

*Alphonse Daudet*

*Les Étoiles*



## Récit d'un Berger Provençal Tale of a Provençal Shepherd

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**I**N THE DAYS WHEN I WAS SHEPHERD on the Luberon I used to pass whole weeks without seeing a living soul, alone among the pastures with my dog, Labri, and my flocks. From time to time the hermit of Mont de l'Ure went by, on his search after simples, or, may be, I spied the black face of some charcoal-burner from Piedmont; but these were simple folk, whom silence had rendered taciturn. They had lost the taste for talk, and knew nothing of the gossip of the villages and towns down in the lowlands. And so, every second week, when I heard the bells of our farm mule tinkling up the road, with my provisions for another fortnight, and when I saw the brisk head of our little *miarro*<sup>1</sup> coming up the mountain-side, and growing little by little more distinct, or the russet head-dress of old "Aunt" Norade, I was very happy, I can tell you. I made them tell me the news of the country-side below, the baptisms and the marriages; but what interested me most was to hear about my employer's daughter, our little mistress Stéphanette, the prettiest maiden for ten leagues round. Without seeming to take too much interest, I used to make them tell me if she went about much to fairs or parties, and if fresh lovers were always flocking about her. If you ask how these matters concerned me — me a poor upland shepherd — I must answer that I was twenty years old, and in all my life had seen nothing so beautiful as Stéphanette.

Now one Sunday, when I was expecting my fortnight's victuals, it happened that they did not arrive till very late. During the morning I said to myself, "It's because of the High Mass today"; then, towards noon, a heavy storm broke, and I thought that the mule could not have started, because of the bad state of the roads. At last, about three o'clock, the sky being cleansed by that time, and the mountain glittering with rain and sunshine, I heard, amid the dripping of the leaves and the rushing of the swollen streams, the bells of the mule ringing as brisk and gay as the church chimes on an Easter morning. But 'twas neither our little *miarro* that drove her; no, nor old Aunt Norade. It was — guess who it was — our little lady, my friends! our little lady herself, seated there between the wicker panniers, all aglow with the mountain air and the freshening breath of the storm.

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<sup>1</sup> [farm-boy]

The little farm-boy was sick: Aunt Norade off on a holiday to visit her children.

Pretty Stéphanette told me all this as she alighted from her mule; and also that she was late because she had lost her way: but to see her in that Sunday attire, with her flowered ribbons, her gleaming white skirt and her lace, you would have thought she had lingered at some dance instead of seeking her way among the thickets. The charming maid she! I could not take my eyes off her. It is true I had never seen her so near. Sometimes in winter, when the flocks were led down to the plain, and I used to go, in the evenings, and eat my supper in the farm-house, she would trip through the kitchen, with hardly a word for the farm-hands, always daintily dressed and the least bit disdainful. Now I had her there before me, all to myself. Wasn't it enough to make one lose his head?

When she pulled the provisions out of the pannier, Stéphanette began to look about her with curiosity. Lifting her pretty Sunday skirt a little, lest the mud should spoil it, she entered the sheepfold, asked to see the corner where I slept, the straw bed with the sheepskin coverlet, my cape hitched on the wall, my crucifix, my flint-gun. All of these amused her.

“So this is where you live, poor shepherd? How tiresome you must find it here, always alone. How do you manage? What do you think about?”

I longed to answer, “About you, mistress.” It would have been no lie; but the trouble was so great within me that I could not find so much as a word. I thought she saw it, too, and — little mischief-maker! — took pleasure in doubling my awkwardness by teasing me.

“And your sweetheart, shepherd? Does she climb up, sometimes, to see you? She must be the Lady of the Golden Fleece, no doubt, or the fairy Estérelle — she who only inhabits the mountain-tops.”

And she herself might have been that fairy Estérelle as she spoke, looking back with that pretty smile as she turned to go — to go so soon that her visit seemed a vision only.

“God keep you, shepherd!”

“Farewell, mistress!”

And with that she was gone, carrying back the empty baskets.

As she disappeared in the thicket down the hill, it seemed that the loose stones trickling under her mule's hoofs were dropping one by one upon my heart. I heard them far away, and farther yet; and until sunset I stood as a man in a dream, not daring to stir for fear of awakening. Towards evening, as the hollow of the valleys became blue, and the sheep crowded together, bleating to enter the fold again, I heard my name called up the slope, and saw our little lady reappear, no longer laughing, as before, but shivering with cold and terror and wet.

It seemed that at the foot of the mountain she had found the Sorgue swollen by the rain of the late storm, and that, wishing to cross it at all hazard, she had come near to drowning herself. The terrible part was that, at this hour of the night, she could no longer dream of returning to the farm; for the little lady could never have found the

cross-cut road by herself, and, as for me, I could not leave the flock. The prospect of spending the night on the mountain greatly disturbed her, above all because the folk at home would be so anxious. I did my very best to hearten her.

“In July the nights are short, mistress. Your worry ’ll soon be over.”

And quickly I lit a big fire to dry her feet and her frock soaked in the waters of the Sorgue. Next I set milk before her, and cheese biscuits; but the poor little maid could neither think of warming herself nor of eating; and when I saw the big tears rising in her eyes, I, too, wanted to weep.

