- 6 -

‘LES GRIFFONS’ AND ‘RUE DES DAHLIAS’

We eventually arrived in Avignon. In the end we developed a friendly relationship with the man in the car. It turned out that he lived in his car and was happy to travel all over France. Elijah, it tells us in the Bible, was fed by ravens, and God had certainly chosen this particular raven to get us back to Avignon and Sorgues to find the team base.

Our first port of call was to set up home again in Les Griffons, the council flat or ‘Habitation à loyer modéré’ (HLM) as they are known in French. When they were first built these enormous megaliths of concrete were meant to be the ideal home for the rising well-to-do. However, most folks found the harsh anonymity of concrete and promiscuous contact with the neighbours too much to bear and moved out, leaving the blocks to become ghettos for the poor and disenfranchised. A magnet for the despised immigrant Arabs (mostly from Algeria and some Moroccans), whose ubiquitous families filled the dark, bulb less corridors. I first began to realise how much the Algerian war had wounded France when I met Alain and Patricia. Alain, himself the son of an immigrant, was in his early forties and should have been in his prime enjoying life with his wife. Instead, he was an empty broken man full of anxiety sleeping night after night with a loaded gun under his pillow.

As a young man he had been conscripted into the horrors of the Algerian war. He had been witness to the barbarity of torture on both sides and his mind never recovered. Something snapped within and he spent the rest of his time, after the war, in a drugged daze taking pills to ease the pain and erase the memories. He was a staunch supporter of the National Front, an extreme right wing group which wants to expel all foreigners from France, whose policies and virulent attacks meant that the wounds between Algeria and France were even harder to heal. In spite of the hurts they were a wonderful couple who delighted in pampering us single Brits with the wonders of French cuisine. At the other end of the spectrum were the young ‘beurres’ (literally ‘butters’ - a self-assumed slang name for the French 2nd generation Algerians whose ‘bronzed’ appearance like the colour of butter set them apart from the true Frenchmen) who roamed the flats. Most of them were unemployed and just passing time with the ever-prevalent temptations of falling into crime and drugs. They were always very friendly to us recognising in our own foreignness a common bond. We lived in bâtiment HI on the top floor, which gave us plenty of exercise, as there was no lift.

A local estate agent put us in contact with a small furnished villa which was up for rent in the town. As we looked around, it seemed the ideal place to base the girls flat and develop the offices of Horizons in France. The rent was very reasonable so we took another step of faith and signed the contract. It was very run down, but also very attractive with a nice garden. It had its own fig tree and a beautiful vine, which gave delicious grapes and covered the large front porch. It came complete with its own resident magpie who we called Fred. As we would worship the Lord in the front room he would often come and join in, tapping the window with his beak.

A young Swiss lady called Sylviane, who had been called to work with Horizons during our very first French expedition to Morocco, joined Claire and they set up home in the villa. It was house number 8 in the very quaintly named Dahlia Street. The girls were the Dahlias and the boys the Griffins!

Sylviane taught us to speak French and made sure we really spoke it amongst ourselves during the day. She also made wonderful soup on Saturdays which gave me and Pete a good reason to drop by on weekends to see if a light bulb needed changing! We put together a multimedia (drama, song and slides) presentation about World Mission and began to visit different churches to promote the work of Horizons and the call to serve Jesus.

I don't know how the French survived our atrocious English accents and numerous grammatical faults as we presented the needs of unreached French speaking people groups around the world. I began to work quite a lot with Sylviane in putting together our literature (she was a tri-lingual secretary by training) and one Christmas we were printing it all out on an old Gestetner press. I was getting quite flustered and annoyed as the printer wouldn't work. In a noble attempt to help, Sylviane tried to move the stencil, accidentally tearing it. I exploded and from the overflow of my mouth spoke out a flurry of unmentionable swear words. I don't think she'd met a Christian quite like me before! At least she got to know me in a no frills way and in spite of my rough and ready ways we began to get along well. I had learnt French in the pubs of Paimpol (Brittany - Côtes d'Armor) so I'd picked up a lot of slang words. Often after I'd preached in a church she would gently let me know what words I shouldn't have used!

We had planned a promotion tour for Paris and Switzerland (to visit Sylviane's church and other contacts) so we were very excited to be on the road together. We had borrowed a large red Ford Transit diesel van from Great Britain. It wasn't the easiest vehicle to park in the back streets of Paris! We didn't have many church contacts at that time so we tried to arrange our meetings by directly telephoning various pastors from a public call box asking if we could speak to their church. A good number refused but we did manage to get a meeting at one of the largest churches in Paris. The meeting coincided with the battery on the transit going dead, so imagine our joy when the 1.000 FF we received from the church meeting exactly covered the costs of a new battery!

Paris is a beautiful city. It was also springtime and Paris in the springtime is famed for its romantic atmosphere. That atmosphere must have started to rub off on me as I began to look at Sylviane with greater interest.

