

## Chapter 9

See also Georges Roberts description of Villa Sylvain in the appendix

Opposite us in rue Bernardin de Saint Pierre lived Oncle André and Tante Olga, my father's sister, and their two children Georges and Pauline. Georges was important to me and we will be discussing him further. Tante Laura (Kellman) lived in an annex to their home. Oncle Malcolm lived in one of the two rooms set in the mansard roof. In the dependence lived Adrienne and Laure, who had been with the family for ages. They were retainers really and did little real work for Tante Olga. Their house is named "Villa Sylvain". This house has a very special place in the annals of The de Chazal family and therefore needs some more description.

*Villa Sylvain:* Basically a single story house with mansard roof in which was a large room divided into two. It was about three rooms deep with a glassed-in veranda. The kitchen was at the back and if I remember correctly was quite narrow. Outside the kitchen door was a huge Jamalque tree, well shaped for climbing and giving a lot of fruit every year. We used to take some salt and sit in the tree enjoying the crisp pink fruit which may be called rose apple or tambis.

The centre of the house consisted of a little used living room, through which one walked to get to the front door, at the rear was the dining room. This contained a barometer which Tante Laura would consult daily and at times of interesting weather patterns she would look at every half hour if the need arose. Above the sideboard was a large picture of two dogs at a kennel---it is a well known picture, black and white I think, also a silver mounted mirror.

To the left was Oncle Andre's study. This is where he was mostly to be found, he loved his work and had a successful and respected business as Attorney-at-Law. Behind that was George's room. There was a bathroom down some stairs, the levels being lower. To the right of the living rooms was the main bedroom and probably that of Pauline.

Their telephone number was 224.

When I think of it like this I wonder how our grandparents with thirteen children managed, they must have been very much on top of each other.

The back garden was large with a stone wall down the middle. I think it produced quite a lot of produce. The volcanic earth was fertile, rainfall prolific and warm temperatures fairly steady. The river was the back boundary but the land there was very wet so was left as a patch of grass surrounded by tall trees. Much later Pauline had a house built there or maybe it was further towards the main house.

The front garden had some magnificent giant dahlias at the right time of year.

Behind the garage which was at the back of the dependence was a bed in which manioc grew.

The river was beautiful, very wild. Goave de Chine (small guavas) bushes grew there. When the sun shone there would be dappled sunshine coming through the trees, small birds and butterflies fluttered along the river which was not controlled in any way and hence rose and fell quickly. One could catch "pic-pics" by putting some chewing-gum on a stick, when they perched there they got stuck. I don't think we did this much, in fact we rarely went down to the river at all.

Wasp's nests could be seen in trees and we would smoke them out and throw stones to get them down. The best antidote to a sting is to pee on the spot where it hurts. The reason for all this is to obtain the grubs and eat them fried. It is all very well eating exotic things but when one has undergone real danger from fire, danger from stings, danger from stones flying about and the excitement of being The Big Hunter, then the reward of the food is extra special.

Tante Olga had an oven. This was a paraffin heater with a metal box on the top; I think I was there when it was delivered, we were thrilled! It was quite effective I think. Previously everything had been done on charcoal.

She had a *nénene* to care for the children and do the chores, I think there was a male gardener but I also remember a “*bibi*” weeding the drive, she was probably casual labour. Surely there was a cook but I do not remember her.

Hawkers would come round with large baskets on their head selling bread, vegetables and live chicken. The main bread was a “*ti-di-pain*” which was a good sized roll; they were always fresh and delicious. A spiced roll was called “*mucacha*” (muck-ah-cha). In the evening a man on a bicycle went round the streets selling flat pancake type food (*dall-pouri*) with different savoury spreads.

I think most of the food buying was done by the servants.

I don't remember how *Oncle André* got to work, he must have had a car and I do remember they had a small Renault with the engine at the rear, after that I think they had a Triumph, the one with sharp edges making it box-like. The drive was made of stones about 2 inches across which caused dust, weeds and was generally untidy. One day this was made smooth by tar, a steam roller came for the day and we could ride on it. A real proper steam roller---that was something to remember.

*Oncle André was married to Tante Olga:* *Oncle André* was an attorney-at-law, a Mauritian though and through. He worked very long hours and was very well respected. I do not think I ever got to know him, he was just another adult. He had high standards. I do not think he was a socialite but he enjoyed company, more specially if it was to do with his work.

