

“The Ruby Blade,”

by D.B. Jackson

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I

A fire crackled and danced in the hearth of the Dowsing Rod, warming the tavern against the howling winds and scratching snow of yet another New England blizzard. Ethan Kaille, conjurer, former thieftaker, now bar-hand under the kindly if tasking eye of his beloved wife, Kannice, sat near the blaze, his feet--clad only in woolen hose--propped on a second chair, a cup of barely-watered Madeira by his side.

It was a rare luxury for Ethan and Kannice to have the Dowser very nearly to themselves on a Tuesday night. Usually the tavern would have been filled to bursting with her usual patrons, who frequented the establishment for her savory stews and chowders, and the fine flips concocted by her hulking barman, Kelf Fingarín. Tonight, though, it was just the three of them.

Ethan might have felt guilty, reclined as he was, listening as Kelf and Kannice bustled in the kitchen behind the bar. They were, it seemed, doing a bit of conjuring themselves, creating a feast from foodstuffs that might otherwise have gone to waste in the empty tavern. But for all his talents with woodwork and furniture repairs, not to mention his abilities with spellmaking, he had no aptitude for cooking. Ethan didn't know what they were making, and they had all but ordered him out of their way.

That suited him. His back and shoulders ached from clearing nearly a foot of snow from the entry way to the tavern. Kelf had offered to do this, but Ethan had noticed in recent days the

start of a paunch around his belly. It seemed the excellence of Kannice's fare, and the relatively staid life of a tavern worker, at least when compared to the rigors of thieftaking, had begun to catch up with him. He had welcomed the opportunity to exert himself. Just as he now welcomed the opportunity to warm his frozen toes and sip his wine.

Kannice emerged from the kitchen and stepped around the bar, bearing a steaming bowl of stew in one hand and a small round of bread in the other. A few strands of auburn hair hung over her brow, and her cheeks were flushed, making her cornflower blue eyes appear even more vivid than usual.

"You look comfortable," she said, setting the food in front of him.

Ethan swung his feet to the cool floor and straightened. "I should be helping."

"You're helping by staying as far from my kitchen as possible."

He grinned. "Where's your food?"

"Kelf is bringing it out. In the meantime, try this."

Ethan inhaled the fragrant steam rising from the bowl, which was rich with fresh cream and bay. "What is it?"

"Oyster chowder. There's roasted cod as well. While the rest of Boston hides from the storm, we'll be enjoying a feast that would make King George himself jealous."

"I think you're trying to fatten me up."

She stooped and kissed his cheek, smelling of lavender. "Aye," she whispered. "You'll fetch a better price at market. Eat up."

She spun away and returned to the kitchen. Ethan tasted his chowder, which somehow exceeded the promise of its aroma.

Kannice appeared again a moment later, Kelf in tow, both of them carrying platters and bowls filled with stew and fish, potatoes and bread.

They had just placed their burdens on the table, when the tavern door opened with a squeak of hinges and a blast of cold air.

Kannice and Kelf turned. Ethan stood.

Two men entered the tavern. One was slight, about Ethan's height, with dark, watchful eyes and dark hair. The other was a mountain of a man--at least as big as Kelf--his dark hair straggly, his face broad and homely. Nap and Afton.

Behind them, sauntering with the self-assurance of the queen consort, came their employer, Sephira Pryce, Empress of the South End, the most notorious and feared thieftaker in all of Boston. Dark curls fell over her shoulders and down her back, sparkling with snowflakes. She wore a black cloak, also dusted with snow, and clasped at the neck with a golden brooch. She halted just inside the doorway and glanced about the tavern, cool appraisal in the icy blue eyes, an insolent grin on her lovely face.

Wind whistled at her back, and flakes swept in onto the wooden floor.

"Would you mind closing the door?" Ethan said.

Sephira made the smallest of gestures. Afton shut the door, silencing the wind.

Ethan stepped in front of Kannice. "I'm sorry. I should have been clearer. I meant with you on the other side of it."

Her laugh was throaty, unrestrained. Ethan had always thought it her best quality.

She removed her cloak, revealing her usual raiment: black breeches, a white shirt, and a velvet waistcoat that hugged her form with unnerving snugness. Nap took the cloak and draped it

over an arm.

