” he said. “Careful of the compass, getting in. I’ve smashed the thing twice now, myself. If I wasn’t right at home with it set down there on the floor, I’d throw it out and get a better. Switches off.”

He stood by the propeller in his tweedy-cloth flying clothes, in no particular hurry, enjoying the morning.

“You do have switches in this machine, David?”

I felt like a dumb Colonial. Supposed to be an airplane pilot and I can’t even find the magneto switch.

“Oh, yes. Sorry I didn’t say. Outside the cockpit, next the windscreen. Up is on.”

“Ah, so.” I checked that they were down. “They say off.”

He pulled the propeller through a couple of times, calm and easy, with the detachment of one who has done this a thousand times over and still enjoys it all. He had learned to fly rather late on in life, and it had taken him twenty-eight hours of dual instruction before he finally soloed the Moth. He neither brags nor apologizes over it. One of the best things about David Garnett is that he is honest with himself and the world, and therefore is a happy man.

“Switches on,” he called.

I clicked them up. “OK. You’re hot.”

“Pardon?”

“Switches on.”

He pulled the propeller quickly down with one hand and a practiced turn of wrist, and the engine caught at once. After a brief little roar it settled to perk quietly at 400 rpm, with the sound of a small inboard Chris-Craft at idle on a blue-morning lake.

Garnett climbed rather awkwardly into the front cockpit, fastened his leather helmet down over his head, and adjusted his Meyrowitz goggles—of which he is quite proud, for they are first-rate goggles. When he isn’t flying his helmet and goggles hang on a hook just over his fireplace at Hilton.

I let the Gipsy engine warm for a few minutes, than touched the throttle forward and we scraped and teetered to face the longest way across the field. The Moth had no brakes, so I checked the magnetos quickly on takeoff, and, full power, the machine leaped up into the air.

It was a little like that moment in a spectacular motion picture when for visual effect they run the film in black and white, and then flick it over into color. As we came off the grass, the sun burst and sprayed yellow light all over England, which strangely made the trees and meadows go full, deep British green, and the lanes gold and warm.

I played about with the airplane a bit, a lazy eight and a steep turn, but most of all just little turns and a climb up to one thousand feet and a rush back down to sea level below the cliffs by the ocean, dodging gulls.

The haze came up an hour later, and clouds capped it down to earth, so we pulled up into the gray, keeping the airspeed between sixty and seventy and the sun overhead, till we broke out on top at three thousand feet, “… above a plain of vapour,” as David would say. The sun shone brilliantly, black shadows of struts and wires striped the wings. We were alone with the cloud and with our thoughts that morning. Only an occasional triangle of green slid below to remind us that the earth still existed, somewhere.

At last I shut down the engine and duplicated a flight that he had told me about: “… yes, there were the hangars and the aerodrome … (and there they were, and two miles beyond, our meadow) … I did a big sideslip, but even so I overshot and went round again … (so did I—we were still two hundred feet up when we came across the fence) … This time my approach was perfect and my landing curiously soft and dreamlike. I was on the earth, but the earth was unreal, a limbo of haze and softened sunlight. Reality was far above me …”

I’ve done a lot of flying with this soft-spoken fellow, and in this day of few real friends, when a man is fortunate to go past three counting them, David Garnett is a real friend. We like the same things: the sky, the wind, the sun; and when you fly with somebody who puts his value on the same things that you do, you can say that he is a friend. Anyone else in that Moth, bored by the sky, would no more have been a friend than that businessman twelve rows down the aisle of a 707, though we share our flying a thousand times.

In a way, I know Garnett even better than his own wife knows him, for she can never quite understand why he wants to throw hours away in that noisy, windswept contraption that sprays oil all over one’s face. I do understand why.

But probably the most curious thing about knowing David Garnett is that though we’ve done a lot of flying together and though I know him very well, I have no idea what the man looks like, or even if he is still alive. For David Garnett is not only an airplane pilot, he is a writer, and to one way of thinking, the talks we’ve had and the places we’ve flown have all been between the battered covers of his book, A Rabbit in the Air, published in London in 1932.

The way to know any writer, of course, is not to meet him in person but to read what he writes. Only in print is he most clear, most true, most honest. No matter what he might say in polite society, catering to convention, it is in his writing that we find the real man.

David Garnett, for instance, writes that after flying those twenty-eight hours of dual instruction, after flying those thirty-six lessons, all he did after his first flight alone in the Moth was to step out of the cockpit and smile and sign up for some more flying time. And that is all we would have seen, had we stood and watched him that Wednesday afternoon in the end of July, 1931, at Marshall’s Aerodrome.

But was he really so unmoved by his first solo? We have to leave the aerodrome to find out.

“Half way home, I asked myself alone in the supercilious voice which has so often been used to me, ‘Have you gone solo yet?’

