

THE SECRET OF CAMBRAIGE CASTLE

Medieval tale of suspense,
betrayal and hope

Bonus Story....

LADY SIMONE'S *SECRET*

Historical suspense

By Carolyn R. Scheidies

C_R Publications

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I DEAL IN HOPE

History, Mystery, Romance...and Hope

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DEDICATION

To members of CNFCWAM, my writer's group, (you know who you are) who continue to encourage and stretch me.

Thanks!

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified. What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?

(Rom 8:28-31 KJV)

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Medieval tale of suspense, betrayal and hope

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PROLOGUE

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hill, from whence cometh my help.

Psalm 121:1

The two men galloped up the steep incline challenging each other and the horseflesh under them. They strained to gain on each other, the younger, well-built knight laughing into the wind that whipped his hair into his eyes. At the crest of the overhang, the two pulled up mounts that blew and stomped, not yet ready to end the race. Leather creaked as the older nobleman wiped sweat from his brow.

Sudden tension rippled through the nobleman's rather gaunt shoulders as he reigned in his restless destrier. Snorting, the thick muscled animal slashed his

long, well groomed tail against the flies buzzing about his round flanks.

The Earl of Comfrey eased up on the reins once more, aware his golden chestnut's unease was due to his own tension. "What say you?" he asked, his gaze on the tall, well-formed knight who rode so easily beside him. "I shall not rest easy until I know Leelah is properly looked after. I don't worry about myself, but my daughter...."

At the bluff overlooking Comfrey's lands, the dark knight pulled up his huge bay gelding with an ease and command that drew forth the older man's admiration. As far as the eye could see, trees spread out before them all dark greenish-blue before disappearing into a dense mist rising off the icy blue lake curling about the base of the far hill.

"It is worth fighting for, Comfrey."

Both knew they spoke of more than the vista stretched out before them.

"You comprehend the problem?"

The knight surveyed the older nobleman whose gray cape fluttered in the breeze. Even dressed in the sturdy tunic and leggings, the proud man in no way resembled the peasant whose clothing he wore with such grace. The knight's own gold-edged black tunic contrasted sharply with Lord Comfrey's usual mode of dress. In the deep forests and secret glades of the Welsh countryside, the knight felt out of place.

"His Majesty be well pleased with thee, Comfrey. He knows thee as an honest Marcher Lord. You hold the borderlands by his leave and his blessing."

Comfrey's blue eyes narrowed. "I would not forswear my sword oath to King Edward."

"Many others have." The knight shrugged the soft wool cape from his broad shoulders, revealing his well-

muscled torso. Yonder he gazed down over Comfrey's fief, a gift of gratitude from King Edward I. Like his father Henry, Edward continued efforts to subdue the Celtic people and force the freedom loving people to submit to him as overlord. The task seemed hopeless.

While the dark knight did not necessarily wholeheartedly agree with the king's methods, he had also sworn sword oath and would do as his king, and friend, bid him. Glancing toward the shorter nobleman, the knight was startled at the deep sadness in the man's eyes.

Comfrey spoke low. "It should never have happened."

Turning from Comfrey, the knight stared into the valley. Silently, he waited for Comfrey to continue.

"If only David had not raised that revolt in '82." Contempt dripped from his lips. "Traitor to his own people as well as to the king."

He continued with a sigh. "Despite capturing Hawarden Castle, his revolt would have failed right then had he not convinced his cousin Llewelyn to join him."

"Edward could not forgive such treachery," the knight said. "After all, he had already pardoned them once. Their unprovoked attack was not something he would forget--or easily forgive."

"Aye, but the Celts love their freedom. Who can blame them? They ask nothing more than to be left alone to govern their own affairs. Why must they submit to a foreign overlord?"

Indolently, the knight smiled at Comfrey's vehemence. "So speaks thine own Welsh heart." He sobered. "'Tis prudent not to speak so openly."

"Mayhap." The commanding nobleman felt Comfrey's studied gaze. "I choose my words, and my company, carefully. I hold my land from Edward,

but I shall not deny my heritage. Though my mother's blood burns within me, I am the King's own true liege man."

