

'Well, this is no good, I don't want to live here!' I said as we drove along yet another tarmac road behind a row of whitewashed houses. 'I want to live in the mountains, for heaven's sake, not in the suburbs of some town in a valley.'

5 'Shut up and keep driving,' ordered Georgina, the woman sitting beside me. She lit another cigarette of strong black tobacco and bathed me in a cloud of smoke.

I'd only met Georgina that afternoon but it hadn't taken her long to put me in my place. She was a confident young Englishwoman with a peculiarly Mediterranean way of seeming at ease with her surroundings. For the last ten years she had been living in the Alpujarras, the 10 foothills of the Sierra Nevada, south of Granada, and she had carved out a niche for herself acting as an intermediary between the farmers who wanted to sell their *cortijos** in the hills and move to town, and the foreigners who wanted to buy them. It was a tough job but no one who saw her ironing out deals with the coarsest peasant or arguing water rights with the most stubborn bureaucrat could doubt she was the woman for it. If she had a weakness at all it was in her refusal to suffer fools and ditherers.

15 'Do you bully all your clients like this?' I protested.

'No, just you. Left here.'

Obediently I turned the wheel and we shrugged off the last houses of Órgiva, the market town where I'd been adopted by my agent. We bumped onto a dirt track and headed downhill towards the river.

20 'Where are the mountains?' I whined.

Georgina ignored me and looked at the groves of oranges and olives on either side of the track. There were white houses covered in the scrags of last year's vines and decked with bright geraniums and bougainvillea; mules were ploughing; boiler-suited growers were bent bum-up amid perfect lines of vegetables; a palm tree shaded the road where hens were swimming in the 25 dust. Dogs slept in the road in the shade; cats slept in the road in the sun. The creature with the lowest priority on the road was the car. I stopped and backed up a bit to go round a lemon.

'Drive over lemons,' ordered Georgina.

There were, it was true, a hell of a lot of lemons. They hurtled past, borne on a stream of water that bubbled nearby; in places the road was a mat of mashed fruit, and the earth beneath 30 the trees was bright with fallen yellow orbs. I remembered a half-forgotten snatch of song, something about a lovelorn gypsy throwing lemons into the Great River until it turned to gold.

The lemons, the creatures and the flowers warmed my heart a little. We drove on through a flat plain quilted with cabbages and beans, at the end of which loomed a little mountain. After dipping a banana grove, we turned sharp right up a steep hill with deep cuttings in the red rock.

35 'This looks more like it.'

'Just wait, we're not there yet.'

Up and up we went, bend after bend, the river valley spread below us like an aerial print. On through a gorge and suddenly we burst into a new valley. The plain we had crossed disappeared utterly, hidden from sight by the mass of mountain, and drowned by the roaring of 40 the river in the gorge below.

Far below, beside the river, I caught sight of a little farm in a horseshoe-shaped valley, a derelict house on a cactus-covered crag, surrounded by unkempt fields and terraces of ancient olive trees.

'La Herradura,' Georgina announced. 'What about that, then?'

45 'Well, it's nice to dream but the pittance we've got to spend is hardly going to buy us a place like that.'

‘With the money you’ve got to spend you could afford that place and have some left over to do it up.’

‘I don’t believe you. You can’t possibly be serious.’

50 I was incredulous because this was so far beyond my wildest hopes. I had come to Spain with a sum of money that would barely stretch to a garden shed in the south of England, expecting to buy at best a ruined house with perhaps a little patch of land.

‘Well, there’s no point in going any further. I’ll have that one. Let’s go down and see it.’

Extract from *Driving Over Lemons* by Chris Stewart (Sort of Books, 1999);
© Chris Stewart, reprinted by permission of Sort of Books.

**cortijos*: rural farmhouses typical to the south of Spain

What is the narrator’s attitude to events as they unfold in this extract?