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DOUBLE PULITZER PRIZE WINNER

DAVID McCULLOUGH

THE WRIGHT BROTHERS

The Dramatic Story behind the Legend

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Capital Exhibit A

He inspires great confidence. HART O. BERG You people at home must stop worrying! There is no need of it. WILBUR WRIGHT I. The four well-dressed French gentlemen and the American accompanying them were the subject of much talk almost from the moment, on March 20, 1906, when they walked into the lobby of the Beckel Hotel in Dayton to register at the front desk. Word was out that the “Wright boys” had made arrangements to sell their flying machine to the French. But when a reporter for the Dayton Herald inquired of the head of the delegation, Arnold Fordyce, if this were so, his reply was they had come “merely to see the sights.” He was writing a book about the customs and industries of America, he said. Dayton was one of four cities on the tour. He did add, however, and most cordially, that they hoped to call on the Wright brothers while in town. Arnold Fordyce had once been an actor. In truth the men had come with no other purpose than to meet with the Wrights. Three of the group, despite their business suits, were French army officers. Commandant Henri Bonel was chief of engineers of the French General Staff, the only one of the group who spoke no English and an acknowledged skeptic concerning the Wrights and their flying machine. Captains Henri Régnier and Jules Fournier were military attachés from the French embassy in Washington. The one American, Walter Berry, represented the French ambassador to the United States. An international attorney, Berry spent most of his time in Paris, where he figured prominently in the social life of the noted American novelist Edith Wharton and was well attuned to moving in influential circles on both sides of the Atlantic. The year 1906 thus far had not been particularly promising for the brothers. Their work proceeded on a new,

more powerful engine, but they were doing no flying. Meanwhile, in France there was growing excitement over the progress in aviation being made by French manufacturers and such glamorous aviators as Louis Blériot and the Brazilian-born Alberto Santos-Dumont, while the Paris Herald, an English language paper, mocked the brothers in an editorial titled “Fliers or Liars.” The Wrights have flown or they have not flown. They possess a machine or they do not possess one. They are in fact either fliers or liars. It is difficult to fly. . . . It is easy to say, “We have flown.” Now here were the brothers sitting down with a French delegation that had come to talk seriously. That it could be a most important step forward for all involved went without saying. As Bishop Wright recorded, they met above the bicycle shop every day for more than two weeks, and with the Bishop, too, sitting in on the discussions. On the evening of March 24, at the invitation of Katharine Wright, Fordyce, Commandant Bonel, and Walter Berry “supped” with the family at 7 Hawthorn Street. The brothers refused to show the delegation their Flyer III, but willingly provided photographs and eyewitness testimony of the plane in flight. In little time even Commandant Bonel, the skeptic of the group, was convinced, impressed primarily by the Wrights themselves and despite the language barrier. While no agreement resulted, the possibility of a future working arrangement with the French had been strongly reinforced and respect on both sides greatly strengthened, a point the brothers emphasized in a letter to Bonel written April 6:

Notwithstanding the failure to reach an agreement at our final conference last evening, we shall always remain very friendly to you personally and to your country. . . . Allow us to express our hearty appreciation of your uniform fairness and courtesy throughout this long conference. But by now, much of the scientific world and the press had begun to change their perspective on the brothers, with Scientific

American making the most notable change. In its issue of April 7, 1906, the magazine carried an article titled “The Wright Aeroplane and Its Performances,” in which eleven eyewitnesses to flights by the brothers at Huffman Prairie, in answer to twelve specific questions, affirmed that they had seen one or the other of the brothers fly in their machine in varying winds and perform all manner of movements with complete control throughout. Included, too, in the article was a letter from Charles Webbert, from whom the Wrights rented the bicycle shop, telling how in October he had witnessed Orville flying the machine for about half an hour and how the machine had traveled in large circles of about a mile around, and how the Flyer was “absolutely free from the time it left the rail upon which it started until it touched the ground in making its final landing.” On May 22, 1906, the patent applied for in 1903 was at last issued on the Wright Flying Machine, patent number 821,393, and through the rest of that spring and summer, preoccupation with a new engine for Flyer III went on, and flight tests continued at Huffman Prairie into the fall. In France, Alberto Santos-Dumont, flying what looked like a motor-powered hodgepodge of box kites, had made a public flight covering 726 feet. French aviation enthusiasts went wild with excitement. Santos-Dumont was said to have “gained the greatest glory to which man can aspire.” He had achieved “a decisive step in the history of aviation,” and “not in secret.” “I fancy that he is now very nearly where you were in 1904,” wrote Octave Chanute to Wilbur. “Fear that others will produce a machine capable of practical service in less than several years does not worry us,” Wilbur would reply confidently. “We have been over the course and understand how much yet remains for them to do.” Then came overtures from Flint & Company, a New York firm with extensive experience in marketing war materials in Europe. By December the overtures had become serious. Flint & Company was offering the

