VIII

THE VENTOUX

July 1955. It was the time of the crowning glory, the third successive victory in the Tour de France. A sense of solemnity gradually descended on us.

Without any particular reason, Louison was anxious. The route was a classic. From the Départ in Le Havre it headed for the cobbles of the North, a stage in Belgium, crossed the Vosges and made a stop-over in Switzerland – the only unknown – before mounting an assault on the Alps. He reckoned the French team to be currently the best in the race. His distinguished team-mates: brother Jean, Antonin Rolland and Bernard Gauthier were joined by such talented and experienced riders as Darrigade in his capacity as French Champion, Geminiani because he was Geminiani, and Dotto, Forestier, Malléjac and Mahé.

The race was wild and unbridled, untameable. But Louison made his first mark by winning in Liège; Antonin Rolland seized the maillot jaune in Metz, and I occupied third place on General Classification. We thought we had effectively taken control when the situation suddenly deteriorated. Kubler led us a merry dance across Switzerland, even if Darrigade asserted himself in Zurich. The Dutch were so unruly they were driving us mad, and we faltered in the Alps. The Luxembourg climber, Gaul, quickly baptised 'Angel of the Mountains', took off up the Galibier and, in Briançon, made up ten minutes on Louison. The newspapers laid it on thick again.

Was Bobet as strong as they said? Were his team-mates not over-stepping the mark? Was mutiny on its way? I tried to conceal or play down the unkind words and the nasty questions put to me for transmission to my big brother, who was worried, frustrated, on edge. The smile made a cautious return the next day, however, after Geminiani's timely win in Monaco.

But the malaise was palpable. Louison was becoming more and more nervous, and now he had several good reasons. The entire peloton was watching him. The attacks were coming from all sides, from every part of the bunch. Wherever it went, for more than 1,500 kilometres, the French team had felt it was being persecuted.

I was beginning to believe it myself.

On the Monaco–Marseille stage Louison threw a tantrum and decided to 'box Charly Gaul's ears' by laying waste the opposition at the feeding post in Toulon. It was carried out very effectively: the Gaul in question was declared 'weak at the knees' at the finish, having lost much of his swagger in the midsummer heat, where he was not really comfortable. At the velodrome in Marseille the French team expectantly awaited their leader's gratitude. They were disappointed. Louison had heard a few whistles from the crowd during his lap of honour. Every day, whether he won or not, he was asked to take a lap of honour in his

capacity as reigning world champion. But the people of Marseille could not care less about the rainbow jersey. What they wanted was Bobet in the maillot jaune, right there, right now. After all, the Tour de France had been under way for eight days now.

I told the team that the boss was in a temper and that we'd have to wait a while for the congratulations. I knew my brother, you see. With him, it took very little to poison a moment of happiness. Just one person criticising him was enough to send him off the rails. Geminiani, who, as usual, had understood the situation, summed it up with a joke: 'Goodnight, children, it's school in the morning.'

Very early in the morning, indeed, the atmosphere was electric. Tense. There's going to be trouble I thought to myself.

There was trouble. The French team decided to do a sortie d'hôtel, that is, to attack from the off. Along an endless false flat on the motorway the peloton stretched itself out, re-formed, frayed, re-grouped, was distended once again, and finally split. There were about 20 of us in front, with Rolland, Geminiani, Mahé, Forestier, Malléjac, Louison and me from the France team. I was feeling pretty good. I knew what the little knocking feeling in my stomach was: fear before the Ventoux. For two days people had been talking about nothing else but the Ventoux. I had climbed it before, from the Malaucène side, but that was child's play, apparently. The southern ascent, from Bédoin, is terrible. And if it's hot, it turns into hell.

It's very hot. I'm going to hell. Not a word. Nothing is more impressive than a silent peloton. Nobody says a word, nobody laughs. Lifting your head slightly you can make out the shape, in the distance, through the mist, of the Ventoux.

We're riding on the rivet, and yet Ferdi Kubler somehow manages to slip through our fingers. Luckily, Geminiani goes with him. Louison comes up to see how I'm getting on: 'All right?' 'Yes,' I say. Niceties out of the way, he gives me my orders: 'With Mahé and Forestier you're going to rip to the the foot of the col. That's where it's going to explode.'

