



AN EASTER CYCLE-TRIP THROUGH FRANCE.

BY GEORGE H. LEONARD, JR.

THE balmy winter days of the Mediterranean shore had already begun to lengthen into the long hot ones of summer. The air, fragrant with the scent of roses, violets and orange blossoms throughout the month of April, was becoming heavy; and great clouds of dust rolled up under the wheels of passing carriages, only to settle down again more thickly on the patient palms. There was a general spirit of languidness hovering over the Côte d'Azur. I had already begun to feel its effects, and was becoming impatient to join the small army of foreigners that had been rolling by for several days bound for the northern parts of France.

The great snow-peaks of the Maritime Alps with their suggestion of crisp air seemed to beckon me on; and now that the return to Paris was necessary, the idea suddenly suggested itself of wheeling through France. Why not? A tour through the little-known island of Corsica had been abandoned; the spirit of adventure was strong within me; and—an important consideration—there was just time for a two weeks' outing. No sooner said than done! Maps were consulted. The Corniche road along the coast to Marseilles, then into the Midi, sparkling with sunshine and color,

sounded attractive if—and there was the rub—there was no dust, no rain, no mistral.

The ifs seemed too formidable, and I decided in favor of the route over the mountains. Across the Basses-Alpes, through the Isère valley, up into Savoie, a passing glimpse of Geneva and the Swiss snow-peaks; then through the rugged Jura department, down to the Côte d'Or, with its golden wine, and so on through the green fields of middle France to Paris. What a promise of enjoyment!

The morning of Good Friday dawned with a forbidding aspect. Great masses of cloud came blowing up from the east, with occasional bursts of rain. By nine o'clock, however, the sun broke through, and the air was fresh with the fragrance of roses, carnations, and now and again the pungent scent of tardy orange blossoms. The beautiful Cap d'Antibes, with its groves of olive trees, and gardens of wonderful oeillets, never appeared so attractive as on this last morning. Down the shady road to the shore where the water was washing lazily against the massive walls of the town, each turn disclosing new beauties, and recalling the names of Meissonier, Daubigny, Harpignies and others of France's greatest artists who found out this spot years

ago; then up, *toujours montant*, by a road shaded with cork, olive, and mountain pine to the town of Grasse.

Grasse once passed, I was fairly launched on my solitary journey through the Lower Alps. Several times, while riding through these lonely mountains, I recalled the advice of friends to carry arms. I rejected this well-meant caution with the disdain of inexperience, and had no cause to regret it. Throughout the journey of six hundred miles, I found the peasant people kind and courteous, the mountaineers rough but honest, lacking in the surface polish of the Parisians, but always responsive to a pleasant word and ready to lend a helping hand.

Not the least interesting part of such a trip as this is the variety of amusing incidents. Imagine the intrepid little donkey having fear of a humble cyclist! But so it is, and it pays to humor the beasts, as I found after some sad experiences, especially as I was opening the season of wheeling traffic. Several times I found myself forced to stand aside to let some old lady, perched high upon her steed, pass by in safety on the steep mountain road. Bare and rugged peaks stretching up into the gray sky covered with a rough tangle of brown scrub; occasionally a flock of sheep almost lost in the underbrush, the shepherd, with his brown felt hat and ample cloak, standing like a sentinel on the desolate mountain slope. I can recall the picture of two little blue-eyed girls tending their goats. What a charming group they made with their fresh young faces, blue aprons, sabots, and a white goat, seen against the brown houses of St. Vallier. And how simple and frank their greeting as I rode by and on up the hill.

The top reached, a great panorama lay before me. A vast sea of low peaks, and the tortuous range of the Esterelles, piercing the sunset sky; away beyond, 'the capes of Fréjus and Toulon jutting into the sea. And down between the nearer mountains a last glimpse of the white semaphore of Antibes, and the isle of Ste. Marguerite where "the man in the iron mask" pined away twelve years of his miserable life. Then on across the plateau, and coasting down the trail high above the ravines. I began to catch the gurgle of mountain streams as they came tumbling down to the road, sparkling and cold. The air was

deliciously brisk, and a clear, full moon rose silently above the peaks, as I wheeled into the hamlet of Castagnolles, my first lodging-place.

