

A RAMBLE IN NORMANDY

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THE direct service from Southampton to Caen tempted me with a new way of getting to France, and I came on deck of a fine August morning, to find the boat lying off Ouistreham. It was an hour or so before the tide let us enter the harbour, and even then the canal lock was long filling. An Englishman beside me remarked: "The worst of this way of travelling is that it is so leisurely." "Or the best", I said.

At the lock were young men in flannels and damsels in light coloured frocks; a dry wind shook the bunting in the harbour, and forced the fishing smacks which followed us to tack smartly across and across as they beat up into the entrance. The valley of the Orne was all rich greenery, as became the country of Pont l'Éveque cheese; and it was surprising to see a group of factory chimneys on some rising ground beyond this pastoral scene. Then a branch from the canal led to a ship-yard full of clangorous activity; this was only a department of the huge works, which covered many acres of ground; the small size of their spoil-banks showed all this to be quite new. A ship's officer enlightened me. Back in the hilly country eastward, iron was discovered not long before the war; Germans acquired the concession; then the war came, and French enterprise took it over. Coal of every sort is brought there, pulverised and treated; all its by-products are used in smelting and steel forging; there is said to be nothing in Europe to equal the completeness of this equipment. Before the war, the manager would have been a German, working for Germans; now he is an Englishman, working for the French. Beyond this modern structure, which did not lack a certain beauty of finely balanced masses, and was admirably smokeless, the towers of Caen rose into sight; and presently the canal brought us to our berth in the heart of the city.

It would be foolish, with Percy Dearmer's *Highways and Byways* available, to describe the architecture of Caen, which really has just as much to show as Oxford or Cambridge. But I fancy many English travellers go there without realising that Caen also is a university town, yet how different! You come endlessly on corners which might be stray bits of Merton or New College, tucked away between the main streets and reached only by tunnelled pass-

ages which run back between the houses; but all these belong to town, not gown. The university buildings lie away up in the modern quarter, which has the splendour inseparable from buildings constructed in fine cut stone—and the Caen stone is famous; but it lacks all other picturesqueness or archaeological interest. The genius of modern French study avoids that visible nexus with the past which Oxford and Cambridge cultivate. What struck me chiefly about the university was the enormous size of the school of agriculture—separate from which again is the school of pomiculture—scarcely less important for a province with so big an apple crop. These scientists cause any farmer in Calvados to be prosecuted who lets mistletoe flourish; for, scientifically considered, that cherished growth is a mischievous parasite.

I might have more to say of Caen if the weather had let me row up the long straight solemn river, which runs parallel to the racecourse—a huge grassy tract, looking richer in pasture than Meath or the Golden Vein, and reminding strangers that this is horse-breeding Normandy. But it rained on me perniciously till I got to Bayeux where the sun shone, and perhaps for that reason Bayeux cathedral pleased me as nothing did in Caen. I liked its floor, which follows the ground level of the ridge on which the church is perched, so that the two transepts are several feet lower than the nave and the choir. Great slender shafts of the warm white stone, running up an immense height, link this part of the design to the decoration of the upper courses. I liked also the contempt for exact symmetry shown by the stone-cutters who wrought here so lavishly, encouraged by the soft material; even in their conventional ornament two sides of a panel often lack correspondence. Indeed, the church itself carries out this characteristic; on the south side of the choir is a range of six chapels open and exquisitely windowed, but on the north a blank wall encloses the ambulatory, so that from the nave you look to an enchanting distribution of light and shade. On your right a forest of white shafts rises into vaulted arches, between which the sun pierces in from the south, while to your left all is dark dim columned stone.

It was a special delight, too, on that sunny day, with blue moist Atlantic weather, to look from the centre of the church along the nave, with its richly decorated Romanesque, to a broad tract of sunlight at the west end; the great portal stood wide open, and you could see people coming and going to a little tea-shop. Or again, from that you could look out of dazzling light into the long lovely recession of column and arch. All the old glass has been broken, except for one charming light in the east end and a complete

rose window in the west; but the latter, with its admirable violet dyes, is hidden by the organ: an outrage on that piety which we owe to the Guild of Cooks of Bayeux who paid for this adornment in the fourteenth century, and I think their craft in the town to-day shows some symptoms of discouragement. One eats badly at Bayeux.

