Lovereading.co.uk

The Winter Ghosts

Kate Mosse

Illustrations by Brian Gallagher

Published by Orion

Extract

All text is copyright © of the author and illustrator

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

THE WINTER GHOSTS



Kate Mosse

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRIAN GALLAGHER

TOULOUSE

April 1933



La Rue des Pénitents Gris



He walked like a man recently returned to the world. Every step was careful, deliberate. Every step to be relished.

He was tall and clean-shaven, a little thin perhaps. Dressed by Savile Row. A light woollen suit of herringbone weave, the jacket wide on the shoulders and narrow at the waist. His fawn gloves matched his trilby. He looked like an Englishman, secure in his right to be on such a street on such a pleasant afternoon in spring.

But nothing is as it seems.

For every step was a little too careful, a little too deliberate, as if he was unwilling to take even the ground beneath his feet entirely for granted. And as he walked, his clever, quick eyes darted from side to side, as if he were determined to record every tiny detail.

Toulouse was considered one of the most beautiful

cities in the south of France. Certainly, Freddie admired it. The elegance of its nineteenth-century buildings, the medieval past that slept beneath the pavements and colonnades, the bell towers and cloisters of Saint-Etienne, the bold river dividing the city in two. The pink brick facades, blushing in the April sunshine, gave Toulouse its affectionate nickname, *la ville rose*. Little had changed since Freddie had last visited, at the tail end of the 1920s. He had been another man then, a tattered man, worn threadbare by grief.

Things were different now.

In his right hand, Freddie carried directions scribbled on the back of a napkin from Bibent, where he'd lunched on filet mignon and a blowsy Bordeaux. In his left-hand breast pocket was a letter patterned with antiquity and dust, secure in a pasteboard wallet. It was this – and the fact that, at last, he had the opportunity to return – which brought him back to Toulouse today. The mountains where he'd come across the document held a strong significance for him, and though he had never read the letter, it was a precious possession.

Freddie crossed the Place du Capitole, heading towards the cathedral of Saint-Sernin. He walked through a network of small streets, obtuse little alleyways filled with jazz bars and poetry cellars and

gloomy restaurants. He sidestepped couples on the pavements, lovers and families and friends out enjoying the warm afternoon. He passed through tiny squares and hidden *ruelles*, and along the rue du Taur, until he reached the street he was looking for. Freddie hesitated at the corner, as if having second thoughts. Then he continued on, walking briskly now, dragging his shadow behind him.

Halfway along the rue des Pénitents Gris was a *librairie* and antiquarian bookseller. His destination. He stopped dead to read the name of the proprietor painted in black lettering above the door. Momentarily, his silhouette was imprinted on the building. Then he shifted position and the window was once more flooded with gentle sunlight, causing the metal grille to glint.

Freddie stared at the display for a moment, at the antique volumes embossed with gold leaf, and the highly polished leather slip casings of black and red, at the ridged spines of works by Montaigne and Anatole France and Maupassant. Other, less familiar names, too: Antonin Gadal and Félix Garrigou; and volumes of ghost stories by Blackwood and James and Sheridan Le Fanu.

'Now or never,' he said.

The old-fashioned handle was stiff and the door dug in its heels as Freddie pushed it open. A brass

bell rattled somewhere distant at the back of the shop. The coarse rush matting sighed beneath the soles of his shoes as he stepped in.

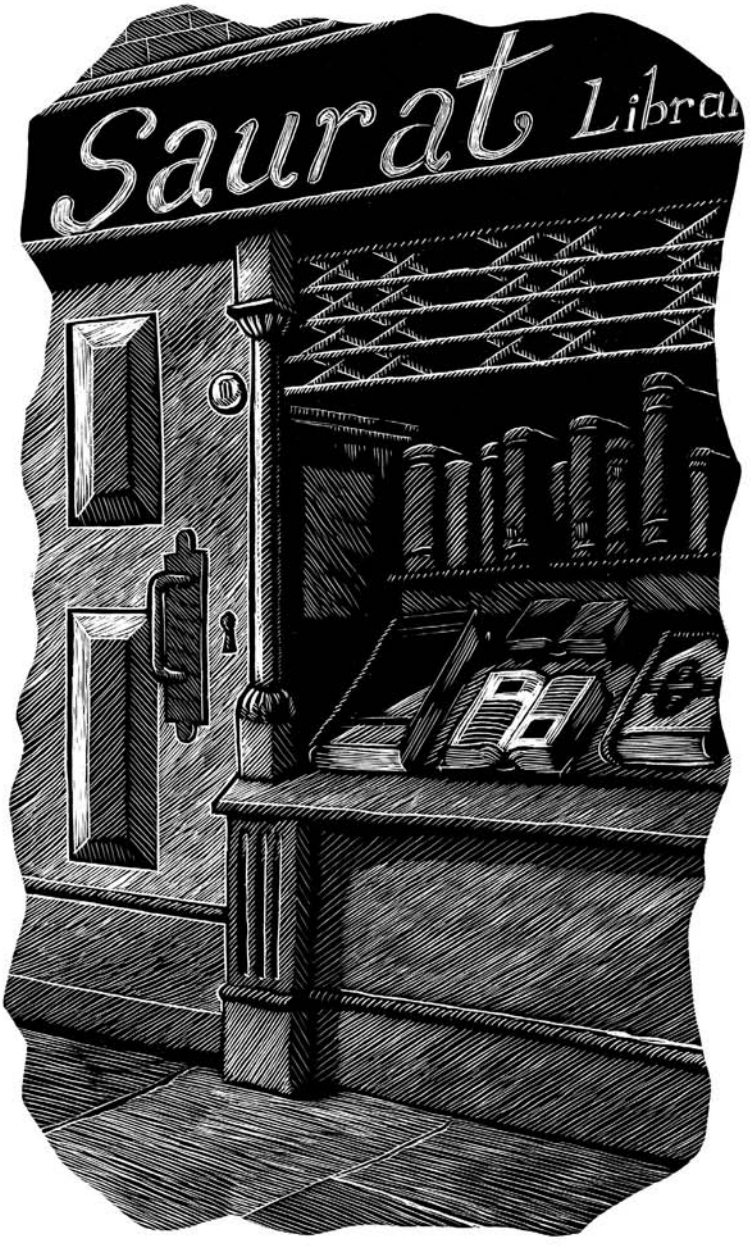
'*Il y a quelqu'un*?' he said in clipped French. 'Anybody about?'

