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BRIEF HISTORICAL NOTE

Catharism.

The heresy of Catharism began to take hold in various parts of France at the end of the 12th century but it was in the south Languedoc where it really flourished. Its rise was partly due to the simple way of life of its 'priests'. There was only one prayer, the Lord's Prayer, no cross and no eternal hell – delivery from evil was through baptism and they believed in reincarnation. Nobility and commoners alike respected their lack of wealth. Furthermore Cathar 'priests' preached in the common language, Occitan, and did not ask for money. The Roman Catholic church (referred to by the Cathars as the Church of Wolves), which was already facing problems with Moslem advances in Jerusalem and Spain, could not face such a heresy in Catholic lands and called for a crusade in 1208. One year later Béziers was sacked and the population of 20,000 slaughtered. There then followed a series of bloody sieges and massacres (chronicled in the songs of the troubadours) and the Cathar fortresses fell one by one. The last few Cathars took refuge in the hilltop castles at Montsegur, Puilaurens and Queribus, the latter falling in 1255. By 1271, all Languedoc had been incorporated into France. Occitan traditions and language are still defended in this region.

The Mystery of Rennes-le-Château.

While the remote village of Rennes-le-Château was reputed to have a population of 30,000 in 1062, in 1885 it was a dilapidated settlement of 294 with a castle and church in terrible disrepair. Enter Abbé Saunière, the newly appointed Priest of the village who raised money to repair the church. During the works he discovered some parchments and a flagstone with sculpted side face down. He is then supposed to have worked in the church late at night, wandered in the hills with a vine basket and even opened graves in the cemetery with his housekeeper, Marie. He then spent vast amounts building a villa, a gothic tower for his books, a calvary, expensive renovations in the church and landscaping the gardens which he filled with exotic animals. He also gave lavish dinner parties for weekend visitors from Paris, including Emma Calve, an international opera singer and follower of the occult, and a member of the Hapsburg family. He refused to account for his expenditure and the case of the country curé went as far as the Vatican. He died in 1917. Marie the housekeeper died in 1953 without revealing more. Whether he discovered treasure or documents "so important as to change the face of the world" nobody knows – but he spent an awful lot of money!

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