

*The
Provençal
Tales*

The great affair is to move; to feel
the needs and hitches of our life more nearly;
to come down off this feather-bed of
civilization, and find the globe granite underfoot
and strewn with cutting flints.

R.L.S.

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*This book is above all for Jean Renoult who
was the first to show me the roads of Provence.
It is also for the shepherds of Grimaud who
allowed me to walk those roads in their company:*

*Marius Fresia et Huguette, Leonce Coulet,
Paul Graziani et sa fille, Milou et Lucien,
et la Famille Martel-Jules,
Joseph, Jean et Jeanette*

INTRODUCTION

I saw Provence for the first time in the summer of 1957. I was travelling by train, overnight from Paris; a travel guide escorting five hundred people to a holiday village at a place called St Aygulf – a tiny resort on the Mediterranean a few kilometres to the west of Frejus. Somewhere south of Valence I awoke, leant out of my couchette, raised the blind that darkened the window and found myself in a different country to the France I had gone to sleep in. The sun was fierce, the colours were a thousand years old and the roof tiles were rounded and pale.

By the early spring of the following year I was the assistant manager of the holiday village with a staff of thirty or more to look after. I supervised the restaurant, I organized excursions and I was the master of ceremonies for the soirées that were held on the terrace. There was no dance that I dared not tackle, no partner that I feared to approach. I could rhumba and I could cha-cha-cha; I could fox-trot and I could tango. In my lightweight mohair suits and white Italian pumps I was the nattiest of fellows.

This promotion had been brought about not so much by my talents but rather by the temptations that went with the job. In the three years since it had opened Les Auberges au Soleil, as the residence was called, had lost the same number of assistant managers. One had run off with the cash; another had succumbed to the lures of the flesh and the third had drunk himself into hospital. I was engaged to put a stop to this decadence.

The manager of the 'Auberges' was a podgy little ex-maitre d'hotel with suspicious eyes and a burton of a nose set in the middle of a round and heavy face. His thin black hair was smarmed in streaks across his skull and contrasted nicely with his red complexion. He looked choleric and was. He disliked most people, trusted no one and had married a woman with a face as narrow as a knife. His name was Garreau and there was only one thing to recommend him – the moment he saw that I was halfway competent he handed me over to a man called Jean Renoult and then left us to rub along exactly as we wished.

Jean Renoult had been at the 'Auberges' since the day the first tourists had arrived to leave their footprints in the wet cement and to sleep in the roofless chalets. He had emigrated from Normandy, where he'd been raised, to live in the sun and along the way had decided that work of any serious kind was a waste of valuable time. He had married a girl from Toulon, sailed a canoe along the Mediterranean coast, been a soldier on skis, patrolling the Italian frontier in 1939, and a forester in Brittany during the German occupation. He had no home apart from his books and not many clothes either. He loved love, the sun, the rolling hills of Les Maures, all women except Madame Garreau,

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reading, the sea, his wife and children, pastis, the Provençal language and the oddities of human behaviour. He disliked only one thing; working for money.

On his arrival at St Aygulf Jean had done his best to hide his understanding and intelligence and had taken up the job of gardener and odd-job man. It hadn't come off. A succession of managers had seen through his disguise and when I met him he was living with his wife and children in one of the chalets and had been made responsible for the forward planning of the restaurant and the general maintenance of the whole set-up; plumbing, drainage, gardens, everything.

Jean taught me my duties within a week or two and we buckled down to the long season, March to October. We worked together every day and ate at the same table when we could. As the weeks went by he talked about Provence and told me where it lay and who lived there. I learnt some of its history and some of its poetry. The sensation I had felt in the train that first day had not misled me. I had entered a different country indeed. Provence, as I discovered through Jean's words and the books he gave me, was a wide and empty land of lonely peaks and windswept plateaux. Not France, not Spain, it was a country of extremes; cool forests and bleak hills that burned in the sun; waterless plains and deep torrents – a cruel land.

But there was magic too. There were Saracens in the woods and castles on the mountains; deserted villages where the ghosts of wise and beautiful women still listened to the songs of troubadours. And there were archbishops and sorcerers, forever searching for power and happiness. Above all there was the language – the Provençal that sounded like a song.

While it lasted my job was good enough but there was no working with Garreau for long. A hot-tempered man he was jealous perhaps of the strong friendship that grew up between Jean and me. In any event he was certainly irritated at being both ignored and disliked and he soon made my life at St Aygulf unbearable. By the March of 1959, and as the result of a flaming row, I found myself packing my trunk.

Without having given the matter much thought I decided to return to London but Jean came to my room, a rather pleasant one looking down to the sea through eucalyptus trees, and convinced me otherwise. He was right; I had money in my pocket, Provence lay before me and there were books to read.

What was more, he said, I could stay with his mother for as long as I liked. Two hours later I was standing, over-dressed in a pale blue suit, at the end of a track in the middle of a vineyard, halfway up a stony hill, somewhere behind the town of Grimaud. Two peasants, a man and a woman, their heads only just visible over a bank of broad vine leaves, were staring at me. I was surrounded by suitcases, the sun was hot and I was sweating.

Bonne Maman Renoult was as remarkable as her son. Her husband, an artist turned engineer, had died only a couple of years previously. Now all she had to live on was the minutest of pensions and, after moving from one rented

shack to another, she had finally settled in a two thirds derelict farmhouse halfway up the hill of Rascas.

Like most Provençal farmhouses Rascas was tucked into the hillside in order to protect it from the mistral. Extensions had been built on to it at various times but they were now in ruins. Bonne Maman lived in three rooms in the middle; one down and two up. There was of course no electricity and water came from a well a hundred metres away. Brambles grew up to the door and in through the ruined windows. There was no lavatory either and the track from the valley was a vertical path by the time it reached the little plateau on which the house stood.

Bonne Maman's living room was a treasure trove. All round the walls were scores of her husband's paintings, showing, as far as I could tell, undeniable talent. There were one or two fine pieces of furniture from her great days in Paris, books, silver oil lamps and, above the fireplace, there hung a portrait of her husband painted by his cousin Raoul Dufy, all in dark browns and yellows. She was, when I met her, about seventy years old.

Bonne Maman had no idea I was coming that day, just as I had no idea that I was leaving St Aygulf. It didn't matter a bit. She showed me where the wheelbarrow was and I brought up my cases and installed myself in the third room, happy to begin a visit that was the first of many and which was to last three months.

Our social life, or rather her social life, was a fairly busy one. Though she lived on her own there were often ten or fifteen people at her table. Visitors came from everywhere; there were priests, peasants, sculptors and painters, relatives and strays like me. She held court up there on the hill of Rascas and I was a fortunate onlooker. I threw away my suits and my sea-island cotton shirts and cut back the brambles. I found a broken bike in one of the nearby ruins and mended it. Now I could cycle down to St Pons les Mures, on the coast road between St Maxime and St Tropez, climb a gate, cross a vineyard and come to a deserted beach and picnic alone; there where now the holiday apartments of Port Grimaud stand with their security gates, their breeze-block 'Provençal' towers and their plastic boats at the door.

It was at Rascas that I met Marius Fresia, the shepherd. Bonne Maman had gone to visit friends at Avignon for a few days and I was left in charge of the house. Quite early on the second morning I was awakened by strange sounds; a kind of rustling by the door, a shout or two and the clanging of small bells.

I got up, put on my dressing gown and went out into the sunlight to find myself surrounded by about five or six hundred sheep. In the middle of this flock, with two savage dogs at his heel, stood a man some fifteen years older than me, leaning at his ease on a stout staff. He was clothed in a rough flannel shirt and heavy corduroy trousers of dark brown. On his feet were big solid boots with soles an inch thick. On his head he wore a broad brimmed hat of olive green felt, while tied across his back with a piece of cord was an enormous blue umbrella. Over his shoulder was slung a large leather bag, the musette, containing his food and drink.

The man's face had been darkened by the sun and the wind but his expression was cheerful and bright, like the sound of his voice, though that was so coloured through with the language of Provence that even when he spoke French it was, at first, difficult for me to understand him. This then was Marius, the man I later cajoled into taking me with him on the transhumance, a trek of about two hundred kilometres, from Grimaud to La Colle St Michel and beyond, from the coast to the mountains with three thousand sheep, away from the burnt out grass of the coastal plain and up to the high pastures of the Basses Alpes.

