

S'IL VOUS PLAÎT

Funny how Charlotte, walking somewhat more or less casually through the pewter-coloured air of Avenue *George Cinq* beneath the rust leaves fluttering overhead, had not really noticed before how the dry stiff leaves clacked against themselves in the brisk wind, as if they were whispering, yet certainly still in an effort at any rate to be heard. They whispered to Charlotte strange and bemusing things, whispers of autumn. Charlotte's thoughts staggered ahead of her, zagging down the grey avenue, strolling with purpose between the clusters of pedestrians who passed briskly and busily; and Charlotte, a step behind, shadowed these running thoughts, dozens at a time and scattering, that darted out from the dimly obscure doorways of her clouded brain as though she might chase them down and reach out to grab them by the sleeve. *C'est le temps—a la heure—le temps, le temps*, whispered the wind. Paris, at the moments when tattered gaps unraveled the clouds, reclined drenched in a tepid sunlight. It was an intermittent but placid sunshine, calming, that dribbled down on the city facades, re-freshened—not like the bruised, grim, and gray-bleak battered Paris that had emerged some twenty or so years ago from the Occupation. Paris was

again serene and resplendent, regal, a bit older and wiser, the resemblance of some immaculate dowager, though of perhaps dubious origins, now sitting sedately in her aura of *haute* silk and good jewellery. Even with the first huff of autumn, the streets were full of the smell of washed stone and bread and clear river air and just a bit of *parfumerie*, underlaid by a hint of wood chimneysmoke. Charlotte lingered inquiring eyes over the finery in every shop window. *Le temps, le temps*, the wind whispered again. In those receded years at the beginning of the Occupation, now anew again in her clouding memory, Charlotte then only twenty years old emerged discreetly into Paris, a young girl grown of late just a bit too quickly, provincial, prodded and dragged through a gray time. Though likened to only yesterday, how long ago it seemed now; and how ever-more-rapidly time passed. The shop windows were alight with spectacle, tableaux of the most enticing fine things. Even Charlotte's own atelier, where she offered to *cossu* ladies the ensembles she designed, was even now burdened under remnant bolts of exquisite French satins and *matelasses* and brocades, the finest Italian silk chiffons, and luxuriant Scottish woolens, plus laces from every country. The serious frivolity of dressmaking was her own artistry. Still, Charlotte had lately become somehow disaffected, troubled vaguely by ill-defined niggling thoughts attempting to edge into her consciousness. Charlotte,

though she spent most of her holiday lounged in her city apartment, noticed during her week at the sea, staring absently into the flow and the splashing children's sandcastles, that she in these leisure moments would be caught unaware suddenly floundering in oppressive ennui. It was a somewhat unexpected and a kilter, new, and disturbing, sensation. And since the return to Paris that feeling at odd moments of unease and uncertainty and near-panic arose in her mind again, an unawakened clawing kitten unaware of its pricking kneadings.

A sudden shout of the whispering wind lifted the loose ends of the knotted scarf which held tucked in place the veil of Charlotte's hat. She pulls the collar of her coat closer, questioning the skies. In ripples around her other citizens of Paris sailed the pavements, launched on their après-luncheon errands and missions, under the same bluster of skies, yet vague and apart from the clamour of Charlotte's preoccupied thoughts. Though appearing as apparition-like through a fog before her sight, she started to take notice of those other pedestrians, few solitary, couples, trios. There were well-dressed ladies, or simple ones; seemingly shy, demure young women who also perusing the shop windows sidled toward the storefront doorways; and men, brusque and hurried, who if they were a gentleman who still wore a hat, braced their heads against the

