

# FROM THE FRENCH PROVINCES

I—WHAT OF FRANCE?

HUMPHREY HARE

Dear HORIZON Reader,

Am I to write about France to you who know it so well? You must expect nothing from me on the grand political scale; expect no comment from me—indeed, how much better the French do it themselves!—on the relations of de Gaulle to his ministers, on Palewski to de Gaulle, no prophecies as to the results of the elections or the future constitution of France. I can only reflect the conversation of my French friends which is, to some extent, typified in the recent headline in *Le Canard Enchaîné*—‘M. Palewski vient d’arriver à Washington accompagné par le Général de Gaulle’. But indeed, I can only write personally and hope that from my loose and sentimental ramblings you may be able to formulate for yourself some picture of France—of the Midi in particular, which for so long has been so dear to us both.

Do you remember the approach? How the road in great wide turns like a skein of wool in disarray sweeps down from la Gineste to the sea? And the last corner turned, the little *Place*; the old women dressed in black sitting on the benches under the planes—their hands idle now for lack of thread—and the young boys chattering by the moss-grown fountain? I drove slowly by; but no one made a sign of recognition. Only one or two of the boys looked incuriously, unshyly at the jeep. I could almost hear them: *Un de ces salauds d’Américains*. But la Réserve was different. At least there was no lack of warmth in the welcome there. André stooping emaciated behind the bar, was still thinner now, paler and finer drawn: Madame, who always reminded me of a plump love-bird, obviously had had no difficulty these last years in the lacing of her stays. ‘*Ah, Monsieur l’Anglais!*’ they cried and there was much hand-shaking. A drink was called for and André with a despairing shrug towards his empty shelves suggested wine or marc, and, as he filled our glasses and we drank, talked of the old

days, the suppers we had comfortably eaten behind the shut doors when the café was closed for the night, the wines we had drunk and of those who had been there. Jean?—In the army: died in a German prison camp. Pierrot?—Dead: in the navy. How?—Mers el Kebir. But I must not think there was any bitterness. *Mais non, du tout, du tout.* It was those *sales Boches* and, of course, *Vichy—qui n'ont rien compris.* But there was Georges—Pierrot's young brother—on the other side of the street. He would call him over and he could tell me himself how little they blamed the English for that terrible misfortune.

I said that I must leave them as I had but little time to spare, that I must take a walk round the harbour before I left and that my American driver was waiting for me—bored, I privately felt certain, in what I was sure he would call 'a one-horse burg'. Georges offered to accompany me. But Madame André insisted on our having another drink. Besides, she said, for old times' sake Georges must put a record on the 'pick-up'. It was rarely used nowadays. With an unsurpassed certainty of selection '*J'attendrai le jour et la nuit . . .*' came hoarse and cracked from the loud-speaker. Yes, said André, it was the same disc. Did I not remember that night and Pierrot throwing a glass at the gramophone? Everyone had been very gay. For a moment Tino Rossi's tenuous nostalgia triumphed.

Georges and I went out to the *boule* ground, too uneven now for play and shadeless since the Germans had felled the trees to improve their field of fire. I did not remember Georges very well except as Pierrot's young brother. He must have been one of the ten-year-olds in shorts in those days, going to school with his black serviette and whose voice one heard chanting lessons in chorus through its windows. No, he said now, do not think we are bitter. These things happen. Pierrot often spoke of you. Look he said; and from his pocket he took a battered wallet and out of it a photograph. I remembered the day. Three of us had taken a boat to the Calanques and on the way had stopped to bathe. There we were, Pierrot and I, all dripping from the sea, sitting in the stern, the helm between us, against a background of cliffs, laughing wide-mouthed—at what? Georges wanted to know. I have often wondered, he said, what you were both laughing at. It must have been something very special for you both to laugh like that. I don't know, I said, I think we both

laughed a lot in those days; I expect Pierrot had just told me a dirty story. Yes, said Georges, I'd thought of that. I would very much like to hear it; do you think it may one day recur to you?

The harbour looked strangely empty, no yachts there now or pleasure craft and the fishing-boats were fewer in number and needed a coat of paint as badly as the houses that lined the quay. These last seemed to have faded to a uniform grey with peeling plaster and shutters hung awry. Across the mouth of the harbour two ships—I suppose of two or three thousand tons apiece—had been sunk by the Germans. They lay at strange angles fast on the rocks, their masts and funnels quartering the sky, their bulk enormous beside the little Port and the toy lighthouse at the end of the mole.