There have been shepherds in Provence since pre-Roman times and Marius, as well as those who travelled with him, were little different, I imagine, from their forebears. They herded their sheep towards the mountains during the cool hours of the night and chose always to begin their journey at a time of full moon. When the sun got up they rested in the shade, leaving the sheep to lie exhausted under the trees while around them the dogs slept, panting. But the shepherds never slept. Instead they stretched their bodies on the ground, propped themselves on an elbow or against a tree trunk and talked the day away, drinking from time to time or tearing chunks of bread from a loaf to eat with the saucisson that they hacked at with their knives.

What they spoke of at such length was not, at the beginning, easy for me to discover, but after a while, and little by little, I managed to pick up just enough Provençal to follow the burden of their conversation: sheep and their illnesses; what had happened on the road in previous years and who were the best drovers to hire. But there was another thing. There was an on-going, everlasting discourse that, I suppose, had been kept up for generations, and it was spoken in low murmurs all the way down the long road.

The greater part of this talk was devoted to the misfortunes and adventures of other shepherds, both alive and dead, ancient and modern. But I heard stories too and fragments of stories, legends of Provence not told in any literary way, but recounted in an offhand, outdoor fashion. And more tales, only touched upon, casually, as we threaded our way through a ruin or camped under the trees and the ghost of the place reminded a shepherd of something he had heard or seen.

These more oblique references intrigued me and, when I could persuade the others to speak in French, I would worry them with questions as we walked along: 'Where did these stories come from and were they true?' - but all the answer I ever got for my pains was a shrug of the shoulders or a shake of the head. And so my imagination was set free to wander from the track we followed and I encouraged it to range over the whole country, searching by night for castles and sorcerers, and by day for troubadours and the ladies they served.

And of course I must have dreamt as well, fighting against sleep at each bivouac so that I could listen to the shepherds, but often tired beyond measure, especially during the first two days, I would sometimes doze

through the lazy hours and not come fully to my senses until Marius shook me awake at the very moment it was time to march on.

The ground, I remember, seemed as soft and inviting then as a quilted mattress but I knew I had to open my eyes and force myself to my feet. Even as I stood the shepherds were calling in the dogs, hitching up the mule and throwing their cloaks into the cart. All I had time for was a swig of water and I was off again, stumbling along, still half-asleep on legs that ached to the bone, not daring to look over my shoulder lest the people of my dreams still lingered beneath the trees or slumbered on their coats by the embers of our fire.

The shepherd, constantly on the move, has always been feared by the sedentary peasant. In the popular imagination he was a stranger from beyond the horizon. He had seen many things, he was many things; doctor at best, magician at worst. He garnered and kept knowledge; he knew the names of poisonous plants and could make potions; he knew the spells to ward off the evil eye. Some said he was a descendant of the wandering gypsies and weren't they, if the truth were told, the Saracens who had failed to return to Africa and Spain after the fall of Fraxinetta? Whatever the reality behind these legends it was certain that the shepherd was the repository of much dangerous learning, and it was best not to cross him in case he pronounced the words that could do you harm.

But there was one thing the peasant could not help admiring in the shepherd, and that was his power of story-telling. The shepherd's ancestors had been closer than anyone else to the ancient troubadours and they had been accustomed to welcome such travellers to their camp fires, happy to exchange meat and wine for ballad and song. Over the years, subjected to this influence, many shepherds had become troubadours, and, in bad times, troubadours had often been forced to become shepherds.

This alliance, enduring for some two centuries, had made the shepherd the guardian of a quantity of stories and this was, perhaps, his most curious gift. If you could induce him to tell his tale then it was bound to be both wondrous and enchanting. Unfortunately it was something he would rarely do beyond the confines of his own narrow society. He held the peasant in contempt and scorned the stranger; in a word the shepherd kept to his kind.

I soon found this to be true. For the duration of the transhumance, Marius, with a flock of about six hundred, had joined forces with four other shepherds who possessed flocks of a similar size. Herding three thousand sheep, not to mention half a dozen spare mules and thirty goats, is hard work. Marius's companions did not know me nor did they want to – I was a nuisance. On that first night of the trek they ignored me completely, except to swear roundly when I got in their way. For the next three days they continued in the same vein, more or less, and I was on my own. Marius could not be expected to help me, he had work to do and, after all, it had been my idea in the first place. He had said that it wouldn't be easy and it wasn't.

The food Bonne Maman had given me ran out after a day or two; I didn't

have a cloak to keep me warm and I didn't have the enormous blue umbrella, the mark of the shepherd, to keep off the sun and the rain. And, in those first three days, I wore through the soles of my gigolo shoes and there were blisters on both feet. I was on the point of giving up, just as everyone had said I would, when one of the hired hands fell ill and left us. He was the man who walked behind the mule cart, transporting the food and drink, the spare clothes and the new-born lambs when there were any.

It was the most despised job of all and he who had it walked forever in a cloud of dust and horse-fly, on call at every moment to run the length of the flock with whatever was needed; cloaks, leggings or a bottle of wine.

I welcomed this opportunity with open arms and proposed myself for the vacancy and, from the moment I showed that I was not a fool come along to gawp, everything changed. Someone lent me a spare cloak, ragged but warm. Someone else told me that I could buy a pair of the best shepherd boots ever made at Bargemon and yet a third person gave me a broken umbrella. I was no longer a tourist.

Six years later, having in the interim read for a degree at Trinity College, Dublin, I was offered a twelve month scholarship to the École Normale Supérieure, Paris, so that I might look round for a suitable subject for a doctoral thesis.

What I did for most of the tenure of that scholarship was visit the Cinémathèque, the theatres and art galleries and sit in cafés arguing with friends. Occasionally, however, I would spend a day or two in the Bibliothèque Nationale – a huge, imposing library where the quiet echoed between old wooden desks and which was lit by row upon row of table lamps bearing dark green shades.

It was a good place to work and I whiled away many hours in it, browsing through volumes that dealt with Provence and its history, hoping, in a vague way, to find something that might link the shepherds and troubadours in some common tradition.

I did not take this work at all seriously but gradually I pieced together a theory which was substantiated here and there by references that did indeed indicate a bond between these two groups of men – Doctor Michael de Larrabeiti, how well it rolled off the tongue.

It was not to be and my thesis never saw the light of day. The two or three stories I had been told in French and the fragments I had heard in Provençal would not leave my thoughts. As I attempted to press on with my research I began to unearth allusions to the shepherd stories and to the past of that wild country I had trekked across. Gradually my interest in a doctorate waned and I read only where the imagination led me.

Now it so happened that during my time on the transhumance I had made a point of keeping a notebook. I had written down the distances walked and the names of the places where we had camped. I had also kept a brief record of conversations and these notes reminded me of nearly everything that had been

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said. I made use of this detail and slowly, at my desk in the Bibliothèque Nationale, I put together the scaffolding for a collection of stories, half-imagined and half remembered and all to be set against a background of what I had read and observed.

But the stories went the way of the thesis. The attractions of Paris were too strong and too many. The original enthusiasm slipped away and before I realized it the wonderful year had ended and I took myself off to do other things. It was not until recently, while emptying a trunk, that I rediscovered the sketches for 'The Provençal Tales' and came to the conclusion that they were still worth working on.

I have decided to remain faithful to the original structure because that was the way the transhumance happened, though now, after a gap of twenty years, it is difficult for me to distinguish between what I overheard and what I invented. The shepherds were always telling anecdotes of one kind or another; forever reminiscing and wondering out loud. 'There is no place without a story,' Marius used to say, 'and what is more, someone has to tell each and every one of them for the very first time, sometime, someplace, so why not me . . . or you?'

I have often been reprimanded by my friends for not going on with my research: I should have persevered with the troubadour connection, they say, and even prevailed upon the shepherds and their families to divulge more of what they knew. I don't know. It was a rare invitation I received that June to walk the road and that experience can, perhaps, be best conveyed by these stories and their setting. Besides it is too late to begin again. Most of the shepherds I went to the mountains with are dead; they were well into their sixties then, though I am told you can still see Marius and Jean Martel in the plain by Cogolin, and at eighty-five Jules still leans on his staff and counts his sheep above Peyresq.

