

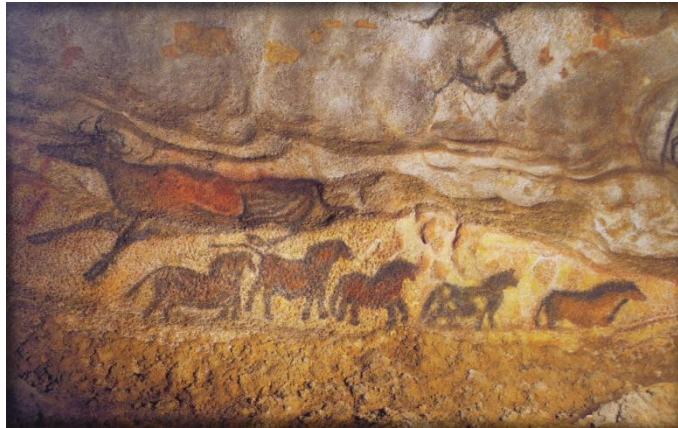
Tree Rings

by

E.S. Kraay

Chapter Three

The Artist, 20,000 BC



Lascaux

The British agent huddles over his wireless set and holds the headphones tight to his ears trying to discern the message from the static. His concentration is evident in the wrinkles that line his brow. The *maquisards*, the French resistance fighters, surround him waiting anxiously for what news he can share. Two smoke cigarettes and pass them among their comrades. A watchful owl questions, “Who” from the nearby forest.

Reardon, the Brit, nods his head and speaks into the handheld microphone, “I understand. Over and out.” He turns off the unit to conserve power and removes the headset. “Give me that,” he says to no one and extends his searching fingers, waiting for a cigarette. He wipes the sweat from his forehead. A quarter-inch of tobacco glows red and turns to ash as Reardon draws deeply. “Thanks,” he says. The ashes fall like snowflakes.

The Frenchmen are patient.

He nervously taps the table with the blunt end of his pencil then rubs his tired eyes like an insomniac. “You need Stens, we’ve Stens,” he begins in his properly abbreviated English. “The SOE is prepared to deliver 200 in a single drop ...” A round of backslapping interrupts him before he can finish.

“When?” the partisan leader asks.

“When?” Reardon echoes and leans back in the chair with his fingers wrapped behind his head. “When I can assure them that you can secret them so Jerry won’t find them.”

“This is no problem,” a tall man leaning against the door jamb with arms akimbo haughtily declares. “The Germans have taken our livestock. We have more barns than animals.”

The others laugh, except for Reardon whose cold glance pierces the tall man. “Barns are not acceptable.”

“Why not? That’s where we’ve been hiding our supplies.”

“And that’s why you always need more supplies. The Germans finds them. The commander is specific: a barn won’t do.”

“That’s crazy,” another remarks, his beret cocked perilously on the side of his head.

“No,” Reardon calmly responds, “that’s what the commander says. You’ll have to come up with an alternative. We can’t risk losing 200 Stens because a German soldier wanders into a barn to take a piss.”

Silence. Then a timid voice whispers from the shadows, “I know a place.”

Reardon squints and waves the whisperer into the light cast by the single candle on the wooden table. His left eyebrow arcs suspiciously. “Hmmm? I’ve not seen you before. Who can speak for him?”

“I can.”

“What can you tell me that I will believe?”

Pascal is large, powerfully built. He places a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “His name is Marcel. I’ve known him since he was a child. His parents are good people and I employ him as an apprentice in the garage. He is a good worker.”

“Is he a good mechanic?”

“Not yet, but a good worker.”

“You trust him?”

“With my life.”

Reardon examines the boy from head to foot. As he lowers his eyes, he pulls back his head, smiles the smile of a serious man, leans forward and asks, “And who is this one? Is he a mechanic, too?”

“No, sir. He is my dog, but if he were a mechanic, he would be a good one.”

The partisans release a collective laugh that eases the tension, at least for the moment.

“You’re not much more than a boy. How old are you?”