breeze while shouldering through it. That was the particular way men were, concluded Charlotte; they were direct, convinced of their appointed place, no oscillating, sure of their direction, shoulders hunched against an obstacle. Surely they were possibly not all so, Charlotte surmised; but that is how she perceived that most of them polished their facades, even the ever-so-feminized versions she had encountered in the artistic niches of the fashion coterie. But she was now thinking of those men who behaved really as men: do-ers, and managers, leaders, and task-setters, and financiers, philosophers, and nobility, and doctors, and husbands. What a cornucopia of rich choices men had. *They* could do important and daring things. But—Charlotte? Ah, Charlotte was bewildered. Looking around herself, the men she saw rushing past her, in this neighborhood, somberly intent, nicely dressed, sober haute bourgeoisie, were a collection glazed and sweetly rich as the choices in the pastry cases at Le Notre, the selection rather dazzling. Charlotte inhales the dampish air and narrowed her eyes in rather overt contemplation, dashing toward judgment; she declared it was the shoulders she noticed first, broad and firm, or perhaps the arms hanging like thoroughbred-muscled appendages stretching from their withers. There was a quick appraisal of hair and colouring, of the shine and depth and gaze of eyes; she noting a particularly strong nose or a cleft at the chin, or sighing dreamily

over dimples that deepened in extravagant lines sometimes to the laughing crease at the still-clenchable jowl where the blue tint of a man's shaved whiskers was so inexplicably seductive. Then, of course, followed closely the legs, striding, sturdy presence gliding forward like a sailing ship with fearless banners, bounding over tides, guiding, as Charlotte also noticed, the surging thrust of a tautly defined, particularly muscular, and well articulated derriere. It put forward a passing thought to make Charlotte blush there on the street.

What a variety of them there were—men. There a gentleman coming toward her left, very impressive, a well-tailored light grey topcoat with a Persian lamb collar, a trim white beard and cool blue eyes, very old guard with a walking stick, quite erect, and bounding jauntily; though sixty-ish, Charlotte surmised, but not bad however, still virile and confident, attractive like a stately chateau. Along next came two men, talking, forty-plus in age, one quite animated and physically appealing, very attractive, and the other beginning to lose his manly magnetism, starting to spread untidily in a soft middle-aged manner that indicated a lack of caring. What wounds scarring there needed a balm—what punctures to the heart a caressing kiss? The other, however, the vivacious one trim of hip with salt and pepper hair and slate-coloured eyes—how utterly enticing, such a fine example of the admirable manly grace which Charlotte lately esteemed. Of

course she admired also the fine strapping youth, like the one there, the university student or the young business intern, wavy-tressed, broad-shouldered, thick-chested, young colts racing toward their first purse. They were delightful, and so full of spirit, needing careful training and exercising. Visions of speed and exuberance at whom Charlotte bestowed her yearning adoration; but still Charlotte had to admit that now she preferred the elegant enticements of the more mature male, still in the prime (heaven knows they—some—aged so much better than their matronly counterparts). Evidently her tastes had grown more mature, even as she had. She yearned for their strength, their certainty, their sense of entitled demeanor and solidity. What a handsome man that one was there, gliding past, handsome as cinema stars are in a positive and breathtaking way. Perhaps one, a particularly debonair one, would cross toward her now smitten with intrigues, smile charmingly at her, and suggest they run off together to the south, or Athens, or Barbados, or California. Ah, fate would apparently not have it so—but imagine the thrilling tableau if it had happened just as Charlotte conjured. Would I, she mused, be happy living with a stranger, an earthy and tanned man on a pig farm in Spain? *Que sera*. Perhaps it might be worth an effort to find out.