But nowadays those sheep are freighted to the high pastures in lorries and the shepherds follow in their cars. Even if I should take to the road of the transhumance I would not find men like the men I knew beneath the trees near Bargemon or down by the river at Castellane – characters in their own mythology with stardust clinging to their cloaks. Nor are the ruins of Rascas ruins any more, for they have been rebuilt entirely and the Parisiens who own them can drive to within a yard of the entrance. Bonne Maman has gone and so has her son, Jean Renoult, to whom I owe so much it cannot be told, but this book is for him – and the shepherds too of course – I know that's what he would have wanted.

OXFORD, 1988.

LE COL DE GRATTELOUP



Marius came in the middle of the afternoon, right up to Rascas through the heat. 'It's tonight,' he said, 'it's decided. Be at la Queste about midnight.'

I was pleased. 'Have a drink,' I said.

Marius laughed and turned to go back down the path, his head already level with my feet because of the steepness of the hillside. 'There's too much to do,' he answered, 'much too much.'

I was eager to set off and had been for days. Everything I needed was in a large white duffel bag that had belonged to Bonne Maman's husband. There was a sleeping bag, several changes of clothing, a map and a notebook. That evening, after dinner, Bonne Maman and I talked until it was almost time for me to leave, then we stood outside the house for a little while and the moon came up as big as a melon, illuminating the ruins of Rascas and the narrow terrace that I had cleared of brambles. Bonne Maman walked to the edge of it with me and we embraced. 'Come back when you want,' she said and I went down the path.

It was only two or three kilometres from Rascas to Notre Dame de la Queste and I soon covered the distance. In front of the chapel, by the side of the road, I sat on the duffel bag and waited. Opposite was the black bulk of a farmhouse and all around me the silver fields. Midnight Marius had said. I glanced at my watch. I had an hour to go.

The air was still and I might have been the only person alive in the whole world. I looked towards the castle of Grimaud where it stood like a ghost against the sky. I could hear nothing save the trickle of the fountain a few metres away. Then, a moment or two before one o'clock, the noise came, distant to begin with but growing louder with each minute. I got to my feet.

I distinguished the cries first, the voices of men, tense and angry, shouting at the barking dogs. Next came the bells, heavy ones that boomed and lighter ones that rustled more than rang, each one made by a shepherd's hands and each one with a different tone; scores of them filling the night with sound. Now I could hear the rattle of twelve thousand hooves on the tarmac, the bleating too and soon I saw the hurricane lamps being waved

from side to side to warn those who drove cars at night of the dangers that lay before them.

At last came the flock and the backs of three thousand sheep caught the moonlight and sent it rippling from place to place like the shadow of the wind on water. Dark shapes of men went past me. I stepped forward and swung the white bag to my shoulder. Plainly visible I was ignored until Marius ran by, his two dogs leaping beside him. 'Throw your bag into the wagon and get moving,' he shouted and then he too was gone. I did as ordered and followed the lamp that swung from the tailboard of the mule-cart. 'Don't get so close,' a voice said, 'you block that light and some stupid car will drive right into us.'

I moved to one side and we marched on; all along the coast road, through Beauvallon and into St Maxime. Here the dawn came up as we passed by the grey sea and the sheep filled the streets outside the dead night-clubs and the sleeping restaurants. We went deeper into the town, crossed the bridge and turned left, heading upwards and inland. Now the noise of the shouting and the bleating and the bells brought people from their beds and they came to their balconies and rubbed their eyes as we went by. Children ran out into the street in their night-clothes, dragging their parents with them, their faces all smiles because the passing of the sheep meant that summer had arrived. And some families walked with us to the very edge of town before they fell away and waved and went back to their breakfasts.

But the shepherds could not stop and the long straight road continued northwards and the sun came up and the air began to creak in the heat. The heads of the sheep drooped and they slowed their pace; the dogs padded behind in silence and I began to limp, not knowing if I could finish the day's distance. It was not until ten o'clock, nine hours and twenty kilometres after leaving Grimaud, that we arrived at the Col de Gratteloup and the sheep were guided from the road and pushed in under the trees. Then the mule was unhitched and the cart manhandled into the shade of a ruined chapel. There we found another shepherd, with his flock, waiting to join us, and this was Leonce Coulet.

Leonce was at his ease, both fed and watered, and he started talking immediately. I was beyond anything. I pulled my belongings from the cart, climbed into my sleeping bag and fell into a deep slumber, too tired to eat or drink. A few hours later I was awakened by Marius. The shade of my tree had shifted from me and I was lying in the full strength of the afternoon sun.

'Best move,' he said, 'your brains will fry in this. You ought to eat something, and drink too.'

I rolled back into the shade. The shepherds lay around me, their limbs sprawled in comfort, their hats tipped over their eyes. Leonce Coulet was still talking. His voice was rough, like stones on a shovel, but it was full of mirth and compassion too. He was a tall man dressed in a soft grey shirt and a waistcoat and trousers made from black corduroy. His hat was black also and had a wide brim.

But it was his face that I found remarkable; framed as it was with iron grey hair and lined with dark creases where he grinned or frowned. It was a face that stopped you in your tracks and made you want to know the man

and listen to him. Under well-marked brows his eyes were mischievous and when they rested on you they made you feel glad to be alive and when he spoke his huge hands moved and wove a spell. Troubadours must have looked and sounded like Leonce Coulet; perhaps he was a troubadour, one who had been lying in ambush at Gratteloup for centuries, just waiting for us to halt there so that he might tell his tale before we went on with our journey.



The Troubadour and The Cage of Gold

There was once a young and handsome Prince and he lived in that most beautiful part of Provence which people have always called Les Maures. This young man had been born and brought up in a fine castle built halfway between Collobrières and La Mole and in due time, that is to say on the death of his father, he came into his full inheritance. The Prince had loved his father and grieved for him deeply, as was only right, but as soon as the proper period of mourning was over the Prince looked about him and set his mind to the future and to the responsibilities he bore.

The Prince had come into possession of a paradise on earth and the loveliest part of it all was the castle. Called the Château of La Verne it nestled into the side of a gently sloping hill and was surrounded by splendid trees. Their branches gave a welcome shade throughout the long days of summer, and under the broad leaves the traveller or troubadour could always find somewhere to rest and refresh himself. There were trees of all sorts; chestnuts, pines, cork-oaks, fragrant eucalyptus and even palm trees that had been brought, so some said, from Africa by Abd al-Rhman in the ancient Saracen days of war and pillage.

Inside the walls of the castle was a wide hexagonal courtyard and in the middle of the courtyard was a large fountain fed from a spring so deep that it never froze in winter or ever dried in summer. Growing high over the fountain was a ring of tall and leafy plane trees and it was here, in the dusk of the evening, that the inhabitants of La Verne, from the richest to the poorest, would meet to talk together until night fell and it was time for sleep. Around

the perimeter of the courtyard, at intervals, flights of steps rose to the apartments of the castle while the largest entrance led to the Prince's quarters and the main dining-hall.

Beyond the fortifications and all along by the banks of the river that gave the castle its name, were to be found the farms and fields and vineyards that gave the Prince and his courtiers their sustenance. As chance would have it the Prince was not a greedy youth and his father had seen to it that he grew up to appreciate his good fortune and, as part of his upbringing when a boy, he had been made to help with the harvest and the grape-picking every year. He had even wandered the hills in all weathers with the rough and ready shepherds who tended his father's flocks. Now everything was his and his peasants and servants were happy to come under his rule for they knew that he would manage his lands to their best advantage. The people of La Verne were completely happy but the Prince himself was not – and the reason lay in the past.

As part of his education the Prince had travelled from one end of Provence to the other, visiting many castles and every large city. Because of this he knew that although his father had been content with the simple life of La Verne he himself entertained very different expectations. He had no wish to change the way the ordinary people on his estates lived, quite the contrary, but after all, he had seen dancing, heard music; he had read books and discussed philosophy. What was perhaps more important was that he had listened to troubadours and had been deeply moved by the stories they'd told him and the ballads they'd sung. But there was nothing to be learnt at La Verne; his father had discouraged it; no poets came to exchange verses with other poets and no troubadours came to tell stories to other troubadours – yet that was where the Prince's desires lay. He was possessed by a powerful and irresistible ambition. He wanted to transform La Verne into the most renowned of all Provençal castles, and by doing so he dreamed of making himself the most renowned of all Provençal princes.

