French Lessons

by

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Author's Disclaimer

The locations featured in this book are all real, but some have been given false names for reasons which will become very obvious. The same applies to most of the characters and many of the situations. It is for you to decide which bits are true and which are not, though I bet you get most of them wrong.

Every man has two countries; his own and France.

Thomas Jefferson,
third President of the United States of America

Prologue

Friday, 13th September, 11.57am:

We sit as condemned prisoners, sentenced to sign away the home of our hearts. My crime has been a chronic inability to keep the financial wolf at bay, and my poor dear wife must now pay the price of my failure.

Despite our situation, it does not seem possible that when we leave this unremarkable office someone else will own the Mill of the Flea. When we bought our first home in Normandy, it was a time of excitement and anticipation. In some ways the ceremony of affirmation was like a christening. Now we are losing La Puce, it seems more as if we are attending a funeral.

Donella and I and Milly the cross-collie are arraigned in front of the local notary's desk. I am wearing the surviving jacket of an old business suit to complement my home-made Bermuda shorts and the only tie I own, and have made the effort to look my best as a gesture of respect for the passing of La Puce into other hands. The shorts were salvaged from a pair

of trousers which suffered collateral damage during an attack on a bramble patch with a military defoliant said by its vendor to have been very effective on the rain forests of Vietnam. The tie was a Christmas present from a friend who thinks he has a sense of humour, and when the knot is tweaked it plays a tinny version of *Jingle Bells*. Hopefully I will not set it off during the ceremony, as that would seem like blowing a raspberry as a dear friend is laid to rest.

Alongside us are the happy couple who will shortly be the new owners of a mostly restored farmhouse, a mostly ruined mill cottage and ten acres of streams, ponds, meadowland, and - at last count this morning - two hundred and thirty eight mostly upright trees. For the keys to La Puce, the couple will be handing over a sum which would just about buy a very small terraced house in an undesirable part of town less than a hundred miles away across the Channel.

The Mill of the Flea was prized far above rubies by us, but that is its current value in rural Normandy and we desperately need the money.

When we have paid off the bank and borrowed back roughly twice as much as we originally owed, we should have enough to buy the big house further down the Normandy peninsula and set up a holiday accommodation business to help repay our new Everest of debt. As there now appear to be more Britons attempting to make a living by renting out bits of their French homes to fellow countrymen than there are British visitors to France each year, it is unlikely to be a lucrative project. But we have spent the past decade in France trying to make a living from my writing and a series of what proved to be disastrous financial adventures, so our new career path is hardly likely to be any less rewarding.

* * * * *

The long-case clock in the corner chimes the hour as Mr Remuen toys with some papers that I know he keeps on his desk purely for shuffling purposes. He then clears his throat magisterially, adjusts his trendy rimless spectacles and prepares to launch into the convoluted process of property exchange in France. It is not that there is any special significance in the chiming of the clock, and the rite was anyway due to begin over an hour ago. Like most French people I know, our *notaire* enjoys taking advantage of any opportunity for a dramatic frisson during bureaucratic transactions.

I am touched that he also seems to have dressed to suit the sombre occasion, and is wearing what for him is a restrained combination of pink shirt, yellow tie and pale blue trousers. His lime green jacket is hanging on the back of his chair. As I wait for the performance to begin, I reflect on the apparent requirement by the Fourth Republic that, along with all the other necessary qualifications, its rural representatives must also be certifiably colour blind.

After formally welcoming us, Milly, the buyers and our agent Mark Berridge, Mr Remuen begins the ceremony by solemnly reminding us of the day, month and year and why we are here. He then tells each of us who we are, where we were born, and our ages and maiden names where applicable. Although giving away the ladies' ages without demur, he stops short of revealing our horoscopes for the day, our inside leg measurements, favourite colours and the ancestry of our dog, so I suspect he has a busy day ahead.

After a suitable pause for reflection and the heightening of tension, the *maitre* moves on to the next stage. This involves the production of a large map showing where France, Normandy, the Cotentin *departément* and La Puce are situated, then the display of a series of ever-more detailed plans of the location and assets of the property. I feign interest and surprise as he uses his designer pen to indicate holes in several of the dozens of hedges, fences and tree-lined boundaries, but I can sense the excitement mounting as our buyers see exactly what

and how much they are getting for their money. They are a nice young couple from London, and are probably thinking that, in their part of the city, several thousand people would live in the area that Mr Remuen is casually outlining with his gold-plated *Mont Blanc*.

* * * * *

Almost an hour of signing and counter-signing has passed, and we are nearing the point of no return when the telephone rings. The years fall away and I return to the day we bought our first home in France and were sitting in a similar office. At this stage of the proceedings I was convinced something dramatic would happen to stop us getting our hands on the satisfyingly ancient and ornate keys to the front door of our dream cottage. Each time the telephone rang my heart stopped for fear the call would cause the ceremony to be aborted. Now I am hoping that the caller will be our relenting bank manager or a neighbour who believes he has a claim to some part of La Puce and wants to stop the sale. Perhaps it could even be our solicitor in England, ringing to say that a previously unknown relative has died and left us a fortune.

