

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Schiller Byron Maupassant Schiller
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Kipling Doyle Willis
Baum Henry Nietzsche Dumas Flaubert Turgenev Balzac
Leslie Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Whitman Twain
Darwin Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato
Potter Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen
Kant London Descartes Cervantes Burton Harte
Poe Aristotle Wells Voltaire Hesse
Hale James Hastings Cooke
Bunner Shakespeare Chambers Irving
Richter Chekhov da Shaw Wodehouse
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Letters from my Windmill

Alphonse Daudet

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LETTERS FROM MY WINDMILL

BY

ALPHONSE DAUDET

Translated for Project Gutenberg by Mireille Harmelin & Keith
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FOREWORD

As witnessed by Master Honorat Grapazi, lawyer at the residence of Pampérigouste.

"As summoned

"Mr Gaspard Mitifio, husband of Vivette Cornille, tenant at the place called *Les Cigalières* and resident there.

"Who herewith has sold and transferred under guarantee by law and deed and free of all debts, privileges and mortgages,

"To Mr Alphonse Daudet, poet, living in Paris, here present and accepting it.

"A windmill and flourmill, located in the Rhône valley, in the heart of Provence, on a wooded hillside of pines and green oaks; being the said windmill, abandoned for over twenty years, and not viable for grinding, as it appears that wild vines, moss, rosemary, and other parasitic greenery are climbing up to the sails;

"Notwithstanding the condition it is in and performs, with its grinding wheel broken, its platform brickwork grown through with grass, this affirms that the Mr Daudet finds the said windmill to his liking and able to serve as a workplace for his poetry, and accepts it whatever the risk and danger, and without any recourse to the vendor for any repairs needing to be made thereto.

"This sale has taken place outright for the agreed price, that the Mr Daudet, poet, has put and deposited as a type of payment, which price has been redeemed and received by the Mr Mitifio, all the foregoing having been seen by the lawyers and the undersigned witnesses, whose bills are to be confirmed.

"Deed made at Pampérigouste, in Honorat's office, in the presence of Francet Mamaï, fife player, and of Louiset, known as Quique, crucifix carrier for the white penitents;

"Who have signed, together with the parties above and the lawyer after reading it."

LETTERS FROM MY WINDMILL

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

I am not sure who was the more surprised when I arrived – me or the rabbits.... The door had been bolted and barred for a long time, and the walls and platform were overgrown with weeds; so, understandably, the rabbits had come to the conclusion that millers were a dying breed. They had found the place much to their liking, and felt fully entitled to made the windmill their general and strategic headquarters. The night I moved in, I tell you, there were over twenty of them, sprawled around the apron, basking in the moonlight. When I opened a window, the whole encampment scampered off, their white scuts bobbing up and down until they had completely disappeared into the brush. I do hope they come back, though.

Another much surprised resident was also not best comforted by my arrival. It was the old, thoughtful, sinister-looking owl, a sitting tenant for some twenty years. I found him stiff and motionless on his roost of fallen plaster and tiles. He ran his large round eyes over me briefly and then, probably much put out by the presence of a stranger, he hooted, and painfully and carefully shook his dusty, grey wings; – they ponder too much these owlish, thinking types and never keep themselves clean ... it didn't matter! even with his blinking eyes and his sullen expression, this particular occupant would suit me better than most, and I immediately decided he was only too welcome to stay. He stayed right there, just where he'd always been, at the very top of the mill near his own personal roof entrance. Me – I settled down below in a little, whitewashed, vaulted, and low-ceilinged room, much like a nun's refectory.

* * * * *

I am writing to you from my windmill, with the door wide open to the brilliant sunshine.

In front of me, a lovely, sparkingly lit, pine wood plunges down to the bottom of the hill. The nearest mountains, the Alpilles, are far away, their grand silhouettes pressing against the sky.... There was hardly a sound to be heard; a fading fife, a curlew calling amongst the lavender, and a tinkle of mules' bells from somewhere along the track. The Provençal light really brings this beautiful landscape to life.

