MAX LEONARD

LANTERNE ROUGE

THE LAST MAN IN THE TOUR DE FRANCE

Contents

ABOUT THE BOOK

lanterne rouge:
French / noun

1. *The red lantern that hangs on the rear of a train*
2. *The competitor who finishes last in the Tour de France*

If you complete a bike race of over 3,000 kilometres, overcoming mountain ranges and merciless weather conditions while enduring physical and psychological agony, in the slowest time, should you be branded the loser? What if your loss helped a teammate win? What if others lacked the determination to finish? What if you were *trying* to come last?

Froome, Wiggins, Merckx – we know the winners of the Tour de France, but *Lanterne Rouge* tells the forgotten, often inspirational and occasionally absurd stories of the last-placed rider. We learn of stage winners and former yellow jerseys who tasted life at the other end of the bunch; the breakaway leader who stopped for a bottle of wine and then took a wrong turn; the doper whose drug cocktail accidently slowed him down and the rider who was recognised as the most combative despite finishing at the back.

Lanterne Rouge flips the Tour de France on its head and examines what these stories tell us about ourselves, the 99% who don’t win the trophy, and forces us to re-examine the meaning of success, failure and the very nature of sport.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Max Leonard is a writer and amateur cyclist. He has written about bicycles for *Esquire*, *Monocle*, *Rouleur*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Guardian* blogs, *Rapha* and others, and wrote the *City Cycling Europe* guides for Thames & Hudson, as well as *FIXED* for Laurence King. He has never knowingly come first – or last – in anything.

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MAX LEONARD

LANTERNE ROUGE

The Last Man in the Tour de France

Yellow Jersey Press
LONDON

So the last shall be first, and the first last.

Matthew, 20:16

Prologue

ISSOIRE

… success, especially your own, is not a good subject; failure is.
Tim Krabbé

17 July 2011: the Auvergne, central France.

My day begins in a hotel car park at 4.45 a.m., applying wet weather lube to my bicycle chain as warm, fat raindrops fall slowly all around. It is my first real moment of consciousness on the journey from the short hours of sleep to the start line. I'm one of the 4,500 amateurs riding the Étape du Tour, the closed-road event that gives cycling fans the chance to emulate their heroes and ride one stage of the Tour de France. This stage, 208 kilometres through the mountains of the Massif Central from Issoire to Saint-Flour, is one of the toughest in the 2011 race.

We had known the storm was coming, had watched the black clouds gather for days over the extinct volcanoes surrounding the start town but had hoped in vain that ignoring them would forestall the inevitable. But by the time we are in the start pen waiting for the 7 a.m. gun, those clouds have been making good on their promise. It has been raining for hours. The mayor of Issoire counts us down, and then we're off, over the start line early and riding easily with a fast group, the bike sliding smoothly through the wet.

For a year as a student I lived in Clermont-Ferrand, the regional capital just 20 kilometres from here, and a French friend from that time, David, who still lives in the area and teaches in a primary school, has promised to be out on the road clapping us through. It is miserably early on a Sunday morning and, with the road spray and the rain jackets, the cagouls and the umbrellas, I am not sure either of us will recognise the other, but the idea that he is there gives me comfort. That there are any spectators at all for this amateur jolly through an unseasonal storm is astounding.

Forty kilometres in, the first climb, the Côte de Massiac, splinters the bunch. The gradient takes its toll and each man settles into his solitary rhythm. At the top is a featureless plateau and a long drag up to the 1,200-metre Col du Baladour.

Up above 1,000 metres the wind rises, the temperature drops and the remaining groups split. No hiding in the bunch from the gusts. Rain stings the eyes, then hail, yet for 20 kilometres or more it feels OK. Hands? Not too cold. Feet? Not too cold. Head down, watch the wheel in front, take a turn and drop back off. The mist closes in, the world shrinks. A small square of black tarmac ahead of the front wheel, the sound of the wind, raindrops pelting my rain jacket. I begin to see riders on this closed road heading the other way, turning back for the start. Then a descent. Five kilometres? Three? Long enough to numb the feet and strip feeling from the hands, making it near impossible to work the brakes. Glasses discarded, head bowed to stop hail hitting eyeballs, arms and shoulders chilled rigid, suppressing shivers with every breath. Wobbling along, buffeted from side to side, gripping the bars. At the bottom in Allanche, the first feed station, my faster companions are waiting for me, blue-lipped and unable to speak. We watch as riders young and old travel erratically down the slope. Looking shell-shocked, they dismount and dump their expensive bicycles on the ground before sitting down next

to them or running for warmth in the village hall, which has been opened because of the weather. Two degrees at the top of the next col, someone says.