He sighed as though from the depths of his being. "I realize, as most of my Celtic countrymen do not, that the English side of me will one day win this battle to unite England and Wales, even Scotland. I see how effectively King Edward is codifying our laws to bring about justice and fairness before the law--even for the lowliest serf.

"'Tis a good thing Edward does. Henry may have been a saint, building Westminster Abby, but his leadership, at best, was ineffectual. 'Tis time we assert ourselves as a unified and independent free nation."

The knight's large destrier shook his massive head and shuffled back a pace from the cliff. The knight gave him his head enough to stretch his muscles; then pulled him up again. "You speak with the

voice of a prophet. Thou lecture of nations when most men of rank refuse to see beyond their own fiefs, their own petty castle walls. Even your women are captive to whoever holds the land. Does not Lord Cambraige lay claim to your fief by some ancient Celtic title?"

"He is greedy for my land, land he would lief claim but for the king's support. Still, he seeks what all Celts seek--freedom. The English, too, seek freedom from their Norman overlords." Wiping his hand across his brow, the Earl murmured, "God's will be done."

Breaking from a low bush, a rabbit jolted the horses momentarily. The two men quickly calmed their startled horses. The knight continued solemnly. "You speak high treason, Comfrey. I hate to think what would happen to your lovely daughter should your views regarding freedom become common knowledge. Beware the French king hear not of your

prophecy, seeing as how he is convinced King Edward holds the English crown solely by his leave alone. I wonder you trust one such as myself who holds French lands."

"Like most other lords." Comfrey grimaced before adding, "Our sovereign is of a different opinion. One day, my friend, we shall be free and independent Englishmen. We shall speak with the English tongue and not that of the French king across the channel. And, who better to bring about this change than our own King Edward? I fear not the French king, but those much closer to home."

"Aye." His companion swatted an insect buzzing about his head. "His majesty will do what he can to lend you support. He is a great and a good man."

"In stature as well as heart," Comfrey agreed. "Even the lowliest peasant falls to his knees in homage. However, even He is not God. He can not be everywhere at

once."

"Since coming to the throne in 1272, Edward has done his best to consolidate his holdings. War seems to invigorate, rather than drain him."

Comfrey surveyed the man who towered over him. "Is his hair still thick? Does he still decry his nickname? I had hoped, once, to take my Leelah-- Laural to court. As things stand, it is impossible to leave Comfrey unguarded for so long a time."

Chuckling, the knight said, "Always his majesty despises the name 'long shanks' and his hair is still thick though it has changed color over the years. He is ever loyal to those who agree with him, but, as always, he finds it difficult to accept anyone who disagrees with him. Still, he is a fair man and, usually, a reasonable one. Lady Comfrey would be safe under his protection. It might behoove you to make the acquaintance of

the queen. It would not do your daughter harm, and might well auger well for her future."

"Mayhap, but I trust you more. I know Edward is a just man, except where the Celts are concerned," Comfrey broke in, "but the blood of Celtic warriors runs in Leelah's veins. His majesty's anger burns yet at what he perceives as treachery on the part of the Welsh men of rank and power."

Without speaking, thoughts turned to the king's response to the treachery of David and his cousin Llewelyn, a response untempered by compassion. The heads of both graced the tower of London until there remained but empty skulls. The dark knight shuddered at the memory.

Though he shirked not his duty, he had no part of the cruelties carried out on David. Comfrey interrupted his thoughts.

"Henry hemmed in the Celts with his

lords, but now these barons are but crazy with greed and book not interference of their affairs even from King Edward-- despite their oaths of allegiance. They do as they will to their Celtic subjects, laying a heavy burden on the people. It be no wonder the people seek their freedom in whatever manner they can."

"Far different it be on your lands, friend."

"Aye," Comfrey gazed down over his beloved land. "This, too, has its dangers. My own blood kin brand me as a traitor to our people and seek my life, while the other borderland lords intrigue to deprive me of both my rights as a freeborn Englishman and my lands. I see no end to it."

As though sensing the tension in his master, Comfrey's destrier snorted and threw up his head. Lord Comfrey settled him quickly. "I see little future for me. I have no son, but my daughter..." He

struggled with his emotions. "She is all I have. Her welfare is my highest concern. She must marry well. If she is to survive, she must marry and soon."