Don't you wonder, right now, if I am missing your black and bustling Paris? Actually, I'm very contented in my windmill; it is just the sort of warm, sweet-smelling spot I was looking for, a long, long way from newspapers, hansom cabs, and all that fog!... Also, I am surrounded by so many lovely things. My head is bursting with vivid memories and wonderful impressions, after only eight days here. For instance, yesterday evening, I saw the flocks of animals returning from the hills to the farm (the *mas*), and I swear that I wouldn't swap this one hillside wonder for a whole week's worth of *Premieres* in Paris. Well, I'll let you be the judge.

Here in Provence, it's normal practice to send the sheep into the mountains when it's warm enough in the spring, and, for five or six months, man and beast live together with nothing but the sky for a roof and grass for a bed. When the first autumn chill is felt in the air, they are brought back down to the *mas*, and they can graze comfortably on the nearby rosemary-scented hills.... This annual delight, the return of the flock, was accomplished last night. The double barn doors had been left expectantly open since daybreak and the barn had already been covered with fresh straw. There was occasional, excited speculation about the flock's exact whereabouts; "Now they are in Eyguières" or "They are in Paradou" was rumoured. Then suddenly, towards evening, we heard a rousing shout of "Here they come" and we could see the magnificent cloud of dust that heralded the approach of the flock. As it continued along its way, it seemed to gather everything into its path to join the great march home.... The old rams, horns assertively pointing forward, lead the way, with the rest of the sheep behind; the ewes looked tired out, with their new-born lambs getting under their

feet;—Mules bedecked with red pom-poms were carrying day-old lambs in baskets and rocking them to sleep with a gentle motion. Then came the breathless, overworked dogs, tongues hanging out, in the company of two strapping shepherds in their red serge, ground-hugging cloaks.

The whole parade filed merrily past before being swallowed up by the open barn doors. They shuffled inside with a noise like a tropical downpour.... You should have seen the turmoil inside. The huge, silken tulle-crested, green and gold peacocks loudly trumpeted their welcome as they recognised the new arrivals. The early-to-bed hens scattered everywhere as they were woken up. All the pigeons, ducks, turkeys, and guinea-fowl were running or flying wildly about. The whole poultry yard was going absolutely mad!... You'd think that every single sheep had brought back an intoxicating dose of wild mountain air in its fleece, which had made all the other animals hopping mad.

In the midst of all this commotion, the flock somehow managed to settle themselves in. You couldn't imagine anything more charming than this homecoming. The old rams relaxed visibly at the sight of their home farm, while the tiny lambs born during the descent looked all around in astonished wonder.

But, it was the dogs that were the most touching, the gentle sheep dogs, who had busily looked after their charges until they were all safely back in the farm. The guard dog, barking from his kennel, did his best to call them over, and the well-bucket, brimming over with cool water, also competed to tempt them. But nothing, nothing could distract them, at least not until the livestock were all safely inside the pen, the small gate securely latched by its large bolt, and the shepherds seated at the table of their low-ceilinged room. Only then were they content to go to their dog pound, lap up their slop, and spread the news to the other animals, of the adventures they had had in the mountains—that mysterious world of wolves, and tall, purple foxgloves brimming over with dew.

THE COACH FROM BEAUCAIRE

I took the coach from Beaucaire to get to my windmill. It was a good old patache, a sort of rural coach, which, although it only made short trips, dawdled so much that by the end of the day it had the wearied air of having travelled a long way. There were five of us on top, plus the driver of course.

There was a thick-set, hairy, and earthy-smelling Camargue Ranger, with big, blood-shot eyes, and sporting silver earrings. There were two men from Beaucaire, a baker and his dough mixer, ruddy and wheezy, as befits their trade, but with the magnificent profiles of a roman Emperor. Lastly there was this fellow; no, not a person, really, just a cap. You were only aware of the cap ... an enormous rabbit-skin cap. He said little, gazing miserably at the passing road.

