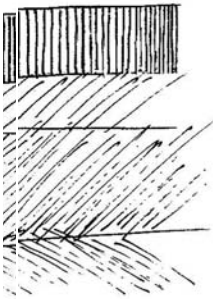






The Trouble with Spain

Martin Lloyd



Queen Anne's Fan

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First published in 2005 by **Queen Anne's Fan**
PO Box 883 • Canterbury • Kent • CT1 3WJ

Reprinted 2013

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ISBN 9780 8547 1501 4

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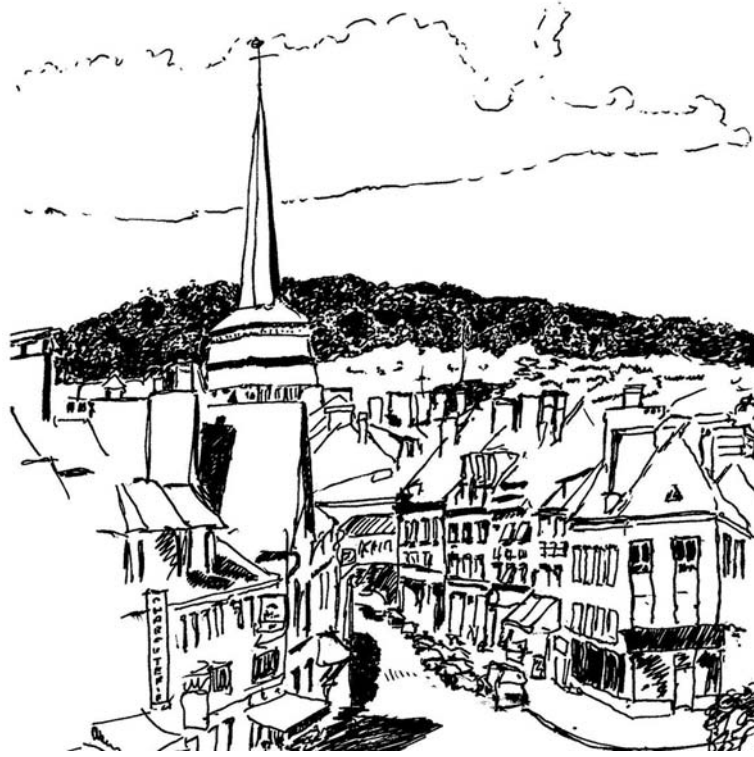
Printed in England
Set in New Baskerville 11pt

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chapter one

The trouble with Spain...

The trouble with Spain, I suddenly realised, was that I had to go through France to get there. I stopped spinning my wet sock above my head and draped it over my handlebar. And the problem with going through France was that it still had a score to settle with me. I pulled my other wet sock from my jacket pocket and hoisted it to the helicopter rotor position ready to start the drying process.

A quick survey of the cloud layer suggested that the rain would hold off for another hour or so. The impetus for my

expedition to Spain was a desire to cycle in a country where the sun shone whilst I was on my bicycle and not just for the ten minutes that I spent in the supermarket. The damp sock whirring above me was a dizzy reminder of the French unreliability in matters meteorological and it hardened my resolve to reach Spain despite the impediments before me.

One of the latter was of my own making. I had taken the utterly daft decision to try to cross the nine hundred miles of France without going on any main roads. What was the point of that? Did I think that by sneaking through Gaul by the back alleys I would escape detection? Vain hope!

I was nearing a town. A car rollicked around the corner and the two ladies inside pointed and screamed derision as they roared towards me. Much too late did I remember that I had stretched my underpants across my front light so that they would dry in the breeze of my travelling. Something had to be done. If I was to be faced with a perpetual set of damp clothes I needed a system for drying them on the bike that did not offend the locals or frighten the horses.

So I stop at the ironmongers. I wait whilst a woman in a navy blue gabardine raincoat conducts her business with Mrs. Ironmonger, who is saying, 'But it shows you on the tin what colour the paint is. Look, it's pale blue.'

