

CHAPTER TWO



It was late in the long, hot, dry summer of '76 when we first found our house in the sun. Semi-derelict and quite overgrown, it had been on the market for three summers and no one had lived in it for eleven years. I like to think that it was waiting for us. My husband Mike and I are lizards. Normally workaholics, when the sun is strong and the air warm our only urgency is to bask. I once briefly contemplated marriage with a handsome, fair-skinned young man with whom I imagined myself in love until, on a day trip to the sea, he covered his splendid legs with a towel in case they

burned and I knew that he was not for me.

Each summer we would drive our two sons as far south as time and money would allow. We would all idly dream of buying a house in Italy or Spain even though we knew we could not afford it. It was not until we went to the south west of France where we discovered old houses, abandoned and not expensive – the French much preferring to build smart new villas – that we realised for the first time that our dream might just become reality. In Lot-et-Garonne we fell in love with a region of small undulating farms, medieval hill-top towns, their balconies crammed with flowers, incredibly cheap, gastronomic menus and simple, friendly people. Even then it was to take us five years to find what we wanted.

Each holiday we would point the car south west from Calais. The search was on and it filled a need in me for something to absorb me completely. Ever since I had finished playing at the Piccadilly Theatre in ‘Man of La Mancha’ I had felt a great restlessness. Musical roles like Dulcinea in the story of Don Quixote are once in a lifetime and I had been incredibly lucky to get it – and even luckier to repeat it the following summer playing opposite Richard Kiley who had created the role on Broadway. The notices made my agent happy.

It was a special show. The distinguished critic of the *New York Times*, Brooks Atkinson wrote: ‘In the final

A HOUSE IN THE SUNFLOWERS

scene Dulcinea and Don Quixote are not figures of fun but enlightened human beings who know something private but beautiful that is outside the range of ordinary experience.' Small wonder that I found the world of cabaret and one-nighters to which I had returned less than satisfying.

Looking for our house in the sun became almost an obsession and in the next five years we must have seen scores of houses. We looked at complete ruins, converted or unconverted barns, neatly restored villas, even shacks made of wattle and daub which looked as though a high wind would blow them away, but we found nothing that was exactly right. And of course each year when we returned our slowly growing savings were outstripped by rising prices. Would we ever find the right house in the right location at a price we could afford?

That summer we had almost been persuaded by an English entrepreneur, living in the south west, to buy a huge barn that he had found and to let him supervise the conversion. Still undecided we went to have another look. The interior was huge. The walls of beautiful, honey-coloured stone were a metre thick and the original wooden stalls still full of hay. However, one wall needed to come down and be completely rebuilt, it was too close to the road and the distant view was marred by a giant pylon. But it was, not surprisingly, very cheap and our holiday was almost over. Could we

bear to go home once more disappointed? That night we lay awake.

‘Is *that* what we’ve really been looking for?’ asked Mike.

‘No.’ I had to admit it. And that was that.

We decided to forget the wretched barn and spend just one more day searching. We had gradually established priorities and the first had to be the one thing which we could not change – the location. Next morning at an agency that we had not tried before we explained, as best we could, what it was that we were looking for. The agent, a plump, dishevelled blonde, seemed sympathetic and armed with her list of three possibilities we set off yet again. The first house turned out to be a sagging wooden cabin in a gloomy valley. We did not even stop. So much for her understanding. It was no good, we might as well start thinking about going back to England. Even the intrepid Matthew was getting fed up with all this fruitless house-hunting.

It was midday. We looked at the second name on the list and consulted our, by now, dog-eared map. The owner, a M. Bertrand, lived in a farm on the edge of a village about six kilometres away. We might as well just go and look. We could, perhaps, eat our picnic in the village square and buy a drink at the café. As we approached the village – hardly even that: a shop, a church, two petrol pumps with an urn of oleanders on either side and a telephone box under a tree –

A HOUSE IN THE SUNFLOWERS

nothing moved. It appeared deserted. We climbed out of the van into the midday heat and looked about us. The stillness was broken by the creak of a gate and turning we saw a very small, very old woman in a dark speckled pinafore and carpet slippers coming silently towards us. Did she by any chance know M. Bertrand, the farmer, we asked her? She smiled, raising her thin eyebrows.

‘*Mais, bien sûr Monsieur,*’ she whispered, pointing down the road ahead. We did not know then of course, that she had known him for forty years and others in the village for twice as long.

Several tethered dogs barked wildly as we drove into the farmyard. The house was quite imposing and the garden ablaze with asters and zinnias. A boy about the same age as Matthew came out of a side door. He had long brown legs, a smiling intelligent face and he explained that his father was ‘*en train de manger*’. We apologised for we knew, even then, that there could hardly be a greater crime than interrupting a Frenchman’s meal, especially at midday.

