

The Hopeless Life of Charlie Summers

PAUL TORDAY



PHOENIX

One

People change. I have changed since my army days, even since my days in the City. The other evening I heard a Mozart oratorio being sung in York Minster, an event organised by the charity I now work for. As I listened to the pure notes of the tenor singing *Ave Dominus*, the tears welled up in my eyes and ran down my cheeks. I prayed that no one would notice. Until a few years ago, the only musical pieces I reacted to, with perhaps a slight prickling at the back of the eyes, were the ‘Eton Boating Song’ and ‘The British Grenadiers’. Now I can scarcely remember the words of either work, especially the latter, which once meant so much to me:

Rum tumtuntumtumtum; rumtum, tumtumtum
Of Hector and Lysander, and such great names as these
But of all the world's great heroes, there's none that can
compare
With a tow, row, row, row, row row something British
Grenadiers

Because people change, one becomes aware that it is difficult, if not impossible, to estimate the true worth of another human being. In the army we learned to sum up people very quickly: good soldier; crooked as a nine-pound note; one prawn short of a sandwich. As a simple system of

categorising human types, it served quite well. But it was not adequate to recognise human potentiality: the possibility that, when one shone one's torch into the coal cellar, a refracted gleam might indicate the presence of a diamond among the sooty lumps of more basic forms of carbon.

Such reflections did not pass through my mind when I first met Charlie Summers. I was, in those days, still very much a man of business; and hoping one day to become a man of leisure, a state of being which I thought I might be able to afford quite soon, if things kept going smoothly for a year or two longer. I did not then reflect much on my life or on others' lives: I judged people at a glance. In Charlie's case, when I saw a rather grubby-looking man in his forties, wearing a navy blue blazer with the shine of age upon it and anointed with dandruff about the shoulders, I was inclined to place him as a typical middle-aged drifter; neither use nor ornament, as my mother used to say. The rest of his outfit was in the same vein: well-worn chinos that had once been white; scuffed suede shoes; brass buttons on the blazer, and a striped tie, hinting at military circumstances without committing to any specific regiment.

I had driven down to the South of France with Henry Newark, and our plan was to play golf and drink wine for a week. Henry was a very old friend, but he was also a potential punter in Mountwilliam Partners, and I felt sure we would find a moment to talk about money and investment in among the golf and the eating and drinking. That morning we were taking some time off from these rigorous obligations, sitting in the square of a small French town, in the hills above the Corniche. We had moved from cups of coffee to a glass of a sour white liquid, which was the only thing available in the form of an aperitif. It was as yet only eleven

o'clock. The *Daily Mail* had been read, and Henry was now working away at the Sudoku puzzle. I was looking at the business pages, and saw that the Footsie 100 Share Index had reached another record high. House prices were up another ten per cent year on year. Everyone everywhere was making money: even me, in a small way. I put aside these reflections with my newspaper and settled back in my chair to watch the theatre that seems to be an integral part of daily life in small Provençal towns: a sinister-looking man, shuffling down a side street carrying a baguette, clearly intent on murder; a shop girl flirting with a customer who was by no means obviously her husband or her boyfriend.

At intervals, enormous trucks would climb the steep and winding roads from the plains below – vehicles large enough to be considered a problem to overtake on a motorway, let alone on the small roads that intersected the hillsides. As they arrived in the town square, their progress was impeded by a stone fountain, which might – or might not – have been intended for use as a roundabout. There they might be confronted by a people carrier full of Swedish tourists, whose driver, in the panic following a near-head-on collision with the oncoming truck, seemed unable to locate reverse gear. In the ensuing impasse the most optimistic outcome one could imagine was the demolition of the side of a house as the truck manoeuvred its way around the fountain, crushing to death the occupants of the people carrier as it did so. At the high point of this drama three madmen on Harley Davidsons flew between the opposing vehicles and roared off down the hillside. Then, all at once, the crisis was resolved, without anyone quite seeing how it happened: the people carrier had gone, and the truck was parked by the local supermarket, its

driver handing over the tray of yogurt that he had come all this way to deliver.

