

## Georges Brittany Diary

Monday 12th:

Finding the horses playing hide-and-seek in the copse, I backtracked and followed the trail of manure to a field, the entrance to which had originally been fenced off by a length of blue string. As anyone who has lived in rural France will know, blue baling twine has magical properties. Even for the largest farm animals, it has about the same impenetrability factor as the force field of the star ship Enterprise on maximum setting. This piece of magic string was broken, and the horses had obviously felt empowered to do a runner. Across the lane, a faint light glowed through a glass panel set in the door of an otherwise darkened farmhouse. People generally go to bed early in the countryside of any country, but I was sure the owners would want to know their horses had done a bunk. My tentative knocking eventually summoned an elderly and very small lady in a big nightgown. As I began my tale, her bemused, faintly irritated and finally pained look took me instantly back to the time I started trying to communicate with the French in their own language. Having listened for as long as she could bear, the lady gave a fleeting glance towards a shotgun hanging in the hallway before turning and shouting at someone who, going by the language she used, was probably Klingon. Moments passed as I waited for Mr Worf to come lumbering down the stairs, but I was disappointed. The suitably gnarled and elderly countryman who appeared was a trifle shorter than the lady of the house, and, together with the same pained expression, was wearing an interesting combination of striped pyjamas, countryman's cloth cap and wooden clogs. As he joined in with the open-mouthed gurning, I realised that I was trying to make myself understood to a couple to whom French was a second language. It was not Klingon they had been speaking, but Breton. Another echo of my early days in France came as I resorted to sign language, giving what I thought was a passable impression of a runaway horse by neighing, tossing my head and prancing up and down outside the door while slapping my backside. More silence followed as I pawed the ground and blew heavily through my lips and the lady looked thoughtfully at her husband and then again at the shotgun. Eventually, the man looked across the lane at the empty field opposite, and understanding spread like dawn across his weathered features. He said something to his wife which I assumed was the equivalent of 'You forgot to put the force field on again', and she disappeared and reappeared with rubber boots and a couple of rope halters. I pointed at the poo in the lane and at the entrance to our driveway, then beckoned, remembering not to slap my backside, whinny and prance as I led the way. There will be plenty of time for the neighbours to get to know us, and I would not want to start by giving the impression that the newest member of the community is not only foreign but thinks he is a horse.

\*From a bar stool, Clint Eastwood surveys his surroundings with that trademark part-puzzled, fully angry squint. At his shoulder, a man with a purple head is arguing with himself about whose turn it is to buy the next round. From a nearby table the mad monk Rasputin gives us the evil eye. On the terrace, a coach-load of visitors are pretending to be entertained by an man wearing a monogrammed dressing gown and an oversized pair of boxing gloves. He ducks and feints and shuffles adroitly as they smile weakly in a very English way. What they do not know is that the man is reprising the action on the night he claims he nearly won the area finals in the Breton boxing championships of 1976. The locals know he is a former Latin teacher, and some say he lost his reason trying to conjugate a particularly ticklish irregular verb for his bored pupils. Cynics say he is merely a compulsive attention seeker and very mean, and that he wears the boxing gloves so as to be unable to get his hands in his pocket when it is his turn to buy a round. From what we have learned, this is just another average night in Huelgoat. It is our first night out in Brittany, and it seems we have come to the right place for local colour and interesting characters. Armed with some stunning natural attributes and a few made-up legends and lots of places to take drink, Huelgoat is a popular tourist attraction. Huelgoatians also clearly like a drink, as for a population of only a thousand there are seventeen licensed premises which remain open all year round. As well as the facilities in the betting shop and camping gaz outlet, there are even well-appointed bars in the two bakeries in case customers become faint and weak with thirst while waiting for their daily baguette. Claims to fame for Huelgoat ('High woods' in Breton) include a large lake, hundreds of acres of forests ringing the town, a renowned arboretum and a fascinating valley called The Chaos. The forest and riverside walk is littered with giant rocks said to be thrown around when the giant Pantagruel stubbed his toe and lost his cool while passing through. I reckon it more likely he was staggering home after a night on the batter in Huelgoat and felt like a bit of giant-sized vandalism. Like a hundred others around Europe and even further afield, the town also claims to be a favourite stopping-off place for King Arthur, with the alleged remains of his camp are to be found in the forest. Later and more verifiable residents of note include the ancestors of American Beat Generation poet, novelist and artist Jack Kerouac. Impressionist painter Paul Gauguin is said to have painted the lake from the attic studio above a shop just off the square, but as the premises sells painting and art materials, that could be a marketing ploy. Another link with famous patrons is the much told story that actress Jane Fonda once cooked a crepe for her then boyfriend Roger Vadim in the kitchen of a hotel in the square. Pagan groups are said to occasionally prance around the forest, and to is claimed by those who know about these things that Huelgoat sits on a confluence of ley lines, giving it a mystical significance and special appeal to those of a spiritual nature. This may be true and I do believe there is something special about the town. It might be a force of nature, or it could just be the number and variety of bars on tap which attracts so many unusual people. Huelgoat certainly seems to have its fair share of weirdos, which is why my wife thinks I feel so instantly at home here. Our guide and future gossip correspondent for this part of the region is Alan Bevan, a former naval master-at-arms in the Royal Navy who now runs a bed and breakfast establishment near the square. Or rather, his wife Ann runs the B&B, while Allan absorbs the ambience and red wine and researches the book he will one day write about his life and times in Huelgoat. As he says, if and when it is done it will have to go in the fiction department as nobody would believe it to be about real people and circumstances. As the evening revs up, we learn that, as usual, all is not as it seems as first sight. Clint Eastwood is actually a local plumber

