

To my wife

Preface

In the presence of Honorat Grapazi, Esquire, notary residing at Pamperigouste,

Appeared:

Mister Gaspard Mitifio, spouse of Vivette Cornille, tenant farmer on the property known as the Cigalieres and residing there:

Who by these present articles has sold and transferred all promises of right and deed, free and clear of all debts, privileges and liens,

To Mister Alphonse Daudet, poet, residing in Paris, attending and accepting the aforesaid.

A windmill for grinding flour, located in the valley of the Rhone, in the heart of Provence, on a slope wooded with pine and live oak; the said windmill having been abandoned for more than twenty years and out of commission for grinding, overgrown with wild grape, moss, rosemary and other weeds covering it up to the sail;

Notwithstanding which, such as it is and in this condition, with its large wheel cracked, the foundation on which it stands sprouting grass between its bricks, declares Mister Daudet to find the aforesaid mill to his liking and able to support his poetic efforts, accepts it at his own risk and peril, without any recourse to the seller, for the purpose of causing any repairs to be done to it.

This sale is outright, for the agreed upon price, which Mister Daudet, poet, has placed upon the table in valid currency, the full amount having thereupon been accepted and removed by the lord Mitifio, under the scrutiny of the notaries and the undersigned witnesses, whose testimony is certified.

Articles drawn up at Pamerigouste, at the office of Honorat, in the presence of Francet Mamai, fife player, and Louiset, known as the Wiener, cross bearer of the White Penitents:

Signed along with the contracting parties and the notary after reading it all through.

Master Cornille's Secret

Francet Mamai, an old fife player who comes over to my place from time to time to while away the evening drinking cooked wine told me a little village tale a few nights ago that my windmill was witness to some twenty years ago. The good fellow's story moved me, and I am going to try to tell it to you exactly as I heard it.

Imagine yourselves for a moment, dear readers, sitting in front of a jug of nicely spiced wine, and that it is an old fife player who is talking to you.

"Our land, my good sir, was not always a place dead and lacking in song the way it is today. In yesteryear, milling grain was a good business, and for ten leagues around people from the mas brought their wheat to us to be ground. All around the village the hills were covered with windmills. Whether you looked left or right, all you could see was their sails turned by the mistral over the tops of the pines, strings of tiny donkeys loaded with sacks, going up and down the paths; and all week long it was good to hear from on high the snapping of whips, the creaking of sacks, and the gee-haws of the millers' helpers. Sundays we all went to the mills, in groups. Up there the millers offered good with muscatel wine. Their women were as lovely as queens, with their lace shawls and their gold crosses. Me, I brought my fife, and we would dance farandoles until it was too dark out to see. The windmills, you see, were the pride and joy of our countryside.

"Unfortunately, some French people up in Paris got the idea they wanted to build a steam-powered milling plant over on the road to Tarascon. Beautiful. The latest thing! People got into the habit of sending their wheat to the plant to have it ground, and the poor windmills fell into disuse. For a while they tried to hold out, but the steam won out, and one after the other, the pity of it!, they were all forced to shut down... The little donkeys didn't come anymore... The pretty millers' wives sold their gold crosses... No more muscatel! No more farandoles...! The mistral could blow all it wanted, the sails remained immobile. Then, one fine day, the township decided to knock all the towers down and to plant vines and olive trees in their place.

"Yet throughout all of that, one windmill had remained standing and continued to whirl courageously on its hilltop, right under the nose of the steam mills. It was Master Cornille's windmill, the very one in which we are currently whiling away the evening.

"Master Cornille was an old miller, who had spent sixty years in the flour, and was enraged by the situation in which he found himself. The installation of the steam powered mills had driven him near to madness. For eight days he could be seen rushing about the village stirring everyone around him up and screaming at the top of his lungs that people were trying to poison Provence with flour from the mills. "Don't go there, he would say; those thieves want to make bread with steam power, which is an invention of the devil, while I work with the mistral and the tramontagne, which are the breath of God above..." and he would spout a stream of words in praise of the windmills, but no one listened to him.

"So, in righteous indignation, the old man shut himself up in his mill and lived there like a wild animal. He didn't even want to keep his grand-daughter Vivette close to him, she a child of fifteen, who since her parents died, had no one in the world but her gramps. The poor girl had no choice but to earn her own living getting jobs as she could on the surrounding farms, helping with the harvest, or tending silk-worms, or picking olives. Yet her grandfather appeared to love her, this child. Very often he would walk the twelve miles in the sun to see her at the *mas* where she was working, and when he was with her he spent entire hours watching her with tears in his eyes...

"In the countryside many people thought that the old miller had sent the girl away out of stinginess; and it was no credit to him that he let his grand daughter go from farm to farm, exposed to the harshness of the foremen, and to all of the other misfortunes that young women face in the work place. People also found it doeright awful for a reputable man like master Cornille, who up until then had show great self-respect, to go wander the streets as he did now barefoot like a bum, his cap with a hole in it, his sash in tatters... The fact is that on Sundays, when we saw him arrive for Mass, we were ashamed for him, the rest of us old folks; and Cornille sensed it himself, so that he no longer dared to sit in the tradespeople's pew. He hung to the back of the church, near the holy-water basin, with the poor folks.