After Paris, we headed for Switzerland. It was a first visit and, even though many people had said how beautiful the country was, I really was bowled over by the fairy tale beauty of some of the lakes and snow-capped mountains. We were able to stay with Sylviane's family who, at that time, were part of a Christian guesthouse, conference centre and old people's home called Bethel situated in the Jura Mountains.

On one of our days off we were able to go out walking in the snowy hills. Feeling like an adolescent again, I got into a snowball fight with Sylviane and we ended up rolling down a hill together finishing up in a tangle of arms and legs at the bottom.

During one of our morning meetings someone was sharing the story of Abraham and Isaac, emphasising how Isaac had to be willing to go up onto the altar in self-sacrifice. I felt personally challenged to greater consecration giving up the final trappings of my old life. However as I read on I found that Isaac got off the altar and proceeded to get married. I felt the Lord saying that if I were willing to give myself fully to him he would take control of my life and that I would soon be getting married! I was flabbergasted. I could hardly believe that the Lord had spoken so directly to me through His word. I resolved to say nothing and let events work themselves out in their own time.

So many questions were popping inside my head as we headed back to France.

"Would Sylviane be the person I was meant to marry? Did she even like me?"

After a couple of days back I needed to do something.

"Oh Lord," I prayed that morning. "Please give me an opportunity to speak to Sylviane today."

That lunchtime Sylviane asked if anyone wanted to come with her to visit a lady who was sick in Avignon hospital. The opportunity was there so I volunteered adding an invitation to come for a meal with me afterwards. The decisive moment had arrived. Having got through the formalities of the afternoon visit, we now sat facing one another in a small café in Avignon's famed Pope's palace square. We ordered steak and chips and while the meal was being prepared I knew I had to say something. Tongue-tied I began.

"Er, well Sylviane, how are you?"

I really didn't want to embarrass her and wondered how she would react to a declaration of love.

"This morning I was reading in one of the Psalms that God wants to give us good things" I continued. ".... and .... er .... Well, I think that you are one of the good things that God would give to me. Sylviane, would you consider going out with me...?"

There it was. I'd said it! And now for the moment of truth. How was she going to react?

Her face reddened and then she replied.

"I've been waiting nearly a year for you to say that. Yes, I'd like to go out with you."

Wow! We were both so moved, so gripped by a sense of destiny that when the food came we were no longer hungry! We just sat there staring at each other! I picked at a few chips but it was no good. I had another hunger now. We quickly paid for the uneaten meal and walked into the romance of the Avignon night. Isaac had found his Rebecca!

The rest of the team were delighted with the news, as were our respective parents. We were just going out but I knew that things were serious. During a trip to England my Mum gave me her old engagement ring suggesting I might be able to use it.

A few weeks went by and I invited Sylviane to dinner .... again. This time it was at the Pope's second palace, Château Neuf du Pape, a small village famous for its wine. We went to a small restaurant called *'La Mère Germaine'*. This time I'd learnt my lesson. Before saying anything I got on with the meal! After the meal we went outside for a walk. It was a clear star filled night, full moon with the crickets giving their own natural rhythm to the symphony of the night air. We walked into a little olive grove and I got Sylviane to sit down on a rock. Then, in time honoured tradition, I got down on bended knee, took out the ring and asked Sylviane to marry me. She said "Oui!" and managed to get the ring on (even though it was a bit tight and needed to get it enlarged later!).

Before getting married (the date had been set for early November in Chambéry) we had to get through a busy Summer running several evangelistic campaigns. The British Ford Transit needed to return to Wales so we faced the challenge of needing a new bus. This was our first real faith challenge as a small French team and an ideal opportunity to put into practice the principles of praying for finance which we had been learning. We decided that we would fast over every lunchtime using the time to pray for a bus and also putting whatever money we saved from the meal into the project.

The days became weeks and the weeks months! As our bodies grew thinner our faith grew stronger and money began to come in for the bus. On one particular day we were led to pray specifically for £400 to come in. That morning £100 was in the letterbox. In the afternoon Sylviane had a surprise visit from a couple from Switzerland who wanted to support the work and left £200. Around 9 o'clock that evening another £100 had anonymously and mysteriously appeared in the letterbox. Looking back we spent hours and hours in prayer for relatively little amounts of money, but it was this apprenticeship of faith which laid the foundation for the multiplied thousands of pounds that were to come in for the future work. Just before our July deadline when the teams would be arriving we finally had enough money and were able to break the fast. We were able to buy a second-hand white Ford Transit van which gave faithful service to the team for over 12 years before it finally died in 1997 in a slight road accident in the Ardèche.

The scene was set for another season of summer outreach. A passion to share Jesus with ordinary French folk outside of the traditional church setting had always gripped us. We would often organise kids clubs in the council flats or do open air work in the streets. One time we were out with a group from Cambridge University who were

particularly gifted musicians. One guy was playing the saxophone in the midst of a block of flats when a young couple came to the window waving at us with much excitement.

The night before they had been wondering about the meaning of life and thinking about God.

"If you really exist God," they had said, "we want you to show us by giving us a sign tomorrow."

They were overwhelmed when the answer came blasting in via a Christian saxophone under their window the next day! They became regular members of the small church in Sorgues.

