



Illustration for "The Story of Adhelmar"

See page 709

HE FOUND MÉLITE ALONE

The Story of Adhelmar

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

I

WHEN Adhelmar had ended the tale of Dame Venus and the love which she bore the knight Tannhäuser, he put away the book and sighed. The Demoiselle Mélite laughed a little and demanded the reason of this sudden grief.

"I sigh," said he, "for sorrow that this Dame Venus is dead."

"Surely," said she, wondering at his glum face, "that is no great matter."

"By St. Vulfran, yes!" Adhelmar protested; "for the same Lady Venus was the fairest of women, as all learned clerks avow; and she is dead these many years, and now there is no woman left alive so beautiful as she—saving one alone, and she will have none of me. And therefore," he added, very slowly, "I sigh for desire of Dame Venus and for envy of the knight Tannhäuser."

Again Mélite laughed, but she forbore to question him concerning the lady who was of equal beauty with Dame Venus.

It was an April morning, and they sat in the hedged garden of Puy-sange. Adhelmar read to her of divers ancient queens—the histories of Lady Helen that was the leman of Sir Paris, the Trojan knight, and of the Lady Melior that loved Parthenopex of Blois, and of the Lady Aude, for love of whom Sieur Roland slew the pagan Angoulaffre, and of the Lady Cresseide that betrayed love, and of the Lady Morgaine la Fée, whose Danish lover should yet come from Avalon to save France in her black hour of need. All these he read aloud, suavely, with bland modulations, for he was a learned man.

For the rest, Sir Adhelmar de Nointel was known as a valiant knight, who had won glory in the wars with the English. He had rested for a fortnight at Puy-sange, of which castle the master, Reinault, the Vicomte de Puy-sange, was his cousin; and on the next day he proposed to set

forth for Paris, where the French King—Jean the Luckless—was gathering his lieges about him to withstand his kinsman, Edward of England.

Now, as I have said, Adhelmar was cousin to Reinault, and, in consequence, to Reinault's sister, the Demoiselle Mélite; and the latter he loved—at least, as much as a cousin should. That was well known; and Reinault de Puy-sange had sworn very heartily that it was a great pity when he had affianced her to Hugues d'Arques. They had both loved her since boyhood—so far their claims ran equally. But while Adhelmar had busied himself in getting some scant fame and a vast number of scars, Hugues had sensibly inherited the fief of Arques, a snug property with fertile lands and a stout fortress. How, then, should Reinault hesitate between them?

He did not. For the Château d'Arques, you must understand, was builded in Lower Normandy, on the fringe of the hill-country, just where the peninsula of Cotentin juts out into the sea; Puy-sange stood not far north, among the level lands of Upper Normandy; and these two being the strongest castles in those parts, what more natural and desirable than that the families should be united by marriage? Reinault informed his sister bluntly of his decision; she wept a little, but did not refuse to comply.

So Adhelmar, come again to Puy-sange after five years' absence, found Mélite troth-plighted, fast and safe, to Hugues. Reinault told him. Adhelmar grumbled and bit his nails in a corner for a time; then laughed shortly.

"I have loved Mélite," he said. "It may be that I love her still. Eh, St. Vulfran, why should I not? Why should a man not love his cousin?"

Adhelmar grinned, while the Vicomte twitched his beard and desired him at the devil.

But he stuck fast at Puy-sange, for all



HE SANG FOR HER AS THEY SAT IN THE GARDENS

that, and he and Mélite were much together. Daily they made parties to dance, and to hunt the deer, and to fish, but most often to sing songs together. For Adhelmar made good songs. As the old chronicler wrote of him:

Hardi estait et fier comme lions,
Et si faisait balades et chançons
Rondeaulx et laiz
Tres bien et bels.

To-day, when he had ended his reading, Adhelmar sighed again, and stared at his companion with hungry eyes, wherein desire strained like a hound at the leash.

Said Mélite: "Was this Lady Venus, then, very beautiful?"

Adhelmar swore an oath of sufficient magnitude that she was.

Whereupon Mélite, twisting her fingers idly and evincing a sudden interest in her own feet, demanded if she were more beautiful than the Lady Ermengarde of Arnaye or the Lady Isabeau of Brieuç.

