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SWORDSPOINT

ELLEN KUSHNER



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For the Other One

Man desires that which is Good.

Plato

'We all have faults,' he said.
'and mine is being wicked.'

James Thurber, *The Thirteen Clocks*

In the end . . . everything will be found
to be true of everybody.

Lawrence Durrell, *Balthazar*

Chapter I

Snow was falling on Riverside, great white feather-puffs that veiled the cracks in the façades of its ruined houses, slowly softening the harsh contours of jagged roof and fallen beam. Eaves were rounded with snow, overlapping, embracing, sliding into each other, capping houses all clustered together like a fairy-tale village. Little slopes of snow nestled in the slats of shutters still cosily latched against the night. It dusted the tops of fantastical chimneys that spiralled up from frosted roofs, and it formed white peaks in the ridges of the old coats of arms carved above the doorways. Only here and there a window, its glass long shattered, gaped like a black mouth with broken teeth, sucking snow into its maw.

Let the fairy-tale begin on a winter's morning, then, with one drop of blood new-fallen on the ivory snow: a drop as bright as a clear-cut ruby, red as the single spot of claret on the lace cuff. And it therefore follows that evil lurks behind each broken window, scheming malice and enchantment; while behind the latched shutters the good are sleeping their just sleeps at this early hour in Riverside. Soon they will arise to go about their business; and one, maybe, will be as lovely as the day, armed, as are the good, for a predestined triumph. . . .

But there is no one behind the broken windows; only eddies of snow drift across bare floorboards. The owners of the coats of arms have long since abandoned all claims to the houses they crest, and moved up to the Hill where they can look down on all the city. No king rules them any more, for good or ill. From the Hill, Riverside is a tiny splotch between two riverbanks, an unsavoury quarter in a prosperous city. The people who live there now like to think of themselves as evil, but they're really no worse than anyone else. And already this morning more than one

drop of blood has been shed.

The blood lies on the snow of a formal winter garden, now trampled and muddy. A man lies dead, the snow filling in the hollows of his eyes, while another man is twisted up, grunting, sweating frog-ponds on the frozen earth, waiting for someone to come and help him. The hero of this little tableau has just vaulted the garden wall and is running like mad into the darkness while the darkness lasts.

The falling snow made it hard for him to see. The fight hadn't badly winded him, but he was hot and sweaty, and he could feel his heart pounding in his chest. He ignored it, making for Riverside, where no one was likely to follow him.

He could have stayed, if he'd wanted to. The swordfight had been very impressive, and the party guests had been well entertained. The winter garden party and its outcome would be talked about for weeks. But if he stayed, the swordsman knew that he would be offered wine, and rich pastry, and asked boring questions about his technique, and difficult questions about who had arranged the fight. He ran on.

Under his cloak, his shirt was spattered with blood, and the Watch would want to know what he was doing up on the Hill at this hour. It was their right to know; but his profession forbade him to answer, so he dodged around corners and caught his breath in doorways until he'd left the splendours of the Hill behind, working his way down through the city. It was breaking dawn when he came to the river, flowing murky green under the Bridge. No one waited there to challenge him, so he set his foot on the stone, ploughing through snowdrifts and the messy trails of other late-night workers who'd come before him, until he'd put the river safely between himself and the rest of the city. He stood now in Riverside, where the Watch never dared to come. People knew him here, and wouldn't bother him.

But when he opened the door to his landlady's, there was a considerable crowd assembled, all wanting to know about the fight. Other Riversiders had been on the Hill too, that night, burgling houses and collecting gossip, and already the rumours had begun. The swordsman answered their questions with as much civility as he could muster, suddenly awash with exhaus-

tion. He gave Marie his shirt to wash, and climbed the stairs to his own rooms.

Less than an hour earlier, Marie the whore and laundress, who also rented out rooms by the week, had lain snoring lightly in the arms of a dear client, unaware of the impending excitement. Her friend was a sailor turned coiner, whose wooden leg leaned handily against the headboard. He was her fifth and last of the night, and she, not as young as she once was, slept through the initial pounding on her shutters. The sailor stirred uneasily, dreaming of storms. When the knock came harder, Marie bolted up with a cry, then shrieked at the cold outside the blanket.

'Marie! M*arie*!' The voice through the shutter was muffled but insistent. 'Open up and tell us all about it!'

Marie sighed. It must be St Vier again: every time the swordsman got up to something they came to her to find out the details. This time, it was annoying to admit, she didn't know – but then, she didn't have to tell *them* that. With the laugh that had always made her popular, Marie got up and unbolted the door to the house.