In fact, the caller is Mr Remuen's secretary. As he explains, it is now past noon so she is obviously concerned that some tragedy has occurred to prevent him from departing for his lunch.

Our notary reassures Madame that he has not died of exposure to my tie and shorts, replaces the phone and smiles encouragingly at the buyers as he asks for their cheque. The piece of paper is handed across the table with due ceremony by Mr Remuen. I look at it blankly for a moment then give it to my wife, who takes it as if it were a well-used sheet of toilet paper. Later, she will sew it into her brassiere for safe keeping while we cross the Channel to our British bank; for now, she puts it back on the desk and distances herself from what it stands for with one disdainful finger. For a moment I picture myself ripping the cheque up, throwing the shreds in the air and storming out of the office to reclaim our home and put up the barricades against the bailiffs. In reality, I stand, avoid my wife's eye and shake hands weakly with Mr Remuen, then our agent…and then the new owners of La Puce.

* * * * *

We gather outside the office and two small children tug at their parents' sleeves, obviously anxious to lay claim to their new adventure playground. I continue to avoid my wife's eyes, as I know that one of her greatest regrets at leaving La Puce is that our grandchildren will never swim in the grotto or climb any of the two hundred and thirty eight trees.

Another echo of a funeral service as we gather in a group, all anxious to be on our way for different reasons yet none wanting to be seen to leave with inappropriate haste.

Mark is the first to go, and pats my shoulder as we shake hands. He knows our circumstances and feelings, and good man that he is has been an almost unwilling accomplice to the sale of La Puce.

Next, Mr Remuen moves forward to wish us well in our new home in another part of the Cotentin, and adds that he is to retire soon. La Puce will be one of his last property transactions, and he will miss us, especially after the frequency of our recent meetings. I try to make a joke about whether it will be a bad or good miss, but it does not work in French, so ask him what he plans to do with the rest of his life. He says that he has sold his town house to an English couple and has bought a cottage by the sea in the village where he was born. I say I hope that he had a good *notaire* for the property transfers, and he laughs. When I tell him this will be our last move as I

think we have paid enough in taxes and fees for the pleasure of making money for him and the government, he points out that it has been a small price to pay for living in Normandy. I agree, but remind him of all the money his colleagues across France have made from people who have bought homes here after reading my books. He ripostes that, from what he has heard, most of my books seem calculated to put the English off buying a home in France. This would obviously not make me popular with the Association of Notaries, but I might just qualify for an award from those of his countrymen who have not welcomed *l'invasion*.

The stilted banter stumbling to a close, he shakes my hand again and then breaks tradition and protocol by giving Donella an awkward hug before leaving for his overdue lunch. He too knows our financial situation and understands our emotions.

We are left with the couple, who invite us back to their new home with similar awkwardness. I suspect they also know the reason we have sold our home to them.

I thank them for the invitation but say we have to leave in good time to catch the boat. They will know that the next car ferry to Portsmouth does not leave for hours, but are visibly relieved. After another round of uncomfortable hand-shaking and cheek-kissing, they load their children in the car and drive away to their new home.

We watch in silence, then my wife says she wonders how much the couple will change la Puce, and how much it will change them. She hopes they will be kind to our former home, and that it will be kind to them.

I put my arm around her shoulder and say that I am sure they will look after the old place, then remember that I have not given them the list of instructions on how to coax the best from the wood burning stove in the mill cottage and how not to electrocute themselves when using the alleged power-shower I bought from Didier, our local dodgy dealer. I suggest we drive after them, but Donella says it would be better to go straight to our local bar and ask Franco the Fast to deliver the envelope. She does not think I would be happy to return to La Puce so soon after saying goodbye, and besides, given the way he drives, Franco will probably arrive at our old home well before its new owners.

I agree. Franco is a delivery man for a local cider company, and a demon driver even by French standards. The last time we met he seemed unhappy, and when I asked what was wrong he said that the PR department at the factory had recently taken the progressive step of having a *How Am I Driving?* sign fitted to the back of his secretly souped-up van. When I asked if there had been many complaints, he said the company had not received a single call, which was of course why he was so unhappy. I sympathised and said it was probably because he was going so fast that the people he cut up did not have time to take the number or see the sign, or perhaps even his van.

We cross the road to the Flaming Curtains to set Franco on his furious way while we attend the surprise party we know Coco and Chantelle are staging. It will be the fourth farewell celebration they and other old friends in the area have put on for us in less than a month, though in our present mood I fear it will be more like a wake.

But as my wife often says when bad times come, life should be an adventure and a challenge. We may have reached the end of this chapter in our lives together, but the next awaits.

PART ONE

Hark, hark the dogs do bark.
The beggars are coming to town.

13th century nursery rhyme

1

September 18th:

Dawn approaches, the page has turned and we are in our new home in Lower Normandy.