‘We’ll come back later,’ we said, but at that moment M. Bertrand himself appeared, wiping his greasy chin with the back of his hand. He was small but sturdy, dark-eyed, his sunburnt feet in dusty espadrilles. We apologised for disturbing him but he shook his head and smiled. It was nothing. Yes, he did have a house for sale, he would be glad to show

it to us. He climbed onto a small motorcycle. We protested. It was always slightly embarrassing to have to explain to any vendor that their house was really very charming but not exactly what was required – and to have to do so after dragging this poor man from his meal!

‘If you’ll just tell us how to get there,’ we pleaded, ‘we’ll go and look and then, if we are interested, we’ll call back.’

He smiled at us, shaking his head.

‘Impossible,’ he said. ‘You’d never find it.’

It was at that moment that we had our first stirrings of excitement.

‘Is it well situated?’ asked Mike.

‘Better than here,’ he yelled over the sudden roar of the bike and away he careered down the drive. We followed.

Two hundred yards along the winding, narrow road he suddenly disappeared from view as he turned to the right up a rough track and we turned, bumping and swaying behind him. The track swung left, climbing and narrowing through dry, head-high maize. At the far end of this tunnel we could just glimpse two ruined walls and a great heap of stones. Our hearts sank. Was that it? The farmer, no doubt realising what we were thinking, turned and, pointing at the ruin, shook his head, the bike lurching wildly. Another turn, this time to the right, past a dried-up pond and a large

A HOUSE IN THE SUNFLOWERS

barn and as he stopped, we saw our house for the first time.

The engines switched off, the sudden stillness was overwhelming as we climbed down into the dry, bleached grass. As our ears adjusted we became aware of the papery rustling of the maize and the shrilling of crickets in the dry, sweet air. It was very hot although the sun was obscured by thin cloud and as we walked toward the house we all spoke quietly as though someone were asleep.

It was a long, low building and, from what seemed to be the front, which I now know is the back, it appeared featureless. The end section on the right seemed to be an afterthought, having been roofed in different tiles from the ancient Roman ones which slithered down the remainder of the roof.

‘That part is not so old,’ said M. Bertrand. ‘Not quite a hundred years I think.’

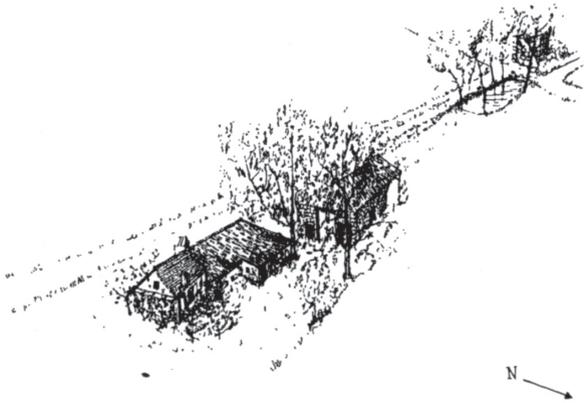
‘And the rest?’ I enquired.

He shrugged. ‘Two hundred, three hundred, perhaps more. Who knows?’ He led us round the side of the house where a long-neglected vine had interwoven with a japonica bush. It had climbed higher than the roof and then twisted over to form a long, shady, ragged tunnel full of spiders’ webs.

The real front of the house now came into view. The nearest corner was almost hidden by what had probably once been a neat box hedge but was now

RUTH SILVESTRE

a tall, straggling screen of trees. Beyond this the roof sloped steeply down to form a wide porch. Behind two low iron gates of uneven width we could see a stone well, an ancient front door and a collection of cobwebbed clutter; lengths of string and wire posts and broomhandles and cracked clay pots. M. Bertrand shooed away the cows which grazed right up to the porch and taking out a huge key on a tattered shred of dark red cloth, he unlocked the door.



Stepping into that cool, dark interior was the strangest experience for the furniture was still there, layered with dust and cobwebs as if in a fairy tale; yet even after all those years of neglect I still felt the strong sense of its having been loved and cared for. M. Bertrand pushed the shutters open and the fierce light flooded in through the grimy glass showing more clearly the

A HOUSE IN THE SUNFLOWERS

long table, rickety chairs, and a sideboard, dark and massive with an old lady's straw hat lying on the top. I picked it up and slowly put it on and I knew then that this was the house I wanted. Something about continuity; impossible to explain.

In this main room, to the side of the one small, deep-set window were two tiny wood-burning stoves. Their sooty chimney pipes crossed the greasy wall to join the main chimney breast of the wide, open fireplace, the hearth a simple iron plate on the floor. An opening to the left led to the newer part of the house which consisted of two quite large rooms opening off this main room. M. Bertrand opened one door then another.

