



Full Circle



BRUCE HILL

Bruce Hill is a retired translator. His work covered almost any sphere, from the translation of serious medical studies and legal documents to translations of hospitality brochures via innovative IT texts, operator manuals and company press releases, the latter couched in technical phraseology or business jargon. He wished, at last, to distance himself from the world of commercial profit and write for his own pleasure and possibly for the pleasure of others.

J. Farady (a friend)

Table of Contents

BOOK I

CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 7

CHAPTER 8

CHAPTER 9

CHAPTER 10

CHAPTER 11

CHAPTER 12

CHAPTER 13

CHAPTER 14

CHAPTER 15

CHAPTER 16

CHAPTER 16 b

BOOK 2

CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 7
CHAPTER 8
CHAPTER 9
CHAPTER 10
CHAPTER 11
CHAPTER 12
CHAPTER 13
CHAPTER 13
CHAPTER 14
CHAPTER 15
CHAPTER 16

BOOK 3

CHAPTER 1
CHAPTER 2
CHAPTER 3
CHAPTER 4
CHAPTER 5
CHAPTER 6
CHAPTER 7
CHAPTER 8
CHAPTER 9
CHAPTER 10
CHAPTER 11
CHAPTER 12
CHAPTER 13
CHAPTER 14
CHAPTER 15
CHAPTER 16
CHAPTER 17

CHAPTER 18

CHAPTER 19

CHAPTER 20

CHAPTER 21

CHAPTER 22

BOOK I

CHAPTER 1

A terrible wind was blowing, cold and penetrating, down from the Massif Central. The tall leafless trees were bending under the weight of the gale and from time to time old, sapless twigs and small branches would come flying across the field where Charles with the constant and uniform help of Mardi the Percheron was ploughing the 5 hectare stubble field from the previous year's harvest. He had abandoned his cap which was now tucked into his belt as the wind blowing at some 50 km/hr was indeed fierce. As a result, his fair hair which he refused to have cut short, unlike most young men of his age, kept blowing into his face and making him swear. However, when he reached the headland he halted Mardi, gave him a handful of grass to munch and sought and found some tough, flexible but thin twigs from a bush growing there and twisted them into a rough rope to tie his hair back. That done, he took hold of the plough handles again and manoeuvred the horse and plough to the furrow to be turned over in the opposite direction. It was November and the field had to be finished before the first snowfalls and frosts. He could be described as being completely resigned to his life of farmer's son, thought nothing of rising very early in the morning and bedding down early in the evening, just like his parents. There was a difference though and that was that his mind had been nurtured and his intellect encouraged to blossom through the attentiveness and devotional care of the local priest or *curé* who had taken him under his wing at an early age. Could he have been five years old? This had not been without a certain amount of opposition from his parents who feared that there would be no successor to take over the running of the farm later on. The *curé* reassured the parents to some degree by emphasizing that any instruction he

gave their son would be based on the bible and the music he taught would be put to good use in the parish church on the organ. He did indeed teach Charles the rudiments of the Old and New Testaments together with the catechism that was more or less mandatory at that time and the musical training he received was put to good use after he had reached the age of fifteen by accompanying the choir and parishioners for the different parts of the mass – Offertory, Kyrie, Gloria – and for the hymns. However, the musical instruction, unknown to the parents went far beyond that and he succeeded in instilling in the lad a love of classical music and also simple country music. Idem for classical writings over and beyond the sacred works encouraged by the Church of the day. The *curé* was in fact an enlightened person and although he was a true believer in the Almighty he was also a believer in Man and being of an extremely generous nature he sought to bring out the best in his parishioners and had spotted young Charles at an early age when he left the church with his parents on a Sunday after the mass. The young lad had questioned him about his sermon asking for instance how the sea had parted into two to allow the Jews to escape the Egyptians. He had put further questions, like the seven loaves and seven fish, which the priest had answered evasively always putting the ‘will of God’ to the fore. It was precisely these questions that made the latter feel strongly that Charles was intelligent and was not to be put off by vague, imprecise replies, exactly like himself, he mused. So, once a week in the morning when he was still very young and then in the evening when he had reached the age of helping his father actively on the farm he was taught history, literature and music at a level far above the level of the compulsory education administered by the local elementary, then secondary school. Strange to say he knew so much more than his contemporary pupils at all stages that he had to appear to be a little dull-witted not to draw the attention of