So we do something professional riders very rarely do, and especially rarely in the Tour. We give up. DNF – did not finish. Thousands of others that day did the same.

In normal circumstances I do not quit. I hate failing. Coming into the feed stop I remember thinking – somewhat confusedly – that I should keep rolling through, because if I climb off the bike I will not get back on it. But the sight of my friends, better riders than me, already resigned to abandoning alleviates any residual guilt or self-recrimination. I feel curiously blank about giving up. The coaches that will take us to Saint-Flour are next to the long racks of abandoned bikes, which will be trucked to meet us there. We climb on board and wait, and as we warm up we steam. The windows cloud with condensation that obscures the scene outside, making the extreme, miserable cold seem far away, and we begin to laugh about how awful it had been. My friend Joe, a late addition to the coach party, is asked to get off just as the bus is preparing to leave as he does not have a seat to himself. I feel sorry for him, back out in the chill.

It’s only when I see him at the hotel that evening, wandering around glassy-eyed, full of beer and calorie debt, that I realise that instead of waiting for another coach he’d retrieved his bike and cycled to the end. I feel obscurely jealous of his feat of suffering, and my pride begins to dent. That was where the itch kicked in. Nobody I was with blamed us for abandoning: in the circumstances it was the right thing to do. I had not asked for sponsorship, since my friends knew I cycled events like this for fun, had not sacrificed my social life for months of training (the Saturday and Sunday before, I’d ridden 380 kilometres, Brighton to Paris and back, so hadn’t felt the need to get fit specifically); I knew I had enough free time and was

enthusiastic enough to go and ride on beautiful mountain roads again pretty soon. In short, it didn't matter to anyone else that I'd failed. Only to me. Those feelings of stubborn pride and thwarted tenacity, it would turn out, took a long time to shake off. The challenge would not be as easy to relinquish as simply getting on a bus.

A week before, albeit in better weather, the pros' experience of the Tour stage on those same roads had been no less dramatic: on a fast, narrow descent, a horrific crash broke collarbones and wrists and forced six riders to abandon their journey to Paris. Alexander Vinokourov, leader of Team Astana, was lifted out of a tree by his teammates, a broken elbow and femur ending his valedictory Tour; other big names including Dave Zabriskie and Jurgen Van den Broeck fared barely any better. Later, Team Sky's Juan Antonio Flecha was sideswiped by a France Télévisions car that, against race authorities' orders, was passing a breakaway group on a narrow road. He hit the floor in front of Johnny Hoogerland, catapulting the Dutchman into a barbed-wire fence. Despite deep lacerations to his thigh, which would require 33 stitches, Hoogerland got back on his bike and finished the stage, 17 minutes behind the day's winner.

Even before my inglorious dismount I'd been in awe of the demands of professional racing. Trying – and failing – to ride just one stage in the wake of the pros really puts you in your place. Their fitness levels and the lengths to which they push themselves are almost unimaginable. For those shooting for a place in history, the pain and the sacrifices might – just – be worth it (Hoogerland went on to take the King of the Mountains jersey for several stages). But professional cycling is not a zero-sum game. Behind every winner there are a hundred other riders, indistinguishable in the swarm of the peloton as they go about the dangerous business of racing. Guys who, for little reward or

recognition, ride hard, crash, get back on and keep on going. Then get up the next day and do it all again, one more time, with feeling. Repeat to fade. In modern Tours there are the prologue and stage wins, four jerseys, the combativity prize and the team prize; barring the odd team time trial, that's a maximum of 35 'winners' each year. And the corollary: 163 guys – if miraculously nobody drops out – who wake upon plump duck-feather pillows and Egyptian cotton bedlinen at the Hotel Concorde La Fayette the day after the Champs-Élysées party, officially unrecognised and unrewarded, with only sore legs, deep tanlines, a raging metabolism and some flaking scabs to take home with them. And don't forget the hangover.

One of them each year is the *lanterne rouge*, to give the last man in the general classification his popular title. It is probably cycling's most notorious prize and it exerts a peculiar pull on many fans. Some see the *lanterne rouge* as a joke, simply a booby prize for an untalented rider; others as a survivor's badge of honour awarded to a man nobly struggling on against the odds. At once emblematic of failure and yet imbued with the most sought-after qualities, the *lanterne rouge* is a paradox – both celebrated as a symbol and yet, for the most part, forgotten as an individual. What is for sure is that, for better or worse, the *lanterne rouge* does not quit. Each year, by the time he lays his head on that Parisian pillow, he will have outlasted approximately 20 per cent of the starting field – his competitors mainly dropping out because of injury or illness.

