

CHAPTER 2

When José first mentioned the journey in 2003, I thought he meant something that led to a state of realisation. Other people thought other things. We were all wrong. The journey led to the unexpected and unbelievable, beyond the laws of this universe as it is normally understood. Not surprisingly, the truth and nature of the journey were kept hidden. Society members through the ages had defended the material with their lives.

Shortly after José had raised the subject, I spoke with the local hotel owner, Señor Mons, who said that one began the journey at the barraca—a small stone hut on a stretch of land José had inherited that happened to adjoin the property of the Frenchwoman. Señor Mons hadn't been on the journey himself but had heard it wasn't exactly a tourist excursion. He said the people who came back from it were changed by the experience. I asked if it was religious.

'Not to do with the Church. You can be sure of that.'

'Black magic?'

No, he didn't think the kind of people who were purported to be involved would be associated with magic. So who were they? People of standing? Señor Mons didn't

know, at least when I asked. When he spoke in terms of 'the ones who came back', I asked what had happened to the others. His answer wasn't satisfactory.

'Was it like the pilgrimage to Santiago?'

'No, nothing like that,' he replied in a tone that dismissed the subject. Then he introduced a few ironic Catalan jokes to get my mind off what he clearly thought it shouldn't be on, anyway.

The Catalans were not keen on the occult or mysticism in general. Even their visions had to be confirmed by the Church; otherwise, those who witnessed them were considered lunatics or drunks. The Church approved only of visions associated with the local stories or the appearance of water, as in the vision at Lourdes. The favourite condoned myth was that of St Narcis calling up swarms of flies to drive back the French in the seventeenth century.

The Catalans for centuries had considered themselves down to earth and materialistic—people who dealt with the land, food, money, and survival. Until Franco's death in 1975, they were dominated by the Church, the military, the police, the bureaucracy. They acquired property if they could, and land. They were not like the French, who had a long history, style, and culture, as well as an enviable aristocracy. Catalans had always felt inferior to the French, and they were still dealing with the complex even now. The Catalan rich—and there were always rich ones, whatever the circumstances—amassed land and the people on it, huge houses in the country, and palaces in the cities. These land owners were minor aristocrats, but, as the historian Lluís Maria de Puig has said, 'They were not exciting and grand like the European aristocracy farther north, and they knew it.' Nor were these minor aristocrats any more interested in the occult than were the ordinary citizens.

So, apropos the journey of which José spoke, the Catalans would not have believed in the subject matter the private society guarded, in any case. They did not make journeys except to work, to church, or to the bank or bar.

Naris, who had built up a good business exporting fruit, understood that Señor Mons was a member of the Freemasons and had received his information about the journey from them. After Señor Mons's sudden death in 2004, his widow said he'd actually only known of one person who had made the journey; it was from that man that he had heard of others and their experiences. The idea had interested Señor Mons for a while, but it had not been for him, and his widow certainly didn't want to talk about it. It was all in the past and didn't happen anymore.

While doing research for my book *City of Secrets*, I found records of journeys made in the 1890s. They hadn't happened often and were usually for the purpose of a ritual experience or for the initiation of a new member of the society. It was clear that the French priest had been on such a journey.

Why did the experience begin at the barraca—the hut on the land José owned—and how many sites on the journey were there? Where was the destination? After a while, I understood that it didn't have to do with 'where' but with 'what'. I was told not to involve myself in the process but to stick to writing my book—that alone presented enough obstacles. But I could not heed this advice and kept trying to find out more about the journey. Apparently it followed an unchangeable route and entailed, along the way, a great deal of physical and spiritual preparation.

The barraca had hardly changed over the centuries. A tough little building, it stood alone with a solid roof, well-crafted chimney, and two friendly windows. Thick trees kept it private. Many things over the years had been



Figure 2.2. Roger Mathieu, the tower at Girona in the background.

hidden in this one-room stone hut, including people. By some lights it belonged in a fairytale. The land was variously used for keeping small animals and growing vegetables, and José had cultivated the garden without losing its wildness. For a while it was a place for celebrations, with lights in the trees, dancing to live music well into the night, and lamb and sausages cooking on the wood fire. But essentially it was a hidden place on the slope amongst the trees at the junction of two tracks. Few people even

knew it was there. Neighbours passed without seeing it. There was no electricity or running water, the latter having to be carried up from the fountain on the rough path to the village San Daniel.

