A Lover's Pinch

by Titlark

Summary

"The stroke of death is as lover’s pinch which hurts and is desired…"
William Shakespeare

It’s December 1702. The Chevalier is very slowly recovering from the sudden and shocking loss of his beloved Philippe and trying to live his life without him. But even though he’s trying to forget, his illness and the sins of his past are beginning to haunt him. And what’s more - someone has his own opinion about where his true place is....

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

8th December 1702
At the beginning of December the weather in Paris showed a charming combination of “bitterly cold” and “humid”. It wasn’t quite cold enough for snow to fall and there was a constant annoying drizzle. But nonetheless the freezing wind penetrated every coat and found even the smallest cranny in the window shutters.
The fire in its tall fireplace glowed yellow and red, but the cold draught soon made it a gloomy bedchamber, with the wind’s howl competing with the sound of crackling wood. The room itself was big, but there were just the necessary pieces of furniture, much less than would make this a cosy place. Excluding the fireplace, there weren’t many light sources in the chamber, just four small candles – the Chevalier de Lorraine called more light utterly unnecessary, because everyone can see by this light, so why should we waste more? He had two reasons for insisting on this lie – the first one covered the fact that for him more candles wouldn’t make any difference whatsoever, because his eyesight had worsened so rapidly and he lived in fear that someone would notice this – so preventively he made everyone stagger around in half-darkness. The second reason was even simpler – he knew quite well that for those who can see properly his face isn’t a pleasure to look at.
I wasn’t always like that. He remembered so well the many times people had described him as beautiful as an angel. Or they called him “the devil’s godson” or “homme fatal”, sometimes “son of a bitch” and not to forget, one person called him “my love”. He started that life quite early and soon he found all the pleasures of it - lovers were easy to come by, men and women, many times both at once. That didn’t change when he arrived at court and found his darling, some fidelity didn’t bother him one bit. His twenties and thirties went by in a blur, one lover after another, sometimes his little angel was included in the amorous frolic, many times not. It was seemingly endless, an intoxicating rollercoaster of love and lust, hazard and pleasure of all kinds. But from forty he began to unravel. His self-esteem was glued to his beauty and his dressing table was slowly becoming a mess of expensive make-up, powders and many other things claimed to keep him youthful. When fifty hit, now hair greyed, he started to disappear even faster, and wrinkles became deeply etched on his face.

Now, two years before sixty, the Chevalier had to remind himself that he just can’t give up – but in moments of despair he asked himself, why bother? Sometimes he spent all days locked in his chamber, in bed, wishing nothing more than to die already. But then the last surviving drops of vanity tapped on his shoulder and he quickly got up, called the servants and ran around all the parties to remind people, that the Chevalier de Lorraine is still a man who should be taken seriously. Most times he earned disconcerted smiles, silent disgust and careful compassion. The past months had been some of his better ones. The Chevalier was standing in front of the mirror while a servant was adjusting imperfections on his evening clothes. The Chevalier frowned and moved his wig forward to cover the unsightly boils and blotches copying his hairline. The doctor said these are normal with this disease, as is the loss of hair, also those disgusting warts there, and that irritating rash there. And of course…

The Chevalier anxiously looked over his shoulder.
“Is everything alright, Your Highness?”
“This world would look quite differently if everything was alright,” retorted Chevalier and his voice was hoarse, “leave me alone, now.”
The servant hesitated. “The Mademoiselle is waiting-”
“So let her wait. I’m sure she can survive a minute or two without me.”
Was there really something… no, no, of course not, the Chevalier assured himself.
“As you wish, Your Highness.”
The door closed behind him and the Chevalier stood there alone. Or… no, alone, he was alone. The wind howled once again around the closed windows and shadows moved across the room as the flame in the fireplace waved. Was it… really just because of that, or…
The Chevalier rested on an old sofa and closed his eyes. He knew people, some of them his lovers, who went mad. Hearing things… seeing things… the Chevalier was sure this wouldn’t happen to him, for one good reason – he knows very well, that those shadows in the corners are nothing but shadows. He can ignore them, nothing difficult about that. He was accustomed to simply ignoring most of the unpleasant things in life.
Was it the illness, or was it a simple fear of a man alone in a dark room, with the wailing wind down the chimney. Or – no there was no other “or”.
The Chevalier looked around and he could literally hear the beating of his own heart, so loudly it hurt and took his breath away. This room is cursed, he thought. That’s the thing. Cursed. The air was stagnant, soaked by damp and those shadows in the corners were fighting with him, it was a duel. The Chevalier closed his eyes and he could feel that creeping darkness, coming for him, stretching its shady hands towards him, like damned souls already looking for their sister. He opened his eyes again, so startled he could barely move a finger. The wind wailed again. Did they move, since he looked the last time? Maybe?
No, they’re shadows, they couldn’t move. But… they did! He could keep telling himself he was seeing things, hallucinating… but they…
Shhh…
The Chevalier froze. What was that? The wind, outside or inside, it had to be.
Suddenly his heart jumped so high it blocked his throat, when a hand touched his shoulder. He didn’t shout. He didn’t even move, he just closed his eyes again and repeated, this cannot be true, cannot be true…