On the quay we met Père Moraud. He greeted me without surprise. I said it was a long time. Some times were long, he said, and some times were short, but it didn't seem to make much difference these days. I asked, how was fishing? He could just get out of the harbour in his boat between the sunken ships when the weather was fine, he said, but there was nothing in it. I said the village must need the fish badly. He said yes it did but it didn't get any from him. He said he sold his fish on the *marché noir* in Marseilles because otherwise he couldn't raise enough money to buy the black market petrol which alone permitted him to fish at all. Besides there was the question of nets—they cost a bit these days. And he wanted his son back from Germany to help him. It is true, said Georges, when we want fish we go out in a rowboat and catch enough for ourselves. There is also bread, but little else; some vegetables, but there are seven thousand mines in the gardens and the German prisoners have only begun to lift them. But what about the meat, the butter, the oil? I asked. I know the ration is small . . . I do not complain of its size, said Père Moraud. I complain merely that it does not exist. My wife goes to old Fabre for the meat and every day it is the same story: it has not yet come in but will surely be there by tomorrow morning. And everywhere else it is the same. Either it has gone to Lyons or it has gone to Paris or the army is eating it—or it is sabotage. It is very strange that since the Americans have come we eat less than we did when the Germans were here. It is very strange but otherwise it is more pleasant. The Germans made us build a concrete wall along the *plage*. They

gave us all a number and made us work. Not that we did much—but we ate. I asked him how his brother was, who had abandoned the sea, made good in Marseilles, and now made wine on his property up the valley. In health, said Père Moraud, his brother was all right but was low in spirits. Would I go out to see him? I said I had not the time but was sorry to hear about his spirits. Yes, said Père Moraud, his brother had lost two vintages which the Germans had taken from him and prospects were not good for this year. He could not afford to spray his vines. To purchase sufficient copper sulphate would cost more than the whole vintage was likely to be worth. Besides, the Gestapo had occupied his house for a year and had stolen many things of sentimental value. All this I would understand was particularly depressing for a man in his brother's position with two daughters of marriageable age. 'Mais', he added with an inclusive gesture, 'ça passe'.

But I had to leave; there was no time to risk meeting more friends and being detained. Georges I rewarded with a packet of cigarettes and a bar of chocolate and thereby, I feel sure, earned his eternal gratitude. I promised to return, but I never did and I doubt now if ever I shall. Do you remember those fourteenth of July? The fireworks which had no sinister meaning; the Provençal pipes and drums by the lamppost on the quay—which reminded me always of the Burning Bush—the Bastille, mounted in canvas on the oldest fishing-boat, being sunk in the harbour, and how we danced the Farandol all round the town; and the trouble M. got into when he announced to a young man the following morning that he had 'bien baisé' his sister the night before—meaning something so much more innocent; and those autumn evenings chugging home with the fishing-boats, the harbour lamps alight and the moon hanging low over the cliffs, the women waiting for the catch with their enormous baskets on the quay, the sardines silver in the nets, and the lights from André's and the Café du Port and always the music of that quick French impossible two-step or Tino Rossi wailing '*Souviens-toi sous les branches dans un bois d'Ajaccio-o-o?*'

I confess I was depressed as I headed the jeep for Cannes. There seemed to be confirmation for the stories I had heard in Marseilles: the warehouses full of potatoes and cheese which could not be issued to the hungry people except on authority

from Paris and when, after much delay, the authority arrived, the food was found to have gone bad: the cargo of olive oil from North Africa which was sent in drums that had previously contained petrol and had not been cleaned in the interval. From my own experience I knew that in Marseilles I had the choice of eating American rations at home or paying five pounds for them in a black market restaurant—in the latter case with the addition, perhaps, of a little fish. The index figure for American goods on the black market could at this time be gauged by the price of cigarettes; they were now at 120 frs. for a packet of twenty. Besides it now seemed to me that I had heard that tone of voice with the same meaningless optimism in which Père Moraud said '*ça passe*' before; the same acceptance of hardship, the belief that the mere passive acceptance of suffering was sufficient. I remembered that phrase repeated endlessly in 1939 '*cette fois il faut en finir*'—repeated casually as a remark on the weather without urgency in bars, cafés, on the trains and in the Metro—and the depths to which France had fallen. The difficulty the French appeared to find either as classes, communities or even fortuitous small groups of individuals, of whatever *bonne volonté* each individual might separately be, was of standing together, or working for one generally admitted desirable end. There were too many traditional disparities—catholicism, protestantism, a hopeless inherited royalist cause, freemasonry, freethinking and how many more—these could never be subordinated, it appeared, to anything less impassioned than the over-riding emotionalism of revolution.