Wrights $500,000 for the sales rights of their plane outside the United States. The Wrights would maintain the American market. By nature the more entrepreneurial of the two, Orville showed the most interest, and it was he who went to New York, met with the head of the firm, Charles Flint, and made a "deal." Or so it seemed. Further issues required further discussion. So, early in the new year, 1907, both Orville and Wilbur took the train to New York. The tempo of financial possibilities was picking up considerably. In February, Germany offered $500,000 for fifty Wright Flyers, and the brothers agreed that Flint & Company should be their sales representative—but only their sales representative—on a 20 percent commission everywhere except in the United States. Then in May came an urgent message from Charles Flint, saying the company's European representative, Hart O. Berg, had become skeptical about the Wrights and their machine and wanted one or the other or both to come to Europe as soon as possible and make their case themselves, all expenses, of course, to be covered by Flint & Company. Wilbur thought Orville should go. Wilbur wanted to see to the finishing touches on the new engine and prepare the Flyer III for shipment. "I am more careful than he is," Wilbur would explain to their father. Further, the one who went to Europe would have to act almost entirely on his own judgment without much consultation by letter or cable. Wilbur felt he was more willing to accept the consequences of any errors of judgment on Orville's part than to have Orville blaming him if he were to go. Orville stubbornly disagreed, insisting that Wilbur would make the best impression in France, and Orville was right, as they all knew, including Wilbur, who "grabbed a few things" and left for New York. By Saturday, May 18, he was on board the RMS Campania, sailing past the Statue of Liberty on his way out to sea. An entirely new adventure had begun, unlike anything he, or any of the family, had yet experienced. Wilbur had just turned forty that April and was to be on

his own far from home, separated from his family, for longer than he had ever been or ever imagined, and tested in ways he had never been.

II. "I sailed this morning about 9 o'clock and we are now something over 200 miles out," Wilbur wrote in a letter addressed to Katharine but intended for all at home. "The St. Louis and another ship started at the same time, but we have run off from them." The Campania, part of the Cunard Line, was known as one of the finest vessels of its kind, and one of the fastest, a "flying palace of the ocean," which Wilbur particularly liked. The ship was 622 feet in length, with two tall stacks, and burnt some five hundred tons of coal per day. The predominant interior style was Art Nouveau, with staterooms and public rooms paneled in satinwood and mahogany, and thickly carpeted. The weather was "splendid," the sea smooth, and he had a cabin to himself. With only about half the usual number of passengers on board, he was able to get a $250 cabin for only $100, and he was quite happy about that, too, even if Flint was covering expenses. "We made 466 miles the first day," he wrote the following evening, "and left the other boats out of sight." The third day out he took a tour of the engine room, marveling at the scale of it all—engines half as high as an office building back home, engines that could deliver 28,000 horsepower, this in contrast to the 25 horsepower of the new engine for Flyer III. There were twelve boilers, and over one hundred furnaces. The ship's propellers measured no less than 23 feet in diameter. He kept note of the miles made day by day, and walked the promenade deck five to ten miles a day. Though he wrote nothing about the food served or the other passengers, he seemed to be having a fine time. All went ideally until the sixth day out, when a storm hit and Wilbur had his first experience with pitch and roll on water, not in the air. "The waves are probably 10 feet high and the ship pitches considerably. Fortunately there is but little roll." The spray was such that the promenade decks

were useless. The ship had become more like a hospital, though he himself felt only “a little sick” just after breakfast. The last day at sea, off the Irish coast, he wrote of seeing gulls at intervals, “and how they could skim within a foot or two of the waves and in strong winds did not even have to flap their wings very much.” After landing at Liverpool at first light, Saturday, May 25, Wilbur went by train to London, where, at Euston Station, he was met by the Flint & Company sales representative, Hart O. Berg, an American who recognized Wilbur the moment he stepped off the train. “I have never seen a picture of him, or had him described to me in any way,” Berg would write to Charles Flint, “. . . and either I am a Sherlock Holmes, or Wright has the peculiar glint of genius in his eye which left no doubt in my mind as to who he was.” Berg also noticed Wilbur’s luggage consisted of a single leather grip the size of a doctor’s bag and his wardrobe left much to be desired. But on the way to the hotel, it was Wilbur who suggested it might be “advisable” for him to buy a new suit. At a tailor shop in the Strand, Berg “fixed him up” with both a dress suit and a tuxedo. When Wilbur’s account of these purchases reached home, Katharine wrote at once to tell him how “Orv had marched off to Perry Meredith’s [haberdashery] this morning and ordered the same for himself.” Intent on wasting no time, Berg told Wilbur there was little likelihood of doing business in England and the sooner they left for France the better. The main effort would be made in Paris. They also found themselves disagreeing on the best approach—whether to deal with governments primarily or with individuals, Berg much in favor of individuals. Either way, both agreed it would be best not to make much of Wilbur’s presence in Europe, not for the time being at least. Summing things up, at the close of his long memorandum to Charles Flint, Berg stressed how pleased he was with Wilbur’s whole bearing and attitude. “He inspires great confidence,” Berg wrote, “and I am sure he will be a capital Exhibit A.” How Wilbur

