

All in honour, part 3

Change

Paris.

It was getting late; Chantal Delon looked out from her balcony over the lights of Paris. She had been drawing all day, but her flair seemed to have temporarily deserted her. It was very frustrating; the show was only a month or two away and it needed something new to give it the spark that it currently lacked. Was she getting old, or tired – or just bored?

The street was dark, lit only by a few street lights among the trees. A movement below attracted her attention. She watched as a man came out of the darkness into the light. Her eyes widened – his gait was familiar, his hair unmistakable. She leaned out and watched him entering the lobby below, then went back into the room to wait for the bell.

He stood at the door, stiff, white-faced and exhausted, unsure of his welcome. She put her arm round him and drew him in. “Mon ami, mon cher, qu'as-tu? D'où viens-tu?”

He sat down – or rather, was pushed down – on the sofa, and Chantal sat beside him, taking one of his hands. “My child, what's happened to you, are you hurt?” He shook his head, “No, I'm all right. I – I've been on a job. It went wrong.” He hung his head. “I'm so tired, Chantal.”

“You look thin, too. When did you last eat?”

He shrugged. “You need food. Stay there.” She stood up and went into the kitchen, leaving him lying back on the cushions with his eyes closed. He almost fell asleep now; but he sat up when she returned and found enough appetite to eat the mushroom omelette she had made. A glass of wine warmed his heart, and a coffee woke him up. He looked at her and smiled his thanks, but she saw lines of strain, and dark smudges under his eyes. “Now, my friend, tell me,” she said.

He told her what had happened. She made no extravagant exclamation or outcry, but lifted a motherly hand and stroked his hair. “Cette histoire,” she said, “ça manque quelque chose – something is missing. I know a little about your work. People get killed; you have got used to it – a bit blasé, a bit uncaring, yes? What is *this* death to you?”

“She wasn't one of us – she was under my protection.” His voice shook a little. “She said I would bring danger to her. She was right. I should have prevented it, she shouldn't have died.” He was stammering now, and burst out, “She shouldn't have been betrayed ... She was so young attractive, intelligent, loving... She said She knew what I... She understood –” he stopped, his face in his hands.

She thought she could guess something of what had been understood – by him, at least – and waited, but he was silent.

He might tell her more later, perhaps. He had always trusted her.

“And what are you going to do about it?” she asked. He stared at her. He had been waiting for her to make reassuring noises, like women were supposed to. Her challenge was unexpected. Then quite suddenly he realised that this was why he had come to find *her*, not someone else. But he had no answer, of course.

“I don't know. I can't go back, I shall resign. But where can I go, what can I do? I'm not welcome anywhere in the West.”

She thought for a moment. “That may not be the case, you know. The Organisation would have to accept your resignation, and surely, with your record, your people would arrange for your acceptance wherever you wanted to remain. Isn't that so?”

He shivered suddenly, wondering if that could ever be true.

Watching him, she added, “I think you would still have a welcome here in France.”

And now, because he seemed, unusually, so stricken, she insisted that he stay, and it was she who unpacked the bag he had with him. Among his clothes, she found a shirt still marked with old blood-stains, and a jacket and pair of trousers showing the signs of dust and mud – she would arrange for them to be cleaned in the morning and checked the pockets. She found a copy of *Uncle Vanya* in Russian in the jacket. Inside was a girl's name. She took it to him, sitting so listlessly, and watched his face with concern as he opened it and saw the name. “Chéri,” she said, putting her arms round him gently and whispering reassuring words against his hair as he rested his head on her shoulder. She felt his body gradually stop shaking and slowly relax against her. “Now, you must sleep,” she said.

She made up a bed, persuaded him to get into it at last, and left him. Before going to bed herself, she washed his clothes and hung them to dry. He lay listening to her movements, and looking at the light from the street playing on the ceiling, and gradually fell asleep.

He woke to the luminous sky of a Parisian dawn. It was beautiful. High cloud, still air. He could see the tricolor moving gently in a light breeze on a nearby building and gleaming against the pearly sky. He showered, and dressed in what clean clothes he had left, black tee-shirt and black trousers, and padded barefoot into the main room. Chantal's desk was covered with drawings. He bent over them, intrigued by the process by which a fashion designer achieves her results.

An hour or so later, Chantal found him sitting at her desk drawing. His back was turned so he was unaware of her. She withdrew and went into the kitchen from where she called, “Good morning! Coffee?”

“Good morning. Yes. Thank you.” He came through and kissed her cheek. “Shall I go out for croissants?”

“Yes, please do. You know the boulangerie?”

“Of course.”

As they finished breakfast, she said, “I saw you drawing at my desk. May I see?”

He looked a little embarrassed. “I was looking at your drawings, and thought of a design I'd like to see someone wear,” was all he said, but went with her through to her desk where she took up his drawings.

“How interesting,” she said, holding up one. “You have something here.” She sat down and pulled some of her own drawings over to compare. He had taken an idea she had scarcely begun to outline and created a romantic clinging evening gown for a young woman. It was held up by thin straps from the neck yoke, leaving the shoulders and back bare. He had crowned his model with a spray of flowers twined in her hair. It was entirely charming, and also quite sensual. An artist can't help but reveal his hidden depths, she thought.

“It’s charming. Is that it, do you think, or do you have more in you?”

“Do you like that one?”

“I do, and maybe I'd like to use it in my show – crediting you, of course.” She spoke like a professional business-woman talking to a collaborator.

He was surprised. “My design?”

“Yes, your design. Do some more, and we might ... who knows ... anyway, try.” She pointed at his clothes, “You certainly look the part.”

She didn't imagine he would really turn out to be a designer – she hadn't even known he could draw – but at least it would occupy his mind. He might inject something new into her own work and certainly that of her other designers. Thinking wistfully of her own future, she thought it might be interesting to have a real partner to work with now that she was getting older, and then laughed at herself for entertaining such foolish optimism.

He sent his resignation to his chief, and to the further consternation of the Old Man and his colleagues did not return to work out his notice. Unknown to himself there was considerable and mortified discussion of the reasons for the failure of his mission, so he was surprised to find the Organisation generous and forgiving. He was even paid a pension, as if retiring for health reasons (put through by the Chief, if he did but know it), which enabled him to live in reasonable comfort in Paris, and he gradually regained confidence and a measure of happiness as he began to develop a long-forgotten talent in drawing and painting – and now, increasingly, dress design. He even relaxed enough to have affairs – short-lived for the most part: none of these beautiful Parisiennes ever penetrated his shell. It didn't matter. They were just casual affairs. He would never be able to offer commitment, or marriage.

Chantal was critical, challenging, encouraging, and sometimes even accepted one of his designs. His work complemented hers, his designs flowing and sensuous where hers were cool and elegant; for young, vital women, where hers were aimed at the older and more sophisticated. The show attracted a good deal of attention.

Within a year, he was designing for her on a regular basis, and travelling to establish the business in important foreign cities, New York, London, and even Russia.

Eventually, they went into partnership as Chantal and Vanya.

=====

Notes

K's resignation, referred to in the "Fifteen years later affair."

Original character

[Series title "For nought I did in hate, but all in honour." Othello: Act 5 sc. 2]