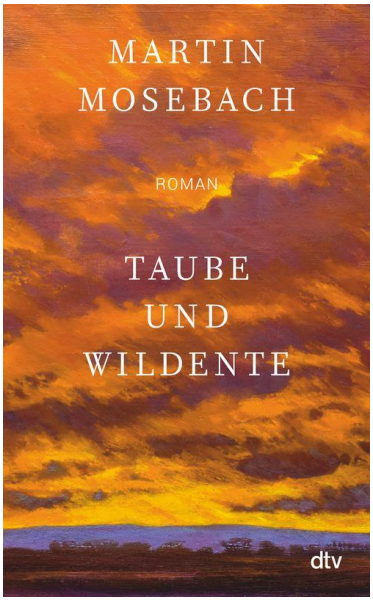


## Martin Mosebach

# Dove and Mallard

Original title: Taube und Wildente
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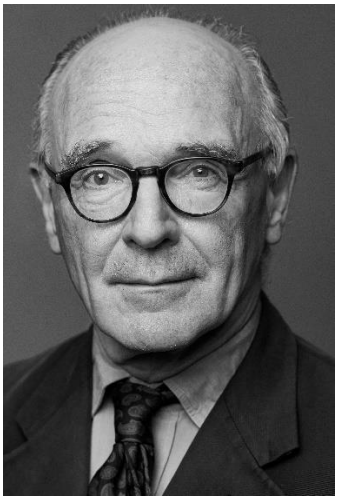
336 pages

### A blazing novel about art, love and treason

As always, the Dalandt family spend their summer vacation in southern France. The heat makes everyone sluggish, the cicadas are serenading in the cypresses, and every morning the lady of the house, negligently dressed in her night-gown, crosses the grounds on her way to the gatehouse, already expected by the steward. Her husband is distracted by a fateful affair of his own. But then a marital row is ignited by a painting called “Dove and Mallard”, a still-life from the 19th century. Why is there a vermillion spot right in the centre of the painting? This would make it a modern masterpiece, wouldn’t it? However, the wife wants to sell the painting and thus the tension between the spouses is growing.

- Martin Mosebach, a painter with words, depicts human failings like no other
- Books by the author have been translated into 12 languages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Born in Frankfurt on the Main in 1951, where he has remained, **Martin Mosebach** has been making his living as a freelance author after obtaining a law degree. His output includes novels, short stories, poetry, essays and librettos, for which he has received many awards including the Heimito von Doderer Prize for Literature (1999), the Heinrich von Kleist Prize (2002) and the Georg Büchner Prize (2007). Further works: “A Long Night” (2000), “The Moon and the Maiden” (2002).

Sample Translation
By Eleanor Updegraff

## 1

Cruelty. Watching as something beautiful is torn to shreds. I've been sitting here, riveted by the sight, for half an hour now, in the lawn chair near the cypress in whose dusty blackish-green the cicadas are sawing, working tirelessly away, as though together they might be able to carve the tree into tiny pieces. The scratching of cicadas in the sweltering heat is part of summer at the *chaumière*; it coincides precisely with siesta hour, although I never observe it. I'm always awake, actually, never exerted enough to sleep.

All the more astonishing, then, that it was only yesterday I saw my very first cicada. Before, they'd always made themselves invisible to me, even though they're as big as May bugs and have long wings that jut out far beyond their bodies. But then, suddenly, there it was – a magnificent insect, lying dead at my feet. It was João who revealed it was a cicada. I could see it immediately: This was a special kind of creature. Broad forehead, spherical eyes, a thick-shelled neck, lower abdomen protected by rings of armour tapering to a pointed rump, enormous outspread wings that seemed to be made of shimmering cellophane spanned by delicate black veins. João swept it up while I was still bent over it, and I didn't dare protest. But I'd seen enough of the cicada to be sorry it would end up on the rubbish heap. A large creature that manages to live in hiding while simultaneously making a penetrating din.

But see something once, and your new acquaintance will usually put in a second appearance – maybe even alive this time. The young black cat that visits us (but never lets us touch it) was lying contentedly at my feet, stretched out in total relaxation. Until: a lift of the head, alertness. Why? At first, it was a mystery to me. Then, all of a sudden, a soft whirring as though from a miniature propeller, and the cat has sat up, crouching on its hind

legs, has cocked its head and is striking out with a soft forepaw at some solid thing – unrecognisable, but seemingly the source of the whirring. Like a ball player, it dribbles the humming body, which is so hard that when it hits the ground, I think I hear it bounce, like a very faint knocking on wood.