But even though the baracca was relatively unknown, it was not without historical importance. It had been one of the original outposts of the city, and Charlemagne had rested there in AD 785 on his stealthy journey into Girona. The legend stated that he'd had a strange experience while at the baracca and had later placed a sundial on the grounds. In the 1960s, the sundial was still there and had odd markings that seemed to change with the light.

The first track leading to the baracca reached up from behind the cathedral, passing the Frenchwoman's garden to the broken Torre Gironella—another legendary landmark, especially during the nineteenth-century Napoleonic war. The other track, steep with sliding stones, passed the fountain to the agricultural neighbourhood known as San Daniel. It was by this approach that Charlemagne had marched into Girona, then under Moorish invasion. The Moors hadn't expected this cunning French attack and so were defeated within days.

The barraca was always kept swept and clean with a stone floor, table, a bed, a stove. José had inherited it from his uncle, and it pleased him more than any other place except the Frenchwoman's garden. He would stay there in silence, giving himself time to write, to reflect.

The barraca didn't change. It was said a ritual had been performed in the eighteenth century to keep the place safe and secret. The land could not be sold or exchanged but had to be handed down through the family or from one member of the society to another. It was believed that to try and make a profit on the property would bring bad luck. In 1870, the hut had been designated as a place to sit in

silence, reflect, and prepare for the journey. A list of questions in French was kept beneath the stone floor:

'Am I strong enough to be a member of the society? Am I able to fast? To be alone? To cut from those I love and need? To keep the secret?'

In the fifties, José's nearest neighbour was still Maria Tourdes, but from the barraca he could see only the tower of her house. Once when he and I were at the barraca together, I commented that the tower was a strange addition, neogothic, a young intruder in the midst of such a feast of history. José made no response then, but later I discovered the tower's purpose, and it certainly didn't have anything to do with grandiosity on the part of the house owners.

It was also in the barraca that José would reveal the story of Maria Tourdes and Bérenger Saunière to me. One day in the mid-nineties, I had just come from a visit to Rennes-le-Château and was showing my literary agent and his wife the French garden. They had read my books on Girona and were keen to see the city. The heat was suddenly terrible and I took them toward the shade of the cathedral. I would not have seen José at all if a wind from the south—always lucky for me—hadn't started up and made me turn to enjoy the sweetness, and there in the distance was a figure I'd know anywhere walking along the path leading to the barraca. He was carrying a large string bag of oranges and a bottle of water from the fountain. I called his name and in spite of the heat hurried toward him.

'I've been to Rennes-le-Château,' I said.

'But Rennes-le-Château is here. You'll find nothing there.' The kiss he gave me was polite and formal, but his eyes were fixed on mine in a way I will remember until death.

My agent and his wife were quite impressed by this meeting and its sheer improbability. Just minutes before we

started our walk, Lluís of the Arc Bar had told us that José was out of town with his wife.

'Oh, José's always the first person I see,' I said, nonchalantly enough, now that I knew the love between us was still in place. Suddenly, I wasn't the same person the agent and his wife had met an hour ago. Octaves of high happiness had made me unrecognisable.

'We're on a magnetic path, aren't we?' José said offhandedly, trying to explain the surprise, the excitement, away.

The barraca was cooled by the abundance of trees growing densely together, and gratefully we sat in their shade and drank fountain water. José showed us Charlemagne's sun dial. 'It's made in the French way. When he wanted privacy, Charlemagne used to sit here in the cool evening and listen to the music from the cathedral, which was smaller in those days.'

The next story just came out of José without his customary caution. Was it the surprise of our meeting that made him so free with the facts?

'Of course,' he went on, 'Rennes-le-Château is here. That's why the priest came here. Girona always held the secret. A place like this, with all its resonance, would of course have something as powerful as that.'

'What secret?' my agent asked.

'The one they keep trying to find across the border in France.'

'So the priest came here?' I asked. It was the first I'd heard about it. Bestselling books had been written on the subject, yet José had not ever said one word about it to me, until now.