Still, however, instead of expanding to include extravagant villas and

sailboats and ballrooms and casinos, Charlotte's world seemed on the verge of diminishing, far to an abrupt corner at the point of which there was no return. Also, she had her business to consider. The atelier that served as her showroom and shop had past been successful enough, in future certainly with the placement of an acceptably talented *sous-conceptrice*, to sustain itself and provide Charlotte with enough income to maintain—along with the generous friendliness of the widow who was for many years her landlady—her thrifty apartment and to eat well, simply but well, at any rate, an advantage for shaping her still fashion-conscious figure despite a certain weakness for pastry and confections. It was a business that Charlotte had worked diligently to establish, an imploring necessity during those deprived years of the war, a time when Charlotte had worked out of her living quarters and gone summoned by appointment to the darkened chill rooms of her clientele who for an entire year could possibly order only one new dress, or perhaps at most to re-cut or decorate an older one into something approximating new. Many larger couture houses even had been shuttered for the duration. Charlotte survived those dark days. Those times were, blessedly so, past. Other days Charlotte remembered had had their daunting troubles, setbacks and financial squeezes, but nothing approached the sad dreariness of those days of the Occupation, ultimately the dark nights blasted by the wail of

the trains carting deportees. Charlotte could not compare now with reasonableness to that turbulent then, but surely enough the small world she knew was changing once again, slower and more subtly than that other time but just as surely. The pastured landscape of France, of Charlotte's familiar Paris, perhaps of the whole globe, was once again shifting, cracks appearing who knew where. First evident during last spring in the brocaded serenity of Charlotte's *salon de mode* when, although timidly enough, her clients, until now a traditional and complacent lot, began—most noticeably the younger ones—questioning Charlotte about “something—newer, fresher, perhaps sleek, more...umm, adventurous?”, more “not so much *frou*...more M. Givenchy-like”. Charlotte looked around but she did not immediately altogether comprehend the veering of the times, the accelerating pace of tastes. Was it just her? Was there some shift moving past her that she was failing to recognize? She had, perhaps, grown complacent with using a certain style of lace, a certain adornment of embroidery, a certain length of glove, or a certain palette of colours.; or failing to notice a growing preponderance now of synthetics in the fabrics, or how unamusing and only functional buttons had become, the decline of artistically arranged passanterie, or even the failure to cover one's head in church or the willingness to abandon wearing a girdle, or even the disappearance of a

monogram embroidered on a jacket lining.

Orderliness—scrupulous quality, these were no longer the absolute custom of the day. Well, fashions change: Deauville, not this year; happy landings, Ibiza; Piaf, *une peu passé*; Presley and Supremes, parvenu potentates; a *maillot*, possibly not; *le bikini, et voila*. Charlotte, who in the past perceived little difficulty of keeping up an interest in the *au courant*, had found it increasingly harder to keep apace. And she was not alone, for she had noticed numerous millinery shops that had closed their doors, “end of business” placards in the windows; as well shops that specialized in only knitted cardigans or corsetry or fancily decorated handkerchiefs, closed by the lack of demising clientele. Even her own business, at times seemingly hanging on by only a single thread, had suffered its trials: trusted long-time seamstresses in order to work on a black ensemble had to be seated directly under a flood of light or needed assistance to see how to thread their needles, very few remembered the technique of tatting a trimming and even fewer customers even bothered to ask for such things; it was more and more difficult than ever to find the artisans who could hand-make the exquisite and delicate organza flowers that rivaled Nature’s blossoms or to search out of retirement some remaining few Russian émigré ladies whose now-stiffened fingers might have remembered, like a single thread fraying through

time, the hand-knotting which encrusted glimmering beading on the last of the Empress' ladies' court gowns. The creaking rocking chairs of Paris were the asylums of such. They sat in a corner, as ancient as an old "fascinator", or a shoebutton hook, or the greying wedding dress wrapped in a shroud of tissue paper to present to a daughter who no longer really wished to wear it. In these times it sometimes seemed doubtful if Cinderella's fairy godmother would be able to scrounge up a pair of glass slippers. Flow of times was moving on, indeed, and the past was only able to cling by a single ever-more-fraying thread. Charlotte felt she would have to prod herself to move with the time in this cascade rather than succumb to being pulled under, to accept cascading time as a new era where the old world had yet again faded away into another dim hall in some outstretched gallery that went on and on, transiting with a rather cautious step from a sunlit *orangerie* into a dimness perforated with coloured lights and incense and a drumbeat of electronic music. Where amidst this storm of tempestuously blowing modernity could one find the shock of proper stimulation needed to freshen an outlook? Not here, not among the once-more refurbished and so stately accoutrements of a luxuriously well-appointed smugness, of just the perfect chocolate glaze, the perfect shade of clear blue ink for correspondence, the perfect spray of orchids for the atelier, the perfect note of