A cicada – only the second of my life – alive now, but in mortal danger. What do cicadas taste like? Brown crabmeat? But the cat isn't in a hurry to eat. It bats the buzzing-winged insect back and forth between its paws; those large wings an obstacle now, good only for drilling slowly through the air as though into some tough substance, lacking the rocket power they'd need to develop for the insect to shoot into the space above the cat's head, up into the realm of airborne safety that surrounded it just moments ago, yet now is entirely beyond reach.

There was no escape for the cicada. And yet the cat gave it time, studying it pensively after each blow. It only drew back its paw to strike again when its victim began to move. Was it the propeller-like humming that nettled it, like it did me? A little organic machine had been turned on here. The cat gave the now-stricken cicada – it must have been wounded by the blows – a chance; it orchestrated its torture in a game akin to a dance. I'd never seen the cat so elegant, so graceful.

Standing on one leg, it pirouetted, used the momentum to leap over the cicada, and advanced its mask of terror from the other side, to strike again at once. Yes, I might well imagine, its real way of moving – an eternal secret – was on two legs; only when being observed by humans did it sink down on to all fours. And maybe it could even fly, lift itself into the air out of a pirouette. Even airborne it would be superior to the cicada, would find it easy to knock such a cumbersome creature off its trajectory, on to the ground, with one precise paw-blow. How droll its expression was, as though it were playing with a rustling ball of paper and not a desperate living creature.

Though already the cicada was no longer desperate, but motionless, studied intently by those widening cat-eyes, nudged first by one paw and then the next, yet still neither twitching nor whirring. The cat turned away; this was disappointing. It slunk off, disgruntled. Had it expended more effort on the cicada than it would have liked, perhaps

even made itself ridiculous? It left the insect lying on the ground; not for one moment had it considered eating it.

I bent down towards the small corpse. Its rings of armour still sat true – but no, one had come loose, dampness spreading from underneath. Its giant wings were shredded, incapable of whirring ever again. Now the cicada was nothing but rubbish, and later it would be swept up by João, just like the first one, not even worthy of a place in its predator's stomach.

In the ancient world, this sort of small battle between domestic animals would have been seen as something idyllic, a template for a quaint little scene set within a fresco. And 'idyllic' is what our life here is, too – with me idle, scribbling away in the heat; João collecting snails from the anise; Marjorie dozing naked under the mosquito net in her darkened room; Paula sleeping in the hammock with the little one curled up against her, a peaceful scene; while inside the house Max has been at the grand piano for an hour, trying his hand at a keyboard arrangement of 'L'après midi d'un faune' – toodle-doodle-doo – though the wit in that piece is all in the flute part. I've given up passing comment on his efforts, even to myself.

*From Ruprecht Dalandt's 'Provence Diaries'*

## 2

Cornelius De Kesel had been dead for twelve years, but he was still present in *La Chaumière* through his vice-regents on earth: the dos Santos, a married couple from the Algarve who, like hundreds of thousands of their compatriots, had lived in France for many years. At first, João had worked as a bricklayer and Anna as a domestic help, until they had jointly taken on the care of De Kesel, sixty-five years old at the time; Anna became the cook and João the gardener, in a welcome return to the agricultural milieu in which they had grown up. João also waited at table, his broad paws sheathed in white cotton gloves. Each evening, along with a matching white jacket, he literally pulled on a new persona; the man of the countryside bowed himself out, and into his place stepped the sullen major-domo, stern conductor of the evening meal. This was the school of De Kesel, which his staff had to study closely; his ideal was to reach a state in which he no longer had to give any instructions. A household that ran like clockwork, unaffected by the turning of seasons or fortunes – this was his aim, albeit one that was no longer easy to achieve. Perfect staff came with a price tag, these days.