As I came out of the cathedral, I read this notice signed by the Bishop:

We request our priests not to admit to the Confessional or the Holy Table persons who have not conformed to the rules of Christian modesty which enjoin covered neck and long sleeves. This announcement is to be posted in the churches of all towns *and watering-places* in the diocese.

The italics are not due to the Bishop of Bayeux; they are my tribute to his temerariousness. If this prelate can enforce his order on the *plages*, he should make a name in history. But if he cares about a smaller achievement, he might use his episcopal authority to abolish the pompous abominable wooden pulpit which bellows out across that most beautiful of naves.

From the west front of the cathedral, everybody goes round to the museum where the famous Bayeux tapestries are kept, and on the way you may have the luck to find a very jolly little entertainment—the lace school, which is opened as a holiday class for tiny girls; some are only five years old—probably none more than ten. There they were, playing their intricate games with spools and bobbins, two hours in the morning and two more in the afternoon. I stayed so long watching that later on one of the infants greeted me outside the church. She told me with pride that she had made ten *dents*, I suppose little sword-teeth of an edging; and she said that it amused her well as a holiday pastime. Then I went on to the tapestries, or rather, embroideries. Nobody had ever told me how well they are housed—in a slate-roofed eighteenth century building, probably at one time ecclesiastical, which is perched up on a terrace, having a formal garden below it. On one's right was a wing of the building; on one's left the terrace had a *charmille* of limes, and below them, on the retaining wall, was a line of pots with pink geraniums which are Bayeux's favourite flower; countless window boxes of them cheer up its grey streets. Standing outside the museum, one looked across to the superb length of the cathedral; the sun blazing down brought out all the detail of the south side, a mass of open stonework; and the soft yellowish grey of the exterior was heightened by contrast with beds of begonia and lobelia in the museum gardens. After a swift reading of the graphic chapter

in history which is to be followed in the needlework—Queen Matilda's primitive cinema—I came back gladly to sit in the sun and soak in this beauty. Presently strolling down to lower ground by the east end of the cathedral, I found a most covetable old dwelling house, and a jail in which it would be a privilege to be shut up; then, swinging round by the end of the church, I was met by a gigantic plane tree filling the space between the cathedral and what was once the Bishop's palace, but is now municipal buildings and the museum. I never saw a plane of such girth; but then an inscription told me that it was otherwise remarkable. It was a Tree of Liberty, planted in 1797 to take the place of earlier saplings which had not survived—tender growths of 1789 or the Terror. Plane trees do not often see out five generations, and this specimen must have been hardy indeed, to have flourished through so many revolutions and counter-revolutions, outside the *ancien eveche*, under the eye of ten or a dozen successive bishops, all of whom presumably looked crooked at it—if, indeed, they refrained from hostile prayer. It is not a bad symbol of what it stands for in France. Far away up the trunk you can see the trace of lower branches, thrown out in its early youth, but all of them lopped ruthlessly—manifestation of Liberty that France did not want. There it stands anyhow, with its memories and its symbolisms.
Floreat!

One of the pleasures of this journey came from a commission given me by a friend to look up old furniture shops, and (in extreme cases) to buy. At Caen I had found intelligent people installed in a beautiful old house where there was space, not merely to exhibit a jumble of curiosities, but to show rooms furnished in the various French styles. A little distance outside of Bayeux another *antiquaire* was using a pleasant house and garden for this commerce; and these places not only give one a meeting-ground with folk who often know a great deal, but they add to a foreigner's very limited acquaintance with French interiors. In this case the process of packing up a small purchase admitted me to the most enchanting Norman kitchen. Space and air and meticulous cleanness made it an apartment which any English mistress would choose for a dining-room. It was living-room as much as cooking-room; there was a huge wide hearth for winter, but for summer a trim little stove, wood-burning, served all purposes; and as in all Norman kitchens, there was profusion of burnished copper and roughly painted old earthenware dishes and plates. What stamped the antiquary's establishment was the use of two old screws from cider presses to make supports—four feet high by a foot in diameter—for a mantel-shelf.