The Summer festival in Avignon also offered many opportunities for effective, joyful street outreach. Music, mime, theatre, clown work and testimonies fitted in with the other street performers. We'd be out most afternoons with teams of thirty to forty folk mingling with the thousands of tourists and local folks who would come for the Festival. Many of the students who joined us for these Summer outreaches received the call of God on their lives and are now serving the Lord in many different ways around the world.

The August trip took newly engaged Sylviane and myself to Apt in the Luberon valley where, with a French team, we were going to do some evangelistic work with a local French church. We were to be based in an old church. The only problem was that there was no running water, no loos and no beds! Just a big, empty hall! The time was a battle from beginning to end. I remember one afternoon when we had been preparing our drama sketches and songs in preparation for going into the town. On arriving in the town centre there was hardly anyone there! Not to be discouraged I proposed that we sing in front of the town hall as a proclamation to the heavenlies that Jesus is Lord. As we began to sing it began to rain! Still not wanting to give up I persevered on finding an undercover location where we could still sing. Just as we began to sing *'Avec les cris de joie' – 'With cries of joy'*, a smelly dustcart pulled up right in front of us, leaving the engine running while the driver went for a drink. It was all too much! The girl playing the guitar ran off in tears and I really did wonder if it was worth it. That night, after a particularly difficult time with the team, Sylviane came to me saying that if Christian work was going to be like that she didn't think that we should get married as it was too hard to bear.

The next morning, the sun was shining, we had news of a contact during the previous days who had become a Christian and the team was working well.

Over lunch Sylviane said

"I'm not sure if I meant what I said last night."

"That's alright," I replied. "I wasn't listening anyway!"

Following the summer we busily launched into all the administration necessary in France to get married. It was doubly complicated with us being British and Swiss. As the Church and State are separated in France, the legal marriage takes place in the Town Hall (Mairie) with the blessing following at church if the couple so desire. Although we lived in Sorgues, in the southern Vaucluse region, we decided that it would be better to be married church in Chambéry (Savoie region) where we had good friends and which also gave good access for Sylivane's family from Switzerland. Our major challenge was to find a suitable venue for the marriage in Chambéry, which fitted the weekend of the 10/11 November. In the run up to this date we had only one weekend free to get to Chambéry and find a place. We drove around asking God to lead us to the best location, and we found ourselves led to a big supermarket on the outskirts of Chambéry just off the motorway. There in the window was a big sign 'Salle de noces à louer' - 'Wedding reception room for hire!' We went in, enquired, and just by chance the man responsible for the room happened to be passing through at just that time. We explained who we were and what we did and how we were asking God to lead us to the best place for a wedding reception. The man was quite moved by our testimony and in just a short time, he had organised the whole thing for us. Room, meal, wine, wedding cake, the lot, all at a very reasonable cost.

The big day drew near. We decided that we would go for the civil marriage in Sorgues on the 7th November and then head up to Chambéry for the church wedding on the 10th. We saw the 10th as being our real wedding day before God. Friends in Chambéry helped us with the organisation, and with the decoration of the church. At that time I was a bit of a scrooge concerning money, and my faith in God's generosity was not yet mature. Sylviane wanted to buy some flowers for the church and reception. I grudgingly agreed, stipulating that she was not allowed to spend more than £10! She bought a few choice blooms and then trekked off to the meadows of the Savoie to supplement the florists meagre offering with the beautiful wild flowers which were freely growing in abundance!

We had also been asking God previously for a wedding dress. Sylviane has a good memory concerning that. We were visiting my Mum and Dad in Great Britain when my Mum mentioned to Sylviane that she knew a lady who made wedding dresses. She invited Sylviane to come and just have a look. As they were looking, Sylviane felt that God was going to answer her prayer especially as one particular dress had caught her eye.

"If this is the time to buy," she said. "Give me a sign Lord."

My mum then said that she felt she should buy the dress for Sylviane and proceeded to tell the lady dressmaker that her daughter-in-law had been praying for the right dress and that now they had found it. The lady looked up surprised and began to weep.

"You know," she said, "I really needed to sell a dress tonight and I prayed to God that you would be the answer."

God had wonderfully answered two prayers that night.

A further episode with the dress (or a bit of it) happened when Sylviane was dressing for the wedding. She had gone to the hairdresser's that morning and had the veil plaited into her new hairstyle. One problem - she still needed to take a shower! I've often tried to imagine the scene of Sylviane in the bath with her sister holding back the veil, aiming the shower appropriately!

The wedding went well with my twin brother preaching magnificently at the ceremony, and we had a marvellous evening celebration with Paul Harbine (the French/Russian who build the Chambéry centre) and family who brilliantly animated the evening with their singing.

A honeymoon in the mountains of Montana in Switzerland crowned a wonderful two weeks for us.

If the heart of history and Christianity is the love story of Christ for his Bride, the Church, surely heaven and eternity must be even better than snow-covered peaks, romance, rest and passion! You can keep your harps and clouds… I'm looking forward to a celestial honeymoon!