felt about Berg at this point is not clear. Though fellow Americans of roughly the same age, their backgrounds and experiences in life could hardly have been more different. Born to a Jewish family in Philadelphia and raised in New York, Berg had attended private schools until sent off to Europe to be trained as an engineer at Liège in Belgium. In the time since he had become a pioneer in the manufacture of pistols, machine guns, automobiles, and submarines. He had worked at the Colt firearms factory in Hartford, Connecticut, maintained his own sales office in Paris, and spent three years in Russia, where he obtained orders from the czar for building ten submarines. Where Wilbur was lean and rumpled, Berg was stout and immaculate in attire. Berg was fluent in several languages and well connected, with contacts in high places throughout Europe. And though arms dealers—"merchants of death"—were an anathema to many, he seems to have been well liked and respected by nearly everyone. Berg and his wife, Edith, also an American, had lived in Paris for years, and the French held him in high regard. In 1901, he had been made a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor. From London down to Dover, then across the Channel, Wilbur and Berg were joined by another Flint executive, Frank Cordley. They arrived in Paris on the evening of May 27, when it was still daylight, and checked in to the luxurious Hôtel Meurice on the rue de Rivoli. "The Tuileries Palace and the Louvre are only a couple of squares to our left," Wilbur reported that same night to Katharine and the family. The column Vendome is behind us, and the Place de la Concorde and Arc [de] Triomphe are farther up the Champs-Elysées. We are right in the most beautiful and interesting part of the city. He was also residing in one of the finest hotels in all Paris, indeed, in all Europe. The "New Hotel Meurice," as said, had only just reopened after major "refurbishments." The old "Hotel of Kings" had been made more sumptuous than ever. Its restaurant, in decor and cuisine, was now one of the finest in the city

and a “rendezvous of fashion.” One could take a magnificent new elevator to a roof garden, and for panoramic views of Paris there were few to compare, or, for that matter, from those guest rooms fronting on the rue de Rivoli, one of which, room 329, Hart Berg had reserved for Wilbur. “Stay in Paris and taste the pervasive charm, the freshness of beautiful summer nights. The sky dusted with stars is radiant,” read an advertisement for the Meurice. The electricity shines through little lampshades, the flowers give out a fragrance. We are only a few steps from the Concorde, but one would think himself so far away, transported into a town of dreams. Wilbur wrote nothing of the roof terrace or the magnificent crystal chandeliers in the main dining room, or the fancy livery worn by the elevator operator. Interestingly, in all he would write about his time in Paris, he never mentioned his plush accommodations. Probably he had no wish to incite envy at home. Or to magnify concern over his being corrupted by high living. Except for the hotel stationery on which his letters were written, one would never have known where he was staying. Nor did he make mention of the women of Paris, or the fashions on parade, or the shops, the opera, the theater, or the French in general, or the American tourists, of whom there were a great many. What he did write about in the days that followed, apart from all he reported on his dealings with Berg, Cordley, and the French, were the great buildings and art treasures of Paris, revealing as he never had—or had call to—the extent of his interest in architecture and painting. Like so many seeing Paris for the first time, he could not get enough of it, and covered more ground on foot than ever before. The five to ten miles a day he walked on board ship would seem to have been only a warm-up. Whatever free time he had away from business, he was out and on his own way. It was spring in Paris, the chestnut trees in bloom. From the Louvre to the Arc de Triomphe was nearly two miles of gardens and esplanades with thousands of

statues, he wrote. He climbed the three hundred steps to the top of the Arc de Triomphe, walked the banks of the Seine to the Île de la Cité, walked to the Opéra, walked down the rue de Rivoli two miles to the Place de la Bastille. On a Sunday morning he hiked to the top of Montmartre, a distance of nearly two miles that included more than three hundred steps. He loved seeing so much open space used to set off important buildings. “Paris is the most prodigal of land for public purposes,” he wrote in a long, descriptive letter to Bishop Wright. There was much to be learned from the French about how to place public buildings. There is always an open space as big as a city square in front of each building. . . . And in addition there is nearly always a broad avenue leading directly to it, giving a view from a long distance. It is this, as much as the buildings and monuments themselves, that makes Paris such a magnificent city. If only a city like New York were arranged the same way. Even New York’s skyscrapers, like the Belmont and Knickerbocker hotels, if properly set, would be “wonderful.” He seems to have soaked up everything in view. And whatever he looked at, he looked at closely. Some of the landmarks were “a little shabby.” Half the gilding was gone from the dome of Les Invalides, where Napoleon was buried. The same was true of the pedestal of the Egyptian obelisk in the Place Vendôme and he was sorry to see so much of the statuary marred by black streaks. He spent considerable time at the Panthéon, which, he explained to Katharine, was not used as a church but as commemoration of the great men of France. The dome seen from inside was “not much,” he decided—too high in proportion to its diameter, like looking into an inverted well—but the interior was “very grand.” He took architecture seriously, thoughtfully, and made up his own mind, irrespective of whatever was said in his red Baedeker’s guidebook. Notre Dame was a disappointment. “My imagination pictures things more vividly than my eyes.” He thought the nave too

