

THE SARLAT QUARTET



Stephen William ROWE

Biography:

Doctor Stephen William ROWE is a retired industrial research scientist. He is a consultant specialising in the physics of ultra-high voltage electrical arcs and electrical insulation up to several million volts.

He is a Fellow of the English IET and the French SEE and author and co-author of about a hundred scientific and conference papers.

An accomplished musician, Dr Rowe is also a prolific songwriter, having collaborated with many excellent singers.

Born in the UK, he now lives in the French Alps, near Grenoble.

All his novels and compositions can be found on his website.

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This story is a work of fiction.

All the characters involved are products of my imagination and any resemblance of the characters to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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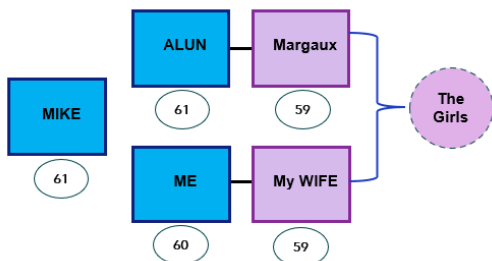
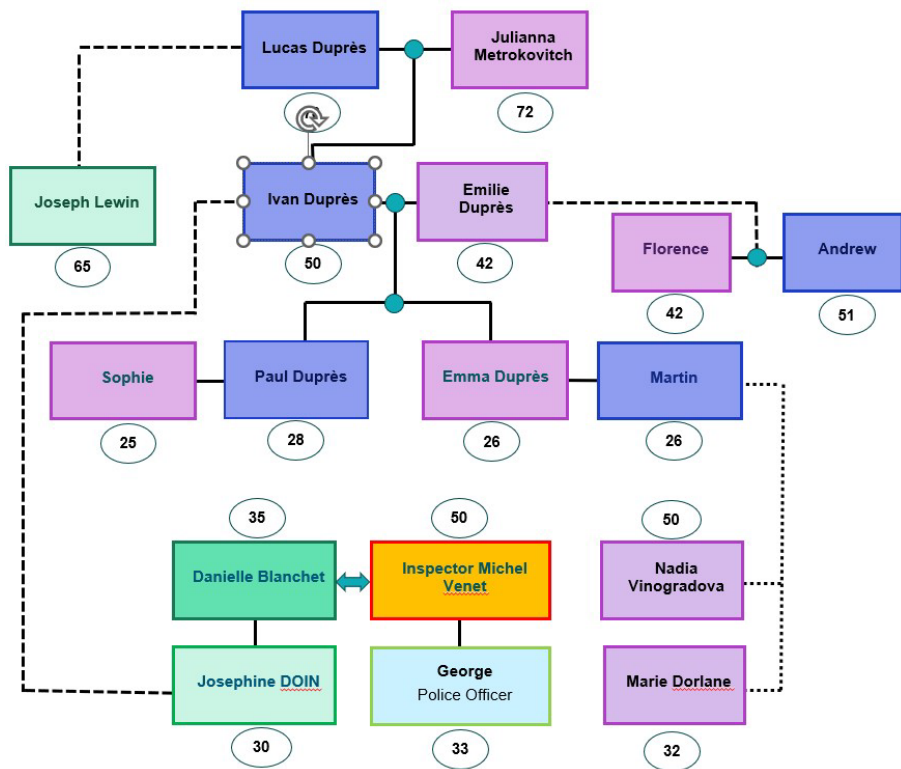
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CHAPTER 1

Mike nodded to himself as he handed me the binoculars, 'I thought so. A body.'
'You didn't think it, Mike,' I replied. 'You said it.'
'I thought it too,' he grumbled.

I took the glasses and swept the cliff face. 'Ah! Yes,' I agreed. 'A woman's body. A bit on the naked side, too.'

Alun made a grab at the binoculars, 'Gimme.' He fiddled with the eyepiece a bit, then whistled. 'Oh, yes! No doubt about that. A woman, all right!'

'Agreed,' I nodded. 'The lack of clothing considerably simplifies the identification process.'

'Was,' said Mike.

'Was, what?' I frowned.

