



*Reluctant Press*

# Spirit Of A Lady

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**AN 'ADULTV' NOVEL**

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## *Reluctant Press TG Publishers*

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# **SPIRIT OF A LADY**

**by Susan Peerless**

## **CHAPTER I: Hippogryphs On Azure Rampant**

The great masonry building was quite visible in spite of the wind blown tendrils of mist that tried to obscure it. Its high grey mass was perched on a hill with white limestone cliffs. In the fog it looked a bit like a classic castle on the Rhine, but the tourist guide referred to it's exterior walls as a splendid example of a Norman Keep, or small fortress. While my eyes studied the image, I had the strangest feeling, a faint shimmering memory and recognition. I shivered in my leather jacket. The Northern moors of England are hardly noted for their sunny warmth. I twisted to a more comfortable position on the motorcycle seat. I could feel my sister, Fern, move to see over my shoulder better.

“Is that it?”

I looked in all directions at the empty moor. “I don't see any other candidates around.”

“Why would anyone build something like that out here?” she asked in wonderment.

“How the hell should I know? Ancestral lands, better defensive position. It's just there, that's all.” I stood on the starting pedal and the engine took on the familiar throb that had accompanied us all the way from London. “Don't think I even should have accepted the place.”

“You had no choice, did you? It was left to you,” Fern countered with a laugh, “And after our uncle's estate was required to pay the death taxes to Inland Revenue, there is little else but a title and a tidy little income.”

“I could have refused it.”

“I suppose so, but what about the fabled jewels?”

“Fabled is right. I think that is merely a lure to make the heir to accept the damned ruin. Our family's been looking for them for a century. I doubt if they really exist. Or if they did, some-one's made off with them by now.”

I throttled the cycle into movement and we took off down the slight rise from the vantage point where we had stopped.

My name's Gregory Simmons, a 24 year-old computer programmer from New Jersey. I'm of slight build, hardly the most fearsome male human to walk the planet. Certainly not the image of a Norman knight that, went with the castle on the horizon. That's the reason for the motorcycle and leather jacket image. I mean what else could I do?

Anyhow, I got notice that my Uncle Felix on the Penbroke side of the family had dropped dead and left his ancestral home to me. So I'm sent an airline ticket and notified that I've just become the owner of the looming pile of masonry ahead of us.

I skidded very slightly in a puddle and Fern gave a little squeal. She's my younger sister and begged along on this jaunt, probably just to see the silly castle that we had both heard about so much as kids. She's 20 and has enough money to pay her way so what could I say? She came along. I had to admit that she's one smart cookie and might come in handy.

As we came down the country lane that passed in front of the castle it became obvious that the area wasn't quite as isolated as it had appeared from a distance. The lane went through a tiny village with a church steeple and all. Wasn't much though. If you piled up all the buildings in the town they wouldn't mass as much as the castle.

The bike engine struggled on the steep castle road built against the face of a limestone cliff that went straight up a hundred feet to blend as foundation into the massive stone work of the great keep itself.

We pulled up in front of the main gate and I killed the engine.

The layout of the stone work in the front showed that the original design had included a moat, drawbridge and such. All that was gone leaving just a monstrous front gateway with a huge wood and iron door that appeared to be big enough to admit passing elephants through sideways. There was a much smaller door built into the center of this great door. In my mind I could see three knights abreast riding across the moat bridge and on through the great portcullis, with this massive gate opened for the daytime to admit villagers and guests. And the lesser door used only at night.

Fern jumped off the bike, took off her helmet and shook out her long blond hair with an obvious sigh of relief. "I hope that this old ruin has a bath."

"They didn't think much of baths in Norman times." I walked the bike over to the main gate and pushed. The big iron monster of a gate swung open on well greased hinges. "What no screech of ancient hinges, no flight of bats, no shrieks in attic? As a castle this one leaves much to be desired!"

"I rather like it," Fern responded to my quip as I pushed the bike through the ancient portcullis arch into a tunnel like passage that ran at a 45 degree angle from the gateway for about twenty feet, then changed direction at the same angle for another thirty feet. Here and there I could see the bowman slits once designed to give defenders a clean shot at any intruders trying to hack their way through this tunnel. The slits were now sealed with stone.

