



VINTAGE

THE THREE EVANGELISTS

FRED VARGAS

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About the Book

Sophia Siméonidis, a Greek opera singer, wakes up one morning to discover that a tree has appeared overnight in the garden of her Paris house. Intrigued and unnerved, she turns to her neighbours: Vandoosler, an ex-cop fired from the police for having helped a murderer to escape, and three impecunious historians, Mathias, Marc and Lucien – the three evangelists. They agree – both because they need the money and out of sheer curiosity – to dig around the tree and see if something has been buried there. They find nothing but soil.

A few weeks later, Sophia disappears and nobody worries too much until her body is found burned to ashes in a car. Who killed the opera singer? Her husband, her ex-lover, her best friend? Or could it be her lovely niece recently moved to the capital? They all seem to have a motive.

Vandoosler and the three evangelists set out to find the truth.

About the Author

Fred Vargas was born in Paris in 1957. An historian and archaeologist by profession, she has now become a bestselling novelist. Her books have been translated into thirty-two languages.

Siân Reynolds is a historian, translator and former professor at the University of Stirling.

Also by Fred Vargas

Have Mercy On Us All
Seeking Whom He May Devour
The Chalk Circle Man
Wash This Blood Clean From My Hand
This Night's Foul Work

TO MY BROTHER

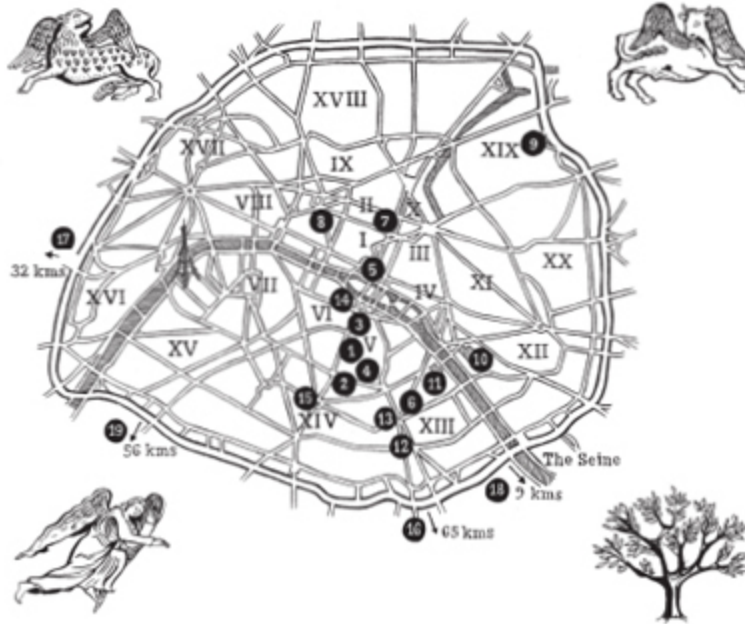
FRED VARGAS

The Three Evangelists

TRANSLATED BY
Siân Reynolds

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

PARIS



- | | |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| ① Rue Saint-Jacques | ⑪ Gare d'Austerlitz |
| ② Rue du Faubourg Saint-Jacques | ⑫ Métro Maison-Blanche |
| ③ The Sorbonne | ⑬ Avenue d'Italie |
| ④ The Val-de-Grâce | ⑭ Saint-Michel fountain |
| ⑤ Métro Châtelet | ⑮ Place Denfert-Rochereau |
| ⑥ Rue Chasle | ⑯ Fontainebleau forest |
| ⑦ Rue Saint-Denis | ⑰ Marly forest |
| ⑧ Métro Opéra | ⑱ Maisons-Alfort |
| ⑨ Rue de la Prévoyance | ⑲ Dourdan |
| ⑩ Gare de Lyon | |

Rue Chasle is on the Left Bank in the southeast corner of Paris, in the 13th *arrondissement*, but so quiet a street as to be difficult to locate.

The Three Evangelists is set in the mid-nineties.

1

'PIERRE, SOMETHING'S WRONG with the garden,' said Sophia.