Fresh from my fiasco, with the experience of abandoning a Tour stage still raw, I wanted to find out more about the man behind the *lanterne rouge*. With the spectator's feeling for the underdog, I had rooted for a few *lanternes* through various Tours. One stuck out: Kenny van Hummel, a Dutch sprinter. In 2009 he had occupied last place for much of the race, often finishing half an hour or more behind the stage

winner. Though manifestly not greatly suited to the task put in front of him, he had won himself a legion of new fans around the world with a gutsy ride in which he refused, through high mountains, heatwaves and tumbles, to bow to the inevitable and leave the race (until he crashed badly in the Pyrenees and had to withdraw).

Every year when the Tour comes around a story or two surfaces about the *lanterne*, either from that edition or from a journalist digging deep into the barrel of the race's rich history and coming out with an inspirational, sad or funny tale. Kenny's was that year's, and he attracted more attention than most. But aside from a few media opportunities each year, the back of the race is relatively unexamined.

So I began thinking: if you turned the Tour upside down and gave it a shake, what would fall out?

Really, I knew very little about the *lanterne rouge* or why I was interested, except for a few vague and interconnected notions.

First: I am not that keen on winning as a concept. Competition, yes; racing, yes; shooting for a goal and trying to be the best you can, definitely. And beating a rival can be an incomparable feeling, for both good and bad reasons. On the flipside, I am definitely not a fan of winning's opposite, losing … and that's OK, because this most certainly is not a book about losers. However, once the race is run, the whistle blown or the results in, I lose interest in the idea of the winner, it feels somehow shallow. We're often told that it's not the winning but the taking part that counts. It is said consolingly to a bereft child at a school sports day, to someone who's just missed out on a job opportunity and to a thunderous-looking bloke whose team has just been thumped in the derby on home turf. But, if there is more to life than winning, what, exactly, is there?

Second: I was bored of listening to most winners. Their point of view, it seems to me, is potentially one of the least

interesting on any contest, yet they hog the limelight. Listen to certain great champions from any sport and you'll hear platitudes about focus, toughness and achieving one's dream, but precious little insight into what actually went on. Dig down into the peloton, on the other hand, and there are as many stories as there are men and stages. Riders who experience lots of different facets of the race, who, after spending hours and hours in the saddle, watch for the umpteenth time the backsides of the fast guys disappear up a hill – they must have had some time to reflect on winning and losing and why they do what they do. For those of us outside sport, who probably never actually come first (or last) in anything in life, that might be useful.

A third and final thought: if there is more to life than winning, it must be contained somewhere in the Tour de France. Because the Tour is more than a race: it is a bastion of France and French culture, a three-week lesson in that country's geography and history; it is a drama of ethics and emotions; a tragicomedy in which 200 people want the same thing yet only one will get it, and many aren't even capable; a melodrama of (false) hope and (doomed) endeavour, desperation and despair, optimism and disillusion; a human zoo and life in microcosm. Not to mention that it's a three-week test of the commentators' ability to fill dead time with chat about châteaux and cheese.

Tony Hoar, the first British *lanterne rouge*, wrote an article for *Cycling* magazine in 1955, giving his impressions of the first British sortie on to Continental cycling's biggest stage. 'The Top Tour Rider needs the Qualities of Zátopek, Marciano, Harris, Tenzing and Coppi', ran the overly long headline. Respectively, the era's greatest long-distance runner, world heavyweight champion boxer, record-breaking trackman, Everest-conquering mountaineer and the *campionissimo* – cycling's champion of champions.

Could this ever be one rider? I wanted to go in search of men who had once aspired to these qualities and definitively fallen short – who indeed could not have fallen any shorter. To find out more about these riders who were unable to win and yet unwilling to fail, and to talk candidly with them about the race in a situation in which they did not have to explain why they didn't get the yellow jersey.

To ask them: what keeps you – keeps us all – going? Why not simply get off and do something easier and less painful instead?

Chapter 1

THE FIRST LAST MAN

Now all the truth is out,
Be secret and take defeat
From any brazen throat,
For how can you compete,
Being honour bred, with one
Who, were it proved he lies,
Were shamed neither in his own
Nor in his neighbours' eyes?
Bred to a harder thing
Than Triumph, turn away …

'To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Nothing', W.B. Yeats

I'd been searching for signs of life – signs of *a* life – for so long it came as a relief when I finally saw his face.

