

# From Dijon to Semur

*A British Writer Finds Charm in the Unexpected As He Rambles Across France*

By Stephen Gwynn

From *The Spectator*, London Conservative Weekly

IT is a good journey when you accomplish the objects you set out for, and are not disappointed: but a lucky journey brings you, for a kind of bonus, some experience which you never planned for because you never knew it could be had. Such chances await the traveler in England at a thousand corners. Or, overseas, France is so rich a treasure house, offering such a variety of beauty and interest and pleasure, that again and again on my wanderings I have, as we say in Ireland, happened lucky there.

But the luck I mean comes to those who work for it. You must be on the look-out for information all the time, in all places; and you really must carry a guide book. Respectful homage to those who compile and edit the *Guides Bleus*, which have seldom failed to answer any question that I put to them, and which have told me, time on time, of things that could be done or seen on the way to a special destination — places where I should just have changed trains and no more about it, but for the invaluable companion provided by Messieurs Hachette. If only England were as well equipped!

Still, when you have worked your hardest, luck remains outside the net; but there are times when it comes tumbling in, and I take for example and encouragement two cases from a short wandering last vintage-time.

I was on my way from Dijon to Semur, and I must get off at Les Laumes. The name meant nothing; and the railway guide told me I must wait some time before a train would take me on. Then I looked up the *Guide Bleu*, and behold, Alesia, where Cæsar forced the surrender of Vercingetorix, is only a couple of miles from Les Laumes.

All this hilly but traversable country which stretches west from the Côte d'Or to the Morvan is full of ancient camps,

first Gaulish and then Roman; but the associations of Alesia were too dramatic to be neglected. So, having lunched excellently at a civil little *Hôtel de la Gare*, I set out along two kilometres of dull road which finally mounted to the village of Alise Sainte Reine, beautified by an eighteenth-century brick-built hospital. Near the hospital I passed a museum; two or three hundred yards further on in the long street, and two or

three hundred feet higher up, was another museum — which seemed excessive. Higher still, a steep path led between vineyards to the long flight of steps which gives access to the camp, and the colossal statue of Vercingetorix, set up by order of Napoleon the Third. You may see it on your left as you go from Dijon to Paris.

I do not go into the history which tells how Vercingetorix here entrenched himself and how Cæsar drew other lines round him to prevent escape, and was himself again surrounded by Gaulish levies, till finally the Roman won. I cannot tell the reason, though I should like to know, why there are two tiny museums in the village, one maintained by the 'Municipality,' the other by a society with its headquarters at Semur: I cannot describe the diggings for relics which are still in progress, because I turned lazy there. But one thing sticks in my mind: a display of selected skeletons in the upper museum. Three or four great, raw-boned Gauls hang there, with lower jaws like a gorilla's, and thigh bones like those of the traditional Scot; three or four Romans with small delicate skulls (what right had a man with a head like that to go near Donnybrook Fair? as the coroner's jury said) and small delicate bones and a total height perhaps a foot short of their adversaries: and it was the small-boned men who won, not by the use of machine guns or any such contrivance. Yet a Frenchman said to me that all the same, you come back to superior armament; the Gaulish claymores which hang there too are four feet long, the Romans' swords not three feet; but while the Gaul was swinging his pointless weapon to split his enemy down, the Roman lunged in with the point.

