

The Good Silver

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MATTHEW DUNN

Day One

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Erased

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The Good Silver

By
Matthew Dunn

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The Good Silver is a work of fiction. Many of the characters are inspired by historical figures; others are entirely imaginary creations of the author. Apart from the historical figures, any resemblance between these fictional characters and actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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PROLOGUE

**Syracuse University Campus
Syracuse, New York
February 14, 1879**

At least it was not snowing, William thought as he walked briskly behind his best friend Charles, whose long legs and determined bearing set a pace difficult for William to match. However, it *was* very cold, well below freezing, and the wool sweater he'd thrown on hastily before stepping out into the twilight only twenty minutes ago had long since lost its will to shelter him. He had forgotten his hat and his gloves, exposing far more of his delicate skin to the elements than his mother could forgive, and his toes—his poor icicle toes, protected only by the thin cowhide of his Oxfords—now felt more attached to the frozen pathway than to his shivering body.

Had he exhibited the fortitude to refuse his friend's request, he would be sipping hot tea beside a glowing fire right now in the company of his sweetheart, Margaret—warm and bosomy Margaret. After all, it was Valentine's Day, and a young man like himself should be spending its ebb with a young lady—a warm and bosomy young lady. Was not that the order of the world? So why was he trailing along after his decidedly non-voluptuous friend braving the bitter cold, he asked himself. It was very simple.

He could never say no to Charles.

Charles had arrived at William's tiny apartment just as he was finishing his supper, insisting that he come at once, saying that a lynch mob was gathering on campus and that they needed to hurry. "History could very well be made on this night," he said, "so grab your cloak and come with me, my friend."

Without hesitation, William snatched the incompetent pullover off the back of a chair and followed Charles out into the cold, completely unaware of why he was doing so. They had walked almost a mile now and he still did not know. Over the course of their hike, he had not been able to move his frozen lips enough to ask.

Anticipating the opportunity to thaw, a thankful smile melted across William's red face as he finally saw their destination on the darkening horizon ahead—the Hall of Languages—the sole structure on the ten-year-old, 50-acre farmland campus of Syracuse University. He tucked his hands deep into his armpits, bowed his head, and trudged on knowing that relief was but a few minutes away.

Built of Onondaga limestone in the American Second Empire style borrowed from France, the Hall of Languages was the only building, of a planned seven, erected on the young college campus during the harsh economic recession of the 1870's. Elegantly styled in a double-pitched roof with a steep lower slope—the hallmark of the design,—it stood alone atop a quiet hill, tall and welcoming, a beacon to all in search of greater knowledge. Tonight, upon their teeth-chattering arrival, the two freshmen students found a large, gruff-looking man in a heavy overcoat, wool cap and boots blocking that normally unimpeded light.

As Charles attempted to move past what he would later describe as a dim-witted grizzly bear, the man extended his large, intimidating paw and said, "I'm sorry

boys, but this convention can be attended by invitation only."

"A convention, you say?" Charles asked with a raised brow. "From what I've heard, I would liken it more to an assembly of hungry wolves; and a misguided rabble at that, if I dare be frank, sir."

If the mountainous sentinel took offense, he did not show it. He just stared at Charles, who defiantly stared back while icy white clouds spewed from their mouths, helplessly mixing in a fusion of brawn and brain before disappearing into the night air. As William expected, his best friend was not the first to blink.

"Shove off," the man growled.

"We're students here," Charles said unflinchingly. "We've paid our tuition and therefore we may go anywhere on campus we like. Chancellor Haven assured us of that during our orientation last fall."

"I don't know no Chancellor Haven," the man replied. "I was told to keep students, reporters and all other undesirable types out. So that's just what I intend to do," he continued as he pushed his barrel chest into Charles's opposing beaker, "I would advise you and your companion to go back to your books while you're still able to read."

Momentarily defeated, the regrouping Charles turned, seized William by the arm, and led him off without another word.

"Where are we going now?" William asked.

Charles snuck a peek back at the still grumbling obstacle and smiled. He then turned to William and said, "I know a side door that the dim-witted grizzly bear doesn't, and if luck is with us, its lock has not yet been repaired."