the teachers and above all of his friends. It did show through though sometimes and when he became a little too inspired by some literary work, for instance, or when he started to quote some poet, he suddenly realized what he was doing and shut up like a clam. His school mates frankly could not understand his behaviour especially as he played the rough and tumble games with them just like all of them. The teachers were not naive and realized they did not have to worry about his education. Even though he kept a very low profile they could see he was well beyond the others as far reading and writing were concerned. They rarely asked him questions, except for mathematics, not wishing to make him feel superior to his class mates. This might be thought to be very advanced for the period, but not really. It simply meant that practically speaking they had one less child to educate!

So he developed a true love of literature, for Voltaire, de Lamartine, de la Fontaine (for his fables) and for many others and would spend as much time as possible reading works and memorizing poems. In respect of the music the *curé* taught him, he would spend much time in the church on the organ but also with a guitar that his guide and mentor lent him and eventually gave him, unknown to his parents. He learned the true facts about Napoleon, his conquests, defeats and final banishment and in so doing learned something about other European countries and especially England. He would not be long in knowing a little more about England but from another source!

The ploughing job he was engaged in was passing quite rapidly because although it looked a dull, repetitive job to an onlooker, it made Charles feel close to Nature. There were birds pecking at the worms in the turned slices of land and rabbits, squirrels and other animals about their business around the field and in the boundary trees but most of all he enjoyed the company of the percheron, Mardi. He was firm

but gentle with the horse, often patted his flanks, stroked his head, gave him grass to munch. Ploughing with the horse was real teamwork, the animal encouraging the man and vice versa. When a field was eventually ploughed, Charles looked at it in the same way a painter might glance at his latest work. A satisfied feeling of work well done. Not only that, but he would sing sacred solo parts of the mass he found attractive or even local country music. A passerby in the lane adjoining one side of the field might stop and listen to his melodious voice in the still air accompanied by the sound of the metal plough share hitting stones although not in time with the song!

He felt it was time to eat his ploughman's lunch made up by his mother in a no-nonsense way. There was almost a whole baguette with a large piece of goat cheese made on the farm, a half bottle of some unknown red wine, the same of spring water, some walnuts, an apple and a large wad of his mother's cake. It was very wholesome and when he had devoured it he settled down in a trimmed ditch out of the wind but with sun shining on his face from time to time, to take a nap. The horse was unhitched and eating its own 'lunch' in the hedgerow accompanied by half a wine cask filled with water to slake its thirst. This was as near to happiness Charles would ever get - a pity he did not realize it.

He was just rubbing his eyes after his nap when he heard the muffled sound of hoofs from the unpaved lane. Standing up he could see his mentor and now friend (one could say) trotting slowly down the lane, longish hair floating in the wind and round, empathetic face with large lips and deep brown eyes smiling almost fiendishly astride his sturdy, nicely brushed mare. The *curé* raised his hand in welcome and Charles pushed through the hedgerow to be able

without shouting to say a few words."Good afternoon, Père Farnault, how are you on this brisk November morning?"

"I'm fine, Charles, just trotting my horse and enjoying the sunshine while trying to devise a theme for next Sunday's sermon. As you know, I want to introduce Christian values into people's lives without thrusting religion as such down their throats. It's not so easy." All this in his deep, rounded, magnetic voice.

"Oh yes, Père, I've noticed that you avoid reference to hell's fires and even to eternal bliss and prefer talking about the worthwhile aspects of the here and now, even going as far as saying that to relax and enjoy your life is not negative as long as it hurts no-one. I've taken your advice to heart and I frequently find certain aspects of my life not too tedious. Of course I love reading, as you know, and I love playing and listening to music, as you know, too. But I have come to enjoy things I would only have considered as hard work before and what I am doing today is one such task. I suddenly realized this morning that ploughing this field with my old friend Amber (a small chuckle) is a pleasure – quite hard work, of course, but when I look upon the achieved job, I can actually feel happy."

