

FIRST TWO CHAPTERS

Published by
SUNPENNY PUBLISHING
www.sunpenny.com

TITLE: Blackbirds Baked In A Pie
(Memories of Rozinante)
AUTHOR: Eugene Barter
ISBN: 978-1-907984-16-7
CATEGORY: Non-Fiction/Memoirs/Cookbooks
RRP: £9.99
PUBLISHER: Sunpenny Publishing
PUBLISHED: March 2013
FORMAT: Paperback, 203mm x 133mm,
326 pages

At age 60 Eugene Barter, along with her sister and brother-in-law, moved to a house in the foothills of the Pyrenees to start an auberge. This is the story of her experiences. Humorous and often self-mocking, always gentle and quirky, Eugene takes us on a journey through the countryside and its people, Catalans and French alike, with a good dose of her German and English guests thrown in. Her love of the region shines from the pages – surely a timeless joy for all ages.

The second half of the book focuses on the recipes with which Eugene used to feed her guests, though still interleaved with her engaging anecdotes. English, Catalan and French recipes, all easy to follow, sit side by side, and there are conversion charts to help step through the metric and imperial standards, and maintain that essential *entente cordiale!*

Born in Penarth, South Wales, Eugene left school at 16 to work as a trainee journalist on two local newspapers, in the days when discrimination against women in the workplace made the job twice the challenge it was for male colleagues. Moving on to an assignment in Holland at a Unesco conference, she stayed on for two years, learning the language and working with companies in Amsterdam struggling to get back on their feet after the horrors of the second World War. Studying with the Open University in her late forties, she became a Tutor/Counsellor after graduating, before moving briefly back into journalism, then working in the House of Commons – eventually becoming Senior Secretary to Sir Edward Heath. In her sixties she took on the running of an

BLACKBIRDS BAKED
IN A PIE

(Memories of Rozinante)

EUGENE BARTER

With drawings by Mary Jose

BLACKBIRDS BAKED IN A PIE

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ISBN # 978-1-907984-16-7

First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Sunpenny Publishing
www.sunpenny.com
(Sunpenny Publishing Group)

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*To my family and friends, whose love and support
made the French adventure such fun!
– and to entente cordiale.*

Every man has two countries: his own, and France.

– Thomas Jefferson, America's 3rd President

*J'ai toujours attaché une enorme importance à la
nourriture, à la preparation des aliments. J'y vois
une forme de savoir-vivre, de savoir-aimer.*

– Régine Deforges

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Preface

Running *Rozinante*, my guest house in France, was a progressive experience through a long haul of trial and error seeking refinement and possible perfection. Not that I believe perfection is the ultimate goal, since personal taste is reflected in the ultimate choice of recipe and *Rozinante* was a special experience of catering for many different nationalities, although principally French and British. There was the added incentive of trying to prove to the French that British cooking was not as bad as they feared and every French compliment after a meal was music to my ears.

“Where do you get your recipes from?” a friend, a former opera singer with a life-time of exotic meals behind her, asked me after a party recently and without hesitation I replied, “From seven years of running a guest house in the French Pyrenees.” But lying in bed that night, when one’s thoughts circulate around the day’s events, I realised that my response was only partly true and what I should have said quite simply was, *From my mother*, because it is there that an interest and love of food and cooking commences and continues throughout one’s life and my dear mother not only loved cooking but enjoyed the fruits of her labours – as her weight testified.



Where to begin?

Well, at the beginning of course, and growing up in Wales in the 1930s there was hardship due to economic recession, just as the War, later in the 1940s, dictated the circumstances of what there was to eat. When I was young

most families had allotments and grew their own fruit and vegetables, and my earliest memory of really enjoying food was a plateful of freshly picked and cooked garden peas with a knob of butter and a thick wedge of my mother's own brown, home-baked bread. Equally delicious was a plate of mashed swede, served in the same way. Breakfast often consisted of the crust of the loaf smothered in 'dripping', the solidified fat from the Sunday meat roast.

