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# A Month Travelling With Mrs Hunt

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## Chapter 3: Bellegarde-sur-Valserine

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The flight from New York to Geneva took us through the night. There was a nice steak dinner and a Business Class seat, although of the old-fashioned variety that doesn't lie flat. How our expectations have changed, eh? I remember being upgraded from economy to First Class in the pre-Business Class days on Alitalia. The First Class seat we flew in on that flight was exactly the same as the one we now consider passé in Business Class.

We beat Graham to the airport, but only because our flight was early. We watched people arriving. Many were greeted by people with signs that said "Toyota" and "Audi". Others were wearing Formula 1 jackets. We chatted with a young Englishman who was waiting for friends to join him on the slopes. He had planned to stay overnight in Geneva but ended up in Annecy owing to the International Motor Show.

We waited by the *automatique porte* and soon saw the Rev Graham Beeston, aka Mrs Hunt's brother, shambling towards us in his characteristic gait. He always looks like his connection with the earth is mediated through some distant realm. As he came through the door, Mrs Hunt went up to hug him and, for a moment, his reaction was less "Hello Sister" and more "Merde, some woman is attacking me!" His mind re-entered the present realm, and the siblings kissed and hugged.

Graham was there in his Renault Clio. Somehow it seemed smaller than I remembered, but we managed to squeeze ourselves and our luggage inside and then went the wrong way on the freeway. This temporary diversion afforded us the opportunity to observe the location of the Mongolian embassy. Useful discovery should we ever find ourselves in Geneva and in need of a visa to Mongolia.

The drive to Bellegarde became more beautiful the closer we got to the town. Bellegarde-sur-Valserine, which you may guess by its name is by the Valserine river, is in a hollow surrounded by mountains. The higher peaks were dusted with icing sugar snow. The road twisted around a steep valley and down into the town. Graham took things slow in the Clio, but then he had quite a weight on board. The suitcases, I mean.

Françoise welcomed us to their home in the main street of the town. Right beside the church of which Graham is the pastor.

Bellegarde-sur-Valserine soon became plain *Bellegarde* in our conversation, although it has the longer name to distinguish it from another eight towns in France with the same name. I wanted to ask Graham and Françoise what the name of the town meant, and why there were so many of them. But every time I thought of the question I was asleep, and when I was awake I was too busy enjoying food and wine and walks around the aforementioned Bellegarde. Some quick Internet research has since proved fruitless. My uneducated



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guess is that there were many towns in which the military were garrisoned. Hence, *la garde*. But why *belle*? As they say in France, *je ne sais pas*. I noticed they say it much better than I.

As you can see from the photo on the previous page, their home has three levels. A garage and a meeting room are on the ground floor. Since this is the main street the space in front of the garage door is marked *No Parking* but during our three days we noted the instruction was frequently honoured in the breach.

The view from the front of the house is an uninspiring vista of the local supermarket, and the constant traffic of the main street. The view out the back is of neighbouring apartments, Françoise's garden, the neighbour's garden covered edge-to-edge in black plastic, a Fiat sign discarded on a low roof, and a cat sunning itself in the weak sunshine. It may contrast with the leafy view from our Melbourne home, but it has much more happening. If we see someone in our street at home we almost write up the observation for the local paper. Here, there is a constant, interesting passing parade. Mrs Hunt and I spent a good half hour watching an evolving drama after a passing incompetent sideswiped an illegally parked car and left its passenger-side mirror dangling by its wire sinews. We hoped for a fight, but the lady owner, when she finally arrived seemed delighted to be given so much attention.



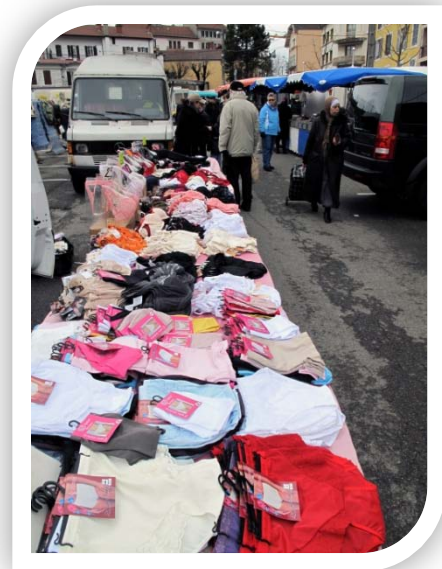
The 1<sup>st</sup> floor has a European sized kitchen. Read *small*. A lounge, a dining room, and a study for the pastor. Above are three bedrooms and a bathroom. The building is cute, friendly and the floorboards are creaky. Useful for covering unavoidable moments of flatulence. Scattered about are Françoise's many collections. Masks from Africa, pots from other places, perfume bottles from France (of course).