'Oh I can see what colour the tin is,' says Mrs. Raincoat. 'I want to know what colour the paint inside is.'

Mrs. Ironmonger gropes under the counter and pulls out the broken-bladed knife which seems to be a shopkeeper's favourite tool. With a hiss and a thud she prises the lid from the can.

'See, it's pale blue.'

'Oh that's no good.' Mrs. Raincoat takes another can from the shelf. 'Try this one.'

'This is peach,' Mrs. Ironmonger says and, faltering

before the woman's eyes she adds, 'At least, that is what it says on the tin.' *Hiss, thud.* They look in. 'Yes, peach,' she confirms.

'That's no good. What about this one?'

'That's red. But what colour are you looking for?'

'The tin's red.'

Hiss, thud.

'So is the paint.'

'Don't want red.'

'What colour are you looking for?'

'Pink.'

I reach up and silently hand a tin of coral pink paint to Mrs. Ironmonger. Mrs. Raincoat turns her whole body around to look at me and then swivels back to the counter where the broken knife blade is already feeling the rim.

'Coral pink. That'll do,' she says.

'Don't you want me to open it?'

'No don't trouble yourself. It's got the colour on the tin.'

I secretly pray that the contents are canary yellow. I purchase a plastic string bag. Green to match my bike. With my washing arranged in this, I can hang it from the handlebars in all decency and the breeze can dry my clothes even when travelling through towns.

The sun emerged from a patchy cloud sky when I stopped to eat my lunch at Senarpont. I sat by the old ford where the Bresle tinkled its route to the sea at Le Tréport. I watched the fish squirming sinuously in the river whilst, a little further upstream, the traffic to Beauvais thundered over the concrete span which had been built to avoid the narrow bridge and ford which were now my picnic stop.

The day now began to get quite hot, reminding me that with every day's travel I would be moving further from the moderating influence of the sea.

I saw two other touring cyclists, probably English, having their lunch in the shade of the trees by the church. I tried

waving to them but they stared stone-faced at me. This reminded me of a story which was recounted to me by a Frenchman purporting to illustrate differing national characteristics. A woman, her husband and her lover are all shipwrecked on a desert island. All they possess is a bed and a revolver. What happens? If they are French, the lover shoots the husband; if they are Dutch, the husband shoots the lover; if they are Spanish, the husband shoots his wife; if they are German, the husband shoots himself; if they are Italian, the wife shoots her husband; if they are Belgian, they throw the gun into the sea and if they are English? Nothing happens because they have not been introduced.

It had been a short, sharp descent into Senarpont from the north; the southerly road out was a long climb towards the forest of Guimerville. In the elbow of the wood nestled a factory. It appeared to be a glass factory. All along the verge of the road and impressed into the tar metalling itself, glass splinters of all colours reflected and refracted the sunlight in a riot of rainbows and jewel-like beams. The lorries which were bringing to the factory the glass for recycling were obviously not quite as secure as they should be. Whilst enjoying the colours I nevertheless gave the margin of the road a respectfully wide berth. I did not want to be picking psychedelic splinters from my inner tubes for the rest of the day.

The landscape was now characterized by a series of short steep valleys and hilltops crowned by forests. I had arranged my route so as to take advantage of this and traverse as many of these forests as I could legitimately put in my way. I had time in hand so when I saw the next wooded ridge appear on the horizon I decided to do a little exploring. I knew what I would find. I had studied the subject so many times that I had become a little blasé about what I now realise to be an unusual knowledge that I have of the woods of northern France. On various journeys in company I have pointed out dumb shapes lurking in leafy shade and thrown

bald explanations to my companions and I have been astonished by their deference to my apparent erudition.

