



a novel

An
IMPROBABLE
PAIRING

GARY DICKSON

ADVANCE PRAISE

"An Improbable Pairing is an entertaining romp through Europe's high society of the 1960s, featuring a lovable young American rogue who aspires to love above his station and the countess who possesses the wit and charm to conquer him. Upon opening this book, you might feel you've stumbled into a Technicolor world starring a young Paul Newman and Audrey Hepburn, their romance blossoming amid the sparkling sights of Europe. Grab a box of popcorn and enjoy!"

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A marvelous tale in which each character demonstrates the importance of an open mind, the ability to embrace different cultures, and to create in this manner a life together; while in the beginning improbable, it is in the end so rich, and so filled with love. I await the sequel!”

—**Nadine Juton**, professor of literature at the Alliance Française of
Los Angeles, University of Strasbourg, France,
master’s degree in French literature

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First Edition

To my wife, Susie, my very own countess

“Sometimes things become possible if we want them bad enough.”

—T. S. Eliot

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HOW DIFFERENT SCOTT'S LIFE WOULD HAVE BEEN HAD he been attracted to the young girl, the one more his age, who was standing at the railing of the ship, rather than her companion, the beautiful woman wearing a soft gray suit, her hair blond and straight, a cashmere scarf of a crystalline blue that matched her aquamarine eyes draped casually across her shoulders. It was she who drew his attention. Her posture and bearing suggested a sophisticated, long-standing confidence, and Scott was transfixed by her beauty.

He, like these two women and most of the other transatlantic passengers, had moved to the starboard side of the liner in anticipation of an imminent departure. Peering down from the navigation deck, he was determined to get a better look. Cutting a path through the throng, Scott circled the deck before squeezing between two of the ship's lifeboats to gain an unobstructed view of his new interest. But by then, the mysterious woman in gray had slipped from sight. Given her impeccable style, Scott guessed she was on her way to first class. He was in cabin (second class)—recommended as more fun by a friend of his father.

The woman's younger companion, however, remained where she had been, leaning against the railing. Based on her fair complexion, reddish-blond hair, and slight frame, Scott thought her English, no doubt. A child (from their resemblance, probably the young woman's sister) and a stern-looking woman, whom Scott imagined a nanny, joined her. Distracted from his observations by the noise of

the crowd, Scott looked beyond the trio of women, searching for his parents among those bidding passengers farewell on Pier 86, some eighty feet below.

The day was August 30, 1963, and Scott was sailing from New York to the ports of Le Havre and Southampton aboard the SS *United States*, the fastest and most modern luxury liner afloat. In the late afternoon sun, the ship cast long shadows across the crowd below as the crew prepared to sail with the evening tide.

Though the crowd stood elbow to elbow, Scott quickly spotted his parents and waved. Mother's impeccable silhouette had caught his eye immediately, dressed as she was in her usual Celine finery; Sarah Stoddard dabbed at her eyes time and again with a white handkerchief, while his father, Edward, stood by displaying his usual steely demeanor.

Scott was headed to graduate school at the University of Geneva to study international relations. His mother thought Switzerland too far; his father considered studying abroad too extravagant. The Stoddards agreed, however, on one thing: their vision for Scott's future—a quick degree abroad before returning to get a law degree from a prestigious American university. His assignment was clear.

The ship's company jerked, startled by the two six-second blasts from the vessel's giant foghorns, which announced that the SS *United States* was soon departing.

Spurred on by the captain's megaphoned instructions from the top of the bridge, the crew scurried about on the starboard side loosening the brawny hemp ropes from the dock's massive cleats and then throwing them into the water. The twin diesel engines roared to life and, as soon as the last line was undone, the tide pulled the ship away from the dock. In seconds, Scott felt separated from everything he had known.

Dutifully waving until his parents disappeared into the mist, Scott remained at his post long after the other passengers had retreated. He watched the receding pier as the ship passed the Statue of Liberty and then exited the Hudson channel into the open Atlantic.

A noticeable lump hung in the young man's throat, and a shiver—either cold or emotion—rippled across his tall, muscled frame. Though

the other passengers saw a young man, brown hair ruffled by the breeze, hands jammed into his coat's pockets, inwardly, Scott cheered—he was free: free to do whatever he wanted, free to be whomever he would be. And free from the almost constant supervision of his parents.

UNPACKING IN HIS CABIN, SCOTT DISCOVERED HIS activity sheet. Intrigued, he noted there was a dance in the ballroom following dinner. His thoughts wandered to the blond woman he'd spied on deck; he felt certain he would not see her there. She would be a world away, behind many secured passageways and doors, luxuriating in the grandeur of first class, which he would only be able to experience by paging through the ship's brochure. But perhaps the young English girl, her friend, would be in attendance. Determined to make an impression, Scott dressed in an elegant dark navy suit, blue-and-white striped silk tie, and a crisp poplin white shirt, lightly starched. A last check in his mirror revealed fashionably styled dark brown hair, cropped in the day's popular Kennedy cut; a pocket square, peeping out just the right amount; and a tie with one perfect, single Windsor knot. All was in order.