“Eighteen.”

“Do you hate the Nazis?”

Marcel hesitates. “I love my country.”

“Do you love your country more than you hate Nazis?”

“Yes.” The boy reaches down and pets his dog.

“Does the dog have a name?”

“Robot.”

“Odd name.”

“It’s a good name. He likes it.”

Reardon lowers his hand and calls, “Here, Robot.” Robot is a small, short-haired terrier, a Jack Russell, white with a brown spot that covers his left eye like a pirate’s patch. The dog moves forward, sniffs Reardon’s hand and licks his outstretched fingers. The agent smiles. “The dog will vouch for you, Marcel. I trust dogs more than I trust people. “So, you know a place to hide the guns?”

“Yes, sir. I do.” Marcel tells his story ...

When we are children, we hear the tales of a mysterious chateau built beneath the surface of the forest. As we play in the woods, we are always on the lookout for the secret passage that leads to this magical place. “If you find it,” they say, “you can claim a casket of gold guarded by the spirits of the forest.” Of course, no one will ever find it, but we are forever poking sticks in rabbit holes with the hope that maybe this treasure truly exists. As we grow older, our minds turn to more practical ways to claim our fortunes, ways that do not include animal spirits or woodland fairies.

Several weeks ago, a strong storm blew through the forest. Two days later as I walked through the woods from my home to the garage, Robot raced off the path barking as he often does. I believed him to be chasing a rabbit. It is one of his favorite things to do, but as I watched him, he ran to the base of a large tree that the storm had blown so hard that it leaned to its side with half the ball of its roots exposed. Robot barked at the uprooted tree and began to dig.

I trotted to his side and found that he had opened a small hole in the earth. I took a nearby stick and explored the hole. I could not touch bottom as is the case when you shove a stick into a rabbit hole. I dropped to my knees. Firmly holding the stick, I pushed it as far as I could. There was no resistance.

I did not want to be late for work, so I did not delay, but I returned in two days, on Thursday when I was not needed at work. Three friends came with me. We moved some large rocks and made the hole big enough that we could squeeze through. Robot was already inside and his happy barks echoed. This was more than a rabbit hole. Perhaps we had discovered the secret passage that had eluded us in our youth.

One by one, we squeezed through the small opening we had made ...

“And you say this cavern is large enough to store our weapons?”

Marcel nods. “If the hole were large enough, you could drive a truck into the cavern beneath it. That is why it is such a good place. If you didn’t know the hole was there, you would never see it.”

“How many people know about this?”

“Only five: me, my three friends and the priest. He told us to tell no one about the place because he did not want the Germans to find it.”

“Why would you tell your priest?” Reardon asks. “Finding this place is no sin and nothing you need to confess.”

Marcel lowers his eyes, removes his beret and twists it nervously in his hands. “There is one other who knows,” he begins. “We were startled when we first lit our

lamps, for we faced large, moving beasts, then we realized they were not real animals, but images on the walls and ceiling that appeared to move when our lamps flickered.”

“So, you told your priest about the pictures.”

“Yes, but there is more. As my eyes adjusted to the dim light cast by our lamps, I saw a face, inverted and staring directly at me. At first, I thought it to be another image, but I knew it was not when the eyes blinked. I raised by lamp to have a better look.

“A man clothed in animal skins laid on his back on a ledge high on the wall. His hair was unkempt and his face unshaven. My friends saw him, too. He stared at us – more with curiosity than fear, though he probably would not have said the same about us – and we stared at him. We were as still as statues.

“When I dared take a step forward, he turned cat-like to his stomach and waited. I said, ‘Hello,’ but he did not respond. ‘Who are you? What is your name?’ I do not believe he understood what I said. I surveyed the giant cavern with my eyes and we slowly backed away and left through the hole by which we entered.”

“You returned with the priest?”

“Yes,” Marcel continued. “The man in the cave was very dirty. We live in a small town, but none of us had ever seen him before. When I am unsure of what to do, I ask the Prêtre Boucher. He always has an answer.