narrow, the clerestory windows too high, the interior far too dark. “The pillars are so heavy and close together that the double aisles on each side form no part of the room when you stand in the nave.” How amazing it was, he wrote in another letter, to see thousands of people dining on the sidewalks up and down the avenues, sitting at little tables outside restaurants, sipping wine and eating in the open air “right on the sidewalks.” Often, as the time passed, he was himself dining handsomely, as the guest of Hart Berg. There was Boivins on the avenue de Clichy in Montmartre, Henri’s on the rue Volney, and the famous Café Anglais, where Wilbur enjoyed lunch with both Berg and Mrs. Berg. He would fill his free time in Paris to advantage and with the same level of intensity he brought to nearly everything, making the most of every waking hour in what, for all he knew, might be his one and only chance for such an opportunity. Of all that Paris offered, it was the Louvre that he kept going back to again and again, spending hours there and logging still more miles walking the long galleries. His description of the paintings he saw could go on for pages, a sign, it would seem, of how much interest in art there was at home as well, and with Katharine in particular. He preferred the Rembrandts, Holbeins, and Van Dycks, “as a whole,” better than the Rubenses, Titians, Raphaels, and Murillos. His disappointment in the Mona Lisa was as great as it had been in Notre Dame. “I must confess that the pictures by celebrated masters that impressed me most were not the ones that are best known.” He much preferred Leonardo’s John the Baptist to the Mona Lisa. Above all, he was taken with the work of the seventeenth-century Flemish master Anthony Van Dyck. In a letter written after a full afternoon at the Louvre, he moved on to a collection of nineteenth-century French masters, including Delacroix, Corot, Millet, and Courbet. “While I do not pretend to be much of a judge, I am inclined to think that in five hundred years it [the collection] will be

recognized as some of the greatest work ever done." What appealed especially about Corot was the way he painted the sky. The sky was his source of light. Such keen interest as he had in art was not only remarkable in someone so committed to technical innovation, but a measure of a truly exceptional capacity of mind. As weeks, then months passed, Wilbur, of his own choice, visited the Louvre fifteen or more times. What he did not report to those at home was the extent to which he was being scrutinized by the press, and the stir he caused at public occasions. Any hope of anonymity was already gone. To a reporter for the Washington Post who stopped him in the lobby of the Hôtel Meurice, Wilbur refused to say anything about his machine or his plans. When the subject turned to the difference between flying and going up in a balloon, Wilbur said he had yet to go up in a balloon, but that it was "entirely another thing from flying which affects one with intoxication. After having once flown it is almost impossible to turn to anything else." In mid-June he went with Hart Berg to see the balloon races at St. Cloud. Amid a particularly elegant crowd in which were to be seen Gustave Eiffel and the American ambassador, Henry White, Wilbur drew more attention than anyone. A reporter for the Paris Herald asked, "You are over here on pleasure, are you not, Mr. Wright?" "To some extent," Wilbur said. "I am enjoying myself splendidly and seeing all manner of new things." "You like Paris?" "It is a marvelous city." "Mr. Wright talked carefully," the reporter wrote. It was obvious that he feared to be caught in a trap concerning his remarkable machine and what he wants to do with it. At the end of each question his clean-shaven face relapsed into a broad sphinx-like smile. That this same American bicycle mechanic from Ohio was spending hours with the masterpieces of the Louvre was apparently not of interest to the press. The business sessions arranged by Berg had begun their first full day in Paris. Wilbur had been taken to meet an

active patron of ballooning with a strong interest in aviation, Henri Deutsch de la Meurthe, whom Wilbur described for Orville as “the Standard Oil King of France.” There were sessions with Arnold Fordyce, Commandant Bonel, and officials of the French government. Berg was a “pretty slick hand,” Wilbur told Orville, and things were going well. Berg was “very practical,” and Wilbur liked the way he was always at hand to explain what was being said in French and said so often at an extremely high speed. Berg could be depended upon to do his utmost. Besides, he was “about as enthusiastic now as a man could be, and he really has a remarkable faculty for reaching people.” The business talks often seemed endless, but thus far the prospects for an agreement looked encouraging. In general outline, the Wrights were to receive $350,000 for their Flyer, once a public demonstration was made in France, before any agreement was struck. The French insisted on seeing the plane and seeing it operate, which was clearly their right. “The pot is beginning to boil pretty lively,” Wilbur reported. But then one French faction tangled with another, political intrigue intervened, progress slowed. Not so many years before, Wilbur had decided he was unsuited for “commercial pursuits.” Now he found himself in the thick of extremely complex commercial dealings, playing for extremely high stakes with highly experienced entrepreneurs, politicians, and bureaucrats, and in a language he neither spoke nor understood. The whole game, the players, the setting, the language were all new to him. Yet he was more than holding his own, and in good spirits, aware as he was of the derision to be found behind the scenes. At the war ministry it was being said the Wrights were “bluffers like all Americans,” “worthless people” trying to sell to France “an object of no value” that even the Americans did not believe in. Alert, patient, closely attentive, Wilbur “never rattled,” as his father would say, never lost his confidence. He could be firm without being dictatorial, disagree without causing offense. Nor