Scott made his way along the ship's passages to the dining room. It was customary that passengers were assigned to tables for the duration of the voyage. He sighed as he exchanged handshakes, for Scott's assigned companions consisted of five other male passengers: two business types (who spoke no English) and three young students returning to their English boarding school. Scott was not interested in the company of these men. Impatiently, he watched the entrance for more diverting diners.

There. Scott spied the glint of reddish-blond hair. The young woman, her sister, and the nanny proceeded to the front, near the captain's table

where the second in command (the executive officer, subbing for the captain) was seated with his invited guests. The young woman, too, had dressed carefully for dinner, and her attire suggested a real interest in the after-dinner dance. A black dress, with empire waistline and spaghetti straps, smartly accentuated her slender frame. Black high heels and a white pearl choker perfected her ensemble. Smiling and conversing with everyone at the table (especially one of the young officers seated across from her), she appeared to be in a very gay mood.

Dinner ended. Scott, along with almost everyone else, migrated to the lounge, where he stationed himself at the bar. Situated near the entrance, Scott was strategically positioned to observe all comings and goings. When the young Englishwoman did enter, she was not alone. Though her sister and the nanny had disappeared, four other girls were in tow. Scott knew from experience that separating her from her friends could be a challenge. Approaching two girls to ask one for a dance was chancy. With five girls, any potential suitor would have to pass muster with all to be considered by one. Grimly, he remembered the many debutante balls and cotillions he had attended since his teens—the very life he was trying to escape by leaving Charleston. Under the circumstances, he knew he must swim with the tide. Ah, well; perhaps he'd find an interesting diversion.

The music was continuous, the combo orchestra showing off its range of songs, from Bobby Vinton's *Blue Velvet* to Peter, Paul, and Mary's *Blowin' in the Wind*. The girls, animated, talked and giggled. Scott finished his drink, summoned his courage and, with good posture and a winning smile, approached them as confidently as possible.

"Good evening, Miss," he said. "I'm Scott. That dress looks like it wants to dance. Shall we?"

"That's a very brash beginning, but you're an American, so I forgive you. I'm Millie."

"That's a lovely name, but it doesn't answer the question. Would you like to dance?"

"Yes, Miss Millie Summersmith accepts with pleasure the kind invitation to dance."

“Well, we had better hurry. This song will be over if we continue to banter.”

“Is there something wrong with bantering, Mr. . . what did you say your name was?”

“Scott. Scott Stoddard.”

As they made their way to the dance floor, he could see the other men’s envious glances and was glad he’d moved quickly. Millie’s dress suited her well. Her smile was genuine, and her pale green eyes glistened in the room’s soft light.

For the first few moments they were quiet, patiently learning each other’s moves. As they eased into the rhythm of unconsciously following and leading, he said, “Summersmith; that’s English, isn’t it?”

“Are you always a master of the obvious?”

“I’m not always anything, but I was right about the dress.”

For the next two dances, Millie made sure she and Scott got to know each other. She: nineteen, parents divorced, her father living in New York, her mother in London. That summer, the three of them stayed in New York, on Long Island. Scott had correctly surmised that the younger girl was her sister (Tillie) and the older woman, her sister’s nanny. Millie made it clear that Miss Bannister was Tillie’s nanny, not hers, letting Scott know by the subjects broached—and so many other, subtle ways—that she was a young sophisticate.

Scott volunteered that, at twenty-two, he was traveling to Geneva to earn his master’s degree. Millie laughed. His first trip to Europe! She’d been going back and forth between Europe and the States from an early age. She teased him about his American accent; his good-humored rebuttal—“You’re the one with the accent, Millie.”

As they laughed, a well-dressed, tall (though not quite as tall as Scott), and handsome-enough guy tapped him on the shoulder to ask, “May I cut in?”

Millie answered, “Sorry, not now.” The rejected suitor quickly turned to pursue another dance partner.

“He looked eager,” Scott said.

“Eagerness is too common a trait.”

“Then I will try to keep it in check.”

When they stopped dancing, Millie asked, “Want to have some fun?”

“I thought we were.”

“They have more fun in first class,” she said knowingly.

“I bet they do.”

“Let’s go! I know someone there, a friend of my mother’s.”

Millie rejoined her companions’ table, retrieving her evening bag and saying something to her girlfriends, who convulsed with nervous laughter. Scott wondered—was it him or their destination that prompted giggles?

three

THROUGH THE LAUNDRY ROOM, STARTLING WORKERS busy with the sheets and towels turning over and over in vast steamy vats, Scott and Millie hurried through the labyrinth below decks. Millie led them to a double steel door; when opened, the passageway revealed still another, a revolving door, to negotiate. Finally, they entered the ballroom.

