

BARRY A. WHITTINGHAM

**FRANÇOIS THÉODORE
THISTLETHWAITE'S**



**FRENGLISH
THOUGHTS**

**François Théodore Thistlethwaite's
Frenglish Thoughts**

Barry A. Whittingham

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To Renée

With grateful thanks for her daily efforts to stop me from
taking myself too seriously.

‘Sans divertissement, il n’y a point de joie, avec le
divertissement il n’y a point de tristesse.’

Pascal, *Pensees*. 395

Author's Pre-Word

This seriously humorous look at the French and English belongs to the relatively new *genre* of what I would call *reality-fiction* (I believe the commonly-accepted term is *creative non-fiction*): an inextricable interaction between that world of imagination which exists only inside an author's head, and what actually goes on outside it. Some characters, names, events and dialogues, therefore, as the usual disclaimer goes, are products of my imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons or occurrences is purely coincidental. With others this is not entirely the case.

It might be thought that the main protagonist, François Théodore 'Thistlethwaite (F'TT)', a 'Frenglishman' through whose frequently disconnected eyes the themes of this work are viewed, can have no existence in reality. This, also, is not completely true. Some manifestations of his dissociated condition bear comparison with those symptoms characterizing *Multiple Personality Disorder*, a very real psychiatric pathology, frequently originating in childhood trauma, by which a host person can carry within a number of disparate selves, each of whom take recurrent control of the identity of the whole. And though I myself only occasionally hear voices, being born and educated in England, before spending the following four decades in a country so radically different as France, has provided me with the opportunity of living two lives separate enough for me not to perceive myself as altogether the same person in the one as I do in the other.

And is my inclusion of a third, rational, moderating *alter ego*, in the personage of Théodore, as far removed from reality as we might think? Do not the majority of what we agree to call *normal* beings have conjoined within them *two* contrary, yet mutually dependent forces? Is there not in most of us, at

least, a reciprocal action between involuntary mental inclination and feeling, and that which is sourced in rational discrimination and choice? Do not what convention requires us to call ‘normal’ people carry within them a set of scales on which they seek to bridle preponderant impulse by a compensatory weight of rational judgement, with the aim of bringing harmonious equipoise to the whole? Though it would be a dreary man who had only reason in him, would not he who followed only the urgings of sensibility fall into the pit of his unguarded desires? The difference between the person of François Théodore Thistlethwaite and those among we mortals considered to be in the norm is that his middle role of reason has a far more delicate task: in FTI’s three-part configuration Théodore finds himself part of a precarious see-saw arrangement obliging him to counterbalance *two* separate, contra-balancing weights by his central, pivotal one.

Though I have attempted to lend to this book what might be termed a philosophical dimension which I am pretentious enough to believe is not without relevance to the guidance of our day-to-day lives, I am inclined to think that true philosophy begins by taking that distance necessary to mock philosophy. In reply to those who might be critical of, or even enraged by the impious nature of some aspects of this work, I would ask them to consider whether much the same attitude could not be adopted towards religion.

Most of the anecdotes I have related also have a firm footing in reality. They are based on incidents and events gleaned from the news media, or drawn either from personal experience, or the testimony of friends and acquaintances whose sincerity I have no cause to doubt. The organizations and entities described are also real enough and, even though my caricaturist treatment may have twisted these a little out of shape, I insist on thinking it has not quite wrung all the truth out of them. And though I am optimistic enough to think that some of the aberrations I have related are far from representing the norm, I am fully conscious of the fact that,

in an era where the smokescreen of correctness frequently masks a reality painful to admit, the disclosure of certain practices can disturb. It can also, for lack of tangible proof (which, when a question of personal experience it is, of course, difficult, if not impossible to provide), expose their author to the wrath of their perpetrators. I sincerely hope that there are still people honest, responsible and courageous enough to seek remedies by examining the causes rather than choosing to ignore the symptoms, or penalizing those who make them public. In any case, this is a risk I have chosen to take.

Given both their frequency and importance, I have considered the parenthetical comments and explanations of the host person, FTT, as being an integral part of the main text, and consequently, rather than relegate them to the bottom of the page or, even worse, despatch them to the ignominious seclusion of the back of the book, I have boldly placed these as near as possible to the subject they allude to.

Finally, though the town of Saint-Clou does not figure on any map of France, it is only partly a figment of my imagination. And even though some of the anecdotes relating to it may be considered strange, I did not wish to give the impression it is so grotesquely apart from others that readers should imagine these could not have been based on what might take place in any French provincial town of 10,000 inhabitants or so.

Barry A. Whittingham

Autumn, 2012

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Author's Pre-Word](#)

[Chapter One – Who Am I?](#)

[Chapter Two – The Dream](#)

[Chapter Three – Liberté - Egalité – Fraternité](#)

[Chapter Four – La Fonction Publique](#)

[Chapter Five – The Puritan Factor](#)

[Chapter Six – The Frog and the Bulldog](#)

[Chapter Seven – The Rule of the Exception](#)

[Chapter Eight – At the Wheel](#)

[Chapter Nine – The Art of Un-Queuing](#)

[Chapter Ten – Le Système D](#)

[Chapter Eleven – A Sporting France](#)

[Chapter Twelve – Feminist or Feminine?](#)

[Chapter Thirteen – Food \(and Drink\) for Thought](#)

Chapter One

Who Am I?

My psychiatrist told me I had three alter egos. I asked how much I owed him and he replied, 'That'll be £30.' So I gave him £10 and said, 'Get the rest from the other two.'

François Théodore Thistlethwaite

A copy of an entry of birth records that I became a certified member of the human race on the twenty-ninth day of February, 19.., name(s) and surname of father: Theodore Thistlethwaite; name(s), surname and maiden name of mother: Françoise Madeleine Thistlethwaite, formerly de Laissy-Tignancourt. Deposited at the foot of the document, in testimony to the fact that this was an official copy of an entry in a register, the signature of the Registrar, a Mr U.R.A. Featherbraine, the tremulous, blotched configuration of which seemed to indicate that, at the moment of inscribing his name, the man to whom the writing hand was appended had been under the influence of strong emotion (unless his calligraphic vacillations can be attributed to the inceptive phase of Shaking Palsy, Alzheimer's Disease, or other manifestations of precocious senility), whose causes must remain hypothetical but may perhaps be sought among one (or more) of the following:

- 1) Being a man of great sensibility, he was fully aware of the traumatizing effects a span of four years from one birthday to the next would inevitably have on a child.
- 2) Having himself inherited a surname which had been a lifelong source of mirth to others and utter misery to himself, he had been overwhelmed by an empathetic anticipation of

the future sufferings of this lispingly-named innocent, so recently pushed out into a cruel world.

3) The dreadful truth had dawned on him (the explanation I tend towards) that he was signing into official existence a monstrous aberration of nature, the product of a fusion between two mutually repellent cells: an Anglo-Frenchman.

And throughout the length of my boyhood, the antagonistic nature of my conception was confirmed by unremitting parental strife, where the ferocious battles of past centuries – Hastings, Agincourt, Crécy, Poitiers, Trafalgar and Waterloo – were re-enacted over half a score of years.

FTT: In spite of the uneasy truce which exists today, any study of the history of Anglo-French relations inevitably brings to mind words like ‘natural foe,’ or ‘hereditary enemy.’ Apparently, this has not always been the case. In times long past, when the British Isles were joined to the Continental mainland, contacts were frequent and relations amiable – so much so that whenever a French and Englishman met they kissed each other affectionately on the lips, in much the same way as Russian men do today. One day, however, a Frenchman inserted his tongue into the mouth of an Englishman in what, of course, became universally known as ‘the French kiss.’ The Englishman, no doubt considering this to be a shameless violation of his private territory, proceeded to bite off the end. This marked the beginning of a gradual deterioration in relations between the countries.

Barely had I been thrust out into the light of this world than the skirmishes began. The earliest confrontations, I was later to learn, took place around the choice of Christian name for me. Apparently, it was maman who always drew first, took a three-quarters guard and made a first assault at arms with the name François. Phonetically, it contained the word

France and was the masculine equivalent of her own. Father would make a reverse parry by saying he rather preferred Francis, and a *corps-à-corps* would then ensue; after days of constant infighting, however, he finally relented by intimating that, not being inclined to mortal combat, he was ready to concede a ‘c cedilla’ and an ‘o’ (being English, he had a placid, conciliatory, phlegmatic temperament, and only really got going when he had his back to the wall).

But the final struggle centred round my middle name. Father made a brave last stand by explaining that, since it was often the custom in England for a son to inherit his father’s first name as a second middle one, he considered Theodore to be an incontestable choice: not only had several men achieved great distinction under this appellation, but didn’t it present the additional merit of existing in French? In short, the name Theodore provided a solution which he was convinced a native of a country renowned for diplomatic compromise would be wholly receptive to.

‘Ah oui, mon cher,’ retorted maman, ‘mais, what you appear to ’ave overlooked is, ‘le petit accent aigu au-dessus de l’e!’ **(FTT: the little acute accent over the ‘e’!)**. Father countered to the effect that, as he had gone so far as to grant her an ‘o’ and a ‘c cedilla’, the least she could do was to forego a miserable little acute accent over an ‘e’. But maman was unrelenting. All further negotiations were suspended and there was even talk of calling ambassadors home. Fortunately, common sense prevailed in the end and, as father reportedly said at the time (he had the English habit of keeping his sense of humour in times of crisis), if the problem hadn’t been acute it would have been grave: he had heard of divorce on the grounds of physical and mental cruelty, adultery, desertion and non-consummation, but had an acute aversion to getting divorced for the sake of an accent!

FTT: Though anecdotes abound concerning the Englishman’s legendary ability to preserve his sense of

humour and *sang-froid* in moments of crisis, the Frenchman in me has just pointed out that fewer exist regarding another of his specialities: hypocrisy. A few years ago, he reminds me, during a terrorist bombing campaign in London, I was enjoying a quiet evening drink with an English friend in a pub near Piccadilly Circus, when suddenly in the distance we heard a violent detonation. The window panes rattled slightly, glasses on shelves behind the bar chinked together, and a few particles of dust floated down from the ceiling. To my utter amazement, everybody except me threw themselves to the floor, and remained there for several moments in deathly silence. Finally, on realizing there was no danger, my friend raised himself to his feet, casually dusted jacket sleeves and trouser legs, looked me knowingly in the eye, and then remarked with a smug-looking smile, 'Oh! You were so scared you couldn't move!'

So, father finally capitulated: maman got what she wanted, a peace treaty was signed, and I was called upon to face the vicissitudes of life under the hair-on-tongue appellation of François Théodore Thistlethwaite.

It is even now most distressing for me to dwell on the grievous mental torment that shamefully hybridized name caused me during my formative years; and the traumas engendered were mercilessly exacerbated by the constant verbal pillory of my English schoolboy peers. Oh! how infinitely more would I have preferred to have been pelted with rotten tomatoes and stinking eggs than to have had flung jeeringly into my face (thereby confirming Mr Featherbraine's sombre forebodings) a name normally descriptive of a web-footed aquatic of the genus *Rana*!

FTT: Fully aware of the inborn horror English people have of ostentatious displays of intelligence, wit, oratory

and learning, I would claim extenuating circumstances to any accusation of gratuitous pedantry levelled at me for alluding to this amphibian by its Latin genus only. The more sensitive among my readers will understand that, such were the deep mental wounds inflicted throughout my early years, I still find it beyond me to make either written or oral allusion to the vulgar name of the animal in question. I should also like to take advantage of this parenthesis to stress, in the most categorical manner possible, that my Englishman shares the same unbounded repugnance as the vast majority of his countrymen regarding the gastronomic consumption of the rear legs of this same creature.

But the worst sufferings – both physical and mental – resulted from those ceaseless internecine battles between my French and English gene armies within. French-held territories were concentrated on my left, those on the right occupied by the English, and fighting was always bitter for control of the Central Trachea Corridor and Oesophagus Pass (the main lines of provision for munitions and victuals to both camps). The bulk of the two armies extended from the pylorus to the anus; the gall bladder, the right kidney and colic flexure, the liver, the fetid bog lands of the large intestine (including the cecum and ascending colon) were, in spite of the unsavoury nature of the terrain, positions strongly fortified by the English; the spleen, the left colic flexure, the malodorous swamp of the left kidney, the duodenum, the ileum, the descending colon and the putrid regions of the rectum entrenched by the French; and the mosquito-infested waters of my bladder were a no-man's land where both armies feared to tread. The vast, airy grasslands of the upper areas of my lungs and bronchial tubes, which also belonged to neither, were the scenes of daily forays, skirmishes and ambushes. But the most ferocious fighting was located around the vital regions of the heart, which beat alternately to

the rhythm of English or French control, with much blood-flowing on both sides.

In reply to possible accusations that locating the main bodies of both armies principally in the lower, post-digestive regions of my body represents a blatant attempt to belittle, ridicule or degrade the proud name of each nation's fighting forces, I would answer that, throughout those years in which my body was the seat of open Anglo-French hostilities, at no time did the officers and men of either conduct themselves in a way unbefitting the traditions of patriotism and heroic courage that are associated with both. During this span, countless valiant actions took place, many soldiers were mentioned in despatches, and numerous decorations (including a VC, and a couple of *Croix de Guerre*) were awarded on each side.

The case of Private Gormless and Lance-Corporal Belcher is edifying. Separated from their unit somewhere in the Biliary Duct, hopelessly outnumbered by the French, and finally taken captive (not without tenacious resistance), our two unfortunates were imprisoned in atrocious conditions: not only were they deprived of *The Daily Star*, English Football League, and an intake of five pints of best bitter per day, but their normal diet of fish and chips, egg and chips, sausage and chips, bacon and chips, egg, sausage, bacon and chips, Toad in the Hole, and Spotted Dick was replaced by *Daube de Boeuf à la Provençale*, *Cassoulet de Toulouse à la Ménagère*, *Sole en Matelote à la Normande*, and *Tournedos au Vin Blanc*, with occasionally – horror upon horrors – *Escargots Farcis à l'Ail* – all forcibly accompanied by a bottle of 1982 vintage first-growth Claret. In addition, determined attempts at brainwashing were made by piping through loudspeakers in their cells songs by Piath, Brael, Brassens, Aznavour, Johnny Halliday (and occasionally Sacha Distel). Fortunately, after weeks spent digging a tunnel with a cake slice dissimulated from their captors, our two heroes succeeded in escaping and making their way back to the English main lines through the

Pancreatic Duct and Scrotal Sack - their commanding officer having no hesitation in recommending they be awarded the D.S.C. for valour and heroism far beyond the call of duty.

And how can mere words describe the terror inspired by those two ghastly, recurring dreams? The first was unfolded beneath the sombre clouds of a low-hung sky. A motley throng of those same amphibians – spotted, striped, stippled, mottled, dappled, speckled, freckled, small and big, male and female, young and old – were gathered round a pond, mockingly croaking that name so relentlessly slung at me throughout my childhood years. A square-shaped platform floats into view; and on it a tall, upright frame: that diabolical instrument of surgical decapitation - the guillotine. For impending execution there is: the victim, a regal-looking batrachian, lies strapped length-wise over a low backless bench, head clamped, stock-like, through the hole of a plank, face frozen into a darkened mask of doleful resignation. And, horror upon horror, on looking closer who do I recognize but my own prostrate self! The viciously-angled blade comes swishing down, neatly lopping off my head which falls with a sickening thud into a large wicker basket placed just below. A vile-looking, wart-covered member of the same species (though it could have been a toad) steps over, seizes my severed head by the hair and proceeds to wave it aloft in triumphant circles - to a delirious accompaniment of croaks, squeaks, grunts and cackles from the company around.

In my second dream the spectators, the pond and the guillotine have gone and the sky is a radiant blue. But the stage-like platform is still there. Resting on it now is a round, wooden vat of what looks like fermenting red wine. Two corks shoot up from out of the depths, rise high into the air before exploding in a profusion of red, white and blue-coloured streamers. As they float down they change into the cords of a gently-swaying parachute; and grimly hanging on to it are two grotesque figures: a bowler-hat with spindly-limbs, and a black beret with short, plump legs and monkey-

long arms. Both Bowler Hat and Black Beret are without features, except for the same mouth-like slit. Just as they are about to land, the platform vanishes and they alight on what seems to be a military parade ground next to a short length of rope. Each seizes an end and they begin a ferocious tug-of-war. Bowler Hat shrieks, 'You're mine! You're mine!' while Black Beret screams, 'Non, tu es à moi!' And then I see what the contest is all about: hanging from the middle of the rope there's a red, white and blue sash; and dangling by the hair at the end of it ... that same gory head! It falls onto the stage, rolls over the floor and plops into the vat of wine which has now reappeared. Black Beret and Bowler Hat jump in after and disappear.

FTT: The psychiatrists among my readers will certainly have diagnosed in the imagery and symbolism of the above-related dreams signs and symptoms not unlike those associated with *Dissociative Identity Disorder*. This mental condition (also known as *Multiple Personality Disorder*) is characterized by a pathology whereby one single host person may display several distinct identities, each having its own specific pattern of perception and interaction. I should like to take this parenthetical opportunity of pointing out that I am in a position to recount other dreams of a comparable nature, and place myself at the entire disposal of students of psychology, psychodrama, psychogenesis, psychognosis, psychomancy, psychometry, psychoneurosis, psychopathy, or any other psychos preparing theses on the subject, with the ultimate aim of pushing back the frontiers of knowledge regarding the development of the dissociated Anglo-French person.

I was in my late teens when things really came to a head. The location on my left of such a vital organ as the heart, and the growing awareness that more and more Marxist-inspired,

insurrectional thoughts were circulating through my mind (I had just started my first year at university, and it didn't take much to see which side they came from) certainly explain why Thistlethwaite began preparing a do-or-die assault on French-occupied territory - the objective of which was, no doubt, to bring me under total English control. And as my Englishman massed his forces, dreadful stabbing pains in my lower abdomen - like so many bayonets ripping into flesh - provided a premonition of the terrible carnage to come.

Broadly speaking, English strategy was aimed at attacking French-held territories in a massive, two-pronged, sweeping offensive (code name *Operation Frog-strike*) over a vast front stretching from the appendix in the south to the northern areas of the gall bladder, with the initial plan of outflanking the French at both points. The two forces would then join up to encircle enemy positions firmly entrenched within a Maginot line of defensive fortifications and labyrinthine tunnels stretching from the small intestine down the full length of my lower left digestive tract as far as the transverse colon. A crucial part of the operation consisted in a section of the southern attack force marching further south with the aim of cutting off alternative French supply routes leading up through the rectal passage into the sigmoid colon. If everything went to plan (and my English alter saw no reason why it shouldn't), the French, hopelessly encircled and permanently deprived of victuals and munitions, would be left with just three options: (i) to come out of their holes and fight (superior in numbers, discipline, equipment and moral, the English were confident of victory in the event of direct confrontation); (ii) to stay inside and starve; (iii) to surrender unconditionally. After French defeat, the English army would then march northwards, taking possession of the heart along with the strategic regions around, before moving up through the trachea and seizing control of my central nervous system located in the brain.

But as I grew into manhood, my interposed personage of Théodore - that scarce-heeded product of the little moderation which then governed my two polar selves - had been making his voice of reason more pressingly heard above the battle cries around. It is said that it takes a great crisis to produce a great man. Never in the field of human conflict was it better illustrated than by my middleman; for it was this imminent, life-threatening catastrophe which brought all his previously unsuspected qualities to the fore. And no tribute can do full justice to the profound sense of responsibility, the unflinching tenacity of purpose, the exemplary self-abnegation and courage by which he distinguished himself in rising to the life-or-death challenge he had been so dauntingly confronted with. Barely minutes before *Operation Frog-strike* was to be launched, my peacemaker made a final solemn appeal to his English brother. What sense was there in unleashing an assault which could only bring misery and desolation to all? Was it not vital that, instead of going to war, the three of them joined together in a spirit of mutual co-operation and compromise to define those *sine qua non* conditions to a lasting peace? And how else could this be achieved than by uniting their three disparate selves into one integrated whole? To this effect, he would gladly stand between them in a narrow strip of conciliatory moderation and reason bringing them together, while at the same time holding them apart. Was it not in this direction, and in this direction alone that their only hope for survival lay?

I will leave it to readers to imagine by what awesome skills of persuasion and diplomacy my intermediary finally brought French and Englishman to sit round a negotiating table. And I will also spare them details of the arduous discussions, indeed ferocious verbal disputes that followed, and of the numerous occasions when either, or both, were on the point of walking out. But even though his untiring efforts were finally rewarded and a peace treaty was signed, Théodore's task had only just begun. His deep study of

history having taught him the fragility of so-called non-aggression pacts, my moderator was anxious to lay the constitutional foundations of a unifying system of governance strong enough to avert all risk of future, devastating internal war. Generally speaking, Théodore sought a political system which, given the significant divergences in culture, life style, institutions and mentality involved, would allow each as much autonomy as possible, while bringing them inseparably together in common allegiance to the whole. For him, the only solution lay, therefore, in a form of democratic government which only a loosely-knit federative structure could provide. As a result, two separate provinces of equal anatomical composition were defined: one broadly based on the former French-speaking territories, running down my left flank and governed by François; the other, English-speaking, occupying my right, administered by Thistlethwaite. As for Théodore, not only was it agreed that he should occupy a thin buffering strip between, but his main residence would be located in that generally-acknowledged seat of reason - the head. And all matters concerning one, but liable to have repercussions on the whole, would be submitted to the higher authority of a tri-partite head council, consisting of both French and Englishman and presided over by a Lieutenant General in the person of Théodore, whose casting vote on any subject of discord would be deemed final and binding.

It goes without saying that my heart was the object of much palpitating debate. Though colonizing my liver, right kidney and lung as well as the gall bladder (not to mention the duodenum, the cecum together with the strategic passages of the ascending and much of the transverse colon, including the taenia coli), Thistlethwaite stubbornly rejected this total dependence on a 'Frenchy' for such a vital source of emotion and life. After racking my brains for many agonizing hours, Théodore finally presented a plan giving my ticker and its immediate *environs* the status of an enclave, partitioned (in much the same way as Berlin was in the past), into

independent French and English zones. In order, however, to guard against any risk of one being annexed by the other, and fully aware that the heart must be tempered by reason and reason softened by the heart, Théodore agreed to occupy another buffering zone between the two.

Despite this final consensus, it must not be imagined that my French and English alters did not remain deeply suspicious of the underlying motives of each. In view of the extreme left-wing, revolutionary tendencies latent in most Frenchmen, undeniable signs of which he had detected in my own, Thistlethwaite was eager to know what guarantees Théodore proposed in order to provide protection against any future insurrectional attempt to replace this democratically-based federation by a centralized, Marxist-oriented dictatorship.

‘If it comes to that,’ retorted my Frenchman, ‘what assurances do I ’ave that the representative of a nation over whose empire the sun never set will not try to turn us all into an English Crown Colony?’

My mediator hastened to reply that, since he would have quarters in both heart and head, all such machinations, from whatever side they came, would be felt and/or deduced at the very earliest stage, and that he could be relied upon to take all necessary action to nip them in the bud. Nevertheless, he was personally convinced that both had now enough sense to realize their present arrangement was a matter of life or death, and that its success lay in their sincere desire to make it work.

It is still not possible for me to express that feeling of ineffable release on finally comprehending that my inner self would no longer be the field of brutal battles for possession of my body and soul. And words alone cannot describe the pride I felt in being invested with one single identity: for I could now delete those shamefully divisive mental commas which had for so long held the François, Théodore, and Thistlethwaite in me apart.

Once my initial euphoria had subsided, however, it was with his usual down-to-earth sagacity that my middleman whispered to me that he was under no illusion as to the effects of daily, intimate co-existence between his French and English brothers. This would, he confided, be the inevitable source of misunderstanding and dispute over the years to come. After all, what else can be expected of the representatives of two nations whose sole point in common is provided by the colours of their flag? And only seconds later an internal argument broke out to confirm what he had just said.

It started when a thought suddenly crossed my mind that, rather than attempting to produce a literary work, a person who hears voices would be better advised seeking assistance from one (or more) of the specialists parenthetically detailed on a previous page of this chapter. It could only have been my Frenchman who then rather indignantly brought it to my attention that not only did Joan of Arc hear the voices of Saint-Michael and Saint-Catherine, but had illuminating conversations with both. And whatever you English might say, *her* sanity could never be put into doubt. Now I, the integrated François Théodore Thistlethwaite, had personally thought that, given the considerable amount of water which has flown beneath the bridges since this young lady's unfortunate demise, passions on the subject would have cooled. This was not to realize that the death of this eternal symbol of Gallic suffering at the hands of the English still fills the French with a burning desire for revenge – so much so that the subject sparked off what began with a heated argument, but soon flared up into a blazing row within. In reply to my Frenchman's accusation that it was the English who were alone responsible for the young lady's flamboyant death, Thistlethwaite went to some pains to point out that, according to history, the Maid of Orléans was betrayed and condemned by her own. Though somewhat taken aback, my middleman soon recovered and, with his usual masterful tact,

managed to appease both by agreeing with François that it was indeed the English who put her in the hot seat, while assuring Thistlethwaite that his countrymen did at least have the decency to admit they had burned a Saint.

But even though my mediator managed to cool things down, the incident served as a salutary warning that, in the heat of the moment, nobody really knew where contentions of this kind could lead. It was, therefore, proposed by Théodore, and finally agreed by the other two that subjects likely to be of a controversial or disruptive nature, rather than being allowed to develop unchecked, would be subject to the strictest control. Suffice it to say that, after considerable discussion and consultation, these practical contingencies were included in a contractual arrangement, duly drawn up by my arbitrator, with the aim of legally regulating all potentially explosive subjects of inner dispute - thereby reinforcing the foundations of a stable, harmonious, everyday working relationship between the parties concerned. The following is a faithful copy of the document which was submitted for the approval and signature of all three:

INTERNAL AGREEMENT

Conditions Regulating Peaceful Co-Existence between the three Alters to the Host Person of François Théodore Thistlethwaite

By the terms of this present agreement, drawn up this day of , it is expressly agreed by the three alters or parts, namely François, Théodore, and Thistlethwaite, presently conjoined within the host person of François Théodore Thistlethwaite, that any subject or subjects, past, present or future, direct or implied, considered or liable to be considered erroneous, defamatory, deprecatory, discriminatory, conflictive, or prejudicial in any way to the integrity of the English and French nations and their agents, including (but

not limited to) modes of governance, political systems, social tendencies, laws, regulations and diverse codes, institutions (officially recognized or not), established usages, customs and traditions, historical references, accepted lifestyles, culinary habits, religious beliefs and denominations, sporting activities, sexual habits and tendencies, meteorological phenomena, state officers, political or confederation leaders, royal persons or simple citizens (male and female) should, in the event of dispute, and at the sole request of either the aforesaid François or Thistlethwaite, be submitted to the aforementioned Théodore in his capacity as officially-nominated judge and arbitrator, and that the latter's decision alone as to whether the theme(s), or other subsequently related sub-theme(s) may be pursued and reproduced in written form by any of the previously-mentioned three dissociated parts, or by the fully integrated François Théodore Thistlethwaite, shall be deemed final and binding.

Signature of Alters:

.....		
François	Théodore	Thistlethwaite

Signature of Host:

.....
François Théodore Thistlethwaite

Dated: 22nd September, 20..

Chapter Two

The Dream

There are more things in Heaven and Hell than are dreamed of in your philosophy, Horatio.

William Shakespeare

It is a generally accepted truth that Morpheus, whose realm is of the night, keeps by far the greater part of our dreams for his own delectation. Admittedly, he deigns to leave them with us during our periods of slumber, but at the wakening hour he quickly claims them as his own, and for poor mortals such as we they are melted into oblivion as icicles in the morning sun.

I can only conclude that this Prince of Dreams was one night exploring the windings and alcoves of my tri-partite being when he happened to light upon a film which, when projected within the darkness of my inner self, brought to his astonished gaze images so grotesque to eye, and words so strange to ear that he consented to suspend drawing up that bridge which spans that tortuous river dividing the conscious and sub-conscious mind long enough beyond the stirrings of dawn for me to set down on paper a record of what he would otherwise have appropriated for his sole delectation.

FTT: Despite our deity's magnanimous concession, my readers will still be left in some doubt as to how on earth I could have recollected in such meticulous detail what normally flows into the waters of Lethe at first light of dawn. I can only repeat that this was no normal dream, and that the broad contours of my vision were undimmed enough by the light of day as to provide a clear indication of the path to follow in order to

transpose it into verbal form. Since, however, dreams are of limited interest to all but the psychiatrist, not forgetting the dreamer himself, I must confess to having resorted to a form of literary embroidery which, while remaining faithful to the basic fabric weave, consists in introducing strands of varying consistencies, lengths and colours, with the aim of enhancing the appeal and impact of the tapestry as a whole.

Those who die a technical death and are later medically resuscitated tell of strange transcendental remembrances, ineffable sensations of ethereal ascension towards a longed-for deliverance as the spirit is released from its corporeal envelope, and begins a beatific ascension to more exalted spheres. There also exists a perhaps more-common-than-we-think phenomenon while we are asleep, where there occurs a temporary suspension of the respiratory system of varying lengths in time, during which it is not beyond the limits of plausibility to imagine that, in some instances, the soul gulls the body into believing it is irretrievably lost; the former breaks out of its terrestrial chrysalis and, like some celestial butterfly, eagerly commences heavenly levitation, only to suffer the ignominious discomposure of being ordered to get back down where it belongs as breathing begins again and normal bodily functions resume.

And perhaps I had here been granted a fleeting glimpse of what awaits us beyond the final gasp: for the word dream is not expressive enough to qualify the hallucinatory scenes scanned by my memory as graphically as if they had been digitized, and which began with the indescribable feeling of long-awaited liberation I have so inadequately alluded to above, and any explanation for which must certainly be restricted by occult dimensions eluding all rational comprehension by man. And I say inadequately alluded to with no false modesty: for language often provides an unsatisfactory approximation, a codified standardization of

what we really wish to communicate, and a spontaneous glance or gesture may tell us infinitely more than a page covered in mere words. And so, when I think of terms such as airiness, weightlessness, or disembodiment, all seem deficient in that their earthly sense is inextricably bound up with matter existing in varying degrees of ponderousness; whereas in my dream I had no solid existence: I was Airiness, Weightlessness, and Disembodiment as I swooped and soared high above the brownish blue globe below.

After much ecstatic romping in the troposphere, seraphic frolicking in the stratosphere and beatific cavorting in the ionosphere, I plunged back down to the wispily-coloured glass marble below, and again began gliding and wheeling, drifting and hovering over the deep blue waters of an infinite ocean. All at once, my gaze was held by a V-shaped form of seething white waters surging forward at aeronautical speed, behind which a spray-blurred configuration swiftly assumed the sleekly-bounding outlines of an off-shore power boat. Arriving beneath me it hove to, and my eyes followed the now dissociated arrowhead wake, which continued to plough on with ever-increasing velocity to plunge out of sight over the horizon. On casting eyes back, I saw that the boat, by some surrealistic transmogrification, had now taken on the shape of an imposing cruise liner, its superstructure glistening white in the sun with frosty, icing-sugar incandescence. But, unlike a real vessel of this kind, the one in my dream had an unlikely number – perhaps a score or more – of super-structured decks rising aloft above one another in progressively smaller and smaller rectangular tiers, each supported by four ornate Byzantine columns, both decks and pillars rampantly encrusted in a delirious rococo jumble of glacé shells, sea-horses, sea weeds, fishes, corals, acorns, flowers, fruits, intertwined foliage, grotesquely gaping gargoyles, provocatively posturing mermaids, lasciviously leering goblins crystallized in a host of icing paste poses, like some lavishly ornate wedding cake, baked and iced by a

demented confectioner for a debauched party of pagan Gods, culminating in a final level of miniscule proportions in which was sunk a tiny swimming pool where, floating alone on a water mattress in indolent repose and unabashed nudity, I could unmistakably discern the bronzed frame of a gentleman whom I instantly recognized as no other than ... François Théodore Thistlethwaite!

In the seconds that followed, the same bolt-like frothing wake, now swollen into a monstrous tidal wave, came surging back from below the horizon on a line which met the longitudinal and latitudinal axis of the ship - the resulting encounter being so much to the advantage of the former that the latter foundered in an instant, plunging passengers and crew, and you know who, down into the depths to join Davy Jones's collection of blanched cadavers, and leaving as sole evidence of its previous floating state three or four marzipan lifebuoys and sundry icing flotsam bobbing unconcernedly in the evening sun.

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In prominent black letters set against an immaculate white background, the wooden notice board displayed the peremptory inscription *All Souls Must Report to the Porter Immediately on Arrival*. These words were reinforced by a prominent, laterally-pointing arrow beneath, unequivocally intimating that the only authorized procedure for satisfying the injunction lay in tugging the metal handle affixed to the end of a braided cord hanging close by on the right, which, if followed by the eye *for a short distance* in an upwards direction, could be seen suspended from an arm, itself attached to the summit of a solid-looking brass bell bracketed to the front of the lodge presumably occupied by the previously-mentioned porter.

FTT: Hardly had I been allowed to complete the last sentence than a French-accented voice expressed surprise, indeed indignation that the notice should have been written solely in the language of Shakespeare, with no corresponding translation into that of Molière. It was certainly my middleman who, in reply, diplomatically pointed out that, though he genuinely understood the cause of his French brother's frustration, he must resign himself to the fact that, since English was the international language on earth, it was certainly the official one in Heaven.

I also incurred my Frenchman's displeasure (he even talked about lodging an official complaint) by originally expressing the linear dimension of the bell cord in units of English measure (four feet) – the main cause of his exasperation being that 'even if they'll never be persuaded to drive on the right, they'll have to get used to kilometres, metres, centimetres and millimetres sooner or later!' After much heated argument, during which it was certainly Thistlethwaite who explained that, as English was the appointed language in Heaven, it was logical to assume that, not only were Anglo-Saxon measurements of length in force up there, too, but those of area, mass, volume, speed, pressure, energy, and temperature. In addition, it was my Englishman's decided opinion that all business on high was transacted in pounds sterling. After lengthy internal bickering, Théodore finally intervened and imposed the above-italicized compromise 'for a short distance.'

Had our three poor souls enjoyed embodiment, it would have been in a thoroughly drenched and miserable state, with great trepidation of heart, trembling of limb and chattering of teeth that they would have been seen standing in awesome contemplation of the majestic, towering portal of solid, burnished gold adjacent to the lodge and barring all

advancement beyond. And it would have been with desolate foreboding that one of them (I don't quite know whether it would have been François, Théodore or Thistlethwaite) would have plucked up courage enough to raise an arm, and with a no doubt quivering hand pull the cord suspended from the bell, the actuation of which was confirmed by a single mournful clang.

With much creaking and squeaking the solid, metal-studded door slowly opened to reveal the person of an elderly, sagacious-looking gentleman clutching what appeared to be the Holy Scriptures in his left hand, and what certainly was an enormous, ancient-looking key in his right. Loosely hanging over his bent and crooked frame, and corded at the waist, was a full-length, sandy-coloured robe displaying an impressive number of doubtful, brownish-coloured stains; and any description of cranium and visage must necessarily involve a monotonously reiterative reference to all epithets connotative of the word hairy. For apart from the gentleman's crown which, for evident reasons of age, was entirely bereft of capillary growth, a compensatory profusion of mousy-coloured hair cascaded from his temples, inundating ear and shoulder, and tumbling shaggily down to sandal-shod foot. A bushy, capillaceous excrescence so engulfed ear, nostril, eye and mouth as to seriously threaten the normal functions nature had allotted them; and it could only be assumed that the venerable *monsieur* had been vested with some seraphic detection device capable of sensing the presence of incorporeal souls, for shaggy eyebrows projected themselves in a sudden upward movement, and a long tangled beard took the opposite route as he became aware of the presence of the three spirits despondently ranged before him. The whites of his eyes and the orifice of his mouth having resumed their normal impenetrable state, a gruff voice struggled out from beneath the labial undergrowth to enquire what its owner could do for them.

That same soul who had so boldly extracted the lone, doleful dong from the bell introduced himself and his alter egos, and proceeded to inform our fleecy interlocutor that their presence before him had been occasioned by a summons, totally out of the blue, obliging them to appear before the Supreme High Court on a matter of life or death. Receiving neither oral nor gestural confirmation that the message had permeated the filamentous matting hiding the woolly elder's ears, our indomitable soul ventured to position his lips as close to the estimated location of the gentleman's right one as respect and propriety would admit, and reiterated the same information in a slightly more emphatic tone. Hardly had he withdrawn his buccal cavity to a more becoming distance, however, than an outraged voice was clearly heard to declare that its owner was certainly not deaf and for the Lord's sake why were there three of them standing before him and why on earth hadn't they been informed that Supreme High Court cases like this could only be examined on an individual basis and why the hell couldn't they just go away and sort themselves out and by Deuce if they didn't present themselves one by one in strict chronological order of decease he would have no hesitation in despatching them to the Devil right away.

I will not risk wearying readers with a detailed narration of how my spokesman soul (it could well have been Théodore), by a stupendous effort of self-restraint and tact, managed to bring the shaggy elder to understand that their case was somewhat anomalous in that they had all three cohabitated in a single mortal envelope during their abridged existence on earth. His immediate reaction was to fish out from beneath his robe a compact-sized angel wing shell (though it could have been an ark shell, or even a pearly nautilus shell), apparently invested with cell phone capacities; for without further ado, he raised it to the level of his lips and rather grumpily asked to be put through to a person whom he referred to as Jeanne - a name I immediately associated

(readers will certainly have guessed) with that of a heroic Gallic maiden of Anglophobic inclination, who, in recompense for her fiery devotion on earth had apparently been elevated to the much coveted position of Personal Assistant to the Supreme High Court Judge.

On being informed of the dilemma, our *demoiselle* immediately consulted the automatically-updated celestial data base kept on the birth, life and death of all mortal beings, and with much clicking finally brought up on her screen her file on the terrestrial life of François Théodore Thistlethwaite.

FTT: Readers may be interested to learn that, in line with a general policy of modernization and permanent quality improvement, a fully-computerized fecundation, birth, marriage and death registration process has recently been implemented on High. By this first, under normal circumstances, whenever spermatozoid penetrates the ovular cell, a divine software programme automatically registers and prints out a record of the fusion in the form of a provisional soul certificate, giving official validity to the conception. Details are then automatically C (Celestially)-mailed to the Great Provider on High and deposited as pending in His celestial data base files. The emergence of the corresponding being into separate bodily existence is, of course, officially attested to by one sole birth certificate on earth, a copy of which is automatically transmitted to Heaven where, on receipt, a full soul birth certificate endorsing independent spiritual existence is generated, and a life-long file simultaneously opened. Generally speaking, the system works well: a cloud computing back-up service is in faithful operation, updates are religiously down-loaded, and nothing being sacred (even in Heaven), a scan is programmed to begin at nine o'clock every Sunday so as to guard against intrusion and infection by devilish hackers, pirates, Trojan horses,

satanically-inspired viruses, bugs and worms of all description.

After lengthy perusal, poor Jeanne, faced with a total lack of spiritual jurisprudence and suspecting more than a touch of Mephistophelean machination, could only conclude that the whole business was above her head. Her dismay was occasioned by the fact that, in the file she had on François Théodore Thistlethwaite, there reposed one sole mortal birth certificate and just one soul celestial one, whereas no fewer than three souls had presented themselves at the porter's lodge! She could, therefore, only conclude that two of them did not have a soul to call their own. After much soul-searching (she feared that sole liability might be attributed to her), the maiden decided that the sole solution was to refer the matter to the sole Soul Judge in the person of her Lord and Master.

FTT: In view of systematic English attempts over the centuries to cast smutty aspersions on the virginal purity of this legendary liberator of a violated France - some going so far as to claim that, in reality, she herself could by no means have been ignorant of the fecundation process, and others having the unspeakable shamelessness to claim that she had even been an enthusiastic participant in it - François would refute in the most categorical manner possible the slightest suspicion that the Pucelle d'Orléans could ever have allowed herself to have been the recipient of the instrument of such insemination, or even enjoyed any its stimulatory preliminaries.

In addition, some readers may be wondering why the French Christian name, Jeanne, has been retained to refer to our heroine, whereas Anglo-Saxon history books commonly use the English equivalent of Joan. In the original manuscript of this work I did, in fact, replace

her French name by Joan. However, in face of my Frenchman's deep indignation, Thistlethwaite went to considerable pains to convince him that, as on earth, English was undoubtedly the official business language in Heaven, and that since all legal, administrative and general business documents, letters, facsimiles, C-mails were certainly drafted in this language, and meetings, conferences, discussions, training courses, seminars and interviews conducted in that same tongue, we might justifiably assume that foreign Christian names were also replaced by their Anglicized equivalent. He also went to some lengths to point out to his French brother that the young lady, being of peasant stock and entirely uneducated, and given her smouldering resentment (if not burning hatred) of the English on earth, would certainly have had a deplorable level, if any at all, in the language of Dickens. Consequently, on being reviewed for the post, not only would it have been a *sine qua non* imposed by her future Boss that she followed a crash secretarial course, but nomination would also have depended on her obtaining an acceptable written and oral grade in the English language part of the H.C.D.B.A. (Higher Certificate of Divine Business Administration). And finally my Frenchman's attention was drawn to the fact that the hypothesis of only one soul language, unquestionably English, being admitted on high found irrefutable confirmation in the universally-known aversion of the Supreme Judge to all forms of multilingual confusion, as endorsed by His pitiless destruction of the Tower of Babylon (Genesis 11, Verses 4-9). Despite these arguments, François (no doubt supported by Théodore) remained stubbornly unmoved, insisting that, here, it was not only Jeanne's moral reputation which was at stake, but the international status of the French language as well as the honour of the nation as a whole.

The Supreme Judge had not been Himself lately, pondered Jeanne. Yesterday, He had been as miserable as sin and this morning He was as grumpy as hell. Perhaps she had hit the nail on the head in thinking He was at cross-purposes with His only son. Or, He could have eaten something which was playing the devil with His digestion. So, to try to sweeten Him up beforehand, she thought it might be a good idea to offer Him His favourite Continental Roast and a few Lady's Fingers. He did so relish a nice tit-bit now and again.

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The Lord Chief Justice was considerably mollified after His mid-morning intermission. His favourite Continental Roast had gone down a treat, and the Lady's Fingers had really tickled His fancy. He was also partial to a nice piece of Angel Cake and never said no to a bit of Eve's Pudding, or even a taste of hot Roly-Poly, though strangely enough, he had never been able to stomach one single mouthful of Spotted Dick.

FTT: English cooking, the Thistlethwaite in me reflects, while never attaining the rapturous heights of *la gastronomie française*, is now considerably underrated, and certainly no longer merits the malicious denigration to which it is still systematically subjected by our Gallic neighbours. French readers may be interested to note that Lady's Fingers, Angel Cake, Eve's Pudding, hot Roly-Poly (with custard and treacle), and Spotted Dick are just a few of the wide range of delicious English cakes, buns and sweet puddings which are of far greater quality and diversity than is generally believed. Spotted Dick (a mouth-watering steamed suet pudding with currants), for example, is simply divine, especially when eaten with custard or fresh cream. My Englishman would strongly recommend the following work to all amateur French cooks wishing to enlarge their culinary

horizons in the area of English sweets, puddings and desserts:

Sweet Talk: The Seventh Heaven of English Tarts, Buns, Sweet Dishes and Hot Puddings, I. Bakewell (Gourmet Publications, 2010).

So infernally convoluted was this particular case that the Supreme Judge could not help but wonder whether the whole business was not simply another devilish scheme to undermine His divine jurisdiction on earth. In the general interests of humanity, the laws of procreation which He had decreed below should, under normal circumstances, have rendered all procreative intercourse between Gallics and English as totally unproductive as that between French Poodle and British Short Hair Cat. Moreover, he was at a complete loss to understand how on earth this horrendous conception had been allowed to see light of day, and why in Heaven's name Jeanne hadn't informed Him of this monstrous aberration at inception. After all, it was her job to make sure everything ran according to His divine plan, and even if He were God Almighty He couldn't be expected to know and see everything! He had personally sown the seeds of the Immaculate Conception and, had He been informed, would have had no problems in reversing the process and nipping this odd mix-up in the bud. And even though it was true she had faithfully obeyed His summons to boot the perfidious English out of France, perhaps the Bishop of Beauvais had not been entirely wrong, and she was a bit of a witch after all.

FTT: The scholar in me points out that Pierre Cauchon, Bishop of Beauvais, was President of the ecclesiastical court which condemned Jeanne to the fate we all know. What is not generally known is that whenever a man, wishing to stigmatize the disagreeable and/or malicious character of wife, mother-in-law or female companion,

utilizes the word 'bitch' (as in common expressions such as: 'Why did I ever marry a bitch like you!' 'Your mother is a real bitch!'), or would like to insult another male by insinuating that he is the issue of a woman of like disposition (i.e. 'You son of a bitch!'), he is in no way comparing her, contrary to general belief, to a female member of the canine race, which is usually of a benign and benevolent nature. As the etymologists among my readers will certainly be aware, the word is, in fact, a corruption of the expression 'a bit of a witch', where the syllables 'of a wi' have been gradually elided over the years (a similar linguistic phenomenon may be observed with the name 'Santa Claus,' certainly a corruption of 'Saint-Nicholas'). If, therefore, the strict etymology of the word is respected, whenever a man addresses a woman in this way, he is, in fact, inferring, like the Bishop of Beauvais, that she is a wicked sorceress having frequent connections with the devil.

In any case, there would be the devil to pay and He would certainly give her hell for this. It had been a long time since she'd had a good roasting, and this time He would really haul her over the coals.

Though His time was sacred, the Lord Chief Justice religiously devoted the rest of His morning to a scrupulous, in-depth examination of His personal file on the life of François Théodore Thistlethwaite. After weighing it in the divine balance, it was found to be sadly wanting. Not to mention an appreciable number of sinful irregularities on the part of the accused, He noted that, on 24th December, in the year of our Lord 20., at precisely 11.56 p.m., the ultimate blasphemy had been committed during an internal argument on religion in the form of the following declaration, deliberately designed to undermine His authority on earth: 'l'homme n'est pas une création de Dieu; Dieu est une création de l'homme' (FTT: Man is not God's creation; God

is man's creation). The fact that this sacrilegious statement had found expression in the language of Voltaire, and in view of the secular, indeed irreligious traditions of this author's nation, it would not be unreasonable to conclude that the origins of the thought were imputable to the Gallic part of the accused.

He had, however, been no less shocked by the utterance, 'We all know about *virgins* who hear voices!' – the word *virgins* being detached from the rest of the sentence, and emphasized in such a manner as to impart the sarcastic inference, unworthy of the even the smuttiest English tabloid, that His chosen maiden was not entirely intact. He could only interpret this as yet another base attempt to cast doubt on the physical and moral integrity of His Personal Assistant by sullyng the saintly image of chastity and piety which the French people venerated in her, as well as to question the wisdom of His own divine intervention, through her person, against an Anglo-Saxon nation which could never rid itself of the conviction that He always was, always is, and always will be entirely on their side. It did not, He reflected, take much imagination to see who was responsible for this. Moreover, by his failure to bring the extremely grave nature of these aspersions to the notice of his two alter egos, Théodore, in his officially-appointed capacity of moderator and judge, could only be guilty of the grievous sin of omission.

Nevertheless, He was forced to admit this was a devilishly queer business, and though three wretched souls were waiting at the gatehouse, officially there existed only one soul birth certificate. Consequently, he would have to play it by the book and, from a strictly legal point of view, the sole person who could be judged was the whole François Théodore Thistlethwaite. In reality, the latter was comprised of three earthlings who, through the incompetence of His Personal Assistant, and no fault of his own, had been unhappily condemned from birth to permanent divisive cohabitation in a single mortal envelope. And, though now blessed with a

stable constitution, not only had this genetic mishap been the cause of constant physical and moral affliction to the aforesaid, but had until very recently rendered any form of democratic determination impossible: sometimes he had been presided over by François, other times ruled by Thistlethwaite, and occasionally adjudicated by Théodore. It would, therefore, be unjust on His part to cast the whole man down into the flames of Hell for the profanities of the first, consign him to Purgatory for the salaciousness of the second, or condemn him to eternal agony for the omissions of the third.

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Jeanne was rather taken aback by her Master's injunction to send the poor souls to Him forthwith. Notification of celestial verdicts was usually entrusted to her - though, admittedly, He had lately been taking malicious pleasure in personally sentencing a growing number of deceased French politicians to a permanently painful reminder that, even if they considered themselves above the laws of man, they were certainly not exempted from His. And it was with quivering, premonitory trepidation rather than damp gelidity (the shaggy gentleman had been charitable enough to dry them out and make them a nice, hot cup of tea) that my poor souls were ushered into the Supreme Courtroom.

Had my three souls again existed in incarnated form, the sudden eruption of a blazing column of coruscating, towering white flame would have caused them to have bowed their heads in blinded, reverential wonder - upon which the awesomely commanding, yet sublimely merciful voice of the Universal Judge bade them relax, and be without fear. The last time He had made this type of entrance, He mused, had been some while ago now when He had wanted to have a cosy chat with Moses. But this time He had no desire to beat

about the bush, so He invited the unholy trinity forthwith to take a pew, and began His oration without further ado.

The Lord Chief Justice began by informing my trio that, after the gratifying release of the mid-morning intermission, He had religiously devoted a goodly portion of His sacred time to a detailed appraisal of the earthly life of François Théodore Thistlethwaite. Not only had He been mortified by the shameless attempts to sully the pristine reputation of one of His closest and most cherished collaborators, but He had also been appalled by the appreciable number of instances where His own name had been taken in vain. Hence, under normal circumstances, the accused would not have had a hope in Hell of leading the high life among them, and would have been cast down to eternal damnation, without even the ghost of a chance of expiating his sins in Purgatory. However, the desire to be scrupulously equitable obliged Him to confess that this was far from being a normal case. Responsibility for the aforesaid transgressions could not be solely imputed to the accused, since he was, in fact, not a one soul person but a three-soul one. It would therefore be wholly one-sided of Him to hold the total accountable for the doings of any one of the thirds. Moreover, He Himself could not deny a certain moral liability resulting from the contributory negligence of His administrative services which had been originally reprehensible in allowing this unfortunate impregnation to follow its course undetected - thereby obliging the hapless mother to labour under the misconception that her offspring would be blessed with happiness, whereas it had already been pre-destined to a life of Hell on earth. If, then, in view of these considerations, it could be admitted that He was responsible, without being guilty, He could only conclude that François Théodore Thistlethwaite was guilty, without being responsible. And as He was not prepared to argue the toss between guilty innocence and innocent guilt, the only just verdict He felt it possible to return was one of acquittal.

Accordingly, in view of the normally inconceivable nature of the circumstances surrounding the fecundation, subsequent birth, and terrestrial existence of the person of François Théodore Thistlethwaite up to the moment of soggy demise, and in recognition of, together with reparation for the unquantifiable moral and physical prejudice suffered thereby, the Almighty Judge, in the exercise of His absolute and infinite powers, had decided upon a number of unprecedented measures He had instructed his Personal Assistant to draw up in the form of a contractual document, the main points of which I have summarized as follows:

1. To operate divine severance enabling the previously conjoined personage of François Théodore Thistlethwaite to lead a second existence of physical, mental and spiritual dissociation in the three totally separate and inalienable beings of François, Théodore, and Thistlethwaite – this measure to take effect forthwith.
2. In temporal compensation for the incontestable prejudice caused to the conjoined François Théodore Thistlethwaite during the period between his birth and decease, and which the terms of the present contract explicitly admit, to grant to each one of his newly independent alters, specifically named under Clause 1, an extension to the normal human life-span. This addition shall be calculated on the basis of present average male life expectancy on earth, to which shall be appended the age at which their previous conjoined existence was brought to termination. Moreover, in supplementary indemnification, each of the afore-said beneficiaries shall enjoy the guarantee of being free from illness or injury up to and including the age of 100 (one hundred) years, it being expressly stated, however, that beyond this figure each will be subject to the vicissitudes inherent in normal mortal life.
3. In further recognition of, and compensation for the suffering occasioned, resulting in a life of Hell on earth, to

provide the above-named successors with the opportunity of creating a Heaven on earth.

4. All disputes and litigation arising from the provisions of this agreement shall be submitted to an arbitrator or arbitrators appointed according to the Rules of Conciliation and Arbitration of the Celestial Chamber of Commerce, it being expressly stipulated that the above clauses discharge the Principle from any form whatsoever of further liability towards the three above-mentioned beneficiaries.

As our souls were departing, and no doubt fully aware of the universally-acknowledged prowess with the ladies which his countrymen enjoy, the Divine Judge took François to one side. And had this same Judge – of many names, but of no body or face – had arms and a head, He would have given my Frenchman a gentle dig in the ribs and, with a roguish twinkle of the eye, would have whispered into his ear that what He was going to say should be considered off the cuff, but he could take it from Him that once he and his brothers had had time to settle in, and really started feeling at home, He'd be sending them down the great, great, great, great, great – in fact he'd rather lost count of the exact number of greats but it didn't really matter - grand-daughter of Eve who, if He'd been a bit younger, would have been the apple of His eye, and two of her mates (also fruity bits of stuff); for though He Himself was above that sort of thing, He understood very well the temptations of the flesh and, after all, once they'd got themselves straightened out, they'd have to start thinking about the generations to come.

FTT: Though the above highly irreverent portrayal of the Almighty will doubtlessly appeal to a certain wickedly-salacious, free-thinking Gallic sense of impiety, I fully realize it would be a grave mistake on my part to infer that reactions on the English side of the Channel would be just as forbearing. I am, therefore, acutely aware that in a country which counts more

religious denominations than cheeses, and where more time is spent making tea than love, my representation of the Supreme Judge as not being insensitive to nubile feminine charm might at best exasperate, and at worst profoundly offend underlying puritanical sensibilities.

I am also not without knowing that the divinely-endorsed treatment of young women as sensual objects whose function is merely to satisfy the carnal appetites of men, risks enraging not only spiritual leaders, but also the feminists among our English lady readers who, having claimed and obtained their right to emancipation and equality much earlier than their French sisters, would certainly be inclined to react with more vociferous disapprobation to this kind of humiliating, sexist discrimination.

However, in a general plea for attenuating circumstances, I would draw attention to the fact that this account is not necessarily a reflection of my personal thoughts but the detailed description of a dream - by very definition, the surfacing of the unfettered, frequently irrational emanations of the subconscious mind, and as such beyond the dreamer's control. It must also be borne in mind that the elements of this dream were rarely, if ever, the product of my integral whole, some parts emerging from the left part of my subconscious mind, some from the right, with the occasional contribution from my man in the middle, and some from a crazy, surrealistic mixture of all three. Nevertheless, François, Théodore and Thistlethwaite, along with myself, their integrated host, are unanimous in expressing our sincerest apologies for any offence that might have been caused.

In fact, the Almighty, profoundly dispirited that man seemed only to defile and destroy all He endeavoured to create - often in His very name - had been desperately

pondering a means of restoring His shattered confidence in humanity, and had glimpsed in the strange case of François Théodore Thistlethwaite an earthly-sent opportunity of doing so. In His boundless wisdom and foresight, He had taken the precaution of reserving a no-go area on earth in the Bermuda triangle: a divinely-protected sanctuary prohibited to man, and defended by an awesome array of cataclysmic forces – gales, typhoons, hurricanes, tsunamis, electric storms, bolts from the blue, plus a couple of secret weapons He kept well up His sleeve - which were automatically unleashed whenever human violation was threatened by sea or air, and which the icing-sugar liner previously described had certainly been the victim of.

*

Thistlethwaite awoke to find himself recumbent on that same air-mattress he and his conjoined brothers had been so slothfully reposing on the moment the ship had met its divinely-impelled fate. But this time he was alone on the vast ocean, and greatly surprised to see he now had a body he could call his own.

In view of the previously disincarnate state of François Théodore Thistlethwaite, the more critically-minded reader might be wondering how in Heaven's name I saw it was Thistlethwaite or, for that matter, how on earth Thistlethwaite saw it was Thistlethwaite. The simple answer is that it could have been no-one but an Englishman: for lengthy exposure to the relentless rays of the tropical sun had transformed the pallid whiteness of his indigenous skin into an alarmingly vivid shade of vermilion - as if epidermis was frantically striving to warn the lanky, blond-haired person it enveloped that no more could be taken; and the surface of forehead, nose, cheeks and shoulders were beginning to resemble coats of blistered, peeling Burgundy-red paint to which the flame of a blowtorch was being assiduously

applied. In stark contrast, the deep crimson hue which coloured his face brought out the watery-blue paleness of his eyes; and though it would be wrong to say he had no chin, it had to be looked at twice to make sure one was there. But what struck most was the curious sight of two prominent front teeth firmly reposing on lower lip, the effect of which was to impart to his face a permanent, beatific smile - as if the cruel sufferings inflicted on the outer man were being met with imperturbable cheerfulness by the one within.

After agonizingly long hours adrift on the empty blue waters (during which his courage was sorely tried), a nebulous line on the horizon gradually shaped itself into the outlines of what appeared to be a small atoll. Stung into action by the thought of deliverance, my lion-heart desperately activated arms and legs to propel his mattress forward, and finally crawled ashore, completely drained, but no longer all at sea, and tickled more than pink to see he still had a hereafter before him. And so, washed out, half-seas over with fatigue, his ebbing strength all but overrun by the rising tide, Thistlethwaite hauled his blistered carcass painfully up to a sheltering berth in the cooling shade of an indolently-leaning palm. The white-sanded beach, lapped on one side by the warm, turquoise waters of a breath-taking lagoon, fringed on the other by the bolls of gently-swaying palms whose fanning fronds, languidly ruffled by a musk-scented breeze, offered such deliciously cooling shelter to my hero beneath that he immediately sank into the deepest of sleeps; and while he slumbered, scores of crabs of diverse sizes, varieties and shapes, crept warily out of the translucent waters, and gathered round his recumbent figure in frothy-mouthed awe and stalk-eyed wonder.

A couple of hours later, feeling much more in the pink after his reparatory sleep, Thistlethwaite decided to explore this treasure of an island which the hand of the Almighty had so bountifully unearthed, and so unerringly guided him towards. Though made of stout stuff, the bastion of his

English phlegm had not been designed to withstand this expeditionary incursion into the Promised Land, and the previously unshakeable ramparts of his imperturbability, like the walls of Jericho, crumbled beneath the ecstatic cries of delight the wondrous sights produced. An oasis of green in a boundless blue desert, the island was crowned by an emerald exuberance of luxuriant splendour, fringed by a pristine white shore sloping gently down into the barely-ruffled indigo deep which provided a breath-taking contrast to the lighter-shaded jades of the lagoon within. And girdling the sands grew clusters of coconut palms, their sylphlike trunks reverentially bowing to the blue-blooded ocean beyond, and their gently-waving fronds beckoning all to taste their bounteous fruits in the deliciously-cooling shade proffered beneath. Between ocean and lagoon a broad strip of rampant verdure, a riotous growth of intertwined plants, ferns, vines, creepers and flowers pullulating beneath berry-laden bushes, psychedelically-blossoming shrubs, and multifarious fruit-bearing trees, their branches bent low with cornucopian charges of fructiferous plenty.

Most of the fruits he could identify without hesitation: bananas, pineapples, peaches, dates, mangoes, breadfruit, and passion fruit. Some of the trees were less mundane: his appetite was wetted by the juicy-looking fruit of the Maidenhair Tree, and he even spotted the hanging branches of the purple-flowered Judas Tree (though his eyes might have betrayed him). And he could not put a name to a heavenly shade-casting tree. Some were really out of this world: a rather forbidding-looking one bore a tempting, fleshy, apple-like fruit which, in all innocence, he did not know from Adam; and another a nectarine type of fruit which, after reflecting for what seemed an eternity, he could not for the life of him recall seeing before. Beneath this arboreal ceiling, a plush carpet of mosses, grasses, ferns – a multifarious variety of plants riotously spreading, sprouting, climbing, crawling, trailing, tumbling, bounding, burgeoning

and blooming in a sumptuously-piled weave of variegated green, dementedly patterned by a wildly-coloured arabesque of phantasmagorical florescence: Passion Flower amorously ogling Blue-Eyed Mary, violet Monkshood lecherously leering at yellow Touch-Me-Not, Venus Flytrap flightily fondling Solomon's Seal, and fragrant, virgin-white Madonna Lily coyly contemplating Aaron's Rod. And above, in the balmy airs and sweetly-scented bushes and trees, Humming Birds hummed, Lovebirds loved, Paradise Birds paraded, Bishop's Birds babbled, and Apostle Birds prated. He even spotted in the under-forest a pair of familiar-looking, ungainly, flightless birds which he had never seen in real life before, but whose name he was dead certain he could recall if he really tried.

FTT: Readers will certainly be acquainted with the legend of Noah and the Ark (Genesis 5-9). Many centuries ago (a lot of water has flowed under the bridges since), the Almighty, deeply disappointed by the imperfections of what He had fashioned out of wet clay, began to suspect that His creation had been a blunder of the first water. However, stubbornly refusing to wash His hands completely of the matter, He resolved not to wipe man off the face of the earth, but to have a good clean-up instead by means of a great deluge which, according to the Holy Book (though for some this does not hold water), lasted forty days and nights. As we all know, before opening the Heavens, He commanded Noah, 'a just and righteous man,' to construct an ark, collect a male and female specimen of every species on earth, and herd them onto the boat along with self and family – thereby assuring the survival of all creatures great and small, and giving man a clean start. What is not recorded is that the Patriarch, having successfully accomplished his earthly mission (otherwise he would certainly have been in hot water), was recompensed by being made an honorary, eternal-life member of the

D.S.P.A. (Divine Society for the Protection of Animals), and given a nice, steady, part-time job - a sinecure which did not flood him out with work - keeping a watchful eye on species in danger of extinction. Whenever this was the case, the same celestial hand that had raised François Théodore Thistlethwaite up from his watery grave winched Noah gently down from on high in a watered-down version of the original ark, the last pair were collected and shipped to the island Thistlethwaite was now upon. Though this may not wash with some (and might even be considered utter hogwash by others), cold water must not be poured on the theory that the two clumsy-looking birds glimpsed by my Englishman were, in fact, Dodos, and that further investigation would certainly have uncovered the presence of Great Auks, Elephant Birds, Passenger Pigeons and other species, both two and four-legged, wiped off the face of our planet by the imbecilic hand of man.

In attempting to imagine the unimaginable and describe the indescribable, I have no desire to turn the reader's stomach, and cause him to throw up both patience and credibility by forcing on him a glut of fudgy hyperbole. Let me simply conclude by saying that antelope and deer frolicked in the underbrush, and that even without the Methuselah guarantee so munificently bestowed by his Creator, enough sustenance would have been effortlessly on hand to prevent body and soul from departing in diametrically opposed directions for the remainder of his generously-allotted years.

Understandably, the more enquiring reader may be finding it beyond his comprehension to grasp why an Englishman should have been dispatched as vanguard on such a crucial mission, and why the Almighty Judge had, on the surface at least, left my Frenchman and philosopher in

such deep water. Though difficult to get to the bottom of (He always works in profound and mysterious ways), it might be surmised that, in recompense for the successful accomplishment of past missions to spread His son's gospel over the pagan masses of our planet, He had decided it was only justice that an inhabitant of this country should be granted a head start over the representative of a rival nation whose members are not only secular in spirit, but also born complainers, criticizers and protestors, steadfastly refractory to all authority, discipline and established order.

In response to the same curious-minded reader who may be wondering whether Thistlethwaite was distressed by the absence of his former alter personae, I can only record the naked truth and reply by a firm negative. For having sipped the nectarine mead of celestially-cleaved separation, and chewed the Ambrosia curds of a heaven-sent Shangrila, my Englishman was now consumed by the heady sensation that body and mind were now unassailably his, and that within the sand-bordered confines of this promised isle he was sole master of his destiny - beholden to no man, and bound by no laws other than those natural ones vital to continued conjunction of body and soul. But the balmy air of freedom, so headily wafted by the scented breeze, was tainted by anticipatory distaste at the forthcoming prospect of daily exposure to the egalitarian emanations discharged from his French brother's garlic-laden mouth, and the pontificating exhalations escaping through Théodore's thin, bloodless lips.

Alas! such is the nature of man's earthly condition that not only is life ineluctably programmed to come to an end, but even while we live our most precious hopes, our most treasured dreams are, sooner or later, dashed on the cruel rocks of reality. For my Englishman, harsh reality was washed up, like so much flotsam, in the bedraggled, barely-alive deposition of his former alter egos on the pristine sands of the isle in whose fragrant air he had been so rapturously exulting just a few moments before. And their belated advent

was principally due to the nature of their vehicular means, the padded, circular configuration of which is designed to maintain heads vertically above water rather than convey them horizontally through it, and which held the pair in intimately-enforced proximity, thereby rendering their divinely-decreed disaffiliation shamefully incomplete.

The same enquiring reader might now be asking himself how, in view of their previous immaterial state, François realized he was not Théodore and Théodore saw he was not François. The bare facts of the matter were that the one could not possibly have mistaken himself for the other. An over-indulgent fondness for good living had stretched my Frenchman's thick, olive skin into a smooth, rubbery tightness over a ballooning belly; and stubby legs combined with disproportionately long arms had imparted a distinctive monkey-like configuration to his squat, bloated figure. A thin moustache pencilled his upper lip and a tuft of hairs sprouted from the point of his fleshy chin. And apart from his chubbily-rounded cheeks, what struck most was his oversized cranium which, crowned by a crop of dark, brush-like hair, appeared to be screwed on to body in a permanent, upwardly-inclined position; and his deep brown, close-set eyes peered down the sides of a sensual, aquiline nose in such a way that, even when they were looking up at you, the inner man seemed to be gazing down in haughty disdain.

In starkly-defined contrast, Théodore's cavernous cheeks and bulging, pale blue eyes were those of a man whose quest for a life beyond the anguish of despair had destroyed all taste for worldly sustenance: his long, bony frame - like some choked, spindly grass starved of nutrient and sun - seemed to reflect this ceaseless aspiration towards existentialist light; and his skin, as if striving to imitate the abnegation of the metaphysician beneath, sagged despondently down in fleshless pleats.

Being a valourous Englishman worth his salt, Thistlethwaite inwardly resolved that it would be far nobler in

mind not to take up arms against the troubles the sea had just washed up, and to shield himself from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune that had so deflated his dreams by mentally restructuring, and discreetly retreating behind the fortifications of his phlegm. Consequently, a paralyzing dose of stiffness was injected into his upper labial appendage - thereby producing the opposite effect on the one below: for the latter proceeded to sag limply down, causing the aperture of the buccal orifice between to produce an even more vacuous, toothy gape, the general effect of which was to impart a look of amiable imbecility to his visage as a whole.

An instant later, however, and a perceptible reduction in the distance between upper and lower lip went to suggest that my Englishman was now pulling himself together: for he advanced solicitously towards his siblings, bade them an affable enough welcome and, seeing they were at a low ebb, gently steered them to the same fronded haven beneath which he had so readily fallen into Morpheus's narcotic embrace. And while they were slumbering, he abandoned himself to wry cogitation on how best to shore up the dyke of his defenses against the tidewaters of reality that were now threatening to swamp this newly-found land of his dreams, and to limit to a maximum the quantity of water the laws of harmonious cohabitation would ineluctably oblige him to pour into the undiluted wine of freedom he had been enjoying only moments before.

As soon as the Prince of Sleep had allowed my remaining two survivors to re-emerge into the realms of perceptive consciousness, Thistlethwaite offered to take them on a guided tour of the island - a proposition which my Frenchman and philosopher readily accepted, but a further detailed account of which readers will be glad to learn they have been spared. Let me simply record that the virginal voluptuousness of the isle found repeated orgasmic echo in the barely interrupted ejaculations that spurted ecstatically forth from my Frenchman's lips; and let me also not forget to

mention a remarkably audacious attempt on the part of my ascetic to impart to the corners of his pale, narrow lips a scarcely perceptible rigidity which, far from being describable as a smile, or even the beginning of a smile, might conceivably have been interpreted as the start of the beginning of one. As dusk began to fall, my intrepid three made their way back to the white-sanded beach, the fronds of whose gently-inclined palms, now ruffled by a cooling evening breeze, offered them deliciously-refreshing shelter as they assembled beneath. And those same crustaceans that had first greeted my Englishman again crept from the now darkening waters, settled themselves nearby, and gazed up at the three in even greater frothy-mouthed awe, and stalk-eyed wonder.

‘Gentlemen!’ began my sage, his dark-rimmed eyes grimly reflecting the sombre forebodings of a tortured mind. My Frenchman’s brow knitted into a reproachful scowl.

‘Messieurs!’ he recommenced. ‘I am sure we are all acutely aware of the boundless honour but, above all, of the immense responsibility occasioned by the awesome charge which has been placed on our shoulders: that of demonstrating man has within him all that is necessary to define, establish and maintain a paradise on earth. And might I not add that our mission would seem to have been considerably facilitated by the idyllic circumstances in which we have had the fortune to be placed.’ He paused for a moment to gaze around, and like a pale, fleeting ray of sunshine piercing a somber winter sky the gravity of his gaze was momentarily lightened by what might have been perceived as a distantly flickering glow.

‘Gentlemen! Messieurs! I think the time has now come for us to share our thoughts on this matter in the hope that a consensus may be reached on the founding principles we must abide by in the building of our brave new world. Which one of you would like to begin?’ His eyes fixed themselves first on the Englishman, and then the Frenchman in a now frozen, expressionless stare.

‘Messieurs les Anglais, tirez les premiers!’ exclaimed my Gallic, his rounded cheeks puckering into a fatuous smirk.

FTT: ‘Will you English gentlemen shoot first!’ On 11 May, 1745, a battle took place near the small Belgian village of Fontenoy opposing the French and the allied English, Austrian and Dutch armies, in the sovereign presence of Louis XV. Basing his research on Voltaire’s *Précis du Siècle de Louis XV*, my scholar relates that just before battle commenced the English officers, commanded by Lord Hay, advanced their men to within eighty paces of the front line of French guards, led by the Vicomte d’Auterroches. Here they halted, had the straightness of troop alignments checked, and proceeded to greet the enemy by raising their hats. The French removed theirs in turn and raised them to the English. Lord Hay, brandishing a silver-knobbed stick, then marched alone to within thirty paces of the French line, again divested himself of his hat and bid the French guard commander, ‘Sir, have your men fire!’ – to which the Vicomte d’Auterroches is said to have replied, ‘Non Monsieur, à vous l’honneur!’ (FTT: No sir, the honour is yours!). Taking, no doubt, the pragmatic view that they couldn’t carry on like this all day, and that somebody would have to take the bull by the horns, the English infantry executed a withering drumfire, considerably depleting the French front ranks.

Today, this military version of ‘After you’ (as familiar to the French as Nelson’s ‘England expects ...’ is to the English) is used to initiate sporting contests with the hereditary enemy in humorous reminder of a long-past age when battles were apparently fought politely, to strictly-defined rules. Reality, however, was rather different. This seemingly urbane summons to the enemy to be the first to engage hostilities was based more on down-to-earth military considerations than any desire to

be polite: for at that period it was, in fact, a disadvantage for infantry troops to shoot first in close combat, since, during the considerable time it took to reload, their defenceless ranks were exposed to enemy counter fire. And so, English acceptance of the French invitation to fire first was a tactical blunder which certainly contributed to their final resounding defeat.

In cacophonous echo of the English opening fire which wrought such havoc on the French front ranks, a staccato-like clearing of the throat – causing the line of crustaceans to break in wild disarray – seemed to suggest that my Englishman was intent on mounting a determined assault to avenge past military defeat.

‘I’ve never been one for beating about the bush,’ he began, ‘so I’ll let you have it straight from the shoulder without any shilly-shally.’

My Frenchman’s brow furrowed and his eyes narrowed in puzzled admission that his linguistic capacities did not extend to a total comprehension of colloquial English.

‘Basically, what we should aim at is a set-up which gives each one of us as much freedom as possible to make our own way in life, without some interfering state poking its nose into what’s none of its business, and telling us what we must or we can’t do.’ He raised a hand and with a wince brushed away the rivulets of sweat streaming down his scorched brow.

‘I mean, as long as it doesn’t affect another chap’s right to do the same, what’s wrong with that? An’ I’m sure our French friend can only back me up on this one,’ he ventured, the corners of his mouth widening into a feeble smile. ‘Wasn’t this what their Revolution was all about?’

At Thistlethwaite’s mention of this most glorious of moments in his country’s history the blubbery contours of my Frenchman’s cheeks rounded into a self-satisfied smirk, and his cranium executed a curt, acquiescent nod.

‘After all, aren’t we skipper of our own ship an’ fully in charge of where we’re going? Don’t get me wrong – I’m not saying laws aren’t needed; but at the end of the day these should be kept few and simple, an’ focussed on letting a go-ahead chap make a success of his life. So, what we should be looking to do is to lay the foundations of a land where private ownership and enterprise, free competition, taking a risk or two, an’ plenty of bloody hard graft are actively encouraged an’ made worthwhile, an’ where taxes are kept to a minimum an’ not used to pay people to sit on their backsides all day long doing sweet FA!’

FTT: In my dream I distinctly remember Thistlethwaite’s original words being: ‘... an’ not used to pay people to sit on their backsides all day long doing f * * * all.’ On reading over the manuscript of this work prior to publication, I immediately realized that, in view of the unmentionably vulgar sexual connotations associated with this four letter word (so much so that propriety usually requires it, as above, never to be publicly written in completed form), it would be far more preferable to use a less offensive expression. After giving the matter some thought, I finally decided on ‘to do sweet FA,’ - the capital ‘F’ of which, I would make it perfectly clear to those among my French readers not conversant with English vernacular, is in no way a crude allusion to the act of procreation. In reality, FA represents the initials of the female name ‘Fanny Adams’, which, when preceded by the adjective ‘sweet,’ conveys a notion of total idleness. Despite having conducted considerable research into the matter, the scholar in me has, unfortunately, been unable to find any plausible explanation as to either the origins of the idiom, or the identity of the lady in question, and would be extremely grateful if any of our English readers could enlighten him in this respect.

It is interesting to note, moreover, that the French equivalent of the expression 'to do sweet FA' would be 'ne rien foutre,' (I've done sweet FA today = j'ai rien foutu aujourd'hui), the verb 'foutre' having, etymologically at least, very much the same meaning as the unmentionable English four-letter word. The French verb, however, though remaining slightly vulgar, has lost its direct reference to the sexual act, and is now commonly employed in such everyday expressions as 'je m'en fous' (more accurately translated by 'I couldn't give a damn than 'I couldn't give a f...'); 't'as rien foutu de la journée' (you haven't pulled your finger out all day); 'il se fout de moi' (he's making a fool of me), to quote just a few.

My Englishman paused for an instant, and his eyes - their bloodshot veins matching the cherry red of his sun-blistered physiognomy - sought those of my Frenchman in a bellicose glare. Placing left foot forward, he steadied himself, took a resolute breath, and then let fire:

'An' as a first step, I propose we split this island up into three parts, so each one of us is free to do exactly what he wants with his share. That's what I think!'

Unlike his English brother, my Frenchman's dark, matt skin had offered heroic resistance to the sustained onslaughts of the sun, and the colour of his visage had been transformed into a hale-looking hazelnut brown - to which the impact of Thistlethwaite's words was now imparting a purplish tinge. Despite my Englishman's determined offensive, however, he courageously stood his ground.

'Messieurs, I also will not turn around of ze pot. I will oppose the most ferocious résistance to any attempt an Englishman may make to impose on zis island ze type of société 'e 'as juste advanced. For what 'e wishes to perpetuate is a criminal, ultra liberal, capitalist système in which ze downtrodden prolétariat are mercilessly exploited by a

monstrous bourgeois class 'ose one and only aim is to conserve a world of injustice, inégalité and division in ze sole name of base profit.'

FTT: In my dream the dissociated François expressed himself, of course, in his mother tongue, which I have rendered into English. However, in order to retain something of the original Gallic savour, I have served up my translation with a clove or two of garlic pushed in near to the bone. Fully aware of Anglo-Saxon repugnance for the devastating effects this herb can have on breath, however, I have used it moderately in the hope that the resulting flavour will not be so intrusive as to prevent my Frenchman's reflections from providing Anglophone readers with some food for thought.