parfum, or the perfect wording of a perfect “thank you”-note. Charlotte had been only once to the United States, two summers ago she had sailed on the S.S. France to New York. It was a languid crossing, resplendent with crystalline days; the ship was an artful sculpture, comfort unfurling its shining banner. Sailing into New York harbor with its worldly traffic and up the Hudson River to berth at the outstretched arm of Manhattan which wore the amethyst jewels of skyscraping buildings with the names of Woolworth, and Chrysler, Empire State, Rockefeller, Waldorf, and Seagram were thrilling sights; of course, Charlotte had only vaguely learned the names at English tutorials, nevertheless the sight of Manhattan’s towers gleaming in après-Eisenhower sunshine was a throat-catching moment washed with a spatter of awed joyous tears. Days and nights in New York were spectacular; but it was brash and frenetic, and it was not Paris. Paris was perfectly *detendu*, and it was home. Possibly Charlotte needed an exciting change of scene to re-invigorate her business, herself. But to leave Paris, however, to live in some awkward provincial place with Bastille Day as the only merry *divertissement* was an unappealing prospect; and certainly despite its brash enticements she could not go so far as the illiterate and incomprehensible United States. So?—what of that pig farm in Spain? Ahhh, well, the companionship of the agile hardened earthenware farmer might worthwhilely

compel a new-found interest in ham, pork cracklings, and lazing away with a grunt long hot afternoons. This one—Charlotte startled from reverie, noticing the gentlemanly figure, handsome, mustached, urbanely pale, looking up the street beyond her as he entered a bank—was no farmer, but he was a very dapper attractive man, very attractive in his well-cut dark suit. They, these myriads of men, did seem to be everywhere.

London? What about London? A place to invigorate one's outlook, re-inspire creativity, renew? After all, it was enough close by and, from what Charlotte could hear among the fashion-able grapevine, so much seemed to be happening there: all those young people, restless, and music, new ideas in style, silly boulevard comedy, Nureyev—and, of course, there were those teddy boys—and designers, as the English would have it “kooky, cheeky”, who came up with coloured makeup, mini-skirts. Tragic about the unfortunate food, but *quell sacrifice, n'est pas?*; at any rate, a change of scene. If that is what was needed? Though anywhere exciting found for only a moment of newness, that new anywhere would prove at length a stab in the heart to not be in Paris, a city of just the right proportions, this beautiful home. The English men were so stiff, so damp and chilly. Inquisitive Madame would always have to be glancing for the beautiful Irishman on the street, if possible one could find one, in order to get a

glow. A French man, even more so the older ones, never failed to cast an eye toward female charm. They were as dependable, as warm and comforting, as an apple tart or a cognac; as readily installed with bare effort as any footstool carried up the stairs into a boudoir. They were after all perhaps more comforting than the plushest footstool, a slight bit more attentive when they wished to be, and able to muster up at the moment the warmth to enliven any chilly wintry evening. They not only would escort you to the opera or the ballet, but they would pay for your diversion as well. It had never in the past been Charlotte's fate to have a husband. *Timothee* lay still in Algeria, where he had slept since nineteen-forty one, casualty of war, Charlotte's first and incipient romance. While half-heartedly promoting dalliances in subsequent years, it had never been Charlotte's good fortune that these flirtations had blossomed into any consummation of hearts beating in unison, of lives entwined. Charlotte looked to the sky where the limbs overhead reached out to touch along the Avenue *George Cinq*. They quivered, as in sympathy did Charlotte's hatveil; the russet leaves clacked, occasionally a ghostly pale and yellowing leaf released its tenuous grip and plunged downward, either falling onto a gentleman's hatbrim or clinging to a passerby's shoulder or, missing anyone, fluttering down to be swept aside on the stones. It was little surprise that Charlotte must with some positiveness arrive