From the War years and rationing came the enduring experience of eating offal, which, unlike meat, was not rationed. Hearts, livers, kidneys, sweetbreads, brains, tripe, sheep's head, and pigs' trotters and ears – all appeared regularly and were much enjoyed. It grieved me that I could never serve such dishes at *Rozinante*, since modern tastes are geared towards convenience and fast foods, palates often having been neutralised to reject all strong tasting food. Nevertheless, guests thoroughly enjoyed eating a first course of *charcuterie* and *pâté de campagne*, which relied heavily on the offal I have just described! Fortunately, in many parts of France traditional regional cooking prevails and menu boards outside restaurants will often offer offal dishes of kidneys, liver, pigs' feet and tripe, which are delicious.

Apart from offal, during the War it was 'corned beef hash' that made repeated and welcome appearances. This consisted of a tin of corned beef mixed with mashed potatoes and fried onions, baked in the oven with cheese and slices of tomatoes on top. Along with rabbit pie it was a great favourite, only replaced by tins of Spam once the Americans arrived on British shores, since slices of Spam could be fried, dipped in batter, chopped up on rice or just served cold with salad. We had never tasted anything quite like it, and I still enjoy it.

Once the War was over there was the long, slow decline of the individual grocer, butcher and baker, as the growth of the supermarket industry introduced us to a far wider range of food than we had ever had before. Simultaneously there was a tremendous expansion of world commerce, and the influx of immigrants into Great Britain accounted for much of the international content of stores today. With the increasing number of women going out to work there has also been an acceleration in 'fast food', with microwave

ovens and other kitchen aids such as mixers, pulverisers and bread-making machines, to name but a few, which have all brought culinary change in their train.

To try and write a cookery book today is to compete in one of the most difficult publishing fields and, whatever one's criticism of the 'fast food' syndrome, for the person who genuinely enjoys food the choice of recipes is limitless – as a glance at the culinary section in any bookshop will confirm. Foreign travel is so commonplace that dishes such as *paella*, *moussaka* and *coq au vin* are recognisable anywhere, and there are specialist books on almost every food culture conceivable.

There are growing numbers who reject meat and animal fats and look for vegetarian dishes, quite apart from those on diets who want wholesome but light-weight foods. Tastes have simplified and there is a far greater use of fruit and vegetables and much less fat in food these days, as people are aware of 'healthy' eating. We are also more familiar with people who suffer allergies and illness relating to certain foodstuffs.

I welcome the diversity of information now available. All I can hope is to offer a lifetime's interest in cookery, and how I was forced to hone whatever talents I have to suit the taste of my guests at *Rozinante*. If there is an emphasis on stews, casseroles, pies, sauces, cakes, and camouflage for left-overs, then this is, too, the result of catering for guests who would arrive and want to talk to me! I could not be locked up in the kitchen but would have to have prepared as much as possible in advance, and thus be free to socialise and help my clients to enjoy their holidays. The recipes are essentially French and Catalan in flavour because one uses local ingredients, refined to suit different tastes and, as I have discovered, it is not necessary to mix too many flavours or to try and prepare too rich or too exotic a dish.

The culmination of my cooking experience has been expressed in my *Rozinante* recipes. I hope that in using them the reader will understand, from this anecdotal account of our life in the Pyrenees Orientales, how integral to the joy of living in France was the dining table!

Bon appétit!



"... round and round in circles."

Chapter 1

Le Début

Where's the restaurant?" asked my sister, pushing her way impatiently through the swing-doors of the hotel we had booked for a week's intensive house hunting in France, but her progress towards food was unceremoniously overruled by the male members of our party, who steered us purposefully towards the bar! Drink, not food, was required after a fraught drive through the tortuously narrow streets of Perpignan's centre, where French direction arrows proved deliberately ambiguous, often indicating right when they meant straight ahead! Driving on the right hand side of the road in a left hand drive car frequently involved much turning on of wind-screen wipers instead of indication signals, thus causing havoc to traffic behind us.