Still seated on his saddle, "Don't get me wrong, Charles, I believe there is a force out there somewhere and that force we Christians call God but I am not sure that that force is counting points – in one column for unpleasant deeds or words and in another for good deeds or words – to see whether we end up there (he pointed upwards) or there (downwards). I feel that we are all responsible to some extent for what we do in life but confined to certain limits. For example, it would be difficult for a baker's son, or daughter for that matter, to become a doctor or lawyer. Your position on the other hand is somewhat different in that you

are destined to become a farmer but that due to your intelligence and perhaps a little tuition I have given you, you could do something else with your life. However, you have just said, more or less, that you are satisfied with your life and even happy, so it's not for me to persuade you to change direction." All this was said slowly but with a twinkle in his eye. "I know I'm a bit nosy but can you tell me what you are reading at the moment?"

"Well, I heard some people at the town hall talking enthusiastically about a book and as it was available I borrowed it but I only have 2 weeks to read it. It's quite long. It's called Marion Lescaut by Antoine François Prévost. It's difficult to put down - not at all stodgy. Do you know it, Père?"

"Oh, yes, indeed. The version available today has been revised because nearly a century ago the book was condemned to be burned. It treated subjects that people were not allowed even to think about at that time. Luckily things have changed and those poor women of ill-fame are now at least allowed to change their lives if they can. The Church would say that they would have to repent. But you know all that. I believe that it is not always possible to change one's life and many of these women are in their position through no fault of their own. Anyway, it's true the story takes you up and carries you along with it. Yes, I read it some time ago at a time I should not have - at the seminary in fact. Gosh, if the Father Superior had known I would have been thrown out! Read it, enjoy the good parts and let me know what you think about it afterwards but don't let it encourage you to do anything untoward. I must be on my way." A huge wink and off he went, clippety clop.

Charles smiled enormously. The *curé* always did him a lot of good but he could not have told you why.

The conversation that had been punctuated by pauses where each man looked the other in the eye before replying had delayed Charles' work and he could see he was going to be late returning to the farmhouse for there were other tasks awaiting him, not least the feeding of the farm animals. However, he kept going for another three hours but as the evenings were short and vision was becoming a problem he decided to call it a day, unhitched the wheeled plough from Mardi, patted and stroked the horse for his good work and climbed up onto his back to ride slowly but saddle-less to the stable almost a kilometer away in distance. They (Charles and Mardi) were just leaving the rough entrance between two hedges to the field that entailed a short descent when from the corner of his eye he noticed but could not yet hear a white clad figure on what looked like a fine chestnut thoroughbred trotting with apparent ease down the lane towards him. Had he seen the figure before, that he now saw was a woman, he would have let her pass before leaving the field but as it was he had no choice but to wait and stop in the lane, pulling Mardi to one side allowing the horsewoman to pass with plenty of room to spare. It was obvious that the woman, now seen to be young, had come from the white painted but slightly tarnished manor house to be seen on the hilltop facing the field Charles had been ploughing. This was surprising because Charles and his parents assumed that the house that he seemed to remember was ironically called "Beau Repaire" (built one hundred years before on the site of a highwayman's cottage) was empty and had been for many years.

"Oh, thank you so much," she said with a strong accent - Germanic, or was it English? "You are so, how do you say, chivalrous!" With this phrase which it was obvious gave her pleasure to utter she smiled a highly enticing smile,

enhanced undoubtedly by her playful green/hazelnut eyes and fairly wide mouth.

Charles saw she was young and noticed her long auburn hair tied very fashionably with bright ribbons. He also noticed her hands that were not the hands of someone who was unused to manual work but bore long, tough fingers that were not gloved nor did they look as if they were manicured. She was obviously quite tall judging by the stirrups and carried no excess weight. All this he took in at a glance.

These observations of the young woman were reciprocated by her for Charles saw her eyes sweep over his person to take in his height (a little above average) his angular but not lean face, the intense expression emanating from his dark brown eyes and his long hair, still tied back rustically behind his head. She must have seen that his body was lean and muscular.

Charles, having been brought up to respect the gentry (although often combined with a certain disdain) expected the young lady to trot away from him without another word but this was not to be so. Instead, she turned her horse round so that she was face to face with Charles and asked. "Is your farm far from here and what will you be sowing in this field I see you have so neatly ploughed?" All this in her quaint foreign accent but with no faults of grammar or syntax.

