

As soon as the gate had shut behind us and we were standing with the lantern dancing before us in a gardener's hand, beneath a canopy of pruned yew trees through which there filtered only an occasional drop of the downpour, we sensed that warmth and shelter were not far ahead. With a laugh we agreed that the motor accident that had left us stranded in the middle of the countryside must surely be regarded as what one would call 'a lucky break'.

Indeed, it turned out that Mr B... - the regional councillor and lord of the manor who welcomed these two bedraggled, unexpected travellers on his doorstep – was a vague acquaintance of my husband, and his wife – a former student of the *Schola cantorum* – recalled having met me at various Sunday concerts.

An effusive good cheer sprang up around the first wood fire of the season. As our hosts had only just finished dinner, my friend Valentine and I found ourselves obliged to accept a supper of cold meat washed down with champagne.

An aged plum brandy and scalding-hot coffee brought us together like old friends. The electric lighting – so rare in these parts – and smell of light tobacco, fruit, and blazing resinous wood were familiar charms that I now savoured as one would gifts from some exotic isle.

Broad-shouldered Mr B..., with hardly a grey hair on his head and one of those beautiful pearly-white Southern French smiles, engaged my friend Valentine, while I observed Mrs B quite as much as I spoke with her.

Slim, blonde, and dressed as if attending an elegant dinner party, not entertaining stray motorists, she astounded me with eyes so light in colour that the slightest ray of light would strip them of their pale blue.