

The Nativity of the *Santons* of Provence

Translated from the French by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw from Audouard, Yvan. *La Pastorale des santons de Provence*. Paris, France: Le pré aux clers, 1986.

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Gloria is heard with bells and trumpets.

Boufaréo: Me, I'm the angel Boufaréo [Puffy]. They call me that because of the big jowls that I've ended up with because of all the trumpet playing I have to do each time that something pleases the good Lord. He was about to become a Father any minute. And me, I had never blown so loud on my instrument.

Trumpet.

I'm going to tell you how it all happened, because, after all, from where I was, it was me who had the best view of things. It was the night of December 24, and the wild west wind was blowing and all the people of Bethlehem went to bed early. And they pulled the covers over their heads so they didn't have to listen to the wind howl. The west wind, which was a friend of the good Lord, had chased the clouds for thousands of miles, so that the sky would be all clean and all shining with stars for the birth of the little one. It was not a bad thought, but it brought the temperature right down. I only had my wings to cover me, and thought I was going to freeze to death. I hunkered down the best I could.

Finally, I saw them, the poor wretches, it was painful to watch. Saint Joseph walked in front, his beard shaken by the wind like a streamer. He tried to shield the Holy Virgin with his large shoulders. From time to time, he looked back and said:

Joseph: How are you doing, my beautiful one?

Mary: I can't go on.

Joseph: Keep it up just a little longer. Look, I see a cottage there, close by.

Mary: No one wants us.

Joseph: Well, maybe not the rich people, but, here, these are the poor. They will surely make a little place for us.

Mary: Give me your arm.

Joseph: Here, hold tight...

Mary: Oh, how it pains! Aïe!

Joseph: Oh, aïe, aïe, aïe, aïe, aïe, what misery, oh, we are really in a fix. No money, no house, and a wife who is going to deliver in the middle of the night, and in such awful weather! Don't be afraid... Wait, I'll carry you.

Mary: Please forgive me for being so much trouble.

Joseph: I'm sure it will all work out. But all the same, the good Lord, He is asking too much. When I agreed to marry you, I should have given him my terms and conditions.

Mary: Do you regret it?

Joseph: No, but listen well, my beauty, but who am I, me, a poor nobody. And the good Lord gave me the right to hold you by the hand, to carry you in my arms, you, the mother of his little one. And you think I might regret it? Oh, but such happiness, it's something I don't deserve. Only, if the good Lord would only help us out a little. Otherwise, we're headed for disaster! And people will say that it was my fault. Wait here, don't move, we're here. *Knock, knock, knock.* Anyone here? Oh, the poor people are sleeping. I hate to wake them up, but there is no choice. *Knock, knock, knock.*

Boufaréo: Did you hear Saint Joseph? There is no more decent fellow on earth, he doesn't like to bother people, and even, when he sees that the cottage is a stable, he hated to bother the ox and the ass. Of course, they were just animals, but they had to work had all day and they had the right to sleep like anybody else. He said to them:

Joseph: Uh, so sorry to bother you.

Boufaréo: The ox and the ass that he had woken up from a deep sleep almost lost their temper. But when they saw the pretty Holy Virgin so fair and white, and Saint Joseph with his large hands rough and calloused from hard work, they were ashamed and became kind and gentle.

The Ass: Don't stay out any longer.

The Ox: Come quickly where it is warm.

The Ass: You are very lucky: the straw was just changed this morning.

The Ox: If we had known you were coming, we would have cleaned up a little.

Boufaréo: Saint Joseph was a simple man, and found it no surprise that the animals spoke with an accent. And, of course, he had too many worries on his mind to even think about such things because the Holy Virgin, she had just gone into labor.

Joseph: Oh, this is awful. Oh, what is to be done--I have no idea!

The Ass: Me neither, I'm just an ass.

The Ox: I'd love to help, but I'm no good at anything.

Joseph: Dear God, help me out quick. With no one but these two figurines here, how am I supposed to get out of this fix?

Boufaréo: It was almost midnight. I approached the little window opening. What I saw and heard, it seems unbelievable, but it was the honest truth.

The Ox: Since we are helpless, we could always say a prayer.

The Ass: Do you know any prayers?

The Ox: Me, no, but Saint Joseph, he must know some.

Joseph: Listen, you nutcases, prayers haven't been invented yet. That's exactly why the little one had to come to earth.

The Ox: In the meantime, we could at least kneel down.

Boufaréo: It was perfect, and that's exactly what happened. Saint Joseph, the ox, and the ass knelt down all three. It was exactly midnight.

Gloria in excelsis Deo...

And the little one was born. Not even a cry, he was born smiling. The Holy Virgin was smiling, too. The ox, the ass, and Saint Joseph had tears running down their faces as big as olives. Then, Saint Joseph said some words that came from the depths of his heart and that no one had ever taught him. And the ass and the ox who knew even less about it than he did answered perfectly in their turn.