She opened the window and examined the patch of ground. She knew it by heart, every blade of grass. What she saw sent a shiver down her spine.

Pierre was reading the newspaper over his breakfast. Maybe that was why Sophia looked out of the window so often. To see what the weather was like. That's something you do quite often when you get up in the morning. And whenever the weather was dull, she would think of Greece, of course. These sessions standing at the window had, over time, become full of nostalgia, which swelled inside her some mornings to the point of resentment. Then it would pass. But this particular morning, something was wrong.

'Pierre, there's a tree in the garden.'

She sat down beside him.

'Pierre, look at me.'

Wearily, Pierre raised his face towards his wife. Sophia adjusted the scarf around her throat, a habit she had kept since her days as an opera singer. Protect your voice. Twenty years earlier, on one of the stone terraces of the open-air Roman theatre in Orange, Pierre had proposed to her with a cascade of protestations of love and undying certainties. Just before a performance.

Sophia cupped in her hand the gloomy face of the newspaper reader.

'What's eating you, Sophia?'

'I just told you something.'

'You did?'

'I said: "There's a tree in the garden".'

'I heard you. That's pretty normal, isn't it?'

'There's a tree in the garden that wasn't there yesterday.'

'Well, what about it? Am I supposed to react or something?'

Sophia was not feeling calm. She didn't know whether it was because of the newspaper, or the weary look, or the business about the tree, but it was clear that something was not right.

'Pierre, explain to me how a tree can turn up in a garden all by itself.'

Pierre shrugged. He really could not care less.

'What's the problem? Trees reproduce themselves. A seed, a cutting, a graft: that's all it takes. They grow into mighty forests in this climate. I imagine you know that.'

'It isn't a cutting. It's a tree! A young tree, standing up straight, with branches and everything, planted all by itself a metre or so from the end wall. How did it get there?'

'It got there because the gardener planted it.'

'The gardener's been gone two months and I haven't found a replacement. So, no, it wasn't the gardener.'

'Well, it doesn't bother me. Don't expect me to get worked up about a little tree standing by the end wall.'

'Don't you even want to get up and have a look? Can't you just do that?'

Pierre heaved himself to his feet. His reading had been interrupted.

'See?'

'Yes, of course I can see. It's a tree.'

'It wasn't there yesterday.'

'Maybe.'

'Not maybe. It wasn't there. So what are we going to do about it? Any ideas?'

'Why should I have?'

'That tree frightens me.'

Pierre laughed. He even put an affectionate arm round her. Briefly.

'I'm not joking, Pierre. It frightens me.'

'Well, it doesn't frighten me,' he said, sitting down again. 'In fact, having a tree turn up is quite nice. You just leave it in peace and that's that. And you might perhaps give *me* a bit of peace about it. Someone got the wrong garden, I dare say. Their problem, not ours.'

'But it was planted during the night, Pierre!'

'All the more likely someone got the wrong garden. Or perhaps it's a present. Have you thought of that? One of your fans wanted to honour you discreetly on your fiftieth birthday. Fans get up to all kind of tricks, especially those mouse-type fans, the obsessive ones, who won't give their names. Go and see, there might be a message.'

Sophia thought for a bit. The idea wasn't entirely ridiculous. Pierre had decreed that her fans fell into two camps. There were the mouse-type fans, who were timid, agitated, silent, but unshakeable. Pierre had once known a mouse transport a whole bag of rice into a rubber boot over the course of a winter, grain by grain. That's the way they are, mouse-fans. Then there are the rhino-type fans, equally to be dreaded in their way: noisy, loud-mouthed, very sure of themselves. Inside these two categories, Pierre had developed masses of sub-groups. Sophia couldn't remember them all. Pierre despised the fans who had come before him and the ones who came after him, in other words, all of them. But maybe he was right about the tree. Possibly; not certainly. She heard Pierre go into his 'Bye-see-you-tonight-don't-worry-yourself-about-it' routine, and then she was alone.

With the tree.

She went to take a look. Gingerly, as if it might explode in her face.