Scott gaped: crystal chandeliers, mahogany paneling, etched and stained glass, and an imposing, serpentine bar created a scene of opulent elegance. The full orchestra, an animated crowd, and champagne-fueled revelry—this was how he'd imagined evenings on the *Titanic* or parties described in *The Great Gatsby*. Luxury was front and center.

"We made it," Millie said. "Let's find Desirée."

She was leading him across the ballroom when Scott spotted Millie's companion, the beautiful woman he'd admired during boarding. Weaving through the tables and dancers, they approached her table in the corner of the ballroom. A party of two men in black tie and two women wearing ball gowns, their jewelry ablaze, were gathered there. The men rose as Millie approached the table. They all seemed to know Millie.

"Millie, my darling," Scott's mystery woman said.

"Yes, *c'est moi*, up from second class," Millie said.

"I don't understand why your father insists on putting you down there."

“He says not to spoil us. Desirée, please let me introduce you to my friend, Scott Stoddard, an American. Scott, the Countess de Rovere.”

The countess extended her hand. Scott took it gently and looked directly into her eyes. “*Enchanté*, Countess.”

As the formalities of introduction and small talk progressed, Scott noticed the countess spoke with confidence and ease in both French and English. From what he discerned, she and her friends had spent late July and August in the Hamptons and were now returning to their respective residences in Europe. As they spoke, he marveled at her gestures, how her beautiful hands accentuated conversation; it was like watching a skilled conductor lead a symphonic orchestra. He’d never experienced any woman like her.

The countess held court. Seated at the head of the table, the others were arrayed around her. As befits the star of the show, her attire was stunning. She wore a sheath embroidered with pearls and sparkling embellishments. A silver band gathered her blond hair in a sophisticated updo while allowing copious beautiful tresses to tumble out in seemingly random—though surely planned—fashion. A delicately braided silk cord circled her neck and, suspended from it, a sapphire and diamond brooch nestled at her décolletage.

Aware that most Americans were known to gush a little too quickly, Scott spent most of the time at the countess’s table listening and sipping the free-flowing champagne. When he spoke, it was sparingly and with brevity, mainly answering any questions directed his way.

At one point, he asked Millie to dance. When he pulled her close (and then a little closer), she didn’t resist. He knew they made a handsome couple on the dance floor. Once they returned to the table, the questions began. Their dancing together had been noticed, and now, out of their respect to Millie, the countess and her companions were protectively interested in finding out just who this American fellow was.

“Mr. Stoddard are you going to Europe for business or pleasure?” the countess asked.

“Neither. I’m entering a graduate program at the University of Geneva in international relations,” Scott replied.

"Well, you must be very smart,"

"Thank you; I have a lot of people fooled."

"The countess lives part of the year in her home near Geneva," Millie interjected.

"If you have any problems or need any help," the countess said, "I would be glad to try to assist you."

"You're too nice," Scott said, "but I couldn't impose on you."

"Not at all. Geneva can be a difficult place. Perhaps you should take my number just in case."

Take her number? Of course he would.

"Desirée knows everyone in Geneva," Millie said. "You must call."

Around midnight, Millie announced it was time to go. Scott addressed each person, following the correct and expected protocol of "good evenings" and "pleasure to meet you." In parting, the countess turned to Millie. "Why don't you and Mr. Stoddard join me tomorrow night for dinner? We have some catching up to do, and we can't have you languishing down there. Your mother would never forgive me."

"We'd love to, wouldn't we Scott?"

"Certainly," he said, marveling at his good fortune. Things couldn't be more perfect.

They found their way back without incident, and Scott delivered Millie to her cabin on the upper decks. He wondered: was her sister's nanny lying in wait for Millie's return? As Millie deftly unlocked the door, she said, "I'll see you tomorrow" and gave him a kiss on the cheek, slightly grazing his lips in passing.

Scott walked to his stateroom and considered the evening. He recognized that Millie was the more age-appropriate romantic interest of the two women he'd met. She was perfect, lovely in every way, but he couldn't get his mind off the countess. Dare he even think of a liaison with this more sophisticated, wiser, worldlier woman? Well, he was; the thought filled his mind. The Countess de Rovere was unaccompanied. She hadn't been wearing a wedding ring; maybe she'd never married; perhaps she was divorced. Scott mulled over their encounter. Was there any reason to believe she could have anything more than a casual interest in him? Whether anything more was possible, his

hopeful imagination thought perhaps she'd reveal more of herself at tomorrow night's dinner.

Scott's anticipation at seeing the countess again was building. But there was Millie; how could he give the countess the attention he so wanted and encourage any trace of reciprocity with his dinner date present? The countess would surely find any impoliteness crass. Balancing his attention between two sophisticated women, both of whom were attuned to the maneuvers of men, would be like walking a tightrope.

