

THE MYSTERIOUS HERMIT OF THE TOMB; or, THE PHANTOM OF THE OLD CHÂTEAU

PART ONE

Chapter I: The Storm

Come, O Muses of Occitania, come to me, either dancing to the sound of the joyful tambourine or sighing a plaintive ballad on the amorous harp. I want to sing the praises of your children; I want to recall those fortunate epochs when the triple alliance as formed of songs, combats and sweet tenderness, when beauty inspired both the warrior flying to his victory and the minstrel lover of the pleasant triumphs that do not cost the vanquished tears. Alas, they have disappeared, those days of glory and gallantry. Today, disenchanted amour has lost its happiest charms; it no longer blushes, it has ceased to merit the worship that our sensible ancestors had devoted to it..

O Muses, unroll for me the tableau of centuries past; and you, troubadours, pour into my soul a portion of your amiable genius. All my wishes will be fulfilled if I can obtain a few flowers of your crown, and if ever beauty grants me a smile, O troubadours, I shall owe it to you!

It was night; black clouds charged with hail and lightning were advancing from the south, driven by the impetuous sirocco. The trees, violently agitated, collided with one another, groaning; the fields, covered with gilded ears of wheat, were on the brink of seeing their rich hope annihilated; and in the long galleries of the fortified château of Saint-Félix, whistling sounds were heard that imported fear into all souls.

Even Arembert, in spite of his bravery, was prey to the most baneful terrors. The storm that was about to burst over the town reminded him vividly of the one that passion had ignited in his heart.

In the midst of his principal vassals, Arembert was pacing back and forth in the large audience hall of his noble dwelling, Sometimes, stopping dead, he attached his gaze to the stained glass of the windows, seemingly searching through them to ascertain the progress of the storm; sometimes, marching with precipitate strides, he seemed to indicate by his abrupt movement that he might be trying to escape disastrous thoughts. Unhappy Arembert! At what price have you bought the pomp that surrounds you!

Meanwhile, the clouds were rising over the horizon, the thunder was rumbling forcefully, and frequent lightning flashes shone over the countryside, carrying into the hall a fugitive clarity that illuminated its extent momentarily. Several minutes ago, Arembert had run to sit down under the elevated awning, the mark of his power; he hid his head in his hands; he did not speak, but frequent sighs were heard, exhaled from a breast oppressed by a thousand painful memories.

Standing around him, in a respectful silence, his officers were contemplating him with pity when a terrible thunderclap appeared to wake him, and the page who was closest to him thought he heard these words emerge from his mouth:

“Well, what are you waiting for? Strike, then, vengeful heaven.”

After a few moments, Arembert, proudly raising his somber forehead, asked in an altered voice whether young Adémar had returned to the château.

“Nor, Sire Baron,” replied Roberto, his man of confidence, “the youth, who left at the fourth hour of the day, only accompanied by a squire, has not reappeared within our ramparts.”

“Why, when the tempest is rumbling, does he stay away?”

“Perhaps, surprised by the storm, he has sought shelter in a vassal’s cottage.”

“As soon as he appears, do not forget to tell him that I want to speak to him without delay. What an evening, Roberto! The air has never seemed to me to be inflamed to such a point!”

“You ought to be accustomed to storms, Monseigneur; our country has been their arena for a long time.”

“How feeble man is! I shiver in spite of myself when the flashes of lightning announce its fall.”

“Arembert ought to fear it,” pronounced a voice.

Arembert rose to his feet precipitately and angrily. “What insolent person dares to insult his master? Guards, search for him; seize him and let him be precipitated into the dungeon of the great tower!”

He had spoken, and people ran to carry out his orders, but no one had spoken; all those who were in the hall, devoured by an inexpressible terror, were only able to tremble and remain silent.

“Roberto! Roberto!” cried Arembert.

“Sire Baron?”

“It is time this ended; I want to know the audacious individual who has been playing with me for so many years. What does he want with me? What does he seek?”

“Vengeance!” said the voice.

“Again!” said Arembert and his officers.

