

***FRÉDÉRIC
MISTRAL***



***MIRÈIO,
A PROVENÇAL
POEM***

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Mirèio, a Provençal Poem

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CANTO I.

Lotus Farm.

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I SING the love of a Provençal maid;
How through the wheat-fields of La Crau she strayed,
Following the fate that drew her to the sea.
Unknown beyond remote La Crau was she;
And I, who tell the rustic tale of her,
Would fain be Homer's humble follower.

What though youth's aureole was her only crown?
And never gold she wore nor damask gown?
I'll build her up a throne out of my song,
And hail her queen in our despised tongue.
Mine be the simple speech that ye all know,
Shepherds and farmer-folk of lone La Crau.

God of my country, who didst have Thy birth
Among poor shepherds when Thou wast on earth,
Breathe fire into my song! Thou knowest, my God,
How, when the lusty summer is abroad,
And figs turn ripe in sun and dew, comes he,—
Brute, greedy man,—and quite despoils the tree.

Yet on that ravaged tree thou savest oft
Some little branch inviolate aloft,
Tender and airy up against the blue,
Which the rude spoiler cannot win unto:

Only the birds shall come and banquet there,
When, at St. Magdalene's, the fruit is fair.

Methinks I see yon airy little bough:
It mocks me with its freshness even now;
The light breeze lifts it, and it waves on high
Fruitage and foliage that cannot die.
Help me, dear God, on our Provençal speech,
To soar until the birds' own home I reach!

Once, then, beside the poplar-bordered Rhone,
There lived a basket-weaver and his son,
In a poor hut set round with willow-trees
(For all their humble wares were made from these);
And sometimes they from farm to farm would wend,
And horses' cribs and broken baskets mend.

And so one evening, as they trudged their round
With osier bundles on their shoulders bound,
"Father," young Vincen said, "the clouds look wild
About old Magalouno's tower up-piled.
If that gray rampart fell, 'twould do us harm:
We should be drenched ere we had gained the farm."

"Nay, nay!" the old man said, "no rain to-night!
'Tis the sea-breeze that shakes the trees. All right!
A western gale were different." Vincen mused:
"Are many ploughs at Lotus farmstead used?"
"Six ploughs!" the basket-weaver answered slow:
"It is the finest freehold in La Crau.

“Look! There’s their olive-orchard, intermixt
With rows of vines and almond-trees betwixt.
The beauty of it is, that vineyard hath
For every day in all the year a path!
There’s ne’er another such the beauty is;
And in each path are just so many trees.”

“O heavens! How many hands at harvest-tide
So many trees must need!” young Vincen cried.
“Nay: for ’tis almost Hallowmas, you know,
When all the girls come flocking in from Baux,
And, singing, heap with olives green and dun
The sheets and sacks, and call it only fun.”

The sun was sinking, as old Ambroi said;
On high were little clouds a-flush with red;
Sideways upon their yokèd cattle rode
The labourers slowly home, each with his goad
Erect. Night darkened on the distant moor;
’Twas supper-time, the day of toil was o’er.

“And here we are!” the boy cried. “I can see
The straw-heaped threshing-floor, so hasten we!”
“But stay!” the other. “Now, as I’m alive,
The Lotus Farm’s the place for sheep to thrive,—
The pine-woods all the summer, and the sweep
Of the great plain in winter. Lucky sheep!

“And look at the great trees that shade the dwelling,
And look at that delicious stream forth welling
Inside the vivary! And mark the bees!
Autumn makes havoc in their colonies;

But every year, when comes the bright May weather,
Yon lotus-grove a hundred swarms will gather.”

“And one thing more” cried Vincen, eagerly,
“The very best of all, it seems to me,—
I mean the maiden, father, who dwells here.
Thou canst not have forgotten how, last year,
She bade us bring her olive-baskets two,
And fit her little one with handles new.”

So saying, they drew the farm-house door a-nigh,
And, in the dewy twilight, saw thereby
The maid herself. Distaff in hand she stood,
Watching her silk-worms at their leafy food.
Then master Ambroi let his osiers fall,
And sang out cheerily, “Good-even, all!”