THE NEXT EVENING, MILLIE DIDN'T DISAPPOINT. Dressing beyond her years, she wore a sexy flapper-styled dress with white fringe, lace, and beads. Obviously skilled in cosmetics, Mille had dramatically accentuated her eyes and lengthened her eyelashes with mascara. The reddest possible lipstick completed her outfit. The night before, Scott had been the only man in first class without a tux. Having never anticipated a foray out of steerage, he hadn't packed his own for the crossing; his tux, along with the rest of his stuff, would be shipped once he'd found a place in Geneva. Though he'd felt uncomfortably underdressed for first class and the countess, his charcoal suit would have to do.

Tonight, they took a more direct path through the ship, and Millie filled him in on the countess as they walked.

"I think Desirée approves of you, and she doesn't like just anybody," Millie said.

"Why, because she included me in the dinner invitation?"

"No, because she said, pointedly, that I should hang on to *that*, the *that* meaning you."

"Well I hope you do," Scott said. "So, what's her story?"

Millie's mother had known Desirée's mother, Françoise de Bellecourt, who was descended from a long French line. Desirée had married and then divorced an Italian count, who came from a Venetian shipping family, after a short and childless marriage. Something to do

with the count's gambling debts, Millie supposed. She didn't reveal Desirée's age, and Scott didn't ask, though he wanted to know. He guessed she was somewhere between twenty-eight and thirty.

Fifteen minutes after nine, the countess appeared in the first-class dining room doorway. The ship's personnel, falling all over themselves, guided her to the captain's table where the countess took her seat. Scott had seen her now for the third time, and he was struck, once again, by her elegance. The Countess de Rovere wore a North African caftan of white silk and gold thread. The loose folds hung from her five-foot, seven-inch silhouette, draping her body, revealing nothing, yet suggesting everything. A single gold ring and hammered bangle cuff completed her look. Scott, momentarily mesmerized by the countess's grace and sexuality, had to mind his manners. He didn't want Millie to see him surveying the countess, or worse, staring with too much interest.

After a settling-in period of a few minutes, the countess turned to Scott and asked, "Do you have friends in Geneva?"

"No, I don't know anyone."

"Well, that's not quite true. You know me. Do you have a place to live?"

"I'm going to rent an apartment."

"It would be best to rent something in the old town, near the university, but of course it's more expensive," she said.

"Convenience has a price," Scott said.

Was she being cordial because he was a newcomer or was there something else?, Scott wondered. Now and then, it seemed Desirée's aquamarine eyes were revealing more than the casualness she affected in conversation. But he couldn't be sure. And Scott knew that the slightest indiscretion would end his budding friendship with Millie and dismantle any beginnings of a relationship with the countess. No; if a move was to be made, the countess must be the one to act. Scott realized how highly improbable this scenario was, but, if he could wait patiently enough, there was still time to find out. A woman like Desirée—beautiful, single, and wealthy—would, without a doubt, have an army of suitors.

Millie's voice broke into his thoughts: "Scott, you seem to be somewhere else," she said in an accusing tone.

"Oh yes; sorry. I was just thinking."

"About what?"

"Nothing really."

"Come now, can't we know just the tiniest hint of what took you so far away?" the countess asked.

Scott felt a certain heat in his cheeks, which he knew were turning red. He told himself to relax, to breathe, but on reflection, he wasn't totally displeased his interest had been revealed; that reverie and resulting blush had exposed Scott's preoccupation. Perhaps this gave the countess the tip she was looking for. He imagined that Desirée liked having the upper hand, and he wasn't ready to give her any more clues to confirm her suspicions. Not at this time, anyway. Scott guessed the countess could be the kind of woman who wanted to subject every man and was probably driven mad by those she couldn't immediately ensnare. *I'd love to drive her mad*, he thought.

"Forgive me," Scott responded. "I was reveling in my extraordinary fortune at having dinner with the two most beautiful women on the ship."

"Flattery will go a long way with the distaff set, Mr. Stoddard," the countess laughed.

"It's only flattery when it's not true," he replied.

On that note, their repartee ended, and conversation turned to plans for Europe. When the ship reached England, Scott learned that Millie and her sister, like most of the ship's company, would disembark in Southampton. They'd be picked up and chauffeured to their mother's summer home in Somerset, where the girls would enjoy the last few warm days before returning to London. The countess, however, would leave the ship at the first port of call, Le Havre, France, on the Normandy coast, early in the morning before it crossed the channel northward to Southampton. She'd proceed to Paris, where she would visit her mother, and then on to Florence, where she'd stay until the end of October. Although Scott didn't say, he was scheduled for a few

days in both London and Paris, a kind of young man's grand tour, before arriving in Geneva.



THE NEXT TWO EVENINGS AFFORDED NO MORE VISITS TO FIRST class. Scott was disappointed. He had hoped to dine with the countess again, and the lack of invitation could mean she wasn't interested or that Millie had prevented any more threesome evenings. But this didn't stop him from thinking about Desirée. It made him obsess even more.