And again the lightning, falling with an indescribable din, penetrates into the hall, strikes Arembert’s escutcheon, pulverizes it, smashes his armor and, exiting again in a column of fire, runs to bury itself in a tree in the garden, to which it sets fire.

Terror, brought to its peak, becomes general. Everyone, by virtue of a spontaneous movement, places one knee on the ground, and the Eternal is the object of their prayer.

Arembert has not shared in the general devotion; his eyes do not roll beneath their lids; his mouth is agape and his entire body remains in a frightful immobility. Several seconds go by thus.

Finally, Arembert, coming round, addresses himself to Roberto, and in a voice that he tries to render tranquil, he commands him to go and inform the pilgrim who arrived two hours ago that he is ready to grant him the audience that the latter wishes so dearly.

After having bowed, Roberto draws away. Valets arrive, bringing wax candles; they distribute them around the hall. During that occupation, the pilgrim, conducted by Roberto, presents himself. Then Arembert makes a sign, and everyone retires, leaving him alone with the newcomer.

“Approach, man of God; I am disposed to listen to what you have to say to me.”

“Sire Baron, it is not about myself that I want to talk to you; God forbid that I occupy your time with such an unimportant object.”

“What do you want, then?”

“The interest of the Church alone has brought me to you.”

“Explain yourself.”

“Can I do so in surety?”

“Trust in my word.”

“I am tranquil henceforth. A political tempest is about to burst over the neighboring lands. Far from expelling the heretics from his estates, Comte Raymond de Toulouse is lending them a support whose consequences can only be disastrous for Christianity. The Albigensians are raising their impious heads, their number is increasing; they are threatening our holy religion; everywhere the cry of the just is making itself heard, everywhere people are asking the Lord to put an end to an abomination that is making Toulouse a second Babylon.

“The cry of the just has been heard; already, coming from all directions, ardent defenders of the faith are taking up arms in order to annihilate a perverse race; but success will not crown their efforts so long as Raymond reigns in the Languedoc; their house has been secretly polluted for a long time with the venom of heresy. Raymond VI grants an evident protection to those whom Rome has condemned; it is necessary, in order to obtain the chastisement of his audacity, that he fall with those who have rendered his doom necessary. Already, everything is prepared for that attempt; the Comtes de Bourgogne, de Nevers and de Montfort have taken up arms the cause of the Church is already triumphant; Béziers, that

superb city, has fallen to the crusaders' arms, and its blazing walls already announce the fate reserved for the Lord's enemies."

"Can it be! What, Béziers...?"

"Has disappeared in the ashes. Its towers, which the flames devoured, its fugitive inhabitants, everything announces that the Albigensians will only oppose an impotent resistance to us. And you, whom the Comte de Toulouse has long misunderstood, whose services he has only recompensed with ingratitude, will you be obstinate in burying yourself under his ruins, while, while a prosperous fate might shine for you? Informed of our valor, the leaders of the crusaders wants to conserve you, and even augment your possessions; will you refuse their generous offers? Will you stick to a fidelity that can only be prejudicial to you? Believe me, hasten to accept the propositions that I am charged with making to you..."

"But the name of traitor..." said Arembert.

"Are you one, in fighting for God's cause?"

"My oath of obedience..."

"Only the heretics can reproach you for it."

"What guarantee do I have of the promises made to me?"

"Come to treat with the crusaders in person," said the pilgrim. "They will be at the gates of Carcassonne at dawn tomorrow. They will speak to you."

"Is Raymond not among them?"

"What does a prince who will soon cease to be one matter to you? Sire Arembert, will you permit me to speak to you in all confidence?"

"I beg you to do so."

"Your name has reached me, as well as the renown of secret pains that are rending your soul."

"Is that possible?" said Arembert, involuntarily.

"Whatever the cause of your chagrins might be, it depends on you to put an end to them. Throw yourself into the arms of the Church, embrace its defense; it will protect you, it will forgive you, it can sanction everything that men might do, and that which men cannot do. It can assure you the peace of your conscience."

"If I thought that...!"

"I assure you of it."

"No," said the voice, "there are sins for which Heaven refuses its pardon; its ministers do not have the power to undo them."

"Great God!" cried the pilgrim.