'Messieurs, 'ave we not been provided wiz ze possibilité to turn a clean shit? Is it not vital zat we profit from zis 'eaven-sent occasion to realize our wildest dreams? For 'as not Destiny presented us 'ere wiz a unique opportunité to turn the back forever on ze monstrous iniquités of ze preceding world in which we lived, and to lay down on zis magnifique island ze fondations of a brave new ordre, free from ze oppression of rich over poor, wizout distinction of class, and where all ze men are free, totally equal, and united by fraternal love?' Squinting down the sides of his nostrils, he slowly lowered his head until the enemy was lined up in a bead formed by a yellowing pimple on the end of his nose. Then, holding himself motionless, he discharged:

'Ze world you seek to establish, Seesleswaite, is zat of ze law of ze jungle where only ze strongest trees can survive. Mine is one where we 'ave chopped zem all down so zat ze weak saplings languishing beneath may grow up in ze light of ze sun! For it is only in zis fashion zat we can build on zis

island ze land of Liberté, Egalité and Fraternité to which it must be our noble aim to aspire!’

Dropping to his knees, Thistlethwaite’s mouth fell open in a desperate struggle for breath, and the bright redness of his physiognomy gave way to a worrying shade of pale. Determined to take advantage of my Englishman’s seizure in order to deliver the coup de grâce, François began to advance towards the exposed English lines. But just as he was about to raise a conjoined middle and forefinger towards my prostrate Englishman’s head he failed to notice an outsized, extremely crabby arthropod which, no doubt alarmed by his determined strides, proceeded to seize the largest digit of a Gallic left foot in a pincer movement which could only be persuaded to loosen itself by much vituperative bellowing and vigorous shaking on the part of its owner.

Taking advantage of this providential respite, and with all the plucky grit of an Englishman with his back to the wall, Thistlethwaite struggled valiantly to his feet, and pointing his right arm, bayonet-like, in the direction of the oncoming foe, prepared for hand-to-hand combat.

‘Over my dead body!’ was the battle-cry that boomed so defiantly from his lips that the advancing Frenchman was halted in his tracks.

‘You must be bloody well joking! I’ve never heard so much blithering twaddle in all my life! Why, it’s nothing less than a Commie state you want to start up here!’ He paused to look daggers at his brother before attacking with newly-found aplomb.

‘You know what? I think our Frog here is living in cloud-cuckoo land! I mean, doesn’t he find it a bit strange that in our life before so many people risked their lives and even got themselves killed for trying to escape from countries he calls paradises on earth? I’ve never seen this happen in nasty capitalist societies. An’ why do people try to escape in droves? Because they’re living in a bloody prison, that’s why! They can’t go where they want, they can’t say what they want,

they can't read what they want, they can't write what they want, they can't vote for who they want, they can't organize a get-together when they want, they can't join the party or union they want, they can't buy what they want because it's not on sale an' even if it was they'd either be too skint to afford it or they'd have to queue for hours to get it. I mean, what's wrong with people getting rich when they've worked their guts out for it? His bloody communism brings poverty to everybody! An' then you've got the secret police everywhere, putting the wind up everybody and generally making sure the poor buggers do what they're told, and carting 'em off to prison without a fair trial if they don't. An' what takes the biscuit is that all this time your party leaders are living the high life. Is this what you call a paradise of freedom, equality an' universal fraternity? You must be stark, raving bonkers. I call it Hell on earth, that's what I call it!

During these open hostilities Théodore had been sitting in cross-legged, Buddha-like meditation; and except for the bony ridges of cheeks, nose and shoulder blades, his pale, emaciated face and body had been shown surprising clemency by the cruel sun. As he rose, a sudden stillness invaded the scene: the jabbering spider monkeys, the screeching macaws, the chattering mocking birds all fell hushed; the watching crabs opened wider bubbling mouths of reverence and stalky eyes of awe, and the jade waters of the immense ocean suspended their smooth, steady swishing on the soft, silky sands.

'My brothers, mes frères,' he began, 'I have listened with great attention, and, I must confess, considerable trepidation to the views you have expressed.' He paused for an instant to allow his words to take full hold.

'For you, Thistlethwaite,' he continued, fixing a solemn, unsympathetic eye on my Englishman's flayed countenance, 'you are convinced that our future nation must have a strong liberal foundation giving precedence to individual freedom and private initiative. And you, François,' he went on,

focussing on my Frenchman the same disapproving gaze, 'you are persuaded that predominance should be given to society as a whole, whose constant collective aim must be to establish and maintain fraternal equitability among all its members. One desires liberty for each, the other equality for all.' He again marked a pause, and then, in a tone of barely-concealed resignation:

'Gentlemen, Messieurs, I can only conclude that your conceptions are once again in diametrical opposition. For individual liberty and social equality being in inverse ratio to each other, the more you have of the one, the less you inevitably have of the other.' He lost himself for a moment in contemplation of the infinite ocean beyond.

'I trust you will grant us a law or two, Thistlethwaite?' he abruptly resumed. 'For in a totally liberal regime there is no single collective authority. Individual conduct is ruled by raw selfishness and expediency and, as François points out, the resulting pre-eminence of the wild ensures that only the strongest survive.'

A smug grin creased my Frenchman's chubby cheeks and his head came down in a confirmatory nod.

'And in the absence of any central power there is no real nation, but simply a disparate collection of individual entities, perpetually forming and reforming into varying-sized groups in sole obedience to the demands of self-interest and self-survival.' He turned his gaze once more towards the vast darkening blue.

'And you, François, in place of the laws of the jungle you offer a jungle of laws!' My Frenchman's smirk vanished in a flash, and his moustache-striped lip rounded in a pout of indignation.

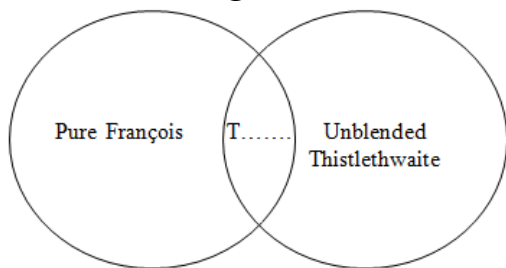
'For, as Thistlethwaite affirms, in a political system which seeks to impose total equality on all, the central power is absolute, and conduct is regulated by a tangle of laws depriving each of freedom as an individual, and obliging all to bend to its ideology. Boundless anarchy in your world,

Thistlethwaite, bounded uniformity in yours, François; and the shackles of oppression in both!’ He broke off once more, and a barely perceptible blur moistened his ice-blue eyes.

‘My brothers! Mes frères! Need I remind you of the circumstances of our own preternatural conception which fused into one single body two beings as mutually repellent as like magnetic poles, and which made of our lost childhood a battleground of alternating triumph and defeat for each, and permanent desolation for the whole? François! Thistlethwaite! Did not our previously conjoined state make you doubly aware that our now externalized existence within the limits of one small isle can never be brought to fulfilment by the confrontation between opposing extremes? How can you, at this critical moment, ignore the salutary lessons of the past by failing to recall the vital intermediary role played by my interposed person, itself issued of you, whose moderating voice of reason worked so unsparingly to unite your disparate forces into a balanced, maturing whole?’ My Englishman’s lower mandible sagged into a vacuous gape.

‘Perhaps a schematic visualization of our initial configuration will help you to remember the traumas we endured during those early years,’ he ventured. Nimbly settling himself onto bony knees, he proceeded to poke the following schema into the warm, pristine sands:

Figure 1



FTT: In order to facilitate all future references and with, of course, my philosopher's full approval, I have allocated a number to each of his figures.

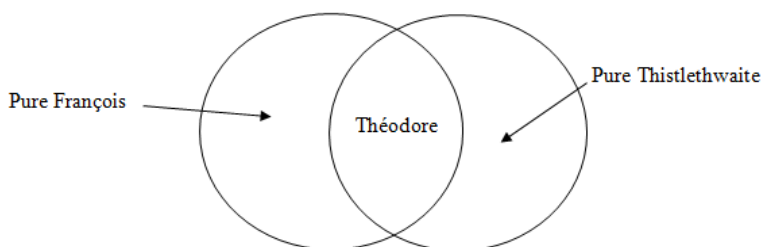
‘Let us imagine that this basic diagrammatic representation of two collateral, intersecting circles embodies the personage of the François T. Thistlethwaite during our immature years. This circle on the left personifies the almost pure Frenchman in us, the one on the right the unblended Englishman, and the small interposed area created by the intersection of the two, my own self, Théodore – that still, small voice of equilibrated compromise, an amalgam of the little that was reasonable in your selves at that time. And, as I have indicated, the barely-existing influence I then exerted on our whole justifies me being designated by no more than the initial letter ‘T’.’ He broke off to look one and then the other solemnly in the eye.

‘But little by little, life's painful, yet mellowing lessons began teaching you to heed my call for moderating reason which, in a conciliatory pull, brought you, François, on our left and you, Thistlethwaite, on our right irresistibly towards each other - thereby diminishing the baneful zone of influence your two extremes exerted by increasing the palliative area of my own presence, and thus imparting a wider area of unison to our whole. And though I was not so optimistic as to be convinced that your congenitally antithetical characters would never again be the cause of internecine strife, I was not so pessimistic as to believe that a relatively stabilized maturity had not been attained by the whole. And a rational analysis of our being led me to consider the person of François Théodore Thistlethwaite more and more in terms of a common-based, uni-circular oriented configuration with that unyielding part of François now relegated to the minor left periphery, all that is inflexible in Thistlethwaite now concentrated on the opposite right, and my own moderate and moderating self occupying a far

broader area between. In consequence, I might reasonably think that the following schematic arrangement provides a faithful representation of the composition of our more harmonious, integrated self just before our precocious demise.'

With a deft stroke of hand the previous geometrical representation of the incomplete François T. Thistlethwaite was dispatched into oblivion, and the same spindly forefinger traced my more mature successor into the silky white sands.

Figure 2



'Yet well before our aqueous demise I had begun to extend the subject of my meditations beyond the narrow circumscription of our own tri-part self in a universal orientation which, by attempting to encompass the reality of the condition of man, might provide a permanent white blaze he could follow along life's labyrinthine path. And though it might not lead to a Paradise on earth, I am pretentious enough to think it could somewhere enable him to circumvent Hell.' Like a candle in an Arctic wind, a flicker of light fleetingly softened his glacial fixedness of eye.

'Grant me, my brothers, accordez-moi, mes frères, the immense gratification of sharing with you the fruits of my reflections.' The crabs' mouths opened wide in frothy bubbles of awe.

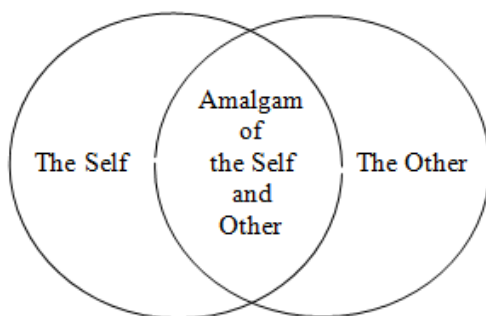
'It would seem to me an elemental truth that any human structure is condemned to collapse if it does not repose on a solid, realistic perception of the fundamental condition of man. And prolonged deliberation has led me to a basic fact on which I have constructed the foundations of my

reasoning: just as the fully integrated personage of François Théodore Thistlethwaite embraces a graduated scale ranging from pure François on the extreme left, through the moderating composite of my own reasonable person in the centre, to unblended Thistlethwaite on the opposite right, the motives of all human conduct may be located on a similar polar range extending from total selfishness at one end to an extreme of selflessness at the other, and passing through a compounded, intermediate mixture of both.’ Despite the growing obscurity of approaching night, the face of my Frenchman could be seen colouring into an explosive shade of crimson. My metaphysician looked him steadily in the eye.

‘Far be it my intention, I hasten to add, to bring any personal judgement to bear on yourselves by inferring that an extreme of selfishness is imputable solely to that one of you located on our left, and an excess of selflessness exclusively to his brother on our right. I simply cite your former selves as the personification of two absolute extremes.’

‘Allow me once more to illustrate.’ The sands again gently yielded to the tip of his spindly forefinger.

Figure 3



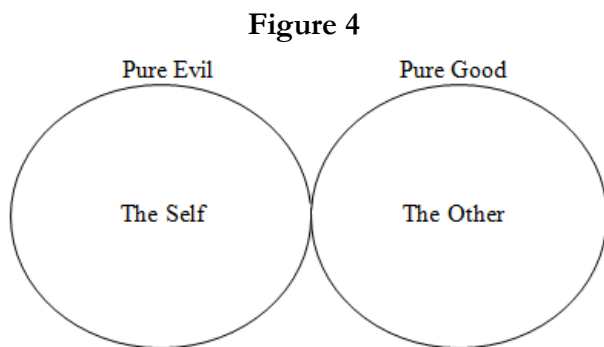
‘Let us imagine that the circle on the left represents all acts of pure selfishness of which, by definition, the Self is the sole beneficiary; the circle on the right those driven by pure selflessness, the object of which is the Other alone; and the middle area created by the intersecting of the two a zone

where all behaviour is motivated by an inextricable intermingling of the two. The geometrical similitude between this configuration and the one I outlined a few moments ago (**FTT: Fig. 1**) in materialization of the barely-associated version of our own primitive self will certainly not have escaped your notice. Does it not follow that, just as the former dualistic composition of François T. Thistlethwaite was a personal source of pitiless, commonly-destructive discord, such a bi-polarized world of the Self and Other can only generate similar dispute, degeneracy and desolation on a universal scale?’

In total defiance of the laws of human physiology my Englishman’s jaw dropped lower, while his eyelids shot up higher – both movements conjugating to impart to his physiognomy an even more striking expression of imbecilic mystification.

‘And why, we may ask, would this totally dichotomous universe ineluctably result in the moral and physical annihilation of man? Let us first imagine a hypothetical configuration where these juxtaposed circles of the Self and Other are so totally disconnected that they produce a Manichean world composed solely of pure Evil and pure Good with no buffering zone between the two.’

With a deft sweep of palm, my metaphysician erased *Figure 3* from the face of the beach, and poked the following two circles into the softly-parting sand:



‘Now, might we not deduce that this universal configuration where, in the absence of any centrally-placed, concessionary zone, two integral, antithetical forces are in direct confrontation would inevitably generate a conflict resulting in the triumph of pure Evil and the annihilation of all Good? For is it not in the inescapable logic of things that pure Evil must destroy pure Good with the same lack of conscience (for what is conscience but the concession Evil makes to Good?) as he would crush a stone beneath his heel, and that pure Good can have no choice but to consent to be sacrificed on the alter of his own purity?’

My Frenchman had now recovered most of his aplomb after his undignified *mêlée* with the irascible crab, the stigmata of which were plainly discernible on the largest bunioned appendage of his left foot. And though the Cartesian within could only approve my philosopher’s geometrical envelope, he was at pains to conceal his scepticism as to the theorizing it contained.

‘But, *mon cher Théodore*,’ he protested, ‘your reasoning ’ere is based on nosing more zan pure abstraction!’

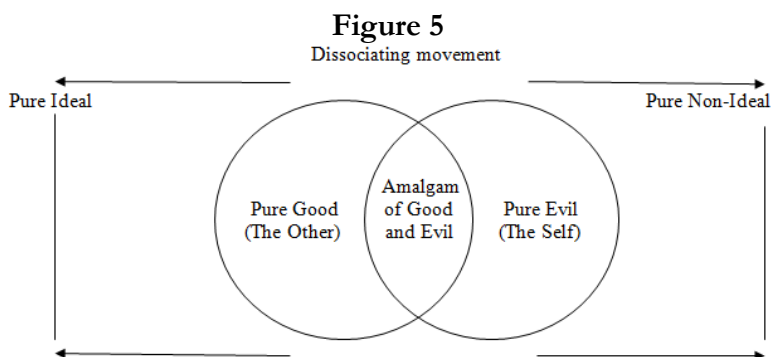
‘That, for the moment, I can only grant you. But if you will allow me to proceed a little further along this way, it will lead to a point where more specific considerations will come into play.’ He gave a loud cough – more, I suspect, in an attempt to recapture my Englishman’s waning attention than from any desire to clear his throat.

‘May we not, then, infer from our fundamental hypothesis that, if the existence of this disassociated universe of pure Good and pure Evil will inevitably result in the devastation of man, all bi-polarizing movements in the direction of either of these extremes must equally be to his detriment in so much as they generate the same destructive dissociation of the circles of the Other and the Self?’

‘It is évident zat all movements tending towards a world of pure Evil will bring about our vilification; but surely it is ze noble task of man to initiate those which, in an opposing

élan, seek to bring about ze réalisation of our ideals? For wizout ze selfless visionary are we not condemned to choke in ze slime of our égoïsme?’

‘It is my considered opinion that any inclination inspired by a desire to create an ideal world of pure Good is as equally harmful as that which tends towards its opposite. For both perceive the salvation of man through a dissociation rather than a convergence of the forces of pure Good and Evil.’ Allow me once more to illustrate my thesis. His forefinger again penetrated the gently-yielding sands.



‘Moreover, a detailed examination the history of man would seem to confirm that so-called pure ideals are unrealistically inspired and, as such, doomed to dangerous failure. For the bi-polarizing effect produced by any impetus seeking to create an increase in the area of the circle of pure Good will necessarily augment in the same proportions that contained by pure Evil. This will inevitably reduce the buffering zone of blended compromise between Evil and Good formed by the overlapping of the two, the vital, yet neglected function of which, as embodied by my humble self within our former tri-partite personage, is to maintain two extremes at a salutary distance. The resulting dissociative movement can, therefore, only produce the conditions I have dwelt upon where a proportionately larger area of pure Good

becomes more and more directly exposed to an equally greater zone of pure Evil – a configuration which, as I have demonstrated, can only result in the final triumph of the latter.

‘It would seem to me zat ’ere you are arguing le paradoxe for ze sake of le paradoxe. Surely you cannot be serious when you maintain zat any attempt to create a world of pure Good is just as ’armful as one which tends towards one of pure Evil! Does not the future of man fly on ze wings of ’ope? Would it not be a sad world where he was deprived of all belief in ze possibilité of attaining an ideal?’

‘What I am asking you to reflect upon is that all polarizing endeavours to create a so-called better world are condemned to failure in so much as they are based on illusion. As we saw in our own maturing self (**FTT: Fig. 2**), a more realistically-perceived appraisal of the human condition would indicate that the way to an improved world might lie not in disassociation but, on the contrary, in a movement of adulterated, harmonious association of the forces of the antithetical absolutes of the Self and Other. A more rational, moderating approach resides, therefore, in embracing the vital fact that the Other and Self, and all sub-products of the two, can only exist as an inextricable part of each other, and must always be ...’

‘And what exactly do you mean by all sub-products of ze Ozer and ze Self?’ interrupted my Frenchman, scarcely able to conceal the tone of dissension which had now crept into his voice.

‘From this left circle of pure Good spring all concepts having their source in selflessness: love, honesty, sincerity, courage, generosity, to name but a few; and from this right circle of pure Evil all corresponding contrary notions born of selfishness: hate, deceit, hypocrisy, pusillanimity, mean-spiritedness and so forth.’ He broke off for an instant, as if anticipating renewed interruption. But for the moment there was none.

‘What I would bring to your notice, then,’ he pursued, ‘is that these Siamese twins of Evil and Good, along with all of their corresponding sub-products, lie inextricably conjoined in the womb of mankind, and any idealistically-motivated surgery to scalpel the two apart may be as disastrously destructive as cutting heart from body: for so-called absolute notions of love, honesty, and sincerity can have no pure existence in themselves, and must be considered as merely an intrinsic, inseparable and constantly-varying proportion of their opposites of hate, deception and hypocrisy. And so any idealistic venture to create a society of total justice and equality is devoid of sense in that it can never result in the destruction of injustice and inequality, but merely in their proportionate displacement to other areas, with all the corresponding disruptive effects this may have on the stability or - depending on circumstance and the extent of the surgery applied - the health, indeed survival of the body in question.’

FTT: Some of my readers will not fail to have drawn a parallel between Théodore’s meditations on a dichotomous universe of pure Evil and pure Good, and Stevenson’s classic of fantastic literature, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (which the scholar in me has studied), exploring this same duality in man. It is interesting to note that Henry Jekyll’s primary motive for wishing to separate the forces of Good and Evil within him was inspired by a pure ideal arising from what my philosopher considers to be an illusory perception of the potential existence of only Good - that Good and Bad could be made to go their own separate ways, Evil treading the path of pure Evil, Good that of pure Good: ‘If each, (Good and Evil) could be but housed in separate identities, life would be relieved of all that was unbearable; the unjust might go his way, delivered from the aspirations and remorse of his more upright twin; and the just could walk steadfastly and

securely on his upward path, doing the good things in which he found his pleasure and no longer exposed to disgrace and penitence by the hands of this extraneous evil. It was the curse of mankind that these incongruous faggots were thus bound together – that in the agonized womb of consciousness these polar twins should be constantly struggling.’

My philosopher seems to have reached the same conclusion as Stevenson: that Good and Evil are an inseparable part of each other and, just as Evil ended by destroying Dr Jekyll, any attempt to separate the two will result in the victory of pure Evil over pure Good and the ultimate devastation of man.

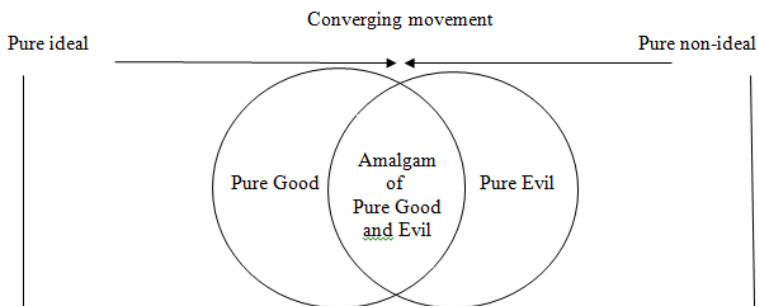
Given his prolonged absence from the dialogue I have been relating, readers might be forgiven for wondering whether my Englishman had now managed to extricate himself from the state of bemused incomprehension in which I had left him a while ago. Apart from a limited number of what might have been interpreted as short-lived remissions, the answer would tend towards an unequivocal ‘No.’ In effect, the more pragmatically-inclined temperament with which he had been naturally endowed had caused him to view things more in terms of their practical relevance and consequence, and his efforts at following the metaphysically-oriented discussion between my Frenchman and philosopher seemed, all things considered, to have met with a relatively pronounced degree of failure. However, a sudden reactivation of the normal laws of musculature had now reduced the yawning expanse of his mouth, and the inordinate frontal exposure of his eyeballs to more congruous proportions, thereby occasioning a praiseworthy facial modification which, though not sufficient to impart a semblance of understanding, did make a modest contribution towards relieving the expression of vacant imbecility with which his countenance had hitherto been seized. And it was, I suspect,

a wish to maintain an appearance of comprehension rather than comprehension itself which now generated the limited cerebral and vocal exertion necessary to producing an unconvincing ‘Hear! Hear!’

‘So where, zen, do you sink man’s future well-being lies?’

‘As I have attempted to point out, past and present systems embodying the pursuit, application and maintenance of the pure values of an ideal life here on earth have, in reality, been instrumental in engendering the very opposite of their avowed aim – not the elevation but the moral and physical debasement, if not destruction of man. May we not, therefore, be justified in thinking that our sights were unnaturally set on targets which will forever remain beyond our reach, and that somewhere it might be salutary to lower our eyes and focus our gaze on what is a more realistic, adulterated, converging appraisal of our condition here below? Allow me to illustrate my perception of the fundamental impulse necessary to producing at least the quiverings of a better world.’ The tip of erect forefinger again stroked the cooling sands.

Figure 6



‘What you are saying, zen, is zat we must abandon all visions of a selfless ideal and turn our efforts in ze very opposite direction, c’est-à-dire towards extending the surface of zis

middle zone of what you consider to be inextricably intertwined Evil and Good. In other words you wish to encourage basely selfish motives in all our acts!

‘My only desire is to point to what things *really* are – to bring an awareness and acceptance of the fact that, whether agreeable to us or not, the greater part, if not all of our acts, spring from reasons which, in varying degrees, have the self in mind.’

‘But is this not a pessimistic, indeed cynic view of the motives of man!’

‘What we sometimes call a pessimist is often a realistic optimist. Any idealized conception of human goodness draws its substance from the belief that man is capable of producing a state of pure selflessness. What is pure selflessness but complete extrication from the circle of the Self ... and total implication in that of the Other? And what is pure selfishness but complete detachment from the circle of the Other ... and total attachment to that of the Self? In the first case, the Self abandons itself totally to the Other; in the second, the Other immerses itself body and soul in the Self. Now, is it realistic to think that man can maintain himself in such total selfless detachment as to view himself entirely from the circle of the Other? Is it possible for him to integrally apply the same criteria to the Other as he does to the Self? Is it not an inescapable fact that he is more, rather than less forbearing towards the Self, and less, rather than more indulgent towards the Other? Is it not, therefore, logical to suppose that, apart from perhaps the isolated act, inspired by self-blinding sensibility, man can only partially step out of the circle of the Self into that of the Other and vice versa and that, accordingly, we can only conclude that most, if not all of our thoughts and acts find their motivation, to differing degrees, in the middle area of the Self and Other, in this inseparable amalgam of selflessness and selfishness, the proportions of which are in ceaseless variance with each other?’

‘But wizout a pure vision of sings where does a better world lie?’

‘It is my considered opinion that most efforts directed towards creating a better world are based on nothing more solid than dreams. My greatest wish is to give man a mirror in which is reflected a truer image of what he *really* is, so that any steps towards making our world a better place to live may tread on the solid rock of the real rather than the shifting sands of illusion. Anything less can only lead to a Paradise for dupes.’

‘And what do you mean by ze shifting sands of illusion?’

‘It would appear to me that man’s inability to step totally out of the circle of the Self generates a distorted perception of the Self and the Other. For it prevents him from seeing that we wander through a hall of mirrors, and the reflection of his face and that of the Other can never be a faithful likeness to what they *really* are, but what his hopes and fears, in short, his subjective self, sees them to be. And does not that commonly-agreed code that is human language, by very nature, incite us to attach credibility to the label on the bottle rather than to examine the nature of the lotion it conceals? Does not, for example, a term such as ‘equality’ create the illusion that the notion it encompasses can have separate existence whereas, in reality, it is an inextricable part of inequality and can only exist in relation to its conjoined twin?’

‘Look, I dunno about you guys, but I’m bursting for a leak. If you don’t mind, I’m just going to shake hands with an old pal of mine,’ my Englishman announced with an asinine guffaw before disappearing into the rampant undergrowth behind.

Even though my Frenchman’s linguistic capacities did not extend to a meaningful comprehension of colloquial English in general, and to what, therefore, was being alluded to in particular, a look of disdainful mystification wrinkled his brow. The eyes of my metaphysician narrowed in censorious mortification.

‘When, therefore, we describe the motive of an act as ‘selfless’, what we really mean is that it springs from an indivisible, interdependent amalgam of selflessness and selfishness in which the former would appear to have predominance over the latter. But, as we may never penetrate the inner motives of others who can say that this act was not *really* prompted by a preponderance of selfishness? And so, who is to say that a seemingly supreme act of self-sacrifice is not, in fact, inspired, at least partially, by the most selfish of motives? How do we judge the missionary who shows self-abnegating zeal on earth when what he *really* seeks is his own salvation in Heaven? What must we make of the politician who swears that his sole motivation springs, not from personal ambition or hunger for power, but the selfless desire to serve his country? Is it not easy to exploit this propensity to illusion by concealing self-seeking motives beneath a selfless appearance in order to manipulate, exploit and debase?’

‘Can you give us a more worldly démonstration of ’ow what you consider to be ze illusory pursuit of a pure ideal may lead to ze destruction of man?’

‘Indeed. Imagine a group of self-appointed visionaries whose avowed ideal is to replace the selfishness, corruption, injustice, inequality, dishonesty, hypocrisy and exploitation they see around them by their pure opposites. Since, in their eyes, most of the evils of our world may be attributed to the ubiquity of the circle of the Self, in which private ownership, personal gain and selfish exploitation of the weak predominate, they resolve to create a brave new world based on the selfless opposites to the imperfections I have enumerated. In this idyllic world of dreams the notion of selflessness is based on what each member considers a freely-consented choice to subordinate personal interest to the common good; and to this end all consent, in the name of egalitarian fulfilment, to forego personal ownership or material benefit of any kind. Everything and everyone

belongs to nobody but the group. Can we seriously expect this type of structure, founded on nothing more solid than a disjointed, illusory perception of the human condition to survive much beyond the initial fervour of each member? Would it not be surprising that real, inborn considerations emanating from the circle of the Self and Other or, on occasions, purely from the circle of the Self, reasserted themselves? A child would squeal, 'That's my toy!' A woman might cry, 'That child was born of me!' A man might declare, 'That woman is mine!' Would not the foundations begin to subside? Would not cracks appear? And would not the edifice, sooner or later, heave, totter and collapse?' He gazed at my Frenchman for an instant, and his cold blue eyes softened into the vaguely amused beginnings of a semi-smile.

'As a result, in order to avert the utter desolation of their original ideals and maintain a modicum of stability within their collapsing community, our visionaries would be compelled to accept some form of compromise - a source of bitter deception for some, and perhaps salutary disillusion for others - by placing themselves firmly in the circle of the Self and Other, and even in some cases, in the opposite circle of the pure Self (for one extreme begets the other) of the tripartite universe we have before us (**FTT: Figure 6**); or, in order to buttress the bulging walls of the original stronghold, the only alternative would be a merciless internal power struggle among the harder-line members, from which would inevitably emerge a scenario of dog eat dog, resulting in the inevitable subjugation and elimination of the weaker by the stronger, and the forcible establishment of an exclusive, privileged, all-powerful, arbitrary and self-perpetuating central authority obliged to impose dictatorially on all (with, perhaps, the exception of itself), the initial collective principles, no longer in the name of a selfless ideal but in that of a dehumanizing ideology which must, at all costs, give apparent proof to be working but in which really prevailed the rule of the furtherance of personal interest and ambition, and the

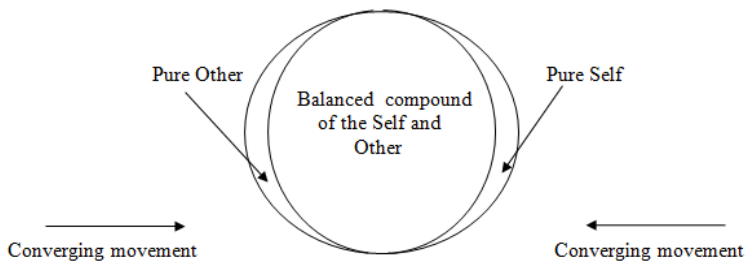
thirst for dominance and power. One extreme would have begotten the other and a ghastly nightmare would have been born of a naively altruistic dream!

Having satisfied his pressing call of nature, my Englishman had re-joined his two siblings, an expression of relieved vacuity now reflecting the emptiness of bladder as well as that of head; and it was certainly a desire to bring to their notice his renewed presence rather than the results of any significant reflection he had been having which prompted an 'I couldn't agree more!' His French brother gratified him with a look of ineffable scorn.

'D'accord, so you 'ave indicated where la réalité is not, now, s'il te plaît, can you tell us where it can be found?' His chubby cheeks rounded into a mocking smirk.

'It is my conviction that the only stable grounds on which our new world can be built are to be sought in that area providing the greatest potential for us to approach as near as we may to what *really* is - that is to say this compounded circle of the Self and Other. Our goal, therefore, must be to extend its limits. Since the disassociating pursuit of a pure ideal or, of course, any non-ideal necessarily produces a polarizing movement tending to reduce our compounded cushioning area of balanced compromise, with all the dangerous effects this will exert on the whole, our only hope - for hope there is - resides in coming to terms with the opposite; for it is by operating a concentric reduction of the area of the two extremes, thereby producing an expansion of this compound of the Self and Other, that we may bring about an increased awareness of where man's true condition lies. And I might be tempted to go so far as to state that the movement should be extensive enough to cause the circumferences of the circles of the pure Self and Other to converge into almost total superimposed concentricity.' With a deft flick of the back of his hand *Figure 6* was swept from the face of the earth, and the same erect forefinger stroked the following schematic materialization onto the silky white sands:

Figure 7



While my philosopher was engaged in producing the above geometrical representation of almost totally superimposed concentricity, Thistlethwaite's cranium was seized by a series of nods which, if not quite interpretable as an outward sign of acquiescent comprehension, seemed to be indicating that the cerebral matter within was beginning to distinguish a glimmer of light. Alas! A few seconds later and the credibility of this assumption was seriously compromised by yet another gapingly flaccid sagging of the lower jaw, the effect of which was to produce on my Englishman's ruby-red physiognomy much the same expression of understanding as that which would have been shown by a moderately intelligent eight-year-old suddenly confronted with a univariate polynomial equation of the second degree.

FTT: At this stage in my narration, I feel it necessary to go some way towards placating the probable annoyance of my English readers by here admitting that this deprecatory portrayal of Thistlethwaite (emanating, no doubt, from a preponderant French influence on my subconscious mind during the dream) as a crude imbecile, capable only of addressing empirical reality, and mentally impervious to any form of metaphysical comprehension, is both simplistically deforming and historically refutable and as such downright offensive to all but the most indulgent of his compatriots. I am also

conscious of the fact that not only could this be construed as an outrageous attack on the mental capacities of Anglo-Saxons in general but, by inference, an unjustifiable insinuation of the immeasurable superiority of Gallic intellect.

In a plea for mitigating circumstances, however, I would point out that a dream, by very nature, operates beneath the threshold of conscious perception, usually offering to the inner mind a grotesquely symbolic, frequently irrational representation of extraneous reality entirely beyond the control of the dreamer, and for which he may, therefore, be held in no way responsible. And, as the Théodore in me points out, there are certainly as many French imbeciles as English - the only difference being that the latter are plain imbeciles, whereas the former are imbeciles who reason. I would also appeal to that legendary English capacity for self-derision - that redeeming trait which makes an Englishman, after falling flat on his face in the street, first laugh at himself (the instinctive reaction of the Frenchman being to make sure others are not laughing at him) - in not taking too much to heart this burlesque portrait of one of his countrymen.

‘And though I have not entirely abandoned the temptation to think it might be better if our twin circles of the pure Self and Other converged into wholly superimposed concentricity, thereby precluding any behaviour resulting from either of their extreme forms, I have preferred, in doubt, to leave open a narrow peripheral fringe by which it is admitted that certain acts may originate solely in either pure Good or Evil.’

‘So in your infinite bounty you will bestow on us *ze générosité* to be motivated by pure *générosité* of heart?’

‘I would like to be positive enough to say I am not so pessimistic as to believe that some acts cannot be other than

totally selfish, nor so optimistic to think that some cannot be other than totally selfless, nor so unrealistic to consider that the motives for most are neither as good as we hope nor as bad as we fear.'

With what could almost have been a twinkle of the eye, my philosopher broke off for a moment, as if to allow my Frenchman's brain to clear its way through the tangle of negatives which had rendered his words almost as impenetrable as the tropical undergrowth beyond.

'So according to you zere is no place on our island for ze idéaliste?'

'The problem with regard to the idealist is that it is difficult to know in what proportions his vision springs from the circle of the Other in the form of innocent illusion, from that of the Self in the shape of a cynical desire to exploit illusion in others, or - what is far more probable - from an amalgam of both in which the desire to create a better world is mixed in with both the cravings of personal ambition, and the lust for power, dominance or gain. Beware, my brothers, of the artless visionary and the world-weary parader; for the one knows man too little, the other knows him too well; and both may lure those who blindly follow down the path to disillusion.' He turned a meditative gaze towards the red-flamed horizon beyond.

'My reflections have led me to distinguish six types of masqueraders whose beguiling postures lead too many to believe in a world based on illusory ideals. Let me briefly sketch a portrait of each.'

'Look, you guys,' interposed my Englishman, 'aren't you sure you wouldn't like to knock this off for a patch now and take a bit of a breather? An' couldn't we try and find something to eat and drink? I don't know about you two but my belly's starting to think my throat's cut, and my tongue's as dry as a mummy's dick!'

The parching effects of the day's scorching sun that had prompted my Englishman's comparison between his own

lingual appendage and that, genital, of a long deceased Pharaoh could not approach the searing glances which both my Frenchman and ascetic bestowed on their brother.

‘I’ll tell you what. I’ll just pop off an’ see what I can root up! Won’t be a tick!’

‘Pay attention, mon ami. Night is falling and you do not know what might be lurking out zere!’ sniggered François. After a short sigh of resignation my philosopher pursued.

‘At the head of our parade cavorts the artless dreamer. His nebulous visions of a Promised Land blind him to the imperfections of his fellow man. For his innocent dreams of a brave new world are conceived in the untroubled sleep of the child, and his schemes for things better repose on nothing firmer than ignorance of himself and his brother: he can only be Good, and the Other can never be Bad. Needless to say, the mirage he pursues can only lead him and those credulous enough to follow into the wilderness of disillusion. And when harsh experience finally confronts him with what *really* is, disenchantment may be so complete that its consequences are in proportion to his original ingenuousness. Cold cynicism may be born from the spent fire of his illusions; the noble image he had of the Self and the Other is irremediably defiled: he is worthless, the Other is worthless, and all he sees around him is the baseness of man.

And marching at his side is what he might well become: that pretender of a thousand masks and guises - the cynic. At the moment he is tossing sweet-smelling roses to the acclaiming throng, but what he dreams of are the flowers of Evil. For he promises the Kingdom of Heaven while scheming to become its Monster King. He delights in foreseeing in his naïve companion what he himself has become; for now the black beast within has devoured his soul and he wallows in the exquisite slime of his own worthlessness. And the vileness he feeds on serves only to nourish his conviction that within the Self and the Other all is but selfishness, depravity and decay.

Behind him strides our next imposter. He wears the sandal-shod, rebellious-haired appearance of the non-conformist outsider who rejects the world of injustice, inequality and exploitation he sees all around. In reality, he is immaturely maladjusted to the flawed world of man. Though materially without ambition, morally he demands the earth: for what he requires is that others adapt to him. And behind the carefully-groomed image of the unkempt visionary hides the blind, inflexible egoist refusing to see, let alone admit, the need for personal accommodation. If he looked at himself honestly, he would see within a mind closed to all which does not conform to his unshakeable preconceptions of how things should be.

The ambitious politician or confederation leader sports the garb of our next deceiver. His self-avowed mission is to serve the interests of his country or exploited brother man. The cause he really serves does not extend much beyond his own. What drives him on is an implacable hunger for dominance, and his relentless pursuit of a better world is fed by an insatiable need for confirmation of his own triumph. And behind the mask of the protector and reformer leers the face of the demagogue and opportunist; for his altruistic postures are bounded by the expediency of the moment, and his only real conviction is his own unwavering desire for success and power.

And how can we not fail to see the broad-bearded, extremist religious leader? He wishes to shackle man in the implacable irons of his Truth and behead those traitors to divine Will. Observe him now! He is gazing steadily into the throng. For what he is seeking is the rootless drifter who, by pledges of eternal summer, he can stamp in the mould of his pitiless intransigence.

Their eyes mistily focussed on the horizon ahead, the intellectual visionary and the revolutionary theoretician proudly march in our parade. They would like to reduce man to malleable clay which they could rework into the shape of

their system, and bake in the fierce fire of their convictions. If they ever thought to look at themselves in the mirror of honesty they would see reflected the face of the zealot; for their beliefs are not sourced in love of their fellow, but in an unbending desire to impose the rule of their system. And for this they would willingly sacrifice man on the stony altar of their dogma.

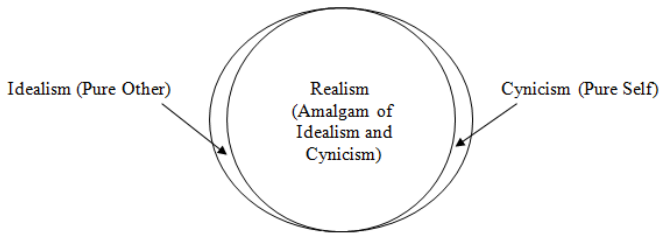
‘But, ’ow can you ...?’

‘In reply to the question I think you are wishing to ask, it is far from my intention that any of these portraits should be interpreted as an apologia for a system based on unbridled *laissez-faire*, the roots of which are also grounded in the circle of the Self, and which, though having the merit - if the word can be considered appropriate - of perhaps revealing more openly the rules of the game, is no less responsible for having established structures whereby many unfortunates, through no real fault of their own, were, and still are viewed as little more than dehumanized objects, not in the name of some unattainable ideal but in that of pitiless, selfish, exploitative gain.’

‘I can only repeat, mon cher Théodore, zat your view of man is so pessimiste zat we might even go so far as to call you a cynique, too!’

‘Do not confuse cynicism with realism!’ retorted my sage. ‘For does not cynicism - the belief that all human conduct originates in total selfishness - spring from the circle of the pure Self? And is it not idealistic dream - the conviction that all human conduct is rooted in total selflessness - which constitutes its opposite pole? Does not realism embrace the notion that human conduct springs from that inseparable amalgam interposed between? Observe how the concepts of cynicism, realism and idealism may be incorporated into my schematic configuration of the condition of man:’

Figure 8



‘So what are you zen, a realistic idéaliste or an idealistic réaliste?’ enquired my Frenchman, his cheeks creasing into a derisive smirk.

‘Label me as you wish. My only desire is to define as clearly as words will allow my perception of the reality of man’s condition, and to put you on guard against the unmindful or cynical who distort this stuff of the real by forcing it into the mould of their dreams.

‘What you seem to be saying is zat we must accept ze fact zat man is, by nature, égoïste. Is it not, au contraire, our present form of société which makes ’im what ’e is? If we made table rase of ze established ordre, and built a new land of brozer’ood, égalité and justice on zis island, surely man ’imself would nécessairement be shaped in ze image of zis brave new world?’

‘So the poor grade of the thread is due to the failure of the fabric? Even though an ill-conceived weave may cause premature wearing of the fibre, the coat of society is fashioned from the cloth of man, and if we wish to make this stronger should we not first endeavour to improve the quality of the yarn?’

‘And ’ow do you propose to achieve zis?’

‘By working on those three filaments of which it must be composed!’

‘And what, may I ask, are zese sree éléments?’

‘Before answering your question let me first take the example of another so-called pure idealist: the pacifist. Now,

since it is insincerity to demand of others what we do not practice ourselves, and hypocrisy to profess adherence to values which are belied by our deeds, the integrity and credibility of this type of visionary depend not only on him opposing all acts of violence in others, but on him being resolute enough to apply them to himself. A true measure of the pureness of an ideal may, therefore, only be obtained in the reality of action, and a pacifist's attachment to the principle he professes in name involves, in the absolute, a self-imposed duty to accept that, in certain circumstances, this may be to the total detriment of the Self. Accordingly, by the selfless nature of his persuasion, our idealist places himself firmly in the circle of the Other. Is it not, then, his duty to examine soul and conscience in total honesty in order to ascertain whether, in reality, he would have the necessary courage to shoulder this supreme personal accountability – a charge which could involve not only the sacrifice of his own life but of those dearest to him? Was not this, moreover, the supreme lesson given by that legendary figure of western philosophy, Jesus Christ, whose act of total self-abnegation in sacrificing his own life for love of base mankind provided such an astounding model of honesty, responsibility and courage that it inspired a planetary religious movement?

‘Are you suggesting, zen, zat any idéaliste worzy of ze name should be prepared to go so far as to sacrifice ’is own life in ze name of ’is beliefs?’

‘In the absolute, yes. Given the imperfection of man, no. The point I am endeavouring to make is that, since the majority of our pacifists would not be prepared to go to this extreme, might we not infer that their motives spring more from an inextricable amalgam of selfish and selflessness than from any altruistic desire to be totally faithful to their ideal? And might I also suggest that this is understandable, even acceptable, provided they show enough honesty, responsibility and courage to admit this. For here lie the three

inseparably braided elements we must strengthen in order to improve the cloth of man.'

'And which of zem must be ze strongest?'

'These strands are mutually dependent, and the weakness of one will necessarily have a debilitating effect on the whole. All must, therefore, be equal in strength. For if we are not honest with ourselves how can we be responsible? If we are not responsible how can we be honest? And the strands of honesty and responsibility must be wound together by that of courage; for honesty and responsibility are loose, unresisting threads if we do not have the strength and tenacity to bind them into one inseparable, resilient whole. And our ambitions for self-improvement must have a double aim, being turned as equally towards the Self as the Other. For if we are neither honest, responsible nor courageous with regard to ourselves how can we be this towards our fellow man, and by what right can we demand it of him?' He gazed up for a second at the now twinkling Shepherd's Star.

'My brothers, mes frères, might I then propose that we raise this three-flamed beacon of Honesty, Responsibility and Courage as the national motto for our yet-to-be-born federation so that – even though it will not lead us to a paradise on earth – we might be spared from foundering on the rocks of disillusion.'

My Englishman had now re-appeared, empty-handed, from his foray for earthly sustenance, and it was certainly mention of the word 'ocean' which prompted his suggestion: 'I don't know about you guys, but I'm sweating buckets. What about taking a breather and going for a dip?'

'Pay attention to ze sharks!' enjoined François, his chubby cheeks creasing into a roguish smirk.

My philosopher raised eyes of supplication to the glittering vault above.

'And, since you mentioned Jésus Christ, what rôle, if any, would you assign to religion in our brave new world?'

Having decided to heed his French sibling's warning on the perils of bathing in tropical seas, my Englishman's head had been executing a series of short, jerky downward inclinations seeming to indicate that he was now being drawn more and more tightly into sleep's narcotic clutch. But, on hearing the name Jesus Christ, like a canine drawn from its doze by the magic word 'walk,' his cranium shot up alertly erect.

'Now that's a good question. Sooner or later we've got to talk about religion! After all, our kids'll need some moral and spiritual guidance in life! We can't build a paradise on all this philosophical crap, now, can we? I mean, how can we teach youngsters the difference between good and bad without solid Christian values?'

His words were accompanied by waves of nervous fidgeting of bristly legs and restless wandering of stalked eyes.

'If, by 'philosophical crap', as you put it,' my philosopher replied, in a tone of barely-concealed distaste, 'you mean principles which you yourself have decided to close your mind to, let alone put into practice, I would certainly agree. If, by these words you wish to imply we must choose either religion or philosophy, I would certainly not. For it is not to be excluded that religion and philosophy march hand in hand, despite the significant differences which exist between the two.'

'And what are zese différences?'

'Religious faith feeds on the flames of blind feeling and hope; the philosopher's thinking is sourced in the cooler, more limpid waters of reason. Even though religious systems, whatever form these may take, meet what is for most an inherent need for comfort, inspiration, hope, moral and spiritual guidance in the vicissitudes of life here below, they draw their essence from the promise of eternal, paradisiacal peace and redemption on High. In this latter respect, I cannot help but feel they are emanations of this propensity to self-illusion, so intrinsic to the constitution of man, in so much as

they perpetuate the myth of everlasting life beyond what, in reality, the rational philosopher can only conclude to be the ineluctable finality of death. Do they not, therefore, encourage a dichotomous vision of what we would like things ideally to be, and not what they *really* are? And so, from a rational point of view, at least, is not God a pure invention of man and religion little more than a comforting Utopian dream?

FTT: Readers may be wondering why, only hours after my trio's personal meeting with their Creator, the philosopher among them should now appear to be casting doubt on His existence and the Eternal Paradise over which He reigns. I can only answer by reminding them once again that the present chapter is based on my remembrances of a dream – by definition an emanation of the changing, uncontrolled, and often contradictory flows of the subconscious mind, with all the incoherencies this may produce. Or did the Lord, in His infinite beneficence, decide to grant my trio total free will by effacing all memory of their divine encounter on High?

‘And la philosophie?’

‘Philosophy, on the other hand, - or, at least my conception of it - explores a form of improvement through reason and knowledge of what is; and, like a democratically-centred political system, it must allow for the flawed reality of man; for it is in his imperfections here below that he seeks to point humbly towards where a modicum of progress may lie. The aim of the philosopher is not only to approach, by lucid analysis of man's condition on earth, a form of personal serenity we may call wisdom, but to indicate the reasoning by which he has acceded to his source of enlightenment - in the hope that a flicker of this flame will form a guiding glow for others in the nebulous meanderings of life. And my

geometrical schemas are intended merely as a point of departure and in no way represent a proved finality, for I have placed no Q.E.D. at the end.'

'So, like our English friend, you sink religion 'as a part to play in ze future of zis island?'

'Absolutely! Let me make it perfectly clear that the thoughts I have expounded in no way preclude, and are in many ways complementary to a system of values based on religious belief. For religion, though drawing much inspiration from the illusory, is an intrinsic part of the reality of the defective nature of man, and as such must be granted consideration. Despite the fact that I should somewhere like to think I was not tempted to feel that the world would be a better place if we left God in His Heaven and concentrated more on man here below, I do not wish in any way to exclude those not of this mind. It is not, therefore, my desire to contest the individual right to and benefits of religious belief and worship. I cannot help but think, moreover, that believing in something is better than believing in nothing and that the moral and spiritual nihilism which seeks gratuitous destruction of the other, or reduces life to the empty pursuit of material acquisition and predominantly selfish pleasure can only be a source of debasement to man. Religion gives identity, roots, a sense of duty, a moral and spiritual structure, and is a source of stability, solace and hope.

'Nevertheless, you seem to 'ave reservations!'

'As I have explained, my principal reticence resides in the fact that religious belief - apart from its debasement to pure superstition by some, and to an instrument of tyranny by others - necessarily denies the absolute finality of death by perpetuating the myth of an apotheosis of eternal, paradisiacal peace and redemption on High. By this, it encourages a potentially dangerous vision based on ...'

'What d'you mean by potentially dangerous?' interrupted my Englishman who, moderately stimulated by the more godly orientation the discussion had now assumed, seemed to

be gradually extracting himself from the dim-witted torpor by which he had been previously seized. 'I always thought Christian values were based on peace, love and forgiveness!'

'Both past history and present events have demonstrated that the idealistic, emotive basis of all religious belief may make it a dangerous tool in the hands of man. For religious credence, by very nature, is convinced it is in undivided possession of varying proportions of the Truth. Might we not, therefore, logically deduce that the more we are convinced the Truth belongs to us, the less credibility we are likely to lend to the claims of others to the same? Does not all religious belief, then, bear within it the seeds of intolerance and fanaticism in so much as it represents a bi-polarizing rejection of those who do not believe in the same God? Does it not tend, in reality, to divide rather than unite? And is not this propensity to division even encouraged by those whose prophetic status I would have reasonably thought should have prompted them to advocate the thesis of union among all men?'

FTT: Perhaps my philosopher had particularly in mind the following declaration attributed to Saint Paul: 'Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness (2 Cor. 6:14)?'

He cast another meditative glance into the now darkened sky.

'And does not this conviction that we have been granted exclusive possession of the Truth lead us to think that a privileged status goes along with it? Was this not particularly discernible in your part of our previously conjoined self, Thistlethwaite?'

Despite the hitherto encouraging signs of recovery the sudden downward movement of my Englishman's chin,

along with the widening orbits of his eyes, seemed to indicate they were well on their way to producing yet another moronic gape - to which a tinge of offended pride was not to be excluded.

‘For you will certainly recollect,’ pursued my philosopher, in a bathetic descent from the elevated to the mundane, ‘that final game of golf we had together with Monsieur Martin a few days before our fatal soaking.’ Thistlethwaite’s head inclined itself in a self-satisfied nod.

FTT: As we shall see over the coming chapters of this work in our wakened life Monsieur Martin is my company-owning neighbour.

‘I am sure François will join with me in applauding you on a victory entirely due to your individual brilliance.’ My Englishman winced as his blistered lips widened and scorched cheeks rounded in a brave attempt to produce a modest-looking grin.

‘And after your remarkable ten-foot put at the eighteenth both François and myself could not fail to hear you declare, ‘Jesus was with me today!’ By this, I can only surmise that you considered yourself to be the recipient of preferential treatment from on High. Might I also add that, so grateful, it would seem, is the Divine Judge’s only son for your attachment to his holy cause that not only has he chosen to bestow precocious reward on you in the form of discriminatory treatment in the bunkers and on the greens and fairways here below but - unlike lesser-favoured mortal golfers – it might be assumed that celestial recompense will vest you, on demise, with the status of eternal champion on the immaculate links on high!’

In defiance of nature’s normal physiological limitations my Englishman’s mandible dropped to a previously unimaginable low.

‘Furthermore, you cannot fail to remember, my dear Thistlethwaite, that occasion in our early twenties when you suggested that we got our three heads together to discuss possible adherence to a religious denomination whose ideas were rooted in an unshakeable, literal interpretation of the narrations of the Old Testament, and which rejected any idea that man could have descended from anyone other than Adam and Eve. And, – perhaps it was because of your own particular attachment to the object of our adoration of that time – when discussions turned towards marriage and children you were adamant in declaring that not only would it be inconceivable not to grace any future offspring with a Christian name drawn from the Holy Script (Jacob, Isaac, Israel, and, of course, Adam and Eve, were the ones which sprang immediately to your part of our mind), but you would be bitterly disappointed if, in the words of the Apostle Paul, they subsequently became ‘unequally yoked.’ Surely, regarding this latter point at least (and here I am sure our French brother will agree) should not our children, once they are old enough, be left free to make their own choices - especially when it comes to something so personal as selecting a partner in life?’

‘En effet, mon cher Théodore, I could not agree wiz you more! But I sought I ’eard you say zat religion and la philosophie can walk ’and in ’and.’

‘Firstly, and in response to our English brother’s apparent conviction that morality is the exclusive monopoly of the religious domain, I would remind him that not only are our Western moral codes based on an amalgam of both philosophical and religious values but I, for one, believe there is no reason why metaphysical reasoning may not generate high standards of conduct without belief in a God. I will concede, however, that, if the fervour of religious belief is to be cooled by reason, then cold philosophical reason must be softened by the heart. As I have attempted to explain, my meditations are sourced in the belief that the only form of

satisfaction we may aspire to is that which is founded on the constant, coherent search for a balanced and harmonious structure – and, I cannot emphasize enough - the fusion of opposing absolutes into a converging, integrated and equilibrated whole, and not in the diverging pursuit of an absolute in itself. I work for realistic incorporation, whereas both pure reason and unadulterated emotion tend towards illusory bi-polarization.’

‘In ozer words, zen, all religious belief must be tempered by doubt?’

‘Indeed. Unlike firm conviction, doubt springs from that area of moderating reason and, as such, lends an associative movement to our spheres. For the less certain we are of the degree of ‘Truth we hold, the more we widen that intermediate, blended realm of reasonable compromise (for what is doubt but the concessions two opposing extremes grant each other?) by admitting that not only may the Other have a legitimate entitlement to some, but that imperfection is an intrinsic part of our world.’

‘And what are your soughts on religion and politics?’

‘While I can conceive of marriage between religious faith and philosophical reason as a mutually complementary means of bringing men together in a spirit of tolerance and understanding, I cannot prevent myself from thinking that a union between religion and politics makes for an uneasy, potentially dangerous mix. In a political structure whose aims are to guarantee a maximum of social equality and personal liberty for the greatest number, strong religious belief, by nature tending towards exclusivity, combined with the political power inherent in government, may go to produce a perilously limitative and potentially despotic amalgam. Imagine, for example, the arbitrary limitations on freedom and equality imposed by a state in whose constitution and resulting laws the alienating declaration of our saint has been integrated as a major principle! Beware, then, of the politician

who declares that God is on his side!’ My Frenchman’s face lit up in a radiant smile.

‘I would hasten to add, moreover, that much the same may be said of a man-made ideological doctrine, in many ways akin to a religion, which, in a reaction of revolutionary violence to a regime of unjust and unjustifiable privilege and exploitation, seeks by the opposite extreme to impose and maintain what can only be an illusory reign of total equality here on earth.’ The smile clouded into a sombre scowl.

‘So all politicians should be godless chaps like you two!’

‘It is in not at all my intention to infer that those holding public office should not be free to espouse religious conviction. The only proviso I would make is that all manifestation of faith be restricted to the intimacy of their private lives and that, in the fields of politics and civic governance, all should be subject to the strictest neutrality.’

‘An’ just what do you mean by that?’

‘What ’e means by zat, mon ami, is zat zere must be a strict *séparation* between Church and State!’ interposed my Frenchman, his plump cheeks rounding into a self-satisfied smirk.

FTT: My Frenchman’s self-satisfaction was certainly drawn from the fact that, after decades, indeed centuries of bitter dispute, French civic life is today organized on the basis of secularity - a total separation between Church and State – which is now firmly established as a fundamental Republican value. The divorce was officialized by the Law of 1905 which made state schools a totally neutral place where all signs of religious affiliation are forbidden - thereby making religion an exclusively private activity to be pursued outside school hours and premises.

My French readers may be interested (and perhaps surprised) to learn that English state schools are, up to the time of writing, still legally obliged to provide for all

pupils daily collective worship ‘wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character.’ While parents have the right to withdraw their children, they must do so explicitly (if, indeed, they are aware of this option), and all too often the system amounts to little more than worship by default. Though state schools have no autonomy in the matter, headmasters may apply to have the Christian part of the requirements relaxed when they consider it unsuitable. In face of both increasing apathy, and the growing number of pupils of different religious backgrounds, recent years have seen an increase in the number of campaigns in favour of making state schools a more neutral ground, either by banning religious worship altogether, increasing flexibility, introducing inclusive assemblies (whose contents are general enough to be applicable to all), replacing collective by optional worship, or even extending the right of excusal to the pupils themselves.

Similarly, while in England it is possible for a man and woman to be united both civilly and religiously in church, the same rule of secularity requires that the official marriage ceremony in France be a civic act, taking place in the town hall and carried out by *le maire*. It goes without saying, however, that if the newly weds are religiously disposed, they are then free to go on to receive the divine blessing provided by a church service.

‘But all this is anti-religious!’ my Englishman exploded. ‘What we need is an official religion! And what’s more, it’s got to be Anglican! There’ll be none of your popery here!’

‘It would seem to me that the principle of separation between Church and State in matters of civic life should be construed more as a positive contribution to the values of liberty and equality than an anti-religious measure. For does not a nation with no officially-credited religion offer not only the advantage of recognizing all denominations, while

favouring none, but also the free right to be a non-believer? I do realize, however, that as an Englishman, Thistlethwaite, you find this difficult to comprehend. For even though your English tradition leaves a person free to follow the orientation of his choice, it gives official recognition to the Anglican Church, of which the reigning monarch is supreme head. A Roman Catholic, whose allegiance is, of course, to the Pope is, therefore, barred from acceding to the throne – a situation which causes both myself and, I am sure, our French brother, to question the contradiction involved in making religious discrimination illegal for the ordinary citizen in his daily life, while imposing it at the level of state.

‘So if, as you maintain, all religions carry wizin zem ze germs of intolérance and fanatisme, ’ow tolérant should we be towards intolérance?’

‘There are limits to our acceptance of intolerance, as there are limits to all. What we must never consent to, indeed determinedly oppose, is that which denies our right to say what others do not want to hear. The only God we should be prepared to worship, then, is One who gives man the freedom to choose, while knowing the choice could go against Him. In an open society nothing can be total conviction. We cannot give unlimited freedom to those whose inflexible convictions go towards negating it in others. And though I would never contest the right to say God created man, when religion is in control of public thinking to the point of criminalizing those who believe the opposite, or when it contests the opinions of others simply because they do not coincide with its own, it is a danger to individual liberty, social justice and human enlightenment, and must be opposed in the same proportions as the threat it constitutes.’

‘I dunno about you guys, but I’m beginning to feel a bit knackered. What about calling it a day and getting a bit of kip?’ François raised his eyes imploringly towards the now brilliantly-starred celestial vault.

‘A society of freedom,’ Théodore pursued, ‘is one which perceives its members in the relative terms of their worldly imperfections, and the philosopher must take into account and act in consequence of the freely-chosen, flawed preferences of men. His domain, like that of the politician, is one of compromise, and both must accept and yet endeavour to fashion a better world from the same impure, disparate clay. Philosophical wisdom can never be found in illusion, in a vision, limitlessly based on how we would wish or hope things to be; nor can it be found in that opposite excess of pure delusion - the cynical, nihilistic denial of all that is positive in man.’

The scented evening breeze which had been so refreshingly rustling the fronds had now been replaced by a heavy stillness, as if molten lead was being poured into the air.

‘Somewhere this wisdom, then, is to be sought in an equilibrated compromise between pure reality and illusion. For unalloyed Truth can never be found; and our only hope for something like redemption lies in a middle way between reality and dream, an equally-portioned mix which does not deny that dreams must flower, but which is equally convinced their roots must feed on lucidity. The comforting illusion of pure dreams must be hardened by a perception of what things really are, and the harshness of unadulterated reality softened by what we would best like things to be. Pure idealistic vision can only engender perilous fantasy, while visionless lucidity only begets destructive negation.’

‘And do your *théories* ’ave a political application?’

‘Indeed. My circular representation of the Other and the Self may, of course, be used to illustrate the full political spectrum ranging from tendencies giving predominance to the notion of social equality to those emphasizing the principle of individual liberty, and which in democratically-inspired systems are freely embodied in parties extending

from extreme left through a moderate centre to the opposite extreme right.'

FTT: In democratic nations the political tendencies my philosopher is alluding to are, of course, represented by a variety of parties, the names of which vary according to the country concerned: Labour, Liberal and Conservative in Great-Britain; Social and Christian Democrats in Germany; Democrats and Republicans in the U.S.A., to name but a few. As might be expected in a country where nothing is the same as everywhere else, the situation in France is far more complicated, the political scene being characterized by a multiplicity of parties (somewhere reflecting the individualistic nature of the French people), each representing a movement on the political gamut.

'I dunno what you two're hatching between you, but I can tell you one thing,' Thistlethwaite fulminated, in a final desperate stand, 'a Commie state on this island'll be over my dead body!'

'And in accordance with my philosophy of equipoised harmony,' Théodore went on with valorous imperturbability, 'any attempt to provide this isle with enduring political stability must be characterized by an acceptance of the inseparability of these political emanations of the Other and Self, and by a constant endeavour to find and maintain a conciliatory, counter-weighting balance of the two. Needless to say, any impetus tending to impose on our society a political system based on either social equality or individual liberty in their pure forms can only entail a reduction in that interposed area of the counterbalancing composites of the two by reason of a bipolarizing disengagement, analogous to the one I have already represented (**FTT: Fig. 5**) – with all the nefarious consequences this would inevitably have.'

‘It goes wizout saying zat a civilized société of justice, fraternité and égalité must provide assistance to zose among its membres in need.’

‘Look here, you two!’ exploded my Englishman. ‘I’ve not really followed all this highfalutin talk of yours ... an’ I’m not sure I’d be better off now if I had. Putting it in plain English, as far as I’m concerned it’s all right to chip in an’ give a bit of a hand to a guy who’s on his uppers through no fault of his own, but quite frankly I want to live in a place where, if a chap grafts all hours God sends, doesn’t go throwing his lolly about, is willing to chance his arm, has the guts to shoulder a bit of responsibility and the sense to put a bit away for a rainy day ...well, he should get his fair reward. An’ is it right that he should have to fork out for some skiving git who thinks he can sit on his fat arse all day long, living on the brass others have sweated their guts out to make? Is that your idea of justice?’

Was it curiosity to see the author of this impassioned elucidation which prompted a diminutive hermit crab to emerge from its self-appropriated shell – only to be seized in the voracious claws of a more voluminous crustacean?

‘As we may observe around us,’ continued my sage, ‘Mother Nature obliges her offspring to face up to the responsibilities of their existence, granting few, if any, extenuating circumstances; for in a world where only the strongest survive, all forms of weakness are mercilessly punished. And though this reality may appear harsh and unjust to most human sentiment, it can be regarded as genetically sound. Moreover, there is no reason to believe that a similar rule of the survival of the fittest did not play a substantial part in governing the lives of our distant ancestors, and does not still somewhere underlie our condition today. All the more reason, therefore, that, in the name of moral principle and social cohesion, it is the duty of a civilized community to assist those who, through misfortune of birth or circumstances for which they may not

be held responsible, find themselves in a situation of inequality and vulnerability.'

'But are we not all products of circonstances beyond our control? As you 'ave juste indicated, Nature 'erself is profoundly discriminatoire: some are born weak, ozers strong, some 'andicapped, ozers valid, some black, ozers white, some rich, ozers poor, some intélligent, ... and ozers *stupid*.' His last word was accompanied by a resigned nod in the direction of my Englishman.

'And, not only is Nature injuste: ozer unfortunates are born into a milieu where, I sink you say, ze gun is charged against zem. Is it not our responsabilité to fight against social injustice in all its forms wiz, I repeat, ze aim of creating a world of égalité for all?'

The ravenous crab's prandial appreciation of his lesser brother was suspended by a barely perceptible ruffling of the still waters of the lagoon. It cautiously raised its feelers, as if seeking to identify the strange palpable presence it now detected in the air.

'I trust, Thistlethwaite, that you will not help people too little!'

My Frenchman's lips widened into an approving smirk.

'And I hope that you, François, will not assist them too much!'

His mouth instantly rounded into an indignant pout.

'For you, Thistlethwaite, are not wrong in maintaining that each man is responsible for managing his own life; and you, François, rightly point out that we all have a responsibility towards our more unfortunate brothers. But though it is the duty of society to help those of its members who are in genuine need, it is yet another fact of flawed human nature that assisting people too much may encourage them to do too little to help themselves. A balanced compromise must, therefore, be sought between rights and duties: the individual's right to require society to respect its duty to bring him assistance, bounded by society's right to

require the individual to respect his duty to help himself. And does it not require an immense effort of honesty and responsibility to admit these principles as well as unwavering courage to apply them?' He turned his eyes towards François in a benign gaze.

'I cannot help but think, mon cher François, that any attempt to create a society of total equality among men is built on a dangerously impossible ideal. Would it not, in reality, merely serve to drive the injustice of inequality into other areas? Must it not be our aim to create a society, not where all men are held arbitrarily at the same equal level, but where all is done to provide them with the equal opportunity to prove their own individual worth? Must we not endeavour to produce a world where each member is honest, responsible and courageous enough to accept his limitations, and to know he has his right place? Must we not somewhere accept the fact that graded order is an inherent part of the reality of man? For, if we reject this, do we not refuse all scales of value? And can ...?'

It was at this point that Morpheus – no doubt realizing that if he were to continue being a credible Prince of Sleep, he could not allow my dream to linger much longer into the hours of wakefulness – whispered into my ear that the reprieve he had so magnanimously granted must now be brought to an end. But did not a dream of such purport deserve a grand finale finish? How could this be done? Now he himself, he confided, had always had a secret longing to be a Hollywood film director, specializing in the disaster-film genre. Wasn't this a God-sent opportunity to produce one for his own particular pleasure? After all, why should it always be others he staged dreams for? He had seen *Titanic*, and he was sure he could sink the atoll just as well.

And hardly had these utterances crossed my subconscious mind than a stifled, cavernous booming echoed dully from the depths beneath; boles and branches raised creaks of agitation, leaves and fronds offered quivering whispers of

trepidation in the heavy, breathless air; and the sands were seized by soundless shudders, the watching crabs lifted outstretched claws of piteous supplication, and birds and monkeys raised a mournful cacophony of screeching and howling to the spangled vault above.

In a surging bound it was upon them. The earth shook and juddered, heaved and cleaved into gaping, running bloodshot yellow wounds, each coughing growling expectorations of sulphurous, glowing magma and rock into the skies. And a mustard-coloured, vaporous blanket hid the twinkling stars and doused the lunar orb into a dingy, greenish blotch. The atoll was cast in a doleful gloom which filtered the fiercely flaming torches of trees and bushes around, tinting all in a flickering, sepia pallor of doom. The indigo lagoon began gurgling, hissing and bubbling, and columns of scalding vapours rose up, as from a giant's cauldron; and myriads of pink crustaceans shot up like popping corn before plopping back into the seething waters beneath.

Like some uncontrollable, inverse zoom effect, the eye of my mind glimpsed the reclining forms of François, Théodore and Thistlethwaite, still imperturbably engaged in discussion, receding into the distance; and then, just as they were on the point of disappearance, their heads burst open, spewing sparkles of incandescent light; while their bodies discharged themselves in glittering bursts of reds, whites and blues, before keeling over as empty conch-shells. And I, the conjoined François Théodore Thistlethwaite, was shaken out of Morpheus's soporific clutch with teeth chattering and limbs trembling beneath trickling rivulets of icy sweat.

Chapter Three

Liberté - Egalité – Fraternité

Only two things are really equal in this world: we are all born naked and we all die.

François *Théodore* Thistlethwaite

TO the moment I am certified out of this mortal world, I will remember that rain-drenched afternoon when, tightly clutching daddy and maman's hand, we boarded the ferry which was to carry us over to my first encounter with that cursed country of garlic-stinking, wine-swigging, black-haired, pencil-moustached, onion-festooned, beret-topped, unscrupulous, stab-you-in-the-back frog and snail eaters which destiny had made me so much a part of, and set me so much apart from my English peers. And during the crossing it was with doomed resignation that I ruminated on the sickening thought that people who enjoyed batrachians and gastropods as a first course would have no qualms about devouring the tender roast rump of a five-year-old boy for the main dish. But later, as my parents led me onto the open deck, a slanting ray of evening sun broke through the leaden clouds, picking out the approaching coastline like a thread of gold intertwined among the dingily merging fabric of land and sea. My heavy forebodings immediately gave way to a strange elation of heart and levity of step; and when feet finally touched ground, I was overcome by a feeling very much akin to love at first sight: an exhilarating sensation of walking on air - as if 23 miles of horizontal navigation had had very much the same effect as 236,857 miles of vertical flight, and that I was now in a land where Newton's law no longer applied, and apples took considerably longer to fall to the ground.

Who else but my Frenchman could have been so over the moon as to have moved me to begin this chapter by such a starry-eyed narration of my first touchdown on France? And who else but my pragmatically-inclined Englishman could have brought him straight back down to earth with the thought that, though a cloud-cuckoo land may exist on high, he very much doubted this was the case here below? It was certainly the same Englishman who went on to add that such a head-in-the-air description would seem to cast considerable doubt on his French alter's ability to bring a realistic contribution to bear on a chapter whose aim, they had decided, was to examine those Republican ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity so cherished by his *compatriotes*, and to examine to what extent they find everyday substance on the Gallic part of our planet. As a result, therefore, of the above considerations, he had no hesitation in putting forward the motion that such a high-flown subject could only be placed under the neutral, rational and moderating guidance of my highbrow. And who else but a feet-on-the-ground Englishman such as he could provide necessary anecdotal corroboration drawn from the vicissitudes of their daily life?

A reflective-sounding voice then informed me that, though he inhabited the middle of my body, he was unaccustomed to occupying the centre of the stage. However, in view of the potentially disruptive nature of the present chapter's subject and the nefarious effects it might have on my whole, he could only declare it his duty to accept. But, since he would make a considerable effort to steer a middle course, his acquiescence was conditional on his right and left-flanked brothers making an equal effort to do the same. Tacit agreement from my Frenchman came in the form of a rather subdued hiccup and this chapter was finally launched.

*

The French people are provided with daily reminder that the edifice of State reposes on the three Republican pillars of

Liberté, *Egalité* and *Fraternité* by their prominent display on postage stamps, coins, the frontage of public buildings as well as on tax declaration forms – presumably in an attempt to assure the *citoyen* that the money thus levied will be spent on a noble cause. Contrary, however, to what this juxtapositioning of separate words might lead us to think, the ideals of liberty and equality (as well as that of fraternity) do not encapsulate dissociated notions. All are inextricably linked. In line with the philosophical reasoning I have previously elaborated (**FTT: Chapter Two - *The Dream***), the more extreme the concepts of liberty and equality are, the more oppositional they become: for, however desirable this may be, a state which imposes compulsory taxes on its citizens in order to finance, for example, educational facilities for all, is penalizing individual freedom in the name of social equality. And a government which promulgates a system of private health insurance for the exclusive benefit of those who are financially able to contribute to it, is acting against the principle of social equality in so much as it is denying the same access to medical treatment for all. Thus, the more social equality there is, the less individual liberty we have; and the more individual liberty we have, the less social equality there is.

Total liberty is, of course, an impossible ideal. Even if we lived alone on a desert island, freedom to do exactly what we wanted, when we wanted, how we wanted would be seriously limited by the necessity to comply with the implacable laws of survival: the need to devote significant time and effort in finding bodily sustenance, providing ourselves with protection from the elements as well as from any predators we might be sharing our island with. And, since we lived outside human society, the problem of equality would never arise.

Even in what it is generally agreed to call the civilized world, total equality can never be. Though an advanced society considers it desirable to work actively towards creating

some form of equality among its members, genetic and environmental factors are such that not even identical twins can be exactly the same. It is interesting to note, moreover, that the notion of equality is a specifically human one. In nature, inequality is in the immutable order of things: the relentless rule of the strongest and fittest prevails and, even within the same species, a system of precedence is frequently in force.

From a political point of view, the principles of individual liberty and social equality provide, of course, the ideological basis for the notions of right and left wing, broadly termed capitalism and socialism; and, in this respect, I propose commencing our study by reversing the flow of the sands of time in order to draw a brief historical sketch of the evolution in French attitudes towards the two - in the hope that an overview of the past may go somewhere towards helping us understand outlooks in the present. I trust neither of my two brothers will disagree.

FFT: Though, prior to embarking on this chapter, my scholar did appeal to his two alters to be reasonable throughout its pages, I regret to say that, even at this early stage, this was hardly the case. Barely had I got his last words onto my computer screen than a French voice blurted out with barely concealed delight, ‘Personnellement, je n’y vois absolument pas d’inconvénient!’ (Personally, I’ve got absolutely nothing against it!). I can only assume my Englishman took this as a declaration of hostilities, for another voice instantly retorted, in vulgarly disagreeable terms, that at school he had always found history, especially when it assumed a Gallic orientation ‘a pain in the arse.’ But, even though he realized that a short historical introduction was necessary, this didn’t prevent him from hoping ‘our egghead wouldn’t fart around too long’ as he had better

things to do with his share of my time than ‘having his balls bored off him!’

At the risk of shocking my more sensitive readers even more, a desire for factual veracity obliges me to record that, as a result of this exchange, a violent argument broke out between my man on the left and the one on the right. Contrary to what might be thought, the cause was not so much my Englishman’s contemptuous dismissal of French history as his personal appropriation of the two testicular appendages referred to above. In this respect, my Frenchman furiously demanded to know by what right Thistlethwaite considered both to be his exclusive property, vigorously protesting that he could at least have left him the one on the left (which was his due right). Propriety forbids me from disclosing my Englishman’s reply. Overcoming his disgust for this kind of Rabelaisian earthiness (surprising in an Englishman), my scholar finally managed to re-establish enough inner peace to resume this chapter by pointing out that, since his own personal gratification was to be found in purely cerebral spheres, they should consider themselves fortunate that the two were not shared by three.

It was the winds of liberty and equality that fanned the embers of discontent which had been smouldering throughout the second part of eighteenth century France, and which were to burst out into the all-consuming conflagration of a Revolution whose cathartic flames reduced to ashes the pyramidal edifice of the *ancien régime*, the rigidified, self-perpetuating political and social structures of which – unyielding bastions of ecclesiastic and aristocratic prerogative – had been erected on the foundations of a long-defunct feudal system, where the aspirations of the people, totally subservient to the higher orders, were crushed beneath the intolerable burden of fiscal charge. And these frustrations

were seized upon and channelled by an ambitious emerging *bourgeoisie* in avid search of the economic and political power that would render them masters of their destiny - the way partly paved by the not-long-past American War of Independence against the English occupier, and brilliantly illuminated by the philosophers of this Century of Light, whose plans for a brave new world were drawn from a vision of a society rebuilt with the stones of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity and bonded, no longer by discredited religious faith, but the secular cement of reason.

It was the newly-constituted *Assemblée Nationale* which laid the pillars of the bridge that was to span that chasm between feudal autocracy and modern democracy by proclaiming the *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* on 26 August 1789, thereby embedding in the Constitution the ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity for all. The Declaration announced that 'men are born and remain free,' and are 'equal in rights', these 'natural and imprescriptible rights' being 'liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression,' and that 'the only bounds to the exercise of the natural rights of each man are those which ensure that other members of society enjoy these same rights. These bounds may only be determined by law.'

Liberty, not equality, was, therefore, the ideal in which first hopes were placed. Not that provocative, anarchic, limitless and ultimately impossible freedom of 'Il est interdit d'interdire' (**FTT: It's forbidden to forbid**), cheered from behind the student barricades of 1968, and hurled at the established order through the cobble sets torn up from the Paris boulevards, only to reveal the sands of an illusory paradise beneath, but a liberty of responsible counterbalancing of mutual rights and duties. Though implicitly opening up a social dimension by declaring that each man has the individual right to be free but, at the same time, the social duty to ensure others have the right to the same degree of freedom, no overt mention is yet made of

social equality. We must wait until 24 June 1793 for the Constitution to declare openly that 'the aim of society is the happiness of all,' and that 'government is instituted in order to guarantee that man enjoys his natural and imprescriptible rights,' which are 'equality, liberty, security and property.'

