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opening extract from

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K. M. Grant

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It's high time for me to sing;
I have been slumbering so long
that my music wasn't heard far away anymore,
but now I am waking up,
and I will keep retrieving my joy
against the Winter and the cold north wind.

Cercamon, early 12th century



Is it this time already? I have slept too long! Excuse me while I get my bearings. There now, let me see. Yes, thank goodness. I'm in much the same shape as I was when I went to sleep. A few boulders have fallen, the vines have spread, and with their eternal dripping persistence several rivers have worn new paths for themselves. But that's only to be expected. Let me shake myself. I love to feel the tickle of a thousand sloughed snake skins. How they glitter on my crags. See! One has caught the eye of an ibex. He lowers his head and the curved shadow of his horns disturbs a viper nursing her young. I feel her slither back inside her cave although she'd like to bask in the sun. It must be August.

Now I'm properly awake. At what point in my story did I, the Amouroix, a small county in the larger Occitan and resting in my fastness under the northern side of the Pyrenean mountains, leave you? I think it was when Yolanda – no, that's not the way to do it. Whilst I dozed, you have been busy with other things. We must catch up properly.

I have already told you how the Blue Flame of the Occitan,

the Flame that held the essence of the Occitan soul within itself, was brought home in the care of Parsifal, an old and unsuccessful knight, and how it showed itself in my hills when Occitania was under attack not just from the French King Louis but also from within. It was to you that I revealed, hanging my head with shame, that when the Flame returned, instead of finding an Occitan united against her enemies, it found her divided into Catholics and Cathars, each struggling against the other instead of against their real enemy. It's strange to think what fools men were for God in those days. I mean, how can you hate in the name of the God of Love? Yet hate they did, with Catholic Inquisitors lighting pyres to consume the living, and Cathar high priests, those they called Perfecti, creeping about like shadows. Not that the Cathars feared death. On the contrary. To the Perfecti, death was preferable to life since they chose to believe that all the beauties of this world were lures set by the devil. Each of these, Catholic Inquisitor and Cathar heretic, wanted the Flame because possessing it would show that the Occitan was theirs alone.

As I take up my tale again, may I ask you something? Why is it that people of your time think that those who lived long ago did not love each other with the passion you so brazenly display? Please don't be affronted if I tell you how very wrong you are. Take Raimon, for example. He knew about love. At fifteen, he had already been swept up in its unsettling and all-consuming rush. For him, Yolanda was the starry future even amidst the troubles of his present, and his troubles were not small. His mother, father and sister had all fallen under the

spell of one particular Perfectus known as the White Wolf. In thrall to this man's implacable will, his mother had starved and his father and sister had fled. And Yolanda's family, the family of the girl for whom Raimon would have laid down his life, as she would have done for him, could not, or would not, come to his aid. Her family were Catholics, you see, and when her Inquisitor uncle was murdered, her brother Aimery, count of my lands since his father's death, found Raimon a convenient scapegoat and condemned him to burn on a pyre.

Aimery did not see the Occitan's future as Raimon did. He saw only that whoever had the Flame, Catholic or Cathar, it would not be theirs for long because King Louis of France wanted it and what King Louis wanted, he had the power to get. Already the king's impatience against his troublesome southern neighbour was growing. Soon he would come as conqueror, take the Flame and with it the Occitan's independence. In a year or two at most, so Aimery reckoned, the Occitan would be no more.

He did not view this as a disaster. Rather, Aimery saw a fine opportunity for his own advancement and mine too. He would not wait for me, the Amouroix, to be vanquished like the rest of the Occitanian counties. Instead, before a drop of Amouroix blood was spilt, he would willingly give me, and himself as my lord, into the king's service. What was more, he would marry Yolanda off to Sir Hugh des Arcis, a French knight of high degree who had the ear and confidence of the king. With Sir Hugh des Arcis as his brother-in-law, Aimery would be safe when the French armies finally rolled in, and my lands would escape the scourge of a war of conquest. And

Aimery also had something else in mind, something that would surely cement his place as one of King Louis's newest but most loyal subjects: the king would receive the Blue Flame from Aimery himself. That would be the moment when King Louis knew he had won.