"Well, he replied, it will take me 20 minutes or so to reach home on Amber (he patted his Percheron on the neck) and as for the field, I think my father has decided to sow winter oats in this field." He did his best to put on a natural voice although he tried to cut out any rustic words or accents. He wanted to be up to the mark although he knew in advance

that that could not be. How could he, a mere country lad, be at the same educational and cultural level as someone like this newcomer before him? "By the way, my name is Charles Berger and my parents' farm is called La Rouarniere."

"I'll never be able to remember the name of your farm, but can I call you Charles or must I call you Mr Berger?" she said, a twinkle in her eye. "My name is Priscilla, Priscilla Grafton, and you will have guessed that I am English."

"Funny to see a noblewoman in this neck of the woods, but yes, I did guess you might be English or German. Is your family staying in ... in ... the white hilltop manor?" He laughed a little awkwardly after posing the question.

"Yes indeed. She smiled very reassuringly. My father is a diplomat and has received an appointment at Clermont Ferrand following the fall of Napoleon. I do not know what his job is exactly but he decided to rent a property of standing not too far from his posting, so here we are. Now tell me about this land you're working. Does it belong to your family, and when will you be sowing the oats?"

"There's quite a lot of work to do before we can sow. The land must be harrowed after ploughing, then sown, rolled and fertilizer spread."

"That's interesting but I know nothing about farming. What's this term "fertilizer? I have never heard of that before now," and he briefly explained the new technique.

"Perhaps I will have the opportunity of hearing more about your modern ways of farming, she said amiably, but there will be a lot of repair work and painting to do at the house before we can receive guests although that should only take a few weeks but when that's done - here she hesitated a

second or two before resuming - I'm sure you will be seeing more of us, Mr Berger. *Au revoir*" She laughed tantalizingly. And off she trotted.

Charles took a deep breath but kept Amber at a standstill until Priscilla was out of sight. He was astonished by the way she addressed him because the only person above his station who talked to him in such a friendly way was the priest. He could not imagine the local marquis or marchioness even smiling at him let alone talking to him as an equal as she had done. But when she had said "more of us" did she mean her family or herself alone? A conundrum that only time would unravel but he thought it improbable that his parents and hers' could mix. No, he would have to get her out of his mind.

CHAPTER 2

The Bishop of Clermond Ferrand was unlike many of his rank in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, that is, he had never pushed to be in the position he now enjoyed but had reached it by dint of hard work and good example. Most people in the Western World might associate bishops with pomp and think of them perhaps as well established clerical “civil” servants with nothing much better to do than sign clerical papers and ordain priests!

Not so, our bishop who thought it his duty, with a pinch of pleasure, to visit the parishes in his bishopric on a routine basis.

It was thus the turn of the commune and parish of St Germain de la Montagne to welcome His Excellency some two weeks or so after the encounter of Charles with Priscilla. *Père* (Father) Farnault had been informed of the date of the visit some time previously and was prepared. Being quite a good musician himself he had often rewritten musical scores of masses by eminent composers to suit the limited musical resources of his parish. In the present instance he could however count on Charles to play the small organ and a lady whose husband was a successful lawyer would play the violin. That was it for instruments but the choir also was limited in number. There were five or six women and an equal number of men. Farnault had rewritten the scores of a mass by Vivaldi for two voices – mezzo soprano and baritone – which simplified matters. The result was not at all bad at the last rehearsal and in the small mediaeval church with its more than adequate acoustics the sound was quite uplifting. All concerned in the musical rendition of the mass

were looking forward to the bishop's visit. *Père* Farnault would conduct the musical endeavour while the bishop himself would say the mass.