Mahé, Forestier and I are riding at the head of the group. The news isn't bad. Ahead of us, Ferdi and Gem are in range and, behind, the peloton is losing ground. Everyone around us is getting excited. The cars and motorbikes of the race followers pass us, stop, set off again. I sense that it's going to be worth giving everything. I feel that something is happening, I'm sure the race is about to tip. And I'm getting excited myself: I'm a hell of a guy, because I'm in on this decisive move. And I'm going fine.

Still, it hurts your legs this bit of descent after Carpentras. Up it goes again, up a false flat towards Bédoin, and Louison comes alongside me to whisper that he's not feeling well, not well at all. Knowing him as I do, that's a good sign. When you leave Bédoin the legs really start to hurt. François Mahé's head starts leaning a little further to the right; Jean Forestier is a little flatter over his frame. I must be listing a bit as well and the pace may be slackening. 'Two more kilometres on the rivet!' It's Louison. He's feeling a bit better, I can tell.

I'm sure I'm going to implode at the foot of the Ventoux. With 20 kilometres to climb, I'm on my knuckle ends. I'll never get used to those damn false flats before the cols. One more kilometre and I'll drop out. I can read the state of play: Ferdi and Gem, still a minute in front, the peloton two minutes away and a cloud of dust behind. Not much in return for all

that effort. If I start calculating, thinking about it, it's all over. It's already all over. I'm having trouble staying ahead. Some of the hard men are catching up with me – some Belgians, some Italians. There is Louison, not looking at me, seeing nothing. I can smell gunpowder… Shit! My front tyre has gone. Well, no regrets now, that's it. In any case, I can't repair it, the mechanic is still down there, way back, in the car. Standing up, my legs are hurting even more than in the saddle. The mechano does the repair and Marcel Bidot shouts, 'Take water now, Jean. There isn't any further up.' And then, suddenly, in an instant, everything disappears into the mountain. I am still standing there, alone.

There is nothing more sinister than a disappearing peloton. You can still hear the sound of tyres on tarmac, the panting of the riders, the cries of protest between chains and dérailleurs and then, following on, the humming of motors in the caravan. Then, after the first bend, comes the silence. And here am I on the side of the road, out of it all, out of the Tour…

'And the desert becomes still again,
when the heavy travellers fade on the horizon.'

This is a fine time to be reciting poetry. Poetry doesn't push you uphill. Into the saddle. Into the desert.

This business has cost me two good minutes. Calm down now. The problem is getting to Avignon this evening. Here comes the racket: motorbikes, whistles, shouts. No point looking up, I'm back with the peloton. It's suffocating in the pack. You can smell the fear of men going to a lingering death. The road twists to the left, the famous corner, banked like for motor races. Now the going gets tough. Two or three grimpeurs, who'd go up trees like marmosets if they had to, shoot off at top speed. As if there were no slope at all. I don't have to stay with this bunch. I get over to the right and let the ones in a hurry come past. There must be a good 15 kilometres before the top. No need to panic.

I had seen it in training: a sensible 45x24, hands on top of the handlebars, chest out, cap back to front to protect the nape from the sun, eyes fixed on the road ten metres ahead and no further, whatever you do, and I get my breath back. I drift past some of the other lads. Some not looking great, some completely knackered.

There are folk lining the road now. People with bare torsos, lucky devils, and carrying water. And they're handing it out. One with his watering can sprays me from neck to shoes and shouts to his mates: 'Water, water, he's French!' It's great to be French on a col in the Tour de France. Not so great as being Italian in a col on the Giro – there, they push you as well – but still great. I want to ask for news of the leaders, but I wouldn't hear a thing over the shouting.

Now what? The road is blocked. Or nearly. A crowd on the right, a bike on the ground, photographers, gendarmes and a quack. I saw the doctor all right, wearing shorts: it's Dr Dumas (the Tour medic). A fall? Surely not, climbing at 15kph?

Emptiness again. Not an inch of shade, nothing but bloody sun everywhere. So thirsty. Suddenly, I'm back with Jean Forestier. It looks like young Jean's a bit done-in.

But he can talk: 'Did you see Malléjac?' No, I didn't see Malléjac, and besides, everybody in the team knows very well that I never see anyone, or anything. 'He's in a bad way. He's half-dead.' So that's why the doc was there on the road just now. I stay with Jean Forestier. I'm going a bit more slowly, but it's good to have some company again and we can finish the stage together. Not counting the fact that the spectators like to see two fellow-countrymen together, and there'll be more to drink.