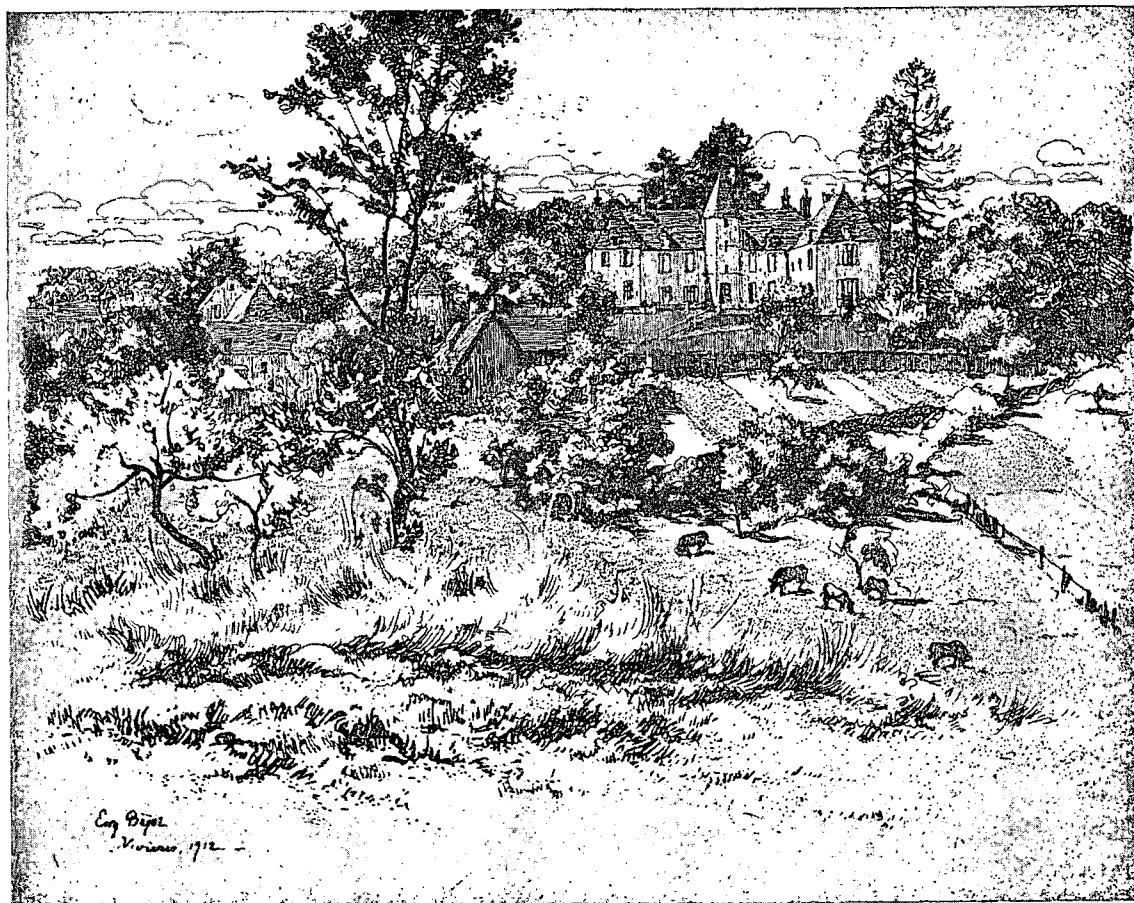
There were, of course, heaps of interesting relics. How like



Courtesy of Frederick Keppel & Company

RUE POSTE AUX LIONS, DIJON  
FROM AN ETCHING BY ROBERT LOGAN





CHÂTEAU VIVIÈRES  
FROM AN ETCHING BY E. BEJOT

Courtesy of Frederick Keppel & Company

the Gaulish sculpture was to that which the Gael, eight or nine centuries later, was doing at Monasterboice and other places in Ireland. And the Normans, even Henry II.'s Normans, when they came to Ireland, brought nothing with them that showed a culture so elaborate, so over-refined, as some of the little Greco-Roman images that survive among débris from the place where the big-boned Northern had finally to go under to little men from the South.

Then I went on to Semur. It was luck, too, that brought me there — sentiment for the memory of Mrs. Oliphant who wrote about the lovely place, but, so far as I could judge, either never saw it or forgot what she saw. Still, that does not count — though anyone is lucky who sees Semur in a fine autumn. The luck I write of came in again on my next stage, from Semur to Chablis. I went back to the main line, and changed at Tonnerre, where, once again, the *Guide Bleu* told me not to miss my chance. As usual, the railway station is on the plain, some distance from the old town, which as usual is on a hill, with a church set high up. There were two churches indeed, both of them worth more than a glance; yet what pleased me more was the view from the

top over the long straight valley of the Armançon with long straight lines of poplars traversing the vista: Turner has suggested the like again and again in his studies of French rivers, and again and again the beauty itself in France recalls the beauty that a great painter distilled from it. Which is the echo, which the voice?

The upper church, St. Pierre, was poised on the edge of a cliff and one looked down to the clustering roofs, among which were Tonnerre's two chief glories, the Hospital and the Fosse Dionne.

