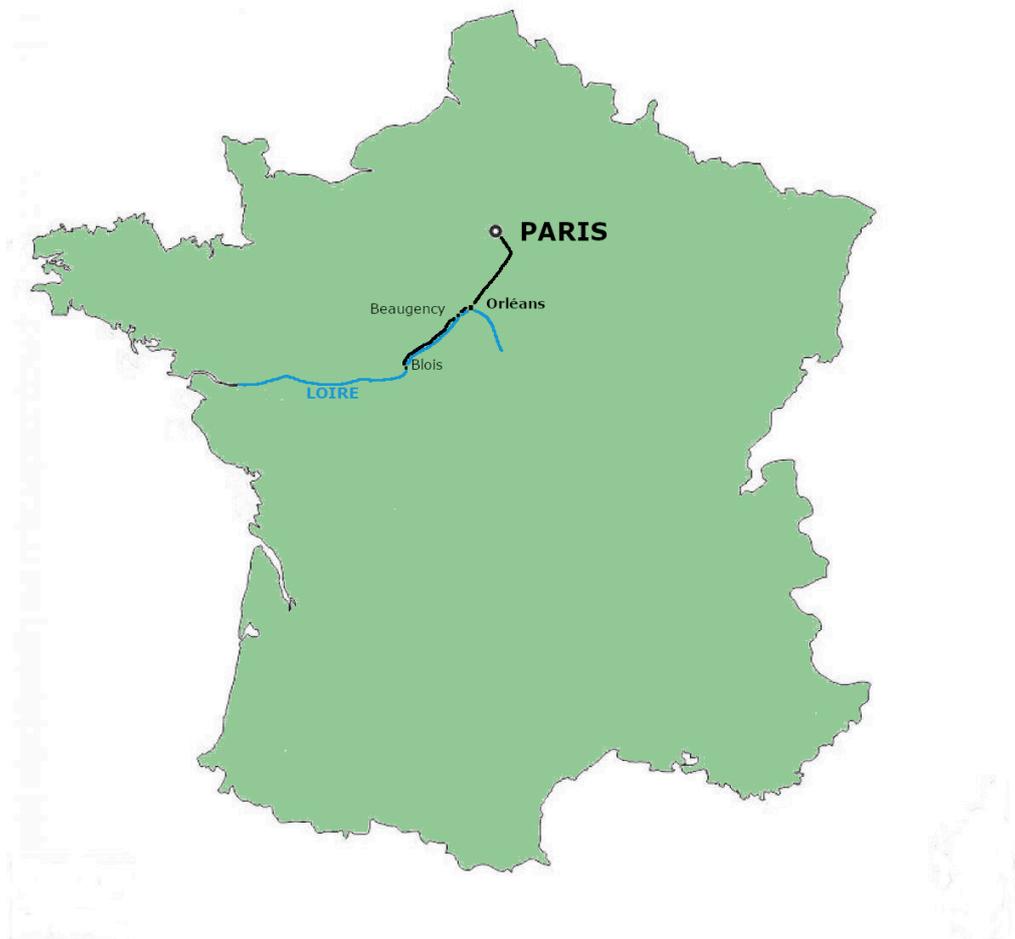


PART TWO

# THE LOIRE VALLEY



## 4 - THE LOIRE VALLEY

Sunday, 22 May

Having slept little through the night, I was up before seven o'clock in order to avail of a lift to the local train station from the two chaps. However, by now I had hit upon another plan of action: noticing that there was an *autoroute* to Orléans, my next destination, I concluded that hitch-hiking there would save a lot of time and money. I therefore got the lads to leave me at a junction close to Fontainebleau town, where all the main roads met.

Arriving there by half past seven, I stuck my thumb out and after five or ten minutes two lads in a tiny Citroën car pulled up and drove me about twelve kilometres to the little town of La Chapelle, where I had something to eat. I then set off, walking along a country road that was bordered by a flat but pleasant landscape that included trees and large fields. By now the sun was shining and the weather was fine. As few vehicles were travelling along this road, I had to walk for half an hour before one of them stopped: a van that was heading for the town of Pithiviers. The driver, a young man, was quite chatty and so we were able to have a good conversation in French. I was thoroughly enjoying this experience, for it was far more interesting than travelling by train. I now realized that people living outside the capital could be very pleasant and kind. The driver, like the first fellow, shook hands with me when we said goodbye and wished me *bonnes vacances*.

