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DOUBLE PULITZER PRIZE WINNER

DAVID McCULLOUGH

# THE WRIGHT BROTHERS

The Dramatic Story behind the Legend

# CHAPTER TEN

# A Time Like No Other

Every time we make a move, the people on the street stop and stare at us. KATHARINE WRIGHT I. Wilbur's days at Le Mans had never been so full. In the months since Orville's accident, he had become an even bigger sensation. Not since Benjamin Franklin had any American been so overwhelmingly popular in France. As said by the Paris correspondent for the Washington Post, it was not just his feats in the air that aroused such interest but his strong "individuality." He was seen as a personification of "the Plymouth Rock spirit," to which French students of the United States, from the time of Alexis de Tocqueville, had attributed "the grit and indomitable perseverance that characterize American efforts in every department of activity." The crowds kept coming to Le Mans by train and automobile and from increasingly farther distances. "Every day there is a crowd of people not only from the neighborhood," Wilbur reported to Orville, "but also from almost every country in Europe." During the six months Wilbur was flying at Le Mans 200,000 people came to see him. The thrill of beholding the American wonder in action, the possibility, perhaps, even to shake his hand or be photographed with him, the constant fuss made over him by young and old, men and women, were all part of the excitement, as was the sight of prominent figures daring to ride with him in the sky. First there had been the rotund Léon Bollée, then Hart Berg, and after that Berg's wife, Edith, who was the first American woman to go up in a plane. To avoid the embarrassment of having her long skirts lifted aloft by the winds, she tied them around her ankles with a rope. On her return she said she had felt no nervous strain or "the least bit of fear."

Her admiration for “Mr. Wright,” strong as it already was, had increased tenfold by his master-working of the machine. She would be ready anytime, she said, to fly the English Channel with him. A photograph of Madame Berg seated on the Flyer at Wilbur Wright’s side, beaming with pleasure in advance of takeoff, made an unprecedented magazine cover, and the famous Paris dress designer Paul Poiret, quick to see the possibilities in the rope about the ankles, produced a hobble skirt that became a fashion sensation. Arnold Fordyce, who had led the French delegation to Dayton in 1906, took a turn to ride with Wilbur for a full hour, and for the chief of the French army’s aeronautical department, a Colonel Boutioux, Wilbur made several rounds at only 18 inches or so above the ground, which astounded everyone. Another passenger, like Edith Berg, marveled at how “steady” was the entire time in the air. It seemed as if Wilbur and he were “progressing along an elevated track,” wrote an English officer and aeronautical enthusiast, Major Baden Fletcher Smyth Baden-Powell, brother of the founder of the Boy Scouts. But he was astonished, too, by the noise. Mr. Wright, with both hands grasping the levers, watches every move, but his movements are so slight as to be almost imperceptible. . . . All the time the engine is buzzing so loudly and the propellers humming so that after the trip one is almost deaf. A reporter from the Paris Herald took a turn, then another reporter from Le Figaro, then several Russian officers. The “accommodating attitude of this man that we took great pleasure in depicting as a recluse, is inexhaustible,” wrote the reporter from Le Figaro. Clearly Wilbur was having a grand time. “Queen Margherita of Italy was in the crowd yesterday,” he wrote on October 9. “You have let me witness the most astonishing spectacle I have ever seen,” she told him. “Princes and millionaires are as thick as fleas on the ‘Flyer,’” he added, knowing Katharine would love hearing that. That women found him increasingly

appealing became quite evident. One highly attractive Parisian lady, the wife of a prominent politician, spoke freely and at some length to a reporter on the matter, with the understanding that her name would not be mentioned. Her first impression was not altogether favorable, she admitted. “M. Wright appeared a bit too rough and rugged. His expression was fixed and terribly stern. But the moment he opened his lips to speak, the veil of severity vanished. His voice is warm, sympathetic and vibrating. There is a kindly look that imparts exceptional charm and refinement to his bright intelligent eyes. . . . The frank honest way in which he looks straight in the eyes of the person to whom he speaks, and the firm grip of his wiry, muscular hand seem to give true insight into his character and temperament. . . . He impressed me as one of the most remarkable men I have ever met. Having finished the number of test flights required by the French syndicate, Wilbur began training the first of three French aviators, as was also required. He was Comte Charles de Lambert, a slim, blond-haired Russian-born aristocrat, age forty-three, who spoke English and to whom Wilbur took an immediate liking. With the plane fitted out with a second set of levers, he would ride to Wilbur’s right. For his part Wilbur would sit with his hands between his knees, ready if necessary to take control. Never had it been more important that Wilbur perform to perfection, for any mishap now, coming after Orville’s crash, would be seen in a very different light, and so, as much as he was enjoying himself, the pressure on him was greater than ever. Only by escaping out into the countryside on his bicycle could he have time to himself. “How I long for Kitty Hawk!” he wrote to Octave Chanute. In his honor the Aéro-Club de France was planning its biggest banquet ever at which Wilbur was to receive the club’s Gold Medal and a prize of 5,000 francs ($1,000) and in addition a gold medal from the Académie des Sports. “I will have quite a collection of bric-a-brac by the time I return home,” he

