

Butler circled the room. Franklin found a comfortable seat where he was soon encircled by a mixed crowd as he exerted his charm. Surrounded by paramount families of Philadelphia, Butler felt certain the old man was safe. A light touch on his arm caught him by surprise.

Lizette Fournier smiled up at him with a guileless expression. "Forgive me, Master Butler, but I appear to be without a partner for this dance. Would you do me the honor?"

He allowed her to take his arm. Butler hoped he didn't forget the steps. When he had served with Washington as a youth in the French and Indian War, the colonel had seen fit to teach him dancing. The colonel, now general, was both an excellent dancer and teacher. Butler felt a debt of gratitude to him as he led Mistress Fournier into a well-known country dance.

Lizette Fournier was light on her feet. Her delicate blue gown, with its frothy lace, reminded him of seafoam as it moved back and forth. Her eyes watched him as he turned and swayed along with her.

"You are a fine dancer, Master Butler," she called as they drew closer. "I wonder that I have not seen you at some of our other gatherings."

Butler waited until they were close again. "Regrettably, I have had little time for entertainment since I entered this fair city."

"Really, I wonder what sort of business would keep an attractive man away from the very gatherings that allow men to make connections valuable in conducting a successful business."

Butler nodded as they turned. "I have seen many of Philadelphia's finest families represented here tonight, but not all business is conducted at a ball. The ladies expect better of us than to take time away from the festivities."

"It would be a shame," she agreed. "That's why so many of our fine men slip away to the card tables so that they can drink and gossip with impunity."

Butler laughed. "Is that how it is done? I will keep that in mind." He bowed before her as the dance ended. "Perhaps I had best excuse myself and move to that room." He moved swiftly before she could compel him to another dance. Fortunately, he had spotted the adjacent room set up for cards as they had moved across the dance floor.

Candelabras surrounded the group of square tables set up in an elegant room papered in blue and white toile print. Dark blue draperies partially drawn across the windows gave the room an intimate look. The windows were open to allow breezes inside and allow smoke from cigars and pipes to drift out into the night.

As he passed by the settee where Franklin was ensconced, he heard a giggle. He had been joined by a pretty young girl in a pale pink dress covered in bows. Butler watched as Franklin leaned over to kiss her cheek and chuckle heartily. Butler briefly wondered if he had been entrusted with the defense of an old lecher, but he saw nothing of concern from either Franklin or the girl as they sat talking. He moved to stand behind a chair close by.

Franklin basked in the attention of the young lady, her mama, and a few others as he shared a story about one of his experiments regarding electricity. "We soon discovered that lightning would strike the highest point in the vicinity in order to reach the ground, and," he leaned over to whisper conspiratorially, "whatever it struck would explode as if shot from a cannon." He leaned back and saw Butler. "Master Butler, could you find me some refreshment? Regrettably, my throat has gotten quite dry with the sharing of my scientific work."

Butler shot Franklin a look. "It would be my pleasure."

"Thank you, my good man." He turned to the girl. "Now, my sweet Felicity, where were we?"

"You were about to tell us about attaching a key to your kite," she replied. Chestnut brown curls were piled artfully on top her head while two or three large sausage-shaped ones drifted over her bare shoulder.

They had moved on to another of Franklin's experiments by the time he returned. Butler handed him a frothy goblet and passed the other to the girl. Franklin drank deeply, draining the glass before setting it on a nearby table.

Butler smiled over at Franklin. "I believe I read that your son assisted you in many of your experiments."

"William helped a great deal. He served as my assistant and recorder. He could be very useful when he chose."

Felicity asked. "Where is your son now, Dr. Franklin?"

Franklin remained silent for several moments, his expression unreadable. "William is far away from me now."

Butler left to get a drink for himself, pondering how two men once so close could grow so far apart. Avoiding the syllabub, which he found disgusting, Butler acquired a glass of wine and settled along a wall. Before long, he was joined by Frances Fournier, also with a glass of wine.

"It is a fine party, is it not mon ami?" Fournier's glass was almost buried by the enormous cascade of ruffles flowing out from the cuffs of his jacket. The pale ivory of his waistcoat stood out in contrast to the blue of his suit. All were covered with embroidered roses that must have taken hours to produce. Fournier gazed with pride at the crowd filling his home. "My wife does an excellent job with these things."

Butler nodded. "She seems very talented. You must be pleased to have such a beautiful and skilled lady at your side."

Fournier nodded sagely. "She is a remarkable woman, my Lisette, and tolerant of my eccentricities." He smiled expansively. "She will not notice if I slip away for a few hours with a like-minded friend."

Butler wondered what Fournier was alluding to. There was very little a wealthy man could not discreetly do. "It is good she is an understanding woman," he said at last.