Yesterday we returned from England and the disgorging of my wife's brassiere at the bank, and have spent our first night at *Le Marais*. Although we will not sign the final papers until next week, the owners have kindly agreed to us staying here until the deed has been done and we have paid the balance of the purchase price. We have also moved all furniture, clothing and members of our menagerie on to the premises, and my old friend, mentor and sometime adversary René Ribet has been acting as house and animal sitter. As my wife said, it seemed more than a little illogical to put a fox in charge of the henhouse, but all appears to be well and there seem to be no vital furnishings, fittings or buildings missing. I am also pleased to have had such a strong link with our past to welcome us to our future.

At the moment, though, I have other thoughts on my

mind and must find a bandage.

I have a drinking friend who says he is going to write a book about all the unusual places and situations in which he has woken. His problem is finding enough time between sessions to get started on the book, and also remembering enough about the awakenings to write about them. A few moments ago, I knew how he must feel at the start of every day.

Coming to, I went through the usual process of recalling who I am, and after overcoming the disappointment, explored my surroundings. My fingertip search revealed I was laying on my back in my Superman pyjamas, with cool tiles beneath my body and a warm trickle making its way down my brow. Further exploration revealed the trickle to be blood, and worse, that it was my own.

Considering the options, my first thoughts were that I had either been taking the yearly Flaming Curtain Absinthe Challenge with the (allegedly) former French Legionnaire Thierry The Very Mad, or been attacked by Lupin, the trainee werewolf who spends daylight hours masquerading as a large and irascible ginger tomcat.

Finding my feet and the light switch, I eventually concluded that I had become a victim of nothing more deadly than an unreasonably low door frame. This would not have bothered the previous generations of owners of our new home, as being of sturdy Norman country stock they would have been close to the earth in more ways than one.

Piecing together the evidence, I concluded that during the night I had woken, groggily assumed my wife and I were still living at the Mill of the Flea and visited the bathroom without switching on the light. This will mean I have probably relieved myself in the posh bidet in our curiously toilet-free new bathroom. Or worse, in my wife's wardrobe, which is located where the bathroom door would have been in the mill cottage.

Either way, it seems I have made my mark on our new home and it has made its mark on me.

* * * * *

A little later, and I sit in the kitchen, watching the kettle and musing on the vagaries of life and fortune. I suppose that with time my surroundings may soon grow familiar and even comforting, but for the present my heart is still at La Puce. For thirteen years I have been waking in a comfortably distressed water mill and it is strange to realise that it will never happen again. Familiarity is said to breed contempt, but not always so with familiar domestic surroundings. Except, as my wife says, when she is looking at a surviving example of my DIY skills.

I drop a spoon on to the flagged floor and the noise echoes around the high-ceilinged kitchen. It seems almost uncomfortably still in this great, brooding house, and I realize I am missing the early morning sounds of the river tumbling by, the wind soughing through the missing roof tiles, and various insects competing to work their way through the remaining rafters in the mill cottage.

The coffee made, I find my way to where my wife lies sleeping. I know how unhappy she was to have to leave La Puce, but also that she will never show it for fear of making me feel even guiltier for losing our home because of my financial incompetence. This is just one of the million reasons I love her so much.

As I wait for her to wake, I think about what has happened to us in the past year, and remember a philosophical friend who believes our lives are but dreams of our own making, and that if we had the power we could awake to a better world and future. He even believes that if our wills were strong enough, we could awake and be someone else. I have often pointed out that the new reality we woke to might be worse than the dream and so, however bad things may seem, we may be better off in our individual illusory worlds. He does not agree, and I suspect

because this does not suit his theory or perennial dark regard of the world and his place in it.

Somewhere in the reaches of the great marsh beyond our new home an owl hoots and is answered by at least two others. Our bantam cocks Fred and Barney react to the challenge, and I begin to feel more at home as the countryside stirs. Dawn is still some time away but our birds like to make an early start, and it is a relief to hear their arrogant cries parried from a nearby homestead. When you have cockerels in your yard, the best neighbours to have are those who also keep one. At La Puce, our closest neighbour lived more than a quarter of a mile away, but we are now part of a small hamlet and must remember that we have responsibilities to those who live close by.

For a moment I consider starting a conversation with the owls, but decide against it. I am a reasonable mimic and like to talk to wild birds, but recall the experience of a friend with a similar disposition. Moving to a new area, he set up a regular dialogue with the residents of what he thought was a nearby rookery, and it was more than a year before he found that his neighbour also fancied himself as an animal imitator and that they had been talking to each other. Their regular exchanges across an acre of meadow had also frightened away all the real birds in the area.