"Have no fear, my friend." The dark knight grasped his companion's shoulder. "Her welfare is now mine. You may rest easy. It will be as we agreed."

The two men exchanged a look of total understanding.

CHAPTER ONE

My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth. Psalm 121:2

Laural, Lady Comfrey, pushed back the strands of her luxurious molasses colored hair, escaping the two long plaits that swung to her hips. Moon silver sparkled through the rich tones of her hair from some distant Viking ancestor. Her unusual hair made her impatient not realizing how it framed her fragile elfin beauty.

At the moment, her heart-shaped face was anxious, and her usually smiling lips turned down into a frown.

"Papa, I wish you would stay home this forenoon. Please grant me this one favor. Don't go out hunting with Lord Cambraige and his men. The steward

wishes to speak with you and..." She grasped the rough cloth of his tunic.

She let her father search her apprehensive expression. "I do not wish to argue, daughter, but I must needs meet with Cambraige. Mayhap we can settle our differences amicably." He patted her shoulder. The soft blue of the delicately embroidered silk bbliaut she wore over her chemise contrasted sharply with the dark blue of her eyes that darkened to gray in her concern.

"My men will also join us, Leelah." His long gentle fingers, more suited to a man of letters than of war, touched her soft cheek.

His pet name for her softened her expression. "How can you trust Lord Cambraige? He is a devious and deceitful man who is greedy for your lands." She shook her head.

"'Tis the complete truth of the matter, Leelah. All the more reason to disorder

his plans. I am not without influence."

Around them, the servants and pages bustled about the huge great hall, cleaning up after the breaking of the fast and preparing the hall for the day. In the cool of the morn, the fires raging in the maw of the mammoth fireplaces at either end of the long, vaulted ceiling room cast but paltry heat and less light.

On mats and benches around the room, men-at-arms, attended by their squires, conversed or played chess or other games. At times, arguments erupted that were soon quelled by a single look from Comfrey.

Laural might well have continued her entreaty, but for the nail-studded door that swung open with a deep groan. A crisp morning breeze swept in, lifting the edges of Laural's gown. Along with the breeze entered the ponderous Lord Cambraige.

His hard boots clanked ominously

against the stone floor, and Laural wondered if she shivered more from the cold air or from the chill in Cambraige's dark eyes.

Laural entreated one last time.

"Father, please don't go."

Lord Cambraige's gaze narrowed.

"Comfrey, 'Tis time to depart. My horses and men wait impatiently while you dally with the womanish fears of your daughter." His gaze moved swiftly but thoroughly over her slight form, bringing a blush to her pale cheeks.

Comfrey's face darkened at Cambraige's barely veiled contempt. "You shall be civil toward Lady Comfrey, Lord Cambraige. She is a highborn lady, not one of your scullery wenches to be bowed by the import of your rank."

Lord Cambraige bowed stiffly. "I forget myself, Comfrey. Then again, as the English king's man, you forget your obligations to your own countryman."

"I forget nothing, Cambraige. Let us be gone. Forsooth, our quarrel is not for the ears of a lady."

"Or other fools," Cambraige grumbled, glaring at the Earl's knights.

"God speed, Father."

In an unexpected sentiment, Comfrey kissed his daughter's cheek. "My dear, fear not. My life is in the hands of God." Momentarily, his eyes darkened, and he lowered his voice, "Should something untoward happen, I have made provisions for you, Leelah. Do not be afraid; God will never leave His own without the comfort of His presence." With those cryptic words, he followed Cambraige out the door.

Late that afternoon, Laural sat in the women's bower diligently laboring over the tapestry on her lap. Her lips moved in prayer as uneasiness settled within. Her concentration broken, she stifled a cry of frustration as she picked out her last row

of tiny delicate stitches.

Sitting near the high narrow window, she gazed out over the courtyard below, her thoughts pushing away the giggles and quiet conversation of the few other women in the bower with her.

There were not many women, wives of her father's knights, and none with whom she felt fully comfortable. Without the presence of her mother, other lords did not send their daughters to the castle to learn to be wives, and her father had refused to send her away after her accident.