The hand on his shoulder certainly wasn’t there, the feeling was too vague to be real. And no hand could be so light. But it was more than nothing, it warmed him and he felt the heat and longing from that touch. As if the person behind his back wanted to embrace him completely, not just give comfort.

Shh…

Did I really think “comfort”, crossed the Chevalier’s mind, this isn’t comforting, this is… nothing, simply nothing.

He opened the eyes and stared in front of him, while the feeling of the hand lasted. He could turn around or not even that – just look into the mirror on the wall and he would know, but… He didn’t want to accept any of the two possible options.

But the shadows, the shadows moved again and the hand strengthened its grasp and suddenly he was scared and his heart was beating so much it hurt and…

“Beatrice!” exclaimed the Chevalier. “Beatrice!”

All the strange things disappeared, the shadows, the hand on his shoulder and when the woman called Beatrice opened the door, breathless from the run, she found him breathing heavily, sweaty, sitting on the sofa and staring at the wall.

She had seen this before, so she quickly approached him, sat on the sofa and took his hand. Her full name was Beatrice Hiéronyme de Lorraine, but everyone knew her as Mademoiselle de Lillebonne.

“Oh, Lilli…,” whispered the Chevalier.

“I’m here, cousin,” she assured him carefully, trying to guess his state of mind and which way to proceed, “don’t worry, I’m here.”

“Is anyone else here?”

“No one, my dear. Just me, you, servants…”

“Just tell me – tell me that I’m seeing things,” asked the Chevalier.

Mademoiselle de Lillebonne lightly pressed his hand, got up without a word, took a candle and went to all corners of the room, then moved some pieces of furniture.

“See?” she smiled. “Nothing here. You are seeing things. But if you’re worried, we can tell the servants to look for mice. Maybe its them making noises.”

The Chevalier nodded, slowly calming down. “Yes, mice.”

Mademoiselle de Lillebonne, or “Lilli”, as the Chevalier called her, was the type of woman, who still looked twenty when double the age. Even with her medium-height she appeared small and desirably curved, her face was heart-shaped and dominated by caring grey eyes. Her small nose and pale sensuous lips looked like the artist decided to place them there at the last minute just for appearance’s sake. Kind, quiet, educated and religious, she was bought up very strictly and under constant supervision. Her parents hoped she could one day make a good match for the pious Duke of Modena himself, so even the slightest scandal couldn’t touch her name. That wasn’t exactly easy at court. But after the king refused to support the marriage and the Duke married another, Mademoiselle de Lillebonne was left alone and cast aside, pigeonholed as a shy and boring old maid. At least that was until she met her older, by twenty years, cousin, the Chevalier.

“I’m going mad, Lilli, am I not?” uttered the Chevalier, after she sat down next to him again.

“Don’t say that,” she admonished him, “never say that. You’re just tired. We shouldn’t have gone to that party yesterday.”

“Thank you, but I’m not such a wreck for a quiet party to exhaust me for days,” retorted the Chevalier, “forget it. I’m fine.”

“I never said you weren’t,” returned Beatrice, “I’d only wish it was the party that exhausted you.”

He looked at her, frowning, but then he exhaled and chuckled.