absolutely at her own conclusion, her mind made up (for the most part), newly resolute and rather convinced. This seemed—was—the way out, out of the uncertain paths of the foggy constricting forest. She would...she would take a... lover. Of course, she would—she must. It should not be too very difficult (though she was so extremely out of experience with flirtations). But, yes...it must be easy enough to regain, like riding a bicycle. Charlotte trembled, for it seemed her head had become quite light.

Still trembling weakly, stepping into the first *salon de the* she came upon, Charlotte took a seat; the shop was over-warm and steamy, smelling a bit of carnations and medicinal herbals or ferns. She hoped to attract the attention of the *garçon* (*quel beau*, certainly he was pleasantly appealing) attending the samovar, but it was the proprietress who came to receive her order. When it came, the tea was soothing and very refreshing. Charlotte calmed in her resolution; and as she stared out the shop window with her newly-illuminated eyes she was amazed at the variety of the possible choices, a monumental fashion show. *Mon dieu*, she thought, they are like a parade passing before me—and I like a general with curious eye reviewing the troops for my edification. Such a regiment of them. Charlotte removes her gloves (her hands were very warm now), and sipping the mellow tea she cradles the heavily-flowered porcelain cup

as if that warm touch distractingly cooled her fingers. Beyond the window glass the parade continues. And who—who should be this newly-shined and tractable subject of Charlotte's arousing affections? That was a matter for some contemplation, seriously. An insane fling might be heady and exciting, a joyous possibility, but Charlotte had to admit that she was interested in something truly a little more stable, sedate, longer term. Who might that be?

I know no one, she thought; it must be a stranger, plucked from the crowd. Therefore it could be...could be a choice that was ideal: perfect eyes, perfect colour to the hair, perfect shyness in the smile, just the right twinkle of abandon, abrupt, a dangerous fall, as dashing naked through a snowy courtyard. Despite the *laisser-aller* induced by the warm tea Charlotte staggered beneath the cornucopia of choices. It was the point where not to leave such things to chance. At any rate chance had been rather remiss at such affairs up until now. Of course, one must be open to such possibilities; and Charlotte herself had rather held back and for many years veiled herself in a shellacked aura of reserve. But neither had anyone been intent on peeling away at the thick-layered amber, the strata of hardened rectitude. In the game up until now unyielding chance had taken every trick, held all the winning cards; now Charlotte was intent to play what might prove to be her ultimate hand. Chance had languished in the

bidding; while Charlotte calculated her odds. Time was running by, the evening's play was slowing. Chance—*fiat*—chance; mere happenstance. Only once, long ago, with Timothee, had Charlotte rounded the corner toward love, and that so long ago and shortened that she could hardly remember how it began, as a familiar greeting or as two idle youths on a walk toward school. Like slipping down into a soothing tepid bath, it became a comfort; it was not a jolt like the tremorous plunge into a mineral-y hot-spring spa surrounded by banks of ice amid a swaying birch grove; but it was a comfort in a world grown increasingly demented—and it ceased in 1941, and Timothee had ever since slept beneath the earth of distant Oran, Algeria. It was rather impossible for Charlotte to say for herself what ignited the embers of her attraction for a stranger, for it was rare that such a dalliance kindled itself, and there seemed no impetus to define the particulars. In the one or two cases which had sprang up since that time of the war they were indefinable, anyway, and extraordinary. Who could say what an attractions' powerful jolt was built upon? Who could ultimately discern why, when faced with two or even more admirable provocateurs across some crowded avenue, each equally well-turned and appealing, dark or light, serious or smiling, does one feel compelled toward one rather more than the other, toward a certain stance and lift of the hand rather than a courtliness of manner? Who can