These characters, well known to each other, were speaking very loudly, and even more freely, about their personal business. The Ranger announced that he was making for Nîmes in response to a Magistrate's summons for pitch-forking a shepherd. They're hot-blooded, these Camargue folk. As for the men from Beaucaire; they were at each others throats about the Virgin Mary. It appears that the baker was from a parish dedicated to the Madonna, known in Provence as the Holy Mother, and always pictured carrying the baby Jesus in her arms. His dough-mixer, on the other hand, was a lay-reader at a new church dedicated to the Immaculate Conception, whose icon showed her with open arms and illuminated hands. The way they treated each other and their respective Madonnas, had to be seen to be believed:

– She's no more than a pretty girl, your "immaculate" lady!

– Well, you know what you can do with your Holy Mother!

– She was no better around Palestine than she should have been, yours!

– What about yours, the little minx! Who knows what she got up to.
Only
St. Joseph can answer that.

You'd have thought we were on the docks in Naples. In truth, it only needed the glint of a knife blade, I'm sure, to settle this fine theological point once and for all; that is if the driver hadn't intervened.

– Give us some peace. You and your Madonnas! he said laughingly, trying to make light of the Beaucairian dispute: it's women's stuff, this, men shouldn't get involved.

He cracked his whip, from his high perch, as if to emphasise to his lack of religious conviction and to bring the others into line.

* * * * *

End of discussion. But the baker, having been stopped in full flow, wanted to continue in the same vein, and turned his attention towards the miserable cap, still morosely huddled in its corner, and quietly sneered:

– You there, grinder, what about your wife? What side of the parish border does she stand on?

It was as though it was meant to be a joke; the whole cart-load of them erupted into uproarious laughter ... except the grinder himself, who didn't react to the remark. This prompted the baker to turn towards me:

– You don't happen to know his wife do you, monsieur? Just as well; she's a real queer fish; there can't be another one like her in Beaucaire.

The increasing laughter left the grinder unmoved except for a whisper, his eyes still downcast:

– Hush, baker.

But there was no stopping this interfering baker, and he warmed to his theme:

– He's an idiot! No man of the world would complain about having wife like that. There's never a dull moment when she's around!

Think about it! A really gorgeous girl, who every six months or so, ups sticks and runs away, and, believe me, always has a pretty tale to tell when she gets back ... that's the way it is ... a funny old menagerie, that one. Work it out, monsieur, they hadn't even been hitched a year when she breezed off to Spain with a chocolate merchant.

–The husband was inconsolable after that, sitting alone and drinking and crying all the time like a man possessed. After a while, she drifted back into the area, dressed like a Spaniard, complete with tambourine. We all warned her:

–You'd better get lost, he'll kill you.

–Kill her indeed ... Oh yes, I should say so, they made it up beautifully, she even taught him how to play the tambourine like a Basque!

Once again the coach rocked with laughter. Once again, the grinder still didn't budge, just murmured again:

–Hush, baker.

The baker ignored this plea and went on:

–You might think, after her return from Spain, monsieur, the little beauty would keep herself to herself?. But oh no!... Her husband accepted the situation again, so easily, it has to be said, that she was at it again. After Spain, there was an army officer, then a sailor from the Rhone, then a musician, then ... who knows?... What is certain, is that, every time, it's the same French farce ... She leaves, he cries; she comes back, he gets over it. You'd better believe it, he's a long suffering cuckold that one. But you've got to admit, she is a real good-looker, the little she-grinder; a piece fit for a king, full of life, sweet as could be, and a lovely bit of stuff. To top it all, she has a skin like alabaster and hazel eyes that always seem to be smiling at men. My word, Paris, if you ever pass through Beaucaire again....

–Oh do be quiet baker, I beg you..., the poor grinder went once again, his voice beginning to break up.

Just then the diligence stopped at the Anglores farm. Here it was that the two Beaucaire men got off, and believe me, I didn't try to

stop them. What a trouble-maker sort of baker he was; even when he was in the farmyard, we could still hear him laughing.

* * * * *

With those two characters gone, the coach seemed empty. We'd dropped the Camargue Ranger in Arles and the driver led the horses on foot from there. Just the grinder and myself were left on top, each silent and alone. It was very warm; the coach's leather hood was too hot to touch. At times I could feel my head and eyelids getting heavy and tired, but the unsettling yet placid plea of "Be quiet, I beg you." kept echoing in my mind and wouldn't let me nod off. No rest for that poor soul either. I could see, from behind, that his broad shoulders were shaking, and his course, pale hand trembled on the back of the seat like an old man's. He was crying....