Cannes had a very different atmosphere. The Croisette had been freed of mines and the concrete barricades had been demolished. The hotels were full of American officers who mingled happily on the terrace of the Carlton bar with what remained of cosmopolitan Riviera society—and what remained was surprisingly large—over cocktails at 100 frs. a glass. The members of this society were individually much concerned with the telling to all who would listen of the hardships to which they had been subjected and the dangers which they had endured; 'I was literally compelled, physically, my dear, to ask him to dinner,' they would say when recounting some incident of a German general from whom petrol had been secured and a permit to drive to Paris. Nor were they backward in condemning those

whom they deemed to have collaborated. And, of course, the period of the F.F.I. and the *épuration* rivalled in horror the domination of the Gestapo! There were some, and for these no praise can be high enough, who helped escaping prisoners, assisted in the landing of arms for the *Maquis*, and died, many of them, in the torture chambers of the Gestapo. But these, it must be admitted, were few; the majority of those who were not French had lived in *résidence forcée* in some village in the interior (more often than not in Haute Savoie) and had passed the war comfortably amongst the local produce of butter, eggs, poultry and vegetables. The moment they were liberated they flocked back to their villas on the Riviera—most of which were unharmed—and remade their lives as best they could on the old plan. In this many of them were eminently successful. The money problem for the richer English and Americans was easily solved. Those whose credit was known to be good, were able to cash unnamed and undated cheques at a rate of 100 to 150 frs. to the dollar and 500 to 600 frs. to the pound with the black marketeers, who were prepared to gamble on the eventual collapse of the franc and the prospect of finding themselves one day in the possession of dollar and sterling balances.

All this, however, was unknown to me when Madame P. asked me to luncheon. Was it really all right, I said—the food question in these difficult times . . . Madame P. insisted and, I thought, looked at me curiously. You have only just arrived, she said—more as if stating a fact than asking a question.

The villa looked even grander and more luxurious than I remembered it. I suppose for so long one's eye had been unaccustomed to luxurious interiors, marbles, porcelains, rich silks and rooms scented with expensive flowers. There were about twenty people, the Prince de F., the Princess G. and the Duchesse de N. I must meet Monsieur A., said Madame P., such a charming man, so clever, he had recently made millions . . . There were also two American generals of the sugar-daddy type who showed an inclination to address the company alternately in that slow, throat-clearing drawl so much affected by the higher ranks in the American army, on the general subject of just in what respects American civilization was superior to anything in Europe. The conversation turned to mines; villa gardens near the sea were full of them. It appeared that in order to get them

cleared pressure must be brought to bear on the municipality; they would then send German prisoners—without the proper implements of course—to lift them. When the garden had been declared clear the proper course it seemed, to be perfectly safe, was to hire a herd of goats for fifty pounds to graze in the garden. For each goat blown up one paid fifteen pounds. At the end of a week the garden was considered safe. We drank champagne cocktails and went in to luncheon. The table was a mass of silver and flowers and Waterford glass. The innumerable courses were served by a butler and two footmen on old Staffordshire. I remember the lobster, the saddle of mutton, the soufflé and Madame P. bemoaning the horrors of war, for, as she said, without a third footman the last vegetable could never reach the table really quite hot.

It was delightful to drive up to Vence once more, but it appeared that our directions were not good. We stopped to inquire the way. Where, we asked, could we find the villa of Monsieur Matisse?—Monsieur Matisse?—Yes, Monsieur Matisse, the painter.—Ah, Monsieur Matisse; we should find him two miles along the road on the right-hand side; but if we wanted repairs to our car he feared Monsieur Matisse was no longer in business . . . No, no, we protested, Monsieur Matisse the well-known painter. There was, he regretted, only one Monsieur Matisse in Vence and without doubt he owned the garage; it was, of course, possible that he painted in his spare time. . . . Unfortunately, we omitted to inquire.