The Prince knew that this would not be an easy task. Troubadours and minstrels and travelling magicians were very special people. They were free and untrammelled. 'They blow where the wind listeth,' the proverb said. They might tarry in your company a week and write wicked lampoons about you; or, if they fell in love with your lady, they might serve her for months, making poetry and telling stories and the music and words would carry her fame, and sometimes her husband's, from one end of Europe to the other. It was the best gift the world had to offer; Immortality in a song.

So it became obvious to the Prince that he was missing a lady to grace La Verne and to be his wife. Nor could she be any ordinary lady. She would have to be descended of a princely blood. She would need to be excessively beautiful and she would need a keen and kindly intelligence. Such a paragon would not be easy to find and the Prince knew it. In all of Provence at that time there was only one princess who even approached these requirements and she had been sung of by every troubadour who had enjoyed the good fortune of

seeing her. She was still unmarried and about the Prince's age but she was much sought after and possessed a mind that was independent and robust. She was not a fool and certainly not the type to collapse in a swoon at the feet of the first prince who appeared before her. She was a princess who desired a full life and would do her best to see that she got it. She lived, under the protection of her father, in a castle just above the town of Callas, and that was her name – the Princess of Callas.

The Prince felt that he had little chance of persuading the Princess to make La Verne her home and him her husband, but he was no coward and decided that he could but try. Many princes, he knew, had asked for the hand of the Princess but none had ever been accepted. It was not that the girl was overweening or spoiled, it was that the men who had come for her had all seemed boastful and pretentious, as if she were the lucky one; and they had spent most of their time talking about themselves and the feats they had performed at hunting and fighting. The Princess wanted the man she chose to be brave, of course, but she knew that there are more things in life than sticking swords into enemies or spears into wild boar.

As soon as he had made his decision the Prince set off on the long journey from the valley of La Verne to the town of Callas which is situated on a hill not far south of Bargemon. He travelled quite simply with only a dozen archers for protection and no great retinue. On his arrival at Callas he presented himself to the Lord of that place and after the requisite compliments and presents had been exchanged he asked for permission to see the Princess. This permission was granted, under certain conditions, and the Prince and two of his noblest companions were led by a servant to the terraces where the Princess was to be found.

The Prince was impressed by everything he saw at Callas. In almost every part of the castle were troubadours and minstrels singing, or in company with the ladies of the place, composing songs for the next day. The Prince's heart swelled to breaking point. This was his heart's desire.

At last, in the shade of a great silken awning that fell in folds from a stone balcony the Prince discovered the Princess sitting with her ladies-in-waiting and several men of letters. There was also a minstrel playing his lute nearby but as the Prince and his companions appeared all conversation stopped and silence came over the terrace.

The Prince blushed for the Princess was as beautiful and as regal as rumour had said and suddenly he was aware of how inadequate he was. How could anyone dare to ask for her hand in marriage. He bit his lip. He felt uncouth and awkward. He and his companions had not even bothered to change from their travelling clothes so impatient had the Prince been to present himself. He hesitated, halted, but then, summoning up all his courage, he advanced towards the Princess, trying to ignore the fine and accomplished courtiers who stood near her.

For her part the Princess was struck by the young man's appearance. His life in the forest of La Verne had given him a fine constitution and he moved

with a natural grace even when he was embarrassed. His clothes were covered in the dust of the roads, it was true, but she looked beyond that and saw that they were simple and straightforward with no excess of fashion on them. His face was open and honest. A good face. His manners were not polished in the way of the courts of love but he looked kind and sincere. He was certainly different from most princes who came to ask for her as if she were a horse they wanted to buy.

The Prince bowed. 'Princess,' he began. 'Forgive me, I have come from La Verne, in the hills of Les Maures, to the south. I should, I know, have changed my clothes but I wished to see you . . . without wasting a minute.'

The ladies-in-waiting lowered their heads and laughed and the minstrel plucked at the strings of his lute and made a discord but the Princess raised her hand and there was quiet. She liked the reason the Prince had given and she thought it did him, and her, credit. She smiled and the full power of her smile bore upon the Prince and he felt his heart weaken and his task recede further from him. She was so stately.

'Well, Prince from La Verne,' she said, 'what is it you have come all this way to say?'

The Prince looked about him, at the ladies and courtiers, the men of letters and the minstrel and he said nothing. Everyone was staring and waiting for him to speak, but he could not: not in front of so many. The Princess understood and rose from her chair and taking the Prince by the hand she led him to the end of the terrace where, though still in sight of the company, he and she were out of earshot.

'Well, Prince from La Verne,' said the Princess once more, 'what is it you have come all this way to say?'

Then the Prince began to speak of the range of hills that is called Les Maures and which the Princess had never seen and he told her how restful it was there, how dark and green was the shade beneath the trees and how cool was his castle of La Verne. And he told her about the fine estates his father had left him; how his parents and his parents' parents had already made his inheritance into a paradise for the body and how he, the Prince, wanted to make it a paradise for the mind as well. He could see, he said, just by looking at the castle of Callas, what a court of love should be but he had no real idea of how to begin. The Princess's reputation was already known over most of Provence. If only she would agree to be his wife her intelligence would guide him and her beauty would be reflected in song and verse. She might become immortal, she might not, but at the very least she would be mistress of the endeavour.

The Princess turned to look out from the walls of Callas, across the plain to the crossroads in the distance. Now it was her turn to be troubled. What should she answer? It had been easy to refuse all those who had come before – they had not been worth accepting – but this suitor was different. He was not someone who had simply asked for her hand in marriage so that he could squander her dowry and father children on her. Nor did he ask her just

because she was beautiful, though it was obvious that he found her so. He no doubt desired her for all the usual reasons but he also wanted her for something more; he wanted her to take a part in his life and in the life of his castle.

'We must speak further,' said the Princess and she commanded chairs to be brought, then a table with food and drink and she and the Prince sat down at their ease and the young man began to talk.

The Prince's companions and the Princess's suite sat at a distance and waited. No longer did the minstrel pluck discords from his strings; never had he seen anything like this.

All that afternoon the Prince spoke of his castle and the plans he had for it. And the next day he talked again, and the next day, and always he spoke with eagerness and sincerity, asking the Princess for her ideas on all manner of things. And gradually, as they talked, his plans became their plans and they decided, after a while, on what those plans should be. And a week of walking and talking went by and at the end of it they looked into each other's eyes and kissed and knew that a strong and proper love existed between them.

As soon as they had discovered this love the Prince went to the Princess's father and formally demanded her hand in marriage and as the Prince de La Verne came of an excellent family, and his estates were known to be in excellent order, the Lord of Callas gave his permission and the young couple were married the very next day.

The wedding was a splendid affair and for several days following there were great celebrations in Callas, but the Prince and the Princess were both impatient to begin the work they had set themselves and as soon as the revels were over they made preparations for the journey that would take them to La Verne.

So admired and loved was the Princess that many people from Callas wanted to accompany her, but she resolved to take only a few followers. Two of her troubadours and a favourite minstrel begged to go with her but she smiled at them and refused. 'You scoffed when my Prince came for me,' she said, 'and now I must be loyal to him. Perhaps in a few years, when you are the best troubadours in all Provence I shall send for you. We shall see.'

In this way the Princess left her birthplace and journeyed southwards and she was joyful that she had found her Prince, and joyful that life offered her an important thing to do. What was more the people and the courtiers of La Verne were delighted with their mistress. When she went into the fields and farms of her husband's estate she brought comfort and serenity to all those who saw her. 'It is like having another sun in the sky,' they said.

It did not take long for the happiness of the Prince's castle to become known and the Princess too had carried her reputation with her. Soon troubadours and men of learning began to appear at the gates of La Verne, asking for admittance. The Princess and the Prince received everyone with cheerful hospitality and all equally. The Princess set high standards for conversation and demanded the same of her courtiers and their ladies. Music

and poetry were played and recited every day. From all over Provence, and even from Italy, people came to see and sing. The Princess was adored and the Prince admired; they were a perfect couple and had created a paradise that everyone desired to visit – everyone that was except Bertrand de l'Avelan.