No, of course there wasn't a message. At the foot of the young tree was a circle of freshly dug earth. What sort of tree was it? Sophia walked round it a few times, grudgingly, feeling hostile. She was inclined to think it was a beech. She was also inclined to uproot it now, to tear it out, but being slightly superstitious, she dared not attack a living thing, even a plant. The truth is that few people would tear up a tree that had done them no harm.

It took a long time to find a book that would help. Apart from opera, the life of the donkey and Greek myths, Sophia had not had time to become expert on anything. A beech tree, perhaps? Hard to say without seeing its leaves. She went through the index of the book, to see if there were any trees called *sophia*-something in Latin. It could be some sort of disguised homage, the kind of convoluted thing a mouse-type fan might think up. That would be quite reassuring. But no, no *sophias*. Well, perhaps a species by the name of *stelios* something. That would not be nice at all. Stelios was nothing like a mouse, or a rhino. And he did worship trees. After the cascade of declarations by Pierre on the terraces in Orange, Sophia had wondered how she was going to leave Stelios, and had sung less well than usual. And the immediate reaction of her mad Greek had been to try and drown himself. They had fished him out of the Mediterranean, gasping for breath and floating like an idiot. When they were teenagers, Sophia and Stelios used to love to go out of Delphi along mountain paths with donkeys and goats, playing at being 'Ancient Greeks', as they called it. And then the imbecile had tried to drown himself. Luckily there was the cascade of declarations by Pierre. Nowadays, Sophia was still trying to locate a few trickles of it. Stelios? Was he a threat? Would he do something like this? Yes, he might. When he had been pulled out of the Mediterranean, he had been suddenly galvanised, and started screaming like a madman. Her

heart beating too fast, Sophia made an effort to get to her feet, drink a glass of water and look out of the window.

The view calmed her down at once. What had come over her? She took a deep breath. Her habit of creating a whole terrifying logic out of nothing was exhausting. It was almost certainly just a beech tree, a sapling, and it didn't mean a thing. But how did whoever planted it get into the garden, with their blasted beech tree? Sophia dressed quickly, went outside and examined the lock on the garden gate. Nothing to notice. But it was such a simple lock that anyone with a screwdriver could undoubtedly open it in a moment and leave no trace.

It was early spring. The day was damp, and she was getting chilled, standing there defying the beech. What might it mean? Sophia tried not to think. She hated it when her Greek soul got carried away, especially twice in one morning. And what was she to think if Pierre wouldn't take any interest in this tree? Why didn't he? Was it normal that he should be so unconcerned?

Sophia had no wish to stay alone all day with the tree. She picked up her handbag and went out. In the street, a young man, well thirty-something, was looking through the gate of the house next door. 'House' was perhaps putting it too grandly. Pierre always referred to it as 'that tumbledown disgrace'. He thought that in this privileged street, where the houses were all desirable residences, that barn of a place, which had for years lain empty, let the side down. Up to now, Sophia had never imagined that Pierre might become stupid with age. The notion now crossed her mind. This is the first sinister effect of the tree, she told herself without really meaning it. Pierre had even had the side wall of their garden built higher to prevent them from having to see the so-called 'disgrace'. You could only see it now from the second-floor windows. This young chap, on the other hand, seemed to be looking admiringly at the façade with its broken windows. He was skinny, with black

hair, black clothes, chunky silver rings on the fingers of one hand, and a bony face; his forehead was pressed between two bars of the tall, rusty gates.

Exactly the kind of person Pierre could not stand. Pierre was a defender of moderation and sobriety. And this young fellow was elegant, both rather austere and rather showy. The hands gripping the gates were beautiful. Looking at him, Sophia felt a little comforted. No doubt that was why she asked him if he could identify the tree. The young man moved his head away from the gate, flecks of rust now in his straight black hair. He must have been standing like that for some time. Without showing surprise or asking any questions, he followed Sophia, and she pointed to the tree, which could be seen quite clearly from the street.

‘That’s a beech tree, Madame,’ the young man said.

‘Are you sure? Forgive me, but it is quite important.’

The young man looked again carefully. With his dark and as yet unclouded eyes. ‘Absolutely sure, Madame.’