“Father, the same to you!” the damsel said.
“I had come out my distaff-point to thread,
It grows so dark. Whence come you now, I pray?
From Valabrègo?” Ambroi answered, “Yea.
I said, when the fast-coming dark I saw,
‘We’ll sleep at Lotus Farm upon the straw.’”

Whereat, with no more words, father and son
Hard by upon a roller sat them down,
And fell to their own work right busily.
A half-made cradle chanced the same to be.
Fast through the nimble fingers of the two
The supple osier bent and crossed and flew.

Certes, our Vincen was a comely lad.
A bright face and a manly form he had,
Albeit that summer he was bare sixteen.
Swart were his cheeks; but the dark soil, I ween,
Bears the fine wheat, and black grapes make the wine
That sets our feet a-dance, our eyes a-shine.

Full well he knew the osier to prepare,
And deftly wrought: but ofttimes to his share
Fell coarser work; for he the panniers made
Wherewith the farmers use their beasts to lade,
And divers kinds of baskets, huge and rough,
Handy and light. Ay, he had skill enough!

And likewise brooms of millet-grass, and such,—
And baskets of split-cane. And still his touch
Was sure and swift; and all his wares were strong,
And found a ready sale the farms among.
But now, from fallow field and moorland vast,
The labourers were trooping home at last.

Then hasted sweet Mirèio to prepare,
With her own hands and in the open air,
Their evening meal. There was a broad flat stone
Served for a table, and she set thereon
One mighty dish, where each man plunged his ladle.
Our weavers wrought meanwhile upon their cradle.

Until Ramoun, the master of the farm,
Cried, “How is this?”—brusque was his tone and warm.
“Come to your supper, Ambroi: no declining!
Put up the crib, my man: the stars are shining.

And thou, Mirèio, run and fetch a bowl:
The travellers must be weary, on my soul!"

Wherefore the basket-weaver, well-content,
Rose with his son and to the table went,
And sat him down and cut the bread for both;
While bright Mirèio hasted, nothing loth,
Seasoned a dish of beans with olive oil,
And came and sat before them with a smile.

Not quite fifteen was this same fair Mirèio.
Ah, me! the purple coast of Font Vièio,
The hills of Baux, the desolate Crau plain,
A shape like hers will hardly see again.
Child of the merry sun, her dimpled face
Bloomed into laughter with ingenious grace.

Eyes had she limpid as the drops of dew;
And, when she fixed their tender gaze on you,
Sorrow was not. Stars in a summer night
Are not more softly, innocently bright:
And beauteous hair, all waves and rings of jet;
And breasts, a double peach, scarce ripened yet.

Shy, yet a joyous little sprite she was;
And, finding all her sweetness in a glass,
You would have drained it at a single breath.
But to our tale, which somewhat lingereth.
When every man his day's toil had rehearsed
(So, at my father's farm, I heard them first),—

“Now, Ambroi, for a song!” they all began:
“Let us not sleep above our supper, man!”
But he, “Peace! peace! My friends, do ye not know
On every jester, God, they say, doth blow
And sets him spinning like a top along?
Sing yourselves, lads,—you who are young and strong.”

“No jest, good father, none!” they answered him.
“But, since the wine o’erflows your goblet’s brim,
Drink with us, Ambroi, and then to your song!”
“Ay, ay, when I was young—but that was long
Ago—I’d sing to any man’s desire;
But now my voice is but a broken lyre.”

“But, Master Ambroi,” urged Mirèio,
“Sing one song, please, because ’twill cheer us so.”
“My pretty one,” the weaver said again,
“Only the husks of my old voice remain;
But if these please you, I cannot say nay,”
And drained his goblet, and began straightway:—

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Our Captain was Bailly Suffren;
We had sailed from Toulon,
Five hundred sea-faring Provençaux,
Stout-hearted and strong:

'Twas the sweet hope of meeting the English that made our
hearts burn,
And till we had thrashed them we vowed we would never
return.