“Oh, my Lilli,” he stretched his hand to her and caressed her cheek, smile on his lips, his eyes closed, “my little innocent Lilli…”

Mademoiselle was sitting still, allowing his hand and fingers to caress and touch every spot of her
face, even her lips and the inside of her mouth. She knew this wasn’t right and she wasn’t even sure it was Christian, but probably that was the exact thing which lured her.
The Chevalier captivated her from the moment they met. Her polite question of what had he been doing yesterday he was answered in about two minutes and so graphically, that she left the party red in the face, shocked, swiftly fanning herself to gain some air, convinced that the man was the most depraved, ill-minded creature she ever met.
That night she didn’t sleep, tossing and turning in her bed, trying to avoid the pictures her mind created. She couldn’t even properly recall what the Chevalier looked like, all she remembered was his lecherous tone and shameless story accompanied by dissolute gestures and lustful gaze, which somehow unsettled the very core of her mind. No one before had looked at her like that.
Surprisingly for everyone, since that day Mademoiselle de Lillebonne became the Chevalier’s regular visitor. He tried to show her worst of his nature to make her leave, but she stayed and in time the Chevalier accepted her. After several weeks, he started to enjoy her sweet, caring presence. She began to know all his moods and always listened to the stories from his past with her mouth opened, breathless, excited heart beating in her throat. The Chevalier was amused and flattered. By now he would miss his Lilli dearly, if she decided to leave. Of course, he’d be the last to admit it.
Now the Chevalier’s groping hand slid from her face to the neck and cleavage, which he explored quite shamelessly. Mademoiselle said nothing, only closed her eyes and pressed her teeth, not to give away the pleasure he brought her. She only silently begged God not to let her die before she can confess all these sins.
“What do you say,” whispered the Chevalier.
“I say… please, don’t stop…”
The Chevalier chuckled and leaned to her on the sofa, one hand still on her breasts, he pressed her on the backrest and licked the sweet rouge from her lips. He didn’t kiss her, he was cruelly playing with her, sharing her breath, feeling her fear of excitement and yet giving nothing.
“I remember I fucked so many people on this sofa,” he breathed and grabbed her thigh through the layers of her skirt, “many times it was him. I did him long and hard until he begged for mercy and even then, I didn’t stop, until he became an argil in my hands, and I continued as it pleased me, because I was his master, I took his body and soul… I was killing him but he would kill me if I stopped… can you imagine the sweetest ass in the world, whole for me.”
Beatrice just silently gasped for breath, she was frozen, sweating and her eyes were firmly closed. The Chevalier smiled. “Oh, my dear Lilli, do I shock you so much?”
“You know you do,” she whispered.
He grimaced. “And I also know you like it. To be shocked. There are few shocking things in your life.”
The wailing wind sounded again, just quietly, like a lover’s moan. This time the Chevalier ignored it, eyes fixed on Beatrice. He took her hand and led it to his body, under his clothes, to places where she suddenly touched something and swiftly jerked back.
Chevalier burst in laughter, but then froze in shock. Even though Beatrice had pulled her hand back, a hand was still there – and not at all dodging, on the contrary. It was barely there, but it was warm and confident and quite sure what it was doing. Suddenly the Chevalier realised, it’s been years since the last time, but he could recognise that fondle without a doubt.
In horror, he jumped to his feet and quickly buttoned his trousers. He impatiently silenced Beatrice and listened. Nothing, besides his own heart and breath. Even the wind was quiet now, maybe too quiet – like there was an offended reproach hanging in the air.
“This is impossible,” the Chevalier mumbled, “impossible…”
Everything was now coming closer and closer and his heart was filled with an immense sensation of dread. Impossible…
“We have to go,” he whispered and pulled puzzled Beatrice to her feet, “I won’t be in this room for another minute!”
“Cousin! Where are we going!” protested Beatrice, whilst the Chevalier half-ran through the dark corridors, dragging her behind.

“Didn’t you mention a few days ago, that we’ve received an invitation from Louise de Mare? It would be impolite to let her wait.”

“You wanted me to decline the invitation!”

“And now I’m un-declining it,” retorted the Chevalier.

“Will you tell me what this is supposed to mean?”

The Chevalier stopped, turned to her and gripped her shoulders. The whole situation would be comical, if Beatrice hadn’t seen the dread behind her cousin’s eyes. His hands were shaking.

“What happened?” she asked again, softly and frankly, trying not to allow his fear infect her.

The Chevalier tried to answer several times, but then he just embraced her and pressed her so tightly she nearly couldn’t breathe.

