

## *Prologue*

Four years ago I bought a white château. *Le Château du Jardin*. The Castle of the Garden. Two gardens, in fact, a French one and an English, lie within the château grounds. There is a large wood with ancient trees. A moat shaped like an S winds around ivy-covered knolls. And there is the white château. It is all hidden away in a green land just north of France, *le pays vert*, as the local Belgians call it. Green because it never ceases to rain, and green because of its incomparable soil. It is a soil made of man and blood, quite literally so. For in it lie more than a million young dead.

Four years ago we stood in the marble entrance hall and looked up. There was a massive oak staircase winding round. And moulded reliefs of children playing with lambs and riding on the backs of dolphins. There was a statue of Mansard, the architect of Versailles, staring hugely down from his pedestal. Then a bird flew by; presently another. Water dripped from rotting beams. The sky peeped through a slate roof three storeys above. It was in ruins, our white château. And so, on impulse, and almost out of pity, we bought it.

Every ancient noble home, whether still in its glory or fallen into ruins, immediately confronts its new owners with

its history, plunges them into its great passions, burdens them with its sorrows.

And so it was with us.

Laurence drove the tank, though he was only nineteen and had never driven even a car on English soil. Liam, also nineteen and Irish, handled the maps. John, twenty-one and therefore known as 'Pop', sat in the gun seat behind the turret; and Seymour worked the RT. They were in full retreat to Dunkirk. At five in the morning of 19 May 1940, their Churchill tank turned into the gates of the Château du Jardin and headed down its long drive. Pop leapt off and drew his revolver. He tried the front door. Locked! He rattled it and pounded on its stained-glass windows. A light came on. A lanky, greying man descended the stairs. He had heard the diesel engine from far off, for one hears everything at night in a château. He was already dressed, his hair combed. He opened.

'*Monsieur, s'il vous plaît, petrol!*' said Pop in schoolboy French. He had taken from his pocket some sterling notes, for he had no Belgian money. These he held in his left hand, but he made sure the châtelain saw the revolver in his right.

'*Oui, venez.*'

How could Pop know that the man who spoke those words was as English as himself?

The two descended to the *cave*. Around wine cases, past last year's apples on wooden trays, they went until they came to a room filled with a metal cistern. 'Diesel,' said the man. And he drew a four with three zeros on his palm to indicate the number of litres it contained.

They filled the tank by siphoning with a hose. Laurence slept while the other three worked. By six o'clock, when the first rays lit the sky behind the château, they were finished. The man had pushed Pop's notes away and handed

them instead a sack with wine and cheese and apples.

'*Merci, bon monsieur,*' said Pop, giving him a Yorkshire grin.

They waved and drove away.

He stood on the second floor balcony and watched them turn the tank and point it west. Towards Dunkirk. The tank had nearly reached the end of the drive when a screech rent the morning air. It had almost passed through the columns from which wrought-iron gates were hung – the blue stone columns on which ivy now grows – when the morning was shattered by a direct hit. One tread was found later hanging from the top of an elm. Two thousand litres of diesel went up. And the bodies were burned to charcoal black.

The châtelain rushed in and looked out from an east window. Silhouetted against a glorious dawn, on the crest of the hill just behind the Château du Jardin, was the smoking barrel of a German field cannon. There was already a half-track racing down the hill towards the château. The Englishman had known for some time that this was coming. And he had planned. Stepping smartly to his bedroom he picked up the wrapped parcel and checked that the strings were well tied. He had covered it with waterproof canvas and lined it with tar so that no smoke could filter in. He held the parcel in both hands as he mounted the servants' stairs to the top floor. Opening the trap to the chimney, he laid the parcel on a ledge inside, brought a flap of wallpaper back down over the trap and tightened the screws on the wooden moulding to hide the paper's edge. It was then that he heard the first sharp rap of a German officer at his door.

The four crew men from the British tank are buried on the western hill in a small cemetery with a bronze plaque on its gate. *Commonwealth War Graves Commission*. They are the only British there, and, except for a little girl, they are

the youngest. I look often at the cemetery from that same balcony. On the hill towards which they were facing when their tank was hit.

For five years after that day in 1940 the Château du Jardin was home to forty-five German officers. Those who knew them, like the old gardener who still comes round today, said they were invariably courteous and correct. They installed a well pump, which is still working. They reinforced the north wall of the estate, though it fell in last year's huge wind. And they stuffed old newspapers in unused chimneys to keep out draughts.