'Was a woman, now a lifeless corpse.'

'Crikey, Mike,' groaned Alun. 'Putting it like that takes all the pleasure out of the experience.'

'Lifeless corpses don't get much pleasure out of being lifeless,' said Mike.

'I was talking of my pleasure, you twit. The pleasure of goggling at her.'

'It,' said Mike.

The three of us were standing on the grassy lip of a cliff at the point where a noisy torrent rushed over it.

A hundred metres below us, about a third of the way down, the water thundered into the bowl it had hollowed out of a rocky ledge during the past million years.

The woman's body was floating in that bowl, pushed near the outer edge by the ponding waters.

Mike snatched the binoculars back, 'I wonder how long it's been there.'

'She,' I corrected.

'It,' protested Mike. 'A corpse doesn't have a sex.'

'Well,' I replied. 'This one certainly seems to.'

Alun held onto the massive boulder on which we had been sitting, leant out over the cliff edge and sniffed, 'Hasn't been there all that long. The wind is in this direction.'

'I don't agree,' frowned Mike. 'Look, the poor thing has already swollen up.'

'Swollen up!?' I frowned.

'Yes. She must have been dead quite some time, or decomposition gasses wouldn't have caused that... puffiness.'

Alun and I pulled a face, 'Lovely, Mike,' I said. 'Thanks. However, I might point out that you just call her a "thing" then a "she". So, which is it to be?'

Mike Shrugged and shook his head impatiently.

It might be helpful to the reader to point out that Mike is a bachelor of long-standing, which explains certain things.

I looked at Alun, and he shook his head sadly. 'Women are often that shape Mike,' he said. 'That's not swelling or puffiness. That's... Well, they're often that shape.'

'Not all of them, of course,' I added. 'Some are less... How can I put it...?'

'Swollen?' suggested Mike.

'That's not swollen, Mike,' sighed Alun.

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'Bloated then?'

'No, you idiot. Not bloated either,' sighed Alun.

'Is your wife puffy like that then?' asked Mike, turning to me.

I started and frowned as I involuntarily reflected on this point. Then I shook myself. 'You don't honestly imagine I'm going to tell you, Mike, do you?'

'Have it your own way. And Margaux? Your wife then, Alun?'

'I know Margaux's my wife, Mike. But thanks for reminding me.'

'Neither of us is going to give you any intimate details like that, Mike,' I said.

'Oh, come on! I won't let on.'

Alun and I sighed a mutual sigh.

'Mike,' I said. 'You may not want to, but you *always* do. You inevitably add one clever comment too many. Then Margaux will pounce, and that's that.'

Alun nodded, 'And then we get it in the ear, good and proper...'

'Oh, all right. If you have no confidence in an old friend.'

'We don't,' I sighed.

Alun nodded vigorously, 'agreed,' he said. 'One hundred per cent.'

'All right, all right,' sighed Mike. Let's go and see then.'

'And have a closer look?' suggested Alun.

'At the corpse,' I added.

Alun pulled a face.

Mike shook his head sadly, 'Hell! I don't know about you two, but it makes me feel a bit wobbly in the leg region.'

We nodded. Regardless of all our clowning, we were nonetheless shaken by the discovery.

Now, I'd best mention a few essential details for those who have not followed our earlier adventures. First, we talk

of our wives as "The Girls" when they are together. This saves time and gets the message across just as well.

Secondly, when the three of us are reunited, we aim at having fun. The Girls say that we revert to infancy both in behaviour and intelligence. They also declare that when together, we are more dangerous than a mega-ton of CO₂ is for the environment.

We naturally rebel against such unmerited insults. It's true that we might sometimes have a slight tendency to gloss over rules, regulations, and accepted practices. However, this is rarely more than is absolutely necessary.

Furthermore, stating that we revert to infancy is absolutely not justified. We simply reject a few old-fashioned conventions, that's all.

One final clarification will be helpful to the reader. The three of us took early retirement a couple of years ago.