“You would think I’m mad,” he whispered into her ear, “so… it was nothing. I just need some air. Somewhere else.”

She pulled herself away and caressed his cheek. “Of course,” she smiled, “we’ll go anywhere you want. And I don’t think you’re mad. I never thought that and I never will, I promise. But if you tell me… it might make you feel better.”

The corridor was dark and cold, as this remotely situated wing of the Palace hosted only few people. With the wind from outside, the Chevalier and Beatrice could hear every crackle, every creak, every one of their breaths and almost every heartbeat too.

The Chevalier would never say anything, but the feeling they weren’t alone here intensified with every second. He knew shadows would soon appear in a place like this, but the other thing… the feeling. No, that was nonsense. It would be a direct way to hell to admit it.

The floor creaked again, right behind him. That wouldn’t be so strange, except the fact neither him nor Beatrice moved at the moment. The Chevalier caught the hand of his cousin more firmly and half expected the other hand, the ghostly one, to appear on his shoulder. He felt the cold on his neck, like someone stood and breathed behind him. A silent disapproval was hanging in the air, so he let go of Beatrice’s hand. The tension slackened off, but he still felt watched.

On the wall, by the Chevalier’s right, there was a portrait from Mathieu, or more likely some copy of it, depicting the man who used to live here. The Chevalier saw this portrait many times, but now he could see more than before. It wasn’t just an idle likeness, as portraits usually are, this one was alive. Philippe was staring at him from the canvas, a little smile on his lips. A smile worn by people who are just about to tell a secret. Philippe’s hand in the painting – did the fingers move? Just a little, invisibly, like in invitation. Suddenly the ghostly hands returned and softly caught the Chevalier’s shoulders from behind. He felt… was it a fleeting kiss on his neck?

He jerked and quickly stepped aside. “Leave me alone!”

The strange feeling disappeared immediately and an offended Beatrice pressed her lips together.

“If you wish, cousin…”

“Not you,” blurted out the Chevalier, “he.”

“There’s no one here, cousin, just you and me,” she stood firmly, “and I know you miss him, if I were you I’d surely miss him too, but he’s gone now. He’s gone and he’ll never come back. And now we should return-”

“I’m not going back to that room!”

Beatrice sighed and then smiled. “Very well. It seems your friend Madame de Mare will have company tonight.”

The walk through the corridors to the salon of Madame de Mare was long and uneventful, so it gave the Chevalier time to compose himself and even start to look forward to the evening. This wing of the palace was, unlike the previous one, brimming with activity, nobles, inhabitants, visitors, and the servants – just their presence managed to bring back the Chevalier’s good old cheerful mood. Beatrice felt it and was happy for it.

Madame de Mare was a widow in her late fifties. Some people could still consider her attractive,
even though she was already grey-haired and had gradually gained weight in recent years. A kind, self-confident woman, and the less she cared what people thought of her, the more she cared about them. Her only concession to the court’s lack of morality was an imperishable partiality for gossip of any kind, so if you wanted to know anything about anyone, she was the safe bet.

After the valet announced the Chevalier de Lorraine and Mademoiselle de Lillebonne, Madame de Mare personally rushed forwards to show them in.

“Oh, my dear!” she shined, hurrying towards the Chevalier who was suddenly surrounded by the smell of violets which wafted out of hostess’ monumental breasts. “How lovely of you to show up!”

He only smiled, theatrically bowed and kissed her hand. “I assure you, we just couldn’t stay aloof.” “And you, my darling,” she turned to Beatrice, “you look so well, every time I see you, you only blossom.”

Mademoiselle de Lillebonne quietly thanked her for the compliments, but she also didn’t miss the hostess’ brief enquiring look at her waist. To Beatrice, as to the Chevalier, was quite clear why Madame de Mare was inviting them so often. There was a lot of talk about the sudden strange relationship of these cousins – an old maid and a notorious libertine. The overwhelming majority of gossipers agreed that calling Beatrice “maid” would be highly unsuitable by now, because nearly every week there was reliable news about the depravities so scandalous and shocking, that even the Chevalier de Lorraine had to keep them secret. But from there the information diverged. Some said they had secretly married, others that such a marriage would be nonsense and he would soon leave her anyway. There were even voices that the relationship in fact wasn’t consummated at all, and the Chevalier keeps Beatrice close to have access to virgin’s blood, which is known to help against many maladies from love. And, of course, Beatrice was still in her fertile years, so many interested older women were regularly checking the slimmness of her waist and even bribing chamber maids to keep track of Beatrice’s monthlies. The last one was Madame de Mare’s speciality. Two days late now, so she just had to invite the couple for cards and discreetly search for more clues. This uncertainty was killing her.