say? Underneath it is some inscrutably profoundly deep chemi-organic-electromagnetic neutronal flow that is a charge with pulsing rays of geneto-nuclear current, rawest energy at its most magnified charge, elemental yearn toward heat and light and frisson. Could one possibly describe that in any articulate way? It is only left to attribute the most blatantly visual (and perhaps that is all it essentially is): the bloneness or blackness of hair, the blueness or brownness of eyes, the sweeping curve of a shoulder, the vigourous lift or round orb-iness of a rump, wavering veil of the eyelashes; description on the other hand is indecipherable, invisible as it is electric, the illusionistic awe of magic. A blank slate presented itself, and Charlotte could fill out the spaces as she wished: doctor, lawyer, sailor, tinker, tailor, diplomat, chief. Who could be the ideal? The sun-bronzed and carefree sailor whose yacht epitomized a fortune built from shipping to exotic ports, or the robust and dare-devilish explorer who lead dangerous expeditions, or the brawny Texan enchanted with horses and bulls and oil derricks? Perhaps it *was* the quiet country farmer in Spain or France who steadily tilled the raw land and cajoled the weather to acquiesce? A simple man, good and strong and caring. Perhaps a baker, with a small shop—Charlotte tending the shelves of boules and baguettes. Yes. Happily ever onward.

Men, though, were creatures...simply creatures, slow, notoriously

heedless. Where was this good man? They could be unattractively ridiculous with age—no longer the lithe muscular victor, but instead the over-ripe pear gone mushy, with red veins and brown spots. How easy to find them at times a nuisance, grown delirious and scrawny and morose. The thought of lying in a cuddle with one such of them was a prelude to laughter, at once amusing and sardonic and perhaps frightening. Still, as was said: could you live with them? could you live without them?

Whatsoever the outcome, Charlotte proceeded to assemble her daring plan into action in the days that followed. It was a more or less simple matter of allowing nature to take its course; Charlotte was still an attractive woman, and when she placed herself in environs where men were she could count on men of a certain age, unlike in previous more formal and reticent times, coming up to approach her and striking up an impromptu acquaintance. Of course she had to make herself available; she attended the opera, sat in outdoor cafes, looked at art gallery openings, traversed often the parks and shopping venues, flea markets, perused the museum offerings (all things she might have done in her course of events at any rate). Some days were lovely, and others were not. Reaping through the field of suitors—actually it was rather more like rooting for truffles hidden in the forest—grew into more of a job than Charlotte's regular

work. Sifting out the chaff could become a time consuming effort, not exactly unpleasant, but sometimes tiresome. There was more opera, more art galleries, more long restaurant dinners, occasional frenetic dancing in the new thumping-loud discotheques. Charlotte found herself becoming more choosy than not, finding she could winnow down until there were one or two, then to discover that the initial interest had waned, from whichever side. Still, after a brief rest the search renewed itself—for the searching, whatever her wagers, must play out now that the ball had been released. Round and round—a game of many numbers, combinations, lucky only for the few—and round.

Of late, for a month of occasional evenings, Charlotte had scrutinized the Commandant as he had focused his attentions on her. He was a most charming man, with a few amusing stories, had served in Indo-China, was rather good looking (spectacularly trim in his soldier's tunic), just turned forty-something years (at which Charlotte smiled pleasantly), straight as a ramrod, somewhat reserved, and quite gentlemanly of manners. They had begun a conversation between selections while listening to some music at a bandstand in the Jardins de Luxembourg. It was a sunny day in spring. An invitation to a bistro supper ensued, then walks in the parks, additional concerts, even a day at the Longchamps races. Life became a pleasant waltz of rendezvous and candlelight