The notion of equality has now been brought explicitly to the fore. But the institution of government is still perceived, not in terms of creating a society based on equality of opportunity or, for the wilder visionary, one with no distinction of class, but simply as an instrument in ensuring the same equilibrium between rights and duties: the right to participate in all decisions affecting the collective destiny of the nation, but the duty to abide by all decisions taken by the majority, even when detrimental to personal interest or choice. This participation can only be exercised under collective form; for, as *Article 3* of the *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme* proclaims: 'The principle of sovereignty lies essentially in the nation: no body, no individual may exercise any authority which does not expressly emanate from it.'

From the final years of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth, cataclysmic eruption burst repeatedly through the thin, barely-cooled crust of the nation, to harden, more or less durably, into so many disparately-shaped outcrops, blazing the path of French history up to our present day: the National Assembly (1789-1791; the Legislative Assembly (1791-1792); the Convention (1792-1795); the Directory (1795-1799) the Napoleonic era of the Consulate and First Empire (1799-1814); the First and Second Restoration (1814-1830); the Revolution of 1830; Louis-Philippe (1830-1848); the Commune (1871), each in turn engulfed by the volatile lava of social and political convulsion which has since cooled and solidified - not without leaving visible traces - into the France of today. And during these decades of incessant upheaval to determine not only what form governmental representation would take, but which social category - *le peuple*, *la bourgeoisie*, or the former

aristocratic ruling class - would hold the reins of the nation, a general movement may be observed towards democratic government and social equality - landmarked by the Revolution of 1848, heralding the arrival of socialism and collectivism, and inspired by Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, which demonstrated to the working masses that not only were they exploited, but the only solution was to overthrow their boss - no longer perceived as a master but a ruthless class enemy.

FFT: At this moment there was a pause in the narration, and I distinctly heard what could only have been the voice of Théodore expressing his sincere gratitude to his French brother for the invaluable assistance he had provided in helping him research (and translate) the above constitutional quotes. He even went so far as to ask my Englishman if he wished to endorse this tribute. Regrettably, the very idea seemed to prompt a reaction emanating, once again, from his coarser part, and which the rules of propriety compel me to conceal beneath a diplomatic 'No comment!' Nevertheless, this did not prevent my scholar from presenting Thistlethwaite with his warm congratulations on his generally exemplary patience and self-control (admittedly favoured by an unending supply of nice hot cups of tea, inundating my left side with inordinate quantities of a beverage of which my Gallic alter ego is not particularly enamoured, and at one time even threatening to swamp all three out), which was never completely abandoned, and which, all things considered, corresponded to what might be expected of an Englishman.

Not only did the Constitution of 1848 'propose as an aim to walk more freely along the path of progress and civilization in order to ensure a more equitable sharing of the responsibilities and benefits of society ... and to enable all

citizens to accede, without further upheaval, by the successive and constant action of institutions and laws, to an even higher degree of morality, enlightenment and well-being' but, more importantly, to invest citizens with rights other than those previously considered as 'natural' by admitting that the state now had a duty 'to provide the education essential to all men, fraternal support, work for those without means and, in the absence of any family, assistance for those unable to work.' Even though this represented undeniable social progress, a threshold had been crossed in the sense that, in the name of social equality, the French state had now begun to grant itself the right, and thereby the authority, to establish and apply laws impinging upon the individual citizen's freedom to manage his own private life.

We must wait until the end of those sombre years of Nazi occupation and Vichy government for the Constitution of 1946 to add to the list of official duties the State considered it had towards its *citoyens*: 'Each man has the right to obtain employment ... the nation pledges to provide both private individual and family with the conditions necessary to their development. It guarantees for all ... health, protection, material security, rest and leisure. Every person who, because of age, physical or mental state, or the economic situation finds himself unable to work, has the right to obtain suitable means of subsistence from the community ... the nation guarantees equal access to child and adult education, professional training and culture.' The Constitution also added other rights: women's right to vote (female emancipation took time to reach France); the right to form trade unions as well as the right to strike. Though, I repeat, these advantages brought considerable social advancement at the time, it must again be stressed that, when a central authority grants itself far-reaching, potentially limitless powers to regulate matters concerning the citizen's professional life, his and his family's personal development, health, material security, rest, leisure, education, professional

training and culture, this necessarily limits even more the individual's liberty to organize his own independent existence.

And this same Constitution went even further by decreeing that, in the interests of the nation and in the name of collectivist equality (thereby echoing an immediate post war belief that communism would open the gates to a Promised Land), 'all private estate or enterprise, the operations of which have or acquire the characteristics of a national public service or a *de facto* monopoly, must become collective property,' and that 'each worker, through his delegates, takes part in common decision-making regarding conditions of work and company management.' Whether we agree that these measures represent social progress or not, it can only be admitted they are in total contradiction with the liberal principles of 1789 which proclaimed that 'every being has sacred and inalienable rights from which no law may derogate. These rights are liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression.'

FTT: On recording my scholar's last sentence, an invisible force prised my jaws apart in a resonant yawn, and a huffy-sounding voice boomed in my right ear that 'he was getting really pissed off with all this guff about French constitutions and a toffee-nosed Froggy pestering him with daft questions about whether this was good English or not and a mealy-mouthed swot with the verbal shits showing off how much he knew and that he'd just about had his bellyful – even of the tea – and he couldn't give a monkey's fart about French history and couldn't we get on to something a bit more up-to-date where he could get a word in 'cos if we didn't he just might throw his spanner in the works and ...'

I will not waste time and space in a detailed narration of the diplomatic lengths to which my middleman went in order to mollify both my Englishman's irreverent wrath, and the infuriating effect

it had on my Frenchman's national pride - thereby averting a mutual declaration of war which would certainly have blown me, and this work irretrievably apart. Suffice it to say that, after protracted negotiations, my hands came into limp contact with each other in conclusion of a temporary agreement which promised my Englishman, in recompense for a less virulent deportment, a more active role in the pages to come. In return, my Frenchman was persuaded to exercise equal forbearance with the assurance that a following important chapter would be placed squarely in his left hand. And to set a final seal, Théodore pledged to support Thistlethwaite's suggestion that they watch the England versus Germany soccer match on T.V. that evening, while assuring François he would certainly not veto a nice garlic-spiked roast leg of lamb, without mint sauce, for next Sunday's lunch. My philosopher ended by appealing to both his French and English alters' legendary indulgence in granting him just a few more lines in summary of his historical digest, before moving on to examine contemporary attitudes to those ideals which constitute the subject of our chapter, and which his English brother will soon be given ample opportunity to contribute to. The same irresistible force impelled my head downwards in a begrudging nod.

By this brief overview of the evolution in attitudes towards the ideals of Liberty and Equality, as reflected in the turbulent history of France from the last decades of the *ancien régime*, through the events of 1789 and up to recent times, I have traced a generally constant movement away from the liberal principles enunciated by the fathers of the Revolution towards – under Napoleonic and later increasing socialist and communist influence – an ideal of equality evidenced by the rise, development and ultimate triumph of an all-present, all-powerful and all-pervading central state authority which over

the years, from commencing merely as the guarantor, arbitrator and organizer of individual and collective rights and duties, gradually invested itself with legal powers enabling it to intervene significantly in the management of all aspects of national life, that of private enterprise and of the ordinary citizen, thereby contributing towards making the country that curiously unique, at times schizophrenic hotchpotch of liberalism and egalitarianism that it is today - some of the more common manifestations of which, with the precious co-operation of our Englishman, I will endeavor to analyze over the following pages.

From the Revolution of 1789 up to recent times, then, perceptions of liberty had a balanced dimension in that they contained a general acceptance of the equilibrating social and political function of equality – the equal right of others to enjoy the same liberty as oneself, along with one's own duty to abide by the decisions of an elected majority. Regrettably, in present day France, we can observe a growing bi-polarizing movement which rejects the limitations imposed on personal liberty by these social and political considerations. As a result, the country is withdrawing into self-seeking egocentricity which, in defense of personal or corporate interests, considers authority - not only in the form of persons or bodies professionally, legally, traditionally, or institutionally invested with the right to direct others, but that constituted by the obligation to respect democratically-established laws or generally-accepted rules essential to the harmonious functioning of society - as a constrictive force, and as such the enemy of personal freedom. Consequently, more and more widespread is the attitude that personal liberty and fulfillment can only be obtained at the expense of, rather than in co-operation with authority. Authority, by very nature, works against individual and corporate liberty, and all forms of resistance – even when illegal, violent or extortionist in nature – are justified. When, in order to obtain higher salaries, better working conditions, or in protest at planned

Government reforms, truck drivers hold the country to ransom by paralyzing road networks in defiance of national and European law; when strikers hold their boss prisoner, threaten his family with physical reprisal (or worse), or aggress non-striking colleagues; when workers menaced by redundancy threaten to pollute rivers, burn down (or blow up) their factories, or even sabotage the security systems of nuclear power stations; when small farmers and environmentalists illegally destroy fields of genetically-modified plants; when strikers and demonstrators block access to and exit from petrol refineries, with the aim of creating national fuel shortages, these forms of action are considered to be justified - not only, of course, by their perpetrators, but are often sympathetically perceived by a large section of the population as part of the free and legitimate entitlement of a minority to defend its specific interests or views against the powers-that-be.

And not only are these self-appropriated rights upheld by a large section of public opinion, but often by the media, opposition parties (anxious to glean a few votes for the next elections), and even spiritual leaders who display public sympathy for such movements by depicting those responsible as hapless victims, or defenders of freedom against oppression, and designating authority, in the shape of the government, as the real culprit. All too often, the latter, after repeated appeals to demonstrators' sense of responsibility and respect of the law (while at the same time instructing the police to adopt a policy of non-intervention), attempts to obtain a semblance of moral victory by endeavouring to convince us that their surrender is due, above all, to their willingness to make concessions in a spirit of conciliation and tolerance. Of course, this mix of corporate protestation, violence, blackmail and government pusillanimity throws considerable discredit not only on laws and institutions, but on the democratic system itself, with the result that an increasing number of citizens are becoming more and more

convinced of the futility of participating in a system of elective government, when the combativeness and determination of a minority can override democratically-established laws. In the France of today, then, with regard to that most basic of equalities, the one before the law, some are far more equal than others, and may manifest their opposition by going to sometimes spectacularly unlawful lengths to achieve their ends, while comforted in the knowledge they will be able to do so in all impunity.

It was at this point that an English-sounding voice insisted on recalling to my part of our mind one example of the above, provided some time ago, when a powerful, extreme left-wing trade union decided to call a dockers' strike in protest at the government's declared intention of placing in private hands, - with the aim of remedying heavy financial loss - a state-owned shipping company operating cargo and passenger ferries between Marseilles and Corsica. Union leaders went to some pains to point out that, since the principle aim of the company was to provide a public service, and not a substantial dividend to capitalist shareholders, their militant action was prompted by a desire to protect collective interests rather than a wish -admittedly less commendable - to preserve their own.

The strike was particularly effective: the ferry service was totally paralyzed, passengers and truck drivers were blocked for several days, considerable damage was done to local business, not to mention to the image of the port - all to the accompaniment of daily demonstrations and violent clashes with the police. But what followed was more in the tradition of an action-packed Hollywood movie. In a spectacular sign of defiance, and to a backcloth of carefully and extensively orchestrated media coverage, the hardline leaders, along with a group of the more radical strikers, hijacked one of the company's ferry boats moored in the port of Marseilles, and promptly set a course for Corsica. On the evening T.V. news, we were informed that this type of action, like skyjacking, was

considered by law to be an act of blatant piracy and as such punishable by long years in prison. A military force of intervention was helicoptered out, and the following evening we were treated to a stage-managed reality show of armed, masked commandos sliding down lines and retaking the ship – all to a background of ironic applause on the part of the perpetrators, filmed from the deck of the ferry. The pirate crew was, of course, taken into custody, shipped back to Marseilles where its members were ‘interviewed’ by the police. In the following morning’s press there was vague talk of legal measures being firmly applied – to which the union promptly responded by issuing a declaration to the effect that, if this were the case, even more extreme insurrectional methods would be applied. After a day or two of negotiation, however, an agreement was apparently reached: for the hijackers were discreetly released, everybody went quietly back to work ... and that was the last we heard of that.

In contrast, as my Englishman has once more obligingly brought to my attention, an article which appeared in our local *Saint-Clou Gazette* during a period when truck drivers were blockading the country in all impunity provided perfect proof that, though authority can be mercifully accommodating in face of mass protestation, it can be mercilessly unyielding when confronted with lone dissent.

FTT: The town of Saint-Clou, an important place of pilgrimage in the Middle Ages and now a diocese seat, owes its name to the fact that, for many centuries, an object of religious veneration was enshrined within its Cathedral in the shape of one of the nails (*un clou* = a nail), reputed to have attached Christ to his cross. Though history seems at a loss to explain exactly how it got there, some credibility may be attached to the legend in that, not only was mere sight of the nail believed to have prompted a number of miraculous healings, but the brownish stain by which it was coloured – thought to be

the blood of our Saviour – is said to have become more and more pronounced over the centuries. Unfortunately, this holy relic was confiscated during the Revolution of 1789 and, as it has never reappeared since, we can only assume it to be irredeemably lost.

The owner driver of a small itinerant greengrocery business who plied his trade at the different fruit and vegetable markets of the region, rolled up early one morning at the afore-mentioned town where he was in the habit of pitching his weekly Saturday stall, only to discover that the place normally allocated to him by the municipal authorities – the central position of which considerably favoured rapid disposal of his wares – had been erroneously attributed to a competitor. Furious at the mistake of the former and the stubbornness of the latter (who systematically rejected all attempts at conciliation), and presumably encouraged by the success of his fellow drivers at a national level, our itinerant greengrocer decided to register his personal brand of protest by driving his van into the town centre, bringing it to a halt in the middle of the narrow one-way *Grande Rue*, locking the doors and ... vanishing into thin air. The blockage which ensued caused indescribable confusion and popular fury for the next two hours. The long arm of the law finally hunted him down in one of the town's numerous cafés where he was quietly savouring his revenge behind an umpteenth *pastis*. He was promptly handcuffed and frog-marched off to the *commissariat* where he was charged, and left to spend the rest of the day and following night in solitary contemplation of the vulnerability of lone opposition. A few days later, he was sentenced to a stiff fine, plus a three-month license suspension, for impeding the free circulation of traffic.

With, of course, the continued, invaluable co-operation of our Englishman, I am not without further examples of the extent to which French governments will go in order to entertain the illusion that faint-hearted, short-term expedients

– in total contradiction with the principle of equality before the law – will produce durable, long-term solutions.

Like all developed European nations, confronted with a lack of home-grown labour to satisfy the demands of a developing post-war economy in the fifties and sixties, France opened up her borders to massive immigration from her former African colonies and protectorates - in particular the *Magreb* countries of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. The same phenomenon was, of course, observed in Britain where considerable numbers of workers from the Commonwealth countries of Pakistan, India and the West Indies were encouraged to emigrate by promises of regular work and access to a better life. And in France, as in Britain, not much beyond the economic needs of the moment was taken into consideration. No really serious thought was given, for instance, to the long-term integration of these expatriate communities who have since profoundly modified the ethnic composition of much of Western Europe, and whose social, religious and cultural divergences still keep them as far separated from the indigenous population as the distant continents they originated from. In France, these immigrants formed ethnic communities in *les banlieus* - the outskirts of large cities where, over the years, a numbers of factors, including high unemployment, discrimination, and rootlessness have created, especially among *les beurs* **(FTT: the original immigrants' children and grandchildren, born in France but, in reality, only French in name)**, an explosive atmosphere of insecurity, crime (particularly drug-dealing), gang warfare, hopelessness, hate, violence and, of course, Islamic extremism, which have lead to the establishment of 'no-go' areas, no longer governed by Republican law but that of the street, where the police fear to tread. Even though politicians have promised to make every effort to find solutions to the problem, very few tangible results have been obtained, and in the absence of any determined policy regarding social, educational and

professional integration, successive French governments seem all too often to have resigned themselves to a pusillanimous, provisional, and sometimes unofficial one which consists in sacrificing on the altar of appeasement the sacrosanct principle of equality before the law. An English-sounding voice has once more kindly volunteered to help me relate one graphic illustration of this which our neighbour, Monsieur Martin's recent experience provided.

A few weeks ago a raging toothache drove Monsieur Martin to his dentist's. Now, since Monsieur Martin's dentist's surgery is located in close proximity to the police station in Saint-Clou, it is hardly surprising he counts a number of police officers among his patients. While waiting for the anesthetic to take effect, Monsieur Martin and his dentist had a little chat about things in general and the government in particular, during which the latter informed him that a number of policemen had been grumbling to him recently about certain instructions they had received 'from above.' Apparently, they had been told 'to go easy' on certain sections of the immigrant population. Monsieur Martin was soon to discover personally what this meant. Here's what happened:

The following Sunday morning, Monsieur Martin decided to give his car a thorough clean. Being a man of method, he resolved to begin by the inside. To this effect, he reversed the car out of the garage into the drive and then popped back into the house for his wife's vacuum cleaner. Now, given the fact that he had left his vehicle reposing well within those bounds of safety normally associated with one's home, Monsieur Martin might have been forgiven for not removing the keys from the ignition. Alas! He could not have made a more fatal mistake. Emerging only minutes later, he was obliged to give both cheeks a series of sharp pinches: for the cubic area previously occupied by his car had now been replaced by a corresponding volume of thin air. After recovering from the stupefying shock this sudden

transformation understandably produced, he came round to see us, explained what had happened, and asked if one of us would be good enough to drive him round to the police station to report the theft. All three of us were only happy to comply.

Two days later, Monsieur Martin phoned the *commissariat* to enquire how investigations were proceeding, and was promptly informed by the *commissaire* that he had some good news ... but also some bad. He began with the good. By a remarkable coincidence he had himself found Monsieur Martin's stolen vehicle. The previous evening, he explained, while driving home through the centre of Saint-Clou, he happened to bring his car to a halt behind another vehicle at a red light. On closer examination, he was astounded to see that the car in front answered in every detail the description Monsieur Martin had given of his. He jumped out of his car, arrested the driver (a youth of immigrant extraction), drove him back to the *commissariat* where he was charged and placed in custody for the night. And then came the bad news: he had just received a phone call from his superiors instructing him to drop all charges against the youth! It goes without saying that, on arriving home, the young man received a hero's welcome from his peers.

FTT: Contrary to what my Englishman and scholar seem to be inferring, it would appear that this government policy of appeasement towards certain sections of the population is barely concealed. A few weeks ago, a television news report focused on police work in the Paris *banlieus*. The police were shown stopping cars in order to check the vehicle documents of their drivers - mainly young *beurs*. One youth, when asked to produce his driving license and car insurance certificate, cheerfully replied that this would be impossible as he was, and never had been in possession

of either. After a brisk salute and with an engaging smile, the policeman bade him continue his way!

Some explanation for this Gallic tendency to consider legally-constituted authority as an impingement on personal liberty may be sought in the historical evolution of the nation. In England, the erosion of monarchic despotism began in 1215 with the signing of the *Magna Carta* - considered as the embryonic beginning of parliamentary rule - and continued, without major interruption, up to the present day. The French, on the other hand, up to 1789, and even beyond, were bound by an absolute central power, embodied in the King, whose arbitrary right to rule and judge was considered to be divinely invested. So omnipresent was this sovereignty that it encroached, in one way or another, on most aspects of the ordinary person's daily life, and could only be opposed by a general withdrawal into a position of mistrustful defense which, over the years, became profoundly rooted in the national character. And though the egalitarian movements of the last two centuries transferred more and more power into the hands of *le peuple*, they also served to bring more to light this 'us against them,' 'poor against rich' trait embedded in the nation's mentality, and which is still reflected in popular attitudes toward anything perceived as embodying some form of dominance. This traditional distrust of authority may be observed in the average Frenchman's desire to keep to the barest minimum any co-operative contact with those professionally charged with maintaining law and order. I will leave it to my English brother to relate one example of this provided recently by another article in the *Saint-Clou Gazette*.

During the early hours of one morning, a small firm located to the rear of a block of residential flats in a quiet road just behind the *Grande Rue*, was the object of a break-in. After forcing his way into the premises with the obvious intention of appropriating any cash or valuables he might find to hand, our burglar's eyes lighted on a safe reposing on the

floor in a corner of the main office. Being designed, like all safes, to oppose maximum resistance to any form of penetration other than that provided by the appropriate key and combination, neither of which our man was, of course, in possession of, it was soon realized that the improvisatory methods being applied were, and would remain fruitless. Being a man of great determination, resourcefulness and optimism, and fortified by the ingurgitation of an appreciable amount of alcoholic drink, our man resolved not to let the matter rest there, and began directing his efforts towards seeking a means by which the safe might be conveyed to a location affording the leisure necessary to gaining undisturbed access to its contents. On exploring the storeroom, he came across a device fitted with rollers and two hydraulically-operated prongs, designed to lift and transport heavy, palletized objects single-handed. After expending considerable energy manoeuvring his booty onto the forks and jacking it up, he crashed through the door of the delivery bay, wheeled the safe down the adjoining ramp onto the street, and then proceeded to push it in the direction of the van he had parked a short distance away. Despite the resulting night-shattering commotion, not one single person phoned the *gendarmérie*; and it was only the following morning when staff arrived at work that the burglary was finally reported. The gendarmes immediately conducted a door-to-door enquiry among nearby residents who supplied a description of our man in such detail (they had obviously been observing events from their windows) that he was promptly identified (it was not his first misdemeanour) and arrested.

In contrast, not only do many Anglo-Saxons still consider it an integral part of their civic duty to co-operate with those officially invested with the task of maintaining law and order, but are actively encouraged to do so. I will leave Thistlethwaite (what would I do without him?) to relate an

experience we had which provides a perfect illustration of this.

It was at the end of one of those typically English winter days which had never fully rid itself of the previous night, and was now slinking shamefully into the next that we drove home (I forget which one of us was at the wheel), parked the car in front of our flat and went inside. François, (it's all coming back now) served up a Frenchified dinner (warmed-up *ratatouille* with too much garlic for my taste), I cleared the table and did the washing-up, and Théodore was entrusted with drying and putting away. Then, we all settled down to watch the local T.V. news, during which we were informed there had been a series of burglaries and car break-ins in the neighbourhood recently. As none of us could quite recall whether we had locked the car, I volunteered to pop us out and check. Just as I was squeezing the door handle, I casually glanced across at the houses on the other side of the street. Most of them had a light in the window, but the one directly opposite was still plunged in darkness. All at once, a brief flicker of light by the front door caught my right eye. It first crossed my mind that it was just the neighbours arriving home from work, but on closer examination I could just make out the silhouette of a man hunched over the thin ray of a pencil torch in what seemed to be attentive scrutiny of the lock. An instant later and my rising suspicions were confirmed. As I let go of the car door handle it gave a loud click. The man started, froze for a second or two, and then loped noiselessly off down the side of the house to the back – a path I clearly followed; for, strangely, in his panic he forgot to switch off his torch. Hurrying back inside, I insisted on us dialling 999 (François was against). Within minutes two brawny officers arrived and carried out a search of the area but, unfortunately, the bird had flown. Once the policemen had left, our Frenchy sneered, 'Ils nous ont pris pour un fou!' (**FTT: They must have thought we're crazy!**). But I had the last word: two days later we received a letter from the

police thanking us for our public-spiritedness and at the same time stressing that we mustn't hesitate to contact them if ever we were to witness similar suspicious acts in the future.

Many thanks, Thistlethwaite. In Anglo-Saxon cultures this generally-held view that individual well-being and freedom can only be obtained by co-operating with legitimate authority has led to a more developed willingness to work together in reinforcing the observance of rules and laws. Unlike in France, it is common in England to find voluntary *Neighbourhood Watch* schemes which involve the ordinary citizen in creating organized surveillance groups whose aims, in co-operation with the police and local authorities, are to reduce burglaries, car-crimes and general anti-social behaviour, as well as increase security (e.g. better street lighting) within a given residential area. Far from being considered as a limitation of personal liberty, these initiatives are generally perceived to be in the interests of the common good.

And it is perhaps even more significant that in England enough trust is placed in the ordinary citizen's sense of civic responsibility to invite him to become actively involved in *directly* ensuring that others respect what is generally considered to be conducive to the well-being of all. As Thistlethwaite so pertinently points out, an example of this was provided some time ago when a well-known haulage firm hit upon the idea of appending to the rear of its trucks a conspicuous sign, along with a phone number, inviting public road-users to report those among its drivers they judged to be conducting themselves in a manner dangerous or simply discourteous to others. This initiative was generally perceived as making a positive contribution towards increasing safety and civility on roads – so much so that it considerably reinforced the public image of the haulage company in question. Moreover, during recent city riots in England, popular newspapers made headline appeals to the general public to *Shop a Moron* - to denounce to the police those they

personally recognized from video surveillance footage as committing acts of violence, theft, arson and looting.

For the French, solicitations of this kind would be inconceivable. Not only would they be considered as Big Brother style encroachments on individual liberty, but dangerous in that they provide too great a temptation for individual human perversity to divert them to malicious, selfish ends by encouraging people to inform on others for reasons of personal animosity, jealousy or desire for revenge (perhaps the national memory has not forgotten those sombre days of Nazi occupation when denunciation was rife), and accordingly best left to those professionally appointed to carry out the task. For in France, it is not impossible that the English haulage company's publicity campaign could have been exploited for personal financial gain. As Thistlethwaite once again reminds me, this, at least, is what our neighbour, Monsieur Martin's experience would suggest.

Now, Monsieur Martin's firm has a small fleet of delivery vans on the sides of which the company name, together with e-mail address and telephone number used to be displayed. I say 'used to be' because Monsieur Martin has deleted the phone number. Why? Simply because he was receiving more and more calls from people claiming that one of his vans had bumped into their car, causing considerable damage, before driven away without stopping. In reality, these allegations were simply fraudulent attempts from members of the general public to save their no-claims bonus by attempting to make Monsieur Martin's firm liable for damages resulting from an accident which the claimant himself was probably responsible for in totally unconnected circumstances. Seeming proof of this was supplied by the fact that not one single person has yet accepted Monsieur Martin's systematic invitation to provide him with an official, written claim containing name and address, along with details of the circumstances in which the 'accident' occurred.

FTT: At this point a heavily-accented voice suggested that, in view of the considerable cerebral effort my scholar had hereto provided, not to mention the anecdotal contributions his English *alter* had made, both might at this stage appreciate the relaxing effects of a short break. If this was the case, no objection would be raised by him to Thistlethwaite making a nice hot cup of tea which he and Théodore could share along with a chocolate biscuit or two. And as far as the continuation of this present chapter was concerned neither of them should have cause to worry. Having now recovered from the exaltation of spirit inspired by memories of his first childhood contact with the country of his *ancêtres*, he could assure them that his left foot was now firmly planted back down on earth. So, while they were enjoying their well-earned pause, he would be only too happy to help out for a page or two, and bring his own Gallic point of view to bear on the subject of this so-called exemplary English public-spiritedness. Even though I did feel some uneasy stirrings in the region of my right kidney, nothing objectionable could be detected down my centre, and the following lines began to flow:

Merci, mes chers frères. Même si ... sorry, even though I would admit that a limited number of my *concitoyens* may be accused of lacking in citizenship, I can't help thinking that extenuating circumstances are to be sought in the fact that, all in all, the freedom granted to you English to do what you want in public places is far more restricted than in France. So, doesn't this diminish the merits of your infuriating habit of abiding unquestioningly by the rules? For not only are you at constant risk of being brought to order by authority or, incredibly, by your fellow citizens, but I don't know of any other nation which displays such a generalized obsession for regulating public behavior in the minutest detail. I mean, what

else can we say about a country where the ubiquitous presence of such a multiplicity of signs, notices, placards, boards, stickers, plates, pointers, arrows, warnings, instructions, recommendations, injunctions, enjoinders and sundry symbols makes it perfectly clear to all what they can and can't do in publicly-frequented places, and leaves them in no doubt of the dire consequences of failing to comply? And what better illustration of this can you have than that provided last summer when we visited one of your English stately homes?

This is not to say that things didn't get off to a reasonably encouraging start: for, as we arrived, I distinctly remember all three of our heart zones being considerably warmed by the prominent notice *Welcome to Grumblesby Hall* attached to a pillar of the palatial lodge gates. But I couldn't help feeling slightly chilled by a peremptory *No Dogs Allowed* hanging beneath, making no bones of the fact that, if anyone had brought Rover along for a run (or more), they were barking up the wrong tree. Meanwhile, as we drove through the gates a *Car Park – 200 Yards* reassuringly informed us that not much more than a stone's throw ahead an area had been thoughtfully provided for us to deposit our vehicle; and the prominent arrow underneath left those visitors lacking a sense of direction in no doubt of the way to follow in order to get there. A few metres farther, however, and my worst suspicions were confirmed by a killjoy *Maximum Speed 5 mph*, bringing it to the attention of the boy racers among us that any attempt to reduce the previously-indicated distance at a speed not much exceeding the locomotive capacity of a snail would be deemed perilous enough to render them liable to a *Fine Not Exceeding £100*.

In an effort, no doubt, to deter the more adventurous visitor, eager to get off the beaten track, the next sign announced there must be *No Parking on Grass Verges* - below which a ghastly-sounding *Wheel Clamping in Operation – Release Fee £100* brought it intimidatingly

home that, not only would offending vehicles be clapped in irons, but an extortionist ransom would have to be paid before they were freed. As we inched forward, another **No Parking on Grass Verges** came into view - the **At any Time** beneath bringing it imperatively home to all and sundry that military-style rigour was in operation here, and that even in the most excusable circumstances not the slightest quarter would be shown.

After crawling on for a hundred metres or so, an **Official Car Park** sign informed us we had now reached the limits of authorized vehicular advancement; and the nearby **All Vehicles Must Be Parked Within Lines – Fine £100** made it perfectly clear that satellite link-up precision was required of all cars deposited within. And just in case any simpleton had the idea that parking was on the house, the words **Pay and Display** brought it soberingly home that the right to position oneself neatly within the designated lines was dependent not only on a monetary consideration but visible proof you had acquitted yourself of it.

Having abandoned wheel for foot, we made our way towards two disagreeable-looking appliances whose function the sign **Ticket Machines** would have left even the dimmest visitor in no doubt of. Their uncooperative nature was confirmed by a **Ticket Machines Do Not Give Change**, below which could be read the injunction **Parking Tickets Must Be Clearly Displayed at all Times**, along with an explanation of the technique required to meet it: **Tickets Must Be Affixed to Windscreen or Side Window of Vehicle so as to Be Clearly Visible at all Times**. In marginally smaller letters below, it was made uncompromisingly clear that the operation described was the entire responsibility of the vehicle owner, and no sympathetic consideration could be entertained should your ticket become unstuck and fall out of view. And the directive **Time Paid for Must not be Exceeded** left us in no doubt that only Swiss-train punctuality would be accepted.

As we walked back to the car, clutching our ticket, another ***Wheel Clamping in Operation – Release Fee £100*** sign (at this stately home £100 covered every form of transgression) supplied yet one more dire warning of the fate that would befall the more absent-minded among us. And if by now any bright spark was still under the illusion this was all bluff, a terrifying ***Wardens on Patrol*** and ***CCT Monitoring at all Times*** brought it grimly to our notice that the car park had been provided with a system of surveillance worthy of one of Her Majesty's maximum security prisons.

As we strolled past the immaculate turf, several notices to ***Keep of the Grass*** provided repeated reminders that in England this type of surface is for the eyes alone, and any incursion by foot is as shockingly profane as entering a mosque with shoes still on. A little farther on, however, and a spirit-raising ***Picnic Area*** proclaimed that a spot had been thoughtfully reserved for the more pantheistical visitor seeking prandial communion with nature. But it took no more than a couple of strides for this brief moment of cheer to be doused by a ***No Picnicking Beyond this Spot***, making it perfectly clear that this sort of nonsense could only be tolerated within narrowly-defined limits. And a minute later a ***Visitors Must Use the Benches and Tables Provided*** put a stop to any idea Mum might have had of sunning herself on the car rug; while a ***No Ball Games Allowed*** made it equally plain to Dad that if he got the bat and ball out of the boot for a knock with the kids, he'd be playing on a sticky wicket.

FTT: To play on a sticky wicket = to find oneself in a difficult or delicate situation. Derived from the game of cricket, a better understanding of this commonly-used expression pre-supposes an elementary knowledge of this quintessentially English sport – if, indeed, the word 'sport' may be used to qualify an activity which my Frenchman describes as 'more akin to ritualized

loafing.’ The *wicket* is the name given to the narrow strip of grass where, according to him, ‘most of the little action which characterizes the game’ takes place. On it, a bowler pitches a ball at a hitter who will attempt to strike it with his bat. Unlike baseball, the cricket ball is usually pitched in such a way that it bounces in front of the batter, and when the wicket is ‘sticky’ (i.e. drying out after a fall of rain), the ball can rebound in a frequently unpredictable way, thereby placing the batter in a perilous situation.

Anglo-Saxon readers will be surprised that such a typically English expression should have come from my French part. The only explanation I can find is that prolonged and intimate co-habitation with an Englishman, himself a passionate lover of the game, has caused him, in spite of himself, to be permeated by one or two rudimentary notions of the sport.

Close by, a *Please Use Litter Bins – Fine £100* brought it home to us all that any attempt to apply the precept ‘If you’re going to do it, make sure it’s on somebody else’s doorstep’ would be at the offender’s considerable financial risk. Coming to a splendid ornamental lake, complete with fountain and ducks, the double interdiction *No Feeding the Birds* and *No Feeding the Fish* announced to the animal lovers among us that it would be better if they took all uneaten bread home for tomorrow’s breakfast toast. And the triple injunction *No Swimming – No Paddling – No Fishing* threw cold water on any plans some might have had of depositing themselves wholly or partially in this liquid element, or extracting existing occupants from it.

As the house came into view, a large *Admission: Adults £10 – Children and OAP’S £6* sign informed us that a price was to be paid to view the treasures within; and the bracketed parenthesis (*Non-Refundable*) beneath left us in no doubt that once you were in you were in, and that, financially at

least, there was no getting out. And yet another ***CCT Surveillance in Operation at all Times*** made no bones of the fact that Big Brother was still watching, and that anybody tempted to pocket a Ming Dynasty tea cup as a souvenir had better drop that one right away.

Before committing ourself to a paying visit (even though the three of us could have got in for the price of one), I think it was Théodore who suggested we might first step into the nearby café and discuss things over a cup of coffee. In the unlikely event that someone had escaped that genetic programming which lines you English up with the same fatalistic resignation as lambs waiting for slaughter, a ***Please Queue Here*** herded us towards the usual roped passage, barely a yard wide. And while stoically waiting in the queue, we couldn't fail to observe a ***Customers May Not Consume Their Own Food and Drink*** hanging from the ceiling, underneath which a ***Food and Beverages Must Be Paid for Before Consumption*** brought it to the attention of all that the silly French habit of only settling the bill after wouldn't be tolerated here.

While sipping our coffee, the three of us got our head together, and an animated discussion followed as to whether we should proceed to go in. During the arm-throwing which followed, one of our hands (it could only have been that clumsy devil, Thistlethwaite's) sent our cup crashing to the floor. Immediately a waitress came up and announced, "That'll be £5, please!" I explained we had already paid.

'Oh, that's not for you coffee. Haven't you seen the notice?' she replied, nodding in the direction of an ***All Breakages Must Be Paid For*** sign we had somehow not observed. Even Thistlethwaite raised no objection when I suggested we spend the rest of the day at the coast.

And your English obsession with punctilious regulation of public behavior can even be carried to the most ridiculous extremes. Imagine, par exemple, a businessman decides to take a train to go and see a customer in London. His wife

drives him to the station in the morning and stops at the drop-off point in front. What's more natural that, just before he gets out of the car, their lips should come together in a parting kiss? But, incredible as this may sound, at one station in England at least, they can't do it. It's forbidden! Presumably, in an attempt to get us to swallow the idea that it increases the fluidity of traffic, the area has a prominent sign displaying a man and woman in the act of kissing – with a prohibitive line drawn through! But don't worry! Inside the station another sign indicates that kissing is now allowed. The only problem is that his wife's on her way back home and there's nobody left to kiss!

But, après tout, what's more normal that in a country which created Big Brother, the video camera should be put to such widespread use as an extension of the policeman's eye – not just to dissuade potential miscreants, or record the identify of perpetrators of crime, but simply to keep a permanent watch on the civic behavior of law-abiding people like you and me! I mean, neither Thistlethwaite, Théodore nor moi-même can fail to remember that incident which happened during the same holidays last summer when we were strolling through the shopping centre of a large town. It was our sweet-toothed Englishman who suggested we had one of the mint humbugs he had insisted on us buying a few minutes before. After a combined effort at unwrapping the sweet, his right hand popped it into our mouth while my own left one screwed the paper up and dropped it on the ground. And then, can you imagine it? A voice boomed out, 'Please pick that sweet paper up and put it in the litter bin!'

'Mais de quoi je me mêle!' (**FTT: What business is it of yours!**) I retorted, looking daggers at a passer-by.

The same voice blared out once more, 'Will you please pick that sweet wrapper up immediately and put it in the bin on your left!' The passer-by nodded his head up towards a loudspeaker and camera fixed to the top of a post a few yards away. The Thistlethwaite in us sheepishly complied.

FTT: At this point, I distinctly heard my scholar's voice ringing in my middle ear, thanking my Frenchman for allowing his English brother and himself to take such a pleasantly refreshing break. For, even though Thistlethwaite had appropriated most of the tea, he had managed a couple of sips as well as a biscuit or two. This, however, was not important. Not only had he noted François's pertinent comments, but this short interlude had enabled him to collect a few more thoughts on the subject at hand which, with the continued assistance of his left and right alters, he was confident would allow him to pursue this chapter for a few more pages.

Now, let me remember. Where was I? ... Ah, yes! So, what could be more inexorable that these opposing French and English perceptions of authority should be the source of mutual incomprehension and tension? In the more civically-oriented Anglo-Saxon culture, not only is it considered essential to the common good that the individual work with authority, but laws are viewed less as being imposed by authority than as a direct emanation of the democratic process, and accordingly a product of liberty. The French, on the other hand, perceive public demonstration and protestation in defiance of the law, with the aim of defending personal or corporate interests, as a reflection of direct democracy - the free right of the citizen to protest openly against the power which promulgated that law. For the Anglo-Saxon protests of this type are a denial of the democratic process which produced the law and, as such, little more than anarchic manifestations of the rule of the street.

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Though a number of interpretations may be applied to the concept of equality, two broad schools of thought can be

distinguished: equality of opportunity and egalitarianism. The equality of opportunist believes that society should go some way towards compensating for the inevitable inequalities caused by nature and socio-family background by providing the greatest number with the same chance for social and professional advancement. This conception of equality represents a progression from social equity to personal liberty as it gives society an initial equalizing duty, after which it allows the individual the freedom to exercise his right to control his own destiny by proving his ability, and finding his corresponding level in a competitive, hierarchical, capitalist world. Social equality, then, is perceived as a springboard for individual liberty in a system based on the principle of treating equal things equally.

The egalitarianist, on the other hand, believes that society should fight to reduce the inequalities inherent in nature and socio-family background by destroying the capitalist society which produces them, and replacing it by a classless one of equals. Since, in a capitalist world, power will always remain in the hands of those who have proved themselves pre-eminent, necessarily at the expense of the less fortunate, this type of society can only be overthrown by the latter, who will then rebuild a model one, the egalitarian structures of which will be maintained by the fraternity of its members, and permanently oriented towards the collective good. Any individual effort directed, therefore, towards personal promotion, as opposed to this communal ideal, is considered reprehensible in that it tends necessarily towards re-establishing the previous hierarchical society. Social equality, then, predominates over individual liberty in a system which seeks to treat unequal things equally.

FTT: The philosophers among my readers will certainly recognize in my scholar's words Aristotle's demonstration of logic proving that 'Treating unequal

things equally is just as unfair as treating equal things unequally.'

It is yet one more paradox that France is perhaps the only industrialized, capitalist-oriented country on our planet where so many are ready to believe that society is composed of a Manichean division of rich and poor, and where so much credibility is lent to an ideological doctrine which seeks to create, through revolution, an egalitarian, classless paradise for man. For this vision still imparts a distinctly red hue to the French political scene where it not only colours the moderate left (which, in consequence, has less room for manoeuvre than its European neighbours), but also weighs heavily on centre and even right - to which it imparts a more leftist inclination than with many socialist governments elsewhere. And, as we shall see in the following chapter, it constitutes an important cog in that machine of state, *la fonction publique* (**FTT: the public service**), and is present enough to divert union efforts from necessary social reform by assigning to them a strongly ideological role. For, paradoxically, the main reason France is constantly ravaged by strikes is not due to the fact that union membership is exceedingly high (the opposite is the case compared to that of most countries), but because left-wing extremism is not diluted enough by the presence of sufficient numbers of non-politicized members. As a result, the more leftist *syndicats* are frequently controlled by a minority concentration of hard-liners who consider their function to be more political than social in so much as they perceive their union as a counter power to capitalistic government and are, therefore, more intent on imposing egalitarian doctrine than improving the working conditions of members. In addition, egalitarianists tend to be portrayed by much of the media as being not half so diabolical as their extreme right-wing opposites, the nationalistic, anti-immigration stances of which are associated with strong fascist tendencies, reminiscent of Vichy

collaboration with the Occupant during the Second World War, and as such a denial of the legacy of the Revolution, and the values represented by a country still proud of its reputation as the cradle of human rights.

And, as our brother, Thistlethwaite, rightly points out, so anchored in the mentality are these egalitarianist attitudes that they can frequently be observed in the banal situations of everyday French life. Take, for example, the contents of some of those letters and e-mails which appear in the forum page of the *Saint-Clou Gazette*. Now, the forum page of the *Saint-Clou Gazette* extends a daily invitation to its readers to express their views on matters of topical concern. On one occasion, he reminds me, they were invited to send in their reaction to the declarations of a right-wing Presidential candidate who, as part of his pre-election campaign, was going to considerable lengths to convince the voting public that, if elected to office, one of the first measures taken would be to reduce the amount of income tax *le citoyen* would be required to pay. The country was immediately split into two ferociously opposed camps: the income-tax payers (around 50% of the population), and those who paid none. Our Englishman recalls one indignant reader who wrote in protesting that the poor non-income tax payer would be unjustly ignored by this proposed measure for the sole benefit of the rich. The result, he continued, would be to increase even more shamefully the inequality which existed between *la France d'en haut* (**FTT: upper France, i.e. the privileged classes**) and *la France d'en bas* (**lower France, i.e. the poorer working classes**). The writer went on to condemn in the strongest possible terms what he considered to be the inequitable attitude of the income-tax payers who maintained that, since this measure was aimed at reducing the level of income tax, it was logical that only those paying income tax should be concerned. On the contrary, he declared, the only fair solution was to treat unequal things equally: the government should provide the non-income tax payer with some form of direct financial

compensation which, if not reducing the gap between rich and poor, at least would go some way towards preventing it from growing wider.

On another occasion, Thistlethwaite goes on, the same newspaper invited its readers to send in their reactions to a government proposal to increase substantially the price of cigarettes. One reader expressed his exasperation at the proposed measure which, he declared, reeked of provocation, injustice and ... class distinction. For not only would the impecunious working-class smoker be once again penalized in that he would have to make a financial effort out of all proportion to that required from the rich, but this would compel the government (tobacco is a state monopoly in France) to market cigarettes in miserable packets of ten or even five. This would lead to the same scandalous situation as the one which used to exist in England where the rich were instantly recognizable by their elitist packets of twenty. He could only conclude that the sole equitable solution was, once again, that of treating unequal things equally: the government should place a total ban on the sale of cigarettes for all.

It is certainly this same egalitarian factor, moreover, which has spawned that exclusive French tendency by which more private satisfaction is gained from the failure of others than one's own success, and has produced in many a Frenchman the secret urge to end what he perceives as ostentatious personal advancement by reducing the successful person to the level of everybody else. I am well placed to observe that, while the sight of a Rolls Royce or Cadillac would prompt the Englishman or American to dream of the day when he will be the proud owner of the same, the Frenchman dreams of the day when their owner (especially when he is clad in a pin-striped business suit) will have been reduced to walking ... like everybody else!

FTT: In all honesty, I must confess that this observation is not Thistlethwaite's own. It is to be found in *Pierre*

Daninos' *Les Carnets du Major Thompson* (Librairie Hachette, 1954), which all three of me have read. The book takes a deliciously-amusing, comparative look (even Théodore was forced into a weak smile) at the French and English, through the perpetually-astonished eyes of a retired British Army officer and gentleman, now married to a Frenchwoman. Despite being written more than half a century ago, many of the Major's comments and observations are still relevant today, and I can only recommend the work as a classic in its *genre*.

In this respect, the English-occupied part of me has also recalled to my mind that experience our company-owning neighbour, Monsieur Martin, had during a period when the relative tranquillity of Saint-Clou was disturbed by a series of thefts of top-of-the-range cars. One evening, on leaving the restaurant where he had been dining with a customer, Monsieur Martin had the disagreeable surprise to find that the space in which he had carefully deposited and locked his newly-acquired limousine some two hours previously was now as vacant as the most gaping yawn. The same soporific simile having certainly occurred to our neighbour, it took a series of vigorous, self-applied pinches to convince him that he was not in the land of dreams, and send him hurrying along to the police station to report the theft.

A policeman was seated at the reception desk, his eyes intently focused on the sports page of the *Saint-Clou Gazette* spread out before him. It becoming soon obvious to Monsieur Martin that his precipitous arrival had in no way altered the policeman's determination to finish the article he was perusing before indulging in any professional activity of note, the former took the liberty of emitting a discreet cough. The policeman slowly lifted his head and, raising a peremptory finger in the vague direction of the three subdued-looking citizens Monsieur Martin had failed to see perched on a bench opposite, gruffly enjoined him to 'Wait

your turn ... like everybody else!’ Monsieur Martin meekly complied. A few minutes later, wishing to inform Madame Martin of his predicament, and realizing he had left his cell phone in the stolen car, Monsieur Martin again approached the policeman and politely asked if he might avail himself of the telephone reposing on his desk. The same imperious forefinger was lifted, this time towards the door, and the same grumpy voice was heard to say, ‘Why can’t you use the public phone box outside ... like everybody else?’ After a lengthy wait, the officer finally summoned Monsieur Martin and, while he was taking down his statement, asked him for the registration number and make of his vehicle. On being informed it was an expensive German *marque*, the policeman’s eyebrow’s shot up, and his lower jaw dropped down in an expression of irritated stupefaction. ‘But why can’t you drive a Renault,’ he growled, ‘... like everybody else!’

And given our internal configuration, what is less surprising that our own self has not been spared? For, we are not infrequently the victims of a recurrent, two-part dream. In the first, we’re strolling along the sun-drenched quayside at Saint-Tropez. A group of holidaymakers are gaping at a superb yacht. Out of curiosity we join them. On the aft deck three chairs are arranged around a table, its glass top almost hidden by an immense vase of gladioli. Next to it, two stunning, topless blonds are sunning themselves, face up, on loungers. A tall, dashing-looking man trots up from below. He’s sporting an elegant, gold-buttoned, navy-blue blazer and impeccably-creased white flannels; a skipper’s cap is perched rakishly on his head; in one hand he’s clutching a glass of champagne, and between two fingers of the other a huge cigar is wedged. As he sits down, he casts a supercilious glance at the spellbound crowd, and then murmurs something inaudible to the girls. They burst into loud giggles. Something tells me I’ve seen this man before! I look more closely at his face. It’s the disincarnated Thistlethwaite our host described in Chapter Two!

The second part now begins. We're sauntering along the same sun-baked quay. We join the same bunch of holidaymakers gawking at the same yacht. A short, plumpish figure catches my eye. I instantly recognize him as our Frenchman of Chapter Two. But *he's* not on holiday. He's wearing a suit and tie, and a bulging briefcase is swinging from his left hand. Without so much as a glance at the holiday crowd, he marches straight across the gangplank and coldly greets all three. He seems to ask Thistlethwaite if he's the owner of the yacht, for our Englishman gives a curt nod.

'Eh bien,' my Frenchman slowly replies in a voice now loud enough for everyone to hear, 'allow me to introduce myself. My name is Monsieur François. I'm a tax inspector.' He glances mockingly at the two girls who now sit up, startled. Thistlethwaite's jaw drops open in incredulous dismay.

'Forgive me for this untimely intrusion, monsieur,' he continues in the same loud tone, and with a smirk on his face, 'but it has been brought to our notice that you are in possession of a number of undeclared Swiss bank accounts.' He pauses theatrically. Then, with barely-disguised delectation, 'In view of the considerable amounts involved, I must inform you that the French state intends to take legal action against you for massive tax evasion.'

Thistlethwaite's lower jaw sags even further. The two blonds stand up and reach for their bikini tops.

'Monsieur,' our Frenchman continues, 'might I be permitted some personal advice?' Thistlethwaite gives a stunned nod.

'Since you stand little chance of winning, and the resulting financial penalties will, no doubt, be of a ruinous nature, might I suggest you begin by selling your yacht!' He fixes his gaze on the blonds for an instant, and an even deeper smirk creases his cheeks, 'But don't worry, cher monsieur,' he goes on, in scarcely-muted triumph, 'if you're still so fond of

boating, you can always hire a *pédalo* (FTT: a pedal-boat) ... like everybody else!

It is certainly this same egalitarian factor (reinforced, no doubt, by Catholic-sourced perceptions of the iniquitous nature of monetary pursuit) which has anchored in the popular mind the notion that all efforts tending towards financial gain must necessarily be soiled by the stains of exploitation and immorality. So, in face of all this hostility, what is more normal than that those it is directed against should take refuge in postures of self-defense? Take, once again our bourgeois, capitalist neighbour, Monsieur Martin. Now Monsieur Martin informs us that when he's on holiday, and gets into conversation with a stranger who asks him what line he's in, he will mutter something vague about 'being in industry.' And when pushed for more details, he will reluctantly admit to 'working in an accounts office.'

'I prefer this,' he smiles, 'it doesn't cause any embarrassing tensions and gives the impression I'm just an ordinary employee ... like everybody else. Then we can go ahead and have a nice, friendly relationship between equals!'

And only the other day Monsieur Martin took delivery of an expensive new limousine. Now, an Englishman or an American would have taken the first opportunity to show it to us with undisguised pride. They might even have told us, without the slightest complex, how much it had cost. Not so with Monsieur Martin. Monsieur Martin adopted an almost apologetic attitude, and it was only after informing us that 'ils m'ont fait une offre que je ne pouvais pas refuser!' (FTT: **they made me an offer I couldn't refuse!**) that he relaxed and a smile of satisfaction appeared on his face.

It would be wrong, however, to think that the French are systematically hostile to all manifestations of affluence. For strangely enough, royalty - provided it resides beyond the *Hexagon* (FTT: *this eight-sided geometrical figure is commonly used not only to evoke the geographical contours of France but as a symbol of the nation itself*) -

has a fairy-like attraction for these guillotiners of sovereigns. In addition, the ordinary Frenchman shows little hostility to conspicuous wealth emanating from the world of sport and entertainment (perhaps because these constitute an intrinsic part of his leisure life), and the extravagant trappings of grossly- overpaid sportsmen and show business personalities, which, had they been displayed by a wealthy businessman would have aroused popular wrath, are greeted, at worst, with a resigned Gallic shrug.

FTT: As my Englishman was here quick to point out, it is yet one more paradox that the antipathy which the ordinary Frenchman shows towards *les riches* does not stop him from playing the lottery each week in the hope of joining their ranks.

And it is not unknown for these stars of popular entertainment to undertake the consolidation of their positive popular image by going to considerable pains to convince us that their heart is, and always will be firmly oriented towards the left. On the eve of a presidential election an ex-French-tennis-star-turned-pop-singer, now contending to become the champion of inter-racial fraternity, sought to reassure his fans by publicly declaring that ‘Si Sarko passe, moi je me casse!’ (**FTT: If Sarko gets in, I get out!**). If by ‘get out’ he wished to indicate that, in the event of this right-wing candidate being elected, he would have no hesitation in seeking refuge under more brotherly climes, he seems to have had second thoughts: for even though Monsieur Sarkozy did get in, our ex-tennis-playing pop singer did not get out. Would it be cynical to think that this was due, in part at least, to the fact that most of his (considerable) royalties are generated in France? It would appear, however, that he had again hit a winner, as a survey later revealed he had been voted France’s favourite personality - for the seventh year running!

More recently, in a similar attempt to reinforce his popular image, a retired football-star-now-turned-actor staged a media show, the goal of which was to turn to his advantage the antagonism of a good proportion of the French public towards what it perceives as being the heart of an unjust, exploitative system. During an internet interview, he went so far as to suggest that the collapse of capitalist banking structures might be brought about if 20 million people all decided to draw out their cash at the same time. In all fairness, however, our multi-millionaire ex-football star actor, though busy making a film on the fateful day, did, apparently, practice what he preached by trotting along to his bank during a break in filming to make a symbolic withdrawal.

This firmly-embedded conception of a society split into rich and poor, places considerable pressure on French governments to remedy the supposed imbalance through redistribution of what are popularly viewed as ill-gotten gains. As a result, it is, above all, the middle-class citizen who is the victim of a complex and, for some, confiscatory system of social and fiscal contributions, obliging him to part with substantial amounts in the name of *solidarité* with his fellow man.

FTT: France is probably one of, if not *the* highest-taxed country in the world. One of the taxes my scholar certainly has in my mind is the *I.S.F. (Impôt de Solidarité sur la Fortune)*. This fortune tax is levied on all households whose total earthly possessions (including the wife's gold ear-rings) exceed an amount which would make an American split his sides with laughter. And even though, at the time of writing, the entry level has been raised, the revenue lost will certainly be more than compensated for by a substantial increase in taxes on the interest, profits and dividends deriving from the *citoyen's* estate.

Just as I had finished transforming my middleman's thoughts from his part of my head into words on a screen, a raucous eructation of garlic-reeking gases rattled up from below. I could only surmise that, in view of the distinct bluish tint these pages were now taking (explainable, perhaps, by the fact that Thistlethwaite was insidiously gaining control of me), my Frenchman had now had as much as he could stomach and that, were he obliged to ingurgitate more, acute dyspepsia would follow. Then, all of a sudden, I started to see red and a thought flashed through my mind that, if the French worker was so hostile towards his capitalistic boss, this was because it is difficult to believe in the sincerity of a class who never stop complaining that raising the minimum salary will considerably damage their competitiveness while some of them happily pocket up to 500 times more. And, as I now seemed to be heading towards a major clash of colours, a sagacious-sounding voice suggested it might now be preferable to bring this chapter to a speedy close.

Readers will again be spared details of the prodigious efforts of diplomacy my mediator made to persuade his political anti-poles to agree to a temporary peace. Suffice it to say that he finally managed to settle me down by hinting to my Gallic that he would be entrusted with the guidance of the following chapter on the subject of *la fonction publique*. And most of my Englishman's objections were removed by a formal pledge on the part of my mediator not to vote against him should he suggest a nice joint of beef, not underdone, with Horseradish Sauce, Yorkshire Pudding and at least three vegetables for next Sunday lunch. In the meantime, my scholar would be grateful to both if they would allow him to express a thought in conclusion to this present study.

Our feminist readers will certainly be surprised, even aggrieved that I have not included in this chapter any reflections on the considerable inequalities which exist between the two sexes, particularly on the Gallic side of the Channel. I had, in fact, intended to offer a few thoughts on

the subject, but I am sure they will understand that, given the acidic turn inside events have now taken, it is preferable that this chapter be brought to an end with as much haste as the desire to bring a credible conclusion to bear will allow. I trust that our lady readers' justified frustrations will be somewhat alleviated by the fact that a future chapter on the fair sex is being ruminated during which this delicate subject will, no doubt, be broached. Might I now conclude with a brief reflection on an ideal barely mentioned up to this moment, but without which those of Liberty and Equality could barely exist?

FTT: Readers will certainly have guessed that my sage is here referring to that third Republican virtue of *Fraternité*. Curiously, in present-day France, though the words *liberté* and *égalité* are frequently employed, *fraternité* seems to have been almost totally replaced by the term *solidarité*. Is this due to a more realistic realization that, when the *citoyen* is required to be financially supportive towards others, he does not necessarily do this out of brotherly love? For it must not be forgotten that, though the French make spontaneous and generous contributions to a plethora of charitable causes, this official version of human fellowship is legally enforced, and non-compliance will incur the full wrath of the law.

As I endeavoured to explain at the beginning of this chapter, the ideals of Liberty and Equality can be considered as having very much the same effect as a swing: when one goes up, the other automatically comes down in the same degree. Does not responsible governance, however, consist in doing all within its power to work for a configuration where neither is significantly higher than the other? And, since a body will continue in motion until acted upon by another, do we not need a central, regulatory force whose function is to

bring and maintain Liberty and Equality at the same evenly-balanced level? Might I be permitted to think, then, that this unifying, transcending dimension which only brotherly affection can provide may be incorporated as the pivot of a new order of *Egalité – Fraternité – Liberté* which may go somewhere, at least, towards preventing an excess of freedom from producing too little equality, and too much equality from resulting in too little freedom?

FTT: Initially, Théodore advanced a new order of *Liberté – Fraternité – Egalité*, to which my Frenchman vigorously objected on the grounds that this gave the impression his countrymen favoured an Anglo-Saxon, *laissez-faire* style of capitalism whereas, in reality, they were far more oriented towards equality. Not only would the order *Egalité – Fraternité – Liberté* be more appropriate, but could be considered more neutral in that it presented the advantage of being alphabetical. And after all, he was French, so didn't he have a say in the matter? Being a member of a nation of compulsive gamblers, Thistlethwaite suggested we tossed for it, but was immediately overruled. In view of the logical nature of my Frenchman's argument, the philosopher in me could only concur.

Chapter Four

La Fonction Publique

It's state workers who make the best husbands: they're never tired when they come home from work, and they've read the newspaper.

Jean Martet

After much reflection, I can only confirm that any comparative study of the English and French will inevitably lead us into an inextricable tangle of contradiction and paradox. What else can we say of two nations, separated geographically by such a narrow stretch of shallow brine, yet mentally so vast an ocean apart? How else can we describe a pragmatic, feet-on-the ground people who reject all thoughts of a paradise here below, yet firmly believe in the presence of ghosts? And in what other way can we qualify their Cartesian neighbours, so mockingly dismissive of the existence of spirits on earth yet so firmly convinced that an egalitarian Utopia can exist among men? For so deeply rooted is the Marxist factor in the Gallic mind - as firmly entrenched as the Puritan syndrome in the English - that my resident Frenchman was quick to point out that, not only must a serious work on his countrymen include some thoughts on this subject, but no one was better qualified than he to demonstrate how an egalitarian ideal can be made to come true.

Barely had I registered my Frenchman's proposal than the right half of my skull was seized in the vice-like grip of a splitting migraine, the aim of which was, no doubt, to seize up the whole. But since the Constitution of our democratic body does not allow one single member to block any motion, François immediately referred it to my tri-partite head

assembly for discussion and final vote. And it was my centrist's casting voice which compelled the English part of me to withdraw his cephalous objection, and placed the control of this chapter in the hand of his left-wing *alter ego*. The ache in my head accordingly subsided and the following thoughts began to flow:

Camarades! Is it not the capitalist Englishman who refuses to see that a society of true Libert , Egalit  and Fraternit  must be our constant dream, and that this brave new order can only be born when the working masses of our world have thrown off those chains by which their bourgeois oppressors have shackled them for so long? Since the circumstances of our conception have placed us in such close proximity within one single mortal envelope, I cannot fail to be aware of our own Rosbif's (**FTT: a common French nickname for the English**) unfounded criticism, indeed unjustified condemnation of the social, political and economic system inspired by the revolutionary theories of those immense benefactors of humanity, Marx and Engel. And I am well positioned to see that his systematic denigration of what can be the only future for man is based, not on what true communism *really* is, but on a pernicious manipulation of what bourgeois pigs like him want people to think it is.

Vous savez, our Rosbif would like to have us believe that the collapse of the Soviet Union signifies the total failure of communism as a whole. Eh bien, the simple reply is that the Soviet Union was more a state which *claimed* to be communist rather than actually *being* one. En tout cas, as our original thinkers went to great pains to emphasize, communism, as a social and economic system, can never be bounded by the frontiers of just a few countries, and to be really effective must exist on the same global scale as capitalism. As for those scandalous accusations regarding our beloved Uncle Joe, things have been grossly exaggerated. Though I cannot deny he did send a few bourgeois parasites away to cool off and learn what a good day's work was all about, he must be

judged by his intentions: for he always had the good of his people, indeed humanity, at heart. And you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs, n'est-ce pas?

But if we look at things objectively, is capitalism above all reproach? Can we, in all honesty, say that a system based on private ownership is an example to follow when it produces cars for millions of people all over the world, while depriving countless more of clean drinking water and condemning them to live (and die) on a starvation diet? Can we have faith in a doctrine of free enterprise whose insatiable greed pillaged the New World, massacred entire Indian populations and reduced millions of innocents to a life of slavery? Is it possible to trust a system of *laissez-faire* which, under the hypocritical pretext of introducing civilization, democracy and Christianity to primitive nations, brought rapacious colonization, aimed, in reality, at exploiting their natural resources? What can we say about the imperialist oppressors who waged merciless war against those downtrodden colonies whose only crime was the desire to free themselves from their intolerable yoke? What words can we use to describe that pernicious capitalist propaganda which accused the Soviet Union of communist expansionism when the only thing we sought was to assist these hapless nations in regaining their identity and pride? Can we really envisage a future of peace for our children under a system which, twice during the last century, threw humanity into horrendous strife, and which carries within it the germs of future war? Can we honestly conclude that the future of mankind lies in an order which enabled immense fortunes to be built on crippling workdays of 14 hours or more, on the hellish toil in factories and mines of children barely out of the cradle, and on the blighted lives of countless millions of exploited women and men?

And have things now changed for the better? Your Anglo-Saxon-inspired, ultra-liberal capitalism with its dehumanizing, never-ending quest for profit to the sole

benefit of shareholders and a minority ruling class is still the dominant economic, social, and political system in our world today. The bourgeois exploiters of our planet are still just as contemptuous of the rights and dignity of those who, by the sweat of their brow, slave to produce their wealth. For what else but the word *slavery* can we use to describe the fate of the ordinary working man? How else can we qualify the daily working conditions of those countless millions, condemned to sweat away their lives for a pittance, squeezed dry by a merciless, money-grubbing boss, sucked into the infernal spiral of increased production rates (often in health, or even life-threatening conditions), mentally tortured by the ever-present risk of losing their job in a dehumanizing order which reigns, not by fraternity, but by division among men? And even when that longed-for-moment comes to take a well-earned rest, is it not the profiteering bourgeois pig who continues to live off the fat of the land, while those whose strength he has so mercilessly sapped must be content with a mere scattering of crumbs to eke out the remainder of their days? Non! A society based on the exploitation of man by fellow man must never be allowed to be! Our future must fly on the wings of Hope! We must carry on our noble struggle to change this world into one where relations between men are based, not on conflict, servitude, exploitation and inequity, but freedom, equality, fraternity and justice for all. And it is only through revolution that we can reach the end of history.

FTT: No doubt prompted by the blatant ignorance of most English people regarding the fundamentals of Marxist thinking, a scholarly-sounding voice suggested at this point that he might be allowed, through me, to give a brief overview of Marx's perception of the historical evolution of human society. Though my Frenchman voiced his hearty approval, Thistlethwaite's

silence seemed to indicate he had retired into a deep sulk.

Marx perceived history in terms of a class struggle, centred on the ownership of the means of production. He defined six major stages in the evolution of human society which I have summarized as follows:

- 1) Primitive Communism. The period covered by early human history where tribal societies held everything in common.
- 2) Slave Society. A form of society based on bondage where the means of production were in the hands of a newly-emerging aristocracy.
- 3) Feudalism. An agriculturally-oriented society where land, owned and controlled by a minority aristocratic élite, was the principal means of production, and where the majority peasant class had few, if any rights. This period saw the emergence of the merchant who would gradually evolve into the capitalist class.
- 4) Capitalism. A society where technological progress (the invention of the steam engine) enabled the minority ruling class to amass huge profits through factory forms of production employing the proletarian masses.
- 5) Socialism. A form of society where the working masses have gained class awareness – the realization that they are oppressed by a bourgeois capitalist order, and that the only way to free themselves from this dictatorship is to bring about, by proletarian revolution, socialization of the means of production.
- 6) Communism. In this type of post-revolutionary, egalitarian society not only are the means of production held ‘in common’ for the benefit of all, but class struggle has disappeared for ever. As my Frenchman states, this represents ‘the end of history’ - the final Marxist goal in the sense that it is impossible for any further form of society to develop.

It is not my intention to enter into any great detail as to the historical beginnings and inexorable development of our noble-minded cause in France. Suffice it to say that the unfailing, longstanding spiritual, moral, and financial assistance of our much-loved guide, Uncle Joe, the preponderant role played by our heroic resistance in the armed combat against the Nazi Occupant, and their treacherous capitalist Vichy collaborators, the ceaseless fight of our long-oppressed party to gain political recognition, the never-ending struggle of our unions to improve the deplorable condition of the proletarian masses, the pens of countless intellectuals and philosophers who rallied spontaneously to our cause, and, above all, the fervent support of millions of ordinary working-class men and women who, after the horrors of a cataclysmic war, wished to express their total faith in the building of a better world - all contributed to our being granted at the Liberation a richly-deserved say in the governance of our nation.

FTT: In order to give my English readers a better understanding of the reasons why the communists should have been given such an important part to play in immediate French post war government, my scholar suggested he again be allowed, through me, to include the following broad historical sketch, which he trusts will give some idea of the explosive political context prevailing at the time. To this, my Frenchman, of course, posed no objection. A vague grunt on the part of my Englishman suggested he was still in a huff.

Even before the end of the Second World War, the French Provisory Government had taken the necessary steps to resume administrative control of the country. The communists, who had played a major (but far from exclusive) role in the *Résistance*, and who were still in possession of their arms, had also done the same - with the aim of seizing power in as many of the newly-

liberated towns as possible. The Allies, fully aware of the fact that, after the Liberation, they could well have a civil war on their hands, had prepared their own emergency plan in the shape of the *A.M.G.O.T. (Allied Military Government of Occupied Territories)*, which placed officers of the Allied Armed Forces in all key administrative posts, and even had a special currency of occupation printed. It took all the authority and persuasion of General de Gaulle to convince the communists (who controlled a third of the provinces) to lay down their arms and, in the name of national unity, prepare themselves to share power and accept democratic elections. There was, of course, a price to be paid. In the 1945 elections, such was the post-war belief in promises of a brave new world (as well as a growing realization of the monstrous human sacrifice the Soviet Union had been obliged to consent during the conflict) that the communists obtained more than 26% of votes, and more than 150 communist *députés* were elected to the *Assemblée Nationale*.

In the resulting provisional Government of Liberation which he formed, de Gaulle was obliged to nominate five communist ministers, one of whom was Maurice Thorez. Maurice Thorez (1900-1964) was a mainly self-educated miner, a life-long militant and devoted Stalinist who rose through the ranks of the *PCF (Parti Communiste Français)* to become General Secretary from 1930 to his death in 1964. In 1945, he was placed in charge of *la fonction publique*, his reform of which, he claimed, 'liberated' the state worker from the previous 'autocratic' system instituted by Napoléon. The imprint of his reforms is still very much in evidence in the French public service.

Merci pour ces explications, mon cher Théodore. And what is more natural that Camarade Thorez should have been

appointed *Ministre de la Fonction Publique*, with the noble task of liberating its oppressed workers, sowing the seeds of revolution within the bourgeois capitalist state, and transforming the public service into an egalitarian, fraternal society proud to serve as a model for a future brave new world. Though I would not yet claim we have here produced a promised land, I can honestly say we have created enough of a land of promise to continue resolutely along this way. But I will now leave it to our English readers to decide for themselves whether, even if the end of history has not yet been reached, the beginning of the end has indeed commenced.

Unlike the private sector, where the dehumanizing forces of unrelenting competition, insatiable financial gain, endemic conflict, permanent job insecurity, and humiliating worker oppression – to the sole benefit of rapacious company bosses and shareholders – make life a veritable hell on earth, the public service is totally committed to creating, and permanently improving those conditions enabling workers to wile away their time in a climate of harmony, comradeship, equality, freedom, and mutual respect, from the day they join us to that on which they take their amply-merited repose. And what can be more vital to creating these conditions than the peace of mind provided by total job security for each? For though we are convinced that individual ownership can only be a source of inequality, division and exploitation, this is certainly not the case in the public service where employees may relax safe in the knowledge that all are in inalienable possession of their job for the duration of their career. Only in the most exceptional of circumstances, therefore, will dismissal be tolerated.

This does not mean, however, that the public service and its staff are committed to each other for life. The more adventurous spirits among us, understandably discontent with their pitiful salary (which we are constantly fighting to improve), are free to leave the public service at any time in

order to occupy a better-paid post, or even create their own company in the private sector. Since employment with us is guaranteed for life, employees will be comforted to know that this option involves absolutely no risk on their part. For when they become disillusioned (as they inevitably will) with the harsh injustices of the capitalist world outside, and decide to resume their career of peace and tranquility with us, they will be relieved to learn they may rejoin our ranks at the same salary level as the one they would have enjoyed had they remained. In addition, during their absence they may opt to continue contributing to our matchless public sector pension scheme which will enable them to take their well-earned retirement at an age, and with the financial means allowing them to take full advantage of their remaining years.

Nevertheless, though we pride ourselves on being an understanding and caring employer, steadfast in our defense of total job security, it must not be thought that the public service is unaware of the foibles of human nature. In this respect, staff members may be confident that the greatest compassion will always be shown towards the limitations and imperfections inevitably coming to light during their working career, and can relax in the knowledge that these will be treated with the utmost sympathy. However, in extreme cases, and as a final resort, it must be understood that, with their own welfare in mind, those who experience significant problems of adaptation, whatever form this may take, may be considered for transfer to other locations within the country. And what would be more unjust that the mental and material prejudice occasioned by these moves did not find adequate compensation in the form of appropriate removal allowances, salary increases or, in many cases, promotion?

Since each employee in the public sector enjoys total possession of his job for life what, then, is more normal that salaries should follow this same principle of strict equality for all? In contrast to the private sector where the constant struggle for profit encourages a climate of rivalry, humiliation,

division, insecurity, even hatred among brothers by rewarding personal ambition, misplaced individual prowess and effort, the systemization of which can only lead to inequity and discrimination, we in the public service, in pursuance of our policy of equality and justice for all, are firmly attached to the strictly objective criterion of seniority. State workers, therefore, may rest assured that salary increases are independent of those divisive, capitalistic notions of competence, initiative and effort, and follow a fixed, pre-defined scale applicable to all. How reassuring (and convenient) it is to know exactly what your salary level will be at any future given time! How bonding it is to note that your brother will be earning no more than you! How comforting it is to understand that you will never be subject to infernal cadences transforming you into little more than a mass-production machine! How heartening it is to realize your specific temperament and personal dignity will always be taken into account! And how pleasant it is to see you have an employer who fully understands you are not responsible for what you are, and that it would be unjust, therefore, to penalize those whose more easy-going disposition makes it more difficult to maintain the same work rate as their more fortunately-endowed comrades.

But, as all responsible people know, rights must always be accompanied by duties. Employees should, therefore, never lose sight of the fact that in the public service the work rate necessary to accomplish a task must, in certain circumstances, decrease to accommodate the surplus time allotted to it. With this in mind, staff members are expected to make the necessary effort to understand that it serves no purpose at all to risk ruffling the general ambiance of peace and serenity by humiliating and dividing colleagues through ostentatious displays of over-zealousness and individual prowess.

In the same spirit of equality for all, any exceptional salary increase negotiated by employees' union representatives for one specific category of staff will be applied proportionally to

all members of that same category. Thus, a 1% rise in the salary of primary schoolteachers will automatically generate the same percentage increase in the salary of, for example, school surface technicians.

FTT: A surface technician = a cleaning lady. No doubt in the same spirit of equality, and in a scrupulous desire to avoid anything remotely approaching what could possibly be conceived as humiliating discrimination, the French, like the English, have not escaped the politically-correct technique of using euphemistic terminology in order to conceal down-to-earth reality – in this case to imply a high degree of specialized competence to describe a modest occupation well within the grasp of a moderately endowed twelve-year-old.

Regrettably, at the time of writing, basic salaries paid in the public service are, on average, only 10% higher than those earned in the private sector by people with similar skills and seniority. Consequently, significant progress still remains to be made in this area. Persons interested in a career with us will, however, be pleased to learn that we have managed to get some way round present obstacles by negotiating a wide range of bonuses, benefits, tax reductions and allowances of all types - so wide, in fact, that nobody knows the exact number. Our detractors maintain that the total is around 1,300. Even though the figure is grossly exaggerated, we do prefer to remain discreet on this point as it could add weight to their argument that, all things considered, we are not all that badly remunerated – which could be prejudicial to our legitimate claims during future salary negotiations.

It is a measure of the confidence which our official employer, the French state, has placed in our sense of responsibility towards the nation that we have been given considerable latitude to make our own decisions, and in some cases these bonuses have been granted to us by ourselves.

Employees are thus assured of qualifying for more than one. In our railway division, for example, a train driver may expect to receive an end-of-year bonus, a holiday bonus, an annual operating bonus, and a mileage and displacement bonus counting among the most common. It is encouraging to note that a further allowance has recently been negotiated to compensate drivers for the driving bonus which their summer holidays prevent them from earning. Although these different bonuses and allowances increase salaries by 8%, this must not be considered as definitive as we always aim higher, and our policy is to strive, by permanent improvement, towards the ideal of more and more pay for less and less work. In view of their working week (25 hours), and the highly responsible nature of their job (in every way comparable to an airline pilot's), what is more normal that *TGV* drivers (**FTT: *TGV = Train à grande vitesse = High Speed Train***) should be entitled to a special bonus?

In our constant endeavour to serve the public good, and to point the way to a future workers' paradise for all, it is hardly surprising that we in the public service should be the victims of unfounded criticism, emanating from the reactionary bourgeois class, and based on their fearful realization that we are succeeding in our lofty task. Some even go so far as to make the scandalous claim that the first people we serve are, in fact, ourselves. It is, therefore, reassuring to know that public service employees are protected by law against all forms of libellous attack or insult, such as allegations of irresponsibility, dishonesty, personal appropriation of public service property, disobedience, negligence, incompetence, laziness, carelessness, lack of initiative or merit, unpunctuality, absenteeism, impoliteness or indifference towards the public they serve, and that scandalous attacks of this nature will be subject to legal action. It goes without saying that malicious accusations of this type will in no way constitute a threat to job security or promotion within the service. However, - and here I repeat -

it is essential that staff realize they labour as part of a team, and any attitude or behaviour deemed to be of an individualistic nature (in whatever form this may take), aimed at currying the favour of the departmental head, will be considered dangerous to group cohesion and, as such, discouraged.

It will also put minds at rest to know that, as representatives of the supreme authority incarnated in the French state, public service workers are legally considered to be pure and, in this capacity above all forms of mistake. As a result, they can in no way be held responsible for the correctness of any information they may be called upon to supply. I mean, how can you possibly be held liable for errors you can never make? It can, therefore, only be others who make them. In this respect, prospective employees will be reassured to learn that, once again, the full weight of the law is on the side of public service staff in making private enterprise, and the general public fully responsible, not only for the mistakes or defaults only they can make, but in bringing them to our notice, and being both answerable and punishable for them. Consequently, if a member of the general public, or an employee of the private sector should have the insolence to accuse a state worker of any failure or omission, he will be put firmly back in his place; and should he still insist, all measures will be taken to make him understand once and for all that, since all authority is on our side, the sooner he realizes that a state worker is never in the wrong and he is never in the right, the better it will be for all concerned.

FTT: At this point, my bulldog (who seemed to be emerging from his sulk, and for the last few minutes had been pricking my right ear up at what was being said) informed me that, since he had a bone to pick with the public service, he'd like to relate an anecdote regarding what has just been said above. Though my Frenchman

voiced his unqualified disapproval, my centrist had no hesitation in approving Thistlethwaite's request.