"There was something in Master Cornille's life that was not quite clear. For a long time no one, from the village at least, had brought him any wheat to grind, yet the blades of his windmill continued to turn just as before... In the evening people would run into the old miller on the roads driving his little donkey all loaded with sacks of flour before him.

"Good evening, Master Cornille!" the farmers would call, "business is going well, is it?"

"Doing just fine, youngsters," the old man answered stoutly, "Thank God, I'm not short of work."

"And if anyone asked him from where in tarnation all of the work came from, he would put a finger to his lips and say "Shhh. I'm working in export," with great seriousness. No one could get anything more out of him.

"As for sticking your nose into his mill, there was no way to even come close. Not even little Vivette went in there...

"When one passed in front of it, the door was always closed, the huge blades were always turning, the old donkey munching the grass that grew around its base, and a big scrawny cat sunning itself on the windowsill watching you with a suspicious eye.

"All of this smacked of deception and made everyone talk. Everyone had his own explanation of Master Cornille's secret, but the general consensus was that there were more sacks of money than of flour in that windmill.

"In the end, however, everything was found out. And here is how:

"While I was playing my fife so that the young folks could dance, I noticed one day that the older of my boys and little Vivette had fallen in love with each other. In truth, I wasn't upset, because the name of Cornille was held in high regard by everyone, and because I wouldn't be at all unhappy to see the bright little bird fluttering around our house. Only, because our two lovers were together so much, I wanted to avoid an accident by setting the matter straight right away, so I went up to the windmill to have a word with the girl's grandfather... Ah, the old sorcerer! You should have seen how he received me! It was impossible to get him to open his door. I explained my reasons as well as I could, through the key-hole; and all the while I was talking, there was that skinny cat wheezing like a devil over my head.

"The old man didn't give me time to finish, and shouted at me rudely to stick to playing my flute, and that if I was in a hurry to marry off my son I should go and look for a bride for him over at the milling plant... You can imagine how steamed I got listening to this talk, but I was wise enough to control myself, and leaving the old nut to his millstone, I returned to tell the children about my failed attempt... The poor lambs could hardly believe it, and they asked me for permission to go up to the windmill to talk to the grandfather about it themselves... I didn't have the strength to refuse them, and pffft! ... off they went.

"When they got up there, Master Cornille had just left. The door was locked up tight, but the old man, on leaving, had left the ladder outside, and it was at that moment that the idea immediately occurred to the children to climb up it and to go in the window to see what was inside this famous windmill...

"Strange thing! The milling room was empty... not a bag, not a grain of wheat; not the slightest trace of flour on the walls or in the cobwebs... Nor did they smell the sweet warm smell of crushed grain that usually fills such places. The transverse beam was covered with dust, and the skinny old cat was fast asleep upon it.

"The room below had the same air of sad abandon: an uncomfortable bed, some rags, a hunk of bread left on one of the stairs, and over in a corner, three or four torn sacks leaking loose rubble and white dirt.

"So this was Master Cornille's secret! It was this plaster which he was hauling every evening over the roads, to save the honor of the windmill to make people think that flour was still being made there... Poor windmill! Poor Cornille! The steam-powered plant had long ago taken away their last custom. The blades continued to turn, but the millstone turned in the void.

"The children came back, in tears, to tell me what they had found. My heart was broken by what I heard... Without waiting so much as a minute I ran to the neighbors' and quickly told them the story, and we agreed, then and there, to take all of the grain that we could find in all of our houses and bring it to Cornille's mill... No sooner said than done. The entire village set out, and we all arrive up there with a procession of donkeys loaded with wheat... real wheat it was!

"The windmill stood open... Master Cornille was sitting in front of the door on a sack of plaster, crying, his head in his hands. He had noticed, as soon as he had come home, that someone had gotten inside the mill during his absence and had found out his sad secret.

"Woe is me! said he, "I have nothing left to do but die... The mill is dishonored."

"And he sobbed so to tear your very soul, called his mill all sorts of names, talking to it like it was a real person.

"Hey, ho, in the windmill! ... "Hey, ho, Master Cornille!"

"And the sacks started piling up on the platform, and good red grain spilled out all around...

"Master Cornille opened his eyes wide. He had taken some of the wheat in the hollow of his aged hand and he was talking, and laughing and crying all at the same time:

"It's wheat! ... Lord God! ... Good wheat! ... Let me look at it

"Then, turning to us, he said: "Ahh. I knew that you would be back... All of those men down at the plant are thieves."

"We wanted to pick him up and carry him about the village in triumph:

"No, no, my children... first I must go and feed my windmill... Think about it! It's been a long time since it had anything to put its teeth to!"

"And we all had tears in our eyes to see the poor old man scurrying about from left to right, pouring out the sacks, checking on the stone, as the grain was ground and the thin dust from the flour floated up toward the ceiling.

"And to do justice to all of us: since that day we have never let the old miller go without work. Then, one morning, Master Cornille passed away, and the wings of our windmill ceased to turn, for ever, that time... When Cornille died, no one took over the mill. What do you expect, sir! ... everything comes to an end in this world, and you have to accept that the time of the windmills had passed the same as the passenger barges on the Rhone, of parliaments, and jackets with large flowers.