Bertrand de l'Avelan was the most acclaimed troubadour of that time and it was said that he was known throughout the whole civilized world. He had sung in Austria and told stories to Saladin. If he stayed in a castle for a month then that castle was honoured. If he wrote a song for a woman, no matter how lowly, then she gained immortality. And so the Prince believed that if Avelan could be tempted through the gates of La Verne then its reputation would be assured and his dearest wish fulfilled. But Avelan never came, nor was there any news of his coming.

This state of affairs did not perturb the Princess in the slightest. Her castle was perfect and so was the life she led there. She loved her husband as much as she had on the day of their marriage and, in the seven years since, she had presented him with two handsome and talented sons to ensure the succession. She had more than enough troubadours to amuse her and she never gave a moment's thought as to whether or not the great Avelan was aware of her existence.

But for the Prince this absence was an insult and it poisoned his life. It was as if he needed to extinguish in his mind the fame of all other castles of courtly love before he could enjoy that of his own. This preoccupation was a deadly one and the Prince fought hard to conceal it; none of his courtiers knew of it and nor did his wife. He saw to his estates and his servants and entered into all the culture and learning that La Verne had to offer, and yet, underneath an appearance of joy, his heart became more and more envious.

The Prince himself hoped that his envy would gradually disappear but to his horror, he found it increasing as time went by. Seven more years passed in this way and it seemed that the more perfect La Verne became the stronger was the Prince's obsession with Avelan the troubadour and the reasons, real or imagined, why he had never come to sing before the Princess. In the end the Prince began to fall into black moods of despair. At times, so as not to disturb his wife's happiness, he locked himself away in his own apartments. There he would bury his head in his hands and wonder what was to become of him. He should not have tormented himself. One day, in the early evening, the finest troubadour in all Provence simply appeared at the castle gates. There was no warning, no messengers, no servants and no companions; just Avelan.

Avelan was a man of good looks; not too tall and not too broad. No longer in his first youth, his hair was cut short and bleached a great deal by the sun and not a little by the years. His face was scarred by the wind and the rain and the things he had seen, but it was a compassionate face and one that understood the world. He wore the simplest of tunics, held at the waist by a wide belt with a silver buckle on it, a shepherd's belt. His legs were bare and brown and his shoes were old and covered in the dust of the roads he travelled.

Over one of his shoulders hung a lute, and over the other a goatskin bag containing songs and poems. That was all that Avelan carried with him.

With no ceremony at all he strode through the open gates of the castle and entered the wide hexagonal courtyard where the plane trees grew. Here, weary from his journey, Avelan sat and took his ease at the fountain, resting his feet, shoes and all, in in the cool waters.

Those servants and courtiers who were standing nearby were much taken aback for the stranger's manner was direct and outlandish and they had no idea who he might be. He did not, from his appearance, seem to be a person of note but, nevertheless, one of the castle servants ran for his master and, finding him quiet in his room, went instead to inform the Princess of the strange new arrival.

The Princess came immediately to the window of her apartments where she had been avoiding the heat of the day, and looked down at the courtyard and the crowd now gathering there. She saw the troubadour with his feet in the fountain, arms straight behind him on the wide stone coping, and his head flung back to the sky while his eyes were closed so that he might better enjoy the sensual pleasure of tired limbs. Something plucked at the Princess's heart and she caught her breath. This was no ordinary man.

'Stranger,' she called, 'you will soil the water with your dusty feet.'

Avelan straightened his head and opened his eyes. He gazed at the Princess for a moment and then smiled. 'It is good honest dirt from the roads of Provence,' he said, 'and it will soon wash away . . . but if you knew, lady, how far my feet had tramped so that they might bring my eyes to see this castle and contemplate your beauty you would not begrudge me this luxury, for I deserve it. And if your castle pleases me I might make it immortal – you, Princess, I certainly shall.' And with this Avelan rose and bowed, where he stood, in the fountain.

The Princess smiled and leant against the side of her casement and Avelan took his lute from his shoulder and there and then he sang the Princess one of his most beautiful songs. As he sang the shadows of the day lengthened and the evening sunlight turned the castle walls to gold and not a single person in the courtyard moved. The Princess stayed at her window and was entranced. Never had she heard music like this, or a voice like this or words that grew so well the one out of another. She felt bewitched, spell-bound in bonds she could not break.

At the end of the singing the silence lasted a long moment and the courtiers turned towards the Princess and waited for her to speak and at last she did, leaning forward and saying: 'Are you a troubadour or a magician?'

Avelan laughed and leapt from the fountain. 'To be the first, my lady,' he answered, 'is to be the second, though to be the second is not always to be the first, but being one or both leaves me, none the less, weary and hungry.'

The Princess nodded and, gesturing at her servants she gave commands. 'Your chamber will be prepared,' she said, 'and you shall dine with us. Will you sing again?'

Avelan slung his lute to his shoulder. 'After food and drink,' he said, 'I will do anything,' and with this remark he turned to follow the servants into the castle but the Princess spoke again.

'Your name,' she called, 'you have not told me your name.'

The troubadour looked up to the Princess on her balcony and his eyes burned into her and her heart stirred again. 'Why,' he said, 'I am Bertrand de l'Avelan, the troubadour, and you are the Princess of Callas and as many leagues as I have walked to see you I would walk ten times over for the merest glimpse only.' And everyone in the courtyard laughed at the compliment and its exaggeration, but they admired it also, and so did the Princess.

During this time, in his own chambers, where the shutters were closed to keep out the sun, the Prince had been sitting alone in one of his sombre moods. But his apartments too overlooked the courtyard and he also had heard the song of Avelan, just as clearly as everyone else. The music and beauty of that song had been wondrous and it had stolen into the Prince's heart and banished the gloom that lay there. It had raised his head from his hands and made him more content than he had been for years. It was as if all his ambitions had been realized and his whole life fulfilled; as if he had been on a long quest and at last found the thing he had searched for. In his dark room he stood and stretched his arms to the ceiling – now his name, and the name of his wife would live forever.

In the hall of the castle that night there was great rejoicing. The Prince and the Princess had dressed themselves in their finest clothes and so had every courtier and servant. The happiness of the Prince was visible and the sight of it made the Princess happy and when she was joyful the whole world was. The tables were crowded and some of the villagers from the valley pushed into the room and stood around the walls in groups and stared. On the right hand side of the Princess sat Avelan himself, washed and revived and looking splendid in apparel that the Prince had presented to him, celebrating this arrival after so many years of waiting.

Those fortunate enough to be sitting at the top table hung on the troubadour's every word. Between courses he drank the good wine of Pierrefeu and told one story after another. He told sad ones and humorous ones; some of hate and some of love and his words were a spell and no one present so much as dreamt of interrupting him.

And the Prince leant back in his chair and smiled at his wife from the heart, like he had not smiled in a long while. He touched her face and kissed her and they both thought of the day, fourteen years previously, when he had ridden into Callas to ask for her hand in marriage. And they both looked back down the years and saw how everything had grown into what they'd wanted and how this night was the best of all nights. With the coming of Avelan the good had been made perfect.

This brief glimpse of perfection led the Prince to believe that all those moments of envy and despair he had seen in the past were exorcised from his

heart for ever. He imagined that now his ambition would fall away and wither and leave him content for the rest of his life. But he was too hopeful too soon. Already another desire was stirring in his breast. Here before him was beauty and music, story and poetry such as he had never heard, but how, the Prince began to wonder, could he seize that perfection and keep it. Surely such a thing was not beyond human wit. There must be a way to possess this gift eternally – there must be a way.

It was as these thoughts entered the Prince's mind that Avelan reached for his lute and started to sing a song for the Princess; a song of such charm that it cheered the Prince immeasurably, and he raised his cup of wine to the company and everyone present drank a health to the troubadour who had no equal and who, they hoped, would stay with them and never leave.

At first it certainly seemed that the troubadour had no intention of quitting the hills of Les Maures and the castle of La Verne. From month to month he was there and the news of his whereabouts spread through Provence as if carried by the birds of the forest. The reputation of the castle and its lord and lady grew and minstrels hastened to the place so that they might learn from Avelan. Everyone knew that this time at La Verne was a blessed time – but they also knew such wonders could not last, and they said so. Even the lowliest shepherd in the valley was aware that however much a troubadour might love his lady it was in his nature to journey on when the spirit moved him. All too soon Avelan would think of saying his farewells. After all he had served the Princess for more than a year; more months than he had ever served anyone.