From a distance of a quarter of a mile I surveyed the silent, dark mass of trees. I needed the north west edge of the wood, just where the trees gave way to the fields of maize. Or where they would have done in 1944. There should be a small road. Studying the exit from the village through my spyglass I could just distinguish a hedge leading up to the wood. That would do. As I plunged into the green shade of forest, escaping the harsh sun for the first time, I realised what a jolly good idea I had had. I also noticed the overgrown concrete track and before I could stop myself the bike had swerved down it. I was on German concrete.

Twenty yards into the wood the track forked and I knew that the branch would go to the motor transport store. I continued on the unbroken rib of concrete which was beginning to disappear beneath a scattering of twigs and leaves until I reached a low rectangular brick and concrete building. This would have been the final preparation area. The road ran through it and further on I stopped before the characteristic wide open arch of the non-magnetic building. A wider entrance than the other buildings because at this stage extra clearance would have been needed for the wings. In the floor there would have been a bronze azimuth ring to enable the staff to set the compass. I could see the groove where it had been fixed but the valuable metal itself had long gone. Only the shell of the building remained, the interior invaded by the trees and shrubs pushing up through the bombed concrete floor.

I checked on my compass. The bearing was about 280 degrees. It was just right for London. The non-magnetic building, of course, would have been built in the same alignment as the launching ramp. I peered through the unyielding greenery. I parked my bike and stumbled on through undergrowth that had been churned and tussocked by five-hundred pounders. All that remained of

the ramp was a low, moss-covered wall of the grey concrete blocks that they always used for the blast wall. I continued through the site, past the long storage building built with a curved end to avoid bomb blast from detonating its contents. These were the buildings which from the air looked like skis and gave the name of 'ski site' to the 'targets for tonight' of Bomber Command.

Regaining the unassuming country lane I looked at the peaceful wood. The tall, heavily foliated trees would continue to withhold the secret from all but the most curious of investigators. The casual Rambler would never know that he was walking past a V1 launch site of the Second World War. A place from which the doodlebugs or flying bombs of 1944 were hurled roaring into the night sky in a cloud of steam and jet fumes to fall thirty minutes later and redesign a portion of Kent or London with their load of Amatol explosive. And I had found scores of such sites in northern France. But then, that does not interest many people.

In the next village I discovered that the road that I wanted to take was closed by a makeshift barrier. Knowing that these barriers never really applied to bicycles, I swerved around it and carried on.

The verges on both sides of the road were flattened as if by the passage of many feet, and mud had been spread everywhere. As I pedalled away from the village, the road sunk between the hedgeless fields and there I could see evidence of works of some sort. A great scar had been gouged out of the field on one side, the unbordered earth sculpted like blancmange. At the next corner it was the opposite side of the road where the earth had been moved.

There was something bizarre about this. The work was obviously unfinished – the road surface was in a terrible state, covered with mud and shingle and yet I could see no diggers, nor any of the other paraphernalia that one usually finds at road works. And why had they dug the outside of the curves – why widen the road there? It was the

opposite of straightening it and those curves were somehow too artistic. What was going on?

When I came to the bridge carrying, over my track, the fast main road which I had taken the trouble to avoid, the mystery resolved itself. At the foot of the bridge had been excavated a lagoon to take the rain shed from the carriageway above. It was deep, well-fenced and utterly empty. It had contained water, a lot of water probably, indeed, sufficient water to breach the downhill bank and thunder down the road, slicing great chunks from the fields and flattening the verges with mud before charging down the village street to dissipate in the broader, flatter fields beyond. It must have given the villagers something to talk about.

The old main road into Neufchatel en Bray had been declassified and its *route nationale* soubriquet switched to the bypass which stalked long legged across the valley. This meant that I could legitimately claim that I had cycled the day's miles solely on secondary roads. As I rode into the town a man hailed me from the opposite pavement. I stopped and crossed the road to him.

'Which road do I take for St. Valéry?' he asked. 'Do you know?'

'No, but I can work it out.' I pulled my map from my cycle bag.

