

FREDERIC MISTRAL

WHILST Italy celebrates the bi-millenary of the birth of Virgil, Provence keeps this year the centenary of her own Virgil, Frédéric Mistral, born at Maillane, near Arles, on the 8th September, 1830. His memory is still fresh amongst his people, for he died only as recently as 1914, and we may confidently expect a flood of personal reminiscences from many who were privileged to know him intimately, but to the average Englishman, Mistral can be spoken of only as one who has already passed into literary history, and the justification of these lines must be the comparative unfamiliarity of their subject matter to most English readers.

That Mistral is so little known here is perhaps to be ascribed to the fact that his writings are to us, in a sense, doubly foreign. His most important work, *Mirèio* (Mireille), may be known, as to its theme, through the medium of Gounod's opera, but, of the latter, two versions exist, one of which falsifies the action of the poem for the sake of a 'prettier' curtain. The poem itself has been translated into English, but such is the irony of things, that the more readable a translation, the less it savours of the original, and in the case of poetry one feels dissatisfied with anything but a strictly literal version intended to enable the reader to follow the original, line by line. Mistral is doubly foreign to us, in the sense that even Paris is able to read him only with a French translation *en regard*.

Mistral stands to the Provençal Renaissance of the nineteenth century very much as Dante and Petrarch stood to the rise of vernacular, and especially Tuscan, literature in their own time. He was by no means

its first flower : he was rather the perfect fruit, which was to yield an abundance of seed for the future. But whereas the Italians were producing something which had never existed before, Mistral and his associates were consciously reviving the glories of a past, when Provence led the world in song. And it is perhaps no exaggeration to say that in Mistral, Provence and her tongue have been dignified as never before, even in the age of the Troubadours.

That which distinguishes Mistral and the *Félibrige* from their predecessors of the earlier part of the century is the almost scientific organisation, which they undertook, of what had long been regarded, and despised, by people of education as a series of rustic dialects. On the linguistic side much was due to Joseph Roumanille, the *doyen d'âge* of the *Félibrige*, who was Mistral's senior by fifteen years, and had been his form-master at Avignon ten years before the movement took definite shape. The *Trésor du Félibrige* which Mistral published between 1880 and 1886 was, however, far from being an artificial compilation. It was a dictionary of the language as spoken, and as spoken in those parts of Provence where it had suffered least admixture of foreign elements. It further sought, by defining a consistent orthography, to establish the essential unity of the *langue d'oc* in its numerous dialects and sub-dialects. From 1855 onwards was published the *Almanach Provençal*, which remains to this day the year-book of the *Félibrige*.

Mistral seems to have dominated his group, not only by his superior gifts as a poet, but also by the gravity of his purpose and the clear conception which he had of a mission to be accomplished. Already at the age of twenty he had determined to devote himself to an attempt to revive the whole culture and racial consciousness of his people which had been stifled by the insane educational centralisation of

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Revolutionary and Imperial France. This end he proposed to attain by restoring to his people their language; and this in turn was to be achieved by the fire of great poetry. Politics entered neither into the end of his endeavours nor into the means by which that end was sought. His aim, communicated to and shared with his associates, was to escape from the spiritual rather than the political influence of Paris. And who can say that by doing that which lay nearest to his hand, and by concentrating on what came first in the order of his action, he was not to accomplish what might never have been realised by a political or even a religious campaign? Fundamentally, the movement was one of conservation; *au fond*, to be a good Provençal was to be a good Catholic.