The Prince grieved deeply when he heard these rumours of the troubadour's impending departure. He went in search of Avelan and found him leaning on the battlements, gazing into the blue haze of the hills beyond Gonfaron. It was high summer and the forest below the castle lay at the very point of incandescence and Avelan was thinking that in the mountains the air was cool and the water in the streams there tasted like wine.

'Avelan,' began the Prince, 'stay with us a little longer. Everyone loves you so, it will make us sad to see you leave.'

Avelan turned and smiled at the Prince. He leant his back against the wall, resting his elbows on the flat top of it. 'I have been happy here,' he said, 'perhaps too happy. It is not easy to take to the road again – but troubadours must. If I do not leave I shall die. The memory of the stories I sung you, that is my gift, it is all I have and I give it you with all my heart. But I must go, there is no changing it. I must feel the earth beneath my feet, the grass under me when I sleep and the hard edge of life cutting into the palm of my hand. If I dwell too long in castles I am not a troubadour and if I am not a troubadour I cannot sing and I shall wither. Believe me, Prince, this is the way of it.'

The Prince of La Verne sighed and gazed between his feet at the flagstones of the terrace. He understood but did not want to understand. He nodded, opened his mouth to answer but then said nothing and went to ask his wife to

speak to Avelan so that she might add her entreaties to his and beg the troubadour to stay if only for a short time more.

The Princess did as she was commanded but again Avelan smiled his smile and shook his head. 'Never have I served a lord and a lady so full of grace,' he said, 'but I have new songs in my pack now, songs that sing of you and La Verne, and all the world will know them. Perhaps, when I am too old to walk the roads of Provence, perhaps then you will give me a corner of the castle where I may keep warm in winter, but now, while I can, I must go. There is only one way for me to live and that is the way of the troubadour.'

The tears trickled down the Princess's cheeks and she was moved as profoundly as she had been on the first day. 'Troubadour,' she said, 'I trust that your songs will be immortal, but even if they fade from the world they will stay forever in my heart.'

Avelan looked towards the horizon. 'It is only in your heart that I can live,' he said, 'and whether your husband sees reason or not, I still have to bid you farewell.'

'Yes,' said the Princess, 'I know.'

When the day of departure came there was a great melancholy felt throughout the castle. Avelan felt it too and for a year or a day he might have stayed a little longer, but deep within him he had no doubt; he had to journey on. So, with only a brief 'Adieu', Avelan strode through the castle gates and took the track that led northwards to the mountains of High Provence, the shepherds' road to Castellane and beyond. He looked exactly as he had done on the day of his arrival, for all his fine clothes, those presents from the Prince, he had left behind in his tiny turret room.

'You cannot travel with possessions,' he had once said. 'How can you sleep by the roadside if you are fearful of being robbed, and how can people invite you to their table if you have more to eat than they have?' And Avelan crossed the valley and disappeared into the forest with only his lute on one shoulder and his bag of songs on the other. The moment the troubadour was out of sight the Prince fell into the blackest mood he had ever known. With a gloomy face he rushed to his apartments and locked the doors, swearing that he would see no one, not even the Princess.

Concern for the Prince, coupled with the effect of Avelan's absence, made everyone in the castle morose and the quiet of death fell over what had been, only twenty-four hours earlier, the happiest court of love in all the kingdoms of France and Navarre. That evening, when courtiers and servants gathered at the fountain, they scarcely spoke and those troubadours still present were subdued and despondent, not caring to sing even one song.

This silence continued and no one thought to break it until at dusk, when the red sun came to rest on the rim of the horizon, the Prince reappeared dressed for the hunt and, in a fierce and angry voice, called for his best horse and six of his archers. When all was ready he led his men from the castle at a gallop and took the road to the north; the road that Avelan had taken.

The people of La Verne were much perplexed by the Prince's behaviour but they were not kept in suspense for long. That very night, before the moon had risen very far, the Prince and his archers returned. Their horses' hooves clattered across the drawbridge and the Princess opened her casement to stare at the scene below. There, in the flickering light of the burning torches, mounted behind an archer, his hands tied behind him and his face covered in dust from the tempestuous ride, was Bertrand de l'Avelan.

No one spoke. Quickly the archers dragged their prisoner from the back of his horse and hustled him away to the room he had lived in before and where all his fine garments and possessions awaited him. But this time his door was locked and a guard was set at it. As for the window, it was high in the turret. Anyone attempting to climb from there to the ground was sure to meet death on the rugged cobbles below.

Strange as it may seem there was very little criticism of the Prince's action. Most inhabitants of the castle had been made so unhappy by the troubadour's departure that they were only too pleased to see him again, no matter how his return had been accomplished. Even the Princess, who still loved her husband as dearly as ever, managed to find excuses for his conduct and, with only a little effort, persuaded herself that no damage had been done. That very night the Prince came to the Princess's bedchamber and told her what he was setting out to do, and why.

'I have no intention of keeping him long,' began the Prince, touching his wife's hair, 'a month or two, that is all. I love him and you too much to keep him imprisoned. It is that my people were so downcast, we must give them time to get used to the idea of his not being here, time for other troubadours to finish learning his songs. I have explained this to him, he understands. It did not take many words to persuade him to come back to us.'

'You did him no harm?' asked the Princess.

'My love,' answered the Prince, 'as if the man who is your husband could do any such thing.'

'He will be free, he may go where he likes?'

'Of course,' said the Prince, 'though there must always be an escort of archers with him. You understand that?'

With this the Princess was content and when, next morning, she met with the troubadour and talked with him she was delighted to find that he appeared not at all put down in his spirits. The Princess smiled and took the troubadour's hand.

'You must forgive us,' she said. 'It will only be for a little while. We missed you so and my Prince was so unhappy. I promise, Avelan, that you may wander where you will and it will be just like before. Be patient.'

And so things at La Verne went on as they had done previously. Avelan made light of his captivity and told stories and sang songs at table and in the courtyard every day. He donned his rich clothes again and talked to the Prince and the Princess without giving any sign that he was angry at being held against his will. In fact rarely did he stray beyond the castle gates, but when he

did he was always accompanied by three or four archers, each with a bow in their hands and a quiver of arrows at their back.

This state of affairs continued for some months. It was as if Avelan had always lived at the castle and had never dreamt of leaving. The Prince quite forgot that he had ever ridden out after the troubadour, and the Princess no longer remembered that she had promised he might leave after a few weeks. From time to time Avelan would try to discuss his captivity with anyone who would listen but when he did the courtiers shook their heads, saying that they couldn't possibly do without him and, what was more, the Prince certainly would never let him go. Everyone urged Avelan to be patient: 'Only be patient,' they would say, 'only be patient and you will soon be back on the open road.'

It was no good. Avelan could not wait forever. He saw his life slipping away and he always a prisoner.

One day he was not at his usual place in the great hall; he was not in the courtyard. From his room his lute, bag and tunic had disappeared. There was no mistaking the evidence. Avelan had escaped.

This time the Prince rose from his table in a towering rage and called all his archers and soldiers and servants to him. Hastily they mounted and the whole company set out to scour the length and breadth of the countryside. All that night, the next day and the following night, they searched and it was not until the morning of the second day that a small group of the Prince's men came up with the troubadour on the road to Montferrat. Although Avelan was well beyond their master's jurisdiction, they took him anyway and bore him back to the castle of La Verne, and Avelan wept.

'Do not weep, troubadour,' said the Prince when his captive stood before him. 'You have my promise that you will not be here much longer. Believe me, I only wish to do what is right. Here you are loved, everyone admires you. All this time you have been with us your renown has grown and people come from all over Provence to sit at your feet. My only wish is to increase your fame and to make a collection of your songs . . . and then you shall leave us. All down the centuries people will remember Bertrand de l'Avelan and the castle of La Verne.' And when this speech was done the Prince commanded that Avelan's door be double locked, that bars be set at his window and that sentries should guard him all night and never sleep.

Now things were greatly altered. Avelan kept to his room and rarely showed himself, never touching his lute or singing. Sometimes, when quite alone, he might touch his bag of poems or even whisper a song into the loneliness of his soul, but nothing more. Almost all his waking hours were spent at his window, staring at the bright countryside by day and at the starlit forests by night.

