Leon and Bébert Aloft

by Evan S. Connell

"This is madness," Bébert said, "pure unadulterated madness."

Leon was not listening. He had begun to fasten his seat belt when suddenly he leaned forward with an expression of deep interest.

"What are you looking at?" Bébert asked. "Is anything wrong?"

Leon was staring out the window. "Press that button just above you!" he ordered. "Never mind, I'll do it," he added quickly and after pressing the button he turned around to wait for the stewardess.

"I wish you'd tell me what's happening," Bébert said plaintively.

Leon was beckoning the stewardess to hurry. As soon as she was close enough he seized her by the hand and pulled her down so that she could see out the window. There at the end of its little chain the cap to the gas tank was jiggling and bouncing merrily up and down on the wing.

The stewardess after one look hurried forward to the pilot's compartment. A few moments later the engines stopped.

"Well!" Bébert said after the gas cap had been screwed in place and the engines started up again. "Well, Leon, I must admit I'm glad you're here. There's no telling what might have happened."

"Probably nothing," Leon said. "We wouldn't have lost much gas."

"But it could have been dangerous, don't you think?"

"I prefer having everything in place," Leon remarked. He pushed back the curtain and squinted at the sky. "If we don't run into a lot of holiday traffic we ought to be on schedule. The weather looks okay. A few clouds."

"I still insist this idea is insane. Who ever heard of flying all the way to New York just to attend the opera? Anybody would think we belonged to the jet set."

"We were in a rut," Leon said. "Hanging around the same places, seeing the same crowd. You admitted yourself it would be a change. Anyhow,

I've got some of Callas' records but I've never seen her and this seemed like a good chance."

"The last opera I attended was *The Flying Dutchman*!" said Bébert, laughing. "Don't you think that's funny?"

But Leon was once again sitting forward with a serious expression. Bébert gazed at him in alarm. The plane was trundling toward the end of the runway, wallowing slightly in the wind. Leon looked back at the control tower.

"What is it?" Bébert asked. "What now?"

"Some pretty heavy gusts out here. I couldn't feel them when we started. Shielded by the terminal, I guess."

"Is it too windy to fly? Do you think we ought to tell the pilot?"

Leon settled back into his seat. "I very much doubt whether the pilot would take kindly to any more suggestions."

"But if you think there's too much wind ..."

"There isn't. Besides, I'm not flying it. He knows his business. I was just surprised at how heavy the gusts are."

"I wish we weren't going. I'm sorry I let you talk me into this. I have an awful premonition."

"There's nothing to worry about," Leon said, tightening his safety belt. "Here we go. Hang on."

As the plane began climbing Bébert said, "To tell the truth, I didn't think we were ever going to get off!"

"We took a hell of a long run," Leon said uneasily. "It feels like he's got a load of cement on board. And that number-three engine I don't care for. I think it's missing."

"Missing?"

"One of the cylinders may be dead."

"Is that serious?"

"Oh," Leon answered without much conviction, "I doubt it. Probably everything's all right."

"We're on a jinxed flight," Bébert said. "And please don't tell me to stop worrying because I just worry all the more. It may not bother you, be-

cause you know about airplanes, but every time I get off the ground I get terribly concerned."

"We'll be there before you know it!" Leon said with an attempt at heartiness.

"I most certainly hope so."

"Theoretically we should be able to maintain altitude even if that number-three engine does conk out. Unless they've got us overloaded."

"You used to pilot one of these. Isn't that what you told me?"

"No, I was in dive bombers. And that was a long time ago. Flying has changed a great deal since my day."

"I don't ordinarily smoke," Bébert said, "but if you don't mind, I'd like to borrow a cigarette."

At that moment the No Smoking sign flashed on again, then the sign ordering them to fasten their safety belts.

"What in the world is this about?" Bébert asked. "He just turned those lights off. Is anything the matter? I'm beginning to get nervous."

Leon shrugged. "Maybe some turbulence ahead. He'll probably come on the radio to explain."

They waited, gazing at the signs, but the captain's voice was not heard. After several minutes the lights again blinked out.

"I hate riding back here," Leon said. "I like to know what's going on. I wish they'd let me sit up front and look over his shoulder."

"You surprise me. I thought you'd be perfectly relaxed, but here you are practically as jumpy as I am."

"Feeling helpless bugs me. I'd be all right if I could sit near the controls. I get almost this identical sensation riding in the back of a car on the freeway."