‘Excuse me, have either of you gents got a light?’ said a voice near by. I looked up. It was the middle-aged drifter I had spotted earlier. He was bending over our table, a small unlit cigar in one hand – the kind that are made from sweepings from the cigarette factory floor – and an ingratiating smile upon his face. Henry, without looking up, indicated a lighter lying on the table next to his packet of Gitanes – a luxury he allowed himself when his wife Sarah was not with him – and the newcomer took it, clicked it open and lit his cigar. Then he stood for a moment expectantly, as if waiting: for an invitation to sit down; comments about the weather to be exchanged; or the offer, perhaps, of a glass of wine. None of these things happened. Henry continued with his Sudoku and I stared off into the middle distance. The new arrival was being treated, surely not for the first time, with the cruel indifference, bordering upon outright hostility, with which the English sometimes treat each other when abroad.

He left. Henry looked up then and said, ‘He’s your double, Eck.’

‘I don’t see it,’ I said, rather offended.

‘Apart from the fact he’s older, he could be your brother.’

The thing was, Henry had a point. The man, who had retreated to a table at a neighbouring café, was the same height and build as me, though carrying a few more pounds and with rather more hair on top than I have now. His hair was the same reddish colour as mine, he had blue eyes and the same highly coloured, square-shaped face.

Henry Newark is one of my oldest friends. He is a land-owner from Gloucestershire whom I first met when we were at school together. He is very rich, and rather pompous, but a

kinder-hearted man I have never met. We have known each other a long time and are comfortable in one another's company. We are both equally bad at golf, which helps. These golfing excursions have always been more to do with Henry's need to get away, from time to time, from his rather tough wife, Sarah. I am happy to help out, and nearly always free if someone like Henry rings up and proposes an expedition of this sort. At the time, it was almost part of my job.

We said no more about the drifter, although from time to time I was conscious of a movement on the periphery of my vision, as if the stranger were circling us, waiting for a moment of weakness when he could pounce and get us to buy him a drink.

Half an hour later we toddled off to the villa we had rented from one of Henry's friends. There we helped ourselves to a light lunch that the French housekeeper, Valerie, had laid out for us. In the afternoon we played golf. In the evenings we usually dined out: preferring to take our main meal in a restaurant rather than risk exploring the limits of Valerie's goodwill or ability. Tonight, however, we were to eat in, because my cousin Harriet was coming to stay the night.

The problem of what to do about Harriet had been exercising me for some time. Sometimes it seemed as if I had been thinking about little else for most of my life, although this could not have been the case. It was only about three years ago that I went to her engagement party: a guest, as it happens, of her fiancé Bob Matthews rather than at Harriet's invitation. Harriet and I were cousins once removed, and not especially close. Bob Matthews, on the other hand, though not in my regiment, was a friend of some years' standing. When he was killed in action in Iraq – in circumstances that

have remained unclear to this day – I was more affected by the news of his death than many others that had taken place – it seemed with increasing frequency – in that meat-grinder of a war. I was fond of Bob.

Harriet was devastated by the death. Such a word is used so freely now as to have lost most of its meaning. In her case it was exactly the right word to describe her state of being. She was like a country that had been laid waste: villages burned to the ground, fields of wheat trampled by marauding horsemen, orchards slashed and burned.

I saw her at Bob's memorial service in Hampshire. She was so pale that it was as if she, not Bob, ought to have been given funeral rites. She was very thin by then, much thinner than I remembered her at her engagement party. She spoke little; she thanked me for coming, as she thanked everyone who attended the service on that oppressive, drizzly day in August a year or two back. I'm not sure how much of it she took in. She still had that stunned look on her face, even though many weeks had passed since Bob's death was officially announced on the MoD website. I later heard that she gave up a high-powered job in London as a partner in a firm of land agents and went to live in France. There she stayed and eventually found work, as a fixer and project manager for well-off English people wanting to buy or develop property in the South of France.

The problem was this: on the few occasions when Harriet and I had met, at family gatherings or at parties and even – I must admit to myself – at her own engagement party, Harriet had made my heart her own every time she glanced at me. That she thought of me as anything other than a rather dull and distant relation, there was not the slightest evidence. No

grounds existed, could even be imagined, for hoping that she had ever felt anything for me.

I wrote a letter of condolence to her, and eventually received an answer, which was formal enough. I wrote again once or twice and she made some effort to describe, in her reply, her new life and to explain why she had decided not to come back to England. To me it sounded like running away from life. She was like a bird with a broken wing which had crawled into a hedgerow until life ebbed away. Nevertheless, we became occasional correspondents, and after a while I noticed a change in the tone of Harriet's letters. They were less dutiful; she was not responding simply out of a sense of obligation or good manners. Perhaps, in a minor way, I had become a link to her old life, a sign that she had not altogether relinquished her past, her family, her existence over the last thirty-two years.