Slowly the heat of the summer diminished and the evenings became shorter and colder until at last the shepherds and their flocks came down from the mountains, passing through the valley on their way to the pastures by the sea. The troubadour raised his head and heard the sound of sheep bells in the dark.

At dawn he saw the shepherds resting on the river bank, and the sight filled him with sorrow for this was a true sight of the open road.

Soon Avelan became ill, taking to his bed, and the Princess went to him immediately, grasping his hand and pressing it to her lips.

'Oh, my love,' she said, 'be not so sad. Only let my husband make this book of your songs and I promise on my heart that you shall leave us, but do not keep yourself alone like this. Remember we love you.'

'Yes,' said Avelan, his voice lifeless, 'such a love is a cage of gold,' and he said no more and even though the Princess kissed him yet still he would not sing.

Then the Princess knelt before her husband and begged him to release the troubadour at once. 'This,' she said, 'is not part of the bright dream we once dreamt of together.'

It hurt the Prince to see his wife kneel and he raised her from the ground and spoke with kindness, asking that she bear with him only a little longer. He had no desire, he said, to do Avelan any harm, but the troubadour could not leave now that he was ill, but as soon as he had recovered his spirits he would be released - meanwhile the Princess must look after Avelan and make him happy. He must be made to sing again for the Prince had conceived a new ambition. Not only did he want to copy into a book every song that Avelan knew but now he wanted to copy the stories and poems also. Above all he wanted to learn some of the troubadour's skill; how he composed, how he planned his stories and what were the mysterious gifts that lay behind the telling of them.

'And you must help me,' said the Prince to his wife. 'To me Avelan will say nothing, but to you he will tell all, I am sure of it. A scribe shall sit behind the door, writing down everything Avelan says, and you will spend your days with him . . . learning his secrets and when you know them you will tell me. He shall be well again and I shall become the most talented lord in all Provence.'

In spite of herself the Princess was persuaded by her husband's idea. It was obvious, as the Prince had said, that the troubadour could not leave the castle as he was. She must nurse him and during that time the Prince could learn the things he wished to know. The sooner he was satisfied, the sooner the troubadour would be free and she would have made both men happy. The Princess smiled and embraced her husband: 'Yes,' she said, 'I will help you.'

As soon as this conversation was over the Princess went directly to Avelan's room and, ordering the guard to open the door, she entered the sunlit cell, sat by the troubadour's bed and told him of her husband's latest plan, and of her part in it.

'Madouneto!' he said. 'What your husband asks is madness. He does not have enough life and nor do I,' but the troubadour stopped speaking when he saw the Princess's face fall in disappointment, and even though he wanted to say more he did not. Instead he glanced away at the horizon for a moment and then looked back at his lady. His eyes flared with a new idea and a smile of

cunning touched his lips. The Princess mistook the smile and answered it with one of her own.

'Will you do it?' she asked, breathless.

Avelan glanced at the horizon again before answering.

'Yes,' he said at last, 'but you will have to spend long hours with me, work hard and note everything I say . . . then you may carry my words to your husband. It might succeed. I have never attempted such a thing before . . . but, do I have your word that you will release me on the day when I can tell you no more.'

'Oh, Avelan,' said the Princess with tears of happiness on her face, 'of course you have.'

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Avelan's scheme was to teach the Princess with all the craft he possessed for he knew that his very freedom depended on it. He was convinced that the Princess would release him from his captivity if she could, but he was equally convinced that her husband would not. His ambitions would go on growing and he would always find a reason for keeping the troubadour at La Verne. But Avelan also knew that once the Princess had learnt all there was to learn about the way of the troubadours she would no longer be the person she had been. Then she would understand the life of a minstrel and would set him at liberty no matter what her husband commanded.

Now Avelan called on all his powers and sang the Princess songs of great beauty and told her stories of great passion; stories of lovers separated, of dungeons and cruel husbands and lovers triumphant. Day after day the Princess listened and every day the scribe sat at the door and copied down all things but he could not copy what was in the Princess's heart. Soon Avelan taught the Princess to string the lute and his hands touched her hands on the strings and they sat close upon the bed and sang songs and read poems and, without realizing it, the Princess was happier than she had ever been at any previous time in the whole of her existence.

It was not too long before Avelan discovered that the Princess was revealing a remarkable gift for all things relating to the way of the troubadour and she sang and played as if trained to it all her life. Seeing this Avelan began to take real pleasure in his teaching and taught his pupil other mysteries; how to invent stories from a nothing and how to tell them; where to pause and where to smile; where to break off and where to pick up the thread. Never had Avelan seen such an eagerness to learn and he became determined to discover how accomplished the Princess could become. And there was something else that intrigued him – could a woman learn all the skills necessary to a troubadour?

Because of this new interest Avelan's spirits revived entirely and occasionally he even sang at the Prince's table. The light in his eye brightened and when he looked at the Princess that light clouded with tenderness. The Prince was delighted with his stratagem and could hardly believe his good fortune. It would take years for the scribe to copy out all that Avelan knew – the rest of

the troubadour's life perhaps – but in the end, what a jewel of a collection it would be and how great the reward for such toil . . . immortal renown. The Prince's heart felt like it would burst with happiness and he looked back to his youth and saw how fortunate he had been. In his wildest dreams he had never thought to achieve so much.

In this manner life at La Verne went on into the winter and the Princess soon felt confident enough in her knowledge to begin instructing her husband in the techniques and principles she had learnt from Avelan. The Prince was eager to learn and together he and his wife read through the poems and stories that the scribe had collected – but the Prince could not learn them or retell them in a way that brought out their magic. The Princess did not despair but encouraged her husband and placed his hands on the strings of the lute but his voice could not warm to the burden of a song and there was no life in what he sang.

A chill seized the Princess's heart; the man she had loved all these years was in reality different to the idea of him she had carried in her imagination. For all his dedication to the art of the troubadours he now seemed coarse to her. He was like a man crowding his garden with statues to show how rich he was, leaving no room for the grass to grow. The Prince wanted only the glory of possession – story and song in themselves meant nothing to him.

The Princess was dismayed. Why had she not noticed these things before? But she knew the answer – Avelan had done this. He had shown her how to be a troubadour and the revelation had cleansed her; now her heart was like a prism new-cut and the light passing through it would never illuminate in the old way again. She was no longer what she had been and in that same instant she realized that she loved Avelan with a love that was not the love of a lady for her troubadour and she knew it certainly.

Just as soon as she could the Princess left her husband's side and went straight to Avelan's chamber and he looked at her and he also knew. He took her by the hand and together they went to the window and gazed at the horizon.

'Now you understand,' he said and the Princess nodded.

Then there were more weeks and Avelan began the last part of his teaching. He told the Princess of his own life, right from the very beginning; how he had run wild as a boy; how he had gained a precarious living as a shepherd, paid only by the day or with scraps of food. And later, how a troubadour had sat by his fire one night and talked. 'Those words were enough,' said Avelan. 'I put on my shepherd's cloak and I followed that man for two years and learnt all I could. I have never stopped learning. I have been to Italy to see the great painters. I have slept in silken beds and in ruined barns. I have been loved and I have been despised. I have read all the poets and sung all the songs. I have had children and I have left them. I have wept and laughed. Without all these things I would never have been a troubadour. To be a troubadour is like having the sesame that will take you to live in a tapestry of a thousand flowers – but you cannot stay there long, for you will always wake to find that you

have been sleeping under a hedge, but even so, only troubadours travel in that country of flowers and magic, only troubadours.

'And I,' asked the Princess, 'will I ever travel there?'

Avelan nodded. 'You will,' he said, 'you have the gift. From me you have learnt, but from others you must learn also and one thing only you can do, and that is to cross the world and see and sing alone. Your husband thought he could take all this, imprison it, make it his, own it, show it. He cannot. There are two things, the gift and the crossing of the world. You have the gift already. The Prince has neither. Even the finest troubadour alive is not permitted to keep the gift. It is something we borrow for a while, use, and when we die it is left by the side of the road for someone else to find. By trying to possess what cannot be possessed the Prince will lose everything, including that which he loves the most.'

The Princess lowered her head at this for she knew that what Avelan said was true and there was no denying it, but Avelan put a finger under her chin and made her raise her head again and after only a second's hesitation, they kissed.

When the kiss was done the face of the Princess shone with a radiant light and she knew that she had finished with the past. 'We must leave this place,' she said, 'I can no longer live here, it no longer means anything to me, nor my husband nor my children. It is as much a prison for me now as it is for you. All I can think of is escape.'