Luckily, other guests in the salon were completely calm about the question of Beatrice’s potential motherhood. For example, Madame de Grancey, who stood next to the window, glass of wine in her hand, not even trying to hide her boredom. Right next to her there was a man, of around the same age as the Chevalier.

“Lovely to see you, Diane,” the Chevalier approached Madame and kissed her cheeks, “and Antoine!” For kissing the Marquis d’Effiat he chose the lips. Diane de Grancey impatiently watched their moment, waiting until they were finished.

She was two years younger than Madame de Mare, and they didn’t have much in common, in fact, nearly nothing. Madame de Grancey managed to keep a slim figure, even though her youthful curves were now mostly the work of a good tailor than her actual body. Her face was carefully covered by a very light powder. That, combined with her blue eyes and curly blond hair, which probably used to belong to some Bavarian villager, made her look like an innocent angel. Nothing would be a bigger lie, as the Chevalier often claimed, knowing this woman literally inside out. For decades, she was known for her licentiousness, raising her status at court through any amount of beds necessary. She and the Chevalier often found a common language, comparing their experiences, sometimes even experiences with the same people.

“Keep it for later, you two,” she frowned now, “and remember, you’re no longer paid for it, darlings.” “Just a little remembrance of good old times?” grinned the Marquis. “And if I recall correctly, you used to watch us all in much more compromising situations.” Then he turned to the Chevalier and winked: “Still good. Too bad you care so little for your old friends. I should start wearing dresses to catch your attention.”

The Chevalier raised an eyebrow. “Vain effort, even in a dress you wouldn’t fit into any of my fantasies about either sex.” D’Effiat gave a snort. “Don’t feel too flattered by some vague misapprehension that you’re the
reason why I’m here. I’m here for the cards and a drink.”
“I see you even took an extra chin for the occasion.”
The Chevalier burst out laughing as the Marquis immediately checked his figure.
“You really are a bastard, aren’t you?” frowned d’Effiat.
The Chevalier just winked. “And I thought you knew me by now.”
Once again, he grinned, took a glass of wine from a servant and watched Beatrice engaged in
conversation with Madame de Mare on the other side of the room. Then his eyes fell on a young
boy in fine clothes, standing in the corner out of sight, sipping wine.
“And what’s this?” he asked with an interest.
The Marquis turned around. “Oh, him. He’s mine.”
Madame de Grancey lightly smiled, watching the boy too. “Where did you find him? He’s a pretty
little thing.”
“Claudel!” called d’Effiat, the boy raised his head, smiled and immediately headed towards them.
He bowed. “Your Highness, Marquis, Madame…” He could have been around twenty years old, a
porcelain doll with child-like cheeks, but his eyes were already the dead eyes of a whore.
“My valet found him for me at Annalise’s,” d’Effiat continued and smiled while his hand was
casually groping Claudel’s flawless body.
Madame de Grancey sighed. “Oh, poor little thing. To work in a brothel… dreadful…,” her heavily
ringed hand caressed Claudel’s face, while he just stood still, smiling.
“We all have to carry our burden, Madame,” he nodded and played shyness and his long lashes
fluttered, “but that’s exactly what makes enjoying the pleasant parts of life not only an option, but
our sacred duty.”
“Oh!” squeaked Diane and started to laugh. “Dear God, indeed, you are such a cute little rascal. Is
he to be borrowed, Antoine?”
D’Effiat pursed his lips for a while before he slowly let go of Claudel’s behind.
The prostitute immediately gave Diane radiant smile, she embraced him and kissed him without
any further delay.
“Dear God, it’s like an execution,” whispered d’Effiat to the Chevalier, as they both watched the
long smooch, “disgusting, but you can’t take your eyes off it.” They both started to giggle and after
a while Madame de Grancey finally let go of the boy.
“Be sure this isn’t the last time you hear of me,” she winked, pulled off an emerald ring and gave it
to Claudel, who smiled even wider and kissed her hand.
“And if not, I’m determined to find you myself, Madame,” he replied.
The Chevalier chuckled. “Prepare yourself for something extraordinary, boy,” he advised,
because the places under this lady’s petticoat are like Notre Dame. Visited by generations
already.”
“Your Highness, if I may be so bold,” Claudel turned to the Chevalier and his eyes shined, “I have
to say it’s so exciting to meet you, I’ve heard so much about you-”
The Chevalier raised an eyebrow and smiled. “What do we have here, finally a whore who
understands his job? Flattery and that sweet ass of yours will get you far, if you use them
properly.”
Claudel took the Chevalier’s hand and slowly placed it on the mentioned part of his body.
“You mean this, Your Highness?” he smiled seductively.
The Chevalier chuckled and drew the boy nearer. “Exactly.” And as Madame de Grancey before,
he too tasted Claudel’s lips. The whore knew his job well, the kiss was long and passion well
played and…
I love you.
The Chevalier fiercely pushed Claudel aside, heavily breathing. The boy looked quite shocked by
the development, so did d’Effiat and Madame de Grancey.
“You stupid dope, where did you get that tongue of yours, from a cow?” snapped the Chevalier at
Claudel to hide the real reason, why… He looked around the room and the invisible presence was
so intense, and those words from Philippe’s lips so, so real…
Mademoiselle de Lillebonne was keeping her eyes on the group since the Chevalier had left her with Madame de Mare. She was used to her cousin’s behaviour and she didn’t take it personally, but now she headed right over to them.