wrote to brother Reuchlin. What he valued still more, he said, was the friendship of so many of the good people of Le Mans. When he had arrived a few months earlier he had known no one. Now he counted some of his warmest friends among those he had come to know. It seemed all the children within a dozen-mile radius would greet him as he rode by on his bicycle. They would politely take off their caps and smile and say, “Bonjour! Monsieur Wright.” “They are really almost the only ones except close friends who know how to pronounce my name,” he told Reuchlin. “People in general pronounce my name, ‘Vreecht’ with a terrible rattle of the ‘r.’ In many places I am called by my first name, ‘Veelbare’ almost entirely.” The Aéro-Club de France’s banquet took place in Paris the evening of November 5, 1908, in the salle de théâtre of the Automobile Club on the Place de la Concorde. As reported, the “brilliantly illuminated” room had been “transformed” by plants and flowers “in profusion.” The 250 guests, nearly all men in full dress, included almost every major figure in French aviation—Léon Delagrange, Louis Blériot, Alberto Santos-Dumont, Ernest Archdeacon—in addition to Léon Bollée, Hart Berg, and Comte Charles de Lambert. Conspicuous, too, was the great structural engineer Gustave Eiffel. Among the few women present was Edith Berg. A military band provided appropriately rousing music and, as the guests read in the menus at each of their places, the evening’s sumptuous feast included jambon d’York aux épinards (ham with spinach), faisan rôti aux croutons (roasted pheasant with croutons), salade Russe (Russian potato salad), and Glace a lananas (pineapple ice cream). All was quite befitting the occasion—as a statement of national pride and the elegant taste of the time, and as recognition of an infinitely promising turning point in history. In presenting the Gold Medal, the president of the Aéro-Club, M. L. P. Cailletet, spoke of the great change in public opinion that had swept over France and the world in general

since Wilbur Wright began his performance at Le Mans. He spoke of how Wilbur and his brother had endured a period of ridicule and abuse such as had seldom been known in the history of scientific investigation. France, he said, was now at last showing its appreciation of their merit. Wilbur received a sustained ovation, and Louis Barthou, minister of public works, delivered a "hearty speech of congratulation," lauding Wilbur and Orville for achieving "through straightforwardness, intelligence, and tenacity . . . one of the most beautiful inventions of the human genius. Mr. Wright is a man who has never been discouraged even in the face of hesitation and suspicion. The brothers Wright have written their names in human history as inventors of pronounced genius. Photographs were taken. Then Wilbur rose from his place at the center of the head table. Baron d'Estournelles de Constant translated as Wilbur spoke. For myself and my brother I thank you for the honor you are doing us and for the cordial reception you have tendered us this evening. If I had been born in your beautiful country and had grown up among you, I could not have expected a warmer welcome than has just been given me. When we did not know each other, we had no confidence in each other; today, when we are acquainted, it is otherwise: we believe each other, and we are friends. I thank you for this. In the enthusiasm being shown around me, I see not merely an outburst intended to glorify a person, but a tribute to an idea that has always impassioned mankind. I sometimes think that the desire to fly after the fashion of birds is an ideal handed down to us by our ancestors who, in their grueling travels across trackless lands in prehistoric times, looked enviously on the birds soaring freely through space, at full speed, above all obstacles, on the infinite highway of the air. Scarcely ten years ago, all hope of flying had almost been abandoned; even the most convinced had become doubtful, and I confess that, in 1901, I said to my brother Orville that men would not

fly for fifty years. Two years later, we ourselves were making flights. This demonstration of my inability as a prophet gave me such a shock that I have ever since distrusted myself and have refrained from all prediction—as my friends of the press, especially, well know. But it is not really necessary to look too far into the future; we see enough already to be certain that it will be magnificent. Only let us hurry and open the roads. Once again, I thank you with all my heart, and in thanking you I should like it understood that I am thanking all of France.

