

October 1922. 'A Little Woman'. In: *Prager Tagblatt*, 20.4.1924. 'Josefine, the Songstress'. In: *Prager Presse*, 20.4.1924. The last two publications were arranged in a hurry, to help finance Kafka's desperate need for medical care. 'Josefine must help out a little, there is no other way', he writes to Max Brod on 9 April 1924 from a sanatorium near Vienna.

THE AEROPLANES AT BRESCIA



La Sentinella Bresciana of 9 September 1909 reports, and is delighted to do so: 'In Brescia we have a concourse of people such as never before, not even at the time of the great motor-car races; visitors from Venetia, Liguria, Piedmont, Tuscany, Rome, indeed even from as far as Naples; distinguished persons from France, England, America; all are jostling in our squares, in our hotels, in every spare corner of our private houses; all the prices are rising splendidly; the means of transport are inadequate to bring the crowds to the *circuito aereo*; the restaurants on the airfield could serve two thousand people admirably, but so many thousands are bound to defeat them; troops would be needed to protect the buffets; in the cheap areas of the field there are 50,000 spectators standing all day long.'

Reading these accounts, my two friends and I are filled with both confidence and alarm. Confidence: for where there is such a terrible crush everything tends to proceed in an agreeably democratic way, and where there is no space at all one has no need to look for it. Alarm: alarm about the Italian mode of organizing such enterprises, alarm about the committees that will concern themselves with our welfare, alarm about the trains, of which the *Sentinella* has tales of four-hour delays to tell.

All expectations are false; somehow all Italian memories become confused once one is back home; they lose their clarity, one can no longer depend on them.

As our train enters the dark hole of Brescia station, where people are yelling as if the ground was burning under their feet, we are still solemnly exhorting one another to stick together whatever happens. Are we not arriving with a sort of hostility?

We get off the train; a cab, barely able to stay on its wheels,

receives us; the coachman is in very good humour; we drive through almost empty streets to the Palace of the Committee, where our inward malice is passed over as if it did not exist; we are told all that we need. The inn to which we are directed appears at first sight to be the dirtiest we have ever seen, but soon it is not so excessively bad. A dirt which is simply there and is no longer spoken of, a dirt which never alters, which has put down roots, which makes human life somehow more solid and earthy, a dirt out of the midst of which our host comes hurrying, proud in himself, humble towards us, with his elbows in constant motion and his hands (each finger is a compliment) casting ever-changing shadows over his face, with incessant bowings from the waist that we all recognize later, for example in Gabriele d'Annunzio, on the airfield; who, one must ask, could still have anything against a dirt such as this.

The airfield is in Montechiari, and can be reached in less than an hour by the local railway that goes to Mantua. This local railway has reserved for itself a track on the public highway, along which it runs its trains in modest fashion, no higher and no lower than the rest of the traffic, among the bicyclists, pedalling into the dust with their eyes almost closed, among the completely useless carriages of the entire province – which accept as many passengers as you please, and get along fast as well, it passes all understanding – and among the often gigantic motor-cars which, once let loose, seem positively determined to turn over at once, with their manifold hootings that merge at such speed into one simple blare.

Sometimes all hope of reaching the *circuito* in this miserable train deserts one completely. But all around us in the train people are laughing, and from right and left people are laughing into the train. I am standing on an end platform, pressed against a huge man who stands with his legs astride two carriages, over the buffers, in a shower of soot and dust that comes from the gently shaking carriage roofs. Twice the train stops to wait for an oncoming train, so patiently and so long that it might be just waiting for a chance encounter. A few villages move slowly past, screaming posters of the last motor-car race-meeting appear here and there on the walls, all the plants by the roadside are unrecognizable under the olive-leaf colour that the white dust gives them.

Since it can go no further the train finally stops. A group of motor-cars brake at the same time; through the dust that swirls up we can see, not far off, a lot of little flags waving; we are still held up by a herd of cattle that comes, wildly excited, dipping in and out of the hillocky ground, simply charging into the motor-cars.

We have arrived. In front of the aerodrome there extends a large open space with suspicious-looking little wooden huts, on which we would have expected to see other notices than: Garage, Grand Buffet International, etc. Immense beggars, grown fat in their go-carts, stretch out their arms in our path, one feels tempted to jump over them. We overtake a great number of people and are overtaken by a great number. We look up in the air, which is after all the thing that matters here. Thank heavens, no one is flying yet! We make way for no one and still we don't get run over. Between and behind the thousands of vehicles, and coming towards them, there bounces Italian cavalry. Order and accidents seem equally impossible.