"Do you hear it, that voice, which pursues me incessantly," said Arembert, "which assails me at all hours and which, when I deliver myself to sleep, wakes me up by lavishing threats upon me? What am I saying, sleep? There is none for me; if fatigue weighs upon my eyes, my imagination retraces for me...no, it cannot retrace anything for me!"

With those words, Arembert falls silent; a clap of thunder is heard; thus the conscience of the Baron de Saint-Félix is rumbling dully.

In spite of his apparent piety, even the pilgrim was gripped by fear; he leaned on his staff; his head inclined toward the ground and he seemed to reflect. Finally, after an interval of silence, he addressed himself to Arembert:

"Will you give me a response, Sire Baron?"

"I intend to take it myself," said Arembert.

Bowing, the pilgrim was about to withdraw when a page, opening the door to the hall, announced young Adémar. The latter came in slowly; his expression was somber, and, far from running to the Baron in order to kiss his hand, as he was accustomed to do, he contented himself with bowing respectfully. Arembert, too distressed to pay any heed to the youth's new conduct, asked him where he had passed the time of the storm.

“Not far from your château,” said Adémar, “is the forest of Caillavel; at one of the crossroads of that wood, the hermit Étienne has established his dwelling, next to a tomb that he seems to be guarding carefully. It is there that I sought a refuge against the waters of heaven, which were falling in torrents.”

“The hermit Étienne!” said the pilgrim. “It seems to me that the legate Milon has ordered me to visit his modest dwelling.”¹

“I don’t know whether it will be easy for you to penetrate as far as him,” said Arembert. “People rarely approach him, and his hermitage appears to be guarded by beings of a superior essence. He has settled in my domains however; one evening, I wanted to enter his habitation, but a sight that still troubles me at the moment when I am speaking to you, constrained me to recoil involuntarily. Since that time I have not attempted again to approach a bizarre being who takes pleasure in surrounding himself with magic and mysteries.”

“It’s said that his influence is all-powerful over the people of the region,” said the pilgrim.

“He alone preserves my vassals from the poison of heresy, which had made immense progress in the surrounding area. But Adémar, go and get ready to accompany me.”

Adémar went pale. “You’re leaving?”

“The interest of my barony demands that I go to Carcassonne promptly.”

“I was counting on obtaining permission from you to go to Toulouse tomorrow.”

“What design can take you there?”

Adémar hesitated. “I am going there to satisfy the designs of the saintly hermit Étienne.”

“Has he put his confidence in your hands so rapidly?”

“It is a secret, at least, of which he has made me the depositary.”

“Monseigneur Arembert,” said the pilgrim, “let the noble Adémar fulfill the promise he has made to the venerable Étienne; perhaps he is sending this fine knight to Bishop Foulques, whose zeal for the good cause is well known.”

Adémar bowed without making any reply, although the pilgrim’s glance seemed to be inviting him to do so. He addressed the Baron de Saint-Félix, and, in a timid voice, he asked him whether he would permit him to keep the promise he had made.

“Yes,” Arembert replied. “You can leave tomorrow; take care not to prolong your absence, and come back when you can to my château, where you will carry out my orders if they have arrived ahead of you, or at least await them.”

He had finished. Adémar saluted him and withdrew, followed by the pilgrim, while the Baron, preceded by his squires, went to his apartments.

¹ A papal legate named Milon is mentioned by the chronicler who accompanied the crusaders, Pierre de Vaux-de-Cernay, as having been in conflict with Raymond when the latter was trying to reconcile himself with the church, but is said to have died soon afterwards, and certainly did not take the leading role in the crusade attributed to him in the story.

Chapter II: The Hermit

By virtue of a secret presentiment, Adémar had not wanted to inform Arembert of the cause that was to take him to the capital of Raymond's estates the following day.