When Henry and I made our golfing plans, I looked at the map and saw that the place where Harriet lived was not impossibly distant from the villa we had rented. I wrote and proposed that she join us for lunch or dinner, and to my surprise, she agreed a date.

She arrived about seven. I had been standing on the terrace, looking at the view without seeing it, wondering when she would ring to cancel. That she would not come, I felt certain. The whole thing had been a mistake. If she did come, what would I say to her? What did we really have in common, except Bob? That was the last subject to chat about over a drink. Henry was inside, supervising Valerie's preparation of our dinner, and no doubt getting in the way. Then I heard a car door slam.

I went around the side of the villa and found Harriet standing by a small blue car, extracting an overnight bag

from the back seat. I took the bag from her and received a kiss on the cheek.

‘Harriet, it’s good to see you,’ I said.

‘You’re looking well, Eck. You’ve caught the sun.’

She smiled. She was exactly as I remembered her, and yet the memory and the real person were quite different, in ways too subtle to explain. She was still too thin; tall, not quite my height, which is six foot, but certainly five foot nine. She had cut her hair shorter. It was a golden blonde, and used to reach down to her shoulders. Now it was cropped at the base of her neck. Her face was as pale as I remembered it at Bob’s funeral, as if she had never recovered her colour, as if it had drained from her face that August day two years previously, and had never returned. The smile was the only thing that was different since the last time I saw her.

‘Come and meet Henry,’ I said. We went inside and Henry was introduced, a bottle of wine was opened, and the three of us sat on the terrace and watched the evening sun going down over low, wooded hills on the other side of the valley. I could see that Henry was rather impressed by Harriet’s looks.

‘We used to see each other at children’s dances a long time ago,’ he told her.

‘I’m afraid I don’t remember,’ said Harriet. ‘I used to hate parties at that age. I was terribly shy.’

‘I remember your father, the general,’ said Henry. ‘Is he still alive?’

‘No – he died a year ago. He was in his seventies.’

‘He must have married late, then,’ said Henry.

‘I was an afterthought,’ explained Harriet. There was a silence. I tried to think of something amusing to say, but failed. Harriet looked at me and said, ‘Eck, it was so nice of

you to keep writing to me. I'm afraid I'm not much of a correspondent.'

'I'm not a fan of email when I'm not in the office,' I replied. I felt I was blushing, for some reason.

'It's so nice to get letters,' said Harriet.

'I love emails,' said Henry. 'I've been going to classes at the local college. I know all about computers now. You get such amusing jokes sent to you once you know how to get on to the Internet.'

'You never actually said what you are doing now, Eck,' said Harriet.

'He doesn't do anything except chat up clients for his new firm, and play golf or go on corporate days shooting,' said Henry, 'although considering the amount of time he must have to practise, he's still very bad at golf.'

'I do have a job, as a matter of fact,' I said. 'I work in London, for an investment fund.'

'That sounds safer than the army, at any rate,' said Harriet.

'Well, I had ten years in, and then a couple of years working on the other side of the street for a private security firm. But now I'm looking for a quieter life.'

'And what a jammy job he has too, Harriet,' said Henry. 'He works for Bilbo Mountwilliam. Do you remember Bilbo? No? Wasn't he at school with us, Eck? A year or two above us? For some reason he pays Eck the most enormous salary just to have lunch or dinner with people.'

'It is real work,' I told Harriet. 'I don't know if Henry could explain how he passes his working days, but mine are pretty full. And as you say, it's safer than the army.'

At that instant, Valerie appeared in the doorway and announced that dinner was ready.

The rest of the evening passed without difficulty. Henry and Harriet got on well enough; they both knew some of the same people in Gloucestershire. It was I who felt on the edge of the conversation. If Harriet had been a client I would have managed well enough. I had never found it difficult to talk to other men, which was one of the reasons Bilbo had hired me – maybe the only reason. I was fluent enough sitting in Wiltons and chewing on a Dover sole, while I asked after my guest’s golfing, or fishing, or shooting, and worked him around into a good mood so that I could bring up the subject of Mountwilliam Partners. I sometimes found myself observing my own behaviour at a dinner or drinks party and thinking, I’m the life and soul of the party. How do I do that? It was a little like thinking about riding a bike: everything’s OK while you’re just getting on with it, but the minute you start to wonder how you stay upright you are in danger of falling off. That was how I felt now: I had forgotten how to talk, how to be easy and amusing, and I simply couldn’t work my way back into the conversation. I sat and watched Harriet talking, even laughing once or twice, and found myself wishing Henry was dead, or in Gloucestershire. I wanted her to myself. I wanted her attention to be focused on me, and me alone. Why could I not think of anything to talk about? This was my cousin, someone I had known most of my life.

