

Extract from *The Alps and The Pyrenees*

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## Chapter 4. The Farm

On arriving at the farm finally, we were sufficiently tired and hungry to content ourselves with unlocking the front door and doing the minimum required before going to bed.

François proved to have the front door key hung about her neck where, she said, it had remained, save for when she bathed, since she'd left the house she'd shared with her late husband almost a year and a half before.

We stripped the coverlet from the bed, and replaced it with fresh sheets and a down comforter extracted from a sweet-smelling cedar chest. We stripped off our own clothes next, and took turns standing under the pump in the yard while the other worked away on the pump handle. Bloody cold. We made love then, it would have been impossible not to, and went to sleep immediately, though we'd promised ourselves that we'd finish off the last of the bread and cheese we'd brought with us first.

Not till the next morning did we discover that everything that might be taken from the farm had been. The tool shed was almost empty; it held only a broken rake and a broken shovel both of which she said had been intact before she left. Surprisingly, chickens nested in the coop still – their eggs provided the basis of

our breakfast, and a small bag of feed lay nearby. The main feed supply, a huge bin, had been emptied.

The source of many of these disappearances, the neighbor who'd offered to watch over the property in return for permission to farm the acreage adjacent to his own, appeared at this point, indignant over the disappearance of what he termed his eggs.

François proceeded to offer him a list of the many items that had disappeared from barn and tool shed. The man stammered, said that he had only taken them to his home for safekeeping, and that they would be returned the next day.

The next day, the neighbor did not appear, and François suggested that it was now time for the tough guy with a gun act. I observed that with so many items that needed to be returned this effort might be premature; we would need both a truck and even a helper; ought we not wait for the man to honor his commitment?

The neighbor to the left of her farm was her brother in law, one with who she'd never been exactly on speaking terms. (This explained why the neighbor on the right had been given the task of overseeing her farm.) The brother-in-law had plowed and harvested the acreage adjacent to his own farm during her absence though and was grateful enough to loan us both his truck and his son. The latter, I notice, went flaming red when hugged by Tante François. He would need to be watched.

The trustee of our tool shed was not pleased to see us. He babbled how things had cost more than he expected. Perhaps, he should be allowed to keep certain items in payment thereof. I took out the gun and shot him in the thigh. As with

the Gautlier of Roclincourt, this was not where I had aimed. People came running from the house when they heard the shot, and later even François took me to task.

"Could you not have first tried to negotiate?"

"L'Armee de l'Air did not teach us how to negotiate. They taught us how to kill."

Not one to panic, I directed our young helper to start loading such items as his aunt might choose to point out and succeeded in ignoring the shouting until this task was completed.

I've already mentioned that I was forced to shoot two men, the consequence of my having such terrible aim. The next day the neighbor showed up with his younger brother, a sturdily built, vigorous lad who undoubtedly wrestled bulls in his spare time. I shot him in the balls. It was the resulting protests of his wife who proceeded to complain long and loudly throughout the village that I believe were responsible for the gradual return of so many items to François, some of which had yet to be missed. These last often arrived mysteriously during the night to be left at the top of the drive. Even François's sister-in-law appeared one day with some china which she said she had been standing guard over – "to prevent their theft" – until François returned.

The presence of my gun and my willingness to use it also proved of value in negotiations with the local merchants for we would need their assistance in acquiring the seed we needed for the next harvest. We had animals to purchase also, though François' cow, and a pair of pigs were retrieved from the neighbors' farms.

I liked the taste of goat and thought a pair of them would prove useful in putting down the grasses that had been allowed to rise up all about the house and drive. We acquired three, a buck and two does in the hope, realized the next spring, of both milk and young goat meat.

Barley and hemp were both winter crops and as we simply took over acreage already planted by our two neighbors, we were able to feed our animals from our own stocks by spring.

Tante François took over the garden as she had in Paive and we soon had fresh vegetables, though I didn't quite care for all she raised, cabbage not being one of my favorites.

The land itself yielded bountiful harvests of asparagus, apricots and cherries in the Spring, figs and olives the following Fall, and delicious wild mushrooms of various kinds throughout the year. Under François' tutelage, I learned to make cabécous of Rocamadour from goats' milk. And these in turn would be eaten along with mashed potatoes, garlic, and fresh cream.

Quillan was, if anything, more isolated than Paive. Was there a war in progress? or had there been one? Of course, men like François' husband had left for the army and not returned. But was this because of the war or simply because they chose to stay away? Much excitement might be found elsewhere in the world. Here the teller might wink but then reassure me that he, personally, much preferred the simple country life. After which he would stroll away down the main street toward one of the two petanquier courts.

Meanwhile, of course, I waited, waited for the message from my superiors

that would indicate I should finally complete my mission. One might argue that my moving away from Paive would prevent this, but as François was in communication with her brother (though not mentioning my presence), and he was in communication with her (and he could not keep a secret) there was no reason to believe that a message had arrived.

I have already discoursed several times on the size of François's breasts, a natural enough obsession in the adult male. But after we had lived together on the farm for two or three months, it became evident to me that François's breasts were larger, and that her face, once drawn and sallow, had filled out and was now fully fleshed. A new color suffused her cheeks and altogether she looked totally radiant.

No more than a few years later, I would have had no trouble in recognizing these changes for what they portended, but I was very young then. A month later, the breasts still larger, and the belly, too, no explanation was required.

"I want to get married," she said.

Now François had once talked me into going to Church with her, a late-morning mass on a Sunday, so that we would not be rushed in bed. "But I'm not a Catholic," I'd cried, "I won't know what do, when to rise, when to sit down."

"You rise when I do, you sit down when I do."

"But won't I have to go to confession?"

"Only if you wish to receive communion. And I have no intention of going to communion while I am making the beast of two backs with you.

"Confession is for those who feel the need for absolution. Do you feel such a

need? Is there something you feel you must have absolution for?"

Whereupon, as she had been talking to me raised up on her knees and elbows over the bed, she gradually lowered herself down, fitted me within her and made me come again for the second time that morning.

"You know I'm not a Catholic." I said when she first brought up the subject of marriage. "Were we to marry, would I have to take instruction? Promise to raise my children as Catholics? Would your Church be willing to marry you and me at all?"

"Do not fret. Of course, the Church will not marry us; divorce is not permitted."

"But I'm not divorced and I thought your husband was . . ."

"I don't know if my husband is or is not dead; that is the problem." (A not uncommon problem in France and many occupied countries at that time. In Britain and in Germany no woman whose man was in service could be completely sure, nor would be sure till the war was over when or whether her man would or would not come home.)

"But what I want from you is a declaration, some sort of ceremony."

"Then you shall have it."

Since that time, I've learned that the simple ceremony we performed out on the lawn in the presence of her brother-in-law and his family would, at least among the Quakers, or the Religious Society of Friends as they are more accurately known, have qualified as a marriage. At least, it would, if François were ever to

succeed in establishing the death of her former husband.

We both repeated, "In the presence of God and these our witnesses, I take thee [insert Peter 's or François's name here] to be my [husband or wife, respectively] and promise to do the things that a [wife or husband] would be expected to do."

The ceremony was moving enough that her sister-in-law cried. Her nephew may have also. (Like me, I'm sure he had a thing for his very attractive aunt.)