Then we came to a view of the castle grounds.

I had sort of expected a Sleeping Beauty situation. You know, with a hundred years worth of vines covering up everything. But no, the grounds were very well kept up.

"Look at the beautiful rose bushes! Come on. Jump aboard. The house is still about 40 miles away," she noted.

I looked at the great house itself, set well back from the main castle gate with the driveway through a formal Tudor garden.

"It's only a block. I'll walk. Don't want to have to get on that monster again."

Fern started walking toward the house, stopping now and then to admire some of the roses.

From what little I knew of castles I could see that the great outerwalls had been repaired by the simple expedience of filling in the passageways and storage areas with stone and cement. The watchtowers and the great parapet walkway on top of the walls remained functional, although I imagined that the backhouse toilets once built into these towers were no longer open. The huge storage barns, housing for the castle troops, armory, jousting grounds, and similar needs of an ancient fortress were all removed to leave the smooth face of the inner walls and the lovely inner formal garden. All that remained of the inner fortress was the *great house* and a nearby maintenance building and garage.

I parked the *my noble steed* near the front door.

A tall, thin man in an old-fashioned butler's outfit came out.

"May I inquire about your business, young Sire?" the butler intoned.

"Well, err. I guess I'm your new boss. I'm Gregory Simmons."

"Ah yes, quite so, our young master. Please come in, My Lord," he noted with a tolerant look towards our dress. "And your young lady too."

*'All this young business had to go!'*

"Your err... machine will be rolled around to one of the garages, Sire," the butler added.

“Ah, yes, give her a rubdown and gasoline. She has been well ridden today,” I quipped causing Fern to giggle. I turned, “Fern, come on. We're being allowed in. Don't forget to wipe your feet.”

I spoke to the butler. “Fern is my sister, not my 'young lady'.”

“I stand corrected, Sire, Lady Fern. My name is Fergins. I am your majordomo, as such I have the honor of being responsible for managing the entire household establishment,” he paused as if to clear his throat with a sound that could only be viewed as disapproval. “If I had been informed as to the time of your arrival, Sire, I would have had staff awaiting you for their presentation. It is customary...”

“Oh, just like on Upstairs, Downstairs,” Fern exclaimed with a touch of disappointment as she glanced my way in mock disapproval, which seemed to please Fergins, despite the fact that he showed no signs of having heard her as he led the way into the great house itself past the marble foyer.

The main hall was impressive. The highly polished limestone floors were covered with oriental rugs. The central room was about forty feet wide and sixty feet long. At the far end was a huge fireplace. To other side there were Roman columns that reached up to about thirty feet to support heavy wooden ceiling beams built as triangles to support the sloped roofs of the great hall. Beyond the colonnade on each side was another room about twenty feet wide and sixty feet long with several more fireplaces.

It didn't have much in the way of furniture, being mainly filled with suits of armor placed at every other column like an awaiting guard. Before each of the other columns was a nude statue of a maiden bearing a candelabra, no doubt converted into an electric light fixture. Massive art work and tapestries were hung between the side fireplaces. While here and there, there was an oak table, storage cabinet, or sitting chair.

Although I could imagine a feasting scene out of Ivanhoe, a visit from Henry the Eighth, or a Georgian ball being held in this great hall, all I could think of was how much it must cost to heat it.

The light from small, high side windows fell on two greater than life size portraits on the wall above the main fireplace. One was of a heavily built man with a jaunty mustache. The other of a striking woman, who looked strangely familiar. Both were dressed in a style of the last century. Centered between them there was a shield painted clear blue. It had three mythical animals on it, standing on their hind legs and clawing the air.

Fergins noted the direction of my gaze.

“That is Lord Jaime Penbroke and Lady Demaris.”

I grunted since people dead a century could hardly be of interest to me.

Fern asked, “And the shield?”

Fergins stared haughtily for a moment. “I'm surprised that you wouldn't recognize the Penbroke family crest, three hippogryphs on azure rampant.

Fern wasn't to be put down, “Yeah, I'm surprised too, Greg.”

Fergins continued, "The hippogryphs are..."