'Is it that one?' he asked.

'Just a minute. Let me get my bearings.' I turned the map to the correct quadrant. 'St. Valéry is on the coast isn't it?'

'They say it is.' I found his answer to be rather mysterious. He continued, 'Or do you think it is that road over there?'

'No. It's that road there. Look...' I showed him my map. 'I've just come down from the north. To get to the coast I would have to turn right, which makes it that road by the side of—'

Without a word, he turned from my map and slowly walked across the road to look in the window of the pharmacy. I stared after him for a while, expecting him to come back to me but when he had finished his study of the display of pill boxes he began to stroll along the opposite pavement, idly window shopping, ignoring me completely. I refolded my map and reminded myself not to drink the tap water in Neufchatel.

I checked in at the Hotel du Lion d'Or, musing that it was probably possible to cross all of France and sleep only in hotels of that name.* Once my bike was safely locked in the vast hotel garage, I thrust my hands into my pockets and mingled with the holiday crowds which were sunning themselves on the afternoon pavements. A happy, relaxed atmosphere infused the town.

When you are carrying three sets of cycling clothes to last you a thousand miles, you have to work out a fine procedure to ensure that you always have something to wear. Mine is this. Having reached the hotel by about four in the afternoon, I go straight to my room, strip off and wash the clothes I am wearing. I then wring them in my magic towel and peg them out on my washing line which I will have previously attached to any process or protuberance which will support it. I then take a shower and put on my evening wear which consists of a pair of crease-proof black trousers and a short sleeved open necked shirt made from a sort of artificial seersucker which is meant to look creased and so does not need ironing. If it is chilly in the evening, I slip on my thin vee-necked sweater.

Sometimes I can hang the damp clothes across my open window, having closed the shutters. This allows them to dry in a breeze without offending the passers by, or the hotel manager. You become quite astute at recognising opportunities to dry clothes. One night I leapt out of bed

* I came to regret this fatuous claim when later I was challenged to prove that such a journey was feasible. *Hunting the Golden Lion* was the result.

suddenly at three in the morning because my subconscious had heard the radiator click as it heated up and I was thus able to take down my damp clothes from the line and steam them dry on the radiator. On another occasion, feeling the heat radiating from my bedhead reading lamp, I had laid out a pair of soggy socks and bent the flexible lamp down so that it gently basted them whilst I ate my dinner. It is when I can find no system to work for me, that I end up cycling along, spinning my laundry above my head. But now, with my latest acquisition – a plastic string bag – all these difficulties would be banished.

When I came downstairs to dinner, the town had changed dramatically. The bustling crowds, the hooting cars, the skipping children, the shopwares spilling out onto the street; these were all gone, to be replaced by... well, nothing really. Indeed, it seemed to me from listening to the conversations throughout the very ordinary meal, that the natives' requirements in evening entertainment were being amply furnished by the burglar alarm on a car parked opposite the church which kept spontaneously playing a one-note fanfare.

At breakfast I realised that I had been in France forty eight hours and I was already half way across the second of my fifteen large scale maps of France which would relay me in dog-leg fashion across the Seine and the Loire, down the Atlantic coast of France and over the Pyrenees to Bilbao.

I can hear you laughing at the ridiculous amount of luggage that I must have been carrying. You forget that after ten years of lugging a loaded bike around the countryside anybody can think up tricks to lighten their load. I am not talking about expedition gimmicks like cutting the labels from clothes or drilling holes in spanners but practical and sensible ideas like preparing stamped addressed envelopes so that as I used the maps I could mail them home; or metering out the disposable razors to correspond with the projected number of days' journey;

taking only three changes of clothing but a bar of soap and a washing line and pegs. My retinue was designed to lighten itself the longer I travelled so that by the time I reached the Pyrenees I would be on my last map, my last razor and my last scraping of soap. If I ever reached there I would be on my last legs as well.