As Pithiviers turned out to be a rather uninteresting and noisy town, I was glad to escape from it and return to the countryside once again. This time an elderly lady who was driving a Citroën Visa stopped and drove me along the road for about ten kilometres, leaving me near the village of Moreau. She was a rather prim and proper lady, but pleasant enough. I told her that my father also drove a Citroën Visa. When I explained that I was Irish, she made it quite clear that she did not like the goings-on in Northern Ireland.

Once again I now found myself back on an uninteresting main road, complete with an abundance of cars, vans, lorries and articulated trucks roaring past me. It now began to cloud over and turn cold; shortly afterwards a sharp wind began to blow. Fortunately a large truck stopped when it started to rain. Above the din of a radio, the young driver shouted down to me that he was driving to Orléans and so I hopped inside. Like everyone else, he drove at top speed and so we soon reached the large, noisy city. When we arrived, I very quickly made up my mind not to stay here!

I hopped out of the lorry when we reached the city centre and paid a quick visit to the *Syndicat d'Initiative* in order to get information about hostels and other types of accommodation. I also went to the train station to see if I could hire a bicycle. As I was not able to get much information, I peeped into a

nearby church and then walked to the Loire river, where I was able to position myself on the main road again and hitch for another lift.

I now found myself on an uninteresting busy road – not quite what I expected to find in the famed Loire Valley. Although there was even more traffic than usual, nobody stopped at all. I walked for about two hours, passing through several uninteresting villages, and eventually became fatigued and soaked from the drizzling rain. I was just about to give up and look for a bus when a car suddenly stopped. It was driven by a very pleasant man who spoke very clear French. We had a long conversation, during which he gave me advice on where to go and what to see. He told me that at some time in the past an Irish girl had stayed with him and had looked after his children. He said that he would leave me at Cléry-Saint-André, where he had a bar named *La Belle Image*, so named as one of the French kings had stopped in it at some time in the past – possibly Louis XI, who is buried there.

When we arrived in the town, he brought me into his bar so that he could give me some leaflets about the region. As I was tired and thirsty by now, I sat down to enjoy a cool glass of beer. When we eventually said goodbye to each other, we exchanged addresses and, after he had recited the words of the Irish song *Molly Malone*, I left him and went across the road to look inside a nearby church.

Following the bar owner's advice, I then headed towards Meung-sur-Loire on the other side of the river. When it began to rain again, a car stopped and a lady drove me to the little town. I then found my way to the main road and continued hitch-hiking. Exhausted by now and thoroughly dispirited by the dreadful weather, I soon lost patience and was about to give up when a very old and battered car stopped and a pleasant chap said that he was going to Beaugency, the town that I was heading for. During the course of conversation I mentioned that I intended to hire a bicycle and cycle around the valley. On hearing this, he told me that he had an old bicycle that he no longer used, and which he would happily lend me. I offered to pay for the use of it, but he refused to accept any money.

When we arrived at his lovely rural home just outside Beaugency, he went into his garage and hauled out an antiquated bicycle that had become very rusty and dirty. I attacked it with a brush and some oil, and the man went off to a neighbour's house to borrow a pump, for the air had escaped from the back tyre. When he returned and began to pump it up, the pump broke. He managed to fix it and continue inflating the tyre. After he had done this, he went into the house to take a shower and change his clothes.

I continued to work at the bike, removing the front lamp and dynamo. When my new friend went off somewhere, I went into his house to wash my hands and met his pleasant young wife. She sat me down, gave me a glass of beer and chatted to me for a while. She told me how she loved the peace and quiet here. As it began to rain again, I delayed a little longer then eventually left, offering to pay for the beer, which she refused.