After the exertions of the previous few days, a shortened night, and the bountiful lunch, topped and tailed by alcoholic indulgences, we slept. The post-prandial collapse has now become a traditional phenomenon for visits to the French Beestons. It was begun by one friend, Warwick, who left the table with the announcement that he was *going up* to lie down. He made it only to the sofa across the room. We made it to our bedroom above, but only just.

We surfaced for the evening repast, more conversation, and bed at a proper time. Next day, we had a breakfast of fresh coffee, bread with homemade jam and Speculoos. This looked a lot like Nutella or maybe Peanut Butter, but was neither. It was very sweet.

After this we went to the market. Now, markets are something that the French really know how to do. The whole town square was taken over by cheese, fish, vegetables of all kinds, fruit, clothing in all shapes and sizes, toys, including alarmingly realistic machine guns. I hoped they were toys anyway.

While a little knowledge of French may be a good thing, complete ignorance may be preferable. I heard snatches of understandable French. The desire to respond and show that I was not a complete English-language chauvinist welled up within me. At the same time, I contemplated the irony of needing a French word like *chauvinist* to describe my state of mind. Fully formed English sentences sprang to mind. *I appreciate the fine hams and olive selections you have here*. I quickly translated this into say-able French. And then realised that I only knew how to say *Je* and *et*. *Je appreciate the*



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*fine hams et olive selections you have here. Oh attendez, I know ici too.* By this time I was at the next stall.

The town itself was full of interesting sights. An ATM that was called a *distributeur de billets* and gave me real European money that was worth twice as much as Aussie money. Just multiply all the price tags by two, Philip. Don't be deceived. *Oh look, I can buy a new CitroenC2 for only twelve thousand!* There were all the usual services. Hairdressers that seemed much more, well, French. *Would you like a coiffeur, monsieur?* Sounded much better than getting a short back and sides, or a number two. Or, for that matter, going to a *Friseur* in Vienna, which made me think I was going to come out with an Afro (an improvement on baldness perhaps?).

There were travel agents with posters of exciting places like the Australian Outback or *Outback l'Australie*. Looked really nice and somehow familiar. I'd like to go there someday.

But in the meantime I was walking past cafes called *La Bodega* and wine bars called *La Cave* and pizza parlours called *La Pizzatier* and advertising *Pizza a emporter*. Just call 04 50 56 00 07. And be prepared to order in French.

Perhaps the highlight of the town is the town hall. It is the most magnificent orange colour. I doubt any town council in Australia has the panache to colour their town hall orange. In Bellegarde-sur-Valserine it is only challenged by the arts centre next door. It is pink.

The few days passed in a pleasant blur of aperitifs, food, conversations and walks around town to buy postcards, stamps, or tissues.

Around the dinner table Mrs Hunt would remind her slightly older brother about the series of failed boyfriends he had lined up for her when she was rapidly heading towards spinsterhood at the age of nineteen. Graham remembered hardly any of them. Mrs Hunt remembered them all. Oh yes, she remembered them well. The one who was too stupid to live. Another who smelled of something decaying. A third who was studying endocrinology and thought it romantic to discuss his studies in depth.

Françoise and I listened to the siblings swapping horror stories from their youth. We looked at each other in bemusement.

"By what amazing stroke of good fortune, Françoise," I asked, "did we manage to marry into this fascinating family?"

After supper, Mrs Hunt, Françoise and I played Scrabble. At first in English. And later, after suitable *digestifs* were consumed, in French. The ladies took turns in winning. Graham, who knew better, forswore the game and retired to his study. Françoise admitted she attends a Scrabble Club once a week. Only she was putting Z and Q on the triple word score.



We visited a country restaurant called *La Chaumière*. The children of the owners attended Graham's catechism class. When gymnastics and other sports didn't interfere with such secondary heavenly matters. The owners were also the chef and the waitress. The waitress and maître d', who were one and the same person, greeted us with enthusiasm and kindly chose to practise her passably good English on us. "I speak English, French and a little Dutch," she informed us. Naturally, I replied in German. But I meant French, so it was the thought that counted.



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Her husband, the chef, was a stout man with a bald head and big arms that he wrapped around each one of us in turn, kissing us on two cheeks, and then one more out of pure joy. Mrs Hunt is never sure which cheek to offer first, which can result in mutual nose bleeds, but she managed to negotiate the chef's affection with dignity, if not obvious delight.

We ordered three courses each and a bottle of St Emilion to harmonise with the food. And enjoyed the meal so well, that we accepted the bill and more hugs and kisses on the way out.

One day we went for a drive to higher altitudes, as opposed to the alcoholic heights that could be induced merely by sampling the Beeston's aperitif cabinet. The snowy mountain villages were all picture book pretty, and French to a full fraternity. Not to mention equality and liberty. Driving with Graham was a gentle experience. We watched many hastier drivers overtake, but they weren't on holidays.

And we were. On holidays. And heading for Vienna.