It is only now that I realise that he took over my grandfather's business in Port Louis. He was the obvious candidate to so.

It was at Christmas time that I got to realise that he was much liked. It was then that *Adrienne* and *Laure* came into their own. *Oncle André* was showered with gifts from grateful clients, the Chinese were especially generous. They gave uncooked hams. *Adrienne* and *Laure* would build a fire in their front yard fuelled with wood. The “*pot*” would be a four-gallon petrol tin and the ham was boiled for many hours. In an Island with little meat this was a real luxury.

*Adrienne* was quite tall and held herself well. I remember they had peach trees in their yard and they brushed their teeth with peach twigs, hey had good white teeth.

*Oncle André* I think left parenting to *Tante Olga* and the *nénene* however he took a great interest in their education and *Georges* benefited much from his encouragement, advice and example.

I last saw *Oncle André* in 1990. When we arrived he was sitting at his desk, in the same way as I always remembered him, nothing had changed. It was sad time because *Tante Olga* was very ill and in fact she died some days after.

*Tante Olga:* had been brought up in *Villa Sylvain*. She was quite laid back and took things in her stride. She ran the household, was very generous with her time and was pleased to see anyone who came.

When *Tante Olga* died we were in Mauritius with several of my first cousins. I was invited with some of them to be a pall-bearer. I was touched by this honour. The big church in *Curepipe* (St Therese) was full, with standing room only, the Prime Minister was there---no doubt because of *Oncle André's* reputation. Fortunately we did not have to carry the coffin, it was put on a trolley which we wheeled in, head towards the altar. I am still to this day concerned that when we wheeled the coffin out poor *Tante Olga* went head first. I think she should have been turned around. Was there space? Did we get it wrong? Was there a lack of communication between us? Odd, the things we worry about.

*Georges* was born six months and one day after me. I think it is this fact that reminds me each year to celebrate my half-birthday; thank you *Georges*. Because he lived across the road from me, spoke excellent English, and was my age, we were friends. We were of course completely different.

*Georges* had had a stable background with his mother always present at home. He had cousins and friends since childhood and knew no other life than that at school and at home. As a contrast my life had been disrupted at the age of six, I had lived in Europe, changed language and school several times, I don't think I was aware of it as a fact but I probably felt that my parents were not getting on as they should. I did not settle at school and was, I think, not happy.

I should have followed *Georges*' good example, he was serious, studious and an all round good-guy, I just did not have his make-up.

I was not inclined to music or sport. I can't think of anything I had any aptitude for and cannot think that I made any effort to be pleasant, nevertheless Tante Olga and *Georges* seemed quite happy to see me. I will always be grateful to them for that.

I remember playing with a football in their front garden, a small area. The bamboo hedge was thick enough that the ball would rebound off it, this was my speciality and I would run round *Georges* to score (will he dare to contradict me?). We had endless games of mah-jong and monopoly sitting in their veranda. *Georges* rarely came over to our place.

Kassim had our meal ready at 19.00 every evening promptly after which he went home. He probably used the charcoal to start up the wood stove to give hot water for the bath.

*Georges* went on to win scholarships to The Royal College and then "The Big One" to go to Oxford to study law. While there he came from time to time to 28 St Gabriels. *Georges* would always go back to be a big fish in a relatively small pond but he was expected to go back to help his father. *Georges* was very faithful to his father but my opinion is that left to his own devices he would have modernised, expanded and done a lot of things. The trouble was that Oncle André dominated their working life and *Georges* had his own son André join the business before he really had the chance. By then of course the inclination was lacking. *Georges* will give advice if asked but I think that he has now given André Jnr carte blanche to do as he sees fit with the business.

Where *Georges* met Laurence and how he managed to get her to marry him is a mystery known only to themselves. It may well have been through the church, Roman Catholicism and a spiritual life is important to them. Laurence is a real gem, a wonderful wife, mother, organiser, cook, manager, secretary, confident. *Georges* knows. They have three talented children; André Jnr who took over the law business, Anne who has emigrated to Montreal with her daughter Emma, and Patrice. Patrice studied at Southampton University and visited us in Guildford from time to time. I remember in his first weeks some friends and I went down there to run The Great South Run. Patrice ran also, Laurence came to support us all. Patrice spent some years in Singapore working for a US courier firm, DHL. He is now CEO of a Mauritian firm dealing in fish products. I am sure the present 2008 credit crunch will impinge on his business which turns over £millions.