



# The High Place

*James Branch Cabell*

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## **The High Place** James Branch Cabell

"In the sulphurous The High Place, the amoral hero Florian enters the sleeping-beauty story and (unlike Jurgen with Helen) does not draw back at the sight of excessive beauty. Complications ensue: Beauty is realistically diminished during pregnancy, the first-born child is forfeit to Satan under the pact that guaranteed Florain's success, and an irascible saint is eager to call down holy fire on transgressors. Florian treads close to damnation and is saved only when Satan and the angel Michael conspire to let recent events become, again, a dream: he has a rare second chance and learns better." -- The Encyclopedia of Fantasy

## **The High Place Details**

Date :

ISBN : 9780345018557

Author : James Branch Cabell

Format :

Genre : Fantasy, Fiction

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### Insouciantly says

You have to be in the right mood for this book. Definitely funny, in a deadpan ironic witty sort of way. It's hard to identify with the main character though, a rich and entitled man who murders four wives and tries to kill the fifth....

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### Joseph says

Beautifully written, witty and fundamentally cynical. Florian de Puyssange sees the sleeping form of Melusine, the most perfect of all women, and sets out with some singleness of purpose to attain her only to discover that some things are best left unattained. Florian would probably regard himself as an eminently practical fellow; over the course of the book you discover, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, that he's actually fairly despicable by almost any standard you'd care to apply; at the time he seeks Melusine he's already left behind four wives and any number of paramours of a more casual variety, all of whom seem to have suffered unfortunate accidents of one sort or another.

Cabell's prose is, as always, a joy to read, regardless of the unpleasantness of the events being so delicately alluded to; in addition to Florian, the book features various highly suspect saints, angels and devils, and by the end although it's probably not fair to say that everyone has lived happily ever after, things at least have circled back to some sort of conclusion.

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### Terry says

James Branch Cabell was a phenomenal talent. He writes with wit and style, with turns of phrase that can take your breath away and displays of keen insight into human nature. Despite all this I find myself unable to love his works wholeheartedly. I've been accused of being something of a cynic or pessimist myself (I prefer the term pragmatist, thank you very much), but Cabell makes me look like a doe-eyed boy scout. While I certainly do not always disagree with many of his points about the incongruous and laughable aspects of human nature, I just can't bring myself to wholeheartedly condemn even the best parts of it as mere illusion and wish fulfillment as he does. I also find that many of his stories in the great cycle of Poictesme, known collectively as "The Biography of Manuel", lean a little too far towards the allegorical for my taste, though I readily admit that even Cabell's allegorical characters have a fulsome and well-rounded nature. That being said reading *The High Place* leads me to the conclusion that Cabell was first and foremost a moralist, though of a decidedly materialistic bent.

The "hero" of our tale is Florian, Duke of Puyssange, descendent of both of the most famous members of the Poictesme cycle: Jurgen and Manuel. We first see him as a precocious boy wandering against all sound advice into the enchanted forest of Acaire. There he is taken to "the high place" wherein lies the castle of old King Helmas and his magically sleeping court and the boy is vouchsafed a vision of Melior, the King's daughter and most beautiful woman in creation. From this point forward Florian retains this vision as his heart's desire. All else in life pales in comparison to this great and lovely ideal. Herein lies the trouble.

Florian grows into a man who is certainly less than worthy of our admiration. He is a man of convenience who has disposed of four wives, and many more acquaintances and compatriots, when the waning of his desires, or the dictates of convenience, have urged him to do so. Of course in his own mind there was no maliciousness in these “acts of convenience”, Florian was simply following the dictates of his honour and his logic, the twin arbiters of his choices. He also performed these necessary acts in the most circumspect of ways, for he lives according to the great Law of Life as learned from his father: Thou shalt not offend against the notions of thy neighbours...at least publicly. Thus he retains respectability, while freeing himself to wantonly pursue his every desire. Every desire, that is, but one: the great desire of his heart for the beautiful, and apparently unattainable, Melior. Florian soon comes to discover, however, much to his ultimate chagrin, that this unattainability is less a reality than it at first appears.