A train had taken me to Bayeux because I did not know that there was an autobus; having discovered that one ran twice daily to Caen and back, I set out with it in the afternoon for Creully which has a most delightful château. The beautiful tiling of the roofs, flecked like autumn foliage, set off the colour of the local stone. For here also there is a quarry of perfect building material; a way-side shanty, apparently to shelter roadmenders, was built of cut blocks instead of corrugated iron. From Creully I walked out to Lanteuil, a huge pompous château, set down in a hollow among great trees, with its fish ponds and its moats; and to these splendours the road from the highway was a cart track. There is a curious lack of finish about domestic magnificence in France.

Here, in what is called Le Bessin, the country spread broad and fenceless; it is tremendously fertile; there was a wide expanse of cut hay, grown for seed and stocked in sheaves; vast stacks of wheat were being built, and there was also a big patch of several acres of flax. The farmers here simply pull and dry the flax; it goes elsewhere to be steeped, and this presumably avoids, or at all events confines, the trouble about fish-poisoning which vexes northern Ireland. Probably also the complex processes of dealing with this crop are better carried out by technical experts than by the small farmer and local scutch mill.

After a night at Creully, where the inn was very old and had a charm of its own as well as a pleasant hostess, next morning's autobus took me to Thaon, two stages on my way to Caen. It started, of course, dreadfully early, and I was shot out at a village post-office on a grey damp morning before eight o'clock. We had approached it through a narrow street of houses, all splendidly built of cut stone, and almost all in ruins. They might have been the habitations of merchant princes, but in truth their occupants had been only agricultural labourers, and the desertion was simply part of that drift to the big towns which France also is feeling. Of late the dearness of living in towns as compared with the cheapness in country is setting the tide back, but I saw little sign of this in Thaon, and found it gloomy enough at first. Still, when I praised the superb pink hollyhock that grew by a wheelwright's door, the *charron's* wife insisted on giving me seed of it to take away. She told me also that it was a sad day in her household, for the son was called up for his military service; the best of sons, so keen and so good at his trade! However, there is hope that he may be allowed to follow that trade even in the army, and I pray devoutly that all his military career may lie near the base.

My road to the old church of Thaon lay along another street, again mostly in ruins; there were garden walls of cut stone, having breaches in them as wide as a church door. Then, passing the château and its great farmyard, I followed the demesne wall, till an open gate led into such a field as I never had seen the like of. Thirty acres at least in extent, but semi-circular, it sloped down gently to a curving ridge of high land which enclosed the bottom of it like a rampart; and all round it was a double row of apple trees, fully a mile in circuit. Imagine that garland on that greenness in springtime!

Then I followed a lane through such jungle of hedgerow-growth as is everywhere in this fruitful country, to where a bottom of water-meadows was deep in grass, with heavy cattle trying to eat it down and not able to, and grey poplars shimmering silver in the wind. Nearby, among taller poplars, with a great yew tree outside its door, was the derelict church. Normans made it in the twelfth century, and since then little has spoiled the jewel. Even time has spared much of the ornament; many rough expressive sculptured heads survive; the slow tooth of the sky has not gnawed them into shapelessness; and the little capped tower, a marvel of symmetry, is intact. It was a marvel of colour, too, that fine day; all the pinks and yellows and greys of the small stone slabs which made its roof set off the yellow grey of the walls.

