



VINTAGE

LE MARIAGE

DIANE JOHNSON

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Diane Johnson

Dedication

Title Page

Epigraph

1 Clara

2 Tim

3 Anne-Sophie

4 What Anne-Sophie Saw

5 La Virtue

6 Delia's Story

7 Dernier Train

8 Sunday Morning

9 Hôtel Le Mistral

10 Goddess of the Hunt

11 Will You Wear White?

12 Tears at the Tennis Club Marne-Garches-la-Tour

13 Who is Tim?

14 Where is Gabriel?

- 15 The Clipping Box
- 16 Illuminating Manuscripts
- 17 The Invitations
- 18 The Houseguest
- 19 At Madame du Barry's
- 20 Hospitality
- 21 The Driad Apocalypse
- 22 The Arrest of Monsieur Savard
- 23 Confidences
- 24 The Arrest
- 25 Prison
- 26 Have You Heard What Happened to Clara?
- 27 The Prisoner
- 28 Stir-Crazy
- 29 Word from Gabriel
- 30 Out on Bail
- 31 Clara and Delia
- 32 Cave Canem
- 33 The Shadow of the Altar
- 34 The Hunting World
- 35 Take it Off, Take it Off
- 36 Tim and Antoine Talk
- 37 Public Opinion
- 38 Lunch at the Persands
- 39 A Walk in the Woods

- 40 The American State of Mind
- 41 Cécile
- 42 Principles
- 43 Self-Denial
- 44 Lunch Date
- 45 Chestnuts from Suzanne de Persand
- 46 Pyramid Power
- 47 Take Me to the Shining Shore
- 48 Lust
- 49 Oregon
- 50 Guinevere Worries
- 51 Snowbound
- 52 Meanwhile Back in Paris
- 53 Farewell to the New World
- 54 Real Life
- 55 Countdown to the Altar
- 56 Rehearsal Afternoon
- 57 The Crays Entertain
- 58 The Rules of the Game
- 59 Wedding Day
- 60 The Beginning

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About the Book

Clara Holly is a former actress, beautiful, rich, and 'well married, far from her Oregon beginnings' to the renowned but reclusive film director Serge Clay. Anne-Sophie is a proper young Frenchwoman with a smart little antique stall in the Paris flea market and a wedding to plan. As the plot thickens they are all drawn into a cross between a modern Feydeau farce and a Kafkaesque nightmare, as their paths and those of a host of other characters intersect at the Cray's château. Despite murder, misunderstanding, hostage-taking and erotic encounters, however, le mariage must go ahead in the grand French style.

About the Author

Diane Johnson is the author of *Le Divorce*, a 1997 National Book Award finalist, as well as of eleven previous books. She has also worked on several screenplays and collaborated with Stanley Kubrick on *The Shining*. She lives in San Francisco and Paris.

ALSO BY DIANE JOHNSON

Fiction

Le Divorce
Health and Happiness
Persian Nights
Lying Low
The Shadow Knows
Burning
Loving Hands at Home
Fair Game

Non Fiction

Natural Opium
Terrorists and Novelists
Dashiell Hammett
Lesser Lives

To the memory of
Alice Adams and
William Abrahams

Diane Johnson
LE MARIAGE

VINTAGE BOOKS
London



What the artist calls good, the object of all his playful pains, his life-and-death jesting, is nothing less than a parable of the right and the good, a representation of all human striving after perfection.

—Thomas Mann, *Homage to Kafka*

Clara

IT WAS WIDELY agreed among the other Americans in Paris that Clara Holly had the ideal life here, and people also agreed that if her good fortune had distanced her slightly from the normal lot of Americans, even from human beings generally, it hadn't made a monster of her as often seems to happen to women in her category—beautiful, rich, well married, far from her Oregon beginnings. Sometimes women in this category, married to Europeans, are seen to acquire unplaceable mid-Atlantic accents and a certain amnesia about being American except for eight weeks spent on Martha's Vineyard every summer.

"And sometimes fortunate people can come to feel that they have earned their good fortune," remarked the princess Sternholz, née Dorothy Minor from Cincinnati, of Clara, though she liked her.