was there ever a doubt that when he spoke he knew what he was talking about. Most importantly, he remained entirely himself, never straying from his direct, unpretentious way, and with good effect. If anything, his lack of French, his lack of sophistication, seemed to work to his advantage. He was, indeed, as Hart Berg had anticipated, a capital Exhibit A and more. That Wilbur neither drank or smoked or showed the least interest in women remained, of course, a puzzlement to the French. The whole while he was keeping those at home, and Orville in particular, fully abreast of all that was happening, by mail and by cable, often in lengthy detail, describing the various configurations of how they were to profit financially depending on who put in what money. An experienced financial reporter could hardly have provided clearer coverage. For occasional relief, Hart Berg would treat Wilbur to a pleasant chauffeurdriven drive with him and Mrs. Berg in their grand automobile through the Bois de Boulogne or out to Fontainebleau or Versailles. One Monday morning, while Wilbur was lying in bed, a hotel clerk knocked at the door to say a dirigible, known as La Patrie, was flying over Paris. La Patrie, as Wilbur knew, was the first “airship” ordered by the French army. He dressed at once and went up to the roof garden. La Patrie (The Homeland), was a giant, sausage-shaped gas bag with an open gondola for the crew hanging below. It passed over the Arc de Triomphe and almost directly over the Meurice at what Wilbur estimated to be 15 miles per hour. He judged it a “very successful trial.” But as he was shortly to write, the cost of such an airship was ten times that of a Flyer, and a Flyer moved at twice the speed. The flying machine was in its infancy while the airship had “reached its limit and must soon become a thing of the past.” Still, the spectacle of the airship over Paris was a grand way to begin a day. Most mornings only meant more meetings. The primary question at issue had become whether to sell to the French government or set up a

commercial company with Henri Deutsch. The possibility of a contract with the government seemed all but certain, until the French army insisted the Flyer trial be conducted in winds too strong and demanded an exclusive agreement for three years, neither of which Wilbur would agree to. Then, for the first time, it became clear that Flint & Company was expecting a commission of 20 percent not only on what they sold, as had been agreed on, but also on what the brothers retained. ("Don't worry over Flint's commission," he told Orville. "We can hold them level.") Next thing, Wilbur was informed confidentially that if he, Orville, and their associates were to raise the price to the French government by $50,000, this sum could be "distributed among persons who had the power to put the deal through." In other words, those in power would need to be bribed substantially. This Wilbur refused even to discuss. The longer the talk dragged on, the more obvious it became that little would ever be decided until a demonstration was staged, and Wilbur kept urging Orville to speed up progress at home. "I presume you will have everything packed and ready before this letter arrives," he wrote. "Be sure to bring everything needed in the way of spare parts. . . . Bring Charlie Taylor along, of course, when you come. . . . It will pay to have enough trustworthy assistance when we come to experiment." This was written on June 28. Wilbur had had no word from Orville for nearly a month. In a letter from Katharine, dated June 30, he was to learn that things were not going at all well at home, that she and Orville felt left out of what was happening in Paris. "Orv can't work any," Orv was quite "uneasy," Orv was "unsettled," "really crazy to know what is going on," "wroth" over how things were being handled in Paris without him. Clearly she was, too. She and Orville had lost all patience with Flint & Company and questioned whether they could be trusted. She had had little or no experience with Jews, but having seen a photograph of Hart Berg, she wondered if he might be

one. “I can’t stand Berg’s looks,” she wrote. “It has just dawned on me that the whole company is composed of Jews. Berg certainly looks it.” A few days later, she let Wilbur know the situation at home had become even worse. She was nearing a crack-up, and it was largely his doing. “What on earth is happening to your letters?” Her letter became a storm of anger, blame, self-pity, and desperation far beyond her “wrathy” nature. She had had more than enough of the “whole business.” “We are all so nervous and worn out with the suspense that we can’t any of us keep from being cross. Orv and I regularly fight every time we get together for five minutes. And poor Daddy does nothing but advise us to ‘be calm, Bessie, be calm,’ while he is so excited that he can’t hear anything we say.” She had never been so tired in all her life. “I want to cry if anybody looks at me.” Some of their letters to him were being returned because of the wrong address. “Why couldn’t you tell us sooner that you weren’t getting your mail? It makes us desperate to sit here and be perfectly helpless while they [Flint & Company] are working every scheme they can to get advantage of you. What business had they getting you into that French business? You could have done better there by yourselves. . . . I despise the whole lot of them. . . . Orv is so worried and excited and tired out that I feel some concern about him. He can’t stand this forever—neither can you, for that matter. The problem, Wilbur would later explain privately in a letter to his father, knowing the Bishop would understand, was that Orville appeared to be “in one of his peculiar spells” and “not really himself.” The morning of July 17, from his room at the Meurice, Wilbur wrote a long reply to Katharine setting straight for her and Orville the situation in Paris, how he was going about his part in it, his concern for them, how he had tried to spare them aggravation, and why they need not worry. It was noticeably candid and entirely confident in tone, and as revealing of his own estimate of himself as almost anything Wilbur ever wrote, his

