

# I

2019

The voice on the phone was urgent. 'I'm in Paris,' it said. 'Turn on your television!'

I was at home, in the kitchen, with Barbara, my wife. We had just finished supper. I had not drunk any wine, which turned out to be a good thing. I did not yet know it, but the evening was going to be a long one.

The voice on the phone belonged to an old friend. She has weathered many crises as a Member of Parliament and a Cabinet minister, and is completely unflappable, but she sounded shocked.

You know what we saw on the screen: the wonderful Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris, one of the greatest achievements of European civilization, was on fire.

The sight dazed and disturbed us profoundly. I was on the edge of tears. Something priceless was dying in front of our eyes. The feeling was bewildering, as if the earth was shaking.

I know the building well. One Christmas Barbara and I went to midnight Mass there. Thousands of people thronged the church. The dim lights cast deep shadows in the aisles, the carols echoed in the nave, and the vault high above us was cloaked in darkness. Most moving of all was the knowledge that our ancestors had been celebrating Christmas this way in this building for more than eight hundred years.

I had visited the church many other times. My earliest sight of it had been in 1966, on my first holiday outside the UK, although at the age of seventeen I'm afraid I was too interested in the girls in our group to pay serious attention to a cathedral. My last had been only four weeks earlier, when I had driven along the Left Bank and, as always, had drunk in the magnificent view of the twin towers and the flying buttresses.

As soon as I began to think rationally about what I was seeing on television, I understood what was

burning and how the fire was gathering force, but the journalists commenting did not – and why should they? They had not studied the construction of Gothic cathedrals. I had, in doing research for *The Pillars of the Earth*, my novel about the building of a fictional medieval cathedral. A key scene in Chapter Four describes the old cathedral of Kingsbridge burning down, and I had asked myself: Exactly how does a great stone church catch fire?

I had climbed up into the dusty spaces under the roofs of cathedrals including Canterbury and Florence. I had stood on the mighty beams that spanned the naves and looked up at the rafters that supported the leads. I had noticed the dried-up debris that often gathers in such places: old bits of wood and rope, sandwich wrappers left by maintenance workers, the knitted twigs of birds' nests and the papery homes of wasps. I felt sure that the Notre-Dame fire had started somewhere in the roof, probably when a dropped cigarette or a spark from an electrical fault ignited some litter, which in turn had set the timbers ablaze. And the damage resulting from that threatened to flatten the building.

I decided to share this thought with others, so I tweeted:

*The rafters consist of hundreds of tonnes of wood, old and very dry. When that burns the roof collapses, then the falling debris destroys the vaulted ceiling, which also falls and destroys the mighty stone pillars that are holding the whole thing up.*

That turned out to be about right, except that I underestimated the strength of the pillars and the vaults, both of which were damaged but, happily, not completely obliterated.

Here's how the destruction of Kingsbridge Cathedral happened in *Pillars*, seen from the point of view of Prior Philip:

*A crashing sound made him look up. Immediately above him, an enormous timber was moving slowly sideways. It was going to fall on top of him. He dashed back into the south transept, where Cuthbert stood looking scared.*

*A whole section of the roof, three triangles of beam-and-rafter plus the lead sheets nailed to them, was falling in. Philip and Cuthbert watched, transfixed, quite*

*forgetting their own safety. The roof fell on one of the big round arches of the crossing. The enormous weight of the falling wood and lead cracked the stonework of the arch with a prolonged explosive sound like thunder. Everything happened slowly: the beams fell slowly, the arch broke up slowly, and the smashed masonry fell slowly through the air. More roof beams came free, and then, with a noise like a long slow peal of thunder, a whole section of the north wall of the chancel shuddered and slid sideways into the north transept.*

*Philip was appalled. The sight of such a mighty building being destroyed was strangely shocking. It was like watching a mountain fall down or a river run dry: he had never really thought it could happen. He could hardly believe his eyes.*

As night fell on 15 April 2019, the people of Paris came out into the streets, and the television cameras showed thousands of grief-stricken faces lit by the flames, some singing hymns, others just weeping as they watched their beloved cathedral burn. The tweet that got the most heartfelt response from my followers that night just said:

*Français, françaises, nous partageons votre tristesse.*  
*Frenchmen, Frenchwomen, we share your sadness.*

It should have been *nous partageons* with an 'e', but no one minded.