João and Anna had understood their master. He was welcome to have what he wanted from them, as long as it was given on their terms. Lunch and dinner were to be served punctually, the beds changed every three days, and, very importantly, fruit from the garden was to be made into preserves – every day of his life, Cornelius De Kesel began meals with a dried fig harvested from his own estate; even today there was sweet tomato jam, and home-made quince paste to go with coffee – and not much more could be expected. Anna didn't waste any energy on cooking. Her meals were, to put it nicely, simple (others called them dismal, or even inedible), but when served in an impeccable manner, Cornelius De Kesel was able to resign himself to them, while his daughter Marjorie and granddaughter Paula didn't particularly enjoy eating anyway, and might even have been secretly grateful that the meals which appeared on the table at the *chaumière* did not present an insurmountable temptation for the palate. Old De Kesel was resolute only in standing on ceremony; the

chicken served on its large platter was to look edible, and that would have to suffice. Once he'd finished training them, he stopped giving his domestic staff orders – after all, everything was set, from the aperitif taken in the salon before dinner to the coffee poured after the meal – and, once they had taken stock of the situation, any instructions that went beyond this would only have been received ill-humouredly by the dos Santos.

And so, more and more, it was they who ruled the household. They determined proceedings, and any special wishes would have to wait their turn. A visitor received by Anna or João immediately sensed this distrust, suspecting that through their very presence they were holding things up. If De Kesel offered his guest something to drink, he would cast an anxious glance at Anna standing in the doorway, from which position she seemed silently to convey that there were more important things preventing her from attending to the visitor. When eventually she did bring a glass, she would begin whispering to the master of the house, who listened to her uneasily and then, with a hesitant wave of his aged hand, authorized her please to proceed at her own discretion. As she left the room, she would throw another long, accusing look at the new arrival, who by this time was well aware that their stay here would be subject to narrow limits.

Both dos Santos were short-legged and wide. When João was working in the garden, a dense thicket of white hair could be seen spilling out of his vest; his brow was low and his nose flat, as though smashed by a fist. In her youth, Anna would probably have been what is commonly called a 'sweet girl', but in her more advanced years had retained only a certain sweetness of expression, especially when she brought in something home-baked for dessert: *Now, here's a real treat for you – you didn't expect that, did you?* It was this very expression of annunciation that so irritated Ruprecht Dalandt that he would bow his head towards his plate so as not to meet her eyes. His wife, Marjorie, was no friend of the dos Santos either, and often had cause to complain about the cleanliness of her bathroom in particular – the only criticism she uttered, which each time triggered a long bout of huffiness.

'Please, let the people do their work,' old De Kesel used to say when he caught wind of such a conflict. 'And remember, it's me who gives the orders around here.'

'But you don't give any,' she always answered, upon which the old man would start

muttering angrily to himself.

In a special bequest, he had forbidden his daughter ever to dismiss the dos Santos, as though the couple were the vassals of a feudal lord, companions in his fate. And, indeed, Marjorie made no attempt to change the status quo, though she did love making comments at mealtimes, along the lines of 'This must be the most expensive salad in Provence' – a statement that may well have proved true, had the hours João spent in the untidy, weed-choked kitchen garden been converted into leaves in a bowl. Ruprecht, her husband, was quietly of the opinion that no bequest could ever be subject to an eternity clause – his father-in-law had been dead twelve years, so it would be entirely reasonable to expect the dos Santos to go back to the Algarve – yet it was so incontrovertibly clear that he didn't have the slightest say at the *chaumière* that Marjorie didn't even bother to stave off any attempts he might have made in this direction. No, the constitution of the property was not to be touched; this had been excluded from her remit. And even if she had spent every summer of her life at the *chaumière*, it didn't change the fact that the property didn't actually belong to her, but instead to the family foundation, whose beneficiaries (besides distant relatives) were herself and her sister – only that said sister lived in California, didn't like the house anyway, and rarely set foot in Europe.

To the credit of the dos Santos it might be added that summer residences of this sort, which are uninhabited for much of the year, usually require a good week or so before they begin to seem homely again; *La Chaumière*, on the other hand, under the iron rule of the Portuguese, seemed to be inhabited as early as May – inspirited, even, if not exactly by a terribly hospitable spirit. Thick sheaves of lavender hung in all the rooms; this was something introduced by Cornelius De Kesel, who had found a musty home more troubling than an uncomfortable one. Only shortly before the arrival of the family did the caretaker dare venture into the house. He, too, had taken up his position when Cornelius De Kesel was still alive, and lived on the estate in a tumbledown stone pile, an old stable block converted into a gatehouse on the edge of the property where it met the road. He would draw up a list of repairs made necessary by winter, and return with his handymen, who would proceed to fix a piece of guttering here, a tap or a window catch there. The man was

not well liked by the dos Santos, but as something of a favourite of De Kesel's, he had to be respected, and continued to be seen as a kind of family friend.