message being that he was the one on the scene in Paris, he was in command, knew what he was about, knew the people with whom he was dealing, and there was no call for those at home to get worked up. "In view of the fact that I have written, alone, three or four times as many letters home as I have received from all of you together," he began, "it is a little amusing to read your continual complaints that you get so few from me." In the two and a half months he had been away, he had received, on average, a letter a week from home, whereas he had been writing to them three to four times a week, except for a ten-day stretch when things were in such an unresolved state that there was nothing to report. He had felt from the start, he continued, that anything he wrote to Orville would unsettle him, but he felt Orville had a right to know what was going on. As for Flint & Company, he did not remind Katharine and Orville, as he could have, that it was Orville who had most wanted to get involved with them in the first place. "I have done what I know he would have done if he had been here and understood all the facts. In such cases the man at a distance only does harm by trying to give instructions which do not fit the case." Within days after reaching Europe, he had felt confident he could handle the situation. His only worry was whether Orville would be ready to follow as quickly as possible with the machine. "It is not my custom to voice my complaints, but this business of never being ready has been a nightmare to me for more than a year." As for Berg and Cordley, they had at first considered him "merely sort of an exhibit." But their eyes have gradually opened, and now they realize that I see into situations deeper than they do, that my judgment is often more sound, and that I intend to run them rather than have them run me. . . . Now I control everything and they give advice and assistance. In this role they can be of great service to us and I see no reason for breaking with them. He was very sorry those at home were so worn down by excitement. He

himself, he assured them, was feeling better than he had in several years. They must stop worrying. There was no need. In closing, he reported, arrangements had been made by some Americans for him to go that afternoon on his first balloon flight. They took off from the Aéro-Club grounds at St. Cloud, eventually sailing into the clouds to emerge at about 3,000 feet out into bright sunshine and blue sky. It was higher into the sky by far than Wilbur had ever been, and the view was utterly spectacular. They were fifty miles from Paris by then, crossing open country. “The alterations of rich brown newly plowed soil, with green fields of grass, and grains of different shades and the light brown and yellow fields ready for harvest made a wonderful picture,” he wrote. He loved seeing the little towns with their red tile roofs and the white roads reaching off in every direction. They flew nearly eighty miles in just over three hours and landed in a wheat field about ten miles west of Orléans. But beautiful as it had been, ballooning was not for him any more than it had been for Otto Lilienthal. Once on the ground you had to hike to a nearby village, find somewhere to spend the night, then, because of the prevailing winds, go back to where you started by a slow local train. (“What we are seeking is the means of free motion in the air, in any direction,” Lilienthal had written.) On the evening of the same day that Wilbur was heading back to Paris by train, Orville left Dayton on an overnight express for New York, also on his way to Paris. The Flyer III had at last been finished, packed, and shipped off to France, to be stored in the customs house at Le Havre until needed. Orville, as Katharine said, had gone off looking “pretty well fizzled out.” He had also, as he discovered en route, forgotten to bring Wilbur’s hotel address in Paris. III. Early on a Sunday morning in late July, the brothers were reunited. Having enjoyed an uneventful crossing on the steamer Philadelphia, Orville succeeded in finding his way to the Meurice, where he discovered Wilbur looking better than he had in

years. Following breakfast at the hotel, they went for a long walk together, talking the whole time. They lunched at the Café Alcazar on the Champs-Elysées, after which they spent most of a sultry afternoon sitting and talking in the park along that boulevard. And by all signs they succeeded in clearing the air between them. The following day they met with Hart Berg and Frank Cordley for what Wilbur described as "a rather warm heart-to-heart talk," meaning it was extremely heated. They took up the matter of patents, Wilbur making it clear from the start that Flint & Company was in no way entering into a partnership with them. "We are, and intend to be, the sole owners of the patents," he said, according to his own notes on the conversation. They talked of expenses, and of stock in the enterprise. "The point is this," Wilbur told Berg. "We do not intend you to own twenty percent of any stock. We intend to own the stock. You are the selling agents." And so it went back and forth, Berg making his case, Wilbur and Orville holding firm. From all Wilbur had reported and explained to him, and from his own judgment of Berg, and from the meeting, Orville had his suspicions absolved, his mind put to rest. He was ready to proceed with Wilbur and as Wilbur directed. "Our friends F [Flint & Company] and B [Berg] are not in the bandit crew," Orville was glad to assure Katharine. Wilbur led Orville on a first stroll through the Louvre and to celebrate Orville's arrival in Paris, Frank Cordley hosted an evening at the legendary and highly expensive Tour d'Argent by the Seine on the Left Bank, where a tableside preparation of duck, canard au sang, the main course, performed by the restaurant's celebrated owner-chef, Frédéric Delair, seems to have made a far greater impression on Orville than anything he had seen at the Louvre. Delair worked in a formal tailcoat and with his flowing side whiskers and pince-nez eyeglasses, looked, as Orville would report to Katharine, more like a college professor than a chef and had a way of swinging his head as he carved up the duck into