Fern cut in, "mythical beasts, half horse and half lion. The *azure* refers to the background color of the shield while *rampant* refers to the position of the beasts, reared up with the fore paws extended."

"Lady Fern, I didn't realize that you know heraldry," put in a startled Fergins.

"I know of it, not about it. Tell me more about Lord Jaime and Lady Demaris."

I wandered away, bored with the subject and spent some time examining my new art collection, broadening myself culturally. You know what I mean; like trying to peer behind the fig leaves on the marble statues of nude candleabra carrying females, real cultural stuff. I discovered that someone must have added the fig leaves after the original statues were carved. Obviously, the prudes came later....

If there really were something different, something strange about this property I'd certainly become interested. Right now my idea was to sell it for what I could get and go home. Unfortunately, like the title, the house could not be sold. They were a package deal...

Fergins took us on the grand tour. The chapel brought out the art student in Fern. The battlements reminded me of Howard Pyle's *Men of Iron*. The family crypt was right out of Poe, and I expected to see Vincent Price wandering about. Unfortunately, the wine cellar was almost empty and, fortunately, the dungeon was completely so!

Off the grand hall to the right there was a Victorian livingroom with French doors that led out to a private garden in back. It was clear that sometime during the reign of Queen Victoria someone had cleared out the debris of the past to build within this south wing of the great house more *modern* living quarters for the family and service staff.

"The north wing of the great house and grand entrance hall remain as classical Norman," Fergins noted as our tour guide. "The National Registry maintains it as a tourist attraction on the Grand Norman Tour. We receive a small income from the tour, and the Registry was after your uncle to restore some of the original keep. But, he preferred the gardens; which, fortunately, are also of some historic value." He paused. "Of course, this part of the house is yours, My Lord, and is not a part of the tour."

Then he took us to a grand staircase that led to the second floor of the mansion. There, at the top of the stairs, we stood in an extremely long hall that ended at a single door.

Along this hallway there were portraits of the family members dating back to the sixteenth century. "Before then, you may find that the family crypts have some brass etchings of the family members. Tourists often do rubbings from them. And, of course, you can see the stone carved likeness of the First Duke, Gaston Penbroke upon his vault."

“Ah, just one of the family,” Fern noted looking at the stiff formal portraits on wood, then canvas, with little brass plates identifying who it was, and later the artist name as well. The only light in this long hall came from the little portrait lamps...

To our right there were several doors that led, no doubt to the guest rooms. In the entire length of that hall on our left, or to the west, there was only one other door, a narrow wooden one just before the door at the end.

Fergins stopped in front of that narrow door. He took a chain of keys from his pocket and unlocked the door.

“This is a very strange and somewhat dangerous aspect of the manor so I will explain it to you,” Fergins noted as he threw open the door.

When I looked through I was surprised to find that I was looking at the setting sun. The door opened onto nothing, no other room, no balcony, not even a railing, just a sheer four story drop to what looked like a circular stone patio and a sunken private garden below.

I commented, “Rather a drastic way to have a place to sweep out the dust, and you're right about it being dangerous. Why was it put here?”

“It used to open onto the roof of another part of the building. This rooftop was called Lady Demaris' parapet. It was Lady Demaris' favorite place. There was a little enclosed stairway right beside this door that led down to a room under the parapet which was Lady Demaris' study and sewing room.”

“What's a parapet?” asked Fern.

“Generally its a low wall or battlement. The original main house was an inner fortress with its own battle towers which were completely surrounded by such parapets. It you look at the North End you will see some of the remaining towers. On this end the towers were removed to leave just a roof-like parapet. Lady Demaris died by falling from this roof. No one knows really if she fell or was pushed.”

I stared at Fergins. I was becoming interested.

“So what happened, Fergins? Where is this Parapet and her rooms?” I asked.

Fergins drew himself up as if to start on a long and complex story, which he was.

“As you may know, Lord Jaime earned his fortune by commerce with India and Ceylon. He spent years out there in the colonies. Lady Demaris was from an old and wealthy family in Goa, then a Portuguese colony on the West Coast of India. They met in Goa, fell in love and married. When they left for England, Lady Demaris' father gave unto her a treasure, as her dowry, in effect the family jewels. In so far as anyone knows, this treasure consisted of a large number of emeralds and rubies, mostly from Ceylon. No one knows if they were mounted in jewelry, or cut, or what. On special occasions Lady Demaris would appear wearing a large cut emerald in a gold necklace. It was rumored that she had the rest carefully hidden.