An hour before the mass was due to start Fr Farnault carried out an ultimate rehearsal of parts of the mass, especially the Gloria, that were fairly difficult - a sudden change of tempo, for example, or a pause after which it was imperative to find the right note. One could now hear the parishioners arriving and they settled into their customary although not obligatory seats. Some were chatting together discreetly while others, mostly women, were on their knees. The mass was due to start at 11 a.m. and towards 10.45 a carriage could be heard pulling up before the entrance to the little church. Yes, it was His Excellency dressed as it behoves a bishop in his purple cassock but smiling gently and patting children's heads while chatting pleasantly with parishioners. He was accompanied by the deacon who had replaced the parish priest during the rehearsal. The deacon preceded the bishop to the sacristy to enable the latter to dress in alb, stole and chasuble to say the mass and chat for a few minutes with the *curé*. All was in place when just before the hour struck in the steeple the small choir, musicians and choirmaster took their places before the altar. Then it was the turn of the bishop, followed by the deacon in his liturgical attire and two altar boys.

There was a pause for a few minutes while Charles played some pleasant background music on the organ. The mass then proper began with the Kyrie and the small choir started to put up a valiant performance backed by the two musical instruments.

They had sung the first Kyrie Eleison and were ready to embark on the Christe Eleison when a loud sound of hoofs could be heard arriving before the church. There were

almost certainly two horses to make such a clatter. The main door of the church opened and who could be seen to arrive but Priscilla and her (it would seem) father. All heads including the bishop's now turned towards the distraction. The father, strikingly different from most of the parishioners present, wore a tail coat and breeches and held his top hat in his hand. He looked frankly foreign but very much at ease and with no difficulty found the seats reserved for him and his daughter in the front row. Priscilla wore a long hooded cloak hiding her dark blue full length dress to a large extent. They settled down as comfortably as the wooden benches would allow.

The Kyrie was now almost over and Priscilla was glancing around the quaint church and at its occupants. She saw the bishop now before the altar and the deacon and two altar boys who were serving him and behind them Father Farnault's back, the small choir neatly spaced apart with the violinist to one side but the organist could not be seen. The organ was two meters or so behind the musical gathering and it was only when one or other member of the choir moved position slightly could he be seen and of course he had his back to the congregation. But that was enough to arouse her interest because Charles's long fair hair was to say the least unusual in such a formal setting. She did not of course recognize him for a long time, for who would expect a farmer's son to be sitting at an organ and playing so delicately. But at the end of the mass which had unfolded without a hitch and quite successfully the bishop turned to Fr Farnault and he, in turn, beckoned the choir, violinist and organist to the foot of the altar, bowed to the congregation inviting his singers and musicians to do likewise. People almost wanted to clap but at that time it was not the done thing. However, one could hear murmurs of appreciation emanating from the congregation and the bishop, after thanking the parishioners for their goodwill and wishing

them a joyous and holy Sunday, said how much he had liked the mass adorned with such beautiful and happy music and pointed out that the parish priest had been to great pains to put it together so wonderfully. Being slightly non-conformist he said. "If you so wish, you can clap discreetly" which caused almost a gasp but clap they did.

The people were now starting to gather up their missals, gloves and hats and were very slowly filing out of the church. All this while Fr Farnault was talking to the bishop but then introduced Sir Adam Grafton, Priscilla's father and Priscilla herself to His Excellency and the four of them chatted pleasantly for ten minutes or so. Priscilla, however, seemed a little distracted and was trying to keep her eye on Charles who was shuffling about, darting a few words to members of the choir and violinist, trying to look occupied but whose real attention was focused on Sir Spencer's daughter. At one moment the two young people's glances intercepted each other and if you had been close to one or the other you would have seen them blush fairly profusely. But then suddenly they, both of them, found something extraordinarily interesting in what their interlocutors were saying! Could Cupid's arrows have found their targets? That's to be seen. For the moment the great day's event, yes, the mass, had come to a close and nothing more would happen except that the *curé* invited his stalwart choir and musicians to the presbytery to drink the health of the bishop, and why not? the health of everyone. Unfortunately, there was no good reason to invite Sir Spencer and his daughter to this minor festivity so after saying "au revoir" to the latter, the bishop and priest led the choir and musicians out of the church and to the presbytery.

CHAPTER 3

Charles was this Monday back in the same field as the previous week. He and Amber were plodding up and down the furrows letting the slices of earth fall over gently to be worked by the sun, rain, wind and insects for sowing the barley in a few weeks. He was singing parts of the Gloria or Kyrie from the eve's performance or sometimes whistling. He felt fine but just a little disappointed that nothing had subsequently happened after he had seen Priscilla in the church but he thought, "it was not to be, is not to be and never was to be ..."

