



IN 1965

I. The Encumberment of the Parisian Sky and its Disruptions of Circulation. A Handbag Lost in an Airplane Jam

Having lavished a dozen kisses on each of her two children—Gustave, a young fellow of six, already tall and determined, and Pierrette, a girl of five, with a pretty pink face beneath wild curls, seemingly sketched in flourishes by an eighteenth-century master with blue dots for eyes—Madame Suzanne Montgrabel finally seemed to calm down. She drank a glass of water, moistened her temples slightly, kissed her children another six times, threw herself into an armchair, got up, walked about agitatedly and sighed profoundly.

The chambermaid, who had been following the various phases of the scene for ten minutes, seemed reassured, and smiled.

“Truly, if Madame had not recovered completely, I could have believed that she had fallen eighteen hundred meters from the tower of Notre Dame! But Madame, it’s only a trivial little accident, such as happens every day. These air-taxi pilots are so imprudent! They bump into everything! Adroit imprudence is forgivable, but clumsiness is understandably disagreeable. If Madame had taken her autoflyer, she would be in this state...”

“That’s nothing,” said Suzanne. “What annoys me is that I’ve lost my handbag, that’s all...”

“Did Madame have her jewels in it, or her check book?”

“No, Annette, just a few papers...”

“Well, then, it’s nothing.”

Suzanne Montgrabel allowed some emotion to show again. It was a great deal for a trivial air-taxi accident such as happened every day—or rather, a simple incident of circulation. A little while ago, a hundred and fifty meters above Neuilly, her air-taxi, awkwardly caught between a minihydroplane and an autoflyer, had given her half a second of terror, but the air-taxi had got out of it by dropping downwards.

The usual airplane accident altercations had followed, her pilot was called a “carter” and a “bus-driver” by his colleagues—stinging but unimportant insults, immediately evaporated in the atmosphere by virtue of the speed of the vehicles. However, Suzanne, surprised or distracted, and in any case not very brave, had dropped her pretty little handbag overboard in her disturbance.

An unimportant loss, since it did not contain either jewelry or a check-book—but why, then, was Suzanne Montgrabel so upset, even anxious, over such a little inconvenience?

“My God!” she murmured, in a terrified tone, “what a disaster! Why did I...? What if it falls into my husband’s hands? What shall I do! What shall I say? And my father-in-law! My God, what imprudence! No, no, it’s necessary to get it back immediately...!”

She looked at her watch. The hands were not moving very quickly.

“It needs time—I don’t want to go too soon. Oh, what if the bag has fallen in the Seine and sunk to the bottom! But no, it wasn’t heavy enough; there was no jewelry in it, unfortunately. Let’s see, what time is it? Let’s wait a little longer...”

She toyed distractedly with little Pierrette’s curls and gazed vaguely at a page of Gustave’s handwriting. Then she picked up the telephone and rang the central flight terrace of the Montgrabel house—the flight-pad, as one says—for her personal pilot.

“Firmin, will you get the autoflyer ready—we’re going out.”

A few more words over the tele to Madams Montgrabel, her husband’s mother: “I’m going out for a short trip, Mother dear, and I’ll be back in no time.”

“It’s just,” said Madame Montgrabel, in a slightly plaintive voice, “that it’s one of my days of depression, you know...life is so busy! So much to do! It gives me vertigo...I still have ten reports on our social work to read, twenty-five accounts to check and thirty letters to dictate in the meantime... See you soon.”

“I’ll be back in no time, Mother dear.”

At the flight-pad Suzanne found Firmin, who was starting up his engine; she only had to leap into the autoflyer.

“The Central Lost Property Office,” she said.



The autoflyer took off without a jolt. It is a fine instrument, the autoflyer, a model so slim and so solid in its delicate appearance; it has three light wheels and takes off immediately at a simple pressure of the pilot’s hand.¹ A slightly old-fashioned vehicle, undoubtedly, but very convenient for short trips and much appreciated by timorous individuals who do not like high-altitude winds or are slightly fearful of the bewildering aerial circulation and the veritable clutter of the air above large cities.

¹ Robida’s illustration shows a vehicle with three wheels set in a linear arrangement, one in front of another. An “autoflyer” is a primarily a road vehicle, which employs its wings in order to jump over inconvenient obstructions—and an idea that failed to catch on even in futuristic fiction, although similar vehicles are featured in Victor Margueritte’s *Le Couple* (1924; tr. as *The Couple*, Black Coat Press, ISBN 978-1-6122-362-4).