I now set off on the old boneshaker along a quiet road and into the picturesque town of Beaugency, where I cycled around the charming old-world back streets. All the old buildings were made of grey stone and were very quaint. I found the *Syndicat d'Initiative*, where I spoke to a very nice lady

who could offer me very little by way of information. I then went to the post office, where I was able to telephone home.

Afterwards I found my way to the nearby youth hostel with the help of two old mad fellows whom I found very difficult to understand. Fortunately there were plenty of beds available at the small but comfortable hostel. A man told me how to get to a nearby grocery shop and so I went there to buy some food. The people in the shop were very friendly and the prices were low.

Back at the hostel, I tried to fix the brakes on the bicycle, which did not really work, and then did an errand for the man in charge of the hostel: he gave me money and asked me to buy some wine for him. I suspected that he was a drunkard. After trying unsuccessfully to get some hot water from the shower, I then ate my evening meal and went out for a short walk. As it started to rain again, I returned and began to write my diary. When the man in charge came back after his supper, he was very drunk.

A French girl and a fellow arrived later and, as both were exhausted, immediately went to bed. I then did likewise but could not sleep, thanks to the man in charge noisily trying to fix his bicycle and constantly coughing. Eventually the girl left for the other dormitory and turned out the light. At last the coughing ceased and I fell asleep.

Saturday, 23 May

I was woken early by more coughing and noise from the crazy warden. I got up at 8.30, washed and ate some breakfast. When I was ready to leave by about ten o'clock, it started to rain. Rather than get soaked, I retreated into the hostel, where I wrote my diary. It was still raining heavily when I finished the entry. Knowing that I was obliged to leave the hostel as it would be full this evening, I packed my things on to the old bike and set off for the town in the rain, with the intention of visiting the museum. By the time I reached it, however, I was saturated. Completely dispirited by now, I sheltered under an archway for almost an hour and a half, looking at the rain and not knowing what to do next. By now I felt like cancelling the rest of the holiday and returning home. While I was thinking about this, the drunkard from the hostel appeared, parked his bicycle under the arch and continued his work on the dynamo and light. He suggested that we have a drink and eat together. At half past twelve I excused myself and told him that I needed to go to the post office and make a telephone call. When I arrived there, I found it closed for lunch.

Cursing and feeling down at heart, I decided to return the bicycle to its owner and therefore set off in the rain for his house. Fortunately the young couple were at home. I told the husband that I had decided to cancel the rest of the holiday and return to Ireland. He responded by telling me that he had been thinking of me today. After I had left the old bicycle in the garage, he invited me indoors and told me to take off my wet clothes. He then asked me if I had eaten and I said yes (I had just eaten an apple). He sensed that I was not telling the truth and persuaded me to have lunch with him. Inwardly I was very glad of his hospitality, for I badly needed somebody to talk to and

somewhere dry to rest. All my belongings were wet, for my little bag was anything but waterproof.

I then sat down with my kind host and ate with him. Although he had explained that his wife had eaten earlier, I got the distinct impression that I might have been eating her share of the meal. We started with spiced tomatoes and bread, and a helping of red wine was poured into my glass. Next came a large chunk of meat served with chips and more wine, then we had a selection of cheeses with more bread, and the meal finished with black coffee and a shot of cognac. After all this I felt quite drowsy and found it difficult to think straight!

My host then persuaded me to see at least one château in the Loire Valley before I left; he suggested that I go to Blois, stay there the night and visit the château at Chambord. His wife telephoned the station at Beaugency to find out the time of the next train to Blois (3.18 p.m.), then telephoned the youth hostel in Blois to book a bed for me tonight.

This done, my host drove me to the train station and wished me goodbye. Once again I tried to pay him for his kindness, but he would accept nothing. He now told me that he had learned hospitality not from the French, but from the people in North Africa, a region that he had visited. As they were poor, he explained, they were more helpful to one another.

As I had been thinking of returning to Paris in order to stay with the French chap whom I had met at the concert, I now reluctantly bought a ticket to Blois, which cost me 13 francs. In the very modern and comfortable train, I stood in a corridor and chatted to a very nice black girl from Cameroon who was studying in France.