He had ploughed four furrows in the two parallel directions which had taken some 20 minutes when having started to plough a fifth time in the direction of the parkland opposite with its slight rise and the large house sitting smugly on it, he saw in the middle distance a figure dressed in a dark cloak slowly descending the incline on a black horse. Charles continued to the headland nearest the parkland and pretended not to notice the person now coming plainly into view. He raised the plough and he and the Percheron took their time to move purposefully over to the furrow that would take them in the direction of the wood, away from the lane, the parkland and the person who Charles now saw, from her build and her way of holding herself in the saddle, was clearly Priscilla. Ploughing in the two directions, towards the wood and then towards the lane was a task of some ten minutes and Charles was certain at first that the English gentleman's daughter would continue her ride taking no notice of the farmer's son labouring in the field. Imagine his surprise when, ploughing now towards the lane and parkland, he saw from the corner of his eye, for he kept his

gaze downwards towards the plough share, that the young lady had mounted the slight rise of the entrance to the field and was sitting there motionless waiting for him to arrive.

“Good day, Mr Berger, Mr Charles Berger, is it not?”

“Yes, indeed, Miss Grafton, Miss Priscilla Grafton?”

“Oh that’s lovely, Mr Berger. I love your sense of humour and I love your organ playing. That was a great surprise to see you seated there in front of the instrument and playing so sensitively. I felt I had to meet you properly. Have you ten minutes to spare?” She had pushed the hood away from her cloak to reveal her auburn hair. It was parted in the middle and both sides arranged with hair clasps leaving the wind to play with the ends which were free.

“Yes, Miss Grafton, “Charles said hesitatingly, “ten minutes is permissible but my father is a hard taskmaster and he wants me to finish this field this week.”

“Well, Mr Berger, I am very curious to know how you came to play the organ. After all, it’s not an easy instrument to play with its different keyboards – it’s difficult enough playing the piano which I do, though not very well.”

“Let’s not exaggerate, Miss Grafton. My teacher has been the *curé* for the last five years or so and a very good teacher he is – patient and methodical. I have learned a lot from him. You might have noticed, he’s not a stuffy spouter of morality and eternal damnation. He’s very human and a good laugh, too.”

“As you undoubtedly know, the English are not Roman Catholic but mostly Church of England which however bases its rules and liturgy on the Roman church, which means that if I come to hear the priest’s amusing sermons and your

music at the Sunday mass I will not be able to receive your Communion. Does that matter?"

"Not at all. I know it's heretical to say it in this day and age but for me the Church liturgy and lots of its teaching is mumbo jumbo. Perhaps I believe in a god but I mostly believe in the goodwill of men - and women, of course," he chuckled. "People might look at you and be astonished that you do not receive communion but word will get round that you are a convert in the making and they will all be pleased! Anyway, they are all good people, so don't take any notice."

"Very well, I will bear your advice in mind. Will I have the opportunity of talking to you after the mass. I think we have things in common. What do you think?"

"Well, I don't know about that. Do you really think we have things to talk about? You are a young woman of the world. You are used to meeting grand people and know a great deal about the politics of both England and France. I know practically nothing except from what I pick up from old discarded newspapers. Of course we have music (some music or all music?) in common, but what else? Do you know what it's like to work on a farm, the sheer grind sometimes?"

"Not really, but come off it, I'm not interested in politics and not at all in politicians, who are all men of course. On the other hand, to answer your question, I have to clear out the stables and load the manure on carts that a neighbouring farmer takes away to be spread on his fields. That's the arrangement with my father for having a horse. Also, I love using my body to keep in good physical health - unlike most women. For example, and don't tell my father this, I enjoy rock climbing which I do with a small group of men and one other woman. I feel as if I have achieved

something when I reach the summit. For the moment we climb small outcrops of rock here and there but even that is exciting and we have plans to climb Snowdon in England but my father must definitely not learn about that!"

"Well, you surprise me in no small way", said Charles, hands on hips and looking at Priscilla in a different way. "I had never even thought of that as a pastime."