Joseph: Hail, Mary, full of grace.

The Ox: The Lord is with thee.

The Ass: Thou art blessed among women.

Joseph: And blessed is little Jesus, the fruit of thy womb.

The Ox: Saint Mary, the good mother of God.

The Ass: Pray for us, poor sinners.

Joseph: Now, and until the hour of our death.

The Ass, the Ox, and Joseph: So be it.

Boufaréo: Then I went up a ways into heaven, as fast as I could, to announce the good news to the world, and I blew my trumpet so hard the veins in my neck almost popped. *Trumpet*. Then the west wind stopped for a bit. I thought it was me that made it stop. People sat up in bed and rubbed their eyes and said: "What in the world is happening?" Then the rest of my angel pals, those who have sweet voices, sang a little song so the people wouldn't be scared, so they would know that it wasn't the end of the world, but rather the day when the world had just been born. *Born on earth, the divine Christ child*. And then, I hardly knew in which direction to look because, from that moment, miracles started happening one right after the other. The miracle of the Tramp and the Constable, well, who would have thought such a thing could ever happen?

The Tramp, his job is to steal chickens. The Constable, his job is to stop Tramps. For twenty years, he had been chasing, and until now, the Tramp had always gotten away. Now, on that very night, at exactly midnight, was heard in Roustido's henhouse—Roustido was the richest man in Bethlehem—a loud laugh of triumph.

The Constable: Ha ha ha ha!!!

Boufaréo: It was the Constable, who had finally caught the Tramp in the act! *Cot, cot, cot!*

The Constable: This time, my friend, I've got you!

The Tramp: But, I've done nothing wrong!

The Constable: And that turkey that I saw you take with my own eyes, maybe it belongs to you?

The Tramp: Well, not exactly. But it's Christmas!

The Constable: And...

The Tramp: And, on Christmas, everyone eats turkey.

The Constable: Christmas? I've never heard of it! Get going! You walk in front of me, and don't try to run away. I'm warning you that I've got my gun trained on you!

Born on earth, the divine Christ child!

The Tramp: Did you hear that, Officer?

The Constable: First of all, I'm not an officer, and second, don't try to distract me!

The Tramp: But, whether you are an officer or not, you heard it all the same!

The Constable: Of course, I heard it.

The Tramp: And what did it do to you?

The Constable: It's none of your business!

The Tramp: Well, I'm going to tell you what it did to you: I know for certain that it made you want to set me free!

The Constable: What is going on? We've all gone crazy!

The Tramp: Maybe so.

Hou hou.

Boufaréo: You must have noticed that my pals changed their tune, but whatever they sing it always has the same effect. It awakes in the hearts of men things that they didn't know were there, that they had forgotten. Even the coward Pistachié, even his wife, who sold fish, they suddenly felt strange, as if they were changing into different people!

The Fish Woman: Why aren't you sleeping, Pistachié?

Pistachié: I heard a noise, maybe robbers!

The Fish Woman: Oh, you're crazy, robbers indeed!! You should be ashamed to be so frightened!

Pistachié: And what about you, why aren't you sleeping? You know very well that you need to get up at 5 am!

The Fish Woman: I'm having nightmares, I know it's winter, but the fish that I was planning to sell tomorrow, that makes more than a week that I've had them.

Pistachié: But, what's that to you, since you don't have to eat them. Just sprinkle a little water on them, and no one will notice anything.

The Fish Woman: True, but that's not honeSaint

Pistachié: Well, it's been twenty years that you do business that way--why should you change now?

The Fish Woman: Shut up, you make me ashamed! I've got to go look at those fish, and if they aren't up to par, well, it's too bad for me, I'm throwing them out!

Pistachié: What's become of my poor wife, she wants to put us in the poor house!

Hou hou.

The Fish Woman: Pistachié, oh, Pistachié, come quickly, come and see!!

Pistachié: Did somebody break open the cash register?

The Fish Woman: Come and look at these scorpion fish!

Pistachié: Oh!

The Fish Woman: When we went to bed, they were soft and gray, and you could hardly see their faces. Well, look at them now, they look almost alive, see how clear their eyes are, they look like they're going to speak! And their color...

Pistachié: It's a miracle!

The Fish Woman: So, could it be that this little one, is it the good Lord who sent Him to us?

Pistachié: We've got to go see right away!

The Fish Woman: You want to go now, in the middle of the night, coward that you are?

Pistachié: In these situations, I forget that I'm a coward. Go on, let's do it!

The Fish Woman: Let's take your hunting rifle along with us, in case you see the Tramp.

Pistachié: If I see the Tramp, I'll blow right by him, but I'll take the rifle along all the same, just in case I see a hare...