"I have practically the opposite attitude," said Bébert. "I prefer to leave my fate in somebody else's hands. I'm not a good driver. You know how erratic I am. Consequently I much prefer being the passenger. Provided, of course, that I have confidence in whoever's driving."

"I trust nobody," Leon said. "Nobody except myself."

"Maybe that's a result of the narrow escapes you had during the war."

Leon smiled.

"Perhaps that does sound funny," Bébert admitted. "But I'm sure that anybody who was a pilot, especially during the war, must have had some narrow squeaks. You can't tell me you didn't."

"There were times, there were times. But they're long gone. I hardly remember anymore. I'm not even certain I could still handle a plane. If I had to I guess I could."

"Is there much chance you'll be recalled for service as a result of the Vietnam thing?"

Leon shook his head. "It's simpler to train some kid than try to untrain and then retrain somebody like me. The whole system is different now. I imagine even the ground troops get a different sort of training. And as far as the air force is concerned, it's totally different. Anyway, if they did call me I wouldn't go."

"I don't understand."

"It's very simple. I'd refuse."

"When our government calls, one doesn't refuse."

"They can try me if they want to."

Bébert looked at him doubtfully. "You must be joking."

"I'm not having any more," Leon said. "I got through it once and I'm not having any more. They can blow all the bugles they want to. I won't be there. I'm not one of Napoleon's boys."

"I admire you for taking such a stand."

"Admire, hell," Leon said irritably. "This is simply how I feel. Certain wars are put together by a few old men."

"I realize you're not apt to be called, but in case they did and you refused, don't you think you could be threatened with prison?"

"It would be more than a threat. However, the food's probably no worse."

"Don't pretend you're not joking."

"Yes and no," said Leon.

"You sound practically treasonous."

"As I told you, I've had it. Right up to the neck, and I'm not having any

more. I don't care what anybody thinks, I don't care what anybody does to me. I don't care if I'm called a traitor, because I know I'm not. What we're doing is foul. It's very rotten. No statistics could convince me otherwise, so don't quote me statistics. I know better. I never expected to reach this state of mind, Bébert, but I'm outraged and ashamed and disgusted and shocked and sickened and embarrassed, to say the least. I'm so ashamed when I open the morning paper that I can hardly eat breakfast, it's that nauseating. Besides, every bigot, hoodlum, fascist and professional criminal in the country is in favor of it, which is reason enough to be skeptical."

"Leon," Bébert whispered, "I think the man across the aisle is listening."

"So?"

"He seems interested," Bébert continued in a low voice. "It occurred to me that he might be with the CIA."

"I shouldn't say such things, is that what you mean?"

Bébert looked uncomfortable and scratched the tip of his nose.

"What you actually mean is," Leon continued, "it's all right to flood somebody's land and poison the crops and prostitute ten-year-old children and burn their parents with napalm, and maybe finally let go with another atomic bomb. It's perfectly all right to scatter death and destruction like we were the original Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—that's all right, only it's not good manners to mention the fact. Is that what you mean?"

"You sound as though it was my fault."

"No," Leon said, "it isn't your fault. I apologize. We just got betrayed, that's all, and I'm so bugged I don't know which end is up."

"I understand," said Bébert. "You haven't offended me. Everybody's upset these days. Incidentally, speaking of the CIA, do you remember my cousin? He visited me last summer. You might have met him, in fact I'm sure you did. Ellsworth Kupperman?"

"Vaguely," said Leon.

"This might interest you. Ellsworth told me that a friend of his in Bridgeport once worked temporarily for the CIA. He was hired to drive a sports car from Bridgeport to Miami Beach. Then he flew back to Bridge-

port and was paid a thousand dollars. Isn't that fantastic? But that's only half the story. This car had white leather seats and white sidewall tires and he had to dye his hair platinum blond and carry a tennis racket conspicuously strapped to his suitcase. Furthermore, he never did know what was in the trunk of the car because it was locked when he picked up the car and he had been ordered not to try to open the trunk. There must have been something terribly important inside."

"Allen Dulles," Leon suggested. "Or maybe just some old worn-out spy. Or the suicide kit from one of our U-2s. Let's see, what else?"

"I'm serious," Bébert went on. "Ellsworth told me everything his friend had told him about it. The CIA wasn't joking. They followed him around Bridgeport for almost a week before they finally gave him his orders. This friend told Ellsworth he knew he was being shadowed because there were these two men in a peanut butter truck."

Leon turned his head to look at Bébert but did not say anything.