“Lord Jaime had inherited this old castle and spent a fortune converting the south wing into his manor house. This was in 1875 or thereabouts. Shortly afterwards one of his ships was sunk on the trip back from India. From that point on his fortunes began to decline.

“When Lady Demaris died, he discovered that there was no sign of her treasure. She had told no one where it was hidden. He was sure that it was hidden somewhere in her favorite part of the castle, so he spent a couple of years and considerable money disassembling that part, stone by stone, with armed, trustworthy men watching. He died of consumption a few months after finishing that task unsuccessfully.”

I considered for a moment. I had heard part of that story before.

“Of course it is reasonable to assume that if someone killed Lady Demaris, he took the treasure with him. Or that the *trustworthy* men weren't quite so trustworthy. In effect, the treasure is no longer here,” I concluded.

“Quite,” answered Fergins. “Most the following members of the Penbroke family assumed the same thing although that didn't stop many from making new searches. Your Uncle Felix searched the building and grounds extensively with a metal detector. He found a lot of cannonballs, and such, but...”

“No treasure.”

“Exactly.”

“Jewel stones wouldn't register on a metal detector,” Fern observed.

“Lady Demaris' massive gold necklace with the big emerald was never found either. It is felt that it must be with the treasure too,” Fergins countered. “It seems rather unlikely that there still is any treasure. It would seem so except for one thing. A strange mystery. Lady Demaris' ghost is still seen roaming these very halls?” Fergins gave a slight smile. “Such has been reported, but I've never seen her, personally.”

“And, how long have you been here, Fergins?”

“My Lord, my family has served the Penbrokes for four generations. My great grandfather was Lord Jaime's man servant in India.”

“Oh. And the final door at the end of the hall?”

“The master bedroom, Sire.”

“Lead on, faithful Fergins!”

“Yes, Sire.”

The bedroom was smaller than the main hall downstairs, but not by much. The walls were of a rich green garden patterned Victorian wall paper, with ivory woodwork and heavy emerald green satin drapes over ivory lace concealed the eastward French doors that opened onto a private balcony.

From the reworking of the white and gold ceiling with its lovely Solon style painted ceiling of nymphs playing in a pastoral setting it was clear that one end of the bedroom had been partitioned off to contain a turn of the century bathroom

and private dressing room. The furniture pieces were of solid mahogany. The bed was covered by a great tasseled green satin canopy and could sleep a small regiment.

One wall was covered with massive wooden doors, probably closets. Another wall contained a lovely white marble Georgian styled fireplace, which had a cozy little wood fire in it.

Everything was quite clean and seemed ready to move into.

“Nice. I guess I’ll use this room.”

“I’ll bring your bag up later.”

“Fine, who was the last person to use this room? Uncle Felix?”

Fergins looked surprised.

“Oh no, Sire. He complained that it was haunted and it gave him headaches. The last person to live in this room was Lady Emile, Lady Demaris' daughter. After Lord Jamie's death. She had the room redecorated and lived here in the 1890's I believe.”

He could see my puzzlement.

“In a way it's because of the mystery that I mentioned. Although, at that time they didn't realize it.”

“O.K. explain.”

He went over to one of the wooden doors along one wall and opened it. It was a closet and was packed with long, old-fashioned gowns and dresses.

“Every item of Lady Demaris' wardrobe is still here and in perfect condition. Nothing has ever been cleaned nor repaired. The rest of the room is cleaned regularly by Janice, my wife.”

“So?”

“You don't understand, Greg.” Fern stepped forward to examine a gown. “These things aren't made of nylon or rayon.”

“Didn't have many of those things then,” I quipped.

“None what-so-ever. These clothes are made of wool, linen, silk, cotton and such, all natural fibers. In a hundred years they'd be rotting, stiff and easily torn. These look new.”

Fern looked so intent!

“Sire,” Fergins reached into another closet. “We have kept one of Lord Jaime's jackets as an example. It was made of top quality Australian wool, lined with top grade linen. Look at it.”

