

AN ENDLESS EXILE by MARY LANCASTER

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Chapter 1

“Hereward is dead.”

Whatever I had expected of my husband’s nephew, rousing my household in the middle of the night to throw his dripping person and its accompanying blast of cold air at my feet, it was not that. Even though there can have been few men more likely to die.

Just for a moment, I could only stare at the bent, agitated head, watching the rivulets of water run down his hair to join the thousand others on his sodden cloak. By the trembling, almost sinister flame of my porter’s lamp, I could even see the little pool of water forming between us. Just for a moment, that fascinated me too.

Hereward is dead. Was this news, then, already galloping and spreading under the night-stars? Northwards, perhaps, to York and beyond, to his sister and to his erstwhile Danish friends of Northumbria. West too, to the old rebels of the Welsh marches – would Edric the Wild weep for the ally he had never met? South, probably, to the King in London or Winchester or wherever he was, and whatever pity was in his heart today. And eastward – was it eastward? – among the fens which had always been his. Were his people, the lost and despairing, loud in lament for their last great hero? Wildly – or silently – inconsolable? Or did they close their eyes in peace, breathe a mighty sigh of collective relief and say, “Thank God it is over at last: Hereward is dead.”

Perhaps, in the end, it would even be the Normans who mourned most for their new and prestigious friend. Or were the present masters of this land too full of such an unexpected triumph over their one-time enemy? An enemy who could never, after all, have become one of them; only a dangerous rival. Perhaps they would be unable to believe their luck, passing on the news in superstitious whispers through the great estates and courts of England and Normandy, that Hereward the Exile, the Outlaw, was dead.

There is a dreadful finality about that word. Even through the detached ramblings of my mind, I was aware of it. Gradually too, I became aware of the pain in my hand where Siward, my husband’s nephew, was pressing it into his face. He was kneeling still at my bare, icy feet as though begging forgiveness for the news he bore, and in his own torment of grief – or his completely misplaced fear for mine – gentleness was forgotten.

Still distractedly, I began to draw my fingers free. They were wet. Releasing me, Siward dashed his hands across his eyes, and rose slowly to his feet, sword clanking dully at his belt and brushing against the fur cloak I had dragged around my chemise to receive him. In the dimly flickering light of the lamp that my porter held unsteadily above us, the skin of his still young face looked taut and sickly, the hollows around his exhausted eyes black. The tangled mass of fair hair, palely imitating his uncle’s,

fell damply forward over one cheek; then, impatiently, he pushed it back, the better to peer at me, I think, for signs of emotional disintegration. Baffled, I gazed silently back at him until in pity he lifted both arms for me. Instinctively, I stepped backwards out of his reach, and as his arms fell again, a frown of puzzle-ment creased his low brow.

“Torfrida, he is dead,” he repeated deliberately, as if to a child, or to an imbecile who could not understand simple words. “Hereward, your husband, is dead.”

And at last the breath seemed to seep back into my body.

“Good,” I said with satisfaction. “Then I can go home to Bourne.”

* * * *

In the first light of a grey, wintry morning, I prepared with some care for my ride from Lincoln to Bourne. I dressed in a warm woollen gown of bright, sky blue, over a fine yellow under-dress. Beneath my veil, which was circled with a braided ribbon of the same blue and yellow, my hair was as neatly and becomingly pinned as I could make it. I had no intention of being surprised by anyone at any time.

That done, I drew the sable travelling cloak about me and regarded my reflection in the sheet of polished bronze which was the one extravagance of my solitary, sterile bed-chamber. My face was too thin now, marked by life like the grey streaks in my once jet-black hair. I looked, in fact, disconcertingly frail. My eyes, too large and bright for that face, stared back at me, half-frightened, half-excited; and in my breast my heart beat and beat and beat.

“Stop it, Torfrida,” I whispered. “Stop it . . .”

Then, taking a deep breath, I rose and went to collect my children. I was thirty-two years old, and felt as if I were waking up after a long, expectant sleep.

* * * *

The journey was accomplished mostly in uncomf-ort-able silence, at least after we had drawn away from the children. Siward the White, torn between his own grief and an increasingly desperate, if covert, search for signs of mine, began to withdraw even further into his own private misery. I could not help that. It was not the time to try. For my own part, I think I sang a little, snatches of a merry French song that brought Siward’s eyes round to me with an astonishment that was far from admiring.

I smiled at him, beatifically, and twisted back in the saddle to give one last wave to the children. They were riding two ponies – Frida on one, the two little boys together on the other – in company with their nurse and most of the men-at-arms. We had agreed that they would go directly to Folkingham, to Gilbert of Ghent, their father’s godfather, while I insisted on riding ahead with Siward the White, to visit Bourne on the way. Siward said it was not fit for me. It was where Hereward had been killed.

“Do they know?” Siward asked abruptly.