It was precisely such friends of the family whom the dos Santos regarded with suspicion. All the more hurtful, then, that Marjorie had shared her allocation of rooms with the caretaker and not them. They begrudged him knowing more than they did, and so Anna listened with narrowed eyes and an implicit shaking of her head, as though what she was hearing was utter drivel, as he read aloud to her from his tablet: 'Madame in her room, Monsieur in his room, Mademoiselle Paula in the Flower Room, her little girl in the small room next door, Monsieur Max in the through room, Monsieur Allmendinger in the Green Room, Madame Stiegle in the Empire Room.' Every one of them an impertinence after the long weeks in which the house had been unfailingly left to occupy itself.

'That's seven people – and you'll be coming for meals as well.' It sounded like an accusation.

Yes, the caretaker would always be present at mealtimes. He kept an eye on other summer houses, too, but when Marjorie and her family arrived, he would be on the spot. He was also part of the legacy left by Cornelius De Kesel, who even in his old age had thought about décor. He had wanted the fireplace in the salon redone in a rustic, simple, Baroque marble style, and the English set-painter Damien Devereux had been recommended to him from town. Devereux had arrived at the *chaumière* and never left. Beforehand, in all likelihood, he hadn't even known that this kind of home was precisely what he'd been looking for all along, a place that would offer a solid foundation for daily life, yet also seemed provisional enough that he wouldn't have to feel tied down.

After the fireplace had been painted – a process that involved the trialling of several different versions – other things in the house turned out to be in need of renovation. Old De Kesel must have found his quietly sarcastic manner extremely agreeable, as well as the way he appeared only ever to be working incidentally. Not yet old at that time, he already had deep lines etched in his sharp-angled, rather small face; his thick, fine hair fell constantly across his brow. His aura was one of discreet tragedy. He had built a comfortable life for himself without getting caught in the mill of a proper profession, had – albeit without

the money – held the same dream of life in the south as Cornelius De Kesel, but had now reached the age at which he would no longer be granted the credit he might have enjoyed in his youth; his eyes peered sadly out from beneath long lashes as he sucked on his cheap Torpedo cigars. But amid it all there was also a sense of reliability and loyalty, and although the management of *La Chaumière*, which he ended up assuming, was never really examined, his financial statements didn't set any alarm bells ringing, and that was all that mattered.

Devereux was also clever enough never to come into outright conflict with the dos Santos. His correctness disarmed them, and they withdrew from their dealings with him in a bad mood – but then, they did that with everyone.

## 3

Fritz Allmendinger, the man who balanced the books and oversaw distribution at Ruprecht Dalandt's Papyros Press, collected the new editor from the station – Sieglinde Stiegle was scared of flying and had chosen to come by train. The overheated carriage had taken it out of her; she was agitated and made defensive gestures when Allmendinger tried to hug her.

'I'm glad you're here, Sieglinde. I'm bored to death and we can't start work without you ... although, what do I mean, "work"? Dalandt's incapable of work, never done it in his life. We just need to get him to give us the go-ahead somehow, otherwise the entire schedule will get out of whack.'

Allmendinger didn't look at her while he was speaking; his eyes were fixed on the road. His sports car was an older model that he tended to use only sparingly, but he'd wanted to be seen driving it at *La Chaumière*. It gave him a sense of security and lessened the pressure he felt in the face of someone else's prosperity, a pressure that lay heavy on him whenever he was invited – or, better, summoned – to the publisher's summer residence.

Sieglinde Stiegle's luggage consisted of a large rucksack and a handbag. 'I didn't know what to pack. Dalandt said, "We keep things very simple," but looking at him, I find that hard to believe.'

'No, no, you can believe it. The two of us are intellectuals; we don't get taken seriously anyway. They do dress for dinner, but I think that's just for the staff, really. And don't go imagining some mansion surrounded by magnificent gardens. No, it's all very natural, very rustic, like something out of a picture book – anti-luxury! A simple retreat for an artistic soul. Not quite thatched, and certainly bigger than a hut, but you can barely see the house, it's so squashed down into the countryside. Most rooms on the ground floor; bedrooms in the attic, with sloping walls and dormer windows; smoke from the wood fire coming out of the chimney ... not now, of course, it's too hot, but that's part of it as well. And nothing around it but scrubland, dried-up bushes, herbs, rabbits ... Small snakes and scorpions, too – best not go walking in sandals!'