Alun is a tall, thin man with kind eyes. He has long legs and an indecent quantity of dark hair for someone his age. Mike, on the other hand, is much shorter. He makes up for this by the broadness of his shoulders, his powerful arms and a certain roundness midway down. His round face is usually decorated by round wire-framed glasses, distracting attention from the shining expanse of his hairless head. Finally, I am situated between the two in appearance, well-tanned, blue-eyed and semi-bald. Furthermore, were I less modest, I would add that I am pretty good-looking too.

Alun took out and polished his reading glasses, unfolded the map and squinted at it. It showed our planned track as a thin dashed line zigzagging downwards across the cliff face below us and behind the waterfall. It then zigged and zagged down a hundred metres more into the forest far below. For the greater part, it remained prudently behind the sparse growth of stunted pine trees, which had

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somehow found space for their roots on the narrow ledges. At one point, however, those dashes gave way to a short, dotted passage.

Alun held out the map to me and, raising his eyebrows, pointed to this detail.

I nodded back but said nothing.

Over the years, this would by no means be the first “delicate” passage we had had to navigate. However, today, we remained silent. It’s true that usually, Mike was all for a bit of adventure and has sometimes even gotten us into hair-raising situations. However, he might resist if he knew of its existence in advance, which would spoil the day’s fun.

After all, we were particularly enthusiastic about having a closer look at that corpse... For purely scientific reasons, of course.

So, off we scrambled. Down the steep, boulder-strewn track, grasping overhanging branches or rocky outcrops wherever available.

About halfway down, we paused to take in the view of the forest spread out below us. Not a single building or road was visible as far as the eye could see.

‘Do you think the poor girl dived?’ asked Mike.

‘Dived!?’ exclaimed Alun.

‘Yes. Perhaps she tried to dive in but missed.’

‘I thought she was an “it”, Mike,’ I jeered.

‘During the diving phase, she would still have been a “she”,’ smiled Alun. ‘Becoming an “it”, shortly after her arrival at destination.’

‘Shut up, Alun,’ groaned Mike. ‘After all, we are talking about a dead woman.’

‘For heaven’s sake, Mike!’ I said. ‘Who on earth would want to dive off the side of a cliff?’

‘Alun used to jump off them,’ retorted Mike.

'I had a hang-glider attached to me, Mike,' smiled Alun.
'That makes a big difference.'

'It takes all sorts,' I smiled back.

'But Mike,' Alun shook his head, 'Why dive off a cliff in the nude?'

'As the guy said,' smiled Mike. 'It takes all sorts...'

I sighed, 'There's one point of interest though.'

'Only one?' said Alun. 'I noticed several...'

'What on earth are you blithering about?' groaned Mike.

'Points of interest,' he smiled. 'I noticed several.' Having said this, he had the decency to shudder a little and pull a face. 'Not in good taste that,' he admitted. 'Sorry.'

'Well,' I continued ignoring this, 'When you dive in the nude...'

'I don't dive in the nude,' said Mike.

'Thank heaven for little mercies,' cried Alun.

'Shut up, Alun,' said Mike.

'As I said,' I went on. 'If "one" dives in the nude, one usually takes one's clothes off before doing so.'

'Agreed,' said Alun, 'removing them on the way down takes a lot of training.'

'Shut up, Alun,' groaned Mike. 'So,' he nodded, 'she was naked before she dived. And...'

'Who said she dived, Mike?' said Alun.

Mike shook his head sadly, 'For heaven's sake, you two idiots,' he sighed. 'If she wasn't diving, what on earth would a woman be doing naked in a forest clearing in the middle of nowhere? Tell me that, smartarse.' He nodded and paused to allow this bit of wisdom to sink in.

Alun and I exchanged looks and rolled our eyes.

'Perhaps you ought to ask Margaux about that when we get back down, Mike,' I smiled. 'She might be able to shed some light on the subject.'

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'So,' I continued, 'If we might, for the moment, pass over the pre-flight period during which the clothes were discarded...'

'We can,' nodded Alun.

'Well... Where are those clothes now?'

Alun frowned. 'You're right. There were no signs of shed clothes up there in the clearing.'

'Or on the track leading to it,' I added.

Mike frowned. 'It's obvious. She made a bundle in a waterproof bag and took them with her.'

'Not an "It" yet, then?' I said.