Black coffee, without milk, and dry bread are not a hearty breakfast, but they had to suffice for my second day. One must be prepared for a few rough experiences in the mountains; and the beauty and grandeur of one's surroundings make up for many a hardship. As I rode on, the character of the landscape began to change. Bare rocky wastes gave place to heights covered with mountain pine and fir; patches of brush dotted the slopes, or stood out brightly against dark mountains; here and there the clefts of the summits were filled with snow. The winding road ran on between rows of stiff poplar trees, through long, flat valleys, with groups of bare, windowless houses. Blossoms were just appearing on the apple and pear trees. The fragrance of the pines, the sound of a musical brook below, and the tinkle of a distant bell told me that I was approaching a more hospitable region; and soon, far above the road, I saw clustered the tiny white houses of La Garde—a name which recalls Björnson's "Arne" with its intense impressions of the rugged life of Norway. Eight kilometres down, a wonderful road, swinging round and again, and then a long run to the mountain river and under elms to the snug little town of Castellane.

One of my pleasantest recollections is of this picturesque spot entirely shut in by lofty heights. Clumps of decaying houses hanging over the lime-colored waters of the Verdon; fragments of the old Saracen fortifications standing like sentinels on the hillside; but most interesting of all, the chapel of Notre Dame crowning the towering monolith of rock directly above the village. I could see this beacon point long after leaving it behind, the white statue of Our Lady standing out boldly against the background of dark mountain; the houses nestled at the foot of the rock. A very jolly dinner I had there, too, with a couple of well-to-do tradesmen. My surprise at seeing that one of them took none of the red beverage known as *vin ordinaire*, vanished when he handed me his card and I read, "*Vins et Spiritueux, distillateur.*"

There is a proverb that cooks do not

eat of their own cooking; but they know how to dine well, so I noticed the name of my friend's hotel at Digne and climbed out of my noonday resting-place. Through a rocky pass where the torrent swirled down a deep chasm, the sides of which were worn like ivory; then out on a broad valley. I believe I had the satisfaction of entering the smallest chapel in the world—a box of a structure, perhaps thirty by ten feet, but complete with a confessional, font, and miniature gallery. I chanced upon this Lilliputian curiosity in my search after some Gobelin tapestries which had been stowed away for years in the ancient ruined town of Ste. Genéviève, formerly with 4,000 inhabitants, but now occupied by a few shepherds. I could see its old brown houses far away across the stream, but left the tapestries for some future antiquarian.

The bells of Easter Sunday were ringing the early mass as I rode out the following day into the crisp morning air. A party of English enthusiasts armed with butterfly nets, their blistered faces swathed in handkerchiefs, were already on the road. An interesting run across low hills of slaty shale, with occasional glimpses of the distant snow-peaks. A lucky miss at the turning to Sisteron, took me through a most charming district without materially lengthening my journey. I was well on my way before I discovered the error, plunging into a wild, sparsely settled country, always following mountain streams or climbing up the brown hillsides. The spirit of Easter Sunday was in the air, making all nature seem bright and joyous. The young girls were coming out dressed in their best, and with fresh, healthy faces, that told of a simple out-door life up in these little mountain villages. Church over, and the mid-day meal disposed of, the men gathered in groups with coats off, and speedily were absorbed in the characteristic game of boules—something between quoits and ten-pins.

The sun was declining and the players separating to their homes as I approached Chorges, after a grand run along the bank of the Durance, and up a picturesque ravine piled with tall aspens and mountain elms, rising decoratively against the deepening blue of the mountain clefts. What a dramatic setting!—this mountain town at night—

surrounded by towering masses of gray rock, capped with snow. The dark alleys, with here and there, across the road, bars of light from the door of some cabaret; occasionally the clink of glasses and the laugh of a jovial soldier. Outside, the rising full moon, picking out the dim corners, and throwing purple shadows aslant the walls.

Perhaps the most picturesque part of this flying trip across the mountains, was the ride from Chorges to Grenoble, through the Hautes-Alpes, by Gap, up the stiff road to "Le Corps," with grand panoramic views of the Dauphiné. Presently I saw ahead of me a bridal party, the interested couple apparently oblivious to their surroundings, the rear of the little procession brought up by the old grandams of the households—all wending their way to the tiny church at the summit.