“Can I have a private word with you, cousin?” she asked and the Chevalier agreed, even though amused glances of his companions followed them.

“What’s the matter?” whispered the Chevalier immediately after they sat in a lonely corner, out of earshot.

“You’re not well.”

“I assure you I am.”

“Do you think I’m stupid?” responded Beatrice. “I can’t see in your head, but I can see it in your face, every time. I’ll make some excuse, we have to go, you should rest.”

Her eyes were serious and the Chevalier actually considered her offer. Indeed, he didn’t feel well, and it wasn’t just about the shadows or the voices, but he felt tired, sick and weak. He could feel his heart jumping in his chest. It hurt and every flow of blood caused him a new wave of dizziness and dark sparkles in front of his eyes. Nearly subconsciously he caught Beatrice’s hand.

She knew about him, of course she knew everything and somehow he didn’t mind that she knew, but… he looked back at d’Effiat and de Grancey… they can never know. Gossip travels fast and if he left now, it will be like admitting defeat.

“We have to stay,” he decided.

“Cousin, you-”

“Lilli,” the Chevalier whispered, “please… Don’t you understand that it doesn’t matter where I go?”

She pressed her lips, but then she nodded. “You know that I’m here. And before we go back, you should probably kiss me, so this conversation won’t look so suspicious.”

“Will we finally get to play cards?” smiled Beatrice at Madame de Mare, the hostess briefly nodded and invited all her guests to the card table.

“What did we just see?” Madame de Grancey smiled expressively at the Chevalier as they all sat down and the Marquis d’Effiat started to shuffle the cards in preparation for the first game.

“How do I know what you saw?” returned the Chevalier disinterestedly.

“It seemed quite like a horse slowly getting a halter,” she amusedly pursed her lips and turned to Beatrice, “if I were you, my darling, I’d be careful, today he’s here, tomorrow he’s gone…,” she waved her hand, “like that.”

“If you were her,” replied the Chevalier while arranging his cards into a fan, “you’d be twenty years younger and much easier to get on with.”

“Oh! Dearie me!” Madame de Grancey giggled. “Can we expect an announcement soon, perhaps?”

“How was Versailles, Louise?” Beatrice quickly asked.

“His Majesty was most kind,” nodded Madame de Mare, “and very appreciative about my last project. I had organised-”

“It became so boring after a few days, when I was at Versailles recently,” Madame de Grancey interrupted her to prevent a lecture about her charity work, “I’m so glad to be back in Paris, where I have my dear, dear friends.”

“It almost sounds like you’re settling down,” d’Effiat teased her, “be careful, you might even gain a good reputation.”