‘Thank you, Monsieur. You’re very kind.’

She smiled at him and walked away. The young man walked off in the other direction, kicking a small stone with the toe of his shoe.

She was right, then. It was a beech. Just a beech.

Dammit.

2

THAT WAS HOW it started.

He had been down on his luck - for how long now? About two years.

And then finally, a gleam of light at the end of the tunnel. Marc kicked a pebble, sending it about five metres up the street. It's not so easy on the pavements of Paris to find a pebble to kick. In the country, yes. But who bothers in the country? Whereas in Paris, you sometimes really need to find a pebble and give it a good kick. Sod's law. And, like a little ray of sunlight in the clouds, he had had the good luck, about an hour ago, to find a very suitable pebble. So he was kicking it along and following it.

His pebble had now taken him all the way to rue Saint-Jacques in the Latin Quarter, not without one or two problems. You're not allowed to touch it with your hand, it's strictly feet only. So, anyway, the bad luck had lasted two years now. No job, no money, no woman in his life any more. And no way out in sight. Except, perhaps, the house, or if you prefer, the 'disgrace'. He had seen it yesterday morning. Four floors, counting the attics, plus a bit of garden, in an out-of-the-way street, and all in a totally tumbledown state. Holes everywhere, no central heating, an outside lavatory with a wooden door and latch. If you screwed up your eyes, it looked fantastic. If you opened them properly, it looked like a disaster area. On the other hand, the landlord was willing to let it at a peppercorn rent,

in exchange for the tenant doing it up a bit. This house might help him get out of the hole he was in right now. What was more, there would be room for his godfather. Somewhere near the house, a woman had asked him an odd question. What was it now? Oh yes. The name of a tree. Funny how people know absolutely nothing about trees, yet they can't live without them. But maybe they're right. After all, he knew the names of plenty of trees and where had that got him?

The pebble went off-piste in rue Saint-Jacques. Stones don't like going uphill. It had rolled into a gutter right by the Sorbonne, what was more. Well, farewell the Middle Ages. Farewell all those monks, lords and peasants. Marc clenched his fists in his pockets. No job, no money, no woman and no more Middle Ages. How pathetic. Skilfully, Marc propelled the pebble out of the gutter and back onto the pavement. There's a trick to doing that. And he knew all about the trick, just as he knew all about the Middle Ages, it seemed to him. Don't even think about the Middle Ages. In the country, you never have to confront the challenge of getting a pebble back onto a pavement. That's why one can't be bothered to kick a stone in the country, even though there are tons of them there. Marc's pebble sailed smartly across rue Soufflot and manoeuvred without too much difficulty into the narrow part of rue Saint-Jacques.

Two years, then. And after two years of that, the first reaction of someone down on their luck is to look out for someone else down on their luck. Seeing friends who have succeeded, when you have made a complete mess of your life, aged thirty-five, only makes you bitter. At first, OK, it's interesting, it gives you ideas, and encourages you to try harder. But then it begins to get on your nerves and makes you bitter. Well-known fact. And Marc wanted at all costs not to become bitter. It's pathetic, and even dangerous,

especially for a medievalist. Dispatched with a solid thump, the pebble reached the Val-de-Grâce.

There was someone else who was in his position, or so he had heard. According to information recently received, Mathias Delamarre was very seriously down on his luck, and had been for some time. Marc liked him, liked him a lot in fact. But he had not seen him for the last two years. Maybe Mathias would come in with him and rent the disgrace. Because even if it was a peppercorn rent, Marc could only manage about a third of it. And the landlord wanted a reply right away.