small pieces that in itself was worth the full price. The legs, wings, etc., [Orville continued] are sent to another room where we cannot see them receiving the finishing touches; but the carcass, after most of the meat has been removed is put in a fancy press, and all the juice and marrow extracted. The meat and juices are then placed over the alcohol flame and cooked together. Mr. Frederic basting the meat the entire time. Finally the duck is served with the enclosed card and folder which gives the serial number of the duck we ate. When, in a letter, Bishop Wright expressed dire warnings over the temptations of Paris, Wilbur wrote to assure him they would do nothing to disgrace the training they had received at home, and that all the wine he had tasted thus far would not fill a single glass. “We have been real good over here,” Orville added. “We have been in a lot of the big churches and haven’t got drunk yet.” Their prospects in France were at a low ebb, thanks in large part to the number of government officials departing for their customary August vacations. But with interest in Germany still active, Wilbur and Berg decided to leave for Berlin, departing August 4. On the way to Berlin, seeing a sign from the train window of the small town of Jemappes in Belgium, Wilbur began talking about the historic battle fought there in 1792, and, to Berg’s amazement, went on at length about the importance of the victory won by the army of the infant French Republic over the regular Austrian army. It was for Berg yet another example of the extraordinary reach of Wilbur’s mind. He had read about it in his youth, Wilbur explained. A week later, when Charlie Taylor arrived, Orville had him check into a less conspicuous hotel on the rue d’Alger, around the corner from the Meurice, and register simply as C. E. Taylor of Lincoln, Nebraska. “We do not want the papers or anyone here to know that he has come over,” Orville wrote Katharine. In the time since Orville’s arrival the press had been following the brothers everywhere, and it was becoming ever more

bothersome. To the reporters the brothers were like no one they had ever tried to cover. A correspondent for the London Daily Mail told Orville he was “the toughest proposition” newspapermen had yet run up against. He himself, said the correspondent, had already spent more money on cab fares trying to learn what the brothers were up to than he could ever hope to recover, but that he could not give up for fear some other reporter would get the “scoop.” In mid-August, when it looked as though French interest in an agreement had revived, Wilbur and Berg returned from Berlin. Still there was no real progress with the French. Nor had there been with the Germans. By early September the brothers had little to do but bide their time, and to judge from what Orville recorded, they had become occupied primarily with sitting in the park watching the passing parade. If Wilbur had his Louvre, Orville had the garden of the Tuileries. “You need not worry about me missing the use of the front porch,” Orville wrote to Katharine, “I spend at least half of my time while awake in the park across from the hotel.” There were hundreds of little iron chairs in the park, the rent for which was 2 cents a day, he explained. “A number of women are employed in going about to pounce down on every unsuspecting chap that happens to be occupying a chair and to collect the two cents.” He especially enjoyed watching the French children, amazed by how well behaved they were. He described the small merry-go-rounds, each operated by a man turning a crank, and thought it was pathetic that the children could so enjoy something so tame, hanging on as if riding a bucking bronco. Then, every so often, along would come some American children to liven things up. They jump on and off the horses while the affair is going at full speed— which is never fast—seize the rings by the handful, which they are supposed to spear one at a time with an ice pick, and when the ride is over begin tossing the ice picks (I don’t know what they are called here) about among themselves when the man comes to

collect them, till the poor fellow that runs the affair is driven nearly crazy. “Of course, we feel ashamed of the youngsters,” he added, “and know that they need a good thrashing, but it does seem pleasant to have something once in a while that is a little more exciting.” Greatest by far was the spectacle of seeing so many—children, men, and women of all ages—playing with “diabolo,” a simple, age-old toy that had lately become all the rage. It consisted of a wooden spool the shape of an hourglass and two bamboo sticks about two feet in length, joined by a string four to five feet in length, and it cost about 50 cents. The player would slip the string around the spool, then, a stick in each hand, lift the spool from the ground and start it spinning and by spinning it faster, keep it balanced in the air. It was because the spool would so often fall to the ground, until the beginner got the knack, that it was called “the devil’s game.” It had originated in China a hundred years or more earlier, and to the brothers it was irresistible. The whole course of their lives, they liked to say, had begun in childhood with a toy, and a French toy at that, and now here they were in middle age in France, enjoying themselves no less than if they were children still. With the diabolo the magic was not that the toy itself flew, as did Alphonse Pénaud’s helicopter. Here you yourself had to overcome the force of gravity with skill. You had to learn the trick by practice, and more practice, with the sticks and string, to keep the spool flying—just as an airplane was not enough in itself, one had to master the art of flying. The time the brothers devoted to playing diabolo so publicly did not go unnoticed and added still more to the growing puzzlement over les frères mystérieux. The “mystery” of the Wrights, wrote the Paris Herald, remained as dense as ever, and quoted an American visitor who frequently observed them in the garden of the Tuileries and became convinced they had laid aside their flying machine and quit thinking about it. “Everybody knows,” the man had said, “that when a person