Past the church the footpath led in a few yards to a huge slab of white stone laid across a tiny limpid chalk stream. Ten yards further was another rill and another slab, sculptured by the feet of generations. That coolness, that greenness, the white massive simplicity of those bridges under the shivering poplars, outside the adorable little building, seemed to me the last word of beauty. The track led on, under a rising ridge, pine-clad and showing the lines of some ancient camp, Roman or pre-Roman; a little further on, a chasm ran into the ridge under the pines, with masonry supporting the vaulted entrance to the old quarry, whence had come those bridging slabs, and, seven centuries earlier, the church itself. I scrambled on to the ridge to look back at Thaon and my beautiful apple-girt field; and I saw that on to the west, beyond another green expanse of meadow, another wooded ridge answered mine. On this, profiled against the sky, and taller than the tallest timber, was the château of Fontaine-Henry.

That was my destination, and the track which I had left followed the stream towards it through the valley below me. Entry to the château is permitted only on Fridays, and I must merely look from the gateway at this beautiful building, with the incredibly

steep and high slated roof of its tower, beside which the dwelling house spreads out its mullioned windows, its pillared porch and its balconies, all wrought of the stone from the ridge which faces it. The village was pleasant, too; flowers, gay or rich in colour, showed wherever there was a glimpse between the walls of hewn stone, and here were no symptoms of ruin. The lord of Fontaine-Henry is the Comte d'Alençon, a royal name; and it was not surprising to see the little old Norman church full of fleur-de-lis.

There are two restaurants in Fontaine-Henry, and one has rustic woodwork and a balcony; the Restaurant Avray, where I ate, has only a little courtyard with seats and a wisteria and dahlias and climbing nasturtiums—and geraniums, of course; but it has friendly dogs and cats and two friendly women, one old and one young. It has also good wine as I know, for I drank there, feeling empty after my early morning start, a bottle of old Burgundy—after which I did not make all the possible endeavours to see the chapel in the château's grounds, but wandered up a grass-grown lane to a stubble field where were horses tethered; and there I slept or dozed until the autobus was ready to take me back to Caen.

Friends had praised to me the valley of the Orne, which is Caen's river—tidal up to the town. The adventure was a little disappointing. I was to have fished, and I did fish; but the natives were all in agreement about one fact, though disputing as to its cause—trout, they unanimously declared, had become very scarce. I see no reason to differ from them. Also the hotel where my friend had stayed was no longer a hotel, and the best entertainment that I got in the valley of the Orne was the *plat de bonne mine*—a pretty French name for the host's desire to please. This was never lacking in the menu.

The Orne comes down from the high country which people call (rather absurdly) *la Suisse Normande*. For this I headed, stopping in Falaise (but the Conqueror's birthplace is too well known to write about), and going on from there to Domfront, on the very edge of that high ridge which divides the waters that flow north to the English Channel from those that flow south and west and so out by the Loire.

How steep this ridge is I learnt on arriving, for I put my suitcase in the horse-drawn, but—according to my principles and practice—clung to my knapsack. Long before I had reached the Hotel de la Poste, I was wishing principles and practice and knapsack to the devil; for surely Domfront is a city set on a hill.

The town is very old; the Conqueror and the Conqueror's father before him, and dozens of conquerors thereafter, fought for it; but—to my relief—it contained no old churches. Actually,

on the very peak of the hill they were building a new one; not greatly to my taste, so far as one could judge the design; yet for the novelty of such a sight in Normandy I responded (frugally) to the appeal of a subscription box.