People complain a great deal about that encumbrance, although it is inevitable, as had to be accepted along with its various inconveniences. Certainly, at many points in the Parisian sky, the circulation is difficult to regulate suitably, but how could it be otherwise, with the thousands of vehicles of every sort that fly over the Parisian agglomeration and its surrounding area above the first twelve hundred meters of altitude: the countless airships, airplanes, hydroplanes, minihydroplanes, helicopters and other varieties of the numerous family of great artificial birds, leading to traffic jams around local flight-pads or tube stations?

Between that intense aerial circulation and terrestrial circulation, still considerable for heavy transportation, there is the intermediary—which is to say, autoflyers avoiding obstacles and, it is necessary to consider, descents from on high, the vertical circulation that is, of course, very troublesome on occasion.

At the first leaps or glides of the autoflyer, Suzanne Montgrabel could not help casting a suspicious glance around, above and below her. As the weather was superb, with bright sunshine, the sky was very animated. The auto rolled for two minutes, bounding over a few blocks of streets or boulevards, and flew at fifty meters, soon going around the swarming terrace of the great Neuilly flight-pad.

There were lots of people about, many walking—the weather was so fine! Between two business-meetings, people were going hastily to inflate the lungs by means of rapid hops in the atmosphere, where the vivifying western breezes could be felt as soon as one reached five hundred meters.

But the pilot Firmin could not be called a bus-driver. He was skillful and vigilant; there was nothing to fear with him. He did not tangle with any autoflyer or collide with any chimney-pot which hurdling an unusually tall building. Only the vertical circulation could cause Suzanne any anxiety.

In the distance, the great Paris-New York-San Francisco dirigible could be seen casting off; it was the hour of the daily departure. Generally, the friends or relatives who have accompanied the passengers on board allow the dirigible to gain height in order to descend by parachute. Parachutes with auxiliary motors, for diagonal descents, are frequently used nowadays—they are so convenient! You can quit airplanes or dirigibles at will, and the parachute sets you down at the chosen location tranquilly, without a jolt. It is, however, a prerogative that is not without occasional inconveniences for distracted or inattentive people down below, who are not paying sufficient attention to vertical circulation and risk receiving the parachute-traveler on the head, or allowing themselves to be clipped in passing.

Distraction is the sole and veritable cause of the majority of atmospheric accidents, almost always so easy to avoid with vigilance and a cool head. In our epoch, is it acceptable to dream outdoors? Can we, who live plunged in the formidable turbulence of modern life, carried away at top speed by the incessant breathlessness of very complicated machinery, walk around like our ancestors, tranquilly letting our minds drift in the insouciant waves of untimely reverie, as dangerous to others as ourselves? The clumsiness of airplane pilots, amateur or professional, gets the blame. In truth, that is quite mistaken. They are not clumsy; it is the obsolete dreamers—poets, if you wish—people of another era, who are at fault. One does well to say: “So much the worse for them!” Unfortunately, it is often so much the worse for others.

So Suzanne, in spite of her preoccupations, kept watch on the sky. In fact, the Paris-New York dirigible was taking away a cinema-opera troupe, and the numerous friends of the troupe’s stars, having concluded their adieux and handed over their bouquets, were now quitting the dirigible. Their shouts could be heard—*See you soon! Bon voyage! Have a nice trip! Au revoir! A tele call without fail every evening! Au revoir!*—a confused rumor that faded away amid the varied music of engines, distant murmurs or nearby purrs.

In all directions, parachutes began to cut through the atmosphere as the friends of the troupe left the vessel.

“Look out, Firmin! Several of them are coming toward us!”

Firmin smiled without making any reply. He never lost himself in a dream, and did not care about parachutes.

At the same moment, a valise went past, like a yellow meteorite. A dreamer in the dirigible up above had dropped it, doubtless while contemplating the cinema-opera stars.

“Oh!” said Suzanne.

That was more dangerous and less easily avoidable. Unfortunately, it is still necessary, in aerial life, for us to expect a certain amount of imprudence and negligence, which will certainly diminish over time. At every moment, a thousand objects rain down from the sky: poorly-secured luggage that has escaped, helmets, hats, flying packages, or even bottles that have stupidly been allowed to roll away. There are sanctions, lawsuits and fines, which are perhaps not severe enough.

By means of an abrupt serve, Firmin avoided the valise; he also avoided the maladroit gentleman who, in order not to lose it, had decided to follow it by parachute, postponing his journey until the next departure.

Five minutes later, the autoflyer landed in front of the Central Lost Property Office, annex 22 of the prefecture.

Suzanne got down quickly. It was vast, that Central Office: several halls where, behind a railed balustrade, one perceived a host of very various objects on tables, with labels and serial numbers. Suzanne passed them rapidly in review, searching for the hall of found objects of small dimension.