has contracted the diabolo habit he cannot possibly attend to anything else." Apparently the brothers caught on quickly to the diabolo art and became quite good at it. But for Charlie Taylor, the spool kept falling to the ground nine tries out of ten. As for what else Charlie Taylor may have been doing to pass the time, besides diabolo, there is no record. When Katharine read about the hours spent in the park, she bristled as a schoolteacher must. "You never told me whether you learned to talk any French," she wrote to Orville. "Instead of sitting around in the park everlastingly, it seems to me that I would have been getting around to see everything about Paris. Couldn't you get someone to talk French with you?" Just the same, she asked them to "be sure" to bring home a diabolo for her. His sense of humor plainly in play again, Orville told her he had indeed met a Frenchman in the park who spoke English, but that he thought it hopeless to try to learn both diabolo and French at the same time. Schools had reopened in Dayton, Katharine was back in the classroom, and all was well at home, the atmosphere entirely different from what it had been. She and father were "getting along famously." He had bought a new typewriter. She had ordered a new stove. "You can stay as long as you please," she told the brothers. "What plans do you suggest?" Wilbur asked Orville at the end of September in a letter from Berlin, where he had returned again. "We cannot afford to spend much more time on negotiations, nor can we afford to return to America without some arrangements for our European business." So stay they did and for a while Orville joined Wilbur in Berlin. Not until the start of November, back in Paris, did they decide it was time to go. But not before going with Hart Berg to see a demonstration put on by the French aviator Henri Farman, "Monsieur Henri," a former artist, champion bicycle rider, and automobile racer, who was considered Europe's outstanding pilot. Large crowds gathered at Issy-les-Moulineaux southwest of Paris. Farman had been getting a great deal

of publicity, and even in the United States. (“Aren’t you getting worried over ‘Farman’s flights’?” Katharine had asked.) Farman flew a biplane made by a French aircraft manufacturer, Voisin Frères. Many of his trials were unsuccessful. On the longer flights, he had trouble getting off the ground, and the same was true when trying to make a circle. But in one flight he covered more than half a mile and flew an almost complete circle. Yet from what he saw, Orville felt he and Wilbur had no cause to worry. When asked by a reporter what he thought, Orville said only that he and his brother never liked to pass criticisms on the work of others, and that time would show whether the methods used in the Farman machine were sufficient for strong winds. French aviation enthusiasts had no doubt, however, that France was now clearly in the lead. France could boast of the Voisin brothers, Gabriel and Charles, who had formed their aircraft company only that year, and other French aviators beside Henri Farman, including Léon Delagrange, who also flew a Voisin biplane, and Louis Blériot, who had taught himself to fly in a monoplane of his own design. Like Henri Farman, these French pilots flew in public and greatly to the public’s delight. Also, quite unlike the Wright brothers, most of the pilots in France—Farman, Santos-Dumont, Delagrange, Blériot, Comte Charles de Lambert—were men of ample private means for whom the costs of their aviation pursuits were of little concern. “It seems that to the genius of France is reserved the glorious mission of initiating the world into the conquest of the air,” said the president of the AéroClub. To his eminent fellow member of the club, Ernest Archdeacon, the Wright Flyer was no more than a “phantom machine.” For the time being, the Flyer III and all its parts would remain in storage at the customs house at Le Havre. Wilbur and Charlie Taylor left for home first. Orville followed soon after. Writing from on board the RMS Baltic, his spirits high, Wilbur told his father: We will spend the winter getting some more machines ready for the

spring trade. Then we will probably put out a sign, “Opening day, all goods below cost.” We will probably return to Europe in March, unless we make arrangements with the U.S. Government before that. While Charlie went directly to Dayton after arriving in New York, Wilbur stopped off in Washington to check on developments there before reaching home in time for Thanksgiving. He was extremely pleased to report that at long last the U.S. Army was seriously interested in doing business. With the onset of a new year, all that the brothers had worked to achieve in the way of sales agreements began to happen. On February 8, 1908, their bid of $25,000 for a Flyer was at last accepted by the War Department. Less than a month later, on March 3, they signed an agreement with a French company, to be known as La Compagnie Générale de Navigation Aérienne, with the understanding that public demonstrations of the Flyer in France would follow by midsummer.