The contrast between the brightness outside and the patchwork of shadows within made Freddie blink. But there was a pleasing smell of dust and afternoons, glue and paper and polished wooden shelves. Particles of dust danced in and out of the beams of slatted sunlight. He was sure now that he had come to the right place and he felt something unwind inside him. Relief that he had finally made it here, perhaps, or of being at his journey's end.

Freddie took off his hat and gloves and placed them on the long wooden counter. Then he reached into the pocket of his suit jacket and brought out the small pasteboard wallet.

'Hello?' he called a second time. 'Monsieur Saurat?'

He heard footsteps, then the creak of a small door at the back of the shop, and a man walked through. Freddie's first impression was of flesh; rolls of skin at the neck and wrists, a smooth and unlined face beneath a shock of white hair. He did not, in any way, look like the medieval scholar Freddie was expecting.


Saurat Libra

'Monsieur Saurat?'

The man nodded. Cautious, bored, uninterested in a casual caller.

'I need help with a translation,' Freddie said. 'I was told you might be the man for such a job.'

Keeping his eyes on Saurat, Freddie carefully slipped the letter from its casing. It was a heavy weave, the colour of dirty chalk, not paper at all, but something far older. The handwriting was uneven and scratched.

Saurat let his gaze slip to it. Freddie watched his eyes sharpen, first with surprise, then astonishment. Then greed.

'May I?'

'Be my guest.'

Taking a pair of half-moon spectacles from his top pocket, Saurat perched them on the end of his nose. He produced a pair of thin, linen gloves from beneath the counter, pulled them on. Holding the letter gently at the corner between forefinger and thumb, he held it up to the light.

'Parchment. Probably late medieval.'

'Quite right.'

'Written in Occitan, the old language of this region.'

'Yes.' All this Freddie knew.

Saurat gave him a hard look, then dropped his

eyes back to the letter. An intake of breath, then he began to read the opening lines aloud. His voice was surprisingly light.

'*Bones and shadows and dust. I am the last. The others have slipped away into darkness. Around me now, at the end of my days, only an echo in the still air of the memory of those who once I loved. Solitude, silence. Peyre sant . . .*'

Saurat stopped and stared now with interest at the reserved Englishman standing before him. He did not look like a collector, but then one never could tell.

He cleared his throat. 'May I ask where you came by this, Monsieur . . . ?'

'Watson.' Freddie took his card from his pocket and laid it with a snap on the counter between them. 'Frederick Watson.'

'You are aware this is a document of some historical significance?'

'To me its significance is purely personal.'

'That may be, but nevertheless . . .' Saurat shrugged. 'It is something that has been in your family for some time?'

Freddie hesitated. 'Is there a place we could talk?'

'Of course.' Saurat gestured to a low card table and four leather armchairs set in an alcove at the rear of the shop. 'Please.'

✦

Freddie took the letter and sat down, watching as Saurat stooped beneath the counter again, this time producing two thick glass tumblers and a bottle of mellow, golden brandy. He was unusually graceful, delicate even, Freddie thought, for such a large man. Saurat poured them both a generous measure, then lowered himself into the chair opposite. The leather sighed beneath his weight.

'So, will you translate it for me?'

'Of course. But I am still intrigued to know how you come to be in possession of such a document.'

'It's a long story.'

Another shrug. 'I have the time.'

Freddie leaned forward and slowly fanned his long fingers across the surface of the table, making patterns on the green baize.

'Tell me, Saurat, do you believe in ghosts?'

A smile stole across the other man's lips.

'I am listening.'

Freddie breathed out, with relief or some other emotion, it was hard to tell.

'Well then,' he said, settling back in his chair. 'The story begins almost five years ago, not so very far from here.'