For days I'd been scanning the pages of the defunct sports newspaper *L'Auto*, picking out his name in 110-year-old race reports. Days among snoozing old men and equally somnolent students in the basement of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the French national library, on the windblown Left Bank of the Seine, scrolling through rolls of scratchy microfilm, chasing ghosts on bicycles on their maiden journey around France.

I was looking for Arsène Millochau, who I'd plucked out of obscurity because, I'd reasoned, the story of the last man in the Tour de France has to start with the first to have that dubious honour. But I was beginning to regret setting

myself the task. It hadn't proved easy to unearth any facts about him, and what I'd intended to be just a simple historical sketch was turning into a manhunt, a cross between an archaeological dig and a missing person's investigation. The only thing I could be sure of, it seemed, was that he'd been last, first. In 1903 he'd crossed the finish line a whopping 64 hours, 57 minutes, eight-and-two-fifths seconds after the winner, Maurice Garin, 21st of 21 finishers.

Millochau raced the first Tour – and raced pretty badly you might say – then never attempted it again.

Some things about the first Tour are pretty well established. That it was, for example, the last throw of the dice to save *L'Auto*, a French sports newspaper, from failure in a bitter circulation battle, and that its editor, Henri Desgrange, was a fierce, athletic ascetic who seized upon the idea of sending riders on a wild six-stage tour of France when it was suggested by his junior reporter Géo Lefèvre over a glass or two of Chablis and a lobster thermidor, as they tried to dream up publicity wheezes to save the crisis-struck paper.[fn1] Ever since the world's first road race, Paris–Rouen in 1869, and especially after the success of the first Bordeaux–Paris in 1891 for the weekly *Véloce-Sport*, French newspapers had organised promotional races. Paris–Brest–Paris (1891) and Paris–Roubaix (1895) are two of the best known that still survive in some form today, but this was even more ambitious. A tour of France. It is a crazy plan, but it might just work.

Aside from these known knowns – to paraphrase Donald Rumsfeld – there are a lot of known unknowns, too, but also a lot of half truths, maybes and facts bordering on myth. After all, what do most of us know about Maurice Garin aside from he had a period-correct set of moustaches, a nice line in chunky knitwear and was partial to a gasper every now and then? That he won the first Tour de France, yes, and that he was disqualified from the second Tour for

taking the train. Or maybe that was Pottier. Or was that 1906? And the Tourmalet was the first mountain they climbed? In the Tour, more than in many other historical events, it's a case of you tell me your truth, I'll tell you mine.

Until the bibliothèque in Paris all I'd had to go on was a very brief Wikipedia entry and some tantalising references on distant strands of *le web*. I was pretty sure Millochau had been born in Champseru, near Chartres in north-western France, in 1867, but couldn't quite be sure of his name: many sources had it as 'Millocheau' with an 'e'. Old Arsène was a shadowy figure, almost coquettish in his reluctance to let himself be known, and I had been drawn into the chase. I'd been sending out fruitless enquiries on Internet forums, and missives via obscure genealogy sites, but the bibliothèque was where I hoped a few scrappy facts might be saved from the waste-paper basket of history. As the old *L'Autos* unspooled in front of me so did the first Tour, as if happening for the first time. And Arsène's role gradually came into focus. Unfortunately for him, right from the off that role predominantly involved bringing up the rear.

In January 1903 Desgrange officially launched the Tour de France, 'The greatest cycling test in the world'. Europe's cyclists, however, were not as gung-ho as he was; initially scheduled for June, the start was pushed back to July because of the lacklustre response. From May onwards the race, the regulations Desgrange was dreaming up and in particular the prizes were regular 'news' in *L'Auto*. It cost 10 francs (around €100 in today's money) to enter and a list of new *engagés* was published daily but, despite Desgrange's efforts, sign-up was slow. The 15 June deadline loomed and the front-page exhortations to riders, by turns cajoling and pleading, became more frequent and urgent.

1 June: 'Almost all the "cracks" of the road have already entered,' *L'Auto* says, as if this might encourage lesser riders to part with their money and throw their names in the hat. Millochau, probably not being regarded as a 'crack', is not one of them. 7 June: Lucien Pothier, who will finish second, becomes only the 37th name on the list; Arsène's still not there. 11 June: Desgrange resorts to publicly naming and shaming such stars as Lucien Petit-Breton (a future winner) who have signed up but have yet to pay their fees. Come and have a go if you think you're hard enough; Millochau is still conspicuously absent.