With a sigh, Marc negotiated the pebble to a telephone box. If Mathias agreed, he might be able to say yes to the deal. But there was one big problem about Mathias. He was a specialist on prehistoric man. As far as Marc was concerned, once you'd said that, you'd said it all. But was this the moment to be fussy about a man's academic speciality? In spite of the terrible gulf between them, they liked each other. It was odd, but that was what you had to hold on to, this strange affection, and not the peculiar choice Mathias had made to study hunter-gatherers and flint axeheads. Marc could still remember the phone number. Someone answered, saying that Mathias had moved, and gave him the new number. Doggedly, he dialled again. Yes, Mathias was in. Hearing his voice, Marc breathed again. If a guy of thirty-five is at home at twenty-past three on a Wednesday afternoon, it's a sure sign he's in grade A trouble. Good start. And when he agrees, without more ado, to meet you in a down-at-heel café in rue du Faubourg Saint-Jacques, that tells you he is likely to agree to anything.

All the same.

3

ALL THE SAME. he wasn't the kind of man you could push around. Mathias was obstinate and proud. As proud as Marc? Possibly worse. He was the kind of hunter-gatherer who would chase his bison until he was exhausted and then stay away from the tribe rather than return home empty-handed. No. That sounded too much like an idiot, and Mathias was more subtle than that. On the other hand, he was capable of going two days without speaking, if one of his ideas came up against reality. The ideas were probably too complex, or the desires too inflexible. Marc (who could talk for France, to the weariness of his audience) had more than once had to stop short when he came across this blond giant in the corridor of the university, sitting silently on a bench, pressing together his huge hands as if he was squeezing into pulp the contrariness of fate, a great blue-eyed hunter-gatherer, away in pursuit of his bison. Was he from Normandy perhaps, a descendant of the Vikings? Marc realised that in the four years they had sat side by side, he had never asked Mathias where he came from. But what the hell did it matter? That could wait.

There was nothing to do in the café, and Marc sat waiting. With his finger, he was doodling on the tabletop the outline of a statue. His hands were long and skinny. He liked their precise engineering and the veins standing out on them. As for everything else about his physique, he had serious doubts. Why think of that? Because he was going to

see the great blond hunter again? Well, so what? Of course, Marc, being only of middling height, and very thin, with a bony face and body, would not have made an ideal bison-hunter. He would have been sent up a tree, more likely, to shake down the fruit. A gatherer, in other words. Full of nervous dexterity. Well, what of it? Dexterity is useful. No money, though. He did still have his rings, four big silver rings, two with gold strips, conspicuous and complicated, part-African, part-Carolingian, on the fingers of his left hand. And yes, it was true that his wife had left him for a more broad-shouldered type. A dumbo, for sure. She would work it out one day. Marc was counting on that. But it would be too late.

He rubbed his drawing out with one swift stroke. His statue had gone awry. A fit of pique. He got them all the time, these fits of irritation, these impotent rages. It was easy to caricature Mathias. But what about himself? What else was he, apart from being one of those decadent medievalists, neat, dark, delicate but tough little creatures, the prototype of the researcher after useless information, a luxury product with dashed hopes, hitching his futile dreams to a few silver rings, to visions of the millennium, to ploughmen who had been dead for centuries, to a long-lost Romance language that nobody cared about any more, and to a woman who had abandoned him? He looked up. Across the street was a large garage. Marc did not like garages. They depressed him. Striding past it with long swinging steps, came the hunter-gatherer. Marc smiled. Still blond, his hair too thick to be properly combed, wearing his eternal sandals which Marc so much disliked, Mathias was keeping the rendezvous. He was still wearing no underclothes. Nobody knew how, but you could always tell. Sweater and trousers straight on to the body, sandals and no socks.

Well, rustic or refined, tall or thin, there they were at a table in this dingy café. So no matter.

'You shaved off your beard,' said Marc. 'Aren't you doing pre-history any more?'

'Yeah, I am,' said Mathias.

'Where?'

'In my head.'

Marc nodded. The information had been accurate. Mathias was indeed down on his luck.

'What's up with your hands?'

Mathias looked down at his black nails.

'I've been working in an engineering shop. They kicked me out. They said I didn't have any feeling for machines. I managed to fuck up three in one week. Machines are complicated. Especially when they break down.'

'And now?'

'I'm selling tatty posters in the Châtelet Métro station.'

'Any money in that?'

'No. And you?'

'Nothing to say. I used to be a ghostwriter for a publisher.'

'Medieval stuff?'

