

## THE BRETANGES ESTATE

‘What a beautiful day!’ declared the young man, pushing open his bedroom shutters. Muslin curtains fluttered on either side of the upstairs window of the seventeenth-century house. His gaze swept the countryside – a small corner of Limousin attached to Périgord as if by mistake. The parched landscape was dotted with oak trees. A clock struck one on the mantelpiece behind him.

‘What time do you call this?’ And you the new deputy mayor of Beaussac! When I was mayor, I got up much earlier!’ boomed a deep voice from the garden, coming from under the ancient chestnut tree.

‘Father, I was putting the finishing touches to my project to divert the Nizonne.’

‘Amédée,’ said a woman’s voice from the shade of the tree, ‘stop badgering our son. At least he’s dressed. You look good in your summer suit, Alain. Don’t forget your boater, it’s another scorcher today,’ continued his mother, fanning herself.

Alain grabbed his straw hat from the rosewood table and left his room. The dark staircase smelt strongly of wax

polish. His soft dark-brown leather boots betrayed a slight limp as he went down the stairs. An old, worn tapestry hung in the entrance hall. Alain paused in front of a framed picture depicting the main square of a small, deserted market town.



‘You like that picture of Hautefaye, don’t you?’ exclaimed his mother, catching sight of him through the open front door.

‘Yes, I do. Our neighbours are very friendly,’ Alain replied, leaving the house to join his parents, who were sitting at the garden table, about to have lunch. ‘I hope my drainage project will be approved and that they’ll all like it, as they did in Beaussac.’

‘You slept so late I thought you’d forgotten all about the annual fair,’ muttered his father, his nose in the local paper.

‘Father, I’ve never missed the Hautefaye fair. All my friends will be there.’ Alain went over to embrace his mother, a dark-haired woman with blue eyes.

‘Oh, you’re such a wonderful boy, so helpful and uncomplicated. You were born to please, always smiling, always with an angelic look in your eyes,’ she gushed, stroking his cheek.

His father rolled his eyes, uncomfortable with the excessive display of motherly love. Alain moved into the shade of the chestnut tree.

‘Oh, it’s so lovely and cool here. Perfect on such a hot and muggy day. It’s as though it were put here for this very purpose.’

‘Well, stay under the tree then, instead of going to war,’ said his mother, anxious all of a sudden. ‘Dear Lord, you’ll be in Lorraine next week fighting in this wretched war against Prussia. Why do you insist on going when the medical board has already exempted you for having a weak constitution? Do you want me to die of worry? You could easily have exchanged your unlucky conscription number at Pons when you were in Périgueux. It would only have cost us a thousand francs. Alain, are you listening to me?’

‘Magdeleine-Louise, he’s already told you hundreds of times!’ grumbled his father. ‘You know he doesn’t approve of using a lottery system to decide who goes to war. Especially because poor boys who draw a lucky ticket then sell it to wealthy boys who have an unlucky one.’

‘Mother, everybody knows and likes me here in Nontron, but I would be so ashamed if I came across the parents of the boy who’d gone to fight in my place . . . Anyway, my limp won’t be a problem, as I’ll be in the cavalry.’

Alain shouted over to the household servant, who was dozing under an arbour, ‘Pascal, would you saddle my horse please?’

‘Aren’t you eating with us?’ asked his mother, surprised. ‘Look, we’ve got lentils with bacon and that soft cheese you like.’

‘No, I’ll have lunch at the fair, at Mousnier’s inn. I’m meeting the Marthon notary there.’

‘Why?’ asked his father.

‘Before going to the front, I must sort out some estate business. I promised to give our needy neighbour, poor Bertille, a heifer to replace the cow that drowned in the Nizonne marshes. I also said that I would help the Lac Noir farmer re-roof his barn. It was hit by lightning in last week’s storm and I want to try and find a carpenter in Hautefaye who’ll be able to start working on it as soon as possible. I was thinking of Pierre Brut, that roofer from Fayemarteau. It’s urgent and I must make the necessary arrangements before I leave for Lorraine.’

Alain paused at the edge of the meadow to listen to the hornets buzzing and the cicadas chirring. A pretty little lark broke into song and then flew from its perch on a dry bush.

‘My head’s spinning,’ said his mother, who was feeling unwell. In poor health already, she was badly affected by her son’s enlistment.

‘It’s the heat, Mother.’

‘What does the paper say, my boy? Does it mention Prussia? Did we beat them at Reichshoffen and Forbach? I don’t have my glasses.’

Alain picked up the *Dordogne Echo*, which was lying beside his father’s plate. His father was looking at it but said nothing.

‘Is this really today’s paper?’ he asked. ‘Tuesday 16 August 1870. Ah yes, this is it.’

Shocked by the headlines, he decided to read aloud only a small column from the bottom of the front page:

*‘The drought continues unabated and the situation is going from bad to worse. Larger towns are already rationing water and, in some areas, citizens are to receive no more than eight pints per person per day. In areas that have no large springs or streams, people are travelling long distances to the nearest river or are having to pay for water.’*

‘It is rather hot,’ agreed his mother.

‘You should go and play the piano in the drawing room after lunch. You’ll feel cooler in there.’

Pascal brought over Alain’s fine chestnut horse and held out the reins to him. As Alain mounted, his mother advised him to return before nightfall.

‘Mother, I’ll be thirty in two years’ time! And Hautefaye is a mere two miles from our house. I’ll just go there, say hello to a few people and come straight back. See you later.’