I look at my wife and feel a great welling of tenderness as she stirs and smiles softly in her sleep. She has stuck by me through more than thirty years of struggle, and has not wavered in her faith in my literary abilities for a single moment. I and my dreams of becoming a successful author have kept us poor, but each time I offer to stop writing and get a proper job she insists that we stay the course. When we learned that we must leave La Puce and Donella found me crying in my writing shed, she held me close and said that she would rather live in a council house than see me give up my work. I do not know what I may have done in this or previous lives to deserve such a companion, but I must be as lucky in

love as we have been unlucky with money. When I was much younger and lusting for material wealth, my mother used to tell me at regular intervals that I would eventually realise - if I found those treasures - that health, happiness and the love of a good woman is much more precious than gold. I did not believe her then, and it is too late now to tell her how right she was.

My beautiful wife opens her eyes and gives me a lazy smile. I take her hand and suggest that we welcome the new day from the balcony overlooking the *marais*. To see our first dawn come up across thousands of hectares of brooding marshland should be a suitably dramatic and romantic start to our life in this enchanting part of Lower Normandy. It may also help ease my worries about how we will repay our monstrous debt to the *Banque de Voleurs*.

* * * * *

Moments remain before the new day arrives. We watch contentedly as the eastern horizon begins to glow like the skin of an English tourist in southern France during high summer. We and the rest of the world move unknowingly through space, and the aurous loom of the coming sun dulls the twinkling lights in distant Sourciéville. Our local town is a full seven miles away on the other side of the great plain where the sea once lived, and there is not a single building or road between to mar the view.

A train moves silently along the edge of the marshlands on its way to Paris and work, pleasure or sadness for those who travel in it. Nearer the house, a solitary tree appears through the retreating gloom, and a low whinny and snuffle breaks the silence. It has been a dry start to autumn, so cattle and horses still graze upon the plain. But in February, we shall be looking out across a huge lake.

Behind us, the stone-slabbed roof and soaring chimneys of our new home take form, and I begin to feel more confident and even happy with what lies ahead. Le Marais will never be La Puce, but it is a spectacular property. When we first saw it I was almost frightened by its size and unaccustomed splendour, and told Donella that I thought it might be too grand. She snorted and said that was exactly why we should buy it.

Our old home was set in singularly striking surroundings, but Le Marais will be perfect for letting out rooms to people who think they think they would like to live in a place just like this. Some of the rooms are bigger than the entire mill cottage at La Puce, and even though we visited our new home half a dozen times before moving in, we are still finding parts of the property we had overlooked. Yesterday afternoon, I found a nailed-up door behind a curtain in the bathroom, and behind that a winding flight of stairs that had obviously not been trodden for years. At its end was a whole floor that previous owners had not bothered to decorate or use. If we can attract customers to our stately B &B, we shall certainly not be short of places in which to bed them down. There was also much evidence of bats and owls in residence in the loft, so my wife was delighted to have added to our retinue of non-paying guests.

The owls on the *marais* make their closing exchanges before they and the night depart, and a security lamp in the back yard of the house next door flashes on. Caught in the pool of light, a fox strolls across the flagstones, then pauses to look incuriously up at us. At my side I feel Milly bristle, and a low growl precedes a throaty bark of warning to the trespasser. I reach down and tap her muzzle lightly to remind her that we now have neighbours to consider.

Then all hell breaks loose.

The air is rent with a cacophony of yelping, baying and barking, and it is as if at least two packs of hounds have arrived to compete over which should have the pleasure of ripping the fox to shreds. Milly cowers into a corner, then we hear a distant shout and the bedlam abates almost as quickly as it erupted.

I totter to the balcony wall and look numbly into the gloom. The explosion of noise seems to have come from a large barn close by the fence marking the start of our other neighbour's land.

My wife and I stare at each other as silence returns. I shake my head like a boxer who has just received a heavy and unexpected blow, then go to find a torch.

* * * * *

I am walking along the winding track from the lane to our neighbour's house. The entrance to his property is a full quarter of a mile from our gate, but then returns towards the barn alongside our fence.

It is still dark beneath the shroud of trees, and when my torch picks out a broken-down gate, I reach out to open it. I quickly decide against this plan as the gate shudders under the impact of a shuddering blow and a pair of glowing eyes appear high above the top rail. There follows a frantic scrabbling and slobbering, and the quivering beam of light reveals what at first appears to be a very aggressive Shetland pony trying to get over the gate and at me. I take at least another pace back and then realise that the creature is not a small horse but a very large dog. Thankfully, it looks more puzzled than angry, but I decide not to come closer and discover whether it will eventually decide to ignore, welcome or eat me. From an even safer distance, I train the torch on a sign fixed to the gatepost. Below a faded photograph of the dog in a much happier mood, the notice declares that my neighbour is the proprietor of a properly registered *elevage du chien*.

Too shocked to think clearly, I pat the dog's great head absent-mindedly and return to break the news to my wife.

After more than a decade of warning readers of the

potential hazards of buying property in France and stressing the importance of location above virtually all other virtues, I appear to have bought us a house next door to an obviously thriving dog kennels.

I cannot stop the French being French.