At the point when Wilbur expressed his gratitude for the warm friendship he had experienced in a country not his own, his "habitually rigid mask softened," according to one account, "his voice, usually so clear, quavered slightly." The members and guests responded with a standing ovation. The band played "The Star-Spangled Banner," and for some time afterward Wilbur stood patiently signing two hundred or more menus. "He knows the little chores that are incumbent upon our heroes to perform," observed the account in L'Aérophile approvingly. In the weeks that followed, Wilbur returned several times to Paris to receive additional tributes and awards and to be hosted at more dinners in his honor. When not being celebrated at such gatherings, he could be seen striding alone up and down the Bois de Boulogne or exploring the avenues, looking in the windows of curio shops or standing quietly studying the architecture of one of the city's monuments. "He has a half dozen invitations for every day," wrote a correspondent for the New York World, "and some few of them he accepts, putting on his hat and coat to go out and meet ladies and gentlemen who have spent an hour or two with their maids and valets in order to make themselves sufficiently beautiful for the honor of meeting him. They drive up in carriages and pairs with gold-braided coachmen and footmen, and Wright shoulders an umbrella for a walk through the rain to the house where the dinner happens to be. . . . He is

just himself in the most refreshing way. During an extended conversation with Wilbur one evening at the Bergs' apartment on the Champs-Elysées, it became clear to the correspondent how greatly Wilbur enjoyed Paris. "He has too keen an appreciation of the beautiful not to do so." In early December, with winter setting in, Wilbur sent the Comte de Lambert to the southern reaches of France to look over the fashionable resort town of Pau, close to the Pyrénées Mountains and the border of Spain, as a possible location at which to continue the demonstrations. It was where de Lambert had grown up, a town of some 34,000 people known for its fourteenth-century castles, its foxhunting and eighteen-hole golf course (the first on the continent), and what was considered one of the most appealing winter climates in Europe. The prospect of visiting a destination so popular with the high society of England and Europe might also, Wilbur hoped, further entice Orville and Katharine—Katharine especially—to join him there for an extended stay. A few months in such a place would do them both great good, he wrote to her. "I know that you love 'Old Steele' [her high school], but I think you would love it still better if the briny deep separated it from you for a while. We will be needing a social manager and can pay enough salary to make the proposition attractive. So do not worry about the six [dollars] per day the school board gives you." But she had already made up her mind. "Brother and I are coming over as soon as we can," she wrote only a few days later, in advance of his letter reaching Dayton. She had only to make satisfactory arrangements for the Bishop, who had just turned eighty and was not up to such a trip. In Paris, where new toys being sold were part of the "streets sights" of the Christmas season, the most popular was a little reproduction of the Wilbur Wright airplane, of which much was made in the newspapers, including the Chicago Tribune. It is quite a wonderful toy, for even the smallest details have been perfectly carried

out, and the tiny machine will start from the ground, make its miniature flight, and then descend in a manner that is most remarkable. “Mr. Wright” himself is seated in the toy and operates it in the most life-like way. The features of the inventor have a distinctly more Parisian than an American cast, but for all that no one but knows for whom it is intended and the sale of them has been quick and large. In Le Mans, despite increasingly cold days, Wilbur, having switched to wearing a black leather motorcycle jacket, was busy practicing takeoffs without the use of a catapult. He had decided to compete for the Michelin Cup, a prize newly established by the French tire company, and in the competition such launching devices were not allowed. On the day of the event, December 31, the last day of the year and Wilbur’s last big event at Camp d’Auvours, in spite of rain and cold he was barely able to endure, he put on his most astonishing performance yet, flying longer and farther than anyone ever had—2 hours, 20 minutes, and 23 and one fifth seconds during which he covered a distance of 77 miles. He won the Cup. He was sorry to have missed Christmas at home, he wrote his father the next day. “But I could not afford to lose the Michelin Prize, as the loss of prestige would have been much more serious than the direct loss. If I had gone away, the other fellows would have fairly busted themselves any record I left. The fact that they knew I was ready to beat anything they should do kept them discouraged.” After landing he prepared to go up again, no matter the cold and rain, and this time took the minister of public works, Louis Barthou, with him. “He informed me that the government had decided to confer the Legion of Honor upon both Orville and myself.” II. For many, even veteran travelers, the prospect of crossing the Atlantic in the middle of winter would have kept them happily safe and comfortable at home. But Katharine Wright, who had never been to sea, never even set foot on board an ocean liner, seems to have had no misgivings or hesitation