While filling out our annual tax declaration last year, I realized we needed a special form on which to declare a specific source of income. Now, I might have been forgiven for thinking that the solution lay simply in procuring one from the local Inland Revenue Office in Saint-Clou. So, along I took us. At reception, a rather severe-looking lady was absorbed in scrutiny of her computer screen. After a couple of sonorous coughs had finally induced her to transfer her attention from it to me, I politely stated the reason for my visit. Great was my astonishment on being casually informed that, since only one remained in her possession, it would be preferable if I applied to another Inland Revenue Office. Our English readers will certainly understand why, at this point, I began to get a bit shirty and informed her that, even if this solution might be better for her, it certainly didn't suit me. Her brow knitted into a deep frown. And my following enquiry as to whether she would be receiving replenishments in the near future produced a curt, 'Je ne sais pas, monsieur!' In exasperation, I finally suggested it was perhaps the responsibility of the Inland Revenue Office to supply the taxpayer with one.

'Ah non, monsieur,' she replied with a triumphant smirk, 'it's not our responsibility to supply you with one, it's the taxpayers' responsibility to obtain one!'

I then intimated (no doubt influenced by our moderator) that a mutually acceptable compromise might be found in her supplying me with a photocopy of the form - a suggestion which prompted her to express serious doubts regarding the legitimacy of the procedure. It was only after much cajoling that she reluctantly agreed. Before doing so, however, she went to considerable pains to make it perfectly clear she could

in no way be held liable for any future prejudice our 'private arrangement' might cause.

Bon, et maintenant est-ce que je pourrais continuer? Merci. Young people will be pleased to learn that the public service is an equal opportunity employer, and firmly opposed to discrimination in any form. Access to employment is through competitive examination and based on merit alone, regardless of race, religious conviction, political opinion, sex, sexual tendency, social condition or physical capacity. It should, however, be understood that those interested in joining our ranks must be of French nationality and, since we pride ourselves on our relaxed, family working atmosphere, preference will be given to those candidates whose relatives we already count among us.

Those contemplating a career with the public service need have no cause to worry about the possible extension of working hours caused by the introduction of the 35 hour week, which, though representing undeniable progress in the private sector, would have occasioned substantial regression in ours.

FTT: For the benefit of our English readers, Théodore has asked me to explain that in August, 2000, with the aim of creating more employment, the Socialist government reduced the official working week from 39 to 35 hours in both the public and private sectors. As a government minister remarked at the time: 'This measure is going to be difficult to apply in the public sector, and we must proceed progressively - 30 hours to begin with, then 31 and after 32 ...'

Although a minimum of two full hours of work per day is strongly recommended, the public service's policy in this respect is far from rigid, and is based primarily on respect of staff's sense of personal responsibility. In practice, what really

matters is the successful accomplishment of work at hand. Breaks may, therefore, be taken at employees' discretion for such relaxing pursuits as chatting with colleagues, perusing the newspaper, drinking coffee, playing computer games or doing a Sudoku, surfing on internet, or any other analogous activity vital to their well-being - the de-stressing nature of which will make them even more efficient in their dealings with the general public.

In order to allow them the necessary time to recover, both physically and mentally, from their arduous task, and with the constantly-present aim of serving the public even better, the public service has been allowed the liberty of granting itself special dispensations from the normal rules governing periods which may be taken off work. Accordingly, in addition to five weeks' annual paid holiday (not counting statutory public ones), employees may feel free to take advantage of the opportunities made available for them to enjoy a total of around 180 days of annual paid leave, allocated notably for the following reasons: jury duty, voluntary fire-training courses or participation in fire-fighting activities, military instruction, exercise of public electoral functions, maternity and paternity leave, arrival of adopted child, sickness of children, medical appointment, marriage, serious illness or decease of husband/wife/live-in partner/mother-in-law/children, pilgrimage to graves of soldiers killed on the battlefield, attendance at religious ceremonies, blood donations, beginning of school year, study for examinations, abolition of slavery (overseas territories only), removals resulting from job relocation, sporting activities, supervisory work at holiday centres, or training courses organized by the Ministry's social services, to name but a few. It must be understood, however, that leave of this type is subject to permission being granted by departmental heads. Nevertheless, in line with our policy of maximum staff emancipation and equality for all, the authority exercised by the latter exists more in theory than practice, and employees

may rest assured that requests motivated by any of the above-mentioned reasons will be treated with the greatest sympathy.

It is also at the heart of our preoccupations to provide conditions whereby optimal health - both physical and mental - may be obtained, and maintained in order to enable staff to continue accomplishing their duty as devoted servants of the public. With this in mind, an additional 30 days paid sick leave per year has been placed at their disposal. We strongly urge all staff members to avail themselves of this facility, especially in the event of temporary indisposition (chill, tummy upset, headache, stress, bad night's sleep, Monday morning feeling, etc.). And should they decide to grant themselves a day or two off every month or so for, 'private family reasons', nothing more will be asked. It goes without saying that this will in no way be detrimental to future career prospects with us.

Though we are working towards a system based solely on personal responsibility, where staff are free to come and go at hours they themselves deem fit, for the moment state workers are required to register their time of arrival and departure from work, both in the mornings and afternoons. Naturally, no disciplinary action will be taken against those who, having terminated their work, spend the rest of their day in pursuit of a hobby, sporting or practical activity (e.g. tennis, golf, skiing, mushrooming, shopping, gardening, home renovation, etc.). However, for administrative reasons, we do ask staff to clock in punctually each day and, should they have reason to absent themselves during working hours, to return to their work place to clock out at midday. Similarly, it would be appreciated if they again clocked in when work resumes in the afternoon, and then return to the office to clock out at the official departure time.

Public service utility vehicles are available gratuitously for personal use (i.e. removals or transportation of cumbersome objects), but we rely once more on the responsibility of all to ensure that this, as well as the private appropriation of public

service office material (i.e. paper, paperclips, pens, staplers, etc.) remains within reasonable proportions.

In unswerving pursuit of our noble aim to create a workers' paradise on earth, every effort is made to establish and preserve a co-operative and fraternal working environment, and to grant staff the greatest possible freedom of action. Though employees do have a duty to obey their hierarchical superior, no obligation is placed on them to accede to orders that are manifestly illegal, liable to disturb public order, or of a generally unreasonable nature. In addition, staff must always feel free to refuse to do work of a repetitive or humiliating nature, and a departmental head may be requested (politely) to do work of this nature himself. In this respect, employees need have no fear of disapprobation, recrimination or sanctions on the part of hierarchical superiors. If a departmental head should attempt any form of evaluation, staff may take the liberty of suggesting (politely) that he should first address his own personal and professional shortcomings through the remedial process of self-criticism.

As a reward for their tireless efforts in the sole interests of the public good, and as the worthy precursors of a better life for all, it is only fitting that public service employees should enjoy a number of fringe benefits. Those contemplating a career in our Railway Division will be transported with delight to learn that all employees are granted unlimited, totally free rail travel in France and most other European countries. One reservation which must be made, however, is that, for the moment at least, employees' wives or husbands, live-in partners and children benefit from a niggardly 18 free journeys per year. This is an injustice we take every opportunity to rail at. However, we are in permanent discussion with the management on these points, and are confident that in the very near future things will start moving along the right track. In the meantime, some small consolation may be found in the fact that, beyond this number, it is required that only a quarter of the fare be paid

(plus seat reservation). It is equally regrettable that employees' children should not be permitted to enjoy these advantages beyond their eighteenth year, from which age only their parents may continue to benefit from totally gratuitous rail travel.

In order to assist our Electricity Division workers in making ends meet, some 95% of their domestic electricity consumption is supplied free of charge - though it comes as a shock to learn that the reminder is at their expense. This, however, is something we are currently working on, and we are confident that a few lightning protest strikes will generate more and more support, and that eventually our state employer will begin to see the light.

It is also part of the public service's general social policy to place at staff's disposal the leisure and holiday facilities so vital in helping them recover from the mental and physical strains of their daily toil, and so essential to their personal equilibrium and welfare, as well as that of their family. To this effect, the Railway Division's Welfare Committee, with kind contributions from the taxpayer, has been able to acquire over past years a number of holiday centres, villages, houses, flats and camping sites in the Alps, Brittany, and on the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts, which employees and their families may avail themselves of in the very best conditions of comfort and price. By way of comparison, these facilities make it possible for a public service worker with a family of two children to spend a fortnight's holiday on the coast in summer, or the ski slopes in winter, with no comfort spared, at a total price some five times less than what it would cost a comparable family in the private sector. This difference could represent as much as two month's salary - a consideration which should go some way towards placating understandable exasperation at the inequitable level of basic pay in the public sector which, I repeat, is only a meagre 10% superior to that in the private one. I mean, why should it always be bourgeois pigs who lead the high life?

And what is more natural that the general public should be required to make a financial contribution to the Electricity Division Welfare Committee in the form of a 1% levy on each household electricity bill? After all, they are the first to benefit from our services and let's face it, £200,000,000 takes some finding. Fortunately, the capable management of this annual budget by our anti-capitalist, fraternally-united union enables us to spend an average of around £1,600 per year on the social well-being of each worker. I can only reply by the silence of contempt to those libellous accusations emanating from the reactionary forces of the nation which claim that a considerable proportion of this amount finds its way into the coffers of political parties and unions of extreme left-wing persuasion, as well as the pockets of their leaders.

It is the steadfast goal of the public service not only to transform the workplace into a haven of peace and tranquility, and encourage worker fulfillment in every aspect of his social life, but also to provide those who have reached the end of their careers with the means to enjoy the full fruits of their labour. What, then, is more understandable that workers should qualify for a pension allowing them to enjoy some of the things they have always dreamed of? I mean, why should it always be the same profiteering capitalists who get all the pleasure in life? Is it not perfectly legitimate that retirement should be at an age when the ordinary worker is able-bodied and minded enough to take full advantage? And what is more normal that those in the filthy rich private sector should be invited to contribute? Our capitalist detractors maintain it is scandalous that public service staff should enjoy a pension calculated on a more advantageous basis than that in the private sector, and that the taxpayer should play a major part in subsidizing it. But after all, isn't it only justice that we should be the first to reap some small reward for our pioneering efforts to create a world of equality for all?

In general, Railway Division workers qualify for a full retirement pension at the age of 55. However, train drivers who have reached the terminus of their working lives, prematurely aged by years of enforced overtime, unsociable hours and the obligation to sleep frequently away from home, are entitled to take their well-earned rest at an average age of 50. I will ignore those retrograde comments from jealous elements in the private sector who maintain that retirement at this age goes back to the days of the steam engine, when stoking and driving a train was a physically awesome task, and that it is no longer adapted to our age of diesel or electric-powered locomotion. You don't give away hard-earned benefits, now, do you? What they don't seem to realize is that mentalities have progressed since then. Après tout, you can't live in the past forever, can you? Moreover, as the amount of the retirement pension corresponds to 75% of the final salary earned, and in order to ensure the highest possible sum, we have hit on the brilliant idea of holding certain well-paid jobs vacant, and awarding promotion to employees during the last six months of their career. Those same jealous elements in private industry never stop moaning that in the public service we are more equal than others, since the rules for calculating their pensions are different, and result in a smaller amount for them. Eh bien, all I can say to that is why don't they take the lead and go on strike instead of always leaving it to us?

FTT: At this juncture, with Thistlethwaite's full approval, Théodore asked if he could include the following details of the methods by which pensions are calculated in the private sector compared to those in force in the Railway Division at the time of writing:

A private sector employee receives a certain number of points, based on the monthly sum he pays into the state pension scheme which depends on the salary he earns. To qualify for a full pension, he is obliged to have contributed over a period of forty years (soon to become

longer), and the pension he receives is based on the average salary earned over the final twenty-five years of employment. The railway workers' pension scheme differs in that a pension is calculated not only in terms of years of employment, but on the salary drawn at the moment of retirement. Each year of employment entitles a worker to a pension equal to 2% of the salary he will be earning at the end of his working career. Consequently, as thirty-seven and a half years' contributions qualify him for a pension equal to 75% of his last salary, the amount drawn may be far superior to that of a comparable worker in the private sector. And since railway workers' contributions to the pension scheme fall far short of the amount required, considerable financial assistance is afforded by the state (via the taxpayer) as well as private sector companies. Et maintenant encore à vous, François.

Merci. And when it comes to health insurance, the Railway Division can never be accused of not looking after its own. Staff members are provided with sound guarantees regarding illness or accident which, though far from perfect, may be considered to be moving along the right lines. Those with a minimum of 15 years valid service who, because of their physical (or mental) state are no longer fit for employment, immediately qualify for a disability pension. If the disability results directly from active employment with the railways, no conditions are required regarding length of service. Employees can also rest assured in the knowledge that if they have the misfortune to twist a knee while skiing, or feel a bit dizzy after spending the day roasting on the beach, they will be provided with the best medical treatment, entirely free of charge, other people's money can buy. Staff who are taken ill, or have a slight accident during non-holiday periods may, of course, consult their doctor during working hours, without loss of pay.

Those still interested in joining the public service will be reassured to learn that workers' interests are defended by our militant unions. Though substantial progress has been made, we are even more determined to continue the struggle against those reactionary forces of bourgeois capitalism whose immense fortunes, let us never forget, were made in an all-too-recent past by the pitiless oppression of their fellow human beings: child labour, endless working hours, few or no holidays, miserable pay, dangerous and unhealthy working conditions, and a total absence of medical and social protection, or retirement pensions. To this end, we have fought to acquire a significant say in all aspects of corporate organization: staff supervision, departmental administration, career development and promotion, staff recruitment and transfer, disciplinary action, etc. It goes without saying that employees may at all times count on their unions to defend them against scandalous management accusations of gross incompetence or professional misconduct, and to protect them from scandalous government proposals, systematically designed to destroy both the advantages we have fought to obtain, and the fraternal adhesion that exists within our ranks. Suffice it to say that the parity of decision we share with management enables us to obstruct any measure on their part detrimental to staff interests, or generally tending to show that we are not infinitely more qualified than them to run the operation.

It is also interesting to note that our unions do all in their power to encourage those employees tempted by a more politically-oriented career to help their brothers-in-arms in their noble aim to light the fire of revolution, and build a workers' paradise from the ashes of an unjust *régime*. In our Education Division, for example, teachers may be co-opted by their union – that is to say they can cease all teaching activity in order to devote themselves to union activities on a full-time basis. These brothers will, of course, still have the same state employer who will continue paying them the same

salary, and granting them the same benefits and increments they would have enjoyed had they pursued their original teaching careers. I mean, how else could they find time to organize union actions in defense of the interests of the pupils and students they so selflessly serve? I will once more reply by the silence of scorn to those cynics who maintain that the only interests they defend are their own. Union representatives may even be allocated an office, with a secretary, on the premises of the employer and, of course, at the latter's entire expense. And let me assure those who take this option that they are legally protected from any type of dismissal or retribution on the part of their employer. Officially, some 20, 000 of our comrades are engaged in work of this kind, but it is reassuring to note that the real figure is certainly higher.

Those who criticize our *syndicats* for systematically withdrawing their labour three or four times a year fail to understand that this is the only means of giving the government and its capitalist lackeys a salutary warning of the chaos which would result, should they threaten the quality of that selfless service we extend to the public by attacking those richly-deserved benefits we have fought so stubbornly to obtain, or by refusing our all-too-justified claims for improved working conditions and pay. But, as they well know, we are a structured counter-power with the organization and weapons to bring governments down. And it must never be forgotten that we control the country's key facilities (postal services, education, inland revenue, railways, the underground, public bus transport, ports, civil air traffic control, petrol refineries), and are determined to obtain satisfaction by means of go-slows, strikes, protest marches, sit-ins, factory blockades, and other more strong-armed tactics, when deemed necessary, to further our cause. In addition, we have in our midst those who, in order to build an egalitarian paradise on earth, are ready to wage all-out guerilla war. But we know that politicians have all too many

human flaws and, after a mere token resistance, they will eventually capitulate; for contrary to their claims, what interests them, above all, is their own advancement, and nationally-paralyzing actions which risk undermining their popularity may compromise their political future, and cannot, therefore, be allowed to last. Even though our actions involve considerable cost to the nation as a whole, we never lose out! For when the government finally gives in to our demands, as it always does, we carry on the strike. I mean, they started it in the first place so why should we be out of pocket? So we only go back when they've agreed to compensate us in full for the days we didn't work.

Though it would not be quite true to say that our social movements (**FTT: i.e. strikes**) do not cause a certain amount of inconvenience, frustration and loss of earnings to the general public, such is the support for our cause that those who have been waiting for hours on a station platform, or are informed that only one in five trains are running, rarely show any aggressive reaction, and await the inevitable government capitulation with the same heroic stoicism as that shown by your Cockneys during the *Blitz* of the last World War. We are, nevertheless, acutely aware that this type of disruptive union action must never exceed those boundaries where public support changes into hostility. In this respect, therefore, whenever possible, we organize actions designed to boost our public image. A short while ago, for example, our Electricity Division decided to implement a series of power cuts in protest against a government plan to privatize our industry, which could only have reduced, in the name of base profit, the quality of the service we so devotedly extend to the general public. Fully conscious of the general inconvenience this would cause, however, we came up with the noble idea of organizing a national 'Robin Hood' campaign: this consisted in reconnecting those poor, oppressed households, victims of our rapacious, profit-oriented society, whose electricity supply had been previously cut off as a result of unpaid bills.

FTT: I will leave it to my readers to guess from what quarter now came an indignant voice (accompanied by an agonizing stitch) which rang in my right ear, declaring, 'That's just typical of you lot! You're so good at spending other people's money and trying to get them to do what you don't do yourselves!' I will also let readers imagine what fury this aroused on my French side, and by what feats of diplomatic prowess my ombudsman managed, after so many pages of almost unchallenged Gallic control, to establish enough harmony to place the guidance of this chapter back into the hands of my own integrated self.

No sooner had I got the above onto my computer screen, however, than the same English-sounding voice reminded me that, though his French alter was an advocate of proletarian dictatorship outside my body, he was part of a democratic government within. Consequently, not only must he accept the permanent presence of an opposition member, but the latter's inalienable right to express his own more liberally-orientated views. For if he didn't, he might just be tempted to use the same blocking tactics which had temporarily paralyzed the right side of my skull at the beginning of this chapter in order to compromise its end.

It was my arbitrator who then intervened to point out that, in view of the tension he felt now building up - which could lead he knew not where - perhaps we might settle for a reasonable compromise by placing the termination of this chapter in the hands of someone independent of the three? The person he had in mind was, in fact, Monsieur Martin's younger son, Jacques. Now, since his elder brother, Pierre, is destined to take over the reins of the family business, Jacques has set a course for the safer haven of the public service Tax Division. Having passed his *concours* (competitive

entrance exam) with flying colours, he has just started a probationary year, at the end of which he will, hopefully, be nominated to a permanent post. As a conclusion, might we not, then, include the letter Jacques recently wrote to his parents and brother? He was sure Monsieur Martin would agree. Though my Frenchman voiced his strong disapproval, Thistlethwaite voted unhesitatingly for.

25 August, 20..

Dear Papa, Maman and Pierre,

Sorry it's been such a long time since I last wrote but I haven't had a minute to myself since I started work here. I'm glad to say things have settled down now. I've got a couple of hours to kill before lunch, so I thought I'd get down to writing you a nice long letter to let you know what I've been up to.

Most of my time has been taken up flat hunting. The bedsit I had was a bit cramped so I decided to look for something bigger. I took a break from work each morning to go and buy a local newspaper. Then, over a cup of coffee (there's a nice café with a big terrace just opposite the tax office where we all go when it's nice), I drew a circle round the flat-to-let ads which seemed promising and went to view in the afternoon. I originally intended to do this on Saturday but my colleagues told me it would be more convenient to do it during the week. Things would be much quieter as everybody was at work. I wanted to ask my boss if this would be all right, but they said it really wasn't necessary as long as I didn't broadcast it. I don't remember papa's workers being able to do this sort of thing.

I've finally managed to find a nice studio flat. It's much more modern and spacious, the rent isn't too high and it's only five minutes walk from work – so if I get up at nine I

can be here for half past. I'm moving in tomorrow. Once again, I thought about doing this on Saturday, but my colleagues told me we're officially allowed time off for this sort of thing with no loss of pay. And you know what? I don't even need to rent a van for the removal as I can borrow the office one free of charge. Maman, you'll be pleased to know I'm eating well, and not staying up too late (except on Saturday evenings). I'll be holding a flat-warming party once I get settled in. Thanks very much for the pullover you knitted for my birthday. I really like the colour and it certainly looks snug and warm. I don't think I'll be wearing it in the office this winter, though. Jean-Pierre (he's a colleague just a bit older than me) told me the men like working in their shirt sleeves, so the heating's always turned up to the maximum. It's a bit odd, but even though we're still in summer, for some reason or other it's on full blast, and all the windows have got to be left wide open - otherwise it'd be too sweltering to work.

My job is going fine and I'm getting more used to things now. I'm writing this e-mail on one of our office computers. It's a bit on the slow side and has certainly seen better days. Claude said I could use his while he slipped out to buy a card and some flowers for his wife (it's her birthday tomorrow). Claude's job is to check taxpayers' declaration forms to make sure there's no cheating going on. He's not a bad sort of chap, really. He's also our union representative. Claude says he and the union don't really agree with all this modernization. It means fewer jobs for comrades. He tells me that if we hadn't had all these computers we'd have been able to employ at least a dozen people more.

Working here is very different from your company, papa. Things are much more free and easy, and nobody ever seems to be in a hurry. Apparently, fifteen people work here but up to now I've only met eight. Mind you, it's just as well really as there only seems to be work for four or five. When I first started work on Monday morning more than a fortnight ago

now, Monsieur Lebrun (he's our boss) called me into his office for a word or two. Monsieur Lebrun is a friendly sort of chap, once you get to know him. He must be about 55. Unfortunately, he retires next year. He told me he's really looking forward to getting out of it. I didn't really understand what he meant, but I didn't think it would be right to ask him. Apparently, he'll draw a good pension so he'll be able to do a lot of travelling. He even told me that, since he's a qualified accountant, he'll do a bit of undeclared work on the side.

Monsieur Lebrun informed me I have six weeks annual leave plus bank holidays. He then gave me a wink and said I could add on at least another six (weeks not days), as you can always take time off for some reason or other without your salary being docked. Yesterday, Jean-Pierre announced he hadn't taken any of the 30 days annual paid sick leave he's entitled to yet.

In addition, Monsieur Lebrun gave me one or two tips. He explained that between him and me, if I wanted to get on in the Tax Division it was better to keep a low profile. 'Above all,' he said, 'don't try to be a smart Alec and disturb the peace and quiet!' I asked him what he meant by this, and he replied that I should never try to make a name for myself by working hard or taking initiatives, and even less to criticize others. He then went on to add that this didn't mean I shouldn't work, but it was important to work normally - or rather to make people think I was working normally. So, even though I would never be too hard pushed, it was important not to give the impression I wasn't working. And if ever I did get a bit bored twiddling my thumbs, and decided to read *Paris Match* or whatever to pass on the time, which he quite understood, it would be better to be discreet and hide it, for example, inside a file. Whenever I went out of the office, I should always try to look busy and carry some documents under my arm. Papa will know what I mean.

Since this is my probationary year, he told me it's vital to give a good general impression as this will follow me

throughout my working career – regardless of whether I’m good at my job or work hard. Then, once I get through this year, my job will be safe and salary increases automatic for the rest of my career - so I can relax and do more or less what I want (within reason, of course), without being bothered too much by anybody. It’s a bit confusing really but he told me I’d soon get into the hang of things.

We have a flexi-time system in operation here. This means we can start work any time between eight and half past nine, and leave between four and half past five. Officially, we do a seven hour day, but Monsieur Lebrun told me he’s not a stickler about this, and that a maximum of three hours was a good average. What really matters is that the work gets done. He even told me that, since we only have to clock in or out when we arrive or leave work in the morning or afternoon, nothing stops me from slipping out during working hours if I haven’t got much on. The thing is not to make it too obvious. But he did say it’s important to come back to the office and clock out at the official time rather than go directly home. I don’t think your workers can do this, can they, papa?

He also told me that in winter when it’s not fit to go out and there’s not too much work on, Odile (she’s the longest-serving employee) gives knitting lessons in the main office for anyone who’s interested. I really laughed at that one, but he assured me it was true. Apparently, they’re very popular – even with the men! Odile works at reception. She’s got a good heart, even though she does go on a bit sometimes. This morning, for example, she’s been on about a woman who came in wanting some information on tax relief. Odile told her to wait a minute while she finished her game of patience on the computer, and apparently the woman got a bit shirty. ‘Can you imagine the cheek?’ moaned Odile. ‘I mean who does she think we are? Our job is to collect taxes, not to explain how to pay less!’

Monsieur Lebrun also said he was supposed to give me a mark at the end of my year, but he told me not to worry as he

systematically gave 19 out of 20 to all his staff, including those doing a probationary year. Apparently, when he was first promoted Chief Tax Inspector he once gave a staff member a bad mark. This created a rumpus with the unions, and caused him more problems than the employee. Since then, he'd learned his lesson, and in any case Regional Office, who don't know anybody here, always have the final word.

While we were chatting, I couldn't help noticing hundreds of letters and envelopes piled up everywhere in his office – on the floor, on chairs and even on his desk. He saw me looking, and told me they had to be sent out by the end of the week. He also added that if I didn't mind a little job, I could give him a hand folding and slipping them into the envelopes, sticking on address labels and putting them through the franking machine. When he first came, he'd once asked his staff to help him, but they'd told him they weren't paid to do that kind of menial work, and if it was all that important he could do it himself. So now, usually it's his wife (she's a retired schoolteacher) who helps him to do this on a Saturday or Sunday morning. Someone had even been rude enough to tell him to go and get stuffed! Can you imagine it? I don't remember your workers being like this, papa. I asked him who the boss was, then, and he said it certainly wasn't him. He personally didn't hire staff, he couldn't give them a proper mark, and he certainly couldn't sack them - so what weight did he have? The only authority he had, he told me with a smile, was that conferred by his great age!

So, as you can understand, I haven't really been overworked up to now. Last Monday afternoon Odile (she's going to teach us to sew this winter) gave me some filing to do. She said it would take me three or four days, but I'd finished by 10 o'clock the next day. I thought she'd be pleased but, in fact, she was a bit cross. She told me if I carried on like this they'd have nothing left to give me. Is it the same in your firm, papa? Anyway, she said that since there was only an hour and a half to go before lunch, it wasn't

worth starting another job and suggested I go and do a couple of Sudokus. She also gave me one or two tips on how to fill in time. For example, we have two coffee machines, and you can always help a few minutes pass on by going to the one farthest away from the office you're working in. And if you happen to meet a colleague or two at the coffee machine, or on the way (which you always do), there were so many things to chat about: yesterday evening's T.V. programmes, sport, current affairs, what we'd done last weekend, what we were going to do next weekend, etc., etc. And the same goes for when you arrive at work in the morning and afternoon. It all goes to make a nice, friendly working atmosphere!

I must be going now. By the way, we've got a couple of weeks' holiday at Christmas. I'll be spending a day or two at home with you, of course, and then for the New Year I've arranged to go skiing in the Alps with Jean-Pierre. He told me we've got a really nice holiday centre in one resort with full board at amazingly low rates. Skis and even skiing lessons are provided free, and we get a good reduction on the lifts. Hope you're all keeping well and that papa is taking things a bit easier. You know life isn't meant for working all hours.

Your loving son,

Jacques

Chapter Five

The Puritan Factor

It is said that in some countries trees will grow but will bear no fruit because there is no winter there.

John Bunyan

My inner left ear often hears the souls of Calvin, Wesley, Luther and Cromwell laughing their heads off on high (where they were pre-destined to be) at having managed for so many years to terrorize an entire nation into believing that life was far too serious a business to indulge in the sinful vanities of ostentatious display and frivolous pleasure, and that any deviation from the straight and narrow path of strict sobriety was tantamount to signing your own warrant to be skewered and barbecued in the fires of hell. But what my Frenchman finds particularly deplorable in you English is that a country whose literary heritage includes writers unashamedly vaunting the subtle plays, indeed sensual pleasures of heterosexual love should have allowed itself to be influenced by a mixed bunch of self-righteous prudes - to such a point as to generate a reign which undertook a ubiquitous, in-depth, long-term operation to convince our planet it would be a far more decent place to live on if a way were found to perpetuate the species without the slightest contact between its male and female inhabitants. For what other judgement can we have on a century where matters of the flesh were viewed as so shockingly improper that chairs, tables and pianos were guilty of indecent exposure if their legs were not hidden beneath long woollen socks? Even the most innocent display of heterosexual affection was considered shamefully offensive. As a child, I remember Grandad Thistlethwaite telling the story about Grandma and himself: one spring afternoon,

shortly after becoming officially engaged, they were strolling arm-in-arm in the local park, when Grandma's father came striding resolutely towards them. 'What's up wi' thee, lass? Is tha lame?' was his dour comment on beholding such unbridled debauchery.

FTT: The Thistlethwaite in me is of Yorkshire extraction. For the benefit of readers unaccustomed to the esoteric vernacular of this northern part of England, the Queen's English rendition would be: 'What's the matter with you, my girl? Have you hurt your leg?'

So profound and far-reaching was this rigid sexual morality that, even in my own childhood, the most innocent reference to the natural consequences of the procreative act was still considered shamefully taboo. As a young boy, I used to spend a week of the summer holidays with Grandma and Grandad Thistlethwaite who lived in a small mining village in the heart of what was then the West Riding of Yorkshire. Perhaps it was the little French boy within who, one Sunday lunch over roast beef and Yorkshire Pud, prompted me to remark casually, with only the vaguest notion of what it meant, that their next-door neighbour, Mrs Shufflebottom, was *pregnant*. Now, as Mr and Mrs Shufflebottom had been united in holy wedlock for well over a year, and nothing went to indicate the inseminator was anyone but the former, Mrs Shufflebottom's condition was above all moral reproach. But, while any French parent would have seized on this heaven-sent opportunity to give a first lesson on the birds and the bees, something in Grandma Thistlethwaite made the word unmentionably indecent, especially in the mouth of a seven-year-old, and I was told with grim firmness never ever to be heard using *that* word again.

However, as my Frenchman often observes, what else can we expect from drinkers of tea with milk that this stiff moral brew should have been served up with a good dash of

hypocrisy? Grandma Thistlethwaite's condemnation of all things conceivably sexual never put into question her own systematic, protracted and, as I later more than suspected, delectating post-prandial perusal of the pages of a Sunday newspaper, popularly referred to as the 'News of the Screws', the main articles of which involved the repetitive narration of illicit encounters of the flesh, going at that time (to my utter mystification) under the term *intimacy*, and usually spiced with vaguely-perverse little details: 'They had their four o'clock Sunday tea, and intimacy then took place on the lambs' wool hearth rug in front of a roaring fire,' or: 'She was in the habit of sucking a piece of Cinder toffee while they were being intimate.'

Not only did Grandma Thistlethwaite's notion of seemliness attempt to erect an impregnable bastion protecting her secret delectation of the carnal from public scrutiny, but surrounded it by a deep moat whose sombre waters provided an additional line of defence against any attempt to violate her private affective territory. The result was a general emotional atrophy, characterized by a profound reluctance to express inner feeling of any kind, whether pleasant or not. In her mind you never even talked, let alone complained about your ailments. You had to 'grin and bear it,' and the only time she really gave vent to her grumbles was when others had the indecency to mention theirs – which automatically prompted an 'If she had to put up with what I have to, she'd really have something to moan about!'

What exactly Grandma Thistlethwaite had to put up with always remained a mystery to everybody. It was certainly not Grandad Thistlethwaite, a peace-loving, generous-hearted, mild-mannered sort of man who seemed to go out of his way never to give her the slightest cause for trouble, and outbursts of this kind usually met with bemused resignation on his part. Perhaps in the *oubliettes* of her self-erected citadel there languished a woman of deep passion, and outraged eruptions of this type were prompted by a subconscious sense of

injustice which maintained that, if she made such inhuman efforts to conform to the rigid dictates of Puritan suppression, it was only right that others should try to do the same.

And what is more normal in a country which counts twice as many religious denominations as cheeses that Grandma Thistlethwaite's efforts to present an appearance of moral seemliness should have been reinforced by membership of a fundamentalist Evangelical sect whose austere creed demanded extreme plainness of worship (no statues, no musical accompaniment to song, no graven images, no official minister), along with a literal interpretation of the Old Testament, and the strictest sobriety of person. For the brethren, - the 'respectable' folk of the village, consisting mainly of the mine's managers and deputies (not surprisingly since non-membership of the flock was a neigh-on insurmountable impediment to promotion) - the only road to Salvation involved implacable observance of the Lord's Day in particular, and rigorous abstention from all forms of entertainment in general.

As a result, normal distractions such as card-playing, dancing, going to the cinema, playing (even watching) a sport, gambling of all kinds and, above all, imbibing alcohol (at a very early age children were obliged to sign a formal pledge never to touch one single drop of tippie for the rest of their days), were considered so many enticements proffered by Satan, indulgence in which was, in addition, associated with the most unacceptable forms of Popery. For on that straight and narrow path of righteousness, Roman Catholics, in their moral levity and unbecoming ostentation, were so much foreign matter to be swept pitilessly aside.

At least one of these righteous servants of the Almighty seemed to have had difficulty in comprehending that the real hard work began once you came home from Chapel. Grandma Thistlethwaite's nephew, Jacob (a temptation the brethren could not resist was to inflict their progeny with

Biblical names), used to tell the story about his father, Israel, a particularly committed member of the sect. As no ordained ministers were allowed, it was chosen members of the congregation who took turns to rise up and preach.

One Sunday morning, Jacob's father delivered himself of an impassioned sermon on the theme 'Love thy Neighbour as Thyself'. His personal endorsement of Christ the Redeemer's exhortations to universal affection among men proved itself rather restrictive in scope, however, when put to the test of real life. Jacob, aged around 18 at the time, had recently discovered the innocent bliss of first love with a girl of Irish immigrant stock. Knowing nothing about the young lady, and perhaps with an eye to assessing her eligibility for both the sect and his son, Israel suggested he invited her over for four o'clock tea and cakes the following Saturday. The day duly arrived and, while buttering their scones, Jacob's father, with feigned innocence, asked the girl what her religious persuasion was. On her replying that she was a Roman Catholic, a high velocity bullet, Jacob relates, could not have matched the speed with which he shot up from his chair and, pointing an imperious finger in the direction of the back door, summoned this daughter of Beelzebub to 'get out of his house right away!' It goes without saying that this enforced departure not only marked a traumatic end to Jacob's sweet idyll, but poisoned all future relations with both father and his creed.

What is less surprising, then, that these daunting censors of even the most harmless manifestations of heterosexual attraction should have profoundly modelled your English character, and that, like fish and chips, sexual scandal should have become a staple part of your national diet, served up in generous daily helpings by your numerous tabloids?

FTT: Even though it would appear to be my Frenchman who has taken control of the present chapter, this is not to say that Thistlethwaite was not asked to lend me his

thoughts. In reply, a disdainful-sounding voice declared that he preferred to leave such shameful encounters of the flesh to those who were internationally-reputed specialists in them. Nevertheless, he added, his dissociation should in no way be interpreted as a sign that he had resigned himself to his French brother taking full possession of my thoughts. On the contrary, he had chosen to take advantage of this opportunity to retire within myself to have a good think about the contributions he personally would be making to the following chapter of this work.

Nevertheless, let me state here and now that I in no way wish to lead English readers to believe my compatriots are not partial to a nice tit bit now and then. After all, unlike you English, we French are only human. However, it is my opinion that the difference between you and us in the appreciation of a tasty morsel is that, while we find our pleasure simply in the piquant sauciness of the dish, your English enjoyment is more perverse: your titillating relish of matters of the flesh also feeds on an indissoluble moral (and inevitably hypocritical) condemnation of the same. No better illustration of this was provided some time ago by the alleged extra-conjugal frolics of a well-known English sportsman.

One of your tabloids gleefully disclosed to an avid public the exclusive news that the personal publicity agent (the article included a head and shoulder photo of an attractive, demur-looking brunette) of a soccer star had revealed that her employer, recently transferred to a foreign club, in the absence of country and spouse (she had remained in Blighty), had sought and obtained consolation in her arms. In the following day's edition our footballer (he had hitherto enjoyed a shining public image of model husband and doting father) attempted a brave shot at denying everything *en bloc*. After crunchingly tackling him on this, the attractive, demur-looking young lady counter-attacked by trying to pass herself

off as the victim of foul play. At the end of their encounter, she claimed, our soccer star had more than intimated that his official partner just wasn't in the same league, and that the quality of play had been such (apparently even extra time couldn't separate them, and the match was finally brought to a climax in an exciting shoot-out) that he was prepared to consider the contest as more than just a friendly. In the meantime, his denial of any form of contact other than that imposed by strictly professional requirements now caused her to feel cheapened and betrayed. As a result, she was left with no alternative but to come forward and defend her reputation by revealing the whole and nothing but the truth to the great British public who, she was sure, would not hesitate to give our soccer player a red card.

The attractive, demur-looking brunette's credibility was placed in some doubt the following morning, however, when it was revealed she had accepted the tabloid's generous invitation to present an exclusive, fully-detailed, after-match report on the soccer star's on-the-ball performance during the encounter – to appear in the next day's edition. But the young lady's plausibility took a real knock when the following day's edition published a prominent photo of herself, still looking as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth (together with a much smaller one showing a glum-looking soccer star), crouching semi-naked, dog-like on all fours, with a notice dangling from a collar round her neck, proclaiming to all in bold, capital letters that she was **HOT STUFF**. And in true bulldog spirit, the opposite page bore a lengthy, pontificating editorial lambasting the doubtful morality of both!

Being the Frenchy I am, I would once again stress that this affair (and certainly the photo) would not have been without interest for my compatriots. I mean, would a man be a real man if he found this juxtaposing of sexual provocation and virginal innocence (albeit feigned) totally without *saveur*? But, I can assure you there would not have been the same pseudo-moral reprobation barely concealing the perfect

hypocrisy of most of the actors, if not all. A realistically-indulgent view would have been taken. After all, a soccer star is not a Benedictine monk, and at the end of the day what is more understandable that a healthy, good-looking, rich, famous, normally-constituted young man in the prime of life should succumb to a momentary weakness of the flesh, and seek satisfaction where it lay? And what is more normal that a healthy, attractive, impecunious, unknown, ambitious, normally-constituted young lady in the prime of life should consider it both an honour and a pleasure to oblige?

And, as we all know, the younger the meat, the more appetizingly tender it is. The same tabloid certainly had this in mind when it served up another sensational front-page story a few weeks later, this time about a 12-year-old-girl who had been inseminated by the next-door neighbour's son, aged ... 11! While providing some statistics and professing great concern at the spectacular increase in child pregnancy in Britain, the brief article was eclipsed by a prominent photo of the 12 year-old, looking extremely proud of herself, and flanked by a grinning Mum and Dad on the front lawn of their semi. Thankfully, the boy's parents, we were laconically informed, had declined what was certainly the same financially-tempting invitation to pose by their side.

In matters of the flesh, then, we French tend to take a broad-minded view, and think nothing of allowing the really specialized gourmet to indulge his appetite for much spicier fare. In France, what you English term 'the sexually explicit,' provided it takes place between consenting adults, is discreetly but openly on sale in all the newsagent's of the land to those above the age of 18. Is it yet another manifestation of your censorious Puritan syndrome that this is considered far too hot to be put on general sale? And is it yet another indication of the hypocrisy inevitably going with it that what you prohibit for the enjoyment of a few, you permit - provided it is served up in slightly diluted form and, above all,

with a strong dash of moral righteousness - for the delectation of all?

Vous savez, from a certain point of view, I can't stop myself from grudgingly admiring Calvin, Wesley and crew for having accomplished the awesome feat of turning for so long what could have been a perfectly enjoyable day into such a interminable, daunting ritual for so many. While on Sundays we French have always been free to do a spot of shopping, go to the cinema, watch a football or rugby match, trip the light Fandango, or simply put our feet up and relax, for you English the only alternative to killing time behind a newspaper (or at most, when your weather allows it, cleaning the car) was to be frightened out of your lives by grim morning, afternoon and evening sermons on the wrath of God, and the inherent sinfulness of man.

Even today my heart sinks when I look back at those childhood English Sundays, so chillingly mournful that even Thistlethwaite snuggled up to me for warmth: the icy church mustiness, the bum-numbing pews, and the excruciating boredom of interminable, canting sermons on subjects I barely understood. And so great was my loathing that I hit upon the ploy (even then I was the smarter of the two) of stretching myself out on the sofa after Sunday lunch, and getting us to pretend to fall asleep - not really because I seriously believed papa would be fooled by this, but somewhere I hoped that the sight of a little boy reduced to this sort of subterfuge might prompt a modicum of pity in him. But these attempts to bring to papa's notice that a forced diet of morning Church and afternoon Sunday school were more than a little boy could stomach always ended in miserable failure. For his irony-tinged voice would always sound at the appointed hour, 'Wake up, François! We don't want to be late now, do we?'

Sunday evenings did, nevertheless, provide a slight variation. At that time papa was employed as a commercial traveller for a wholesale grocery firm, one of whose directors,

a Mr Digbert, was an itinerant Methodist lay preacher. Since Mr Digbert didn't drive, papa, who had a company car, used to chauffeur him to the different chapels where he was engaged to preach. In return, Mr Digbert bestowed on the family tins of chicken soup and salmon – inaccessible luxuries for most during those immediate post-war years of rationing when families were limited to a packet of margarine and half a dozen eggs per week. Mr Digbert sat in the front, of course, with papa, while maman and I sat behind with Mrs May - an attractive, dark-haired woman, I remember, whose official assignment was that of Mr Digbert's housekeeper (though the cynicism of later years led me to believe that she probably spent more time sharing his bed than making it.) I clearly recollect papa arriving home from work one evening and announcing, thunderstruck, that Mr Digbert had mysteriously vacated his office. Rumour had it he had been dismissed for purloining company goods. Whether the allegations were true or not, I never knew, for not only did our Sunday evening revivalist outings come to an immediate end, but the names of Mr Digbert and Mrs May were irrevocably consigned to shameful oblivion.

It was around the age of nine that the deliverance I had so fervently prayed for finally came when papa acquired a car of our own. Without further ado, the Lord was sent to the devil and, like the changing of water into wine, a hated day of ineffable boredom was miraculously transformed into a heady, sun-drenched treat of country jaunts and seaside frolics.

I might be forgiven for suspecting that the religious brew forced down papa's throat throughout his own childhood and early youth was far more potent than the one my alters and I were obliged to imbibe. For its effects were never completely eliminated, being frequently brought to our notice, usually early on weekend or holiday mornings, in the form of sonorous, painfully out-of-tune renditions of hymns such as *All Creatures of Our God and King, Praise My Soul the King of*

Heaven, Onward Christian Soldiers, All People that on Earth do Dwell, to name but a few. Despite the awesome proportions of papa's repertoire, his particular favourite seemed to be *Love Divine All Loves Excelling*. However, the monotonously-repetitious singing of the praises of Godly supra-love never enabled him to surmount his own aversion to men with long hair, ear rings, tattoos and, above all, beards (discreetly-sized moustaches were grudgingly tolerated); and to the end of his days he never ceased to castigate this form of facial growth, displays of which were, no doubt, perceived by the Puritan within as an outward sign of personal vanity in that they were rooted in an excessive concern for the effect produced on others. And the results of a rigidly-imposed childhood observance of the Sabbath as a no-work, no-play holy day, devoted exclusively to worship of the Almighty, also resurfaced whenever he caught sight of a line of washing hanging out on a Sunday morning. On occasions like this, his fury could only be compared to that of a bull close to whose nose a bright red rag was being waved.

My French readers might, nevertheless, be inclined to think that Puritan-inspired Sabbatarianism in Britain is now a thing of the past. Broadly speaking, this is certainly the case. A recent newspaper article, however, would seem to indicate that, in certain backwaters at least, feelings on the matter can still run deep. A short while ago the remote Scottish islands of Lewis and Harris almost foundered in a storm which blew up over a decision to launch a Sunday ferry service from the mainland. Unfortunately, the very first ferry happened to break down - an incident which was immediately seized upon by some as a manifestation of divine displeasure. Those who consider religion as little more than an elaborate superstition can only have their views confirmed when they learn that the Reverend Minister of the islands himself described the mishap as a reminder of 'God's Providence,' while one inhabitant had enough faith in the power of divine intervention to declare: 'Anyone who works on a Sunday is

making a mockery of God and His laws, but God says He will not be mocked. He has the power to sink a Sunday ferry.' The skipper, passengers and crew had better make sure they don't walk under any ladders over the next few months.

Would I be wrong in thinking that papa's puritanical condemnation of what he viewed as an excessively self-regarding concern for personal appearance was just one indication of your general English distrust, still in evidence today, of all that can be interpreted as showy outward form? While we French are firmly convinced that making an effort to present a harmonious exterior is a good general indication that everything is in well-oiled working order within, I can't help feeling that for you English a polished appearance has very much the same effect as a red light on a car dashboard. But, on reflection, what is more normal that a nation which was preached to so often, and for so long, that a modicum of pride or application in your appearance, qualities, gifts and achievements was a deadly sin, should have developed a deep suspicion towards anything in a person which remotely smacks of personalized, sophisticated or ostentatious display, and has made you raise ordinariness and self-effacement to the status of a national virtue? For you are certainly the only people on our planet to have made a quality of all that is plain: plain manners, plain common sense, plain dress, plain food, plain women and plain English.

On the last-mentioned subject of language, for example, we French generally agree that oral communication is facilitated when speakers express themselves using accurately-chosen, correctly-pronounced, well-articulated words, uttered in enough of a standardized accent as not to leave those having the misfortune to originate from other areas in considerable doubt as to what they are attempting to say. On the contrary, you English are more likely to brand someone able to align intelligibly, without hesitation and in anything other than a heavily-accented mumble, half a dozen words - one or two of which may not necessarily be part of a soap-

opera character's normal mono-syllabic vocabulary - as a 'smoothy'.

FTT: 'Smoothy' - a derogatory word used by the English to describe a man whose impeccable presentation in manners, dress and speech are more than suspected of concealing a far less respectable person beneath.

Just one instance of your English mistrust of those showy enough to try impressing people with words exceeding two syllables in length was provided during our last trip to England. As maman's birthday was approaching, Thistlethwaite, Théodore and myself got our head together, and after lengthy, animated debate, voted to buy her a nice new purse. So, off we went to a shop specializing in quality-leather goods. There, the lady assistant (something in her demeanour suggested she was the owner) was extremely patient and helpful, producing several purses of different colours and shades for our inspection. A dark-tan one caught our eye. At first we were in three minds about it, but I finally convinced our Englishman (he's got very little taste, you know), and philosopher (most of the time his head was in the clouds) that this was the nicest colour – a choice which the sales lady immediately endorsed by the comment 'Yes, I think dark tan is the most appropriate colour for leather!' Her visible embarrassment at having involuntarily let slip such a superior-sounding, polysyllabic word as 'appropriate' could not have been greater had it been a salacious four-letter one; for apologetic self-correction instantly followed in the form of a more modestly-chosen 'Yes, well, I mean ... err, I think that's the nicest shade for leather!'

And is it this same Puritan legacy which has gone towards making you a nation of down-to-earth pragmatists, wary of anything which could be remotely considered as ostentatiously intellectual or convolutedly theoretical? In France we tend to hold in some esteem a person displaying a

modicum of grey matter and a capacity for abstract, logical, even philosophically-oriented reasoning. You English are more likely than not to label him a pretentious show-off, a 'clever Dick,' a 'smart Alec,' or even an 'egg-head'- an ivory-towered dreamer ten thousand metres above the practical realities of everyday life.

Take that same last trip to Blighty. An English friend was driving us through a large town when we were caught up in a long hold-up caused by traffic lights located at a T junction some 200 metres ahead. After containing himself for a few minutes, his exasperation finally got the better of him:

'You know, this is just typical!' he exploded. 'There used to be two lanes here, one for drivers turning right and the other with a filter for those turning left. So, traffic was fluid and there were never any hold-ups like this. Then some bright spark on the town council came up with the idea of reserving the left lane for cyclists only! Now we've got just one single lane for motorists turning both right and left, and this is the result! The idiot's probably got a university degree!'

FTT: My own egghead has requested me to point out that it is yet further proof of the diametrical opposition of approach which has always reigned between the two nations that, as a general rule, the pragmatic Englishman, when confronted with the blueprint of a new project, will pose the question: 'All right, so it seems to be fine in theory, but will it work in practice?' He will then go to considerable lengths testing on a workbench whether it does so. The Cartesian Frenchman, on the other hand, will ask: 'D'accord, so it seems to work in practice, but will it hold up in theory?' He will then devise a complex mathematical formula demonstrating that it does so.

Nevertheless, Théodore has asked me to emphasize that not all French people are head-in-the-cloud imbeciles. Enough of them are in contact with down-to-

earth reality for a number of jokes to be in circulation regarding the theoretical intelligence, lack of practical awareness (mixed in with a good dose of arrogance) of some *Enarques* (graduates of the *E.N.A.*, the *Ecole Nationale d'Administration* - a prestigious university charged with producing the nation's political, industrial and administrative élite). One joke tells of a recently-graduated Parisian civil servant who decided to spend a weekend breathing the fresh country air. As he was rambling through the hills, he happened to meet a shepherd leading his sheep down from their summer pastures.

'Tell me, my good man,' said the Enarque, 'do you know how many animals you have in your flock? You do! Well, I'm willing to bet you 100 euros against one of your animals that I can give you the exact number of sheep, rams and lambs you have at this moment.'

Certain he was onto a winner, the shepherd, accepted the bet.

After making a series of what seemed complex mental calculations, the Enarque declared, 'At the moment you have 251 sheep, five rams and 157 lambs. These figures are correct, are they not?'

'Why yes, you're dead right!' exclaimed the astonished shepherd. 'O.K. you've won. Go ahead and pick a sheep!'

So the Enarque proceeded to choose an animal. As he was leading it away, the shepherd shouted, 'Hey, stop! That's one of my dogs you've got!'

Another joke tells of a former *Président de la République*, also a graduate of the *E.N.A.*, who was visiting a primary school one day. When the teacher asked her pupils if there were any questions they would like to ask the ex-Head of State, a little girl put her hand up.

‘Could you please tell me, sir,’ she asked, ‘why you don’t have any hair on the top of your head?’

‘Oh, the answer is very simple, little girl. That’s because I’m very, very intelligent,’ *Monsieur le Président* replied. ‘You know, all exceptionally intelligent men lose their hair because they think a lot!’

Pointing to the growth on his temples, the girl exclaimed, ‘All right, but in that case you must be a bit stupid on the sides!’

And is it this same Puritan factor which holds that intelligence and female seductiveness rarely go together? Somewhere, I can’t stop myself from thinking that, in the eyes of you English, a sexy, alluringly-dressed young female can have brains no bigger than *petits pois*, and that a woman mustn’t be too much to look at, and must be soberly adorned to qualify as having an I.Q. superior to that of a brooding Rhode Island Red. In this respect, I was recently struck by an article, penned by an English lady journalist in a so-called quality newspaper, on the subject of sexism in France. In a society made for men by men, she wrote, French women were light years behind their Anglo-Saxon sisters. Just one illustration of this, she went on, was provided by French television. Here, as everywhere, the Latin macho male was in such undisputed control that, for his titillation, he had dictated that the news, political debates, current-event magazines, the weather forecast and even sports programmes should be presented by what she termed ‘dolly birds’ (FTT: **Made-up, fashionably-dressed, attractive-looking (i.e. like a doll), but intellectually-limited young women.**)

What she didn’t seem to be able to comprehend (or was it just female sour grapes?) was that these apparently dumb-headed dolls are intellectually well on a par with their austere-dressed, plain-Jane Anglo-Saxon sisters – the main difference being that, rather than doing their best to look and

act like a man, they do all they can to make themselves attractive to a man.

Another thing I have never really been able to understand about you English is why such a pragmatic, no-nonsense nation, proud to call a spade a spade, and so mistrustful of words of more than one syllable in length, should be so systematically given to hyperbolic extravagance in speech. For there is certainly no other people in the world who have incorporated into their everyday descriptive language such a vast array of effusive adjectives: fantastic, extraordinary, marvellous, incredible, amazing, out of this world, awesome, superb, fabulous, stunning, devastating (and, if this wasn't enough, frequently reinforced by *absolutely* or *utterly*) to qualify what barely emerges from the mundane: 'The weather was absolutely superb – it must have got up to 20°!' or: 'We had a simply awesome view from the top of Blackpool Tower!'

And what about that time when the three of us decided to have lunch with a friend in an English pub. The waitress, a pleasant, not unattractive young lady brought us the menu, came back five minutes later, took down our order and then departed, after gratifying us with a sweet smile and a mystifying 'Wonderful!' If, by this, she wished to compliment us on our choice, I have yet to understand what she could have found so extraordinarily delightful about steak and kidney pie, chips and peas.

I've got to admit, however, that when it comes to good manners you English are just as convinced as we French that, in a civilized society, generally-agreed rules of respect and consideration towards others, especially when these are strangers or barely known, are vital in reducing the risk of conflict or offence in the requests, agreements, refusals, apologies, greetings and partings which are so much a part of our daily lives. You are also not without knowing that polite manners consist in maintaining a fine balance between showing you think well of others, and not giving others the impression you think too well of yourself. Is it those same

Puritan virtues of modest self-effacement and informal simplicity which have caused your English version of politeness to incline less towards showing others (in appearance at least) you think well of yourself, and more towards demonstrating to others you think well of them? For I will never cease to be surprised by the monotonous frequency with which you use those words 'please' and 'thank you' and, above all, by the modest, apologetic type of civility you generally adopt towards those who are paid to serve you directly. I mean, who else but you English could thank the dustbin man for being considerate enough to empty your wheelie bin, the postman for going so far out of his way to pop your mail through the letterbox, and the bus driver for showing such exquisite courtesy in actually bringing his vehicle to a halt at your stop? And I will never understand why, in a café, you say, 'Could I possibly have a Cappuccino and a Brownie, please?' or, 'I'm awfully sorry to bother you, but could I have the bill, please?' in such a deferential tone of voice, when it's the waitress's job to do exactly this. Or, when the home help arrives in the morning, instead of giving her polite but firm instructions on what you require to be done, you give the house a good clean beforehand, and then apologise for the mess it's in when she finally turns up!

You know, I would be ready to bet my bottom euro that there isn't another country in the world where direct rectification, disagreement or contradiction is perceived as being tantamount to a declaration of war. I mean, it can only be you English who, when you find yourselves in the embarrassing situation of having to correct a mistake, will go to such extraordinarily apologetic lengths to point out that what you are about to say is in no way a criticism, but stems merely from a wish to explain. Though I would be the first to admit that the rules of politeness oblige us - often hypocritically - to conceal our true feelings and opinions so as to minimize the risk of conflict with others, you take this to ridiculous extremes. I really don't know of any other people

who, instead of declaring, 'No, I disagree with you entirely!' go to such extraordinary lengths to reply, 'Well you certainly might have a point, but, on the other hand, don't you think ...?' when they are intimately convinced you are talking unmitigated rubbish. Let's be honest, how can you possibly trust someone who systematically professes to agree with everything you say?

De plus, I might even go so far as to say that your English reluctance to indulge in what could be remotely construed as direct disagreement would appear to be even stronger than your distrust of obtrusive outward show. Take that occasion when, after landing in England early one weekday evening, we caught a train from the airport station. The next stop was a large town where the train filled up with people going home from work. Barely had we settled down to a quiet read when my attention was drawn to a dark-blue, pin-stripe-suited gentleman sitting at the other end of the carriage who had just begun talking loudly into his mobile – so loudly, in fact, that it would have taken someone with the hearing capacities of a stone to have escaped the slightest detail of what he was saying.

The gentleman, we were quickly led to understand, occupied a high managerial position in an insurance company, and his discussions were focussed on the financial consequences of a fire which, apparently, had ravaged the premises of a large local company the previous day. But as soon as one interminable conversation had ended someone else was contacted, and the same sort of discussion began again. I remember thinking it strange that he should be disclosing to any Tom, Dick and Harry what normally would have called for quiet discretion, when the truth of the matter dawned: his aim was not to discuss any insurance settlements relating to the fire; he was staging a one-man show intended to impress upon the captive audience of a commuter train's second class carriage that they had been granted the inestimable privilege of being allowed to share the

professional life of a man whose ruthless business acumen was in every way comparable to that of an American soap opera oil baron.

Now in France, at an early stage, it would have been politely but firmly brought to his notice that these conversations were becoming intrusive. It could even have been pointed out that, given their confidential nature, they might be more appropriately confined to the privacy of his office. But everybody bore up with the fortitude of a Stoic philosopher resigning himself to unavoidable necessity: not a word of objection was to be heard, and we were subjected to an hour or more of uninterrupted talk (the businessman's telephonic partners were strangely mute). However, our man, I noted, repeatedly made rather amusing, frequently-the-same grammatical errors (he was particularly fond of beginning his sentences by 'The point being is that ...').

I mustn't have been the only one to notice this, for a young woman sitting nearby could contain herself no longer, and burst out into a fit of uncontrolled laughter - so contagious that it quickly seized most of the carriage's occupants. It took only a couple of minutes for our businessman to realize that in the eyes of the audience his performance was more in line with that of a clown - for he promptly lowered his voice to an inaudible whisper and, a few seconds later, sheepishly switched off his mobile before seeking shameful refuge behind the outstretched pages of his *Financial Times*.

And is it this same Puritan principle of simple, unceremonious manner which causes you English to consider it the height of civility to give total strangers the impression they have become your instant bosom friends by inviting them to address you by your Christian name, even nickname, at the very first meeting? Only last weekend, for instance, we attended a dinner party given by some English friends.

'I don't think you've met Jennifer and John,' said our hostess, by way of introduction to a couple we'd never clapped eyes on in our life before.

'Oh, just call me Jennie!' replied the lady, her cheeks creasing into the sweetest of smiles.

Your English insistence on using Christian names as a sesame to on-the-spot friendship with people you have never had the pleasure of meeting before may even be observed with regard to those you are separated from by a considerable gap in age. Take that time *maman* was obliged to spend a week in an English hospital. The fact that she was in her eighties did not deter many young nurses from systematically addressing her as 'Françoise.' This would have been barely conceivable in France where calling an almost total stranger nearly four times your age other than by a respectful 'Madame', or, at most 'Madame Thistlethwaite' would be perceived as being highly impolite.

FTT: In all fairness, it would appear that hospital authorities in England are now instructing their staff to give elderly patients the choice between being addressed by their Christian name, or title and surname. It somewhere goes to endorse what my Frenchman is saying that most elderly English patients opt to be called by the more 'friendly' Christian name.

The fact that, in England, what a French person would interpret as an outward sign of strong affection does not necessarily mean that participants are on the most intimate of terms was illustrated one day last summer when I took my two alters along to visit an agricultural show with an English friend and his wife. As we were walking past one stand a young woman rushed up to my friend's wife.

'How marvellous to see you again!' she effused, seizing her in a smothering embrace. A brief conversation followed between them, after which we proceeded on our way.

‘Yes, I met her at a dinner party given by our son and his wife a couple of weeks ago,’ my friend’s wife explained, ‘but I can’t for the life of me remember her name!’

En outre, the systematic inclusion of those magic words ‘friendly service’ in the small ads of local newspapers and magazines seems designed to assure us that, should we decide to give our custom to the village pub, grocery store or plumber, we will be given the same rapturous welcome as that which would be extended to a sibling we had been separated from since birth. And such is the importance you English attach to ready-made closeness that, when you go into a shop, you can be addressed by someone you have never had the opportunity of meeting in your life before with a disconcerting variety of appellations which can only lead the foreign observer to believe you are on the most intimate of terms. For, depending on where you are in England at the time, you can be gratified with *love*, *dear*, *darling*, *sweetie*, *sweetheart*, *mate*, *duck*, *mush*, *chuck*, *cock*, and certainly many others, by people you have never in your life kept the pigs with.

FTT: My Gallic is here alluding to the common French expression: ‘*On n’a pas gardé les cochons ensemble*,’ literally meaning ‘We haven’t kept the pigs together,’ and used to evoke inappropriate familiarity. In France, keeping the pigs together can, apparently, lead to shameless intimacy.

And only the other day I walked into a small shop where I was greeted by a lady assistant, young enough to be my grand-daughter, and whom I had never in my life seen before, with a cheery ‘Hello, young man!’ The welcome smacked so much of inappropriate familiarity that, as a Frenchman, I felt obliged to react by politely but firmly pointing out that, since she would never have addressed a genuine young man in these terms, what really prompted her greeting was, in fact,

the opposite to what she was attempting to infer - namely that I was no longer a young man. Mon Dieu! How is it possible for a Frenchy not to fall into total confusion in a country where you often call a man a 'young man' when he's not a young man, but rarely call a man a 'young man' when he is a young man, and where it is quite possible to address both an old man and a young boy as 'young man', and both a young man and an old man as 'old boy?'

I mean, isn't it far more logical to be friendly and relaxed with people you know, and just polite with those you don't? For what never ceases to astonish me is not only how familiar you can be with those you have just made the acquaintance of, but how distant you can be with people you have known for years. A well-brought-up young Frenchman, for example, on meeting a girl for the very first time, will politely address her as 'mademoiselle,' and after they get married she will certainly become 'ma chérie.' An Englishman will use 'darling' or 'love' to address a girl he has never met in his life before, and proceed to call her 'Missis' once they have walked down the aisle! But on reflection, is it all that surprising you English should go about greeting people the opposite way to what they ought? Après tout, what can you expect from a people who drive on the left (sure proof they are not right in their head), and take roundabouts the wrong way round? Who can deny that it's we French who've got things right? For what is more normal that, when you meet someone you hardly know, you begin with a polite 'Bonjour, monsieur,' 'Bonjour, madame,' or 'Bonjour, mademoiselle?'

FTT: As my Frenchman explains, when you walk past a male acquaintance in the street in France, the rules of formal politeness require you to use the greeting 'Bonjour, monsieur.' And if you decide to stop for a chat these same rules oblige you to say 'Au revoir, monsieur' when you part. It must be noted, however, that the word 'monsieur,' in this context at least, is not, as many

English people imagine, the equivalent of 'sir'. While 'monsieur' is simply polite, the English word 'sir' (apart from its use as a title of nobility, i.e. Sir Winston Churchill), when employed in the situations of everyday life, is both polite and deferential, and as such used to address someone perceived as being in a position of social, professional (or commercial) superiority. It is also not uncommon for the French to make the mistake of equating 'sir' with 'monsieur'. For even though in France you would begin with a polite 'Excusez-moi, monsieur,' or 'S'il vous plaît, madame,' when addressing a stranger in the street prior to asking, for example, a direction, 'Excuse me, sir' would be entirely inappropriate in similar circumstances in England.

Normally, then, in France, polite etiquette requires us to address a stranger or a person we hardly know by his or her title: monsieur, madame or mademoiselle (even though, in the name of female equality, there is, at present, talk of abandoning this last reference to an unmarried female). On getting to know the person a little better we can pop on the surname (i.e. Bonjour, Monsieur Martin), but Christian name terms are only considered when you really begin to hit it off. A more subtle halfway point can even be observed, which consists in showing friendly respect towards someone who is more than just an acquaintance, but less than a bosom friend, by using the title to which is appended his Christian name, i.e. Monsieur Pierre. Considerable time may elapse between each phase - though this is not necessarily a question of duration - and, depending on the case, the relationship may even remain stable at one defined point. As a general rule, the longer we remain at one stage, the more difficult it is to progress to the next, and we may never get beyond the Monsieur Martin point with someone from whom we are separated by a

significant difference in age, social or professional status, or even gender.

And what greater damage could have been inflicted on Anglo-French relations than by that modest second person singular subject pronoun 'tu'? Is it again this same desire to get on familiar terms with every Tom, Dick and Harry in the time it takes to say Jack Robinson which makes you English consider it the magic key to split-second fellowship with all? I mean, the fact that it barely exists in English doesn't mean it's not subject to clearly-defined rules.

FTT: What French people (and also quite a few English) do not realize is that the equivalent of the familiar French 'tu' form of address may still be heard in some northern parts of England, especially in the mouths of the older generation. One of Grandad Thistlethwaite's oft-quoted Yorkshire dialect sayings was, I remember: 'ear all, see all, say nowt; sup all, ate all, pay nowt; an' if tha does owt fo' nowt, do it fo' thissen!' (Hear all, see all, say nothing; drink all, eat all, pay nothing; and if you do something for nothing, do it for yourself!).

Take the case of Sue. Now last year, our neighbours, Monsieur and Madame Martin, had an English teenager, Sue, staying with them as an *au pair*. Sue had just left school, and before going on to read French at university had decided to spend a sabbatical year working in France to improve her spoken language. At the beginning of her stay, Sue systematically gratified everyone, regardless of age, social position or degree of acquaintance, with the familiar 'tu' - under the mistaken impression this would be interpreted as a sign that she wanted to be friendly with all. What had to be explained to her was the fact that, though acceptable with someone of a similar age and situation, her use of 'tu', especially to address someone considerably older than herself,

was frequently perceived as little more than misplaced familiarity, a discourteous lack of respect akin to a youngster in England addressing a senior he hardly knew by his first name.

FTT: Broadly speaking, unlike its politely respectful and plural equivalent 'vous', (used to address complete strangers, people we barely know, or those with whom social or professional status, age or even gender create a distance), 'tu' is employed when talking to those we are on more familiar terms with, i.e. relatives and friends. These are, however, general indications and, depending on circumstances, exceptions may occur. We can, for example, find ourselves quickly, or even immediately on 'tu' terms with people we hardly know when we belong to the same association, club or age group (especially if this is young) in as much as it is considered that all are fraternally united in pursuit of a shared goal or activity.

Barely had I finished the above paragraph than I distinctly heard my scholar diplomatically request his French alter to allow him, through myself, to take advantage of this same parenthesis to go on to point out that the continuing existence in modern French of this distinction between the familiar 'tu' and a decorous or plural 'vous' again reflects a more formally-structured code of politeness requiring a stricter adherence to prescribed or customary forms. This would suggest that French notions of urbanity have retained a greater part of their aristocratic origins than in England. For, in both countries, the rules of well-mannered behaviour in the past were the appendage of a high-born social category, and adopted not only to facilitate refined relations of consideration and respect within its own peer group, but also as a means of demonstrating a polished self-presentation serving to distinguish it from the vulgar lower classes.

Théodore then went on to inform me of his thesis that, in England, prolonged exposure to the Puritan ethic with its emphasis on simple, unceremonious behaviour, vanity-free obedience, and humble conformism to established social and moral norms, gradually modified aristocratic-inspired perceptions so that politeness today is more a question of presenting oneself to the other in an unostentatiously friendly way. For the French, it is still frequently a question of showing one belongs to a superior social category. In England, for instance, ill-mannered behaviour is likely to prompt a 'What a horrid person he is!' type of reaction. The criticism is directed, above all, at the lack of respect shown for the standard rules governing congenial human interaction. In France, impolite behaviour is not infrequently castigated by a 'Qu'est-ce qu'il est mal élevé!' (What an ill-bred person he is!) – a remonstrance which raises doubts more as to the quality of his family and social background.

Moreover, a Frenchman who considers himself as belonging to a higher social category will, in a heated dispute (even with someone he knows quite well), become more and more aloofly polite, addressing his opponent as 'monsieur', i.e. 'Vous vous trompez, monsieur!' (when he would really love to punch him in the teeth) to distinguish himself from the vulgar commoner who would tend to resort to coarse, familiar abuse. Though this same practice did previously exist among the higher social *échelons* in England, it has now completely disappeared.

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Given the doubtful nature of your cooking, I can certainly understand why you English cannot be gulled into taking seriously someone who expresses the wish that you enjoy

your meal. I would, nevertheless, have thought that a conception of politeness which encourages you to display a maximum of congeniality towards your fellow man would at least require you to have the decency to express the hope that he spends a pleasant day. Toutefois, when I think about it, what could be less astonishing that a people who for centuries were preached to night and day that enjoyment of any kind was a mortal sin rarely wish one another a pleasant anything? In France, on the contrary, wishing your conversational partner(s), on parting, a good something or other at least a dozen times per day is not only an intrinsic part of our rules of politeness, but is even considered by the more superstitious to be a good way of turning events in their favour.

FTT: Though the English tend to wish each other agreeable things more than in the past, this is still far from being an established rule. As François points out, the French are incapable of taking leave without wishing each other something nice. The practice has attained such a high degree of institutionalization that not expressing the hope your conversational partner has a pleasant day, or enjoys his game of golf would be unusual enough not to escape notice, or even to be considered discourteous. The most frequently used of these turns of phrase are stereotyped, and are proffered systematically, depending on the time of day - *bonne journée*, *bonne soirée*, *bonne nuit*, *bon weekend* being among the more common. Some may be more specific (and untranslatable in English) in their time reference: *bonne fin d'après-midi* (literally: enjoy the end of your afternoon); *bon début de soirée* (enjoy the beginning of your evening); and *bon réveil* (literally: enjoy waking up) is a favourite with early morning news announcers. The convention is flexible enough to accommodate any activity the other is, or will soon be engaged in, and

variants are without limitation - *bonne partie de puces* (enjoy your game of tiddlywinks) has even been heard. Among the more standard offerings are *bonne promenade* (have a nice walk), *bon courage* (bear up), and, of course, the ubiquitous *bon appétit*. In addition, an all-embracing *bonne continuation* (continue to enjoy whatever you're doing now) is not infrequently heard.

In spite of the French and English divergences I have dwelt on above, one might be excused for thinking that in the common circumstances of daily life politeness can only go to unite. What is more normal with the two most dissimilar peoples on our planet that it can frequently divide? For just as your English attachment to friendly politeness prompts you to lapse into what we French view as inappropriate familiarity, our own codes of decorous civility can be equated with arrogant aloofness by you English. This was brought home to me on one occasion when, having just landed back in England, our Rosbif was still fast asleep, and our philosopher was still a few thousand metres above the clouds.

The train taking us from the airport was almost empty and I had no problem finding us a window seat. At the next station, however, a crowd was waiting to board and the train soon filled up. Pointing to the vacant seat beside us a lady politely enquired, with an amiable English smile, 'Is anybody sitting here, please?'

'No!' I replied, with a shake of the head.

Now, had this been in France the lady, without further ado, would have proceeded to sit down. Not so with our English one.

'I'm asking you if this seat is free!' she repeated with barely-concealed annoyance.

A little surprised, I retorted, 'Your original question was, 'Is anybody sitting here?' My reply was 'No!' That means nobody is sitting here!' And I beckoned her to take the seat.

She sat down stiffly. Despite having brought to her notice the correctness of my grammar, something in her demeanour made it obvious that offence had been given, and a long, heavy silence ensued. Puzzled, I gave the matter some thought. And, as we rolled along, it must have been the Englishman in us who began to stir; for it gradually dawned on me that, not only had my laconic response to her first question been totally lacking in your English-style, friendly warmth, but could even been mistakenly construed as, 'No, I don't want you to sit here!' In fact, what I should have said was, 'Not at all, go ahead and sit down, love!' accompanied by a cordial smile. But now the harm was done, and all attempts at reconciliation only met with grudgingly-consented, monosyllabic replies. I finally retreated into resigned perusal of my newspaper.

What is less astonishing, then, that this divergence between your unceremonious and our more formalistic conception of polite interaction with others should be yet one more source of misunderstanding within our own tri-part self? Take that little incident the other morning while we were doing some errands in Saint-Clou. Arriving at the baker's at the same time as a well-dressed, middle-aged lady, what is more normal that the gallant Frenchman I am should have pushed the door open, and with a polite 'Je vous en prie Madame' invited her to step in before us. Now, it is true that, had we been in England, she would certainly have gratified us with a warm 'Thanks, love,' accompanied by the friendly smile. Our French lady, however, never for one moment let her face slip, and simply returned my formal words of courtesy with an equally formal 'Pardon monsieur' as she stepped in past us. For me, there was nothing untoward in this, as none of our French rules of politeness obliged her to do more than apologize for any unseemliness involved in moving so closely past a total stranger. But for Thistlethwaite this was not enough. And presumably, in reaction to what he interpreted as cold aloofness, I distinctly heard him muttering

under our breath in his own inimitable style, 'Who the bloody hell does she think she is? The Queen of Sheba?'

And these differing perceptions of what constitutes polite form may be the cause of apparent *malentendus* which can even shake the foundations of the *Entente Cordiale*. It was certainly a gross misunderstanding of the rules of French diplomatic protocol (or was it yet another perverse attempt on the part of a Francophobic English tabloid press to confirm in the popular mind all the bad it wants to think of the hereditary enemy?) which caused one newspaper to criticize our *Président* during an official visit to London some time ago.

FTT: Generally speaking, the more educated and travelled English middle-classes tend towards a positive perception of their Gallic neighbours. This is far from being the case with the more popular strata whose anti-French prejudices are often encouraged by the English tabloid press which, for nationalistic and commercial reasons (it enjoys a readership of tens of millions), seems to delight in serving up liberal portions of what readers want to hear. Some years ago, during a national truckers' strike in France, a number of strike-busting English drivers who happened to find themselves on French roads at the time, were held prisoner by their French equivalents. This unleashed so much fury on the part of one tabloid that it hit on the idea of conducting a 'Frog-bashing' campaign by inviting readers to send in all the anti-French jokes they knew. The degree of response defied all imagination, producing thousands of rib-ticklers such as 'How do you make money out of a Frog? By buying him at the price he's worth, and selling him at the price he thinks he's worth!'

Remonstrations were centred on the coldly arrogant, 'hostile' attitude displayed by our Chief of State in systematically addressing your Prime Minister as 'Monsieur le Premier Ministre,' whereas the English Prime Minister, the newspapers went to some pains to underline, was much warmer and 'friendly' in that he constantly addressed our President by his Christian name. What the tabloid did not seem to know (or deliberately chose to ignore), was that the more formalistic rules of French protocol require a person holding public office to be addressed, on official occasions at least, through his or her function rather than person, i.e. *Monsieur le Maire, Monsieur le Commissaire, Madame la Présidente*. Not doing so could be construed as a lack of respect towards the person and/or the office he or she holds. In France, therefore, the public use of Christian names between heads of state would be considered inappropriately familiar. Nevertheless, this in no way precludes the use of Christian names, in private, if their degree of personal friendship permits.

You know, I would have thought that our friend, Thistlethwaite, had lived close enough to a Frenchman and long enough in France to have realized that ...

FTT: Was it mention of his name which drew him out of his cogitations? Was it my French alter's frequently uncompromising thoughts on the Puritan factor, and its influence on the day-to-day attitudes of the English, which finally goaded Thistlethwaite into action? Whatever the case may be, a sudden ill-mannered poke emanating from the right, and applied unceremoniously to the region of my lower inside left rib cage not only gave me a painful reminder of my English part's renewed presence, but left my middleman in no doubt that the time had now come to call a halt to this chapter. Before doing so, may I, in my capacity as host, express both my grateful thanks to the Frenchman within for his

lucid contribution (not forgetting that of my scholar) to the previous pages, as well as the hope that his reflections will go somewhere towards producing a greater mutual understanding and tolerance between our two diametrically-opposed... you damned Froggy, take that ... aie! ... ouch! T'es fou ou quoi? Arrête! ... my sincere apologies for this rude intrusion on the part of my Eng... ouch! ... mais arrêtes-toi! ... bordel de merde, ça suffit! ... Come on you chaps, let's pull ourself together!

Chapter Six

THE FROG AND THE BULLDOG

Though a Godly paradise may exist on high,
Where pure equality, justice and fraternity lie,
Our world below is less divine,
And Frog and Bulldog must put water in their wine.

François Théodore Thistlethwaite
(with apologies to La Fontaine)

The French Primary School curriculum spares no child the task of reading and committing to memory at least one of what is as inseparably French as a runny Camembert and a crisply-baked baguette: *Les Fables de La Fontaine*.

Jean de La Fontaine (1621-1695) was born into an upper middle class family living in Château-Thierry, a small town located in the Marne valley some 80 kilometres north east of Paris, and now part of the capital's outer urban sprawl. His father was *Maître des Eaux et des Forêts* – a civil servant responsible for managing the King's forests, rivers and lakes of the region. At that time, this type of office was either handed down from father to son, or actually bought in return for an annual salary, along with a considerable number of fringe benefits. It is not clear whether La Fontaine himself was given the office by his father, or whether it was purchased from someone else. Whatever the case may be, it was something of a sinecure, and didn't in the least prevent our poet from spending most of his life frequenting literary and aristocratic circles in Paris.

After going to school in his home town, La Fontaine entered the Oratory in Paris at the age of 20, only to leave a year later, more attracted by the free-thinking and often dissolute company of poets and playwrights than the austere

doctrines of Saint Augustine. Little is known of his teens and twenties other than that he studied law in Paris and qualified as a lawyer at the age of 28. Two years earlier his father had found a spouse for him in the person of Marie Héricart, a budding beauty aged ... 14, by whom he had a son, Charles, born in 1653.