Clara Holly remembered her roots, yet would rather not, and almost never went back to the U.S. When in Paris she belonged very much to the American world that exists like a specialized form in a complex ecosystem, dependent on its hosts but apart from them, extending mossily from the Marais to Neuilly, the stodgy suburb to the northwest, and into the delightful countryside between Saint-Cloud and Versailles—so Marie Antoinette in its pretension to wildness, nature, and simplicity.

Clara and her husband Serge Cray, the renowned if now somewhat reclusive director, live out there, near the village

of Etang-la-Reine, in a château of exceptional beauty that had once briefly belonged to Madame du Barry. This was a decrepit structure that had somehow escaped the notice of the ministry of such things, fallen into further decay, briefly become a bed-and-breakfast, and been bought by a newly rich Russian who sold its *boiseries* and *cheminées*—its panelling and fireplaces. After Serge Cray bought it, he directed the refurbishment, using studio carpenters and props from his costume film *Queen Caroline*, and Clara had thrown herself into restoring the gardens, going into Paris only a couple of times a week to shop or see an art show or go to a party.

Clara was always planning to go back to Oregon—her widowed mother lived in Lake Oswego, to whom she spoke almost daily—but somehow she didn't go more than every year or two. This was partly because of Cray, who could not go to America because of some income tax matter, a running battle with the IRS that did not quite warrant extradition.

Cray had some view that she would be held hostage. The idea of her going always threw him into one of his fits of gloom. He was Polish to his boots, though after the age of twelve he had been raised in Chicago. It wasn't so much her absence he would mind—they got lost in their rooms and corridors and saw little of each other—it was that America could attach a piece of his property: Clara.

Whether it could or couldn't, Clara respected his fears. They tallied with her own, which over the years had grown exaggerated from reading American newspaper accounts of violence, handguns, road accidents, and crime.

Now thirty-two, Clara had been married for a dozen years, but hadn't acted since that first film, when she met Serge, and when she gained a little bit of cult fame for a daring dance scene. In truth, her dancing had not been as memorable as her nubile beauty, just out of her teens, black curls and a voluptuousness that was close to plumpness.

She became thinner with marriage and motherhood. Lars, their eleven-year-old son, was at school in England, to Clara's distress and over her objections, it being Cray's view that English education was superior to French for a boy with Lars's handicap. Mrs. Holly, Lars's ailing grandmother, agreed it was a shame to send a child so young off without his mother, and in her opinion Clara wasn't happy; but the husband was overbearing, as these film people are. Mrs. Holly would say all this to her caregiver Cristal. "There's nine hours' time difference between here and France," Mrs. Holly would always add, it being so odd to think of Clara all the way on the other side of the world where it was dark when the sun shone in Oregon.

Clara was controversial in the American community. The natural suspicion people are apt to feel of above-average beauty was allayed by her apparent modesty and intelligence. A certain loftiness was attributed to shyness, so that people could almost forget about how she looked. Some felt sorry for her because of Lars, deaf from birth, and of how she must miss him, while others remarked that into each life some rain must fall. Yet there was also the fact, undeniable, that the possessors of good fortune tend to take it for granted and then to expect it, and Clara was no exception. In her own view, she may have felt she had mysteriously earned her looks, wealth, and good fortune by the conscious exercise of virtue.

Tim

THE NIGHT THE American journalist Thomas Ackroyd Nolinger met the former actress Clara Holly in Paris—without, he says, special presentiment at the time—he had by coincidence been talking about Serge Cray that very morning in Amsterdam in connection with an interesting crime. Nolinger, European stringer for the American conservative newsmagazine *Reliance* (and also, using his initials TAN, for the liberal monthly *Concern*; he was more or less untroubled by the ideological contradiction), contributor to the English literary magazine *The Weekly*, occasional reviewer for the *TLS*, film buff, restaurant critic, and would-be novelist, had been sitting in the Café Prolle in Amsterdam reading through the pile of stuff his helpful magistrate friend Cees had brought him, and noticed something that touched on Clara, or actually her husband, little suspecting he'd be meeting her later the same day.

The crime that interested Nolinger was the theft of a valuable medieval manuscript from the Morgan Library in New York. Though far away, it connected surprisingly to his own life when he read, in the list Cees gave him of prominent collectors of incunabula and illustrated manuscripts, not only the well-known name of Serge Cray, the reclusive director, but the names of a couple of people he had actually met in Frankfurt. These were people the criminals might be expected to try to sell their stolen loot to.