“ ‘Yes.’

“ ‘Have you gone solo?’

“ ‘Yes!’

“ ‘Have you gone solo?’

“ ‘YES!’ ”

Does that sound familiar? Remember when you were learning to fly, driving home after each lesson, that condescending pity you felt for all the other drivers, bound tightly as they were to their little cars and their little highways? “How many of you have been flying just now? How many of you have just looked away out across the horizon, have ten minutes ago won a battle with a fierce crosswind across a narrow runway? None of you, you say? You poor people … I HAVE,” and pulling back the steering wheel of your automobile, you could almost feel her going light on her wheels.

If you remember that time, you have a friend in David Garnett, and to meet him costs a dollar or so in a secondhand bookstore.

Thousands of volumes have been written about aviation, but we do not automatically have thousands of true and special friends in their authors. That rare writer who comes alive on a page does it by giving of himself, by writing of meanings, and not just of fact or of things that have happened to him. The writers of flight who have done this are usually found together in a special section on private bookshelves.

There are rafts of flying books left from World War II, but nearly every one of them is absorbed in fact and exciting adventure, and the author shies away from the meaning of the fact, and of what the adventure stands for. Perhaps he is afraid to be thought egotistic, perhaps he has forgotten that each one of us, in the moment that one reaches toward a worthwhile goal, becomes a symbol of all mankind striving. In that moment, the word “I” doesn’t mean a personal, egocentric David Garnett, it means all of us who have loved and wished and struggled to learn, and who have soloed our Moth at last.

There is something about a blend of fact and meaning and pure honesty that gives a book presence, that puts us in that cockpit, for better or worse, heading out to meet our destiny. And when you walk the same path toward destiny with a man, that man is likely to become your friend.

Out of World War II, for instance, we meet a pilot named Bert Stiles, in a book he called Serenade to the Big Bird. The Big Bird is a Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress, running combat missions out of England in France and Germany.

Flying with Bert Stiles turns us weary to death of war, and of eight hours a day in the right seat, sitting and wrestling with the airplane or sitting and doing nothing while the aircraft commander wrestles with it. The oxygen goes stale in our mask, the flak comes up all black and yellow and silent, the black-cross Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs come rolling through us in head-on attacks, yellow fire sparkling from their nose cannon and thuds and splinters through the plane and bombs away and the whole complete entire High Squadron is shot out of the air and a hard thud and orange flame from the right wing and pull the fire handle and feather Four and the Channel at last the beautiful Channel and straight in to land home on the ground and chow without taste and sack without sleep and right away Lieutenant Porada snapping on the light to say Come on breakfast at two-thirty briefing at three-thirty and start engines and takeoff and sitting there in that right seat while the oxygen goes stale in our mask, the flak comes up all black and yellow and silent, the black-cross Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs come rolling through us in head-on attacks, yellow fire sparkling from their nose cannon …

Flying with Stiles, there is no glory, and a bomb run is not even flying. It is a dirty terrible job that’s got to be done.

“It will be a long time before I have made up my mind about this war. I am an American. I was lucky enough to be born below the mountains of Colorado. But someday I would like to be able to say I live in the world and let it go at that.

“If I live through this, I will have to get on the ball and learn something about economics and people and things … In the end it is only people that count, all the people in the whole world. Any land is beautiful to someone, any land is worth fighting for to someone. So it isn’t the land. It is the people. That is what the war is about, I think. Beyond that I can’t go very far.”

After his combat tour in bombers, Stiles volunteered to fly combat in P-51s. On November 21, 1944, he was shot down on an escort mission to Hanover. He was killed at age twenty-three.

But Bert Stiles did not die before he had a chance to arrange some patterns of ink on two hundred pieces of paper, and in that arranging he has become a voice inside our head and sight inside our eyes to see and to wonder and to talk honestly about his own life and therefore about ours.

The only important part of Bert Stiles was set to paper near an Eighth Air Force runway those thirty years ago, and that same paper is here for us to touch and know and see within, this minute. That important part is what makes any man what he is and what he means.

To talk in person with Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, for instance, we would have had to peer through a constant cloud of cigarette smoke about his head. We would have had to listen to him worry over imaginary diseases. We would have had to stand at the airport and wonder … would he remember to lower the landing gear today?

But as soon as Saint-Exupéry ran out of excuses not to write (and these were many), as soon as he found his inkwell amid the clutter of his room and when at last his pen touched paper, he set free some of the most moving and beautiful ideas about flight and man that have ever been written. Few are the pilots, reading his thought, who cannot nod and say, “That’s true,” who cannot call him friend.

“ ‘Careful of that brook (said Guillamet), it breaks up the whole field. Mark it on your map.’ Ah, I was to remember that serpent in the grass near Mortril! Stretching its length along the grasses in the paradise of that emergency landing field, it lay in wait for me a thousand miles from where I sat. Given the chance, it would transform me into a flaming candelabra. And those thirty valorous sheep ready to charge me on the slope of a hill.