“You should see the people the people, darling, so awful!” she illustrated her words with a gesture, “there was a handsome man occasionally, but the women were all simply intolerable witches.”

The Chevalier raised an eyebrow. “If you noticed them in the Hall of mirrors, Diane,” he remarked, “I think there might be an explanation.”


The Chevalier winked. “You know I’m always a gentleman, so… ladies first.”

“Speaking of which – did you hear about Gérald?” uttered d’Effiat.

Madame de Mare immediately nodded. “Of course, Dreadful thing.”
“He’s dead already?” questioned Madame de Grancey, with surprise. “That was quick. But at least he didn’t suffer.”

The Marquis stretched and shrugged his shoulders. “Well, they gave him emetics, clyster and then they cut off his leg, so I assume there was some discomfort.”

“I guess those thick thighs of his put up quite a fight,” remarked the Chevalier.

“I would have thought you’d be more upset considering how often I had to share him with you,” d’Effiat emptied his glass and let a servant fill it again.

“That was long ago, he wasn’t so fat back then.”

“Yes, he used to be quite sweet,” Madame de Grancey nodded pensively and suddenly the trio exchanged glances as they all returned to a time at least twenty years previously. When they all used to be prominent members of Monsieur’s household, his friends, lovers and companions. Comparing those times, full of joy, hope and love, with what was actually left from them…

“What about a toast?” suggested d’Effiat and raised his glass.

“To what?” asked Diane. “To Gérald?”

“A toast… to life.”

“To life,” nodded Diane and smiled.

The glasses tinkled.

The Chevalier held his in the air for a little longer, he really expected to hear one more “to life” than he actually did. This was an impossible situation, the Chevalier emptied his glass, angry at himself. He couldn’t tell what was more unsettling – to have him here or not? But he isn’t here, he wasn’t here and you should be glad, that he isn’t now. But… where is he?

The Chevalier turned around and carefully watched the room. Nothing, not a sign. His anxiety somehow grew. Damn him, he was there, he can’t just leave. He really must make up his mind, sort out what he wants.

Suddenly he started to realise, what Philippe wanted. What he always wanted – and the way to get it. A cold chill ran down his spine, when this thought crossed his mind.

Suddenly, he was scared – and it seemed the dark shadows in the corners, even here, waited for just this moment to show themselves again.

“Is everything alright?” asked Madame de Mare and the Chevalier immediately turned back.

“Yes!” he smiled quickly, perhaps too quickly, because d’Effiat and de Grancey exchanged glances. His heart was beating fast and wildly like a runaway horse, he felt dizzy and sweat was dripping down his body even though he felt cold. Very, very cold.

“Can you…,” his voice was hoarse, “…can you order some more candles? I can barely see my cards in this.”

Madame de Mare hid her surprise quite insufficiently, but ordered the servant to carry out the Chevalier’s request.

“I thought you hated more light,” remarked Madame de Grancey and dropped one of her cards, “you’re not yourself today.”

The Chevalier forced a smile. “Or simply I’m a man full of surprises, my dear.”

“No, she is right. What is wrong with you?” asked d’Effiat directly, frowning.

“Why on earth there should be something wrong with me?” responded the Chevalier, trying to calm down and hide his distress as quickly as possible.

“I didn’t even ask,” Beatrice quickly and loudly preventing the Marquis from answering that question, “what were you all doing yesterday? Was anyone attending Madame’s soiree?”

Everyone welcomed the change of subject.

“Well, after Her Royal Highness called me the devil’s spawn once,” said d’Effiat, “I’m afraid I can’t expect invitations to any of her parties. Once she sent both of us to hell,” he turned to the Chevalier, an amused smile on his lips, “remember? When she found us and Monsieur in-?”