And then what a grand coast down to Ste. Bonnet, cutting through the crisp mountain air! What exhilaration! with keen eye and firm grip, every nerve intense with pleasurable excitement, throbbing with life, ready for any emergency. Gnarled trees, rough hillsides, and stunted willows flew by in rapid succession, and presently I found myself rolling along a broad plateau between long rows of poplars. The scenery became finer, with a mixture of wildness and grandeur. What color, what breadth and suggestion in these great valleys under the towering gray summits, with the afternoon sun slanting down and across in broad patches of light! Far up in the deep clefts masses of snow, that fell down through gorges lined with firs. At the foot, perhaps, a little brown village nestling in its hollow. Still below, the Drac, flowing down on its winding course to join the Isère.

And I—I was high above all this wonderful panorama, spinning along the plateau. Down, down a wild ravine, only to see, across, the same road winding tortuously up to Le Mur. A charming district, quite in contrast to the grandeur behind; little mountain brooks coursing through wooded ravines and tumbling over miniature precipices. Everywhere a beautiful, fantastic growth—a fairyland, with the blossoms of plum and pear trees dotted decoratively against the wild tangle of vines and creepers. In among the trees a blue coat of a shepherd, a little white-capped

girl with golden hair, sheep browsing—a charming pastoral group blending harmoniously with the gray birches in the fading daylight. This was to be my last glimpse of the simple country-life of the Lower Alps, for as I pushed up the hill into the town of La Mûre, electric lights glimmered out in the dusky streets, groups of soldiers stood at the corners, and somewhere in the distance the shrill toot of a locomotive sounded.

The next morning a drizzling rain had set in and kept me shut up for half a day, staring dismally at the wet street outside. It was already in Grenoble when I reached that interesting city after an exciting series of acrobatic contortions on the part of the puffy little engine on the narrow-gauge road. By the second day, however, the clouds had vanished, and the sun was breaking through the mists that still hung low over the mountains when I bid good-day to my host of the comfortable Hôtel Monnet and rode out into the fresh morning. Then only did I realize what a unique position Grenoble held, and why it was the most strongly fortified city of France. The road along the river bank by which I had come seemed to be the only entrance into the valley walled in by towering mountains, and guarded on every side by frowning fortresses.

The famous monastery of the Grande-Chartreuse lay but a short distance from my direct route to Chambéry; so that by a slight detour I was enabled to make a pilgrimage to the shrine of the Carthusian monks. It was a journey that will come back to me in my dreams, with a fantastic setting of rocky gorges, tumbling waters, a wild tangle of wood and vine, and enormous birches shooting up into the infinite blue above. I shall imagine brown-cloaked monks toiling up the steep road, treading the narrow footbridge, and then on, struggling through great snowdrifts, to the little chapel of St. Bruno, perched high up on an overhanging ledge. And when the neighboring church bell strikes midnight, the bare walls of the convent, the dingy chapel with smoky tapers, dim forms of white-hooded fathers, and the solemn chant rising and falling and echoing away down the cold cloister galleries. The reality was less fanciful and quite a novelty, with the *déjeuner* in the great dining hall, a substantial repast, washed

down with a *petit verre* of the famous green liqueur.

Dinner over and our tour of inspection finished, I mounted my wheel once more, and with the cheery *bon voyage* of the portly doorkeeper ringing in my ears, started for Chambéry. The Col du Frein was still under snow and impassable, a peasant informed me. For a moment I hesitated, looking up the snow heights; the next I was pushing my way up toward the unknown pass. Happily I found the snow already gone from the roadbed, although it was piled on either side, and lay among the dark fir trees and down in the hollows of the green valleys. Climbing steadily upward I overtook an old gentleman busily engaged in lecturing his young nephew. My chance acquaintance proved to be an old sailor with American voyages to his credit, and yet, with the usual perversity of mankind, he could give me no information of the road before me; his own surroundings were an unknown quantity with him.

Never shall I forget the moment when I reached the summit of the pass. For two hours or more I had climbed steadily up, pushing my wheel. The shadows had crept slowly down the slopes, blotting out the bright patches of green sward, and, turning the masses of white snow to deepening shades of blue and violet. The narrow road winding through bits of pine wood, finally swept away over the bare uplands, out through a deep cutting, and then—the grandest view of my lifetime. Before me, seemingly but a few miles away, stretched the whole range of the Swiss Alps, rising majestically in endless succession as far as the eye could trace. For a moment the jagged snow-peaks flushed pink as the sun set in the gray mists of evening, and then faded quickly away. Below, a great valley lying like a sea of blue and green, with here and there the gleam of some lake.