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But all the first month of our cruise
We saw never a thing
From the shrouds, save hundreds and hundreds
Of gulls on the wing;
And in the next dolorous month, we'd a tempest to fight,
And had to be bailing out water by day and by night.

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By the third, we were driven to madness
At meeting no foe
For our thundering cannon to sweep
From the ocean. When lo!
"Hands aloft!" Captain cried. At the maintop one heard the
command,
And the long Arab coast on the lee-bow intently he scanned.

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Till, "God's thunder!" he cried. "Three big vessels
Bear down on us strong;
Run the guns to the ports! Blaze away!"
Shouted Bailly Suffren.
"Sharp's the word, gallant lads! Our figs of Antibes they
shall test,
And see how they like those," Captain said, "ere we offer
the rest!"

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A crash fit to deafen! Before
The words left his lips
We had sent forty balls through the hulls
Of the Englishers' ships!
One was done for already. And now the guns only heard we,
The cracking of wood and perpetual groan of the sea.

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And now we were closing. Oh, rapture!
We lay alongside,
Our gallant commander stood cool
On the deck, and he cried,
"Well done, my brave boys! But enough! Cease your firing, I

say,

For the time has come now to anoint them with oil of Aix.”

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Then we sprang to our dirks and our hatchets,
As they had been toys;
And, grapnel in hand, the Provençal
Cried, “Board ’em, my boys!”
A shout and a leap, and we stood on the Englishers’ deck;
And then, ah, ’twas then we were ready our vengeance to
wreak!

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Then, oh, the great slaughter! The crash
Of the mainmast ensuing!
And the blows and the turmoil of men
Fighting on ’mid the ruin!
More than one wild Provençal I saw seize a foe in his place,
And hug till he strained his own life out in deadly embrace.

And then old Ambroi paused. “Ah, yes!” said he,
“You do not quite believe my tale, I see.
Nathless these things all happened, understand:
Did I not hold the tiller with this hand?
Were I to live a thousand years, I say,
I should remember what befell that day.”

“What, father, you were there and saw the fun?”
The labourers cried in mischief. “Three to one,
They flattened you like scythes beneath the hammer!”
“Who, me? The English?” the old tar ’gan stammer,
Upspringing; then, with smile of fine disdain,
Took up the burden of his tale again:—

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So with blood-dabbled feet fought we on
Four hours, until dark.
Then, our eyes being cleared of the powder,
We missed from our bark
Fivescore men. But the king of the English lost ships of
renown:
Three good vessels with all hands on board to the bottom
went down.

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And now, our sides riddled with shot,
Once more homeward hie we,
Yards splintered, mast shivered, sails tattered;
But brave Captain Bailly
Spake us words of good cheer. “My comrades, ye have done
well!
To the great king of Paris the tale of your valour I’ll tell!”

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“Well said, Captain dear!” we replied:
“Sure the king will hear you
When you speak. But for us, his poor mariners,
What will he do,—
Who left our all gladly, our homes and our firesides,” we
said,
“For his sake, and lo! now in those homes there is crying for
bread?”

XII.

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“Ah, Admiral, never forget
When all bow before you,
With a love like the love of your seamen
None will adore you!
Why, say but the word, and, ere homeward our footsteps we
turn,
Aloft on the tips of our fingers a king you are borne!”

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A Martigau, mending his nets
One eve, made this ditty.
Our admiral bade us farewell,
And sought the great city.

Were they wroth with his glory up there at the court? Who
can say?

But we saw our beloved commander no more from that day!

A timely ending thus the minstrel made,
Else the fast-coming tears his tale had stayed;
But for the labourers—they sat intent,
Mute all, with parted lips, and forward bent
As if enchanted. Even when he was done,
For a brief space they seemed to hearken on.

“And such were aye the songs,” said the old man,
“Sung in the good old days when Martha span.
Long-winded, maybe, and the tunes were queer.
But, youngsters, what of that? They suit my ear.
Your new French airs mayhap may finer be;
But no one understands the words, you see!”