"Well, I'm sorry," Bébert said, "but it's the truth. There were these two men in a peanut butter delivery truck and they were CIA agents. They had on brown uniforms with the name of the peanut butter on the breast pocket. Ellsworth's friend said no matter where he went he noticed this truck. It was eerie. Then one day he had to walk past this truck and suddenly he was handed a large sealed envelope."

"Bearing the coat-of-arms of the peanut butter king."

"I'm not making this up."

"All right. Did Ellsworth's friend say specifically what the orders were?"

"No. But apparently they instructed him to drive to a certain garage in Miami Beach, so he did. He had a very dull trip, according to Ellsworth."

"No Soviet agent in a black limousine trying to run him off the turnpike?"

"Not as far as I know. He got to this garage and handed over the keys to some attendant and that's all there was to it. Then, of course, he had to rinse the dye out of his hair."

"I've changed my mind," Leon said. "There wasn't anything in the trunk of the car. The message was rolled up in the handle of the tennis rack-

et."

"I think your sense of humor is inappropriate. I admit it does sound strange but the fact is, we have no way of knowing."

"A thousand bucks. A cool thousand bucks!" Leon said thoughtfully. "I wonder how he got that job. Hell, I wouldn't mind driving to Miami Beach."

"Nobody knows how he got the job. He didn't know, himself. But they wouldn't hire you if you were the last person on earth."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Just think, Bébert, our taxes go for things like two grown men riding around in a peanut butter truck. Stop and consider that for a while."

"I suppose they know what they're doing."

"I don't believe it. I used to, but no longer. I don't believe the government has a clear idea of what it's doing."

"That's exactly what you said when Ike was president. Only then you blamed it all on the Republicans."

"This is different. This is really serious. This hasn't got anything to do with being a Republican or a Democrat. This is the most serious thing that ever was."

"I agree. My only claim is that our government does know what it's doing. I do believe that's true."

Just then Leon sat erect and appeared to be listening; Bébert gazed at him.

"The gas cap isn't loose again, is it?"

"Something's the matter with that inboard engine. Hear him fiddling around? Don't you hear? Listen!"

"Engines all sound alike to me," Bébert answered with a look of despair.

Leon gradually began to relax, finally took a deep breath and then reached into his pocket for another cigarette.

"We're not going to get down alive," Bébert said. "I can feel it in my bones."

"That's an interesting figure of speech," Leon said with the cigarette

between his teeth. "You may or may not be aware of this, but seamen sometimes develop a sort of feeling in their bones about ships. They can tell whether a ship is living or dead. I remember hearing about a chief petty officer in command of a launch who was supposed to inspect a cruiser that had been torpedoed and abandoned but hadn't sunk. As soon as his foot touched the deck he ordered everybody off and ordered the launch to back away, and about a minute later the cruiser heeled over and went down like a rock. The chief couldn't explain how he knew she was ready to go, but he did know."

"You're worried," said Bébert, "don't pretend you're not."

Leon yawned and stretched. "Sitting back here makes me nervous. The plane's probably all right. Probably what it needs is a good overhaul. It does have sort of a dead feeling, though. I noticed it during the takeoff."

"How much longer do you think we'll be?"

"Not much. Half an hour or so."

"I wish we'd gotten to the airport early enough for a drink."

"I agree," Leon said. "I feel like an old dried-out sponge."

A few minutes later Bébert said, "You know, you've turned into quite the heretic over the past couple of years. Do you realize it?"

Leon nodded. "Only it goes back further than the past couple of years. It started with our U-2 incident. I've forgotten which year that took place but what happened is still absolutely clear in my mind. That was the first time I ever realized our government would lie. It was a big shock."

"I confess I'm hazy about the details," Bébert said, "it seems such a while ago. I do remember there was a great deal of confusion. My opinion's always been that the government merely became confused. It's so gigantic."

"Stop sounding charitable."

"I'm not being in the least charitable, Leon. I hesitate to believe the government would deliberately lie. Consciously, at any rate, unless there was extreme provocation."

"Well, it did, whether you hesitate to believe or not. Some famous French philosopher said: 'One must be truthful in all things, even when they concern one's country.' And our government lied. It knew exactly what had

occurred when that spy was shot down twelve hundred miles inside Russia, yet it attempted to lie its way out. With incredible stupidity, I might add. A weather plane accidentally blown off course! Any Mongolian idiot could tell a more convincing lie."

"That's usually the way with governments."

"Maybe. But the thing is, Bébert, until that moment I believed. I was one of the faithful. See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. But now I can't believe any longer. I've lost faith."