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Escape was not easy. The Prince was a determined man and, since the troubadour had already tried to get away once, stern measures had been taken. Although Avelan was relatively free during the day, at night there were at least two guards at his door; half a dozen more were on duty below his window, while the main gate to the castle was barred at sunset every evening. There was a small postern gate also but that too was watched. It seemed that there was no way out for the lovers, but then Avelan was a poet who had seen and done much.

'We need a potion,' he said one day, 'a sleeping draught, something that we can put into the wine the guards drink at supper . . . and something that you can put into your husband's drink also . . . for you will have to betray him.'

The Princess placed her arms around the troubadour's neck. 'It will not be difficult,' she said. 'In the woods below the castle wall lives a witch. I have never seen her but my servants talk. She has powers, they say. Next time I go riding I will see her.'

Some days later the Princess dismounted outside a cave in the valley of La Verne, entered it without fear and discovered an old woman, covered in cloaks, sitting in a wide wooden armchair, warming herself by a low fire. The Princess was surprised at the benevolence that showed on the witch's face. It was the face of someone who took pleasure in aiding those who were in trouble and curing those who were diseased. She had never used her magic for the purposes of evil.

The witch smiled at the Princess. 'The Princess of La Verne,' she said. 'I have heard much about you and you are as beautiful as they say . . . but what does someone who has everything need with me?'

'My husband does not rest,' answered the Princess. 'He has an ambition, he is obsessed by it. He needs to sleep deeply so that he may wake with clear sight. He would be happier then.'

The witch, whose face was lined and whose hair was a dirty grey, folded her arms where she sat and stared at her visitor. 'And while the Prince sleeps, what will the Princess do?'

The Princess's voice faltered. 'Why, I shall care for him, see to the castle, and the estates. If I know that his mind is healing then I shall be content enough.'

The witch sniffed. 'Would that all wives loved their husbands as much as you,' she said.

'Who can tell?' answered the Princess, 'perhaps such is the case.'

The old woman questioned her no more but, dragging her cloaks tightly round her shoulders, she went to a cupboard at the back of the cave and took out a small green bottle which she gave to the Princess. The Princess took it and held out a gold coin but the witch shook her head and pushed the money away.

'This potion,' she said, 'not only brings deep sleep but when those who have drunk it wake they find that they perceive the things of life more clearly. After his sleep your husband will see his obsession for what it really is and with you to care for him he will be a wiser man. But you . . . you will never be happy, not like before.'

The Princess dropped her eyes to the bottle she held in her hand. 'The happiness I once had I no longer desire,' she said. She shook the bottle. 'Is there enough here?'

The old woman went back to her chair and sat in it. 'One drop,' she said, 'will make a man sleep for a week. Two drops and he will sleep for two weeks. The whole bottle and he will sleep forever.' She watched the Princess closely and the Princess's face reddened at the idea of murder.

'I do not want to make anyone sleep for ever,' she said.

'No,' said the witch, 'I don't think you do, and if you are only patient then one day we shall all sleep forever.'

'I know that only too well,' retorted the Princess, 'that is why each of my days is as precious as a diamond,' and with those words she turned and left the cave, hurrying back to the spot where her attendants waited for her.

SSS

The Princess lost not a moment in putting Avelan's plan into action. That very night, as she sat next to her husband in the great hall, she poured two drops from the witch's bottle into his goblet of wine and held it up to him.

'Since it is you, my wife,' said the Prince, who had already drunk well, 'I will raise this cup to our love and the renown of our castle of La Verne.'

'Yes, my love,' said the Princess, 'drink.'

And while the Prince drank the Princess called her favourite servant to her, and gave him a gold piece and a bejewelled belt so that he might take a jug of her husband's strongest wine to the guardroom, where the sentinels of that night were at supper. And she gave him also the potion, instructing him to pour into the jug twice as many drops as there were guards. The servant bowed and did as his mistress ordered.

No sooner had the Prince drunk his cup of wine than he fell forward onto the table in a deep stupor. This was by no means a usual occurrence with the Prince but it had happened once or twice before so the Princess commanded those courtiers dining with her to carry their master to his room. The Princess accompanied the courtiers to see that the Prince was safely and properly laid in his bed and, as soon as she was alone with her lord, she took from his neck the chain that bore the key to Avelan's quarters.

For the last time the Princess gazed at her husband's face. 'Sleep,' she said. 'You gave me love for fourteen years but now it is not enough, and nor are you. I hope your heart does not break when you find me gone. I fear that mine may, husband, but not for you.'

And with this farewell the Princess hastened to the turret where Avelan waited for her and there, sprawling across the stone steps, the guards slumbered. Quickly the Princess slid the key into the lock of the prison door and it swung open. Avelan stood ready, smiling, and the Princess ran into his arms and they kissed, free of everything now save for the love they bore each other.

Then they lay together on the bed and waited for the middle of the night so that the whole castle should be asleep; and when it was they arose and the Princess took some boy's clothing and dressed herself as a page, and in this disguise she went with Avelan down the turret stairs and out into the courtyard.

There too the guards slept and by the castle gates also. Without a word the two fugitives slipped across the flagstones and made their way to the postern. The witch's potion had done its work well. Here the sentinel sat against the wall, his head cradled in his arms, and on the ground by his side lay his pike. Avelan drew the bolts; the door creaked open and in a moment he and the Princess were following the path that led into the valley and to the road that ran north and south.

'Let us hurry,' said the troubadour, 'tomorrow we shall be pursued.'

'Nay, let us tarry,' said the Princess, 'the Prince will not wake for two weeks, nor will his soldiers.'

Then Avelan laughed and took the Princess in his arms and in the starlight he looked into her eyes. 'I shall make such a song about you,' he said, 'and it will be sung forever, but come, let us walk across the world and into the tapestry if we can.' And together, side by side, the man and the woman set out along the dusty road towards the horizon but long before they reached it they had disappeared from view beneath the dark trees of the rolling hillsides and what became of them was never known. Some say that Avelan only used the

Princess in order to escape and that once she had served his purpose he deserted her in the forest. Then, when she found herself forsaken, her heart broke and for the rest of her life she wandered, crazed and demented, until at last she died of the cold one winter, starving and in rags.

Others say this tale is a nonsense and that Bertrand de l'Avelan could never have done such a thing. They say that after his imprisonment at La Verne his reputation went on growing, and it is further said that wherever his name is written in the ancient books there is also written the name of the Princess, and their love and talent lasted until they died.

There is yet a third tradition, more believable it is thought, which tells a different story. However much Avelan loved his lady he wooed her to be free. Certainly they would have stayed together for a while, a year or two even, but one day she would have woken in a castle room, stretched out a hand and found nothing. Being what she was the Princess journeyed on and became a troubadour in her own right, continuing to disguise her womanhood beneath men's clothes. This person is famous in the histories as Mellano de la Queste and her poems are still read wherever Provençal is spoken. But although this story has the ring of truth about it nothing is known for sure.

As for the Prince when he awoke it was into a life of sadness. Just as the witch had said the potion gave a clearer awareness of things and the Prince knew as soon as his eyes opened that his wife had left him, that she had taken to the roads like a troubadour and that she loved him no longer. He knew also that it was pointless to search for her. He could see now how foolish he had been in his attempt to possess another person's gift and experience. He saw too his lack of talent and his wife's abundance of it, and he lowered his head into his hands and wept like a child.

For the Prince there was nothing left and from that day his castle was avoided by everyone because of the great sadness that abided there. No troubadours came by, no music was sung or stories told. Then the courtiers and servants took their leave, singly and in groups – after all Provence was wide and full of song. And the Prince's sons grew to manhood and rode away, disdaining their inheritance and preferring to take their chances in the world as their mother had done.

When the Prince died, many years later, the castle was abandoned and not even the grazing sheep would enter its ruined gates. Eventually the spring beneath the fountain ceased to flow, the castellated walls crumbled and, piece by piece, every last stone was taken by monks to build a monastery which still stands, itself a ruin, on a hillside some miles away. So of the castle nothing now remains to be seen; all is overgrown and vanished and only the fox and the wild boar can find their way to the place where once a princess listened to the songs of Avelan, the finest troubadour that ever lived.