The Fish Woman: If, by chance, you see a hare, you'll do what you always do: you will take aim, and miss it!

Pistachié: Let's go and find out. If the good Lord has performed one miracle tonight, why couldn't he do two?

Hou hou.

Bonfaréo: I can't tell you about all the miracles that happened that night, because there were too many. Everyone in Bethlehem was gathered on the square. They had put on their Sunday clothes, they had cartfuls of gifts, and they were holding candles. There was one who was sleeping: it was the Dreamer. It wasn't because he was deep in sleep, but because no matter whether it was day or night, he was never completely awake. During the day, he stood at his window, arms in the air, looking at people, the sky, the animals, the flowers while saying:

The Dreamer: How beautiful the world is! It's amazing that it is so beautiful!

Boufaréo: With his arms still lifted and his nightcap on his head, he came down to join the crowd. Suddenly, he stopped: he had just seen a sad old man standing under a porch.

The Dreamer: What's wrong with you to be so sad?

The Blind Man: Me, I'm blind.

The Dreamer: On a day like today, you must be happy regardless. Come with me, I'll tell you everything. I will tell you what's going on, and—trust me—I have a wonderful imagination. When I tell you my version of the story, it will be even truer than the truth itself.

Boufaréo: And he took the blind man by the arm, but he didn't know exactly where to go. People were turning left and right and asking each other: "Where is this little one?!" I gave a little toot on the trumpet (*trumpet*). Everyone was quiet, and I told them: Just follow me! So, they took each other by the hand, and followed me while dancing the *farandole*. (*farandole music*). If you will allow me, we're going to file in front of you to see what is happening in the stable. But don't forget to bring your overcoat, because it's freezing there. Saint Joseph was numb with the chill.

Joseph: Oh, this is not Christian weather; the poor little one is going to catch his death of cold.

The Ass: And at his age, a cold will move quickly to his chest.

The Ox: Instead of your foolish talk, try to come up with a good idea.

The Ass: As you know, asses are very good with ideas.

Mary: His little hands are all chilled. The end of his nose is frozen.

The Ox: Wait, good mother, I'm going to warm him up. Would you mind putting him down on the straw?

Joseph: Watch out, he is so little and unprotected.

The Ox: Don't worry, you see, I'm going to lie down next to him, and my friend, too. Hurry, so he will have a little shelter from the cold air.

Joseph: But that won't be enough to warm him up.

The Ox: No doubt. We animals, during winter, grow a thick hide and it keeps our insides warm. Of course, a warm hearth with a blazing fire would be even better. But all that we can give him is our own warmth.

Mary: You are so very kind. My Son will not forget you.

The Ox: If the unfortunate didn't help each other, life would lose all meaning.

The Ass: Don't be hypocritical. Tell the good mother that you are also thinking about the glory of it. Up to now, it's true that there is plenty of glory for the horse and the bull, but I'll bet, from now on, people will speak well of us, too, don't you think?

Jesus: (*Sneeze*)

Joseph: Oh, no, he sneezed! He is going to be deathly ill, this little one!

Mary: Give him back to me.

The Ox: Hold on. My friend, when I blow on your muzzle, how does it feel?

The Ass: Uh, it makes me laugh.

The Ox: It makes you laugh, but it warms you up. Blow on me to see...

Joseph: Hey, do you think it's a good time to play around like idiots?

The Ox: Here is what we will do. My buddy and I are going to blow on him. Together, you will see if it doesn't warm up the little one. Here we go!

Boufaréo: You will say that it nothing would have been easier for the good Lord than to have sent some good weather, a decent December 24—that would have been no

surprise. But first, the scriptures had to be fulfilled. Remember that the good Lord always knows what he is doing. His little one, he wasn't a spoiled brat. He had to be brought up in tough conditions, so he would learn the hardships of life. But, now the farandole dancers are coming. (*Farandole music*). And the Dreamer was first in line, holding the blind man by the hand.

The Dreamer: Well, I've seen plenty of cute little kiddies in my day, but I never knew that cute little kiddies like that cute little kiddy there could be for real!

Bonfaréo: And he was right, that old nutcase! Because me neither, I had never seen baby Jesus, and the just the sight of Him clipped my wings. And all the people there were completely knocked out with surprise and joy. Then they fell down on their knees, and they started to sing out loud (*music: GloOoooria*). After that, there was an awkward silence. Everyone wanted to speak, but nobody knew what to say. And the most flustered one of all was the constable. All the people in Bethlehem had brought gifts but him. So he turned beet red and said.

The Constable: Holy Virgin, and you Saint Joseph, forgive me. I didn't have time to stop home. I was on duty. Otherwise, I would have brought you some pork sausage, buckeye flour, and Corsican cheese. But I don't have anything on me except my revolver. So, I'll give it to you for the child to play with.