"Because of that one incident?"

"That was only the beginning. After the U-2 business I began questioning things instead of automatically accepting them and I began to realize we're told whatever part of the truth the government wants us to know. They hide what's left. They simply bury it. Then by the time somebody gathers enough evidence so that the remains have to be exhumed, why, what good does it do? It's a fait accompli!—that's what it is."

"I must admit I've never seen you so impassioned."

"Well," said Leon, "if this isn't the time to be impassioned there never was one. A grim hour's near if you've been led by a Cyclops."

"I predict your pessimism will be temporary. I know I personally have been disenchanted with Washington more than once."

Leon shook his head. "There's something irreversible about acquiring knowledge. I've lost too much faith in the integrity and decency of our government to get it back."

"You sound absolutely subversive. You do! If I hadn't known you for so many years I'd swear you were a Communist."

"I guess I'm disappointed, which is why I'm angry. When you've trusted anything or anybody for a long long time but then suddenly learn he's a liar, that's how I feel. It makes me sick at my stomach. You hope for so much from your country and then the enormity of its wrongs—the enormity, Bébert, when you know in your heart! As I say, it makes me sick. I'm so enraged at certain times that I'd like to go to the wharf while a military transport is unloading and direct the coffins to the White House."

Bébert turned his head and whispered: "Please! That man across the

aisle is listening."

"Good for him," said Leon sullenly. "I hope he learns something."

"I mean, really," Bébert whispered. "I was teasing before, but, Leon, he is! He's jotting down little notes."

"Maybe he's a poet."

"Poets go by bus."

"Well, suppose he is one of those turtlebrain reactionaries, we're both entitled to an opinion."

"Of course, but you ought to be careful about what you say in public."

"I've signed petitions and written senators and contributed my two cents to every organization I know of opposing this imbecilic war and if the FBI or the CCC is interested in making a dossier on me they've already got it started. I couldn't care less who jots down notes."

"All right, but don't count on much assistance from me if you get called before the House UnAmerican Activities Committee."

"I'll eat 'em alive," said Leon, and blew a smoke ring.

"You might not think it's so funny later on," Bébert said ominously. "They're very serious about their work. They don't think anything is funny."

"So much the worse for them."

"So much the worse for you, perhaps."

Leon shrugged.

"Now tell me honestly, can you honestly suppose that protesting does much good?"

"Of course it doesn't," Leon said, looking at him in mild surprise. "Anybody with the least common sense knows it doesn't. The government isn't aware of my existence—except for income taxes—any more than a tornado is aware I exist. It'll swirl right over me no matter what I believe or do. I write to senators, for instance, but they never see the letters. Some secretary slits the envelope and if there's no campaign check enclosed she drops it in the wastebasket. However, I've done what I could. And in a way it puts me on record, at least in my own mind. I know what I believe and where I stand. Nobody is ever going to say Leon was too chicken to be counted."

Bébert grew thoughtful. "Perhaps it has an effect."

"It has no effect. None whatsoever."

"You can't be sure."

"Look," Leon said, "there must be fifty thousand artistic masterpieces condemning exactly the sort of foul stupidity we're in the middle of, from Picasso's mural back through Goya and God knows how many more. At least fifty thousand, but a lot of good they've done. The artists and the writers go along hippity-hop century after century blasting the philistines, but who runs the world? You know as well as I do. Don't talk romantic nonsense. Listen, you could mail the White House a petition long enough to wrap six times around the equator, but how much effect would it have on our bloody policy? Tell me, how much?"

"Let's not talk about it. I'd rather not discuss the matter," Bébert said. "Aren't we overdue at the airport? It seems as though this flight has taken months. I'm sure we're overdue. I just pray nothing else happens."

"I doubt if anything will since we've gotten this far. I imagine we'll make it all right."

At that moment the plane rolled into a steep turn and a few seconds later began rolling in the opposite direction. Leon pressed his face against the window while Bébert, with a terrified expression, shut his eyes and gripped the arms of his chair.

"We might as well be locked in a boxcar," Leon said. "I wish I knew what this idiot was doing. I wonder if he got in the wrong lane. I wouldn't be surprised. Nothing surprises me anymore."

"I'd just as soon not know," Bébert said weakly.

Leon continued to glare out the window. "How'd he ever get his license? He flies like a turkey. I could do better with a bag over my head. Honest to God, Bébert, the people that get licenses these days! It's hard to believe."

Bébert didn't speak until the plane was level again. Then he said, "Would you mind telling me what those gyrations meant?"

