

Gerard

Knights of Normandy – Book Three

By

Maryse Dawson

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Chapter One

Saxon Compassion

Ilchester Castle, Somerset, England 1072

Sir Gerard de Clairvoy, eldest of three brothers, scanned the surrounding countryside from the parapets of his castle, his countenance grim. His sister-in-law, Cynwise, had been missing since noon and, search as they might; they had found neither hide nor hair of her. 'Twas most unusual, especially as her son, Hubert, was only five-months-old and was now crying lustily for his next feed. She was an attentive mother, which made her disappearance all the more uncommon.

Running a hand through his cropped hair, Gerard thought hard on where she could be but came to a dead end. Just as he turned to go back down below, he spotted his brother, Renaud, in the distance, returning with the group of knights he had taken to seek out his wife. His shoulders were slumped and he looked weary. Cynwise wasn't with him.

When he was within hearing distance, Gerard called down to him, "Renaud, did thee find aught?"

His brother looked up and shook his head despondently. "Naught. 'Tis as though she hath disappeared into thin air!"

He looked grey with worry as would he be, if it were his wife that had gone missing. He called out again, "Meet me in the great hall – we shall discuss what to do." Gerard quickly made his way down to join his brother, where he found him pacing to and fro, his brow furrowed.

"This makes no sense, Gerard!" Renaud exclaimed. "Wherefore wouldst she go?"

"I know not."

Just then, the castle constable, Eudo, entered the hall, followed by a small boy. "My lord, I hath news. Algar the Blacksmith hath taken the Lady Cynwise against her will!"

For a moment, Gerard and Renaud just stared at him, both shocked into silence. Renaud

quickly found his voice. "How come thee by this?"

Eudo pushed the boy forward. "Cenred saw them, and Algar threatened him with violence should he say aught." The boy stared up at Renaud, his eyes wide with fear.

Renaud hunkered down in front of him. "Fear not, Cenred. No harm will come to thee. Tell me everything thee didst witness."

Cenred explained that he had been aiding the Lady Cynwise to gather herbs from yonder woods when Algar had approached her. A little way away, Algar hadn't noticed him. There had been a fierce exchange of words and then Algar had strode away, cursing loudly. He had reappeared, moments later, with a horse in tow and had simply scooped the Lady Cynwise up onto the saddle.

"I tried to hide, my lord, but he saw me. He said...he said he would punish me soundly if I told another living soul!" The boy began to cry and Renaud immediately reassured him.

"Thou art safe within these walls, Cenred, and I thank thee for being so brave as to come forward."

Gerard laid a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Did thou see the direction they rode in?"

Cenred sniffled and wiped his eyes. "Aye, 'twas West, through the forest."

"West? Wherefore would he ride west?" Gerard pondered aloud.

"My lord, if I may be so bold?" Eudo asked.

"Aye?"

"Algar has family in Devonshire. Mayhap, he could be making his way there."

Renaud frowned. "If he thinks Cynwise will settle to a life with him in Devonshire, then I pity the poor fellow. He is obviously devoid of his faculties."

Gerard thought of his rebellious sister-in-law and how she would react under such circumstances. He came to the conclusion that Algar was indeed addle-brained.

He laid a hand on his brother's shoulder. "We shall get her back, Renaud. Take heart – Algar has acted rashly, but methinks he will do her no harm." He turned to Eudo. "Prepare for the journey. We shall take two knights and ten men-at-arms. Make haste."

Eudo rushed off to get ready, leaving Cenred looking up in awe at the two brothers. Gerard ruffled his hair. "As for thee, young Cenred, methinks a nice warm meal would not go amiss." Cenred nodded, his eyes wide. "Then go with Ancel to the kitchens. He will see thee provided for."

Ancel, Gerard's page, smiled at Cenred and led him out of the great hall, leaving the two brothers alone.

"Prepare thyself for the journey, Renaud. I will see Hubert is given a wet nurse from the village. Elfreda will care for him whilst we are gone."

Renaud smiled grimly and left. Gerard dispatched his squire to search out a reputable wet nurse for Renaud's son in the local village and then to tell his wife the news about Cynwise.