Finally, on Tuesday 16 June, the first edition after the Monday evening deadline: 'A. Millochau (Chartres)', 67th out of an eventual 80 conscripts – the paper magnanimously promises to honour entries posted by 5 p.m. the day before. Even though his participation had never seriously been in doubt, it still sent a thrill down my spine to see the name in print for the first time.

What was Millochau thinking at that point? Riding 2,428 kilometres around France as fast as you can is a big commitment, and 10 francs would have been a lot of money to waste if you didn't have serious designs on the race, even with the allowances paid to each rider to defray the cost of participation. On the other hand, anyone who's ever signed up late for a race or a sportive knows that getting your entry form in at the last minute is hardly a sign of overweening confidence. Arsène was a bicycle mechanic after his racing career, and probably during it too, so riding the Tour would conceivably have lost him money but also been potentially good for business. He may have fancied his chances, or have been lured as a bear to honey by the rather generous allowances, but he must have balanced the pain, hardships and loss of earnings against the gleaming possibility of glory, fame and fortune.

On the start line at the Au Reveil Matin café in Montgeron, just south of Paris, there are only 60 men. Present are the favourites, among them Maurice Garin and Hippolyte Aucouturier, but Millochau is there too, meaning he has already outlasted one quarter of the original field. They are about to embark on a super-sized 467-kilometre first stage to Lyon in central France.

'My sportsman's heart delighted in the spectacle of these courageous men, silhouetted in golden dust by the sun, before whom the road stretched into infinity,' writes Géo Lefèvre, gearing up for the reams of lofty copy he will be expected to file over the next three weeks. But for all the highfalutin words, genuine doubts remain. Can it even be done, this Tour de France? In many remote parts of the country the bicycle is an unknown machine, and the sight of charging riders frightening for the locals; even in large towns there is outright disbelief that a man might pedal to the next town. At the inaugural Bordeaux–Paris race, villages along the way prepared banquets and beds, believing the riders would take several days to cover the 560 kilometres whereas, fuelled by a combination of raw meat and an unidentified special 'tonic', the fastest rider took only 26 hours. Ditto, Paris–Brest–Paris (1,200 kilometres) seemed unimaginably far until a bloke called Charles Terront made it look easy, conquering it with barely any sleep in 71 hours and 22 minutes. Dirt roads and primitive technology – heavy, unreliable bicycles, rickety wheels, no gears – were but two of the major impediments: everywhere in early racing there is a sense of pushing the boundaries of human endeavour, of finding out through trial and, if necessary, error what the limits of the possible are.

Desgrange is very keen on pushing limits but he also feels these doubts. He is there to wave the riders off, but, betraying his fear of failure, he will not follow the Tour. That job, which comprises timekeeping, marshalling and

reporting, he leaves to little Géo Lefèvre, who must chase the race in a madcap succession of train journeys. In a further sign Desgrange is hedging his bets, the front page the day before the Tour starts is consecrated to the marvellously named Gordon Bennett Cup, an annual motor-racing challenge between moustachioed gentlemen amateurs from England and the United States.

The *Grand Départ* is scheduled for around 3 p.m. in the hope that the riders will arrive in Lyon on the morrow in time for the results to be telegraphed to Paris before the next day's paper goes to print that evening. At 3.16 precisely they're off, and Desgrange retires to his newsroom. Lefèvre follows the first 60 kilometres in a car – long enough to see Arsène dropped from the main group. In the first four hours, 20 men join those 20 who didn't start, and get off their bikes. Millochau rides through the crowds thronging the route and passes the first checkpoint, at Cosne after 174 kilometres, in just over six hours – 19 minutes after Garin. According to the account that appears the next day, the roadside support does not let up all night. Édouard Wattelier, one of the favourites, abandons at some point in those dark hours but Garin is in Lyon at 9:01 a.m., having covered the rough roads at an incredible 26 kilometres per hour. Millochau comes in almost 10 hours later, just before 7 p.m., 33rd out of 38 finishers.

What happens during those extra hours of brittle, sleep-deprived cycling through the blinding daylight? Perhaps there are mechanical problems – this is, after all, an era when riders are responsible for all their own repairs, and where several hours can easily be lost mending a wheel or taking a pair of forks to the blacksmith. Perhaps Millochau finds a quiet corner and has a nap under a tree, his bicycle stashed behind a hedge for safekeeping. What is easier to know – yet far less revealing – are the implacable, inescapable numbers. By the end of the second stage, in Marseille, Millochau is almost 25 hours behind Garin and

has slipped into last. After a terrible third stage to Toulouse, Millochau has been riding for 84 hours, 48 minutes and 55 seconds, almost a day and a half longer than Garin. Steadily, many of those above him drop out, but Arsène keeps going. He is now last, and will be last for the rest of the race. Toulouse to Bordeaux, Bordeaux to Nantes and, completing the circuit, Nantes to Paris.