"Holy Ouen!" scoffed Adhelmar; "the ladies, while well enough, I grant you, would seem but callow howlets blinking about that Arabian Phœnix that Plinius tells of, in comparison with that Lady Venus that is dead!"

"But how," asked Mélite, "was this lady fashioned that you commend so highly?—and how can you know of her beauty that have never seen her?"

Said Adhelmar: "I have read of her fairness in the writings of Messire Homer and Stesichorus and of other clerks. And she was very comely, neither too little nor too big; she was fairer and whiter and more lovely than any flower of the lily or snow upon the branch, but her eyebrows had the mischance of meeting. She had wide-open, beautiful eyes, and her wit was quick and ready. She was graceful and of demure countenance. She was well-beloved, but her heart was changeable."

"That is well," said she, flushing somewhat, for the portrait was like enough, "but you tell of a woman, not of a goddess."

"Her eyes," said Adhelmar, and his voice shook, and his hands, lifting a little, trembled with longing to take her in his arms,— "her eyes were large and very bright and of a color like that of the June sunlight falling upon deep wa-

ters; and her hair was of a curious gold-color like the Fleece that the knight Jason sought, and curled marvellously about her temples. For mouth she had but a small red wound; and her throat was a tower builded of ivory."

But now, still staring at her feet and glowing like Aurora new-stolen from the arms of Tithon, the Demoiselle Mélite bade him desist and make her a song. Moreover, she added, untruthfully, beauty was but a fleeting thing, and she held it of little worth; and then she laughed again.

Adhelmar took up the lute that lay beside them and fingered it for a moment, as though wondering of what he would sing. Then he sang for her as they sat in the gardens:

"It is in vain I mirror forth the praise
In pondered virelais
Of her that is the lady of my love;
No apt nor curious phrases e'er may tell
The tender miracle
Of her white body or the grace thereof.

"The vext Italian artful-artless strain
Is fashioned all in vain:
Sound is but sound; and even her name,
that is
To me more glorious than the glow of fire
Or dawn or love's desire
Or song or scarlet or dim ambergris,

"Mocks utterance. I have no heart to
praise
The perfect carnal beauty that is hers,
But as those worshippers
That bore rude offerings of honey and
maize

"Of old towards the stately ministers
Of fabled deities, I have given her these,
My faltering melodies
That are Love's hapless, stammering
messengers."

When he had ended, Adhelmar cast aside the lute and groaned, and then caught both her hands in his and strained them to his lips. There needed no wizard to read the message in his eyes.

Mélite sat silent for a moment. Then: "Ah, cousin, cousin!" she sighed, "I cannot love you as you would have me love. God alone knows why, true heart, for I know you for a strong man and a brave knight and a faithful lover; but I do not love you. There are many women who would love you, Adhelmar, for the

world praises you, and you have done brave deeds and made good songs and have served your King very potently; and yet"—she drew her hands away and laughed, a little wearily—"yet I, poor maid, must needs love Hugues, who has done nothing. This love is a very strange, unreasoning thing, cousin."

Again Adhelmar groaned. "You love him?" he asked, in a harsh voice.

"Yes," said Mélite, very softly, and afterward flushed and wondered dimly if she had spoken the truth. And then, somehow, her arms clasped about Adhelmar's neck, and she kissed him,—from pure pity, as she told herself; for Mélite's heart was very tender, and she could not endure the anguish in his face.

But Hugues d'Arques, coming suddenly out of a pleached walk, stumbled upon them just then and found the picture distasteful. He bent black brows upon them for a moment.

"Adhelmar," said he at length, "this world is a small place."

Then Adhelmar rose to his feet. "Indeed," he assented, with a wried smile, "I think there is scarce room in it for both of us, Hugues."

"That was my meaning," said the Sieur d'Arques.

"Only," Adhelmar pursued, somewhat wistfully, "my sword just now, Hugues, is vowed to my King's quarrel. There are some of us who hope to save France yet, if our blood may avail. In a year, God willing, I shall come again to Puy-sange; and till then you must wait."