The hospital is a hospital still; but Margaret of Burgundy, sister-in-law to St. Louis, who founded it seven centuries ago, had views that were larger than ours. Its patients to-day are sheltered in modern buildings; a hospital ward as Margaret planned it was over a hundred yards long by twenty yards wide, stone floored. How it can ever have been heated passes conception, and it has been for centuries only a place for interment, not for convalescence. Margaret is buried there herself, under the single span of that vast roof: and Louvois, Louis XIV's Minister, has a magnificent tomb in a side chapel. This florid monu-

ment, set up originally in Paris, and brought here I know not why, had no charms for me, and Margaret's tomb has been reconstructed. But in a side chapel to the south, steps lead to a vaulted room where is a sculptured group of the Maries and the disciples laying Christ's body in the grave. Jean Michel and Georges de la Sonnette were the sculptors in 1453. The Mother in the centre, looking straight out, did not move me like the other two Maries — one with head dropped on the breast, and the eyes felt rather than seen under the projecting head-dress; the Magdalen, with box of spikenard in her hand, a half-swooning figure drenched and drunken with grief. Nowhere else in Burgundy did I see a group of sculpture equal to this.

And yet, perhaps because I had looked at too many similar things, and partly because I

could not stay long enough in that chilly crypt, I do not keep visual memory of it so clear as I could wish; while the other sight that Tonnerre showed me in a glory of sunshine will not easily fade out of recall.

The Fosse Dionne is a great spring breaking out from the cliff, and its name Divona shows that the Gauls worshiped it. I went along the level street under the cliff, turned up a lane between old houses, and came out on to a space almost filled by a bowl of transparent water — a bowl of cut stone some thirty feet across. The color of the water against the brown stone was startling. I have seen green becks in and about Ullswater, and there is a great lake in Mayo which looks like emerald on a clear day, and like jade when the sky is gray: but this water was blue-green like the sea. Beyond the circle of it, a semi-circle of wall had been built into the cliff, and from this projected a semi-circular penthouse of timber with tiled roof; under this shelter, some thirty women of Tonnerre were on their knees washing — and yet did not soil the water. The spring was led into the bowl by a lower inlet, while a wide opening in the bowl on the cliff side allowed the overflow to escape into a circular stone

channel carried round the bowl. This again was enclosed by a low circular balustrade behind which the women knelt, and on which they wrung the linen, the water constantly escaping past them and hurrying along to the channel below the bowl, through which it bickers down to the Armançon half a mile away. Imagine all these concentric circles of

brown stone, the bright water rushing round outside, and in the centre this great lovely shining circle of blueness: the semicircle of timbers and pink-brown tiles, and the busy women with the strong blues and pinks of their clothing — all this under a glow of autumn sun, and away up against the blue sky, poised on the cliff edge, St. Peter's old church.

France often gives a lovely setting to this humblest of women's ministrations; but nowhere have I seen one so beautiful, so dignified, and so characteristic in its will to preserve and enhance an ancient inheritance. What a conservative country France is, after all its violences and spasms! That is why it keeps so generous a lucky bag for its guests to dip in.

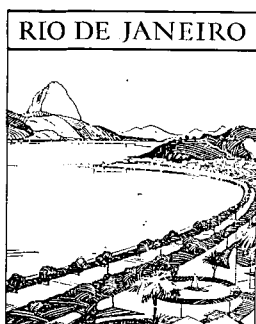


*Courtesy Kennedy & Company*

DANS LES CHAMPS PRÈS PROVINS  
FROM AN ETCHING BY JACQUES BEURDELEY

# Metropolitana

*New Roads that Lead from Rio — 'Plan Z' for the Defense of Paris — Collecting Roman Kittens —  
The Homeless People of Berlin — A Westerner Honored in Tokio — Busy Warsaw  
Puts Her House in Order — Changing London*



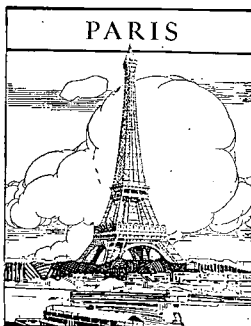
American Road Congress which is to meet in the capital in 1929.