Charles de Gaulle

2

September18th. Evening:

I believe most people who know me would agree that I am an optimist by inclination and conviction. I suspect some would say I am often optimistic to the point of insanity.

This time, though, even I can see no benefits to the situation in which we find ourselves. The dreadful dawn chorus from the barn within yards of the outbuildings we planned to convert into tranquil holiday apartments has defeated even my ability to see an opportunity where disaster appears to lie in wait.

All our plans for our new home and future seem to be have been destroyed in a moment, simply because I did not make proper enquiries as to what our new neighbours do for a living.

Some years ago, I devised a list of the most important considerations for Britons when buying a property in France. It was based on the most common horror stories from people who had bought in haste and repented at long and expensive leisure. At the top of the list was a warning about the importance of checking out the temperament and occupation of your potential neighbours. This was followed by a homily

about the often fatal error of borrowing lots of money to develop a large but entirely unsuitable property for holiday accommodation. Elsewhere in my books I have passed on cautionary tales about a vegetarian who bought a house next to an abattoir, and a couple who tried to set up a meditation centre alongside a nascent motorway. Now I have posted new standards in my own canon of unsuitable property purchase, and in the process broken every rule in my own books.

Another irony I find hard to appreciate in my present mood is how long we searched for and how carefully we considered our options before settling on our new home. Le Marais was by far the most impressive and beautifully restored house we had seen, perfect for our plans and a real bargain. We were also delighted to find it at the bottom of a dead-end lane and ringed by tens of thousands of hectares of national parkland which could never be blighted with new housing or roads. Now I can see why it might have seemed such a bargain buy.

Unfortunately for us and our plans for Le Marais, I did not enquire too closely about our neighbours. When I asked, we were told that the cottage on one side of Le Marais is home to an elderly widow, and that the property next door is owned by a man who likes animals. We were not told that the animals he particularly likes are dogs, and that he likes them so much that he keeps dozens in a barn within yards of the front door of the house we planned to buy.

But as usual I have only myself to blame for our predicament. We had heard the occasional yap and bark on the two visits we made to Le Marais before signing the first stage of the contract, but the absence of dogs in any home in rural Normandy would have been, if anything, abnormal. Now we have learned more about what lies beyond the fence alongside our planned development of holiday cottages, and the news is not good.

This morning I spoke to our estate agent, to the current owners, and to the *notaire* who is dealing with the exchange. According to the agency, they knew nothing of the kennels.

According to the owners, they told the agency about the kennels. According to the notary, it is normally forbidden to run a commercial kennels so close to a private home, but the premises are registered and apparently legal. Someone, he said with the verbal equivalent of the most fatalistic of Gallic shrugs, must know someone in high places. Even worse news is that the premises are licensed for the keeping, breeding and raising of up to seventy dogs.

When he had waited a moment for me to compose myself, Mr Lecroix said he will be making further investigations, and we have arranged to meet at his earliest convenience, which is next week. Before that meeting, we will be talking to a lawyer specialising in rural property and boundary law. In France, this makes him a very important and busy man, and the cost of just an hour of his time makes even the rate of our friend and septic tank specialist Albert The Very Expensive seem reasonable.

For now, I have convened a meeting on the balcony to talk about what we will do if the kennels next door prove to be a legitimate business.

All is peaceful, and the late evening sun turning the plain into a vast and rich field of gold is a cruel reminder of just how wonderful a place this could be without our neighbour and his guests.

As ever, Donella is coolly practical in her approach to our situation and how we should deal with it. She reminds me that the noise from next door is only intrusive at dawn and other feeding times. We will grow used to it, and it might not upset guests, especially if they, like us, are animal lovers. It may be that the owner is not allowed to keep his dogs so close to our home, and even if he is, we could restrict our accommodation plans to bed and breakfast guests in the main house.

I refuse to see any light at the end of the dark tunnel I have led us into, and make a couple of sarcastic suggestions. Donella dismisses my idea that we set fire to the kennels on the grounds of the danger to the inmates, and points out that my refinement of warning the owner in advance might prove

incriminatory. My proposal that we specialise in holidays for obsessive dog lovers, trainee kennel maids and profoundly deaf people finds more favour, and we finally agree that we should make the best of our situation and wait until our meetings with the notary and lawyer before deciding on any drastic action.

As we look out at the big Norman sky and the distant lights of Sourciéville, my wife moves her chair closer to mine and strokes my brow as if comforting a fretful child. All that is important, she reminds me, is that we are together and well. If it makes me really unhappy to live here, we shall refuse to complete the sale. Even if we lose our deposit, we can start the search again for somewhere I will be happy. We have been in worse situations than this before and come through them. Besides, whatever the outcome, I will at least have something dramatic to write about in my next book. She is sure that my readers will find my latest cock-up entirely in keeping with the general theme of my literary work.

After thinking yet again just how lucky I am to have such a woman to steer me through the rocks that fate seems to delight in placing in the middle of our path through life, I say that even my readers will not believe that I could be so stupid as to buy a house next to a dog kennels. Looking at the moon and then exchanging meaningful glances with Milly, Donella smiles indulgently, pats my head and suggests we play a round of killer dominoes before retiring.