Once or twice he disappears from the official classifications only to be magically reinstated the next day – a result of carelessness, or an understandable lack of interest in the tail-end Charlie, I conjecture. Save for the official inscription of his name at the checkpoints he passes, he appears only once more in *L'Auto* during the whole Tour: at Orléans, 155 kilometres from Paris: 'At 9.50 a.m., Millochau, very fresh. He lunches.'

He gets dropped, and he lunches. Is that it? I think. Any old fool can do that, but this man, in between those two mentions, cycles 2,200 kilometres – on his way to becoming one of only 21 men ever to loop around France – and all they can say is he lunches?

That was where I left Arsène one evening: him eating, me turfed out of the library at closing, frustrated at bumping up against what was both a practical and philosophical problem: how to tell the story of the back of the race. Races, if you'll forgive the basic point, are really one-directional. They're teleological, goal-oriented: everyone's trying to get to the top of the pile. The attention of the riders, organisers, fans and media is focused at the front and there's very little interest in what goes on at the other end, so what happens there is likely to get lost. Throw the historical distance into the equation and it becomes doubly tough: go all the way back to 1903 and the swirling mists of time and bad historians have almost carried the winner off into obscurity, let alone that pariah figure, the last-placed man.

I repaired to a canalside Parisian bar where a beer or two did much to quell such pseudo-profound angst. Then I *vélib*-ed back to where I was staying. At a red light in the Rue de Charonne, I checked my inbox on my phone for the 473rd time that day. And there they were. Two emails: one from Millochau's great-grand-nephew, and one from a Tour historian containing a scan of a *Miroir Sprint* article from 1947. Accompanying the article there are two photos of Arsène Florentin Millochau, fit and healthy at a grand old age and still mending bikes on – I'm not making this up – the Rue de Charonne. In the first, he's wearing a workingman's jacket and a peaked hat like a bus conductor's, and is cycling along the street on a town bike with flat handlebars. 'Still alert and smiling' deadpans *Miroir Sprint*, '«Papa» Millochau prefers his bike to *Le Métro*' – managing to make this historic Tour finisher sound like your average fluoro-clad commuter on a Halfords-bought hybrid. In the second picture Arsène, a small, elven man, is in his kitchen, which also doubles as his workshop. The walls are festooned with old bike parts, yellowing photographs, advertisements and race numbers, including his one from the 1903 Tour, and the crankset he used in the first ever Bordeaux–Paris. He is inspecting a chainring over a vice and looks like a follower of the bash-it-with-a-hammer-and-hope philosophy of bicycle repair. And why not: it's not one that ever goes out of style, and is probably just the job when you're faced with riding a heavy bike with no gears over dirt roads for more than 20 hours at a time. It's those kind of hardships that leads him to scoff: '*Le Tour d'aujourd'hui? Une simple randonnée*.' Today's Tour? A walk in the park.

As for his other achievements, Emile Toulouse, the *Miroir Sprint* reporter, is all ears. 'Just think: my bike weighed 33 kilos[fn2],' Millochau says, of the first Bordeaux–Paris, in which he claimed to have come 28th (held back, perhaps, by his hugely heavy bike). 'I had provided for all

eventualities and had armed myself with several spare parts.' After that, Arsène says, he was on the start line of the first Paris–Brest–Paris, and later at the first Paris–Roubaix in 1895. Add those three – still undisputedly the classics, the most prestigious races of their kind – to the first Tour de France, and suddenly Arsène, far from an unworthy straggler, becomes a kind of proto-racer, a pioneer present at all the most significant occasions marking the birth of road cycling.

As for Millochau the man, I'd found Thierry, Millochau's great-grand-nephew, through a French genealogical website. Like Arsène, Thierry was happy to share his stories. In his email, he wrote:

> Uncle Arsène was a family character. What I know of him was told to me by close relatives who knew him directly. My grandmother in particular has tender memories of him. She talks about him as a handsome athletic man, a seducer who was appreciated by women long after the end of his sporting career.
> […]
>
> Arsène came from a family of 11 children, all of whom we know about. One of his brothers, Louis, is my direct ancestor. Arsène was twice married. As the family legend has it, in his youth he would leave for long periods of solo training on the road. He also invented mechanical parts adapted for the bicycle racing of the day (I don't know anything more).
>
> His participation in the Tour remains, at least in the family's mind, an exploit that was very far from being a failure. He was himself very proud of it, and not at all cynical as today's sportsmen are. At the end of his sporting career, he maintained his passion by opening a bike shop in Paris.
>
> I remember when I was a child a newspaper cutting that showed his premises. The memories of him that remain portray a kind, independent hard-working man.