There was also conflicting and often acrimonious advice from passengers to driver as to which lane he should be in when there were four to choose from – all this hampered by the fact that the French are notoriously impatient drivers and the slightest hesitation on a driver's part produces not only a chorus of protest from a dozen car horns but verbal abuse and shaking fists from car windows. Modern-day psychiatric investigations have produced conclusive evidence of distinct character changes in both men and women once they sit behind the wheels of their cars.

The French are no exception, often admitting – when challenged as to why they prefer to overtake on dangerous bends instead of safe stretches of road – that they do suffer from suicidal tendencies. Stopping for advice or directions also produces such conflicting instructions in rapid-fire

French that we soon regretted stopping at all.

“*Tout droit,*” said a gendarme dismissing us brusquely with a wave of his white-gloved hand.

“*Non, non,*” protested an onlooker (the French are always interested bystanders), “*c’est toujours à gauche!*” Which meant that we went around in circles, only to return like homing pigeons to the same vantage point.

Consequently it was a distinctly dishevelled and irritable foursome that finally unearthed the small hotel in the cul-de-sac we had passed constantly in our travels. Only the drinks and an eventual evening meal restored our British *esprit-de-corps*.

It had long been my ambition to live in France, although an incredulous friend could not believe the news when I told him I planned to retire there. When I asked why he was so surprised, he raised a mocking eyebrow and said, “But, the French, my dear, the French!”

“What about *entente cordiale?*” I countered.

“And what about perfidious Albion?” he replied darkly.

It is hard to explain one’s motivation to people, although having a French sister-in-law helped, since her devotion to her country of origin had never been in doubt, despite 30 years of living mainly in London. It was largely her advice that directed us to the Rousillon which was, we discovered, a natural, unspoilt region of France, little-known and only tentatively explored, with a lush vine-growing plain extending from the snow-capped Pyrenees to the dark, red coastline of the Mediterranean.



“There’s skiing in winter,” I defended my choice of location to friends, “and swimming and surfing in the summer.” What more could you ask for – and with property prices at a fraction of their counterpart on the more sophisticated Côte d’Azur, yet with a comparable climate?

In any event, the exploits of Don Quixote, the elderly Spanish knight who set off late in life for new adventures, sparked a reciprocal feeling, so that to me it did not seem at all strange at the age of sixty to find a house to use as

an *auberge* and prepare to tilt at whatever obstacles came our way.

The very first of these obstacles appeared in the form of successive estate agents whose ‘wide knowledge and expertise in helping clients to find the home of their dreams’ soon expanded into several nightmarish days of being shown property which looked as if nothing had been done to it since the sackings and lootings of the 18th Century French Revolution.

Opening the front doors proved impossible in some houses where every known kind of rot and worm had tortured the frame beyond endurance. We discovered marble sinks, but no electricity or running water. We had been warned that water was a scarce resource in the south of France and consequently we should always verify its whereabouts. To my amazement, ‘a source’ often meant a stream at the bottom of the garden which ran in the winter but dried up in the summer!

Time and time again, in one ramshackle house after another, having been told that ‘*tout est impeccable*’, my brother-in-law would ask what ‘impeccable’ really meant, while drawing my attention to a particularly large hole in the roof. Our initial disappointment with the properties we were shown owed nothing to language difficulties, since I had chosen English agents (fearing my inability to cope with the problem of house buying in the French language). So one listened sympathetically to the explanations of agents, but after three fruitless days chasing around the countryside we wondered whether the English agents had been left with those pieces of property the French had either failed or did not wish to sell!

On the other hand, one English agent said that most of the English who came prospecting frequently arrived with a long list of ‘priorities’ in their hand, such as *near the sea, cheap price, house of character* etc, and then ended up with a house that was miles inland, of very little character and quite expensive.

“The result is,” she said wearily, “we now largely ignore what the client says he wants, show him a cross-section of everything available and just hope to find something he can afford.”



*"... we now largely ignore what
the client says he wants."*

This somewhat cynical response was, we found, typical of the agent – Mrs Cadwallader, a formidable figure of great girth and weight who, despite her ungainly appearance, was prone to wearing brilliant yellow or red tracksuits. Don't hide it, flaunt it, seemed to be her motto.

Driving a van with reckless ease, she explained that on the death of her husband she had started to transport English antiques (mainly paintings, china and glass) from their original premises in Bath to market towns in Provence, where she had set up a stall and sold her wares. From these modest beginnings she had branched out into the buying and selling of property and it quickly became obvious that her driving skills were matched by an equally ruthless and determined approach to the property market.

Mrs Cadwallader had taken us in charge. It was she who introduced us to the Prades area of the Roussillon which proved to be a small market town nestling in the foothills of the Pyrenees, with a firm reputation as the cultural centre of the region. The world-renowned Pablo Casals



"... nestling in the foothills of the Pyrenees."

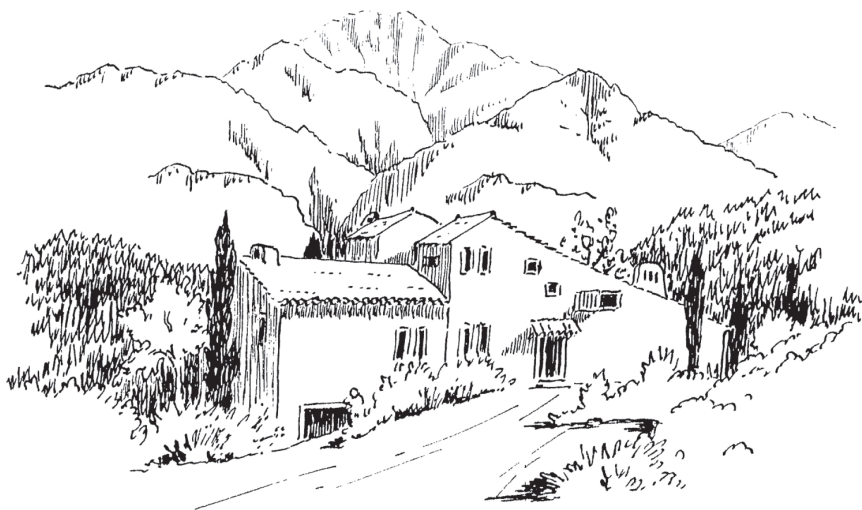
music festival took place every year at the local Abbey of St Michel de Cuxa to commemorate this musician's stay in the town after his flight from Franco's Spain during the Civil War.

The first house she showed us was a converted mill, but the route to the village in question was so steep, with sheer drops on either side, that I could imagine myself nervously checking the car brakes every time I ventured out. Consequently we decided to rule out mountain retreats, and returned to the depths of the valley with a sense of disbelief, as our week's house hunting was now nearly over with no sign of our dream property in view. I began to regret the many newspaper and magazine articles I had read extolling the beauties and reasonable prices of French property, without realising that a country as large as France has many regional variations and architectural designs.

The Dordogne, I discovered later, had in the 18th Century been a wealthy part of France from where the rich sent their sons to be educated in Paris. Once influenced by

the capital's splendid buildings, they returned to embellish their own homes. Perpignan, on the other hand, had been the centre of Catalonia – a poor, often struggling part of France, without rich soil or wealthy landlords, despite the mountain loveliness and beautiful climate. The Industrial Revolution had also passed it by, both an advantage and a disadvantage in as much as the natural beauty of the countryside prevailed, but the poor subsistence-style farming precluded the creation of fine houses and landscaped grounds.

On the very last morning of our week's stay, there was just one more house to view at a village called St Eulalie, and this tiny village burst upon our startled gaze with what may only be described as a vision from another world, since the magnificent landscape was dominated by the majestic and mysterious mountain of Canigou. There was inevitably another steep climb and another hairpin bend to be negotiated, so I closed my eyes and groaned, only to be told, "We've arrived!"



"... modern, but mellow and honey-coloured."

The house was modern but mellow and honey-coloured with steps around the side that led to a full and uninhibited view of the whole face of the mountain that still leaves me with a sense of awe every time I gaze at it. To our delight the house had a balcony, and although contemporary in design sported some rustic, solid-looking beams, both inside and out, that lent it a time-worn appearance. There was also – joy of joys! – a full-sized swimming pool, in need of minor repair and which the owner, should I agree his price, was willing to put in order. The price, incidentally, was just within our range.

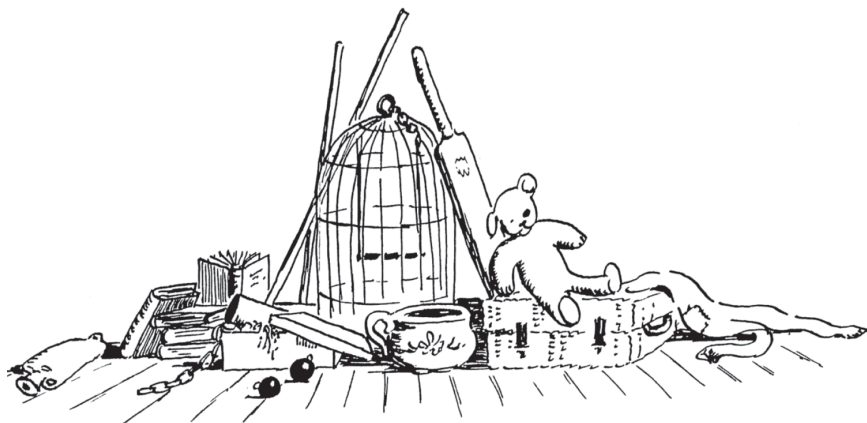
My sister fell in love with the house instantly. “How happy the dogs would be here!” was her oft-repeated opening remark, which proved both prophetic and true.

Fortunately the purchase of a house in France is simple, with no possibility of gazumping. It took only a brief meeting at the Notaire’s office in Prades, where a young solicitor spoke fluent English, to ease us into the first phase of property owning in France: an agreement to pay ten per cent of the purchase price immediately, and the remainder within three months. Any change of mind on my part and I would forfeit the ten per cent.

Once these brief formalities were over we all relaxed, ready to fly home and face the removal process, and it was the furniture removal that was to give us our first real taste of French bureaucracy, along with all the other formalities insisted upon by the French Consul in London before our departure. There were medicals by French doctors, attestations of character, declarations of financial solvency, and other references from eminent people.

But the furniture posed the biggest problem, since every item had to be declared together with estimated values and agonisingly difficult decisions had to be made about whether or not we really needed half the things we had been living with and cherishing for most of our lives. There were endless discussions on the relative merits of great grandmother’s potpourri pot and, more to the point, her solid mahogany bedside commode (might be both useful and valuable one day). Harsh decisions were taken – and often later regretted – while the amount of rubbish that continued to accompany us resides to this day in the cellar

below. Old cookery books, school exercise books and drawings, broken cricket bats, a half-worn croquet set, a parrot cage without the parrot (a much-loved bird whose famous phrase, "Christ, we've hit the bloody rocks again!" was clear witness to the family's obviously chequered maritime past) ...



"... what could be considered useful?"

However, by the end of March three of us were sitting in the garden of our beautiful villa in St Eulalie waiting for the furniture removal van to arrive, and it is just at such a moment in time, with the sun shining out of a cloudless blue sky, and when you feel that God is in his Heaven and all is well with the world, that something inevitably nasty rears its ugly head.

"I say," said my brother-in-law who, being deaf, generally speaks in a very quiet non-committal way, "someone's got a good fire going over there."

My son and I snoozed on regardless, and it was some quarter-of-an-hour later that we noticed a slight increase of concern in the tone of Ray's voice. Now standing apart from us, he said, "By Jove, it's gone up the hill and is now going down the other side!"

With the distinct smell of smoke in the air we leapt to our feet, to discover the long strip of forest on the other side of the valley blazing away and well into the process of leaping over the skyline towards the village of Corneille.

I could not believe my eyes, and my first thought was one of betrayal, since the previous owner had assured me that this part of France never suffered from forest fires. Yet here we were, on our very first week in the Pyrenees Orientales, with a blatant example of a forest fire blazing away, and there was still no water in our swimming pool to counter any insurgent approach. To confirm our worst fears, the air was soon filled with the sound of helicopters and aircraft spraying water, while fire engines and police cars raced along the narrow mountain tracks, now almost obliterated by large clouds of thick, black smoke.

What have I done? I agonised. Had I really bought a house only to see it reduced to cinders before we'd actually moved in!?

Needless to say, I did not sleep that night and spent the next three days harassing every Frenchman I met to ask in fractured French, "*Y-a-t'il des incendies ici?*" Since the bulk of those I met in the village spoke Catalan only, I did not get much in the way of a satisfactory response. With time, we learned that it was an isolated experience so far as St Eulalie was concerned and simply amounted to gross carelessness on the part of one of the oldest inhabitants when trying to burn too large a pile of rubbish at the bottom of his garden. Negligent in his supervision, he had ignored a sudden wind change, which had shot sparks over the garden fence with the dramatic consequence of igniting the dry scrub between the fir trees. It had been a very warm, dry spring, and fanned by the wind the fire had spread with alarming rapidity to the adjoining valley.

The experience was to prove helpful, as we learned from it the strict rules that apply in France to the lighting of domestic garden fires. Most are forbidden by the end of May, especially after dry spring seasons, and the penalty for provoking a major fire may be imprisonment. The memory of that fire licking and eating its way up the fir slopes was to have an unhappy and dramatic sequel some months later at *Rozinante*.

However, it was during the turmoil of the forest fire that our removal men arrived and the next two days were consumed with the feverish activity of trying to arrange furniture that had been collected from three different homes. Carpets proved to be too big or too small, while case after case of china and glass refused to be accommodated in the limited kitchen cupboard space. Electrical equipment, with British plugs, could not function in the French sockets, while tables and chairs that had looked perfectly at home in an English country setting now looked sadly out of place in the south of France.

We decided reluctantly that we did not need chintz, cretonne or lamps with lace frills, let alone English hunting and sporting prints. What I could imagine in their place was dark Catalan style settles and chests that would match the high-beamed ceiling and Spanish style tiled floors. But just as life is a series of compromises, we reached some kind of order eventually.

The days were lengthening, along with the hours of sunshine, and if the nights were cold because of our altitude we could close the shutters, light the log fire and, with full central heating, snuggle into bed and drop into deep and dreamless sleep.

Once again, it is precisely at this soft, unsuspecting moment, when you seem to be sliding into unaccustomed ease, that fate has a surprise in store.

Chapter 2

Un Resource Minimal

It was late one night, when my brother-in-law Ray and I were alone in the house, that I was jolted suddenly into wakefulness by the insistent throbbing from the garage of the pump that was responsible for distributing water around the house. Having suffered from deafness for most of his life, Ray was forced to wear a hearing aid, which he removed at night. The problem was that once asleep no sound would rouse him. On rare occasions, in emergencies when his wife had been forced to wake him, he had been known to mutter threateningly as he reapplied his hearing aid, “This had better be good!” In other words, fire, flood or other natural disaster, but not something trivial like, “I think I can hear a mouse in the room!”

But after standing at the top of the cellar steps for some time listening to the insistent throb of the motor in the darkness below, I made up my mind and shook Ray awake. Without hesitation, once he had heard my complaint, he ran down the stairs to disengage the pump which was, he discovered, on the point of blowing up! The reason for the pump’s aberrant behaviour was not hard to see when the huge plastic tank holding our water supply in the garage was found to be bone dry – thus no water in the tank for the pump to circulate, and so panic had been justified.

The next and most obvious question was – had I committed the ultimate folly of buying a house in the south of France, not with a forest fire problem, but an insufficient supply of water in the well problem? My French sister-in-law’s injunction to always verify my water source was

ringing in my ears. Hurried questions on the phone to the previous owner produced reassuring noises about how well the system had worked during his tenure, but the Notaire was not so reassuring as he advised gloomily that in the event of this proving to be a real and enduring difficulty, there would be no recourse in French law to sue the previous owner for misrepresentation, as it seems once you buy a house in France, you buy it warts and all.

Eh alors, que faire?

The Water Board said the matter could only be dealt with at a local level, which meant a visit to the office of the mayor. In this respect the system in France is a great deal more efficient, since every small hamlet has a local mayor who is the fountainhead of local administrative knowledge and expertise. I had intended visiting M. Cazenova to introduce myself and pay my respects, and had envisaged a delightful meeting full of *entente cordial*. The reality was somewhat different, as I now appeared at his door grey with lack of sleep, demanding fretfully what had happened to my water supply. (I was tempted to mention how that morning I had been forced to spend several pennies in the garden behind our one and only hedge, but since many Frenchmen enjoy doing that sort of thing, I realised it would not carry much weight!)

The mayor, once he grasped the situation, launched quickly into a defence of his territory's watering facilities, including the local canal system, which was used for watering crops and gardens. The canal, he explained, had been built by the Romans and operated on a system of sluices and channels which would release water into our property for one hour every week, with a calendar giving us our particular watering hour. These watering hours, he emphasised, had to be observed in the strictest sense, otherwise... The mayor spread his hands out and I had a vision of angry local farmers marching up my drive, pitchforks at the ready.

Noting my apprehension, he warmed to this theme and pointed to the necessity for us to understand local customs and traditions, which prompted me to say that my own native land of Wales had its own brand of rituals concerning foreigners. When I mentioned that certain groups of

politically motivated Welsh Nationalists had been known to set fire to or bomb holiday homes owned by the English, M. Cazenova rose to his feet in horror, and throwing his hands in the air said, “We are not barbarians and such things do not happen in France, Madame.”

Thus reassured, attention was once more focussed on a solution to our problem, which evidenced itself eventually in the person of M. Arabia, *le responsable* for the local water supply. He explained that due to the height at which our house had been built, any lowering in the local reservoir meant pressure problems on my supply. However, he quickly produced two local council men, who arrived to tackle the problem with a triumphant squeal of brakes and a flourish of tyres in an old battered council lorry.

In halting, bad French I gave explanations while they climbed ladders and peered gravely into waterless depths, with accompanying clicking and clucking noises and the inevitable French habit of raising their hands above their heads and rolling their eyes expressively as if to say, “The cure, Madame, is in the lap of the Gods!” It was with enormous relief that we saw them remove a rusty filter from an outlet pipe and within two seconds the blissful sound of running water filled our ears.

“*Pas de problème,*” they assured us with a casual wave of their hands as they prepared to leave.

“That’s all it was?” I asked incredulously.

“Seems so,” they replied in a deliberately off-hand way, although they confessed reluctantly there had been some works in the water supply down below in the valley, and, of course, given the height of the house and pressure problems... their voices trailed away significantly. The sky seemed to darken imperceptibly above my head.

“A pressure problem?” I quavered. “You mean there really is a water problem in St Eulalie?”

“Ah, Madame,” the taller of the two said, “it is always a miracle when water arrives at St Eulalie.”

Was the ground giving way beneath my feet, or was there a glimmer of humorous delight in their eyes? It took me some time and several catastrophies later to realise what a couple of well-meaning comedians these two council boys were – and why not? The sight of an elderly English lady

having a *crise de nerfs* over her water supply was an irresistible temptation.

“*Bonne chance,*” they waved happily as their tyres churned the gravel on the drive. “We’ll be back tomorrow.”

“What for?” I queried fretfully, wondering if this crisis was going to prove a daily one.

“We accidentally knocked the float off in the tank, but don’t worry we’ll get another one, unless you like fishing and can hook it up from the bottom!”

True to their word, they returned the next day to replace the float in the tank that was now, thankfully, brimming with clear mountain water, and from that fraught beginning was born a friendship and back-up service for all the minor irritations that living in an isolated community can present.

Unlike some council workmen I have known, these two men were exceptionally skilled in many basic trades such as plumbing, carpentry, electricity and general building repairs. Between them they ran the community along well-oiled lines and could be seen on almost a daily basis, collecting refuse, putting up lights for festivals and fête days and sustaining with an endearing sang-froid every eventuality and contingency a hamlet of some six hundred souls could devise. We discovered that Bernard, the taller, more grave-faced of the two, was a well-known and respected wood carver, able to hold occasional exhibitions of his work. The funny little float he designed for my water tank is a constant and happy reminder of his casual, humorous style, which I much appreciated – a tiny but aggressive French cockerel holding over its head a very British umbrella!

Having survived the domestic water problem it was time now to turn our attention to the garden. Following up on the mayor’s explanation of the system, we walked to the top of the hill at the back of the house to inspect the canal with its succession of sluices, which we had the right to open once a week throughout the summer watering season. It was M. Terrades who belched up the drive one day in his Deux-Chevaux waving a calendar at me and who, with thick Catalan overtones, pointed to the fact that, as the latest arrivals to the district, we were more likely to

find our watering hour at 2 o'clock in the night rather than 10 o'clock in the morning!

Needless to say, this information was given with a cackle of delight at our obvious dismay, while Ray was quite stunned at the news and on the appointed day and time had to be bribed with several whiskeys before setting out with a hurricane lamp to climb the hill and open the appropriate sluice.

This, however, proved catastrophic, since most of the irrigation ditches leading to the garden had not been cleared out for some time – with the result that the water, when finally released, rushed triumphantly down the hill, missed the target intended, and escaped through unexpected channels to sweep down our drive and along the road, ending up in the farm yard below. Worse was to come with morning's early light, when most of our cellar was revealed to be under water, with some earth shelves collapsing, while Jean-Bertrand, our French neighbour, erupted over the horizon to point to a small pond that had accumulated outside his kitchen door and which, he yelled, was now undermining the foundations of his house. The French words for 'I'll sue you!' were repeated so vigorously we had little need for our French dictionary to comprehend his intentions. A spirited run up the hill was organised to check the flood and close the sluices.

Much debate ensued over this problem, until the two men of the family rolled up their sleeves and dug a large hole in a natural hollow of ground which, in the course of time, was sanded, covered with a plastic sheet and filled with a permanent supply of water so that watering could take place whenever we required it and not when the sacred calendar decreed. As to the clearing of the ditches bordering our two properties, there was little debate but considerable dispute with our neighbour over who was responsible for what and the atmosphere was tense with ill feeling.

But if we thought our watering problems were over, we had discounted changing weather patterns, with disastrous consequences.

Like many British settlers in the region, we assumed the sun was a permanent fixture in the sky, taking into

account the proud boast of the Roussillon that the area enjoyed no less than three hundred days of sunshine a year. This is true when times are 'normal' but otherwise can change dramatically. Without warning, at the end of a very sultry, hot September afternoon, the sky darkened and the worst torrential rain I had ever seen poured down from an angry swollen heaven, to the point where the river at the bottom of the valley became a raging torrent, overflowed its banks, and changed course entirely, tearing like a rampaging beast across the countryside, destroying everything in its path. Whole swathes of trees on either side of the banks were tossed like matchsticks in a foaming tide of debris and destruction.

As for *Rozinante*, the sudden violent surge of water cascading down the mountain behind the house rapidly flooded the garage, thus putting at risk our electric boiler and other installations. The deluge continued until midnight with each member of the family taking it in turns to man the pump to keep the water level down, while the next morning revealed the extent of things lost such as boxes full of books and papers, quite apart from apples, vegetables and other stored produce. But the damage suffered at *Rozinante* was nothing compared to houses situated near the river in the valley below, where walls and garages had been swept away. Inevitably, once the river subsided it left a filthy residue of sludge and mud, stones and rubble that took weeks to clear away, while in the long run it took the local council four years to complete a new road building programme to replace destroyed routes to isolated farmhouses. Our own reaction was to dig more drains and listen attentively to the French weather forecasts for warning signs of storms in future.

The scarce resource, it seemed, could sometimes be anything but scarce!

END OF TWO CHAPTER SAMPLE