La Fontaine was a bad husband and an even worse father. He neglected his wife (on his own admission, an intelligent, pleasant and cultured woman), and rarely saw his son who was brought up solely by his mother. As a result of the regular, prolonged absences of her husband, Marie appears to have found consolation in the arms of another. One anecdote illustrates both the amiability of our poet and his indifference towards his spouse: a Dragoon Captain was in the habit of paying regular visits to Madame de La Fontaine. Though La Fontaine himself did not seem to be aware of anything amiss, his wife's infidelity was not only brought to his notice, but he was made to understand that the rules of honour required him to take her lover to task for his impertinence. Rising at dawn one morning, he called on the Captain, told him to get dressed, buckle on his sword and follow him. When they reached a meadow just outside town, he announced to the astonished officer, 'I'm obliged to fight you! I've been told there's nothing else to be done!' Briefly explaining the reasons, and without giving his opponent time to reply, our poet drew his sword. The Dragoon Captain, who had no alternative but to defend himself, drew his own and immediately knocked La Fontaine's weapon out of his hand. After declaring how ridiculous their behaviour was, the Captain then announced that, since he had been woken so early, he would never again set foot in his rival's house. 'On the contrary,' La Fontaine vehemently declared, 'I've done what was expected of me. Now I'd like you to be an even more regular visitor than before. If not, I'll fight you again.' They parted the best of friends.

Another story relates that his literary friends in Paris once persuaded him to attempt a reconciliation with his wife. With this in view, he set off home to Château-Thierry. After knocking on the door, he was informed by a servant that Madame de La Fontaine was absent, having 'gone out to prayers.' On hearing this, he called to see a friend who invited him to stay for dinner and after to sleep the night. Next morning, he went straight back to Paris. When asked whether his visit had been successful, he replied, 'Oh, I didn't see my wife, she was out at prayers.' On another occasion, at a literary gathering in Paris, he got chatting to a young man whom he found both witty and intelligent. When, afterwards, he was informed it was, in fact, his own son, Charles, La Fontaine is said to have exclaimed, 'Oh really! I thought I'd seen him somewhere before!'

One of La Fontaine's greatest literary ambitions was to become a member of the prestigious *Académie*, his election to which would be greatly facilitated by a recommendation from the King. Thinking it might help his cause if he could present his verses to Louis XIV in person, he got one of his illustrious protectors to obtain an audience for him. Once in royal presence, he began searching through his pockets - only to realize he'd forgotten to bring his poems with him! 'Oh, another time, another time, Monsieur de La Fontaine,' replied the Sun King with admirable indulgence.

In marked contrast to many of his fables which extoll the virtues of down-to-earth common sense, Jean de La Fontaine comes through as a head-in-the air, live-for-the moment, ingenuous and negligent dreamer, totally oblivious to the financial realities of life. He was even obliged to sell his office in 1672 to pay off some of his substantial debts. However, his depleted financial circumstances were never a matter of life or death, and throughout his life he seems to have enjoyed the favours of Providence (perhaps his naivety and, above all, his artistic genius were appreciated by all), and always landed squarely on his feet. For he could always rely on the

patronage and generosity of wealthy, influential, aristocratic protectors (especially when these were women), to whom he wisely dedicated his works and who, during his periods of impecuniousness, provided him with accommodation – which, in his childlike guilelessness, he seems to have considered to be in the natural order of things. Another anecdote tells that one day he was walking in the street after being turned out of his lodgings, presumably for not paying the rent, when he met a wealthy, aristocratic couple of his acquaintance. On being informed of what had happened, they immediately invited him to come and stay with them. ‘Oh, I was just going!’ La Fontaine replied.

An obvious contradiction exists, then, between the elegant, subtly humorous verses of *Les Fables*, the themes of which draw their substance from a realistic appraisal of human nature, and the seemingly indolent, scatter-brained, happy-go-lucky character of the poet himself. It is also not immediately understandable why some of the most sociable and intelligent men and women of the time could have actively sought the company of someone who could give an impression of dullness, even stupidity – though it is said that when the conversation got animated he livened up, too. He also appears to have been indifferent to social niceties. Another anecdote tells of one occasion when he was invited to dine at the home of a wealthy financier, no doubt flattered to have an author of such distinction and fame as a guest. Apparently, La Fontaine relished the meal and had little to say while eating. Rising from table after dessert, he got ready to leave. On being asked to stay a while longer he replied, ‘I’m sorry, but I’ve got a meeting at the *Académie*. I must go.’

‘But the meeting won’t start for some time yet,’ was the reply.

‘Yes, I know,’ retorted la Fontaine, ‘but I’ll go the longest way round!’ And he promptly left.

His collections of more than 240 fables, written between 1668 and 1694, most of which stage anthropomorphic

characters, and contain a self-avowed moral aim (many of which have become household proverbs), are universally considered to occupy a deserved place among the masterpieces of French literature. One of the best-known of La Fontaine's Fables, *The Cicada and the Ant*, praises those traditional, common-sense virtues of hard work and saving for a rainy day, while stressing the dangers of improvidence. For the benefit of my English readers, I got my three inmates to work together for once to produce the following translation, which the scholar in my middle has certified to be as much in conformity with the original French as it will ever be possible to get:

The Cicada having sung his* song
All summer long
Found himself without a crumb
When the North Wind did come,
Not one small morsel could he find
Of fly or worm of any kind.
Starving, he went to see his ant neighbour
To tell her he was at death's door
And begging her for a grain or two
So he might survive all winter through
Until the coming of the spring.
'By August I'll pay back everything,'
Said he, 'interest and principal, both,
Upon my insect oath.'
Now the ant may have a fault or two
But lend is what she will not do.
'What did you do last summer?'
Asked she of this would-be borrower.
'Why, night and day, you surely won't mind,
I sang to comers of all kind.'
'You sang? I'm glad you had that chance:
Well now you can run off and dance!'

*FTT: In French, the nouns *cigale* and *fourmi* are both feminine in gender. Consequently, in the original version of the fable, La Fontaine referred to the two insects by the pronoun 'elle'. However, since it is the male cicada only which chirps - and this in order to attract a mate - after much heated discussion my three parts decided, in the interests of entomological accuracy, to assign a masculine role to the cicada. I am sure La Fontaine would have forgiven them for this slight deviation from the French text.

In addition, my *alter egos* toyed with the idea of depicting the ant as a male, too. After all, in the conflictive context of the fable, it did seem more appropriate to evoke a male-versus-male type of situation. In the interests, once more, of entomological precision, this was dropped on my trio learning that, in the world of ants, it is the female who does all the work, the male's function being solely to inseminate the queen. In consequence, the English feminists among my readers will certainly be pleased to note that, in the English rendering above, there is no doubt as to who, male or female, is the real boss. And I am sure La Fontaine would have agreed that my *alter egos'* choice is not entirely irrelevant to the world of humans - in his time as well as today. For is it not the ladies who have always called the tune?

So human nature hardly changes and, like all works which have passed with honours the cruelly selective test of time, the themes embraced in *Les Fables* are just as pertinent to our present day. With this in mind, I couldn't help imagining what reactions *The Cicada and the Ant* might have inspired in my dissociated French and English parts, had I assigned to each, for the length of a chapter, the animal form we popularly identify with their countrymen. I must confess, however, that, not having been endowed with the poetic

talents of the illustrious master, I am obliged to render their thoughts in mundane prose. And since these pages spring from a masterpiece of French literature, I have no doubt my Frog would have jumped at the opportunity of being invited to be the first to lay before us the reflections it might have spawned.

Merci à vous. Now, let me begin by making it perfectly clear that, even though La Fontaine was a Frenchman and admittedly not without literary flair, these are the only good things I can say about him. You know what he reminds me of? He reminds me of a *remora*. Eh bien, you probably don't know what a remora is. I'm sure our poet friend didn't. Well, I'll tell you. A remora is a fish with a sucker. By using his sucker to latch on to sharks, he obtains protection while scavenging the scraps his host lets drop. Wasn't this the case with La Fontaine? Wasn't he a parasite who lived by what the mighty King Lion and his court deigned to let him have?

What's more, as FTT has just related, in real life La Fontaine, the man, was more a cicada than an ant. So, shouldn't he have been the first to admit that you can't expect such a happy-go-lucky insect to work like a beaver and save like a squirrel? It's unnatural, n'est-ce pas? Aren't creatures like him born chirpers? I mean, his maman and papa were chirpers, his grandparents and great-grandparents were chirpers, so how can you expect him to be anything but a chirper? En outre, I'm sure his parents never even thought of giving him a piggy bank when he was little. And even if he did manage to work a bit, the little he earned would have all gone in taxes so that King Lion and his court of preening peacocks and stuck-up poodles (who paid nothing at all) could have gone on living the high life. I mean, how unjust can you get? Just croaking about it makes my skin crawl.

FTT: I hope my Frog will not jump down my throat for this but, in all fairness, he is not doing La Fontaine full justice here. He must have been in hibernation when I

read the fable of *The Plague-Stricken Animals*, which shows that our poet was acutely aware of the injustice and hypocrisy of the world around him.

The fable is set in an animal kingdom ravaged by the plague. The mighty King Lion chairs a council of animals. After opening the meeting by announcing that he believes the scourge to be God's punishment for man's sins on earth, and that expiation can only be obtained by sacrificing the guiltiest one among them, he invites each animal to confess his sins. As an example to the others, he himself admits to having devoured plenty of sheep in his time, and even one or two shepherds. The sly fox compliments King Lion on his scrupulous honesty, and flatters him by declaring that the stupid sheep should have been grateful for the honour of being eaten by his Majesty. As for the shepherds, they certainly deserved all they got. Everybody applauds, and the tiger and bear, along with other powerful animals, proceed to confess other grave misdemeanours. Finally, it's the humble donkey's turn. As he was walking past a meadow, he confesses, so hungry was he that he couldn't resist munching a mouthful of grass. This is instantly condemned by the council as a heinous, unpardonable crime and, without further ado, the poor animal is hanged. The fable ends cynically with the moral that 'depending on whether you are mighty or in lack the court will judge you white or black': justice doesn't depend on whether you are really innocent or guilty but on the power and influence you have. I trust my Frog has taken due note. Now back to him with my sincere apologies for this interruption.

D'accord. So he did write one or two amusing little fables about the injustice, inequality and hypocrisy around him. But you can't exactly call him a revolutionary, can you? I don't remember him ever calling on fleeced sheep, and milked-dry

cows and goats, or ill-treated beasts of burden like carthorses, mules and donkeys to rise up against their fat cat exploiters. And even though some were headed off in 1789, what did this change for these poor exploited creatures? Rien! It simply left the field open for the big bad bourgeois wolf to come out of the woods and exploit changing political, social and economic circumstances by creating a de-animalizing system enabling him to amass colossal fortunes through the pitiless subjugation of fellow creatures, young and old, male and female, forced to spend their lives labouring for a pittance in conditions that even a dung beetle would have turned his feelers up at in disgust. Non! This fable is yet one more pernicious, propagandist attempt to further the illusion that the only future for the animal world lies in a *laissez-faire*, capitalist system founded on the false virtues of hard work, free enterprise and competition. In reality, these only serve to produce a world where creatures like ants and cicadas are divided by conflict, exploitation and inequity. Shouldn't it be the very opposite? Shouldn't it be our noble aim to build a society of insects and animals (including fishes) united in fraternity, equality, and justice?

And isn't it yet one more indictment of the iniquitous society we live in that it produces creepy little crawlers like the ant who can be so hard-hearted as to turn a hungry, defenceless brother insect away to perish of cold and starvation? I mean, even if she doesn't believe in lending, she could at least have *given* him a few grains to keep the wolf from the door. But wouldn't anyone with a modicum of insect feeling have asked him in, cooked him a nice hot meal washed down with a bottle of good wine, and then sat him in front of a roaring fire with a cup of coffee and a glass of cognac? I'm sure he'd have repaid her kindness by giving her an after-dinner chirp. And then they could have danced together... and why not more if they found they'd things in common? She could even have given him room and board

for a few months. Like this, he'd have been as snug as a bug in a rug until spring came, and he began to feel a bit chirpier.

You know what? A little bird told me that our heartless little creeper isn't content with being less than knee high to a grasshopper. She wants to be the cat's whiskers! I wouldn't be at all surprised if a compulsive worker like her wasn't planning to start her own business. Isn't it perfectly obvious that the only thing she's interested in is exploiting others for her own financial gain? I have a hunch that she'll call the poor cicada back – not because she's relented (inhuman slave-drivers like her give nothing away), but because she wants to propose a deal. Telling the cicada to run off and dance was just a foxy ploy to put pressure on him. She's going to offer to give him one or two grains provided he works for her in return! Can you imagine it? What gets my goat is that she'll pay him chickenfeed to do the donkey work – long, anti-social hours, mindless tasks, infernal production cadences in freezing conditions! And a ruthless capitalist crawler like her would have no qualms about telling a hapless cicada worker that the slightest pay rise will put the future of her company in danger. What's more, she's already shown she'd have no scruples about kicking him out in the middle of winter to catch his death of cold if things didn't go as well as planned. She'd even have the nerve to justify this by telling him it was all due to the economic situation – even when she's still making huge profits! What a load of bullshit! He'll be led a dog's life and she gets the lion's share! Do you call that justice? It's nothing more than slavery! But what choice has he got? Mind you, is it all that surprising? We all know what her kind do to aphids! And then, in two shakes of a lamb's tail, she'll be establishing colonies all around, and hiring other harmless, sun-loving insects such as grasshoppers, crickets, weevils and bark beetles, to name just a few.

You know, I can't help thinking that a nice little job working for the state would suit our cicada down to the ground: a twenty hour week, three months' holiday every year

with winter breaks in the sun, a reasonable salary with automatic annual increments, pleasant working conditions, total job security, good social and health protection, early retirement with a decent pension. And why couldn't he be released from his normal duties every summer to chirp the months away for the general benefit of all? I mean, a progressive society must reserve an important place for culturally-oriented activities of this kind. What you've got to realize is that insects like the cicada are artists. So, don't talented singers like him have a vital creative role to play? Don't they enrich the world in which we live? Oughtn't we, therefore, to provide them with the means to survive when times are hard? Isn't it simply scandalous that in a so-called civilized land of milk and honey like ours, magnificent chirpers like him should be left to die in misery and indifference?

Vous savez, the trouble with the dog-eat-dog society we live in is that future employment is totally unpredictable. It's just a rat race where unforeseeable market forces reign supreme, leading inevitably to a self-perpetuating class system where the wealth is always distributed in favour of predatory ants, preying mantas, wily foxes, scavenging hyenas, bloodthirsty wolves, cruel sharks, vicious piranhas and their likes, to the detriment of poor, exploited creatures such as sheep, donkeys, cows, chickens who wouldn't hurt a fly! What we need is an animal revolution putting control of production means in the paws of a popular animal state. You see, when the state is in control it can programme and manage economic changes in a rational and, above all, caring way by compensating for the disastrous effects these could have on the lives of the ordinary cicada on the branch, and by making sure that the wealth goes to those who really create it. And shouldn't it be our noble dream to create a classless animal society where lambs, calves, chicks, lion and tiger cubs, not forgetting tadpoles, can grow up together happy in the knowledge that there is total equality among all species of

animal life? There are those who say it isn't in the nature of lion and lamb to live harmoniously together. What a load of cow flap! All I can say is that we must educate them to change. What's more, while on the subject of education, I'd build one or two camps well up in the north where bourgeois ants can learn what real hard work is all about, and be taught to labour for the collective good!

And isn't it yet one more reason we should rid ourselves of our present society that cicadas and insects like him are condemned to perish of cold and starvation in winter, while tens of thousands of anthills have well-stocked, fully-furnished chambers which remain unoccupied, simply because the rent demanded by their owners is far too high? Isn't it scandalous that the survival of these poor, innocent creatures should depend solely on the generosity of fellow animal creatures?

FTT: My Frog is here certainly referring to what has now become an institution in France: *les Restaurants du Coeur* (literally 'Restaurants of the Heart'). In 1985 Coluche, a popular comedian and film actor (killed in a motorcycle accident in June 1986), came up with the idea of founding a canteen to provide hot meals for the down-and-outs in Paris. His gang of show business friends (*les enfoirés* – 'the silly twits', as he affectionately called them) together with some sporting personalities also promised to do all they could to help. However, what was considered at the time as being a temporary measure now seems to be here to last: for today this non-political, non-religious organisation which started with some 5,000 benevolent helpers now counts more than 50,000 specially-trained volunteer workers, and the number of meals provided has increased inexorably every year from 3,000 at the beginning to more than 100 million at the time of writing. *Les Restos du Coeur*, as they are popularly known, are present in many French

towns (and even in Belgium and Germany) and, as my frog points out, are mainly financed by donations from the general public. The French State also participates indirectly by allowing a percentage of the amount donated to be deducted from taxable income, and the European Union also contributes. Faithful to the commitment of their leader, les enfoirés also provide a significant contribution by regularly organising concerts and recording albums, the proceeds of which go integrally towards funding the charity. Since inception, les Restos du Coeur have considerably extended their field of activity, and now provide accommodation, distribute meals in winter directly to those on the street, give advice and help on social insertion, supply destitute young mothers with advice on suitable food for their babies and, in a fight against illiteracy, even organise educational workshops.

Surely, a simple way to get them off their freezing, wind-swept winter branches would be for this empty accommodation to be requisitioned by the state, and then placed freely at the disposal of cicadas so that they have a roof over their heads, and ample provisions to last them through the winter? And don't they have a right to have a whale of a time now and then, like everybody else? Why shouldn't they be able to throw a party and have a chirp together? If a landlady ant complains they're making too much of a rasp, or because they've had a drink or two, well that's too bad. Profiteering creatures of her species can't always have it their own way.

And as for all those poor little mites creeping in from abroad, all I can say is that our country must continue to live up to her proud reputation of being a sanctuary for those escaping persecution, the ravages of war, or simply looking for a place in the sun. Isn't it our duty to welcome and provide acceptable living conditions for these unfortunate

creatures? Surely, this simply adds to the entomological diversity of a nation. Those bulldogs who claim they're taking the jobs of native animals and insects are barking up the wrong tree. And don't make me croak my sides sore by asking who's going to pay for all this. Those filthy rich ants and their ilk can easily afford another tax or two. After all, it's only justice they pay their fair share. Did you know that one company-owning queen ant who inherited the largest fortune in the land is so stinking rich that, if she invested all her capital at the modest rate of 3%, she would have a monthly income of around 50 million euros? That's the equivalent of what 40,000 cicadas earn on the minimum salary! And yet they still have the nerve to ask where all the money will come from!

It just goes to show what moth-eaten ideas our ant has got when she says she doesn't believe in borrowing. Can you imagine it in this day and age? Not only would she pay her cicada worker peanuts, but she'd also be against him treating himself to some of the essentials of our technological age: a laptop, a cell phone or a Blackberry, for example. And why not a few nice, trendy, designer clothes, while we're at it? Hasn't a cicada got just as much right as an ant to get a bit of enjoyment out of life? I'm sure she'd even object to him having a credit card! As for him getting into debt, would it really be his fault? Aren't artless little insects like him an ideal prey for sly fox credit companies, vulture-like bankers and wolfish supermarkets? I mean, don't they tempt us with so many offers of credit that it's impossible for these poor creatures to resist? It's only when insects are up to their feelers in debt that they realize they've fallen into a carefully laid trap. Shouldn't society protect them from this? What these sharks don't seem to realize is that they've got duties as well as rights. Before lending money, it's up to them to make sure the borrower can pay the loan back. And if he can't, then surely it's the lender's fault, and the debt should be automatically cancelled? With all the money they make they're

rich enough to afford it anyway. And here again, ants should be made to pay more taxes and social contributions, too, so that the state can help sun-loving insects keep their feelers above the water. What a crazy, upside down world we live in!

How reassuring it is to know that the *CLAW* (*Confederation of Insect and Animal Workers*) labours tirelessly in defence of our working rights. There's nothing like a strike or two (preferably just before holidays) to let these ants know they can't colonise us completely. Ant propaganda has it that strikes like this are getting more and more unpopular. These are, of course, bourgeois lies. Even though they may cause slight inconvenience to animals in general, they all flock to our cause. For what matters above all is that they hit the ant where it hurts the most – his pouch. And we also have at our disposal something you stick-in-the-kennel English bulldogs would do well to follow: that wonderful, typically froggy expression of direct democracy: the street demonstration. The media also come to our help in winter, and the T.V. evening news never fails to show poor cicadas huddled in blankets on their branches, succumbing to cold and starvation, while the rich ant is a tucked up inside his hill, his chambers piled high with food. How right they are in revealing this profound injustice to all!

Fortunately, we can always count on that protest singer, Johnny Lark, to fly to our assistance. Johnny's got his own recording studio in his villa overlooking the bay of Saint-Tropez. It makes it so much easier for him to compose, record and release a song in next to no time at all. While we were on holiday on the Riviera last August we drove up to have a look at his pad. Our bulldog didn't like it, but personally I couldn't help giving a croak of delight. And you know what? He even gave us a friendly wave and smile as he flew past in his pink Bentley Continental GT Speed Convertible. That's what I like about Johnny. Not only does he have a heart of gold, but he's never forgotten he came from a modest egg. And you can always rely on him to

produce a great number defending poor exploited insects. His latest rap song *Piss off Ant, You Money-Grubbing Creep* has just got to be one great hit in France. He's not like your English and American singers who have no political awareness. All they're after is lining their pockets.

That investigative journalist of repute, Frank Ferret is also on our side. At the moment he's conducting an enquiry into our ant's boyfriend, a Mr Red A. Ant. I don't want to condemn him at this early stage, but I do know for a fact that the 'A' of his middle name stands for Adolf. Frank has also found evidence to suggest that Mr Ant's father collaborated with the soldier ant Army of Occupation during the Second World War. What do they say about 'birds of a feather?'

And then we've got that renowned intellectual and philosopher, Professor I.M.A. Skunk, on our side, too. I can only recommend his inspirational study *Ants in Your Pants? The End is Nigh!* in which he pours boiling water on all plans by this scourge of Animalkind to colonize the fields and forests of our earth. I would also take this opportunity to mention his classical work, *Uncle Joe, Our Beloved Teddy Bear*, where he proves that accusations of carting millions of revisionist bourgeois parasites off to the *goulag* were yet one more foxy imperialist exaggeration, designed to discredit one of the animal world's greatest benefactors, along with a political, social and economic system representing our only hope for justice, equality and fraternity. As Professor Skunk so rightly points out, it was the profiteering ant who sowed the seeds of war between animal species, and this well before La Fontaine's time. The struggle goes on even more relentlessly today, and we can only begin to tread the path to a brave new world when cicadas, rabbits, deer, chickens, and countless other long-suffering creatures unite to throw off their chains and wipe ants, tarantulas, scorpions, jackals, not to mention ferocious *bulldogs*, off the face of our earth.

FTT: At this juncture, knowing my parts as well as I do, such emphatic allusion to the above-mentioned canine type would have caused angry growls to rise up into my right inner ear, leaving me in no doubt that my own English version of the breed was now straining at the leash to pick a bone with his froggy brother. And my doggy alter would certainly have barked up quite a different tree.

You know what? Even though La Fontaine was French I just can't agree with our frog when he says he was a parasite. I mean, for one thing doesn't a real parasite take everything and give nothing? You've got to be a bird-brained croaker to see this wasn't the case with La Fontaine. Didn't he give his Fables in return? What our slimy hopper doesn't seem to understand is that a country needs to foster a positive image of itself. So, wasn't the money granted to gifted poets and playwrights well spent in that this helped to promote French culture, taste and refinement in the eyes of the rest of the world? And didn't the luxury displayed by King Lion and his court further an image of grandeur and success? Let's face it, who's interested in misery and failure? But when I come to think of it, our frog understands this perfectly well. His so-called perfect commie states were no exception to the rule. Didn't they systematically pull a fast one on us in the field of sport by forcing their greyhounds to swallow performance-improving drugs simply to further the international prestige of their country as well as the so-called superiority of collectivism?

And I couldn't agree more with the moral of our fable. I mean, you've got to be as blind as a bat not to see that life's full of ups and downs, and that sooner or later a rainy day will come. So, doesn't an animal with a bit of common sense make provisions for this by working like a dog and putting something by? Even squirrels know this. If we only live for the moment and don't prepare for the hard times which will

inevitably come ... well, that's just too bad. It's nobody else's fault but our own! We must pay the price. It's as simple as that. Heaven helps those who help themselves, that's what I say!

FFT: Here my bulldog is certainly alluding to another of the fables he and his brothers read together: *The Carter Who Got Stuck in the Mud*. This fable is one of the few not featuring animals, and tells of a carter who, while driving a cartload of hay along a muddy track, gets hopelessly stuck in the axle-deep mire, far from any help. Beside himself with rage, he rants and raves, cursing the holes, the mud, his horses, the hay cart and even himself – all to no avail. Finally, in desperation, he begs the Heavens, in the person of that strong man of Greek mythology, Hercules, to help him.

'If you were strong enough to carry out *The Twelve Labours* then you can get me out of this mess!' he implores.

Immediately, a voice booms down from on High telling him that he will lend a helping hand provided the carter himself does something to solve his problem. The God then invites him to have a look at what is stopping the cart from moving, and suggests he should start by clearing away the thick mud clinging to the wheels. Next, he tells him to take his pickaxe, break up a rock and fill in the ruts with the rubble.

'Have you done this?

'Yes, I have.'

'Right, now I'll help you. Take your whip and give your horses a lash.'

'Oh, I can't believe it, my cart's moving!'

'You see! Your horses had no problem pulling you out of the mud. Heaven helps those who help themselves!'

Not only does Heaven help those who help themselves, but it should punish those who don't! Is this the case in our day and age? Not in the least! In fact, it's the opposite! They're actually rewarded! Our chirper friend seems to think you can live for the moment without a thought for the future, and then when the hard times come those who've had the foresight to anticipate a rainy day should bail him out! And what takes the biscuit is that our frog agrees - in the name of some half-baked, topsy-turvy principle he calls *animal brotherhood*. But I'm not fooled. It's not because I'm an English bulldog that I'm stupid. What he's *really* saying is that the irresponsible should be subsidized by the responsible. He's got bats in his belfry! I mean, what our croaker is trying to get us to swallow is that it's not the cicada's fault if he's a lazy, good-for-nothing layabout who's never done an honest day's work in his life and doesn't intend to start: it's the way he's made; it's his insect background; he's a head-in-the clouds artist; it's the type of society we live in; it's even the fault of the ant! In short, he's a victim - everybody and everything's to blame, except him. Come off it! How ridiculous can you get! If he thinks I'm going to fall for that he's flogging a dead horse! You know, the ant's quite right when she sends him away with a flea in his ear. I'd have seen him off, too. I may be accused of being a hard-hearted bulldog but I believe she's doing him a favour. Perhaps this'll bring him down to earth and next summer he'll pull his proboscis out and think a bit more about the future - if he makes it through the winter, that is.

Mind you, there is one thing I agree with our frog about: it certainly is a crazy, upside-down world we live in! And if he and his hare-brained hopper mates had their way, it'd be even crazier! I mean, we don't have to look all that far around us on a summer's day to see work-shy cicadas and grasshoppers sunning themselves on a branch or sunbathing on a stalk of grass. And they're paid to do it! Where does the money come from? From honest, hard-working, tax-payers like our ant!

They must be chirping their sides sore! I personally know of a carpenter bee who's supposed to be so handicapped by a lifetime of tree tunnelling that she draws a state disability pension. But this doesn't prevent her from taking on regular, undeclared 'black' jobs doing exactly the same work with the same number of hours as she did before! And only the other day I heard of a French poodle who's been given a state attendance allowance because his arthritis is so bad that he's got to be helped out of his basket each morning. But this doesn't stop him from trotting out for long walks with his master; and when he sees a cat you should see him move! And I could go on. What does our froggy nitwit call this? Isn't this injustice, inequality and exploitation at the expense of the taxpayer? Not only do our lax, leftist systems of public assistance open the way to swindling and malingering on a huge scale, but they even encourage it. I mean, if you pay insects to sit on a branch and chirp all day long rather than work, it's hardly surprising they prefer ... to sit on a branch and chirp all day long!

You know, I can't help asking myself just how many of these so-called poor, exploited cicadas our frog goes croaking on about aren't themselves responsible for the plight they're in, or could at least do something about it! But aren't these bird-brained do-gooders creating a society where slothful animals and insects are now so used to being assisted that they consider it their due, and won't even lift a paw or feeler to help themselves? Wouldn't any animal in his right mind look up to an insect like our ant? She's taken charge of herself and gets on with the job without making a song and dance about it. And I'm sure that if she does set up her own business, an ambitious, enterprising, industrious little creature like her will make a go of it. After all, managing a business is not all that different from running your own life. Isn't it the job of a manager to foresee and make provisions for the growth and survival of his firm in face of pitiless competition, not to mention other conditions which he rarely controls, but

has always got to anticipate? And what's more normal that he should be rewarded for his efforts, foresight and willingness to take a risk or two? We need to spur on insects like our ant and not treat them like lice. After all, they create the wealth of a country and provide jobs for others. So, shouldn't they be left free to get on with things? Our frog wants to do the opposite. If he had his way the state would poke its snout into what's none of its business at all – that's if it didn't nationalize all private industry. It stands to reason that the fewer stupid laws you have the better you can work. What business is it of a froggy state to go croaking on about how much we must pay workers, how many weeks' annual holiday we must give them, the maximum number of hours they can work in a week? Isn't this for a company and its workers to decide between them? Private industry should be allowed to make its own decisions. We in the private sector, at least, are responsible enough to know what we're doing. And as for this business of guaranteeing a job for life... he's as mad as a March hare! What we need is exactly the opposite - a flexible system which lets us hire or lay off according to fluctuating market demands. And when it comes to trade unions, I'd have them all banned! All they're good at is calling everybody out on strike, organizing demonstrations, and holding managers and the ordinary insect in the field to ransom. It's incredible what they get away with in Frogland! Then, when a company has got to make redundancies or delocalize because their products aren't competitive any more, they're the first to protest! But when you get down to the nitty-gritty, they couldn't give two hoots about the working conditions of the workers they're supposed to represent. Take the union our frog croaks on about. It's controlled by a minority of slimy extreme leftist frogs (and, I suspect, a few warty toads) whose aim is to overthrow our democratic system and replace it by a totalitarian batrachian state where they can live like pigs in clover! And our frog is right again when he says that working for the state would suit the cicada down to the ground. I

mean, who would turn their muzzle up at a job with total security, automatic salary increases - regardless of whether you're competent or not, a maximum 30 hour week, long holidays, excellent social advantages, early retirement with a good pension. Just imagine the inefficiency! Private companies don't have half as many benefits and yet we subsidize these idle lizards. And even then, they're not satisfied with what they've got! They're always out on strike, or absent from work for some pathetic reason or other, and more often for no reason at all. And they're never taken to account for it. They even get paid for the days they're out on strike! I mean, in private industry they'd be given the push. It's what they deserve! It's not surprising it only takes half of us to do twice as much work. When it's a question of survival, as it always is in a private company, you pull out all the stops and find a solution. So, nobody should be allowed to feel safe in his job. Knowing you can never get the sack, and that you'll be paid the same as somebody who spends all day singing on a branch hardly encourages you to be as busy as a bee, now, does it? It's only animal nature.

You know what? I wouldn't be at all surprised if our cicada friend wasn't a bit on the queer side, if you see what I'm getting at. Aren't all insects with an artistic temperament a bit like this? Why can't he get down to some work like a real man! And now, they even want to be able to get legally married and adopt a family. What on earth are we coming to? It's against nature. I ask you, would the animal world have a future if we were all that way inclined? It's sinful, that's what I say. I mean, isn't it against the teachings of our Sacred Animal Book? The law should get tough with animals like this. And as for those convicted of rape, paedophilia and murder, we should take an even firmer stance. They should be stopped dead in their tracks once and for all!

In addition, our viscous hopper says we should welcome with open feelers any Tom, Dick or Harry of a brown spider, black cockroach or yellow mite who come crawling in, while

introducing even more laws and taxes for native insects... especially when they're ants. Isn't this typical? Just think of it. He finds it quite normal that all these foreign pests should be allowed to creep in without any form of control. If things are allowed to continue as they are we'll be infested. I mean, they don't have the same habits ... and they don't even try to adapt. And they breed like rats! What's more, they take the jobs of native ants – that's when they bother to look for a job at all. But let's face it, they don't really come to work. All they want is to live off family allowances, employment benefits and take advantage of our free health system ... or make a fortune by dealing in drugs and terrorizing honest, hardworking native animals. How scandalous can things get! Surely we must fight to preserve our national identity and culture from this vermin. They should be made to adapt to us and not the opposite. That's what we have to do where they come from! You know if things are allowed to go on like this there won't be a native ant's face to be seen anywhere in fifty years' time! We'll be foreigners in our own country! Our croaker calls this 'cultural diversity.' According to him it's enriching. I've never heard so much frog crap in all my life! I call it 'cultural perversity!' We should put a stop to all this before it's too late. All immigration should be halted, and all foreign insects and animals found guilty of breaking our laws should be made to serve their sentence, and then be sent back where they came from. I mean, all this leftist hogwash about unfair double punishment. What next! It's exactly what they deserve. What's more, he goes rasping on about heartless landlord ants who refuse to rent unoccupied chambers to cicadas and illegal immigrant crawlers. But can you blame them? When you do rent them a room, they're too bone idle even to do a spot of cleaning now and then. Even a cockroach would do more. All they can think about is sitting on their bums all day and throwing wild chirping parties during the night – paid for, of course, by public money. And once they're in, you can't get them out – even when they

don't pay the rent! But, of course, it's never their fault - it's always the filthy rich landlord ant who's to blame. Can you imagine it? It certainly is a topsy-turvy world!

And when it comes to lending and borrowing, hasn't our ant got it right again? The trouble is it's always the same story. Cicadas think they're entitled to everything without lifting a feeler to earn it. They get into debt, never for once stopping to think whether they'll be able to pay the loan back. Then, when the day of reckoning comes, they expect others to pay what they owe. And you know what? It actually works! It's responsible insects like the ant who've got to help them out! Once more, it's not the cicada's fault. It's the fault of our capitalist society! It's the credit companies and banks who're to blame! I mean, if you can't afford something you just don't have it. What's to stop him from saying no? It's as simple as that. Anyway, that's the way I was trained from being a puppy, and that's the way I'll stay. You can't blame the lenders. After all, they're only doing their job. You've got to have the brains of a nit not to see that an interest rate of 1.5% per month means 18% per year. Isn't it up to the cicada to read the small print at the bottom of the contract? There's nothing illegal about all this. Just where are we going? In the past it was the cicada who went to prison. Tomorrow, it'll be the ant. Isn't it about time we got back to some good, honest, old-fashioned values once and for all?

You know what? Our slimy little frog can't pull the wool over my eyes when he goes on about wiping capitalist ants off the face of this earth, and creating a world of justice, equality and brotherhood. You can trust a bulldog like me to smell a rat. He doesn't really live in the cloud cuckoo land he'd like us to think. When you get down to the nitty-gritty, his so-called ideals are motivated in good part by nothing more than plain, down-to-earth jealousy of enterprising insects like our ant who work hard, are willing to take a risk or two, and are well on their way to making a success of their lives. The real reason he wants to destroy the capitalist system is not because

it's unjust, but because deep down he knows he's a failure in it. At bottom, he couldn't give a rabbit's fart for justice, equality and brotherhood, and even less for a cicada. He simply wants to use him and nit-brained insects like him who wouldn't say boo to a goose to bring about an animal revolution and establish a collectivist regime where he'd be the boss. And if he thinks I can't see this ... well he's betting on the wrong bulldog! He's a wolf in frogs' clothing, that's what he is! *He* wants to be the bees' knees. What he's really looking for is power of life and death over others. His aim is to establish a system of totalitarian government where a single, self-perpetuating frog species controls all economic, social and political activity, where free elections are unheard of, corruption, hawk-like police surveillance and denouncement are omnipresent, worker bees get the same treatment as sloths, private ownership is forbidden, and he doesn't have the slightest scruples about carting millions of hard-working ants off to prison colonies, simply because they commit the heinous crime of not thinking the same as he does! And don't give me this cow flap about his beloved teddy bear. We all know what a bloodthirsty shark he was! What he really wants is to be like him! He wants to be the big fat bullfrog who's more equal than the rest!

FTT: It would certainly have been around this stage that a series of head-splitting barks and rasping croaks would have left me, the integrated François Théodore Thistlethwaite, in no doubt that a violent red and blue colour clash was now taking place inside. And I am sure my wise owl would have flown to the rescue by insisting that an end should now be put to our fable of the Frog and Bulldog, and that the time had now come for both to re-integrate the controlled, tri-part configuration of their host. Before bringing the curtain down on this act, however, I couldn't help wondering how La Fontaine himself would have responded to the antagonistic

political colourings my dissociated pair have lent to his fable. I am sure he would have forgiven me for imagining his probable reactions in a modern version, entitled *The Frog and the Bulldog*, the final lines of which I have placed as an epigraph to this chapter.

Chapter Seven

The Rule of the Exception

If to every rule there is an exception, there must be an exception to every rule. But even if there is an exception to every rule, there can be no exception to the rule that to every rule there is an exception.

François Théodore Thistlethwaite

It might be thought that *les citoyens* of a nation which produced a universal declaration, proudly proclaiming to mankind that the individual's right to liberty was limited by his duty to grant others an equal right to the same, would be particularly respectful of the rule. In reality, there is no other country in the world where everybody does his best to be an exception to the rule. As my English part points out, some explanation, at least, may be found in a diverging perception of what constitutes a nation. When an Englishman speaks of his country, he simply makes an addition: the nation *adds up* to around 60 million inhabitants - all of whom are subject to the same common rules. When the more complicated Frenchman speaks of *la nation*, he makes a division and then a subtraction: the country is *divided* into 60 million souls - each of whom is subject to the same common rules - *minus* himself.

For my scholar, it all boils down to a question of culture: the more disciplined Anglo-Saxon perceives the fulfilment of all in terms of general conformity to rules. The more individualistic Gallic, on the other hand, views the fulfilment of each through opposition to rules. One seeks consummation by adherence to the organized whole; the other is convinced this may only be attained by individual resistance to the whole, the regulatory structures of which can

only stifle those highly-prized attributes of intelligence, creativity and resourcefulness in so much as they inevitably impersonalize, standardize and control. And often, when confronted with Thistlethwaite's typical English obedience to the rule, my Frenchman lets out a howl of scornful protest: 'Mais qu'est ce qu'il est bête et discipline, celui- là!' **(FTT: How stupid and disciplined that one is!)** – in echo of a tenaciously-held Gallic view that systematic conformity to pre-established rules is a serious enough denial of one's own individuality as to constitute a deplorable weakness of mind; and since both disciplined people are stupid and stupid people are disciplined, the intelligent, creative individual must always distinguish himself from the sheep-like crowd by constantly endeavouring to grant himself exception to the rule.

Nothing demonstrates more this divergence between French and English than their attitudes towards that rule of 'first in, first out' which normally regulates the act of queuing: for what will unleash boundless fury on one side of the Channel is single-mindedly pursued on the other. And so much is this the case that my middleman has proposed we devote an entire future chapter to a comparative study of this spontaneous tendency of the English to position themselves in an impeccable line, and that, equally instinctive, of their Gallic neighbours to reduce it to little more than a disorderly cluster.

FTT: No sooner had I got this last sentence onto my computer screen than a series of loud rumbles (coming from somewhere between the cecum and ascending colon, as far as I could tell) made me embarrassingly aware that someone was giving vent to his disgust at this common Gallic practice. A confirmatory voice then rang up into my skull, sternly demanding that its owner be granted an active say in bringing to the notice of the civilized world other common everyday situations in

which ‘the damned Frogs think they’ve got a right to do what they like.’ I then heard what could only have been my arbitrator whispering delicately into both left ear and right that he hoped François wouldn’t be offended, but by acceding to my Englishman’s above request he was giving his French brother the opportunity to prove the opposite to what was being alleged of his *compatriotes*. Had my Englishman been in possession of both right arm and left, I am sure the two would have been held aloft in unabashed triumph.

Thank you for the confidence you have placed in me, gentlemen. At least you can rely on *me and my countrymen* to play it by the rule – especially when it comes to such a vital matter as queuing. I mean, isn’t it disgraceful they don’t have the elementary decency to wait their turn? Just thinking about makes my blood boil! I’d like to state here and now I’ll give my unconditional support to our middleman’s motion to devote a complete chapter to the subject. I only hope I’ll be given a full say.

Now, after lengthy, intimate co-habitation with a Frenchy, I’d like to make one thing quite clear: the Frogs are not systematically against rules and regulations. Ask our in-house Frog, for example, if he thinks these are necessary and he’ll reply without the slightest hesitation, ‘Oui, bien sûr!’ But then he’ll spoil it all by adding one of the most frequently-heard expressions (along with ‘merde’) in the French language. This expression is ‘en principe’. Now it might be thought that these two innocent-sounding words mean something like ‘in principle’ or ‘in theory’. Don’t be fooled. In this land where nothing is what it appears to be, what they *really* mean is ‘except for me’. For Frogland is probably the only country on our planet where there’s such a yawning gap between what should be and what really is, and where ‘en principe’ (and sometimes ‘normalement’) are used so often by so many as a

way of easing yourself out of doing the dutiful things you're convinced others should do.

Take, for instance, paying taxes. Some time ago our businessman neighbour, Monsieur Martin, was had up for cooking his company's books. He received, of course, a hefty fine. 'C'est tout à fait normal,' our Frog commented, 'tout le monde doit respecter la loi ... en principe!' (**FTT: It's quite normal, everybody must abide by the law ... in theory!**). And then, you know what? A few days later he informed us that our host, FTT, was paying too much income tax, and suggested we take one or two liberties with his returns. He'd found an infallible way! Can you imagine it? Fortunately, Théodore wouldn't hear of it.

The same convoluted reasoning is applied when it comes to driving. When you ask an Englishman if he thinks the rules of the *Highway Code* should be respected by all, he'll reply, 'Yes, of course!' And that's the end of that. Ask our Frenchman if he thinks the *Code de la Route* should apply to all and his reply will be, 'Oui, bien sûr! ... en principe.' And when our neighbour, Monsieur Martin, gets a speeding fine, he'll tell you it's perfectly normal that this type of offence should be severely punished. But I'm well placed to see this doesn't stop *him* from propelling us from journey start to finish in a time normally associated with the practice session of a Formula One Grand Prix. And when he gets us a fine, you should hear him go raving on about the unfairness and imbecility of the law which penalizes good drivers like him who are a danger to nobody!

FTT: The reasons invoked by some French drivers for claiming exception to the *Code de la Route* can not only be highly imaginative but amusingly endearing. A policeman friend of a friend tells the story of one motorist he stopped for speeding through a village, well above the legal limit, one hot August Sunday around noon. In reply to the policeman's remonstrations, the

miscreant pleaded indulgence by explaining that his excessive speed was due to the fact that he and family were heading for a local picnic spot, and he didn't want the food and drink in the boot to get too warm!

Now, our neighbour, Monsieur Martin's elevated status as the biggest employer in Saint-Clou gives him the idea that he's been personally granted prerogatives which the ordinary mortal doesn't share. He seems to think that getting his bum in the driving seat and his hands on the wheel give him full license to release the brakes on the Fangio which lies in all Frenchmen. And you know what? He more than often gets away with it!

Take what happened the other day. Now the other day I played a round of golf with Monsieur Martin at a course located some distance from Saint-Clou. He insisted, of course, on us going in his new sports car. Coming home in the evening we were just beginning our descent into Saint-Clou when we had the misfortune to fall into a police speed camera ambush. I use the word 'ambush' because only the tip of the camera was visible: the rest, together with its two kepi-topped operators, was concealed behind a wall. Usually, in this type of situation, in a rare display of unenforced solidarity, oncoming motorists will flash their headlights to warn fellow drivers of the presence of the common enemy ahead. But implacable fate had decreed that at this time and place we should be alone on the road, and we could only resign ourselves to the sight of the blue-clad arm of the law being raised.

Now a blue uniform having much the same effect on a Frenchman as a red rag on a bull, Monsieur Martin could have been expected to give a furious snort. But it was with the docility of a sheep being led to transformation into mutton that he allowed us to be directed into a lay-by, where the hand at the end of the blue-clad arm proceeded to write out a fine. Strangely, Monsieur Martin took the fine with a

broad smile on his face, and a polite ‘*merci beaucoup*’ on his lips. After tucking it into his pocket, he tucked himself back into the driving seat, we took off again and set a course - though at a less supersonic speed than before - for home. On touchdown, he taxied into his parking bay, pulled out his mobile and called the Town Hall, where he asked to speak to his friend *Monsieur le Maire*. To cut a short story even shorter, Monsieur le Maire had a word with *Monsieur le Commissaire* (FTT: the police station superintendent), Monsieur le Commissaire had a word with the policeman, the fine was reduced to confetti-sized proportions and promptly consigned to the ignominious oblivion of the wastepaper bin. And since one good turn deserves another, Monsieur Martin despatched a case of wine (nothing exceptional, just honest, straightforward claret) to Monsieur le Commissaire - to which he attached a note expressing his sincere appreciation for the valuable job he and his men were doing in reducing dangerous speeding in and around Saint-Clou!

FTT: As Thistlethwaite points out, in this land of equality some are far more equal than others. Not all that long ago this kind of arrangement (which, of course, only concerns those among my readers willing to believe it) was so endemic that, according to official estimations, one in three traffic fines which saw light of day (not counting those aborted before delivery) were condemned to premature demise. Today, we are being led to believe that the introduction of a totally computerized system which automatically processes driving offenses, and notifies offenders by post, with no human intervention, now provides an effective vaccine. The Englishman in me doesn’t believe one word of it.

On another occasion I was with Monsieur Martin who was hurtling along, well on his way to reaching the speed of sound, when we observed a small village approaching

through the viewfinder. Not being equipped with parachute-assisted braking, a split second later we found ourselves in the middle of a village, still at a speed well in excess of the authorized limit. This was confirmed by the sudden appearance of a kepi-topped head on a blue-uniformed body to which were attached two blue-sleeved arms. As we came nearer the right one was hoisted vertically, while the left was extended horizontally in the direction of a small parking area where we could observe - not without some consolation - several hands of the law engaged in writing out fines to two or three furious-looking motorists. As we reached a final halt and the engine was being shut down, a policeman marched over and gratified us with a smart salute. Suddenly recognizing Monsieur Martin, he greeted him with an embarrassed, 'Ah, Monsieur Martin, c'est vous! Bonjour, monsieur. Comment allez-vous?'

Monsieur Martin replied that, even though he could have been worse, he would have felt considerably better had he not had the misfortune to find himself in the predicament he was presently in. The policeman cast a furtive look around, opened his *carnet*, and proceeded to write out the fine - with the ball point of his pen still retracted! On being handed the blank contravention, Monsieur Martin's face produced an appreciative smirk, the eye of the law gave a collusive wink, the arm of the law supplied a parting salute, and we took off again. As we were accelerating to cruising speed, Monsieur Martin explained it was his policy to encourage the warmest possible relations with the local constabulary through liberal contributions to the police benevolent fund, together with the generous bestowal on the policemen themselves of products manufactured by his company - namely sunglasses - the design and quality of which made them an object of desire for all.

'Vous savez, Seestleswaite,' he remarked, 'it's one way of showing my gratitude for the job they're doing. I mean, some drivers are just a public danger!'

In all fairness, however, it must not be imagined that the blue-clad body of the law grants itself the right to grant exception to the rule solely out of self interest. For even though a French policeman's heart is enveloped in a blue uniform, this doesn't mean its strings can't be pulled. Our astute businessman neighbour seems to be well aware of this. On another occasion, Monsieur Martin invited us to dine out with him and his wife at a Michelin-starred restaurant located some distance from Saint-Clou. Now Monsieur Martin's fondness for the pleasures of the table sometimes drives him beyond those boundaries which reason ... and the law admit. And as fate would have it, on our way back home we were unlucky enough to encounter a road blockade where several bodies of the law were busily engaged in stopping motorists, and inviting them to give a sample of their breath. Though it was quite dark, the breathalyzer revealed as plain as day that Monsieur Martin had had more than one too many, and he was invited to step out of his car.

'Just my luck,' whimpered Monsieur Martin, '... driving home from a restaurant ... such a lovely evening ... first time in ages ... wife's birthday, you know ... and now this has spoilt it all! You a family man, officer?'

'All right,' replied the mouth of the law, 'Disappear quickly before I change my mind!'

'You know, that's the big difference between you English and us,' he commented afterwards. 'You think we must adapt to the law. We think the law must adapt to us!'

My English readers might think that those in authority go to active lengths to cool that urge which drives the French motorist on in his permanent quest to set a new land speed record on the public highway. They would be quite right. My English readers might also think that those in high authority themselves lead the way. Here they would be hopelessly wrong. For this would be to forget that in a land where the exception reigns supreme, nothing is the same as anywhere else. But what, after all, is more understandable that those in

high government office should grant themselves the privilege of jet propulsion when they are safe in the knowledge of being 10,000 metres above the law?

This was brought home to me that very first time we took our car over to France. On arriving in Paris, what is more normal that we should have decided to spend an hour or two seeing the sights? As I was driving us gently down the *Champs-Élysées*, however, we were rudely interrupted by a police motorcyclist who suddenly appeared from out of the blue, drew up alongside and, incredibly, shook all three of us out of our skin by administering a hefty, booted kick to the driving door - at the same time signalling by a most disagreeable gesture of hand that I should pull to one side. And then, before I knew it, a cavalcade of three dark-windowed limousines, blue gyro lights flashing, escorted by two more police motorbikes, zoomed by at supersonic speed, totally ignoring red lights, stop signs, continuous white lanes and bus lanes. Now, I could have been excused for thinking I was either dreaming or witnessing the filming of some action-packed movie where the public enemy number one was being chased to ground. But this was neither dream nor movie. This was the *Président de la République* on his way to work!

The confessions of a retired Presidential chauffeur provided further proof that, in Frogland, once you are at the wheel of state there's no brake on what you can do. Not only, he wrote in his *mémoires*, did he receive official instructions never to 'hang about' at red lights, stop signs or pedestrian crossings, but he also remembered one day in particular when he drove his boss from Paris to Metz (distance 310 kilometres) on the motorway at one of the busiest times of day in two hours flat, at speeds often in excess of 200 km/h. (the speed limit on French motorways is 130 km/h. He even admitted using his siren on several occasions in the middle of towns (presumably with Presidential approval) in order to attract the attention of 'sexy-looking blonds.'

Some months later the President's newly-elected successor declared that, as he was now in the driving seat, he was going to steer a much straighter line: not only would cars carrying or accompanying himself and members of his government no longer use gyro lights and sirens, but in future the Code de la Route would be unbendingly followed by ministers and their chauffeurs. His *Premier Ministre* even added that, 'from now on, the state, in matters of road safety, will play an exemplary role.'

A few weeks after, a popular motoring magazine decided to conduct a survey to determine whether the new government was as good as its word. In a scenario worthy of a spy film, two scooters (used alternately to avoid the risk of being spotted), each mounted by a reporter and photographer, discreetly shadowed government ministers over several days in their official movements through the metropolis to the *Assemblée Nationale*, the *Sénat*, inaugurations, television interviews etc., and all misdemeanours faithfully recorded. A mobile laser speed camera, identical to the type used by the French police, measured the extent of the transgression, and the same scale of fines and loss of licence points applied as for the ordinary citizen.

The driving force of the nation, the President of the Republic, though shadowed for only one day, did show promise. True to his word, his car idled patiently in traffic jams like everybody else, and neither gyro light nor siren was used. The only blot on the Presidential copybook was when his cavalcade (three limousines escorted by two police motorcyclists) blew a 50 km/h limit in a ring-road tunnel by 30 km/h. This lapse would have cost *Monsieur Tout-le-Monde* a fine of €135, and two licence points.

His Prime Minister didn't really set the example he had so faithfully promised. Over the ten-day period he was tailed the final result was: one red light jumped, one right of way refused and one continuous white line crossed – which would

have condemned *Monsieur Dupont* to €1,650 in fines ... and 11 points less.

The *Ministre des Transports* could also have carried himself off better. Having publicly declared that ‘simply respecting speed limits would save more than 3,000 lives per year,’ the road he followed was in tireless adherence to the principle: ‘You do as I say, but I do as I may.’ He managed to drive through two red lights, three amber lights, use a bus-only lane as well as commit three speeding offences more than 20 km.h in excess of the authorized limit. Not only would these misdemeanours have lightened the citizen’s wallet by a total of €2,250, but would have deprived him of licence for an appreciable length of time.

In all impartiality, the efforts of the *Garde des Sceaux* (**FTT: Minister of Justice**) couldn’t even be described as fair and, had she been *Madame Dupont*, she would certainly have been courting disaster. The verdict on the nation’s top judge was: guilty of jumping three red lights, crossing one continuous white line, and taking a one-way street – in the wrong direction. Her results (estimated, as the pace she set was too hot for the shadowing scooters) would have meant a sentence of €3,200 in fines as well as a lengthy licence suspension.

Surprisingly, these revelations, though widely publicized by the media, neither raised many eyebrows nor had any great lasting effect, and another similar survey conducted some time later produced very much the same results.

FTT: It might be thought that one of the motoring magazine’s aims is to encourage its readers to respect the rules of the *Code de la Route*, and that surveys of this nature are designed to shame those at the wheel of state into setting an example for the rest of the nation to follow. This is not wholly the case. Though the journal delights in catching policemen with their pants down, too, (it frequently publishes photos of police cars parked

by no-parking signs, on motorway hard shoulders, or in spaces reserved for the disabled), its attitude to official non-example is nearer one of amused resignation than outright condemnation. In addition, there is more than a hint of 'If they can get away with it, why can't we?' For not only does it go to some lengths to explain the legal dodges you can use to get out of paying motoring fines, but it plays an active part in encouraging that French national sport of reducing travel time at a velocity normally limited to the realms of ballistic science, by publishing every week a full page map updating the exact location of every fixed speed camera in France.

This same affliction which consists in demanding that others observe what you don't observe yourself can also be apparent in the situations of everyday life where the rules of common courtesy require that we show a minimum of consideration for others. The other day I had an appointment with my bank manager. Parking our car neatly within the lines of the one remaining parking space in front of the bank building, I bought a ticket, placed it carefully behind the windscreen and stepped inside. On emerging twenty minutes or so later I was dumbfounded to see that someone had had the bright idea of double-parking his vehicle alongside mine. As there was a car parked both in front and behind I was totally boxed in, and the only thing I could do was wait for the driver's return. When he did finally appear ten minutes later, I jumped us all out of the car and proceeded to castigate him in the most vigorous of terms.

'But where do you expect me to park?' he replied, mouth and eyes agape in what appeared to be genuine astonishment. When I pointed out that he could possibly have chosen one of the several free spaces located, admittedly 30 metres or so distant, his face took on an expression of vexed incomprehension. 'But I'm in a hurry!' he retorted. 'You know, some people can't wait two seconds!' Jumping into his

car, he slammed the door shut and sped off in a rubber-melting screech.

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What is more normal, then, that, in face of the non-example from above, the engine-room workers should consider themselves invested – albeit more modestly – with the same right to exception as those who are in command of the vessel of state? For even the modest *facteur* is firmly convinced that guaranteed employment with the all-powerful public service places him above the common mortal, allowing him, in all impunity, to apply his own special stamp to the Code de la Route. Take, for example, our own postman. Since our postman serves a number of surrounding villages as well as that part of Saint-Clou where we reside, what is more normal that he should have been provided with a post-office van? Now, it is evident that the stop-and-start nature of a van-driving postman's round deprives him of any significant latitude for speedy advancement. Consequently, the time needed to accomplish his daily labours depends less on the velocity he can extract from his van than the degree of proximity he can obtain between it and the citizen's mailbox. In short, his problem is one of parking. Astonishing as this might appear, parking in France is regulated by law, generally conceived to be applicable to all... en principe. For our van-driving postman grants himself the right to bring his vehicle to a halt on pavements, in the middle of roads, alongside other vehicles, by no-parking signs, and even in front of private drives (blocking them totally when he could have parked three or four metres to the left or right). Only the other morning I had a personal taste of this.

Now, our garage issues directly onto the street. As our Frenchy and Théodore were still half asleep, it was yours truly who opened the garage door, jumped us into the car and was just reversing out when, lo and behold, a yellow post-office

van appeared from nowhere and pulled up right behind me, making any further rearward progression impossible. Without so much as a glance in our direction the postman eased himself out, sauntered round to the back of his van, extracted a small parcel, and began strolling leisurely away. I sprang out immediately, loudly enjoining him to move his vehicle right away.

‘Two minutes!’ he replied, casually holding up a couple of fingers as he continued to stroll along.

Even though our Frenchy seemed ready to let him get away with it, I was certainly not. Losing what remained of my English phlegm, I proceeded to inform him, in the strongest possible terms, that if he didn’t shift his van immediately I would be in no way responsible for the consequences. It was with an ostentatious show of reluctance that he consented to comply.

It might, nevertheless, be thought that our postman’s self-granted right to exemption from the normal rules of parking is limited to his working hours. This is not at all the case. I often bring to our notice in the centre of town (François gives our shoulders a Gallic shrug while Théodore raises our eyes to Heaven) the same post-office van lodged in a disabled-person’s parking space, located in front of the café where its driver is in the habit of taking his after-work *apéritif*. And this daily transgression (which if committed by the ordinary mortal would be pitilessly sanctioned) is totally ignored by the two patrolling policeman (also state workers) who regularly pass that way.

It would, however, be a grave mistake to think that it is mainly those with power and influence who place themselves above the rule. In fact, the opposite is frequently the case. For in this land of equality where everyone seizes on the slightest pretext to be an exception, it is the driver of the more modestly-sized car who is guilty of some of the worst excesses, especially of speed – as if somewhere he considers that the egalitarian factor grants him full license to

compensate for his modest cubic capacity by a freer interpretation of the Code de la Route. And is it this same yearning for equality which inspires the muscle-propelled road-user?

We might be forgiven for thinking that the muscle-propelled road-goer does not share the same aspirations to air-born status as his motorized brother, and that his reduced dimensions, limited power and increased vulnerability keep wheels in permanent contact with the ground. In this land of total contradiction how could the opposite fail to be the case? Placing bum on saddle produces in the Frenchman an even greater inclination to fly through red lights and stop signs at a rate more appropriate to jet propulsion. For once mounted on his *petite reine*, the pedal-propelled road-goer's saddle becomes his throne: he is transformed into a modern-day Sun King of the Road, divinely invested with a regal precedence setting him even more above the rules than the combustion-engined commoner.

FTT: *La petite reine* = the little queen. Such is the deep affection in which the common velocipede is held by these egalitarian-minded guillotiners of royalty that it has been granted full sovereign status.

At no time is this more blatant than during those three July weeks when even the most occasional cyclist is convinced he has been invested with the right to imitate the exploits of a bunch of strangely-attired young men, bent on visiting the four corners of the country in the quickest possible time, via the most arduous routes on which the normal rules of the road have been suspended. In this respect, I distinctly remember an incident which happened one July day when I was driving us back home to Saint-Clou. I was half way round a roundabout when all of a sudden a fully-accoutred cyclist, bum up, head down, shot into view. Without so much as a glance to his left, he entered the

roundabout, pedalling so furiously that I was obliged to slam on my brakes to avoid a collision. On receiving an admonishing blast of my horn he stopped pedalling, eased his bum down, brought his head slowly up and, lifting his hands off the handlebars, proceeded to thrust a majestic *bras d'honneur* in our direction.

FTT: The *bras d'honneur* is the French equivalent of the Anglo-Saxon 'V' sign. My French readers may be interested to know that the English method of communicating strong disagreement consists in raising forefinger and middle finger in a V form with *the back of the hand* turned towards the offender. It must in no circumstances be confused with the Churchill-style victory sign where the same two fingers are used in a similar configuration but where the *palm of the hand* is shown. Being, in general, more expressive than the English, what is more natural that, as a general rule, the French should use the whole arm to signal a marked divergence of opinion rather than the two digits attached to its end? This rather curious technique consists in using one hand to tap the inside elbow of the other outstretched arm, the forepart of which is then raised stiffly, fist tightly clenched, in the direction of the object of one's wrath. Is it a sign of the times that a more compact, energy-saving variant is being more and more resorted to in the France of today? Even though slightly different versions do exist, the more common type of *doigt d'honneur* simply consists in raising a gently clenched fist, palm upwards, while at the same time lifting a rigid middle finger.

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In a free-market economy a basic commercial rule states that the supplier should do his best to satisfy the requirements of

the customer as obligingly and efficiently as possible and in preference to his own. In the land of the exception this same commercial rule also applies ... *en principe*. The infinite gap which exists in France between what should be and what is, was again brought home to me one Saturday morning when the need to ensure another week's survival obliged me to take the three of us all along to the only supermarket in Saint-Clou. As the items on our shopping list exceeded the carrying capacity of a hand-held basket, I made our way to the trolley storage area. Now, in order to persuade shoppers to bring their trolleys back to the correct location after use, those provided by the only supermarket in Saint-Clou are equipped with a coin-operated locking mechanism, along with a chain shackling them to the others. Being in possession of neither the required one euro coin nor a plastic substitute counter, I stepped us inside the supermarket and, as there was nobody at the information desk, headed us towards the nearest checkout. Here, a rather sour-looking, middle-aged lady seemed to be doing her best to let everyone know she was engaged in a job beneath her. Just as she was opening her till, I politely asked her if she could let me have a one euro coin for the two fifty cent ones I had in my hand.

'Ah non!' she snapped with a determined shake of her head.

'Mais pourquoi, madame ?' I enquired politely.

'Because I need all the change I've got!'

After giving my right cheek a vigorous pinch, a no-doubt French-inspired thought suggested we should let the matter drop there, go back to the information desk and patiently wait until somebody appeared. But, being a bulldog Englishman, I was determined to stand our ground. Mustering all my native self-control, I appealed to our checkout lady to reconsider her decision by pointing out that, since I was a regular customer, I was perhaps justified in thinking she should place my own requirements before her own. My argument fell as a seed on stony, desert ground. In a

final, desperate attempt to kindle a spark of commercial awareness, I asked if she didn't feel there might be some contradiction between her attitude and the banner hanging just above our heads, proclaiming in bold capital letters that ***CHEZ NOUS LE CLIENT EST ROI (FTT: HERE THE CUSTOMER IS KING)***. Her shoulders projected themselves upwards, while lower lip stretched itself downwards in that facial configuration which is commonly termed a Gallic shrug. I could muzzle myself no longer. Abandoning all restraint, I loudly declared that if I was not the recipient of the required coin within the following ten seconds, the arguments I had so fruitlessly presented to her would be brought directly to the ears of her boss. It was with undisguised bad grace that she complied.

After finally obtaining a trolley, I got down to the business of our shopping. Having a typically English sweet tooth, I wheeled us straight to the biscuit shelves. Here, a young lady was engaged in erecting a tall pyramid-like structure - presumably as part of a promotional display - composed of packets of the chocolate-coated digestives I'm especially partial to. Bringing our trolley to a halt next to her, I was just about to grab a couple when she called out in a tone of barely-concealed irritation, 'Mind you don't knock them all down. You know, it won't be *me* who'll put them all back up again!'

It must have been our Frenchy who bit our tongue and told me that *après tout* she was only doing her job and it would be better if we got out of her way; and since it was Saturday why didn't we treat ourself to some delicious mountain-cured ham as a starter for dinner that evening? It would go down well with a glass or two of light, dry Riesling. As, for once, we all agreed, I moved us over to the *charcuterie* counter.

The charcuterie counter at the only supermarket in Saint-Clou displays a tempting variety of cooked meats: *pâtés*, *saucissons*, *terrines*, sausages and hams. And it could only have been our Frenchy who dug me in the ribs and slyly whispered

that the young girl assistant behind was just as mouthwatering as the wares she was serving. But when I requested half a dozen slices of mountain-cured ham, cut thin, she gave a shake of her pretty little head. Would I do her a little favour by accepting the same ... in pre-packed form? She'd just spent a whole quarter of an hour stripping and cleaning the cutting machine and didn't really want to have to begin again.

I hastened to enquire whether the supermarket closing time was seven o'clock or a quarter to.

'Oui, vous avez raison,' she replied with the sweetest of smiles, 'mais, vous voyez, I'm meeting my boyfriend at half past seven. Since I need at least half an hour to get home and change, I cleaned the machine in advance so I can leave dead on seven. I'm sure you'll understand!'

I meekly settled for a wedge of modest *pâté de campagne* which she cut with an ordinary carving knife.

While I have no cause to doubt their technical competence, those who staff our garage in Saint-Clou show the same original approach to established commercial rule. Now I might have been excused for thinking that our purchase last year of a brand-new car from this same garage (the official agent of a well-known *marque*) ranked us among their better customers - with all the attentive commercial consideration this would normally imply. Well, once again, this might possibly be true ... *en principe*. A week ago, I took our car along to the garage for the first scheduled service, which included, of course, an oil-change. A few days later I received the invoice. Glancing through the listed supplies, I noticed a mysterious item *chiffons* (**FTT: rags**) at the bottom - to which the sum of 3,75 € had been attributed. Going along in person to pay, I asked for an explanation.

'Oh, that's what the mechanic used to wipe all the oil and grease from his hands,' the receptionist breezily replied. I paid up without a murmur.

But that was not the end of it. Two days later, I received a second bill to which a hand-written note was stapled. On the

original bill, it explained, there was a mistake: a medium-grade oil had been invoiced, whereas a high-grade one had, in fact, been used. Since the latter was, naturally, more expensive, the sum of 4,50€ was still owing – an amount I was summoned to settle without delay!

FTT: At this juncture, the burning sensation which I, the complete François Théodore Thistlethwaite, now felt invading my stomach was certainly my Frenchman's way of bringing it to my notice that he was having more and more difficulty digesting what his English brother was serving up, and that if he were allowed to continue much longer acute dyspepsia would certainly ensue. A soothing voice then murmured that, in the interests of all concerned, it was his opinion that we should now be thinking of bringing this chapter to an end. So, while he was meditating on something nicely neutralizing to administer by way of a conclusion, he was sure my Englishman would be fair enough to allow his French alter a brief word on the subject of exception to the rule. My head came slowly downwards in a reluctant nod.

Merci infiniment, mes chers frères. Vous savez, even though we French do sometimes take the liberty of allowing ourselves initiatives which may not be viewed in the most favourable of lights, especially by some, is it not sometimes necessary to be flexible in life? Your blind, unquestioning English obedience to the rule can sometimes turn against you, n'est-ce pas, Thistlethwaite? Has your part of our memory conveniently forgotten that unfortunate occurrence last *Noël*, which, I might add, would have been totally inconceivable, had I been in command? Allow me to refresh it for you.

Our *Rosbif* will certainly remember the 24 December last year when he drove us to the airport to take a flight to England where we were to spend Christmas and Boxing Day. I use the third person singular because he was, by default, in

almost total control. I say 'by default' because the prospect of overwhelming portions of rich, heavy Christmas pudding soon to be engulfing my part of our stomach (as well as the idea of pulling stupid crackers and wearing ridiculous paper hats) had caused me to withdraw almost entirely into myself, and Théodore to retire into solitary, ascetic meditation. On arriving inside the terminal building Thistlethwaite, who was eagerly leading the way, checked us in, and then marched us straight off to the passenger- screening entry gate. A security agent was posted at a desk in front. A screen behind him displayed two flights to destinations different from ours.

'I'm sorry, but you're too early!' he informed us, pointing to the screen. 'I can't let you through until your flight's displayed!'

It goes without saying that, had I been asked, I would have found a way of getting us through there and then. But our Englishman, as usual, insisted on playing it by the rule, and walked us unquestioningly away. Over the following hour, he frequently brought us back to the gate, only to note each time that the flight was still not displayed. Finally, since the scheduled boarding time was now past, and somewhere sensing that something might not be quite right, I ventured to suggest he ask if nothing was amiss.

'It's O.K. for your flight now,' was the agent's reply. 'You can go ahead through.'

Our Englishman proceeded to walk us through the scanning portal, submitted us to a body search, and finally deposited us in the boarding lounge – where we were informed to his considerable stupefaction (and my own heartfelt relief) that the plane had now finished boarding! Apparently there had been a problem with the flight display system, and the security agent had only been informed of this once he had sent us away. Consequently, passengers arriving after had been allowed to go through. And now, since no alternative flights were available, we were obliged to return

home (this time, I took the wheel) where I, at least, spent an excellent Christmas – *à la française!*

FTT: It was at this stage that the voice of my mediator pointed out with his usual diplomacy that, though he could never agree to the rule of the exception, he could only concur with his French brother in allowing the occasional exception to the rule. In any case, he considered it wise that this chapter should now be brought to a close. Before doing so, however, he insisted on thanking my exemplary Englishman for both his thoughts and anecdotes on the subject of French exception to the rule, while at the same time warmly congratulating my Frenchman who, by his respectful silence almost to the very last, has gone a considerable way towards proving that one Gallic, at least, can be an exception to the rule of the exception.

Chapter Eight

At the Wheel

I find the French to be crazy drivers. They have these little cars they drive at great speeds, over 70mph, on roads built for a horse and carriage, or just a horse! They tailgate at 80 mph and brake at the last moment.

An American tourist's first impressions of France *au volant*

It is yet one more paradox that a people who taught our world the principles of international diplomacy, and who attach such vital importance to the rules of polite behaviour and restrained elegance of speech should be given to such gross excesses of conduct and language once their *derrière* comes into contact with a driving seat. What, then, is more normal that my examiner should have given full licence to conduct this chapter to that part of me whose countrymen are unanimously acknowledged for their exemplary standards of moderation, patience and courtesy at the wheel?

Many thanks, gentlemen. Now let me make it perfectly clear from the start that I would have liked to have been in a position to say that the French motorist shows the same tolerance, consideration, and respect for the rules of the road as we English. As our host, FTT, so rightly points out, this is rarely the case. In fact, the opposite is all too often the case. And so diametrically opposed is driving in Frogland that the English motorist who takes the plunge to cross the Channel for the very first time, and compares the speeds at which the French drive with the limits publicly displayed could be forgiven for thinking that their Minister of Transport, considering the English have enough on their plate keeping right (which for them is wrong), and in a laudable attempt not to over-face them with too much metric system as a starter,

has thoughtfully served up speed limits in mph, and that 50 is really 80 km/h, 70 is 105 km/h, 90 is 145 km/h and 130 corresponds to 210 km/h.

FTT: At the time of writing, the speed limits (generally considered advisory rather than mandatory) on French highways are: 50 km/h in villages, 70 km/h on town approaches, 90 km/h on main roads, and 130 km/h on motorways (110 km/h when it's raining).

It is to be noted that, as I was making the above conversions, a heated argument broke out between François and Thistlethwaite on the subject of English and metric measurements in general. My Frenchman took the line that there is something confusingly irrational about a system which states that 1 mile = 1,760 yards, 1 yard = 3 feet, 1 foot = 12 inches, and something irretrievably incompatible between the two when conversion from one to the other results in 1.609km, 0.914m, 30.48cm and 254mm. In reply, my Englishman went to considerable lengths to emphasize that, not only was the English arrangement full of old-world charm, but what could be more characterless than a system where one kilometre = 1,000 metres, one metre = 100 centimetres, and one centimetre = 10 millimetres?

We English are convinced that a plane travels considerably faster than a car. The French do their best to prove the opposite. When an Englishman sets off on a drive of 200 miles, well ... he sets off on a drive of 200 miles. When a Frenchman sets off on a drive of 300 kilometres he launches himself on a desperate race against the clock where traffic lights, halt signs, roundabouts, pedestrian crossings, the pedestrians on them, other drivers, *les flics* are so many obstacles placed in his way to stop him from reducing his journey time at a speed more associated with jet propulsion than the combustion engine.

Ask an English motorist after a 200 mile drive whether he had a good trip he'll most likely reply: 'Oh yes, it was marvellous. We took the highways and byways and stopped a couple of times for a cuppa. The scenery was simply awesome.' Put the same question to a Frenchman, and he'll proudly declare: 'Ah oui, j'ai mis deux heures seulement. J'ai fait une moyenne de 150 km/h!'

FTT: Oh yes, it only took me two hours! I did an average speed of 150km/h! La moyenne = the average journey speed. It is a measure of the vital importance he attaches to systematically reducing time spent between departure and arrival at a speed normally associated with an inter-continental ballistic missile that the Frenchman who struggles to divide twelve by three is able to calculate in less than the blink of an eye, and to three decimal points, the result of dividing the distance he has covered by the time he has taken to do it in.

Proof that motoring in France is not quite the same experience as that enjoyed in England was quickly brought home that very first time I took myself over to the Continent. Driving our Mini off the ferry at Calais, I set a nice, gentle course for Paris. A minute later, a configuration of alternating black and white stripes painted on the road some fifty yards ahead gave me every reason to believe I was about to have my first encounter with *un passage piéton* - an assumption which seemed to be confirmed by the presence of a bent, elderly lady clutching a walking stick standing on the pavement beside it. Now, I don't think I could have been faulted for thinking that a passage piéton has much the same function as a pedestrian crossing: that of providing the muscle-propelled with a clearly designated strip by which to reach the opposite side of the road in conditions offering enough protection against the engine-propelled as to ensure arrival in very much the same physical and mental state as

departure. I could also have been excused for thinking that, when a bent old lady clutching a stick is seen standing beside one, not only might it be supposed she wishes to cross the road, but the rules of elementary courtesy require a motorist to do his best to help her do so. So I brought our vehicle to a gentle stop and with a smile beckoned her to cross.

Now, had we been in England, her reaction would have been both predictable and polite: the bent old lady would certainly have returned my smile, and with a wave of thanks slowly made her way across. I would have waited patiently and, once she was safely over, we would have happily continued our separate ways. But it quickly became apparent that this was not England. Oddly, the bent old lady refused to budge one inch. And even more strangely, my friendly smile was met by a hostile glower - as if somewhere she was saying 'You don't think I'm going to fall for that one at my age, do you?' My growing suspicion that all was not quite right received sonorous confirmation a split second later when a deafening screech of tyres, followed by an ill-mannered blast of horn, made me look into my rear-view mirror. Reflected in it was the furious face of a Frenchman executing a gesture I was to become all too familiar with: a disagreeable screwing movement of forefinger applied to temple seeming to indicate that the *Rosbif* in front needed to tighten up on a thing or two.

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In England people can be divided into two broad categories: the foot-propelled and the vehicle-propelled; and whenever an Englishman gets his bum in a driving seat he never forgets he has just emerged from the ranks of the former. Relations between the two are, therefore, characterized by a spirit of friendly understanding. In France people may be divided into the same two categories. Here all similarity ends. For whenever a Frenchman gets his *derrière* in a driving seat he is

seized by a bout of schizophrenic amnesia which not only effaces all recollection of him ever being one of the foot-propelled, but transforms each into his worst enemy.

Take, for example, our neighbour, Monsieur Martin. Now, under normal circumstances (if we can use the word 'normal' to speak of country where everything is, by definition, abnormal) Monsieur Martin is a polite, amiable, reasonable sort of chap. But getting his foot on an accelerator pedal and his hands on a steering wheel have much the same effect as the potion on Dr Jekyll. For in less time than it takes to turn his key in the ignition he is transformed into a sadistic fiend who, if only he could get away with it, would crush a pedestrian on a crossing with the same feeling of good-riddance that swatting a bluebottle on a window pane would procure. And do you know one of his favourite tricks? When Monsieur Martin is driving through Saint-Clou on a rainy day, and he spots a pedestrian walking past a puddle at the side of the road, his face twists into a diabolical grin; he puts his foot down and speeds on through, noting with fiendish delight as he looks in his mirror that he has soaked the poor soul to the skin. This doesn't, of course, prevent him from having a fit of reverse amnesia and shaking his fist in rage when he's the passer-by.

We might be forgiven for thinking that the French driver's attempts to cover the distance between A and B in a time usually restricted to the Monaco Grand Prix may be seriously compromised by a set of humble traffic lights. This is only marginally the case. For he has at his disposal a wide range of tactics aimed at reducing this type of enforced pit stop to the barest minimum. Take, for example, the colour amber. Now for obvious reasons of safety, traffic lights, both in England and France, are programmed not to change directly from green to red. A brief intermediate phase is supplied, signalled by amber, warning the approaching motorist that red will soon follow. For the English driver things could not be clearer: amber is amber, so he brings his

vehicle to a stop. A French driver has a more blurred vision of things: he tends to see amber in a strong green light.

FTT: A nation's language is, of course, a reflection of the vital role played by certain aspects of its speakers' everyday life, and some areas may have a much richer vocabulary than in other tongues: the Eskimo language, for example, has a multitude of words describing the subtle changing states of snow. In England (where limits are sharply defined), just one word suffices to describe red or amber. In France, where boundaries are far hazier, red and amber - like a ripening tomato - are seen in multifarious shades of green.

