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A Sign of the Times

by Ivor John

He looked around at the beautiful hills, which stretched as far as he could see. Narrow tracks, were woven through the landscape strewn with rocks ploughed up over the years from the clay soil, where they had dried out in the Mediterranean sun and cracked into smooth chunks of terracotta.

Beside the track, the meadows were replete with wild flowers, red, blue and yellow anemones, so vibrant they looked as if they had been painted in oils. Here and there were tall slim Cyprus trees, refusing any sort of order. You could just make out part of the Roman Road, which stretched across Leiria and all the way to Santiago de Compostella, where Spain met the Northern tip of Portugal.

He sighed as he turned from the view and continued pulling the blue tarpaulin cover across the swimming pool. It was difficult to do on his own. Each time he pulled it up another few feet, he had to run to the other side of the pool to do the same to keep the cover even. He felt the sweat on his back as he struggled in the warmth of the spring sunshine. Patches of dampness spread across his crisp, white cotton shirt.

When he had pulled the cover over, he rolled the sleeves of his shirt, revealing strong tanned forearms. Sinews writhing as he struggled to thread large wooden toggles through the metal eyes to hold the cover over the pool. It would keep the frogs out and hopefully slow the algae building up while the pool was not being used.

His wife called him from the villa. She was filling large cardboard boxes with crockery and kitchen utensils. They had managed to avoid paying for the boxes by collecting them, a few at a time, from behind the checkouts in Continente Supermercado on the edge of Avelar. They still needed to buy things for their last few guests, but they were trying to use up food from the freezers and the large store cupboard. She remembered not to pack two plates and two mugs.

They still had a few days before they left, but the removal company would be coming the next day to collect the boxes packed with their clothes and the things from the villa they would be taking back to England. They would drive back a few days later with the last few belongings and Dotty, their Springer Spaniel in their Suzuki Vitara.

When they first came to Avelar, fifteen years ago, they loved it so much they vowed to return one day and live there. Seven years ago, their youngest daughter had left their home in High Wickham to move in with her boyfriend. They decided to follow their dream. They sold their home and bought the villa, pretty much as a ruin. They couldn't speak Portuguese, and neither of them were property developers, but they knew they could turn this into a guest house. They gave up their jobs, took a small amount of pension and left England, anxious but excited to be starting a new adventure.

It had taken them only a few months to get the villa so that they could live in it. Within a year, they started taking guests. At first their friends from England. As word spread, so did their popularity. They were careful and invested in improving the business. They built the pool, an extension with five more rooms and landscaped the gardens. They enjoyed their European lifestyle. It was hard, but such a great place to live. When they invested their lives and savings in their dream, they never for one moment imagined they would be ruined, by the British Government.