* * * * *

Saturday afternoon. This morning I stayed in bed until the canine chorus had erupted. I like to sleep with the windows open, but today sealed myself in the bedroom and played my favourite Iron Maiden tracks at full volume until the day was well aired. It is not that I am overly sensitive, but since we learned about the kennels next door, even a snuffle or whine

from across the fence makes me grit my teeth in preparation for a possible eruption. Yesterday evening, I found myself baying at the moon in frustration and misery when feeding time arrived. The philosopher August Strindberg said he hated people who kept dogs because they did not have the courage to do their own biting. I like to think that I am a dog lover, but find the barking of other people's dogs almost as annoying as the shouting of other people's children. Noise, as another more practical philosopher said, is merely sound one does not wish to hear. I understand and agree with this view, but it does not help.

* * * * *

Sunday morning, and I have avoided going barking mad for another day by persuading Donella to join me for a very early breakfast at our nearest town. It is always a delight to take part in this sacred weekly ritual for millions of French men, and it will also ensure that we will not be at home as dawn breaks.

When we were looking for a new home in the Cotentin, a prime consideration was the location and character of the nearest town. While we knew we would never find another Bricquebec or St Sauveur-le-Vicomte, we were more than happy to have discovered Sourciéville. It is an interesting town with a long history, and is also home to one of my favourite bars.

On the coast of the unfashionable side of the Lower Normandy peninsula and at the confluence of three major rivers, Sourciéville was once an important stopping-off point for barge traffic on its way to and from Paris. Nowadays, all goods and most travellers roar by on the RN13, and the canal head has become a small and determinedly untrendy marina. Many of the visiting craft are sleek and expensive-looking, but the contrasting jumble of barges, fishing smacks and other workboats in the cheaper moorings are as weathered and

sturdy as their owners. The grand merchants' houses on the quayside have become civic offices or struggling hotels, and Sourciéville seems to live off itself and those who come regularly to town from the surrounding marshlands.

Like all the hundreds of small French towns I have visited, Sourciéville has its own distinctive character, yet shares a commonality with every other town of the same size. Regardless of how many retail giants stamp their footprints on the outskirts, the centres and souls of most of these solid burghs remain largely as they have been for generations.

There will be the main square which becomes a market place one day a week, and at other times a jousting centre for drivers with a score to settle. This will be a much-favoured spectator sport for those taking their ease on the benches dotted around the square, and a nose-to-nose altercation over a parking space can be more keenly followed and debated than the most hotly contested game of *petanque*. To help with the confusion, the local authority will usually have erected no-entry signs on most (if not all) entrances to the car parking area, and each directional arrow will point towards the others. Beyond the official war zone, the square will be lined with trees and shops and creatively dented traffic bollards, and there will be an adequate supply of excellent, reasonable and unfavoured bars, butchers, bakers, florists and grocery shops. It is rumoured by some students of provincial French culture that the least popular of these enterprises are secretly subsidised by the town hall to maintain balance and the level of intellectual debate about comparative virtues and shortcomings. Certainly in my experience, the French like nothing better than a good row over who bakes the best and worst baguette in town.

Elsewhere and offstage will be those premises trading in more mundane goods and services. Now and then a naive outsider or hopelessly optimistic local will try and launch an exciting new enterprise like a wittily-named gift or book shop, but he or she will soon accept defeat and pass the premises on to the next doomed entrepreneur. So, life goes on as the

outside world changes. It is small-town France that, for me, holds the key to the future of this great country. When these bastions of everyday values crumble, so will the complex yet somehow simple nature and essence of the Fourth Republic.

Although the streets are barely aired, we find the square comfortably stocked with cars. As it is a Sunday and such an early hour, a truce has obviously been declared and there are no gladiatorial contests as we pull up. I turn off the engine, then flinch as a sudden bark reminds me of our problem neighbours. I look to my right to see that a moped has pulled up alongside and is under the control of a large dog wearing the headgear of a World War II fighter pilot. The dog also appears to be smoking a cigar.

I practice my punch-drunk boxer routine, look again and see that the dog is actually sitting contentedly in the lap of a very small man in dark clothing. The man's head is completely swathed in a black scarf, from which pokes the glowing stub of a cigarette. As we disembark and Milly and I wish the rider and his dog a good day, I ask the man about the dog, the hat and the cigar. After realising that I am a foreigner and thus not totally fluent in shrug or familiar with local tradition, he explains that his dog has an ear infection, so is wearing his master's cap to keep out the chill. The cigar is the animal's Sunday morning treat, and the dog is chewing rather than smoking it. When I ask how many cigarettes the man has smoked since leaving home, he frowns and then tells me that he is about to start on his sixth. That of course does not allow for the modest handful taken with his coffee at breakfast. I look at the brand name of his moped and estimate his average speed and the wind and general road conditions, then propose that he lives no more than four kilometres from the square. He unwinds his scarf turban, confirms my reckoning, beams and shakes my hand before disappearing in the direction of the bar. He is obviously impressed with what he must think is a foreigner's lucky guess, but cannot know that I have made a

detailed study of the classic and gloriously pointless French indulgence of chain-smoking while riding a moped.

