

"Alors, Madame, à demain...four o'clock. I shall be most anxious to meet you; I am sure you are even more charming in person," said the suave voice with the French accent on the other end of the phone.

"And I look forward to meeting you, too," Grace Morrow replied in her cultured voice. "I can't tell you how excited I am about the possibility of arranging a tour for my library group, and I know my friend, Emily Thomas will be just as enthusiastic as I am. It was she, you know, who discovered your ad. Until tomorrow, then. Good-bye."

Grace did not bother to hang up the telephone; she merely depressed and released the switch hook and dialed Emily immediately. "I think we've found the perfect tour," she exclaimed breathlessly as soon as her friend answered the phone. "I've just spoken to Monsieur deSimplon, and we have an appointment to meet him at four o'clock tomorrow afternoon."

"Now Grace." Emily responded in her most matter-of-fact-tone. "Don't get excited until we have all the facts. Did you ask him about the fine print in the brochure? Seventy-five percent of the total cost of the trip, payable in advance, seems somewhat excessive."

"No, I didn't." Grace said somewhat defensively. "Honestly, Emily, I wasn't going to give him the third degree on the telephone! I thought you'd be pleased to be able to meet with him so quickly. You know, my dear," she added "I have questions for him too, and tomorrow will be the perfect opportunity to have all our questions answered."

The sound of her mistress' voice had brought Jessica, a large calico cat, into the room where Grace was sitting. While Grace continued to talk, Jessica chattered to get her attention and leapt gracefully onto the arm of the chair where she was sitting. When Grace finished her conversation and hung up the phone, Jessica stretched her forepaws onto the woman's lap. Then the rest of her body followed and she proceeded to 'nest' as her chatters became contented purrs.

Grace had always been a cat lover, but for years had thought it unfair to coop up a pet in her small city apartment. Then she retired from her job as a librarian at a private day school, and with the uncanny intuition cats have for people who love and need them, Jessica had selected Grace to be her human.

For several days, whenever Grace left or entered her building, Jessica would be waiting outside - or in the lobby if Dan, the friendly doorman, was on duty. The obviously bright but somewhat unkempt cat would ingratiatingly arch her back and entwine herself around the surprised woman's legs. Then, when she had effectively stopped Grace from moving, she would look up and mew beseechingly.

"That cat has sure taken a shine to you, Miss Morrow," Dan would say with a wink. He seemed to enjoy Grace's perplexity and secretly hoped she would adopt the persistent puss. But Grace continued to resist the cat's overtures and gently but firmly extricated herself and went on about her business.

Then, one rainy evening, Grace looked out her kitchen window and nearly jumped out of her slippers at the sight of what seemed to be two amber eyes floating above the fire escape. When she realized they belonged to her determined new friend, she opened the window to rescue the bedraggled stray.

"And the rest is history, cat 'o mine." Grace mused as she stroked Jessica's glossy fur. "What would I do without you? It's hard to remember how uninteresting life was before you came, you smart, dear creature. And now I'm about to embark on an adventure of my own," she said fondly to Jessica as she picked up the glossy brochure she'd been reading before her phone calls and Jessica's arrival in her lap. "Doesn't this look wonderful?"

She adjusted her half-glasses and opened the brochure for both of them to look at. On the cover was a sepia-toned picture of what was obviously a prehistoric drawing of a bison and the words "Tour with Guy deSimplon! Visit France's newly discovered cave paintings!" Inside, the Paleolithic Age petroglyphs were described as having been created about 20,000 B.C. and still in nearly perfect condition.

"I've always had a passion for anthropology and archeology," Grace had told her friends in the library group when she and Emily volunteered to explore the possibility of traveling with M. deSimplon. "The very thought of Cro-Magnon people crawling into those deep, secret caves and creating far more sophisticated paintings than one might suppose absolutely intrigues me. And with what I've learned about the subject plus Emily's financial expertise, we should be able to arrange all the details for a perfect trip."

The group had been researching early art and religious beliefs, and knew there were differences of opinion about the purpose of the cave paintings. Some experts believed they had been done for ritualistic reasons, possibly to enhance the hunting ability of the men, and others believed they represented a great symbolic idea of some kind. So the opportunity to study some petroglyphs first-hand was almost too good to be true.

The next day, following her usual nap after lunch, Grace wound her graying hair into its customary topknot and put on her sturdy walking shoes. Then she donned the herringbone cape she always wore except in the hottest months and tucked Jessica, who was insulted when not allowed to share her mistress' outings, into her arms. The sight of Jessica's big tri-colored head and watchful eyes looking out from under the folds of the cape never failed to attract attention.

Emily was waiting for them in the lobby. The two women were as different in looks as they were in personality. Emily had henna-red hair such as nature never created, and the head underneath was as bright inside as it was outside. A retired accountant, Emily was the treasurer of their library group and in charge of financial arrangements, a subject they all took very seriously. Most of the members had to work with very meager incomes to satisfy their curiosity and love of travel. The money they were able to save for a trip every other year had to be wisely spent, and Emily felt obliged to be very thorough in her investigations.

When Emily had first seen the advertisement for M. deSimplon's tour in a retirees' magazine, she had immediately brought it to Grace's attention. "New discoveries of cave paintings may not be probable, but they are possible," she'd said. "Haven't you told me that more than sixty caves have already been discovered in Europe? And the cost doesn't seem prohibitive, provided there aren't any hidden expenses."