Several things pleased me at my first survey of Domfront that Sunday morning. One was the bold representation of a boar hunt in the charcutier's window; no such advertisement ever adorned a British porkbutcher's shop. Another just subject of admiration was the tact of a former deputy for this region, who, instead of waiting to be commemorated by the image of his own trousered personality, commemorated himself instead by offering to his constituents the statue of a beautiful woman. But the adorable feature of Domfront is the château, which has been turned into a public pleasure-ground, commanding a view not easily matched in Europe. Northward, you look up the valley of the Varenne along which the line comes from Flers. To the west is a steep gap where the little river cut its way through the last of the high ridges; it flows some two hundred feet almost directly under the castle wall. But to the south, green champaign country spreads illimitable. I have seen something like it from the hills above Dublin which overlook the great central plain,—the horizon being defined only by the Mourne Mountains some sixty miles off. Yet when you see all this, you see in the same prospect its water boundary—the Irish Channel. Here at Domfront from east to west, half round the compass, the eye travels unchecked over fertile land. Except for one small dark belt, there was no forest, but all was studded thick with trees; and at least one in every three or four of these would be an apple. They say that in spring-time it is like looking out over rosy snow; and that when the pear trees are in blossom, which line either side of the steeply winding mile of ascent from the railway station, you would find it hard to believe that the road was not prepared for the passage of some wonderful procession.

Even as I saw it, all one greenness, while I basked on the grass in the sun, the view was extraordinary for its beauty; here indeed was a broader lap of earth than our island countries know. And I could see how the dividing ridge stretched away westward, healthy and pineclad, towards Mortain and other places where I planned to explore the Suisse Normande. But my first project was to try for trout in the Varenne that evening. Yet as I turned back to the hotel for rod and tackle, my feet were heavy, and in my room bed seemed more desirable than a distant trout stream. I spent a couple of days undesirably enough in that bed before I left it—though kindly people in the hotel mitigated my misfortune.

When at last I got out, I looked in on an *antiquaire* who lives almost opposite the Hôtel de la Poste. A brass candlestick in his window tempted me; but the fellow to it could not be found; and he began to explain one result of the French law of inheritance, by which a householder's possessions must be shared among the family. Things which are physically divisible, such as a pair of candlesticks or a dinner service, will often be split between rival claimants, though the value is lessened in this way. He refused to attribute this to piety of sentiment,—and perhaps he was right; the French character does not show at its best over questions of succession.

I owe gratitude to this *antiquaire* because when I asked what to do with my afternoon, he referred me to M. Roger—who, after long managing the Hôtel de la Poste, now lives in retirement and drives tourists about in his motor car. And so after déjeuner M. Roger came with his very roomy vehicle, and I put myself in his hands—one of the most sensible proceedings of my life. Our first objective was the château de la Saucière; and we swung down the curving road to the plain, and then headed westward with the high ground on our right. We crossed the Varenne, whose waters have a far journey before they meet the Atlantic tideway at Nantes as part of the magnificent Loire. Presently we turned south into a farm road, barely passable; and when the motor stopped, M. Roger to my delight proposed to accompany me to the château which is now a farm.

Our track lay between English-looking copses and flat pasture fields, tree bordered, full of splendid cattle, which here are mostly white with patches of very light red—the colour of a Camembert's rind: slow-moving beasts that look as if they never knew hardship or exposure. Then suddenly out of these lush green levels rose the château—or what is left of it: two peaked turrets, and a high front of masonry between them. Water had been the first line of defence and the moat was still there, encompassing an acre of land, once no doubt walled round the water's edge, and covered with the seignorial dwellings. Now, only a small farmhouse and out-offices stand in the ring. But the gate-tower is intact, and channels in the masonry show where great chains had once hauled up the heavy drawbridge. Detached thus, an isolated block of fortification, it made a surprising effect in that peaceful countryside; the blue moat water reflected it, among swimming geese and ducks, and the spreading boughs of a laden apple tree made points of lustrous red in the same lovely mirror. We were bidden to explore as we chose; and M. Roger told me with delight that the farmer-folk had not only refused to be paid, but had pressed hospitalities on him.

Nothing was in the tower but chaff, old barrels and other lumber; yet the twin turrets had irregularly-shaped rooms, roughly circular, which had been fitted for modern habitation and would be delightful to inhabit. Over the gateway were two large central chambers, each of which could have housed a score of men when this was the keep of some marauding baron. Yet the plunderers had built their stronghold with the same instinct for beauty which is stamped on their churches—a virile beauty of bold lines like those of their horses and cattle.