The beginning of the end for Florian occurs when he meets “brown Janicot” the ever pragmatic and suavely accommodating Prince of this World. As is generally the case, a compact is made which involves a firstborn child and the ultimate loss of what Florian hopes to achieve. Florian is, however, in all things eminently logical so the price appears more than fair in order to attain his heart’s desire. Thus he once again enters the forest of Acaire armed with Janicot’s infernal blessing and destroys the now sleeping monsters that guard the castle of King Helmas, undoing the enchantment laid upon their land. Florian claims his expected price for his hero’s work: the hand of the king’s beautiful daughter in marriage. Things go downhill from here.

Once brought back to the real world some of Melior’s shine wears off. She is still a majestic beauty, but Florian soon learns, much to his regret, that she is also one of the stupidest people he has ever had the pleasure to meet. The incongruity of her actuality when compared to her hoped-for potentiality is disheartening to the poor Duke of Pysange and, after manfully fulfilling his marriage obligations, he leaves his great house of Bellegarde post-haste in order to hurry on the compact of Janicot so that he may be rid of this inconvenient reality. The ultimate moral of Florian’s tale is the truism perhaps more famously coined, and with a decidedly more optimistic spin, by Browning: that “a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?” One attains one’s heart’s desire only at the greatest of all perils, the ultimate loss of it forever. It would seem that Cabell allows for two types of happiness in the world: those whose dreams outsoar the commonplace and are never attained, and those whose pragmatism allows them to dispense with the airy cobwebs of poetic dreams and idealism. It is a world perhaps congruous with our own, but something of a bland one. In the final definition it would appear that mediocrity and self-delusion are the ultimate laws of human life.

To add to Florian’s consternation is the fact that his patron saint, St. Hoprig, also follows Melior back to the present day from his place in the forest of Acaire. The mere meeting of this person, upon whom Florian had pinned all of his hopes of intervention and salvation, is disquieting. Add to that the inconvenience of the saint’s powers and obvious regard for Melior, not to mention his very unsaintly behaviour, and Florian is an unhappy man indeed. In one fell swoop Florian’s somewhat childish dreams of perfect beauty and perfect holiness are both destroyed by the fact of their attainment. The harsh light of day, it would seem, is unable to support the glamour of an ideal. As Cabell himself states: “there is nothing in life which possession does not discover to be inadequate”. Florian’s fault is his romanticism. His unhappiness is tied to the fact, as Melior herself advises him, that “[he] made the appalling discovery that [she] did not belong upon a pedestal.” He should have been more of a realist. Through many trials, and the intervention, not to say meddling, of a number of supernatural forces, Florian is left staring at the bald fact that the only solution to his problem proves to be to send back his embodied dreams from whence they came: to the land of story and song. The moment they are once again safely removed to the land of the fabled past Hoprig and Melior can once again allow Florian to merely admire them from afar and regain for him something of his former belief in their existence as ideals. In the end the ultimate conclusion of Florian’s story proves to be no less fantastic than his attaining of his dreams, and the instructive morality of his life-lesson is left, if not undone, then at least in a place of ambiguity.

Cabell’s story is chock-full of the somewhat acid revelations that poetry and dreaming are little more than

something which "...embellishes a lazar-house with pastels." He notes time and again that "...we strive for various prizes, saying "Happiness is there", when in point of fact it is nowhere." The fate of all heroes and lovers, it seems, is to ultimately rue the fact that they "...have ventured into the high place, that dreadful place wherein a man attains to his desires." I can't really say that much of what Cabell says doesn't make sense, or have precedent in 'reality', but it is somewhat hard to see how the dreams of mankind can be so thoroughly trashed, and in the most poetic of language too. Cabell is a very interesting read, he seems to combine the fairy-tale whimsy of Gaiman and the poetic prose of Ashton Smith with the somewhat incongruous misanthropy of Harlan Ellison. An acquired taste indeed.

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## **Ragnarok says**

A fascinating book in a peculiar, possibly unique style. Though one of a long "series" it stands perfectly on its own. Entertaining and diverse episodes, written with wit and irony but somehow still serious, build up and up to a philosophical conclusion staggering not so much for its content as for the power of its expression and the earnestness of the author. A comic novel tinged with the melancholy of dreamworlds, seen through the complex lens of modern reflection.

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