'*Attention!*' he shouted as we began to follow him. We soon saw why. Unlike the first room which had a cement floor, these were wooden but, alas, now almost entirely eaten away. As he swung the shutter open I shrieked as an outraged bat flew from its home between the joists, skimming my face as it hurtled out of doors.

Mike, always more practical than I, was looking very doubtful. 'It'll all have to be completely re-done,' he muttered as we went back into the main room and looked up at the ceiling, where there were several large holes giving glimpses of the sky. Green trails of lichen on the corner wall showed where the rain had trickled in over the years. My heart sank. The specification had

indeed said '*INTERIEUR A RESTORER*' but...

Another two doors led off to the right, the first into a corridor about nine feet wide. There were ominous holes in the beaten earth floor which was strewn with broken rabbit hutches, wire cages, dozens of empty bottles, and everywhere cobwebs on the cobwebs, layered with dust like thick muslin. Matthew, always ahead, had already found a mouldering, uneven staircase at the far end lit by a very small window. Above this was another, even older window with no frame or glass, just a hand-carved stone opening, closed by a crude, heavy oak shutter which, when we opened it inwards, showered us with dust but revealed wonderful old nails with which it was studded. There was enough light for us to gingerly ascend into the attic or *grenier* which ran the whole length of the house. It was not in as bad a state as we had expected and was full of old farm implements, piles of corn husks, old boxes and even what looked like another ancient sideboard in the far corner.

Downstairs once more in the main room we opened the second door on the right and found a small room with an unusually low, tongued and grooved pine ceiling and a glass door which led outside. M. Bertrand explained that this room was the newest addition. It had been built inside the main structure for the old lady who had lived there with her son, because it was south facing and so warmer in the winter.

A HOUSE IN THE SUNFLOWERS

‘How old was she?’ I asked.

‘Ninety-two when she died,’ he answered, ‘and her son almost seventy.’

The last area M. Bertrand showed us was the huge outhouse or *chai* which was, he told us, a store for wine, north facing but not like a *cave*, which is below ground. We went in through a wide oak door at one side of the porch. About eighteen feet high nearest to the house, it sloped steeply down to barely five feet at the far end. ‘Brilliant!’ breathed Matthew as we stepped inside. Not only dust and cobwebs here but also an eleven years’ old collection of dead leaves from the two overhanging ash trees. Along the lowest wall, raised on two heavy beams were a dozen large oak barrels and several smaller ones, there was a pair of ancient scales with weights; a weird, wooden, wheelbarrow-like machine which was, we learned, for winnowing the wheat and another for stripping the corn from the cob; benches, baskets, lanterns, boxes, besoms and yet more bottles.

We wanted to talk about the house. Mike explained to M. Bertrand that we had a picnic with us in our camping van. Might we eat it there by the house? We were sure that he too might like to finish his own meal. We were very interested. (Very interested? I was besotted!) We would stay there until he returned.

His reaction surprised us. His face fell. He pushed his straw hat back off his brown forehead to show

the white strip beneath. He shrugged and blushed, shifting his brown feet in the dust. What could be the problem? Eventually he explained that the previous summer he had done precisely that with another group of people. On his return they had already left, taking with them the old brass lamp which had hung above the table. What could we say? We suggested he lock the house but he suddenly smiled, shook our hands and disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

Once more the silence descended as we gazed at the neglected house. Many of the ancient tiles had slipped and staggered down the steep slope of the roof giving it a drunken look. The plaster on the thick walls was stained and crumbling, the shutters falling to pieces and holes in the ceiling – but how I wanted it.

I handed out the bread, cheese and fruit and Mike uncorked the wine. Too excited to sit down, we circled the house again, picnic in hand. Matthew discovered two small outhouses that looked as though they might have been pigsties and another with a curiously high, narrow double door and a copper set into the end wall. There was also a second porch closed in with ugly galvanised doors on the west side which faced the barn. There was no mention of the barn on the specification so we assumed that the farmer used it and it was indeed full of hay. How much land would be ours? It said 2000 square metres but as we were surrounded by fields, it did not seem too important.

A HOUSE IN THE SUNFLOWERS

The pale cows watched us, standing in a line. Mike poured himself another glass. Might this be the moment to try to explain how I felt? Before I had time to say anything Matthew came hurtling back again.

‘It’s great. We can have it Dad, can’t we?’ he said.

His father looked at him, glass in hand. ‘I think we might. There’s an awful lot to do, it’s in a dreadful state and you’ll have to help, you realise. But I feel it’s manageable and it’s less than five thousand pounds.’ We were home and dry.