And Jean Forestier knows everything: 'Kubler has cracked. Louison's in front with two or three Italians and Brankart, I think… You know, there are 25 blokes ahead of us at the most, no more. But there are eight kilos left to climb.' And he can talk, young Jean.

People, lots of people. Shouting: 'Bobet in the lead! Bobet's away!' There are no more trees, only people now. And Louison is putting on a virtuoso display. And this evening he'll tell us that he wasn't feeling well. And Geminiani will crack up.

Back to serious matters. Jean Forestier isn't going as fast as I am. I explain that I'll keep going at my own speed, and wait for him on the descent so we can go down to Avignon together. And I'm on my own again. All alone, that is, in the middle of all these people and their deafening roar.

Surely not? There's someone barring my way. Is he completely crazy? He's right across the road, from the cliff to the ravine, and the ravine to the cliff. And he's crying. A Belgian. I've never seen a man cry like that. He's going to fall in the ravine, I swear. I pass him, or rather cut across him. He's lost in the blackest fog. He didn't even see me.

An over-excited spectator, brandishing a bottle of water which I get ready to grab, leans over my front wheel and runs after me: 'Not for you, you bastard! Get your own!' I'm out of breath but, thank God, I manage to let fly with, 'Piss off!' Not very loud, but nice and clear. The bloke stops in his tracks, taken aback, rooted to the spot. However did I manage to find him I wonder.

Good God, it's Dad. Only two kilometres left. It must be, because yesterday evening he said: 'We'll be two kilometres from the summit.' I aim towards him, brush past him so he doesn't have to shout and so I can hear him properly. 'It's all right, old man… Louison's on his own, a minute ahead. He's fine…' I nod to show I've understood: it's less tiring that way. But it's the same old story with Dad: he never has anything to drink… Mum must be there, too, somewhere off to the side, so as not to see too much. I have to admit that it's no sight for a mother, a son – two even – on top of the Ventoux.

But who cares, mates, we're going to win the bloody Tour. We'll have to spit on our hands between here and Paris, but we're going to win it, this bloody Tour… As long as I can get through… Let me through! They've got to be crazy, these people, there's no room left on the road. A bend to the right. Christ! It's impossible. It's so hard, I'm standing still. Out of the saddle for a bit and everything hurts. I can't go on. I lift my head. I see the red kite at the summit and hear the roars, see the hands waving me on. The circus… I cross the line, unable to turn the pedals any more.

Number 2 – at 13 minutes and 15 seconds.

I loosen my toestraps.

Silence. Then, emptiness. There's nobody left. At 60kph my bike bears me towards Malaucène.*

After the finish supporters on bikes escorted me to the hotel. Noisily.

In Avignon the excitement was still at its peak People clapped me on the back: not once, but three times. One, Bobet had won the stage; two, Bobet was going to win the Tour and, three, so was the French team. At the hotel door a mechanic took hold of my bike, and had just enough time to say, 'Well done, Jean.' Back to sobriety.

At hotel reception Marcel Bidot shook my hand and said, 'Well, done, Jean' as well. Was that all, after what I had just done? That was all, except to add: 'Go and see your brother in his room. He's recuperating. He wants to see you.' Intoxicating.

The elevator and the hotel corridors were very gloomy and silent after the tumult and the sun on the Ventoux. I finally found the room and went in. The room was dark.

After a few seconds I was able to make out the bed and what I thought must be a rainbow jersey. The world champion was stretched out on the bed. He was still wearing his shoes. I could not believe it, because the rider's first act, on reaching his room, is to remove his shoes. He groaned when I tried to take them off and when I tried to open the curtains: 'Don't touch anything. I'm all right like this. Listen to me.' I sat down on the edge of the bed and listened. All the same, I wondered what I was doing there in the dark, in the quiet, while in the road outside I could hear the crowd chanting, 'Bo-bet, Bo-bet!'

Louison murmured: 'Come closer. Listen. Closer.' And he mumbled, in snatches, that he was done in… he couldn't move… he was in pain, all over… he couldn't carry on… he'd lost everything… all that effort had been for nothing… the others would attack tomorrow. What was I to say? What could I do?

Overcome by the mortuary atmosphere I started whispering back. I said that I could tell him a thing or two about the others: Malléjac, who was in hospital, Kubler, who had dropped out, the Italian directeur who had been knocked down, about all the others, every one of them spent, hammered at the finish. And what's more, there had been about 50 still back down the road when I left for the hotel. And I assured him that they would not be queueing up to attack tomorrow.