'Shut up,' scowled Mike. 'She chunked them down to dress again at the bottom.'

Alun and I nodded at this second piece of wisdom. 'Great,' I said. 'Obvious. So, that solves everything nicely then.'

'And all will undoubtedly become clear soon,' said Alun, striding off again.

'Diving!' I laughed.

'Shut up,' grumbled Mike as he followed us along the narrow, rock-strewn track.

A little further on, Alun gave me a nod over his shoulder as we approached the tricky part. The trees stopped abruptly, and the path continued along a ledge beyond which the cliff fell two hundred metres to the dark forest below.

I returned the nod and a raised eyebrow, and we set off as if nothing out of the ordinary was occurring so as not to spook Mike. So, we strode along, leaning warily inwards towards the rock wall, our palms spread on the cold rock.

Even though we were careful to keep our eyes fixed on the track, that passage took the longest twenty seconds I have known for many years. I must have held my breath all the way.

Once across, we stopped to draw breath and wipe the beads of cold perspiration from our brows.

'Hell!' exclaimed Mike, coming up behind us. 'That was a bit on the scary side. It ought to have been marked on the map.'

'I didn't notice anything,' lied Alun.

'Let me have a look. You two are absolute dunces when it comes to map-reading,' sighed Mike.

'Well, we're across now, Mike, ' I smiled. 'You can have a look once we're back home.'

'Home!?' frowned Mike.

'Well, at the village then.'

I'll pause here to point out that Mike, Alun and I were old friends, having known each other for over forty years. We had all taken early retirement, each for a different reason...

So, banish from your minds the idea that you are reading a story about a group of young, tanned, muscular and athletic mountaineers. We may have been tanned, but sadly, we are no longer young and not all that athletic, either. Unfortunately, however, we frequently forget these basic facts in the heat of some enthusiasm or other. This forgetfulness has been known to get us into all sorts of adventures. Not surprisingly, "The Girls" usually replace the word "adventures" with "Trouble".

Although we were unaware of it, our wives, "The Girls", spotted post-retirement boredom looming on the horizon very early on. Consequently, they are now forever engineering new activities to keep that malady at bay. The present adventure belonged to the latest of these. Happily, though, this already seemed to be unfolding in a particularly interesting "Agatha-Christie"-like way.

We had all been invited to a gathering in an abandoned village. This was to celebrate the memory of the recently

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departed grandfather of my daughter's friend, Emma Duprès.

This village was in the Dordogne region of the south of France. However, more of that later.

Oh! As will soon become apparent, one of my and Alun's favourite pastimes was the invention of ridiculous stories with which to goad and annoy Mike. This, we found, spiced up life considerably.

'Come on,' called Mike, pushing past us. 'Let's have a look at that poor girl's body.'

'Corpse,' I corrected.

'Your intention is to goggle, Alun,' called Mike. 'Not to look.'

'Let's say, "observe" then,' I smiled. 'Come on, it's too hot here.'

From here on, the track widened and became relatively flat, following the contours of the cliff face.

After another hundred metres, we turned a corner and discovered the waterfall dashing down twenty metres further along.

We had to edge behind its thundering waters on slippery, slime-covered boulders. To avoid falling into the boiling waters, we grabbed onto whatever we could on the mossy cliff face. Mind you, by the time we got safely across, we were so drenched by the spray that we might just as well have waded straight through. This would have saved time, too.

Once on dry land again, we skirted the edge of the deep pool to where the lifeless body lay, buffeted by the incessant little waves.

'Do you know what I think, Mike?' said Alun.

Mike sighed, 'I don't know what you think, but I know for certain that you're about to invent some utter tripe, as usual.'

I laughed, 'Mike is getting to know you pretty well, Alun.'

'I'm getting to know you too,' groaned Mike.

'Well,' continued Alun, 'From close up, this,' he pointed, 'Looks much more like a "she" than an "it".'

'Exactly,' I nodded. 'Much more she-like than it-like, or even thing-like.'

'And,' added Alun. 'You can see that that's not swelling.'

'Or bloating,' I added.

'All right, all right,' sighed Mike, having kneeled and scrutinised the corps. 'Have it your own way.'