As José then explained, sometime in 1892 Saunière had brought Maria from Quillan to Girona as a very young woman, still in her teens. His purpose was to install her in the house he had bought here to be a front for him. To

begin with she had stayed out of sight. Her supposed gardener, Guillem, was in fact her chaperone. Saunière visited frequently in the late 1890s and kept material in Maria's house that would no longer be safe in Rennes-le-Château because his well-known wealth made his parish the subject of too much curiosity. He also entertained guests of importance at Maria's for the same reason.

'So yes,' José concluded, 'Saunière came to Girona to see the Frenchwoman. It is well known here. My cousin Geli, the organist of the cathedral, knew all about it and looked after her. He did not know the priest, but my grandfather did. In truth, the French priest came here to get that which was never in Rennes-le-Château.'

'But what about the parchments, the ones that were found in his church?' my agent pounced, having turned from a tourist to a tiger. He knew the smell of 'bestseller'.

'They contained coded instructions indicating the location of the material, but it wasn't in France.'

'Material?' We all had a turn at that one.

'Documents. The ritual. The . . .' He stopped and asked if anyone wanted an orange. Nobody wanted anything except for him to keep talking. 'It's unlikely that the parchments today are the originals. They would have been copied and changed several times since 1891. Saunière would have seen to that.'

'Who put them in the church if the secret isn't there?' my agent asked.

'Abbé Bigou. He was the priest of Rennes-le-Château in the eighteenth century and got out of France before the Revolution. He had certain information that linked Rennes-le-Château with Girona.'

'Where did he go?' My agent, soft and persuasive, moved closer to his prey. Before the sun went down, José could get a glowing book deal.

'Here. He came here and to a village nearby. And he had to get out certain information that had been left in the French church. It was 1792.'

José had now also completely changed, just as I had done upon seeing him on the path. I would have said the change had to do with his pride in claiming the importance of his city.

'Any documentary evidence?' my agent asked, carefully.

'A correspondence exists between Saunière and Maria Tourdes.' And then José would say no more.

How did Saunière get the secret encoded in the parchments? And what was it? (I understood he'd taken the scrolls to St Sulpice in Paris to have them decoded. People have puzzled over them ever since.) My agent asked the questions and we all wanted the answers, but all we got was another orange each and a sightseeing tour through the old part of the city. And that was that.

Later, I realised that José had just been throwing us a small, unimportant part of the truth. Although the mystery of the French priest had filled books and documentaries for decades, it was nonetheless at the periphery of the *real* mystery.

The next time I saw José, I asked him why, when he had known of this material all along, he hadn't told me until now.

In typical fashion, he would say only, 'I don't think it's a subject for discussion.'

Was that his way of saying he didn't trust me?

It took a few more years, until I was researching *City of Secrets* in 2004, before I understood more about the journey. Why was the barraca such an important place? Why start the journey there? José said it had always been a site of Reflection and Enquiry, so what better place to begin?

And things could be well hidden there. In the 1790s, when Bigou came to Girona, a hiding place had to be found for the documents and artefacts he carried. The society members in disagreement spent many stressed weeks seeking the right place.

'The solution was there under their noses,' José exclaimed. 'The barraca was warm and waterproof, and safe from movements of the earth, sudden floods, or robbers. Some members of the church, aware of Bigou's presence in the city, compromised his safety. For days afterward, he was kept in the barraca before being moved to a house adjoining a private church in a forest in Palera outside of the town Besalú, west of Girona.'

I asked if Maria Tourdes visited the barraca.

'Only to hide with Saunière when Roger Mathieu arrived unexpectedly.'

I asked who he was.

'Her husband.'

It was the first I'd heard of Mathieu. I asked why Maria married him if she was in love with the French priest.

'Perhaps she saw that there was no future with that particular person.'

Roger Mathieu was a silent participant in the story, and I got little information about him from José or anyone else. What I do know is that, at some unknown date toward the end of Saunière's visits, Mathieu, described as a man of letters who travelled in Europe, made Maria's acquaintance. They married sometime before the onset of World War One. Mathieu had a house north of Girona in Lansà, near the French border, but the couple stayed mostly at the house in Girona, with him travelling frequently. He was the worst choice Maria could have made according to José's relatives, including those in the Church who got to know him. Friends of Maria, especially Lucia's mother, said the

same; and Maria's letters to Pepita, presumably another friend, show that she was not happy.