At length we found the villa—solid, red and as ugly as only a French bourgeois villa can be. Matisse himself came out into the dark hall to receive us and led us into a large airy room. Here the full splendour of his dress was revealed to us—scarlet slippers, sponge-bag trousers, magenta waistcoat, peach-coloured shirt and round his neck a most elegant yellow muslin cravat falling in frill upon frill almost to the waist, the whole covered in a camel-hair coat. The room itself was lined with the brilliant colours of his own paintings and filled with the twittering of birds—canaries, doves, budgerigars in large cages. In a corner sat an old man dressed in black with skull-cap, beard and spectacles apparently engaged in illuminating a manuscript. (My companion afterwards put forward the theory that this was the real Matisse!) We were able to give Matisse news of his son



in New York and then the talk turned—as it always does in France—to the occupation. No, it had not affected his own work—that had continued always as his health permitted. But the Germans had made every effort to ensnare the artists. They had been clever enough to realize the propaganda value of persuading the well-known painters to visit Germany and to reconsider for the time being their verdict on degenerate plutocratic Jewish art. It was one way, they thought, straight to the heart of France. Had many accepted? we asked. A few, he said, *mais que voulez-vous? En question de politique ils sont des enfants*. And as for poor Ségonzac, he continued, with his spectacles glinting, he would have to ask many Jews to dinner *pour se remettre en selle!*

That night sitting on the terrace with the lights of Cannes and la Napoule far below, framed between cypress trees, the coloratura of the nightingales piercing the drone of the cicadas, with only the dark shadows of the warships against the moonlit bay to remind one of the problems of war and peace, it seemed to me that there was no clue to the future of France. I had met the poor, puzzled and bewildered; the rich, grasping and unthinking; the artist, detached and wisely tolerant. This was not all France, indeed but a tiny portion of it, and yet I felt it was symptomatic of the whole. I have not recorded for you the lip-service paid to de Gaulle by some, the frank admiration of others, the growing dislike of his *éminence grise*, the infinite gradations of irreconcilable political feeling. To what is this incapacity for compromise due? Is it to that intellectual clarity, that intransigent logic for which the French have so long been famed? I believe it is due to fear; fear of Russia, of a renascent Germany, of the Right, of the Left, of next winter, of themselves. Their logic is founded on false premises, and intellectual clarity should point to unity, labour and organization. Instead there is fear and chaos.

I regret, dear reader, ending on this pessimistic note, but all is not yet lost. You may, too, very well think that my rambling letter fails to support my conclusions. No one, more than I, could wish them to be wrong.



## II—A VISIT FROM MONSIEUR BENDA

### VIOLET HENSON

*Hammamet, 24 June 1945.*

YESTERDAY afternoon, Jacques brought Julien Benda to see us. In the morning, we had met Jacques on the beach and he had talked about him. He said he was seventy-eight and a brilliant old man who hated going to see people or places, he replied when asked to do so, that he preferred his imagination. This sounded so unusual and sympathetic that I begged Jacques to use whatever wiles or guile he could to drag him to us.

Somehow, he succeeded.

Without much hope, I changed into my one new dress in five years—a pink cotton American Lend-Lease—snatched from the jaws of the *Marché Noir* well before it had got its teeth into it, and started waiting. Whenever I am cleaned up and tidy I wait, they always seem to go together and on the whole the combination is discouraging.

However, this time my boredom was not prolonged. About six o'clock Jacques's car drove up and there they were. Monsieur Benda was a small old man with a fringe of white hair and a beady and ironical face. He suffered, I guessed, from rheumatism, as he was heavily clad in a thick suit and his long French drawers peeped out from the ends of his trousers. The weather, June in Tunisia, was extremely hot.

That afternoon, before they came, I had searched through my library for *Le Trahison des Clercs* with the vague idea that I might—for the first time in my life—ask a well-known writer to sign one of his books for me. My subconscious told me firmly that I would not; I have always wished to do so but have never succeeded; something, perhaps cowardice—or even good manners—prevents me. But the idea still persists. However, *Le Trahison des Clercs* had vanished, perhaps the Germans had burnt it, with many others, or a borrower had mistaken it for a gift, as they so often do. In any case, it had ceased to be a complication.

I knew that Monsieur Benda would detest seeing the garden, particularly so as it is locally famous, so I took him straight indoors and settled him into the only and extremely uncomfortable armchair in our pillaged house, trusting that as a