

# The Trouble with France

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Queen Anne's Fan

# **The Trouble with France**

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Martin Lloyd asserts his right in accordance with the Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work. Indeed, he does so with great gusto and far too often.

All characters and events portrayed in this book are absolutely true. Honest! Any similarity to fiction of whatever sort is purely happenstantial and in the convoluted mind of the reader.

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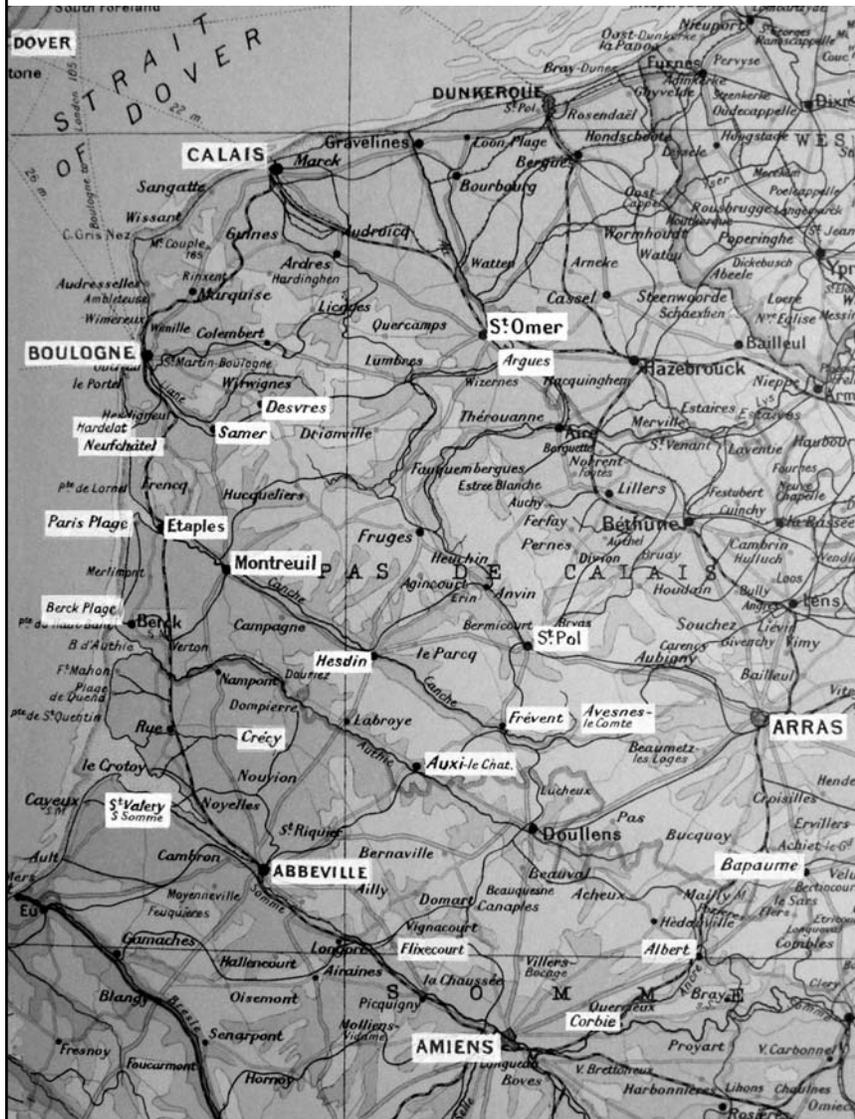
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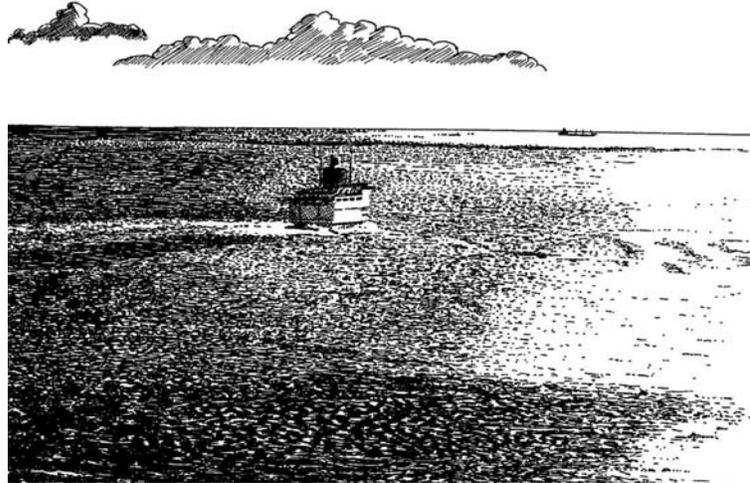
## The Trouble with France . . .