Sooner or later, however, even the French motorist must resign himself to stopping at red. Now the Englishman will generally take advantage of this type of situation to meditate on those same everyday practicalities as he would in a supermarket queue: if it doesn't rain this weekend I'll give the lawn a trim; shall I go to the *Horse and Jockey* for a pint this evening? It'll be more than my life's worth if I forget the wife's birthday next Tuesday, etc. And when the light changes to green he'll slip into gear, ease off the handbrake and continue his journey at the same leisurely pace. The French driver, on the contrary, is on the starting grid of a Formula One Grand Prix. He waits with car ready in gear and handbrake off, eyes fixed in total concentration on the lights ahead so as to be able to blast off the very instant green appears.

FTT: The more reasonable behaviour of the English driver should not be attributed solely to his legendary phlegmatic temperament and innate respect of the rule. The difference in colour sequence between French and English lights has certainly a part to play, too. In England, traffic lights are set to change from red to

amber and then green, thereby providing the driver with all the time in the world to put his vehicle into gear, release the handbrake, and gently press the accelerator before moving away. Since *les feux tricolores* are programmed to change directly from red to green, the Frenchman, on the other hand, finds himself in a far more stressful situation.

Though the French driver shows consummate skill in scraping through traffic lights - even when amber has taken on a ripe tone of red - the same cannot be said of all, and occasionally he is delayed by those less colour blind than himself. In cases like this, he spends his waiting time coldly meditating revenge, and if the imbecile in front is absent-minded enough not to crush accelerator to floor the moment lights change to green, a prolonged blast of horn will teach him to keep his mind on things.

FTT: Readers will have understood that my Englishman is grossly exaggerating when he maintains that waiting for the lights to change to green in France has all the characteristics of a rocket countdown. I have, on certain occasions, noted that as many as five seconds are allowed to elapse before horn blowing is resorted to. Strangely, horn-blowing at traffic lights rarely causes offence in France, and slow starters have even been observed to thank those who produce this form of sonorous prompting with a friendly wave of acknowledgement. However, French readers planning to take their car to England will do well to note that, on the Dover side of the Channel, the car horn is used strictly for the purpose it is intended for: to warn of a danger. Consequently, it must only be resorted to *while the vehicle is on the move*. In England, blowing a car horn *while the vehicle is stationary* is considered to be a

discourteous, even hostile act, and must only be resorted to *in the direst of emergencies*.

A good illustration of this was provided a few months ago while driving through London. I was waiting behind another car at a red light and, as the lights changed to green, Thistlethwaite, who was driving at that moment, went to put the car into gear. As he was doing so, he accidentally knocked the horn button which produced a short beep. The driver of the car in front as well as a number of pedestrians walking by, immediately turned their heads and fixed me with withering glares. I would gladly have disappeared into the boot.

It is, however, temporary traffic lights which provide those conditions enabling the French driver to demonstrate his inborn skills to the full. In France, as in England, major road works on busy highways usually make it necessary to implement a one-way traffic system. This is regulated by a set of temporary, moveable lights positioned at each end of the road works, and designed to provide motorists coming from either direction with the same opportunity to avail themselves of the usable half of the road. And in order, of course, to prevent cars coming from opposite directions at the same time and meeting face to face, lights are programmed so that when they change to red at one end they only change to green at the other after a sufficient lapse of time has been allowed to enable oncoming traffic to clear.

In England things are again of child-like simplicity: when the traffic lights turn to red, the motorist brings his car to a gentle halt, patiently waits for green to reappear, and then continues imperturbably on his way. In France, where things are never simple, the system provides yet another heaven-sent opportunity for the driver to shave a few more seconds off journey time: for when red appears, not only will any self-respecting Gallic carry on, but it is not uncommon to see the more audacious overtake a column of those who, in view of

its now overripe state, have considered it more judicious to stop. Moreover, since major road works are more often located well outside towns, this type of configuration presents the additional advantage of being the object of only occasional police surveillance. My countrymen might think that at some time or other the inevitable is bound to happen, and the miscreant motorist meets on-coming traffic in the middle. In reality, this is rarely the case. For the French driver has acquired a sixth sense of timing, honed by necessity to such an incredibly fine degree, that he usually scrapes through at the other end a fraction of a second before the lights change to green.

FTT: This uncanny sense of timing my Englishman speaks of is not without reminding one of those who, through accident or experimentation, have been isolated from civilization in a hostile environment over a protracted period of time. Compelled to rely solely on their inborn resources in the struggle for survival, they have testified to a heightening of the senses to a previously unimaginable degree. Perhaps this goes somewhere towards explaining the Gallic driver's incredible ability not only to survive, but to improve his *moyenne* in a context as ferociously brutal as that which prevailed in France during the Hundred Years War.

On the very rare occasions when he does make a slight miscalculation and comes face to face with oncoming traffic, the driver in his right indicates what he thinks of the driver in his wrong by the previously-mentioned screwing movement of forefinger applied to temple. It goes without saying that this in no way prevents the in-their-rights from running the risk of joining the ranks of the in-their-wrongs at the next set of temporary lights. The English driver might be tempted to think that this type of situation produces scenes of indescribable chaos. Oddly, this is rarely the case. For *le*

Système D is applied, the disorder miraculously sorts itself out, and the same cycle begins all over again.

FTT: *Le Système D*: the mobilisation of one's personal resourcefulness in improvising a solution to an immediate problem. So much of an institution is *le Système D* in France that François has not only suggested we include a whole chapter on the subject but has kindly offered to be its guiding light.

We might be excused for thinking that the aim of a French driving instructor is to inculcate in the novice the technical basics of driving, along with a thorough knowledge and respect of the Code de la Route. Even though this might be the case en principe, his real mission is to pass on those traditional skills by which the self-respecting Frenchman circumvents those little hindrances preventing him from reducing journey time at a speed not far from that which nature imparts to sound.

This was brought home to me one day as I was driving the three of us back home at a time when the main road to Saint-Clou was the scene of extensive works causing long delays. I was following a driving school car when the temporary lights, located some 50 yards ahead, changed from green to amber, and then to red. Though my own Frenchman turned our blind left eye and Théodore (no doubt fearing a diplomatic incident) made no comment, I distinctly observed the instructor throw up his arms in a gesture of impatience and then, with a wave of hand, beckon his pupil to drive on through.

FTT: Thistlethwaite's claim that the real function of the Gallic driving instructor is to transmit to the learner that French tradition which consists in attempting to set a new land speed record each time he takes the wheel would seem to be endorsed by a news article which

appeared in the *Saint-Clou Gazette* the other day. The article related the misadventure of a driving instructor who, at the wheel of his private Mercedes, was stopped by police for speeding on the motorway at more than 210 km/h the (authorized maximum is 130 km/h). This wasn't, however, the first time, he confessed. Apparently, he had been guilty of a similar offence two years before - but then he had only been doing 195 km/h!

Yet further proof of the French driving instructor's inability to resist this particular call of the wild was provided by Monsieur Martin's son's *moniteur*. Last summer Monsieur Martin's son's driving instructor spent his holidays touring the U.S.A. Less than a minute after leaving the airport in the car he had just hired, he confided, he was stopped and given an on-the-spot fine for speeding.

In England, where sound travels faster than a car, the horn is used to warn of an impending danger. In France, where cars travel faster than sound, the horn is used much less for this reason. As our host, FTT, has previously pointed out, we English have never been able to rid ourselves of the idea that blowing a car horn is akin to making an ill-mannered, aggressive noise. We are, therefore, inhibited by an awareness of the negative effect it may have on others - especially when emitted by a stationary vehicle. And so limited is the use of one's horn that it is quite possible to go on a long journey (including several towns) without hearing a single beep.

Though *le klaxon* plays a not negligible part in the Frenchman's permanent race against the clock, and is frequently used to enjoin others to get a move on, or merely to get out of his way (while being outraged when others do the same to him), sonorous, protracted and repetitive manifestations of this kind are also resorted to at the slightest

excuse (usually in an urban context where they are officially forbidden), beyond the normal field of application or, more often than not, simply as a form of free self-expression. It goes without saying that this type of public vehicular venting of personal sensibilities is totally alien to the more reserved Anglo-Saxon temperament. The French motorist's propensity to use his horn in situations well beyond those for which it was originally conceived is echoed in a number of syndromes, the most frequently encountered of which I have listed below:

a) *The 'Joan of Arc' Syndrome*. Signs of this phenomenon are supplied by the repetitious and prolonged use of the car horn (either in stationary configuration or while on the move) in places of public frequentation, on the occasion of major French sporting triumphs, i.e. Six Nations Tournament rugby matches, World Cup or European League soccer matches, especially when victory has been obtained at the expense of the hereditary enemy. Confirmation of this is provided by the fact that sonorous expressions of this type are significantly less insistent when supremacy has been obtained over other nations. On the contrary, defeat at the hands of *la Perfide Albion* is characterized by a generalized, eerie silence where not one single toot can be heard.

FTT: The expression 'la Perfide Albion' (literally: Perfidious Albion) is still used popularly, and in most cases humorously by the French in order to emphasize the treacherous nature of the English. Why perfidious? A number of historical examples confirming this seemingly specific English tendency not to respect established customs or rules are usually cited. Apparently, the rot started at the Battle of Agincourt (1415) when, on the orders of Henry V, all the French knights previously taken prisoner were mercilessly slaughtered (even though there were extenuating

circumstances), contrary to the code of honour in force at the time which required that they should be spared while a ransom was being negotiated.

b) **The 'Flic-Goad' Syndrome.** As I have already observed, the Frenchman is in a state of perpetual war not just against the English, but also les flics. The horn-blowing which characterizes this behaviour pattern may be commonly heard on occasions considered to be festive, i.e. weddings, carnivals, Bastille Day celebrations, etc. The Englishman might be tempted to think that this irrepressible inclination to create noise is simply a frivolous emanation of a wish both to participate in, and to contribute to the surrounding cheerfulness. Though there is certainly some truth in this, appearances in France are usually deceptive and, in reality, it not infrequently constitutes a sonorous taunt directed at any policemen met on the way, unequivocally informing them that they have already had more than enough to drink, and challenging them to be spoilsports by getting their breathalysers out.

c) **The 'Letting-Off Steam' Syndrome.** Head-splitting examples of this type of syndrome can be systematically heard when vehicles are inextricably blocked in traffic jams. Since concerted manifestations of this nature are totally inefficient in so much as they bring no solution whatsoever to bear on the problems which occasioned them, they may be interpreted as yet more proof of Gallic petulance. In reality, this type of syndrome is more the reflection of the pent-up frustration of drivers faced with the inevitable conclusion that journey time will be shamefully below la moyenne than any profound conviction that their action will significantly contribute towards reducing immobilisation time.

d) **The 'Mr. Hyde' Syndrome.** Being intimately convinced he has been placed on our planet to do good, the Frenchman normally sides with Dr Jekyll. This goes by the (dash) board when he takes the wheel, and putting the car in first brings

out the reverse in him. As a result, he gets a heady thrill of sadistic pleasure in playing the ultimate baddie: stealthily coasting up to senior citizens/the disabled/schoolchildren/obviously pregnant women/young mothers pushing prams, in the process of crossing on a passage piéton, and fiendishly scaring them out of their wits by a sudden, prolonged blast of horn. A similar effect is produced by charging up at full speed, and then jamming on brakes at the very last moment when pedestrians have visibly resigned themselves to being pitilessly crushed.

e) **The 'Friendly Greeting' Syndrome.** This behaviour pattern is characterized by vigorous horn-blowing in the centre of town (where it is strictly forbidden) on glimpsing a friend or relation who can be either in car or on foot. Even though this kind of resonant greeting could be viewed as an indication of the French driver's more convivial side, it is resorted to much more frequently as a sonorous V sign, waved defiantly at patrolling flics, just to remind them that if they think they can ban this form of free expression they've got another thing coming.

f) **The 'I-Hate-To-Be-Overtaken' Syndrome.** Like his Latin cousins throughout the world, the car-driving Frenchman only feels comfortable in a situation of superiority. This is reflected in his love of overtaking ... and his hatred of being overtaken, which he considers a shameful affront to his male honour. When this occurs (especially when the culprit is female, and even more when she's blond), the Gallic male ego takes a considerable battering. A compensatory phenomenon then takes place, designed to retrieve lost self-esteem. This consists in him unleashing a reproachful blast of horn aimed at pricking the overtaking driver's conscience by inferring that the passing manoeuvre was in some way either not permitted, or dangerous (even when this was definitely not the case). In reality, this kind of reaction is little more than sour grapes. The Gallic driver is also prone to accelerating when being overtaken. This is done

not only to counter the assault on his virility, but provides the additional advantage of generating a situation of danger which he can blame the overtaker for creating, and which will, therefore, more fully justify his prolonged use of horn.

g) **The 'You-Can't-Do-What-I-Can' Syndrome.** The signs relating to this type of process are echoed not by the common-a-garden horn, but its more strident relative, the siren, and specific, therefore, to vehicles whose drivers have been vested with an official function, i.e. ambulances, fire-engines and police cars. This form of resonant warning is, of course, normally resorted to as a means of procuring precedential advancement through traffic in situations considered to be emergencies, or in pursuit of those suspected of having infringed the law. However, the frequency with which this type of sonorous injunction to get out of the way may be heard in relatively peaceful little towns like Saint-Clou, especially when activated by the hand of the law, leads one to believe that it may be used for reasons other than those mentioned above. In this land of equality, where everyone takes advantage of the slightest pretext to grant himself exception to the rule, not only is it used to enable policemen to drop off their end-of-duty colleagues as quickly as possible at home, but provides a perfect way of bringing to the notice of the less privileged citizen that they can get away, in total impunity, with what would result in a not inconsiderable fine for him.

h) **The 'We're Coming-To-Get-You' Syndrome.** This type of behaviour is again characterized by the use of siren as opposed to horn, and is, therefore, limited to vehicles driven by those officially appointed - in this case the police - to labour in the public good. It might be thought that this sort of ear-piercing exhortation is used by policemen solely to warn the law-abiding motorist to get out of their way. In this land where nothing is the same as everywhere else, it may also be used to tell miscreants to get out of their way. This was brought home to me a few months ago when most of the

inhabitants of Saint-Clou were roused from their sleep at two o'clock in the morning by the deafening blare of a police car siren. Apparently, the Saint Clou Gazette later informed us, they were on their way to a High Street jeweller's shop which, according to information received, was in the process of being burgled. It goes without saying that the thieves, thereby warned of the law's impending arrival, gratefully seized upon this opportunity to make a hasty escape.

i) **The 'I-Wouldn't-Mind-Bedding-You' Syndrome.** Symptoms of this type of syndrome are characteristic of the more macho type of French driver, who just can't resist blowing his horn at sexy-looking young females (especially blond), strolling down the Grande Rue. Even though practical considerations usually prevent this form of solicitation from being brought to any satisfying conclusion, it does present the double advantage of flattering the ego of the latter (though she will pretend to ignore it), while titillating the imagination of the former. It is, however, not without danger for the ordinary motorist, since sounding one's horn in a built-up area in France is liable to meet with the disapproval of the law. In consequence, it is more usually resorted to, along with many other infringements, by those whose position of influence or authority (i.e. Ministers, Presidents of the Republic and policemen) allows them to get away with it.

FTT: As my Englishman has already pointed out, not only are those at the wheel of State firmly convinced that their lofty position makes them answerable to God alone, but the same principle of *droit divin* seems to have rubbed off onto the common flic. While driving in and around Saint-Clou, the Thistlethwaite in me has on several occasions observed police cars turning without indicators, not marking a stop at halt signs (on French roads a stop sign is a *stop* sign – a driver must bring vehicle to a clearly marked halt ... en principe), or

unashamedly parking where they shouldn't – infringements which, of course, would involve significant fines for the ordinary citizen. The other day, he even observed a policeman who had, presumably, just come off duty, driving his private car out of the police station car park in Saint-Clou with mobile riveted to ear. Whenever he brings these misdemeanours to the notice of my Frenchman, however, my left shoulder is raised in a resigned sort of shrug.

As a general rule, the English motorist *accepts* the right of others to use the road: an attitude of 'give and take' prevails, and driving is usually a relaxed, cooperative, courteous affair. The French motorist *disputes* the right of others to use the road: an attitude of 'every man for himself' is the rule and, all too frequently, motoring is a tense, conflictive, ill-mannered affair.

In England, then, since it is agreed that the road is shared by all, a mainly unwritten code of polite mutual concession prevails; and enough faith is placed in this for it to be deemed unnecessary, in certain circumstances, to indicate who has right of way. In France, where the road belongs to each, this would be inconceivable. In, for instance, a configuration where a country road narrows into a one way passage over a bridge, it is systematically indicated which oncoming vehicle has priority. And woe betide the driver who, in a moment of absent-mindedness or (more usually) realizing he is well below his *moyenne*, fails to heed the sign. For the other, impregnable in the knowledge that right is on his side, will seize upon those previously-mentioned gesticulatory and/or sonorous weapons at his disposal to bring it to the transgressor's instant notice that he is in the wrong.

Yet more proof that driving on French roads is a struggle as ferocious as that which can be observed in raw nature was provided only last Saturday morning. Now, Saturday being market day in Saint-Clou, I found myself caught up in a long

line of vehicles, the advancement of which would not have tried the locomotive capacity of a snail. During one of the long moments we were immobilized, I observed a car, a little further ahead, waiting on the right in a side street to join the main stream of traffic. Now had we been in England its driver would have been promptly invited to join the line. This he would have done with a friendly wave of thanks. But the fact that this was not England soon became abundantly clear: for everyone seemed to be doing their best to ignore him. Finally, in desperation, he must have decided to take the bull by the horns: for, in a determined attempt to force his way in, he suddenly pulled resolutely out. The driver of the car in front of us immediately charged forward in a counter-attacking movement, only jamming on his brakes when a collision seemed inevitable. Beside himself with fury at being obliged to concede defeat, the fist he brandished at the adversary was accompanied by the usual deafening blast of horn.

Illustrations abound of the French driver's unswerving conviction that the only purpose others serve is to get in his way. Only the other day I was driving us through a sprawling little town near Saint-Clou at the regulatory 50 km/h when a car zoomed up behind at a speed more suited to a Formula One Grand Prix Ferrari than a modestly-sized, rather rickety-looking Peugeot diesel saloon. Even though I was driving at exactly the authorized limit, in a classic attempt to pressure me into going faster, he began the usual tail-gating antics. And when I looked through my rear-view mirror, I could see him furiously gesticulating that I should get a move on. This only prompted me to go slower. Realizing that his strategy was having the opposite effect to the one desired, he began blowing his horn and flashing his headlights. Nevertheless, to my immense satisfaction, it was only after leaving the restricted town zone that he was able to accelerate past, not without bringing his displeasure to my notice with another ear-piercing blast of horn. And then, only 100 metres further

ahead, what better could he find to do than stop to turn left, obliging me and others to brake!

But in this land where the macho male driver reigns supreme, the ultimate affront is to be overtaken by a woman. Under normal circumstances, however, the lady driver knows perfectly well that, should she should happen to forget her place and pull out of line, no quarter will be given.

FTT: Thistlethwaite's thoughts on the macho tendencies of the Latin driver would seem to be substantiated by the well-known saying: 'Femme au volant, danger au tournant' - to which my resident French motorist has applied the loose translation: 'When a woman drives a car, danger is not far'.

Confirmation of the French woman's intimate conviction that the best place for her to be, especially on the highway, is dutifully behind the male, was provided one sunny morning when I was driving us along a country road at, it goes without saying, no more than the regulatory 90km/h. Suddenly, a car zoomed up. Curiously, instead of overtaking, it positioned itself less than two metres from my rear bumper. So close was it that I could see, clearly reflected in my rear-view mirror, the face of a pretty blond girl at the wheel. Being the considerate English driver I am, I slowed down and pulled over to let her pass. No doubt suspecting that this was a trap, and that any attempt to overtake would be countered by an acceleration on my part, she remained so resolutely stuck to my rear that I had to resign myself to accepting this arrangement for the next four or five kilometres, despite the straight, traffic-free road. And I only managed to get her off my tail by finally pulling into a lay-bye.

It must not be imagined, however, that the feminist French lady driver does not exist. Occasionally, a woman may be seen attempting to rival the Latin male's attempts to extract from petrol or diesel oil the degree of propulsion

hydrogen normally supplies. And she can be just as forthright in demanding that you get out of her way. A good example of this was provided that day we decided to make a trip to Lyon to do a spot of shopping in a recently-opened commercial centre on the outskirts of the city. François was voted into the driving seat and I did the navigating. Despite giving him clear instructions from my *Michelin* map, the idiot managed to get us hopelessly lost, and we found ourself driving down a narrow country lane in the middle of nowhere. A car shot up behind us, a rather grim-faced woman at the wheel. Now, had we been in England everything would have gone smoothly. She would have patiently followed us, and at the first opportunity we would have pulled to one side to let her pass. And as she did so, she would certainly have thanked us with a cordial wave. But this was not England. Though it was obvious we were strangers to the area (in France the registration plate shows the *département* number), the lady positioned herself no more than a metre from our tail, and began flashing her lights, blowing her horn and throwing her arms up in the usual disagreeable manner. And when she did finally overtake we were, of course, treated to a final, very unladylike blast of horn.

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In England all cars are fitted with direction indicators, the purpose of which is, of course, to inform others of their drivers' intention to deviate from a straight line. In France cars also have indicators. These are totally superfluous to needs: what is important to the French driver is that *he* knows where he's going, and where *he's* going is nobody's business but *his own*.

FTT: English readers may be surprised to learn that a recent report suggests that one in ten French motorists is not in possession of a driving licence. It must be

understood that, as with the traffic indicator, what matters for the French driver is that *he* knows he's a good driver, and this is nobody's business but *his own*. Moreover, driving in France at night soon brings to light of day the fact that a surprising proportion of vehicles have defective headlights (i.e. badly adjusted or in need of bulb replacement). It must again be understood that what is important for the Frenchman at the wheel is that *he* can see where he's going, and this is nobody's business but *his own*.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that the Gallic never uses his traffic indicators. But what is more normal in a land where everybody does the opposite to what is expected that, though he rarely signals his intention to turn right or left, he frequently does so when he means to go straight on? An indication of this was provided when I left home one morning, drove down the side street where we live, and duly stopped at the halt sign at the end. Before pulling out onto the main road, of course, I patiently waited for a gap in the traffic. Finally, everything was clear on the right and, on looking to the left, I observed a small van approaching some 50 yards away with right indicator winking. Now, one might have forgiven me for thinking that, when a vehicle is approaching with right winker on, it is safe to assume its driver is indicating his intention to turn right. So I pulled out in front of him. The screech of brakes and prolonged honking of horn which followed proved that I was horribly wrong. Even though he managed to stop in time, and a collision was narrowly avoided, his fury was great, and was once again accompanied by the usual screwing action of forefinger applied to temple. As I continued on my way, I could only surmise that, shortly before our near collision, the driver must have been obliged (perhaps by the presence of a police car behind), to use his indicator to signal his intention to turn right, and had simply failed to cancel it afterwards.

Proof that my experience is not uncommon is provided by a general reluctance on the part of French drivers to pull out in front of an approaching vehicle – even when its driver is signalling his intention to turn - without waiting until the very last moment to make sure he actually does so.

And what is more understandable in a people reputed for their phlegmatic reserve that an English driver always maintains a respectful distance between his front bumper and the rear one of the vehicle he is following? And what is more normal that the faster the pace the more this distance increases? It would be tempting to think that in a country almost three times the size of England, the motorist has enough room to keep an even farther distance away. In reality, the opposite is the case. In this land where nothing is the same as everywhere else, the faster the pace the more this distance *decreases*. This desire to get closer should in no way be interpreted as a sign of friendliness. On the contrary, it is a carefully thought-out technique with two main purposes in mind: firstly, by making it impossible for the driver in front to exert even the slightest pressure on his brake pedal without running the considerable risk of being rammed from behind, pressure is placed on him to accelerate by leading him to believe that going faster will increase the distance between his vehicle and the one behind; secondly, since the Gallic driver's love of overtaking is only eclipsed by his hatred of being overtaken, the ploy has the additional benefit of providing a remarkably effective way of dissuading all but the most temerarious driver behind from even thinking about, let alone attempting to pass - it being perfectly understood by both that not enough room will be left to pull back in ahead of the vehicle he has just overtaken. Usually very little quarter is given and, on numerous occasions, the French motorist, aware of the fact that the driver behind is attempting to humiliate him by trying to overtake, has been observed to move even closer to the vehicle in front.

Though, in the French driver's permanent quest to be king of the road, taking the wheel automatically involves a declaration of war against other road users, it would be wrong to think he rejects all forms of alliance. He can unite, albeit temporarily, with other drivers when faced with that common foe - les flics; and headlight flashing to warn on-coming drivers of the presence of a fixed speed camera, a traffic control or a speed trap ahead can be not infrequently observed. For, unlike in England, where a policeman can only stop a driver when he has visible evidence there is something amiss, whenever the weather permits (I have yet to come across one when it's raining), the French police regularly operate roadside traffic controls where they stop even the most law-abiding motorist simply to check whether his driving documents are in order. And, in addition to both mobile and fixed speed cameras, they also set cunningly-hidden traps to catch a motorist out for relatively minor offences (exceeding the speed limit by just a few km/h, clipping a continuous white line, or failing to mark a complete stop at a halt sign), designed more to improve state finances than road safety.

A typical example of this sort of ambush was provided that day we visited a cousin who lives in a remote mountain village near Saint-Clou. Arriving at the market square, I was astonished to see two gendarmes - their *fourgeonette* concealed down an adjacent side-street - in stealthy surveillance of a T junction halt sign, ready to pounce on any driver who failed to mark a complete stop before pulling out onto the neigh-on deserted main road. What they seemed to be totally oblivious to was the fact that an average of only three vehicles passed every hour.

Sooner or later, of course, a motorist is obliged to abandon car for foot - the first step of which involves finding a suitable place to leave his vehicle. In both England and France public car parks are provided, of course, for this purpose. The density of traffic and general lack of space in

English towns not only make it difficult to find a convenient spot to park but, as our froggy friend related when describing our abridged visit to Grumblesby Hall (**FTT: Chapter Three: Liberté – Egalité - Fraternité**), acceding to an official car park involves payment of an considerable fee as well as a scrupulous respect of the length of time paid for. Another important requirement is that the motorist deposit his vehicle neatly within the parking space lines. For it is clearly brought to public notice that the driver who leaves his car with wheels straddling, or even touching the delimitations, exposes himself not only to a heavy fine, but also punitive immobilization, along with an substantial ‘release fee’ - a sanction which is applied as unbendingly as the lines within which the vehicle should have been parked.

FTT: As my French alter has already brought to our notice, English car park authorities have at their disposal a weapon, rarely encountered in France, of such fiendish efficiency as to strike terror in the heart of the most intrepid driver: at the slightest transgression (i.e. tyre just touching the dividing line between spaces, or parking time exceeding by 30 seconds that paid for), the offender’s car will be mercilessly clapped in the paralyzing grips of the wheel clamp, release from whose clutches can only be obtained by payment of an extortionist fine.

Proof that car parks in England are under the strictest surveillance by sadistically-inclined attendants who obtain fiendish pleasure from issuing the stiffest fine for the slightest deviation, was supplied recently when we decided to do some shopping in a large town. For some reason or other our Frenchy was at the wheel. After cruising round a town centre car park for some time we finally spotted a vacant space. François hastened to deposit our car in it, bought a ticket which he duly stuck behind the windscreen. Then off we

went for a stroll round the shops. On coming back (well within the time paid for), we were dumbfounded (even Théodore thought it was a bit off) to find, tucked behind a windscreen wiper, a fine for 'not parking within the designated area' (it is true that the front tyre overlapped the demarcation line by half an inch). Beside ourselves with fury, François marched us off in search of 'cette connasse d'aubergine.' On coming upon the 'stupid bitch of a traffic warden,' in question (she was in the process of writing out another fine) he proceeded to contest the disproportionate nature of a sanction which imposed such a large penalty for so minimal an aberration. His argument falling on obstinately unsympathetic ears, and in a laudable attempt to apply *le Système D*, our Frenchman then affirmed that the car next to which he had left ours had been parked so badly that he had had no option but to leave it with a tyre touching the line. The car park attendant remained unmoved. Faced with her intransigence, and in a rare moment of fraternal unanimity, I too became outside ourselves (Théodore kept a stoical calm). Pointing to a nearby car, one wheel of which could also possibly have been conceived (when viewed from a certain angle) as touching a line, I angrily enquired why she hadn't given him 'a bloody fine, too.' After warmly thanking me, she began to write one out.

In England, the disabled driver is provided with specific, conveniently-placed parking spaces which may only be occupied when proof of disability, in the form of an official pass, complete with photo, is clearly displayed. Though in France parking is regulated in public places, and traffic wardens (especially in streets) are on constant prowl, this is rarely the case in private supermarket car parks where the police have little jurisdiction, if any at all, and parking attendants together with wheel clamping are practically unknown. Parking spaces for the disabled do exist (usually in pairs) but, generally, no proof of disability is required; and strangely, in a country whose citizens are the least public-

spirited on our planet, the only attempt to dissuade the able-bodied driver from parking in them is to colour the space in blue, paint a stylized wheelchair on it and accompany the whole by the conscience-pricking appeal: ***'PRENEZ MA PLACE PRENEZ MON HANDICAP'*** (FTT: ***TAKE MY PLACE TAKE MY HANDICAP***). Needless to say, I have frequently observed perfectly valid motorists (as well as les flics) not only parking their vehicle in this type of space, without ever imagining what it is like to have a disability, but doing so with wheels unashamedly straddling the dividing line between.

FTT: This is not to say that the problem of disabled parking spaces being occupied by the able-bodied driver is not being addressed. It is, however, the disabled themselves who are being encouraged to react. They may now purchase *'Prenez ma place, prenez mon handicap'* stickers which can be affixed to the windscreens of indelicate motorists in an attempt to shame them into compliance.

And what is more normal in this land of mathematical logic that, when it comes to supermarket parking, the French motorist should adhere to that elementary arithmetical rule which states that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line? Now, fire regulations require that a designated area running along both sides of a supermarket entrance must at all times be kept free to allow fire brigade vehicles direct access in the event of fire. The only supermarket in Saint-Clou is no exception to the rule, and to this effect a number of conspicuous *Défense de stationner* signs have been painted on both ground and wall. It goes without saying that, in order to gain a few yards, shoppers regularly deposit their cars not only on this strip but also over the no parking signs painted on them – even when there is ample space in the nearby car park.

Generally speaking, in England that same respectful distance maintained between moving vehicles is scrupulously respected on parking your car. When an English driver parks his vehicle at the side of a street, a minimum margin of at least six feet (three in front and three behind) is always added so that the driver of the car ahead or the one behind may extricate his vehicle without undue manoeuvring. This was made perfectly clear to our Frenchy one day when he parked *à la française* in the street of an English town. Having left little more than a foot between our vehicle and the one in front, he switched off the engine, and was just extracting key from ignition when its driver happened to appear. After gazing dubitatively at the dozen or so inches he had been granted, he strode resolutely up, rapped loudly on the driver's window and, even before our Froggy had got it fully down, began castigating him in the strongest terms for parking 'too bloody close,' and 'not giving a damn about other road users!'

My readers might be forgiven for thinking that in this country of Cartesian logic a suitable parking space is generally considered to be one whose length exceeds that of the car. Here again, they would be hopelessly wrong. That same desire to maintain the closest contact with fellow drivers on the highway can assume an even more intimate dimension in town; for the French driver shows a remarkable ability in defying the laws of elementary arithmetic by introducing himself into spaces which the length of his car should not normally allow. How does he do it? Apart from the fact that it is a relatively common sight to see a car parked obliquely with one wheel reposing firmly on the pavement, drivers have developed a more drastic technique which, for the moment at least, would be unthinkable to the Anglo-Saxon mind. The method - that of parking by ear - consists in diving head first into the smallest space, and then with eyes tightly shut, proceeding to create enough room for vehicle by systematically shunting the one to the front and rear.

Is it again that Marxist syndrome which drives the 'have nots' to extract compensatory revenge from the 'haves'? Do driving schools in France consider this particular aspect of driving management beneath their notice? Or can we simply put it down to a lack of proper care and attention? Whatever the case may be, the French driver reserves his most vicious conduct for nice, expensive-looking cars in stationary configuration – usually in supermarket car parks, and especially when deposited there in brand-new, unsullied form. It is my personal experience that a parked vehicle answering these criteria has little chance of keeping virginity intact much beyond half an hour. Incredible as it may sound, in our life up to now we have been fortunate enough to possess nine brand new cars, all of which, without exception, in less than two months after purchase, we have found, on emerging from a supermarket, to have suffered varying degrees of damage.

A couple of months ago we became the proud owners of another new car. Even though François lifted up our arms in a gesture of impotence, and Théodore imparted a fatalistic look to our face, we all three agreed to unite our efforts in order to extend its pristine condition beyond that of its predecessors. After much internal debate, we finally decided that whenever a supermarket was visited, and whoever was driving the car, it would be parked as far away from other vehicles as the car park area would allow. This strategy - the effectiveness of which we were beginning to congratulate ourselves on - worked for six weeks, until that day when we came out of a supermarket, only to note with much dismay that a dent had appeared in the rear bumper. Mystified (the nearest car was parked some 20 yards away), we proceeded to closer examination, and could only conclude that the damage was more in line with the trajectory of a hand-pushed shopping trolley than that of the combustion-propelled car bumper. So now, I, at least, have decided that since I can't beat 'em I'll join 'em; and when I'm at the wheel not only do I park as close as possible to new-looking cars but throw my

door open with such vigour that a dent will be automatically inflicted. And you know what? I'm actually getting to enjoy it - especially when it's a more expensive car than ours!

This strong Gallic relish for clunking into immobilized vehicles is not just limited to those deposited in parking areas. It is also manifest, albeit in far more lethal form, on the motorway hard shoulder where the motorist who has been unlucky enough to break down, can count on a survival time not much exceeding that of a Tommy stepping out of his trench during the Battle of the Somme. Since average life expectancy on this narrow strip of no-man's land is calculated at no more than 20 minutes, it is vital (and this I cannot emphasize enough) that the English motorist who is obliged to bring his vehicle to a halt on it *should instantly take refuge behind the metal barriers*.

FTT: Readers may be wondering why my Frenchman has remained so long in neutral, and why the unswerving course my Englishman has followed over the previous pages in systematically running down the French motorist hasn't ended up by driving him round the bend. Though his silence could be interpreted as a green light to all that has been said, the truth of the matter is that when my Englishman was invited to sit in the driver's seat at the beginning of this chapter, François settled himself down in the back ... and simply nodded off. At this point, however, a tingling sensation in my left buttock drove me to think that he was now itching to get his bum back in the driving seat. So, fearing that a bumpy road, and even a major shake-up lay ahead, my examiner instructed Thistlethwaite to apply the brakes and bring this chapter to a halt.

Chapter Nine

The Art of Un-Queuing

Even if he's alone, a Frenchman will form a disorderly queue of one.

François Théodore *Thistlethwaite*

As we have had more than one occasion to observe, our French neighbours' conviction that a rule is valid – as long as it's for others - has generated treasures of ingenuity and resourcefulness in devising ways of getting round it. Nowhere is this more evident than with the common queue. Though the same word is shared by both English and French, here all similarity ends; for the configuration itself differs so much in outward appearance and inner substance that it is doing the term a grave injustice to use it to embrace the loose bunching commonly encountered on the Gallic side of the Channel. And nothing summarizes more the gaping chasm that exists between the two peoples than their attitudes to, and behaviour in this mundane line.

The English approach to queuing is of child-like simplicity, reposing exclusively on a notion of orderly, single-file alignment in strict accordance with the rule of 'First In, First Out.' As a result, the Englishman is prepared to spend hours happily waiting his turn. However, the slightest deviation from this implacable principle which states that the first to join shall be the first to leave will unleash unbounded fury.

FFT: Though it would seem to be the Englishman in me who is, at this point, in slight to moderate control (certainly with my mediator's tacit consent), this did not prevent a French-sounding voice from reminding me of

one occasion in England when poor maman - in her mid-eighties and only partially sighted - mistakenly joined a queue in the middle. In spite of her age and infirmity, the stony-hearted law of 'First Come, First Served' was applied in all its relentless rigour, and she was sternly enjoined to 'get to the back!'

The Gallic attitude, on the other hand, is of Freudian complexity. As my own Théodorian psychiatrist has analysed, when a Frenchman appends himself to that shapeless formation which, in France, masquerades under the name of queue (in spite of Cartesian precedent, when it comes to queuing the French have a roundabout conception of linearity), he is seized by the phenomenon of depersonalization whereby the individual feels humiliatingly stripped of his specific identity. And the only way to re-establish personal esteem is to accept that self-imposed challenge which consists in mobilizing his inner resources to a maximum in order to reduce to a minimum time spent in this anonymous, conformist line.

It must not be thought, however, that the Gallic does not possess the moral awareness to realize that this type of behaviour - necessarily to the detriment of others - can be judged offensive to generally-accepted standards of fair play; for he may well be piqued when he observes that another has jumped the queue. His annoyance, however (which may even be tinged with grudging admiration), results less from the fact that the offender has infringed the sacrosanct Anglo-Saxon rule than because he has proved himself *plus malin* (**FTT: smarter**) in finding a way round this rule.

In addition, being in competition with others provides a further reason to explain why the Frenchman is never at ease in a queue. On the contrary in England, where others show scrupulous respect for the rule, the queuer has no pressure on him, and can settle down, relax, and even feel at home. While waiting, in a line, my own Englishman, for example, spends

as much time as his French alter will permit, in peaceful contemplation of the more pragmatic issues of daily life: does the lawn need a trim? Would it be better to book the car in for a service this week or next? Shall I make myself a nice, hot cup of tea before, or after putting the shopping away? And he frequently takes advantage of this momentary respite to hone his skills of empirical deduction by means of a fascinating diversion which consists in determining the occupation of fellow queuers by analysing the contents of their trolley. Up to the time of writing he has identified - with a high degree of probability - an alcoholic bee-keeper, a sweet-toothed house-husband, and a transvestite hooker with bunions.

And to my Frenchman's fury, it is Thistlethwaite's steadfast view that in the faultlessly linear disposition of the English queue is reflected the rigorous organisation and discipline by which the greatest-ever Empire was won; and in the dutiful compliance of its members, the God-entrusted mission of a people to impose civilized order on this earth. And in the slapdash clumping going under the same appellation on the other side of the Channel, he cannot help but see the lax disorder by which so many colonial territories were irretrievably lost; and in the persistent Gallic refusal to bend to the rule of the queue, a Satanically-inspired scheme to spread pandemonium over our planet.

FTT: It was at this point that my left-sided vocal cord began to vibrate, and I distinctly heard a voice volunteering the services of its owner in conducting this chapter on the French art of un-queueing. The main argument advanced was that any attempted synthesis of Gallic ingenuity in circumventing the principle of 'First Come First Served' could only proceed from the hand of a Frenchman whose innate, innovative flair, and wide practical experience in getting me speedily through queues of all types and lengths, and in all circumstances,

both in France and abroad, would provide both an entertaining and instructive chapter; and that, in any case, queuing in England is such a boring, well-ordered, sheep-like sort of business where nothing ever happens of any note that there would be little, if anything to write about.

My middleman could do no more than admit the logic of this reasoning. Thistlethwaite did, however, specifically request that I commit to paper his official protestation at the use of the 'The Art of Un-Queuing' as a heading for this chapter - a mere cover-up, he declared, for what, in fact, was 'shameless Froggy queue-jumping.' He also took particular exception to the totally unfounded insinuation on the part of his French alter ego that, in this type of situation, the English displayed a behaviour more commonly associated with an animal of the ovine type, noted for its placid, un-enterprising disposition. And finally, he insisted on the right to give his own opinion on the subject - reinforced by one or two anecdotes - once my Frenchy had had a reasonable say. It was certainly Théodore who pushed my head slowly forward in a thoughtful, acquiescent nod.

Merci, messieurs. Tout d'abord, je voudrais vous signaler ...ummm pardon ... first of all I should like to point out that, contrary to what our English friend has just stated, what he calls 'shameless Froggy queue-jumping,' is as shockingly *dégoûtant* to we French as tea served with warm milk is to you English.

FFT: My Gallic is here referring to what Thistlethwaite considers to be the infuriating habit French cafés have of serving tea with a jug of warmed milk. In their defence, it must be realized that the French consume the beverage in exclusively milk-less form - which is not

entirely without disadvantage: not only does this allow a greater appreciation of the flavour of the tea itself, but more importantly in a country of deeply-rooted individualism, it presents one less possible factor of socio-geographical discord – unlike England, profoundly split between the working-class, mainly northern pre-milker, and the effete, middle-class, southern post-milker. For those wishing to go more deeply into this fascinating subject I strongly recommend Dr Harry Wagg's fascinating study:

Pre or Post-Lactation – A Storm in a Teacup? (Oxbridge University Press, 2009 – 320 pages).

It is strongly recommended that the English tourist, when ordering his cuppa in France, should firmly insist on his tea being served 'avec du lait *froid*, s'il vous plaît.'

Tout d'abord, it must be perfectly understood that in France it is only the cruder types of transgression which go under the term 'queue-jumping'. And it goes without saying that the incorrectness of this type of behaviour is usually brought to the ears of the offender – more because of its unsubtle nature than that it constitutes an infringement of your stupid Anglo-Saxon rule. For the thing my *compatriotes* appreciate, above all, is not so much what one does as how one does it. Everything is... comment dirais-je? in the manner, in a certain delicacy, or even panache of execution, where the perfectionism of the artist is very much in evidence. So much is this the case that advancement obtained in a queue through discreet finesse, or daring flamboyance may be the object, if not of total absolution, at least appreciative indulgence on the part of others. It was for these reasons, therefore, that I felt no compunction in suggesting (in spite of stubbornly rigid English opposition) that the title 'The Art of Un-Queuing' should be applied to this chapter. Fortunately, our middleman has enough artistic sensitivity and intelligence to understand.

And so respectful are you mutton-headed English of the absurd rule of the queue that, even if were you at death's door, you would not openly request priority, let alone procure it for yourselves by, shall we say, more personally-resourced means. Need I remind you this is not at all the case with we creative French? It is, therefore, with great pride that I should now like to proceed to a brief classification of some of the more common methods, techniques and ploys used by my *concitoyens* and *concitoyennes* to relieve themselves of the anonymity imposed by this inane, inflexible Anglo-Saxon rule which states it is in the immutable order of things that the last person to join a queue can never be the first to leave. I hasten to add that French inventive genius is, by definition, capable of infinite permutations, and the following categories, in no way exhaustive, are simply provided as a general guide:

1. Openly Claiming the Right to Un-Queue

Unlike you English who line up behind one other with all the resignation of sheep waiting for slaughter, we French do not hesitate to request permission to advance ahead of others in a queue. Claimants are usually required to submit some form of visual justification in support of their request; when reasons are immediately apparent, however, a simple verbal application may be deemed sufficient. The following visually-determinable grounds are the most commonly-used to support this type of explicitly-formulated solicitation:

a) Temporary or permanent physical incapacity affecting arm(s) and leg(s) and/or any other parts of the anatomy, as evidenced by plaster cast, sling, bandage, strapping, dressing, compression stockings, sticking plaster, crutch, stick, prosthesis, Zimmer frame, wheelchair, neck-brace, eye-patch, or any other medically-approved protection, support or device designed to facilitate walking, handling and/or recovering normal usage of and/or replacing the aforesaid limbs and/or other anatomical parts.

b) Total or partial absence of one or more of the aforesaid limbs and/or anatomical parts. In some specific cases, it is admitted that the more demanding fellow queue-member may insist on the presence of this total or partial absence being clearly displayed.

c) Total or partial absence of one or more terminal appendages to hands and feet. Visual proof is not infrequently requested as it has been known for certain specialists in full possession of the normal number of fingers and thumbs to wear gloves. Similarly, in regard to toes claimants may be requested to remove shoes, socks, stockings, tights, etc.

d) Temporarily-debilitating, visually-determinable reduction of capacity resulting from a natural physical process, i.e. pregnancy, morning sickness, vomiting, etc. Priority may also be granted to a queue-member, the cross-positioning of whose legs would appear to indicate that considerable efforts are being made to stem a pressing call of nature.

e) Temporarily-debilitating, visually-undeterminable incapacity resulting from an acute physical or mental disturbance, i.e. migraines or headaches (including hangovers), hallucinations, paranoia, schizophrenia, etc. Such is the French people's implicit belief in the fundamental integrity of human nature, however, that proof is normally considered sufficient when the queue-member places hand on forehead, and reinforces the gesture by a grimace of pain or groan, or by claiming he is Christ re-incarnated.

f) Obvious permanent disabilities such as partial or complete blindness, semi or total deafness, when evidenced by white stick or hearing aid. Such is the sympathetic tolerance of we French that considerable latitude is shown in this respect, and it is not unusual for claimants to be allowed priority without being obliged to produce visible proof of their infirmity. The unfortunate experience of poor maman related by our host at the beginning of this chapter would be totally inconceivable in a more compassionate and understanding France.

- g) Temporarily-invalidating, easily-recognisable, common ailments of a contagious nature, i.e. a cold, or influenza. Explicit requests to be granted priority for these reasons may be reinforced by repeated sniffing and/or bouts of vociferous coughing or ostentatious sneezing, and may be directed from as near a distance to fellow queue-members as propriety will admit, in an effort to convince them that, should they fail to grant immediate priority, they themselves will be in considerable danger of contracting the same virus.
- h) Rebelliousness and/or tantrums on the part of adult-accompanied toddlers (in France we encourage contestation from the earliest age). Requests by parents to abridge their stay in queues on the above-mentioned grounds are usually treated sympathetically, not so much because of the nuisance caused by their offspring, but in order to reward them for their efforts to pass on to this emerging generation the national propensity to protest, demonstrate and systematically defy authority at the slightest pretext, or for no pretext at all.
- i) Advanced age. In the specific context of queuing, advanced age in France is considered to commence at 40. It is not normally required that a birth certificate be produced.
- j) Sexual denomination. Whenever a display of recognizable feminine attributes places the female gender of the claimant beyond reasonable doubt, such is the innate chivalry of the French male that, under normal circumstances, no further visible proof is required, and consent is immediately forthcoming. However, when the female gender of the claimant is the subject of some doubt (much rarer in France than in England), a closer inspection may be requested.
- k) Sexual desirability. As with sub-category (j) such is the normally-endowed French male's innate sense of chivalry that no explicit request for priority is usually necessary on the part of the more alluring French female - unless the tacit reasons underlying her claim are considered to be more a case of wishful thinking than reality.

- l) Minimal number of articles (less than ten) reposing in supermarket trolley. When accompanied by a politely-formulated request, no difficulties are to be anticipated on this score. Moreover, such is the innate courtesy of the French people that, in most cases of this type, priority is spontaneously offered. Some opposition may be encountered, however, when the real count exceeds thirty.
- m) Any combination(s) of the above.

The above-listed grounds for exemption are commonly resorted to by queue-members of all ages, sexes, and socio-professional categories, and become increasingly common the further south one goes. Claims may be proffered to the person(s) directly in front, at the head of the queue, or to the queue in general and if made politely a high success rate (95%) can be envisaged. Regretfully, as in England, more and more French supermarkets, presumably in an effort to appear more customer-focussed, officially acknowledge the validity of some of the above reasons for exception (pregnancy, physical disability, limited number of articles purchased, card holders, etc.) by channelling these types of queuers through specific check-outs, thereby detracting from the rich diversity of the traditional French queue, and making it more and more like its English counterpart – an extremely boring place to be.

2. Implicitly Claiming the Right to Un-Queue

The above-listed visually-determinable grounds on which claims for un-queuing may be based can also be used for more tacit solicitations – that is to say those accompanied by no verbal appeal. This technique consists in the claimant positioning himself laterally to other queuers, and exerting psychological pressure on them by silently evidencing, or even exaggerating the specific grounds on which the claim to exception is founded. This type of tacit solicitation is usually reinforced by an agreeable smile. If satisfaction is not

immediately forthcoming, however, more forceful or expressive techniques may be used, the following not uncommon examples of which have been personally witnessed:

a) Wheel-chaired invalid and/or senior citizen (especially when at the controls of an electrically-propelled model) threatening to bear down on queuers; non-wheel-chaired invalid and/or senior citizen and/or partially-sighted person aggressively raising crutch or white stick.

b) Elderly person (i.e. 40 +) intentionally imparting convex or concave curve to the back, and/or screwing up face in an expression of mournful desolation, thereby considerably increasing number and depth of wrinkles, and hence amplifying the impression of age. A heart-rending sigh may sometimes add a note of greater urgency to this type of

c) Seemingly distraught mother of three squawking infants ostentatiously thrusting a distended belly containing a fourth in the direction of other queue-members.

d) Full-bosomed and/or bottomed young woman (12+) freezing herself into haughty 'top model' pose, and/or pulling back shoulders, and/or innocently turning back on the queue, and pushing out rump in an attempt to appeal to the chivalrous nature latent in all French males by imparting a more sharply-defined outline to the contents of panties (if worn).

e) Menopausal or semi-menopausal women gazing resentfully at the above, and then attempting to gain the sympathy of male queuers by throwing them an 'I-was-once-like-that-believe-it-or-not' look.

FTT: I would remind those among our English lady readers who might take exception to the disrespectful, if not degrading sexist overtones perceptible in the above sections d) and e) that their source is unadulterated François, and that in this analysis of the techniques and strategies commonly employed to un-queue in France,

the role of both the Thistlethwaite and Théodore in me was, at the moment of writing, a purely linguistic one, limited to rendering the English in which they are conveyed as untainted as possible by the phonological, syntactical and lexical interference normally associated with native French speakers attempting to express themselves in the language of Shakespeare.

It is to be noted that vigorous or graphic solicitations of the above types, admittedly based on a certain degree of emotional coercion, may occasionally be rejected by the more cantankerous co-queuer. The case has been observed of a terminally-pregnant woman implicitly requesting priority (as in 2c), presumably on the grounds that remaining in an upright position might have a downright unhappy effect on the outcome thereof, being unceremoniously informed that she wasn't in a wheelchair, and that in her state it would be better for everybody concerned if she stayed at home.

3. Granting Oneself the Right to Un-Queue

This strategy consists in joining a queue in the middle, or even positioning oneself at its head with no prior explicit or implicit solicitation, thereby leaving it to existing queue-members to determine the exact reason(s) for which this right to un-queue is being assumed, and to decide any possible remedial action. The procedure may be adopted on any of the grounds described in the above Categories 1 and 2, but, as explained previously, this form of crude, shameless queue-jumping, totally lacking in panache, finesse and artistry, tends to offend our innate sense of decorous semblance, and a relatively high level of overt remonstrance can be expected from others, with the possible exception of the following cases:

a) Advanced age. Usually, self-conferred priority on these grounds is treated with resigned indulgence, though occasional resistance may once again be regrettably observed

on the part of the grumpier co-queueur, and the same irascibility shown as towards terminally-pregnant women. It is sometimes brought to the notice of senior citizens doing a spot of weekend shopping that, since they are retired and, consequently, have all the time in the world, they should seriously consider undertaking all future errands during the weekday, when everybody else is at work.

b) High social and/or professional status. Being an industrialist, architect, doctor or solicitor (or their wives), for example, automatically confers the right to un-queue. This type of precedence is common in bank queues in small, provincial towns (i.e. Saint-Clou) where everybody knows everybody.

FTT: Was it Thistlethwaite who, at this stage, interrupted my Frenchman's flow of thoughts to remind me of one example of this type of self-granted priority? One Saturday morning, my Englishman was doing his best to get his French alter to wait my turn in a longish queue at our bank in Saint-Clou when an elderly, elegantly-dressed lady made her entrance and, totally ignoring everybody, proceeded to march regally up to the front of the line where she was promptly served by an obsequious clerk. Her departure was staged with equal majesty. Thistlethwaite was unable to contain himself (I had been patiently waiting for at least ten minutes) and, as she was breezing past on her way out, I could not stop his sharp words of rebuke falling from my lips.

'Mais je peux faire la queue si vous voulez!' (But I can queue if you wish!) she retorted, bestowing on me a look of such haughty disdain that I felt considerably smaller than the red-bowed Yorkshire terrier she was clutching beneath her right arm. An English observer would have been astonished to note that, in a people renowned for their deep attachment to equality, and

given to voluble, disruptive protest at the slightest hint of its absence, not a single murmur of protest could be heard. But in this land where you do all you can to appear the opposite to what you really are, everyone was inwardly fuming. And even though more than a few were looking forward to the day when they would be wealthy enough to do the same, most were dreaming of the time when adverse fortune would oblige her to wait her turn ... like everybody else.

c) Any combination(s) of the above.

4. Claiming the Right to Un-Queue on Purely Spurious Grounds

The grounds invoked in this category reflect the full gamut of French creative genius, and draw inspiration from such a rich variety of sources that a whole book would not even begin to do it justice. Suffice it to say that claims may be based on meteorological vicissitudes: 'I notice it's just beginning to spot with rain, and I've left all my washing on the line ...err do you think I could possibly ...?'; prandial imponderables: 'Excuse me, I've suddenly remembered I forgot to turn off the light under my husband's *ratatouille*...I'd hate it to burn; it's for his dinner this evening ... you know, he loves it so much ... could I ...?'; conjugal dissent: 'The wife sent me out shopping, but on thinking about it I'm sure it's just a ploy to get me out of the way while she hops into bed with her *amant* ...hmm... I'd love to get home earlier than she expects an' catch 'em at it. What do you think?'; or existentialist *angoisse*: 'The societal forces obliging me to play the role of waiting in the queue are causing me to deny my freedom of action... Please allow me to liberate myself ...,' to name but a few.

Solicitations of this type are usually accompanied by the appeal: 'Mettez-vous à ma place!' (**FTT: Put yourself in my position!**), frequently reinforced by a Gallic shrug. Provided these are made coherently and established form is respected,

innate French generosity of spirit overcomes our general *scepticism* and horror of appearing ridiculous, and they have every chance of being accepted.

FFT: English readers would be wrong in thinking that the above reasons supplied by my Frenchman are nothing more than grotesque exaggerations, having little, if any basis in reality. For it is beyond the capacities of the conventionally-minded Englishman to comprehend the shameless lengths to which some Frenchmen will go to obtain a desired result in the briefest possible time. In order, for example, to abridge to a maximum the period between first meeting a member of the opposite sex and knowing her Biblically, the student son of a friend of a friend has developed a strategy of infantile simplicity, but formidable effectiveness. When he is walking in the street and sees a girl measuring up to his desired physical requisites, his tactic consists in stopping her with a polite, 'Excusez-moi, mademoiselle,' and then adding with a roguish smirk, 'Tu as l'air d'une belle salope! Si on baisait?' (You look like a real tart! What about shagging?). Nine times out of ten he receives a vigorous slap across the cheek. But the tenth time...!

5. Lateral Queuing.

The aim of side-queuing is to create and then exploit confusion in the minds of fellow queuers as to the precise moment you have joined the line. The technique consists in casually positioning yourself at the side of the main line of co-queuers, halfway up rather than tidily behind the last person at the back, as you sheep-headed English are programmed to do. By doing this, it is hoped that at some time during progression towards the exit, it will be possible to take advantage of the doubt created in the minds of those already waiting as to the exact moment of your arrival in relation to

theirs, and sneak in before your turn. Moreover, in the event of protest on the part of previously-established queue-members, this method presents the immense advantage, especially when trolley or basket is heavily laden, of allowing the lateral queue-member to justify his action by invoking the pointless expenditure of energy required in pushing it right round to the back. The more accomplished un-queuer of this type can make the strategy even more convincing by an accompaniment of heart-rending sighs of fatigue. A further, not negligible advantage is that when objections are encountered, your face may be saved by retreating into feigned absent-mindedness, or ignorance as to the exact instant of your arrival at the side of the queue in relation to those already in it. But you can take it from me that, contrary to appearances (in France, I repeat, things never seem what they are, and never are what they seem), this type of master tactician is keenly alert – stealthily poised to exploit the slightest inattention. And what beats it all is that, when opposition is encountered, the more gifted among us can even obtain a rousing moral victory by withering the remonstrator(s) with a look of lofty disdain, intended to bring it firmly home that there are more important things in life than this type of petty consideration. Obviously, this particular category of creative un-queuing can only be effective under the right conditions, i.e. those encountered on Friday evenings, Saturdays or on the eve of public holidays when the volume of trade is such that queues stretch right back between the shelving. Though relatively widespread, this ploy is, however, of limited efficiency in that it allows one or two, but rarely more than three places to be gained.

With a little opportunism and anticipation, however, a variant of this stratagem may be used to far greater effect. Take that example (of which I am especially proud), provided by one occasion last year when we went along to do our last minute Noël shopping at the only supermarket in Saint-Clou. Now as in England, French supermarkets are busy places at

Christmas time, and the only supermarket in Saint-Clou is no exception. After completing our purchases, we pushed our heavily-laden trolley towards check-out. Now check-out at the only supermarket in Saint-Clou is composed of three cash desks, only two of which were, for some reason or other, in operation at that moment. And such was the afflux of shoppers that two long queues had formed, snaking back some twenty metres or more between the shelves. Our Englishman, of course, wanted us to go right round to join one of the them at the back. But my instinct told me I must impose myself and, much to FTT's discomfort (he felt a sharp pain in the region of our ascending colon), I managed to position us laterally at the front of the queue adjacent to the unstaffed check-out. Suddenly, as I had anticipated, a third girl appeared and proceeded to open up this cash desk. I will leave it to readers to guess who the main force was in pushing our trolley smartly over, and emptying its contents onto the conveyor belt – with the result that we were checked out first, well before those other queuers who, in certain cases, had been waiting for twenty minutes or more.

Similar techniques may also be resorted to in ski-lift queues. In such circumstances successful application is, of course, considerably facilitated by the nature of the sport itself which requires participants to wear appendages extending some distance ahead of, and behind feet - thereby rendering conventional rectilinear queuing totally impractical (ten skiers aligned with skis attached would probably occupy a distance which could accommodate 50 ski-less queuers). As a result, ski-lift queuing spontaneously generates lateral bunching which provides even the most inexperienced un-queuer with a multitude of opportunities to improve his technique. And so much do queues of this kind make speedy advancement a matter of such elementary simplicity that they provide the perfect training ground for French youngsters to begin their un-queuing apprenticeship in. Moreover, it is interesting to note that, in spite of Thistlethwaite's attempts

to make us believe his compatriots are at all times respectful queuers, English skiers – no doubt working off the accumulated frustrations occasioned by the uncompromising rigidity of queuing at home – are, along with their skis, letting their sense of fair play slip. And such is the enthusiasm shown that I have every reason to believe they will take full advantage of the lessons and experience it has been our privilege to provide them with in order to further develop their un-queueing skills on returning home.

6. Non-Classifiable

In this category we may place that unique Gallic prodigy, the master un-queuer, a true magician whose consummate wizardry consists in joining the queue at the back, discreetly vanishing within, only to reappear moments later at the front, forcing stunned wonderment from all. Regrettably, the latitude offered for this sort of *artiste* to fully express his genius is being more and more restricted by the gradual introduction into France of Anglo-Saxon type, materially-enforced queuing (totally unnecessary, moreover, in a country where the same basic instinct leading the newly-born lamb to the udder of the ewe guides the Englishman unerringly to the back of the queue), which channels queue-members into a pen-like passage, narrowly delimited by barriers, obliging each to remain behind the other, and thereby rendering many of the above-cited techniques and ploys beyond the capacities of all but the most accomplished un-queuer.

FTT: At this juncture my right eye began to see things through a distinctly red haze, while an overwhelming force raised my right fist threateningly in the air. I also started to feel uncomfortably hot around the collar, and was just loosening my tie when an anxious-sounding voice warned me that my English part, furious at the inference that his countrymen might be persuaded to step out of line, could no longer wait his turn, and that if

he wasn't allowed an immediate say I could end up getting punched in my left eye. A few seconds later, however, and the same, slightly calmer voice informed me he had managed to negotiate just one minute to allow my Frenchman to finish what he had to say... so, could François go ahead right now?

D'accord. By way of a hasty conclusion, then, may I say that, though I have been able to give little more than a glimpse of the infinite number of possibilities attached to that fascinating subject of creative French un-queueing, it is my sincere hope that these few pages will have gone some way towards inspiring in you follow-my-leader English a determination to adopt a more audacious, individualistic attitude towards waiting in a line. And now, it is with the greatest regret that I am compelled to place the remainder of this chapter in the limp right hand of our own clueless English...

'Take that!'

'Aie ! Merde! Arrête, tu me fais mal! ... Je ne vois plus! Théodore! Au secours!' **(FTT: Ouch! Shit! Stop it, you're hurting me! I can't see any more! Théodore! Help!)**

'And here's another, you damn froggy queue-jumper! That's put him back in his place! Ah, now I feel much better!'

My countrymen and women do not need me to remind them of those traditional English qualities of meticulous organisation and uncompromising fairness, so faithfully epitomized by our impeccably aligned queues, and unflinching adherence to the rule of 'First In First Out.' And I am sure they will be in total agreement with me when I say that, not only are these the only pillars on which a civilized world may repose, but affirming that what is nothing but shameless queue-jumping belongs to the realms of creative artistry is not only doing our people and their values a monstrous injustice, but can only lead our world into total anarchy. It must, therefore, be firmly opposed in all its forms.

As for myself, I have no hesitation in affirming that the disgraceful, undisciplined clustering which goes under the name of 'queue' in Frogland shows those Frenchies for what they really are: opportunistic, untrustworthy, undisciplined, inconsiderate, brazen cheats.

As irrefutable proof of this, I am now going to provide some anecdotal illustrations, based on my own observations of queuing in France, in the hope that they will give my countrymen and women some idea of just a few of the underhand tricks these imposters are liable to get up to in order to gain a few miserable places; and that they may serve as a dire warning to all that, whenever you find yourself in a Gallic queue, it is fatal, even for one brief second, to lower your guard.

Far more than those encountered in supermarkets or Alpine ski-resorts, it is French airport terminal queues which provide our Gallic queue-jumper with those conditions in which he excels. Take, for example, that time we flew to England for the Christmas holidays. After arriving at the terminal we checked in, went through security control and proceeded to the departure lounge where we patiently waited for boarding. The scheduled boarding time arrived but, as the minutes ticked by, we became more and more uneasy. Finally, our worst fears were confirmed: fog, we were informed, had caused the incoming plane to be diverted to another airport.

The vociferous protestations which the announcement unleashed among the scattering of French passengers in our midst might have led the casual observer to think that my countrymen (who, of course, maintained a dignified silence), were in a considerable minority. Once these unpleasant Gallic clamours had more or less subsided, a member of the ground staff invited us to follow her in order to retrieve our previously-registered luggage. We were then led to the airline's reception desk in the terminal hall where it was announced we would be re-routed to our destination via a Continental airport (our cancelled flight was direct).

Now, this re-routing involved two new tickets being issued manually for each passenger (we were about 50 in all) – the first to the Continental airport, and the second for the connecting flight to our final destination in England. This operation was carried out by two ground hostesses sitting next to each other behind the airline counter. Accordingly, we lined up in two parallel queues of similar length with a space of some three or four feet between. Naturally, the two queues did not advance at the same pace: the hostesses were frequently interrupted by phone calls and direct enquiries from other travellers and, whenever this happened, advancement in one of the queues was temporarily halted. Even though our Frenchy and Théodore declined to take part, waiting in the line provided me with the opportunity of indulging in a slightly modified version of my favourite supermarket queue game – in this case, deducing the occupation of fellow queuers from their general appearance, together with the size, colour and type of luggage accompanying them.

Two respectable-looking, well-dressed, middle-aged French ladies with identical pink suitcases (presenting all the characteristics of retired primary school teachers on a pre-Christmas shopping fling to England), caught my eye. The two ladies had, in fact, arrived a few minutes after us, and had duly joined our queue at the rear, seven or eight people behind. But strangely, here they now were in the other parallel queue, four or five people in front of us and surging on with consummate ease. It didn't take me long to rumble their little game. Instead of committing themselves to just one of the queues and then staying in it, their strategy consisted in straddling both; for there was always a leg and a bit of the body of one or the other in the gap between the two. So, whenever their own queue came to a halt, legs were casually introduced and bodies then unobtrusively worked into the other one. By slaloming in this way they were blithely enjoying the best of both queues! What struck me most was

the obvious complicity of the two (they'd probably been at it for years): not only was their synchronisation perfect but, while they were transferring themselves from one queue to the other, never for one moment did they mark a pause in their loud chattering, and never for an instant did they look round – the result being that they gave the impression of being so absorbed in conversation that they were totally unaware of what they were about. But you can take it from me they knew exactly what they were doing, and I proceeded to call them to order. Faced with my remonstrations, the two had the usual French reaction when caught in the act: a profuse, apologetic show of innocence was staged, with just enough of a trace of supercilious condescension to suggest that I was the guilty one in creating such an unpleasant scene for so trifling a matter.

On another occasion last August, the same airport supplied us with a far more impressive queue, and with it a host of opportunities to observe the Frenchies at their favourite tricks. We had booked a package holiday abroad through a well-known tour operator who, a few days prior to our date of departure, had informed us that, on arrival at the airport, we must collect our plane tickets and hotel vouchers from their reception counter located in the main terminal hall. Even though we arrived well before the specified time and found the desk without the slightest problem, great was our dismay on seeing that our wait would be a particularly long one: for stretching back some 70 yards or more was a monstrous muddle of a queue, getting longer by the second, composed of some 600 holidaymakers and their children, frequently four or five abreast, complete with luggage of varying types and sizes, jostling for position in circumstances which could only be described as chaotic. Apparently, our tour operator had been inspired enough to schedule three different departures within the same half hour, and what we were observing was the future contents of no less than three planes. And to add to the pandemonium, the counter was

manned by just one person, with the result that queuers were advancing at a pace which would have shamed a snail. Not only was the queue horrendously long, but the configuration of that part of the terminal hall, as well as the location of the tour operator's counter, had caused it to assume an inverted L-shaped form; for in order not to unduly impede other travellers walking along the main aisle of the hall, it stretched for 50 yards or so in as much as a straight line as you can expect from the Frogs, before turning left at right angles when adjacent to the counter located some 20 yards away.

Resisting all remonstrations on the part of our Frenchy who, it goes without saying, suggested we should indulge in a spot of lateral queuing, Théodore and I frog-marched him to the back. But, as we edged patiently on, I couldn't help noticing that a good number of people I had seen walking by, and who, in many cases, had arrived half an hour or more after us, were now popping up 20 or 30 yards ahead in that final stretch of the queue after the 90° turn. How had they managed it? A few yards further on and the answer became perfectly clear. Many of those I had seen walking by - whom I had thought were passengers for other destinations - were, in fact, joining our queue at that point in front where it branched perpendicularly towards the tour operator's counter - thereby saving themselves a good hour's queuing time. True to their nature, the Frogs had been quick to identify and exploit the principal weakness of our queue: the right-angled turn. For this right-angle constituted what could possibly have been conceived as a starting point to which the inveterate queue-jumper, under cover of the passing crowds, could append himself far more discreetly than joining it laterally at some point along the preceding stretch. What's more, in the unlikely event of reprimand from others, joining the queue at this point presented the further advantage of supplying offenders with the possibility of pretexting that they had mistaken it for its beginning. In short, this was a dreamed-of scenario for the Gallic queue-predator.

The antics of one specimen of this type of queue-wolf in sheep's clothing were particularly revealing. I couldn't help noticing an inoffensive-looking, diminutively-sized, monsieur (probably a hen-pecked bank clerk) wearing an oversized, gaudily-patterned, short-sleeved shirt and light blue Bermuda shorts strolling past, wheeling a suitcase almost as large as himself. As he reached that point ahead where the queue began its 90 degree turn he stopped, let go of the suitcase handle, pulled a large handkerchief out of his pocket, and proceeded to mop his brow. Then, looking resignedly ahead, he expelled a lungful of air in what was intended to be seen as a deep sigh of fatigue. To the casual observer, he gave the impression he was simply pausing for a breather before continuing on his way. But, after stealing a furtive glance at his immediate neighbours, he lifted his suitcase an inch or two, only to let it almost instantly drop. The same observer would have thought that, realizing he had not quite got his strength back, he had simply decided to grant himself a few more seconds' rest. It didn't escape me, however, that the suitcase had been deposited just a little nearer the queue. Another sly glance followed, and again our little man picked up his case. This time it seemed as if this was merely to disencumber the busy main aisle. Again he put the case back down even nearer the main body of the queue.

To cut a long story short, the same procedure was repeated a dozen times until the case had been worked far enough in to provide a foothold for its owner, after which it was relatively easy to introduce one leg followed by most of his body, and finally the other leg until complete integration had been obtained. And then, by some mysterious airport version of the jungle telephone, he was immediately joined by two small children and a woman, twice his size, whom I assumed to be his spouse.

What astonished me, above all, was the fact that, though some fellow queuers did vaguely grumble among themselves at the unashamed mass queue-jumping going on, all direct

remonstration was carefully avoided. But *I* could take no more. Observing a not unattractive young lady, in the process of shamelessly positioning herself laterally to the queue only yards from the counter, I loudly enjoined her to get to the back. She stubbornly stood her ground, however, and in typical French fashion, made a not unconvincing attempt to make it appear I was the culprit by angrily inferring that my attitude was lacking in gallantry. I consequently abandoned the combat, not before appealing to the grumblers among us for moral support. The assistance I urged was not in the least forthcoming.

‘Ah, vous savez, c’est sûrement la même chose à l’étranger!’ (**FTT: Ah, you know, it’s certainly the same abroad!**) a previously loud lady grumbler exclaimed - no doubt detecting a slight foreign accent (in moments of stress I betray my English origins) in my voice. Despite my attempts to convince her this was certainly not the case in England, she remained unmoved, and I finally let the whole business drop.

Another time, this same airport provided yet one more example of the French queue-jumper’s instinctive ability not only to adapt to a queue’s specific configuration but to exploit the objects at his immediate disposal. It was Easter, and the airport was particularly busy, so, after checking in, we joined the long queue of passengers waiting to go through security control. Needless to say, the queue had only the remotest of resemblances to that splendid linear arrangement we can be so proud of on this side of the Channel and was, of course, the scene of the usual disgraceful bunching and incessant jockeying for position. At the beginning, it was little more than a wide, loose grouping of people loitering five or six abreast but, on nearing the entrance to the security control area it narrowed progressively into a sort of bottle neck purposely created by two parallel, Anglo-Saxon-style metal barriers, only three feet or so apart, channelling queuers into a corridor in which they were obliged to continue single file.

As we came to this final short stretch I made the almost fatal mistake of relaxing my guard. A young Frenchman, whom I had distinctly observed joining the queue some 15 minutes after us, drew up level and, at the last moment, just as we were about to enter that narrow, delimited area where overtaking would no longer be possible, he negligently kicked his large hold-all, previously deposited on the floor, into the small unoccupied space in front of us in what could only have been a blatant attempt to impede our forward progress, and thereby facilitate a last-minute overtaking manoeuvre on his part – a ploy he had been certainly using from the minute he set foot in the queue, and which explained his astonishing progress up to this point. I immediately positioned my right leg between him and his hold-all in a blocking movement, designed to let him know his little game wouldn't work with me. And as he glanced up I gave him a withering look.

'Ah, vous estimez que vous étiez avant moi!' (**FTT: Oh, so you think you were in front of me!**) he declared in pretended innocence.

'Absolument!' I replied.

'Ce n'est pas vrai du tout!' (**FTT : That's not true at all**) he retorted with feigned indignation, 'mais comme vous y tenez tellement je vous laisse la place!' (**but since you're so bent on it I'll let you go first.**) - in yet another classic attempt to retrieve resounding moral victory from humiliating defeat. Ignoring him completely, I propelled myself forward.

And then there was that other time when ...

FTT: At this moment, my Englishman's train of thought was rudely interrupted by an 'r'-rolling voice rrrreerrrrberrrating up my gullet with such force that my left ear lobe began quivering uncontrollably. The same voice then proceeded to inform me that, though he himself had personally proved over the last few pages that a Frenchman was just as capable as a Rosbif of patiently waiting his turn, enough was enough, and he

now felt the time had come to move on to a subject which, though not quite the same, was not unrelated to that of this present chapter. While his English brother had been relating his '*conneries*' (*FTT: his load of cock*), he himself had been putting together some thoughts on one of the most important manifestations of the Frenchman's inborn capacity for brilliant improvisation, with the aim of proving to the mutton-headed English that there was no such thing as problems but only solutions. In this respect, he was confident my middleman would allow him a leading hand in outlining a pattern of behavior so deeply-rooted and endemic as to constitute such an important part of the French approach to everyday living that any self-respecting work on the subject of his compatriots could not fail to include a chapter on it. Théodore must have been in agreement as my head inclined itself forward in a meditative nod.

Chapter Ten

Le Système D

The French are among the most intelligent and resourceful beings on our planet. The same can be said of wolves and bears.

François Théodore *Thistlethwaite*

The following pages being solely for the benefit of you English, it may well be asked why the heading of this chapter has not been rendered into the language of Shakespeare. The reason could not be simpler. It is yet another indication of the immeasurable gulf which divides a resourceful, imaginative, individualistic people from a laborious, unimaginative, regimented one that the veritable institution it describes on our side of the Channel is totally absent on yours. So, how can you expect a satisfactory English equivalent term to exist?

FTT: The tone immediately adopted in this opening paragraph will leave readers in no doubt as to the identity of that part of myself in possession of my thoughts. Even while under deliberation, the theme of this chapter was the cause of much heated debate, generated once more by the considerable friction between the Thistlethwaite and François within. The former expressed his grave misgivings about exposing a virgin nation to a blight which could have very much the same devastating effect as the 'flu on a newly discovered Amazonian tribe, while the latter retorted that the sheep-like English were naturally immune to all risk of contamination by a bug affecting humans only. After lengthy internal discussion, it was agreed to leave the final decision to my arbitrator. Though expressing his

fears that the penning of a chapter on such a topic - revelatory, it is true, of diametrically-opposed mentalities - could only exacerbate the considerable disharmony already smouldering within, my middleman finally ruled that this risk would have to be run; for so endemic is *le Système D* to the French mentality that - as François has previously indicated - no serious analysis of this people could possibly leave it out. And who, then, was better qualified than a Frenchman to share with us his thoughts on the subject?

Je vous remercie, messieurs. Je voudrais ... pardon, I should like to make it perfectly clear from the start that the meagre number of pages placed at my disposal prevents me from giving more than just the briefest of insights into what is yet one more indication of our limitless French creative genius. While I set my part of our mind to putting some thoughts together, and recollecting a few examples from our own daily life for the benefit of you slow-witted English, I am sure our scholar will be only too happy to give a brief explanation of the etymological origins, together with a definition of *le Système D*. A vous, mon cher Théodore.

Merci, François. It gives me the greatest pleasure to oblige. Now, even our non-French speaking English readers will have realized that, as far as the word *système* is concerned, the two languages converge so closely that deleting the grave accent over the first 'e,' while suppressing the second, suffice to render one into the other, thereby giving us a word signifying in both 'a scheme, or plan of procedure.' It is the capitalized fourth letter of the alphabet, however, which imparts that same unmistakeable French flavour to the term as garlic does to lamb; for this 'D' represents the initial letter of the commonly-used reflexive verb *se débrouiller*, literally meaning 'to disentangle' or to 'extricate oneself.' As we have already had occasion to note, our English friends tend to adopt a respectful attitude towards rules (assisted, as we have

seen (**FTT: Chapter 3 - Liberté – Egalité – Fraternité**), by a profusion of signs and warnings inciting them to do so), whereas the more self-oriented Latin sets great prize on using his personal resourcefulness to circumvent them. And the same may be said of those problems and obstacles which life, at some moment or other, inevitably places in our path. These may simply be of a practical, concrete nature, or can be posed by regulations, or those officially appointed to apply them. In order to surmount these relatively minor vicissitudes, our French friends have developed what they ubiquitously term *le Système D* – an implicit, institutionalized anti-code, perhaps not always perfectly licit, but never more than marginally detrimental to others, which relies on the ingenuity of each to improvise an immediate solution. And, as we have seen in the previous chapter, it is their masterly application of *le Système D* which enables the French to glide so effortlessly from rear to front of queue in less time than it takes to say Jack Robinson.