The list of manuscript collectors had been compiled by Interpol, with the cooperation of the International Booksellers Association, from auction catalogues and records of private sales. None of the people on the list had ever been associated with stolen material, Cees explained, and they were not suspected in the recent theft, but all would be contacted by Interpol and made aware of the disappearance of the Driad Apocalypse should it be offered for sale to any of them. “The Americans have some reason to think the manuscript will be sold in Europe,” said Cees. “That’s why the list concentrates on European collectors.”

Tim went to Amsterdam from time to time to be filled in like this, smoke some grass, have a few beers with Cees, and gather such information as was floating around formally or informally about Belgian sex rings, Luxembourgian assassination plots, hardening Swiss drug enforcement policies, art thefts, terrorist smuggling attempts. Tim had nothing special to do with any of this—he was not a crime reporter and didn’t plan an exposé—but he still made the train journey from Paris every few months to hear Cees’s stories. One of these days he would do something with them for *Reliance*, if he could find an American angle. *Reliance* always liked hearing how much more corrupt and criminal Europe was than America, though they didn’t like hearing how much better the trains were. *Reliance* regarded trains as crypto-communist, requiring as they did state subsidies.

Regarding crime in general, theories floated vaguely in Tim’s mind, solid enough to make a little essay: criminal conspiracy as a way of imposing order on the random materials of the chaotic world. Crime required focus, as did perversion; in that sense both represented Order. The psychological *soulagements* of crime—what was the English word for *soulagement*? He often lost words, which hurtled unrecoverably into some slot between his English

and his French, a great disadvantage for someone who made his living writing.

Tim was half American, half Belgian on his mother's side and was called Tim instead of Tom by everyone but his mother. He had kept the pale tow-colored hair of childhood, and was one of those large pink-cheeked rugby-player types, unsuited by his European education for fitting into either culture, and more good-natured than his size would suggest. He was a journalist ostensibly, a wanderer, a dreamer perhaps. And perhaps slightly older than he appeared, which raised the possibility of a lost half-decade somewhere behind him.

Tim had known Cees a long time. They had met at prep school in Switzerland, Cees then a skinny curly-headed cynic, now something of a law-and-order zealot, and much fatter. From what anyone knew, Tim's father had been an American representative of a hotel and car-rental chain, stationed in Europe. The family moved a lot, from London to Istanbul, so Tim mostly attended Swiss boarding schools. His American aunts had referred to this as being "sent away" but he himself had seen it as adventure. His Belgian mother looked on the separations from her son as normal though painful, a form of sacrifice exacted from herself, sacrifice being the nature of life. Tim always spoke with great affection of his mother, inadvertently giving the impression she was dead, though she lived in Michigan.

Always looking for stories, his only means of supporting the rather *mondaine* Paris life he led, Tim resolved to figure out a way of getting an interview with Serge Cray about his collection of ancient manuscripts and incunabula—an approach to Cray he had never seen tried. People were mostly interested in his films, or at the outside his personality, and not especially in his old books. Collecting as a logical extension of the role of *auteur*? Filmmaking as a form of collecting, in the sense that it was an accretion of images and ideas? Tim got out his notebook and wrote

these notions down, since he suspected they were too flimsy to stick in his mind, like many of his ideas.

A young man given to irony and no illusions, in one sense he was a generic young man, for there are always dozens of Americans like him in Paris, clinging to the rather precarious livelihoods they have managed to score, for the pleasure of being there or because they have burnt their bridges and have no idea how to go back home now that they have let the moment go by for getting their MBAs or internships at their hometown radio stations or newspapers or lesser Condé Nast publications. But there was something extra about Tim Nolinger, something more than just the patina of a Swiss boarding school.

"The FBI is coming here," Cees said. "That is a little bit rare. It is hard to see why it is of concern to them—a stolen manuscript from a private American library. Not a federal thing. They usually hand art theft on to the art people at Interpol."

"It might be a federal crime. American laws are complicated—state lines, jurisdictions. I went to an American law school for a year," Tim said. "No Japanese or Arabs on this list of collectors, I notice."

"I often forget you're an American," Cees said.