“I see we’re just in time for supper. How lovely.”

“They’re not welcome here,” Kannice said, pointing at Sephira’s tongs. “For that matter, neither are you.”

Afton’s meaty hand disappeared into a pocket of his overcoat. Ethan guessed he carried a flintlock.

Ethan drew his blade and pushed up his sleeve exposing his forearm and the lattice of scars there from a lifetime of blood conjurings.

“Is that how it is, Ethan?” Sephira asked, seemingly unperturbed by Kannice’s declaration and the threat implied by his blade. “Now that you’re married, you’re forbidden from visiting with your old friends?”

“Not at all. As soon as an old friend arrives, I’ll be more than happy to visit. In the meantime, I believe Kannice instructed your men to leave.”

Sephira gave a small pout. “Now that wasn’t very nice.”

“Sephira--”

“I need to speak with you,” she said, all pretense vanishing, “and it’s cold outside. Neither Nap nor Afton will do anything to anyone. They will sit in this corner”--she pointed to a table near the door--“and be as quiet as mice. You have my word.”

“Your word,” Kannice repeated, voice dripping with sarcasm.

Sephira went still, like a hunting cat. “Tread lightly, Missus Kaille,” she said, a silken chill to her tone. “It’s one thing to be rude, and quite another to question my honor.”

Ethan laid a hand on Kannice’s shoulder. “It’s all right.” To Sephira he said, “What is it

we need to discuss that couldn't wait for daylight and an end to this storm?"

She smiled, exposing perfect teeth. "A fine question. Shall we sit?"

Sephira's toughs watched her, as if unsure of what they should do. Kannice cast a glance Ethan's way.

"It *is* cold out," he said.

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. But not a word out of them. And if they so much as shuffle their feet, they're to leave. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She frowned.

Sephira crossed to their table, tossed two shillings onto the worn wood, and sat.

"Whatever you're having smells quite good. I'd love some."

Kannice glared at the coins the way she would at vermin in her larder. It was more than she usually charged for a meal, but after a moment she swept the shillings off the table and into her pocket and stalked off to the kitchen for another bowl.

Kelf hovered nearby, massive arms crossed over his chest, his glower shifting from the toughs to Sephira and back again.

"Sit down, Ethan," the empress said, mistress of any room she entered. "We have matters to discuss. And your chowder grows cold."

He had long resisted taking commands from her, even when the consequences of his defiance were far more dire than cold stew and sore feet, but he didn't bother to argue. He returned to his chair and lowered himself into it, setting his knife on the table within easy reach. After a moment's hesitation, he took another spoonful of chowder.

Sephira watched him across the table, mocking amusement on her lips.

“You look well enough,” she said. “The soft life agrees with you, though you might want to curb your appetite a touch.” She patted the underside of her own perfect chin with the back of her hand. “You’ve added a pound or two.”

“What are you doing here, Sephira?”

“Yes, why have you come?” Kannice echoed, returning from behind the bar with Sephira’s chowder. Ethan wondered if she had done anything to it.

Apparently Sephira had the same thought. She eyed the bowl, and then looked up at Kannice. At last she shrugged and took a taste.

“Not bad,” she said, raising her eyebrows. “You’re a lucky man, Ethan, in so many ways.”

He stared back at her, waiting.

She frowned. “You used to be more fun.”

Ethan opened his mouth, intending to ask again why she had shown up at the Dowser on this of all nights, braving cold and wind and snow. But she raised a hand, forestalling him. She set her spoon on the table.

“Some months ago, when first you were tamed by your lovely bride, I said that on certain occasions, when I was presented with jobs that might lie within the purview of your meager talents and limited intelligence, I would offer you the chance to work for me, in exchange for one quarter of the fee paid by my employer.”

“It was for one half,” Kannice said. “And what makes you think he’s interested in working with someone who does nothing but insult him?”

Sephira thinned a smile. “Are you his representative on top of everything else?”

“It *was* one half,” Ethan said.

“Fine. Half, then.”

“And what of Mariz?” Ethan went on. “Can’t he help you with whatever work has come your way? You’ve been so happy to have a conjurer of your own. And now you need me?”