He moaned and fulminated. He tried to turn over, in vain. He lay there, shapeless. In an even lower voice he added that most excruciating of all was his saddle sore, which he was sure had re-opened, because the pain was killing him. I could not bear it any longer. I suddenly felt the fatigue come over me. And that was when he bawled at me: 'Even you, you don't understand. Nobody does. I'm dead, completely dead.' I no longer had the strength to reply. I needed air. I left the room. In the corridor I fell, literally, on Raymond Le Bert, who gave me a shake: 'Don't worry, young Jean. We'll buck your brother up again. Now look after yourself. Quick, get in the shower.'

He was bucked up again. But I still think that, on that day, as on two or three other similar occasions, Louison gave beyond his limits.

He would maintain a strange relationship with this one mountain, the Ventoux, for the rest of his life. Whenever he was asked, again and again, to tell his Ventoux story, I would always hear him talk about his suffering, but never his joy at winning in Avignon. Every time he would say that he had been martyred that day. If it is true, as Victor Hugo says, that 'martyrdom is sublimation, a torture that consecrates', then Louison was quite right. His consecration in Avignon was, in my view, the crowning moment of his career.

Bear in mind that all riders have a strange relationship with the Ventoux, more than with any other mountain, throughout their lives. In this connection I have discovered – very late, to my great regret – the testimony of the most extraordinary champion with whom I have rubbed shoulders, without really getting to know him. In 1955 the peloton counted in its ranks an Australian named Russell Mockridge. He was a remarkable fellow. A bespectacled intellectual (sorry, but that's how it was), he was still wavering at the age of 27 between the competing vocations of cycle-racing and the priesthood. As a cyclist he had first appeared in the firmament at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, taking two titles and therefore two gold medals in track events, outclassing the dumbfounded Europeans. That same year, and the next, he had won the Grand Prix de Paris, the celebrated sprint event, at La Cipale in Vincennes, in both the amateur and the professional categories. At the beginning of 1955 he had also taken first place at the Paris Six-Day, in the company of his compatriots, Strom and Arnold. These two rogues belonged to the Six Jours mafia known as the 'Blue Train', and victory in Paris had been promised to them in return for services rendered on other cycling tracks. It was only after the finish that Russell Mockridge was informed of the conspiracy. He developed such a disgust for it that he decided to give up the track and devote himself to road-racing. After promising beginnings he caught the attention of the Tour de France selectors. Signed up for a team baptised 'Luxembourg–Mixed', he found himself alongside Charly Gaul and other riders from the Grand Duchy. As these people were no playmates of ours, I had hardly followed the Australian's career.

Now, 50 kilometres from Paris, during the final stage of this difficult Tour (just 69 finished out of 130 starters), Jacques Goddet had Louison called over to his car to congratulate him and, above all – 'above all, my dear Louison' – to recommend that he savour the historic moment of his third consecutive victory. I was riding alongside Louison, spare bike oblige and, at the conclusion of this courtly exchange, we rejoined the peloton. Or rather, we caught up with Russell Mockridge, who had dropped back by about 20 metres, the better to enjoy the moment, which was historic for him as well. I drew alongside him and heard him singing, 'It's a long way to Prince's Park, It's a long way to go…' Up came Louison, and Russell Mockridge addressed him: 'Bravo, Mr. Bobet. It's a grand day for you! For me, too… after the Ventoux.'

I was speechless. This Olympic track rider, the antipodean phenomenon, was rejoicing at being there, at the gate of the Parc des Princes. In his way he too had crossed the Ventoux, the Giant of Provence. Three years later Russell Mockridge was killed in a road accident during a race in his native Australia. The very first lines of his Memoirs, published posthumously by his wife, run as follows:

‘It will be hell on the Giant today, Russell,’ said my masseur, as he nursed my legs with his gentle fingers.

It seems that the call of the Ventoux can be heard as far away as Australia.

But I should still relate the dénouement of that Tour de France. After Avignon, all the way to Paris, Louison never once emerged from hell: for ten days and 2,000 kilometres. In the Pyrenees the re-opening of his saddle sore left him in agony and vulnerable, a fact the entire team sought to camouflage, day after day. However, when the last time trial came round, between Châtellerault and Tours, the race followers noticed that the maillot jaune stood up all the way, unable to sit down. Certain observers talked of a Pyrrhic victory.

