

Part One

Arete



Here they come. Here they are. *Les anglais*, the English, *les rosbifs*.

The first English tourist to arrive in Hext came by horse-drawn carriage. By the time I met him, in 1914, we had trains and cars, and he was a dodderly old codger. But I can imagine a young Sir Anthony Oswald Valentine, full of fancy and English vim, coming to summer among the Alps.



One

The valley is a vagina, a frilly French quim . . .

Sir Anthony strikes through the word ‘quim’, replaces it with ‘cunt’, tries ‘contrapunctum’ and ‘crinkum crankum’, before rewriting, neatly, ‘quim’.

. . . French quim, inviting penetration. How I long to lose myself in this moist and perfumed . . .

Sir A half smiles and wrinkles his nose in pleasurable anticipation of the word coming next.

. . . tuzzy-muzzy.

He blots the ink on the page of his diary, dated 27th May 1865, and closes the pocket-sized leather-bound book. With the pad of his thumb, he makes a soft dent on the calfskin of its cover. His movements are slow, measured and careful, but there’s a tremor in his eye where the surge of his written words registers.

Summer foliage curling like hair on the fleshy labia of the hillsides, he has written on the previous page. Feminine folds, animal smells, earthy wetness and the whore’s promise of more, always more.

The church clock in the village square chimes eleven. Sir A lifts the iron spiral of the window latch, pulls inwards. The window opens smoothly, but the wooden shutters, carved with hearts, are stiff, and they moan when Sir A presses on them, concertinaing away from him and unfolding backwards against the cold stone wall.

Fresh air on his face, the smell of woodsmoke, pine and damp soil, the noisy rush of the river, a big gibbous moon, silver clouds in the blue-black sky, the notched outline of

mountains with bright skirts of snow on their summits: white ladies of the night.

Write it. Write it down. There's a quickening in his breast, a stirring in his loins. But scholarly, punctilious Anthony Oswald Valentine, classical philologist at University College London, alpinist, diarist, philanthropist, amateur botanist, geologist and glaciologist, exercises the self-control for which he is renowned. He opens the desk drawer, pulls out a thin sheet of pale pink writing paper, shuts the window, moves the candle closer and begins a letter to his wife.

My dearest Charlotte,

I write in some haste, but with much pleasure, to reassure you of my safe arrival at the Auberge Dorée. The landlord and his wife received me with their customary warmth. They send their regards and look forward to seeing you in five weeks' time.

I dined alone, but satisfactorily, on a rich stew of unusually dark meat (horse, I suspect), washed down with passable red wine and followed by a sliver or three of Reblochon, to which I am, as you know, most partial. Plus, a very small glass of green and rather bitter génépi.

The journey from Geneva to the border was swift and smooth, but as soon as we'd crossed into France, things took a turn for the worse. Bad weather, stubborn horses, an irascible driver. We had to change carriages at Bonneville . . .

Et cetera et cetera.

Sir A asks his wife about the garden, the roses, the weather and whether Edmond, their firstborn, has taken his first steps. He reminds her to arrange collection of his watch, which he sent for repair to that new place in Holborn a good two weeks ago. He mentions the delicate matter of her new pregnancy and expresses his hope that the sickness has passed. He promises to write again soon.

After a decent night's sleep and a hearty breakfast, Sir A sets out on the stony track that leads up from the village of Hext, past the cemetery, to the hamlet of Hext-en-Haut and beyond. It's a clear sunny day. The sky above the valley is sapphire blue, the high pastures are peridot green against the darker jades and blacks of the forests, and, close up, each blade of grass has its own dewy hue. Wild flowers – red, gold and purple jewels – glisten by the roadside. And between the sky and the flowers, as if suspended between heaven and earth, the white-capped, rising, rising ridges, cols and peaks.

Pillage and rape. Silver necklaces of snow, pearly icicle-earrings, the cheap chipped glass of the glaciers: my desire is to rip them apart, smash and scatter them, thrust myself naked against this unadorned pite of a landscape.

That is what Sir A will write in his diary later. He will stay up beyond midnight, observing the stars, watching and listening for wildlife, writing, recording, exciting himself with language and nature.

But now, jaunty, he slings his satchel over one shoulder and turns off the track onto a narrow path that snakes up through dense, evergreen trees. His satchel contains nothing but a half baguette of bread, a hunk of smoked ham, two flasks of water, binoculars, notebooks and his diary. The porters will follow later with provisions for the summer, plus Sir A's trunk, the ten heavy boxes of books, Charlotte's several painting easels and his own unwieldy tripod, telescope and folding chair, all of which he himself helped wrap in padded canvas, overseeing the strapping and labelling, in Geneva last week.

After striding at a slow but steady pace – up hill and down dale, as he likes to say, or over the hills and far away, as he likes to hum and sometimes sing – until the sun is almost directly overhead, Sir A arrives at the spot where the only dwelling is a large, square, wooden chalet: Arete, his alpine eyrie.

Xavier is on the balcony. Both men raise an arm and wave simultaneously. Xavier hurries down the balcony steps. Sir A shifts the weight of his satchel, ignores his pounding heart and bounds across the last furlong of tufty grass.

The men shake hands, slap shoulders.

'By God, it's been too long,' says Sir A.

Xavier nods and smiles. He glances back up to the balcony, where a small figure now stands.