“This is about more than witchery.” She canted her head, considering him. Her eyes glinted with candlelight. “In fact, I can honestly say that no one in this world other than you can help with this matter. I need you, Ethan,” she purred, “as I never have before.”

Ethan sensed Kannice bristling beside him, but he was used to this sort of goading from Sephira. So though he was, he had to admit, intrigued by what she’d said, he made every effort to mask his interest.

“Yes, I’m sure you do,” he said, his tone dry. “Perhaps you’d like me to defeat a lock for you.”

She remained unperturbed. “Nothing like that, no. Perhaps I should tell you something of my inquiry. I trust its significance for you will become apparent soon enough.”

“By all means,” he said, trying to affect indifference. The truth was, however, she had his attention.

She gave a low, gravelly chuckle; Ethan had the feeling he wasn’t fooling her at all.

II

“What do you know about Edward and Lydia Fowls?” she asked, and took a mouthful of chowder. Her eyebrows rose and she turned a look of pure innocence Kannice’s way. “This really is quite good.”

Kannice stared back at her, saying nothing.

Ethan pondered the question. Edward Fowls and his wife were not, by any measure, counted among Boston's most famous personages. A relatively young couple--he might have been in his late twenties, or perhaps thirty, and she was several years younger--they lived in a brick house with marble colonnades on Garden Court Street near North Square, a lane known for its impressive homes. Theirs was neither the largest nor the smallest of those structures, though it was larger than they needed, as they had no children. Mister Fowls worked as a customs commissioner, which was one reason Ethan knew anything about him at all. He was a colleague of Geoffrey Brower, who was husband to Ethan's sister, Bett.

The Fowls were also neighbors to Thomas Hutchinson, acting governor of the province, whose home had been ransacked during the riots that followed implementation of the Stamp Tax back in 1765. Their home, which at the time belonged to Fowls's father, was spared by the rabble, but the events of that August night brought attention, largely unwanted, to all who lived on that usually quiet street.

And Edward Fowls had drawn Ethan's attention for one last reason. Despite their obvious wealth--Garden Court Street was not an address for those of modest means--Ethan could not have said with any confidence what it was Mister Fowls had done to earn his status. His appointment as a Customs agent had come only in the last eighteen months, several years after he and his wife had moved into their home and established themselves in Boston's wealthy society. Some said that their money came largely from Lydia's family, but beyond that Ethan had heard few details.

He related all of this to Sephira as she ate.

“Very good,” she said when he had finished. “I knew nearly as much--or perhaps I should say nearly as little--although not about dear Geoffrey. All that changed when I received a message from Mister Fowles a week ago today. It seems that on the night of December thirty-first, as the Fowls were visiting with friends on Beacon Street, celebrating the turn of the year, they were the victims of a most despicable crime.”

“A crime you had nothing to do with?”

Her grin ossified. “Watch yourself, Ethan. I may need you, but I’ll only brook so much.”

He glanced pointedly at his blade before meeting her gaze again. “Your threats don’t carry much weight here. Tell me about the theft.”

“Yes, well, this is where things start to get interesting. To be honest with you, it took some time before they would tell me precisely what was taken. I went to their home Wednesday morning, the second of January. The back door had been kicked in and a chest had been taken from a wardrobe in their master bedroom. Missus Fowls told me that it was filled with ‘valuables.’”

“‘Valuables,’” Ethan repeated. “That was all she said?”

“At first, yes. I asked several questions, of course, but she remained rather evasive. I had the distinct impression that summoning me had been her husband’s idea. But what was just as noteworthy as her reticence on the subject of the chest’s contents, was her certainty that nothing else had been taken, or even disturbed. Their house is well-appointed. The thief or thieves would have forsaken artwork, silver, jewelry, even a collection of carved jade figures from the Orient in Mister Fowls’ study, just to get to that chest. Which, of course, begs several questions. Who were they? What was in that chest? And how did the thieves know to look for it?”

Ethan leaned forward. "I assume you persisted in asking such questions of Missus Fowls."

"I did, but she was not forthcoming. Eventually she admitted that the chest contained a certain amount of gold."

Even Kannice straightened at this.

"Gold jewelry?" Ethan asked. "Gold coins?"

"She wouldn't say."

"Then how are you supposed to retrieve what was taken?"