"Only half. But which half, I am asked, head or heart? Top or bottom?" Tim laughed, and took his leave. It was a question he didn't himself know the answer to, he'd been in Europe so long.

Having promised his French fiancée to turn up at a soiree in Paris, he had booked a plane at sixteen o'clock from Schiphol, which would get him back to France just in time to languish in the traffic at the nightmare rush hour.

Idea for a piece: the terrible traffic in Paris? It was a wonder more people weren't killed. Deploring French traffic was not just rhetorical; their most important people were run over in traffic—Roland Barthes, and the head of Cartier, who stepped out of his shop on the Place Vendôme.

Death in traffic a tradition going back at least as far as the husband of Madame Curie, mown down by a horsecab, his mind on his wife's infidelity.

Anne-Sophie

THE AGREEABLE TIM Nolinger was the future son-in-law of the well-known French novelist Estelle d'Argel (*Les Fruits; Doric, Ionian; Plusieurs Fois*), engaged to her daughter Anne-Sophie. What a misfit the two of them, Estelle and Anne-Sophie. Her daughter's fiancé did not quite please the worldly and practical Estelle, who had greater ambitions for Anne-Sophie, had hoped for a count or a promising politician, or a future Academician, or at the least a sports figure—if from a respectable sport like tennis. Or at least someone French. Tim did play tennis, of course, but only as a form of recreation.

Anne-Sophie, a concern to her mother, was the American community's ideal young Frenchwoman, trim, confident, flirtatious, cheerful, enterprising, with her little shop. After attending *Sciences-Po*, she might have assisted a government minister or become an *attaché de presse* at a publishing house, but drifted instead into dealing in horsey artifacts, a hobby since girlhood. Anne-Sophie's stand, Cheval-Art, formerly belonged to a Monsieur Lavallo who, as he aged, spent less and less time there and over the years had pretty much turned the business over to Anne-Sophie, especially the bookkeeping and the buying; he would come in occasionally on Monday afternoons to take a turn at the stand. Their association had begun when she was still at school, and hung about, little by little betraying a knowledge, remarkable in a *jeune fille*, of Niderviller

horse figurines and antique tack. At first her mother had mistrusted Monsieur Lavalley's intentions regarding Anne-Sophie, but she needn't have, for Lavalley was altogether *gay*.

Anne-Sophie, at home in her small apartment on the rue Saint-Dominique, was preparing to bathe. Rosy and compact, her breasts the little pink-tipped breasts of a Boucher nymph, she brought to mind a particular picture in the Musée du Luxembourg. Nipples just peeking out of the suds. Perhaps a polished toe surfacing at the faucet end. Anne-Sophie lined up the stuff she used for her elaborate baths: bath oil, soap, shampoo, rinse, *crème de gommage*, razor, pumice.

But tonight she felt too devastated, and at the same time excited, to unscrew the tops and embark on the long, absorbing ritual which might lull her mind into a sense of the ordinary after the shocking events of the day. These she wanted to keep a keen memory of, for Tim, when she met him at the princess's party. His journalist instincts would prompt questions she wanted to be able to answer. She had noticed everything, she thought, in case Tim should ask something specific, like "What was the guy wearing?" Gray shirt, blue knitted gilet, blue knitted tie soaked in blood! When it came to Tim Nolinger, Anne-Sophie had a Frenchwoman's sense of vocation—but she was also an expert in hunting prints and a very good businesswoman.

Anne-Sophie had from her novelist mother Estelle two versions of maternal lore on how to lead life. On the one hand were the lessons of the real life Anne-Sophie saw being lived by her mother and father, her brother and herself; on the other was the general philosophy she found expressed in Estelle's works, which represented a reality at once more sophisticated, more cynical, and more exacting. For instance, the comtesse Ribemont in *Against the Tide* says, "Never make a man feel guilty," whereas at home, her

mother had often ignored the countess's principles by snapping at her husband, "You might have called, I've been frantic," or "Where have you been?"

Of the two, Anne-Sophie had concluded that the countess was probably right. There had been nothing really wrong between her parents, just a certain detachment Anne-Sophie found disappointing. Daily life could be led more beautifully, more passionately; Anne-Sophie had therefore patterned her behavior and beliefs on things her mother had written. "Pay attention to the *petits soins*," Madame Godchaud, the worldly grandmother in *Plusieurs Fois* by Estelle d'Argel, tells her granddaughter who is about to be married. The little details of grooming. That meant obsessive depilation and having dainty lingerie. So Anne-Sophie was careful of the *petits soins* both by nature and by the study of her mother's works, whereas in life Estelle had never mentioned such things, beyond the usual admonitions about clean underwear.