“But Madame,” said the employee, when she had described the lost items at length, “it’s too soon, too soon! We have hardly any of today’s finds, as yet. It’s necessary to wait until tomorrow...”

How annoying! Suzanne, increasingly desolate, went back to the autoflyer in order to return to the Montgrabel house. Frowning, her gaze distracted and irritated, she allowed herself now to be carried along without paying attention to the famous vertical circulation. Fortunately, she was not driving, and Firmin was inaccessible to distraction.

“I suspected that Madame would have a wasted journey,” said the chambermaid Annette. “It was too soon. And then, one could have telephoned, since there was nothing in Madame’s handbag...”

“Yes, yes...enough!” said Suzanne, to cut the matter short. “If, by any chance, it’s returned, call me immediately.”

Suzanne is the wife of Charles Montgrabel, the elder son of the great industrialist, whose many enormous and well-directed enterprises have earned him a world-wide celebrity. Charles Montgrabel, an engineer of red coal,² a man whose valor was already well-known, is absent at present. Studies in connection with the exploitation of volcanoes in Java and Sumatra have retained him in the Far East,

In order to perceive Monsieur Montgrabel, the head of the dynasty, we only have to cast a glance at the great hall of the staircase connecting the ten floors of the house, brightly illuminated laterally and also from above, by the daylight pouring through by the perforated tower bearing the airplane flight platform.

Magnificent in its architecture, that stairway of honor, superbly decorated, worthy of Versailles or the Château de Vaux-Fouquet, is broad enough to accommodate the maneuvers of a cavalry squadron, but it is as deserted as it is sumptuous, because no one ever goes up the steps or admires the decorations of its wrought-iron banisters. Only the elevators are employed.

On the wall above the first landing, facing the door of the hall, is a full-length portrait of Monsieur Montgrabel by a illustrious painter, as sumptuous in its color as the staircase: a portrait that gives the impression of being an equestrian portrait, so imposing is it, and so majestically do the eyes of the portraiture seem to float above over everything that the central portal allows to be perceived of Paris and the expanses of the sky that it opens up. But the portal is always shut. People generally enter the house via the terrace above it.

The portrait of Monsieur Montgrabel does not lie, and the authoritarianism of the model is well-known. The family knows something about that, as does everyone in the celebrated industrialist’s entourage or employed in his enterprises.

² “Houille rouge” [red coal] was a phrase that had taken on a macabre meaning in France during the Great War, with reference to the blood whose spillage was fuelling the war. Robida is, therefore, making a joke in re-adapting it to a quasi-literal meaning; Charles is an industrial engineer employing red-hot lava inside volcanoes as a power source for electricity generation.

Thus, without divining the cause, we can understand the emotion of Suzanne, who cannot help darting a glance in the direction of her father-in-law's portrait as she traverses the landing in order to reach the apartment of the elder Madame Montgrabel.

"Here I am, Mother dear," she says, on entering her mother-in-law's small office. Once, one would have said "boudoir," but nowadays one says "small office" or "study," for Madame Montgrabel is a very busy person and the small office is, in reality, a large and brightly-lit room, in which the luxurious desk laden with papers and the telephonoscope are framed by desks for typists and filing-cabinets of an almost administrative appearance instead of credenza, tapestries and display cases full of knick-knacks, as in olden days.

Madame Montgrabel, a rather robust and very elegant woman, whose features still display the residues of youth, is in the process of rummaging through the files and stacks of paper accumulated in her immense desk, searching for her mislaid spectacles. She stirs her papers, throws an armful of files on the floor, and finally unearths three pairs.

"Oof!" she says finally looking up at her daughter-in-law. "My dear child, you see a woman ravaged by cares. I can't do any more, and I'm going to revolt against your father-in-law's tyranny. He's been making me live a feverish existence of forced labor long enough! Take stock for a moment. I assume responsibility for the social relations of the enormous Montgrabel company—my husband doesn't have the time, of course—it's me who has to say to him: 'You know Philippe, Madame is our dear intimate friend... the gentleman near the fireplace is our very amiable country neighbor the Duc de X***, etc., etc.'" Fine! But in addition, I have to supervise the social affairs, masculine or feminine, created around our various factories, mines, enterprises and exploitations in the four corners of the world. As if the world only had four corners! But it has many more, and Monsieur Montgrabel always has something to found, undertake or reconstitute almost everywhere. Then I have to rack my brains and liquefy my brain, for the establishment and efficient functioning of gardens and crèches, schools, libraries, kitchen gardens and workers' parks, cooperatives, hospitals, insurance schemes, etc., etc. All well and good! But now, here are reports in Annamite: 'Workers' Housing in Tonkin,' where we have mines, 'Dispensary at Sontay.' Will I have to learn Tonkinese and Cambodian?"