

POSTCARD FROM *Provence*

Carol Drinkwater on life in the sunny south



I am standing alone in a cool, new room. The last notes of summer have faded; echoes of guests' laughter and family conversations by the pool are, for the present, a memory and there is a touch of autumnal blues about my mood. Yellowing fig leaves drift to the ground; the olives, fat and green, await the harvest. It seems only yesterday that I was unpacking garden furniture, airing cushions stored for months in spare bedrooms, preparing the farm for a special birthday party. My mother has reached a landmark age. I felt it should be celebrated and contacted relatives in distant corners of Ireland; folk I had not met before and my mother had not seen for years.

"Come and celebrate with us," I invited. Remarkably, the acceptances came back fast. I had not expected so many positive responses. "Where will they all sleep?" I asked Michel.

We had been planning to convert a garage and two abandoned stables into two bedrooms with showers. I had talked about it endlessly; here was the trigger. It so enthused me that I also commissioned the construction of a stone cabin at the base of the swimming pool to store outdoor furniture occupying the bedrooms. It required the securing of the pool wall first. Nothing complicated.

Our construction team consisted of four Portuguese – one painter and three masons, all answering to the name José, our regular French electrician, and a Provençal pair I had not worked with before: *le plombier* and his *petit* sidekick who agreed to 'fix' the wall. Altogether, an experienced team. Works got under way to be completed in ample time for the summer debarkation of my Irish family. Foolish me. I have been living in Provence for 25 years. I have written books on the subject. I should have known better. When do building works run smoothly, particularly in the Midi with a woman

(*moi!*) at the helm and a mix of languages on the go?

I was writing in my den when a succession of cries broke out. "*Madame, venez voir. C'est une vraie catastrophe,*" yelled *le petit assistant*. I bolted outside. What was the kerfuffle about? To my horror, the entire stone wall, 16 metres long and three metres high, had collapsed. There it lay, a pile of rubble beneath the swimming pool – an exposed carcass poised in mid-air like a cement liner about to set sail. Earth and sand continued to slide malevolently southwards.


The Provençal plumber and sidekick grabbed the opportunity and began inflating the '*catastrophe*' into one of terrorist-attack proportions, all the while augmenting their fee nine-fold. Husband away, I panicked. Where to turn? The Portuguese could do nothing; they had the extension to complete.

The following morning, unannounced, a pair of Arab men, friends of our gardener, strolled up the drive. They took one look and sanguinely began reconstruction, stone by stone.

"Can you do this? The entire pool could sink." They

shook their hatted heads. "*Inshallah*" (God willing), they muttered. Their certainty calmed me.

One month later, wall reconstructed, extension semi-completed, the Irish relatives arrived. Popping corks, lost in their tales of our family's crazy history, they barely noticed a lack of doors or electricity wires coiling out of walls. Michel was chef while I organised 'the party'. My mother, green eyes sparkling, never looked so radiant. It was worth everything.

Summer is nearly over; our mini-wing has been completed and I am walking the bare white rooms wondering what joys will be born here, who will relish this undiscovered Olive Farm space. Mentally, I am drawing up guest lists. After all, Christmas is not so far away... 



Carol Drinkwater is the best-selling author of *The Olive Farm* series, including the latest instalment *Return to the Olive Farm*. Contact Carol at www.caroldrinkwater.com

ILLUSTRATION: TIM WESSON

ANSWERS TO QUICK QUIZ ON PAGE 85: VICTOR HUGO: RÉUSSIR – TO PASS; UN TABLEAU – A BLACKBOARD; CALCULER – TO CALCULATE; RÉVISER – TO REVISE; UN CONTRÔLE – A TEST; LES NOTES – SCHOOL MARKS; TC, 2B, 3B, 4A