Secretly, Mathieu worked for the Vatican, and his intention was to trap Saunière by proving the source of his wealth and the extent and nature of his activities. The common assumption in Girona was that Saunière's occupation had little to do with the Catholic Church. Society members discussed the situation, and José's uncle, the cathedral organist, observed that the French priest had been 'too wily' to be caught and knew how to deal with his enemies.

It would seem that Saunière still visited Girona, in spite of Mathieu's presence. Maria's friends said the three-way relationship was a source of consternation to her. Mathieu was considerably older than Maria; when he died in 1940, the Vatican gave him a burial of honor. After the funeral, a letter from Maria's closest friend Gloria again confirmed that the marriage had not been happy.

José kept an envelope of Maria's letters to Saunière and of those from him to her. Saunière's letters were often matter-of-fact, concerning his arrival in Girona and entry by the city wall, the plants he was bringing, the architectural plans he wanted of his tower, and proposed visits to Girona by his brother Alfred. In 1964, when an unnamed contingent, whom I later understood was deadly, pulled Maria's house and the tower down stone by stone and dug the palm tree up by its roots, José thought it prudent to hide any information that might be of interest in the barraca.

When I photographed this small hut for my book *Happy Hour*, I had no idea it played such an important part in the Girona story. On José's table in the hut, letters were lying quite casually as he sorted through them determining what I could use. The paper looked well preserved and of good quality, the writing stylish. Maria had written several to the priest about the house; he must have returned them to

Girona with other papers at the end of his visits around 1910.

'Why does she ask him how he wants things arranged? It's her house,' I asked José.

'Perhaps she thought she should. He paid for it.'

José went on to explain how Saunière had set her up in the house sometime at the end of the 1890s. She had been the first secular person to own it. Before then, it had always belonged to the canons of the Church, and a sign over the entrance reading 'House of Canons' was still there. José had the deeds of the house showing that a lawyer named Saguer had put the deal in his name since Maria had been too young—probably just seventeen at the time—and Saunière could not have his name appear anywhere on any document. José's grandfather had looked after both Saunière and Maria, taking care of their practical requirements in this foreign Catalan province. On other occasions, José's cousin Geli told me of Maria's need of company, and the butcher's daughter spoke of having done errands and tasks for her.

Among those initiates to the secret society who had made the journey that began at the barraca was the late nineteenth-century Catalan priest and poet Jacinto Verdaguer. By his poetry, Verdaguer brought back Catalunya's pride in itself, uplifting the mere labour of those working the land into an activity to be extolled. This vision was the basis of his Catalonia and influenced other artists and writers of that time, especially the group known as the *Revista* of Girona, which wanted a new province separate from the overbearing dictates of Spain. Verdaguer brought back the Catalan language into a Catalonia where at the time Castilian had been the official tongue.

In the documents, I saw references to Verdaguer's accounts of the journey as 'Walking with the Great Bear' and 'Treading the Seven Stars'. It is not clear who first referred to the Great Bear, but later I understood from the Cabalists that its inclusion was as old as the material itself. And in every case, the first step of this passage into unknown dimensions had been in a humble hut hidden on a slope among the trees at the edge of an ancient town.

So the stone hut still had an importance, even as in the time of Charlemagne. In the journey directions, it is described as 'the hidden'. A cabalist later confirmed that it was on an advantageous ley line. Although it was a place of mystery and enquiry, no one asked questions about it. José's friends saw it as the ideal fiesta location, with lights strung through the trees. I myself remembered it as a place of love and ecstatic promises. José and I had our secrets, even as Saunière and Maria once had theirs. But I had no idea just how many others had secrets beyond the baracca's low door, or what those secrets were. In 1964, when Salvador Dali talked about an initiation in the rustic hut, was he referring to the barraca?



Figure 3.1. St Mary's Cathedral and the Girona tower, rebuilt by the society in 1851.