“I have not seen you with the ladies, with the exception of my charming wife; perhaps you too prefer the company of men?”

The question was posed delicately.

Butler smiled to show he meant no judgment against his host. “I’m flattered you would ask, but that is not my interest. I lost my wife years ago and have no interest in forming an attachment with anyone.” He stepped back from the wall. “I think it best if I check on my companions before they take in too much of your well-stocked cellars. I wish you a pleasant evening.” He walked slowly into the crush, aware of the older man’s eyes on his back. Butler had no intention of commenting on his interests, although he suspected it was known in society. His mission was to protect Franklin, not judge other men’s choices.

Butler walked outside to clear his head. Strains of music drifted out into the shadowed garden, lit by a few scattered torches. A tall tree’s canopy provided a large dark space where one could shelter and not be disturbed. Butler stood beneath it, taking in the night air.

In the garden, whispers drifted across the ground. Young swains sputtered their affections to young ladies. A few men discussed an upcoming horse race on the edges of town the next day. One apparently was short of funds. Butler paid attention to that. A man desperate for money might be willing to share information for some coins.

A pair of women walked past. Their furtive glances caught his interest. Butler decided to follow. Gravel crunched under their feet as they walked swiftly away from the revealing light of torches that had been placed just outside the house. Butler kept to the shadows surrounding the fruit trees on the edge of the formal beds.

Within the raised beds, pale blossoms of flowers glowed in the shadowed garden. The waxing moon provided ample light to see the path. Butler listened to the hoot of an owl in the distance, warning smaller creatures that it was on the hunt. He watched as the women made for the pergola at the end of the main path. Painted white, it stood out in the darkness.

One of the women stopped as her skirt became caught in the boxwood edging one of the flower beds. As she bent to free it, Lisette Fournier whispered. “Hurry, it won’t be long before we are missed.”

Mistress Cranford rose. “I’m not tearing my skirt. The dressmaker delivered this yesterday.”

Butler lingered outside, concealed by trees and shrubs.

Fournier spoke first. “Has your husband revealed anything about where he stands in this conflict?”

Cranford’s voice sounded exasperated. “We are Quaker. He says we are neutral, but he meets with men like Franklin and George Clymer. He is angry at the threats the British have made. They imply that if he doesn’t support the King, he is a patriot even if he does nothing.”

Fournier nodded. "The British are of like mind. They have no use for pacifists." She raised her head, looking at the sky. Her face was a pale oval, unreadable in the shadowed structure. "The British will come," She said. "We need to prepare. Our husbands may choose to blindly ignore the danger, but we cannot. Our children depend on us to provide a future for them."

"Elizabeth," Lisette grasped her hand. "I realize this is difficult, but you can do this. Listen when he brings his associates home to dinner. Let me know what you hear; that is all you need to do."

The other woman shook her head. "James won't like it if I pry in his business. His family was disappointed he did not marry into a more affluent family. It has been better since Simeon was born. His father dotes on him and his sisters."

"It is for your children you should do this. When the British come, they will take this town and punish anyone they believe sympathetic to the revolution." Her voice deepened. "Men pay no attention to us, but we are necessary to their comfort and wellbeing. Therein lays your power. Be the perfect hostess and entertain your husband's associates with loving kindness. They will speak and never realize you are present."

Elizabeth Cranford drew in a breath. "This is a patriot stronghold. Do you really believe the British will come?"

"British Troops are gathering in New York, waiting for the right moment. It's a matter of time before they march south."

"But Washington," Elizabeth began.

Lisette shook her head. "He works with militias: men of very little training and short commitment. My friends tell me they are not prepared to meet a professional army."

Butler wondered who the lovely Lisette shared her information with.

"It's time for us to return to the ball." Lisette murmured. "I will call on you tomorrow, and you can let me know if James has expressed any opinions to his clients. I have heard that Master Hancock has met with him."

Elizabeth nodded. "They have discussed business contracts. Master Hancock wants to expand where his ships go and find a way to avoid the British navy."

Lisette snorted. "We're all trying to avoid them, as well as the privateers that seek fat ships to loot." She looked about before stepping out onto the pearly pale gravel that lined the garden's walkways. Both women walked swiftly back toward the house, where the strains of a minuet drifted from the open windows. Butler watched them go, pondering what he had heard. Lisette Fournier was far more than a pretty woman. In the right hands, she could influence the course of the conflict here in Philadelphia. The question was, whose side was she really on? It might be possible to sway her to share intelligence in order to garner favor with the prevailing side. Butler recognized she could be a source of tremendous intelligence, but if he wasn't careful, she could also be his doom.