'Oh no – sandals are all I packed ...'

'You'll hardly have time to go for walks anyway. The one thing you need to understand when you see this enchanted estate is there's a vast amount of money behind it. Dalandt married the daughter of the chap who bought *La Chaumière* in the forties. But *he* was the son of Job De Kesel, and *he* didn't have any truck with artistic idylls – he owned mines in the Congo back when it was Belgium's most important colony. Unbelievably rich ...' Allmendinger was a man who had fallen under the spell of large numbers. Nowadays there were loads of multi-millionaires – that had lost its lustre – but in modern terms Job De Kesel would have been a billionaire; 'multifold multi-billionaire' were the words that escaped his mouth.

Sieglinde Stiegle imagined this was a joke, but it wasn't; he needed the exaggeration to convey the sheer incomprehensibility of what he was trying to describe.

'*Such* a fortune!' And with this exclamation he didn't just mean the mountain of money, but also how it had been amassed. The armies of Black people who had toiled in the pits, thousands – but again, this was far too few for Allmendinger – tens of thousands, entire peoples, entire tribes, labouring under wretched conditions, people who couldn't even begin to imagine what would happen to the metals they dug out of the ground, what they could be used for, where they ended up, who profited from their immense efforts. And if those people could have seen what they were spilling their sweat and blood for? Just for example: look at Egypt. The workers who built the pyramids. They got to see (provided they were still alive) these unprecedented – and *still* overwhelming – manmade mountains in all their glory, but what did the labourers of the Congo get to look on as the result of their inhuman enslavement? *La Chaumière*, a little house set in the maquis, with grumpy staff who were currently preparing chicken drumsticks in advance of Sieglinde Stiegle's arrival. That, Allmendinger pronounced passionately, was entirely expressive of this era: the visual representation had all but evaporated. A pretty farm in the midst of parched countryside simply wasn't the optical equivalent of the suffering endured by the exploited Congolese.

'What would be, then?' Her tone made clear her feelings about Allmendinger's pathos, but he wasn't lost for an answer.

'The Palace of Justice in Brussels: exorbitant, harsh, threatening – a triumph of injustice. But at least none of this late-capitalist pastoral!'

Sieglinde Stiegle was undeterred. 'Tastes have changed, though. These days, it's the address that says something – incidentally, the wealthier, the more unremarkable. And maybe there just isn't as much money around as there used to be – who knows?'

'Certainly not as much. This is the third generation, after all, and they're not actively working on their fortune any more. It just gets managed these days, but that doesn't mean Marjorie Dalandt throws it around recklessly. It's all about the money, all the livelong day – especially when it comes to Dalandt. He founded Papyros before he married her, of course. Always struggled to keep it afloat, but could never really give up the ghost either – but then those turned out to be our best years; that's where our prestige as a publishing house comes from. Ever since she started acting as a guarantor for the whole thing, he's been a lot more cautious. She insists things are always in the black – Dalandt's normally allergic to that kind of politicians' talk, but he'll use that expression in all innocence. And don't be surprised to see them doing calculations all day: *you paid that*, and *you owe me this*, and *I paid that back ages ago*, and so on – it's a real game for the two of them. Mind you, she did an MBA at Harvard, and she's turned our Dalandt into a proper accountant by now. His years of publishing idealism are over. He doesn't want a good write-up in the reviews section any more; he just wants to earn money.'

'That's no bad thing for us, though.' Sieglinde Stiegle had detected a whiff of elite sentimentalism in his words, combined with a tendency to find fault with his boss, a continuation of the male battle for dominion that had already been apparent in the complaints he'd uttered back in Germany: he had to do everything in this publishing house himself, Dalandt did nothing, all he did was make lofty speeches in their meetings instead of diving into the nitty-gritty. She didn't want to get involved. 'My dealings with him so far have been very positive. He understands editorial problems and really goes into detail ...'

'At random. You'll see. He only looks at every tenth page.'

'Well, maybe that's clever. If everything's all right, that says something too, doesn't it, and if not, I can draw my own conclusions about the rest.'

'You'll see.'

