Line of Blood

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

“Who is that woman beside the Lord of this castle?” Thomas de Mallet had been watching the woman for some time. She seemed curiously familiar, and certainly captivating. She was tall and strong, with long blond hair that shone in the lamplight of the massive dark dining hall. But he was a guest here. He was impressed but this house, and that woman, but he knew neither.

“That is Celeste of Beaulieu,” his young companion replied – Luke was a young squire left to attend him during his visit. “She is the constant companion of the Earl. He has adopted her son Tristan as his heir, as his own son was killed in the crusades. It was always understood that they would marry, but she has taken some vow of chastity…”. He drew closer to Thomas to whisper - “But it is well known that they share a bed most nights and that she pleasures His Lordship in other ways, to be true to her vow.”

“I can imagine what pleasure she might give,” said Thomas, a knight errant, chewing on another piece of fine beef, seasoned well with the expensive spices of the east. “She looks to me to be a woman of appetite. To get between her thighs would be an adventure … which is all I seek in my travels these days.” Not a true knight errant perhaps?

“Oh, if it is adventure that you seek, then she is the very goddess of that,” said Luke, casting his own admiring glance at the head table. “She rides like the wind – we all know it - and I am told that she swings a sword as well. I not seen her there, but she practices in the Lord’s armory every night.”

“Saints be praised. A goddess you say? A goddess of combat? I can believe it!” How did he know her? There was something in the line of her smooth pale jaw, or that regal nose … it seemed that they may have met before.

She was laughing now. Something that the old Earl had whispered in her ear. A tendril of her blond hair dropped from her forehead and she swept it back behind her ear. Thomas felt his loins stir. \

He had been led astray by those loins before – so many times that he had come to accept that resistance was futile. He would venture into the very gates of hell if his cock pointed the way. That was why he roamed. There was no quest but his own gratification. No damsels to be rescued – he would rather ravish them. There would be sin, but there was always forgiveness in the confessional. In return he had sworn that his sword belonged to God, but only the steel one. The other of flesh belonged to the devil, and he knew it.

High politick had been his what had steered his mind in times past. The furtherance of his own family, and the elimination of threats to it. But by his dalliances his father had disowned him. He had no house to serve. On the European mainland he could ply his trade and sell his sword, or the hand that wielded it. By the rules of chivalry a Lord would give sustenance to a knight errant, and sometimes a squire to serve him, as now.

“How can I get to meet her,” he said to Luke, with a gaze that could not be mistaken for being anything less than driven seriousness.

“I may be able to arrange that,” said Luke, clearly pleased with himself for being able to say it. “I know a maid in her service. On the morrow, perhaps?”

“The sooner the better,” said Thomas. Part of him begged that it be that very night. But wine might calm that thing, so Thomas de Mallet drank heavily from his cup.

And without recollection of how he got there, it seemed that moments later he was abed, and the morning light was shining through the slit window of his chamber below the ramparts, and his squire for the time being was peering around the door.

“Good news, Sir,” chirped Luke. “I am told that the lady Celeste will resort to the armory after she has broken fast with the Earl this fine morn. Perhaps your could happen there. She prefers to be there alone, but there is a way to the room from here.”

The bane of his life remained engorged from a dream of the lady just before waking, so Thomas able to shake the fog from his head, helped by cold water from the jug and basin.

“Show me,” he directed. He was led to a shaft and rope. He knew the thing – an elevator to bring weapons from the armory to the battlements above. A rope to climb down.

“Should I come to, Sir,” said an eager Luke. “I would love to see whether the lady with a sword her hand is twice the person, as is a man with a weapon.”

Thomas smiled. He said – “Please, this is something that I must do alone. I would not want the lady embarrassed by a delegation.” He took the rope in his gloved hand and swung himself into the shaft.

The shaft was narrow, and the walls were stone with footholds and places to place his back. Without armor he could move easily down, only using the rope as needed. He dropped into an alcove with his back to the room.

He was not expecting her to be there. He would wait. But as he turned he saw her. She was standing in front of a wooden dummy bearing the marks of thousands of sword strikes. She held a sword in her hand – it was not a heavy one like his own -it was like a rapier but with sharpened edges. Her blond hair was loosely braided and lay over a shoulder. She wore what looked like a fine silken nightdress, but belted in military leather. The V neck showed a modest but pleasing bust, heaving in a suggestive way following what was clearly some substantial physical exercise.