Still, Scott enjoyed the dinners and dancing with Millie, who always dressed in something a little too sexy or mature for her age. For a nineteen-year-old, she seemed very much of the world. Scott recognized that she knew much more than he did, which caused some anxious moments. She'd already been everywhere. Though Millie wasn't snooty (at least, with Scott), she could drop little teasers at will, such as, "Oh, at Christmas, we always go to Badrutt's in St. Moritz. The *après-ski* is marvelous there."

Scott was familiar with St. Moritz, but what was Badrutt's? He knew better than to ask. That worldliness, he reasoned, resulted in his unease around Millie. And if the younger Millie was a challenge, Scott could well imagine what spending stretches of time with the more sophisticated countess would be like. He'd always been considered smart; everything he attempted looked easy. "Lucky Scott," his friends in school had called him. But these two women were making him realize just how very far behind he was. Scott was determined to catch up.

That, however, was exactly the sort of distraction Scott didn't need right then. University would require all his concentration. And in truth, wasn't he getting ahead of himself with this preoccupation with the countess? Other than the mild (and brief) flirtation at dinner, she'd given no indication she'd wanted anything more than to charm him. Perhaps Desirée acted the same way with every man she met.



AFTER FOUR DAYS TOGETHER, IT WAS OBVIOUS MILLIE AND Scott liked each other (though Scott could have liked her even more if thoughts of the countess had not been lurking in his head). The young people explored the ship and enjoyed activities, finding plenty to talk and laugh about. They sought each other out for dinner and dancing. On the sixth morning, the ship was scheduled to arrive in Southampton, some ninety miles southwest of London, and that made the last night on board difficult. There is always a sadness associated with shipboard farewells—and they are particularly rough when all parties know a next meeting will likely never occur. Not wanting to admit reality, Millie and Scott promised to keep in touch. Scott grasped at the idea of visiting London during the school year. It was one of many little plots hatched during their last evening, schemes designed to assuage their melancholy: their shipboard acquaintance would terminate when the ship docked.

five

SCOTT SET HIS ALARM TO RING BEFORE DAWN. THE NEXT morning, the SS *United States* was docking in Le Havre, and those passengers heading to Paris and other points would disembark. Among them would be the countess. He wanted one last look.

A light fog enveloped the ship. At six in the morning, only a few passengers filed down the gangway to the dock. Hidden in a dark doorway, Scott waited and watched the deck; he knew Desirée would not be among the early group, and it was essential that he spot her before she spotted him. He didn't want his interest known before he was ready. . . and before he knew hers.

Scott glimpsed her sleeve, peeking out from a cabin doorway, first. The vicuna coat, a broad gold cuff encircling a wrist, and a dark brown, kid leather glove—they could only be hers. Desirée appeared in full view, and he was again taken with her beauty: that serene face, her confident posture, and those crystal blue eyes. Encircling her neck was a yellow print Hermes scarf; a chocolate felt fedora completed the countess's travel ensemble. As Desirée headed down the deck, Scott walked in the opposite direction until he reached the stairs to the sports deck. Stopping, he watched her disembark from the ship's bow.

The countess stepped off the gangway and onto the dock and then inexplicably and unexpectedly, she turned. Her gaze traveled up the side of the ship and across the deck, suggesting that she was looking for something—or, Scott hoped, for someone. He thought he detected

the slightest hint of disappointment inch across Desirée's face before she turned away, got in the waiting limousine, and was gone.

Scott reflected on this fleeting vignette for days: what had it meant? He wondered—should he have waved and acknowledged her? Why hadn't he reacted? Did Desirée's wandering glance mean what he hoped, or was it simply happenstance? Shaking his head, he thought *I have to get over her right away*. His infatuation with this woman couldn't interfere with his plans for school.



THAT LAST MORNING WAS NO BETTER THAN THE NIGHT before. Passengers were impatiently waiting to get off the ship, and Millie and Scott had the dreaded anticipation of another final farewell. And then it was Tillie's and Miss Bannister's turn, with Millie and Scott not far behind. As they reached terra firma, Scott spied a large black Rolls Royce, the uniformed chauffeur motioning excitedly. Though the liner provided the short transfer to the London-bound train, Millie and her entourage were going some hundred and fifty miles west of London to their holiday home.

Millie gave Scott a tight embrace, a decidedly more-than-friendly kiss on the lips, and said, "It was wonderful. We had ever so much fun. Please come to London soon. Please write." And then, with a low sigh, "We had a great time, didn't we?"

"We did. An excellent time."

Millie settled into the back seat of the Rolls, extending her hand from the rear window in her signature wave. Scott knew this goodbye was likely final. No matter the promises made or sweet words said to lessen its blow, they'd enjoyed a shipboard dalliance and nothing more. He wasn't looking for an attachment with any future. But Scott knew that, if an opportunity for a liaison with the countess somehow arose, that would be an animal of a different stripe. The countess was a species all her own.