* * *

Elfreda jiggled Hubert in her arms, doing her best to comfort him but it did little good. What he really needed was his mother's breast. Where on earth had Cynwise disappeared to? It wasn't like her to miss one of Hubert's feeds. Aye, before his birth, she had been somewhat of a wayward character but since first laying eyes upon her son, she had matured and a better mother could not be found. Even though it was in her nature to be a little carefree on occasion, she always put the care of Hubert before anything.

The chamber door opened and Gerard strode in, his face grim. Walking up to her, he laid his hands on her shoulders. "I bring bad news, Elfreda. Cynwise hath been taken against her will by Algar!"

"Algar? Wherefore did he do such a thing? Where hath he taken her?"

Hubert responded to her obvious distress by crying even louder. She looked down into his crumpled-up face and then back to her husband. "He needs a feed, Gerard."

"I hath already sent forth Drue to seek a wet nurse for him." Gerard stroked his tiny face. "We shall find thy mother, little one." He looked at his wife, trying to reassure her. "We know which direction they headed in, and, with our dogs, we should be able to keep track. Fear not, Elfreda, we shall find her."

Elfreda knew if anyone could, it would be her husband. She worried her bottom lip. "Bring her home safe, husband."

* * *

Three hours into the ride with no sight or sound of Algar and Cynwise, Gerard decided they needed a break.

"We shall rest a while, brother. The horses need watering."

"Aye," Renaud agreed. "The next river we come to, we shall stop."

Suddenly, their two Irish wolfhounds started howling and yelping, their noses sniffing the ground excitedly. Gerard was instantly alert. "They smell him! Unleash them!" he demanded of his men. As soon as they were free, the dogs rushed off, barking furiously. The men quickly followed their tracks.

"I see them," Renaud snarled. "Straight ahead."

Gerard had already spotted them himself and urged his mount into a gallop. Algar, hearing their approach, looked over his shoulder and spurred his horse on, but his was no match for their superior mounts and, within moments, they were barring his way. He had no choice but to rein his horse in.

Cynwise was sitting in front of him, her hands tied together and her mouth gagged but otherwise she seemed unharmed.

"Let me pass!" Algar snarled, withdrawing his sword.

"Foolish words, Algar!" snapped Gerard. "Provoke my brother and thee will regret it. If thee wish to spare thy life, let the Lady Cynwise free."

For a moment, he thought Algar wasn't going to comply, but when Renaud dismounted and glared at him fiercely, he capitulated, realising he was outnumbered. Renaud reached up for his wife and, with a muffled sob, she was safely back in his arms.

Gerard simply nodded at his men and they jumped down, one quickly grabbing Algar's horse's reins so he couldn't escape, the others surrounding him, swords drawn. "I suggest thee come quietly, Algar, else thee find a sword at thy throat!"

Algar couldn't conceal the hatred in his eyes but seeming to realise the futility of resisting, he finally dismounted.

"Thy sword!" Gerard demanded, alighting and holding out his hand.

Slowly, Algar lowered his weapon and handed it to him. Quickly, Gerard turned him around and secured his wrists with rope. "Thee will answer to the king for thy actions this day."

"Thy king, not mine!" spat Algar.

Gerard spun him around and leaned his face close. "I would keep thy tongue within thy

teeth if I were thee. Methinks thee would not be so brave if King William were before thee."

Algar curled his lip back. "Aye, I wouldst!"

"We shall see." Gerard pulled him over to his horse and secured him to his saddle by a length of rope attached to his wrists. He quickly remounted and stared down at Algar. "Try to keep up!" He sent him a smile that never reached his eyes and kicked his horse into a walk.

* * *

Back at the castle, Cynwise was quickly reunited with baby Hubert, who, after nuzzling happily at her breast, fell asleep in his mother's arms.

Elfreda took him from her and laid him back in his crib. "Come, sister, and rest a while before Hubert demands another feed. Thy day hath been most stressful."

Cynwise needed no further persuasion. Kicking off her slippers, she slid under the coverlet and laid her head on the pillow. Elfreda sat on the edge of the bed. "I am glad of heart that thou art unharmed."

Cynwise shivered noticeably. "Algar just will not accept the fact that I am wed to another. This is the second time he hath tried to steal me away, Elfreda. He hath shown his true nature, and I like it not. For shame! To think I wouldst hath married him."