Blois turned out to be farther away than I had reckoned. When I eventually arrived there, I made enquiries as to how to get to the youth hostel. The only bus that would take me to it would leave at six o'clock. I asked a lady how to get to the *Syndicat d'Initiative*. Realizing that I was lost, she drove me to it and then, when I had found out exactly where the youth hostel was, she kindly offered to drive me to it – just as well, for it was 4.6 kilometres out of the town.

The hostel, which was out in the countryside, was a little difficult to find, but we finally located it. When we arrived, the warden poked his head out of an upstairs window and told me – and a man who had just arrived – to come inside. I left the lady and thanked her very much for the lift.

Upstairs in the hostel, the man and I gave the warden our cards and we were told where the dormitories were. I flopped down on a bed, rested and studied a map, trying to decide what I should do next. I wanted to leave this region, for it did not appeal to me at all.

I finally bestirred myself and went outside, where I met two American girls who had just arrived on bicycles. As we discovered that the showers were working, we decided to use them. It was good to have a proper wash at last.

Afterwards I walked to the local shop, where I bought bread and teabags. Back in the hostel I met more young people, including two lads from Switzerland who were planning to visit Ireland. I joined some of the others in the dining room for a simple meal at about seven o'clock. At this point the warden came in and sat down near me to chat to a French-speaking Canadian

girl from Quebec. A long and very interesting discussion then followed as the warden began to give us his opinions on art, music and literature. He complained about tourists rushing around in order to see so many châteaux in one day, and spoke about some of the notable museums. He had very definite but well-reasoned views on these various topics. It turned out that everything I liked he liked too, and so he began to address his remarks to me more often. I was thoroughly enjoying our discussion and the flow of the man's eloquent French, which I found I could understand quite well, as long as it was not too rapid or abstract. The warden, who I suspected was lonely, also seemed to be relishing our conversation. When the name James Joyce was mentioned, he admitted to not understanding the author's writings, especially *Ulysses*. Not having the necessary vocabulary, I tried to explain Joyce's mode of writing in English to the Canadian girl, who translated for the warden. After he touched on the troubles in Northern Ireland, which he could not understand, our conversation came to an end. Our discussion had been very interesting and I retired to bed afterwards with my spirits raised and feeling a good deal better.

Sunday, 24 May

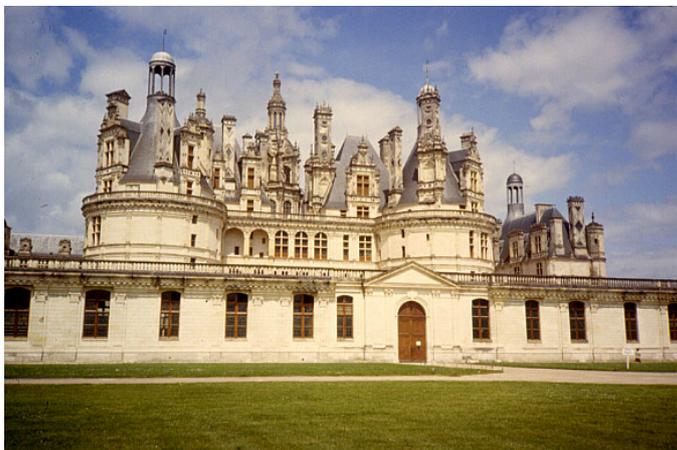
Fortunately the weather looked a little better this morning. We were woken at half past eight by the lady in charge, who told us that the hostel would close at nine. Because of the peace and quiet here, everyone had slept very well and were reluctant to get up. After a quick breakfast, I swept the men's dormitory. Having done this, I then discovered that there was space in the car belonging to the couple of Swiss fellows, who were about to visit the châteaux at Blois and Chambord. I squeezed into the back seat with the Canadian girl (who was leaving today) and off we drove to Blois in the lads' large and comfortable car.

We dropped off the Canadian girl in the town centre, then continued to the rather small and rather plain château, where we joined a queue at the door. One of the Swiss lads tried to buy three student tickets but, as we only had one identity card between us, the ruse did not work and the other lad and I had to pay 10 francs each.