whatever. On January 5, 1909, in New York, she and Orville went aboard the German liner Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse, Orville hobbling up the gangplank as best he could beside her, bound for France. She who had so long been confined by work and family responsibilities was now at last, at age thirty-four, embarking on a venture such as she had only been able to dream of, scarcely imagining it might one day happen. She had made her first visit to the dress shop in Dayton in early December to choose a traveling ensemble and hat, and ultimately packed her trunk with two new evening dresses as well, one pink, the other black. When asked by friends and reporters about the purpose of the trip, she and Orville would say it was for "a sort of family reunion." In their absence, Bishop Wright would be looked after by Carrie Grumbach, who, with her husband and child, had moved in with him at 7 Hawthorn Street. Katharine's primary responsibility would be Orville, who was walking now with a cane instead of crutches, but was still quite unsteady on his feet, with a decided limp, and needed somebody with him to make sure he did not fall. Except for one rough day at sea, the crossing turned out to be extremely smooth. Even so, Orville had trouble walking the deck. They were traveling first-class, enjoying good service and in "pleasant company," as Katharine wrote their father. Clearly all was as she would wish. They landed at Cherbourg the afternoon of January 11 and by boat-train reached Paris at one in the morning to find Wilbur waiting at the station to greet them—"in silk hat and evening clothes," no less, Katharine was delighted to record. He had come all the way from Pau, and with him were the Bergs and Arnold Fordyce, who stepped forward to present Katharine with a large bouquet of American Beauty roses from which protruded an American flag. They all went to the Myerbeer Hotel on the Champs-Elysées, near the Bergs' apartment. Once the others said good night, the three Wrights sat up talking until three in the morning. The following day the

brothers met for lunch with André Michelin, the automobile tire manufacturer, who presented Wilbur with the $4,000 that went with the Michelin Cup. Katharine, meanwhile, went shopping with Edith Berg, “a pretty woman and very stylish,” Katharine reported to the Bishop later that night. “She will be down at Pau with me and that will make it more pleasant. She will take her automobile and take me about in the country.” Wilbur and Hart Berg had already left for Pau. She and Orville would follow shortly. Orville asked her also to tell the Bishop that as of now, from French syndicate payments, prize money, and cash awards, Wilbur and he had $35,000 in the bank in Paris. Orville and Katharine left Paris for Pau, 194 miles to the south, by overnight train the evening of Friday the 15th. En route, at about seven A.M., the train crashed head-on into a freight train, killing two passengers and seriously injuring a half dozen others. She and Orville were “not even scratched,” Katharine assured their father. “We happened to take a compartment ‘de-luxe’ which was all that saved at least one of us from a bad fall.” In fact, Orville, while not injured, had been badly shaken up and subjected to severe pain. After a delay of five hours, they reached Pau the following afternoon and checked into the Grand Hôtel Gassion, next door to the birthplace of France’s most popular king, Henry IV. The hotel was grand indeed and set on the brink of a steep bluff with a commanding view of the green valley below and the spectacular, snowcapped peaks of the Pyrénées, some ten thousand feet in elevation, that stretched the length of the horizon approximately thirty miles to the south. To provide further enjoyment of the spectacle there was also a beautiful promenade running a mile along the top of the bluff. Never in their lives until now had Katharine and the brothers seen such mountains. “I never saw anything so lovely,” wrote Katharine, struggling to find words to express what she felt. Wilbur would not be staying at the hotel but at a flying field called Pont-Long about six miles

from town, or twenty minutes by automobile, where the city fathers had provided him with luxurious living quarters—or at least luxurious by his standards—and with most all the comforts, including his own personal French chef. The chef did not last long, however, Wilbur finding the cuisine too fancy. Neither did a successor satisfy. Finally, a third chef caught on to what the American liked to eat and all seems to have gone well thereafter. At a reception for the three Wrights put on by the mayor of Pau, some five hundred guests gathered in the Pau Garden, at the Grand Hall du Palais d'Hiver at the eastern end of the promenade. Outside the encircling palm trees and flowers another thousand people or more looked on. Wilbur had yet to conduct any of his "experiments," but as reported in the Paris Herald, Pau had "simply gone mad about aviation. Nothing is talked about but mechanical flight, everyone is buying a new camera to snap aeroplanes, painters are busy at their canvases, the long- neglected roads are being repaired, and society is inviting the Wrights to many more gatherings than they can possibly attend. A few days later a photograph of Wilbur, Orville, and Katharine out for a stroll in Pau appeared on the front page of the Herald. She and her brothers were "the whole show" everywhere they went, wrote Katharine. Until a year ago Wilbur and Orville had worked practically in secret. Now they were the toast of Europe and she was with them. "Every time we make a move, the people on the street stop and stare at us. . . . We have our pictures taken every two minutes." She minded this not in the least. "The Daily Mirror of London had a man here who got a dandy picture of Orv and me." With the onset of February and warmer days came a marked increase in the arrival of notables of the kind Pau was known for—counts and countesses, dukes and duchesses, lords and ladies, many of them English. There were members of the French cabinet, generals, lords of the press, and a number of American millionaires, as well as a former prime minister of