Nor has the instinct died out of their race. I met no man who seemed more typically Norman than M. Roger, and if I felt at home with him it was because he reminded me constantly of some Irish vet or dispensary doctor—who would have the same wide acquaintance with the countryside, and the same easy frankness of companionship, bred out of long meeting and dealing with countless men and women. Yet one felt in the continental a much wider inherited culture; nobody could show a more sensitive delight in the charm of his own land and of its monuments, or give account of his feeling in better words.

He promised me something very different in beauty as we motored north of the La Saucière; and presently high ground was ahead of us, with heath and pine showing; another by-road led along a stream, till suddenly we were in a gorge where a great moraine of boulders tumbled down among wooded slopes. This was the Fosse d'Arthour—Arthour being the name of this little river which here came down in a series of little falls, ending in a strong cascade that plunges twelve or fifteen feet into a cliffbound pool. I could find the like of it in Ireland; but nowhere such abrupt transition from rich country like what we left at the château three or four miles away. We climbed to the crest of the ridge, among ling, taller than ours, bell heather bigger than ours and brighter pink, and low autumn flowering furze, but not the round bushy kind which makes Howth golden in August; while a sun stronger than ours brought out the scents more fragrantly as I sat on the top and saw the wide plain spread out, and from east to west could follow the trend of the ridge which limits their Norman Switzerland.

Hardly ever, said M. Roger, does a tourist get to the Fosse d'Arthour—and never to the next place which he proposed to show me. We had to go by a road which serpented over the high ground—at one point a purple wall of heather, steep as an embankment, seemed to block our path; and presently we came running down into the valley where is Lonlay l'Abbaye. The Abbey church was Norman built; but the nave was destroyed by fire, and the choir has been remodelled; all that remains of the old is the magnificent

transept, into which a stairway runs from what was the monastery and is now the presbytère. On this stairway stands the object of chief interest—an old altar wrought in wood with little figures all painted and gilded; work of the early Renaissance, simple and gay and delightful. It has been dethroned to make way for a costly structure in white marble, harmonizing with a series of dull modern paintings that decorate the aisles. The people in Lonlay l'Abbaye must have more money than artistic feeling. Outside in the little marketplace was the *mairie* with a dial whose motto spoke of monastic associations: *Me Sol vos Umbra regit*. "My master is the Sun, yours the Shadow."

Driving on down the valley of the Varenne, we came on sheltered slopes which showed me what Normandy would be in a year when the apples had not failed, as they did in 1925. Every tree was laden, russet and golden and scarlet—but alas, their apples are uneatable. Later on, no doubt, there would be plenty of eating apples and pears, but the early kinds of both must be far less cultivated than in England. Indeed except the fruits which come to it from the south, grapes, peaches and nectarines, inland Normandy offered little to tempt the palate. M. Roger said to me, justly, that if one does not live well there, the cooks are to blame, since the best of meat and of butter are to hand. But the Norman evidently likes two solid meals daily, with two kinds of meat at each meal, and has a positive passion for roast leg of mutton. There is no such inventiveness in cookery as you will meet in Touraine and Anjou, in Burgundy and in Savoy; and this is one of the reasons why a trip to Normandy is less of a change than one to any part of vine-growing France.

But then, it is so admirably near; and never in my life have I seen in two hours such variety of beauty and of interest as M. Roger showed me within a drive of twenty miles. We ended up by a visit inside Domfront section, to the church of Notre Dame sur l'Eau, which looks at least as old as anything that stands on the fortress town two hundred feet above it. Little is left of special beauty; but the building has that heavy comeliness which the Norman always achieved even in the simplest work—and which reflects itself in the prose of *Madame Bovary*. The talk of my companion on that afternoon's drive helped me perhaps to a better understanding of Flaubert, the Norman author *par excellence*—Flaubert is so like Trollope—most English of novelists; and yet how furious Trollope and his contemporaries would have been at the suggestion! The nearer France is to England, physically or mentally, the more significant are the differences. And that perhaps is one of the charms of Normandy.