"Who knows?" Leon replied. "Who knows? Who knows what goes on in this world of ours?"

"Well, you sound so oracular at times that one assumes you think you

know everything."

"As I've told you before, I get upset when I'm kept in ignorance. I like to know the why and wherefore. If he'd told us the reason he was turning, all right. It's not knowing that sends me up the wall."

"I'm sure everybody feels the same, but of course, looking at it from the pilot's point of view, that's not always practical. Every decision can't be explained. That's something we have to put up with in this day and age."

"Not me," Leon said.

"You've certainly changed your opinion about our pilot."

"You assume a man is competent until he proves otherwise. After that, if you go on trusting him, you're a fool. About this particular pilot, I'm beginning to have serious doubts."

A few moments later Leon added, "Well, anyway, here we go, we're starting down. Can you feel the difference?"

Bébert looked at him blankly. "I don't feel a thing except that I'm going to be unspeakably relieved when this is over."

"It won't be long. Maybe ten minutes, maybe less. Frankly, I'll be a little relieved myself. How's the FBI doing?"

Bébert glanced across the aisle and then said, "He seems to be dozing but you never can tell. I do think he resembles J. Edgar Hoover."

Leon looked across the aisle but said nothing and soon resumed staring out the window. The plane had begun descending through a layer of clouds that covered the glass with mist and darkened the cabin. Suddenly beneath the wing the earth was visible. Leon breathed heavily.

"I was watching you," Bébert remarked. "You were biting your lip."

"I do that in clouds," Leon admitted.

"It must be time to fasten our safety belts."

"Almost. Not that a seat belt's going to do you any good."

"Then why does the booklet say to be sure it's fastened?"

"Anything to quiet the troops. Do you still believe whatever you read?"

"You're getting to be more and more cynical and embittered."

"Every day," said Leon, "in every way."

"What a shame."

At that moment the signs flashed on above the door to the pilot's compartment. Leon and Bébert buckled their seat belts. Leon tamped out his cigarette.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, this is your captain speaking," said the captain warmly. "We have a slight malfunction up here. Nothing to worry about, however our landing may be a bit bumpier than usual. All due precautions have been taken. Let me assure you once again, the trouble isn't serious."

"Of course not. Of course not," Leon muttered. "It never is."

"Thank you," said the captain. "Please make sure your safety belts are securely fastened. The stewardess will be there to assist you."

"And we hope you have enjoyed your flight," Leon said as soon as the captain finished speaking.

"What do you suppose is wrong?" Bébert asked. "Do you think it's serious?"

"I don't know, it could be the landing gear," Leon said. "Hydraulic system. Flaps. It could be in a number of areas." He pulled out a handkerchief to wipe the window which had been steamed up by his breath.

"Oh oh!" he continued softly. "Now they've closed the field."

"I don't want to know what that means," Bébert said, slumping in his seat with a dazed expression. "I don't want to know. Don't say a word. Not a word."

"It means," Leon said, peering out the window, "that we've got the entire airport to ourselves. Yes sir, all to ourselves! Isn't that nice?"

"I think I'm going to faint," said Bébert.

"Also," Leon said, "it means just about what I was afraid it meant. Yup! There they are, lined up and waiting for us."

"Who?"

"The meat wagons. The whole apparatus. Fire trucks and everybody. This should be quite a picnic."

"Are we going to crash?" Bébert asked.

Leon spread his hands. "That depends. We're helpless, completely helpless. All we can do is sit here."

"I'm losing my mind, I'm so frightened," Bébert said feebly. "Leon,

I'm going out of my mind."

"I don't feel much like dancing either," said Leon.

"Isn't there anything you can do?"

"Give me an example."

"Can't you offer the pilot some advice?"

"Such as how to pull the rip cord after he bails out? Something of that sort?"

"How can you joke at a time like this?"

"Have you got a better idea?"

"Leon," Bébert went on in a choking voice, "this may be our last hour on earth!"

"What do you expect me to do about it?" Leon snarled. "I'm not your scoutmaster. Let go of my wrist, your fingers are clammy."

"I'm sorry," Bébert said, "I didn't realize I was holding on to you. How much longer will it be?"

"About a minute," Leon answered crisply. "Why? Are you in a hurry?"

The plane continued to descend.

"Down, down, down," Leon muttered, glaring out the window. "We're bloody helpless!" he said furiously, and began pounding his knee. "There's not one bloody thing we can do!"

"Please keep your fingers crossed," Bébert whispered with his eyes shut.