Three years ago, having changed the roof and dried the beams and cleaned the bird droppings from the walls, I began work on the chimneys. A labyrinthine world unto themselves, the chimneys surprised me at every turn. Once, while working in what I thought was an unused one, I dislodged bricks which tumbled the height of the house into a roaring fireplace floors below. It was then, when I pulled out the German papers dated 19 May 1944, with their reports of an Allied landing at Anzio, their warnings of a cross-Channel invasion and their ads for blond tobacco, that I found it. The Germans had just missed it. It was on the very edge of the ledge and would have fallen had it not been for the newspapers. A gust of wind would have knocked it down into the fire. And covered as it was with tar it would have gone up in an instant, forever lost.

It was his writings.

On the leather binding he had carved the words:

*La Tendresse, by Dr. Alain Hamilton*

I read the whole of it over a weekend, and then slowly again throughout the next week. Dr Hamilton was a battle-field surgeon in the British Army, 1915–18. And in 1940,

he was the châtelain of the Château du Jardin. The more I read, the more I wanted to know of his life. I called, I visited, I annoyed. Finally I traced him through the Imperial War Museum, but I refused to give them his writings in exchange. It seemed impossible that they should lie forever in that dusty reading room, poured over from time to time by leathery old eccentrics. Instead I have reproduced them here, in chronological order and with only occasional comments from myself. There are stories and poems and letters, but the format is irrelevant. For what they contain cannot be described; it is of incomparable beauty and tenderness.

In 1882 Alain Michel Hamilton was born into an Edinburgh family of distinguished doctors and undistinguished writers. His mother, Marie-Yvette, was a French poet, a daughter of *la belle époque*. She wrote in passionate obscurity, unknown outside her small circle of women poets. From her Alain Michel received his name, his nose and a lifelong love of writing. His father, Sir William Harvey Hamilton, Professor of Medicine at Edinburgh, was a specialist in all things cardiac. Sir William was a lifetime friend and associate of the pre-eminent physician of his time, Sir William Osler, the 'Father of Modern Medicine'. The two were made baronets on the same day in a ceremony in which the King confused their names. From his father Alain received his love of science and foreign lands; also his passion for beautiful women.

Alain Michel was an only child, and, as a busy doctor's son, he grew up almost entirely in the orbit of his mother. Marie-Yvette had been born into aristocratic luxury at the Château de Senlis. Her father, the châtelain and an officer in the French cavalry, had fought creditably in the battle of Sedan, but valiantly as a *franc-tireur* during the siege of Paris in 1870. From the window of his château, which

lay within the German lines ringing the capital, he picked off five of Bismarck's officers before the Prussians finally caught him and hung him by his feet in the garden. There he stayed throughout the night, while seven-year-old Marie-Yvette watched him from her window. The next morning, finding him still alive, they ran him through with a lance; and when they left they gave orders that no-one cut him down. Later that day, when the birds began to tear at his dangling arms, Marie-Yvette escaped to Paris with her mother. They waited out the siege from their apartment overlooking the Champs de Mars.

She wrote her first poem the day they arrived.

Marie-Yvette revisited the Château de Senlis with Alain when he was seven. She showed him the elm from which his grandfather had hung, the window from which he spied on the Prussians and the rifle used to pick them off. Alain asked to hold it. The gun felt cold and heavy. It smelt of powder still. He imagined the blue smoke floating back in through the open window and the sound of the spiked helmet clattering on the *pavé*. He laid the stock against his cheek and felt its hand-worn smoothness. It was the only thing he wanted in the world. He looked up at his mother.

'Don't,' she said with her eyes, but the new châtelaine had already seen the boy's face.

When they got into the carriage to leave again for Paris, the rifle, wrapped in an oil cloth, was sitting next to him on the seat.

Alain kept the gun all his life. His father had it repaired and Alain learned to fire it. He was hunting with it in a wood the day he met his first love, Annelies. It accompanied him to medical school in Vienna, to the trenches of the First World War, to his exile in the French Alps, and then to the Himalayas. Finally he brought it back with him to the Château du Jardin. They laid the gun beside him at the

closing of his coffin in 1944. He had wanted *La Tendresse* to be there as well, but instead it lay teetering on that ledge for more than fifty years.

Until now<sup>1</sup> . . .

*K.S., Easter 2001*

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<sup>1</sup> In Hamilton's writings there is no numerical sequence. The numbering of the chapters which follow is a convention for the convenience of the reader.