# The Trouble with France

## THEATRE OF OPERATIONS





## chapter one

‘Crew announcement. Carpenter to the bridge please. Carpenter to the bridge.’

The sandy haired gentleman glanced up at the ship’s tannoy. With a sinking feeling I saw him nod at the loudspeaker and then declare,

‘Ah! The captain wants his coffee.’

Having opened the jaws of the mantrap he stood back to allow me to tread in it.

‘But it was asking for the carpenter,’ I protested.

He leaned forward. I could feel the jaws snapping around my ankle.

‘Code.’ He tapped the side of his blue-veined nose. ‘It’s all in code.’

‘Code?’ The more I wriggled the more tightly it seemed to grip.

“‘Carpenter to the bridge’ means that the captain wants his coffee.’

‘But why don’t they just say, “Can the captain have his coffee please?”’

He sucked in his breath with a hiss.

‘Not good for the public image.’

This sounded silly to me.

‘What do they say...’ I asked, ‘when they really want the carpenter?’ Ha! Get out of that one! I thought.

‘These cross-channel ferries don’t have carpenters,’ he declared, ‘they are metal.’ I gazed insolently at the wooden partitions by the duty free shop and the wooden counters in the self service restaurant. ‘Well anyway,’ he said, ‘they don’t call them “carpenters” anymore. They have some fancy title like “Marine Technician.”’ He looked at his watch. With all its levers and dials it looked just like the footplate of a miniature steam railway locomotive. ‘We’ll be in Boulogne in about half an hour.’ He glanced at my cycling shorts. ‘Are you going far?’

I do not hold myself responsible for the conversation that followed. It was perhaps unfortunate that unusual circumstances had precipitated my presence on board this ferry and possibly I did just enjoy being a teeny bit obtuse, but all that I told him was true.

‘Well, Frank and I decided to go touring on our bikes in Suffolk.’

‘Suffolk?’

‘Yes, I’ve never been to Suffolk and Frank said that it was nice so we decided to go there.’

He looked through the salty window where the English Channel was steadily streaming past in a jumble of green foam and hovercraft.

‘What are you doing on this boat then?’

‘Ah well, you see we live in Kent and if you want to get to Suffolk by bike then you have to cross the Thames and this means that you have to practically cycle into London and out again so I looked at the map and decided that the most sensible way was to go by boat.’

‘To Suffolk?’

This was now the second time that he had pronounced

the word 'Suffolk' and I could not help but detect a certain tinge of incredulity slipping into his enunciation.

'I know a friend in the ticket office,' I confided, but that did not seem to help him. 'He worked out our route for us. We pop over to Zeebrugge from Dover on the early morning boat, change boats in Zeebrugge and take the afternoon boat back to Felixstowe. Quite clever eh? Kent to Suffolk via Belgium and you get duty-frees as well.' I sat back, proud of myself but something seemed to be niggling him. He glanced at Cap Gris Nez lying on the port side.

'But er...' he began and then looked into the bottom of his glass. A slice of lemon stared back at him in a watery demi-lunar grin. He opened his mouth and then closed it and looked again at the coast of France. Finally he could restrain himself no longer.

'But this boat is going to Boulogne, not Zeebrugge.'

'Oh I know. That doesn't matter. I can't go to Suffolk anyway. Frank rolled his car two days ago and can't afford to come so I cashed in the tickets and chose to go to France instead.'

'So you're not going to Suffolk then?'

Isn't it strange how people can latch onto one thing?