William wanted to ask Charles how he knew of the door and of its broken lock, but sensing that their conversation could still be overheard, he refrained. Further, he

wondered how the door had fallen into its poor condition. As they made their way toward the eastern side of the building, William decided he didn't really want an answer to these questions. He simply wanted to get inside and get warm.

"I believe it was meant to be some sort of service entrance," Charles said, feeling the soothing rush of warm air dance across his face as he stepped through the broken-locked doorway. "We need only to follow this corridor to the stairs that ascend to the hallway that leads to the main vestibule. I believe that is where we will find the salivating wolves."

Searching for a radiator to huddle against, William ignored his friend's observations, choosing first to attend to his tingling fingers before asking Charles the question he had failed to ask back at his apartment. Relieved that he could find no signs of frostbite on his lethargically numb hands, William finally confronted his escort.

"Why are we here, Charles?" William asked.

"To witness an assault upon Utopia," Charles replied. "Come now, William, I know a place where we can hear everything they say."

As was his habit, William obligingly followed his friend.

"There is an impure emanation from it," a silver-haired gentleman said to the fifty or more men gathered around the room, all listening intently. Seated near the center, his dark attire alleging he was a clergyman, he had a newspaper folded in his lap. "Young people go there and return with these impure thoughts and associations in their minds."

Another similarly dressed man, who had yet to lower his chill-shielding coat lapel, reinforced the rising sentiment, saying, "Their institution is the outgrowth of vile

passion!" The anger in his voice must have been too great to ignore as it triggered many to light their own torches and join the amassing intolerance.

"A nest of unclean birds."

"An immoral adulterous horde."

"A foul blot on the State of New York."

"A disgrace to civilization, I say."

"A *LASCIVIOUS LOT*."

The condemnatory lava would have flowed for hours had not the silver-haired man diverted its path toward finding a way to "suppress the evil."

"Yes, I believe we all agree that they must be broken up."

"Extinguished!"

"Demolished!"

"Wiped out!"

"If we could get a moral sentiment aroused and public feeling turned against them..." one man offered.

"And sway the press into joining our cause instead of condemning our actions," another suggested, a stout man in an ill-fitting clerical collar speaking for the first time. "As teachers of the Gospel and defendants of public and domestic virtue in this part of the country, it is our duty to right the great wrong done to society by these immoral practices." Grabbing one of the many newspapers scattered about the room, he raised it over his head and shook it like a baby's rattle. "The truth must find its way onto these pages if we are to have any chance at all!"

"Perhaps we should have thought of that before we barred all reporters from attending tonight," someone said.

"Quite a valid point," the stout man replied, nodding his head in agreement. "We must leverage the power of the printed word to deracinate the evil rooting beneath

our very feet. I propose that we provide the reporters that have collected outside our door with an abstract report of our proceeding here. Then, there can be no imprudent editorials."

Everyone agreed.

"But, the evil is too deep-seated to be easily eradicated," one man opined. "They have community empathy in their favor. By their thrift, their industry, their activity, they have vastly improved not only the large farm they occupy, but the neighborhood generally has risen in prosperity. Land is more valuable. The poor have employment. They do good work and have an excellent business reputation."

Undaunted, the silver-haired gentleman replied calmly, "then we must, as Hercules said, either find a way or make one."

Find a way or make one. The final words lingered in the cold vestibule like a thick midnight fog.

Hidden in an adjacent room, the completely puzzled William turned to Charles and asked who all these unfamiliar clergymen were so embattled with.

"The Oneida Community," Charles answered in a hushed tone. Keeping his better ear pressed hard against the conveniently thin wall, he then explained that the OC, as they were often referred, were a commune of several hundred people living about thirty-five miles east of Syracuse. "Professor Walls told me that they're Communists. He said they live in a huge mansion that they built themselves where the men can have relations with any woman they choose," he added excitedly.

Curious, but unconvinced, William asked, "But what if the woman is married or is unwilling?"

"All the members consider themselves married to the group rather than to one monogamous partner," Charles said. "They call it 'free love' and they practice it blissfully,

so I am told.”

“Free love?” William pondered aloud as he returned his now salaciously attentive ear to the wall, his thoughts conjuring scandalous images of his darling Margaret *and* her equally warm and bosomy older sister Annie.

Wide-eyed and grinning, Charles replied simply, “Utopia.”