AFTER A FEW DAYS IN LONDON, SCOTT LEFT FOR PARIS and checked into the George V, one of the city's great luxury establishments. He arrived in the early afternoon, the ideal time to ensure his room would be ready without delay. Entering the grand lobby, he recognized that these were not the staid colors and furnishings of conservative London. Generous use of marble and gold, wrought iron with filigree, imposing Corinthian columns, giant cascading arrangements of fresh flowers, and Aubusson rugs—a more Versailles approach to decoration—welcomed Scott; this sumptuous space resembled a palace more than a hotel. Shown to his southern-facing room on the fourth floor, Scott took in the view. There, across the Seine, about a mile away, was the top of the Eiffel Tower. He was definitely in Paris.

The porter, placing Scott's luggage on mahogany racks, offered to open the cases: should he call the maid to put monsieur's affairs in order? Scott declined, and the porter left. Alone, Scott surveyed the room. He smiled at the platter of chocolate truffles and the bottle of Moët & Chandon chilling in the silver ice bucket. As he sipped his champagne, Scott read the hotel director's welcome note and mentally thanked his father's friends who had recommended this mansion of luxury; they definitely knew their way around.

It was a long shot, but that same afternoon, Scott called Andre Bourdonnais, a feature writer for Paris' leading newspaper, *Le Figaro*,

and friend of a friend, who unexpectedly invited him to lunch the very next day at Époque, a brasserie just a short walk from the George V.

Scott strolled down the Champs-Élysées, enjoying the sights of Paris. There, at the top end of the eight-lane boulevard, was the Arc de Triomphe; at the other end, some two kilometers away, he could see the Place de la Concorde. It was late September, and the large plane trees were beginning to show the effects of cooler nights; some were losing a few of their huge leaves of gold.

Upon his arrival at Époque, the maître d' informed Scott that Monsieur Bourdonnais had already been seated. As he was escorted to the table, Scott spotted his host waving at him. Another man was also at the table, and Andre introduced Leon Cardin, one of his coworkers who was a sports reporter.

The men exchanged a few pleasantries; Andre and Leon asked where Scott was staying and how long he would be in Paris. They were very interested in the SS *United States*—with its speed, the ship had become a transatlantic rival to the SS *France*, the country's flagship liner. They encouraged him to stay longer than a couple of days; there was so much to see. And the two writers indicated how impressed they were about his acceptance into the University of Geneva's graduate program.

Lunch turned into a two-hour feast of *choucroute*: various pork sausages in casings of different shapes and sizes, fresh sauerkraut, boiled potatoes, a hot grainy mustard, and lots of Alsatian draft beer from large, extremely cold, wooden barrels. Andre ordered for Scott, and the young American was glad he had. In the most French of ways, they discussed, argued, and dismissed each other's opinions of the food being consumed.

"Leon, you know the frankfurters are good here but better at Chez Julien," Andre said.

"You are completely wrong," Leon retorted. "These frankfurters have a thin casing, so the interior is more succulent and seasoned to perfection. I think you may be losing your palate or perhaps your mind. But the sauerkraut is better at Chez Julien."

"No, no, the sauerkraut is better here," Andre said. "They use too much juniper at Julien."

"It's not the juniper you taste," Leon said. "It's the combination of peppercorns and bay leaf."

"Bay leaf in sauerkraut? It's better in a stew," Andre said.

And the conversation continued, each man with his particular preference for a restaurant, dish, and preparation specifics.

Scott didn't know whether he would regret it, but he asked anyway: "On the ship, I had occasion to meet a woman whom I believe lives part of the year here, in Paris: the Countess de Rovere—"

"You met the Countess de Rovere on the ship?" Andre asked.

"Yes, it was quite by coincidence," Scott said. "She's very beautiful and quite nice, too."

"My dear boy, you are a master of understatement," Andre said. "Why do you think every eligible male in France and Italy chases her?"

"Oh, I guessed she would be very popular. Everyone seemed to like her."

"Do we detect a little hint of infatuation?" Leon asked slyly.

"Yes, my friend; you don't start modestly, I see," Andre said.

Scott was sure his feelings showed, but Andre and Leon relented when he changed the subject. He liked them both. Andre was a generous host. The two seemed so French or, at least, French as Scott imagined it in Gallic stereotypes. Andre's copious thatch of coarse hair had just the right amount of gray at the edges, and his bushy black eyebrows danced in unison with the conversation's ebb and flow. Leon, fair in complexion, was more studied in response, but, with a minimum of inspiration, primed to convulse in genuine laughter, Andre's co-conspirator in joviality and camaraderie.

The two Parisians spoke with amazing speed. Dependent on the conversation, their speech was often laced with a salty French slang. Scott lamented his basic book-learned proficiency and how hard this casual street argot would be to adopt. Andre's sage advice: acquire a French lover.

