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The Ripening Sun

Patricia Atkinson

Prologue - August 2002

AS I LOOK TOWARDS CLOS D'YVIGNE FROM THE CHURCH OF GAGEAC, the morning sun casts dappled light onto the new wall that seems as though it has always been there. It bears the name of Clos d'Yvigne in relief, red lettering against sand and white stone. Behind the wall is a small courtyard with tamarisk trees and wisteria. A recently constructed tasting room, with adjoining office and stocking depot, is to the right. To the left of the courtyard is my house and behind it the winery, the working heart of the vineyard. It contains wine in vats and barrels, along with all the tools of winemaking; pumps, vats, pipes and presses.

In the tiny orchard of fruit trees beyond the winery sits a Massey Fergusson tractor. Further on still are the vines, a parcelle of Merlot in the foreground, their grapes just beginning to change colour from green to deep bishop's purple. I have twenty-one hectares of them, set on the beautiful ridge of hills that run along the left side of the Dordogne in south-west France.

The large, dense leaves clothing the vines reach up to the sun, soaking up nourishment and transferring it to the grapes. I calculate that it will probably be October before I harvest them. Today is Sunday, an afternoon in mid-August. It's the day of the week that I give to myself, in itself a form of liberation. If I want to work I can, but it's officially a day of rest.

I walk up through the parcelles of vines towards a dilapidated cross which sits next to a derelict house. In front of the house is a tree, under which is the old wooden seat where Madame Cholet used to sit in the afternoons.

I am standing on the highest point of my land, the plateau a vast, shallow bowl covered with vines, its perimeters studded by historical monuments. To the west is the fortress-like silhouette of the chateau of Saussignac, the tall spire of the church close beside it. To the south is my house, and beyond it the beautiful chateau of Gageac, home to the de la Verrie family. To the

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north, the land drops away steeply to the valley of the Dordogne. Far below, the fields and vines create a tapestry of yellow and green.

Deep in the river valley in front of me lies the historic town of Bergerac, fought over by Protestants and Catholics in the Wars of Religion and by England and France in the Hundred Years War. To the right and in the foreground is a copse of trees, behind which lies Pomport where the first battle of that war was fought, and interspersed amongst the villages are fruit trees and vines that have been cultivated here for hundreds of years.

I gaze at the horizon and the land, timeless, yet changing; defined not only by history and culture, but also by an interaction with the land, the vines and nature. The confines of my life for the last twelve years have been these landscapes, both near and far. Having come here precipitately, I put down roots and learned to live off this land and these vines.

It is hot. I look at the vines in the foreground; graceful, contoured carpets of lush green, sweeping out in front and to the right of me. Their gentle, sinuous curves follow the contours of the landscape, swathes of form and colour. A summer haze hangs over them like a mantle.

The drone of a distant tractor lends a communality of spirit. I stop for a moment. Hands cupped over my eyes, adjusting to the shimmering glare of the sun, I look up towards the cemetery with its dark, mysterious cypress trees and onwards, to the vines up on the ridge. Jean de la Verrie is slowly ploughing, up and down his vines, the rhythmic sound of the motor accentuating the heat.

RANDOM HOUSE

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