Rising before dawn, guided by his love of hunting, Adémar had quit the Château de Saint-Félix with the intention of roaming the wood of Caillavel, the retreat of wild beasts and game less redoubtable to combat. Followed by Aubin, his principal squire, he had hastened his destrier's pace, and he had been in the forest for some time when the sun rose over the horizon. Then, fatigued by a difficult course, he dismounted and approached a stream that gave freshness to the noble oaks and, while contemplating the fugitive water, he sang a ballad that the celebrated troubadour Pierre Vidal had once composed:²

*Flower of spring shines at dawn,
For the pleasures she receives that day;
Her fresh bud opens and colors
In the pure breath of Zephyr and Amour.*

*Flower of spring, with her charmed beauty
Lavishes her attractions on the butterfly.
She is happy, she believed that she is loved!
Transports of amour make regrets fall silent.*

*Flower of spring, on her weakened stem
Cedes to the rigors of the mutinous aquilon.
No more happiness, your youth is past;
Evening destroys the dreams of the morn.*

While Adémar was singing, a hermit, attracted by his melodious voice, had emerged from the density of the forest and drawn nearer in order to listen to him. The hermit was named Étienne; he had appeared in the region a long time ago, like one of those superior beings who sometimes descend from the ethereal spheres in order to bring happiness to the part of the globe on which they have cast a sympathetic gaze. No one knew where Étienne had been born; nothing certain could be said when people spoke about him, but the peasants called him "the hermit of the tomb."

That name originated from a vast mausoleum of black marble that stood beside his hermitage; that tomb, devoid of an inscription, was placed on four steps of white marble; its form was pyramidal. In the middle of one of its faces there was a bronze door that had no lock; a sword fixed in two grooves was its only defense, but that simple rampart was a thousand times more difficult to overcome than the high crenellations of warrior towns; no man would have dared conceive the idea of approaching a place that the vulgar believed to be destined to profound mysteries and guarded by invisible powers.

There were no marvelous tales to which the hermit Étienne did not lend himself. Here it was claimed that blinding flames guarded the approaches to his dwelling by night; there others asserted that when the chariot of darkness descended from the black mountains, he had been seen, clad in a bizarre costume, being carried through the air on luminous clouds; sometimes his voice had retained hail ready to escape in the night; sometimes he had summoned the obedient lightning down upon a brigand ready to slay an unfortunate individual. Father Étienne's retired life furnished aliments to the avid curiosity of the villagers; it was rare for anyone to succeed in talking to him, and even rarer for anyone to be introduced into his hermitage, but every time he left it, it was only to do good; he had never returned from his excursions without bringing back the blessings of the unfortunate.

² Author's note: "Music by Momigui."

If there were numerous difficulties in reaching him, there were even greater ones in contemplating his face; no one could boast of having glimpsed it, so careful was the hermit to hide it; a vast hood covered it incessantly, and it was only at intervals that one sometimes saw two sparkling eyes shining within it.

Étienne's stature surpassed that of the tallest men; he was six feet and several inches tall, either because he was thus formed or because his costume or the boots that he wore increased his immeasurable stature considerably. In his hands he held a black and knotty staff on which he leaned; his black beard fell in waves over his breast, and a long red robe enveloped his entire body. It was in that apparel that he presented himself before Adémar.

The latter, surprised by his appearance, hesitated momentarily as to whether he ought not to take him for a vision, but, remembering the hermit Étienne, he had no doubt that it was him.

If the hermit had astonished Adémar, Adémar had interested the hermit. Few knights possessed the amiable youth's charms; on seeing him, one experienced a need to love him. His black hair, curly by nature, fell over his shoulders and played around his eyes, which sometimes shone with fiery courage and sometimes displayed an attractive melancholy. Nothing equaled Adémar's smile; by turns proud or gracious, it expressed bravery or tenderness. Born with a soul on fire, the ward of Baron de Saint-Félix idolized the fair sex that heaven has created for our happiness; to him, nothing equaled a woman; he considered her the peer of the angels; Adémar would have done anything for her; his valor would protect her, his wit would seduce her.

When he saw the hermit, far from fleeing, he advanced, prostrated himself and, ready to request his blessing, he said: "Father, impose your hands on a knight."

"Get up, Monseigneur," said the hermit. "Such a posture does not befit a noble Baron before a poor monk."

"Thus youth ought to act," said Adémar, "in order to be respected in its turn when age has curbed its superb forehead."

