

Saint Ex

The title of my paper is Saint Ex. No, it is not about Xavier University basketball, nor the excellent Xavier High School, nor the elegant old Saint Xavier Church nearby on Sixth Street, and I certainly would not give a nickname to the great Saint Francis Xavier himself. Instead you are going to hear about my favorite 20th Century era French author, Antoine de Saint- Exupéry, officially nick-named Saint-Ex.

I will also be digressing a bit because I like to add commentary, often irrelevant, to any subject I attack. My digressions will be biased and bigoted because they originate in the mind of a very old man, of medium stature, whose name happens to be Prince.

I mention my stature and age because, dissimilarly, a very small very young boy is the title character in Saint-Ex's famous novelette, The Little Prince. This small book is still very popular with children in many parts of the World, the United States especially, In fact Saint-Ex wrote The Little Prince with his own illustrations while he was in the United States after the fall of France during World War II. It has been translated into 180 different languages. (1)

My first interest in Saint-Ex began in my 20th Century French Literature course in the spring of 1941. After reading Night Flight, published in 1931, I was fascinated. It was not his first published book, but it was his first major work and it won the distinguished Prix Femina French literary award. He received further awards for later works including the U.S. National Book Award and the Académie Française Grand Prix for novels

I am indebted to Professor Maurice Edgar Coindreau, who

was teaching our course, for his explanations of the sometimes simple and sometimes very deep philosophical messages in Saint-Ex's books, including the so-called children's book The Little Prince.

My room mate, George , also a French major, insisted that Saint-Ex was an existentialist, but I disagreed. My hazy concept of Existentialism began and ended with Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, even though Existentialism is said to have begun with philosophers of an earlier century such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Because of Sartre, my concept of it necessarily included Atheism. And I knew that Saint-Ex was a believer, and came from a Roman Catholic aristocratic family.

Before we graduated in the spring of 1941, Professor Coindreau arranged a very special treat for us. Coindreau had another career besides teaching at Princeton. He was a very well known translator, chiefly of American literary works into French. Faulkner, Steinbeck, Hemingway. Capote are among the many authors whose works had been made popular and influential in France through Coindreau's translations. So it is not surprising that Professor Coindreau knew personally most of those French authors who had fled France after the 1940 débacle and come to America. He was kind enough to contact a few of these notables and invite them to a reception at a Club in mid-town New York so that we students could meet them personally. Sadly, I can no longer clearly visualize much of the meeting- it was 71 years ago. I do remember Saint-Ex, but only as a pleasant looking congenial type, just politely interested in meeting us. He did not look like an adventurous and courageous airplane pilot nor a down to earth philosopher, both of which he most certainly was.

His works include many exciting passages about piloting without modern instruments. There was plenty of risk but also time for reflection and contemplation during long flights, André

Gide wrote the Preface to Night Flight, emphasizing how genuinely and convincingly Saint-Ex was able to relate acts of courage. He notes that Saint-Ex could write that way because he had performed so many such acts himself, and that stories of courage related by those who have not had to display courage are much less credible. André Gide was strongly attracted to Saint-Ex and his literary works.

In the year 1935, after having been aloft for too many hours,, Saint-Ex crashed in a desolate uninhabited area of the Sahara Desert. Fortunately he was not seriously injured and was rescued after a grueling trek through the desert without food or water. But the crash itself became the opening passages of The Little Prince which he wrote so many years later. An American publisher (2) states the story's message very nicely and concisely:

“An aviator...forced down...meets a little prince from a small planet....seeking the secret of what is important in life.... (and during their conversations) ...\the pilot realizes that when life's secrets are too difficult to understand, there is no choice but to succumb to their mysteries.”

The more I learned about Saint-Ex, the more I worshipped him as the kind of man I would like to have been in similar circumstances, even though he had flunked out of prep school and had been unsuccessful in several business ventures before becoming a professional pilot and pioneer of air mail service

In 1931 he had been appointed head of a new-born airline in Buenos Aires, and it was there that he met a very attractive lady from a wealthy El Salvadoran family, widow of a Guatemalan diplomat and journalist. This young lady, Consuelo Carrillo had made a career for herself as a writer and artist, and she had lived in France as well. She was talented and cosmopolitan. Saint Ex had been a connoisseur of women beginning probably even before, he

reached the age of puberty. Later on, during the free time when he was not busy flying or writing, he was very successful at his hobby of seducing women.