England and two kings. Never in their lives had the three Wrights been among so many who, by all signs, had little to do but amuse themselves. Nor did they feel out of place or the least intimidated by such company. They felt that they, in their way, were quite as well-born and properly reared as anyone. Never did they stray from remaining exactly who they were, and more often than not, they found themselves most pleasantly surprised by those they were meeting. At a luncheon at their hotel, their host, Alfred Harmsworth, Lord Northcliffe, publisher of the London Daily Mail, was much to their liking, though a man worlds apart from Wilbur and Orville. He had immense wealth and all the glamour of power and success, but appealed greatly all the same. Further, he was keenly interested in the development of aviation and he liked Americans. On another occasion, they were with Joseph Pulitzer, publisher of the New York World, and his wife. “We all liked them very much,” wrote Katharine. She wrote also of a “rousing good time” at lunch with Lord and Lady Balfour. Arthur Balfour, former prime minister of England, was so eager to take part in preparations for Wilbur’s flights at Pont-Long that along with Lord Northcliffe he helped haul on the rope that lifted the catapult weight into place. Seeing a young British lord also assisting, Northcliffe remarked to Orville, who was standing close by watching, “I’m so glad that young man is helping with the rope, for I’m sure it is the only useful thing he has ever done in his life.” Katharine had the thrill of a day’s expedition to the Pyrénées by automobile with a wealthy Irish couple and, as she reported to her father, knowing how it would please him, she had begun taking French lessons for two hours every morning, and with her background in Greek and Latin her progress was rapid. One of those helping her with her French was the son of Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau. Another she greatly liked was the Comtesse de Lambert, the attractive wife of Wilbur’s student the Comte de Lambert. Her complaints were few. On

those days when there was no sun, the cold and dampness were such as she did not care for. Besides, Edith Berg, whom she had liked at first in Paris, was getting on her nerves. She was “a regular tyrant and as selfish as anyone can be. We will be glad when she goes.” But to judge by her letters, that was as “wrathy” as Katharine turned during the time in Europe, and though Edith Berg stayed on, Katharine appears to have had no further complaints about her. More press arrived, more photographs were taken, more articles written for Le Figaro, the Paris Herald, the London Daily Mail, the New York Times, and papers back in Ohio. One story sent by the United Press from Paris claimed a French army lieutenant had charged Wilbur in a divorce case. The story was a complete fabrication that none of the French papers carried, but in Dayton, where it did appear, it caused a temporary embarrassing sensation. Wilbur wrote an angry denial. Family and friends at home rose quickly to his defense, saying he was not that sort of man. Since arriving in Paris in January, Orville had told reporters that, given his physical state, it would be foolish for him to attempt any exertion. At Pau, he mainly stood and watched, saying little. With his derby hat, well-pressed suit, his polished shoes and cane, he could have been another of the European aristocrats. A writer for Flyer magazine. H. Massac Buist, was surprised to see how small Orville was, indeed, how different both brothers were from what he had expected, judging from press accounts. “I have never seen them taciturn, or curt, or secretive, or any of the other things which I had been led to believe were their outstanding characteristics.” Recalling a line attributed to Wilbur—“Well, if I talked a lot I should be like a parrot, which is the bird that speaks most and flies least.”—Buist wrote that in the course of a day Wilbur talked quite as much as most men; the difference was his words were to the point. The less Orville had to say, the more Katharine talked and with great effect. She had become a celebrity in her own right. The

press loved her. “The masters of the aeroplane, those two clever and intrepid Daytonians, who have moved about Europe under the spotlight of extraordinary publicity, have had a silent partner,” went one account. But silent she was no longer and reporters delighted in her extroverted, totally unaffected Midwestern American manner. Some of what was written went too far. She was said to have mathematical genius superior even to that of her brothers, and that she was the one financing their time in Europe. In the main, however, it was full-hearted, long-overdue, public recognition of the “mainstay” of her brothers in their efforts. Who was it who gave them new hope, when they began to think the problem [of flight] impossible? . . . Who was it that nursed Orville back to strength and health when the physicians had practically given him up after that fatal accident last September? Besides, wrote one correspondent, “Like most American girls, the aviators’ sister has very decided views of her own.” Wilbur made his first flight at Pau on February 3 and from that day on remained a sensation. As said one headline, all Pau was “AGOG.” Virtually every day but Sunday a steady stream of elegant carriages and automobiles headed out to the flying field to see the doors of the huge red “aerodock” swing wide and the four-year-old Flyer come rolling out, showing signs of much wear and tear, the canvas soiled and torn, patched and tattooed with tin tacks. Wilbur would examine it up and down with his usual care, oil can in hand, pockets bulging with twine, a screwdriver, a wrench, touching a wire here, a bolt there, and never hurrying. Then, with all to his liking, off he would go, “right up into the air, turning, wheeling up and down, graceful as an albatross, showing the perfect command of the aviator.” For a second or two, the plane would seem to hang motionless against the high white line of the snowcapped Pyrénées, “absolutely a scene of beauty quite impossible to describe.” One of the few problems to contend with was the ground