“ ‘You think the meadow empty, and suddenly bang! there are thirty sheep in your wheels.’ An astounded smile was all I could summon in the face of so cruel a threat …”

In the very best among the writers of flight, we might expect to find some very lofty and difficult thought set to paper. But not so. In fact, the higher the quality of the writer, and the better a friend he becomes to us, the more simple and clear is the message that he brings. And strangely, it is a message that we do not learn as much as remember, something we find that we have always known.

In The Little Prince, Saint-Exupéry lays out the idea of this special kind of friendship that airplane pilots can have with other pilots who have written of flight.

“ ‘Here is my secret,’ said the fox to the little prince, ‘a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.’

“ ‘What is essential is invisible to the eye,’ the little prince repeated, so that he would be sure to remember.”

Saint-Ex writes of you and me, who are drawn to flight in the same way that he was drawn to it, and we look for the same friends within it. Without seeing that invisible, without recognizing that we have more in common with Saint-Exupéry and David Garnett and Bert Stiles and Richard Hillary and Ernest Gann than we have with our next-door neighbor, we have left them all untamed, and they are no more friends than a hundred thousand unknown faces are friends. But as we get to know that real man who is set down on paper, that man to whom the living mortal devoted his lifetime, each of these becomes, for us, unique in all the world. What is essential about them, and about us, is not seen with eyes.

We are friend to a man not because he has brown hair or blue eyes or a scar on his chin from an old airplane crash, but because he dreams the same dreams, because he loves the same good and hates the same evil. Because he likes to listen to the sound of an engine ticking over on a warm, quiet morning.

Facts alone are meaningless.

FACT: The man who wore the uniform of commandant in the French Air Force, who carried a flight log written with seven thousand hours and the name Saint-Exupéry, did not return from a reconnaissance flight over his homeland.

FACT: Luftwaffe Intelligence officer Hermann Korth, on the evening of July 31, 1944, the evening when Saint-Exupéry’s was the only aircraft missing, copies a message—“Report by telephone … destruction of a reconnaissance plane which fell in flames into the sea.”

FACT: Hermann Korth’s library in Aix-la-Chapelle, with its honored shelf for the books of Saint-Exupéry, was destroyed by Allied bombs.

FACT: None of this destroyed Saint-Exupéry. Not bullets in his engine or flames in his cockpit or bombs tearing his books to shreds, for the real Saint-Ex, the real David Garnett, the real Bert Stiles are not flesh and they are not paper. They are a special way of thinking, much like our own way of thinking, perhaps, but still, like our prince’s fox, unique in all the world.

And meaning?

These men, the only part of them that is real and lasting, are alive today. If we seek them out, we can watch with them and laugh with them and learn with them. Their logbooks melt into ours, and our flying and our living grows richer for knowing them.

The only way that these men can die is for them to be utterly forgotten. We must do for our friends what they have done for us—we must help them to live. On a chance that you may not have met one or two of them, will you allow me the honor of introductions?

MR. HARALD PENROSE, No Echo in the Sky (Arno Press, Inc.)

MR. RICHARD HILLARY, The Last Enemy (also published with the title Falling through Space)

FLT. LT. JAMES LIEWELLEN RHYS, England Is My Village (Books for Libraries, Inc.)

MRS. MOLLY BERNHEIM, A Sky of My Own (Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc.)

MR. ROALD DAHL, Over to You

MISS DOT LEMON, One-One

SIR FRANCIS CHICHESTER, Alone over the Tasman Sea

MR. GILL ROBB WILSON, The Airman’s World

MR. CHARLES A. LINDBERGH, The Spirit of St. Louis (Charles Scribner’s Sons)

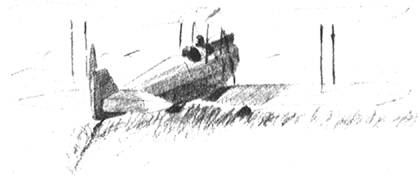
MRS. ANNE MORROW LINDBERGH, North to the Orient (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.)

MR. NEVIL SHUTE, Round the Bend, The Rainbow and the Rose, Pastoral (Ballantine Books, Inc.)

MR. GUY MURCHIE, Song of the Sky (Houghton Mifflin Company)

MR. ERNEST K. GANN, Blaze of Noon (Ballantine Books, Inc.), Fate Is the Hunter (Simon & Schuster, Inc., Ballantine Books, Inc.)

MR. ANTOINE DE SAINT EXUPERY, Wind, Sand and Stars (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.), The Little Prince (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.)



If the book is in print, the publisher is listed. Otherwise look in libraries and secondhand bookstores.