Elfreda patted her hand comfortingly. "'Twould seem his love for thee overrode all reason to make him act so, but he will regret his foolish behaviour."

"Love! Ha! What dost he know of love? If he truly loved me, he wouldst never hath taken me from Ilchester." Cynwise's temper rose. "I hate him!"

"Do not distress thyself, Cynwise. 'Tis over now, and thou art safe within these walls, back with thy child and a man who wouldst move heaven and earth to keep thee safe."

Cynwise's face softened as she thought of her husband. "Aye, I hath never seen Renaud quite so angry. I almost feel pity for Algar...almost."

"Think no more on it, sister. Take thy rest whilst thee can before young Hubert demands thy company! Or wouldst thee prefer I keep the wet nurse here so thee can rest?"

"Nay, sister. I cherish every moment with Hubert. Thank her for her troubles, but I am back now and would see to my son's care myself."

"Very well, sister. Sleep well – I shall see thee anon."

She left Cynwise to sleep, closing the door softly behind her. Leaning against the thick wood, she contemplated whether or not to visit Algar in the dungeons. She was curious to know why he had risked so much for her sister. Aye, lovelorn he might be, but he was no fool. 'Twas most unusual. With a determined look on her face, she made her way to the very depths of the castle.

* * *

The guard looked surprised to see Elfreda as she appeared at the gated entrance.

"Leon, I wouldst see the prisoner," she demanded softly.

"Aye, my lady." He unlocked the gate and stepped aside as she entered the main dungeon. "He is within." He pointed to the last door in a row of three cells.

Elfreda approached cautiously and peered in through the small opening. Algar was sitting with his back to her, his head down, one arm hanging loosely over his lap.

"Algar?" she spoke quietly.

It seemed to startle him and, for a moment, he looked at her with a blank expression until he recognised her. Quickly, he rushed up to her. She stepped back, a little alarmed at his haste.

"Elfreda! Hath thee come to release me?"

Elfreda swallowed hard. "Nay, Algar. I merely came to ask wherefore thou didst act so?"

"Prithee, Elfreda. I made a mistake – I realise that now."

"A mistake? Algar, thee hath scared us out of our wits. We thought thee meant to harm Cynwise!"

"Thou hast known me a long time. Thou knowest I would never harm Cynwise. My only sin is my love for her."

Elfreda looked at his face, filled with contrition, and her heart went out to him. Once he had thought to marry Cynwise, but fate had intervened and Renaud had claimed her as his bride. Algar still loved her, that was clear, but mayhap he spoke the truth. This last attempt to declare his love had failed and 'twould seem he realised there was no hope.

"Art thou truly sorry, Algar?"

"Aye!" he answered in earnest. "I acted impulsively, giving no thought to the consequences. Truly, Elfreda. Prithee aid my escape?"

Elfreda was torn between pity and anger. "Wherefore should I help thee, Algar? Thou didst take Cynwise against her will and yet thee doth expect to earn my pity?" She shook her head. "I will not do it, Algar. Thee will hath to accept thy fate." She began to walk away.

"My lady, please, I implore thee!"

Stopping, she kept her back to him and looked down at her feet, steeling herself against his plaintive cry. "Nay, Algar. I cannot."

With firm resolve, she walked away.

* * *

Later that afternoon, whilst quietly embroidering in the great hall, she overheard Gerard and Renaud as they spoke about Algar.

"I shall despatch Eudo and five men-at-arms to escort Algar to Winchester," explained Gerard. "King William will knowest what to do with him."

"If left to me, I would end his miserable existence!" growled Renaud. "I should hath done so ages ago when I caught him hassling my wife, but I opted for a mere warning. More fool me!"

"Nay, brother. Thee acted according to the occasion – 'twas commendable of thee. Remember, he also received a whipping, and yet it still did not deter him. He is a man obsessed, and I fear naught will stop him."

"Mayhap he will rot in King William's rat-infested dungeons. I care not!"

"Aye, the man hath done great wrong and will be punished. 'Twas a shame...he is an accomplished blacksmith. Now I shall hath to find another."

"One without designs on my wife this time, eh, Gerard?"