There are people who understand more about medieval cathedrals than I do, but the journalists don't know their names. They know mine because of my books, and they know that *Pillars* is about a cathedral, so within a few minutes I started to get messages from the newsrooms. I spent that evening doing television, radio and press interviews, explaining in English and French what was happening on the Île de la Cité.

At the same time as giving interviews, I was watching.

The central spire, slender as an arrowhead and three hundred feet high, was a possible starting-point of the fire, and now it was blazing infernally. It was made of 500 tonnes of oak beams with a lead roof weighing 250 tonnes, and the burning wood rapidly became too weak to support the burden of all that lead. The most heart-stopping moment of the evening, for the grieving crowds on the streets and

the horrified millions watching television, came when the spire leaned sideways, snapped like a matchstick, and crashed through the flaming roof of the nave.

Notre-Dame had always seemed eternal, and the medieval builders certainly thought it would last until the Day of Judgement; but suddenly we saw that it could be destroyed. In the life of every boy there is a painful moment when he realizes that his father is not all-powerful and invulnerable. The old man has weaknesses, he may become ill, and one day he will die. The fall of the spire made me think of that moment.

It seemed that the nave was already a ruin. I thought I saw flames in one of the two towers, and I knew that if they fell the entire church would be destroyed.

President Emmanuel Macron, a radical modernizing leader who was in the middle of a bitter and violent battle with those who disliked his reforms, spoke to the cameras and became, for a time at least, the recognized leader of a united French nation. He impressed the world, and he brought tears to this Welshman's eyes when he said with firm confidence: '*Nous rebâtirons.*' 'We will rebuild.'

At midnight I went to bed and set my alarm clock

for 4.30 a.m., as my last phone call had been a request to appear on breakfast television early the following day.

I feared that the sun would rise on a smoking pile of rubble in the Île de la Cité where Notre-Dame had so proudly stood. I was immensely heartened to see most of the walls still standing, as well as the great pair of square towers at the west end. It was not as bad as everyone had feared, and I drove to the television studio with a message of hope.

I spent Tuesday doing interviews, then on Wednesday I flew to Paris for a discussion on the TV programme *La Grande Librairie* (*The Big Bookstore*) about the symbolism of cathedrals in literature and in life.

It never occurred to me to stay at home. Notre-Dame is too close to my heart. I'm not a religious believer, yet despite that I go to church. I love the architecture, the music, the words of the Bible and the sense of sharing something profound with other people. I have long found deep spiritual peace in the great cathedrals, as do many millions of people, believers and non-believers alike. And I have another

reason to feel grateful for the cathedrals: my love of them inspired the novel that is certainly my most popular book and probably my best.

President Macron said Notre-Dame would be rebuilt in five years. One of the French newspapers responded with a headline that translates: ‘Macron believes in miracles.’ But French attachment to Notre-Dame is profound. It has been the stage for some of the key events in French history. Every road sign that tells you how far you are from Paris measures the distance to Kilometre Zero, a bronze star embedded in



*The author (right) speaking with Philippe Villeneuve,  
chief architect of the reconstruction of Notre-Dame*

the pavement in front of Notre-Dame. The great bell called Emmanuel, in the south tower, can be heard all over the city when it rings its deep F sharp for joy or sorrow, the end of war or a tragedy such as 9/11.

Besides, it is always unwise to underestimate the French. If anyone can do it, they can.

Before I flew home from Paris, my French publisher asked me if I would think about writing something new about my love of Notre-Dame, in light of the terrible event of 15 April. Profits from the book would go to the rebuilding fund, and so would my royalties. 'Yes,' I said. 'I'll start tomorrow.'

This is what I wrote.