Once in Brescia late in the evening we wanted to get rapidly to a certain street, which in our opinion was a fairly long way off. A cab-driver demands 3 lire, we offer two. The cab-driver refuses the fare, and simply out of friendliness he describes to us the positively horrific remoteness of this street. We begin to feel ashamed of our offer. All right then, 3 lire. We climb in, three turns of the cab through short streets and we have got to the place we wanted. Otto, more energetic than we two others, declares that he naturally hasn't the faintest intention of giving 3 lire for the journey that has lasted a minute. One lira was more than enough. He could have this lira. It is already dark, the little street is empty, the cab-driver is powerful. He becomes excited at once, as-if the argument had been going on for an hour: What? – That was a swindle. – What on earth were we thinking of. – 3 lire had been agreed, 3 lire must be paid, out with 3 lire or he'd give us something to think about. Otto: 'The tariff or the police!' Tariff? There was no tariff. – How could there be a tariff for that? – It had been an agreement about a night journey, but if we gave him 2 lire he'd let us go. Otto, fit to terrify: 'The tariff or the police!' Some further screaming and searching, then a tariff is fished out, on which nothing is to be seen save dirt. So we agree on 1 lira 50 and the cabbie drives on up the narrow street, in which he can't

turn, not just furiously but sorrowfully, too, as it seems to me. For our conduct has unfortunately not been the correct one; one cannot behave like that in Italy; it may be all right elsewhere, but not here. Ah well, who can reflect on that in the heat of the moment! There's nothing to complain about, one simply cannot become an Italian in the course of a brief aviation week.

But remorse shall not mar our joy on the airfield, that would only bring fresh remorse, and into the aerodrome we spring rather than walk, with that inspiration of every limb which sometimes takes hold of us here, one after the other, under this sun.

We come past the hangars, which stand there with their curtains drawn like the closed stages of travelling players. On their pediments stand the names of the aviators whose machines they conceal, and above them the flags of their homelands. We read the names Cobianchi, Cagno, Calderara, Rougier, Curtiss, Moncher (a Tirolean from Trento who flies under Italian colours, he trusts them more than ours), Anzani, Club of the Roman Aviators. And *Blériot*? we ask. *Blériot*, of whom we have been thinking all the time, where is *Blériot*?

In the fenced-off space in front of his hangar Rougier is running up and down in his shirt-sleeves, a short man with a striking nose. He flings his arms out with violent gestures, pats himself all over as he goes, sends his mechanics behind the curtain of the hangar, calls them back, goes in himself, driving all before him, while to one side his wife, in a tight-fitting white dress, a little black hat pressed firmly into her hair, her legs in their short skirt set delicately apart, gazes into the empty heat, a businesswoman with all the cares of business in her little head.

In front of the next hangar sits Curtiss, all alone. Through the slightly lifted curtains his machine is visible; it is bigger than people say. As we walk past, Curtiss is holding up the *New York Herald* in front of him and reading a line at the top of one page; after half an hour we come past again, he has already reached the middle of this page; after a further half hour he has finished the page and is beginning a new one. Evidently he is not going to fly today.

We turn round and see the wide airfield. It is so big that everything upon it seems abandoned: the winning-post close to us,

the signal mast in the distance, the launching catapult somewhere on the right, the committee motor-car, which describes a curve across the field with its little yellow flag drawn taut in the wind, comes to a halt in its own dust, and drives off again.

An artificial wasteland has been created here in an almost tropical region, and the high nobility of Italy, glittering ladies from Paris and all the other thousands are here assembled, to look for hours on end with narrowed eyes into this sunny waste. Here there is nothing of the kind that lends variety to sports fields otherwise. The pretty jumps of the race-meetings are lacking, so too are the white markings of the tennis-courts, the fresh turf of the football matches, the stony up and down of the motor-car and bicycle race-tracks. Only two or three times during the afternoon a squadron of colourful cavalry trots across the plain. The hooves of the horses are invisible in the dust, the even light of the sun does not change until nearly five o'clock. And so that nothing should disturb us as we observe this plain there is no music of any kind, only the whistling of the masses in the cheap standing areas tries to meet the requirements of our ears and our impatience. Seen from the more expensive stands that lie behind us, however, no doubt that mass of people melts indistinguishably into the empty plain.

At one point of the wooden railing a whole lot of people have gathered. 'How small!' cry a French group, as if they were sighing. What can be going on? We push our way through. And there on the field quite close, just fancy, stands a little aeroplane, with real yellow paint, that is being got ready to fly. And now we can also spot *Blériot's* hangar, beside it the hangar of his pupil *Leblanc*; they have been set up on the field itself. Leaning against one of the two wings of the machine stands, instantly recognizable, *Blériot*, and with his head set firmly on his shoulders he is keeping a close eye on his mechanics as they work on the engine.

Does he intend to get into the air on this trifle? How much easier it is for people on the water, for example. They can first practise in puddles, then in ponds, then in rivers, and only very much later do they brave the ocean; for these people here there is only an ocean.