Her sailor huddled in a corner of the bed while her friends trooped in, taking over the room with the ease of familiarity. It was the right room for socialising, having been the front parlour when the house was a noble's town house. The cherubs painted on the ceiling were flecked with mould; but most of the laurel-leaf moulding still framed the walls, and the fireplace was real marble. Marie's friends spread their wet cloaks out on the gilded escritoire, now missing all its drawers, and over the turquoise velvet chair no one could sit on because of the uncertainty of its legs. Lightfinger Lucie coaxed the fire to a blaze, and Sam Bonner produced a jug of something that made the sailor feel much better.

'You know,' said Sam ponderously, 'your St Vier's gone and killed a duke this time.'

Sam Bonner was a former pickpocket with an unhandy taste for the bottle. He'd been repeating the same thing for half an hour now, and his friends were getting tired of correcting him. 'Not the *duke*, Sam,' one of them tried again. 'He's *working*

for the duke. He killed two *swordsmen*, see, in the duke's garden.'

'No, no, in Lord Horn's garden. *Three* swordsmen, I heard,' another asserted, 'and from a very reliable source. Two dead, one wounded, and I'm taking odds on whether he'll live till morning!'

'Done!'

Marie sat on the bed with the blankets wrapped around her feet, letting the betting and the squabbling swirl around her. 'Who's dead? – Lynch – de Maris – Not a scratch on him – Horn's garden – Hired St Vier? – Not St Vier, Lynch – Wounded – Dying – Who's paying St Vier? – Horn – the duke – the devil – How much? – More'n *you'll* ever see – '

More people trickled in, adding to the clamour. 'St Vier's been killed – captured – Five to one – '

They barely noticed when another man came in and silently took a place just inside the door. Sam Bonner was roaring, 'Well, *I* say he's the best dam' swordsman in the whole dam' city! No, I'm lying – in the world!'

The young man by the doorway smiled, and said, 'Excuse me. Marie?'

He was younger than most of them there; dark-haired, of average height, his face dirty and stubbled.

'Who the hell is that?' Sam Bonner growled.

'The best dam' swordsman in the world,' Lightfinger Lucie answered with pardonable malice.

'I'm sorry to bother you,' the swordsman said to Marie, 'but you know how the stains set.' He took off his cloak, revealing a white shirt ugly with blood. He pulled the shirt over his head, and tossed it into a corner. For a moment the iron tang of blood cut through the smells of whisky and wet wool. 'I can pay you next week,' he said. 'I made some money.'

'Oh, that's fine with me,' Marie said with off-handed airiness, showing off.

He turned to go, but they stopped him with the shouting of his name: 'St Vier!'

'St Vier! Who's dead, then?'

'De Maris,' he answered curtly. 'And maybe Lynch, by now. Excuse me, please.'

No one reached out a hand to stop him as he walked through the door.

The smell of frying fish made the swordsman's stomach lurch. It was his young gentleman, the University student, wrapped in his scholar's robe, hovering like a black bat over the frying pan in the ornamented fireplace.

'Good morning,' St Vier said. 'You're up early.'

'I'm always up early, Richard.' The student didn't turn around. 'You're the one who stays out all night killing people.' His voice was its usual cool drawl, taunting in its nonchalance. The accent, with its crisp consonants and long vowels, took Richard back to the Hill: for a moment he was once again crouched amid the topiary of the pleasure garden, hearing the same tones ringing on the air from the party guests. 'Who was the poor soul this time?'

'Just a couple of swordsmen. It was supposed to be a duel with Hal Lynch, I thought I told you. Our patrons set it up to take place at this crazy garden party of Lord Horn's. Can you imagine, having a party outdoors in this weather?'

'They would have had furs. And admired the landscaping.'

'I suppose.' While he spoke, the swordsman was cleaning his sword. It was a light, flexible duelling weapon of a sort only he, with his reputation and his reflexes, could carry around Riverside with authority. 'Anyway, Lynch got started, and then de Maris popped out of the shrubbery and started coming at me.'

'Whatever for?'

Richard sighed. 'Who knows? He's Horn's house swordsman; maybe he thought I was attacking his master. Anyway, Lynch stepped aside, and I killed de Maris. He was out of practice,' he added, polishing the blade with a soft cloth. 'Lynch was good enough, he always has been. But our patrons wanted it past first blood, so I think I killed him. I *think* . . . ' He scowled. 'It was a clumsy stroke. I slipped on some old ice.'

The young man poked at the fish. 'Do you want some?'

'No, thanks. I'm just going to bed.'

'Well, it's revolting cold,' the scholar said with satisfaction, 'I shall have to eat it all myself.'

'Do that.'