Hugues conceded that, perforce, he must wait, since a vow was sacred; and Adhelmar, knowing that he had small natural appetite for battle at that or any other time, grinned. After that, in a sick rage, he struck Hugues in the face and turned about.

The Sieur d'Arques rubbed his cheek ruefully. Then he and Mélite stood silent for a moment and heard Adhelmar in the courtyard calling his men to ride forth; and Mélite laughed; and Hugues scowled.

II

The year passed, and Adhelmar did not return; and there was much fighting during that time, and Hugues began to think that the knight was slain and would trouble him no more.

So Adhelmar was half forgot, and the Sieur d'Arques turned his mind to other matters. He was still a bachelor, for Reinault thought the burden of the times in ill accord with the chinking of marriage-bells. They were grim times for Frenchmen; right and left, the English pillaged and killed and sacked and guzzled and drank, as if they would never have done; and Edward of England began to subscribe himself *Rex Franciæ* with some show of reason.

In Normandy men acted according to their natures. Reinault swore lustily and looked to his defences; and Hugues, seeing the English everywhere triumphant, drew a long face and doubted, when the will of God was made thus apparent, were it the part of a Christian to withstand it? Then he began to write letters, but to whom no man at either Arques or Puy-sange knew, saving One-eyed Pierre, who carried them.

III

It was in the dusk of a rain-sodden October day that Adhelmar rode to the gates of Puy-sange, with some score men-at-arms behind him. They came from Poitiers, where again the English had conquered, and Adhelmar rode with difficulty, for in that disastrous business in the field of Maupertuis he had been run through the chest, and his wound was scarce healed. Nevertheless, he came to finish his debate with the Sieur d'Arques.

But at Puy-sange he heard a strange tale of Hugues. Reinault, whom he found in a fine rage, told him the story as they sat over their supper.

It had happened, somehow, that the Marshal Arnold d'Andreghen had heard of those letters that Hugues had taken to writing; and he, being no scholar, frowned at such doings, and waited presently with a company of horse on the road to Arques. Into their midst, on the day before Adhelmar came, rode Pierre, the one-eyed messenger; and it was not a great while before he was bound hand and foot, and d'Andreghen was reading the letter they had found in his jerkin. "Hang the carrier on that oak," said he, when he had ended, "but leave that largest branch yonder for the writer. For, by the splendor of God! I will hang him there to-morrow!"

So Pierre swung in the air ere long and stuck out a black tongue at the crows, who cawed and waited for supper; and presently they feasted while d'Andreghen rode to Arques, carrying a rope for Hugues.

For the Marshal, you must understand, was a man of sudden action. It was but two months before that he had taken the Comte de Harcourt with other gentlemen from the Dauphin's own table to behead them that afternoon in a field back of Rouen. It was true they had resisted the *gabelle*, the King's immemorial right to impose a tax on salt; but Harcourt was Hugues's cousin, and the Sieur d'Arques, being somewhat of an epicurean disposition, found the dessert accorded his kinsman unpalatable.

It was no great surprise to d'Andreghen, then, to find that the letter Hugues had written was meant for Edward, the Black Prince of England, then at Bordeaux, where he held the French King, whom he had captured at Poitiers, as a prisoner; for this prince, though he had no great love for a rogue, yet knew how to make use of one when occasion demanded it—and as he afterward made use of Pedro the Castilian, he was now prepared to make use of Hugues, who hung like a ripe pear ready to drop into his mouth.

"For," as the Sieur d'Arques pointed out in his letter, "I am by nature inclined to favor you brave English, and so, beyond doubt, is the good God. And I will deliver Arques to you; and thus and thus you may take Normandy and the greater part of France; and thus and thus will I do, and thus and thus must you reward me."

Said d'Andreghen: "I will hang him at dawn; and thus and thus may the devil do with his soul!"

Then with his men he rode to Arques. A herald declared to the men of that place how the matter stood, and bade Hugues come forth and dance upon nothing. The Sieur d'Arques spat curses, like a cat driven into a corner, and wished to fight, but the greater part of his garrison were not willing to do so in such a cause; and so d'Andreghen took him shortly and carried him off.

In his anger having sworn by the splendor of God to hang him to a certain

tree, d'Andreghen had no choice in his calm but to abide by his oath.