Already *Blériot* is sitting in his seat, holding his hand on some lever or other, but still he lets the mechanics continue, as if they

were over-zealous children. He turns his eyes slowly in our direction, turns them away from us and then in another direction, but his look he always keeps to himself. Now he is going to fly, nothing could be more natural. This feeling of the naturalness of it, together with the simultaneous general feeling of the extraordinariness of it all round, which he cannot fend off, is what lends him this attitude.

An assistant seizes one of the blades of the propeller to set it going, he tugs at it and it gives a jerk, one hears something like the gasp of a strong man in his sleep; but the propeller gives no further sign of life. He tries again, he tries ten times, sometimes the propeller stops at once, sometimes it is willing to concede a few turns. The trouble lies with the engine. Work begins afresh, the spectators get more exhausted than those immediately involved. The engine is oiled from every angle; hidden screws are loosened and tightened up; a man runs into the hangar, fetches a spare part; then it doesn't fit; he races back, and squatting on the floor of the hangar he hammers away at it between his knees. Blériot exchanges his seat with a mechanic, the mechanic with Leblanc. Now one man tugs at the propeller, now another. But the engine is unmerciful; like a schoolboy who is being helped all the time, the whole class is busy prompting him, no, he can't, again and again he gets stuck, again and again he gets stuck at the same place, gives up. For a little while Blériot sits quite still in his seat; his six assistants stand round him without moving; all seem to be dreaming.

The spectators can breathe freely for a moment and look around them. Blériot's young wife with a motherly face comes past, two children behind her. If her husband cannot fly, that doesn't suit her, and if he does fly she is afraid; furthermore, her beautiful dress is a little too heavy for this temperature.

Once again the propeller is given a turn, perhaps better than before or perhaps not; the engine starts up with a roar, as if it were a different one; four men hold on to the machine at the back, and in the midst of the stillness all round the draught from the swinging propeller sweeps in gusts through the overalls of these men. One cannot hear a word, only the noise of the propeller seems to command; eight hands release the machine, which runs off for a long way over the clods like an awkward performer on the dance floor.

Many such attempts are made and all come to an end unintentionally. Each one brings the public to its feet, up on to their straw-covered seats, on which one can keep one's balance with one's hands outstretched and at the same time use these to express one's hope, anxiety and joy as well. But during the pauses the high society of the Italian nobility moves along the stands. Greetings and bowings are exchanged, there are mutual recognitions and embracings, there is movement up and down the steps to the stands. People point out to one another the Princess Laetitia Savoia Bonaparte, the Princess Borghese, an elderly lady whose face has the colour of dark yellow grapes, the Countess Morosini. Marcello Borghese is at the service of all the ladies and none in particular, he appears from the distance to have an intelligible face but, seen from closer up, the way that his cheeks enclose the corners of his mouth is quite strange. Gabriele d'Annunzio, short and fragile, dances about in an apparently bashful way in front of the Count Oldofredi, one of the most important gentlemen of the Committee. Looking out over the rail of the stand is the strong face of Puccini, with a nose that might be called the nose of a drinker.

But these persons can only be spotted if one is looking for them, otherwise one just sees everywhere, putting everything else in the shade, the elongated ladies of the current fashion. They prefer walking to sitting, in their outfit sitting is unsatisfactory. All faces, asiatically veiled, are carried in a faint twilight. Their dress, loose in the upper parts, makes the whole figure appear hesitant when seen from behind; what a mixed and disturbed impression arises when such ladies appear hesitant! The bodice is low-cut, one can hardly grasp it; the waist seems wider than usual since everything is so narrow; these ladies wish for lower embraces.

It is only the machine of Leblanc that has been shown so far. But now comes the machine in which Blériot has crossed the Channel; no one has said so, everyone knows it. A long pause and Blériot is in the air, one can see the upper part of his body held very straight above the wings, his legs are hidden deep down as part of the machinery. The sun has dropped, and is shining through under the canopy of the stands to glint on the swaying wings. Everyone gazes up at him enraptured, in no one's heart is there room for anyone

else. He flies a small circuit and shows himself then almost vertically above us. And all of us can see, craning our necks, how the monoplane rocks, how it is seized hold of by Blériot and even climbs. What is happening here? Over our heads, twenty metres above the earth, is a man entangled in a wooden frame, defending himself against an invisible danger that he has freely taken on. But we stand down below, quite left behind and insignificant and we watch this man.