FTT: My French readers will certainly be mystified by the words ‘in less time than it takes to say Jack Robinson.’ As all English people know, this colloquial expression simply means ‘speedily,’ i.e. he downed his pint in less time than it takes to say Jack Robinson. What is perhaps less well known are the etymological origins of the name. Though a number of explanations do exist, the least implausible has it that this refers to an officer in command of the Tower of London between 1660 and 1679 - one Sir John Robinson (in the past Jack was a familiar form of John). Originally a palace, the Tower of London, of course, later became a prison and infamous place of execution for nobly-born captives. At that time, the customary way of abridging their sojourn on our planet involved the rather messy business of creating a zone of fresh air between head and body by means of an axe – a procedure which, for the sake of the

person concerned, I trust was accomplished neatly, and in the shortest possible time. Though never himself the executioner, 'Jack' Robinson has, presumably, come to be associated with him.

Broadly speaking, unlike the more collectively-directed Anglo-Saxon cultures which view with disapproval too individualistic an interpretation of the rule, in France *être débrouillard* is a positively-perceived trait, an attribute it is indispensable to possess when confronted with life's everyday inconveniences, and as such, a quality which French parents would encourage in their offspring from a very early age – even to the point of chiding them when it is absent and....

Merci pour ces explications, mon cher camarade. Oui, cohabiting in such close, permanent contact with an Englishman has brought me to the conclusion that, apart from being members of the human race, we have about as much in common as Coca Cola and first growth Claret. As our scholar has explained, just one of the infinite number of things that separate our two nations is the attitude we French adopt towards those little encumbrances which everyday life will not fail to bring. Having a positive, enterprising approach, we are unshakeably convinced that problems rarely exist for which a solution cannot be imagined and successfully applied. And so, with a shake of initiative here and a dash of audacity there, an antidote can quickly be found to all those little things that poison our daily lives, n'est-ce pas? En revanche, you gormless English allow them to dominate you to the point of utter stupidity.

FTT: The Frenchman in me is, perhaps, being a little unfair here. Incredible as this may appear, there are people even more regimented and sheep-like than the English. Our company-owning neighbour, Monsieur Martin, tells of that occasion last year when he went on a business trip to see a supplier in the German-speaking

part of Switzerland. In the evening, he was invited to a concert in the capital of this region. It must have been after midnight, he relates, when he and his supplier, along with a small crowd of fellow concert-goers, came out. Since they had to cross the main street to reach the car park where they had left their vehicles, they walked towards the nearest zebra crossing which was equipped with a set of those miniature lights, designed to indicate to pedestrians when it is safe to cross. As they approached the lights turned red. Even though the street was completely deserted at that time of night, everybody waited obediently for it to change to green – everybody, that is, except Monsieur Martin who began strolling across. Out of politeness, his supplier did the same. The others immediately followed.

In its most rudimentary form, le Système D simply consists in improvising a practical solution to a concrete problem by adapting any material at hand. In this respect, an example of my own imaginativeness (and my English brother's total lack of it) immediately springs to mind. A few summers ago, I spent a couple of weeks' holiday on the *Côte d'Azur*, and by the very nature of our configuration was obliged to take along Thistlethwaite, Théodore ... and Priscille. Who is Priscille, you may ask? Eh bien, Priscille is, or rather was our *petite amie* at that time (as she never knew who she was with, we broke up soon after). Now, in view of the long journey ahead, and the likelihood of encountering dense traffic on the way, we decided to start our journey well before dawn.

While loading up our car of that time, an old 2CV, Thistlethwaite brought to our attention the fact that, in view of the long drive ahead, it would be prudent to remove all the insects that had come to a sticky end on the windscreen over the previous days.

'I'll go and get the window spray,' he added. On coming back he directed the nozzle towards the glass and applied his right forefinger to the button. Nothing happened.

'The bloody thing's U.S.,' he muttered in dismay. 'What the heck are we going to do?'

'Ne t'en fais pas, mon vieux ! **(FTT : Don't worry, old chap!)** I replied without hesitation. 'On va se débrouiller!' **(FTT: We'll find a way round!)**

Being a slow-on-the-uptake Englishman, what he didn't realize was that the same, even better results can be obtained, totally free of charge, simply by using a few sheets of newspaper, a drop of water, and a bit of elbow grease. Soak the newspaper in the water, rub away and squashed insects disappear like magic! 'Elémentaire, mon cher Thistlethwaite!'

A little later that same day, a rather more serious problem enabled me to come up with a more daringly imaginative application. After picking Priscille up, we finally got under way and headed south. We hadn't been driving more than a couple of hours, however, when a red warning light started flashing on the dashboard. I pulled up immediately (*my* hand was at the wheel), jumped myself and my two alters out, and proceeded to lift up the bonnet. It didn't take long to see where the problem lay. The fan belt had chosen this moment to come apart. Now, as our more mechanically-minded readers will know, this type of breakdown, while not being a disaster in itself, makes any further attempt at motorized advancement liable to seriously compromise the future health of the engine. So, if we wanted to reach our holiday destination I had to find a makeshift solution to get us as far as the nearest garage.

'Oh, shit!' said a mortified Thistlethwaite, (Théodore showed his usual fatalistic detachment) 'We're stranded. What the hell are we going to do?'

'Ne t'en fais pas, mon vieux!' I again replied without hesitation. 'Il n'y a pas de problème. On va se débrouiller.'

Needless to say, I found a solution in half the time it takes to say Jack Robinson. Now, the armour of Priscille's virtue constituted an impenetrable shield against every conceivable type of incursion, whatever form it came in, whatever direction it came from, and whatever part it was aimed at, and I had to use all my French charm to get her to divest herself of her tights (after all, weren't we in a tight spot?). But the rest was plain sailing. After twisting them into a rope, I knotted them round the pulleys of the dynamo, and hey presto! two minutes later we were breezing along again. C'est ça, le système D!

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Vous savez, when it comes to getting a bargain you've got to go about it in the right way. I mean, it's amazing what you can gain with just a dash of imagination and a touch of daring. I don't really know why I left it to that stick-in-the-mud Thistlethwaite to buy the car we owned before our present one. After reading through the second hand car ads in the Saint-Clou Gazette, he spotted a vehicle which seemed to fit the bill, and then rushed us off to view it, had us take a test drive, haggled an insignificant discount of 3%, and finally drove us all back home, a self-satisfied smirk on our right cheek. This would not have been my way of doing things.

So, when we decided to buy our present car it was me who insisted on taking charge. I, of course, adopted a far more inspired approach. But first, just as Thistlethwaite had done, I went through all the second-hand professional car ads in the Saint-Clou Gazette until I came across something like what we were looking for. I then phoned the dealer. It was here that I showed all my native genius. Let me explain. Now, since profit margins between car dealers are much less than when they sell to members of the ordinary public, I pretended to be a professional like him, based in another town far enough away for him not to know all the dealers

there. I then proceeded to inform him that I was acting on behalf of one of my customers who had expressed great interest in this model - which I would be pleased to take off his hands ... provided he could manage a discount of 15%. After hesitating a bit I finally got him to agree and off we went to the garage. He only realized I was a private buyer at the last minute when I handed him our cheque! Thistlethwaite, of course, was extremely embarrassed 'at this shameless way of doing things,' but the dealer said nothing and we got away with it. As I told our Englishman at the time, 'You'll never get anywhere, mon cher Thistlethwaite. You play it far too straight. Il faut être malin dans la vie!' **(FTT: You've got to be smart in life!).**

You know, I've tried very hard, but I just don't seem to be able to get it through my English alter's thicker part of our skull that life is too short not to take advantage of every single moment, and that precious time can be wasted blindly following the rule. During the time we were going out together, Priscille lived with her parents about five kilomètres from Saint-Clou, in a small mountain village which could only be reached by a twisting main road.

FTT: It is interesting to observe the difference in approach between an English and French youth when, say, launching a conversation in a disco with a girl who has just accepted an invitation to dance. While the young Englishman would begin with an innocent 'Do you come here often?' the Frenchman gets straight to the point: 'Habitez-vous chez vos parents?' (FTT: Do you live with your parents?). If the answer is 'oui' he will see the dance out, politely thank her and wish her goodbye. When I first met Priscille it must have been the Thistlethwaite in me who was predominant.

Journey time could, however, be reduced by turning left off this main road and following another route - a steep,

narrow, but relatively straight lane leading directly into the village centre. So narrow was this lane that a one-way system had always operated to the advantage of the coming-downers, the going-uppers being officially informed they must take the longer route by a conspicuous **No Entry** sign located at the intersection. It goes without saying that when our Englishman was at the wheel the words **No Entry** constituted a barrier as impenetrable as Priscille's virtue, and we stupidly wasted up to two minutes following the longer main road to the village instead of taking the short-cut.

Things really came to a head, however, when a section of the road between the short-cut intersection and the village was partially blocked by a landslide and a one-way system, regulated by temporary traffic lights, was put into operation. Not only did Thistlethwaite continue to take the same route, but he actually waited when the lights were red, frequently wasting as much as five minutes.

FTT: It must have been Théodore who, at this point, reminded me of that occasion during our holiday in England last year when – incredible as this may sound – I actually witnessed an Englishman shamelessly jumping a temporary red light at a road works. This might constitute one more element substantiating Thistlethwaite's previously-expressed fears that traditional English respect for the rule is being slowly but surely contaminated by microbes blown in from the Continent.

What I could never get into his bird-sized part of our brain was that, even if we took the short-cut, the limited number of inhabitants, the remote location of the village, as well as the time of day (usually we called on Priscille and her parents in the evening after dinner) weighed the law of probability heavily in favour of us not meeting a going-downer on our way up. Of course, much to our Englishman's

discomfort, whenever I was at the wheel, we always took the shorter way up. This choice always revealed itself to be right, except on one occasion when I had to stop and pull in to one side to let a coming-downer through. He, of course, in true French fashion, left us in no doubt as to his opinion of my decision by lowering his window, sticking his head out and bellowing, 'Ca ne va pas la tête, non?' (**FTT: Are you soft-headed, or what?**) – less because I'd infringed the rule than the slight personal inconvenience he'd been caused; for this in no way prevented him from taking the same short-cut himself when he became a going-upper on his way back.

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In the course of everyday life, officialdom places in our path a host of petty rules and regulations which you dim-witted, mutton-headed English resignedly accept as insurmountable hurdles. You just don't seem to realize it only takes a bit of imagination and audacity to reduce them to mere stiles to be hopped over with ease. Nothing illustrates this better than that masterpiece of bold inventiveness I am especially proud of, which got us round a little snag we had with the *la Poste* (**FTT: the Post Office**) last year.

Thistlethwaite will certainly remember that Saturday morning when we got back home from doing our weekly shopping at the only supermarket in Saint-Clou. On opening our letterbox, we found reposing within an official post office form, duly completed by the postman, informing us that he had called at precisely 10.50 a.m. with a *une lettre recommandée avec accusé de réception* (**FTT: a registered letter with acknowledgement of receipt**). In view of our absence, the postman had taken it back to the main post office where, we were informed, it would be available for collection the following Monday morning from eight o'clock onwards (the main post office in Saint-Clou closes for the weekend at noon on Saturdays). Now past experience had taught us that this

sort of missive, often arising from official sources, could, like tap water in foreign climes, be the prelude to a messy business. Even though Théodore was stoical, Thistlethwaite (who's a born worrier) began to fret so much about what it could contain that this threatened to contaminate his weekend and, by extension, to infect mine.

'We're bloody well going to have to wait until Monday morning to know what it's all about!' he muttered resignedly.

'Pas du tout, mon pauvre Thistlethwaite!' I retorted. 'Laisse-moi faire. On va se débrouiller!' It didn't take me long, of course, to concoct a way of getting round all this. Here's what I did:

Picking up the phone, I called the main post office in Saint-Clou and asked to be put through to *Monsieur le Receveur* (**FTT: the Post Office Manager**). I began by politely explaining that I had in my hand a post office form, which the postman had deposited in my letterbox, indicating he had called at precisely 10.50 a.m. that morning with a registered letter which my absence had obliged him to take back to the post office.

Monsieur le Receveur replied - not without a trace of irritation - that he didn't really understand why I was calling, as it was certainly indicated on the said post office form that the registered letter would be available for collection on Monday from 8 o'clock onwards.

'In addition,' he added, 'the postman was simply following post office regulations.'

'Do post office regulations stipulate,' I asked, 'that before depositing the post office form in a letterbox and taking the registered letter back, the postman should first use all reasonable means at his disposal to ascertain whether the addressee is, in fact, at home?'

Monsieur le Receveur confirmed that official post office procedure did, in fact, require the postman to first use all reasonable means at his disposal to ascertain whether or not the addressee was absent from home.

‘And does using all reasonable means at his disposal include ringing the doorbell or applying his knuckles to the door?’ I enquired.

‘En effet,’ Monsieur le Receveur replied, ‘official post office regulations were to be interpreted in this sense.’

‘And is it your honest opinion we can be absolutely sure the postman acted in full accordance with post office regulations?’ I then asked.

‘Since all postmen have received strict instructions in this respect, I have no reason to believe that yours did not act in full accordance with post office regulations,’ was his reply.

‘But don’t you think that, since I’ve not put a foot out all morning, some doubt might be cast on whether the postman really acted in full accordance with post office regulations?’

‘Might I suggest,’ he retorted, ‘that when the postman rang the doorbell, you were engaged in some form of household activity - vacuum cleaning, for example - which prevented you from hearing him?’ I could almost see the smile of triumph on his face.

‘But in any case, since you only have to wait until eight o’clock on Monday morning,’ he added, ‘I don’t really see where the problem is. And since I’m a busy man, would you please forgive me for abridging this conver...’

‘On the contrary,’ I interrupted (and here I showed all my inventive genius), ‘there is a very real problem. You see, I was expecting this registered letter. It contains vital information, determining whether or not I take the six o’clock *T.G.V.* (**FTT: *le Train à Grande Vitesse* – the High Speed Train**) on Monday morning for an important nine o’clock business meeting in Paris. And since I’ve spent all morning quietly reading the newspaper, the only explanation for me not being now in possession of this letter would seem to be provided by the fact that the postman, for reasons known only to him, did not act in accordance with post office regulations.’ I paused for a moment to let my words sink in.

‘But, whatever the cause may be,’ I continued, ‘there’s absolutely no question of me letting the matter rest here. If I don’t obtain satisfaction, I’m going to lodge an official complaint. So what do you suggest we do about it?’

After a long and heavy silence, it was, I must confess, with some relief that I heard him pronounce those magic words I was waiting to hear:

‘Bon. On va se débrouiller! Voici ce qu’on va faire.’

He then proposed the very solution I had in mind. Though, normally, it would have been out of the question, in view of these exceptional circumstances, he was prepared to bend the rule. Since it was now going on for midday and the post office would be closing shortly, if I presented myself at his private flat located to the rear of the building, and identified myself by giving three sharp raps on the door, he would personally remit the letter to me. This, of course, I did, everything went without a hitch, the contents of the registered letter weren’t half as bad as Thistlethwaite had thought, and we had an excellent weekend. C’est ça, le Système D. En France, on se débrouille! I mean, could you seriously imagine this sort of arrangement being concluded by you stick-to-the-rule English?

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Sooner or later, life’s journey leads us on a collision course with those officially appointed to make sure rules and regulations are respected. It must not be imagined, however, that, because a French policeman is clad in blue, a heart of gold doesn’t beat beneath. What I don’t seem to be able to get into Thistlethwaite’s soft part of our brain is that, with the help of le Système D, this type of encounter is far from obliging you to resign yourself to the worst.

During the (short) time we and Priscilla were together, whenever we were stopped by les flics for speeding, she had strict instructions to pretend to give me a resounding telling-

off (towards the end I suspected she wasn't acting at all). At the same time, Thistlethwaite didn't have to force himself to impart a typically English, sheepish expression to our face. In nine cases out of ten the policeman was unable to conceal his amusement and let us off with just a warning!

And when you English receive a speeding fine all you can think of is paying it. Even though *faire sauter un P.V.* is, admittedly, a trifle more complicated now than in the past, we French pride ourselves on being positive, and view automatic, computerized speed camera systems as yet one more exciting challenge.

FTT: *Faire sauter un P.V.* = to get a traffic fine cancelled (P.V. = procès-verbal = fine). As previously mentioned (Chapter Seven - The Rule of the Exception), this widely-established (and generally-accepted) procedure involved contacting an acquaintance (or acquaintance of an acquaintance) whose official function (i.e. a policeman, a politician, a mayor or member of town council) enabled him to exert his influence in having a motoring fine cancelled. Though the exact extent of the practice was, by very nature, impossible to quantify, proof of the inborn talent François claims for his compatriots is provided by certain well-informed sources which estimated that at least one in three motoring fines were, in one way or another, nipped in the bud. In view of the considerable loss of revenue (not to mention inequality before the law) involved, the government has gradually introduced totally automated, computerized systems with permanent roadside speed cameras, temporary traps using sophisticated speed guns or in-vehicle cameras. These devices take a photo of the vehicle registration number which is automatically transmitted to a centre. Here the infraction is processed and, some time later, notification of the fine incurred, along with the number

of licence points lost, is received through the post. Even though the system is now automated from beginning to end, the French are still far from convinced that all human intervention is now impossible.

It goes without saying, of course, that even if we must, for the moment at least, pay the fine, we are totally convinced that - such is our native inventive genius - this obstacle is merely temporary, and will not fail to be quickly by-passed. And I'm pleased to announce that we've already discovered a simple little dodge to avoid, at least, losing any licence points. Here's how you do it:

If ever you're flashed by an automatic speed camera you will, of course, receive, a few days after, official notification of the fine, along with the number of licence points lost. Though there's nothing you can do about the fine, you don't have to lose a single point. You see, we've found a flaw in their computer system. If your fine is, for instance, 90€, you must always send off a cheque for a little more - say 95€. They'll cash in the cheque, so there's no problem about not having paid the fine. You'll then be automatically sent a cheque for the excess amount paid. **Don't pay it into your bank account!** As long as the amount hasn't been credited to your account, and debited from theirs, the points can't be deducted. You see, the matter is officially considered to be unfinished. You half-baked English would never have thought of that! C'est ça, le système D!

Even though it is impossible to do full justice to a subject of such infinite variety in the limited number of pages allotted to me by our cheese-paring egg-head and half-soaped Englishman, it is my sincere hope that the preceding anecdotal examples have given our Anglo-Saxon readers an insight into the workings of our Système D. While realizing that a congenitally ovine people can never attain the same degree of resourcefulness, intelligence, audacity, creativity and tenacity which nature has liberally bestowed on us French, I

trust that this present chapter will have gone a little way, at least, towards providing a source of inspiration when it comes to ironing out those little creases which rumple the fabric of our daily existence. And it is in all modesty that I must confess there are very few obstacles I cannot get around in my own everyday life – with the possible exception of one. This obstacle - amorphous and inert - occupies the right side of our body, answers to the name of Thistlethwaite, and like a stone in the gallbladder, is the source of constant, excruciating pain. However, you can take it from me I'm working on this problem night and day, and you can be sure that sooner or later I'll flush this canker out of our body with the help of le Systè...

... pardon ... can't go on ... terrible cramp in left hand... right hand clenched... fist ...!!!!???!!! ... au secours! ... Théodore, aide-moi! ... major dispute ... chapter ... la fin ... merdel!

Chapter Eleven

A Sporting France

Monsieur Foot, vous êtes un salaud! (Mr Foot, you're a bastard!)

Thierry Roland, a now-deceased French television soccer commentator

Even though a case could possibly be made out in defence of the foreign beginnings of a limited number of minor sports, little doubt can be entertained as to the English origins of the major ones and, above all, the source of the sporting spirit in which they are played.

Readers will have already realized it was my Englishman who won the toss and kicked off this chapter with the above lines. Initially he set the ball rolling by, 'Even though absolutely no doubt whatsoever may possibly be entertained as to the English origins of all popular sports...', but was crunchingly tackled on this by his left wing French team mate. My Gallic vehemently protested that, contrary to general belief on this side of the Channel, well-known sports such as football, rugby, or tennis are, in fact, of French origin. He then went on to insist that if Thistlethwaite were to remain true to the principle of fair play he claimed for himself and his compatriots, the very least he could do was to admit the existence of doubt on this score.

My French left winger then proceeded to declare that, though English history maintains that the game of rugby was inspired by a certain William Webb Ellis, a pupil at the public school of the same sporting name who, in November 1823, during a game of football, hit on the brilliant idea of picking up the ball and running with it towards the opposing goal, this sport can actually be traced much further back in time to

the ancient French game of *la soule*. This contest, apparently originating in Brittany, took the form of what was little more than a mass punch-up between two gangs of young men from rival villages, with few, if any rules - the goal being to carry a bran-filled pig's bladder over a predetermined line. 'If no rules existed,' retorted Thistlethwaite, 'then I grant you it must have come from France!'

Similarly, again according to my Frenchman, tennis has its origins in the French *jeu de paume*. For him, indisputable proof of this is provided by the word 'love', signifying 'nought' in this sport only, and which is, in fact, a corruption of the French word *œuf*, meaning 'egg'— an egg having much the same shape as the figure nought. Imagine my Englishman's stupefied indignation, however, when his French alter tried to bowl him over by declaring that even that quintessential English game of cricket was of Gallic inspiration. So silly was this point that my Englishman was stumped for a reply. After a few seconds, however, he creased himself with laughter but, realising they were playing on a sticky wicket here, he appealed to our middle man to call off play.

François then served for the match by announcing that even the concept of 'fair play' was of French inspiration. Thistlethwaite managed to get the ball back into my Frenchman's court by arguing that proof of its English origins would seem to be provided by the fact that no linguistic equivalent exists in the French language (the Gallics readily use the English expression), and even less in the French mentality. To this François was unable to hit back a winner, and after a protracted rally my Englishman finally managed to win his point.

In all justice, however, it has to be admitted that, though Thistlethwaite remains unshakeably convinced that the spirit of fair play left the shores of Albion in unadulterated form, only to arrive on the Continent considerably diluted (perhaps it got dropped in the water on the way), he is fair-minded enough to concede that the actual level of playing ability of

sports, reputedly English in origin, is often considerably improved upon when exported abroad.

As far as sporting involvement is concerned, after giving the matter much balanced thought, the philosopher in me is tempted to conclude that most of the difference in attitude between French and English boils down to a question of passion. As a general rule the flames of strong emotion leave the English cold. Is this part of their Victorian heritage? To what extent is it due to the Puritan factor? Can it be the result of a philosophy of education which places strong emphasis on the systematic inculcation of phlegmatic restraint? Or should it simply be attributed to the general dampening effects of a wet climate?

Credibility would seem to be lent to Théodore's thesis by the fact that an English judge would certainly not hesitate to sentence a compatriot to life imprisonment in the unlikely event that he emptied a gun on his wife and her lover after finding them in bed together. The French, on the other hand, warm much more to the idea that the fires of intense feeling may destroy rational behaviour. As a result, *le crime passionnel* would be much more liable to provide a plausible argument for extenuating circumstances, and hence be treated with far greater indulgence than a serious misdeed perpetrated in cold blood. Whatever the reasons may be, an Englishman tends to show a much greater inclination to accept sporting misfortune with the same undemonstrative equanimity as he would exhibit on discovering his spouse in bed with the window-cleaner.

In sporting matters, then, an Englishman takes the relatively detached view which states that the opposition could actually prove itself equal or even superior. And so, when his team has the misfortune to lose, even though some disappointment is naturally felt, that is usually the end of that. The Frenchman, on the other hand, takes a more committed stance - so much so that the Thistlethwaite in me cannot help but think that competitive sport for the Gallic is based on a

fundamental principle which states that the triumph of his favourite sporting person or team is inscribed as much in the immutable order of things as the rising of the sun in the east each day. When harsh reality proves the opposite and they have the misfortune to lose, considerable imaginative prowess is shown in invoking reasons which might lead one to believe that defeat was due more to unfavourable circumstance than their own intrinsic inferiority. So frequently is this view encountered in the media that, with the enthusiastic help of my Englishman, I have had no difficulty in providing examples of some of the explanations used to absolve the non-performance of his French brother's sporting countrymen. Needless to say, the list which follows has not the slightest pretention of being exhaustive.

'For some reason we played badly.'

This penetrating analysis was advanced by a French international rugby player to explain defeat at the hands of the hereditary enemy at a Six Nations' Tournament rugby match. Perhaps the reason he seems to have had so much difficulty in finding was simply the fact that the English played better. Oddly enough, when victory is on the French side it has yet to be heard suggested that the opposition played badly.

'The others were so bad they made us play badly, and since we're not in the habit of playing badly this made us play even worse than them.'

A French football manager's praiseworthy attempt to minimize his team's heavy home defeat against a bottom-of-the-table side by trying to convince us that the trouncing was due more to the mediocrity of the opposition than that of his own team. While in England it is generally agreed that in a sporting contest both teams should do their best to win, the French are convinced that the other team should play fair and admit their inferiority by doing all they can to let them win.

‘We don’t play at our best in a hostile environment.’

The same football manager adopting a more moral stance by suggesting it was the unfairly aggressive tactics of their opponents and fans which were the main reasons for his team’s 5-0 defeat in the return match against the same adversary.

‘For them we’ll always be the Frog-Eaters, and for us they’ll always be les Rosbifs. We don’t like them and they return the favour. It’s only natural the Hundred Years War should have left such deep scars...’

On the eve of a Six Nations’ Tournament match between France and England, hostilities were opened by the above lines of an article in the sports page of the *Saint-Clou Gazette*. In England a match between the two countries is, above all, an exciting sporting event. In France it is a declaration of war, justified by the brutal battles of yore, and amply relayed by the written media.

‘Our supporters didn’t really get behind us.’

French home team supporters are expected to play a vital role in maintaining the established order of things which states that since ‘on est chez nous’ (FTT: **‘we’re playing at home’**), only they can be the winners. In order to make sure opponents should not be unfair enough to think otherwise, a deafening chorus of hooting and whistling, to the accompaniment of horn-blowing and drum-beating when they run onto the pitch at the beginning of the match, or when they are misguided enough to think they can convert a penalty (which in any case was unjustly awarded), or even when they are simply in possession of the ball, should convince them of this basic flaw in their reasoning. And whenever the sportingly incorrect happens, and the opposition actually carry the day, the same ear-shattering chorus when they leave the pitch at the end of the match

should leave absolutely no doubt in their minds as to the disgraceful impropriety shown.

FTT: At this point my man in the middle called play to a halt, and proceeded to give my English attacker a good ticking-off, bringing it firmly to his notice that he should be sporting enough to admit that the problem of French fans trying to put off opposition kickers by creating as much din as possible is now being tackled by the French rugby authorities. Visible proof that these tactics are becoming more and more a source of embarrassment on the international field was indicated recently during a European Cup match in Paris between a French and English club by a sign, prominently displayed in illuminated capitals, bearing the following injunction to home team supporters: **SILENCE ET MERCI DE RESPECTER LE BUTEUR DES DEUX EQUIPES (SILENCE AND THANK YOU FOR RESPECTING BOTH TEAMS' KICKERS).**

Things are, of course, not as black and white as my Englishman would have us believe. It must be emphasized that, to their credit, the French sporting public can, in certain circumstances, be generously indulgent towards the opposition and harshly critical towards their own. Generally-speaking, the Englishman is content with victory alone. For the French this is not enough. Triumph must be obtained with *panache*. So, whenever their players are perceived as not putting more than 100% effort into it, let alone when they lose, some mysterious transfer of affection (which the psychologists among our readers will certainly be able to explain) can suddenly operate and, unbelievable as this may sound, they can actually whistle and hoot their own players, and even start ironically applauding the opposition.

(a) ‘Ours was the real victory. We played fair, they didn’t.’

(b) ‘We play above all for the pleasure of playing.’

Just two examples of a French speciality: the ability to extract crushing moral victory from humiliating sporting defeat.

(a) ‘It was trench warfare. The pitch resembled no-man’s land during the First World War.’

(b) ‘It was just as I imagine the Great Flood to have been. The referee could have been Noah.’

In the relatively infrequent cases when meteorological and ground conditions are absolutely perfect, there can, of course, be only one team in it. The main reason advanced to explain French defeat at the hands of the English during a World Rugby Cup semi-final some time ago was that it poured down during the whole match, and the ground became waterlogged. This gave a definite advantage to the English who actually get better when it’s raining cats and dogs, and the pitch is beginning to resemble an Irish peat bog - unlike the French whose talents need the sun to blossom. In their defence, the Englishman in me is sporting enough to concede that many French internationals play for clubs located in the South West of France where the weather is considerably more clement than in England.

‘They were more realistic than us.’

The word ‘realism,’ or rather the lack of it, often crops up to explain French defeat, and I’m not 100% sure what is really meant - perhaps that the opposition got their heads down, took their chances, and generally adapted their game to the unfavourable conditions they were actually operating in: unplayable pitch, foul weather, hostile opposition supporters, incompetent referee, etc. In an ideal world, of course, where opponents are determined to let the Frogs win, and playing conditions couldn’t be better (pitch like a bowling green, holiday weather, opposition supporters and referee entirely

devoted to their cause) there can, of course, be only one winner.

‘The pitch was so uneven it stopped us taking advantage of our superior technique.’

The French B Soccer Team Manager offering his explanation as to why his prodigies managed only a disappointing away draw against a lowly African team by doing his best to convince us that bumps can be great levellers.

‘Our man was tired out. His last match was in five sets.’

On the surface at least, this seems to be a reasonable explanation as to why an up-and-coming French tennis player didn’t make it past the third round of a Grand Slam tournament. So great was this particular journalist’s disappointment, however, that it appeared to cloud the fact that his opponent’s previous three matches were in five sets.

‘He lost because he was short on preparation. Mentally he was saturated.’

Having far more pedigree than their foreign counterparts, French sportspeople are much more sensitive to the debilitating demands their sport exerts on body and mind. Perfect physical/mental conditions would, of course, produce only one winner.

‘They were match fit. We weren’t.’

Another seemingly plausible explanation, provided by the sports correspondent of the *Saint-Clou Gazette*, as to why a relatively prolonged lack of match practice (severe winter conditions had made the pitch impracticable for a couple of home games) led to the downfall of the local 15. Some doubt could be cast on the objectivity of the argument by non-amnesiacs who might have recalled that the previous year the same journalist had penned a similar article imputing his side’s defeat to the superior physical freshness of the same

opponents who, he explained, as a result of two postponed home matches had been able to recharge their batteries for three whole weeks.

‘He just lacked that little bit more experience of the big occasion.’

A journalist’s analysis as to why a promising young French tennis player was narrowly defeated in his first Grand Slam final by a player ... two years his junior (it was also his first).

‘She didn’t fight in the second set of the final at Rome (match score 7/6, 6/1) because she wanted to save herself for Roland- Garros next week.’

As it happened, future events proved that this type of strategy of self-preservation has its limits. The French lady tennis player in question lost ignominiously in the second round of the French Open.

‘He was the victim of a boxing accident.’

A French T.V. commentator attempting to get us to swallow the fact that his man being knocked out in the first round of a World Championship contest after two minutes flat was due more to the disastrous effects of finding himself in the wrong place at the wrong time than the effectiveness of his opponent’s left hook.

(a) ‘We were simply cursed by bad luck.’

(b) ‘As luck would have it all our best players were injured.’

Paradoxically, in defeat these unshakeable supporters of Cartesian logic who ridicule the English for their irrational belief in ghosts become firm believers in the nefarious influence of occult forces.

‘It’s true we lost, but it was a match with nothing at stake.’

To pull out all the stops French sports people need the stimulus provided by the big match atmosphere when first place is up for grabs. Anything less is not worth getting out of bed for.

(a) 'We tried to play attractively but the referee penalized us for this.'

(b) 'The referee whistled too much and destroyed the rhythm of the game.'

(c) 'The referee was incompetent/dishonest/a cheat/bribed/against us/ English.'

(d) 'You've got to adapt to the referee.'

Relations between the French sporting public and the referee are of Freudian complexity, and a complete book could be devoted to the subject. As a general rule, the English adopt the reasonable view that competitive sport consists in a regulated confrontation between two opposing elements, each encouraged by their respective supporters, with three possible outcomes. They are also realistic enough to believe that an arbitrator is essential. While it is admitted that the ref can be subject to human fallibility, the general consensus is that he does his best to apply the same rules equitably to all. The French have a totally different perception of things. In France, *l'arbitre* is greatly relied upon by the sporting public to play a decisive role in nature's grand plan to obtain systematic victory for their people, and in this capacity, he is encouraged to bring his considerable influence to bear. Consequently, whenever he makes a decision in favour of the French, he is prompted to continue along these same lines by warm rounds of applause. When perceived as not pulling his weight, either by ignoring the remarkable acting talents of French football forwards, and not pointing immediately to the spot when they so realistically allow themselves to be tripped in the penalty area, or by awarding unfair advantage to the opposition in the form of free kicks, penalties, or unjustly penalizing the French team by brandishing a yellow or red card under the

nose of one of its players, he is considered to be an ignominious traitor, amply deserving the vociferous aspersions cast on the legitimacy of his birth, the validity of his manhood, his sexual tendencies, moral integrity, not to mention professional competence and mother's morality. The above quotes constitute a limited, printable selection of the more common reproaches levelled against the man in the middle.

Even in the well-bred world of tennis, the French tend to get far more passionately involved than the English. At Wimbledon, tennis spectators generally maintain a restrained, polite and generally neutral attitude towards the chair umpire. Though the French tennis public will warm towards an umpire who provides constant proof of loyal attachment to their player, the slightest hint of treachery will unleash relentless fury. In this respect, Thistlethwaite reminds me of one occasion last year when I was watching a quarter final men's singles match at Roland-Garros on T.V. The French number one was playing an American. After a particularly long rally, finally won by the French player, the chair umpire (who, to cap it all, was English), no doubt perfidiously thinking that the protracted duration of the exchange had sent everybody to sleep, tried to pull a fast one, and instead of announcing 15-0 in favour of the Frenchman announced 0-15 against him. This conclusive proof of where his heart really lay was greeted by a five minute-long cacophony of whistling and hooting from the public, obliging the unfortunate umpire to come clean, apologize and correct the score. And just as a reminder they'd now got their eye on him and all Hell would be let loose if he tried it on again, for the following twenty minutes the impostor was systematically gratified with the same ear-splitting chorus every single time he announced the score.

It would, however, be too simplistic to maintain that the referee is systematically decried by the Gallics. When a French referee is called upon to arbitrate an international

match in which a French team is not involved, i.e. England versus Scotland, he is unanimously acclaimed by public and press as being among the most proficient and fair-minded in the world.

‘They didn’t win. We lost.’

Yet another attempt to retrieve a semblance of superiority from humiliating defeat. Curiously, when victory is French, I have yet to hear ‘We didn’t win. They lost.’

‘The better team did not win.’

Asked by a T.V. commentator to explain what went wrong after his team’s relatively heavy home defeat (1-3), this was the only comment their captain could manage as the players walked off the park at the end of the game. Laconic statements of this type have often more impact than what is more lengthily expressed since they open up - like the all-reaching generalisations of a horoscope - a vast field of conjecture, thereby placing the onus on the listener or reader himself to imagine the specific reasons being alluded to. In this way, they present the advantage of committing the speaker or writer to very little, with the result that, as nothing precise was stated in the first place, any subsequent unfavourable interpretation applied by others to the original words can always be denied by the person they came from.

‘His game was just stifled by the incredible heat.’

One journalist’s explanation as to why a French tennis champion lost a five-set marathon during the Australian Open against a lesser ranked opponent. Things must have been much cooler on the other side of the net.

‘Everything was against us.’

The weather and/or pitch conditions, physical and/or mental state of the French player(s), the referee, the opposing team

and/or their supporters, fate, etc. can all unite to cause a catastrophic accident of nature.

‘We scored too early on.’

An original reflection, advanced by a member of the French women’s soccer team during the recent London Olympic Games, as to why a 2-0 lead after only twenty minutes ended up in a 4-2 defeat. Presumably, whenever a goal-scoring opportunity presents itself during the first half hour or so of play, match-winning tactics consist in passing the ball ever so gently to the opposing team’s goalie.

‘We were unnerved by the deafening silence.’

So accustomed are French rugby players and footballers to converting tries or taking penalty kicks to an ear-shattering accompaniment of hooting, howling, whistling, drum-beating and horn-blowing on the part of opposing supporters that these have become a *sine qua non* for their successful accomplishment. This the perfidiously hypocritical English have long since understood and, consequently, providing the very opposite type of environment, i.e. where a pin can be heard to drop, is a nigh-on infallible way of putting off the most accurate of Gallic kickers.

‘.....’

Fully aware of the fragile mental structures of the French sporting public, the media does its best to attenuate the potentially traumatizing impact of defeat on the collective ego by giving it only the briefest of mentions, if any mention at all. For example, a tennis tournament where all French players have been eliminated ceases to be of interest to anybody, and is immediately consigned to oblivion. One possible exception to this rule is when a French player is knocked out in the first round of a tennis tournament, and his opponent goes on to win the final. In these circumstances, the competition is resurrected and the name of the winner

proudly announced, along with a reminder of his first-round French opponent - as if the former's triumph considerably reduces the ignominy of the latter's precocious exit.

'We hate the English as much as we love them ... against them victory is sweeter and defeat more bitter.'

A French international rugby player sums it all up.

'In the dressing room after the match, there was just one word on all our lips: 'Enormous!'

In victory, as well as in defeat, French passion knows no bounds. This was confirmed by a French lady Minister of Sport's above reaction to the World Championship victory of the men's handball team. But was the general excitement caused only by the extraordinary lengths the players were seen to go to on court?

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Absolute loyalty is also required of the T.V sports commentator whose role is to provide constant proof that he fully shares the 150% commitment of the average French viewer to his sporting favourites. A supreme example of the ideal type of commentator was provided by the late Thierry Roland whose partisan devotion to the French soccer cause not only endeared him to his sporting public but has made of him a legendary figure in the field of football commentary. An example of his sectarian allegiance was supplied, I remember, by an international match I watched on T.V. some years ago. It is, of course, normal that the elevated position of a T.V. commentator should sometimes give him a far better vision of the game than its arbitrator who can, in all fairness, on occasions be unsighted. At one point in the match (which had a high level of what is commonly termed 'physical commitment'), a defender from the foreign team committed a disgraceful foul on a French forward, which the referee failed

to notice. 'Foul, monsieur l'arbitre, froul!' Monsieur Roland howled into his microphone. A few minutes later a French defender was guilty of what could possibly have been an even worse foul on a foreign attacker, which the referee (he must have been English) once again seemed not to notice. 'Oh, the referee is nearer than me!' he calmly declared.

On another occasion during a France-Bulgaria soccer match, so great was this same commentator's passionate commitment to the French cause, and so vigorous his hostility to the referee (who had just proved he was doing his best to deny the French a just victory by awarding a penalty to the opposing team), that in a moment of uncontrollable fury he announced to millions of viewers what I have placed as an epigraph to this chapter: 'Monsieur Foot, vous êtes un salaud!' (**FTTT: Mr Foot, you're a bastard!**) This considerably increased his popularity with the French sporting public: for in view of the hundreds of supportive letters received, the T.V. channel which employed him announced that previously-envisaged sanctions would not be taken. And surprisingly, the referee in question was Scottish, not English.

Indeed, a chapter within a chapter could be devoted to the sporting comments of Thierry Roland, and the following constitute just a short selection of his more memorable pronouncements:

'Don't you think we could have found something better than a Tunisian to referee a match of this importance?'

Surprisingly, this remark was prompted by the famous goal scored by Diego Maradona's 'hand of God' - which the referee failed to see - during a World Cup soccer match between England and Argentina. So much did it pose a threat to Franco-Tunisian relations that the French ambassador was obliged to offer his apologies to the then Tunisian Prime Minister, Ben Ali.

‘Rumanians are chicken thieves!’

An aside made to the other commentary-team member, his ex-football-star chum, Jean-Michel Larqué, during a France-Rumania match.

‘Koreans are all alike ... they all measure 5’8” and they’ve all got brown hair.’

A comment made during a France-South Korea World Cup preparation match. During the same match, in reply to Larqué’s astute observation that a lot of South Korean players were called ‘Lee,’ he retorted: ‘Since there are several ‘Lees’ (*lit* = bed), we can put them all in the same bedroom.’

Other legendary remarks include, ‘Those two won’t spend their holidays together!’ ‘The flies have changed donkeys,’ and, when France won the 2002 World Cup, ‘Now we can all die in peace ... but as late as possible!’ Unfortunately, his wish hardly came true as he departed our planet at the relatively premature age of 74.

*

Though the French sportsman is firmly convinced that, all things being equal, Gallic triumph is proclaimed in golden letters on High, he is not above giving destiny a helping hand. This was no better illustrated than by the French International Team captain who, during extra time of a Football World Cup qualifying play-off, generally dominated by their Irish opponents who were leading 1-0, and where everything seemed to indicate the final outcome was heading for a penalty shoot-out, received a pass (from an offside position), controlled the ball in the goalmouth with his left hand in full view of everybody (err... everybody, that is, except the ref and his two linesmen), and centred for his team mate to head a goal, thereby qualifying France on aggregate for the final stages of the World Cup the following year. Here are some of the resulting reactions from the main people

concerned. The citations and comments which follow are again prompted by the Thistlethwaite (with perhaps some Théodorian guidance) in me.

‘Sure I handled the ball, but I’m not the referee.’

Our French captain seeking absolution during an after-match press conference by placing all responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the man with the whistle. If I understand correctly, what he seems to be trying to get us to swallow is that it’s not his ball handling which was at fault but the ref’s inability to spot it. Is this tacit acceptance of the trickery and simulation which seems to be endemic to the game? So, according to this logic, if you feel like strangling the wife and then getting rid of her body by cutting it up into little pieces and burying them, well, err ... go ahead! That’s fine - as long as you get away with it!

To be fair to the man in the middle, though, there must have been a modicum of doubt in his mind as he did briefly consult one of his linesmen before validating the goal. It still remains that he and his two partners were guilty of a degree of incompetence (some say even worse) which not even a short-sighted, soon-to-be-retired music teacher in charge of an Under 15 B school soccer match on a foggy November Saturday morning would have shown.

‘What’s done is done. At least I’m honest with you.’

The same French captain during the same press conference philosophically admitting there’s no going back, and making a valiant attempt to get us to think he’s not such a bad guy after all. It would, however, have been difficult for him to do anything but come straight, as the T.V replay proved beyond doubt to millions that his hand had deliberately come into contact with the ball.

‘I was behind two Irish players in a crowded goalmouth and the ball came to me, bounced up and hit my hand.’

The referee didn't blow his whistle so, of course, I continued to play ...'

The same French captain still denying the evidence by maintaining that not only was the whole dirty business the ref's fault but the ball had a hand in it, too.

'I am, of course, embarrassed by the way we won, and extremely sorry for the Irish who really deserved to qualify. The fairest solution, of course, would be to replay the match, but it's not in my power to take this decision. I'm not a cheat, and never have been ...'

Part of the *communiqué* released later by a more repentant French captain. In fact, he was on pretty safe ground when he talked about replaying the match as the FIFA, the governing body in soccer, had already ruled that, given these particular circumstances, any replay was against the laws of the game, and that once the referee had validated a goal, that was the end of that. Am I cynical in thinking that this sudden desire for a fair outcome was inspired, partly at least, by a growing awareness that if he didn't make a considerable effort to re-polish his tarnished public image (he was copiously whistled even by his own Spanish club supporters when he came on to play a few days after), his advertising sponsors would be inclined to consider him a less viable product?

'I did consider withdrawing from the French World Cup team but then I thought this would be letting my country down.'

The same French captain continuing the same re-polishing work.

'In spite of all the ups and downs, the main thing is that we are qualified.'

After paying due tribute to the courage of the French players, Monsieur le Président de la République seems to be suggesting here that, though the French nation reposes on

those idyllic virtues of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, in sporting matters at least, a solid foundation in *realpolitik* is more effective.

‘What do you mean by hand ball? I saw nothing!’

The reaction of his Secretary of State for Sport, also present at the match, in a heavy-handed attempt to make light of it all.

‘.....’

Though manifesting great jubilation at France’s qualification, the French team manager refused to comment on the hand ball incident, simply declaring that it was all behind them now, and only the future mattered. It’s true that with a qualification bonus of nearly a million euros in your pocket, it’s not difficult to turn the page.

‘I’m not in favour of video replays.’

The whole controversy could, of course, have been nipped in the bud, had a video replay system been in operation. It appears, however, that the President of the UEFA (a former French international of repute) whose words are quoted above, is, for reasons known only to himself, resolutely opposed to this type of control, which has proved extremely effective in rugby and tennis. It’s true that during his own playing career he did reveal himself to be a consummate master in that French speciality of obtaining penalties by diving spectacularly in the penalty area at the slightest contact with a defender or – what requires even greater skill - when there is no contact at all.

The unparalleled prowess of the French footballer in making the referee look a complete idiot was again demonstrated only a week later during a European Cup match between a French and, if I remember correctly, an Austrian team. Not only did the French forward obtain a penalty (which was gratefully converted) by collapsing

dramatically in the penalty area (the following T.V. replay showing that the opposing player had not come within two feet of him), but so convincing were his antics that the guiltless defender was even given a yellow card.

‘You’ve got to have never played football in your life not to know that this sort of thing sometimes happens.’

The President of the *FFF* (French Football Federation) getting philosophical, and trying to convince us that, as all true footballers know, *c’est la vie*!

‘Football is all about RESPECT.’

The theme of the French Football Federation’s TV video clip we were treated to just before the match began, during half time, and probably after the match finished (I can’t be sure, as by this time Thistlethwaite had forced me to switch off the telly in disgust). The spot showed a group of youngsters happily kicking a football about with the message that the name of the game was **RESPECT**. Err... what do they say about the road to Hell?

‘The decision of the FIFA is final and applies to both Federations.’

In a last-ditch attempt to obtain a replay, the Irish Football Federation appealed to their French counterpart to join with them, and the captains of both teams in bringing pressure to bear on the FIFA for special permission to replay the match (apparently an agreement could possibly have been reached) in the interests of the integrity of the game, and the reputation of the French team. The appeal, of course, fell on deaf ears, the French Football Federation invoking the ‘irrevocable’ decision of the FIFA. By relegating all considerations of honour and fair play to the third division, I cannot help but think that a heaven-sent opportunity was thereby missed in restoring some kind of dignity to the game – especially since the French team was not without the means

of winning. It's true that taking this sort of risk would have required considerable courage and, as usual, commercial considerations and national prestige won the day.

'I realize it was not my fault. It was an unfortunate event that had big consequences for Ireland, but it wasn't the fault of the refereeing team.'

The man in the middle and his two assistants getting in on the act by adding themselves to the list of those who decline all liability. So, just who was to blame in all this? Ah yes.... I've finally got it. The real culprit was that incompetent, hypocritical, irresponsible, pusillanimous, cheating bastard called **MISFORTUNE**.

'Please, messieurs, let's leave this matter where it belongs: in the hands of the football authorities.'

Monsieur le Président of the Republic of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity also announcing his membership of the 'It's-Got-Nothing-To-Do-With-Me' Club. If he really thought all this was none of his business, why did he turn up to watch the match in his official capacity in the first place? Or is justice simply not on his list of priorities?

'..... is not a cheat.'

A retired former French captain defending his mate. What he really means, of course, is that, in a sport where trickery appears to be rife, he's no more of a cheat than I was.

'If I'd been him, I'd probably have done the same!'

Further admission that the game is rotten to the core, this time from the lips of a Brazilian playing in France.

'In football, you know, there are lots of heroes who are cheats.'

A respected French manager (of a famous English club) saying more or less the same thing.

‘Do you think the French team deserved to qualify for the World Cup? Yes / No?’

A question asked by a French opinion poll a few days later. In all fairness, it did reveal that a large section of the French public as well as a number of former French internationals, politicians, and even a government minister found the manner in which the nation had qualified shamefully dishonourable on player, team and country, and that the Irish had probably been cheated out of a qualification which would have been not at all undeserved. However, as the soccer enthusiasts among my readers will certainly be aware, as things turned out during the actual World Cup competition some months later, divine justice did take upon itself the task of compensating for what a lack of responsibility, honesty and courage had caused that of man to fail so miserably to do.

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While some historians maintain that the first golf ball was lofted in the Low Countries (the Dutch word *kolf* meaning ‘club’), and others point out that the Romans played a sport using a bent piece of wood and a ball made of feathers, it is generally agreed that it was the Scots who defined the rules, and obtained official recognition for the game in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. And, as my Frenchman has just chipped in to say, the course of history shows that the game of golf is not devoid of Gallic influence, too; for not only do links exist between golf and Mary Stuart, future queen of Scotland who, in the sixteenth century, introduced the game to France, but the word ‘caddie’ is a derivation of the French word *cadet* (**FTT: junior**) used to designate the young men who helped players carry their clubs at that time.

My English golf-playing readers might be tempted to think that The Royal and Ancient Golf Club of Saint Andrews’ meticulously detailed explanations of the

multitudinous rules and regulations of the game leave golfers no option but to be a model of correctness on the fairways and greens of our planet. Regrettably, this is not always the case. For this nit-picking complexity provides the French golfer with an infinite number of opportunities to torture the rules so as to get them to admit what *he* wants them to say. Take an experience I recently had.

Now, Thistlethwaite's natural English modesty does not prevent him from encouraging in me the belief that I am a considerably better golfer than Monsieur Martin. Yet, whenever we play together my neighbour usually manages to win. Just how does he do it? The case of the hidden stake says it all. I will explain.

The other day Monsieur Martin and my three selves played a round of golf together. Now, honesty compels me to admit that, on this occasion, Monsieur Martin played well enough to merit our scores being level as we teed off at the eighteenth. Now the eighteenth hole of the Saint-Clou course is a relatively straightforward par three of around 160 yards - the only hazard being a small, deep bunker placed just in front of the green with two thick bushes along its right side. Even though we both hit reasonably straight drives neither of our balls were to be seen when we walked up to the green. After some searching, I finally located mine which had rolled so far beneath the low-hanging branches of the first of the bushes as to render any form of club-based extraction impossible. I had, therefore, to resign myself to declaring my ball unplayable, picking it up and dropping it with a one-point penalty. My initial dismay was, however, somewhat attenuated by the fact that Monsieur Martin's ball had suffered the same fate, as it was reposing in a similar position beneath the second bush.

'Ah, a penalty for you also, mon cher Martin!' I exclaimed.

'Mais pas du tout, mon vieux!' (**FTT: Not at all, old chap!**) Monsieur Martin retorted, after bending down and

lifting up the overhanging branches of the bush to reveal an old, rotting, barely-visible wooden stake still attached to its trunk.

‘Vous voyez,’ he triumphantly declared, ‘my bush is still staked. I can drop *my* ball without a penalty point!’

FTT: My environmentalist readers will be pleased to learn that, in order to protect young staked trees, bushes and shrubs from the risk of collateral damage when a golfer attempts to strike a ball lying in close proximity, The Royal and Ancient Golf Club of Saint Andrews’ rules stipulate that it may be dropped at a distance (in accordance with a strictly defined procedure), *with no penalty point*. It goes without saying that in the above case, though technically-speaking the rule still applied, the tree had attained a degree of maturity which had long since caused the stake, and consequently the rule to have lost all *raison d’être*.

Monsieur Martin then proceeded to drop his ball and finished on a par – thereby winning the round by one stroke. Afterwards, over a drink in the clubhouse, it was certainly Thistlethwaite who prompted me to ask our Frenchman whether he would have informed me of the presence of the stake had it been *my* ball which had rolled under that bush.

‘Who knows?’ he replied with an enigmatic smile.

*

A not negligible factor in the English sense of fair play involves a feeling of sympathy for the underdog. Not only is this type of adversary generally expected to be the loser because of his inferior sporting skills, but the circumstances surrounding the impending contest may also be to his disadvantage: the fact, for instance, that he is operating away from home can have a significant part to play. In these

conditions, giving the away-player(s) a sporting chance means going some way towards redressing this acknowledged disadvantage. In England, this is usually echoed by a round of warm applause when the visiting team runs onto the pitch, by an acceptance of the referee's decisions when these go against the home side and, above all, by the cathedral-like silence observed when penalties are being taken by the visitors. Moreover, it is certainly the innate presence in me of this particular aspect of English fair play which explains why I find myself supporting the English team during a France-England match at the Stade de France, whereas at Twickenham I am resolutely behind the French.

The Gallics, on the other hand, are far from sharing this view. In France, performing before your own supporters is an advantage which must be pushed firmly home. As a result, any self-respecting French supporter will use all means at his disposal to make the time spent on the playing field as much of an ordeal for away-team players and supporters (together with linesmen and the referee) as that suffered by General Gordon and his besieged forces on it being made clear to them by the surrounding Dervish hordes that in the impending engagement not the slightest quarter would be shown. And like such popular institutions as street demonstration, strikes, queue-jumping and le Système D, the principle is encouraged in children from the earliest age.

This was brought home to me one afternoon while watching a rugby match in Saint-Clou. A Saint-Clou player kicked such a long, high ball into touch that the linesman made a slight error of judgement as to the exact point where it had crossed the touchline, and raised his flag at a spot penalizing the home team by a couple of metres or so. Though his mistake was minimal, it was enough to unleash a string of invectives, worthy of the most seasoned trooper, directed at the offending touch judge by a girl aged no more than ten, securely ensconced between her parents behind me. Fully expecting her outburst to receive firm admonition on

the part of her progenitors, I turned round. Both their faces were beaming with undisguised pride.

This Gallic desire to exploit to the full the advantages of operating at home can also involve taking not inconsiderable liberties with the rules. Just one example of this was provided one Sunday afternoon when I went along with Monsieur Martin to watch a rugby match between Saint-Clou and a neighbouring team. Now in France, as in England, a derby frequently provides a more keenly-disputed encounter than one against a more distantly-located team, and this particular contest only confirmed the rule. As I have already gone to some lengths to emphasize, the emotional commitment of the average French supporter is usually pitched at a more vibrant level than that of his English counterpart, and in this respect Monsieur Martin is no exception. For even though, under normal circumstances, Monsieur Martin is a polite, reasonable sort of chap who wouldn't hurt a fly, pushing his way through a turnstile transforms him for the next 80 minutes into a raging, unprincipled, venom-spitting fiend. On this particular occasion, Monsieur Martin's fury against the man in the middle (and also a rival supporter standing nearby with whom he almost came to blows) increased in the same proportion as his growing realization that Saint-Clou, even with home advantage, were going to lose. Some 15 minutes before the final whistle the opposition were in a comfortable lead, and Monsieur Martin's wrath began, as usual, to turn against his own: 'Remuez-vous un peu, bande de cons! On est chez nous!'

FTT: 'Shake yourselves up a bit, you load of silly b...s! We're playing at home!' It must not be imagined, however, that my neighbour's supportive involvement is without limits. In many cases it does not survive the disappointment of defeat. Monsieur Martin, for example, on arriving home after a Saint-Clou triumph will proudly announce to his wife: 'On a gagné!' (We

won!); the disillusion of losing, on the other hand, brings cool detachment: 'Ils ont perdu!' (They lost!).

And then the unthinkable happened. The man in the middle, who to the Thistlethwaite and Theodore in me seemed to be doing a competent job (a stabbing pain in my left side led me to believe that François thought otherwise), suddenly started hopping on one leg, clutching the back of his thigh in obvious pain. He had certainly pulled a muscle. Play was halted and our poor ref hobbled off to the ironic cheers of the Saint-Clou supporters. After several minutes of gesticulatory touchline palaver, it was the Saint-Clou team coach who, warmly applauded by the home crowd, ambled on to the pitch - the whistle he was clutching leaving us in no doubt that he had been entrusted with adjudicating the remainder of the match.

Now the Thistlethwaite in me is convinced that, had this incident taken place in England, our substitute referee would have made a point of honour in scrupulously applying the rules of impartiality - even to the point of disadvantaging his own team in the event of doubt. But here it was quite a different game. Within the space of just five minutes there had been a dramatic turnabout. Without anybody really knowing why (even though Monsieur Martin seemed to be in full approval, and the stabbing pain in our left side had now subsided) one opposition player was consigned to the sin bin, what appeared to be a perfectly valid away-team try was disallowed, and Saint-Clou were awarded a succession of penalties ideally placed just in front of the posts. In short, with just a few minutes to go, what had seemed to be inevitable, resounding defeat had now been transformed into a three point lead.

At that moment, during a scrum in front of the Saint-Clou posts, just five metres from the line, a punch-up broke out between opposing forwards. Our stand-in referee blew his whistle faintly a couple of times and made a feeble

attempt to separate them. Undaunted, the players continued their fray. Stepping back three or four paces, he raised head and arms theatrically towards the sky - as if soliciting divine confirmation that he really had tried to do his best - and then, slowly and deliberately, brought his whistle to lips and proceeded to blow the end of the match - a good five minutes before official time! Strangely, the protestations of the away team players were resignedly mute, and seemed more for the sake of form - as if somewhere they considered it all in the normal order of things. And while trudging off, they were certainly contemplating the revenge that would be extracted during the return match when they would be playing *chez eux*.

This same notion of being on home or away ground has an equally important part to play in the ethics of hunting and shooting, too. In this respect, I remember a conversation I had during a dinner party in England a few years ago. As venison was on the menu, talk turned to hunting and shooting. On learning I had a French side to me, the elderly, distinguished-looking English gentleman sitting opposite immediately related an experience he had had in the fifties while on holiday in the South of France. Hearing there was a 'pigeon shooting competition' in a neighbouring village, and being a clay-pigeon shooter himself, he decided to go along to watch. The same horror-struck indignation which had certainly seized him at the time was repeated when he informed me that the 'clay' pigeons released were, in fact, made of bone, flesh and feathers!

'What a shameful transgression of sporting fair-play!' he went on to add. 'It was like shooting a sitting duck!'

'I fail to see the difference, monsieur, between shooting live pigeons and live grouse!' the Frenchman in me countered.

Even though the gentleman confessed to being a keen grouse-shooter himself, he adamantly denied infringing any sporting rules. For him, what distinguished shooting grouse

and live pigeons boiled down to a question of playing at home or away. Since shooting takes place on the grouses' moorland habitat, he considered it was the birds which had the advantage of home ground – and this was enough to make them fair game. With live pigeon shooting it was not the case. Releasing them from the away territory of man-made cages made them 'sitting ducks' – the hapless victims of a shameful massacre. For what can be more disgracefully unsporting than to remove this last small chance an adversary has of escaping?

And this no doubt aristocratically-rooted English attachment to the notion of sporting fairness is still very much in evidence, even today; for an Englishman can come home at the end of a day's shooting empty-handed but, as long as he has respected the ethics of the sport, rapturously happy and satisfied with time spent. The French *chasseur*, on the other hand, is of *le peuple*. He is, above all ... *un chasseur*. Far be it for me to wish to imply that this type of French sportsman is not insensitive to the profound communion with nature his sport provides, nor to the warm *camaraderie* the pursuit of a commonly-shared passion procures, nor, at the limit, to the more rudimentary rules of sporting fair-play. This last consideration, however, comes a poor third. For, unlike his English counterpart, the French *chasseur* takes a far more pragmatic view. What he aims at, above all, is to avoid the humiliating ridicule involved in not obtaining tangible results, and any shame he might feel would be caused less by shooting a sitting duck than coming home with an empty game bag.

And it is certainly this point which explains why in France, where shooting takes place mainly on public land, thousands of farm-reared, human-friendly partridges and pheasants are released into nature at the beginning of each season, only to be pitilessly massacred in less than half the time it takes to reload. In a good season's shooting some 30 million of our feathery and furry friends (15 million of which

are farm-raised 'sitting-ducks' - pheasants, partridges, mallards, rabbits etc., released as gun fodder at the beginning of each season) meet a premature and gory end.

Not only does the chasseur seriously deplete the ranks of animals and birds, and is not averse to using the odd road sign, domestic cat or dog as target practice, he is enough of a bad shot as to strike terror in the hearts of some 15 million of his outdoor-loving *compatriotes*: walkers, ramblers, joggers, mushroom and blackberry seekers, horse-riders, mountain-bikers, photographers, and general wild-life observers.

My Englishman recalls one occasion when, while strolling through a forest one Sunday afternoon, I myself, was the object of a peremptory warning (to the indignation even of my Frenchman), from a group of chasseurs that, 'Vous vous promenez ici à vos risques et périls' (**FTT: You're walking here at your own risk and danger**). And the French chasseur is off-target enough to be the cause of around 170 accidents per year - more than a score of which are fatal, and three score of which are considered extremely serious. Roughly 20 of these accidents involve non-hunters, while the remaining 150 stay in the family.

He also represents a permanent danger to the most innocent non-shooter. Evidence of this was provided by a short article which appeared recently in the Saint-Clou Gazette, evoking a scenario worthy of the gun-toting Wild West. Last Saturday afternoon, it related, a young boy was playing in a junior football match with his local team when the ball happened to be kicked over onto the nearby road. As he was retrieving it, he was struck in the leg by some sort of projectile. He was immediately rushed to hospital where, after examination, a bullet was extracted from his knee. The article went on to reassure us that the boy's life was not, however, in danger, and the following morning the gendarmes in charge of the investigation reported that a hunter had presented himself at the *gendarmerie*, along with rifle and cartridges. It was probably, they explained, a stray bullet which had

ricocheted on a rock. It goes without saying that no French government has the political courage even to ruffle the feathers of this powerful lobby counting more than 1.4 million voters who dictate to all and sundry their law of the gun.

The Englishman, then, being less obsessed with the notion of return on effort, is left with enough peace of mind to be able to consider a much larger part of the activity as pleasurable in itself. As a result, he enjoys a far greater scope to concentrate on the principles of the sport. Nowhere is this more evident than in angling. Unlike his French counterpart, it would be unthinkable improper for the true English trout angler to extract his adversary from its liquid element simply by standing on the bank, and dangling his line in the water with a vulgar worm or tiddler wriggling on the end. Attempting to catch a trout in this way would show a total lack of respect for a noble adversary. Since, for the Englishman angling is far more a challenging sporting contest between equals, where he pits his skill, patience and experience against a mistrustful fish, the only fair way of enticing it to bite is by standing up to his thighs in water with an artificial fly on his hook. It is, nevertheless, true that if the English angler caught the biggest trout or pike of his life, he might be tempted to have it stuffed, encased and placed on public display. But this would be as much a tribute to the fighting qualities of his adversary as his own angling prowess, and usually, when the fish has been successfully extracted from its liquid element, the contest is deemed to be over. It will be weighed, perhaps photographed, and then placed lovingly back.

Like his hunting and shooting brother, the English angler could, therefore, remain from dawn to dusk at a lake or riverside, catch nothing and go home in the evening in rapturous bliss. Not so with a Frenchman. The French angler who caught the biggest pike in his life would be driven not only by the constant fear of ridicule which gnaws

permanently at his soul, but by this same obsessive notion that everything must serve a practical purpose. He would, therefore, have it weighed, have himself photographed with it, then take it home and – what is more natural in this land where cooking has the status of a religion – seek consecration in the eating. For the true English angler, such shameful disrespect for a noble adversary would be considered akin to cannibalism.

FTT: Throughout the summer months, the Saint-Clou Gazette regularly publishes short articles, illustrated with photos provided by the anglers themselves, exhibiting the monstrous specimens of trout, carp, catfish and pike they have extracted, after prolonged and heroic struggle, from the depths of the region's numerous lakes, meres and rivers. It even offers an end-of-season prize for the largest capture in each category. The Thistlethwaite in me particularly remembers one photo showing an angler proudly displaying a ferocious-looking pike. Such were its monstrous proportions (dwarfing his ten-year-old son purposely placed by its side) that considerable concern was expressed as to the cooking - far beyond the capacity of an ordinary kitchen oven. In a reassuring attempt at dissipating readers' fears that the fish's very size might be an insurmountable obstacle to gastronomic consecration, considerable lengths were gone to in order to point out that the local baker had kindly offered his assistance by placing at the disposal of the angler's wife his professionally-sized oven which, it was emphasized, would have no problem in accommodating the inordinate proportions of the beast.

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As we approach the finishing line to this chapter on English and Gallic attitudes to sport, what would be more

inconceivable that I should not give at least a small mention to a sporting activity which finds apotheosis every July, when the eyes of an entire nation are riveted on the self-propelled progress of a grotesquely-attired bunch of energetic young men who, in a Brazilian-like carnival atmosphere, are bent on extracting as much power from leg muscles as that provided by the internal combustion engine - with the aim of visiting the six corners of the Hexagon in the shortest possible time via the longest and most arduous routes. And even here, not only is it a paradox, but yet one more measure of the sporting differences which irremediably separate English and French, that a sport, based on a mundane two-wheeled conveyance which in England (where only horse-propelled sports can pretend to regal status) could never be elevated beyond the common ranks, is so revered by this nation of guillotiners of majesty as to have been invested with the sovereign name of *la petite reine*.

FTT: In view of my English right winger's incessant, near-the-limit tackles on the sportsmanship of his French brother's compatriots, few of which, if any, were whistled by my man in the middle (though, in all fairness, these frequently took place when he was totally unsighted), we can only applaud the unfailing self-control and sporting fair play displayed by my Gallic in resisting all temptation to retaliate. While reading through the previous pages, however, a shooting pain in the right side of my lower jaw (as if someone had just applied his elbow to my chin) seemed to indicate that enough was enough, and that more energetic countering tactics had now been decided. And then, suddenly, my English-defended field of play was invaded by a concerted attack which

Reluctant as I am to interrupt, let alone criticise our man in the middle, the scandalous bias shown by our English side

in the present subject of study has given me no option but to take matters into my own hand by registering an official protest at the way he has been allowed to get away with blue murder in the form of repeated dirty play. Not only should Thistlethwaite have been given a stiff warning for dangerous play, not to mention insulting language, two or three penalties awarded against him for caricaturist distortion, chauvinistic prejudice and vindictive fabrication, but so outrageously did he tackle the subject of fair play by presenting my compatriotes as being arrogantly centred on their supremacy in sporting matters, and so shamefully did he insist that sporting equity was invented by, and still remains the exclusive property of his countrymen, that he should have been invited to take his bath at an early stage.

It goes without saying that I consider it beneath me even to attempt to pull back in defence. I would point out one thing, however. It is my view (and I am perfectly positioned to observe his little game) that Thistlethwaite and his countrymen are much less stars of fair play than champions at making people think they are and, if there was a gold medal to be won in the field of perfidious hypocrisy, they would be world-beaters. On this score, he seems to have conveniently forgotten that experience our neighbour, Monsieur Martin, had in his youth. I am sure our referee will be fair enough to allow me the few lines remaining to refresh his memory.

In his younger days, Monsieur Martin played rugby for the Saint-Clou 15. Now, such is the aggressive nature of this sport, 'a game of thugs played by gentlemen,' that certain situations could provide the opportunity for violent, below-the-belt tactics, worthy of the most unsavoury street-fighter which, admittedly, the referee is not always in a position to witness and punish. The game relies, therefore, on the rules of fair sporting conduct being responsibly applied by all. In this respect, Monsieur Martin often tells the story of the 'friendly' match he played many years ago against a touring English club team.

A match between England and France can never, of course, be amicable in the true sense of the word, and this one was no exception. In an enthusiastically-disputed ruck, Monsieur Martin relates, he received a kick in the head from an English forward (out of sight, of course, of the referee) vigorous enough for him to be obliged to play the rest of the match with blood streaming from a gash in his forehead (this was before the days of the blood substitute). At the end of the game (narrowly lost by Saint-Clou), the English consolidated their triumph, as is their custom, by lining up in a guard of honour and 'sportingly' shaking hands with their adversaries.

'Oh dear! Did you bump your head?' enquired the English forward, seizing Monsieur Martin warmly by the hand.

FTT: At this point my French left winger proceeded to kick the ball into touch, whereupon my referee blew the final whistle to this chapter.

Chapter Twelve

Feminist or Feminine?

On seeing her step out naked from under the shower.

He: Hey, what about a quickie right now?

She: How would this be different from all the other times?

He: What about trying another position tonight?

She: O.K. That's fine by me. You stand at the ironing board and I'll stretch out on the sofa and watch T.V.

He: Why do you never say when you've enjoyed it?

She: Didn't you tell me not to ring you at work?

He: You know, if I had two inches more I'd be a king!

She: Yes, and if you had two inches less you'd be a queen!

He: Honestly, I don't know why you stay with me!

She: Oh, you give us something to laugh about at the office!

Unidentified feminist wit

In view of his compatriots' legendary fondness for, and solid reputation with the ladies, my French side needed no further arguments to convince his two brothers that the guidance of a chapter devoted to such a delicate and complex subject as the fair sex could not be placed in a more loving and expert left hand than his. Though this did spare me much of the stress which the threat of heated internal conflict would have caused, it was not without raising the concern that, given Thistlethwaite's cool indifference on the matter (is it the dampness of the climate which has extinguished most of the fire?), and Théodore's philosophical detachment from all manifestations of female charm, such a disproportionate Gallic influence in a comparative study of the female gender on each side of the Channel might not only belie my middleman's claim to have established a semblance of

equilibrium within my *persona* but, what is infinitely more regrettable, sentence me to the life-long disapprobation of our English lady readers.

Before entering into the meat of the subject, therefore, I should like to take this opportunity of assuring them that the views conveyed over the following pages do not necessarily echo those of the integrated François Théodore Thistlethwaite, and to express the hope that my sage will involve himself enough to bring the weight of his own measured analyses to bear in order to redress any gross imbalance which might arise. I should also like to think that my Englishman will find enough enthusiasm to rouse him from the torpor into which the subject already seems to have plunged him, and defend his countrywomen against any grossly distorted allegations which an excess of French male chauvinism might produce.

Merci beaucoup. Though I might be accused of simplistic generalisation, not to mention Latin sexism, as well as compromising the internationally-acclaimed gallantry of my male compatriots, for me the two words which spring to mind when describing the most striking difference between English and French woman, are those, so similar in spelling, yet so different in meaning, I have chosen to place as the heading to this chapter.

Toutefois, let me make it quite clear from the start that it is in no way my intention to imply that the only common denominator between *les Anglaises* and *les Françaises* is that, generally speaking, they both have a lower testosterone count than men: for each is aware that the physical attributes of men and women are not quite the same; both realize that their reasoning process does not always strictly follow quite the same lines; each is not without knowing that a normally-constituted member of the one is a source of attraction to the other; and both agree that Mother Nature has put things together in such a way that any normal attempt to perpetuate

the species requires an interactive contribution from each. Here, all common agreement ends.

As far as perceptions of the relationship between sexes are concerned, my own lady compatriots tend towards an integral view: for them a man and a woman have each been allocated a distinct, yet complementary role, the two parts of which fit together to form an interdependent, integrated whole. The result, therefore, is simplicity itself: a man can concentrate on being a man and a woman on being a woman. Their English sisters have a more divisive view. They see the human race, not as the addition of two complementary halves coming together to form an intrinsic whole, but as the division of this whole into two unequal parts. Thus, an English woman's *raison d'être* is less to remain feminine and complement a man than to redress what she considers to be a gross injustice of nature by perpetual struggle to conquer territory occupied by the male. Consequently, since a French woman perceives herself in terms of her attraction to men, her main rivals are other females.

The English woman, on the other hand, sees herself in terms of her inequality with men. Her main rivals, therefore, are ... men. As a result, a French woman asserts herself for men: she cooks for men, she dresses for men and she tries to remain seductively feminine for men. And since she exists for men she will put up with more from men. By contrast, in her crusade against male domination, her English sister has taken up the same arms as men; and I cannot help thinking that somewhere *en route* she has lost her way: for not only has she sacrificed a part of her femininity on the altar of feminism, but by trying so hard to behave like a man some strange mimetic phenomenon has made her look like a man.

FTT: My own Frenchman does not seem to be alone in deploring what he considers to be the voluntary masculinization of English girls. The late Pierre Daninos, in his previously-mentioned book *Les Carnets*

du Major Thompson seemed to be of the same mind: 'In France, the dream of every little boy is to grow up to be a man,' he writes, 'In England, it is also the dream of every little girl.'

Will it go some way towards placating the inevitable indignation my thoughts will have aroused in our English lady readers (who will no doubt interpret what I have said as a humiliating, misogynistic, Latin macho attack), if I hasten to add that not all feminists are English women, and not all English women are feminists? Some can still be sent into raptures by our renowned French touch. And far be it for me to wish to imply that all English girls have horse-like teeth, a prominent lower jaw, square shoulders, bulging biceps, hairs on their chest, and big feet. Not only does the legendary English rose still exist, but she more than makes up for all the thorns around. Nor is it my intention to suggest that a French woman is no less determined in her fight to obtain equality of rights with men. The difference resides, above all, in the approach: for the tactics she uses rely much more on discreet, gentle, feminine seduction than aggressive contestation of territory deemed to be unfairly occupied by the male.

And would it be too simplistic to suggest that much of the explanation for the development of high testosterone levels in English women is to be found in that period of your history which saw the founding of an empire of never-setting sun? For one of the most regrettable things we French find in you English is that a nation whose literary heritage includes authors and poets unashamedly vaunting the subtle plays, indeed carnal pleasures (not to mention unbridled orgies) of heterosexual love should have surrendered so meekly to the combined assaults of Luther, Calvin, Cromwell and Wesley. For it cannot be denied that within just a brief span of years your nation underwent a meteoric change (as devastating as that which wiped the dinosaur off the face of our planet), laying waste to all frivolity, and calling up an order which set

in motion a meticulously-planned, deep-seated, long-term operation to convince humanity that the world would be a far more decent place to live in if a way were found to perpetuate the species without the slightest contact between the sexes. I mean, what other conclusion can we draw from a reign where matters of the flesh were considered to be so shockingly indecorous that chairs, tables and pianos were guilty of indecent exposure if their legs were not hidden beneath long woollen socks?

What's more, as boys and girls approached an age when Mother Nature does all she can to bring them together, you English were doing your best to keep them apart. And I don't know of any other nation which went to such extraordinary lengths to deprive the budding fair sex of even the slightest vestige of femininity. For, while in French schools study programmes, consisting mainly of music, singing, dancing, painting and literature, were aimed at turning girls into feminine young ladies whose accomplishments would exert a bewitching influence on men, on your side of the Channel a cocktail of uniformed regimentation and strict Puritan morality, mixed in with a generous dash of competitive sport, was doing all it could to encourage women to behave like men.

FTT: My Frenchman's views on the important part played by competitive physical effort in the past education of English girls of good family would appear to be reinforced by the common expression 'She's a good sport'. French readers will be interested to learn that the phrase, used to describe boldness, and especially good humour in face of defeat or ridicule, is usually applied to women, and certainly originated from this era. It is not without significance that the nearest French equivalent 'C'est une brave fille', makes no allusion whatsoever to the world of sport. It must not be thought, however, that English men escaped the general

tendency of that period to discourage all outward manifestation of strong feeling in misfortune. The expression 'To keep a stiff upper lip', broadly meaning the same as 'To be a good sport', is applicable solely to the male - the only difference being that the stronger sex was not obliged to look pleased about it.

Even though an English boy's education was focussed on the inculcation of values which would later enable him to lose a woman with the same apparent equanimity as he would accept defeat in a rugger match, it was acknowledged that a male could enjoy pre- or even extra-conjugal relations with the opposite sex, as long as it was discreet, and with a member of the lower orders. However, the rules of Puritan morality dictated that this could never be the case with a respectable woman. If this did happen to come to light she was lost for life. And even within the bonds of holy wedlock a woman wasn't supposed to really let herself go. For the only decent posture a lady could adopt in fulfilment of her conjugal duty was not without recalling those recumbent female statues exposed (often by their husband's side) to posterity's gaze in the churches and cathedrals of the land - frigidly prostrate on back, legs slightly apart, hands clasped piously over breast, and eyes cast beatifically on High, beyond the base carnality of man.

What is less surprising, then, that after decades of being forced to behave like a man outside the bedroom, and being repressed as a woman within, in her struggle for the vote she should have resorted to such unladylike methods of civil disobedience as chaining herself to railings, throwing stones through windows, and sitting on policemen? And nearer our present day, what is more understandable that she should flout both her sexual emancipation and equality by claiming the right to wear, as she pleases, either a mini-skirt or jeans with a zip fly?

FTT: At this juncture, my scholar requested me to point out that, contrary to what my Frenchman might be leading readers to think, there has always been an active feminist movement in France. And even though French feminists never favoured the same virile tactics as their English sisters-in-arms, history shows they were just as aware that women constitute a category representing a good half of humanity which always has been, and still is, inequitably treated by essentially male-defined values and male-controlled institutions from a social, political, cultural, professional, family, and sexual point of view.

But, whereas the feminist cause in England was able to progress over the centuries with relatively little interruption, the legacy of the French Revolution created great social and political instability throughout most of the nineteenth century, during which the alternation of liberal and repressive *régimes* considerably hindered, and sometimes completely halted the progress of enlightened feminist views. It was only during its last two decades that more stable, liberal governments enabled the feminist front to emerge from these stop-and-go-cycles. And, as all English feminists know, the Suffragette movement, combined with a national recognition of the important role women had played in the effort of war, resulted in those over 30 being granted the right to vote in 1918 - even though it took another ten years to abolish the age qualification, and place the two sexes on an equal electoral footing. This was not the case in France where French women only obtained the vote in 1944, and were still so subjugated by a society made by men for men that, even as recently as 1965, they still did not have the legal right to open a bank account without their husband's or father's consent.