What I really wanted to say was, ‘Harriet, forget about Bob. He’s been dead for two years. Stop living in exile and come back and live with me in England.’ What I actually said was, ‘And how is your mother, Harriet?’

At that moment, I couldn’t have cared less about her mother, but Harriet appreciated my interest.

‘She’s very well, for her age. A bit wobbly on her legs but still as sharp as a tack.’

‘Oh, good.’

This was a classic conversational dead end. Why did they not train you to talk to girls at school? I was the victim of single-sex education. Of course, there had been girls at parties and at dances in my teenage years, and one or two brief romances which had blossomed – and withered away almost as soon as they had blossomed – during my army years. I always seemed to be just about to get into bed with some girl or other when my leave was over and I was on my way back to Northern Ireland, or Germany, or the Middle East.

Since leaving the army and settling down in my parents’ old home in Teesdale I had managed one or two tumbles with girls I had met. But once the bedroom part of our relationship was over, I seemed unable to concentrate on whichever girl I was with. All they wanted to do afterwards was talk. All I wanted to do was have a drink and switch on the television. It was as if part of me – the adult part – had not yet woken up.

It was quite different with Harriet. I did want to talk to her. I wanted to spend hours talking to her, and listening to her talk. But now that it really mattered, my powers of conversation were not much greater than those of a Speak Your Weight machine.

There was a silence. Henry was gnawing on a lamb cutlet, his mouth too full to speak, so I tried again to think of something witty or memorable to say. What I came out with was: ‘Don’t you ever get tired of French food?’

Before she could reply, if such an inane remark deserved any reply, Henry put down the bone from which he had now removed every scrap of meat and said, ‘But why would she? I never would.’

That was true. Henry’s capacity for food – French, Thai, South American, it was all one to him – was legendary. When

eating out, he studied menus with devotional intensity and he never skipped a starter or a pudding. He had trained Sarah, and Sarah had trained their cook, to provide him with two courses at lunch every day he was at home, and three at dinner. Despite this, he was not fat: Henry was one of those irritating people whose metabolism coped with almost anything in the way of intake without ever punishing him with an expanding waistline.

Harriet said, 'I do miss some things about home, sometimes.'

'Such as?' I asked.

'Oh, English weather: English seasons, I mean. Seeing friends. Seeing more of my mother while I've still got her.'

'You couldn't miss the English weather,' said Henry. 'You must have forgotten what it's like.'

We did not sit up late. Harriet pleaded fatigue and an early start as she had to drive back to attend meetings with clients the following day. I did not want to stay up after she retired, because I wanted to put off the inevitable interrogation by Henry: why did she live in France; what was known of her sex life; what were my own plans in that regard?

The next morning Harriet was up early, and I only just rose in time to offer her a quick cup of coffee. Henry was still in bed. Her face looked serious again, the brief moments of relaxation of the night before now forgotten.

'I'm so glad you could come over for dinner.'

'It was such fun,' said Harriet, although she did not smile as she said it.

'It was good to see you again.'

'You too, Eck – and it was nice to meet Henry.'

To hell with Henry. I put a hand on her arm and said,

‘Harriet – when do you think we might meet again? Won’t you ever come back home to England?’

She looked at me, and I could see she understood.

‘I don’t know, Eck. I don’t want to make plans at the moment.’

‘Can I write to you?’

‘Of course you can write to me. I like getting your letters. Tell me what’s going on in your life, apart from games of golf.’

She smiled then, and kissed me for the second time, on the cheek. Then she was gone, a cloud of dust marking the passage of her car towards the road. I went back into the house and encountered Henry, wearing a bathrobe, padding towards the terrace with a cup of coffee. He looked very relaxed as he bid me good morning; I decided to follow him outside with a cup of my own, and to try and bring the conversation around to Mountwilliam Partners and their magical touch.