filled with bumps, some the size of a bowler hat, that made takeoffs difficult. Someone suggested that with a bit of spade work the ground could be leveled. It was just what Wilbur and Orville had done preparing for their first test flights at Huffman Prairie, but Wilbur by now felt he could dispense with that. “If we have to alter the face of the earth before we can fly,” he replied, “we may as well throw up the proposition.” Such was the way of the man, observed a writer who was present. “He never sought to escape by the easy way round.” Most of Wilbur’s time was devoted to training the Comte de Lambert and another of the French aviators he was expected to teach, Paul Tissandier. Like de Lambert, Tissandier was a wealthy aristocrat who had been an automobile racer before taking up aviation. The third student was a French army officer, Captain Paul N. Lucas-Girardville. Of the three, de Lambert was the best pilot and Wilbur’s favorite. In none of his flights at Pont-Long was Wilbur attempting to set a record, and so other passengers, too, went aloft seated beside him, as many as a dozen altogether, including Katharine, who went up before a large crowd on February 15, just as night was coming on. It was her first time in the air. A spell of cold weather had set in. (“Southern sunny France is a delusion and a snare!” she had told her father.) But all that was forgotten when Wilbur at long last invited her to go with him. She was most happily surprised by how smoothly they sailed along and how easily she could recognize faces below. She thought they were flying at about 30 feet, but found out later it was 60 feet, and they were moving at 42 miles per hour. Yet she had a feeling of complete tranquillity and forgot completely about the cold. The flight lasted seven minutes. To show her the ease with which he could maneuver the machine, Wilbur made several sharp turns, but again she experienced no ill effects and never showed the least sign of fear. Asked later if she had felt like a bird when flying with her brother, Katharine responded, “I don’t know

exactly how a bird feels. Birds sing, I suppose, because they are happy. I sang, I know, and I was very happy indeed. But like the birds, I sang best after the flight was over." By now Wilbur was making flights with passengers five or six times a day. Who got to go was entirely up to him, and while it was assumed by many that he was charging a fee for so rare a privilege, and many were prepared to pay, and pay handsomely, he charged nothing, which made a great impression. When a wealthy American from Philadelphia was told by Lord Northcliffe that only Wilbur decided who went with him, the man replied, "Oh, I dare say that can be arranged." "I would like to be around when you do the arranging, just to see how it's done," Northcliffe replied. The man did not get his ride. Northcliffe would later say he never knew more unaffected people than Wilbur, Orville, and Katharine Wright, and that he did not think the excitement over them and the intense interest produced by their extraordinary feats had any effect on them whatsoever. Katharine filled her assignment as social manager for the brothers to perfection, taking active part in all manner of events night and day, and availing herself of every opportunity to make use of her rapidly improving French. "I understand a great deal now and talk fairly well," she told her father. That neither of her brothers had made such an effort annoyed him greatly. "A year in France and not understand nor speak French!" he had written in reference to Wilbur in particular. It was about as critical as the Bishop ever was when it came to Wilbur. In addition, the brothers depended on Katharine to maintain correspondence with their father, and so she did, sending off letters and postcards several times a week. In more than a month's time at Pau, Orville never wrote a word to the Bishop, while Wilbur wrote only once, on March 1, to say he would be going to Rome next, that Orville was much better than when he arrived, though still "not entirely himself," and that he, Wilbur, would be very glad to

get back home again. For his part Bishop Wright kept them regularly posted on events at home, his health (which was good), Carrie Grumbach's cooking (also good), his travels on church work, the weather, and the fact that he was "not a bit lonely." He had too much to do. He had begun work on an autobiography and had already produced fourteen typewritten pages. A few weeks later, he was up to fifty pages. As noted in the press, the airfield at Pont-Long continued to shine as a "place of pilgrimage for men of eminence." In the last week of February, the king of Spain, Alfonso XIII, arrived to witness "the miracle." He watched Wilbur take off and fly high above in great circles, never taking his eye off the spectacle. Afterward, as his entourage, Orville, Katharine, and others crowded around, he stood close to hear Wilbur explain each of the control mechanisms on the machine. The king, who spoke English and clearly knew a good deal about aviation, had many questions for Wilbur. At one point, turning to Katharine, he asked, "And did you really ride it yourself?" When she said she had, he said he wanted very much to go up with Wilbur but had promised his wife he would not. Katharine judged him "a good husband." Turning to Wilbur, the king inquired whether it would be asking too much to request another demonstration. "I have seen what you can do," he said. "I want to see what one of your pilots can do." Wilbur at once consented, taking off this time with the Comte de Lambert for a flight of twelve minutes, during which Wilbur never once touched the levers. That a student pilot could have learned to handle the plane with such skill in such a short time seemed to impress the king more than anything. Orville had told the press he would do no flying while in France. Nor did he plan to go up with Wilbur. But only days later Wilbur took Katharine for another ride, this time for a thirteen-mile flight cross-country. "It was great," she told her father. Not long after that she would take off in a balloon with a French count, and this time

