

CHAPTER TWO

The gammon wouldn't keep forever and on Sunday it was Raymond's birthday. As I didn't feel quite up to preparing the whole meal I did what everyone does locally and ordered a very large *tarte aux fruits*. I knew it would look splendid and taste delicious.

'*Quelques prunes et poires?*' queried the pale faced *boulangier*, his eyebrows powdered with flour. '*Quelques framboises aussi, peut-être?*'

'Perfect. Anything but strawberries,' I said. I knew that Claudette had an abundance this year.

I also dispensed with making soup as the last few days had been extremely hot, and decided to construct a large dish of hors-d'oeuvre from *macédoine* of vegetables and tinned crab in a lemon mayonnaise, surrounded by hard-boiled eggs, avocado, and sweet, field tomatoes. I par-boiled

the gammon the night before and stripped off the skin.

Next morning, after collecting the tart, imagining myself well ahead of schedule, I lingered at a local gardening market. A mistake! And, in any case, buying plants for my wilderness of a garden was not so much foolishness as complete delusion. I looked at my watch and fled to buy a tin of diced vegetables on my way home to augment the fresh ones already prepared.

FERMATURE EXCEPTIONELLE said the notice on the village shop. *Exceptionelle* it most certainly was and very inconvenient. It meant a trip into Monflanquin, our nearest town, on a Sunday morning early in the season when *tous les vacanciers* would be stocking up. It was just as I feared. The supermarket was packed. There was nothing to be done but wait patiently in the queue and amuse myself, comparing the clothes and the contents of the trolleys of the French, the Dutch, the English and the occasional American. It was almost midday by the time I returned to finish my preparations *a toute vitesse*.

We would be eight. Sylvie was the first to arrive, having come furthest, from Villeneuve-sur-Lot. We first met when I was searching in the archives there where she then worked. As together, on a rainy morning, we had pored over an ancient map we had discovered that Mike and I had bought the very house where her great-grandfather, Celestin, had been born and had lived until

he married. From his daughter, Sylvie's grandmother, I heard more about her aunt, Anaïs, my predecessor at Bel-Air. I learnt that she came in 1889 as a bride of eighteen, to marry Celestin's brother, Justin. How they had one son who was handicapped as a result of an illness, probably polio, and that after Justin died in 1918, mother and son lived at Bel-Air until Anaïs died aged 92. I learnt how hard she worked and how she loved her garden. The roses, the iris, and the lilies which sadly always flower just before we arrive, were all planted by her, long ago. Small wonder that, when I first saw Bel-Air, even in its derelict state, I felt a sense of those seventy-four years of caring.

Fortunately, all my other guests were late. The strict rules about *midi-et-demi* for lunch have been gradually eroded by the next generation. When the old people were alive they were always on time. Véronique, Raymond's daughter, and her husband Jean-Michel strolled up from their house on the other side of the orchard, their daughter Océane, now eight, still drying her bright pink nails. She is not much younger than her mother was when we first came. A plump shy ten-year-old, who helped us sweep out the cobwebs and gave me dictation to improve my French, Véronique is now extremely svelte and the deputy mayor.

Raymond came to apologise for Claudette who had still not returned from her second '*vide-grenier*' of the morning. The local version of a car boot sale,

Claudette can't resist them. They are so popular now that there is one somewhere almost every weekend. Of course the real bargains are to be found when a whole village turns out its attics for the very first time. Then you must be up really early to beat the dealers. With their sharp and expert eyes they soon scoop up great grandmother's old soup plates, copper preserving pans or her heavy, folded, linen nightdresses. You might find the proverbial dozen, damask, dinner napkins, long forgotten, with hand-embroidered initials, or pillow-cases trimmed with handmade lace. There are photograph albums, old lamps and tarnished silver. Claudette is still searching for an old bread slicer but she usually finds something to amuse her. After an aperitif Raymond went back to the farm to fetch her and this time, with many a blast on the klaxon, they drove up in the newly refurbished 1929 Citroen. It now looks very different from the time we first saw it over twenty years ago.