'Not all much evidence of decomposition bloating, seen from close to. What do you think?' he said, turning to me.

'Indeed, no.' I agreed. 'Unless, of course, all those decomposition gases have seeped out through some hidden gash.'

Mike sighed loudly. He had recently completed a Red Cross course to update his first-aid skills. However, he had not expected to need to use that knowledge under such unusual conditions.

He screwed up his eyes, quickly scanned her body for clues, and pulled a face.

Alun watched him, 'I agree, Mike,' he said. 'Her being dead removes much of the pleasure of goggling at naked women.'

'At least she won't feel embarrassed and blush.' I said, turning away to gaze back up at the cliff. 'That must have been one hell of a fall.'

'Or dive,' added Alun.

'Oh, for God's sake!' sighed Mike.

The body in question was that of a woman, probably in her late thirties. Her thick dark hair washed back and forth behind her head in the icy, crystal-clear water. This was not a slender, shapeless body but a full-curved one, much favoured by nineteenth-century painters and sculptors.

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The sort of body that makes men of our age draw in their breath and nod, remembering days of yore.

Mike bent down and carefully felt her pulse.

'Mike!' I cried. 'What on earth are you doing?'

'Best to be sure,' he replied.

'But the poor woman's head is under the water, Mike,' I said. 'She must have been dead for ages.'

'It', smiled Alun.

'Less than ages,' said Mike. 'Or she would have bloated and swollen.'

'It' would have bloated...' smiled Alun.

'Shut up, Alun,' said Mike.

'We know,' I sighed. 'That you've just renewed your first-aid certification and so...'

Mike looked up, 'And so... this is what one has to do. Regardless of outward impressions.'

'You're not going to give her the old mouth-to-mouth trick!?' exclaimed Alun.

Mike pulled a face, frowned, raised his eyebrows, and rubbed his chin. 'Hmm! A bit of a dilemma that.'

'There's no dilemma at all, Mike,' said Alun. 'This one's as dead as a dodo.'

'I suspect Alun's not far from right there, Mike,' I said.

Mike leant closer and looked at the peaceful face floating slightly below the surface of the waves, 'No bubbling. No pulse. No eye movement.' he said half to himself.

'No life,' I agreed. 'Not a bubble on the horizon.'

'Dead then!' nodded Mike.

'That's it,' smiled Alun. 'We pros call that "Stone Dead".'

Mike stood and nodded sadly, 'Rather like the lady of the lake,'

'Except that this is a pond,' added Alun.

'The "thing of the Pond", then,' I smiled.

'Or "Three Pensioners and It",' grinned Alun. 'Good title for a book, that.'

'That's pure tripe,' grumbled Mike. 'Anyhow, how you two can carry on joking in the face of death absolutely astonishes me,' he said, shaking his head.

We stood in melancholy silence for some time, and then he shrugged. 'It seems all wrong.'

We nodded.

Alun opened his mouth to speak, but Mike butted in, 'No, Alun! Shut up, please.'

Alun shrugged again.

I stepped forward and inspected the body, 'All the same,' I said. 'Had she come crashing down from up there, I would have expected a bit more visible damage,' I frowned. 'She looks almost as if she had simply gone to sleep underwater.'

'Agreed,' nodded Alun. 'She doesn't look in the slightest bit damaged.'

'Internal damage doesn't show on the outside,' snorted Mike.

'Which is why it's called internal damage, I expect,' suggested Alun.

'Shut up, Alun.'

Alun raised his eyebrows at me and went on. 'I'd still have thought that diving onto a rocky ledge from one hundred metres would have damaged your outsides a tiny bit. Wouldn't you?'

'Come on, Mike,' I laughed. 'Admit you're wrong.'

Mike blew out his breath, 'All right. Perhaps she walked down the track then...'

'Or up it,' added Alun. 'From below.'

'Yes, all right, or up it. To take a dip.'

I started. 'To take a dip!?'

'That's it. It's been a hot day.'

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'Put your hand back in the water, Mike. Would you want to swim about in that? It can't be much above ten degrees Celsius.'

'It takes all sorts....' he said.

