



## MÉMOIRES D'OUTRE-MANCHE

BY DAVID LOWE

I must be getting old. I feel like writing my memoirs. *Honi soit qui mal y pense!* I first came to France on a coach. I'd packed all my belongings together, including my clown props, for I was coming to the continent to offer my art to the French people. I was going to work as a mime in the streets – mime was a natural choice since my French wasn't very good.

I dreamt of renting a garret, living off French bread, camembert, garlic and red wine; being on first-name terms with the prostitute who plied her wares on the street below:

"*Salut, Fifi!*" Fifi never charged me of course in gratitude for the war effort. I'd look after her poodle when she was working and afterwards we'd drink absinthe together, while a funny little man painted us. Hemingway would join us with a tuna he'd just caught with his bare hands in the Seine. We'd eat it raw and then Henry Miller would tell us some dirty jokes about Anaïs Nin and Marguerite Duras. Arletty would sing a song about Mistinguette missing the metro, and Raymond Queneau would appear with his wife Zazie Quenelle. We could hear the groans of extase coming from the next room as Jean Paul and Simone discussed Hegel.

There's 50 km between France and England – the same distance between Toulouse and Montauban, but for me the French were so exotic a race. The English Channel is a profound mystery, 20 miles wide and 3,000 years deep. That's why you have to tarry a while and take the ferry and not that back passage we call the Chunnel.

I was truly honoured when on arrival at Calais, the customs man singled me out on the coach to come with him to open up my luggage. He must have known that my grandad was at Dunkerque, and the Somme. He pointed to my trunk. I smiled. I didn't know that you shouldn't smile at the French – they take it to be a weakness. Smile too much and they think you're an idiot. I smile all the time. He asked for my permission to open up the trunk. I said yes, of course...

he had a gun. He opened the trunk to reveal a large suitcase. He then opened the suitcase, revealing a smaller suitcase, and then inside that an even smaller suitcase. The French official had in fact stumbled on part of my clown act – *mon célèbre numéro de boîtes chinoises!*

I didn't want him to open the last small suitcase, but he did anyway and was rather surprised by the doll on a spring that almost hit him on the nose – it was a jack-in-the-box. I would have warned him, but didn't know how to say jack-in-the-box in French. *Jacques dans la boîte* didn't sound right especially as Chirac was prime minister at the time. My act wasn't going down too well. The customs officer started to open my other bags. Coming across a trumpet, his eyes lit up. "Ahh," I thought to myself, "a music lover!" We'd got off to a bad start but we'd end up discussing Brel and Brassens in a brasserie – or a *brassière* – I was always mixing up the two. He asked me to blow into it, and like an idiot I took his request to the letter and started playing "The Carnival of Venice" theme and variations by the famous French cornettist, Jean Baptiste Arban. I hadn't even got to the first variation when the man abruptly told me to shut up and be on my way. Of course he didn't want to hear me play, he just wanted to know if I'd stuffed my instrument with drugs. It's a shame because there were such beautiful acoustics in the hall. Anyway I didn't need drugs. I was in love, with Paris, somebody I hardly knew.