who has failed to make a living as a lookalike of the rangy Hollywood star. I am puzzled by his lack of success as, unlike nearly all lookalikes I have seen he really does look the spitting image of Eastwood during his Dirty Harry years. Then Claude/Clint climbs down from his stool, disappears from sight behind it, and the reason for his lack of bookings becomes clear. As Alan explains, the man with the purple head is a local artist who enjoys the company of an imaginary friend, while the mad monk is a former car sprayer and now part-time Druid who lives in a caravan in the Forest with- he claims- a tribe of Breton wood elves. The reason for the baleful stare is apparently that we have not taken out the insurance cover offered to British visitors which involves buying him a drink to avoid their holiday being cursed. As to the crowd, the reason the bar is so busy is that the premises are under new management. The locals have turned out in force to check out such important issues as the ease and level of credit rating and what the new patrons are made of, and Madame is doing her best to show them. She would be tall even without her towering stiletto heels, and is wearing a very unpractical and flimsy dress which clearly leaves very little room for underwear. What looks like Christmas tree baubles hang from her ears, but all male attention is focused on the spheres struggling to escape from the plunging neckline of her blouse. Each time she leans forward to attend to a customer, there is an appreciable stiffening in the bar and sudden falling off of conversation. Alan tells me a sweepstake has already been set up to estimate the exact time her breasts will escape from their billet, and other side wagers include their individual and combined dimensions and weight. To get some inside information, one of the local sculptors has offered to create a life-size statue of her to go in the bar window, but her husband has said he would prefer it to be a bust. Allan points to where a middle-aged man is leaning on the bar and obviously studying form. He must be favourite for winning one of the side bets, explains Allan, as he is the owner of the grocery store and locally renowned for his ability to gauge weight without the aid of a pair of scales.

Saturday 14th: Somewhere beneath the waves in the bay of Douarnenez is said to lay a place with a history of nearly as much drama, sex and misery as a TV soap in desperate search of ratings. The island city of Ys has several great stories associated with it, the most common and popular claiming it was built for the princess Dahut by her father Galon, the king of the Cornouaille region. As well as suffering from a shortage of vowels, the island was below sea level and protected by a gated dike for which the king held the only key. Ys was to become the most impressive and beautiful city in the world, but was also a byword for sin and corruption. Dahut was a bit of a ladette, and had a penchant for organizing orgies then killing her lovers when day broke. One fateful evening, a knight in red arrived and was invited to join in the fun. During the night, he suggested that Dahut steal the key from her sleeping father. She did, and the Devil (for it was of course he) threw open the gates and allowed the sea to swallow Ys. Enraged, the king threw Dahut into the oncoming torrent, where she became a mermaid, doomed to swim the lonely seas for eternity. As with all drowned cities, it is said that on stormy nights you can hear the bells of the church at Ys ring dolefully out, and sometimes even the mournful cries of the lonely mermaid.

\*To be found just before the most south-westerly point turns the corner and becomes the south coast of Brittany, Penmarc'h dates back to before the 14th century, and owed its early prosperity to the fecund cod banks there. The discovery of the vast sea riches of Newfoundland and the attentions of a single but truly ferocious bandit in the late 16th century combined to bring about the decline of the town. The aggressor was an aristocratic thug known as The Wolf, who with his gang of four hundred followers enjoyed sacking, looting and pillaging this part of Brittany. After having his way with Penmarc'h in 1595, The Wolf moved on to the isle of Tristan to set up his HQ. In the process he forced the inhabitants to destroy their own homes, and killed 1,500 protestors in a single day. His vast hoard of booty was said to be secreted on the isle, and may still be there. Altogether a very interesting part of the region, and well worth visiting with bucket and spade if you fancy having a look for the Lost Treasure of Tristan.

not yet no