The Vicomte de Puyssange concluded his narrative with a grim chuckle. "And I think we are very well rid of him, cousin," said he. "Holy Maclou! that I should have taken the traitor for a true man, though!"

"And Mélite?" asked Adhelmar, after a little.

Again Reinault shrugged. "In the White Turret," he said; then, with a short laugh: "Eh, God, yes! The baggage has caterwauled for this shabby rogue all day. She would have me—me, the King's man, look you!—save Hugues at the peril of my seignory!"

Adhelmar stood as in thought for a moment, and then laughed like a wolf. Afterward he went to the White Turret, leaving Reinault smiling over his wine.

IV

He found Mélite alone. She had robed herself in black, and had gathered her gold hair about her face like a heavy veil, and sat weeping into it for the plight of Hugues d'Arques.

"Mélite!" cried Adhelmar, very softly. And the Demoiselle de Puyssange rose with a start, and seeing him standing in the doorway, ran to him, with helpless little hands fluttering before her like frightened doves. She was very tired, and the man was strength incarnate; surely he, if any one, could aid Hugues and bring him safe out of the grim Marshal's claws. For the moment, perhaps, she had forgotten the feud that existed between Adhelmar and the Sieur d'Arques; but at any rate I am very sure that she knew Adhelmar could refuse her nothing. So she ran toward him, her cheeks flushing arbutuslike, and already smiling a little through her tears.

Ah, thought Adhelmar, were it not very easy to leave Hugues to the dog's death he merits and to take this woman for my own? For I know that she loves me a little. And thinking of this, he kissed her, very quietly, as one might kiss a frightened child; afterward he held her in his arms for a moment. Then he put her from him gently, and swore in his soul that Hugues must die that this woman might be his wife.

"You will save him?" Mérite asked, and raised her face to his. And there was that in her eyes which caused Adhelmar to muse for a little on the nature of women's love, and afterward to laugh harshly and swear a great oath.

"Yes!" said Adhelmar.

He demanded how many of Hugues's men were about. Some twenty of them had come to Puyssange, Mérite said, in the hope that Reinault might aid them to save their master. And she swore that her brother was a coward for not doing this; but Adhelmar, having his own thoughts on the subject, and thinking in his heart that Hugues's skin might easily be ripped off him without spilling a pint of honest blood, said, simply: "Twenty and twenty is twoscore. It will serve."

Then he told her that his plan was to fall suddenly upon d'Andreghen and his men that night, and in the tumult to steal Hugues away; after that, as Adhelmar pointed out, he might easily take ship for England, and leave the Marshal to blaspheme Fortune in Normandy, and the French King to gnaw at his chains in Bordeaux while Hugues toasts his shins in comfort at London. Adhelmar admitted that the plan was a mad one, but added, reasonably enough, that needs must when the devil drives. And so firm was his confidence, so cheery his laugh—he managed to laugh somehow, though it was a stiff piece of work—that Mérite began to be comforted somewhat, and bade him go and Godspeed.

In the main hall Adhelmar found the Vicomte still sitting over his wine.

"Cousin," said Adhelmar, "I must ride hence to-night."

Reinault stared at him for a moment; then a great wonder woke in his face. "Eh, so?" said he, very softly. Afterward he sprang to his feet and clutched Adhelmar by both arms, his voice playing him strange tricks. "No, no!" Reinault cried, hoarsely. "No, Adhelmar, not that! It is death, lad,—sure death! It means hanging, boy!" the Vicomte pleaded, tremulously, for, grim man that he was, he loved Adhelmar.

"That is like enough," Adhelmar conceded.

"They will hang you—the King and d'Andreghen," Reinault whispered, in a

shaking voice; "they will hang you high as Haman."

"That, too," said Adhelmar, "is like enough, if I remain in France."

"Eh! will you flee to England, then?" the Vicomte scoffed, bitterly. "Has King Edward not sworn to hang you there, eight years past? Was it not you, then, cousin, who took Almerigo di Pavia, that Lombard knave whom he made governor of Calais—was it not you, then, who delivered him to Geoffrey de Chagny, who had him broken on the wheel? Eh, Holy Maclou! you will get small comfort of Edward!"

