

Hunting, Hats, Hawaiians, and Hornets: Everyday Life in Entre-deux-Eaux, Year 6 Weeks 7 - 21

We woke this Sunday morning (not very early, it has to be admitted, but that was the fault of the previous night's *Haut Meix* celebration, of which more later) to primitive sounds from the hills. Unleashed from a summer of indolence and domesticity, the men of the Vosges were shouting and yelling excitedly. The hunting season had opened. It's hard to imagine they caught anything on the first day. All that noise would have warned off any boar or roebuck, despite the fact that during summer the latter had happily come down from the forests into our open fields. During our six week absence (in England and on Andros) over July and August, one of our young pear trees had been destroyed by deer scraping its bark, eating many branches, and leaving just a single leaf. Then, shortly after our return, John opened the shutters one morning and saw a magnificent antlered beast in the orchard.

But then this summer hasn't been normal. The wet weather meant that lower-lying village fields which could not be cut in May and June's rain had become water-logged during July and August's rain, so still couldn't be cut. So by the end of August when we returned, the fields were tall with mouldering grass. Farmer Duhaut's cows couldn't graze in the uncut fields, so were confined to the upper fields to the north of our house. It's been entertaining to watch them walking daily up and down our road as they did when we first came. There's a slope down from the upper fields to the road. Any cows hesitating at the top when returning to the milking-shed in the evening, get roughly pushed off the edge by their unsympathetic companions jostling behind. Yesterday there was great consternation and bellowing when two cows escaped in search of more succulent grass and had to be driven back and fences repaired. Fortunately there were a couple of good sunny weeks in early September for hay making, grape harvesting - and also for the patchwork festival.

The world of fashion seems very remote from these bucolic scenes. But three quarters of an hour's drive away in the *Val d'Argent* the patchwork enthusiasts of Europe were gathering for their annual colourful event. Fired by descriptions of earlier exhibitions, our friend Ellen flew over from London in early September for the festival. We started our two day orgy of colour in the small village of Ste-Croix-aux-Mines, where the cat-walk had been set up. It was fun watching the elegant models flouncing and gliding in their rich flaring fabrics - felt, velvet, satin and chiffon. The red and black Russian doll sequence was stunning. But it was even more fun observing the audience. Across the catwalk in the front row opposite us perched some surprisingly chic women appraising and surveying. Were they fashion editors? They looked very Parisian. The more ordinary faces of the more ordinary patchworkers (beige cardigan brigade) were lit up with wonder - almost ecstasy. Were they imagining themselves, transformed by these fabulous creations, going Cinderella-like, along with their Parisian sisters, to the Ball?

When the music and applause faded, the audience drifted round the designer garments. The stall holders were in their element as the Parisians descended and tried on extraordinary hats at rakish angles. Their creators pinched and

cajoled their felt and net concoctions into ever more fetching shapes, reflecting back-of-head images in an array of hand-held mirrors. Ochres, rusts and blacks succeeded each other, perched seductively on the impeccably dyed hairstyles. Finally cheques for huge amounts were signed with a flourish.

Meanwhile, in the nearby Villa Burrus, where one of the main tobacco manufacturers had once lived, the ground floor salons were devoted to delicate Japanese silk and ribbon embroideries of ephemeral cherry blossoms, seascapes and starry skies. In the grounds of the villa, a patchwork flower garden is being developed, and more excitingly, beyond the *gloriette* (a cross between a band-stand and summer-house) an ornamental vegetable patch with swirls of colour, texture and scent from its tall red flowered beans, squat purple cabbages, golden nasturtiums, sage, thyme, carrot fronds. Perhaps we should redesign our *potager*.

There were plenty of conventional patchwork quilts and hangings to see in the big churches and the theatre, including Amish and Mennonite quilts. But it was interesting to turn from the traditional tulip patchwork pattern to the appliqué lotus. For in one of the churches were the Egyptian tent-makers, who traditionally embellish the huge tents used for weddings and other family and festive gatherings (though I think that what we saw were being made for the Cairo tourist shops). Cross-legged on the carpet in front of the altar sat Mohammed (according to his name badge) whose high-speed hand stitching and shaping of boldly coloured fabric into ornate appliquéd scrolls and whorls was producing gasps of admiration.