She heard them laugh together, their voices growing distant as they moved away. Her thoughts turned back to Algar. She had known him since childhood and, even though what he had done was a bad thing, she still felt pity in her heart. He was a good man and had loved Cynwise for a long time. He had meant her no harm; he had just let love rule his head. If she set him free, he could start again elsewhere – the thought of him forever incarcerated made her feel sick to the stomach.

She would pack him some clothes, coin and food and send him on his way. Persuading the guard to leave his post would not be easy, but she would try.

* * *

Later, Gerard, on his way to his chamber, saw his wife ahead of him. He went to call out to her but something in her manner made him hesitate. She looked furtive. Intrigued, he decided to follow her.

She was walking quickly, with a small parcel under one arm. When she turned to look back, Gerard quickly hid in an alcove. She was up to something, all right. Her movements betrayed as much.

Stealthily, Gerard followed once more, treading quietly along the narrow passages. She stopped at the entrance down to the dungeons. Surely, she did not think to visit Algar? He watched her sharply as she opened the thick door and stepped inside.

His mind raced. Wherefore wouldst she want to see Algar? Waiting a few moments to avoid discovery, he followed her down into the dark.

* * *

Elfreda, pretending an air of nonchalance, walked up to the guard. "Leon, I wish to see the prisoner once more."

"Aye, my lady." He opened the door with a big heavy key and stepped aside so she could enter.

With an air of authority, she turned to him. "Eudo hath asked for thee to attend him in the great hall."

Leon frowned, hesitating. "My lady, I am on duty and forbidden to leave my post."

She raised her eyebrows. "He was most adamant."

He looked uncertain. "My lady, what if the prisoner turns nasty? Thou art alone with him."

"What can he do, Leon, from inside his cell?" She waved her hand dismissingly.

"Prithee, leave me the key and I will lock the outer door. I will await thy return." She looked at him, willing herself to appear calm, when inside, she was in turmoil.

"'Tis most unusual, my lady, but I shall do as Eudo bids. I will return anon." He handed her the bunch of keys and she quickly took it from him. With one last backward glance, he was gone.

She could see that Algar had already surmised her intention as his face at the door was eager. "My lady, thou hast a change of heart?"

"Aye, Algar." She quickly tried several keys until she heard a heavy click and the door opened. Stepping in, she handed him the bundle she carried. "There is food and coin within. Make haste, afore the guard returns!"

They turned to leave and suddenly found their path blocked. "Whither thou goest?" growled a deep voice. Elfreda gasped – it was Gerard!

* * *

Having hushed Leon to silence as he went to stride past, Gerard had quietly indicated something was amiss. Both men had drawn their swords and returned, only to find his own wife up to no good.

"G-Gerard!" Elfreda stammered. Caught in the act, she squirmed like a fish in a net.

Algar, sensing his imminent escape was to be thwarted, quickly tried to rush past Gerard, only to find himself facing the sharp end of a sword. He dropped his bundle and backed away. "Aye, back to thy cell!" Leon snarled at him, brandishing his sword menacingly.

Gerard pulled Elfreda sharply away, grabbing the keys out of her hand at the same time. When Algar was safely back in the cell, he locked the door.

"Is one wife not enough for thee, Algar? Think thee to manipulate mine as well?"

Algar scowled at him and then spat on the floor but said nothing. Gerard gave him one last glare before turning to his guard. "From this moment on, thee will heed only my authority. My wife is forbidden to come here again." He looked down at Elfreda, his face stern. "I will hath words with thee in our chamber!"

* * *

Reaching their chamber, Gerard pushed her roughly inside and closed the door behind him. "What were thou thinking, wife?"

Her heart thumping in her chest, she tried to offer an explanation. "I-I only wanted to help a friend in need, husband. I hath known Algar many years, and he is a good man. He realises he acted rashly and truly repents his behaviour!"

"Repents? 'Tis too late for such thoughts, Elfreda. He only repents because he is captured."

"'Tis not true."

"Didst thou realise the consequences of thy actions?" Gerard chastened. "Algar would hath been free and mayhap would plot to capture Cynwise again." He paced the chamber angrily. "Thy behaviour was foolhardy!"

Elfreda licked her lips. She hadn't seen her husband this angry for ages and, unfortunately, it was directed solely at her. She sought to pacify him.

"Gerard, methinks Algar was sincere. He promised to leave the county and never return."