The following night, because it was the last of our trip, Henry insisted that we go somewhere special for dinner. There was a restaurant we had eaten in before which seemed to fit the bill and was not far from where we were staying. It was in the middle of a small fortified village that clung to the edges of a limestone gorge. The restaurant itself occupied most of the central square – the part of the square not covered in tables and chairs being used as a piste for pétanque. We sat at a table near the edge of the terrace. It was early June and the evenings were warm enough to sit outside comfortably, the heat not yet oppressive. Behind a low wall, what had once been the ramparts of a castle fell steeply away into a dim green darkness, the haunt of bats and

swifts. As we sipped our whiskies and Henry read out to me offerings from the menu, I became conscious of someone standing quite close behind me. An aroma, hard to analyse with any exactness, but nevertheless indicating recent consumption of garlic and sour red wine, and the inhalation of many cigarettes, wafted over me. A voice said, 'Evening, gents.'

Henry looked up and I looked around, to see the man who had cadged a light for his cigar from us the previous day.

'Funny bumping into you again like this,' said the new arrival, as if we were the oldest of friends. 'Bit off the beaten track here. Charlie Summers, by the way. Don't think I mentioned my name the last time we met.'

Henry's behaviour in these situations was better than mine. If I had been on my own I might have repaid such an interruption with scant courtesy, suggesting that the newcomer might take himself elsewhere, but Henry rose to his feet and introduced us both, using my full name – Hector Chetwode-Talbot. He would have been no more polite to visiting royalty.

'Call me Eck,' I added. There seemed to be nothing to do but ask the man to sit down and have a glass of wine with us.

'Didn't mean to intrude,' said Charlie Summers, seating himself with alacrity. 'Just happened to be passing through; fellow I met told me about this place, and I thought I'd look it up.'

'Are you on holiday here for long?' I asked him.

'Not on holiday. Not as such. The fact is I've had a misunderstanding with Her Majesty's Customs and Revenue. I thought it better to take a leave of absence while my accountant sorts things out. It's the VAT, you see. I never could understand VAT.'

Charlie Summers accepted a glass of wine with every appearance of surprise, drank half of it down, and accepted a top-up.

‘Goes down a treat, this local wine,’ he remarked. ‘Forget what they call it, but they say it’s good for your heart.’

Henry said, ‘Well, it goes down all right. Are you staying near here?’

‘Oh, I move about,’ said Charlie Summers. ‘I get a bit restless staying in the same place for too long, to tell the truth. Rather hoping to get back to the UK soon – a lot of unfinished business had to be set aside when these taxmen interrupted my affairs.’

‘What sort of business are you in?’ I asked. Charlie Summers turned and gave me a smile. The smile was unsettling. It was imbued with considerable charm, yet there was something not quite sane about it. It gave Charlie the look of an engaging, slightly manic schoolboy about to play a prank: like a middle-aged Norman Wisdom. It was odd to sit next to someone who, I had to admit, must look very much like me, even if a few years older – apart from that smile.

‘Dog food,’ said Charlie Summers.

‘Dog food?’ asked Henry. ‘What kind of dog food?’

‘Ah,’ said Charlie. He tapped the side of his nose with his forefinger. ‘I know what you’re thinking. It’s a very competitive business, dog food. Cash and carries, farmers’ cooperatives, all those people sell it. There’s a lot of cut-price food which you can buy by the ton. But that cheap stuff doesn’t do the dogs any favours. They do their business everywhere and their coats look like something that’s been left out in the rain.’

‘And you’ve found the answer?’ asked Henry.

‘Japanese dog food, that’s the answer. Full of alginates –

that's seaweed, to you and me. Cleans up the digestive tract, particularly good for black Labradors, makes their fur and noses blacker and shinier. But you need to know your way around the market. There are snags.'

'What sort of snags?' I asked. Somehow the conversation seemed to have gained a life of its own. The waitress arrived to take our orders, and before I could do anything about it, Henry had asked Charlie to join us for dinner. Later he admitted he couldn't pass up the opportunity of seeing what to him were two almost identical red-haired, blue-eyed twins, sitting side by side and talking about Japanese dog food.

'I could have waited for ever for that to happen,' he told me.

We ordered our food, and some more wine. When that had all been settled, Charlie said, 'You were asking what sort of snags I found with the dog food business? The fact is, you can be tripped up. That's one of the reasons I'm here at the moment. The first batch I shipped in from Japan turned out to have dolphin meat in it. It didn't say so on the label, of course, but some bright spark sent a sample off to Trading Standards and they found dolphin DNA in it. Nothing to do with me; I was just the importer. I didn't kill the bloody dolphins. But you know what people are like. The next thing I knew it was in all the local papers: I had Greenpeace round my neck, Save the Whale, you name it. It wasn't good for business, I can tell you.'