The jacket was of a cut only seen now in the movies. It was dusty, faded and tattered. It looked a hundred years old.

I looked back at the blazing colors of some of the dresses. There was something strange here.

“One could only say that Lady Demaris' clothes looked like they were waiting to be used again!” Fern suggested with an amused glance towards me as she held up one of the gowns. “With the right corset, it might fit you, Greg.”

“Very interesting,” I countered to her little giggle. “But, the only thing I can think of is to sell them. Some Hollywood costumer would pay plenty for all this.”

Fern was indignant. “But Greg, you couldn't!”

“What else? They take up most the closet space and I certainly can't use them. I doubt if you'd want to wear them.”

“No, probably not. Try a few on, certainly.”

Fergins looked glum. “I wouldn't advise such, Lady Fern.”

“Why not?”

“That's what happened to Lady Emile. She took to wearing her mother's dresses and went crazy. She heard voices and saw people, who weren't there. She was committed and died shortly thereafter.”

I was becoming bored again, *more ghost stories....*

“From the looks of those fancy, complex dresses one would go crazy just trying to get into them. Show me where you plan to put up Fern, and then let's go down and have a drink or something,” I suggested hopefully.

“Lady Fern has a guest room next to yours with its own private bath,” Fergins suggested, showing us the way. While not as spectacular as the master suite, it was quite cozy.

“No ghosts?” Fern asked.

“No, Lady Fern,” Fergins responded, to smile just a bit at her look of disappointment, only to add rather drolly, “although, we had a guest who claimed that she could hear Lady Emile's footsteps by the door and her crazy laughter.”

“Thank you, Fergins, I could have done without that bit of information,” Fern laughed with a shrug before she tried out the big canopy bed. “I can get used to this.”

We had dinner in the formal Victorian dining room that matched everything else. It was big.

Janice, Fergins wife, had prepared the meal while Fergins served.

I was told that these two ran the household while extra staff came up from the village weekly to regularly clean-up the great hall, north wing, and the Victorian part of the house as well as caring for the grounds. On the weekends the village also provided staff for the tours. I was also told that the family solicitor, we Americans call them lawyers, would come by tomorrow morning to inform me about the estate's situation.

After dinner Fern and I were led to a small sitting room. This room had a more human size and comfortable furniture.

Fergins mixed up a couple of after dinner drinks to go with our hot coffee and left.

“Getting a bit chilly,” was Fern's effort at starting conversation.

“Umm.”

“Are you really going to sleep up there?”

“In the master bedroom?”

“Yeah, with Lady Demaris' ghost.”

“Oh Hell, Fern. There aren't any ghosts.”

“But that room is so far away from anybody else in the house. No noise. The peace of the grave. Except for the rustling of the haunted clothing that is.”

“You're hopeless.”

We talked a bit more in the same vein.

I took a flashlight and started the climb to my haunted bedroom with Fern at my side. I left Fern at the door to her room. The long hall was a bit daunting in the night. I entered and snapped on the bedroom light.

Fergins had given me a number of books about the castle, the Penbroke family, and even an old one with castle operating costs from 1914 to 1936. So, I sat in a fairly uncomfortable chair and leaved through them.

It was suddenly chilly cold in here, despite the fireplace. It was as if someone had entered the room and had left the door open. I looked up and half expected to see a ghost, but there was nothing.

The only thing that I had was my leather jacket. I got up and opened some of the closets. I came across a red velvet robe that looked very warm, although it was obviously a woman's robe with long droopy sleeves and the buttons on the wrong side, I wasn't going out socially, so who cares. It was comfortable and fit me well. Demaris and I must have been similar in size.

I settled back with the unexciting books.

There was a tap on the door.

I sighed with a grin. “Come in, Fern,” I called out.

Just as I heard the door open, the table lamp that I was reading by flickered and dimmed.

I looked at it.

The electric bulb had become a kerosine flame!

“No my lady, it is I, Sara. I came to turn down your bed.”

I spun around in my chair and there was a young girl that I had never seen before in my life.

She was dressed in some sort of maid's outfit with overly long and full skirts.

“But, how strange,” she said with a smile, “it is already turned down.”

She returned to the doorway and stood in it.