"Those words charm me, Knight. Whence comes so much wisdom combined with so much beauty?"

"Raised by Baron de Saint-Félix."

"Those are not lessons that he can give you."

"I do not think you have any complaint against him?" Adémar queried.

Without responding to the question the hermit said: "Dare I ask you the story of your life? My request might astonish you, but your features recall memories."

"I have nothing to hide from you, Man of God," he said.

And both of them sat down on a tree felled by a woodcutter's ax, one preparing to inform, and the other to listen with avid attention.

"A few leagues from the ancient fatherland of the Tectosages, the town of Saint-Félix stands on a high hill, overlooking all the neighboring land. The town is proud of its position and the power of the Baron to whom it is attributed. Its suzerain is no longer in the days of his spring; in the summer of his life he does not seem sensible to that tranquility, the adornment of a man whose memories are not bitter.

"For a long time Arembert has not known the calm of repose; it is necessary that the agitation of the body incessantly stuns a heart that dreads reflection. At forty, the somber Arembert has not yet felt the pleasures of amour; always flying to where war is rumbling, he seems to have refused a sentiment that embellishes existence; he seeks combats avidly, and, redoubtable by virtue of his bravery, the Comte de Toulouse sees him as one of his firmest supports.

"For seventeen years Arembert has possessed the barony that was transmitted to him by his ancestors; his father, the noble Amanieu, was found dead in his bed without anything having caused the expectation of that sinister death. After the loss of that benevolent lord, the barony belonged to Arembert's brother, who had incontestable right of birth over him. Bérenger succeeded his father, but scarcely two months had gone by when the pious desire to go and liberate the Holy Sepulcher drew him toward the fields of Idumea; that was for his misfortune. He embarked at Marseille; since then, no one has had any news of him, and it was only after a few years that it became certain that he had perished, a victim of the rage of the sea.

“Arembert, having seen all of his family disappear in a short time, remained plunged in a profound melancholy for some time. He fled the presence of his vassals; even his dearest friends did not have the right to penetrate the solitude he had chosen. Not far from Saint-Félix he had a château built into which he went in order to deliver himself to his morosity. Sometimes, however, he ran through the apartments that separated him from his guards, uttering horrible cries and bathed in cold sweat that brought frissons to his weakened body.

“At those times, Arembert only respired war. He ran to make incursions into the domains of lords against whom he thought he had some complaint. He fought pitilessly, and victory almost always crowned his audacious enterprises. On returning to his possessions he summoned his friends and troubadours. Brilliant fêtes were held, and pleasures, for some time, troubled the profound silence of the vaults of the Château de Saint-Félix; but soon, further dolours came to lay siege of Arembert’s heart, and the combats did not take long to recommence.

“One day, tranquil in the new dwelling that he had built on the heights of Saint-Julia, when he seemed less unhappy, a squire presents himself to his eyes; his armor is covered in dust, his voice is tremulous, he seems very emotional. Arembert, surprised, hastens to interrogate him: ‘What is your name, vassal, and how do you dare to appear before Baron de Saint-Félix without having been announced by his pages?’

“‘Oh, Sire Arembert, says the squire, ‘pardon my negligence in favor of the chagrin that is devouring me; I have lost my master—your, friend, in a word—the Seigneur de Saint-Pons is no more.’

“Arembert gets up precipitately. ‘Wretch! What are you telling me? Who is he audacious person who has dared to attack a man I cherished as much as myself? Speak; in naming him to me, you will ensure your master’s vengeance and the punishment of his murderer.’

“‘Alas, Sire Baron,’ said the squire, ‘the man who has caused my sovereign to perish is certain of impunity by virtue of his power.’

“‘Name him, I tell you,’ says Arembert. ‘Whoever he is, even if he is as powerful as the Comte de Toulouse himself, I shall not hesitate to challenge him.’

“‘No, Sire Baron, the noble Raymond is too great to attack in a cowardly fashion; perfidy is unknown in that ancient family.’

“‘Leave the eulogy there and tell me about my friend.’

“‘Well, his murderer is the Vicomte de Carcassonne.’