Joseph: Oh, you are very kind, but...

The Constable: Don't be scared, it's a revolver of an honest man; it's never been used.

Joseph: Yes, but he might hurt himself.

The Constable: Look, it's not loaded.

Joseph: Ah...

The Constable: Right, I wear it on my belt to make everybody feel safe. But don't think I would have ever used it on my neighbor!

Mary: Thank you, Collombani.

The Constable: You know my name?

Mary: I know lots of things about you, Collombani. For example, I know that you have been waiting for a letter for a long time. Well, you'll receive it in tomorrow's mail.

The Constable: A letter?

Mary: Your appointment as an officer: the minister is signing it at this very moment. So, keep this revolver. Because it would look bad to have an officer without a revolver.

The Constable: You're telling the truth?

Joseph: (*sarcastically*) Oh no, of course not, what are you thinking? And don't you go calling my wife a liar, do you hear!

Mary: But promise that you'll still never use it!

The Constable: Don't worry. Not only do I never load it, but I always keep the safety on. Ha, ha, ha, ha!

Boufaréo: After that, everybody wanted to talk at once, but of course, it was Honorine, the fish merchant, that won out.

The Fish Woman: Good Mother, I brought you some scorpion fish for the little one. Scorpion fish so fresh they are almost still alive!

The Constable: Scorpion fish for a baby that's just been born, what are you thinking! Oh, oh, oh!

The Fish Woman: Hey, my scorpion fish have never hurt anyone! What are you getting at?

The Constable: I'm not accusing you of anything! No, I was just saying that the baby is too little to eat scorpion fish. It would make him break out in hives, if not worse!

The Fish Woman: And you, Pistachié, you're just going to let him get away with saying that, of course!

Pistachié: Oh, shut up. Forgive her, Good Mother. She talks a bit rough, but she's a good woman. Anyway, if you don't want any fish, I hope you'll take my hare. It's a beautiful hare. It weighs at least twelve pounds. I killed it on the way to see you.

All: Ha, ha, ha (*they laugh*)

Pistachié: Well, just look at them all laugh. Yes, indeed, I killed it myself, and with one shot!

The Fish Woman: Ha ha, let's see here about your hare. It's the first time you've failed to come back from a hunt empty-handed!

Boufaréo: The Holy Virgin listened with amusement. Once she even broke out and

laughed. And Honorine and Pistachié were so proud of having made the Holy Virgin laugh that they kept right on fighting, which was no longer funny. So the Holy Virgin, she lifted one eyebrow and said:

Mary: Watch out, you're performance is turning into a Marseille operetta!

Boufaréo: From that time on, each villager took their turn with a little more discretion. The shepherd took down the sheep he had around his neck, and he laid it at the feet of little Jesus without saying a word. He stroked his dog one more time, then said:

The Shepherd: Me, I'm a shepherd. I don't make anybody laugh. I talk to myself. I smell bad. I don't have any friends. Well, actually I had one. Only one. It was my dog. He died this morning, but tonight, he came back to life. So, this dog that came back to life, Good Mother, I give him to your little one.

Mary: Shepherd, my son will someday be a shepherd like you. He will be a shepherd of men, and men don't need a dog to guard them. They need love.

Boufaréo: The words of the Good Mother went straight over the heads of the crowd. But the shepherd, he understood them.

The Shepherd: But if He doesn't want my dog, maybe He will want me?

Mary: The time is not yet come. But He'll let you know.

Boufaréo: Thus, the first apostle was recruited without anyone being the wiser. And the Dreamer raised his hand and said:

The Dreamer: Dear God, how beautiful it is when a man who was sad becomes happy. How beautiful, thank you my God.

Pistachié: Oh, listen to that Dreamer, he's getting on my nerves!

The Dreamer: If I'm getting on your nerves, I ask your forgiveness.

Pisatchié: You talk and talk—and you've never actually done anything your whole life!

The Dreamer: I've watched other people, and I've tried to encourage them. I told them that they were beautiful and that they did beautiful things.

Pistachié: And you've hardly worn yourself out doing that!

The Fish Woman: And he hasn't even brought a gift!

Mary: Don't listen to them, Dreamer. You were sent to the earth to marvel. You have fulfilled your mission. And you will receive your reward. The world will be marvelous as long as there are people like you who are able to marvel. (*music in the background*)

The Dreamer: Dear Ark of the Covenant, Tower of David, Door to Heaven, Morning Star, Salvation of Sinners, Mystic Rose, Laudable Good Mother, thanks be to you.

The Fish Woman: Good Mother so pure, thanks be to you.

Pistachié: Good Mother so chaste, thanks be to you.

The Shepherd: Good Mother of the angels, thanks be to you.

The Constable: Good Mother of the Savior, thanks be to you.

The Blind Man: Salvation of the Infirm, