

FLOWER OF THE CAUSSES

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ANNIE HARDACRE

SNOWFLAKE BOOKS LTD

Published by Snowflake Books Ltd.
The Midstall, Randolphs Farm, Hassocks,
West Sussex, BN6 9EL, UK
First published 2010
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Cover and text designed by Snowflake Books
Ltd.

Illustrations by Su Yen Hu.

Printed in Taiwan by Choice Printing Group.

ISBN 978-0-9565457-5-6

To all the kind French people I have met while
travelling in their beautiful country.



INTRODUCTION

*It was not distance that separated us from
our beginning,
But twists and turns,
Things unseen
And things not understood;
Impetuosity and timidity
Each out of place.*

*L*a *Couvertirade* was my aim, but I had lingered elsewhere. Now the darkening sky threatened a thunderstorm which, the guidebooks warn, can be surprisingly severe and dangerous in this region of mountain gorges and steep-sided valleys. Motorists are strongly advised not to continue driving, but to pull off the road, selecting some place which will be safe from falling rocks loosened by the heavy rain. It is not always possible to find such a place quickly.

Beside the road I saw a low, roughly painted sign: *Chambres d'hôtes*. Bed and breakfast, and perhaps supper, I thought. In one respect I do not follow the advice of the guidebooks: I do not book ahead for my night's rest and I have never failed to find somewhere. These little home-made signs used to be frequent in rural France. But experience has taught me also that these simple signs can sometimes be followed for many miles, leading on like some Will-o-the-wisp, or as in a paper-chase, along twists and turns and sudden hidden junctions. With increasing anticipation I have arrived in some ancient-looking, picturesque and remote farm only to be met by an owner shaking his head and adamant that he knows nothing about any accommodation.

Is this a joke played on innocent tourists by mischievous peasants from time to time, or did I simply miss a turning somewhere along

the way? Over a century ago the writer Robert Louis Stevenson travelled in these parts with his reluctant donkey, Modestine. He was wary of the sense of humour of the locals: ‘... as long as daylight lasted I concealed myself, for all the world like a hunted *Camisard*, behind my fortification of [a] vast chestnut trunk; for I was passionately afraid of discovery and the visit of jocular persons in the night’.

So much has changed in the past forty years or so. Like a modern St Christopher, the great god Tourism looks after all we travelers now. Fast roads deposit us more or less safely on the edge of wildernesses. From being an area of declining population and economy, the *Causses* plateau has become a region of well-appointed self catering *gîtes* and overnight accommodation, any of which can be booked by the click of a key on the internet.

This time however the simple directions

were alone sufficient, and having driven for a long time up a narrow, steep, winding road I came into a small hill-town; perhaps hill village would be the more accurate description. These small fortified settlements located on the tops of rocky outcrops are typical of the region; over the centuries its remoteness has attracted significant groups of people seeking refuge from persecution; naturally they chose these defensible sites for their communities. Here, the heretical Catholics, the Albigensians, a sort of proto-protestant sect, and the *Cathari*, ‘the pure ones,’ with their strange doctrines brought from the Balkans, were cruelly exterminated by church and state after a long and bloody struggle. Some accounts suggest that a million heretics were killed, though this seems unlikely given the small size of Mediaeval populations. In the early eighteenth century another group of rebels, protestant Huguenots, sought refuge here from

persecution after Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes, thus withdrawing state toleration of protestant religious practice. These rebels were known as *Camisards* from their white shirts; they too died in large numbers in a conflict which persisted for nearly a hundred years until toleration was restored.

During the First World War one fifth of the soldiers recruited from this region died in battle. The consequent decline in the life of the area led to a further fifth of the population, mostly young men and women, leaving to seek a life elsewhere, establishing a cycle of decline which continued until well into the second part of the twentieth century and which has left many buildings ruinous. In the Second World War this was again a place of refuge, this time from Nazi persecution. But, the land itself, although poor and blood-soaked, has remained and survived in its remoteness. Until now, that is.

I found a room in the only inn. Descriptions of vernacular buildings as growing out of the landscape are usually fanciful. But if that expression is apt anywhere it would be here. Upstanding rocks are incorporated into the walls of buildings; conversely, the rugged stone dwellings appear to have developed, like teeth, from roots deep in the clefts of the rocks. The building stone is only roughly shaped, if at all, and walls have been so nonchalantly mortared as to appear at first sight to have no mortar at all. Timber is sparingly used, for the dry landscape and the depredations of numerous sheep have not favoured the growth of trees. Roofs are covered with crude flat stones. Stone, in fact, is everywhere, thrusting into buildings and landscape alike.

Inside the inn I saw that the interior walls were also of stone, nearly as rough as that outside except that it was more neatly mortared. Here

too the use of timber was minimal, the ceiling of the only public room being a wide and shallow, un-plastered stone vault such as I had not seen before in such a modest building. Traditionally this would have been the place where animals were kept, with the people living above. Now it was a place for tourists and other visitors.

The lighting was subdued and the furnishings simple; to me the character seemed to be pleasingly rooted in the past, and cosy. That may seem an odd thing to say, considering the past I have just outlined. I certainly don't mean to express any nostalgia for those sanguinary times, although, in passing, it is curious to note how we can romanticize such cruel societies. But I think that even in those militant times there would have been other, more desirable, values present: loyalty and courage of course, but also friendship, family, a yearning for peace and domesticity, and above all the wonderful determination and

persistence of people to survive. All of these qualities seemed, to me at least, to be expressed in that room of elemental construction and in its deliberate lack of ostentation: a feeling made more poignant by the knowledge of past suffering. Not a soft, chintzy sort of cosiness then, but more that of the hay-barn that shelters walkers who have found refuge in a storm, or of the ship safely tied up in harbour at last after a tempestuous voyage.

In contrast the bed and the washing facilities in my room were starkly modern and of good quality, for the French tourist authorities these days do a fine job of insisting on high standards. The room itself largely retained the architectural character that I had seen downstairs, with the only gesture towards something more luxurious being the white-painted, uneven plaster on the walls and around the small window opening; the lumpy shapes of the stones, however, showed

quite clearly through the plaster to make an attractive texture. This balance of old and new seemed pleasing to me and after a good meal I was content to go to bed early and I fell asleep to the distant grumbings of the last of the thunder.

Next morning as I was sipping a small cup of black sweet coffee, inhaling the sugary bitter fumes, after a good breakfast, the youthful proprietor came over and naturally asked if I had found everything well.

‘Very well,’ I replied, and meant it.

He looked thoughtful for a moment and then beckoned to his young wife. She came over with some papers in her hand, holding them close to her body as though uncertain whether to show them. The young man hesitated for a moment and then his words impetuously came out. He explained they had only recently bought the inn from a very old man called Georges and his wife. They had borrowed money to improve the

place which had been in very poor condition. Now they desperately needed a grant from the tourist authorities and they had been asked to survey the opinions of their customers in support of their application. Perhaps I would be happy to answer some questions? Of course, he said, if they thought people were not happy they didn't ask them. But most were happy.

They went back to the small bar and quietly fussed around as bar people do, wiping surfaces and polishing glasses, while I took my time in the otherwise silent room to answer the questions to the best of my ability, using my basic French. When I had finished I handed over the papers, ordered another coffee and sat down again. These leisurely interludes between one stage of a journey and the next are often the best part of travelling.

I noticed that the couple were looking through my answers straightaway. My English

reserve led me to feel that some pretence at least of anonymity would have been appropriate. However, I thought I had written nothing that they might object to so I supposed it didn't matter. Then I saw that they were deep in discussion, fingers jabbing at the paper, while occasionally they looked across at me.

The young man came across to my table. 'Pardon, Madame. You have written that you are a *professeur* and a writer.'

This initial re-statement of the information I had just given on the survey paper clearly suggested that some query or contradiction was about to follow. I had no idea what it could be. 'Yes,' I replied and waited.

The hesitation came back into the man's manner: 'We have been asking ourselves whether perhaps you would examine something for us?'

Again I had no idea what this something might be, in this wild place. I hedged my reply,

but did not make it conditional: 'What is it?' I said.

He beckoned to his wife once more. Once more she came carrying papers, but this time holding them out openly, for me to take, as though it would be a relief for her to get rid of them. It was quite a thick bundle of hand-written text and, with mild surprise, I saw that the language was English.

'I must explain, Madame,'

An old Englishman had lived in the inn for many years. Well perhaps he was not so old when he first lived here, but when he died he was old.

The wife interrupted: 'He had your room Madame; it was the best room you see.'

Best room or not, I rather wished she had not told me that. I had been considering staying for another night, but now decided not to.

The Englishman had died a few months before Georges sold the inn to them. No one

knew his true name or those of any relatives or friends who could be informed. He never had any contact with authority so never needed to give a name. He was quite well known in the village, but was regarded as eccentric, even a little mad – ‘*dans la lune*’ – though harmless. He walked a great deal and when people wished him good day he would often reply strangely: ‘Good day. But don’t speak – listen to the wind’. He had no friends except Georges and his wife, although sometimes in the evenings he could be seen with a small group of curious children, explaining why the moon changes her shape, and the names of the stars and planets.

He received regular parcels every three months. It was assumed that these contained English pound notes since he always paid Georges with these, and Georges would change a few into francs for him to spend as well. But no one knew now who sent the parcels and they

had in fact ceased coming a few months before his death.

I could understand that because, before Harold Wilson's government had devalued the pound in the 1960s, I had occasionally, when travelling as a student, paid for a night's lodging in English pound notes, albeit at an exorbitant rate of exchange. 'Ah, King George will pay,' the landlord would sometimes exclaim, which I think was a hang-over from the Second World War and the French Resistance. It seemed unnecessary to point out that King George had died some years before, and in any case I believe the promissory notes were in fact 'Winston will pay,' which were all honoured after the War was over.

When the man's room was cleared out after his death, Georges sold his many books to pay for the last few months rent. There were very few papers and nothing to indicate who the Englishman was; only this anonymous

manuscript. Georges showed it to the local priest who said it had no legal value and should be burnt. But as Georges argued, this man who had been nothing in the world when alive had, as far as they knew, left only this writing and for that reason surely it deserved to be kept and at least given proper consideration by someone who might understand it.

Now the writing had passed to this young couple who begged me to read it and perhaps give it new life. At first I was reluctant. Probably, I thought, it was just another diary of commonplace events in the life of a lonely person. It would have been easy to say I was too busy, I was on holiday, or that I was in a hurry. But Georges' argument was persuasive: could I really reject and, in doing so, extinguish the last breath of the life of this mysterious man and consign him to nothingness completely? And I confess I was a little curious, for on the first

page was the enigmatic poem which I have given above.

‘Very well,’ I said, ‘and I may stay for another night. But I would like to have a different room. You understand?’

‘Yes Madame, we understand. And thank you.’

I settled down by a window in a corner of the quiet bar. Through the window I could see for miles the apparently timeless Causses landscape slumbering under the sun, the dry grasses picking up the colour of the sunshine, and in the sea of grass the scattered rocks like dangerous reefs. Two versions of the Christian God had struggled here. But as I read on I was reminded that there were even older gods whose powers, as Kipling fancifully explains, although dramatically reduced, are still able to create mischief and tragedy in the lives of modern men and women.

1

*The wind bloweth where it listeth,
And thou hearest the sound thereof,
But canst not tell whence it cometh,
And whither it goeth*

(St John, 3)

I found the door. The timbers were bare and old, and cracked by the sun. It looked as though it hadn't opened for a hundred years. Light grey dust from the track that served as a village street lay on the worn doorstep, sifted by the wind. But pinned on the door, level with my eyes, was that large flat flower, dried out and prickly, like a cross between a sun-flower and a thistle.

So I knocked. It was such a solid-looking door that I made a fist and banged hard with the side of my hand. I looked around, half expecting a neighbour to appear and laugh at me for knocking

at such an old door. But then, their front doors mostly looked the same anyway, for this wasn't an English village.

There was a clack of the latch, and the door began to open. I don't know quite what I expected, but I was suddenly struck by the strangeness of what I saw. A man stood in the low doorway, his right hand still resting on the latch on the inside of the door. His face and skin were a rich brown colour, his wavy hair black, typical of those Europeans who live and work under a Mediterranean sun.

Nothing strange in that. But he wore a blue shirt and denim trousers; on his feet were strong light tan work-boots, and he wore a steel watch strapped on his hairy brown arm. It was his ordinariness that was surprising, standing in that ancient doorway. I had expected some old peasant dressed in black shapeless clothes. But here, in rural France, past and present blend together in

a way that they no longer do in England. It was a mixture that was at the same time both commonplace and primitive. It had a promise of mystery about it, like an old attic, or an unopened box.

‘Good day,’ I said, ‘I believe that you have a house for sale.’ I pointed up the track that was a street to where a few grass-covered rough stone steps led to an equally ancient doorway that had no door.

‘You would like to look?’

‘Yes, thank you,’ I replied.

His wary expression collapsed into a friendly smile, and he held out his hand to shake.

And that was how I met Georges, the man who gave me the best advice I ever had in my life, advice which I ignored.



At the time I thought that I understood. Afterwards, when it was all over, I could see that I hadn't. You see, for her, ideas were different. That was my first mistake. I'd known her long enough, and I should have recognised that if she accepted an idea then she lived it. And if she didn't accept it, why then, for her it didn't exist. Certainly she was very tolerant of other people, and willing to go along with her friends' activities; too tolerant as it turned out. But, although she was kind, she didn't, in the true sense, sympathise with the ideas of others. If she did not feel cold then surely no one else should be cold. She assumed the whole world was just as she felt it to be. In fact, she seemed continually surprised that other individuals could have ideas different from her own.

Not that I could be considered sympathetic either you understand, although I was more willing to entertain the ideas of others. But, for me, ideas were abstractions anyway, to be

considered objectively, as I thought then. So I often appeared the better listener, although in fact I was the more selfish. I liked to examine ideas, to try them out for a while. An idea was like a white mouse, set free on the High Table for a joke, allowed to run around for the amusement of the diners; to be cheered on, diverted, checked, and finally put under a silver dish cover, neutralised and rendered harmless by stronger minds. I'd not discovered then that some ideas aren't like that.



A broad column of rock rose from the valley side. On top of the rock perched a small village, isolated, except for a narrow neck of land connecting it with the mountain road up which we had just driven.

‘How can people live there!’

‘Why not?’ I said.

‘Look at that house: it’s actually over-hanging the edge.’ Anne pointed. The house squatted on the edge of the sheer cliff like a chicken on a perch, its back end hanging over the drop; the neighbouring houses clustered round it.

We walked across the narrow entrance. The un-surfaced street was just a path. A man was stringing up some coloured lights in a garden. Two loud-speakers hung on a stand in the roadway.

Whichever way we walked we soon ended up against the cliff top, protected by low stone walls. There wasn’t much to see. Everything seemed just a bit smaller than real life. In the Middle Ages, five and a half feet made a tall man. The café, and only shop, was built right up to the edge.

‘Let’s buy something,’ I said, ‘I feel we owe them for looking around.’

The radio behind the bar was tuned to the local news. There was a seven kilometre traffic

jam down on the main road. We ordered four pancakes with coffee. The owner's wife and son served us with a particular carefulness and slight hesitancy which suggested that they did not get many customers. I wished we had time for a meal.

'You were in the traffic jam?' she asked, as she listened, her head half turned to the radio.

'No, we followed a little road and came here.'

'You will stay for the fête tonight?'

'No, we must find a camp-site soon.'

'You will come back to the fête?'

'We have to meet our son in Orange tomorrow.

I'm sorry.'

It was something more than politeness which made me add, 'But we will come back again.'

When we had finished, Anne wandered outside while I paid. I joined her in the little courtyard which overlooked the whole valley.

'I can't believe this place,' I said, 'It's so unchanged. Pity about the loudspeaker, but I

suppose that's only once a year.'

'Have you noticed the flowers, pinned on all the doors? I wonder why?'

The flowers were about five inches across, yellowish, dried in the sun like everlasting flowers, only larger. It seemed that every house had one.

'I'll go and ask.' Walking back into the café, I already felt at home.

'The flowers? It is the flower of the *Causses*. Look!' She held up a coloured postcard.

I felt I ought to buy it. Three francs.

'What is the *Causses*?'

She laughed, and pointed around her. 'This is the *Causses*, and there.' She pointed up the valley to the plateau top. 'It is very large, and there is no water. It is very poor. People don't want to live here any more. There is little money. We have only the sheep and the tourists.'

I wondered if she saw the wry humour in her last remark. I thought not. But I decided I would see the *Causses* for myself.

‘But the flowers, why do all the houses have them?’

‘For luck, certainly. And they tell us when the rain will come.’ She held up her palm and curled her fingers together. ‘They close up, you understand.’

I nodded.

Her face suddenly became solemn. ‘And when someone dies, Monsieur.’

‘The flowers say when someone will die?’

Her silence only emphasised the truth she attached to what she had told me.

In England it would have been said flippantly, just another quaint old belief to chatter about. But not here. So I didn’t laugh.

‘What do they do?’

She curled her fingers again, ‘Like this.’

I didn't laugh, but I couldn't resist arguing. 'It isn't possible. The weather, yes, I understand, but not' I stopped. I saw the look of disapproval on her face.

'God closes the flowers, Monsieur.'

I couldn't argue against that. It would have been bad manners. I'd really gone too far already. Perhaps old people didn't die when the weather was fine; it was statistically probable.

And so that place began to be a part of my thoughts.

'Well?' Anne said when I came out.

'They're for good luck.'

'There must be a lot of good luck round here then.'

'I doubt it,' I said, 'I think it's just that they need all they can get.'



I suppose you could say it all started that summer. That was when we made the decision. We were touring in France, by car. We had several weeks; the weather was quite good, but a bit more rainy than usual.

The holiday was everything that sort of holiday ought to be. We anticipated nothing but the unexpected, and planned for nothing but the unforeseen. Our only arrangement was that we would stay or go as places or buildings pleased us or not. Not to be in a hurry, that was the thing; not to have to *be* anywhere. We had no schedule, so we could hang around for an hour at an unexpected view, or for a day or so if a particular small town took our fancy. This was the first year that the children had decided they were too old to share our holidays. We both felt a little sad at this, but I have to admit that it was much easier to accommodate the wishes of only two people, especially when one of them was fairly easy

going, rather than four.

As usual, the French were friendly and helpful. Some people don't find them so, but we always did. I suppose that had quite an important influence on the choice we made. We enjoyed many little incidents where we stopped for a coffee or a locally-made ice-cream. There was usually someone who wanted to talk, despite our not very good French. The older people often liked to talk about the war still, while the younger ones just wanted to try out their not very good English. Perhaps it was just holiday euphoria, or a curious wish to believe in an ideal life somewhere, but we always felt safer in France than in England.

French voices are so soothing. We were pleased if we came across a real French camp-site: I mean one where the French families spend their holidays, not some British or Dutch colony. There seemed to be little of the child-smacking and crying and teenage raucousness, or the midnight

drunkenness, which were so common on British camp-sites. We could sit back in the sun and close our eyes and be lulled by the murmuring and cooing of French accents, like the countryside itself.

You'll have gathered by now that on my holidays I like, within reason, to get away from it all as they say. Yes, that includes the English. I like my countrymen as much as the next man, but they will insist on talking about things such as the latest trouble in the health service, or the schools, when on holiday. For myself, I never bought an English paper. And anyway, I was always slightly embarrassed at being a tourist. It was a guilt feeling. Tourism spoils places. If you go to Rocmadour on a fine day you'll see what I mean. Beautiful, unbelievable Rocmadour: an ancient town built vertically on the side of a gigantic cliff. Today, even the guide-books advise giving it a miss. The approach now passes by an

expanse of Monkey Parks with high wire fences. Monkey Parks at Rocmadour! If it's raining, and early in the morning, you just might enjoy its unique quality.

Travelling alone, in a car with a French number-plate, at least it's possible to pretend that no harm is being done, although of course it's a self-deception. For the same reason we tended to avoid the main routes, and travelled mostly on the yellow roads as shown on the Michelin maps. These minor roads are rather bumpy if you go too fast, but about forty miles an hour suited our mood very well, and usually there was scarcely any other traffic. We came across some curious little places that way.



‘This is it,’ I said. We were sitting in a low-vaulted room of rough stone. The hot sun slanted

in through small windows. There was a mid-day stillness. Through the wide entrance I could see the simple garden where we had come in. Beyond, the gray stone houses seemed to be piled half-way up the blue sky.

Anne didn't say anything at first. This wasn't unusual. Her powers of concentration were good, remarkably good, and if she was pre-occupied I often got no reply to something I'd said. At times I found this demeaning, but not today. It was a slow-motion sort of day.

The tranquillity, and some excellent *café au lait*, made unusually with hot milk, had put me in a good mood. Anne was just enjoying the first mouthful of a fragrant, chilled lemon-tart. It's easy to forget, if you don't do the cooking, what a pleasure eating out can be.

She said, 'This is superb,' which was her highest term of praise, and then, as an afterthought, 'What do you mean, this is it?'

There was no one else in the café or in the garden. We could hear faintly the owner and his wife moving things in the kitchen. I looked around the clean simple room, shady yet bright. The roof had been built without timber because timber was scarce here. I felt the coolness within, the shimmering heat outside. All this peace and stillness for the price of a couple of coffees.

‘I’d really like to live here, you know.’

She had heard it before, of course. Other places, other times: ‘You say that every holiday.’

We’d had this conversation before, too. I expect most couples have. I would toy with the idea. I think I really used to mean it for a while. We would day-dream about places, how pleasant they were, how they had none of the problems of where we lived now. We would discuss the implications for the children, for work, for money, for travelling to see our relations. At least, I would day-dream; I think she just humoured me.

Then we would persuade ourselves that really we couldn't be bothered and that we were quite happy where we were already.

How would I know when I really meant it, when the place was the right one? Somehow, I was beginning to think already that this time it was different. This lovely room was not an illusion, a pastiche for tourists. Outside there were no car parks, busy streets and modern shops. Only a fortified twelfth-century village, built by the Knights Templar to guard a watering place on the route to the Holy Land: we had walked around the whole thing in ten minutes. And beyond the walls, as far as the eye could see, there was the dry wild scrubby landscape of the *Causses*, one of the last great wildernesses of Europe. My thoughts went back to the discoveries of the morning.



2

*Here was irony:
That after countless steps into the darkness,
We might have stretched out our hands
And held the sunlight on our finger-tips.*

We had turned off the brash new main road, built so that Parisians could reach the south quickly. We climbed for a couple of hours along the sides of attractive small valleys; rocks, streams and woodlands bathed in quiet morning sunshine. It was pure countryside, elemental: stone, water, vegetation – and light. Nothing intruded; nothing new and ugly to be seen. Only the narrow tarmac road squeezed its way apologetically between the upright boulders. As we climbed, the trees gradually became less frequent, the bushes more scrubby, the rocks more dominant. Of the water, there was now no sign.

And then at last, as the car dipped over a final rise in the road, I saw stretched out before me what our acquaintance at the café had described. Not a landscape that promised welcome by sparkling streams and lushness; nor yet a mountain landscape aloof and distant. But a rare sultry landscape that slumbered in the sun and seemed to gaze back through half-closed eyes. A strange wild countryside to be glimpsed across a crowded world. The sun was now well up, quivering in the sky. I saw long hazy views of dry sparse grass, scattered rocks and light pastel colours. I sensed the stillness. The noise of the engine embarrassed me. I switched off and coasted to a halt.

There was not a sound. No wind, no trees, no birds that I could see; not another car or person in sight, just the hot air shimmering. The landscape impressed, it seemed to demand respect, but did not invite, not at first. No soft green grass or cool streams tempted us out of the car. Yet something

here touched me deeply, more than I knew then. The stillness perhaps, always an attribute of beauty, or the peace, the sense of timelessness. But more than these was a brightness. Not the brightness of the sun; that could shine and yet all around seem dark, as well I knew. Something golden; on the picture, but not part of it. Vaguely familiar; beautiful and lost. I realised it was something bright in me. A golden shiny feeling in my mind, long forgotten.

So the land reached out to me, and began to shine what seemed then to be a healing brightness into dark corners of my mind. It promised – but no, it was dumb. It promised nothing but the reflection of my own needs. It gave only brightness to use as I would. If only I had been content with that. What more can anyone ask of a country but to stretch out on it like a contented old dog in the sun and not to be disturbed. To smell the dry earth, to close one's eyes, not to sleep but

to feel every nerve in tune with the soft wind and the rustling grasses. To lie in the lap of time and be soothed. To find temporary refuge, solace; to dream a little before going on.

Yet on this simple need had been raised a whole jangling edifice of laws and committees and investigations till men and women forget what was the purpose of it all, and lost the joy of it. The land became crowded and organised and signposted; there was no healing solitude anymore. And the dream was always broken.

This land seemed different: uncluttered, uncrowded. A place to dream golden dreams undisturbed. Inexpressibly soothing. Already I could feel its gentle probing fingers. Stored up sorrows began to unfold. I began to sense its power and wondered what was its secret. But with the unfolding came sadness. A loss more than death itself. Men and women submit to the finality of death, they have no choice do they? And they are

borne up by sympathy, by priests, by friends, by all the pedantry of public mourning. But I carried secret wounds. No one saw them. I suffered quite alone. And I realised at that moment that still if she could have called from the other side of the world, even after half a lifetime, I would go. To the end of my life I would never accept that loss. Strange that a landscape should have the power to unlock those secret doors which had been closed for so long. To offer, if not joy, then solace. There must be some explanation, I reasoned, some link. Thoughts are like water running in grooves. Occasionally something happens that makes the water spill over and spread out to cut new valleys, or perhaps to water old dried-up ways. I think now that scene reminded me of the countryside of my childhood. Not the physical form of course, since it was foreign. But of the spirit; something we only glimpse now after a fall of fresh snow – the stillness and the magic. But it wasn't just

the magic of childhood, it was the centuries old magic of the land I had known, and it was gone.

Not an opening of doors then, but a getting back on the other side, the other side of the darkness. Of looking out rather than in, forwards instead of back. Realising it was possible to start again, freed from the rut of sadness.

‘We ought to be getting on.’ Anne, practical as usual, like her father. I valued it; it gave structure to life, prevented the disintegration. And sometimes I hated it. Even on this holiday one had to go on. ‘You’re very quiet,’ she said, ‘don’t you like it here?’

‘Oh yes,’ I replied, ‘secret wounds, you know.’

She knew I had been run down by a car, many years ago. But the physical pain was nothing, nothing compared to that.

‘Is your leg hurting? Would you like me to drive?’

‘Probably, but no, thanks.’

Strange, the most important thing of all, you couldn't share. She was kind and trusting. I never wanted to hurt her. So I lived with the dilemma always.

Reluctantly, confused, I started the engine and we drove on along the straight undulating road.



‘We could stay here,’ I said.

Anne was picking up the last crumbs of lemon-tart on her finger. ‘There’s no camp-site.’

I knew that she liked the idea of living in France. She’d often said so. ‘No, I mean live here.’

She looked at me in horror. ‘But why here of all places? It’s so far from the sea. Why not Brittany, the Dordogne, the Île de Ré, Picardy, anywhere but here for goodness sake.’

I hesitated. ‘... Because, I like rough edges.’

It seemed a trite, superficial remark; but for me it distinguished different worlds: it represented the gulf between the humanised countryside and the council park; between large minds and small ones. ‘Rough edges keep us in touch with our roots. England’s getting too smooth,’ I said: ‘smooth roads, smooth kerbs, smooth buildings, smooth cars, smooth people.’ The list was endless.