But things had not gone quite Aimery's way. Raimon had been saved from the pyre and now had the Flame in his possession. Moreover, though the boy's heart told him to follow Yolanda north to Paris and claim her back from Sir Hugh, it also told him that I, the Amouroix, and the whole Occitan, needed him. So he had made his choice. With all the courage he could muster and Sir Parsifal at his side, he held the Flame high, turned south and stood tall for the Occitan and for freedom.



So come with me now to the August of 1242, as Aimery stood at the topmost window of his château, gazing out to the fires on the hilltop some way beyond. His ears were filled with the howling of a dog but his eyes had fixed with particular intensity on the small prick of blue on the edge of that far hill. The Flame was taunting him from its lofty eminence, like a splendid future just out of reach. The dog howled and howled.

A servant interrupted the howling. 'Alain is back from the hillside, sir.'

Aimery stirred. 'Will that damnable hound never stop?'

The servant grimaced. 'Brees is missing his mistress.'

'It was quite wrong of Sir Hugh to leave him behind. He should have let Yolanda take the animal to Paris. A dog could hardly have upset the marriage plans. If he doesn't shut up of his own accord, I'll make him.' Aimery took one more look at the prick of blue and then hurried to the great hall. Despite the dozens of flambeaux and torches that lit every corner of the painted vault and despite the men sprawled about, the air

was full of a brittle restlessness. Though the new count tried his best to pretend the atmosphere was no different from when his father was alive, the fire still bright with flaming logs and the usual stench of cooked meat pervading every corner, even he felt that the beating heart of the place was missing. There were no troubadours singing dawn songs to parting lovers, no knights joshing each other over favours from ladies, no servants tapping their feet to an unfinished rhythm. There was no easy laughter, nobody eating except to appease their hunger and above all, no Yolanda spinning over the rushes. Yet Aimery stiffened his spine. What did an atmosphere matter? New times were coming. Soon, Aimery thought, the Blue Flame would be safely in Paris, his sister would be Lady des Arcis and Castelneuf would exchange the restless vibrancy of the south for the more settled sophistication of the royal court of the north.

It says something for him, perhaps, that though he had never been a sentimental man and had no intention of succumbing now, he still couldn't shake off an unwanted and unexpected tendril of regret as he looked about him. He couldn't deny that there had been good times here, some of which, being older, he could probably remember better than his sister. For instance, he could actually remember the day the two squabbling troubadours, Gui and Guerau, arrived, as unlikely a pairing as a stork and a bull. He recalled when his mother, as a gentle joke, had set up a Court of Love and how he had sat as a page at the feet of a blushing knight on trial for stealing another knight's amorous verses. Aimery had thought it very silly but it was impossible to forget. His

thoughts made him uncomfortable and he was glad to see his squire. 'Alain. What news?' Brees's howling was still audible, even in here.

Alain was splashing his face in a barrel and now he wiped the drops off with a rough cloth. 'We're nearly through the rock, Sir Aimery,' he said. 'Another couple of weeks, three at most, and we should be able to storm the camp. The men have worked well even in the heat of the day and Raimon's men have only managed to pick off a few. It's a real shame getting through that rock's the only way to carve out enough room to launch a proper attack. Until the rock's gone, those camped up above find it far too easy to use us as target practice.'

'Never mind. It sounds as though we shan't have to worry about that much longer.' Aimery sat down in a new high-backed oak chair he had ordered for himself. It had curved arms intricately decorated with figures from both myth and Bible and he was very pleased with it.

Alain coughed. 'There is one bit of bad news.'

'Oh?'

'The armourer has gone over to Raimon, and four more of your knights.'

