

The French Experience.

The recommended stay in St Martin de Luxe was more-or- less compulsory at her university and the course had such a good reputation that when her mother saw the prospectus she had actively encouraged her application. She didn't remember showing it to her dad, not after the school trip to Calais in the first year sixth which had been as chaotic as her father had predicted. Her parents had been no more protective than any of her friends' families in 1962 but a week in Calais with 20 girls and one member of staff did not engender confidence in Janet's household especially when her grandfather made knowing comments about the French in the war, the first one. She and all but one of her class had returned unscathed, Brenda Howells though, had a different story to tell, it had been she who was missing for several hours on the last night of the trip and never to Margaret's knowledge revealed her whereabouts. Brenda was a boring, swot although her so- called 'French adventure' and the fact that she had never worn glasses again enhanced her reputation no end.

The ferry had been very crowded, the cafe was awful the sea rough and the passengers seemed to be either people on cheap day trips or kids on their way home or off to start school exchanges. So following the slow but interesting bus ride the wait for the lift to their host's house on a seat provided by 'la commune' in the late afternoon sunshine, eating a filled baguette bought at the only shop which seemed to be open, was not a hardship. They were to stay with a family called Chaput according to the information they had been given, just a short way out of town. Eventually a 2CV van pattered into the square, a large man with a moustache and a beret extricated himself from the vehicle,

"He should have a string of onions," Penny whispered as the man walked up to them. He hardly acknowledged them a nod, in their direction perhaps, hauled their cases into the back of the van and said something in an accent neither girls had the remotest chance of understanding, so they had no option but to follow him into the smoke-filled bar, leaving everything they had brought with them in the unlocked van.

The place which seemed very busy at five o'clock on a weekday afternoon was filled with men, most of them seated around a big oblong table. Everyone turned to greet M. Chaput but the conversations stopped as the girls followed and their attention was turned to the two strangers. Behind the bar stood a man with a striped apron, his cigarette dangled from the side of his mouth, a long line of grey ash hung waiting to fall on to any nearby surface his chest bearing the evidence of many such incidents. His nod to their driver initiated a grey avalanche, sending the burned tobacco into a small glass of whatever had been poured for him, what seemed like an apology followed which the farmer ignored and downed the contents without a second's delay. Another glass was immediately filled and consumed. The girls watched fascinated. No offer of refreshment was made to them and after much hand shaking and shrugging the three left taking with them a cloud of smoke-filled air and a strong smell of the alcohol just consumed by their escort.

The drive along narrow lanes with little passing space was, despite the stop at the bar, safely completed and bags unloaded. A small plump woman wearing a wrap around apron and carrying a basket filled with what looked like dandelion leaves was just closing a gate from the garden and she joined them on the doorstep smiling broadly, she embraced the girls, planted three kisses on their cheeks before standing back to examine them carefully. The

conversation was not easy the local accent almost impenetrable so that both Margaret and Penny were pleased to be shown to their room and told to come for dinner at what they guessed was eight o'clock although they just hoped the time *was* eight and they would not miss a meal, the bagette seemed to have been eaten a long time ago.

Dinner was when it came, delicious, beef stew with piles of filling potatoes and bread hacked off a big round loaf by M. Chaput who asked questions they had little opportunity to answer since his wife spent most of the mealtime shutting him up with much tutting and waving of hands. The dandelion salad served with a big soft cheese was a new experience as was the discussion about bed wetting and lions both of which amused the cross cultural company. After using the bathroom facilities which could, at best, be described as minimal, the girls were pleased to find that the beds were very comfortable.