'Eighty-page love stories. You have this guy, untrustworthy but good in bed, and this girl, radiant but innocent. In the end they fall madly in love and it's incredibly boring. The story doesn't say when they split up.'

'Of course not,' said Mathias. 'Did you walk out?'

'No, got sacked. I used to change whole sentences in the page proofs. Because I'm bitter and twisted, and because I was so fed up. They noticed. Are you married? Partner? Children?'

'No, nothing like that,' said Mathias.

The two men drew breath and looked at each other.

'How old are we now?' asked Mathias.

'Thirty-five-ish. We're meant to be grown-up by now.'

'Yeah, so I've heard. Are you still poking about in that medieval midden?'

Marc nodded.

'What a pain,' said Mathias. 'You were always a bit unreasonable about that.'

'Don't start, Mathias, it's not the moment. Where do you live?'

'In a room I've got to get out of in ten days. The posters don't pay enough to rent a bedsit. Let's say I'm going downhill.' Mathias squeezed his two powerful hands together.

'I can show you this house,' said Marc. 'If you'll come in with me on it, we might be able to forget the thirty thousand years between us.'

'And the midden too?'

'Who knows? What about it?'

Mathias, although he was uninterested in, indeed was hostile to anything that had occurred since 10,000 BC or so, had always - incomprehensibly - made an exception for his lanky medievalist friend, who always wore black with a silver belt. To tell the truth, he had always considered this weakness for his friend a lapse of taste on his part. But his affection for Marc, his appreciation of the other's versatile and sharp mind, had made him close his eyes to the distressing choice his friend had made to study that particularly degenerate phase of human history. Despite this appalling weakness of Marc's, Mathias tended to trust him, and had allowed himself to be dragged now and then into one of his quixotic enterprises. Even today, when it was clear that Don Quixote had been unhorsed and was reduced to trudging along like a pilgrim, in short, now that he was clearly down on his luck, just as Mathias was himself (and in fact that was rather pleasing), Marc had not lost his persuasive air of royal grace. There was a world-weary expression perhaps in the lines at the corner of the eyes, and some accretion of unhappiness, there had been shocks and traumas he would rather have done without, yes, there was all that. But he still retained his charm and

the fragments of the dreams that Mathias had lost sight of in the underground corridors of the Châtelet Métro station.

True, Marc did not seem to have given up on the Middle Ages. But Mathias was ready to go along with him to this 'disgrace' that he was describing as they walked along. His hand, adorned with rings, waved arabesques as he explained the deal. What it seemed to be was a tumbledown house, with four floors if you counted the attic, and a bit of garden. Mathias wasn't put off. They would have to try to find enough money for the rent. Make a fire in the hearth. Find room for Marc's aged godfather. Why? He couldn't be abandoned, because it was either that or a retirement home. OK. No problem. Mathias was not bothered. He could see Châtelet Métro station receding into the distance. He followed Marc's lead, satisfied that his friend was in the same boat as himself, satisfied that he was in the pathetic situation of an unemployed medievalist, satisfied with the showy ornaments his friend dressed up in, and entirely satisfied with the wretch of a house, in which they were certain to freeze to death because it was still only March. So by the time they arrived at the rusty gate, through which you could see the house across a patch of long grass, in one of those secret streets that exist in Paris, he was incapable of viewing the dilapidation of the site with any objectivity. He found the whole thing perfect. Turning to Marc, he shook hands. It was a deal. But even with what he earned selling posters, it still wasn't going to be enough. Marc, leaning on the gate, agreed. Both men became serious. A long silence followed. They were trying to think of names. Someone else as down and out as themselves. Then Mathias suggested a name: Lucien Devernois. Marc reacted strongly.

'You're not serious? Devernois? Have you forgotten what he does?'

'Yes, I know,' sighed Mathias. 'He works on the history of the Great War.'

'Come on, you can't be serious. We may not have much money, and I know it's not the moment to be too fussy, OK. But still, there is a bit of the past left to think about the future. And you're proposing we get in a contemporary historian? Someone who works on the Great War? D'you realise what you're saying?'