For a moment, she stared at her hands, flexed fingers that refused to straighten. Behind her, she sensed more than heard the sudden uncomfortable silence, the eyes staring at her unsightly hands. How she hated her hands, hated the stares and shudders they brought forth.

Anger burned inside, anger she tried to quell. "God forgive me," she

whispered. "I...."

The thought remained unformed as a horseman galloped into the courtyard and flung himself from his horse. Even from her vantage point, Laural's heartbeat quickened at the look on the man's face.

Flinging the tapestry from her, Laural leaped to her feet, but before she could make her way to the door, it smashed open and the burly knight of uncommon height burst into the room. Blood flowed down his cheek, and his eyes held a terror that communicated itself quickly to the women who proceeded to screech in horror.

"Enough!" Laural commanded, keeping her own composure with difficulty. She gasped as the knight dropped to his knees in front of her.

"My lady. You must needs come away with me straightway."

"Destrun, what of my father?"

"He is dead, My Lady, and I must take

you safely to the king."

"What happened? Where is father?"

"Come, we must go straightway.
There is no time to lose."

Without another word of argument or complaint, Laural nodded. Immediately, Destrun took her arm and hurried her from the room. At the twisting stairs, he apologized briefly. "My lady, we must hurry." With that, he swung her into his strong arms and strode with her down the stairs into the great hall.

There Lord Cambraige awaited, a deadly smile on his lips. "And where are thee headed My Lady?"

Destrun carefully set her down before facing Lord Cambraige. "At my master's leave, I take her to King Edward. She is under his protection now."

"Faugh!" The Lord's heavily gloved hand connected with Destrun's face.

"Stop that!" Laural commanded, her eyes blazing. "I must needs know of my

father."

"Your Welsh countryman swept down upon us in a surprise raid, My Lady," Lord Cambraige said, his tone dripping with sarcasm.

She steeled herself to meet his contemptuous gaze. "He is dead. You are certain."

"He is even now being brought back on a litter. After the funeral, you shall accompany me back to my castle."

Laural straightened. "I think not, Milord. Father would have me go to the king. He be not so far distant that we could not make it safely within the week. His men with Destrun will escort me...."

"Your father's men at arms are also dead, My Lady."

Suspicion glimmered in her eyes. "How convenient for you."

The blow came so swiftly Laural had no time to dodge. Stumbling backward, Laural's leg buckled and she landed on

floor in front of Lord Cambraige.

Grabbing her hair, he forced her to look into his face.

His actions only inflamed her. "Let me go. You have no right to touch me." Raising her hand, she would have levered herself to her feet, but at the touch of her hand Lord Cambraige shuddered, dropped her and backed away.

He snarled. "Keep those claws off my person."

Laural's face flamed. Her eyes chilled. "Then give me leave, and I shall depart for the king's court." She permitted Destrun to assist her to her feet.

"You'll do nothing of the sort, My Lady. As of now, I claim you and your father's lands for myself. I am the rightful overlord."

Anger mingled with horror. "You would then wed the daughter of Lord Comfrey for his lands?"

"Wed? What foolish nonsense.

Obviously, you have a disordered mind, My Lady, to think any man would wed the likes of a feeble wench like yourself."

"The land is mine. It will belong to he who weds me." Laural managed to control the trembling that began in the region of her heart and was spreading quickly to her knees.

"Ah, but with you as my ward, I hold it all. There is nothing you can do."

Destrun stepped forward. "Lord Cambraige, her father...."

"Faugh! What care I for the favor of a dead man?" He touched the sheathed sword at his side. "Unless you desist, you shall lie at your lady's feet."

"Then die, I shall." Laural stepped between the men, her hand on Destrun's arm.

"You are no good to me dead, Destrun," she murmured and felt the knight relax his hold on his sword. Under her breath she said, "Ride. Ride to the

king with the news."

"Lady Comfrey," a page cried.

"They're bringing the master home."

Headless of Lord Cambraige, Laural hurried out of the hall to meet the litter borne by several of Lord Cambraige's men. At the sight of her father's bloodied body, Laural's head began to swim.

"Papa. Oh, Papa, no. Jesus....NO!" she cried.

As darkness clouded her vision, all she could hear was Lord Cambraige's heinous laugh.

Destrun caught her as she fell.