Next day began early, the school where both Margaret and Penny would spend the month was in 'the village' although neither knew where the village actually was or how they would get there, the answer to the second was answered by 'Madam,' as she liked to be referred, to by her nod in the direction of the yard outside where the 2CV stood, a quiet chugging from its' engine indicating that it was waiting to begin a journey. The farmer was clearly not intending to drive them, he was sitting with a big bowl of coffee by the fire in the kitchen'

Several insights into French life had already been revealed, the jug of hot water delivered following a loud knock was for their ablutions not a morning cup of tea, madam expected to repeat the kissing in the morning although thankfully M. Chaput showed no such inclination and that breakfast was a help yourself affair, bread and coffee at the end of the big scrubbed kitchen table. No mention of their journey to school though. Somehow the girls realised that they were expected to drive the car themselves though they weren't sure that a British provisional licence was even vaguely legal on French rural roads.

"He's saying it won't be a problem, Pen." Margaret assured her friend.

"Yes, I gathered that, but I'm the one with the provisional license and you won't have to explain to a gendarme if we're stopped." Penny replied.

In the event M. Chaput wearing the sort of expression which a hibernating bear might have if he'd been disturbed in the middle of winter, came out of the house shrugging on his jacket and took the to the wheel.

The journey to school was very simple, albeit along twisting roads ending in the clearly identifiable school playground where children were already congregating, some, to the new teaching staffs' amazement, smoking quite openly whilst lounging against a wall near a neatly arranged cycle store. The girls were slightly mystified when they saw M. Chaput take a lift on a passing tractor having parked the 2CV inside the school gates on the edge of the scrubby grass near what looked like the school lavatories but by then they were being ushered inside by an older woman who identified herself as Marie Dupre. The morning passed in a blur, introductions, in for the main part, understandable French followed by a lesson where no language other than English was allowed which mainly consisted of questions by the pupils about England and the English. Enquiries about all sorts of obscure aspects of school and public life occupied the session ending with one about the Beatles was followed by lunch in the noisy but bright dining room which was as good a meal as either Penny or Margaret had eaten outside home in 1960s Surrey.

The morning was so successful that the afternoon could hardly have been imagined. At two pm school re-started with games. Both Penny and Margaret enjoyed sport at college but neither knew the rules of 'basket' which turned out to be basket ball played on a grassy field with some worn out white lines almost obscured by the growing weeds, which they were left to supervise with unlimited 'help' from the pupils. The game eventually deteriorated into a shambles when all but two of the girls decided it was too hot to continue and sat watching the remaining group, meaningfully looking at their watches until their assistantes joined them and they gathered together for a much more interesting quarter of an hour's discussion almost all in colloquial French so that when they thought about the afternoon later they concluded that though they would never be P.E. teachers the language practice had helped no end.

The next problem was their journey back to the farm. It would take a couple more days before either thought of the Chaput residence as home. The van had sat all day with the keys in the steering column and had become in the afternoon sun, very hot inside which exaggerated the noticeable farmyard aroma coming from its' rear compartment. Suddenly Mme. Dupre wheeling her bike around the side of the building ushered a tall dark haired young man over to the van, introduced him as Gerard and opened the door of the passenger side. Gerard slid in to the seat and Margret was surprised to see Penny pull back the drivers seat and motion for her to get in which she did finding the only seat a sort of wobbly deck chair. Penny started the engine and with a little help from Gerard who it appeared needed to drape his arm along the back of the driver's seat throughout the journey, expertly manoeuvred the vehicle out of the school grounds and back to the Chaput's house.

The need to drive illegally was not repeated. Two elderly bikes were dragged out of a barn and after tyres were pumped and plenty of oil was applied were found to be quite serviceable. Gerard became a regular visitor to the house, selflessly sharing himself between the girls although eventually Margaret found a more interesting prospect in the village, leaving the way clear for Penny. Sad to say the budding romance ended on the night of the church dance when Gerard arrived at the farm, carrying a large rug, explaining that the heater was not working in the 2CV which he had borrowed to transport himself and Penny. Margaret didn't like to ask for details about Penny's sudden rejection of the handsome Gerard but it could have been something to do with the fact that M.Chaput had used the van to transport some pigs to market earlier that day.