Her eyes were like blue fire, like the fire in a furnace. She was alone and not pleased to be interrupted.

“Forgive me, My Lady,” said Thomas. “I am a visitor here. I was looking for the armory and not wishing to disturb anyone after last night, I took the route that I knew might lead here.”

She said nothing. But she was looking at him as if she knew him. He felt he needed to say it. “My name is Thomas de Mallet of Bunbury, knight of England.”

“I know the name,” she said. “Her voice was deep, like the growl of a woman just before the scream of passion. It seemed to draw him yet further. “Why were you looking for the armory?”

“Dare I say, for the same reason as you?” said Thomas. “To exercise. To keep the wrist, elbow and shoulder flexible.”

“Come then, Sir Thomas,” she said. “Pick a sword. Spar with me a little.” She waved her sword a little, clearly showing some flexibility that betrayed skill.

“Madam, I could not. Not with a steel sword. There will be wooden swords here for that … if we can find them.”

“I promise that I will not hurt you in combat,” she said. She raised the sword in an outstretched hand, as in competition in armor. It was a challenge. He was prepared to laugh at the gesture – a woman toying with a man by imitating a manly gesture. But she was serious.

He walked over to a rack of superior swords. There were plenty of strips of sharpened steel, but Thomas knew quality weapons. He took a couple in his hand, checking weight and balance. He selected one. It was heavy. A good strike with this might even break her blade. He turned and took the posture to accept her challenge.

She advanced on him, her blade tickling his, with a series of metallic rings. He advanced and used small strokes as one sparring might. She parried each with skill. Her skill surprised him, not just because she was a woman, but because her saw in her movement and the movement of her blade, more skill than he had encountered before.

Then there was a sudden movement by her. The tip of her sword had ripped a tear in his tunic. It stunned Thomas. He backed away and looked down. There was no blood.

“I promised,” she said. “Not while we are in combat.”

But Thomas was angry. Even without a crowd to witness his humiliation he was shamed. He advanced and swung heavily. ‘put up that giant needle and I will break it off!’ was what he was thinking. One swing and then another. She was ducking and weaving. Preserving her sword. It would find the gap.

He found himself backed against the wooden dummy with the tip of her sword at his throat, his sword dangling in his outstretched hand, where he could neither cut or jab.

“I claim your weapon. Let is drop,” she directed. It fell to the floor with a clang. But still the point of her sword was at his throat.

“You have me at your mercy, My Lady,” said Thomas. “But then I have been at your mercy since I laid eyes on you last night. You need no blade to slay me Madam. Your beauty is enough.”

“Words like that make me know how wonderful it is to be a woman,” she said. But the sword stayed it its lethal position. The anger that he had seen in his eyes had not subsided, and yet it was not his words that had displeased her.”

“My Lady, I am confused. Have I done you some slight by my actions?”

“Slight! Slight, Sir? By your actions so much more than that. So you deserve an explanation before I deal with this as I must. Let me give it to you.”

“Pray remove your sword first.”

She whipped it back so fast he barely saw it. She rested the blade lightly on her shoulder.

“Do you remember the noble family of Greville who neighbored your estate?”

“I remember them,” said Thomas. “But they are no more. Without an heir, the land fell to my family. After Lord Greville died there were no descendants The line of blood stopped with the old man.”

“But there was a son wasn’t there? What happened to him.”

In all honesty Madam, I do not know. He met with and accident. He lived but not as somebody who could carry on the bloodline.”

“You had a hand in that, did you not, Sir Thomas?” She stared at him in fury.

“You knew the boy? He spoke to you about it did he? How could any man tell that story and live with the shame of it?”

“Should he be ashamed?” Her fury seemed to be rising. “He was held by two of your men as you cut away his manhood. Who should carry the shame, Sir? You? Or me?”

Suddenly Sir Thomas de Mallet recognized those eyes.

But it was too late. Her blade flashed across his neck servering all the blood vessels and his windpipe.

His body fell to the floor. A line of blood trickled across the stones to the drain in the corner.

The End

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