

simple but enormous farmhouse meal—before which, as the visitor, I was bidden to say Grace.

After this, the farmer, his son-in-law and I sat smoking on the verandah whilst the womenfolk washed up (no use asking to help in this chore on an American farm) and put the children to bed, and we chatted on into the gathering darkness, lit by a naked electric bulb, of farm prices, horses, the ways of rattlesnakes, the price of things in England as against Oklahoma, and all the things that come up at these casual and unexpected meetings of people from different worlds. Kitty had phoned: the team were 160 miles south of me, so they could be expected to arrive between midnight and 1 a.m. I could not wish to keep my host up so late, and around 11 o'clock he asked if I would like to lie down for an hour's nap. I gladly agreed, said I would get up and wait by the roadside at midnight, and promised not to wake anyone when the trailer arrived, but pack up and steal silently away.

Shown to the spare bedroom back of the house, I washed some of the sticky dust off my face and hands, thanked my host for all his kindness and, as I dozed off, heard his son-in-law go out into the yard at the back and return to the house, which sank into silence except for the occasional ping of a prowling mosquito in the warm darkness around me. At midnight I got up, tiptoed out of the sleeping house, and sat down on the dry grassy verge.

The road ran as straight as a ruler right and left from horizon to horizon. The moon was nearly full and riding high, and opposite me was etched the rounding and rustling outline of a large tree from which shrilled the stridulation of a thousand crickets. From the farmhouse behind me came the occasional mutter of a half-awakened child. Time passed on and I thought of many things. I thought how fortunate I was in this extraordinary sport of ours to have seen so many lands and scenes and met so many kind people. Of how, two years before, I had been faced with a similar but more uncertain wait in the Marshes in Poland; then, as now, Kitty had been thundering through the night to my aid, then with Ray and Harry, now with Gale and Bob. I thought of my various sailplanes, and where they were, the Scud still in England, a little anonymous now after more than 25 years, Hjordis a wreck in a hangar at Germiston near Johan-

nesburg, the Minimoa in Iceland, the Weihe in New Zealand, my victorious Sky in Holland, and now my dear Skylark sitting in a field in Oklahoma bound for its new owner in Boulder, Colorado.

The surface wind still blew lightly from the south, but a light haze of high cloud was drifting from the north, and the moon was going out of focus. The horizon was lit up by the headlights of an approaching car, but it was a good ten minutes before it reached me—and swept trailer-less by, and on and over the reciprocal skyline.

I mused on, on love, on hope and on despair. Looking at the fading stars I thought on the universe, and touched on the greatest question of all: What in Heaven's name is it all about? The crickets chirped louder than ever; they knew as much about the answer as I.

The haze had thickened, a ragged cloud drifted across the moon, and a distant flash of lightning and mutter of thunder to the north showed that the front was on the march again, and coming my way. My mind touched on bills of exchange, the Bank Rate and four per cent Consols; and by alliteration on my home at Kits Close, on Kruschev, on Christmas crackers. . . .

A few drops of rain brought me round with a snap, and a glow of light to my right brought me to my feet. It was after 1 a.m. and this *must* be the trailer. It was. Ten minutes later, still cheerful after their 500-mile drive, and facing over 400 miles on the homeward run, my team drew up beside me. Quickly I explained the form, we put the wingtips and tailplane into the trailer, then turned up beside the farm onto the track to the yard behind. As I laboriously undid the wire gate leading into it, the storm broke. A violent northerly wind brought with it a blinding cloud of dust, and as we drove into the yard and tried to unhitch we found it difficult to weathercock the trailer into the wind, and get her hoisted onto her legs.

Then I led the way to the white fuselage looming on the ground—and as we got near I heard a cry of horror from Kitty. At the base of the rudder yawned a horrid jagged hole, and the ply in the fin was gashed. Another shout from Gale, leaning in the streaming dust over the centre section, signalled a staring ragged panel in the fabric near one tip. I stood stupidly gaping. This was *impossible*—in an empty yard?

When I had explained so carefully, as is my wont, how delicately the Skylark must be handled on the ground. But now came more shouts and scuffles in the darkness and gritting wind, and round the corner of the trailer, in the light of Kitty's torch, came the flying shapes of a small calf and a pony, racing for the open gate behind me and freedom.

Instinctively I shot ahead of them and closed it—I could not repay my host's kindness by letting the beasts loose, whatever they had done. But there was no more to be said. For some reason for ever unexplained, the son-in-law, when he went out after I had laid down, must have turned these two frisky animals into the yard where we had put the Skylark; then he must have retired to bed. Sadly we locked up our wounded craft, sadly we stole out onto the wind-swept road, sadly we drove away into the night, drove until the sky brightened, the sun rose again, the day's heat returned. Alternately we drove and slept in the back, and about 11 a.m., exactly twenty-four hours and more than 900 miles after we had left it, my crew and I were back in Odessa.

How we needed sleep! But we were inexorably driven by the necessity to repair the ravages of the night on the Skylark. In this Gale took the major brunt with willing help from others, since this is a field in which I am woefully deficient. Apart from the damage we had seen, the paint was rasped by tongue and teeth, since dope has a taste irresistible to cattle, but on the whole we were lucky. The next day the front had caught us up and there was no flying, so by the following and final day I was once more in the air, and put up a reasonable flight.

As for The Day, on the whole it had been worthwhile, for this was the only day in which the HP-8 lost first place, the RJ-5 being ahead of me by ten miles, and the Skylark, with a distance of 298 miles, clocking an honourable second place, by virtue of my extra hard-won nine miles, and ascending to fourth place in the Championships, which it held to the end.

But for the Oklahoma cow it would have been quite a triumph. And now I was left with a serious social problem. I had promised to write a letter to my host of the night on my return to England. What was I to say?