Patterning yourself after books can make you seem rather literal-minded, unable to figure things out for yourself, so Anne-Sophie was taken by some people to be too literal-minded. And someone interested in horses, in the common mind, was bound to be earthy and simple—a girl cannot be both horsey and flighty. So Anne-Sophie was misunderstood as a sensible outdoorsy girl, when in fact she also had a yearning for luxe and frivolity.

She clamped her mirror between her knees to keep it out of the suds and worked on her eyebrows, but her mind wasn't on them. She was thinking of the gruesome sight she had seen that day in the flea market.

The reception was at the undeniably grand rooms of an elderly American, the princess Dorothy Minor Sternholz, married to Blaise. Sternholz was not a French prince, of course, but something more easterly, perhaps Lithuanian or Czech, his a flimsy, distant title more imposed on him than

claimed. (The French love titles, their revolutions notwithstanding. For that matter, Americans do too.) Blaise Sternholz the prince, the publisher of a sporting newspaper and a member of the International Olympic Committee, had been raised in the Sixteenth Arrondissement and had never been to Lithuania. Dorothy was a permanent fixture among Americans in the City of Light, and had notable art works acquired during a period before her marriage when, on the evidence of a number of paintings she posed for, she appears to have known quite a few French artists quite well.

The American community in Paris was something of a world unto itself. Americans there had their charities, their futile long-distance involvement in American politics, their periodic attempts to disseminate American wisdom, thought, and literature to France as in the days of Tom Paine, their English-language cooking classes, their music, their American Church and American Cathedral, their knot of French friends, their effusive celebrations of the slightly has-been American celebrities who turned up here, their embassy presided over by someone amusing sometimes—the new ambassador being viewed warily after the radiant hospitality of the last one—and the special store where they could buy their peanut butter and popcorn. Perhaps there were no natural contradictions between the French landscape and the Americans who inhabited it so diffidently, but it often seemed that Americans would do well to stay out of what they did not understand. Or was it they who brought the harm?

Arriving at Dorothy's party before Tim, Anne-Sophie embraced the Americans of her parents' age assembled there. Everyone kissed her in the French fashion. Especially intent kisses from Olivia Pace's elderly husband, the rich Robert Pace, did not escape her, nor his squeeze of her hand; he was what the French call a *vieux beau*.

Dorothy crossed to give her the usual two kisses. The princess's affection for Anne-Sophie stemmed in part from fellow feeling. Whereas Anne-Sophie's real mother was so unlike Anne-Sophie that she had never understood her, Dorothy did. Anne-Sophie's interest in horses put her in mind of her own interest in sports, and she often remembered the sense of unfeminine deviance and marginality that went with it, though Anne-Sophie was French femininity itself. Dorothy prided herself on being a great expert on French attitudes and culture, knowledge largely gleaned from her husband, whom she had met as a member of the U.S. Olympic rifle team forty years before.

Anne-Sophie raised her delightful chin, slightly dimpled like a child's, and gazed around the room for people more amusing to talk to. Disappointment. The usual suspects, and no other French people except the hopeless Madame Wallingforth. With despair she scanned the pretty rooms in deep salmon pink, curtained in green, candelabra of French vermeil, oil paintings of American subjects, especially barns and *petits bateaux*, large sofas in lime green, growly Anglo voices, that tall red-eyed anthropologist, and the pretty secretary or whatever she was, about whom, always, many rumors, the usual drab professor in bow tie and the plump wife—was this a reception for one of the bow ties, a famous economist or historian, was that it?—someone who had written a book, another book, about France? *Zut*, they produced them endlessly, anglophones and their books. Even Tim threatened to write one.

"Your reprehensible Tim telephoned to say he'll be late," Dorothy told her. "He's stuck in a taxi from the airport."

"*Tant mieux*, I'll have revenge then before he gets here." Anne-Sophie laughed and made a beeline for the good-looking black actor Sam Strait.