It all goes off well. At the same time the signal mast shows that the wind is now more favourable and that Curtiss is to fly for the Grand Prize of Brescia. So he is going to, after all? Hardly have we got this clear when Curtiss's engine is roaring, hardly have we looked across when he is flying away from us, flying over the plain which expands in front of him, to the woods in the distance which now seem to rise up for the first time. His flight over those woods lasts for ages, he disappears, we stare at the woods, not at him. From behind some houses, God knows where, he reappears at the same height as before, charging in our direction; when he climbs, one sees the lower surfaces of the biplane darkly slanting, when he sinks down the upper surfaces glitter in the sun. He comes round the signal mast and turns, indifferent to the shouting that greets him, straight back in the direction from which he has come, just so that he can quickly become small and lonely again. He executes five such circuits, flies 50 km in 49 mins 24 secs and with that he wins the Grand Prize of Brescia, 30,000 lire. It is a perfect achievement, but perfect achievements cannot be appreciated, everyone thinks himself capable of perfect achievements in the end, for perfect achievements no courage seems to be necessary. And while Curtiss labours away there alone above the woods, while his wife, by now well known to all, worries about him, the crowd has almost forgotten him. On all sides one hears nothing but complaints that Calderara is not going to fly (his machine has been smashed), that Rougier has been tinkering with his Voisin aeroplane for two days now without letting it go, that Zodiac, the Italian navigable balloon, has still not arrived. The stories going round about Calderara's mishap glorify him so much, one is ready to believe that the affection of his nation could lift him into the air more securely than his Wright machine.

Before Curtiss has even completed his flight the engines in three hangars are already starting up, as if filled with enthusiasm. Wind and dust from opposing directions whirl violently together. One pair of eyes is not enough. You twist and turn up there on your seat, you wobble, you hold on to somebody, you say you're sorry, someone else wobbles, pulls you over, you receive thanks. The early evening of the Italian autumn begins, it is no longer possible to see everything clearly on the field.

Just as Curtiss comes past after his victorious flight, and without looking over in our direction raises his cap with a faint smile, Blériot is already starting off on a brief circular flight, of which everyone knows in advance he is capable! One hardly knows whether one is applauding Curtiss or Blériot, or whether it is Rougier by this time, whose great heavy machine is now launching itself into the air. Rougier sits at his controls like a gentleman at his writing-desk, who can be reached from behind his back by a little ladder. He climbs in circles, rises above Blériot, makes him into a spectator and continues to climb.

If we still want to get a cab it is high time we left; many people are already crowding past us. One knows of course that this is only a trial flight; since it's already getting on for 7 o'clock it won't be officially counted any more. In the motor-car park at the entrance to the aerodrome the chauffeurs and attendants are standing on the seats and pointing to Rougier; out in front of the aerodrome the coachmen are standing on all the many vehicles for hire scattered about and pointing to Rougier; three trains, full to the last buffer, are standing motionless because of Rougier. We are lucky enough to get a cab, the cabbie squats down in front of us (it has no coach-box), and, finally become independent beings once again, we drive off. Max makes the very sound remark that something similar to this could and should be organized in Prague as well. It wouldn't have to be a flying competition, he says, though that would be worthwhile too, but to invite one aviator, that would surely be easy and no one concerned would regret it. The whole thing would be quite simple; Wright is flying in Berlin at the moment, shortly Blériot will be flying in Vienna, Latham in Berlin. So one would only have to persuade these people to make a little detour. We two others make

no reply, in the first place because we're tired and secondly because we have no objections anyway. Our road turns and Rougier appears up there, so high, that it looks as if his position can only be fixed by the stars, which will soon show in the sky that is already darkening. We keep on turning round; Rougier is still just climbing, but as for us, we are taking our final plunge deeper into the campagna.

MEDITATION



Children on the Country Road

I could hear the carts driving past the garden fence, sometimes I even caught sight of them through the gently shifting gaps in the foliage. How the wood of their spokes and shafts creaked in the summer heat! Labourers were coming in from the fields and laughing so that it was a scandal.

I was sitting on our little swing, just having a rest among the trees in my parents' garden.

Beyond the fence there was never a pause. Children running by were past in a moment; harvest waggons with men and women perched on the sheaves and round them darkened the flower-beds; towards evening I saw a gentleman with a walking-stick out for a stroll, and a party of girls coming arm-in-arm the other way stepped aside into the grass as they greeted him.

Then birds flew up like a shower of sparks, I followed them with my eyes and saw how they rose in a single breath, until they seemed no longer to be rising but I to be falling, and holding fast to the ropes I began to swing a little out of faintness. Soon I was swinging more strongly as the air grew cooler and in place of the flying birds trembling stars appeared.

I was given my supper by candle-light. Often I had both my arms on the wooden board and I was already weary as I bit into my bread and butter. The wide-mesh curtains billowed in the warm wind, and now and then someone going by outside would hold them fast with both hands if he wanted to see me better and speak to me. Usually the candle soon went out and the midges which had gathered went on circling for a while in the dark candle-smoke. If someone asked me something from the window I would look at him as if I were