Unknown to me, that innocuous conversation marked the beginning of a relationship between me and France which was to develop over the following years into an obsessive battle. Wherever I went in France, whatever I tried to do, nothing turned out as it should have done. Straightforward tasks became operations of indescribable complexity and even simple conversations turned into dialogues of the surreal. It took me some time to face up to the truth that a sinister curse had been cast upon me. France had never forgiven me for putting it second on my list after Suffolk. The irony is that even to this day, I have still never been to Suffolk but trying to explain that to France is as fruitless as arguing with a vending machine.

So, carefree and excited, I bumped over the polished iron molehills in the car-deck and slithered down the wet steel mesh ramp onto the soil of France. I had a bike and a map and a pocket full of francs. What more could I need? Within three hundred yards of the dock gate I discovered that I needed a cycle mechanic. Fifteen love! France was not wasting any time.

Behind the bus station I discovered a cycle shop. That is to say, I assumed it to be a cycle shop for although its grimy windows were festooned with all the recognisable and many of the less familiar parts of bicycles, there appeared not to be one complete and assembled machine inside.

I bounced in and cracked my head on a wheel which had been hanging on a wire from the ceiling. After the impact it fell to the counter and in one bound, landed on a cardboard tray displaying light bulbs. These it catapulted, somersaulting, into the diagonal corner of the crowded shop, rattling and tinkling as they showered down through naked spoked wheels and rolled into inaccessible corners. I lunged forwards to stop the wheel in its pogo stick-like excursion but I found myself arrested around the midriff because a pedal crank mounted on a sales board behind me had inserted itself into the back pocket of my shorts.

‘Don’t move.’ I had heard that said in so many cowboy films that I found it incongruous on the lips of the blank-faced French woman standing behind the counter. ‘Don’t move!’ she ordered as her thumb slid along the edge of the counter and her fingers reached for the button secreted underneath.

She was small and was lashed into a floral apron like a lump of heavy machinery on the exposed well-deck of a North Atlantic cargo ship. We looked at each other and I could tell from the whitening of her thumb that she was pressing that buzzer for all she was worth. Behind her,

dirty wooden pigeonholes climbed to the grimy ceiling. They housed more obscure parts of bicycles and some tins and wooden boxes bearing ancient trade illustrations.

She shifted her glance to a man who was crossing the alleyway towards the shop.

‘My husband,’ she divulged.

Her husband was no taller than she and passed under the stalactites of cycle wheels and frames without disturbing a white hair of his head.

‘Monsieur?’ he piped in the conventional intonation of commerce.

Forgetting that the giant presentation of cranks and chainwheels was still attached to me, I made a step forwards and began to explain my problem. His eyes jerked in alarm to a spot above and behind my head as the eight foot high display board heaved itself languidly from the wall like a bouncer in a nightclub. He scurried behind the counter and stood next to his wife. Whether this was in order to protect her or save himself, I was not sure.

I detached myself from the pyramid which sank back into place, doubtless to plan its next ambush. With some approximate French and accurate gesticulation, I told him the problem. The chain was jumping and cracking over the gears on the back wheel.

He wheeled my machine across the alleyway to his motorcycle shop. Standing alongside the nobbly-tyred, oil smelling gargantuae, my bicycle looked very frail and vulnerable and I began to doubt whether it would survive for the five days of my proposed trip.

Producing a screwdriver from a secret fold of his overalls, he quickly adjusted the derailleur mechanism to a nicety. The problem ceased to exist.

He would not take my money. He insisted that he had made no repair, only an adjustment and that it had hardly taken any of his time. I thanked him, opened the door and sent tottering a motocyLETTE with only one wheel.

Together we watched it, writhing this way and that as it made vain attempts to regain its balance. Then it abruptly gave up the struggle and sat like a Buddha on the concrete floor. The man shrugged and indicated that the doorway was now clear. I smiled and left.

As I passed by the cycle shop I looked for madame to bid her thanks but she was on her hands and knees, coaxing light bulbs out from under the counter with the handle of a broom and so I left her to her snooker. All in all, I thought that I had acquitted myself quite well.