It would be wrong to imagine, however, that the considerable care a French woman takes to remain

seductively feminine for the male is entirely gratuitous. For in return, the first thing she asks of a man is that he acknowledge her efforts to please by displaying a modicum of gallantry: opening the car door for her, helping her on with her coat, complimenting her on a new dress or hair-do, etc. And not only is this male attitude of respectful attentiveness perceived as a tribute to her femininity in particular, but provides a stable and agreeable structure to male and female co-existence in general. On the contrary, your English feminist tends to reject this kind of male courtesy as little more than sexist provocation - a blatant affirmation of female inferiority in that it treats her as an object of male condescension, thereby constituting another factor of tension and conflict.

FTT: For those among my readers who might be surprised that Thistlethwaite has maintained such a low profile, indeed no profile at all, during the pages of this chapter, I would point out that, at this juncture, my scholar did, in fact, ask my Englishman if he had any thoughts to air on the subject. The only reply was an uninterrupted rasping sound, very reminiscent of snoring, echoing in my right ear. My Frenchman was invited to continue.

The worst insult for a French woman, therefore, is male oafishness ... or indifference. The worst affront for a feminist is not to be treated like a man. What is more normal, then, that the more a woman demands the same treatment as a man, the more she behaves... like a man? And, at the additional risk of offending the English male, might I not draw the inverse deduction that the less a man is treated like a man, the less he behaves... like a man? For if my English brother is anything to go by, his growing indifference to the charms of the opposite sex is due to the fact that his

masculinity has been slowly pecked away. In any case, Madame Cresson seems to think the same.

FTT: When feminists maintain that true female equality will only have been attained when an incompetent woman has been appointed to a post of high responsibility, some slanderous macho males cite Madame Cresson as proof that this is already the case. In 1991, Madame Edith Cresson was nominated France's first woman *Premier Ministre* - even though malicious rumour had it that her appointment was due more to the nature of her relations with the President de la République of the time than any pronounced aptitude for the job. Feminists, on the other hand, maintain that the brevity of her term of office (she resigned after eleven months) was the result of pressure exerted by male sour grapes. Whatever the explanation may be, she was never very popular and certainly no diplomat. The Japanese, she commented, were like so many ants; and she endeared herself to the Englishman by declaring he was 25% gay, and in some way '*estropié*' (incapacitated). Indisputable proof of this was provided, she explained, when, during an official visit to London, she took time off for a stroll - only to note with considerable dismay that '*les hommes ne vous regardent pas! Ce n'est pas normal!*' (men don't look at you! That's unnatural!). Though certainly misplaced, Madame Cresson's comments do serve to illustrate that even French women ministers are in no way willing to sacrifice their femininity to the demands of government office... nor to be other than mortally offended when it produces such unreserved indifference on the part of those it is intended for.

In face of all this male frigidity, Madame Cresson's English female ministerial colleagues seem to have long

abandoned all attempts at seductiveness. But after all, even though your tabloids do take perverse delight in publishing photos of English lady ministers in circumstances where they look embarrassingly bad, who can really blame the latter for giving up the ghost, and sporting dresses more reminiscent of a jute potato sack, while allowing themselves rotundities normally associated with a heavily-pregnant sea-cow? And a stroll down the *Grande Rue* and High Street of any French or English town only serves to confirm that the presence of French female chic in the high spheres of government, and the absence of any significant English equivalent are also very much in evidence on the level of the ground.

Vous savez, I can't help thinking that, even though women's liberation has been to the detriment of English femininity, it is your Puritan heritage which is mainly to blame. For not only did it condemn all indulgence in carnal pleasure, but constant preaching that vanity was a cardinal sin anchored in you the belief that conspicuous attempts from a woman to make herself attractive to men were nothing but manifestations of wayward display.

The French woman, on the other hand, having not received the same degree of exposure to the sobering effects of censorious religious doctrine, has never been discouraged from incorporating into her strategy of seduction such daunting weapons as clothes, hair-do, make-up, perfume and jewellery. In addition, being perfectly aware that another route to a man's heart leads through his stomach, she knows all too well that the basis of an enjoyable dish lies in the soundness of the raw material, and that an excess of grisly fat could prove too tough for the male to chew. As a result, a fundamental part of her operational planning is devoted to maintaining a lean power-to-weight ratio, and a permanent offensive is conducted on those strategic fronts of eating and drinking.

On reflection, however, the words 'eating' and 'drinking,' when applied to a Frenchwoman, are usually gross

misnomers. For though she is an awesomely efficient cook, capable of creating a mouth-watering meal in record time, life for her is one calorie-controlled diet, and what she herself nibbles or sips would barely fill a sparrow's crop. And even though I can't deny that some French women do let themselves go, I'd bet my last euro that if you weighed all those over sixteen and divided the total by the number, the resulting average would be significantly lower than that obtained by the same operation on their English sisters.

It is, nevertheless, far from being my intention to imply that the more figure-conscious English woman (and she does exist) is not prepared to make a valiant effort to keep her weight down. But since the Englishman, when he walks past a woman, systematically focuses his eyes on the ground two yards ahead, evidence that she has gained an excessive number of pounds rarely originates in the gaze of the passing male. It usually has a more objective source: the implacable verdict of the bathroom scales, or the resistance of the skirt which slipped on with ease last Easter, but now opposes all attempts at being levered on. In addition, transforming the resolve to reduce calorie intake into daily action frequently requires the promptings supplied by the impending approach of calendar periods rendering her adipose pleats more apparent to public gaze (i.e. spring or the summer holidays). Moreover, her determination is generally cyclic in nature: once autumn comes and all risk of general exposure is past, she will revert back to type, and the whole process will be reactivated the following year.

The Frenchwoman's neigh-on zero consumption of strong drink, as well as her limited frequentation of establishments in which it is offered for sale (with the exception, that is, of the summer terraces of fashionable cafés in Paris and large provincial towns), is made considerably easier both by alcohol's reputation as a substantial calorie provider, and the fact that whetting one's whistle is generally considered to be enough of a male preserve as to be out of

line with her tactics of seductive, controlled femininity. She maintains, therefore, a relatively distant relationship with intoxicating beverage, and usually prefers soft drinks or just plain water. As a result, it is extremely rare to see her in anything more than the mildest state of tipsiness. The only concession she may sometimes be tempted to make takes the anodyne form of *un panaché* (**FTT: a shandy**), a small glass of lager, a pre-prandial glass of white port (in France port is drunk as an *aperitif*), a *Martini* or a *Kir* (**FTT: white wine or, in its royal form, champagne, laced with concentrated black-current juice**). Strong drink, such as brandy, spirits or our typically French *pastis*, is almost exclusively reserved for the male. To accompany a meal, she will often drink sparkling mineral water, though she may take a little wine (frequently diluted with still mineral water), but rarely in proportions greater than those provided by one single half glass, which - amazingly for you English - will be made to last from beginning to end of meal.

Is it, once more, that carefully organised, long-term, puritanical repression of all natural urges, exacerbated, no doubt, by the restricted number of legal hours allocated to public drinking, which has caused you English to rely on the euphoric effects of inordinate volumes of alcohol, imbibed in the shortest possible time, to extract you from your legendary reserve? Whatever the reasons may be, you are a nation of compulsive tipplers. How else can I describe the inhabitants of a country where having a good night out, and being a real man is inextricably linked with the ability to down stupefying volumes of alcoholic drink (usually beer) in not much more time than it takes to say 'Here's to your good health!' And what is more understandable in a nation where the female battle cry is 'Anything *he* can do *I* can do better!' that women should now be storming the gates of this traditionally male-held bastion?

FTT: The generalized virilisation of English girls which my Frenchman describes would seem to be substantiated by Jacques, my neighbour Monsieur Martin's son, who spent last year studying at an English university. Though already enough of the man of the world to be shocked by very little, Jacques confessed to being rather surprised by the behaviour of some English girl students, not only in the desire they unashamedly displayed to have personal confirmation of the French lover's legendary reputation, but also in their ability to compete with the male in swilling enough alcoholic beverage as to render them incapable, the following morning, of having more than just the haziest of recollections, if any recollections at all, of the previous evening's events. As my sage points out, this type of anti-social 'laddish' conduct which momentarily destroys all inhibitions, and all too often leads to grossly degrading, often violent behaviour, even on the part of women, is the very antithesis of that refined, composed and alluring mystery with which the French woman still seeks to surround herself.

A French woman, then, in her compulsive efforts to limit the undesirable effects an immoderate intake of calories may have on the outward manifestations of her femininity, tends to favour more preventive means, and usually prefers to address the problem at source by a strict supervision of the quantity of solids and liquids ingested. In this respect, the appetite-reducing action of the cigarette may not be disdained.

Though making considerable efforts to stay neat and trim is an essential part of her permanent campaign to keep the basic product fresh and deliciously tempting to men, the additional means provided by physical exercise, especially in public, is resorted to far more infrequently. For, as she well knows, a not negligible part of her seductiveness comes from

the mystery surrounding the creation, and exposing to general scrutiny her sweating, red-faced, panting efforts to burn off those extra calories is rather like letting dinner guests have a peep into your kitchen: once they have seen what really goes on, the main dish might be consumed with a little less gusto. As a result, we rarely see the French woman exercising for all to see; and on the few occasions we do walk past one jogging in the local park, though she's wearing a chic-looking outfit, she often looks embarrassed, even apologetic, as if to say, 'I know this isn't very feminine, but don't be too hard on me! I let myself go enough to drink a full glass of wine at the restaurant last night, and I won't be able to sleep until I've worked off those extra 50 calories!' So, keeping a slim figure is normally a private matter, limited to the intimate confines of home, and the nearest she will come to giving her weight-reducing efforts public exposure is to join a gym class where, along with like-minded women, she can prepare herself in the relative discretion provided by four walls and a roof. Since an English woman's physical exertions are less a part of a general campaign to stay trimly attractive for men, and more a means to make her a fitter and more efficient commando in the war against men, it is with far less reluctance that she exposes herself to the risk of unfavourable public judgement. And so, it is without the slightest complex that she will push her sweating, panting body along the roadside, clothed in a faded T shirt and old tracksuit bottom.

There is, of course, a price to be paid for the considerable efforts a French woman makes both to tenderize and spice up the raw material. Some measure of the financial sacrifices consented is provided by the fact that she applies in far greater proportions than any other nation's women the vast array of exorbitantly-priced anti-wrinkle lotions, body-moisturizing creams, rejuvenating soaps, slimming gels she has been persuaded to believe will soften the pernicious effects on her epidermis of the inexorable passage of time.

And being the expert cook she is, she knows full well that, once we get down to the meat of the subject, the size of a man's appetite may be substantially increased when titillated by an *amuse-gueule* or two.

FTT: *Les amuse-gueules* = pre-meal nibbles. These often go beyond the modest peanut or crisp to include tastily refined, dainty little concoctions, served both hot and cold, designed to stimulate the appetite as a prelude to the 'entrée', the first course 'entry' to the meal.

Is it any great surprise, then, that *lingerie* is in the front line of her general offensive to arouse the male? Not only does the French woman attach great importance to the design, colour, sexiness and general quality of her underwear, but is willing to pay the price by purchasing it in specialized shops. And though she reserves a more intimate appreciation of these delicate nibbles for her chosen one alone, she is coquettish enough to reveal for male delectation just a hint of forthcoming delights in the shape of a provocative bra-strap, frequently black, revealed by a loosely-fitting pullover which has somehow slipped off her well-moulded shoulder. But don't be fooled. There's nothing haphazard about all this. This is a part of her carefully-laid plans to excite desire in men. The English woman tends to adopt a more pragmatic approach. I mean, what's the point in spending good money on something only her husband or boyfriend will see? So, she prefers something less onerous and, above all, functional, with no fancy frills, and tends to rely on Marks and Sparks as her chief provider of smalls.

When it comes to make-up the Frenchwoman considers that seduction is all about enhancing and not concealing what is specific to her. Her speciality, therefore, is the natural look, and she manages to brush on just a light *soupeçon* of sophistication while never painting out her personality. Consequently, we never say to ourselves, 'Oh, that's just a bit

too much!' Would I be being both heartless and unfair in suggesting there's something reminiscent of an African tribal war mask in the way some English women daub on their make-up? But, après tout, isn't this quite normal? Isn't the objective both to strengthen the fortitude of the wearer, and strike terror in the heart of the foe?

Paradoxically, in a country whose designers set world standards in matters of *haute couture*, it would be wrong to think that the French woman allows herself to become a slave to the dictates of *la mode*. For it is that same sense of measured restraint, coupled with a desire to make the most of herself as a woman, which conditions her overall approach to clothes. So, generally she keeps it relatively simple and manages to respect that subtle dividing line between refined sobriety, and what can be a too homogenized reflection of pure fashion, or too blatant an exhibition of her physical charms. As a result, she is usually capable of maintaining an apparently relaxed, refined and natural-looking exterior which is often lacking in her Anglo-Saxon sisters. For so subservient can an American woman be in her reverential acceptance of designer fashion that she may appear as stiff as the window dummy her outfit had previously been displayed on. And the more pragmatic considerations an English woman shows in choosing her underwear are repeated in what is worn above: for her choice is less dictated by a desire to present her attractions to a largely unappreciative male than its potential to provide her with enough freedom of movement to give him a good belt round the ear should he step out of line. In addition, I can only note that those among the younger female generation desirous of coaxing the English male out of his general apathy tend to confuse seductive elegance of dress with aggressively vulgar sexual display – in the most ill-suited circumstances. The sight of adolescent girls parading their wares on their way to a Friday or Saturday night binge, clad only in mini skirts and plunging tops, is common in winter city streets where temperatures are low enough to

make even a polar bear start looking for a nice warm place to spend the next four months.

Perhaps the French woman's determination not to allow her personal specificity to be stifled by the dictates of fashion, or an overtly provocative display of legs, bosom and bum, boils down to the innate confidence she has in herself. And whether intended or not, this self-assurance contains just enough uncertainty and unselfconscious nonchalance to prevent it from lapsing into haughty disdain, and to make whatever she's wearing appear freshly spontaneous and tailored just for her – even when it has been designed for thousands. And she will not hesitate to use, often to great effect, the various accessories available in her aim to be able to say to the world: 'This is something I have chosen! This is me!' This personal identity stamp can be many things: an unusual but tasteful piece of jewellery, an originally-designed shoulder bag, a strikingly-patterned scarf or brightly-matching shoes.

Hélas! Honesty obliges me to admit that the irreverent orientations of our present times have not spared the Latin male. More and more frequent examples of the shameless ridicule to which his rule of the roost is now being subjected provide irrefutable signs that the Frenchwoman's traditional deference to her lord and master is little by little giving way. I mean, soon we'll be as henpecked as you English men! You only need to read the humiliating epigraph our Englishman insisted on placing at the head of this chapter. And what I find infinitely more regrettable is that growing evidence exists to show that our French women are now engaged on the path which their Anglo-Saxon sisters trod some while ago. Before finally handing the remainder of this chapter back to our host, François Théodore Thistlethwaite, would I be too unrealistic in expressing my heart-felt hope that this will not result in the former abandoning, as the latter have so obviously done, any of their inborn femininity along the way?

Merci infiniment, François. Now, given that a Latin lover occupies a third of my whole, it might be thought that my knowledge and experience of the fair sex on both sides of the Channel is both deep and extensive. Regrettably, this is, far from being the case. Enthusiasm was certainly not lacking - from my French side at least - but it was my three-part personage which was wholly to blame. For the flames of his Latin ardour were all too often dampened by the indifferent gaze of my wet-blanket English alter, or stifled by the censorious glare of my kill-joy adjudicator. And since girls never really knew (and sometimes I didn't know myself) who they were dealing with in me, they never saw what to expect. In my company, they were stripped of all reassuring markers, and thus felt ill at ease - as if they were being ogled naked under a shower which ran hot for one minute, and then, for no apparent reason, turned chillingly cold. Nonetheless, among the girls I came to be on relatively intimate terms with, it is Claudine and Nancy I have the fondest memories of.

One of the things I remember about Claudine was her unaffected, down-to-earth attitude to life in general, and men in particular. She was not one of those romantically-inclined women in whose head flutter idealized, illusory notions of the perfect, awe-inspiring man; for her common-sense awareness of the foibles of the opposite sex never allowed her expectations to exceed what could be reasonably hoped for. As a result, Claudine seemed to know and accept the opposite sex for what they *really* are, and I never had the feeling of being obliged to conform to some pre-conceived vision of what she thought a male should be. Consequently, I could be as much of myself as my tri-partite configuration would allow, and we soon settled into a relationship where we could be good friends and more.

But even though she never asked the earth, she did expect a man to take the lead. And when in male company, she always adopted a discreetly measured role which might have

been mistaken for subservience by some. In reality, nothing could have been further from the case: for it was more the result of her conviction that she was different rather than unequal with men; and though she granted a man the privilege of showing the way, she never allowed herself to be overshadowed to the point of becoming his foil. If she disagreed with a man she was not afraid to say so, but she usually did this in a calm, unaggressive sort of way. And since she had never been hardened by the War of the Sexes, she had kept her femininity intact, and beneath a sometimes inexpressive, even aloof-looking public façade, I had on several occasions the opportunity to witness a tender and sensitive heart. The only time she came within danger of losing her *sangfroid* was when a man made the mistake of looking down her cleavage instead of into her eyes. But she was rarely provoked into direct argument on a sexist man's terms, and usually opted for cold indifference or haughty scorn. For Claudine always seemed to make a point of keeping steady, efficient control, both of herself and the usual day-to-day tasks.

It was always a source of perpetual amazement to the Englishman in me, how she could cook, single-handed, and in record time, an impressive four-course dinner for six, wearing a trim cocktail dress (barely protected by a chic little apron), while still managing to find time to serve an *apéritif* and chat with our guests. Or how she could possibly be content with such sparrow-sized portions, and make half a glass of diluted wine last right through the meal.

While having neither the neck of a swan, the eyes of a doe nor the body of a Venus, I can only repeat what my Frenchman has said: Claudine seemed to know instinctively how to turn her own particular attributes into something exquisitely attractive to men. But it was always done in a discreet and restrained sort of way, often by using that small, yet alluring detail which was always made to appear balanced and natural: a skirt which was short enough but not

provocatively so; a pullover which was just oversized enough to fall off one shoulder; jeans gently revealing delicately-shaped little buttocks beneath; a *décolleté* V neck low enough to reveal just the hint of a cleavage.

And like all women, she was intimately acquainted with those parts of her anatomy which might be considered as falling short of the feminine ideal; but instead of relying on concealment, she had enough confidence to push them to the front. There was something nonchalantly cheeky about her ability to wear a pullover moulding a pair of pert little breasts which were not without recalling two fried eggs on a plate - as if to say to the world, 'I don't care if I do have tiny tits! Just look at me! I'm all the sexier for it!' Et après tout, didn't she have a point? Isn't seductive attraction somewhere a little flawed? Isn't a look with a slight cast in it far more seductive than a gaze from perfectly matching eyes?

But, though Claudine set great store by a so-called 'natural' look, in reality, this consisted in concealing under an appearance of spontaneity what she had spent hours thinking out. For she could arrive on a date looking casually attractive, and say, 'I was in such a rush I just threw on whatever I could find.' I never believed one single word of it: she had probably forgone eating to spend more time in front of her mirror. And when you complimented her - which she always appreciated in an undemonstrative sort of way - on a new pullover, and then asked her where she had found it, she would reply with the most *insouciant* of airs, 'Oh, je ne me rappelle plus ... tu sais, je suis tombée dessus, comme ça!' **(FTT: Oh, I don't really remember ... you know, I just came across it, like that).** The truth of the matter was that she'd set off knowing exactly what she was after, and had spent most of the day hunting it down.

Despite the fact that Claudine usually made an effort to display a champagne-like effervescence, she could show that typical French trait of being an incorrigible moaner and protestor. But, whenever she did give vent to strong

disapproval – frequently aligned in terms which would not have disgraced a seasoned trooper – the effect was very much the same as an unspeakable English four-letter word pronounced in an upper-class accent, and her femininity rarely suffered. And when sometimes I voiced disapprobation of something she had said or done, she had enough natural roguishness to be able cock her little bum in my direction, at the same time blowing a raspberry, in a gesture which - incredible as this may sound - contained far more impish charm than gross vulgarity.

Now Nancy, on the other hand, was like sparkling wine without the bubbles. During my first years of residence in France, I kept body and three souls together by gainful employment with a language school, inculcating the language of Thistlethwaite, in predominantly commercial form, into French business people - often at their place of work. In one company, the number of staff wishing improve their skills in the language of Shakespeare was such that two separate groups were formed, each requiring, of course, a different teacher: my own self and ... Nancy.

Nancy was a tall, robustly-constituted, blondish, blue-eyed English girl whose womanly attributes were, as far as it was permitted to see, not without potential. But those solid arguments I fleetingly glimpsed were all but neutralized by tightly pinned-back hair, a succession of dowdy, sack-like sweaters, well-below-the-knee skirts, loose-fitting trousers or jeans, and flat-heeled shoes, combined with an almost total lack of make-up of any kind. And mentally she wore blue stockings.

You know, I couldn't help but have the feeling that somewhere in Nancy lurked something of the Amazon which, without causing her to cut off right breast, was present enough to leave you in no doubt that the slightest attempt to intrude upon her private territory (a veritable no-man's land) would be repulsed with considerable physical and mental injury to the assailant. Or was it simply a highly-developed

sense of professional conscientiousness which had decreed that French male students' attention should in no way run the risk of being distracted from the learning process by anything more than an imaginary assessment of her physical charms. And, as far as I was concerned, relations with Nancy could hardly have got off to a more acidulous start.

Since the company where we worked was located some distance from the language school, and as Nancy was not in possession of a car, it was arranged that we should drive there together in my Mini. To this effect, I picked her up every Tuesday morning in front of the block of flats in which she lived. And how can I forget that first time I went to collect her?

François was at the wheel (on French roads, at least, Thistlethwaite tends to veer to the left) and, as we approached, I saw her waiting, a tape recorder reposing on the pavement by her side. Now, in those days tape recorders were rather heavy, cumbersome things so, after pulling up, I jumped out of the car, greeted her with a cheery 'Hello!' and gallantly seized hold of its handle with the intention of depositing it in the boot.

'No, leave it where it is! I can do that myself!' she snapped with such an intimidating glare in her eye that I could only lower my gaze. And that said it all: if we're going to get on over the next few months, let's get it straight right from the start. You wouldn't have offered to do that for a man, so don't come that one with me! Never forget that even if I am a woman I'm just as capable as you, so the sooner you drop that sexist, Latin male seducer nonsense, the better it'll be for both of us - especially you!

Despite this more than chilly beginning, we did warm to each other over the following weeks. But never did I for one instant waver from behaving towards her in exactly the same way as I would have done with a man: for there was always something in her demeanour which left me in no doubt of the dire consequences of not doing so. Our relationship,

therefore, remained well within those limits of friendly, co-operative civility which our shared professional duties imposed. And then the summer holidays came.

By way of celebrating the end of the English course, our students invited Nancy and myself to dine with them in a reputed gastronomic restaurant. The evening arrived and, as usual, I drove along to pick her up. There stood Nancy on the same pavement in front of the same block of flats. Was it the make-up? Was it her hair that was somewhere more attractively arranged? Perhaps her skirt was just an inch or two higher. Or was it simply the fact that the tape recorder was no longer there? Even though I couldn't quite put my finger on the change, a certain *je ne sais quoi* gave the Frenchman in me the barely resistible desire to jump out, and run round to open the passenger door. I resisted his impulse.

It goes without saying that we had a thoroughly enjoyable evening. The food was delicious, and both myself and Nancy did more than justice to the first-rate wine. And all too soon the moment came for us all to say *au revoir*. After much cheek-kissing and handshaking we went our separate ways home. It was certainly Théodore (he had only drunk water) who took the wheel to drive Nancy back home for the very last time, and I could already hear my Englishman yawning somewhere down below. Pulling up outside her flat, we wished each other a pleasant holiday and I was just on the point of bidding her a friendly goodbye when...

The events which followed will forever remain hazy in my mind. Was it the general conviviality of the evening? Was it the *insouciance* occasioned by the approaching holidays? Was it the liberating effects of our rather immoderate consumption of the wine? Or could it have been the Mini's confined interior? All these things no doubt had a part to play. In a praiseworthy attempt to leave Nancy with a modest taste of what French male gallantry was all about, it must have been the François within who prompted me to lean over her to open the passenger door. And as I did so all at once I found

myself clasped - like some hapless fly - in a paralyzing embrace, my head drawn helplessly towards voracious, parted lips ... and all resistance began slowly to ebb away...

My middleman censor has forbidden me from relating in any detail the events which then ensued. Suffice it to say that a firm 'Let's go inside!' was whispered into my ear, a resolute hand led me from the car, a determined arm marched me up the stairs, and the evening was brought to consummation in the depths of Nancy's lair.

Chapter Thirteen

Food (and Drink) for Thought

Worthless people live only to eat and drink; people of worth eat and drink only to live.

Socrates

It is yet one more paradoxical measure of that boundless ocean which separates two nations, geographically located within mutual sight, that my Englishman would feel far more at home in Cayman Brac than Boulogne-sur-Mer, and that the eating and drinking habits of a newly-discovered tribe of Amazon headhunters would meet with considerably less incredulity on the part of my Frenchman than those of a suburban household of middle-of-the-road Mancunians.

FTT: My French readers (whose knowledge of world geography will certainly be limited to *les Territoires d'Outre-Mer*) might be moderately interested to learn that Cayman Brac is one of the three islands (along with Grand Cayman and Little Cayman) comprising the Cayman Islands, a British Crown Colony lying in the Western Caribbean, some 400 miles south of Miami. Today, the islands are a major international offshore financial haven. History has it that they were first sighted by Columbus in 1503, but the first recorded English visitor was that Spanish Armada hero, Sir Francis Drake, who landed there in 1586. The tax-free status of the islands apparently goes back to February 8, 1794 when the Caymanians rescued the crews of several British merchant ships, as well as that of a Royal Navy frigate which had struck a reef and run aground during a storm. In recognition of their heroic efforts, the

sovereign of that time, King George III, promised the islanders permanent future exemption from all forms of taxation.

You know, it has always been an enigma, even to the scholar in me, that a people, so universally condemned for the uninspired nature of their cooking, could have managed to impose on our planet such a varied, copious and delicious meal as the cooked breakfast; nor how a country which has elevated cooking to nothing less than a creative art could have come up with nothing much more than a miserable slice of bread and a bowl of watery coffee by which to start the day.

This is not to say, I hasten to add, that the French do not appreciate the qualities of a full English breakfast. But there is perhaps no other country in the world where so many people unreservedly admit there is nothing like a substantial breakfast to refuel the engine and get the day off to a flying start, and where so few actually find it possible to believe that anyone can have either the time or the stomach to take it - even at the weekend.

What my Englishman finds far more shocking than the insipid, insufficient nature of the Gallic breakfast, however, is the manner in which it is ingested: for he might be forgiven for thinking that bread and coffee, while being consumed at table, must be systematically held apart, and that they should only come together after being dispatched irrevocably down throat. In reality, this is far from the case: a widespread Gallic practice (as rampant as queue-jumping, street demonstrations, strikes and le Système D), consists in plunging bread or *croissant* into breakfast bowl of coffee (or hot chocolate), until the former has imbibed as much of the latter as the laws of physics will allow. The unspeakably-soggy mass thus produced is then popped into mouth, munched with relish before finally being allowed to slide down throat.

And so instinctive is the practice that I would be inclined to attach some credibility to my scholar's theory tracing its origins back to an ancient Gallic ritual which required food to be dipped into a recipient containing the still warm blood of a vanquished enemy. Is it now considered to be a pre-masticatory phase essential to a digestive system not yet in full working order at this early hour of day? Or is it simply a means of adding a modicum of taste to a meal more adapted to a prison punishment diet? Whatever the case may be, the habit is endemic enough to constitute an infallible sign of French presence in the breakfast room of any foreign holiday hotel.

Beyond the doubtful gustative merits of the custom (hereinafter referred to as 'The French Dunk'), and the nauseous spectacle it presents, what shocks my Englishman even more is that this use of bread to perform a function normally conferred on a sponge represents a gross breach of table etiquette: for an elementary rule of good table manners states that solids and liquids may only be united after being despatched *separately* down into stomach.

My Englishman might have been prepared to grant some extenuating circumstances, had the practice been restricted to breakfast alone - which, considering the early hour this usually takes place, would have enabled it to go unnoticed by those non-dunkers still affected by their recent dormant state. Regrettably, the same technique is unashamedly presented to fully-awakened public gaze during meals consumed at other times of day, particularly (though not limited to) their final stages, when most solid matter has been transferred from plate to stomach, and little else remains but the sauce. In this respect, moreover, such is the vigour with which bread is applied to plate that subsequent washing of the latter is rendered entirely superfluous.

On the other hand, my arbitrator does point out that the rules of French table etiquette - though making no mention of breakfast-time dunking - do, in fact, condemn the main-

meal habit of using bread digitally to soak up sauce. It would appear to be tolerated, however, when bread is impaled on fork. It goes without saying that I have never witnessed this pronged derivative in operation, and personal experience would lead me to believe that, like most rules in France, it tends to be ignored. It might also be thought that, in this land of rampant individualism and contestation, the nation would have counted an equal number of anti-dunkers. This is not at all the case. On this point, at least, the country is resolutely united. Indeed, so much a part of the national heritage is the custom that, not only has the verb *saucer* been derived to describe it, but, like those previously-dwelt-on institutions of queue-jumping, street demonstration, strikes, le Système D and insulting referees, it is proudly passed on to progeny barely weaned from their mothers' milk.

Though my Englishman remains stubbornly hostile, the fair-minded arbitrator in me feels that a far more tolerant stand must be taken with regard to the practice - at least when applied to sauce. Must we not question the judgement, he asks, when the judge is rarely confronted with the cause of the wrongdoing? Who can say that even the most well-mannered of English diners would not succumb to dunking, were he faced with that rich variety of deliciously-fresh, good-quality, easily-prepared, natural and inexpensive sauces which *la cuisine française* has elaborated to accompany food? And would it not be akin to profanation that they should suffer the same shameful interment as their crude English counterparts whose un-mopped remains are so systematically laid to rest down the kitchen-sink plughole?

I say 'crude English counterparts' because, sadly, vulgar mint and horseradish sauce, not forgetting floodwater quantities of runny gravy, are more or less the only traditional English options open to a cook wishing to complement the flavour of meat and vegetables and render them succulently moist. So, surely the grounds for Thistlethwaite's denigration of the French practice are considerably weakened by the

more than dubious nature of these native English sauces which, let us be honest, present little inducement to being dunked. I mean, does the thought of bringing bread into absorbable contact with such a cold, unappealing mixture as vinegar, chopped mint and sugar present a prospect any normal eater could find appetizing? And can dunking such a dubiously-coloured liquid as gravy (so watery that most of it will probably run down your chin) be seriously envisaged?

The more anglophile among my French readers, still interested in preparing these typically English sauces, will be pleased to learn that their questionable nature may be somewhat compensated for by their simplicity of preparation. As mentioned above, mint sauce, an essential accompaniment to roast lamb, is made from just a few spoonsful of chopped fresh mint, a dash of vinegar, along with a sprinkling of sugar. Horseradish sauce, traditionally eaten with roast beef, boasts a tangy, mustard-like flavor, and is composed of nothing more complex than vinegar, sour cream, and the grated roots of the plant whose name it bears. And gravy, in its basic form, is simply the juices which run naturally from meat during cooking. These may be further coloured, flavoured and thickened by adding gravy salt (a simple mix of salt and caramel) or gravy browning (gravy salt dissolved in water), and more consistency can be obtained by using an agent such as corn flour. Strangely, the dispensing recipient goes under the name of 'gravy boat.' Is it the nautical appellation, along with the hull-like shape which prompts this nation of seafarers to douse their food with such floodwater quantities of liquid that dinner plates frequently bear a marked resemblance to Brighton beach at high tide? But what is far more regrettable is the fact that, though successful preparation of any of the three would not tax the culinary skills of an averagely-intelligent eight year-old, few English household cooks now consent to the effort of self-preparation: for concentrated cubes and powders, to which hot water is simply added, are now commonly used to make

gravy; and ready-prepared bottled mint and horse-radish sauce - where the only inconvenience is the effort involved in unscrewing the cap - are usually preferred to home-made versions made from fresh ingredients.

Whether it is the effect or the cause, an industry has now developed which has made ready-prepared, artificially-coloured and preserved, standardized bottled sauce concoctions an inseparable part of Anglo-Saxon eating culture. Indisputable proof of this is provided by the shelves of English supermarkets which display an awesome variety of pre-made condiments: sauces, pickles, creams and dressings of every description, the vast proportion of which are totally unknown in France.

Many of these condiments, or their ingredients at least, saw light of day in the distant colonies of an Empire bathed in a never-setting sun, and began life in Blighty as an attempt to sweeten the pill at a time when English cooking was an unimaginative, insipid 'boiled beef and carrots' affair, and swallowing it was something to be got through in order to survive. But the bottled-condiment blight, like Dutch elm disease, has now such an invasive hold that nothing can prevent it from spreading rampantly on; and far too often - unlike home-made, naturally-constituted, often regionally-inspired French sauces, considered to be an intrinsic, complement to a specific dish (and as such containing the same ingredients) - these industrially-produced seasonings represent a standardized, interchangeable accompaniment to almost any dish.

Hélas, the Gallic in me has to admit that even traditional French sauces are now being threatened by the ubiquitous spread of this type of convenience food: for determined efforts are now being made to persuade the French housewife to succumb to the spurious charms of Anglo-Saxon style, ready-prepared cubed, powdered and bottled pretenders. Needless to say, my Frenchman has every confidence that his compatriots will resist this mass invasion with the same

heroic fortitude as that shown by Joan of Arc in raising the siege of Orléans, and booting those damned English out of France for good and for all.

FTT: Barely had I got these thoughts onto my computer screen than a voice (it could only have been my Englishman's) insisted on me emphasizing in the strongest possible terms that, contrary to the stereotyped misapprehensions, the majority of French people still stubbornly cling to, and which, admittedly, I have done little to dispel, not only has sophisticated, tastefully-presented, quality fare always been available in England for those who knew where to find it, and had the means to afford it, but the doubtful reputation still surrounding English cooking is now largely unjustified. In short, the English no longer eat merely to live. Wider foreign travel, the plethora of T.V. cookery programmes and related recipe books, the ready accessibility of even the most exotic ingredients, the existence of top-class restaurants rivalling the very best in France, general availability of well-presented, top-quality, varied and reasonably-priced food in the ordinary pub are factors contributing to an ever-increasing awareness of what the Gallic realized centuries ago – that eating, like fornication, can be indulged in as a pleasure rather than a duty.

This deep Anglo-French discord as to the propriety of using bread to clean dinner plate in much the same way as we apply mop to kitchen floor may also be explained by the contrasting nature of, and diverging attitudes towards this staple food. While the *baguette* is totally fatless with a light, crispy crust surrounding a soft, airy crumb, and just a *soupeçon* of floury taste, the presence of milk and eggs in the tin-baked English loaf produces a thicker, more flaccid crust, and a heavier, more densely-structured crumb; and the use of

stronger flour imparts a more pronounced farinaceous flavour.

In addition, depending on which side of the Channel you are on, bread plays a totally different prandial role. In England, eating it with a meal is rather like asking a plain-looking girl to dance, that is to say it's generally considered as a filler-in when nothing more tempting is at hand. Admittedly, its relative absence at mealtimes can also be explained by the fact that a traditional English main dish is copiously provided with vegetables (usually three or even more); and it is perhaps significant that the only occasions when bread is called upon to play more than a minor mealtime role is when served pre-buttered (in England bread and butter are as inseparable as tea and milk), in compensatory accompaniment to a meal of reduced vegetable content such as fish and chips.

FTT: French readers may be interested to learn that this English national dish is available for purchase in a host of specialized fish and chip shops, the larger of which frequently include restaurant facilities where it is consumed with a round or two of pre-buttered bread, along with a pot of tea. Fish and chips may also be taken away to eat at home. To this effect, they are placed in greaseproof bags which are then insulated by being enveloped in sheets of newspaper.

No doubt in answer to my English part's declarations as to the impropriety of French dunking, François has requested me to point out that the hypocritical English are not always the paragons of good eating manners they claim to be. What could be more shocking, he says, than the fact that fish and chips are frequently consumed from their original wrapping, using fingers into the bargain, while walking in the street, or even sitting in the car – some going so far as to affirm that they taste even better when ingested in this way?

It goes without saying that in such unbecoming circumstances they are eaten without bread and butter.

In France, on the contrary, so essential a part of eating is ordinary, unbuttered bread that the lack of anything less than a full basket of sliced baguette on the restaurant table (as well as its systematic replenishment during the meal) would be as unimaginably incomplete as Paris without the Eiffel Tower.

FTT: Hardly had I got started again than the same Gallic voice requested me to add some words of warning for the benefit of any of my French readers contemplating a touring holiday in England, and intrepid enough to envisage dining in an eating place serving typically English fare. Though, as we have seen, bread is eaten in far more limited meal-time quantities than in France, it does traditionally accompany a first course of soup, usually in the low-profile form of a roll - to which a dedicated side plate is attributed. Oddly, English table etiquette (though the French taught the world to eat, the English invented the rules) requires that the roll be broken up, piece by piece, using fingers only. It should, therefore, neither be bitten into nor sliced with a knife. After each operation the remainder must be carefully replaced on the side plate, and *in no circumstances be deposited on the tablecloth*. It goes without saying that *a seemly distance must at all times be maintained between bread and soup, and each piece should be thoroughly chewed and swallowed before any attempt is made to ingurgitate the latter*. Is it necessary for me to emphasize once more that French-style soup-dunking, even in its forked version, will inevitably meet with general eyebrow-raising from other diners and, if persisted in, expose offenders to barely concealed disapprobation on the part of attendant staff? Though the likelihood can never be excluded, up to the time of

writing no examples have been reported of French soup-dunkers being requested to leave.

Moreover, French and English attitudes towards the crust could not be more diametrically opposed. While the former are convinced that both crust and crumb play an inseparable part in producing a deliciously complementary soft-cum-crunchy whole, the wilting, unappetizing crust of tin-baked English bread makes it about as tempting to eat as bacon rind. I still remember the dubious incitements ('It'll make your hair curl!' was her favourite) resorted to by Grandma Thistlethwaite to persuade the young boy I then was to eat the 'heel' of her otherwise delicious home-baked bread. And the cucumber and potted-meat sandwiches traditionally served with four o'clock tea in English cafés and restaurants are only considered refined enough for human consumption when the bread which goes to make them has been relieved of its vulgar crust.

Is it the same coarse, flabbily-uninviting nature of the crust, along with the intrusive floury taste of the crumb, which causes bread to be conspicuous by its absence at the cheese course in England? For the only real occasion when the two come anywhere near to harmonious union is when brought together in a Ploughman's Lunch.

FTT: My Frenchman has requested me to explain to any of his compatriots who may be reading these lines that a Ploughman's Lunch is a popular lunchtime pub snack consisting of a thick slice of English cheese (usually Cheddar or Stilton), served with pickles and a hunk of usually non tin-baked, crusty, 'country-style' bread, spread with lashings of butter, and washed down with a pint of English ale. Though the name conjures up idyllic images of the timeless, pastoral England immortalized by the paintings of Constable, reality would appear to be more prosaic: the meal originated in the early sixties as a

marketing ploy which took considerable liberties with the past in order to accommodate present commercial requirements to promote the sale of English cheeses and beers in pubs.

As a substitute for bread, the English systematically resort to a wide variety of crisp, lightly-flavoured (frequently with cheese itself) cracker-type biscuits to bring out the taste of their after-meal cheese. And what is more normal in a country where plain, unadorned bread is only deemed fit to be thrown out for the sparrows that these receive a liberal coating of butter? For the French, on the other hand, the only possible accompaniment to cheese is plain, unbuttered bread. I mean, how could it be otherwise when marriage between baguette and cheese provides such an ideally complementary match? For the delicately-flavoured, crispy charm of the one remains discreet enough to bring out all that is best in the other, while retaining enough of its own character as never to be submerged by even the most commanding cheesy presence. Alas, the charms of French bread are of an all too fleeting nature, and freeze into ice-like hardness in a third of the time it takes mortar to set into concrete.

It must, nevertheless, not be imagined that the consumption of sliced bread with butter is totally unheard of France. But the former usually comes in the shape of breakfast-time rusks. My English readers might think that the light and crispy nature of rusks – obtained by reducing the residual moisture of the bread from which they are made – runs counter to the very notion of dunking. After all, what is the point in buying something for its light and crispy nature only to reduce it, at the first opportunity, to a soggy, amorphous mass? This would be to forget that in this land of paradox, where each day brings fresh proof that you know absolutely nothing about it at all, the opposite is the case: for

these enhanced liquid-absorbing properties are exploited even more glutinously than with ordinary, untoasted bread.

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The stoic fortitude by which my philosopher has resisted all temptation to despair at the immensity of his self-appointed task of maintaining harmoniously united in one host person the representatives of two nations whose only common denominator are the colours of their flags, has always been a subject of my unbounded admiration. And it is a source of permanent wonder that he can still cling with such unshakeable optimism to the belief that consensus on the subject of pre- or post-sweet cheesing is not, and never will be an impossible dream: for while my Frenchman is adamant that a nicely ripe Camembert can only be done full justice to before *le dessert*, my Englishman is equally convinced that the delights of a mature Cheddar may only be relished after his pudding. ‘Mais après tout,’ says my Frenchman, ‘what is more natural that a people who think it right to take roundabouts on the left should go the wrong way round eating their cheese?’ For him, pre-dessert cheese-eating is simply a question of practical common sense. Doesn’t it provide an opportunity to drink off the remaining drops of the main-course red wine? But, far more importantly, isn’t English post-pudding cheesing offensive to all rules of taste? I mean, what can be more indelicate than going from savoury to sweet and then back to savoury? ‘Eh bien,’ he sighs, with a resigned shrug of my left shoulder, ‘what else can you expect from a people who eat their meat with jam!’

FTT: Here, François is echoing a common French misapprehension regarding Anglo-Saxon fruit berry sauces such as redcurrant jelly or cranberry sauce, traditionally eaten with turkey, and which the Gallics frequently confuse with the highly sweetened fruit

preserve destined principally for breakfast consumption on bread or toast. The category can also include apple sauce, often eaten with pork, as well as pineapple which commonly accompanies roast gammon or ham. As my Englishman so rightly points out, the French seem to forget that they themselves eat duck with orange, and that it would be unthinkable to eat *le boudin* (black pudding) without its traditional accompaniment of stewed apple sauce.

But what is less remarkable that my pudding-face, tipple-loving Englishman should look at things from the opposite point of view. 'Is finishing off the wine at so early a stage in the evening such a good idea as all that?' he asks. 'Surely the best thing about end-of-meal cheesing is that you can get at your sweet straight after the main course; and then what's to stop you from opening another bottle of wine to go with the cheese? And once you've got that down you can enjoy a glass or two of port!'

FTT: In an effort to bring this highly controversial subject to a close, the arbitrator in me has just pointed out that a compromise solution does exist: it is more and more common in Anglo-Saxon countries - especially when dining informally at home among friends - to privilege neither post nor pre-sweet cheese-eating by serving both dessert and cheese at the same time.

Having now broached the subject of port-drinking, it would be inadmissible of me not to dwell in greater detail on such a traditional English after-dinner practice. Historically, port-drinking in England goes back to the beginning of the eighteenth century when conflict with the hereditary enemy obliged the English to turn to their Portuguese allies to provision them in wine. The long sea journey to England proving detrimental to quality, the wine began to be 'fortified'

- stabilized by the addition of distilled grape alcohol which stopped the fermentation process, thereby retaining a high sugar content while increasing alcoholic strength.

Port is generally regarded by the English as providing the ideal complement, both in texture and flavour, not only to indigenous cheeses such as Stilton, Cheddar or Gloucester, but also as a dessert wine to accompany, in particular, full-flavoured fruit-based sweets as well as nuts. Velvet rich in hue, full-bodied vintage port is, above all, a man's drink, to be savoured in slow, contemplative sips, and is reputed both for the warm, calming effects it has on imbibers, and the philosophical orientations it is apt to impart to conversation. Perhaps it was this latter propensity which, in higher social circles, went towards creating that after-dinner custom which required ladies to retire to the drawing room for tea and gossip, leaving men to discuss life's vicissitudes over a cigar and a glass or two of mellow vintage port.

And what is more natural with these lovers of ritualized tradition that port-drinking should have generated a number of odd ceremonial procedures? For serving and passing the port are subject to rules of etiquette as minutely detailed as those set out in the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of Saint Andrews' Book of Regulations. At formal dinners, a custom, apparently originating in the British navy, requires the wine to be passed from port to port (the port side of a ship is the left-hand side): the host first serves the person seated on his right before passing the bottle clockwise to his neighbour on the left; the latter then proceeds to serve the passer on his right, and then hands it on to the next person on his left who does the same. In this way the bottle is sent round the table until it comes full circle back to the host. If a person should, for some reason, fail to pass the bottle on (another rule states that it must never be allowed to touch the table on the way round), it is considered discourteous (we are, of course, among gentlemen) to bring this to his attention directly. The only acceptable procedure consists in asking him the

question: 'Don't you know the Bishop of Norwich?' This is intended more as a reminder than a reproach. If, however, the culprit is unacquainted enough with port etiquette to answer in the negative, the correct response is: 'He's an awfully nice fellow ... but he never remembers to pass the port!' So quaintly English, n'est-ce pas?

FTT: Legend has it that the ecclesiast in question was the long-lived Henry Bathurst (1744-1837), Bishop of Norwich from 1805 to 1837, who in his later years was in the understandable habit of nodding off over his port, thus failing to pass it on. So seriously was the problem taken that elaborate lengths were gone to in order to find a remedy. A solution was finally provided by the Hoggett Decanter, the rounded base of which made it impossible to stand, thereby making sure it inscribed a full aerial circle before landing back on a special stand (itself called the Hoggett) positioned in front of the host.

And what more can you expect from a nation of incorrigible boozers that another long-established tradition requires that a bottle in the process of being drunk should never be re-corked? The injunction 'No heel-taps!' requires that the last drops of the bottle be drunk off so that another may be swiftly opened. At formal military dinners, moreover, no other wine but port is considered noble enough to be raised in toast to the King or Queen.

Though port may be poured into direct contact with melon as a starter, the French tend to favour it as a pre-meal drink, particularly in its lighter varieties, frequently taken in chilled white form and, along with other fortified wines, more a female preference. The national male *apéritif* is, of course, *pastis*, an aniseed-based spirit inseparably associated with water and ice. And what can you expect from a people who insist on doing things the opposite to everybody else that, not only is *pastis* in England frequently a female choice but,

horror upon horrors, is drunk in undiluted, un-iced form after a meal! On the other hand, sherry, the lighter Spanish equivalent of port, traditionally drunk - especially by women - before a meal, enjoys far less popularity in France.

The Scotch whisky pundit will be pleased to learn that, though aniseed-based spirit is the normal pre-meal tippie of the average working-class French male, whisky - generally considered to be a more sophisticated sort of drink - is rising in popularity among the middle classes. He will be less pleased to hear that whisky's wide, subtle diversity of taste, aroma and origin remains relatively unappreciated in the land of the wine connoisseur. Not only do the French have difficulty in comprehending the fact that venerable single malts are specific to a region which, like first-growth Clarets, may be easily identified by the specialist, but these are frequently placed in the same plebeian company as the more common blended varieties. And purists will be mortified to learn that Frenchmen have acquired the deplorable habit of systematically drinking their Scotch 'on the rocks,' frequently with liberal helpings of carbonated water. And even more kilt-twisting will be got into on the other side of the border when it is learned that the Frenchman who would consider it an unpardonable sacrilege to add lemonade to his first-growth *Mouton-Rothschild* has no qualms about drowning a tumbler of 20 year-old pure malt with equal proportions of Coca-Cola. In addition, little distinction is made between whisky of Scottish origin, and its Irish or trans-Atlantic whiskey cousins, not to mention other more dubiously-sourced variants. Indeed, such is the almost total absence of whisky-drinking culture on the Calais side of the Channel that the English whisky appreciator in me has begged leave to suggest I devote some lines to providing our French neighbours with a few basic drinking tips.

Though the more uncompromising whisky drinker will maintain that the only liquid which can conceivably be added to whisky is more whisky, I am sure he would be ready to

concede that the addition of not more than a fifth of water (soft, still spring water, ideally the same as that used in the distilling) enhances the distinctive flavour and aroma of this water of life.

FTT: The word ‘whisky,’ my scholar informs me, is derived from the Gaellic ‘*uisce beathe*’, meaning the water of life.

It goes without saying that tap water, usually containing too much chlorine, should in all circumstances be avoided. And, just as the harsh taste of inferior red wine may be attenuated by serving it over-chilled, adding ice to whisky may produce a more refreshing drink, but will dull the taste and freeze the nose. The addition of carbonated water will also impinge on flavour. As for adding mixers like ginger ale, soda, or Coca-Cola - well, what can I say? Though this type of treatment is an understandable way of enhancing characterless spirits like vodka or even gin, surely it is no less a crime than treason to inflict it on a drink of such sovereign refinement of flavour, texture and aroma as whisky?

I am also tempted to lend credibility to the notion that whisky, when taken in relative moderation, has a generally-underestimated propensity to prolong our sojourn on this planet. It is interesting to note that, though the purist would certainly not approve, Grandfather Thistlethwaite (who departed this world at the ripe age of 94) was in the habit of adding a wee dram of blended to his first cup of breakfast tea. Moreover, he was adamant in his belief that a daily glass or two, to which a drop of hot water was added, constituted a formidable vaccination against winter flu. And, so firm was his conviction in the efficiency of the treatment that in his later years it extended into the night: for after Grandma’s death, he could never be made to deny categorically that he slept with a bottle beneath his bed. It goes without saying that, in a land noted for widespread, unisex binge drinking,

more and more English females are acquiring the taste, not so much in appreciation of any gustative or olfactory qualities (the fair sex prefers to imbibe it with a mixer or as a cocktail base), but for the proof it supplies that anything *he* can do *I* can do better.

It is yet one more indication of the stubborn misapprehensions which exist between the two nations on the subject of food and drink that, in regard to the latter, a not negligible percentage of the French population is intimately convinced that the English enjoy their beer at a temperature not far removed from that to be found inside a pot of freshly-brewed tea. One explanation, perhaps, resides in the fact that most Gallics (except in the north and north-eastern beer-drinking regions of the Hexagon) consider beer - which they usually imbibe in light, lager form - as little more than a refreshing way of quenching a hot summer thirst. Consequently, anything above 7° is considered to be unacceptably warm. It is, therefore, a source of utter astonishment to the Frenchman that a country whose summers are rarely warm enough to create a thirst which a single cup of tea would not satisfy produces so many men (and more and more women) addicted to quaffing stupendous volumes of it. This would be to ignore, however, that England boasts a rich diversity of traditional regional ales which are enjoyed more for their taste than their thirst-quenching qualities. And since, as we have noted, chilling is a great inhibitor of taste, the full flavor of traditional English draught ale is only released when served at a cellar temperature of around 13°.

It is not the purpose of this chapter to dwell in much detail on such a vast subject as a nation's drinking patterns. I would merely point out that in France, on the whole, alcoholic beverage, especially in its stronger forms, is mostly imbibed by men. And wine does not escape the rule. Wine-drinking in France, however, is viewed by most as an indispensable complement to eating, and even though it may

be taken as an aperitif, particularly in dry white form, it is usually drunk during a meal. What is less surprising that a nation of compulsive boozers like you English (especially the women among you) should have taken it out of the dining room and into the lounge? For you have invented the concept of 'sofa wine' – a so-called aid to relaxation while reading, watching T.V. or when entertaining friends. I mean, isn't this simply a convenient pretext for having a tippie at any time of the day?

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My Frenchman has never been quite able to comprehend why the thought of eating the legs of such an inoffensive little creature as a frog should inspire such unmitigated horror in the majority of you English; nor, given the fact that the legs of this same amphibian are enjoyed by other nations of our planet, why only Gallics are considered so intimately associated with it that the name should have come to be so cruelly synonymous (the French attempt at vengeance with 'les rosbifs' is mild in comparison) with them. The Englishman in me, on the other hand, has always been at a loss to understand how the rear members of so viscous, unsightly a creature as a frog could have come to be considered such a refined delicacy of French cuisine. And he will never be able to overcome that feeling of sickening disgust whenever the nature of my internal configuration compels him to make a personal contribution towards the eating and digesting of them. Nor will he ever surmount the trauma occasioned by that experience I had some years ago.

It all began with an innocent-sounding invitation. At the time, I was living in a small, remote village located in the depths of the Haute-Saône, a rural *département* in Eastern France, renowned for its numerous lakes and meres. One spring morning, a friend casually informed me that he was going to collect a few frogs at a nearby mere which his father

owned. Would I like to go along and help? Thinking this would be a fascinating experience for the Englishman in me, I accepted without the slightest hesitation.

It was all great fun to begin with. So teeming with frogs was the stretch of water that we filled a sack with a hundred or so in next to no time. The sack was dumped in the car boot, brought back to my friend's home and deposited on the kitchen table. The unspeakable horror of what followed – made even worse by the guilty realization of my own contribution to it – will haunt me for the rest of my days. The hapless frogs were dragged out, one by one, carefully positioned on a wooden board, and all connection with life severed by a single deft blow from a small-sized meat-cleaver – no doubt designed for this specific purpose – the razor sharp blade of which sliced heads from bodies with the same mechanical precision as that which dispatched Louis XV, Marie Antoinette, and so many more to premature demise. And even more ghastly was the spectacle which ensued. The headless bodies then underwent the process of *déculottage* – an operation which consisted in stripping them of their skin in much the same way as you peel off a pair of tight-fitting jeans – before they were gutted, and amputated of their still-twitching hind legs.

Though the consumption of frogs' legs is a well-established, organized and widespread enough tradition to justify it being termed an institution, the French are not daily consumers (in spite of what some English people might think), and eating them is considered a special treat, usually taking place in a restaurant and limited to Spring. And it is not, in fact, the legs, but their fleshy upper part, *les cuisses* (**FTT: the thighs**), which are consumed, though it is not unknown for some to extract additional pleasure by sucking and munching the bones. In the past, frogs were collected in millions – in daytime by means of a red rag (for some inexplicable reason frogs are fatally drawn to red), and at night they were mesmerized by the light of a torch. In view of

the rapidly declining numbers, however, it has now been made illegal to harvest them commercially, and frogs may only be taken for personal consumption. Even though a certain amount of poaching still goes on, most frogs' legs eaten in the Hexagon today were attached to the bodies of foreign-spawned frogs, flown in live.

FTT: An indication of how seriously frog-poaching is taken was provided by an article which appeared recently in the Saint-Clou Gazette. Two men, a father and his son, it related, had been caught red-handed collecting a total of 417 frogs encaged in 11 lobster-type pots, surreptitiously deposited in a neighbour's mere. Not only did these considerable numbers suggest that their antics had a commercial outlet (the wholesale price of a kilo is around 30 euros), but the offences took place during the reproduction period at the beginning of March, when frogs are especially easy to capture (the pots had been positioned amidst considerable expanses of spawn). Apparently, this was not their first attempt, and it was estimated they had poached at least 1,000 batrachians annually over a number of years. Though the accused pleaded that the frogs were solely for personal consumption, the magistrate thought otherwise, for the father was fined 2,000 euros (he didn't bother to turn up at court), while the son was made to fork out 1,000.

Restaurant owners obtain their provisions at the airport, take the frogs back home, where they are kept alive in special tanks before enduring, on, of course, a far greater scale (as many as 4,000 tons are consumed each year), a fate very similar to the one described above. As far as the eating is concerned, it is difficult to understand what all the fuss is about: the taste is a relatively bland cross between chicken and fish, and one of the native russet species (*rana temporaria*)

is said to have a noticeable hazelnut flavour. Though sophisticated gourmet variations do exist, normal cooking is extremely straightforward, and when fried in butter with a sprinkling of parsley, together with a few crushed cloves of garlic, they go down a treat. Not only does French table etiquette permit the use of fingers when eating, but they are expected to be licked in audible appreciation. Usually frogs' legs are consumed in dozens and, incredible as it may sound, some restaurants now follow the Anglo-Saxon all-you-can-eat fashion by offering, for an all-inclusive price, as many as you can swallow.

One might imagine that the prospect of consuming a creature even more viscerously repugnant than the frog might have inspired similar feelings of horrific revulsion in the English-colonized part of my stomach. Is it because Thistlethwaite has long been used to relishing its sea-bound cousins? Or is it simply because this gastropod is called upon to suffer in silence? Whatever the explanation may be, I can tolerate, even relish a dozen *escargots*, without the Englishman in me manifesting even the semblance of a qualm. It must be admitted that his appreciation of the dish is perhaps due more to the assertive flavour procured by the butter, parsley and garlic sauce it is usually cooked in; for snail flesh in itself is characterized by a limpish, rubber-like texture, and a taste which bears more comparison with chewing gum that has been conscientiously masticated for at least an hour.

Though horrified by the method used to cut the frog down to frying-pan proportions, my Englishman closes my right eye to the even more hideous fate reserved for the snail: in order to eliminate any toxic vegetation it may have swallowed, our gastropod is first subjected to a three or four-week fast, and the little life then remaining is extinguished by plunging the poor creature into a pan of boiling water. Moreover, if quantities only are to be gone by, the French would be nicknamed 'Snailies' rather than 'Froggies'. For two in every three of the snails swallowed on our planet (a total of

around 700 million per year) find their way into a Gallic stomach. Usually the larger-sized *escargot de Bourgogne* (*helix pomatia*) is favoured, and though, understandably, native numbers are steadily declining, snail-gathering (early wet summer mornings produce the best results) is still legally permitted for private consumption, and even sale. Disappointingly, as with frogs' legs, most of the snails consumed today are of foreign importation, and usually come in deep-frozen or canned form. Ready-prepared snails, ensconced in their shells, and topped with a butter, garlic and parsley sauce, are widely available in French supermarket freezers, and need only be popped into a hot oven, or simply micro-waved. Sauce-bound snails can also be found nestling in a flakey-pastry, *vol-au-vent* type case. Though these are usually eaten as a starter, they may be served up as an *amuse-gueule* - a tasty 'gob-amuser' to be enjoyed with a pre-meal drink. As is the case with frogs' legs, the self-respecting French snail-eater reckons in nothing less than dozens, and the delicacy is, therefore, usually eaten from the shell on a dedicated plate with twelve hollows. Finger-assisted consumption being messy, a pair of snail tongs is provided for holding (and not crushing) the shells, along with a specific slim-line extraction fork (at home a pin could be used). It goes without saying that, not only is systematic dunking of the accompanying sauce allowed, but is generally considered to be an indispensable way of enjoying the whole.

The culinary application of that pungent, aromatic plant that is garlic - reputed also for its preventative medical properties and uncanny ability to ward off vampires, werewolves, and the like - has always been the subject of mixed feelings on the part of you English. While the more nationalistic, working-class Englishman prefers his Sunday leg of Spring lamb roasted plain, and consumed with liberal dollops of mint sauce, the more open-minded middle classes are not averse to spiking it with a clove or two of garlic pushed in near to the bone. Any revulsion it does inspire may

partly be due to the prominent role it plays in French cooking (especially in the south), which has caused it to become almost as synonymous with the hereditary enemy as snails and frogs' legs but, above all, to the devastating effects it can have on breath – the reeking effluvia of which may be formidable enough to stop a charging bull rhinoceros dead in its tracks.

FTT: For those English readers interested in no-risk garlic-flavoured dishes, I strongly recommend Jessica Cookewright's *101 Garlic Recipes You Can Breathe to a Soul* (Bon Vivant Publications, 2011).

The savoury dishes normally associated with traditional English cooking are characterized by a total lack of pretention and infantile simplicity of preparation, and distinguish themselves more by their strangely esoteric names than any claim to subtlety of taste. The limited space available to me does not allow mention to extend beyond the following, generally considered to figure among the most common:

Bubble and Squeak: In the past this was a standard Monday lunch fry-up of vegetable and meat left-overs from the Sunday roast. Preparation and cooking present no great challenge, being well within the reach of a moderately-sharp five-year-old. Instead of being tipped into the wheelie bin, ingredients are chopped up and dumped into a frying pan. Mashed potato is then added as a binder, and the resulting agglomeration fried and turned until golden brown. The name itself, apparently, is an onomatopoeic echo of the sounds emitted during the frying process.

Yorkshire Pudding: Contrary to what most French people think, a pudding is not necessarily a hot dessert. Traditionally, Yorkshire Pudding is eaten either with the main Sunday dish of roast beef and vegetables, or on its own as a starter. Made simply from a mixture of plain flour, milk and eggs, preparation is well within the competence of anyone capable

of producing a tolerable cup of instant coffee, though it is vital to use lard as a cooking medium, and the oven must be really hot before baking. The dish can include onions, and is served with plain gravy or onion gravy sauce.

Bangers and Mash: This quintessentially English dish consists of sausages served with mashed potatoes, and preparation is elementary enough to be well within the capabilities of anybody able to crack an egg five times out of ten without breaking the yolk. My French readers will be interested to note that ‘banger’ is a familiar word for a sausage, and constitutes an onomatopoeic reference to the fact that, unless thoroughly pricked before frying, their high water content makes them liable to explode with a deafening bang.

Toad-in-the-Hole: A sausage covered in a thick, Yorkshire Pudding-type batter, and then baked in the oven. Given that the sausage is usually bought ready-made, this is yet another dish which would not tax the culinary skills of anyone capable of making a decent cup of tea (though, apparently, the next-in-line to the English throne can’t). Why the strange-sounding name ‘Toad-in-the Hole?’ One explanation has it that the end of the sausage emerging from its batter coating is not without resembling a toad sticking its head out of a hole. Well...err with a bit of imagination, why not?

While not quite rivalling the elaborateness and diversity of their French equivalents, what is more normal in a nation of sweet-toothed cream faces that English cakes, buns and especially hot puddings have considerably less to apologize for than their savoury companions? The following rank among the more common:

Custard: A thick, smooth mixture of gently-cooked egg yolks, sugar, milk or cream, frequently flavoured with vanilla, and usually served as a hot accompaniment to fruit pies and tarts, or in firmer, cold form as one of the layers of another typically English sweet treat - trifle (see below). A measure of the excellence of this relatively easy-to-make sauce, and a

tribute to the country it originated from, are to be found in the fact that it was long ago adopted by the French under the name of *la crème anglaise*. Unfortunately, unlike in France where it is still systematically hand-made, English custard is nowadays, more often than not, purchased in convenience, yellow-powder form to which milk is simply added, prior to gentle heating.

Spotted Dick: An intriguingly-named, steamed, sweet suet pudding containing currants, and usually served with custard or treacle sauce. Why ‘spotted?’ Presumably, because the dark-coloured currants are plainly visible from the outside. And what about ‘Dick?’ Despite the comparison the more indelicate among my English readers will now be making, the likeliest explanation is that, since this pudding is prepared by rolling the suet mixture into a cylindrical shape, the name is derived from its resemblance to a ‘sausage’ dog. This would seemingly be reinforced by the fact that another name for the pudding is ‘Spotted Dog’ and that ‘Dick’, like ‘Fido’, was formerly a common canine name.

Rice Pudding: It was the Asian human and resulting culinary invasion of the fifties and sixties which brought rice to the notice of the English as a vegetable ingredient of the main dish. Even though they will now cheerfully consume vast quantities of it with their Chop Suey or Biryani, rice, unlike in France, has never been an accepted part of typical English main-course cooking, and traditionally has always been consumed in sweet, pudding form. Cooked long and slowly in the oven with liberal helpings of milk, cream and sugar, it is often served with a dollop or two of jam, or reinforced by even more fresh cream.

Jelly: A gelatine-based, fruit-flavoured dessert. Jelly’s wobbly configuration and impressive fluorescent colours are a source of open-mouthed incredulity in French visitors to England, but make it a firm favourite among English children who enjoy it at party time with ice-cream. Usually purchased in cubes to which hot water is simply added, the resulting

mixture is then allowed to cool and set. Jelly also provides the penultimate layer for 'trifle' - a typically English cold, festive sweet made up of thicknesses of sponge cake, custard, fruit, and lavishly topped with whipped cream.

Fruitcake: A slowly steamed and/or baked, dark, rich festive cake of currants, raisins, candied peel, glacé cherries and almonds, to which is frequently added, though hardly in inebriating proportions, a flavouring dose of brandy or dark rum. Not only have the French paid the English the compliment of appropriating the cake for themselves (though usually in less rich form), but they have been honest enough to acknowledge its origins by retaining the English name (*le cake* is a reference to the English fruit variety in particular, and not to cake in general). Traditionally, English fruitcake is generously coated in marzipan and icing for birthdays, and is presented in an elaborate, architectural, multi-tiered form for weddings. And an English Christmas would not be the same without it.

Traditional fruitcake is an unforgettable part of my own childhood Christmases which were always spent at Grandma and Granddad Thistlethwaite's. Grandma Thistlethwaite, a reputed specialist in the matter, used to bake her Christmas cakes (there were always two) in the middle of September – an annual event which prompted enough excited anticipation of distant Christmas wonders as to disperse some of the downheartedness occasioned by wistful memories of long summer holidays, and the sobering realities of a recently-begun autumn school term. They were then left to mature (like vintage wine they gained in the keeping), and become deliciously moist in the temperate darkness of the cellar. But though crammed with a mouthwatering profusion of ingredients, care had to be taken with the eating. For another of our great delights were the coins they contained. At that time, small silver three-penny bits, though increasingly rare, were still everyday currency, and occasionally given in change by shops. Throughout the year, Grandma would assiduously

collect a dozen or so which she carefully wrapped in greaseproof paper, and deposited in the cake mix. And then, a few days before the long-awaited event, the two cakes were brought up into light of day.

The first one, I remember, always received preferential festive treatment in the form of a luscious marzipan and crunchy icing- sugar coating, while the other was more modestly crowned with just a ring of glazed cherries and whole almonds. As everybody was gluttoned by prodigious lunchtime helpings of turkey and Christmas Pudding, the cake was first brought out to round off a late Christmas Day tea of boiled ham, cucumber and tinned- salmon sandwiches (without, of course, the crusts), and was never known to survive much beyond Boxing Day. The humbler twin then took over, and provided a sweet and fruity welcome for any visitor who might pop in for afternoon tea and a chat during the few days remaining before the New Year.

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It is yet one more indication of the importance the French attach to eating that, whenever you converse with a friend or even a stranger just before a mealtime (and frequently well before), you will be systematically gratified with an anticipatory 'bon appétit' on parting. And is the absence of any really satisfactory English equivalent (on the rare occasions you do wish one another an enjoyable meal the French expression is frequently used) somewhere an echo of the fact that English cooking - though, as we have seen, not entirely bereft of merit - has still not managed to rid itself of a disastrous international image which still today tends to associate it with insipidness, stodginess, and lack of imagination? Or is it yet one more result of the Puritan factor which required that ingesting a meal be considered, like sex, a duty rather than a pleasure - to be got through in not much less time than it takes to pour a cup of tea?

For while the French have always considered eating as one of the great delights of our existence, enjoyment of which is to be prolonged and shared, I cannot help thinking that, for many of you English, it is still a desperate race against the clock. Unlike the French, who welcome a reasonable interval between courses for digestion, relaxation and conversation, the only thing you English can find to do when you have an empty plate of front of you is to cast incriminating looks at your watch. François has just fed me a nice example of this.

During the last summer holidays in England, I was dining out in a restaurant with some French friends when, as we were discussing the menu, our attention was drawn by an irate-sounding voice coming from the table behind. Turning round, I observed a man seated opposite a lady I presumed to be his wife, vigorously pointing out to a sheepish-looking waiter that five minutes had now elapsed since he had placed his order, and that if the starters failed to arrive within the next 60 seconds they would have no hesitation in walking out. It is also not unknown in some busy restaurants for there to be two sittings of approximately one hour each. And, incredible as it sounded to my left ear at the time, I was once firmly invited to finish off my pudding right away, forego the cheese course and vacate my table, as the second sitting would begin in five minutes.

And not only do you English expect to be served at a speed enabling you to polish off a meal in not much less time than it takes to run a four-minute mile, but your perception of eating and drinking is solidly founded on a notion of hearty abundance. Last year my neighbour, Monsieur Martin, received a visit from an English customer. As this was our Englishman's first visit to France, Monsieur Martin decided to take him to the best restaurant in Saint-Clou which, though not quite up to the same Michelin standards as the most prestigious in France, is no less worthy of being considered more than fittingly representative of the nation's refined,

tastefully-presented, gastronomical cooking. The following day I invited them both over for four o'clock tea, during which I had the opportunity of taking the Englishman to one side, and discreetly enquiring whether he had enjoyed his meal.

'Oh yes,' he confided, 'it was very tasty and nicely presented and all that, but to be quite honest, I could have eaten it all over again!'

One thing which can be said in his favour, however, was that he did appreciate the wine – unlike a previous American customer, Monsieur Martin relates, who, in accompaniment to a similar gourmet meal, preferred a bottle of Coca-Cola to the delights of a 1976 first-growth Claret.

So, not only are small English portions equivalent to large French ones but, while an Englishman will gleefully ingurgitate on Friday and Saturday evenings three, four or even more pints of beer with consummate ease, I have yet to come across a Frenchman with a stomach capacity capable of accommodating more than one. And it is certainly no coincidence that, in England, the value-for-money 'all-you-can-eat', buffet-type restaurants, where in less than an hour you can stuff yourself with enough calories to see you through the week, enjoy much wider popularity than in France. In all fairness, however, as my Englishman is quick to point out, when it comes to the pleasures of the table the French can also be given to excess. Despite the fact that eating habits have changed considerably since the fifties, the festive family meal in celebration of a Communion or Christmas Day, though less and less tolerated by youth, may still represent a marathon-like challenge to the digestive capacities of even the most solidly-constituted stomach. What's more, it is yet another paradox that a people who don't have the patience to linger more than two minutes at a red light are quite happy to settle down to a six-or-more-course lunch at one o'clock - only to stagger away at seven.

Perhaps the most regrettable consequence of the modest stature of native English cooking is that it has never managed to occupy a prominent enough place in the national identity to be able to afford much more than token resistance to foreign invasion. By a strange twist of fate - from a food point of view at least - the colonizer has been irremediably colonized. Not only do rice and curry now occupy vast areas of culinary territory, but even your national dish has not been spared, and the traditional chippie will now almost systematically offer curry sauce as an accompaniment to fish and chips.

Hardly surprising is it, then, that the subsequent onslaughts of the trans-Atlantic fast-food industry have met with even less opposition than their Asian competitors, and the hamburger, hot dog, and American-style pizza are now just as rampantly established on the English eating scene, too. It is both a paradox, and a measure of the relentless efficiency of the American marketing machine that a country like France, so proud of, and so globally acknowledged for the quality, refinement and diversity of its national and regional cuisine, should now find its culinary heritage sufficiently endangered by the regimented assaults of 'la malbouffe' as to have judged it of vital necessity to erect strategic lines of defense.

FFT: The term 'la malbouffe' (literally bad grub, i.e. junk food) is commonly applied by the French to the cheap, standardized, often addictive food, low in essential nutrients, and high in calorific animal fats, sugar or salt, served up in American-style, fast-food restaurants in the shape of hamburgers, hotdogs, chips etc., and which, when eaten on a regular basis and in excessive quantities, are the cause of obesity, heart disease, diabetes, cancer, depression... and, paradoxically, even malnutrition.

Concerned, above all, by the vulnerability of children to fast- food marketing ploys specifically targeting this section of the population, official campaigns, frequently endorsed by well-known chefs, have been organized in schools to educate the young to the virtues of slow-food in matters of taste and health. There are even those who consider the best form of defense is attack. As François points out, unlike you English who gave in without so much as a whimper (but, after all, did you have so much to defend?), his compatriots are fortunate enough to have José Bové on their side. And yet more irrefutable proof that two nations, positioned little more than spitting distance apart, are separated by galaxies in their daily lives is provided by the fact that a household name in the one should be totally unheard of in the other.

FTT: My English readers may be interested to learn that José Bové, a former sheep farmer and Roquefort cheese producer, is the founder of the *Confédération Paysanne*, an agricultural union aimed at defending the interests of the small French farmer and, by extension, addressing general health and environmental issues raised by the multi-national, profit-oriented food industry.

Now a European deputy, he is still an active militant in the alter-mondialist or alternative-world movement, dedicated to fighting uncontrolled economic globalization - by very nature detrimental to environmental and climatic conservation, health, economic justice, social protection and human rights - as well as defending indigenous eating cultures. Though some criticize José Bové's methods, his vigorous commitment to the cause is beyond reproach. Famous for his acts of civil disobedience, his name is inextricably associated with virulent hostility to 'la malbouffe.' Not only has he played an active, much publicized role in the destruction of transgenic crops, but in 1999 achieved notoriety, if not celebrity, when,

along with other members of the Confédération Paysanne, he took part in the wilful destruction (he preferred to call it 'dismantling') of a McDonald's franchise, for which he was sentenced to imprisonment. This was both in protest at American restrictions on the importation of Roquefort cheese, as well as a means to increase public awareness regarding the use of hormone-treated beef in the manufacture of the hamburgers served in McDonald fast-food restaurants - perceived as the symbol of standardized, trans-Atlantic, health-damaging, profit-oriented, world-invasive 'malbouffe' and, as such, the avowed enemy of native French, quality, culinary and alimentary tradition.

In addition to your propensity to ingurgitate giant portions of the wrong type of savoury food (not to mention stupendous volumes of calorific alcohol), you English are a nation of sweet faces: while the vast majority of French would prefer the taste of strawberries served simply in their own juice, you incorrigible sweet-tooths would be disappointed if they were not liberally sprinkled with sugar, and buried beneath lashings of double cream. One result of all this is that, though Thistlethwaite turns a blind right eye, whenever I stroll down the High Street of any English town, the Frenchman who is left cannot help being reminded by the profiles presented to his gaze of proportions normally associated with a Christmas-fattened porker. Even though I can supply no statistical proof as to the increase in the sales of oversized men's trousers, it is a measure of the bovine amplitude now being attained by many English boobs that the widely-sold cup size 60DD is some considerable distance off the existing French conversion scale.

As my scholar goes on to add, it is interesting to note that, in the past, it was the humbler members of society who necessarily remained slim: for they ate simply to prolong their stay on our planet for a few more days. An overfilled paunch,

on the other hand, was proudly thrust forward in status-symbolic proof of a well-lined purse. Today it is the opposite. The more affluent and educated middle classes, better informed and more sensitive to their physical appearance, are now increasingly conscious that keeping a slim figure through regular exercise and healthy eating is a good way to avoid such potentially-terminal nasties as diabetes, heart disease and cancer, and thereby essential to increasing and prolonging active enjoyment of their stay here below. It is more the Mr and Mrs Bloggs of our world (and a growing problem with their kids) who are feeding and drinking themselves into becoming as hideously bloated as a hippopotamus carcass after a week's sojourn in the fast-drying backwater of an African bush river.

At this point, a cavernous rumbling below seemed to provide sonorous indication that my belly was now entertaining the alarming thought that my throat was on the point of being cut. The voice of my middleman then confirmed that, though these reflections on food and drink had now all but filled the pages allotted to them, they had had the opposite effect on the stomach which was now feeling more and more empty. Might he, therefore, suggest I should quickly bring this chapter to an end? And, more importantly, since this heralded the termination of our book, could we not celebrate the event by treating ourself to a nice pub steak-bar lunch? Wouldn't the *Woodman's Arms* round the corner just suit the bill?

A frequently-encountered problem, however, stood in the way. For though I am in possession of just one stomach, there is in me, as we have seen throughout the pages of this chapter, two diametrically-opposed notions of what should go to fill it. It was my voice of reason which ventured to suggest a diplomatic compromise: if Thistlethwaite could see his way to stomaching a pre-meal pastis, served, of course, with water and ice, surely François could put up with a pint of good old, not-too-cold English ale? As for himself, he

would be quite content with a glass of sparkling mineral water. And if my Frenchman could possibly forego having his T bone steak bloodily rare, he was sure my Englishman, who detested it other than well-done, would be prepared, for once, to settle for medium. The insistent gurgling which then ensued was taken to echo nothing but unanimous assent, so off I took the three of me.