What Anne-Sophie Saw

WHEN TIM EVENTUALLY found himself as promised in these same high, vast pink rooms, their long windows festooned in green damask and thickly glazed against the heavy traffic on the rue du Bac, his heart sank at the boredom in prospect. His own set was raffish and motley, not usually American, and—from journalists to gym teachers—not always people he expected Anne-Sophie to like. She on the other hand had a collection of *bon-chic-bon-genre* young women (and men) she had been at school with, well-brought-up Parisians strayed into disparate walks of life by now, and also the occasional holdover from her horsey period, old riding teachers and stable managers, universally dull.

The spindly chairs were arranged in the French way around the edges of the room, as at dancing school. On none of these could he immediately see Anne-Sophie, but she was someone who would be dancing, not sitting. This was not a dance, of course, just a benefit cocktail party for the American Library—was that it? Or a book party. He couldn't remember. In their gabardines and worsted blazers, the mostly American guests looked like forlorn time-travelers in the grandiose eighteenth-century space.

Americans weren't popular this season, or rather, even less popular than usual. The U.S. was embarked on a rescue mission in the Balkans that was seen by the French as a barely submerged drive for world domination. One of

the few French guests, Madame Wallingforth, pointed this out to Tim as soon as he came in.

Though he was not often in the U.S., he explained to Madame Wallingforth, he knew in his bones that it wasn't desire for conquest but its opposite that made his countrymen behave as they did. "Americans want to make everything shipshape so we can be let alone—like a man who has to shave before he can read the paper."

Madame Wallingforth sniffed. "Americans have colonial designs and always have had."

Except that he'd said he'd meet Anne-Sophie here, he'd have cancelled. He had no particular interest in Professor Hoff, Froff, whatever his name was, had had lunch with the aged and sociable princess very recently, and would have liked to go to his computer to research a couple of angles in the matter of the Morgan Library theft.

But he soon saw it was serendipity that had brought him. There was Serge Cray's woman (wife or mistress?)—exactly the person to approach about getting to meet Cray. Clara Holly, instantly recognizable if you had seen her one movie, could be a dozen years ago, with its memorable dance. Clara Holly, first standing somewhat hesitantly in the doorway, clearly thinking she might not come in, then making for one of the little gilt chairs. She sat down and made some adjustment to her shoe.

She was older than the exquisite girl of *Swan Dinner* but had not really changed, except in the way movie actors always seem changed in the flesh, to smaller, older, with normal human variations of skin tone or errors of dress. He moved closer and presented himself—or introduced himself, as Americans say, though it would seem rather risqué to say in French.

"*Bonjour*, Clara," Dorothy was saying. "I didn't think you were coming."

"I wasn't, but then since I'd come into town anyway ..."

“Are you staying for dinner afterward?” They did their cheek kisses.

“I suppose, why not? Your dinners are always so delicious,” Clara agreed. “Why you exert yourself on the food I can’t imagine, since you know people would come for the booze anyway.”

“I’m Tim Nolinger,” Tim said. “Miss Holly, may I just speak to you for two seconds?”

This obsequious but intrusive approach was a mistake, because she sensed a journalist or a fan, and her smile congealed professionally. “Of course, hello,” she said, putting out her hand.

Tim admitted to being a journalist, recited his credentials in hopes that one from the potpourri would appeal to her. European stringer for the American conservative newsmagazine *Reliance*, etc. He did not add film buff, restaurant critic, and the rest, but went straight to the point, her husband’s collection and the Amsterdam police list.

Clara Holly seemed relieved not to be being asked personal questions about herself, or about Cray, and relaxed a little. Tim thought her powerfully good-looking, early to middle thirties, and the only imperfections he could see were two tiny pocks on her forehead. Having predetermined that she was bound to be either one of the two things, haughty or elfin, that actresses always were, he put her down for haughty and failed to register something more intelligent and satirical as well. So much for his newsman’s instinct.

“You could come out and talk to Serge,” she agreed. “He loves to show off his documents.” Tim doubted that—Serge Cray did not have the reputation of a garrulous *collectionneur*. But he seized on the invitation, pleased at the success of his gambit. Then she dashed any sense of intimacy or special favor by telling him to call Cray’s business office.

“The people there have his schedule and can give you directions if he says yes.” She smiled again and escaped him.