After seducing the attractive widow, Consuelo, in Buenos Aires, Saint Ex ended up being seduced by her. The actual marriage was somewhat confusing. Consuelo was very concerned that by changing her name she would lose the inheritance of money and property that she enjoyed from her late husband. Saint Ex's mother was determined that they be married in the big church near the family estate in southern France. And they did marry, twice in fact, first a civil union, then later on in the church. They made their home in France where Consuelo still owned a residence she had inherited from her husband.

There was no doubt that they loved each other dearly, but the marriage was turbulent to say the least. As we all know a Frenchman's attitude toward marital fidelity is apt to differ from ours, and Saint Ex's attitude did differ from Consuelo's. Saint-Ex, who was often absent on flying missions, acted very naturally, feeling free to satisfy his sexual needs. Obviously he was able to love more than one woman at once, and he undoubtedly did not believe that sexual activity had much to do with marital fidelity. That was my interpretation, and it certainly did not alter my hero worship for my favorite author.

During their marriage Consuelo wrote memoirs about their lives together, and apart. The manuscripts were not discovered until recently, and they have since been edited and published. Her book is called The Tale of the Rose, because in The Little Prince Consuelo is symbolized as a rose. It is not surprising that Consuelo's memoirs damage the special version I have of Saint Ex's personal reputation, although other people may not consider his reputation so spotless to begin with.

First off, I am offended by the cartoon-like picture of him appearing on the book's front cover. Inside, the manuscript reveals Consuelo's Smother-love brand of affection for Saint-Ex with endless descriptions of her suffering from his unimportant little forays while out of town and out of reach of her domination.

This situation impels me to digress, the subject being women damaging men's reputations throughout the ages. I could begin with Genesis Chapter 3 verse 6 (3) but I won't.

Instead I will jump to the recent sad case of Monsieur Strauss-Kahn, Chief of the International Monetary Fund until the year 2011. Glancing through the endless coverage given this gentleman by The New York Times, we find that on the morning of his departure from New York back to Paris, he was accused of rape by the chambermaid who had just unlocked the door of his hotel bed room and let herself in. Monsieur Strauss-Kahn, who had just taken a shower, came out of the bathroom to get dressed. The chambermaid claimed that Monsieur Strauss-Kahn then grabbed her, that she fell, and that he forced her to perform oral sex on him.

Here I must digress from my digression. I am wondering how any man could, or would even want to try to, force some woman to "perform oral sex" on him. Every woman has a formidable weapon, a set of teeth, dentures, or just gums. If he were holding a gun to her head she might think twice, but he could hardly enjoy the process with the encumbrance of a loaded Detective-Special in his right hand. Enough said.

.As for Monsieur Strauss-Kahn, it turned out that the chambermaid was lying and that he had been falsely accused. What seemingly happened was that Monsieur Strauss-Kahn, coming out of the bathroom with a towel in his hand and not expecting to see the chambermaid, had quickly covered his genital area with the towel. But the chambermaid, liking what she had

seen so briefly, did whatever was necessary to enjoy herself. Then it dawned on her that she might be able to cash in on the experience as well, at Monsieur Strauss-Kahn's expense. The story generated reams of news print for The New York Times, whose editor seemed to be enchanted ruining Monsieur Strauss-Kahn's reputation. It is ironic to note that Monsieur Strauss-Kahn's successor as leader of the International Monetary Fund is a woman.

But there is no successor to my hero, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Before leaving France in 1940 he was a wartime pilot for the French Air Force, such as it was. In 1942 he left the United States for North Africa to join Free French Allied Forces at the same time that the U.S. military unit to which I belonged was fighting there. Unfortunately, I did not know that. A year later, Saint Ex, suffering health problems, had to pull strings to get one more assignment as a wartime pilot. In the air again, in 1944, on a reconnaissance mission preceding the Allied invasion of Southern France, he disappeared over the Mediterranean, close to the French coast. He was thenceforth MIA, Missing in Action. Parts of his plane and other items were discovered only last year by sea divers, indicating that he had been killed in action. Two or three Luftwaffe veterans subsequently claimed to have shot him down.

Saint-Ex will always be my favorite French author and hero. I know that many of you have enjoyed him also. Lastly, for perspective, I reluctantly recommend reading Consuelo's memoirs, The Tale of the Rose.

Notes: (1) Wikipedia (2) Harcourt Inc. (3) Revised (1952)
Version of the Bible

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