"Oh, but Emily, it says here that M. deSimplon personally guides each group," Grace had enthused. "It must be an exclusive arrangement with the French government! Did you know that many of the caves with paintings in Europe, including the famous Lascaux caves in France, have been closed to tourists because of the damage to the drawings caused by bright lights and warm bodies? Why, they're now reserved for scholarly research only."

Now as the two women - with the cat and their questions - started out on their walk to M. deSimplon's travel bureau, Grace was still trying to reassure her friend.

"I'm sure we don't have anything to worry about, my dear," she said to Emily confidently. "He sounded so pleasant on the phone, and I know when we meet him he'll put all your worries to rest."

Emily turned to her friend and laughed, "You sound as contented as your cat! I only hope you're right."

The travel bureau was located in one of the city's modern glass office buildings. As Grace and Emily entered the first room of what was apparently a two-room suite, the inner door opened just wide enough to permit a tall, slender, elegant man to sidle out. He was wearing a slightly iridescent grey suit, with a decidedly European cut, and a maroon cravat. When he saw his two visitors in the reception area, he gave a little start, quickly regained his composure and hurried across the plush carpeting to greet them.

"Mesdames, je suis enchanté, enchanté," he said as he took Emily's proffered hand and brought it to within an inch of his lips, where he made a small kissing sound. He repeated the ritual with Grace, who then opened her cape to introduce Jessica.

“Ah, un chat,” said M. de Simplon, as he took a step backward and lost some of his smooth manner. Jessica, equally disapproving, tensed and let out a short hiss. It was hard to tell who disliked whom more, the man or the cat.

M. deSimplon busied himself temporarily by rearranging the folds of his cravat, and Grace could not help noticing his perfectly manicured, long-fingered hands and the odor of his slightly musky cologne. Jessica, whose nose and tail were twitching, jumped down from Grace’s arms and darted across the room to sit behind a ficus plant.

“I am so happy that you two charming ladies are bringing your friends to see my caves,” said M. deSimplon with an air of finality.

“Well, I’m afraid that’s not quite a *fait accompli*,” Grace replied quickly. “We have several questions we’d like to ask you about the caves.”

“And there are some financial details we think need explanation,” Emily added, her reservations obvious in her tone.

M. deSimplon scowled slightly. “Did not the brochure explain the details to your satisfaction?” he asked.

“Not quite,” Emily persisted. “For instance, why is it necessary for a group of our size to commit seventy-five percent of the cost a month in advance? And what kind of accommodations are provided? I’d also like to know what percentage of our downpayment is refundable if we’re not able to go for some reason.”

“Yes,” Grace chimed in. “I’d like to know exactly where the caves are located, and if the age of the paintings has been determined by the radiocarbon process.”

“Ah, mesdames, so many questions!” laughed M. deSimplon. “Do not worry your lovely heads about such things. It is for me to worry. I must have the money, you see, to make your arrangements. You must think only of how happy you will be to see the cave paintings.”

Grace tried valiantly to question the tour director again. “May I ask you about the French government’s involvement with this cave? Why isn’t it...?”

Before she could continue, M. deSimplon laughed again and interrupted. “Your curiosity and concern are most charming, most charming. I just know we are going to have a most enjoyable time. All you lovely ladies and your friends must do is relax and put yourselves in my hands,” he said patronizingly as he held his hands out in front of him and regarded them with obvious satisfaction.

Before Grace and Emily could bridle at his condescending attitude, he excused himself with the information that an ‘important client’ was waiting in his inner office and he would return to them shortly.

“Well, what’s your impression of our potential tour leader?” asked Emily when she and Grace were alone. “Your cat doesn’t seem to approve of him

but, of course, she isn't invited on this trip."

"I don't know," Grace sighed dubiously. "He isn't what I expected or hoped for, but he does have the cave paintings we want to see. And they look real enough, don't they?"

The sun streaming in through the huge glass windows highlighted the travel posters and several framed photographs hanging on three walls of the room. The two women turned to examine them and became increasingly excited as they gazed at the stylized reproductions of bison, deer and other animals. Grace scooped up Jessica, who had come out of hiding to follow her around the room, and murmured to her of the wonderful artistry in these depictions of life thousands of years ago.

As Grace turned from studying one of them, Jessica suddenly meowed, wriggled from the woman's grasp, and jumped to the top of the sleek table behind which the photograph was hung, narrowly missing an artful arrangement of snapdragons. Grace gasped, and then her attention was drawn back to the image. After a moment, her eyes widened.

"Oh, Emily," she said quietly, with real disappointment in her voice. "I'm afraid our M.deSimplon is worthy of your concern and Jessica's hostility. He's a fraud! These caves may have existed in 20,000 B.C., but the paintings are probably no more than twenty months old. M. deSimplon simply must not be allowed to dupe unsuspecting people! Why, if it weren't for Jessica, he might have swindled us as well."

Then she showed her friend the clue her cat had helped her catch.

The Solution

"Look," Grace said, as Emily moved quickly to her side to look at the photograph of the cave painting with her. "Do you see the figures there," she pointed, "in the lower left?" Both women bent forward to examine them. "They're obviously a boy, a man and a cat!" Grace exclaimed. And I know that cats weren't domesticated at any time during the Paleolithic Age. Evidence of cats living with people didn't occur until 3,000 to 8,000 years ago; in fact, it was probably the Egyptians who first made pets of them."