The interior was quite interesting but very dark and rather lacking in furniture. The place was more historic than beautiful. It became quite crowded inside as groups of tourists went in and out of the rooms; we took our time and let them go ahead so that we could view the rooms in peace and quiet. As there were not many rooms to see, we soon found ourselves back outside in the courtyard. We then wandered up a staircase towards a museum and found that admission was free. We went in to take a look at the items on display and quickly discovered that there was little of interest to see. There were some Dutch paintings and a few interesting old clocks, but that was about all.

Back in the courtyard, we peeped into the rather plain chapel and had a look at a panoramic view of the town and the river from a balcony. Although the château had a certain amount of charm, all the brickwork was a dull grey and the roof tiles were black.

We then drove off to the château at Chambord. We arrived at this quite magnificent château at about midday, just as a group of tourists were leaving and the sun was beginning to shine. As soon as we had parked the car, a lady came up and demanded a fee of 2.50 francs, which I paid. It was obvious that this place was very commercialized: there were cafés and souvenir shops nearby. We realized that Sunday was probably the worst day we could have picked to come here. We hoped that there would not be too many tourists about when the place opened again, after lunch, at 2 p.m.



*Chambord, Loire Valley*

Fortunately we now had the place to ourselves, and so we walked around the gardens and admired the château from a distance. I took some photos while the sun was shining and then left the two lads in order to eat my lunch in the local wood, with a magnificent view of the château in front of me.

At two o'clock I met my companions at the entrance and in we went. Fortunately the tickets were quite cheap; the reason why, we quickly discovered, was because there was little or nothing to be seen inside the

château. The rooms were all huge, cold and empty. We wandered from one to another, noting that they all looked very similar. Soon we were bored and only continued our visit in case we might miss something of interest. We ended up on the quite spectacular roof, overlooking the rather plain gardens beyond. We were quite glad to leave and return to the car. Yet another one of my dreams had been shattered.

We now drove back to Blois, for my companions had to pass through the town in order to get to Chartres. Before I left them in the town centre, I gave them my address as they were planning a visit to Ireland. After we had said goodbye, I rambled around some of the quite fascinating back streets, ascending and descending steep flights of stone steps. The little houses were very beautiful and extremely quaint, despite the fact that everything was built in the local grey stone. Having peeped into a couple of churches, I then started to look around for somewhere to eat. I had made the mistake of not buying provisions this morning when the shops had been open. Everywhere was closed now – even the restaurants.

Eventually I found a little snack bar near the château and sat down to eat a ham sandwich and drink a glass of milk, which cost me 12.50 francs (£1.50). The steak and chips would have cost me 30 francs – a sum that, even in Paris, would buy a three-course meal. As it had begun to rain again, I sheltered in the restaurant until it stopped, then left and made tracks for the hostel. Stopping to look into a Gothic church on the way, I met three American girls who were also on their way to the hostel. As there were no buses running today, we were obliged to walk and so I accompanied them. I was not surprised to discover that one of the girls, who had freckles, was of Irish origin.

It took us about an hour to reach the hostel. As the girls had heavy rucksacks, they became quite exhausted. When we approached the hostel, we met two American lads who had just arrived and who, like us, were hungry and were looking for somewhere and something to eat. Every restaurant in the area, including a little one nearby, was closed and so there was nothing to be had.

In the hostel I met a young Norwegian fellow and girl, and chatted to them for a while in the dining room. The warden then appeared and proudly presented me with one of his drawings: an excellent portrait of himself done in white chalk on blue paper. As it was very striking and lifelike, I complimented him wholeheartedly on his work. After I had admired some of his other drawings and paintings, which were hung on the walls, he retired but returned later to chat to me and to a very nice fellow from Canada who, like the girl on the previous night, spoke fluent French. Once again our conversation covered a wide range of topics. Unfortunately this time I became very sleepy and found it difficult to concentrate. The Americans and the Norwegians, who were chatting together nearby, could see me trying to stay awake and were laughing at me.

After the warden and the Canadian had finished their discussion, I spoke for a little while to the other people and then we all headed for the dormitories. As I was feeling so exhausted, I left off writing my diary and went to bed, where I fell asleep immediately.