Feeling inordinately pleased with myself, I enjoy ignoring the parking meters and leaving the car unlocked (two more extremely congenial reasons for living in rural France), then lead the way across the square towards the comforting fug and fragrances of the *Bar du Bon Parle*. This is the most popular bar in Sourciéville, though not only because of the conversational opportunities suggested by its name.

In a most civilized example of French pragmatism in the acceptance and understanding of the nature of human nature, the Bon Parle is a combination of pub, tobacconist, news agency and betting shop. The owner also employs the most attractive waitresses in the region, which is another reason for its popularity. Although providing all else the average man could want, no food is served at the Bon Parle as most of the exclusively male clientele will have a wife at home. The average French countrywoman will have no objection to her mate enjoying a drink with his friends or exchanging banter with a pretty girl, but paying to eat someone else's cooking when not in her company could almost be seen as gross infidelity, and perhaps even grounds for divorce.

Of all days and times, early Sunday morning sees the provincial and rural bars in our area at their busiest and best. In the converse to the British social drinking timetable, the bars in the heart of the Cotentin are quiet on Friday and Saturday evenings. Anyone who has seen a French countryman nursing his half of beer before going home to eat and drink with the family will know why prices in bars have to be so relatively high. But on Sunday and at a time when most British pub goers are still in their or someone else's beds, the Bon Parle will be at its liveliest.

I believe that there is no finer institution than the Great British Pub, and it is the one thing I miss above all else when in our adopted homeland. But I know of no public house where I

can find such an atmosphere of camaraderie and lazy relaxation as a busy small-town French bar at first light on any Sunday of the year.

For millions of French men, the routine is inviolable. Ahead lies a demanding day of domesticity and a long lunch with parents and children, so an early start is required to gear up for the day's indulgences and responsibilities. The nominal head of the household will often rise earlier than his weekday working routine demands, and arrive at his chosen bar as close as possible to opening time. On entry, he will take part in the mandatory ceremony of handshaking and verbal or physical badinage with friends and regulars. From my long years of observation, nobody can simultaneously remove his hat, shake a hand, slap a back, tweak an ear, pull a face, light a cigarette and shrug an unspoken response to a dozen enquiries as to his health as adroitly as a rural Frenchman. And all within an hour of waking and a moment of entering his favourite bar on a Sunday morning. As with car jousting, moonshine apple brandy making and moustache growing, our region of rural France naturally claims to be the champion practitioners of this weekly ritual, but I suspect every other region would say the same.

Standing back to allow our new friend to demonstrate his skills, I am impressed to see that he finds time and space to perform all his duties and still order a bowl of water for his dog, a coffee and apple brandy for himself, a copy of the local paper and a whole carton of full strength cigarettes and small pack of cigars to see he and his dog safely through the journey home.

We content ourselves with a general greeting to the bar, and prepare to drink in the inimitable atmosphere which comes free with several cups of strong black coffee, a thimble glass or two of *calva* and the bouquet of the familiar, always interesting and somehow comforting melange of garlic, French tobacco and the occasional male bodily emanation. Although I shall always be a foreigner in France, it is at times like this that I feel totally at home.

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A languid hour has passed, the hell hounds a league and more away will not have demanded their breakfast, and we are already on our third *café et calva*. Unsurprisingly, I am in a relaxed and almost contented mood. As Donella says, nothing is for ever, and as long as we have our health, our children and grandchildren and animals and a roof over our heads, we are the most privileged of people. As I say, I would rather that the roof over our heads was not within baying distance of a busy kennel complex. But with the help of the calvados and my wife's company, I am beginning to see things in a better light. When the black dog of depression visits me and I complain about our present situation and my advancing years, my wife often challenges me to imagine that I were a best-selling author with a world-wide following and a million or two pounds in the bank, but twenty years older and in poor health and all alone. She then asks if I would rather be as I am now and with what I have, or be older and richer. Invariably, I reply I would like all of the good bits and none of the bad. But I know and appreciate what she means. It is a sad aspect of the human psyche that we want what we do not have and belittle what is already ours. Somehow, I believe that all will turn out well at Le Marais. If not, we shall just have to move on and start afresh.

As I test waitress response time by gently rattling my cup in its saucer and lifting one eyebrow fractionally, I see that the boss of the Bon Parle is making his entrance. As the purveyor of so many vital services to his customers, he has high status in this community, and his relaxed yet authoritative gait confirms his importance to himself and his customers.