—This is your place, Paris! the driver said pointing out my green hillock with the tip of his whip, and there, like a huge butterfly on a hump, was my windmill.

I hurried to dismount ... but as I passed by the grinder, I wanted to get look at him under his cap before leaving. The unfortunate man jerked his head back as if reading my mind, and fixed me with his eyes:

—Mark me well, friend, he mumbled, and if one day, you hear of a tragedy in Beaucaire, you can say you know who did it.

He was a beaten, sad man with small, deep-set eyes; eyes that were filled with tears. But the voice; the voice was full of hatred. Hatred is the weak man's anger. If I were the she-grinder, I'd be very careful.

MASTER-MILLER CORNILLE'S SECRET

Francet Mamai, an aging fife player, who occasionally passes the evening hours drinking sweet wine with me, recently told me about a little drama which unfolded in the village near my windmill some twenty years ago. The fellow's tale was quite touching and I'll try to tell it to you as I heard it.

For a moment, think of yourself sitting next to a flagon of sweet-smelling wine, listening to the old fife player giving forth.

"Our land, my dear monsieur, hasn't always been the dead and alive place it is today. In the old days, it was a great milling centre, serving the farmers from many kilometres around, who brought their wheat here to be ground into flour. The village was surrounded by hills covered in windmills. On every side, above the pine trees, sails, turning in the mistral, filled the landscape, and an assortment of small, sack-laden donkeys trudged up and down the paths. Day after day it was really good to hear the crack of the whips, the snap of the sails, and the miller's men's prodding, "Gee-up".... On Sundays, we used to go up to the windmills in droves, and the millers thanked us with Muscat wine. The miller's wives looked as pretty as pictures with their lace shawls and gold crosses. I took my fife, of course, and we farandoled the night away. Those windmills, mark me, were the heart and soul of our world.

"Then, some Parisians came up with the unfortunate idea of establishing a new steam flour mill on the Tarascon Road. People soon began sending their wheat to the factory and the poor windmillers started to lose their living. For a while they tried to fight back, but steam was the coming thing, and it eventually finished them off. One by one, they had to close down.... No more dear little donkeys; no more Muscat! and no more farandoling!... The millers' wives were selling their gold crosses to help make ends meet.... The mistral might just as well not have bothered for all the turning the windmills did.... Then, one day, the commune ordered the destruc-

tion of all the run-down windmills and the land was used to plant vines and olive trees.

"Even during of all this demolition, one windmill had prevailed and managed to keep going, and was still bravely turning on, right under the mill factors' noses. It was Master-Miller Cornille's mill; yes, this actual one we're chewing the fat in right now."

"Cornille was an old miller, who had lived and breathed flour for sixty years, and loved his milling above all other things. The opening of the factories had enraged him to distraction. For a whole week, he was stirring up the locals in the village, and screaming that the mill factories would poison the whole of Provence with their flour. "Don't have anything to do with them," he said, "Those thieves use steam, the devil's own wind, while I work with the very breath of God, the tramontana and the mistral." He was using all manner of fine words in praise of windmills. But nobody was listening.

"From then on, the raving old man just shut himself away in his windmill and lived alone like a caged animal. He didn't even want Vivette, his fifteen year old grand daughter, around. She only had her grandfather to depend on since the death of her parents, so the poor little thing had to earn her living from any farm needing help with the harvest, the silk-worms, or the olive picking. And yet, her grandfather still displayed all the signs of loving Vivette, and he would often walk in the midday sun to see her in the farm where she was working, and he would spend many hours watching her, and breaking his heart....

"People thought that the old miller was simply being miserly in sending Vivette away. In their opinion, it was utterly shameful to let his grand-daughter trail from farm to farm, running the risk that the supervisors would bully and abuse her and that she would suffer all the usual horrors of child labour. Cornille, who had once been respected, now roamed the streets like a gypsy; bare-footed, with a hole in his hat, and his breeches in shreds.... In fact, when he went to mass on Sundays, we, his own generation, were ashamed of him, and he sensed this to the point that he wouldn't come and sit in the