When it comes to the needs of tourists, Calais and Boulogne share a common transparency with Dover and Folkestone. 'How do I get to the Prisunic?' translates as '*Ou est Marks et Sparks?*' and 'Where is the road to Paris?' becomes '*C'est bon pour Londres?*' The visitor to these towns only recognises two options – either you stock up with essentials or you try to get straight through without touching the sides. And yet, surely these four ports are steeped in history? They are, and it is one which clearly establishes the origins for today's dichotomy, because, for several millennia, foreigners either plundered the towns or landed in order to belt inland and invade somewhere more important.

Now take Boulogne for instance, and let's face it, through the years many people have. It was a Roman port, has been and still is an important fishing port, it has a fortified citadel and, until the Canadians replanned the town in 1944, had many other fine buildings. It also has a sense of ridicule. The slightly daft Roman emperor Caligula, he who allegedly appointed his horse as a Consul, came here in 40AD and raised a legion or two to invade England. He set out and once out of sight of land, promptly turned back to Boulogne. Leaving his troops with the commission of building a triumphal tower overlooking the town, he filled his pockets with shells gathered from

the beach and then bearded off back to Rome where he was received in triumph. Well, qualified triumph, since he was assassinated the following year. But the tower his soldiers built was used as a lighthouse until it was pulled down in the seventeenth century. Probably as a result of some central government cost-cutting measures.

And what about King Edward the Confessor's brother in law, Eustace of Boulogne? He visited England in 1051 but had a bit of trouble on his return journey. Whilst waiting for a ship, he decided to quarter himself and his men in the town of Dover. This was not a case of his graciously accepting the town's invitation to partake of its hospitality; it was Eustace authorising his men to take what they wanted unbidden. Indeed, when they had been but a few miles from Dover they had stopped to put on their mail suits.

Not surprisingly the Dovorians did not agree with this behaviour and some went as far as to resist. What started as a simple dispute ended in a bloodletting with about twenty persons killed on both sides. Eustace then withdrew the remainder of his men inland and he was probably lucky to have escaped with his life.

The two Napoleons left their mark on Boulogne, one way or another. Bonaparte had a dock basin constructed in 1801 to shelter some of the two thousand ships he had collected for his planned invasion of England. The invasion never took place but the dock is still there, just the other side of the quay at which the Folkestone boat unloads.

And in 1840, Prince Louis Napoleon, he who was to become Napoleon III, landed at Boulogne in his second ill-judged attempt at insurrection against the rule of King Louis Philippe.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Boulogne was a fashionable seaside resort with a casino and seafront hotels hiring out hundreds of bathing machines. The port not only received the cross-channel packets from Dover, Folkestone, and Ramsgate but also the steamers from

London, Goole and Hull. Coastwise to France it had services to La Rochelle, Le Havre, St Nazaire, Bordeaux and Bayonne. But most surprising is the number of high seas vessels which ran from Boulogne. Perusing the docks and quays today, one can only marvel at what must have been the diminutive size of the ships which went to New York, Montevideo, Rio de Janeiro, Las Palmas, Lagos and Conakry.

Two statistical facts from this period bear consideration: one hundred years ago the population of Boulogne town was five percent English and the crossing time from Folkestone to Boulogne was an hour and twenty minutes. The English population is now just two percent and the crossing, an hour and fifty minutes. The obvious deduction is that the mathematical formula is an inverse ratio: the more English you have in your population the less minutes it takes the ships to cross the Channel.

What was I to be – a plunderer or invader? A bit of both. By four o'clock in the afternoon I was about ten miles inland and regretting my hurried purchase of *pain au chocolat* and *chausson aux pommes* in lieu of lunch. Not for their quality but their quantity. I was hungry.