Adhelmar admitted that this was true. "Still," said he, "I must ride to-night."

"For her?" Reinault asked, and jerked his thumb upward.

"Yes," said Adhelmar—"for her."

Then Reinault stared in his face for a while. "You are a fool, Adhelmar," said he at last, "but you are a brave man. It is a great pity that a good-for-nothing wench with a tow head should be the death of you. For my part, I am the King's vassal; I shall not break faith with him; but you are my guest and my kinsman. For that reason I am going to bed, and I shall sleep very soundly. It is likely I shall hear nothing of the night's doings—no, by St. Maclou! not if you murder d'Andreghen in the courtyard!" Reinault ended, and smiled, somewhat sadly. Afterward he kissed Adhelmar on both cheeks and left him. Men viewed death more lightly in those days.

Adhelmar rode off in the rain with his men. He reflected as he went upon the nature of women and upon his love for the Demoiselle de Puyssange; and, to himself, he swore gloomily that if she had a mind to Hugues she must have him, come what might.

Mérite, at her window, heard them depart, and stared after them for a while with hand-shadowed eyes; then the beating of the hoofs died away, and she turned back into the room. Adhelmar's glove, which he had forgotten in his haste, lay upon the floor, and Mérite lifted it and twisted it idly in her hands.

"I wonder—?" said she.

Then she lit four waxen candles and set them before a great mirror that was in the room. Mérite stood among them



HE CLIMBED THE STAIRS SLOWLY, FOR HE WAS GROWING FEEBLE

and looked into the mirror. She seemed very tall and very slender, and her loosened hair hung heavily about her beautiful, shallow face and fell like a cloak around her black-robed body, showing against the black gown like melted gold; and about her were the tall, white candles tipped with still flames of gold. Mélite laughed softly and raised her arms above her head and laughed yet again.

"After all," said she, "I do not wonder."

Mélite sat before the mirror and braided her hair, and sang to herself in a sweet, low voice, brooding with unfathomable eyes upon her image in the glass, while the rain beat about Puitsange, and Adhelmar rode forth to save Hugues that must else be hanged.

Sang Mélite:

"Rustling leaves of the willow-tree
Peering downward at you and me,
And no man else in the world to see,

"Only the birds, whose dusty coats
Show dark i' the green—whose throbbing
throats
Turn joy to music and love to notes.

"Lean your body against the tree,
Lifting your red lips up to me;
Kiss me, love, with no man to see!

"We will be content for a season:—Yea,
Kiss me, sweet, for the evil day
Draws nigh when love shall be cast away;

"When you will remember the willow-tree
And this very hour, and will call to me—
Me, whose face you will no more see!

"So swift, so swift the glad time goes;
And Death and Eld with their countless
woes
Draw near; and the end thereof no man
knows.

"Lean your body against the tree,
Lifting your red lips up to me;
Kiss me, love, with no man to see!"

Mélite smiled as she sang; for this was a song that Adhelmar had made for her at Nointel, before he was a knight, when both were very young.

V

It was not long before they came upon d'Andreghen and his men camped about a great oak, with One-eyed Pierre swing-

ing over their heads like a pennon. A shrill sentinel, somewhere in the dark, demanded their business, but without receiving any answer. For at that moment Adhelmar gave the word to charge.

Then it was as if all the devils in Pandemonium had chosen Normandy for their playground; and what took place in the night no man saw for the darkness, so that I cannot tell you of it. Let it suffice that in the end Adhelmar rode away before d'Andreghen had rubbed sleep well out of his eyes; and with him were Hugues d'Arques and some half his men. The rest were dead, and Adhelmar himself was very near death, for he had burst open his old wound and it was bleeding under his armor. He said nothing of this.

"Hugues," said he, "do you and these fellows ride to the coast; thence take ship for England."

He would have none of Hugues's thanks; instead, he turned and left him to whimper out his gratitude to the skies, which spat a warm, gusty rain at him. Then Adhelmar rode again to Puitsange, and as he went he sang softly to himself:

"D'Andreghen in Normandy
Rode forth with grace and chivalry;
But God for me wrought marvellously;
Wherefore, I may call and cry
That am now about to die,

*"Domine! Domine!
Gratias accipe!
Et meum animum
Recipe in cælum!"*

VI

When he had come to Puitsange, he climbed the stairs of the White Turret—slowly, for he was growing very feeble now—and so came again to Mélite.