Alun shrugged, 'So, you're suggesting that she trudded all the way up here, jumped in, and the shock stopped her heart.'

'That would explain the absence of damage,' he said. 'Yes. A compelling explanation, I think.'

'Before which, she took off her clothes and hid them. That doesn't make much sense,' I shook my head doubtfully.

'Hmmm.'

'That's what I was thinking,' I said.

'Something odd here,' frowned Alun. 'If she fell or dived from up there, she'd be smashed up, at least a bit...'

'And,' I added. 'If she'd come for a dip, her clothes would still be here.'

'Unless she walked up in the nude,' suggested Alun.

'As a bet with a friend, you think?' I added.

'That's a possibility,' he smiled. 'After all, girls will be girls...'

'Anyway, I'm not certain she would look quite so peaceful after a heart attack,' said Mike.

The three of us stood looking down at the naked body, buffeted by the waves.

'Sad, isn't it,' said Mike. 'Makes me feel peculiar too.'

'Really!?' said Alun.

'I suppose she could have been shot then,' suggested Mike.

We gaped at him. 'Shot!?' cried Alun.

'Can you see any bullet holes, Mike?' I asked.

'Or any blood?' added Alun.

'Odd...' said Mike.

'Yes,' I agreed.

'Not shot then...' mumbled Mike.
'No,' sighed Alun. 'Not shot.'
We stood there for a moment, looking down.
'It really does take the pleasure out of it,' sighed Alun.
'Her being an "it". A dead "it" to whit.'

Mike stood and looked around the ledge, 'I suppose we'll have to take her down then?' he said.

The two of us gazed at him.

'What!?'

'Well, wouldn't that be the right thing to do?' he ended.

'The right thing!?' Alun spluttered. 'The right thing would be to carry this poor woman's naked body down that narrow death trap of a track?'

'Just sling her over a shoulder and trudge down?' I added.

'Well, we can hardly just leave her here.' he said.

'You mean, alone and unprotected?' mused Alun.

'You're right, Mike,' I smiled. 'She would be open to attack or of being shredded to bits by vultures and eagles.'

'That pool is probably swarming with piranhas, too,' suggested Alun. 'We'll have to get a move on then.'

'Shut up, you two,' sighed Mike as he stood, stroking his chin sadly, debating how to deal with the situation.

But happily, as sometimes occurs, before we had to debate much more about the dilemma, it was solved for us.

At this moment, we heard the unmistakable cracking sound of heavy boulders bounding down. Luckily, we had enough experience in mountain trekking to know what to do.

Don't look. Don't think. Run.

We had dashed off down the ledge and were still going fast when we heard the crash.

We slowed, shot a cautious look upward and turned.

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An amazing sight met our eyes.

A huge boulder landed smack in the middle of the pool and blasted the water outwards.

With the tons of water, the woman's body flew over the cliff edge in a graceful arc. Then, down and down it went, arms and legs flailing about as it spiralled and somersaulted earthwards.

However, as we watched, we noticed something else. We saw someone far below, striding purposely along the footpath towards the waterfall's base.

At the noise, the person looked up and, spotting the pirouetting body, screamed. A woman's scream.

She then spotted us and froze.

The body plummeted down and hit the main pool at the base with a huge splash.

'Ouch,' said Mike. 'That must have hurt...'

We looked at him in pity. 'Oh!' he said. 'Sorry.'

'Exactly,' replied Alun.

I turned the binoculars on the woman and saw that she was doing likewise.

'It's that woman from the herbal shop,' I said.

But before I could get any further, she was striding off.

'She's got her phone out. Calling the police, I suppose,' I groaned.

'Here comes trouble,' frowned Alun.

'Oh hell!' groaned Mike.

'Exactly,' nodded Alun.

'I suppose we had better get down and see what can be done,' said Mike.

'Done!?' exclaimed Alun.

'Oh Hell!' I sighed, 'I suspect that there's going to be some tricky explaining ahead.'

'Don't worry,' smiled Alun, 'Leave it all to me. I'll sort it out.'

'Oh god!' groaned Mike.

'As I said, Mike,' I smiled, 'Here comes trouble.'