"Never return?" He rounded on her. "The man is obsessed. Renaud said so anon, but I never realised quite how much." He stared at her hard. "I still cannot believe thee sought to let him go."

"I am sorry, Gerard. Truly I am."

"Thee will be, lady. I will see to thy punishment."

"P-Punishment?"

"Aye, wife. Thee will not sit comfortably after I hath dealt with thee!" She watched as he stormed out of their chamber, the door thudding closed loudly behind him.

She sat down on the bed with a thump. Why, oh why, had she listened to Algar? She knew it had been the wrong thing to do, but his words had swayed her. Was she so easy to manipulate?

She trembled at the thought of her husband's large hands smacking her bottom. She hadn't been punished in a long while. Usually, it was her sister and sister-in-law that bore the brunt of their husbands' wrath – both headstrong and wayward, they needed the discipline. She, however, thought to be above such an act. More level-headed than either of them, she was the 'good' sister. Now, 'twould seem she was just as fallible.

* * *

Gerard, angry beyond words, stormed out of the castle and into the surrounding woods.

Elfreda had acted badly and it was his duty to make her think twice afore ever doing such a deed again. Her bottom would be as bright as yonder berry bush by the time he had finished with her!

Reaching up, he picked several thin branches and whittled them down to thin switches. Aye, her bottom would pay. The trouble she could have caused for the castle was unforgiveable.

Calmer, but just as resolute, Gerard returned to their chamber, the switches clutched firmly in his large hand.

Elfreda was standing by the bedpost, one hand gripping it tightly, the other nibbling on a fingernail. She looked over to him, her face full of apprehension. "Gerard, thee dost not hath to do this. I truly regret my actions."

He walked up to her and placed a hand under her chin, tilting her face to his. "Dost thou, Elfreda, or is it merely the sight of these that sways thy mind?" He held up the switches and watched her pale cheeks flush. She blinked rapidly and began to back away, but he stopped her by grabbing hold of her elbow.

"Prithee, husband?"

He felt her body tense as she realised that her pleading fell on deaf ears. She tried to dig her slippered heels into the floorboards, but she was no match for his great strength, and it was with ease that he flipped her over the side of the bed and threw up her skirts. She tried to turn over, but he laid the flat of his palm on her back and pushed her back down.

"Do not fight me, wife."

"Gerard! Nay!"

Thwack!

He heard her gasp with pain as the switch made contact with her exposed buttocks. Before she had time to recover, he brought it swinging down again. This time, she shrieked and kicked her legs out.

"Gerard! I beg of thee!"

"Thou will not thwart me again, wife."

Thwack! Thwack!

"I will not hath thee going behind my back – what were thee thinking?"

* * *

Indeed, what had she been thinking? Elfreda cringed as the switch once again made contact with her backside. She cried out in pain before gritting her teeth as she fought to combat the fiery sting the bundle of switches left behind. She truly repented her behaviour and wished with all her heart she had not acted so rashly.

Thwack!

"Nay, prithee, Gerard, I hath had enough!" She tried to wriggle off the bed but his large hand pressed her firmly down into the mattress.

"Only I will decide when thee hath had enough, Elfreda!"

Thwack! Thwack!

Her bottom was one big mass of pain, and she knew it would be many days afore she sat comfortably. Tears ran down her cheeks as he continued to thrash her, intent on securing her obedience in the future.

Finally, he threw the switches down on the floor and removed his palm from her back. For a moment, she lay still, softly crying into the covers. She heard him move across the room and then, minutes later, felt the mattress shift as he sat down next to her.

"I hope I hath made myself clear, Elfreda?"

She turned to face him. "Aye, husband," she murmured. "I will never do anything so foolhardy again."

He leaned over and softly ran the back of his forefinger down her tear-stained cheek. "Then all is forgiven. This punishment will not be forgotten easily, will it, my love?"

"Nay, I do not wish to experience this again."

"Then come, lie across my lap, and I will apply some soothing balm to thy buttocks."

Carefully, she wiggled backwards before draping herself over his powerful thighs. The feel of his strong body beneath hers felt comforting and, even though he had proven his authority over her, it only served to make her love for him stronger.

She let out a soft sigh as his hands began to administer the ointment to her tender buttocks. No, she wouldn't forget this for a long time.