Over on my distant right, a sinister wood climbed the escarpment, hemming in my road. On my left, a flat bottomed valley accommodated a stream and a sprinkling of farms. I looked at my map. It was as it should be. Behind me was Samer, whose town centre was revetted in a chaos of pavé which resembled a retirement home for worn-out staircases. Crossing the square on my bicycle had left an impression on me which was to take several days to wear off. On the outskirts of the town I had cycled past the modern factory of Blanzky whose ancestors in Boulogne had turned out four million gross steel pen nibs per annum to make Boulogne the nib centre of France. Now before me, according to my map, was Desvres, famous in the region for

its faience. Here, I would stop for the night. Desvres would have a hotel, a restaurant and perhaps a little nocturnal animation to distract me before I slipped between the sheets.

It was in Desvres that for the first and what will probably be the only time in my life, I discovered a topographical feature which corresponded exactly to its symbol on the map. You know the problem; the map tells you that the church is a black dot with a cross on top and when you enter the village you find it is a red brick belfry grafted onto a rectangular stone nave. There is no feature in the village which in any way could be described as a black dot surmounted by a cross.

So, I was making for the railway station, guessing that I would find there an underpriced and practically empty hotel. I stopped at the corner of the street and unfolded my map. Now, that yellow line is the road which I am on at the moment, that patch of green is the orchard on my right and this empty white rectangle must be....

My view to the left was blocked by a brick wall so I leaned my bicycle against a pole and crossed over. It was silly really. I did not need to see what was behind the wall. I was certain that I was on the correct road but something urged me to check. I looked over the top. It was just like the map said – an empty white rectangle. It had been a cement works but it had been razed to the concrete foundations. Only a blank, white rectangle remained.

I felt as though an elaborate hoax had been played upon me. I wondered if Desvres had furnished the inspiration for the design of the cartographic symbols of the *Institut Géographique National*. Perhaps the town was full of houses shaded with grey diagonal lines, marshy areas liberally sprinkled with those mythical three-black-spike-and-one-across plants, and hills with brown lines running around them to tell you how high they were.

It wasn't.

I grasped the massive handle and pushed the iron and glass door of the Hotel de la Gare. It was heavy and because of this I probably applied more effort than I should have done. Once I had started the door moving I was faced with the problem of trying to stop it as it swung inwards, accelerating all the time, dragging me inexorably with it. It crashed against the rubber stop and rebounded. I had understood more about the concepts of momentum and inertia in the space of the last four seconds than my physics master had been able to teach me in four years.

Like an animated eiderdown of tan and white, a dog slowly hauled itself up from the tiled floor and padded arthritically over towards me. Its golden eyes were tinged with ginger eyelashes. It sniffed at my ankles and then growled. A woman called, 'Lie down!' from the other end of the bar and the dog wandered diffidently away and collapsed like some pneumatic contraption that had been punctured, wheezing and hissing as its limbs nobbled onto the cold floor.

I moved into the echoing bar of the hotel. At one end, young men in spats and young ladies with parasols were alighting from the Paris express. They smiled freshly down at me from the ceramic mural in which they had been fixed one hundred years before. The silvering was peeling from the backs of the musty mirrors, which showed a muslin reflection of the dusty chandeliers and the wrought iron and marble tables.

Against the bar leaned a French workman in dumpy blue overalls. A yellow cigarette hung in his mouth. On the zinc bar top his latest glass of wine stood untouched. He was leaning across the zinc to ensure the confidentiality of his conversation despite there being no other customers. Listening intently, with one hand plunged into the sink was a young lady of striking appearance. Her jet black hair hung in long hanks, her eyes were dark glass marbles set in deep

sockets. Her skin was pale and she wore a black blouse and skirt. You won't believe this bit, but I swear that it is true. On her shoulder sat a raven.

'Monsieur?'

'Do you have a room for me for tonight please?'

'I regret monsieur, we don't 'do' hotel anymore.'

'Is there another hotel?'

She looked at the workman. I looked at the raven. They both twitched their heads, though probably for different reasons.

'Baa.... What's his name, up there,' he suggested. The workman, that is, not the raven.

'Yes, up on the main road, at the crossroads,' the lady translated for me.

Later that night I was to bitterly regret not having asked the raven.

At the fag end of the town I found the miserable café-bar-hotel crouching in the lee of three roads, none of which seemed to want to be associated with its mean corner doorway and shuttered windows. I was discouraged but tried to reassure myself by remarking that above the door was painted the legend *Hotel*. But then, I could have made the same observation at the Hotel de la Gare and that had sported a raven in the bar. I went in.