By the time dessert was ordered, the men had retreated into a kind of half French, half English that admirably fit their personalities and professions as observers and arbiters of culture. It seemed to Scott that Andre and Leon knew how to find joy in the simplest of pleasures.

As lunch came to an end, Scott thanked them for their hospitality. Andre assured him that he was welcome to call him on his next trip to Paris, which he hoped would be soon.



AS SCOTT WALKED BACK TO THE HOTEL, HE THOUGHT ABOUT the countess and her vaunted desirability. Depressed, Scott realized his worst fears had been confirmed—he'd probably made a fool of himself. Andre and Leon surely thought him presumptuous to even dream that a young, inexperienced man such as himself would have a chance with the countess. And yet . . . Scott remembered that the countess would be visiting her mother in Paris. Her mother probably lived in the 7th, 8th, or 16th arrondissement. The George V, Scott's hotel, was situated in the 8th arrondissement; could the countess be wandering about nearby? Scott scoffed at these foolish notions; such a coincidental meeting was unlikely to materialize.

No, he told himself; wait. They'd both be in Geneva at the end of October. But Scott couldn't seek her out without a reason. Perhaps he would call upon the countess to ostensibly notify her that he'd found an apartment. Scott was certain he needed to stay in touch, to be available should the countess choose to make the first romantic move. Scott laughed wryly; to think his mother often accused him of being impatient. Little did she know his patience depended on the prize.

HIS BRIEF VISIT AT ITS END, SCOTT TOOK A TAXI TO Gare de Lyon, Paris' train station for all southern destinations. From there, he'd head to Geneva and school. Overburdened with two large train cases and several pieces of hand luggage, he hailed a porter; between the two of them, they found the right platform, and Scott boarded the train.

Scott sat alone in his first-class compartment, waiting for the train to depart. The conductor shouted instructions in a stentorian voice and slammed the carriage doors shut. The train lurched and then moved forward, steadily gaining speed.

The door to his compartment was pushed open (and not too daintily, either). A young woman entered, dragging a kind of duffel bag behind her. She wore a loose-fitting, light grey turtleneck with a cowl collar; corduroy pants in a distinctive mustard color; and beautiful boots of delicate black calfskin. Her unblemished olive skin bore no makeup, and her long black hair was pulled into an easy ponytail. Though pretty, the young woman wore an unpleasant scowl, appearing intent on settling in her side of the large compartment without the slightest acknowledgment of Scott's existence. Her aloofness hinted at an exotic origin and dramatized her almond-shaped eyes.

The trip to Geneva, around six hours, was a long time to ignore someone three feet away. The young woman managed it exceptionally well until the outskirts of Dijon, the halfway point. The conductor, making his rounds, alerted passengers that the dining car was open.

Scott, having not understood the conductor quite so well, simply followed her to the dining car. Though the young woman requested a table for one, the *maître d'* seated them at the same table.

"Would you prefer if I sat in the bar?" Scott asked in his schoolbook French.

She flinched, shifting in her seat, frowning, negotiating with herself. Did he mean to make her uncomfortable?

"No, please sit down," she replied in flawless English.

"It's no problem; I can sit elsewhere if you like."

"No, really. I'm sorry. I've just been thinking."

"Must be something serious. War and peace? You've been thinking for the last three hours."

She laughed. "Several days, actually."

They ordered, she a *fines herbes* omelet and he scrambled eggs and fresh fruit. Silent again, the young woman pushed her food around the plate without eating much of anything. Occasionally, she blotted the corners of her eyes and shifted her disinterested gaze to the passing scenery.

"I don't mean to pry, but you seem upset," Scott asked. "Want to talk about it?"

She sighed and drew up her shoulders and let them fall back into place in a world-weary shrug. "I don't know you."

"All the better," he said. "I don't know you either. Plus, I'm an expert."

"An expert?"

"Sure. I'm a man, I've been in love, and I've been cheated on."

"How did you know I had man troubles?" she asked, curiously.

"I told you I was an expert. Besides, what else could take days to consider?"

As their conversation progressed, the young woman's mood lightened considerably. Moving back to their compartment, they caromed through the swaying train, Scott opened the doors to each connecting car. On the way, the young woman—Solange—told him about her man trouble. Solange was French and Persian; her boyfriend had been from a highly respected French family. They'd been seeing each other for a year when his parents decided the couple was becoming too

serious and demanded the relationship end. Either their son lost the girl or forfeited his funds. In a fortnight, while Solange was in Deauville with family, her boyfriend had found a new, more acceptable girl, one who would not trigger his disinheritance. When Solange returned, he informed her they were through.

At first, Solange couldn't believe what he was saying, but the young man didn't leave any margin for hope or negotiation. Though he'd couched his termination of their relationship in less pecuniary terms, Solange and those close to the situation were clear on the whys of his actions: money. Her solution was to flee Paris for Geneva, where her mother lived part of the year.