“Know what?” I asked vaguely, straightening in my saddle, and adjusting the warm, soft cloak at my throat.

Siward said sharply, “That their father is dead, of course!”

“Oh no. I see no point in spoiling their treat. They are going to see their grandmother and Aunt Lucy, and stay at Uncle Gilbert’s hall; and Aunt Matilda will spoil them mercilessly. Now, Siward, add to my personal well-being: who had the ultimate honour of killing Hereward?”

This time he did not even try to keep the accusation out of his face or voice.

“The honour of killing your husband? Some treacherous Norman knights, purporting to be his friends! They were dining with him – it was the lady Aediva’s birthday feast – when their servants, who had hidden weapons under their clothes, fell on his men and . . .”

“Yes, so you told me last night,” I interrupted, waving that aside. “But who were they?”

“I don’t know,” Siward said bitterly. “I was not there. The assassins had fled by the time we came to his rescue. But it was Deda who escorted Aediva and Lucy to safety at Folkingham.”

My lip twitched as I regarded his averted face. “Deda,” I said with blatant mockery. “Deda killed Hereward?”

“Hardly!” said Siward sharply, displeased all over again by the flippancy of my tone. Well, what did he expect? “From all I can gather, Deda did everything possible to try and stop the fight. But I doubt the same could be said for that swaggering fool, Asselin!”

I had no quarrel with that description, but glancing up at him from under my lashes, I pointed out, “You told me they fled before you got to them.”

Siward’s pale skin flushed, but his eyes met mine squarely. “I heard from those who survived.”

“Yes,” I agreed evenly. “I expect you did.”

“Torfrida!”

I lifted my brows at him, watched him take a deep breath. Then: “Torfrida, I know this is hard to take in; after all he has done, God knows I never thought he would die like that, foully, in his own home . . .”

“That’s just it, Siward,” I murmured. “It wasn’t his home.”

Siward blinked his pale eyes once. “Wasn’t his . . .?”

“No. He gave Bourne to me, in trust for Frida.”

Siward was staring at me. In truth, the contempt in his eyes hurt me far more than it should. What in the world did he imagine I still owed to a troublesome and adulterous husband I had cast off four years ago? Bourne was all I had had of him, and that I had looked after mainly for his mother and widowed sister who still lived there! My own efforts, my own reviving of my father’s trading ventures, had fed and clothed my children and me . . .

But Siward was angry now. I tried to make allowances for his grief.

“Are you really counting property while he lies cut to pieces not twenty-four hours since?” he said harshly. “He may have behaved ill to you once, Torfrida, but before God, he was still your husband!”

There was a short pause. Then: “Was he?” I actually sounded amused. Mind you, I had not been, although I had tried quite hard, when I first heard the song linking Hereward’s name to Aelfryth’s, and calling her his wife. It had been yelled out joyously by a couple of drunks in imperfect harmony one market day in Lincoln. Well, being young and fair and Saxon, she made a better heroine for the story than I – well past my first flush of youth, Flemish, and endowed with rather dubious knowledge for a Christian.

“There seems,” I remarked judiciously, “to be some doubt.”

Hereward is dead. What would she do when the news got to her? Was someone else – one of the twins perhaps, or Leofric the Deacon – even now riding across the country to tell her what Siward had already told me? Would she come crashing into Bourne, claiming to be his widow? Well, Bourne was one place she would have no such rights. Bourne, as I had just reminded Siward, was mine. Mine and Frida’s.

* * * *

Avoiding the village and the monastery, and the wide, stricken eyes of the few frightened people we encountered on the road, I came home to Bourne. His presence there, unexpected and uninvited, had prevented me returning at all for the last month, even for Aediva’s birthday, and I had missed it. I acknowledged that as my tired horse picked its way daintily across the stream which flowed from St. Peter’s Pool, the natural fountain close by. Above the stream rose the earth mound and stockade that protected my hall.

Whatever occurred here yesterday, Hereward’s people had not deserted his ancestral home. The gates were closed and guarded by a man I knew well: he had a sword-scar on his left buttock. I tried to bear that in mind as he greeted me, disconcertingly with tears rolling unchecked down his rough, pitted cheeks.

While I stared carefully between my horse’s ears and urged it through the gates, I heard Siward quickly questioning the man.

“Where is he?”

“In the hall . . .”

“Is he fit . . .?”

“As he can be.”

I rode carefully on, and my heart beat and beat and beat.

* * * *

There had certainly been a battle here. The whole yard and the burned and damaged buildings around it bore unmistakable witness to that. For the first time, foolishly, I wanted to weep, because in all the years of war, for all the halls and towns and castles I had seen destroyed by one side or another, Bourne had never before been one of them.