Henry was laughing.

'Awfully bad luck,' he said.

'Not the sort of image I was aiming for,' agreed Charlie. 'When the VAT problem turned up on top of all that, I thought I'd cool my heels out here for a while, then go home and do a rebranding and a fresh launch.'

‘I must buy some for my own dog,’ said Henry, to make up for having laughed so much.

‘What sort of dog do you have?’ asked Charlie.

‘A black Labrador: a working dog.’

‘Ah, well, you see,’ said Charlie, ‘this food was developed for Akitas. That’s the Japanese fighting dog: used to go into battle on the shoulders of samurai.’

The food arrived and for a while we talked of things other than dogs. I found myself relenting a bit towards Charlie Summers. He had an odd air of self-confidence verging on cockiness, softened by a look of apology he gave from time to time, as if to say, ‘I can’t help what I am, I’m doing the best I can in the circumstances.’ He enquired about Henry and myself; not obviously interested in Henry’s description of himself as being involved in ‘a little bit of farming’, he showed a more lively enthusiasm for my own career in the army.

‘I expect you were in Special Forces,’ he said to me.

‘No, just a regular soldier,’ I said, but Charlie wasn’t having it.

‘I know you’ve got to say that,’ he observed. ‘I respect a man who doesn’t brag.’

Because of our new companion, we drank rather more wine than usual. Henry poured it freely in order to keep the talk flowing.

‘Are you a married man, Henry?’ asked Charlie. Henry admitted that he was. ‘And you, Eck? You’re not, are you? You have that bachelor look, like me.’

‘You’re right, I’m afraid,’ I said. For some reason, I felt as if I had been reproached.

‘Can’t make up your mind who to tie the knot with?’ asked Charlie. He grinned, looking more like Norman Wisdom

than ever, then he added, ‘I used to be a bit of a ladies’ man myself, you know.’

‘Really?’ I asked.

‘I can well believe it,’ agreed Henry, ‘a chap with your looks.’

‘Now you’re joking,’ said Charlie, but he seemed pleased, and was by no means disposed to deny that he had been, or perhaps still was, something of a Don Juan.

We moved on to cognac and cigars as twilight settled around the square. It was midweek and the place was quiet. Candles were lit, and people talked in soft voices as they watched the last streaks of light fading above the jagged limestone hills.

‘Such a beautiful evening,’ said Henry, ‘candlelight and wine. All we lack is soft music.’

He was not drunk, but had consumed a lot of wine. I had been more circumspect, as I was driving us back.

Charlie said, ‘Oh, music; I can provide the music.’

Then, quite without embarrassment, he stood up and put one foot on the seat of his chair, and began to sing in a surprisingly sweet and tuneful tenor. At first his voice was low, just audible to ourselves, but then it gathered in strength until the whole restaurant fell silent and listened to him sing. The tune was familiar from long ago, at school concerts and – later – weddings; the words, in Latin, were less easily recalled: ‘*Panis angelicus/ Fit panis hominum . . .*’

The performance was as angelic as the words demanded. Where Charlie had learned to sing like that, I could not think. For a moment I forgot everything except the music itself, its emotional impact magnified by the beauty of the majestic hills behind the singer, augmented by the screeching of the

swifts as they soared high up into the darkness. When Cesar Franck composed the music he no doubt had in mind the shadowy interior of some Gothic cathedral as the setting for its performance; one felt he would have approved equally of a Provençal hillside in a June dusk.

There was a ripple of applause from around the restaurant when Charlie finished. He bowed slightly, and sat down.

We both congratulated him and asked him where he had learned to sing so well.

‘Oh, in the school choir a long time ago,’ he said. ‘I don’t much look like a choirboy now, I know.’

He did not seem to want to say more about his childhood.

Not much later, it was time to go. We paid the bill, including Charlie’s share. He thanked us. Then he said he would stay on for a bit and smoke another cigar. Before we left, Henry pulled a visiting card from his wallet. The wine had made him companionable and disposed to think well of everyone, even someone as eminently unsuitable as Charlie appeared to be.

‘If ever you’re in our part of Gloucestershire,’ he said, ‘look us up. Bring some dog food with you.’