"The idea came to me when I learned that seven Italian climbers went up the south side of Monte Rosa in the Alps to seek a mythical lost valley - and that was some forty years ago. I just love clambering up rocks. Of course we are all made secure with ropes between us and we carry sorts of hooks to get a grip on the rock where there is no hold."

"Perhaps we have some things to talk about, after all," Charles said amusedly, "but I'm sorry, I must get on with this ploughing job otherwise my father will get in a state. The farm to him is his life."

"Right, said Priscilla, but there must be a way of talking together leisurely in some place, at some time. After all, you are not a slave, or are you?" She laughed out loud and Charles joined in.

He had begun to enjoy their conversation discovering that she was not at all the unreachable, arrogant, aristocrat-like person he had imagined. "I will see what I can invent to satisfy my father and perhaps I will see you here again, say Thursday, which is the day the field should be finished."

"Yes, I will be back. *Au revoir*," and Priscilla trotted off leaving Charles nonplussed.

She had not gone far when a man's irate voice could be heard above the sound of Priscilla's horse's hoofs. He heard

“where” and “late” and “who was that you were talking to?” much louder. Then the sounds of muffled voices and hoofs faded away by degrees. Charles could see nothing so presumed the man had arrived from the direction of the parkland, like Priscilla, and had been behind the high, overgrown hedge at its boundary. He then thought no more about it and concentrated on ploughing the field as fast as he could. The lunch break would be shorter than usual but the price was well worth paying for the pleasure he had experienced in talking to Priscilla. However, on considering their different social orders could he expect any sort of result from their almost furtive efforts at communication? This he doubted very much. He must drum it into his head that she was way out of his orbit. That’s funny, where did he get that word from and what does it mean? Oh yes, the curé uses it quite a bit –something to do with astrology, no, astronomy! I’m so ignorant. How would Priscilla react to conversing with a nincompoop like me, not to mention her parents. They would be appalled to hear me speak, except of course that they are not fully fluent in French. Well, anyway, get her out of your mind, he thought as convincingly as possible. Alright now, she’s gone from my mind. Ouf! Thirty seconds later, strangely enough, she popped up again!

So the day plodded on, just like Charles and Mardi plodding in the field, and was concluded in his rather dark bedroom after supper with his parents (some sort of soup, goat’s cheese and bread). He noticed that his parents gave him puzzled looks when he retired to his attic much earlier than they as he did most days although he made a point of remaining with them a while on Sunday evenings. He loved his parents as would do any dutiful son or daughter but their conversation, always focused on crops, farm animals and sometimes cooking, made him feel uneasy. He knew he was being unreasonable. But how could they discuss anything

else? They were tied day and night to the farm and the only education they had received allowed them to read basic documents only and prayers, of course, and to add and subtract. He himself needed more and that “more” he found in books. He was able to read books and outdated newspapers with the help of an oil lamp. He finally settled down to a good night’s sleep at around 10 p.m.

The next day followed the course of the previous day’s routine. With the cows, calves, goats and other animals including Mardi to be fed before anything else, then a cold shower under a makeshift affair he had contrived himself in an outbuilding, breakfast prepared by Charles’s mother was served and gladly welcomed. It was basically made up of fried stale bread soaked in milk and battered egg with sugar shaken on it. Coffee with milk accompanied the nourishing meal. Then off to the stable again to harness his companion Mardi and the longish trek to the field which had to be finished, according to his father, at the latest on the morrow. His mother gave him a quick peck on the cheek but nothing from his father who was getting ready to carry out other tasks on the farm – probably fencing or hedging.

Arriving at around 8.30 a.m. he was more than amazed to see Priscilla in the field he had come to plough, sitting on a large boulder near the entrance to the field holding the reins of her stallion and looking at him fixedly as if he had no excuse for arriving so late!

“Well, this is the biggest surprise I’ve had for a long time. What on earth are you doing here so early. I half expected to see you, but only half (with a wry chuckle), later on in the morning or this afternoon. What is happening? I hardly know you ...”

Priscilla, her hair a little dishevelled and looking unlike her usual composed and calm self, stood up, shook the particles of farmland dust and vegetation from her cloak, placed her left hand to her brow to prevent the sun shining directly on her face and said. "Please, can I call you Charles? I would very much like that. I will call you Mr Berger in front of other people, of course." Charles nodded his head in assent but on his face could be seen a large question mark in the form of a narrowing of the eyes, his eyebrows approaching each other and his pursed lips.