Buchy is a sweet little town but for some reason, perhaps because it is the weekend of Ascension, the street lamps are garnished with loudspeakers which are emitting a strident mixture of tin-pot music and brain-rot babble. The screeching noise doggedly follows me into the small supermarket where I buy my lunch.

Today is the day that I am to cross the River Seine. My secret roads take me direct south to an overgrown track that snakes down through a wood to the narrow valley of the Andelle just upstream of its confluence with the Seine. To avoid the main road I remain on the north bank till I reach Pont St. Pierre. In a yard attached to what I assume to be a recycling depot of some sort, slumbers the biggest mound of empty plastic water bottles that I have ever seen. It is the size and shape of a long low bungalow, built of bluey-greeney-grey cylindrical plastic bricks.

Crossing now to the south bank of the valley I round a bluff and catch my first sight of the Seine as it winds its way down to the sea. Here, I am only one and a half meanders upstream from Rouen.

The sun is now unequivocably shining and so I remove my fluorescent yellow cycling shirt. It had already caught a few amazed looks. Two minutes later I nearly fall from my bike in surprise as a young lady cycles past me in the opposite direction, also without a shirt; indeed, wearing nothing above the belt of her shorts. I stare after her, although the view from the rear is not so stunning. Remembering the contours of her chest I cannot help thinking that she would surely be better streamlined with a shirt over them.

The Seine valley at this point is about three miles across and is the home to two rivers. The Seine runs just below me; alongside the road and close under the opposite bank of the valley flows the Eure. The space between is full of lakes and clumps of trees. It is difficult to distinguish lake from river.

I cross the Seine at St. Pierre du Vauvray. Alongside the level crossing there is laid out a diverse assembly of colourful and bizarre items, offered for sale by an equally heterogeneous squad of amateur vendors. It is the *Brocante de l'Ascension*. A young lady with long blond hair and dressed in a short PVC skirt presides over her display of the entrails of motor cars – shock absorbers, dashboards, steering wheels – all, one must presume, having been obtained legally. A tired-faced elderly man, strapped up in some equally tired and elderly corduroys, has arranged his stock of plastic dolls and fluffy animals in a wedding cake meringue of vivid pinks and yellows. Someone is trying to sell broken cardboard boxes full of empty glass jars, another, some off-cuts of carpet and a kitchen stove. Satisfied, smiling customers are hurrying away, bundles tucked enthusiastically under their arms and others are arriving, bright-eyed and expectant.

As I wheel my bike carefully between the stalls, I eventually identify the atmosphere which infuses the meadow. Holiday. Everybody is on holiday.

Over the ridge in Louviers the holiday spirit is foremost. The hotel recommended by the tourist office is shut. The lady tut tuts at the unprofessionalism of the hoteliers on her manor and sends me to the only hotel staying open that weekend.

'One hundred and thirty francs for the room. Pay me now, I can't leave the bar.' The patron flicks the froth from a pair of beer glasses with a wooden spatula. 'Hotel entrance is up the pavement, first door along from the end of the terrace. Put your bike at the bottom of the stairs.'

I cast my eye around the noisy, bubbling bar, the youth of Louviers in relaxed mood: the shrieking, the giggling, the juke box playing, the cars revving and squealing as they circuit the roundabout. This is life!

‘Breakfast is down here in the bar tomorrow?’ I enquire.

He shakes his head as he folds my money into his shirt pocket with one hand and with the other, slides a cup of coffee towards a freckly youth who sports a toothbrush moustache.

‘The bar closes tonight at eleven and opens again on Tuesday. Don’t you know it’s Ascension Day? I’m going away for the holiday.’

‘How nice for you.’ My voice is hollow. ‘Will there be anywhere in the hotel for breakfast?’

‘No there won’t. I run the hotel as well. When you leave in the morning, put the street door key back in through the letter box.’

‘And... breakfast?’

‘Oh, there will be cafés open tomorrow.’

He was lying of course.