I saw her eyes, which had been looking at me intently, glance away. ‘But there’s all those things in France.’

‘But not here,’ I argued, ‘that’s what’s special. Here they let the roofs sag and the wild flowers grow and the roads crumble at the edges. And I love the way the houses always seem to need re-painting, but never rot; the bare wood and old paint just baking in the sun. They’re not renovated to death, they’re still part of the earth.’ I nearly said unspoilt, but it was something more, or less, than that – the word had such an artificial

connotation in England now.

She only dimly perceived what a sense of well-being I was trying to describe. 'It's very pretty,' she agreed, '- and unspoilt.'

Walking on the ramparts in the winter moonlight and bright frost, looking out over the snow-covered plains, unchanged since the Middle Ages, as far as the eye could see, and beyond: it promised the experience of a lifetime.

'The chap in the gallery told me that only about twenty people live here in the winter, they get snowed up you see.'

'It would be cold,' she said with obvious distaste, 'I thought we'd live in France for the sun. And I should feel trapped, and'

A fire, books, music, writing, and the strange mediaeval world outside; weeks of solitude free from interruption and pressure: a trap? At that moment nothing in the world seemed more desirable, and possible. 'Look,' I said, 'we can do

anything we want now. I have a pension, it's cheap here, the children are independent, and there's always mother's old house back in England. All those things that used to stop us, they don't matter now.'

That made an impression on Anne; I'd never played the game for real before, we'd always known before what the end would be. 'But you know how you love England so, well the country anyhow. It means so much to you.'

I shook my head, facing the reality. 'England's over for me. It's losing its soul. It's depressing to see what's going on there. And now my parents' generation have gone, I can see it more clearly. They kept alive a memory, but it isn't real any more. I used to think it was, that I'd go back to my old home one day. But it's not there, you see. And I didn't go when I had the chance.'

'What chance was that?'

'I could have had the farm; it was offered.'

She appeared to think for a while. ‘You’ll be an outsider here –’

That didn’t worry me. I’d always been an outsider. ‘No problem. Anyway, I’m not sure you’re right. These people were very kind to me in the past.’

‘– and lonely?’

‘Not with you,’ I said, selfishly. It might have been a compliment.

‘But why here?’

‘It reminds me –’ The memory wrenched. I felt the involuntary puckering around my eyes. To hide it I drank the last dregs of lukewarm coffee. The hot milk had cooled to a tough skin on the surface. Suppress it. Why had this place teased out such memories after all those years? I nearly told her then. But why cast away twenty-five years of caring for one sentence. What powerful things words are. ‘Don’t you feel like screaming?’ the doctor had said.

Anne noticed. Probably I had sighed. ‘Why *are* you so sad sometimes? You know all I want is for you to be happy.’ It sounded trite, but it wasn’t. She was the most genuine person imaginable. The trouble was, she wanted me to be happy in her way, not mine. Poor Anne. She deserved an uncomplicated, happy husband.

‘You must get away,’ the doctor had said. No, I didn’t feel like screaming. He’d seemed disappointed.

The choice suddenly seemed entirely clear. ‘Look, we can do it now. There’s a house for sale, not here, in that village with all the dried flowers; I noticed it. You know how the system works here. We can agree a sale in a few hours; it’s bound to be cheap. We can buy it out of our savings, and then take our time selling our house in England.’

I saw that my conviction, perhaps that new spark of brightness, was winning her over. I knew that if I asked her to come she would. She didn’t

want me to ask her. But I did. And, knowing her, I thought I could be sure that, once she'd agreed, she would accept the idea without any doubts. Was I being selfish? Perhaps it appears so. But I felt certain that if there were any gods who decided such things, they would judge that she had the better part of the bargain. Of course she couldn't see the whole balance sheet, that was part of the deal, though she didn't know that either. It was a bargain I had made on her behalf because there was absolutely no other way it could be made. I thought I saw the whole picture, and judged it to be fair. But how difficult it is ever to know another person.