"Charles, I haven't much time as I'm supposed to be driving into Clermont Ferrand for lunch with a would-be future husband, his family and my father." She was now looking very upset as if she expected a figurative slap in the face from Charles and dismissal from his life. "I don't know what to do. The chap is alright, his family is rich so I suppose he is too, but I have everything I need in life and he doesn't interest me in the least. He's arrogant and thinks he can do as he pleases. He has manipulated my father with his smiles and wealth and thinks that that is the end of the matter. The lunch today for him, his parents and my father is a sort of betrothal ceremony, a promise of marriage sealed with a glass of champagne. For me, it's like being condemned to a life in prison."

"Christ Almighty - oh, sorry for that, muttered Charles, it looks as if you have no option but to attend the so-called lunch. I would advise you to play the innocent, thank the hosts, including this man, for their hospitality and like in a duel, make any direct aims - I mean allusions to marriage and suchlike - slide off you and make it apparent that to you the lunch is just an enjoyable moment to be in the company of delightful people (lay it on a little but not too much!) and to be able to discuss this and that with your friend - be careful that you insist on calling him your friend and not

your betrothed. Smile a lot, do not look awkward and let them only half believe you have understood the whys and wherefores of the lunch. If you go for a walk with your friend afterwards, make it plain that you like the man, his company and his family but that that you had no idea he was seeking you as a wife. Obviously it's up to you to decide, if after due reflection, you wish him to be your husband."

"Oh, Charles, you make it seem so easy. You know, you are not at all like my so-called friend, Henri-François, and I so wish I was having a meal with you and your family rather than his! I must be off now. When can I see you again? Sunday perhaps, after the mass?" With that she gathered up her skirts jumped up with ease into her saddle and sped off looking quite a different young woman. She waved joyously while turning round to give Charles a wonderful open and charm-laden smile.

Charles had to stop a moment to recover his spirits after such an unexpected turn of events. It seemed now fairly certain that she was waiting for something from him. Surely it could not just be good advice. He liked her a great deal – she was everything that he could have imagined an intelligent, attractive young woman could be – but he had assumed from the first meeting that she was out of his range of possibilities. She was just too good for him. He knew that he himself was not daft and that young ladies in his restricted social circle were not indifferent to him. He knew also that his view on things political and social in this very difficult post-revolution age was different from that of his parents and that of many people he occasionally met in the course of his life, barring Fr Farnault. The latter, to Charles, was exceptional from many points of view. Could he possibly broach the subject with the *curé*? For the moment he had to get on with ploughing the field so he gave Mardi a little flick on the flank with a thin supple stick he had cut

from the hedge to encourage a little more speed from the faithful animal, more to appease his father than from a personal appetite to work faster!

CHAPTER 4

The field was now ploughed, the week had come and gone and with it, Priscilla. The weekend was over and apart from Charles's stint on the organ for Sunday mass nothing had changed. Nobody special came to the mass – just the usual parishioners including his parents – so Charles was somewhat disappointed. “Well, he had said to himself, that was almost bound to happen, or not happen, depending on the way one looked at it!” He had had to laugh to himself as he always had done in like circumstances, refusing to take things too seriously.

But now, there were serious jobs to be done in the same field he had ploughed the week before. The first was to break down the soil into a seedbed. This was to be done by means of harrows that had been loaded onto a cart at the farm and hauled to the field by Mardi. The work would probably only take one day as the soil was fairly dry and of a type easily broken down. Charles got everything ready that Monday morning and started out methodically harrowing back and forth across the field including the headlands that he had ploughed last thing the Thursday before. He succeeded in reaching the halfway point by about 12.30 p.m. and detached Mardi from the harrows and set him loose to browse for suitable herbage. He himself settled down in the same ditch as before out of the wind and hopefully to enjoy a little sunshine if it chose to shine spasmodically from time to time. His mother had prepared as usual, when he was unable to eat with his parents, a fresh baguette, cheese, walnuts and an apple together with half a bottle of homemade wine and some spring water.