Whereon the men, somewhat as in a dream,
From table rose, and to the running stream
They led their patient mules, six yoke in all.
The long vine-branches from a trellised wall
Waved o’er them waiting, and, from time to time,
Humming some fragment of the weaver’s rhyme.

Mirèio tarried, but not quite alone.
A social spirit had the little one,
And she and Vincen chatted happily.
Twas a fair sight, the two young heads to see
Meeting and parting, coming still and going
Like aster-flowers when merry winds are blowing.

“Now tell me, Vincen,” thus Mirèio,
“If oftentimes as you and Ambrio go

Bearing your burdens the wild country over,
Some haunted castle you do not discover,
Or joyous fête, or shining palace meet,
While the home-nest is evermore our seat."

"'Tis even so, my lady, as you think.
Why, currants quench the thirst as well as drink!
What though we brave all weathers in our toil?
Sure, we have joys that rain-drops cannot spoil
The sun of noon beats fiercely on the head,
But there are wayside trees unnumberèd.

"And whenso'er return the summer hours,
And olive-trees are all bedecked with flowers,
We hunt the whitening orchards curiously,
Still following the scent, till we descry
In the hot noontide, by its emerald flash,
The tiny cantharis upon the ash.

"The shops will buy the same. Or off we tramp
And gather red-oak apples in the swamp,
Or beat the pond for leeches. Ah, that's grand!
You need nor bait nor hook, but only stand
And strike the water, and then one by one
They come and seize your legs, and all is done.

"And thou wert never at Li Santo even!
Dear heart! The singing there must be like heaven.
'Tis there they bring the sick from all about
For healing; and the church is small, no doubt:
But, ah, what cries they lift! what vows they pay
To the great saints! We saw it one fête-day.

“It was the year of the great miracle.
My God, that was a sight! I mind it well.
A feeble boy, beautiful as Saint John,
Lay on the pavement, sadly calling on
The saints to give sight to his poor blind eyes,
And promising his pet lamb in sacrifice.

“‘My little lamb, with budding horns!’ he said,
‘Dear saints!’ How we all wept! Then from o’erhead
The blessed reliquaries came down slowly,
Above the throngèd people bending lowly,
And crying, ‘Come, great saints, mighty and good!
Come, save!’ The church was like a wind-swept wood.

“Then the godmother held the child aloft,
Who spread abroad his fingers pale and soft,
And passionately grasped the reliquaries
That held the bones of the three blessed Maries;
Just as a drowning man, who cannot swim,
Will clutch a plank the sea upheaves to him.

“And then, oh! then,—I saw it with these eyes,—
By faith illumined, the blind boy outcries,
‘I see the sacred relics, and I see
Grandmother all in tears! Now haste,’ said he,
‘My lambkin with the budding horns to bring
To the dear saints for a thank-offering!’

“But thou, my lady, God keep thee, I pray,
Handsome and happy as thou art to-day!
Yet if a lizard, wolf, or horrid snake
Ever should wound thee with its fang, betake

Thyself forthwith to the most holy saints,
Who cure all ills and hearken all complaints.”

So the hours of the summer evening passed.
Hard-by the big-wheeled cart its shadow cast
On the white yard. Afar arose and fell
The frequent tinkle of a little bell
In the dark marsh: a nightingale sang yonder;
An owl made dreamy, sorrowful rejoinder.

“Now, since the night is moonlit, so the mere
And trees are glorified, wilt thou not hear,”
The boy besought, “the story of a race
In which I hoped to win the prize?”—“Ah, yes!”
The little maiden sighed; and, more than glad,
Still gazed with parted lips upon the lad.

“Well, then, Mirèio, once at Nismes,” he said,
“They had foot-races on the esplanade;
And on a certain day a crowd was there
Collected, thicker than a shock of hair.
Some shoeless, coatless, hatless, were to run:
The others only came to see the fun.

“When all at once upon the scene appears
One Lagalanto, prince of foot-racers.
In all Provence, and even in Italy,
The fleetest-footed far behind left he.
Yes: Lagalanto, the great Marseillais,—
Thou wilt have heard his name before to-day.