I send Thierry the cutting from *Miroir Sprint*, to rekindle that childhood memory.

The next morning I return to the library buoyed by the emails, ready to follow Arsène into Paris and triumphantly over the finishing line. In *L'Auto* of the morning of the final stage, Desgrange, mirroring my mood, is in superlative mode. His riders have overcome …

… the steepest mountains, the coldest, blackest nights, the most violent, most atrocious winds, the most unjust and numerous misfortunes, the longest roads, never-ending hills … nothing got the better of these men's dogged will. Is that to say that every man finished who started? No. But it seems at this time fair to applaud the victor and the vanquished, and to spare a thought for those who could not finish.[fn3]

At the final control in Ville d'Avray, just a few kilometres from the ceremonial end in the Parc des Princes velodrome, Garin arrived first, sealing his win. There, each rider was given a board with his finishing time painted on it, which they then took on, in their own time, to the velodrome. In the early days it was common for road races to end on the track – witness Bordeaux–Paris at the Porte Maillot, or Paris–Roubaix, which has made a legend of the Roubaix velodrome – at least in part because the huge crowds they'd attract would provide bumper ticket revenues for the track owner.[fn4] On 19 July, 1903 there was a programme of events including a paced 100-kilometre race and the French Speed Championships, to whip up the spectators before the Tour riders arrived. They would be introduced, all freshened up, on to the track in order, displaying their finishing time at Avray, for a celebratory few laps.

And Arsène wasn't there.

He was not given a finishing time in *L'Auto* that day. He was not, in fact, even recorded at Rambouillet (48 kilometres from the finish) or Versailles (13 kilometres away). At Ville d'Avray, he didn't get a board, and he didn't get to ride his laps of honour in front of a roaring, delirious crowd.

Did he simply pack up and go home, I wondered, or perhaps, judging victory laps pointless, head straight for the Au Reveil Matin in Montgeron, his departure point three weeks previously, for a slap-up meal and a vat of red

wine? He was, after all, a man barely noted in contemporary accounts for his capacity to race, but very keen on lunch.

After I got over the temptation simply to wind the microfilm back up and tell nobody – least of all Thierry – about the terrible secret I had found, I sat there for a minute or two, pondering this turn of events and my pursuit of Arsène in general. On the whole, it didn't surprise me that the identity of the first last man might have been misattributed or forgotten somewhere along the long road to the present day. One of the difficulties with the history of the early Tour is that in 1940 the Tour organisation, fearing the Nazis, packed up its archives and sent them by train to the south of France for safekeeping – where, ironically, they were completely destroyed in a fire. Hundreds must have consulted these public microfilms to study the Tour, but how many were really concentrating on the bottom of the GC? It appeared, having gone back to the source, that Arsène was not the first *lanterne rouge*.[fn5]

It brought me down with a bang. My *grand projet*, which is in some senses about failure, was starting with a big fat failure of its own. What was I doing resurrecting the career of this nobody, instead of poor Émile Moulin, the last man to have a recorded finishing time in that Tour-finishing edition of *L'Auto*? I felt like a mad pirate trying to nail mist to the mizzenmast. Would I have to start again with Émile instead? Perhaps I should not have been trying to elevate one man at the expense of another, possibly equally deserving one. Perhaps they should all simply be left in obscurity and a tomb of the unknown cyclist erected in their honour.

One by one, I checked the rest of Arsène's 'known' achievements, as listed by the man himself in *Miroir Sprint*, against outside sources, and he quickly proved to be not only a Houdini in print but also an unreliable witness to his own life. Twenty-eighth in the first Bordeaux–Paris was the

wonderfully named Pierre Tardy, not Millochau. Nor was he on the start list for the first Paris–Brest–Paris or the first Paris–Roubaix. He might have beaten the Paris–Amsterdam record in the 1890s (also mentioned in *Miroir Sprint*), but I couldn't back that up. None of Arsène's many claims, in fact, seemed at all grounded in reality, and it wasn't looking at all good until I skipped forward to the second PBP, in 1901, just to check. There, his name *was* on the start list; more heartening still it was on the finishers' list too – a very respectable 47th.

