

Vintage 1954

ANTOINE LAURAIN

Translated by Gallic Books
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Gallic Books
London

It happened in the middle of a brightly moonlit night in the Beaujolais vineyards. The official account ran over four typed pages in triplicate:

*Charmally-les-Vignes. Monsieur Pierre Chauveau (47) –
witness statement on the events of 16 September 1954.*

Section 557: local matters

I was going home through the vineyards, a little before midnight. I'd had a drink with Michel Perigot and François Lecharny at L'Auberge de la Belette Rouge, and then I'd left them at the war memorial. Anyway . . . I was making my way through the vineyards with only the moon to guide me. It wasn't giving off much light, but it didn't matter, I know the way like the back of my hand. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. That's when it happened (WITNESS PAUSES). There was a very bright flash, like the moment lightning strikes, except that this lasted for a while. I was in the Saint-Antoine vineyard, the one Jules Beauchamps owns. The flash was huge, and there were lights everywhere in the sky. It looked like a town with lots of tiny little windows, but there was no sound. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I

felt so dizzy I had to sit down in the dirt. The thing stayed there for a while, hovering over the vines. Perhaps there were people in it looking down at me. Then suddenly it vanished as quickly as it had appeared. But it was there. I saw it and that's why I've come to give a statement even though my wife and family advised me not to. I've come to report what I saw to the authorities.

Being of sound mind and body
and in full possession of my faculties,
Pierre Chauveau

This unusual testimony was classified by the police as follows: Report of an unidentified flying object by one Pierre Chauveau, a winegrower residing in Charmally-les-Vignes. Despite the singular nature of the account, the duty officers that morning were not overly surprised. Since the beginning of the year police stations across the country had taken down an unusually high number of such statements. Coming from all walks of life, the witnesses included notorious alcoholics, storytellers, lawyers, the simple-minded, local notables, unknown truck drivers, priests, city-dwellers and farmers. The police did their job and duly noted down people's accounts, passed them on to the relevant authority and filed them away in triplicate. The press – especially the local papers – never passed up an opportunity to entertain readers with these bizarre tales. By the end of 1954, more than a thousand witness statements and almost five hundred reports of UFO sightings had been received by the police across the country. No explanation for this phenomenon was ever found, and

gradually the number of reported sightings fell back to normal levels – between fifty and a hundred a year.

As his family had predicted, Chauveau was endlessly mocked, and he earned the nickname of ‘Mr Flying Saucer’.

In 1978, his grandchildren took him to see *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. When the mother ship appeared on screen to the amazement of François Truffaut in the role of Claude Lacombe, Pierre Chauveau shouted, ‘That’s the one I saw! I saw the whole thing in 1954!’ The other cinema goers tutted and shushed, and one, who could not be identified, called out, ‘Shut up, Chauveau!’ That evening at dinner, as his wife looked on disapprovingly, Pierre Chauveau decided to drink the bottle of Château Saint-Antoine 1954 that he had laid down. As usual, he also poured a drop into the bowl of his dog, Ausweis – daughter of Schnell, granddaughter of Sieg, a German shepherd left behind by the Waffen SS as they fled, whom everyone assumed was part wolf.

The next day, he set off for the wine cooperative and neither he nor Ausweis was ever seen again. The last image his nearest and dearest would have of him was of a man with his dog at his side, raising his collar and drawing on his pipe: ‘Foul weather,’ he had said, then he had closed the door and never reappeared. His family had put out a missing person appeal, dragged the ponds and organised a search of the forests but all to no avail.

The wine produced by the Saint-Antoine vineyard in 1954 had been exceptional. The eight hundred bottles of that vintage were all snapped up that year. Even though the wine was new it seemed to have the depth of flavour of a thirty-year-old *grand cru*. An oenologist declared that he detected

‘the tannic notes and lingering flavour of a very good Chambolle-Musigny’. Jules Beauchamps said that was because of his hard work and the new techniques he had used. But he was never able to reproduce such wonderful wine and Château Saint-Antoine reverted to being the very ordinary table wine it had always been.