Between churches we refreshed ourselves at pavement cafés amongst the throngs of patchworkers. The next day we also enjoyed, this time with John, a more leisurely meal at the *Blanche Neige*. We were relieved that they'd recovered from their flood. As we remarked to Ellen, you don't think of buildings on top of mountains getting flooded, but the evening before our previous visit a reservoir wall above the restaurant had broken and the staff had spent the night baling out and were looking exhausted as they served impeccable food. This time, after our meal, we were able to drive down the mountain roads unhindered by cascading water, to the vineyards below, where families were harvesting the early grapes. In the quaint walled wine villages like Riquewihr, less quaint green and yellow plastic tubs of grapes were being decanted and hosed out and children were selling bags of grapes for a euro. In dark cellars round courtyards this year's winemaking was now under way.

Continuing on the restaurant theme, when Leila returned with us at the end of August for a week's sun and rest (before the excitement of moving into her new house in Sherwood), she chose the *Frankenbourg* for her farewell meal. As well as the superb cooking there, we always enjoy the warm welcome that Madame extends to all her guests. By contrast, when we returned to the Michelin-starred *Ducs de Lorraine* in Epinal the remembered glories of their cheese board and dessert trolley were overshadowed by an officious Madame who kept correcting the position of our cutlery and plates; she also allowed valued clients to smoke over our allegedly non-smoking table and pulled a disbelieving face when Dorinda asked for decaffeinated cappuccino, there being no method known to her of producing such a bizarre drink (although

her junior staff had managed it without any problem on our earlier visit).

On one of our Strasbourg visits (yes thank-you, all is well with my arm and I'm signed off now) we went back to a Chinese restaurant we'd enjoyed. It seemed a good recommendation when we noticed forty Chinese tourists coming out of the upstairs room. In search of new restaurants on another hospital trip, we tried *Porcus Dei*, the tiny pork-in-all-its-forms restaurant above an elegant *charcuterie*. As well as good pork, they had some stylish marquetry pictures on the walls by Spindler. (Apparently there is even a Spindler room at Betty's in Harrogate). And one day Roger introduced us to one of his favourites, *Les Trois Poissons* on the canal quay in Colmar. Old photographs outside the loo show quaint old fishermen's cottages and flat bottomed boats. On our way back from there we stopped at the ugly enormous black glass show-room of a wine producer. We'd previously ignored Wolfberger's showy wine emporium, but had to admit, as we stocked up with Alsace wines for John's sister, that it was more interesting than it looked, with friendly staff offering advice and letting us taste as many wines as we wanted in a modern atmosphere.

Returning one day after a totally unmemorable lunch at the clumsily named *Hotel Restaurant du Commerce et de L' Europe* in Grandvillers (on the way to Epinal), we decided to follow signs to the American memorial on the outskirts of Bruyères. Passing some giant colourful ant sculptures on the hillside we began to wonder how much we'd drunk over lunch until we realised they were part of an educational ant walk, and nothing to do with the Americans. A few miles further, in a peaceful forest glade, stood a monument to the 100/442 regiment, who had played such a big part in liberating Bruyères and in rescuing the "Lost Battalion". Significantly the 442nd was composed entirely of volunteers from Hawaii and from the American internment camps for Americans of Japanese descent who, the monument records, "reaffirmed an historic truth here that loyalty to one's country is not modified by racial origin. These Americans, whose ancestors were Japanese, on October 30th 1944 during the battle of Bruyères broke the backbone of the German defences and rescued the 141st Infantry Battalion which had been surrounded by the enemy for four days". Their losses were huge. According to the town's website, in liberating Bruyères the regiment lost 1200 out of 2500 fighting men. And in rescuing the 270 Texans of the Lost Battalion, 800 "Yankee Samurai" were sacrificed. One of the few survivors had sculpted a dramatic "Knot of Friendship" which the had veterans presented to the town fifty years after the battle.