Meanwhile night was come, indeed. On the mountain-tops there lingered but a powdery glow and a bright haze along their western slopes. I desired our little lady to enter within the sheep-fold and lie down to sleep. Having spread a fine new sheepskin on fresh straw, I wished her good-night, and went to sit and keep watch before the gate. God is my witness that, for all the love that scorched my blood, no evil thought occurred to me — nothing but a great pride that, in a corner of the fold, close to the curious sheep, who gazed at her closed eyes — a lamb whiter and purer than them all — slept my master’s daughter under my protection. Never had the heaven seemed so deep to me, the stars so lustrous.

Suddenly the hatch of the sheepfold opened, and Stéphanette appeared. She could not sleep. The sheep rustled the straw as they stirred, or bleated in their sleep. She would rather be out by the fire. Seeing this, I wrapped my goatskin over her shoulders, and made the fire brisker; and we stayed there, seated side by side, without speaking. If you have ever passed the night under the stars, you know that, at the hour when men are sleeping, a mysterious world awakes in the solitude and the silence. Then the springs sing far clearer, and the meres are lit up with little tongues of flame. All the spirits of the mountain fare abroad, going and coming as they list; and in the air there are whisperings, imperceptible noises, as if one were listening to the growth of the trees, the pushing of the green herb. Day is the lifetime of the breathing world, but night of the inanimate. When one is not used to it, this frightens; and so our little lady was all a-tremble, and drew closer to me at the slightest sound. Once a long, melancholy cry broke out from the mere that glimmered far below, and was borne up the hill to us, swelling and sinking. At the same moment a lovely shooting star glided over our heads in the same direction, as if the cry we had just heard carried the light along with it.

“What is that?” Stéphanette whispered.

“That, mistress, is a soul entering Paradise”; and I made the sign of the cross.

She, too, crossed herself, and remained a moment gazing upward, very thoughtfully. Then she said, “It is true, then, shepherd, that you people are sorcerers?”

“By no means, little lady. Only here we live nearer the stars, and know what is happening up yonder better than the folk in the plain.”

She was still staring upward, her chin rested on her hand, wrapped in her woolly skin like a small shepherdess straight from heaven.

“What numbers! And how lovely it is ! Never have I seen so many. Do you know their names, shepherd?”

“Why, yes, mistress. Look straight above our heads. That is *St. James’s Road*.<sup>1</sup> It runs from France straight over Spain. It was St. James of Galicia who traced it there to show the brave Charlemagne his way when he was making war upon the Saracens. Further on you have the *Chariot of Souls*,<sup>2</sup> with its four flashing wheels. The three stars which go before it are the *Team*; and that quite little one, close to the third, is the *Charioteer*. Do you see that shower of stars falling all around? Those are the souls which the good God will not accept, to dwell with Him. . . . A little lower — that is the *Rake* or the *Three Kings*.<sup>3</sup> It’s those we people tell the clock by. Only by glancing at them I know, this minute, that midnight is past. A little lower, still towards the south, blazes *John of Milan*, the torch of the stars.<sup>4</sup> Listen to what the shepherds tell about that star. It seems that, one night, *John of Milan*, with the *Three Kings* and *La Poucinière*,<sup>5</sup> being most hurried, set out first, they say, and took the upper road. Look at her up there, deep in the heaven. The *Three Kings* took a short cut, lower down, and caught her up; but that lazybones, *John of Milan*, who had overslept himself, was left behind, and, in a fury, hurled his walking-stick after them, to stop them. This is why the *Three Kings* are likewise called *John of Milan’s Walking-stick*. . . . But the loveliest of all the stars, mistress, is our own, the *Shepherd’s Star*, which gives us light as we lead forth our flocks in the dawn, and in the evening also when we bring them to the fold Again. We call her *Maguelonne* too, lovely *Maguelonne*, who runs after *Pierre of Provence*<sup>6</sup> and is his bride every seven years.”<sup>7</sup>

“What, shepherd? Are there, then, marriages among the stars?”

“Why, of course, mistress . . . ”

And while I was trying to explain to her what these marriages were, I felt something light and delicate drop softly on my shoulder. It was her head, drooping with slumber, that rested against me, with a delicious rustling of ribbons, of lace, and of waving curls. She remained thus, nor stirred till the stars paled in heaven, their light made faint by the climbing day. As for me, I sat and watched her sleep; a little troubled, deep down in my soul, but kept holy by the clear night which has never given me other than beautiful thoughts. Around us the stars continued their silent march, obedient as a mighty army; and once or twice I fancied that one of these stars, the most delicate, the most lustrous, had missed her way and had come to lean upon my shoulder, and to sleep.



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<sup>1</sup> [Milky Way]

<sup>2</sup> [Great Bear]

<sup>3</sup> [Orion]

<sup>4</sup> [Sirius]

<sup>5</sup> [Pleiades]

<sup>6</sup> [Saturn]

<sup>7</sup> [These details of popular astronomy are from the *Provençal Almanach*, published at Avignon.]