And that was where my research time in Paris ran out. I'd come hoping to firm up my story but departed knowing less than before: yes, I'd succeeded in putting flesh on the bones, but I was now less certain that they were the bones I wanted. Arsène was AWOL on the Tour and, aside from one other confirmed sighting, the histories I had were wrong, the journalism shoddy and the star, if not a charlatan or fantasist, then perhaps at best a teller of tales.

Back in the UK, I resorted to trawling the Internet once more – forums, history websites, all the usual suspects – but it felt futile. If you've been back to the primary texts and found them wanting, how could these secondary sources help out? I needed a specialist to help me make sense of what was going on all those years ago. To my rescue came a Frenchman called Pierrot Picq, a Tour historian who has given the first Tour close study. Arsène, he told me, had not failed to finish, only failed to cross the finish line before the evening's print deadline.

In a flash, those gaps that I had seen in Arsène's attendance at certain stage finishes became entirely comprehensible: with everybody's attention on the front-runners, and an imperative to publish a daily newspaper, the presses simply could not wait for slow cyclists. Had I been able to check the next day's paper, Arsène's final stage time would have been there in black and white (for

the record: he wasn't last), and his final place in the GC confirmed.

Millochau had reclaimed the throne of first last man. For my part I was relieved that all my work had not been wasted. It had felt cruel taking away a man's only extant achievement, and I also felt, somewhat bizarrely, proud of him.

Picq also helped me to fill in the details of Arsène's racing life and *palmarès*. He called Arsène 'one of the pioneers of racing, on the road and track', and gave me some of his race results:

1895	Bordeaux–Paris: 9th
1896	Bordeaux–Paris: 13th
1897	Paris–Roubaix: 24th
	Bordeaux–Paris: 5th
	Bol d'Or (a prestigious 24-hour paced track event): 4th
1902	Marseille–Paris: 13th

Much later on, in 1921, he came 34th in Paris–Brest–Paris and the following year started Bordeaux–Paris, but abandoned. He was 55 years old.

All in all, not bad for a loser and, given that Millochau was talking to *Miroir Sprint* at half a century's remove from the events in question, it's understandable he might have got a few dates wrong. But it is impossible to ignore how far behind the winner he was: Arsène's 1903 Tour was the best part of 65 hours longer than Garin's. It's not quite the record: Antoine de Flotrière, *lanterne rouge* in 1904, took an astounding 100 hours and 28 minutes (and 52 seconds) more than that year's fastest man, on exactly the same course as Millochau. Four other *lanternes* in the 1910s and '20s finished 65 hours or more behind, too.[fn6] Sixty-five hours is a very long time: a modern pro could ride most of a whole Tour de France in the extra time Millochau spent on the road over Maurice Garin. Speed-wise, Garin did not let

up (his winning margin over second place, at almost three hours, was the largest there's ever been) and he was so fast he almost outran Géo Lefèvre, *L'Auto*'s roving correspondent. Lefèvre, commissaire and timekeeper, failed in his roles at the first hurdle: when his train got to Lyon for the end of the first stage, Garin was already tucking in to breakfast. Millochau's average speed, by contrast, was around 11 kilometres an hour slower than Garin's.[fn7]

Survey the whole history of the Tour and the average speeds are interesting. Technology, road surfaces, training, nutrition and on-the-road support have all contributed to their steady rise, though today's Tours are slightly slower than those during the EPO years in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As for the gap between front and back, in the early days, when riders were racing solo on dirt roads and were forced to do their own repairs, it fluctuated wildly. After the Second World War, however, once the Tour became definitively a team endeavour, mechanical help was allowed and the road surfaces became decent, the gap between leader and lantern stabilised and shrank. Post-war, all that separates first and last over thousands of kilometres and 60 or more years is an average speed of between one and two kilometres per hour. Take the recent example of Adriano Malori, a former under-23 Italian national time-trial champion and 2010's *lanterne rouge*, who completed the 3,642 kilometres at an average speed of 37.7 km/h – only 1.9 km/h less than the winner, Alberto Contador (who in any case was subsequently stripped of his title). Or José Berrendero, who rode for Spain in the 1960 Tour: 35.63 km/h, as compared with yellow jersey Gastone Nencini's 37.21 km/h. There are many, many more: the rule really does hold, despite the increases in the averages overall.

One or two kilometres per hour, over three or four thousand kilometres. Such is the margin between success and defeat.