

## **The dancing lesson**

### **Elizabeth Shove**

Light slanted into the wooden panelled room, making jagged diamond patterns across the parquet floor. The new-fangled French doors opened out onto the formal gardens, immaculately clipped, as ever. It was a beautiful day, but Philippe was preoccupied. He'd been Louis' official dancing master for over a decade and by all accounts he had more influence over the King than anyone else. These days, there were spies everywhere, but the dancing class was sacrosanct.

According to the ornate clock on the wall, Louis would arrive any moment now. There were usually courtiers hanging around, currying favour, and making flattering comments just loud enough to hear. But today Philippe had ordered them to stay away.

The King was a conceited young man, living in a deluded bubble of his own, surrounded by sycophants who hung on his every word. He loved the attention, and he revelled in the pomp and grandeur of it all: the fanfares and triumphal entrances and exits, and the power to stop and start wars at will. In his own mind, he believed he was God's representative on earth, that he ruled by divine right and that he was quite simply infallible. Disobedience was sinful, and rebellion even more so.

On this fine Tuesday morning the self-styled Sun God made his way to the mirrored salon alone. Dancing, like fencing, was a necessary art for anyone of status, and Philippe's task was to make it seem as if his protégé was in command of his own body, and the body of the nation over which he ruled. Louis put on his red dancing slippers and tightened the diamond encrusted latchet and chape that sparkled as he moved. He was good to go.

Philippe bided his time. He was a patient man, and, in this case, patience was of the essence. To tell the truth, the dancing lessons were a bit of a pretence, but they served their purpose well. Hours were spent practicing steps and repeating courtly manoeuvres until the King's muscles finally acquired a memory of their own. Philippe knew that Louis would rather be out hunting, or with one of his many mistresses, or plotting another global conflict, but he stuck to the regime.

Spring was coming, the blossom was out and the current war with the Dutch was going well. Behind the King's back there were rumours that the Netherlands and Spain might persuade Normandy to join them, but the penalty for treason was death and the courtiers were satisfied that this was just another empty threat. For once, dancing commanded Louis' full attention.

The lessons were hard work. Philippe was a stern teacher: step together, step, hop, shoulders back, arms to the side, look straight ahead. The three musicians did as they were told: stopping, starting and stopping again. And so it went on.

Louis was concentrating so much on timing and posture that he didn't notice the three masked men who slipped in through a side door, but when one strode across the floor and addressed Philippe urgently, and in Dutch, the musicians stopped playing and the King spun round in disbelief. A traitor at the very heart of the court!

Filip, as he was born – was part of a plot to dethrone the monarch and end the pointless killing in the Netherlands once and for all. The rebels' hopes ran high. With Normandy and Spain on side, and with the King imprisoned in his own Palais, the people would rise up, a republic would be declared, and the despot would be overthrown. Filip's job was to hold his nerve, unlock the door and keep Louis focussed on his footwork.



In the event, the dancing lesson that was supposed to change the course of history had no such effect. The King's bodyguards rushed in at the first sign of trouble and Filip and his comrades were unceremoniously bundled away. Louis, who was shaken but unscathed, was convinced that he'd been protected by God and that his lucky escape was another sign of his omnipotence.

Filip was obviously NOT A GOOD MAN. The King was momentarily upset by the betrayal but after a brief pause the dancing lessons resumed with a new teacher. When Pierre Beauchamp was offered the job of choreographer in chief he knew he had made it, and he was right. Everyone agreed Louis was off his rocker but that didn't matter to the loyal servants who followed his every move.

Pierre had been carefully vetted - he had no plans to upset the apple cart - but he was as cunning and as clever as his traitorous predecessor. Unknown to all, Pierre and his friend Giovanni, had made a secret pact to exploit Louis' patronage and use it to establish opera and ballet as art forms in their own right. If they played their cards right, their pompous boss would never suspect that they were in cahoots or that they were taking advantage of his limitless vanity to pursue goals of their own.

True to form, Louis was blissfully unperturbed. He believed that he could not put a foot wrong and that he, and he alone, led the way in war, in dance and in the affairs of state. Nothing, but NOTHING, could limit his ambition.

When courtly dancing became *the* thing to do, the King wondered about modifying the Palais Royal. If he demolished the East Wing, he could build an elegant ballroom, opulent and grand, and fit for purpose. Alternatively, he could construct a whole new palace, maybe on the site of that hunting lodge out at Versailles.

As usual, everyone agreed this was a splendid idea and a month or two later, the foundations were laid.