But they were there, Hereward’s ‘gang’. Just as in the old days, they would have had word this last half hour and more of my approach. And as my horse picked its way slowly into the devastated yard, they emerged from the hall and the outbuildings, pausing in their tasks of clearing and burying and putting to rights, to stand and move silently towards me, united as one in their enormous loss, in their pity, and in the great grief they assumed, despite everything, that I would share.

“Fools!” I thought, with a sudden fury that could never be free of affection. “Fools, fools!”

Forcing myself, I picked out with my eyes those of them I had known and loved best, marked with my mind those who were notably absent.

“In the hall,” the soldier had said. And since I had no words to offer the men I had laughed with and suffered with for so long, I half-turned, till I could see the hall door. It lay open, half ripped off its hinges, and the twins, Hereward’s cousins Outi and Dutti, stood on either side of it, shoulders sagging with fatigue, mouths drooping with misery. And yet they tried to smile at me.

I did not know what was going on.

My limbs were trembling slightly, and not just with the cold. Lifting my head, I drew the sable close around my throat and moved forward to the hall. Men moved respectfully to let me pass. Behind me, I was aware of Siward saying urgently, “Torfrida, wait a little. At least let me ensure . . .” But I heard no more. At the door, Outi embraced me, briefly, and because I could not stop it, I let him. And then I was past them, in the hall itself.

The battle had been in here too. They had made some effort to clear it up, but broken benches and tables lay piled on both sides and hangings had been torn down or shredded. The walls were scarred and pierced by weapons, stained by many liquids,

some of which, at least, must have been blood. There was always blood. And at the far end, even the high table had been damaged: one of its legs was propped up now on a broken chair. I could see that, although I could not see what was laid upon it. In front of it stood Leofric the Deacon, a stained, ragged bandage askew about his head, and Siward the Red, friend and cousin of the White Siward who had followed me inside. From the footsteps I heard, so had the twins.

For a moment, we stared at each other. Then my eyes flitted beyond them, and around the hall, and back to Leofric. It was he, inevitably, who moved first, stepping down from the dais, and coming straight towards me, a thousand expressions flitting across his open, gentle face.

I decided to strangle the pity at birth.

“Very well,” I said sardonically. “Where is the body?”

Shock brought him to a standstill. Beside him, I saw Siward the Red’s eyes fly to his cousin’s. I even felt the movement of Siward the White’s tired shrug.

Leofric said, “It is here; but I have to warn you, lady . . .”

“I have seen dead bodies before,” I interrupted drily. “You must remember that, Leofric – you were generally there.” And I moved forward, brushing past him. At the last moment, he reached out and caught my arm. He was strong enough to force me, but I did not struggle. Instead, slowly, I looked back at him over my shoulder. His dark eyes gazed at me, serious, intense, pleading.

“Torfrida, don’t . . .”

I laughed. “Don’t what? Don’t look? Why do you think I came?”

I think it was the laughter that shook him off. At any rate I was free, with no inclination, or time, to think about what was in his face. There was only one obstacle left, on the dais: Siward the Red, planted firmly in front of me. On his left, on the table, I could see someone’s up-turned boots.

“Stand aside, Siward,” I said quietly, and reluctantly, slowly, he did.

I took my time. There were the boots, and leggings, and a short tunic worn without armour, save for the red painted shield still slung around his body like his sword-belt. There was a black dragon on the shield, with fierce, jewelled, emerald green eyes. My lips parted.

For the first time, I acknowledged the stale smell of burning that came off the body. His hair and head had been badly burned, beyond recognition. That should not have surprised me. I think it was the isolated clumps of thick, golden hair clinging still to his shoulders and chest that threw me off balance. Siward was right: he had been hacked to pieces. Bits of limbs were missing, there were massive, gory wounds in his legs and body, and his face, dear God, was enough to make seasoned warriors cringe.

I had seen enough. Sickened, I was already beginning to turn away when something on the body caught my eye: something frail and small and stained, but once, unmistakably, yellow. It shone through the singed, filthy, bloody rags of his clothing, somewhere between his chest and his left shoulder. Involuntarily, my hand reached out and touched it.

A braided ribbon, sewn with tiny gems.

My mouth opened, soundless at first, then gasping, and gasping again. Another storm filled my ears, rushing, swelling, endless. “Jesus Christ,” I whispered, twisting with the awful, unbearable thing I had found. “Jesus Christ . . .”

Leofric said urgently, “What . . .?”

And Siward the White interrupted him savagely, “She did not know! She would not believe me!” Blindly, I looked at him while he strode up to the dais and seized me by both arms. “You didn’t, did you? That is why you behaved so – said all those things! For God’s sake, Torfrida, what do you take me for?”

A queer, animal noise burst from my throat.

Leofric said sharply, “Leave her!” And as soon as the fingers slackened on my arm, I was away, bolting for the door, away from the tragedy I had not foreseen and would never be able to run from. The dreadful finality of death was upon me at last, and now, *now*, I was lost.

Hereward is dead.

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