Annoyed, Aimery gripped a pair of carved angels' heads until they bruised the palms of his hands. 'Idiots. Why, with our victory so near?' It was a question to which he expected no answer. He bit his lower lip hard and then ungripped his fingers. 'Oh well, what does it matter who joins Raimon Belot now? When we take the Flame he'll be just a weaver again, like his father, only without even a loom to his name.' He reached

out and dug Alain in the ribs. 'Weavers should stick to making clothes, not try their hand at strategy and warfare, eh! As for the knights –' he grimaced because despite his words, their defection did hurt – 'when I hand the Blue Flame over to the King of France, I'll still have enough good men about me. If others want to go to the devil with Raimon, let them.' A shadow crossed his face. 'Just so long as we get the Flame before Count Raymond of Toulouse arrives. He's another fool, still trying to unite the Occitan behind him. Why doesn't everybody understand that it's really far better to give in to the king gracefully?' He stood and paced about. 'It's so frustrating that Count Raymond's still my overlord. I really don't see why I owe him any allegiance at all now.' He spiked some meat from a table onto his dagger as though he were spiking Count Raymond. He waved it about then ate it and made a face. Mother of all Saints but where did his steward find such wretched cooks? A globule of grease dripped down his chin and he seized Alain's proffered towel without thanks. 'Go back to the hillside and tell the knights and all the Castelneuf men that I'll stand for no slacking until they've cracked the overhang. If they don't get the Flame from the weaver before Raymond appears they'll get no pay.' He spat. How could meat smell of old fish? 'Once the Flame's with the King of France, Count Raymond will be nothing to us. Go at once. You can eat later. I'll have the cooks keep something for you. That should be a treat.'

He walked with his squire out of the hall and stopped at the top of the château's outside steps, looking about with some satisfaction. His home was no longer the ramshackle

affair it had been in his father's day. The steps on which he was standing were smooth and even and the courtyards had lost their weeds so that the newly naked stones blushed ochre and russet. He had had a loft built above the stables and filled it with carrier pigeons. Never again would Castelneuf be out of touch. Aimery thought that Yolanda would not recognise the place if she returned and then thought it better if she never did.

As if he sensed Aimery was thinking of his beloved mistress, Brees's howls increased in volume. Three pigeons flew off in fright as Aimery finally lost his temper. 'I'm coming for you, Brees! I'm coming for you!' he yelled. Unheeding, Brees howled even louder and inside the kennels the dogboys and hounds began to howl in sympathetic chorus until the whole place resonated. Aimery ran down the steps and across the cobbles. Seizing a whip from the armoury, he threw open the kennel door. When he was finished, there was blood on the straw.

Much later on, when Aimery was long back in the hall, with much scuffling and nipping six dogboys and the huntsmen crept outside. When they got near the gate, they hesitated and then returned to the kennels. While the huntsman kept a lookout, the dogboys used each other as human steps to climb over the barrier and tumble into the stall in which Brees, his howls now reduced to whimpers, was confined. One dogboy licked his nose. Another bit through his rope. On four legs and two, they set about shovelling his ungainly weight over the wooden partition and then scrabbled over after him. He lay panting for a moment before

finally crawling into the open where the huntsman regarded him with the pity all huntsman reserve for dogs with neither breeding nor beauty. 'You may be useless but I don't see why you should be thrashed,' the huntsman said before turning with tears in his eyes to bid farewell once again to the hounds he was leaving behind. They were dearer than children to him but they needed their comforts, particularly Farvel, the hound he loved best. 'Goodbye, my lovelies,' he whispered recognising each individual sniffle, each sigh. 'God keep you.' They cocked their ears as his easy, swinging steps receded, and some moaned.

The huntsman blocked his ears as he neatly bypassed the porter and, keeping his curious human pack at his heels and Brees by his side, slipped through the open postern door. Once outside, he shook himself, saw the Flame flickering in the distance and set his course towards it.