"A fine question," Sephira said. "One you may prove helpful in answering."

"So that's why--"

"No," she cut in. "Mariz might help me with that as well. So might Sheriff Greenleaf. Patience, Ethan. Your connection to all of this lies a bit deeper."

He and Kannice exchanged glances. As they did, Afton stood and approached their table, as diffident as a school boy. Reaching Sephira, he hesitated, then bent close to her and whispered something. The more he said, the more her expression darkened, until she was scowling and he had straightened once more.

"Go sit down," she said.

The tough turned and shambled back to where he had been sitting.

"Is there something wrong?" Ethan asked.

Sephira seemed genuinely discomfited and wouldn't quite look at him. "He...he said that...that your stew smells quite delicious," she finally admitted, addressing Kannice. "And he and Nap were wondering if they might each have a small bowl." She stared daggers back at

them. “At my expense, of course.”

Kannice said nothing, but held out her hand. Sephira produced her purse and counted out four shillings. Again, Kannice did not bother correcting her as to the price of fare in the Dowser. Coin in hand, she nodded to Kelf, who returned to the kitchen for two more bowls.

“You were saying that Missus Fowls refuses to reveal the contents of the stolen chest,” Ethan prompted.

Sephira nodded with her usual crisp authority. “That’s right. Fortunately, I’m more resourceful than she might have guessed. I made some inquiries with persons of authority here in Boston. I sent missives to London as well, but, of course, I don’t expect a reply for some time, and I hope to have this inquiry resolved long before it arrives.”

Against his will, Ethan found himself eager to hear what Sephira had learned. For her part, she took another spoonful of chowder, clearly relishing his impatience.

“You, there,” Sephira said, obviously addressing Kelf, who had just emerged once more from the kitchen with food for her toughs. “They’ll want bread as well.”

The barman looked like he might refuse, but at a nod from Kannice he stomped back behind the bar.

“As far as anyone here can tell, Edward Fowls is no more or less than what he seems. The son of a middling family, a man of means but not wealth, of competence but not talent, of limited wit but certainly not intellect. In other words, he’s the perfect customs agent.”

“And what about Missus Fowls?”

Sephira offered a coy grin. “Well, now we come to the heart of my tale. Unlike her husband, the charming Lydia is a good deal more than a first glance might suggest. She’s clever,

and, it turns out, willing to go to great lengths to conceal certain elements of her past.”

“Such as?”

“Such as her true name.”

Ethan narrowed his gaze. “Her true name?”

“She’s Lydia Fowls now, of course. And before they were married, she was Lydia Sheed.

Or so we were supposed to believe.”

“An alias?”

“Yes. She claimed to have been born here in Boston, but we found only one record of anyone named Sheed, and that was a woman. Her mother, it turned out. The real Miss Sheed married and took her husband’s name, but some time later, the daughter, Lydia, assumed her mother’s family name. When I learned of this and confronted her, she admitted to changing her name to avoid the embarrassment of a series of scandals involving her father. By this time her parents were estranged, and the father had long since left Boston for...well, let’s just say for warmer climes.”

Ethan’s pulse quickened at this, and warning bells pealed in his mind. He knew where all of this would lead. Impossible, and yet he knew.

“Care to guess at her true name, Ethan?” Sephira asked, enjoying herself far too much.

“I don’t want any part of this,” he said, his voice barely carrying.

Kannice covered his hand with her own slender fingers, which felt smooth and warmer than they should have been.

“Your hands are freezing,” she whispered. She faced Sephira. “I think you should go.”

Sephira’s gaze never left Ethan’s face. She held her lips parted in a sly smile, the

knowledge in her sapphire eyes aimed like a weapon at the deepest secrets of his life.

“It’s too late for that,” she said. “Her name was Selker. Lydia Selker. But you knew that already, didn’t you? Would you care to tell us her father’s name?”

Kannice’s eyes flicked between Sephira and Ethan, her brows bunched in concern.

“Rayne Selker,” he said, the name coming out rough and low.

“The very same.”

“Is that who I think it is?” Kannice asked. Because, of course, she knew from long ago.

But the rest--

“Who in God’s name is Rayne Selker?” Kelf asked.

Who indeed?