St Vier passed into the adjoining room, which contained a clothes chest that also held his swords, wrapped in oil cloth, and a large, heavily carved bed. He had bought the bed the last time he had any money; seen it in a Riverside market stall full of odds-and-ends retrieved from the old houses, and fallen in love with it.

He looked at the bed. It did not appear to have been slept in. Curious, he returned to the front room.

'How was your night?' he asked. He noticed the pair of wet boots standing in the corner.

'Fine,' the scholar answered, daintily picking bones out of his fish. 'I thought you said you were tired.'

'Alec,' said Richard. 'It really isn't safe for you to be going out alone here after dark. People get wild, and not everyone knows who you are yet.'

'No one knows who I am.' Alec dreamily laced his long fingers in his hair. His hair was fine and leaf-brown, worn down his back in the long tail that was the defiant emblem of University scholars. He had been in Riverside since autumn, and his clothes and his accent were the only signs of where he had come from. 'Look.' Alec's eyes, turned to the window, were dark and green, like the water under the Bridge. 'It's still snowing. You can die in the snow. You're cold, but it doesn't hurt. They say you get warmer and warmer, and then you fall asleep. . . .'

'We can go out later. If anyone is trying to kill you, I'd better know about it.'

'Why?'

'I can't let them,' the swordsman said; 'it would ruin my reputation.' He yawned. 'I hope at least you had your knife with you.'

'I lost it.'

'Again? Well, never mind. I can get you another when the money for the fight comes in.' St Vier shook out his arms, and flexed them against the wall. 'If I don't go to sleep soon, I'm going to start waking up, and then I'll feel rotten for the rest of the day. 'Night, Alec.'

'Good night, Richard.' The voice was low and amused; of course, it was morning. But he was much too tired to care. He placed his sword within reach of the bed, as he always did. As he

drifted off, he seemed to see a series of white images, scenes carved in snow. Frosty gardens, their branches lush with white roses and crystal thorns; ladies with floating spun-sugar hair escorted by ivory gallants; and, for himself, opponents with long bright swords of clear and gleaming ice.

Chapter II

By midday, most of the nobles on the Hill could be counted on to be awake. The Hill sat lordly above the rest of the city, honeycombed with mansions, landscaped lawns, elaborate gates and private docks on the cleanest part of the river. Its streets had been built expressly wide and smooth enough to accommodate the carriages of nobles, shortly after carriages had been invented. Usually, mornings on the Hill were passed in leisurely exchange of notes written on coloured, scented and folded paper, read and composed in various states of dishabille over cups of rich chocolate and crisp little triangles of toast (all the nourishment that ought to be managed after a night's revelling); but on the morning after the garden duel, with the night's events ripe for comment, no one had the patience to wait for a reply, so the streets were unusually crowded with carriages and pedestrians of rank.

The Duke of Karleigh was gone from the city. From what anyone could discover, the duke had left Lord Horn's party not an hour after the fight, gone home, ordered up his carriage despite the snow, and departed before dawn for his estates in the south without a word to anyone. The first swordsman who had fought St Vier, a man named Lynch, had died at around 10 that morning, so there was no asking him whether Karleigh had hired him for the duel, although the duke's abrupt departure upon Lynch's defeat seemed to confirm that he had. St Vier had disappeared back into Riverside, but whoever had hired him was expected to step forward momentarily to claim the stylish and elegant victory over Karleigh. So far, no one had.

Meanwhile, Lord Horn was certainly making enough of a fuss over the use his gardens had been put to, never mind the loss of his house swordsman, the impetuous de Maris; but that, as Lady Halliday remarked to the Duchess Tremontaine, meant precisely

what it was supposed to mean. Horn was doubtless trying to coast on the notoriety that the event had given his otherwise unremarkable party for as long as possible. Both ladies had been there, along with most of the city's great aristocracy, many of whom Karleigh was known to have quarrelled with at one time or another.

'At least', said the Duchess, tilting her elegant head, 'it seems to have rid us of my lord of Karleigh for the rest of the winter. I cannot commend his mysterious opponent too heartily for that service. Odious man. Do you know, Mary, how he insulted me last year? Well, it's just as well you don't; but I assure you I shall never forget it.'

Mary, Lady Halliday, smiled at her companion. The two women were seated in the sunny morning room of the Halliday townhouse, drinking tiny cups of bitter chocolate. Both were clothed in billowing yards of soft, exquisite lace, giving them the look of two goddesses rising from the foam. Their heads, one brown and one silver-fair, were perfectly coiffed, their eyebrows finely plucked. The tips of their fingers, round and smooth, peeped continually through the lace like little pink shells.

'So,' the duchess concluded, 'it's no wonder someone finally got vexed enough to set St Vier on him.'