“When we returned with Father, the man was gone, but Prêtre Boucher was amazed at the images that covered the walls and the ceiling. We moved deeper into the cavern calling ‘Hello, hello,’ but received no reply, though one time a low growl echoed from a hallway. Fearful that it might be a bear, we left.

“We climbed out and dusted our clothes. Prêtre Boucher cautioned us that the Nazis must never know what we’d found. ‘It is very old,’ he told us. ‘We must not let the Germans destroy it.’”

“And when did this happen? When did you find this cavern?”

“Maybe two weeks ago. Yes, it was two weeks. Just three days after I celebrated my 18th birthday.”

“How many times have you returned?”

“Just twice. Once with my friends and the second time with the priest.”

“Can you take me to this place tomorrow? The SOE awaits my answer. If they are to deliver the Sten guns to us, I must tell them we have a safe place. If I don’t, they will send the guns to someone else. Pascal, you will come with us, and I want to meet your friends and the priest. Can you arrange that, Marcel?”

“I can.”

Robot leads them to the place as dawn breaks. The fallen tree is old, its branches broken and gnarled like the fingers of the old men who walk the streets wondering what has happened, wondering why these swastika-bearing soldiers are among them. The secret place is some distance off the path and impossible to see even if one looks in that direction. No one would have reason to depart the beaten path.

Prêtre Boucher waits with the other boys. His hair is thin and he wears spectacles. Reardon asks few questions, satisfied that the priest and the boys share no love for the German invaders. They will not betray him or the partisans. He is more interested in the place.

The opening in the ground is well concealed and nothing suggests its presence. Reardon offers Marcel a quizzical glance. The boy smiles, and he and his friends brush fallen leaves aside to reveal a cross-hatch of sticks that, once removed, reveals the opening. The pregnant smell of stagnant moisture passes. The dog enters, tail wagging. Pascal widens the hole to accommodate his broad shoulders, and the others follow.

Once inside, they illumine their lanterns. Reardon raises his and stares at the ceiling. Indeed, the menagerie of beasts moves as the flames in the lamps flicker. Thunderous hooves pound the stone as bison, deer and other horned beasts journey in peace to their unknown destination. He feels them and hears them, but when he turns to his left, then his right to determine if the others hear what he hears, he discovers that he is alone.

This is not illusion. The flame ceases its movement and stands erect from the tip of the grease gun he carries as his lamp. The fresco freezes and the room is silent and still.

The dim light to which his eyes have become accustomed to reveals a man dressed in animal skins lying on his back atop a crude scaffold, a wooden bowl close to his right hip. He glances at Reardon, but only for a moment before he resumes what he is doing. He dips his fingers into the bowl and draws a curved line on the ceiling less than an arm's length above him. The line is ochre and brilliant against the limestone surface. He retrieves another bowl from his left side and continues, now with black pigment. In a short time, the image of a horse emerges. Then another.

Reardon studied art before the war. As he watches this artist clad in animal skin, he reflects on Michelangelo lying on a scaffold as he creates his masterpiece high above the floor of the Sistine Chapel. Is this man any less a genius?

Time disappears. When the artist is finished – for now, anyway – he has created a plain of horses pursuing a bull. The earth colors soften the black outlines and ochre accents that animate the creatures when the lamp flickers and Reardon's flame is moved by a wind he cannot feel. Aware of Reardon's presence, the painter looks directly at him as if to gain approval for the art he pridefully created.

Reardon squints into the dim light seeking the priest, the boys and the *maquisards* but no one is there. He fights back a hint of panic, an emotion he is unfamiliar with, certainly uncharacteristic of an SOE operative. He clenches his fists to steel himself and reassess the situation, but when he prepares himself to confront the artist, the painter is gone and only his scaffold remains.

Reardon moves toward the framework with uncertain steps. The temperature falls and he shivers. As he raises his hands to blow warm air into his palms, he sees that his fingers are stained with muddy colors. He pulls the animal skin closer to his body and ascends the scaffold to resume his work.