Eventually he spotted Anne-Sophie, who, true to form, had now found the three other French people in the room and was knotted with them in one corner, talking furtively, defying her promise to persevere with the English-speakers in order to combat and conquer her anxieties about her English, although it was perfectly good.

The French people who turned up at these American occasions were usually compromised by some circumstance of their lives: they had worked for American companies, or had spent a year of childhood in an English-speaking country, or were Protestant, which always gave them a slight air of illegitimacy. He didn't join them, but caught Anne-Sophie's eye across the room; she sent an air kiss. He thought, as he always did, how much he liked her looks (she was like him a pale blonde), her blooming skin, her slightly pop-eyed and shiny look of Fragonard, Watteau—but tonight she also had a rattled, stunned quality that made her big eyes wider than usual.

By eight-thirty the drinks crowd had begun to drift off, and those who had been invited to stay to dinner were led downstairs, where a long refectory table had been set for a score of favored guests. Madame *la princesse* was magisterially hospitable—so American that way. Tim believed his own presence was owing to Anne-Sophie, for she was popular with certain rich Americans, with her good English, her reliable taste in sporting prints and equestrian memorabilia, and, through a school friend, her good connections to one of the couture houses. In fact, he was prized in his own right, for his cheerful good manners and good looks, but not quite as much as when he had not been engaged. The princess poured him a scotch, with a gesture that suggested she expected him to take it to the table, American style. Estelle d'Argel sometimes thought Tim

might drink a little too much. Anne-Sophie thought of this as typically Anglo-Saxon.

The stricture against seating a couple together did not apply until they had been married for six months, so Tim and Anne-Sophie were seated together, and during dinner Anne-Sophie kept giving him anguished, significant nudges behind the low, rather prematurely Christmasy centerpiece—it was late October—as if she were unendurably brimming with news. The other dinner guests included Clara Holly, on Tim’s side of the table where he couldn’t embarrass her further by staring, as he probably would have done. The others avoided staring at her, looked anywhere but at her. She must have a lonely view of the world, he thought. The others were several people who could be counted on for big donations, some *Herald Tribune* people, and a British sculptor Tim sometimes played tennis with.

After the soup (*homard aux morilles*), when the subject turned to the affairs of the day, and when she sensed the moment an audience was hers, Anne-Sophie d’Argel said, “*Moi? Pas grand-chose*. A man was murdered at my feet today, that is all. His throat was cut and I nearly walked in his blood.”

This, of course, had the desired effect. The company stopped talking and waited for an amplification of her extraordinary statement. She could see in Tim’s smile approving surprise at her narrative restraint, to have saved such a dramatic tidbit with such forbearance all the way through the aperitifs and first course.

“Yes,” she said. “I was in my stand, my boutique in the Marché Paul Bert.”

“She has an antique shop in the flea market,” said someone.

“Yes, on the theme of the *cheval*,” she explained parenthetically. “Hunting prints, the old Hermès saddles, chandeliers made out of horseshoes, anything equestrian—

sometimes quite funny. But the man, Monsieur Boudherbe, in the next *allée*. First I heard the explosive clatter of a metal shutter, as if in raising it he had suddenly let it crash like a guillotine. Then the screams. *Zut*, the screams ...”

The screams did come back to her with appalling vividness. She would hear them for months. She had not called the police, she had alerted Raoul Pécuchet (Directoire furniture) on the other side of her. He had looked in on Boudherbe, then rushed to use her telephone, then they had taken the police to where Boudherbe lay. “His throat cut, and two Americans standing over him, their faces white as Limoges.”

She answered the questions of the dinner guests as best she could. Had the Americans done it? Had they been arrested? She did not think so, nor had she learned their names. Was there a motive? Is the flea market in general a dangerous place?

Talking about it was helping her manage the lurid memory of the sticky blood. She was not awfully pleased when Clara Holly said, “Well, how bizarre, I think I know something about this,” and quickly drew the attention of the company to herself.

“It’s just a funny coincidence,” Clara said. “A woman called me this morning, from my hometown, in need of help, and it was—must have been—one of the Americans you saw. She was at the flea market and saw the murder.”

She told the story.

Anne-Sophie could not read Tim’s expression, but she noted the rapt expressions on the faces of other men. Clara did not seem to strike them as assertive and unfeminine.