"He is safe," said Adhelmar, somewhat shortly. Then he told Mélite how Hugues was rescued and shipped to England, and how, if she would, she might follow him at dawn in a fishing-boat. "For there is likely to be warm work at Puitsange," Adhelmar said, grimly, "when the Marshal comes. And he will come."

"And you, cousin?" asked Mélite.

"Holy Ouen!" said Adhelmar; "since I need must die, I will die in France, not in the cold land of England."

"Die!" cried Mélite. "Are you hurt so sorely, then?"

He grinned like a death's-head. "My wounds are a little matter," said he, "yet must I die for all that. The English King will hang me if I go thither, as he has sworn to do these eight years, because of that matter of Almerigo di Pavia: and if I stay in France, I must hang because of this night's work."

Mélite wept. "O God! O God!" she cried, two or three times, like one wounded in the throat. "And you have done this for me! Is there no way to save you, Adhelmar?"

"None," said Adhelmar, and took both her hands in his, very tenderly. "Ah, my sweet," said he, "must I whose grave is already digged waste time upon this idle talk of kingdoms and the little men who rule them? I have but a little while to live, and I would fain forget that there is aught else in the world save you and that I love you. Do not weep, Mélite! In a little time you will forget me and be happy with this Hugues whom you love; and I?—ah, my sweet, I think that even in my grave I shall dream of you and of your great beauty and of the exceeding love that I bore you in the old days."

"Ah, no, not that!" Mélite cried. "I shall not forget, O true and faithful lover! And, indeed, indeed, Adhelmar, I would give my life right willingly that yours might be saved!" She had forgotten Hugues now. Her heart hungered as she thought of Adhelmar who must die a shameful death for her sake and of the love which she had cast away.

"Sweet," said he, "do I not know you to the marrow? You will forget me utterly, for your heart is very changeable. Ah, Mother of God! you will forget!"

"No; ah, no!" Mélite whispered, and drew near to him. Adhelmar smiled, a little wistfully, for he did not believe that she spoke the truth; but it was good to feel her body close to his, even though he was dying, and he was content.

But by this the dawn had begun to break, and Mélite saw the pallor of his face and knew for the first time that he was wounded.

"Indeed, yes," said Adhelmar, when she had questioned him, "for my breast

is quite cloven through." And when she had drawn off his corselet, she found a great cut in his chest that had bled so much that it was plain that he must die.

Mélite wept again and cried: "Why had you not told me of this?"

"To have you heal me, perchance?" said Adhelmar. "Ah, love, is hanging, then, so sweet a death that I should choose it, rather than to die very peacefully in your arms? Indeed, I would not live if I might; for I have proven traitor to my King, and it is right that traitors should die; and I know that God can give me naught more desirable in life than I have known this night. What need, then, to live?"

Mélite bent over him; for as he spoke he had lain back in a great carven chair set by the window. She was past speech by this. But now, for a moment, her lips clung to his, and her salt tears fell upon his face. What better death for a lover? thought Adhelmar.

Yet he murmured somewhat. "Pity, always pity!" he said, very wearily. "I shall never win aught else of you, Mélite. For you have kissed me once before, pitying me because you could not love me. And you have kissed me now, pitying me because I may not live."

But Mélite, clasping her arms about his neck, now whispered into his ear the meaning of this last kiss, and at the honeyed sound of it his strength came back for a moment and he strove to rise. The level sunlight fell full upon his face, which was very glad.

"God, God!" cried Adhelmar, and spread out his arms toward the dear, familiar world that was slowly taking form beneath them—a world grown doubly dear to him now; "ah, my God, have pity and let me live a little longer!"

As Mélite, half frightened, drew back from him, he crept out of his chair and fell face downward at her feet. Afterward his hands stretched forward a little toward her, and then trembled and were still.

Mélite stood looking downward, wondering vaguely if she would ever know either joy or sorrow again. And so the new day found them.