

INVASION COUNTRY

ON June 6 we landed at Boulogne. On June 7 we bivouacked beyond Abbeville. Next night we crossed the Oise by moonlight into the Forest of Chantilly. Four more hours of hard pushing and we were in Paris itself. Fast progress? Yes. But that June was 1933. The mechanised unit was a bicycle.

What was this beachhead country like—this patch of France between Brittany and the Straits of Dover? If it were the Anzio beachhead I could describe it in one *coup d'oeil* from the Alban mountains, whence Kesselring swept it each morning. For from this gods'-eye vantage point, Campagna and the Pontine Plain lie like a tawny animated map fanning into blue Tyrehenno. But there is no such vantage point in Normandy or along the Picard coast. From scores of hilltops you will get wide "sweeps-of-eye" across rolling countryside which looks illimitable and empty if you come from hedged, horizonless England, and yet, in its rich cultivation, seems astonishingly full to a New Zealander, despite the absence of fences and farmsteads. Villages show up distantly as compact

ingenious improvisation, the Channel peasant (who probably owns his own land and keeps stuffing a sock towards inglorious retirement) insists on over-washed blue denims like those of 'Erb the labourer in a class-conscious London comedy.

"Shock of Strangeness"

What first strikes the visitor from Britain—the peacetime visitor—is the enormous difference that a few bumpy miles of Channel can make. Here on the Norman coast is what Britain rarely has: a sky, a pale blue pastel sky. Here is a sun, a hot, direct, Continental sun undiluted by moist English atmosphere. Here, in complete contrast to cottages snuggled into the hedgerows and orchards of parkline Southern England, are bare, rectangular, whitewashed, barn-like buildings plonked squarely down among waving wheat over which you may see for miles before a hedge or avenue intervenes. Here, too, simple transactions—like buying a pound, no, a kilo, of sugar—become a daze of complication. "Here one speaks French," but seldom understands a word of it. Here the tides rise up to 30 feet (in the Gulf between Cherbourg and Brittany sometimes, and in some places even

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A.M.R. Recalls .
A Peacetime Visit
to Normandy

40 feet) in one day. Even the sea along this wrong side of what *they* call The Sleeve is a queer blue instead of British green.

When this first shock of strangeness is over the visitor is likely to start quoting Bishop Heber on Ceylon's isle. For a typical, untidy, undulating village street is usually much less pleasing a prospect in its unhygienic insanitation than the countryside it lies in. Farm-houses, too—where cowbyre, pigstye, fowlhouse and dwelling quarters may all be cobble-floored sections of the one building within whose hollow square manure-heap and water-trough practically jostle—are an incongruous surprise to one who left the Hub of the Universe yesterday and expects to reach the City of Culture and Gaiety to-morrow. After that sight and smell he more or less expects to go to bed by candle-light; but still not to see queues with jugs at the town pump; or women on their knees kneading clothes along the canal-bank. The farmwives' shapeless black working-frocks contrast sharply with their city cousins' *chic*. Farm faces burnt Bantu-black by a lifetime of bending face to the soil advertise the superiority of New Zealand short-houred days and long-handled shovels.

Norman Roads

To-day's visitors are pressing forward painfully chain by chain, or barely holding against an immense weight of counter-attack. Our own peacetime progress met with nothing worse than *pavé* and misdirections. When a Minahassan or Cantonese gestures vaguely and makes an unintelligible speech you proceed warily and in any case know too little of the unmapped country to tell whether where you arrive is where you intended to go. But when, in answer to much practised questions, a Frenchman first looks blank and then suddenly says in English, "Go that way, you can't miss it," only the experienced traveller

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On beaches like this our troops have landed in Normandy.

clumps of stone away off on other ground-swells, or where a double line of poplars—indicating a road—crosses the meandering chain of oak and willow copses that indicate a stream. But there is no single dominating scenic feature. The countryside just rolls on and on interminably. The picture from each separate sweep of hillside is delightfully different. But the artist and the gallery are the same.

Graphic and geographic magazines do not normally send their cameramen to Normandy. Certainly there is architecture to be seen. But then *English* Norman Churches usually stand in more picturesque surroundings. Presumably, too, the typical *tricouleur* rural scene does not photochrome well—pale blue sky, faded blue peasants; greyish white houses, muddish white road banks, freckled white livestock; and green, a rolling ocean of green that is varied only by occasional fallow strips and (in Spring) by a ubiquitous riot of poppies. The Normans and Picards themselves are not highly "pulchritudal." Instead of Alsace's German-verging dresses, or Brittany's red fisher suits, or the Midi's



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