'I won't do dinner,' she warned me.

'No, that's fine thank you.'

'Just the bed.'

'Yes, I understand. How much?'

She shrewdly eyed my dusty legs and spiky hair.

'Forty five francs for the bed,' she declared, convinced that this would send me on my way.

'Splendid! Shall I pay now?'

'Pay me in the morning. But I don't do dinner.' She watched her final shot splash short of the target.

We don't do hotel anymore. I won't do dinner. The town

did not seem to 'do' anything at all. On my way from the station I had gone into a patisserie to buy a snack but nobody had come to serve me so I had stolen out again, fearful that I should have been caught leaving and been suspected of evil intent.

Opposite the shop, with the dogged inflexibility of ceramic tiles, gold and green art deco letters had insisted that the hairdresser's was really a horsemeat butcher's. All around the square, the newer businesses had ousted the old but behind and around the cheap plastic fascias the obdurate tiles stubbornly proclaimed their original devotions and denied the identity of the usurpers.

Her son showed me where I could lean my bicycle against a wall in the triangular yard. He jerked his head towards a stable door which was fixed closed by a short length of grubby string.

*'Les waters.'*

My nose had already reached that conclusion. The boy returned to the bar, plugged himself into a pinball machine and began to writhe and jerk in sensual agony before it.

I decided to dine out. It was 6.30 and the town was shut. I trudged on, trying to convince myself that there, just around the corner, I would discover a gaily lit street, half way down which there would nestle one of those restaurants that forever after would be remembered for being as great a discovery as the Victoria Falls. But there was not and worse still, there was no-one in the street of whom I could enquire. It was as if the town were under a curfew.

At last I came across a homeless soul, or a curfew breaker, who after listening with deepening gloom to my enquiry opined that there might still, perhaps, be... indeed, (with a little vehemence) it was the only place where one could eat and it was 'up on the main road'. I followed his directions, past cold, empty shops, down dark, deserted, echoing streets till I was afforded a new vista on my café-bar-hotel where I knew they 'won't do dinner'.

I sprinted half a mile down the main road towards a glowing supermarket sign. I managed to get in before the trolleys were chained up for the night and out before the covers went over the tills.

Back in the café-bar-hotel I tried to be sociable and sipped a hot chocolate. It was difficult as I was the only customer. The bar exuded the welcoming ambiance of a dentist's waiting room. With exaggerated disregard, I tossed my plastic supermarket bag onto the bench and then winced at the sound that two tins of sardines, four bread rolls and a bar of chocolate make when they hit a wooden board. To be caught eating in a hotel room in France is a capital offence nearly as heinous as putting ice cubes in the wine.

I was the only customer in the bar. What on earth did the commerce live on? Surely not the passing trade for it seemed to do just that – pass. I watched madame. Her blonde hair was showing black at the roots and the bags under her eyes were deepening by the minute. Then the police arrived. Or to be exact, *a* police arrived. Was this the husband? Not judging by the way that he was greeted with resigned sufferance.

The woman left the bar and they huddled all three in the corner under the staircase, mumbling together. From time to time one or other or all three would glance across at me. Were they afraid that I could hear what they were saying? I thought of the blue workman in the Hotel de la Gare, leaning across the bar to talk to the barlady. Were they talking about me? Had they all heard the clink of the sardine tins? Were they awaiting the perpetration of my crime? I could imagine the discussion...

‘Wait till he goes up and then Pierre can nip up and listen outside his door.’

‘And when he hears the sardine tin being opened...’

‘I’ll rush in with the handcuffs!’

The following morning, the sun was shining; the coffee strong and scalding; the bread, fresh and crispy and the jam, home-made. Madame greeted me with a jaunty, 'Good morning. Did you sleep well?' and her son asked a couple of healthily pertinent questions about my bicycle. Even as I pushed off from the kerb, the gendarme alighted from his 4L and wished me, '*Bonne route!*'

And all that for forty five francs. What a rich dividend for such a poor town!