Maybe so, but in Paris it was the result alone that counted. Not only was Louison Bobet declared the victor, but he was also fêted as the first man to win three consecutive Tours.

France both acclaimed and claimed him. Over the next two months he made 39 appearances in track events or criteriums. His every performance, whether in the biggest city or the smallest village, was preceded or followed by an official reception. From one day to the next we (I raced with him everywhere) went from Bourges to Abbeville, from Bruay to Creusot, from Angoulême to Belfort, from Paris to Basle, from Châteaulin to Cavaillon…

We finally set our luggage down after the Tour of Lombardy, on 26 October. I calculated that we had clocked up 117 racing days. That was enough. Too much.

At the end of the year Louison no longer had any choice. In order to rid himself of his recurrent inflammation of the perineum, he had to undergo surgery. The operation took place with the utmost discretion, at a clinic in Dinan. It was a delicate operation, with painful consequences. The healing process demanded much care and rest. It was then, to relieve his impatience, that Louison threw himself into what was to become the other passion of his life: aviation. At the local flying club they fashioned a specially adapted pilot’s seat for him, to accommodate his fragile tail-end. He obtained his first-category pilot’s licence at the first attempt, with distinction and, while he was at it, his second-category licence as well. In this way he could get himself quickly across the country, from town to town, and from aerodrome to aerodrome. He bought a ’plane – a Jodel D112 – a two-seater model that enabled my promotion: I was appointed navigator. This meant that, inside the aircraft (I love the French word, aéronef), I occupied the right-hand seat, with the aeronautical maps spread across my knees. Louison was very quickly recognised as a fine pilot. He had the touch, and immediately picked up the three-dimensional sense required. He manoeuvred with such ease that the passengers he invited on board immediately felt reassured.

The only thing was that this fine pilot was also an imprudent one. He was qualified to fly under ‘visual flight rules’. That is, he could travel whenever the meteorologist gave him authorisation. The make-or-break instinct of the champion, however, sometimes prevailed over the prudence of the pilot. It was not unknown for Louison to take off in mediocre weather, and

even in weather that could only be described as bad. Once, I landed with him 'among the cows', on an extremely steeply-sloping field in the hills of the Perche region. It was quite an experience: not a particularly pleasant one, but Louison's skilful handling ensured that not too much damage was done. During this forced landing in the cowfield we had a guest on board (the new 'plane was a three-seater model by the pretty name of Jodel Ambassadeur). After circling two or three times to identify the best place to land, Louison pretended to our guest that we had to make an emergency landing because we had run out of fuel. Our friend did not suspect a thing, and even found the whole operation rather amusing. This passenger was a celebrity. His name was Georges Cravenne, and he was organiser of all the great artistic and high-society galas, which was why Louison's name had found its way into his address book.

Another jaunt ended up causing a stir, too. One April day we had to get to Plonéour-Lanvern, on the tip of the Finistère beyond Quimper. The 'plane seemed the perfect solution for such a trip, and we took off from Toussus-le-Noble. Somewhere around Le Mans the cloud cover became noticeably lower. Above Rennes it was about 500 metres (even if Louison announced it as 1,500 feet!) and the rain was joining in the fun. The pilot, sole master on board, decided not to land in Rennes, which boasted a sumptuous aerodrome, but to continue our journey by 'sitting on' the railway line. We flew over Redon, Vannes, Auray, Lorient at an ever-decreasing altitude, and were hopping the hedges by the time we reached Quimper. I had the map on my knees but was navigating blind, especially when, just after Quimper railway station, the line – my only reference point – disappeared into a tunnel! In the end, Louison, blessed with extraordinary eyesight, spotted the aerodrome's landing strip and managed to pull off the landing under the beating rain and the oaths of the control tower operator. The real imprudence was committed after this incident: Louison told the story to Geminiani, who re-told it, with his own embellishments as you can imagine, to his mate Fernand Raynaud, who turned it into a sketch that would have the whole country in stitches.

Later on, in the seventies, Louison passed me the controls of his thalassotherapy centre* in order to devote himself to the studies and examination leading to a professional pilot's licence. Having passed, he realised one of his life's great ambitions. On board his twin-engined Beechcraft, he crossed the Atlantic twice, together with his son who, incidentally, was a captain in a large airline company.

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