Formerly, restless Brazilian motorists, or ship-weary travelers feeling the insistent call of the accelerator, had three courses open to them. They could join the parade moving down the broad, central Avenida Rio Branco, where the neat taxis of Rio — mostly old European cars, polished till they glisten, and kept in splendid condition by their chauffeurs in white dusters — go buzzing past regardless of crossings, their horns honking like a flock of scared but determined geese. They could strike a somewhat more leisurely pace as they swung out the Avenida Beira Mar around the glittering semi-circle of Botafogo Bay, with incredibly blue water on their left, and, on their right, fresh villas calcimined in pastel tints of yellow, pink, and green. Or, if they sought a more extensive run, they could strike back twelve miles along the road to Tijuca, the mountain on whose shaggy sides begins the seventeenth-century stone aqueduct which still carries the bulk of the capital's water supply; and then swing home behind Tijuca, under the shadow of Corcovada, past the twin peaks of the Two Brothers, back under the sharp-outlined lava peaks of the coast to Rio and — if the immoral desire should overwhelm them — have a true South American cocktail at the Avenida Bar.

Now, however, there are new horizons to conquer. Perhaps the best lies along the newly opened highway to São Paulo, the great coffee centre five hundred miles away. Another new highway, less pretentious, runs from Rio to the adjacent summer capital, Petropolis. If one has ever enjoyed the mad luxuriance of the jungle vegetation even along the Tijuca drive, one can imagine how much more these new roads have to offer.

Automobiling, however, is far from being Rio's only amusement. Theatres, casinos, amusement places in general have done well this past winter season. A 'campaign of righteousness' directed by the city officials has not greatly dampened anyone's spirits. One amusement place — the Copa Cabana gambling casino — has been closed, which was a disappointment to wealthy Argentines who had fled furnaceless houses in Buenos Aires for the comparatively comfortable fifty degrees of Rio's winter. But the main result of this gesture was the sudden discovery on the part of the police that street-lamp bulbs all over the city were being mysteriously broken. Investigators rounded up a number of young men who had been strolling nonchalantly about the midnight streets throwing pebbles at the lamps, explaining that now that the Casino was closed they had nothing better to do.

Meanwhile, those in Rio who prefer less exhilarating forms of amusement have been listening to opera sung by Muzio and Gigli, as well as by the American tenor Frederick Jagel. The newly redecorated Palace Theatre has once more been a battleground for France and Spain, always jealous of each other's cultural influence in Latin America. To this playhouse came first the Moulin Rouge company from Paris; then the Velasquez players from Madrid. Although there is no very accurate way of judging who won the competition for Brazilian acclaim, France seems to have had a slight edge on Spain — perhaps because the Moulin Rouge players were backed by the English Tiller Girls, whereas the Velasquez group was forced to depend upon Spanish charm alone.



dwarfs all others in the country, the great heart from which the lifeblood of

France goes pulsing to the provinces! Eighteen seventy-one, a disaster in which, after a four-month siege, German infantry followed mounted German uhlans through the city gates; nineteen eighteen, a near-disaster in which great German guns, unknown in Bismarck's time, hurled high explosive shells at Notre Dame. And only a few weeks ago the French army aviation forces, emulating the British, staged a sham air attack which filled the French sky for two days and nights with four hundred fighting planes and bombers, and proved that this new weapon, in spite of modern defense measures, could inflict a 'terrific bombing' upon the capital city.

But there is another kind of defense of Paris, seldom talked of, which is beginning to worry thinking Parisians: defense against attack from within the city walls, defense against revolution. When Frenchmen read Russian communist documents which talk about the necessity, in preparing a revolution in enemy countries, of 'creating an organized force in the heart of bourgeois armies, capable at the proper moment of persuading those who are hesitant to join our cause,' their minds leap to the military garrison of Paris; they think of the proved activities of French communists, and of industrial centres like Saint-Denis, a scant three miles from the Place de la Concorde, for centuries the resting place of the bodies of French kings and now a Communist stronghold.

The care with which Paris guards ceaselessly against the possibility of revolt is apparent even to the casual visitor. There are tales of crowds of workmen in caps and sashes and shirts open at the neck surging suddenly from little cafés in the twilight, and swarming up the narrow side streets around Notre Dame, to be met and scattered by the charging horsemen of the municipal police. Nothing is ever said of it; nothing appears in the papers next day. There is a story that near the tribune in the Chamber of Deputies is a plaque in which are affixed three push-buttons. One calls for a vote; one brings down tons of water upon the house from hidden reservoirs above, in case of fire; the third at a single touch brings a strong detachment of the Republican Guard from its nearby cantonment. Who, during a