and fine meals, of shared walks and teasing conversation. There was still a reticence on Charlotte's part to totally abandon herself to the Commandant Champion, but she found him irresistibly alluring, and so devilishly handsome, romantically ideal; and she was just about on the tipping verge of a deliberated tumble. She consoled herself, giddily, why not? Was it not time? How could she wait much longer? She had deliberated such, no? And these times—was it not the new age of a new freedom, of the possibility of a voyage into the stars? Or into a world of utter flailing love, or just merest fling into a world as jumpy and new-discovered as Carnaby Street? That rope-bridge of seizing the moment lay stretched out ahead like across a chasm of the Dordogne; one must sit down forever by the side of the road or one must choose to forge ahead. *Allez, allez—* still with a bit of caution. After all, these ideas of love were important factors; were they not? *C'est l'amour; amour est tout, la vie en rose.*

It was this very evening that Charlotte might come to her rope-bridge, swaying precariously along the chasm toward the unfolding of her future: the evening she had prayed for, for which she had at her apartment prepared for the Commandant Champion a *petit souper intime*. Fluttering with an anxiety like no other she had spent the day in meticulous preparation from flowers to selecting the veal chops to arranging and re-arranging and plus a relaxing sensuously long

and completely scented bath. The perfection of pleasure must be everywhere, for Commandant Champion was truly a most beautiful man, and Charlotte melted at the warmth of his eyes. He grew more handsomely beautiful by the day. Rosy wisps of evening clouds would soon nuzzle about the Tour Eiffel, and golden glazes of sunset would limn the rooftops of Paris, then the soft thickening descent of twilight over the City of Light. Charlotte had slipped into the kind of lounging ensemble now known as “hostess pyjamas”, her hair poufed about her head, cool aquamarines her only jewellery. She wondered if there would be a moon visible from the balcony tonight. She was as prepared as possible, toward a breath-catching evening—with only a passing thought, so she smiled, of the old schoolroom poem of the spider entertaining the fly: “Won’t you come into my parlor?” As the corners of the room slip into a shadowy veil of soft evening darkness, only an instant of wistfulness crept up behind Charlotte, almost unawares; she thought for a moment of Timothee, sequestered in his soundless oblivious tomb in North Africa, the fleet of his young soldier’s face passed before her, a memory as crumpled as a packet of soiled letters on onionskin paper, ghostly and thin, and delicately faded. How silently he slept on; how long ago it was when he ceased from this world.

When Commandant Champion rang at the bell he brought flowers,

gladioli and daisies studded with some baby's breath sprigs; and instead of his uniform he was wearing a linen sportcoat, and smelling of talcum and sandalwood. Charlotte succumbed weak and naively intimidated at his presence. However practical and precise she might be at other times, now with Commandant Champion she was unsure, nervous and erratic in a dispersed and girlish kind of way. He was way beyond handsome; his breath as warm as a tropic afternoon. Charlotte busied herself, her fingers unable to grasp firmly upon things, with seeing that the candles were not dripping onto the furniture as she chattered like a canary on a cage swing—she, indeed, as tremulous.

Commandant Champion smiled his heart-winning smile. "Shall I open the champagne?" he inquired.

"Yes. Please do." Pommery '52, chilling in ice all afternoon—Charlotte's favorite, Pommery, because she remembered fondly first tasting it as a seventeen-year-old before the war. Champagne was still the best drink there was, the gauzy chiffon of silky fizz, so festive and bubbly and exquisite. Commandant Champion took the bottle from the perspiring bucket and cradled it in his hands, carefully stripping the golden paper wrap from the top. Charlotte set down the glasses with nervous hands; but what was not to like in a bottle of Pommery '52? The Commandant smiled as he manipulated the bottle, supple

twisting of a strong wrist, just so, easily and slowly, manfully, *voilà*, the snug cork popping its sighing expression of release.

--J. F. Lowe