Chambéry, with its distant entourage of snow-capped mountains, the hum of city life, and the squads of soldiers, detained me but a necessary night; and then on to Geneva. Avoiding the sanitarium environs of Aix-les-Bains, I had a superb ride around the shores of Lake Bourget, across undulating plateaus, then a prolonged coast down to the frontier of Switzerland, and so on to Geneva. What charming memories

that name suggests! The pleasant city lying by the shore of Lake Lemán, almost under the shadow of Mont Blanc; the green water flowing under the bridges, clear as crystal; rustic parks; and the strains of strolling musicians, playing with spirit and brilliancy to enthusiastic groups of passers-by. At Fernex, the historic house of Voltaire; and away down the lake, the ancient castle of Chillon, with its sixth-century tower where the unfortunate Bonneville passed fourteen wretched years chained fast to a massive pillar.

Mont Blanc was just shaking off the morning mist as I started out on a bright Sunday morning for the second half of my journey. Steadily up the looping road with the noble range of snowy Alps always in sight. On into the snow belt, and over the summit of the Faucille Pass, 1,327 meters above the sea. The little relay station for the mail-coach was almost buried in behind great drifts of snow. The road covered with half-melted ice, hemmed in by huge drifts, offered but scant pleasure to the solitary cyclist.

An hour and a half of this, and then the road ran clear of the frozen zone, out over the hills of the Jura district. Great barn-like houses of stone and wood, with enormous roofs and low eaves; a rolling country with small forests of pine, suggestive of our own northern districts; lumber mills perched over the tumbling cascades. Occasionally I passed a group of peasants playing at tenpins in the yard, with merry shouts and jest. Soon the woods disappeared. Nothing now but broad rolling fields, houses with moss-covered roofs, and everywhere yokes of white oxen ploughing up the soil. The villages themselves began to look more hospitable, in character with this land of abundance, yet with a lingering suggestion of the feudal days in the old massive houses and protecting walls.

I well recall the dinner hour passed in one of these old châteaux in the busy country town of Poligny. It was market day, and the great table was well filled with farmers from the outlying districts. Through the open doors I could see the spacious courtyard—on one side the high wall of a former convent with clinging wistaria; a glimpse of the dark interior of the stable, and in the half light of the further end a white

horse and figures—a veritable Géricault. The singing of caged birds, water splashing a continuous stream into the high panner of water-cress, the neigh of a horse, servants hurrying to and fro; and, within, the rattle of knives and forks, and the laugh of jolly farmers.

Dole, about twenty miles further on, is an excellent example of the walled towns, with its massive ramparts, surrounding moat, and portcullis. I ran across an amusing specimen of humanity in my little fawning hotel proprietor, who took quite a feline interest in me, caressing my coat as if I were some angel dropped from the skies; but my chief recollection of Dole is associated with a little incident that happened the morning after my arrival. I had just risen, when the sound of voices and passing carts caused me to look cautiously out of the window. Over against the Ancien Hôtel de France were ranged some twenty or thirty baby carriages, all alike, but empty. I caught sight of several sturdy countrywomen on the bridge, pushing their little carriages before them. On they came, and reaching the gates, carefully uncovered their charges; and—I rubbed my eyes, and suddenly discovered to my intense amusement that they were no *babies*, but only good-sized milk cans.

Leaving the gray walls of Dole behind me, I entered the great fertile plains of France. Miles of long straight roads, lined with poplars, and then Dijon, famed for its ginger-snaps. Dijon, full of quaint old wooden houses, with overhanging stories, and steep-pitched roofs; great stone mansions with richly carved fronts now almost black with age, but still suggestive of the splendors of former days, and the once all-powerful Dukes of Burgundy. A glimpse of the famous Puits de Moise in the grounds of the ancient château, and presently the open country once more, and the sunny fields of the Côte d'Or. And so on through the pleasant lands of middle France, to the historic towns of Montereau and Moret with their memories of Napoleon the Great. Past the country house of Rosa Bonheur, hidden away among the famed grapevines of Thomery, into the noble forest of Fontainebleau; and then, almost before I had started, I saw the walls of Paris, the familiar sentry-box, and heard the confused murmur of the great city.