“‘Tremble, audacious warrior,’ says Arembert, ‘your doom is assured. Hola! Guards! Sound the horn immediately; let the bells be heard from the summit of the battlements; summon my men-at-arms; let my standard be deployed. Pages, prepare my armor!’

“Thus the impetuous knight expresses himself; he shivers with impatience. He calls for vengeance with loud cries, or rather, he is glad to have found a pretext that will furnish an apparent justification for the new war that he is burning to undertake.

“His orders are executed; the surrounding areas assemble their soldiers. Montgeai sends twenty archers, twenty cavaliers and sixty lancers; Aureac furnishes the suzerain a troop of two hundred men; Roumens, Cadenac and Craissens send as many; a number twice as great assembles in the valleys and on the hills of Saint-Paulet, Mourville, the Vaux, Balègue and Belestas, and those various corps, combined with the troops on watch in Saint-Félix, form an army of nearly two thousand men.

“It was with that detachment that the proud Baron, reinforced by the troops of his friend, the Sire de Saint-Pons, marched against Vicomte Roger Trencavel. Hugues de Saint-Pons, Arembert’s friend, combined an uncommon bravery with an unparalleled ferocity; the excursions that he never ceased, even in times of peace, to make against Vicomte Roger’s vassals, had wearied the patience of that prince; he had set himself at the head of his troops and, having drawn Hugues into an ambush, had massacred him pitilessly. Knowing the amity that linked his enemy with Baron Arembert, he had no doubt that the latter would seek to avenge his death, and, far from scorning such an adversary, he did not send his squadrons away, and held himself ready to fight.

“Scarcely four days had gone by, and dawn was opening its doors in the radiant Orient, when the dwarf placed constantly at the top of the keep of the principal tower of Carcassonne hastened to give the

alarm signal. He had perceived Arembert's soldiers rapidly descending the hills that formed the ring of the horizon. Trencavel, leaping out of bed, hastily put on his armor, gave his orders and sent two heralds, bearers of pacific words.

"Arembert, hearing the bells sounding the tocsin and seeing the archers covering the ramparts, no longer thought of surprising his adversary. He had his troop stop, and, wanting to allow them to take a few hours of repose, he commanded that the tents be erected. While he was delivering himself to his concern, the drawbridge was seen to be lowered; two heralds, their tunics blazoned with Roger's enamels, advanced holding the staffs marking their mission.

"Arembert ordered that they be brought to him. They saluted him by taking off their fur hats and the older of the two said: 'Sire Arembert, Baron de Saint-Félix, what do you want to do? Has not peace been declared between Raymond de Toulouse and Roger de Carcassonne? Can a vassal start a war by his own will? Does he not need the assistance of his suzerain prince? What is your ambition pretending? For what cause have you come to attack my Vicomte without a preliminary declaration? Your heralds have not appeared in Carcassonne; we only learned that we were your enemies when your pennants appeared within sight of our ramparts?'

"Arembert replied: 'Herald of the title of Carcassonne, it ill befits your Vicomte to speak to me about the truce he has concluded with my feudal lord, having broken it every time that he thought that it could no longer be convenient for him, and who always excites the princes of Narbonne, Foix, Montpellier and Nîmes to arm themselves against the house of Toulouse. Believe me, Herald, it is not for the Trencavels to speak about the oaths they have made. You ask me for what cause I have armed my vassals? It is for the most just vengeance, to punish the murderer of my friend, and to ravage the lands of the proud Vicomte. Herald, take him my response, and accept this as a mark of my esteem for the august function in which you are clad.'

"So saying, he took from his finger a rich sapphire, which had once been given to him by the Duc d'Aquitaine, and he constrained the herald to accept it; he had the second given a purse of gold, and sent them away with words of war.

"Trencavel had not hoped for a fortunate success to the attempt he had made, but he wanted to put the forms of justice on his side and prejudice the Comte de Toulouse against the Baron de Saint-Félix. The latter, not suspecting the ruse, only saw the Vicomte de Carcassonne's step as evidence of his weakness. He thought that the victory awaited him and, without waiting any longer, he sounded the charge.