“I remember it well,” the Chevalier nodded, determined not to get distracted from this conversation by anything. Everything’s alright, everything’s alright…

“I don’t know that story,” Madame de Grancey’s eyes sparkled in anticipation of the racy details. “Basically,” the Chevalier shrugged, “it was something very similar to what I was doing just
yesterday.”
Madame de Mare’s jaw dropped. “What was it?”
“Let’s say it involved me and two of the sweetest girls.”
Madame de Grancey chuckled. “Did it? Have you and Beatrice visited your sister in the convent?”
Everyone burst out laughing, even Beatrice, and even… someone else. The Chevalier turned around so quickly it hurt – to see no one. The only thing that lingered was a smell – an imperceptible breath of Carmelite.
The Chevalier slowly breathed out as the warm hand touched his cheek. It was a light and shy touch; it was almost as though Philippe was sorry for the distress he caused.
“Madame de Mare,” the valet entered the room and once again everything went back to normal. The Chevalier was inclined to slap that man.
“What is it?” asked Madame.
“You wanted me to announce when the fireworks appear. The rain is over, so they are perfectly visible, Madame.”
“Oh, yes!” Madame de Mare got up and clapped. “His Majesty has organised fireworks tonight. I was thinking we could all watch them from here!”
“That’s a great idea!” Beatrice got up immediately too. She loved fireworks.
The whole company moved to the window, except for the Chevalier, who got up with the others, but then had to grasp the edge of the table so not to fall. His knees were buckling and it was hard to breathe. No one noticed.
The valet unlocked the window shutters and suddenly the wind flung the window open, swept through the room, dishevelled the wigs and blew out all the candles. The salon fell into darkness.
“Never mind,” uttered Madame de Mare fretfully, when the valet quickly closed the window again, “at least this way we’ll see it better – oh, there!”
The first magnificent display of green and golden sparkles appeared in the sky, followed with more and more.
The Chevalier wasn’t watching, he stood next to the table still, his eyes firmly closed, trying to ignore the muffled firework bangs and especially the darkness around him. The shadows, they were there, all of them… These thoughts were accelerating inside his head. He wanted to slow them down so he could breathe but they weren’t obedient to his will. His breaths came in gasps and he felt like he could black out very easily. His heart was hammering inside his chest like it belonged to a rabbit running for its life. The room was spinning and the Chevalier clutched the edge of the table, trying to make everything slow down to something his brain and body could cope with. He felt so sick. He wanted to call for Beatrice, but his lips somehow couldn’t utter a sound! And it wasn’t even Beatrice he was desperate to see, whom he needed so, so much… but… he’s gone, too far away, he went, breathe, gone, too far away… blackness… creeping shadows from all the corners, from under the table, from behind the paintings on the wall… coming for their prey. If he felt better, perhaps he’d be scared, but now there was only a vague, cold, tired dread deep inside him.
The Chevalier suddenly felt eyes upon him, he raised his stare up from the table and his heart missed several beats. Philippe, just few steps in front of him. And he was just as he used to be in the days of their glory, so beautiful, the one and only, so… so his…
The Chevalier was choking on his own breath as he could do nothing else than stare at Philippe, whose gaze was no less excited about this reunion. There were sparkles in his eyes.
“No,” the Chevalier desperately muttered under his breath, nearly against his will, when Philippe came closer, “no… my love… no… please, not yet… not yet…”
Philippe stopped just step in front of him. He wasn’t smiling, no, his eyes were desperate, full of pain, grief, longing and loneliness, which hurt the Chevalier even more and maybe causing that ice running in his veins in small, painful crystals. He spent all his strength on standing up and he knew it wouldn’t last. He realised there’s no escape this time… no way out… Tears welled up in his eyes and his face became wet as he stretched out his hand to touch his lover.
Beatrice looked out of the window, amazed by the spectacle and just uttered: “Isn’t that just wonderful, cousin!”
The Chevalier didn’t respond, so she turned around, so did everyone else – and they saw the Chevalier standing in the middle of the room, his arm stretched out into the space.
“Cousin?”
Philippe smiled so brightly under the Chevalier’s touch and whispered, softly and tenderly, his voice too cracking with unwanted tears: “My love…”
The Chevalier smiled and suddenly an enormous pain erupted in his chest, so intense and shocking he managed only a gasp before he felt he was falling… maybe he even hit the table or chair, he didn’t rightly know, because at that very moment two strong, warm hands caught him and pulled him forward, from his own body and into the light.
“Cousin!” shrieked Beatrice and ran to the lifeless body on the floor, de Grancey right behind her.
“Call a doctor!”
“Open the window!”
“Someone bring water, quickly!”
There was nothing to be done and amongst the fuss, no one could hear the barely audible sound of steps… and a click of a closing door.

End Notes

Feedback will be appreciated :-)

Please, big applause for my amazing proofreader Trudy White, the stories would be hardly so readable without her.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!