Back to restaurants. The most recent we've been to, for an unexpected celebratory meal, was the *Auberge du Haut Meix*. We thought that we had said goodbye to Roger and Dorinda the previous night when John had cooked a farewell meal. They were returning to England after a holiday spent on fruitless house-hunting. (Their picturesque holiday home in Mandray had lost its quiet charm as excavators and cement mixers have been grinding away for the last year laboriously converting the adjacent farm-house into three apartments, with an incomplete earth terrace looming over their quiet garden). With no apparent end in sight, Roger and Dorinda were getting desperate, and over John's salad, sweet-and-sour and stir-fry, and chocolate mousse and apple tart we had commiserated with their lack of success. Then, the next

morning, after Magic the cat had been to the vet for his returning-to-England vaccinations, they went to look at a final house in nearby Anould. It was a bit smaller (with only two bedrooms) but it had a superb view, lovely garden and substantial outbuildings. On the spot, they put in an offer for it! So an extension of their stay and a celebration were called for. Most restaurants were already fully booked, for it was a Saturday night. But the *Auberge du Haut Meix* hasn't been open very long, is off the beaten track, is only open on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, and had a free table. It was very welcoming after driving through the darkness to arrive at this tiny pinpoint of light on the forested hillside above Taintrux, then walk through its stone-walled courtyard into a brightly lit dining room and be ushered to a huge wooden table. And, although the food wasn't memorable, it was great to be celebrating a successful conclusion to the Great House Hunting Holiday.

Our own house seems to have remained free of dead birds and pine martens while we were away, thanks to the fine chicken wire John installed in the gaps between roof and wall. But we soon discovered that other local wildlife had decided to take up residence. On uncovering the compost heap, John saw what he thought were small white mushrooms growing on the top. On closer inspection they turned out to be grass snake eggs. Given my snake phobia, he kindly disposed of yet another protected species. Then, as I was getting a room ready for Ellen over in the farmhouse I noticed a few dozy hornet-like insects on the kitchen floor. "They might be bees", I remarked hopefully to Ellen, so throughout her stay she continued to gently put them out of the kitchen window. Later John tracked the source down to a nest at the very top of the stove chimney. And they were definitely hornets. Rather than calling in the local firemen he decided to tackle them himself. Lighting a fire to make all of them even dozier didn't work as the nest had almost blocked the flue and the kitchen just filled with smoke. So, wearing a bizarre assortment of semi-protective clothing (like his wood-working visor) John opened the outside trap, sprayed a lot of insect killer up the flue, rodded rapidly and vigorously (no brush) and managed to make a vent hole without too much descending on him, apart from nest fragments, larvae and just a few hornets. Fortunately most of the live ones flew out of the chimney top. After more spraying, John replaced the trap cover and lit a fire in the range which smoked copiously and then roared. The hornets kept trying to return to the nest under the chimney cowl but finally either sacrificed themselves or gave up with the heat. And the next day he was able to complete the sweeping (with brush). Let's hope they don't come back. It might be wise to light occasional fire just in case.

As the rain has now set in again, we'll soon need those fires. It feels as if Entre-deux-Eaux's brief summer is over. The fields are cut and baled at last, the tables in our barn are covered with a bumper crop of walnuts and hazelnuts, the jars of blackcurrant, worcesterberry, and gooseberry jam are stacked up, and the Sunday *vide-greniers* will soon come to an end. But we still have the Geography Festival (sorry, I should have prefaced that with "International") in St Dié to look forward to, we can re-join the Ste Marguerite pensioners at Gym and Scrabble (Helen) and on fortnightly forest walks (both of us have already had our boots on) and the winter lecture season will soon start. Will this turn out to be a mild winter like last year or one of the minus eighteen degrees winters? *A bientôt!*