'Well, yes,' said Mathias. 'But he isn't a complete prat.'

'Maybe not. But still. It's not an option. There are limits.'

'Yeah, I know. Although if you push me, Middle Ages and contemporary history, it's all pretty much the same thing.'

'Oh, steady, watch what you're saying.'

'OK. But I think I heard that Devernois was seriously down on his luck, although he may earn a bit on the side.'

Marc frowned.

'Down on his luck?'

'That's what I said. He left off teaching teenagers in a *lycée* up north. He's got a really dead-end job now, teaching part-time in a private school in Paris. Bored, disillusioned, writing, on his own.'

'So he really is down on his luck, like us. Why didn't you say so straightaway?'

Marc stood still for a few seconds. He thought fast.

'That changes everything,' he announced. 'Get going, Mathias. Great War or no Great War, let's turn a blind eye. Courage, men, France expects you to do your duty. You go find him and persuade him. I'll meet you both back here at seven with the landlord. We've got to sign the lease tonight. Go on, find a way, convince him. If all three of us are in such a bad way, we ought to be able to contrive a total disaster.'

Saluting, they went their separate ways, Marc at a run, Mathias at walking pace.

4

IT WAS THEIR first evening in the disgrace in rue Chasle. The Great War historian had turned up, shaken hands at speed, taken a look at all four floors, and hadn't been seen since.

After the first moments of relief, now that the lease was signed, Marc felt his worst fears reviving. The excitable modernist, who had turned up with his pale cheeks, his long lock of hair falling in his eyes, his tightly knotted tie, grey jacket, and a pair of shoes which had seen better days, true, but which had been handmade in England, inspired in him a degree of apprehension. Even setting aside his catastrophic choice of research subject, Lucien was unpredictable: a mixture of stiffness and *laissez-aller*, *bonhomie* and seriousness, good-natured irony and deliberate cynicism, and he seemed to lurch from one extreme to the other, with short bursts of fury and good humour. It was disconcerting. You couldn't anticipate what was coming next. Sharing a house with someone who wore a tie was a new experience. Marc looked over at Mathias, who was pacing around the empty room with a preoccupied expression.

'Was it easy to persuade him?'

'Piece of cake. He stood up, twitched his tie, put his hand on my shoulder and said, "The solidarity of the trenches. Theirs not to reason why. I'm your man." A bit over the top. On the way, he asked me what we were up to these days. I told him a bit about pre-history, selling

posters, the Middle Ages, ghostwriting romances, and machines. He pulled a face - maybe it was the Middle Ages he didn't like. But he recovered, muttered something about the melting-pot of the trenches, and that was it.'

'And now he's vanished.'

'He's left his rucksack. That's promising.'

Then the trenches expert had reappeared, carrying on his shoulder a packing case for firewood. Marc wouldn't have thought he had the strength. He might be OK after all.

So that was why, after a scratch supper, eaten off their knees, the three seriously unemployed historians found themselves huddled before a large fire. The fireplace was imposing and coated in soot. 'Fire,' Lucien Devernois announced with a smile, 'is our common starting-point. A modest example, but common to us all. Or if you prefer, it's our base. Apart from being out of a job, this is our only known point of contact. Never neglect points of contact.'

Lucien accompanied this with an expansive gesture. Marc and Mathias looked at him, without trying to work out what this meant, warming their hands over the flames.

'It's simple,' Lucien explained, getting launched. 'For the sturdy pre-historian among us, Mathias Delamarre, fire is essential. He thinks of groups of hairy men huddling around their life-giving fire at the cave mouth, because it keeps away wild animals: the invention of fire.'

'The invention of fire,' Mathias began, 'is a controversial ...'

'Enough!' said Lucien. 'Please keep your expert opinion to yourself. I have no interest in who is right and wrong about the caves, but let us honour the importance of fire in prehistoric times. Moving on, we come to Marc Vandoosler, who racks his brains trying to calculate the medieval population and what does he count? "Hearths." Not so easy either, for the poor medievalists. Swiftly climbing the ladder of years, we get to me, and the firing line of the