Orville went, too, sailing some thirty miles to land at Ossun in the Pyrénées. That accomplished, Katharine gave out. Close to collapse from "too much excitement," she stayed in her hotel room for two days. On March 17, the most beautiful day yet—"royal weather," as people were saying—the king of England arrived, having driven more than seventy miles over to Pau from his customary holiday headquarters at Biarritz and with a considerable royal party accompanying him in a stream of gleaming black automobiles. Edward VII was in his sixty-eighth year, a stout, white-bearded, affable figure whose enjoyment of life, whose manner of dress—the homburg hats, tweed suits, the habit of never buttoning the bottom button on his vests—along with his love of fast automobiles and unmasked enthusiasm for beautiful women, had led to his being taken as a kind of emblem for the years since 1900, the Edwardian Era. The oldest son of Queen Victoria, he was an altogether refreshing personification of escape from the Victorian Age. That he was also keenly interested in aviation and had come in person to witness for himself the wonder of Wilbur Wright seemed entirely in keeping. The crowd at the airfield was large, the excitement great. Katharine was presented to the king, who, as noticed, was wearing a small bunch of shamrock in his buttonhole in honor of St. Patrick's Day. He was taken first to see the Flyer inside the shed. Wilbur apologized for the plane's worn appearance, but was proud to point to the very spic-and-span new Flyer being built right beside it, which, Wilbur explained, was to be used in Rome. As Wilbur saw to the positioning of his plane on the field and did his final inspection, Orville explained its workings to the king. Then Wilbur took off, performed to perfection, and after about seven minutes made a perfect landing at the point where he took off. The king watched it all with "bated breath," as he said. As he had for King Alfonso, Wilbur offered to go again to show how he carried a passenger, and once

again, Katharine went with him. She had by now flown longer and farther than had any American woman. Later that same day, much to the pride of all three Wrights, and to every French man and woman in the crowd, the Comte de Lambert performed a solo flight. The clamor and amazement over what the Wrights had achieved—all they had shown to be true time after time at Le Mans and Pau—was by no means limited to Europe. At home in the United States, newspapers and magazines from one end of the country to the other gave the story continual attention. Nor was the potential of so miraculous a creation lost sight of. In a long article in the Waco, Texas, Times-Herald on "The Monarchs of the Air," James A. Edgerton wrote as follows: Most of us can remember when the automobile was a novelty. The writer is under forty, yet recalls the time when the first "horseless wagon" was used, and it was only about a score of years ago. . . . The machine was a big clumsy affair, with large wheels, uncertain steering apparatus, and was run by a very noisy steam engine. This was so great a failure that it was some years before another crossed my field of vision. Now they are as common as millionaires. If the automobile could be so vastly improved in so short a time, who can predict what may occur in the field of aerial navigation now that the principle has actually been discovered and is before the world? Is it not possible that it will revolutionize human affairs in as radical a way as did the discovery of the use of steam? In all this stupendous change going on before our very eyes the Wright brothers are the chief magicians. They are the leaders and pioneers. It had been announced that the Aero Club of America would present the brothers with a gold medal on their return. Congress, too, had voted a medal to be presented by President William Howard Taft, and Dayton was making preparations for the biggest celebration in its history. But for all the attention being paid to the Wrights, there was at the same time increasing realization of how much else was happening in aviation

in France. Six months earlier the number of builders of airplanes in Paris and vicinity amounted to less than a half dozen. On April 25, the New York Times reported that no fewer than fifteen factories were now in full operation. If the Wrights were front and center in the show of inventive change, the cast onstage in France was filling rapidly. Scores of inventors are constructing their own machines [the Times article continued]. There is an aerodrome where pupils are taught to fly. Three new papers devoted to aviation have been founded within the past six months. There are three societies in France for the encouragement of aviation, and over $300,000 in prizes will be open to competition in the course of the year. The largest of the competitive events, an international flying meet, was scheduled for the coming summer, at the town of Reims, northeast of Paris in the champagne country. III. With his demonstrations concluded at Pau, Wilbur spent his final few days there packing the new Flyer for shipment in sections to Rome—the Flyer used at Le Mans and Pau would ultimately wind up in a museum in Paris—and supervising the final stages of training for his French students to the point where all three had soloed. Orville and Katharine had already returned to Paris, and on March 23, Wilbur, too, left Pau for Paris. A few days later the three Wrights went to Le Mans to be received at a heartwarming farewell banquet. Three days after that Wilbur and Hart Berg were on board a train from Paris to Rome, where, a week later, Orville and Katharine were to join them. In Paris, to Katharine's delight, the social pace continued full speed. As she informed her father, she was the only woman ever invited to a dinner at the Aéro-Club de France. "You ought to seen it," she wrote in the Ohio vernacular. "Me—sitting up there big as you . . . talking French as lively as anyone! It was a performance I can tell you." Best of all, she also told the Bishop, he had been toasted. "They drank a champagne in your honor!" Katharine and Orville left for Rome on April 9 and arrived