Though Scott suspected the boyfriend's parents had perhaps had a more socially acceptable young woman in mind, Solange didn't—and couldn't—seem to grasp that her mixed ethnicity might have been at least part of the parents' rejection.

Scott, however, was from the Southern part of the United States and familiar with discrimination. Charleston was certainly not Paris or Geneva, and this was his first introduction to European discriminatory practices, biases that he would come to learn were based more on ethnicity and nationality than on skin color. He could see from Solange's mix of sorrow and anger that this discrimination, if it were indeed that, had exacted a bitter toll. He felt her pain; prejudice was one of the reasons he had left the South for school in Europe.

Sitting next to her, unable to read her face, Scott sensed Solange didn't really want advice. Besides, it was probably too soon for him to offer any. Scott restrained himself during each embarrassing stretch of silence; sometimes giving another person time to regroup, he reasoned, was the best help one could offer.

After what Scott was certain was a supreme effort at composure, Solange finally asked him about himself. Under the circumstances, he gave an abridged version. As he talked, she began to relax again, even laughing at some of Scott's lively recounting of Parisian predicaments: getting lost one afternoon in the small streets of the 5th arrondissement and ordering what he thought to be veal (veal kidneys; he'd managed to choke it down nonetheless). He could have gone on and on.

When Scott turned the conversation to her life, Solange responded openly. She was perpetually traveling to the best places in France, Switzerland, and Italy. There was no mention of school or a job; her long-range plans extended at most to a few months hence and, even then, to where the snow might be best in February.

The longer they spoke, the more Scott began to think of Solange as the French version of Millie, or as the younger countess. This pleasure-filled, upper-class lifestyle—one lacking in work- and achievement-oriented goals—was foreign to Scott. Of course, he was aware of the differences between European and American cultures. These three European women were preoccupied with the best ways to enjoy a life of leisure, luxury, and entertainment. Edward and Sarah Stoddard, although well off, would never have permitted their son a life of such idle luxury. Self-made, Scott's parents embodied a pragmatic approach to life; they had agreed to fund his studies in Geneva only after demanding clear benchmarks of achievement. The understanding: these standards would need to be maintained for Scott's financial support to continue.

The two young travelers grew so intent on their conversation and getting to know each other that, when the conductor announced their upcoming arrival in Geneva, they were surprised. So soon? On the spur of the moment, Solange offered Scott a lift; his hotel, she explained, was on the way to her home on the Rive Gauche, Geneva's left bank. Her mother would be at the station to meet her, Solange said, and an additional passenger would be no trouble at all.

When the train pulled into the station, Solange wrestled her duffle bag from the compartment while Scott signaled a porter to help with their bags. Together, they exited the bustling terminal, and Scott was glad to have Solange's guidance. Businessmen hustled by in crisp suits; conversations in a cacophony of languages buffeted his ears; bicyclists whizzed by, their baskets filled with fresh fruit, French baguettes, and flowers. Close to the station entrance, Scott spotted a silver Mercedes parked at the curb; next to it waited a chic woman, whom he immediately identified as Solange's mother. Dressed in a dark blue gabardine skirt and white silk blouse, yards of gold chains encircling her neck, and matching caramel calfskin pumps and handbag, this

elegant creature was clearly the French branch of Solange's family tree. Though he'd been in Paris only a short time, Scott had keenly noticed how French women of every age seemed to project an air of nonchalant sophistication.

Solange greeted her mother affectionately. "*Maman!*" she exclaimed. "*Salut ma chérie.*" Mother and daughter embraced before turning to Scott.

"Scott Stoddard, let me introduce my mother, Madame Pahlavi," said Solange. Scott swallowed hard. Pahlavi? From newspapers, Scott recognized the Persian royal name—the shah of Iran was Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. Iran's Pahlavis were a very large family, full of multiple generations and many branches, and knowing what he did of Solange's life, the shared surname couldn't be coincidence. Scott bent over the woman's proffered hand and stammered, "It is my pleasure, Madame."

"Maman, Mr. Stoddard is a student and new to Geneva," said Solange. "He was so kind to me on the train. May we give him a lift? He's staying at the Beau Rivage."

"Of course," Madame Pahlavi said graciously. "It's no trouble." She gestured toward the driver, who loaded the luggage into the car. Within minutes, they were pulling away from the station.

"Mr. Stoddard, do you have a place to live while at the university?" Madame asked.

"No, but someone mentioned the old town," Scott said.

"Yes; definitely the old town, because you will be going to class in the buildings there, and parking is difficult," Solange said.

"But the landlords know this. When they find out you're American, the price might go up." Madame Pahlavi advised. "The landlords know they don't need to negotiate. Nevertheless, when you find something you like, take it."

Taking the young American under their wing, the women chattered genially about Geneva until reaching Scott's hotel. Before he made his goodbyes, Solange wrote down their Geneva address and telephone number, recommended a number of restaurants, and extracted Scott's promise to stay in touch.