Matthew, my younger son, and Raymond's Philippe were much the same age and in those early days while Mike and I worked on the house they spent a great deal of time roaming about together. Phillippe's English was better than Matthew's French but they both benefited. One day Philippe took his new English friend to see his Grandpa's car. Matthew came home in great excitement.

‘It’s brilliant!’ he said. ‘It’s really old. You should see it. It’s huge. And you know what? It’s even got DUNLOP written in English on the spare wheel.’

Raymond owned a barn close by the church, which he never seemed to use. We had presumed that it was simply inconvenient, being a distance from the house. We had no idea that inside the rough stone walls was a museum. When the following day Raymond and Grandpa pushed open the massive doors we saw that the vast space was crammed with ox carts and traps and antique farm implements. We stood in amazement while the boys scrambled to the back where we could just glimpse the Citroen up on blocks and protected by old blankets and sacks.

‘Can we uncover her now, Papi?’ begged Philippe.

The old man nodded and we stood round admiringly as she was revealed in all her stately glory. Grandpa brushed the high, dusty mudguard with his small gnarled hand and told us that she had been there ever since the war. They had successfully hidden her from the Germans who were then commandeering every vehicle. He patted her bonnet and smiled. He seemed perfectly happy to leave her there for another forty years but everyone else was eager to bring her out and, a few days later, with most of the village as spectators, she was ceremoniously towed from the barn and trundled off to be repaired. Claudette’s cousin, the mechanic in a nearby village, was delighted when he eventually

made her roadworthy and drove her back in triumph to the farm.

Not surprisingly her progress could be erratic. Over the years, mostly on Sunday afternoons, Mike and Raymond, accompanied by anyone intrepid enough to withstand the noise, the draught, and the occasional breakdown, have made sporadic trips to surrounding villages. Recently, however, Raymond decided that it was time to have the Citroën completely refurbished. Now the dark green bodywork gleams, the nickel sparkles, and she has beautiful new leather upholstery which is much more comfortable. Indicators are the only addition. Just as, all those years ago, the car conferred status and glamour on Granny and Grandpa—he was the only young man anywhere in the region with a car she once told me, smiling—now it does the same for Raymond. He has a new identity as a proud member of the *Club des Anciennes Voitures de Villeneuve*. They plan many trips, prudently always complete with a mechanic and spares.

The meal was a success. The gammon appreciated, although I almost ruined it at the last moment by putting it under the grill to caramelise the sugar on the crisscrossed fat, studded with mustard and cloves. I am still not used to cooking with electricity and can't believe how long it takes to heat the oven. The

grill, however, is quicker. The gammon was rescued just in time. As we were drinking our coffee Philippe and Corinne, his wife, arrived with eleven-year-old Clement. They were looking very fetching in twenties costume and straw boaters and had come to borrow the old Citroën to complete the effect and to visit friends. Clement presented his grandpa with a rose for his birthday and the young family drove off sitting up high and waving regally from the very smart, old car. Raymond had to leave, too, as the wheat was ready and the *moissonneuse* due that afternoon. He is part of a farmers' cooperative who must wait their turn for the combine. Naturally everyone needs it at the same time and there are many anxious moments and frantic phonecalls when the crop is ripe and rain is threatened.

All our guests gone, we dozed in the shade wondering when M. Escoffier would arrive to open the pool. We had already been here three days, three very hot days, and the sight of the heavy, mudstained, blue winter cover still securely in place was extremely frustrating. Once upon a time we would have just got on with it ourselves but those days are, sadly, over. We knew, of course that M. Escoffier, like the combine, was simply overloaded with work.

We had first met him the previous summer. He had a stand at the local fête. We had only just arrived and for some reason had been quite unable to contact

our ebullient M. Bourrière who always dealt with our pool, or his manic son.