the next afternoon to find the city overrun with tourists, including an estimated thirty thousand Americans. Apparently no one had prepared them for such crowds. Hotels, restaurants, monuments, and museums were swarming with people. Hart Berg had found rooms for Orville and Katharine opposite the Barberini Palace. Wilbur was staying several miles south of the city at a flying field called Centocelle, but instead of a shed this time he was living in a nearby cottage on an estate belonging to a countess. In terms of the purpose for which the Wrights had come there, Rome was an unqualified success. From April 15 to the 26, Wilbur completed more than fifty flights, all to great acclaim and without mishap. He trained Italian military officers how to fly his plane, lectured to schoolteachers and students, and took a variety of passengers for a ride, one of whom, a news cameraman, produced the first motion picture films ever shot from an airplane in flight. The weather was ideal and as in France, large crowds watched in amazement. And again there was no shortage of prominent figures among the onlookers. King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy strolled about with a camera slung over his shoulder as though one of the tourists. There were princes, dukes, cabinet members, the American financier J. P. Morgan and his sister and daughter, and James J. Hill, the famous American railroad builder. The American ambassador to Italy, Lloyd Griscom, was one of those who went flying with Wilbur. But for Orville and Katharine, Rome, after the time they had had in France, left much to be desired. That April was “the choice season” in Rome, that the palaces of the Caesars, the Arch of Constantine, and the Colosseum were even more impressive than expected, was not sufficient. As Katharine told her father, “I was homesick for the first time when we reached Rome.” She and Orville both were “very anxious to come home.” She found their hotel appallingly dirty. “We would appreciate a good clean bathtub and clean plates and knives and forks much more

than the attention we receive." In another letter she reported, "The waiters at the table are so dirty that I can hardly eat a mouthful of food." She and Orville thought J. P. Morgan, his sister and daughter, "pleasant" enough, but were growing weary of the ways of the aristocracy. When word came that Victor Emmanuel would be arriving at Centocelle Field at eight in the morning to see Wilbur fly, it only went to prove that kings could be a nuisance. "They always come at such unearthly hours," wrote Katharine. A lunch in honor of the three Wrights at the beautiful villa of the Contessa Celleri, who was providing Wilbur's living quarters, was all quite fine, as was the drive provided for their enjoyment into the countryside in a brand-new, elegant automobile, until the chauffeur, taking a curve at breakneck speed, smashed head-on into a stone wall. Fortunately no one was hurt, though the car was a total wreck. Brother Wilbur was quite well, Katharine was pleased to report to the Bishop. Orville, too, was looking well and "improves all the time, but—like me—doesn't care much for the discomforts of Rome." They would be heading to London by way of Paris, then on to New York as soon as possible. After two days in London, where they were feted and honored still further—a banquet at the Ritz Hotel, the first ever Gold Medal awarded by the British Aeronautical Society—the three sailed on May 5 from Southampton on the German ocean liner Kronprinzessin Cecilie. For Wilbur it was the end of just over a year in Europe, much the greater part of which had been spent in France. It was there, in France, beginning at Le Mans, that he had flown as no man ever had anywhere on earth. At Le Mans and Pau he had flown far more than anyone ever had and set every record for distance, speed, altitude, time in the air, and made the first flights ever with a passenger, and all this, after so many years of the near secrecy of his and Orville's efforts, had been done for all to see. The whole world now knew. The threesome had also become far richer

financially. The time in Europe had resulted in an accumulated compensation from contracts and prizes of some $200,000. Wilbur had also found among the French a wealth of friendship such as he had never known. As he would write much later in a letter of gratitude to Léon Bollée, “We do not forget that you expended much time and gave yourself much trouble in order to be of assistance to us and that you rejoiced with us in our successes and grieved with us in our troubles.” These were not things to compensate for with money, “but we cherish them forever in our hearts.” For Orville the four-month-long Grand Tour had provided a greatly needed change of scene and the chance to recuperate at his own pace. For Katharine it was a colossal reward for all she had done for her brothers for so long in so many ways. Further, as would become increasingly clear later, they had seen Europe at an almost perfect time, when prosperity and peace prevailed, when Americans in abundance were discovering and enjoying the experience of European travel and the changes in outlook it brought as never before, and when the horrors of modern, mechanized warfare were still to come. Travelers from all parts of America who were there then would never forget the time. Nor would the three Wrights. Nor were they ever again to enjoy such a time together. For now, for all three, there was the overriding good feeling of being homeward bound.