Mr Perruque is a small, wiry man who has seen at least seventy summers, and is clad as ever in black shoes and socks,

trousers and waistcoat over a crisp white shirt. Completing our host's ensemble is a large black bow tie which sits uncomfortably around his turtle neck and bobbles alarmingly as he responds to greetings from all sides. Far more striking than the mobile tie is, however, the most patently obvious, blackest and ill-fitting wig I have ever seen.

As he has never been known to serve a customer, it seems a curiosity that he wears the traditional waiter's uniform. It is also obvious that Mr Perruque could afford a much more expensive and far more convincing hairpiece, and that he sports both the woven monstrosity and barman's outfit as a coded signal of his position and the fact that he can and will wear exactly what he likes. The terrible toupée is also perhaps a constant and blatant reminder to his customers that loss of hair is no evidence of loss of virility, or his ability to indulge his libido. For despite his age, unprepossessing looks and slight stature, Mr Perruque is the most renowned *courir de joupons* in all Sourciéville, and perhaps all Lower Normandy. He is known throughout the region as the most dedicated of skirt-chasers, and is further admired by his customers for organising his affairs so that he does not have to chase any skirts and their wearers too far.

As we wait and watch, the owner of the Bon Parle surveys the room like an elderly buzzard surveying a field of corn at harvest time, then turns and makes his way swiftly towards the beaded curtain leading to the stock room. I note that his bow tie twitches and his patent-leather footwear squeaks in protest as he sidesteps and jinks at high speed round a knot of customers. Shortly afterwards, the waitress whose attention I have been trying to attract puts down her tray, fluffs up her hair and makes her way through the curtains. The customers sitting nearby have also seen the subtle signals, and the betting commences. In many British pubs, Sunday morning is traditionally the time for the weekly raffle, with the top prize a roasting joint or bottles of wine and spirits. In the Bon Parle, the customers will be wagering how long Mr Perruque will be

engaged in the stock room, and in what position and condition his bow tie and wig will be when he emerges.

Being forbidden by Donella to lay a bet on the outcome, I repeat my eyebrow gambit with the nearest waitress and catch her eye as she pauses to pass the time of day with the moped rider and his dog. The man is showing her a page from the local newspaper, and I can see that most of it is taken up by a photograph of a hunting party. It is a tableau enacted a million times a week across France, with a number of ruddy-faced men arranged in football team style. The men in the back row nurse dogs, wine glasses and guns, while those in front are kneeling and holding up their catch to the camera. All the hunters look much happier than any of the dozens of dead game birds hanging resignedly from their hands.

On closer inspection, I see that what makes the picture different from so many similar sporting photographs.

In the middle of the back row, a man of late middle-age and considerable girth is smiling complacently and a little smugly at the camera. His plaid shirt is stretched across his paunch, and beneath it, his unfeasibly large penis rests on the shoulder of the man kneeling in front. The victim is obviously unaware of his burden, while all the other hunters seem to be in on the joke and enjoying it hugely. The caption below the photograph makes a witty observation about the pleasures of hunting and exposing oneself to the fresh air. To me, the picture sums up a very special aspect of French culture, and yet another good reason for living here. In Britain, I can think of no daily newspaper - however full of photographs of naked young women and breathtakingly hypocritical kiss 'n' tell stories - which would print such a photograph. Here, the moment of genial ribaldry in the heart of the countryside is seen for exactly what it is, and been chosen without hesitation to brighten the day of the readers of this family newspaper. Like peeing in public, ordinary French people see nothing offensive in any part of the human anatomy or for what it is used.

After the moped man has pointed out the key aspect of

the photograph to the waitress, he places the newspaper on the table, holds his hand apart like a fisherman demonstrating the size of the biggest fish he has allegedly caught, then nods towards his lap. She tosses her head, lets a little puff of air escape from her pursed lips, then lifts one drooping little finger in the air. Having put him in his place, she ruffles his hair affectionately, notes my eyebrow twitching and comes across to take our order.

As I am about to ask for a final round, a stir amongst the customers signals the re-emergence of Mr Perruque through the beaded curtain. A dozen wrists are lifted as the punters check the exact time of his absence, and one young man in a track suit produces and holds up a stopwatch with a theatrical flourish.

The exact time of the brief encounter confirmed, all attention turns to the condition of the runner and rider. Apart from a slight glow to her features and badly smudged lipstick, the waitress appears unscathed. The owner of the Bon Parle, however, looks considerably worse for wear. His face is as white as his now-rumpled shirt, his bow tie is on a vertical rather than horizontal plane, and his wig has moved at least ten degrees askew of its original alignment. There is also a large crimson smear leading from the left side of his upper lip to a point just below his spectacles, the lenses of which have become misted over.

There is no round of applause, but a low rumble of triumph or disappointment from those who have placed a bet. Apparently unaware of the reaction, Mr Perruque straightens his tie and hairpiece and attends to his face and spectacles before returning through the curtain. Presumably he is going for a lie down before the next encounter, or to report to Madame that things are going nicely downstairs and all is business as usual at the Bar du Bon Parle.