Nor was there about Mistral and the *Félibrige* the slightest tinge of the highbrow, the *doctrinaire*, the *dilettante*, or any of those elements which we group to-day under the heading of 'uplift.' The movement was rooted in the traditions and in the soil of Provence. Mistral was himself by birth and upbringing a son of the soil. His father, a peasant proprietor of substance, had planned to give his son a profession, and to make of him a *monsieur*. Accordingly Frédéric was sent to a high school at Avignon, whence he passed his *baccalauréat*, and later to Aix-en-Provence, where he graduated in law at the age of twenty-one. But he had never been happy away from his beloved Maillane, where during his holidays he had always worked in the fields with his father and his men, and he had not the slightest enthusiasm for the career which was intended for him. On the death of his father, four years later, he abandoned it completely and devoted himself entirely to what had long absorbed his interest. It was among the vines and olives of Maillane that his first poems had been written, that the opening strophes of *Mireille*

had been noted down, and that the poem itself had begun to take shape in his mind. Here also he had dreamt his dreams of the rebirth of Provence. All this period of his life has been painted for us by the poet himself in his *Memòri e Racontè*, in which the whole smiling landscape of his native land, and the life and customs of a contented and prosperous peasantry are vividly reproduced. Those who know the *Lettres de mon Moulin* will surely desire to make the closer acquaintance of this other, and greater, Provençal, who devotes a full chapter of his memoirs to recollections of the youthful Alphonse Daudet.

In another chapter of the same volume is described the poet's first pilgrimage to Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, whither people flock every year on the 25th May from all parts of Provence and Languedoc, to venerate the remains of Mary of Cleophas, the mother of James the Less and of Joseph, Salome, the mother of the Sons of Zebedee, and their servant Sarah. On the eve of the feast, the reliquaries are lowered into the church from an upper chapel through an opening in the vault, and it is at this moment that the pilgrims pray fervently for special favours and even for miracles. The legend relates that after the death of Christ, some fifteen of his disciples were set adrift in a sail-less and rudderless boat off the coast of Palestine, and were guided by Providence to the shores of Provence. The little band of exiles dispersed throughout southern Gaul and became its first apostles. Martha ended her days at Tarascon, after having delivered its people from the monster which had ravaged their countryside; Joseph of Arimathea, as we all know, pursued his wanderings as far as distant Britain; and Mary Magdalen retired to the desert of Sainte Baume, in Provence, to do penance for her sins. Unlike her, the other two 'Maries' (for Salome

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is known in the legend at 'Marie-Salomé,' as Mary of Cleophas is called 'Marie-Jacobé') returned to end their days at the spot where they first set foot on Provençal soil and where the little town of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer later sprang up. In Christian times, a cathedral-church was built to cover the supposed place of their death, and in the fifteenth century King René of Provence undertook explorations, the success of which is said to have been confirmed by the marvellous odours which were given off as each of the bodies was brought to light.

The excuse for this apparent digression is the important part played by the legend of the *Saintes-Maries* in the story of *Mireille*, the first and the greatest of Mistral's longer poems. The completion of this work, in 1859, was the occasion of the young poet's introduction to Lamartine, by a fellow Provençal, Adolphe Dumas. Mistral confesses in his memoirs that his ambition had always been to write poetry in which Arles, his Mantua, might recognise the inspiration of a Virgil, and it appears that Dumas, on first reading *Mireille* in manuscript, had hailed its author spontaneously as the 'Virgil of Provence.' Lamartine it was, however, who first brought Mistral to the notice of the wider literary public of France, and in the fortieth Conference of his *Cours familier de Littérature*, enthusiastically acclaimed the poet a 'Provençal Homer,' in whose song were mingled the '*saintetés et tristesses du christianisme*.' It was to Lamartine that Mistral dedicated his *chef d'œuvre* :

*Te counsacre Mirèio : es moun cor e moun amo ;
Es la flour de mis an ;
Es un rasin de Crau qu'emé touto sa ramo
Te porge un païsan.*

It was indeed his heart and soul, the flower of his young years that he had poured into his poem. A peasant it was, too, who offered the gift; but how

much more was given than a mere branch of the vine, for all its luscious fruit! In its twelve cantos are contained, woven into the passionate story which they relate, not merely the heart and soul of the poet, but the very heart and soul of Provence. They are a veritable storehouse of Provençal folk-lore, legend, topography, natural history, religion and song. The story itself is a simple one: that of the mutual love of Vincent, the itinerant basket-maker's son, and Mireille, the only daughter of a wealthy peasant proprietor, whose hand is sought by suitors of greater promise But it were pity not to quote, *en passant*, from Vincent's declaration:

*T'ame, o chatouno encantarello,
Que se disiés : Vole uno estello ;
I'a ni travès di mar, ni bos, ni gaudre foui,
I'a ni bourrèu ni fiò, ni ferre
Que m'aplantèsse ! Au bout di serre,
Toucan lou cèu, l'anariéu querre,
E Dimenche l'auriés, pendoulado à toun coui.*

(*' Je t'aime, ô jeune fille enchanteresse—(au point) que si tu disais : Je veux une étoile !—il n'est traversée de mer, ni bois, ni torrent fou—il n'est bourreau, ni feu, ni fer—qui m'arrêtât ! Au bout des pics,—touchant le ciel, j'irais la prendre,—et. Dimanche, tu l'aurais, pendue à ton cou.'*)

Mireille confesses her love, only to encounter the blank refusal of her parents to consent to the match. Vincent had once recommended her, if ever she should be in trouble, to seek the patronage and succour of the *Saintes-Maries* at their shrine by the sea; and if ever she needed help it was now. So, by night, she sets out on her wild journey, which she continues through the heat of the following day. The second night she obtains shelter and rest, but the heat of another day is more than she can endure. She falls stricken with sun-stroke, but on regaining consciousness, manages to drag herself on to the shrine,

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where she fervently implores the *Saintes* to make her parents yield :

*O Sânti Mario,
Que poudès en flour
Chanja nòsti plour,
Clinas lèu l'auriho
De-vers ma doulour !*

She is rewarded by a vision of the Holy Women, who console her with a reminder of the vanity of human happiness, and the necessity and merit of suffering. To raise her courage, they recount to her the story of their own earthly trials. But Mireille is clearly dying, and they hasten back to their heavenly dwellings to prepare for her the snow-white robe of a virgin-martyr of love. Her parents and Vincent have now arrived, and against their grief is set Mireille's growing peace of mind and her joy at what awaits her. Vincent had promised her speedy relief from sorrow, if she would but fly to the *Saintes*; and relief she has obtained abundantly. The Last Anointing is given. She seems to be in delirium, but it is the *Saintes-Maries* who are coming from over the sea, to take her aboard their vessel! It is now almost too much for Vincent's faith :

*Tu, la perleto de Prouvènço,
Tu, lou soulèu de ma jouvènço
Sara-ti di que iéu, ansin, dóu glas mourtau
Tant lèu te vegue tressusanto?
Sari-ti di, vous, grândi Santo,
Que l'aurés visto angounisanto
E de-bado embrassa vòsti sacra lindau?*

(*'Toi, la perle de Provence,—toi, le soleil de ma jeunesse,—sera-t-il dit qu'ainsi, des glaces de la mort,—sitôt je te vois suante?—Sera-t-il dit, ô grandes Saintes,—que vous l'aurez vue agonisante—et vainement embrasser vos seuils sacrés?'*)

No, my poor Vincent! You speak of death, but do not understand what it is. It is but a mist that lifts at the sound of the morning bells; it is a dream, from

which one awakes at daybreak She is now aboard with her heavenly companions already they are on the open sea, sailing the paths of Paradise! But to the eyes of those about her, she has smiled, and fallen asleep.

J. K. L'ESTRANGE.

LIGNA FRUCTIFERA

IT riseth in the heart of paradise,
The tree of death, delighted to behold,
Among the silver springs—
To every clustered bough ripe beauty clings—
And warm upon each leaf there lies
The bloom of gold.

It riseth dark upon the line of hill,
The rood of life, set in a crimson flood;
'Tis heavy with dead fruit
That droops unsightly from its crown to root—
A load of shame, so lost, so still,
It chills the blood.

EDWIN ESSEX, O.P.