They had now left the suburbs behind and were out on the country road, one that had become widely famous in artistic circles for the iconic view it offered. Allmendinger made a gesture that looked as though he were drawing aside a curtain. 'Voilà, Montagne Sainte-Victoire! It fairly hovers over the *chaumière*, which is why the house was bought in the first place. Like being right in the middle of a gigantic three-dimensional Cézanne painting.'

Sieglinde Stiegle turned her head as far as it would go. And indeed, there it was: the Cézanne view. She admired him immensely, but would never have described him as a naturalist. She'd always been of the firm conviction that his landscapes were stylisations, chiefly intended to exhibit the hallmarks of his own particular style – the brittle, downright crumbling layers of paint; daubs of colour that seemed to have overcome some sort of resistance; hues muted by his heavy-handed use of white – weak green, wan yellow; fields of colour that never melted into one another – and yet here it turned out that Mont Sainte-Victoire really did look like that, shrivelled like a cadaver in the sun, dry as plaster or flour, pale and sucked dry. He'd captured it all true to life, at least as it was now in the midday light – in the evening the mountain would doubtless dab a touch of pink on its tired cheeks – and wasn't it to its painter's credit that he hadn't messed around with romantic illumination, but instead had chosen to portray the most important mountain in his life naked, in the sober light of day? Imagination was all well and good, but it was even more thrilling to discover that a painting she'd thought entirely autonomous was in fact closely based on reality, even surpassing of it.

For a moment, in her astonishment, she had failed to listen to what Allmendinger was saying.

'There's a painter in the house as well, a man they treat as part of the family, though I'm not sure what his position really is; an Englishman who started putting marble in all over the place at one point, though he gave that up again pretty quickly, thank goodness. He seems to have been a parasite on old De Kesel, but now he lives on the property in his own right and takes care of the house – one of those eternally young chaps, though he's clearly

on the cusp of old age now; a kind of hippie existence. And then there's Paula, one of the weird sisters – silent, sometimes gets herself under a dangerously dark cloud. She's Marjorie Dalandt's daughter from her first marriage, to an Algerian gallery owner from Paris. You can see it, too – she's a Maghrebian beauty with thick black eyebrows like they've been drawn on with a burnt cork.'

'Frida Kahlo-esque?'

'Not a bad comparison, though minus the braids. She's a sour person, quite boyish, but of the offended kind, as boys generally are. Has a daughter who doesn't have a father – but you can imagine her spawning a child all by herself, in parthenogenesis. The way she treats the boyfriend she brings with her, I suspect she doesn't like men, especially the kind who come into question at her age.'

Sieglinde Stiegle gave him a sideways glance. 'That sounds as though you're the offended one – or rejected, even? After everything you've told me, surely you'd be trying not to get too close to the family.'

When they'd first met, the two of them had decided they were out of the question for each other, which had absolved their relationship of any tension and even allowed a certain trust to develop between them – something that was by no means a given. The publishing house was small, with a core staff whose members could be counted on one hand, and after years of working together, Dalandt had failed to withstand the inclination to turn the others against Allmendinger – he'd already started trying with her, too – while Allmendinger worked at forging a front against Dalandt. Although, 'forging' was too strong a word for it; the people with whom he was dealing were not, in his experience, made of steel, nor were they metallic in any way, rather composed of a pliable material that had a tendency to fall apart. It was Allmendinger's belief, however, that he had observed Sieglinde Stiegle thus far resisting Dalandt's elaborate canvassing of her support, a technique that comprised a particular mix of little compliments, sympathetic smiles and attentive listening. In return, the publisher was subjected to exactly the same defensively ironic treatment as he was – though was it, in fact, a form of flirting? He continued to describe Dalandt's most dubious sides to her, carefully avoiding, of course, any kind of malicious undertones; no, merely in

the psychologising, analytical manner one would expect from a connoisseur of literature. In his circles, after all, this was how one talked about people, even friends. Unmuted solidarity was considered naive.

The car was now jolting along the unmade road that led through a copse of holm oaks towards the house. They drove round a bend, the trees began to thin, and *La Chaumière* became visible as the land sloped away before them. At first only the old Monk-and-Nun roof could be seen, then the outbuildings, which were set in a square and made the property look almost like a small hamlet.

'Delightful,' said Sieglinde Stiegle, and pursed her lips to lend her old-fashioned praise the right kind of mocking accent – even though, at that precise moment, there was no one there who could appreciate this.