It was most unusual. We had written to fix a rendezvous, as we always did, before leaving England. They had given us excellent service for many years, ever since the day when they arrived with the digger and the first great clods of earth were gouged out of our meadow. It took us so many years to decide to have a pool, both for aesthetic and financial reasons, but we have never regretted it.

Until now, it was always a confident, red-faced, M. Bourrière in his cowboy boots who would arrive promptly to solve any problems. He replaced our calcified filter when, one summer, the chalk level in the water was too high, and he changed the location of our pump. The original underground plastic pump housing, with its large heavy lid, had two disadvantages. It was not frost-proof and therefore the pump had to be removed for the winter and replaced in the spring, and in the summer, the shelter and dark humidity proved irresistible to snakes.

For many years at Bel-Air we never saw a snake. I was actually quite miffed when others told of the size of the one they had seen in their garden. They are not vipers, just harmless grass snakes, called here *couleuvres*, but they can be two meters long and have thick bodies. Mike does not care for them but I wanted to see one at close quarters. Our mayor, now retired, told

me a tale of once being summoned in a hurry by the holiday-makers from Colchester who were staying in his *gîte* next door.

'La dame a crié, "snick! snick!'" he told me dramatically. *'C'était un grand serpent.'*

He killed the snake and gave it to his somewhat eccentric English neighbour who said she would like to show it to her children. The following day she invited the mayor, his wife and his tenants to dinner. One of the courses was a delicate slice of something in a good sauce. After they had all eaten and pronounced it delicious she revealed that it was in fact *'la couleuvre'*. The mayor laughed, showing his gold fillings, as he described the horrified reaction of *les Anglais de Colchestaire*.

'Mais ce n'était pas mal du tout,' he said musingly.

Mike became very tired of our resident snake. He carried a large stick to thump on the lid before lifting it to check the filter. Eventually he had had enough. M. Bourrière and his son removed the pump from underground and promised to build us a *cabine*. It would solve the problem of the snake, they said, and also the over-wintering of the pump. We imagined a sort of small sentry box but arrived back one evening to find a substantial Wendy house complete with window.

But where was M. Bourrière the next summer? It was a mystery. He didn't even answer the phone. M.

Escoffier, standing calmly behind his stand at the fête with samples of plastic pool liners and pictures of other pools, simply smiled and shrugged. He is the complete opposite of M.Bourrière, being dark, slender and very quietly spoken. He must have known that his competitor had gone bankrupt and disappeared, but he said nothing. He was presumably aware that, eventually, we would inevitably be in touch.

About eight-thirty in the evening we saw with relief his white van snaking up the track.

'Trop de travail,' he said clambering wearily out. *'Et comme toujours – tout au même moment.'*

We watched with pleasure the heavy cover being rolled back and saw that the water was clear above the muddy bottom. Tomorrow we would swim. We left him quietly and methodically going about his work, almost in the dark by now, and went down to the farm at about nine-thirty for, as we thought, dessert and champagne and to give Raymond his birthday present, which we had forgotten to do earlier.

They had only just begun their meal. At the long table under the hangar, where we have eaten so many alfresco meals, sat the whole family with both the grandchildren. There was also the driver of the combine, his hair full of chaff, the amiable patron of the farmers' cooperative and Ken Farrington, our nearest English neighbour who had let his house and

was consequently homeless that night and staying with Raymond and Claudette. We resisted the soup, the home-cured ham and melon, the galantine of chicken; but the roast veal...It smelt so good...

'Servez-vous, Servez-vous,' called Claudette.

'Eh, oh, il faut manger, Michel,' urged Raymond. 'You need to build yourself up.'

Well, perhaps. Just a taste. Plates and cutlery appeared like conjuring tricks. We gave in. The moon appeared round the edge of the roof. Much, much later a large cake was carried in, candles were lit, Raymond opened the champagne and we all sang *'Bon Anniversaire'*.