By the time M. Bertrand returned we were planning which would be the main bedroom, which the kitchen, and Matthew had already chosen for himself the floorless room facing south. I now realise that he was the only one who got it right but we had not lived in our house then. We hadn’t even bought it.

M. Bertrand seemed delighted. We shook hands again and then it was a matter of returning to the Agency to pay a deposit and sign the agreement. It seemed a comparatively simple procedure.

‘There’s another way back to the road,’ said M. Bertrand. ‘It will be quicker for you. Go down that track,’ he shouted, pointing, and then he whizzed away. Ten minutes later we were completely lost in a strange farmyard encircled by dogs, cats, chicken, ducks and guinea fowl and a family of three generations who had come out to show us the track that we should have taken. Our new home was certainly remote.

In order to pay the deposit and, more important it seemed, the Agent's commission which was, we discovered in our region, six per cent and, alas, *à la charge de l'acheteur*, we spent the next hour chasing from one bank to another. At that time one could only write a sterling cheque for fifty pounds cash so the process had to be repeated in each available bank. Fortunately the small town appeared to be full of banks. Returning to the Agency we struggled to make sense of the official documents. Mike, who many years before as an eighteen-year-old soldier in wartime France and the only one in his squadron with any French, had had a great deal of practice but nevertheless found it hard going. My own French was abysmally rusty and Matthew, who could just about conjugate *avoir* and *être* if he put his mind to it soon got bored and went to have a snooze in the van.

We were almost finished when we were joined by a newly bathed and dressed M. Bertrand and his small, fair, girlish wife. With a wide face and a radiant smile she was clearly enjoying this unexpected trip into town. At last the documents were completed and we could all leave the airless office for a drink at the café across the road.

'Tomorrow I must get the *géomètre* to measure your land exactly,' said M. Bertrand, and we arranged to meet at the house the following day. We toasted our

A HOUSE IN THE SUNFLOWERS

new friendship in Pernod and Dubonnet. Clinking our glasses we beamed at each other. Time would tell us the quality of these friends that we had had the good fortune to find.

Le Géomètre was young, handsome and very serious. He walked round our house to the front porch and regarded it in silence for several minutes. Then he said solemnly, '*Oui. C'est très recherché.*' We were suitably pleased. We thought so too.

He paced and measured, M. Bertrand following him banging in small wooden stakes at each corner. The narrow strip of land between the barn and the house was evenly divided and then he marched off along the track with his giant tape measure. The further he went the further fell M. Bertrand's face. We were to learn over the years that our friend is totally without guile, his face mirrors each succeeding thought. Then we only saw that he had not realised quite how much of his meadow would soon be ours. We watched the graceful young man pace onward. 'Right!' shouted Mike. 'That's plenty.'

M. Bertrand looked surprised but extremely relieved. 'Are you sure?' he asked.

'Sure,' we nodded. We knew that it would be a long time before we would worry about the size of a garden, there was so much to be done on the house. So the stakes were hammered in and *Le Géomètre* disappeared slowly down the track in his elegant car.

A man of taste. He knew something *recherché* when he saw it.

So with our holiday at an end we took our last look at our house. We were a little disconcerted to learn that it was called *Bel-Air*. A name with such a smart, trans-Atlantic connotation seemed singularly inappropriate for our neglected and unpretentious dwelling. M. Bertrand explained that within a few kilometres there were four ancient houses all called *Grèze Longue* and that *grèze* was a kind of chalky soil. There were *Grèze Longue Haut* and *Bas* for obvious reasons, *Au Bosc de Grèze Longue* because it was in a wood and our house was actually called *Bel-Air de Grèze Longue* because we had the best view and caught all the fresh air. That made it much more acceptable.

Excited as we were there was nothing more to do but return to England and dream about it. Until the transaction was completed we could not begin any alterations. We took a few inadequate photographs to show Adam, our eldest son, who was somewhere in Europe touring with a pop group. In London we had to apply to the Bank of England for permission to buy abroad and we also had to pay the iniquitous dollar premium which was, in 1976, 45%, for the privilege of spending our own money on which we had already paid tax!

In October we received a letter from the lawyer, or *notaire*, saying that our agreement would be even

A HOUSE IN THE SUNFLOWERS

more delayed. When *le géomètre* had consulted the ancient map he had discovered that at some time in the past M. Bertrand, in order that his cows should have easier access to the pond, had simply altered the position of the track or *chemin rural* which passed our house. This explained why it now ran past the back, rather than the front door as it had originally done. Such an alteration was, it appeared, strictly forbidden and French bureaucracy now required the passing of a special *acte* by the commune. We could only imagine M. Bertrand's face when he heard this piece of news!