'Not *on him*, precisely,' Mary Halliday amended. 'The duke was, after all, warned in time to find himself another swordsman to take the challenge.'

'Pity,' the duchess growled.

Lady Halliday poured out more chocolate, musing, 'I wonder what it was all about. If it had been anything clever or amusing, the quarrel would not be kept such a secret – like poor Lynch's last duel, when Lord Godwin's eldest hired him to fight Monteith's champion over whose mistress was prettier. That was nice; but then, it wasn't to the death.'

'Duels are to the death only when one of two things is at stake: power or money.'

'What about honour?'

'What do you think honour buys?' the duchess asked cynically.

Lady Halliday was a quiet, shy young woman with none of her friend's fashionable talent for clever chatter. Her voice was generally low, her speech soft – just what men always claimed to

want in a woman, but were never actually drawn to in the drawing room. However, her marriage to the widowed Basil, Lord Halliday, a popular city aristocrat, was said to have been a love match, so society was prepared to credit her with hidden depths. She was, in fact, by no means stupid, and if she answered the duchess with ponderous slowness it was only that she was, as was her habit, weighing her words against the thoughts behind them. 'I think that *honour* is used to mean so many different things that no one can be sure of what it really is. Certainly young Monteith claimed his honour to be satisfied when Lynch won the fight, while privately Basil told me he thought the whole thing a pointless exercise in scandal.'

'That is because young Monteith is an idiot, and your husband is a sensible man,' the duchess said firmly. 'I imagine Lord Halliday is much more pleased with this fight of Karleigh's; at least it accomplished something practical.'

'More than that,' said Lady Halliday. Her voice had dropped, and she leaned out a little over the furbelows of lace toward her friend. 'He is immensely pleased that Karleigh has left town. You know the Council of Lords elects its head again this spring. Basil wishes to be re-elected.'

'And quite rightly,' Diane said stoutly. 'He is the best Crescent Chancellor the city has had in decades – the best, some say, since the fall of the monarchy, which is generous praise indeed. Surely he expects no difficulty in being re-elected?'

'You are kind. Of course the city loves him . . . but . . . ' She leaned even closer, her porcelain cup held out of harm's way. 'I must tell you. In fact there is a great deal of difficulty. My lord – Basil – has held the Crescent for three consecutive terms now. But it seems there's a law that no one may hold it for four straight terms.'

'Is there?' said the duchess vaguely. 'What a shame. Well, I'm sure that won't matter to anyone.'

'My lord is hoping to put it to the vote in spring. The entire Council may choose to override the law in the case. But the Duke of Karleigh has been quietly approaching people all winter, reminding them of it, spreading all sorts of nonsense on the danger of too much power in the hands of one nobleman. As though my lord would take that power – as though he *could*,

when he expends all his strength just keeping the state together!' Lady Halliday's cup rattled on its saucer; she steadied it and said, 'You may see why my lord is pleased that Karleigh's gone, if only for a month or two.'

'Yes,' the duchess said softly; 'I thought he might be.'

'But Diane – ' Suddenly Lady Halliday seized her hand in an eloquent hissing of lace. 'It may not be enough. I am so concerned. He *must* keep the Crescent, he is just beginning to accomplish what he set out to do; to lose it now, even for a term, would be a terrible set-back for him and for the city. You hold Tremontaine in your own right, you could vote in Council if you chose. . . . '

'Now, Mary. . . ' Smiling, the duchess disengaged her hand. 'You know I never meddle in politics. The late duke would not have wished it.'

Whatever further entreaty Lady Halliday might have made was forestalled by the announcement of two more guests, the Godwins, who were shown up with the greatest dispatch.

It was unusual for Lady Godwin to be in town in winter; she was fond of the country and, being past that time of life when social duties required her presence in the city, spent most of her time with her husband overseeing the Godwins' great house and estates at Amberleigh. The responsibility of representing the family's interests in the city and on the Council of Lords fell to Lord Godwin's heir, his only son Michael. Lord Michael's name was surrounded with the pleasing aura of scandal appropriate to a young noble who did not need to be too careful of what was said about him. He was an exceptionally attractive young man, and knew it. His liaisons were many, but always in good taste; they might be said to be his distinguishing social excess, as he eschewed those of gambling, quarrelling and dress.

Now he escorted his mother into the room, every inch the well-groomed, dutiful son. He had attended parties given by the duchess and by the Hallidays, but was not well enough acquainted himself with either lady to have visited her privately.

His mother was greeting her friends with kisses, all three women using each other's first names. He followed her with a proper bow and kiss of the hand, murmuring their titles. Diane of Tremontaine said over his bent head, 'How charming to find a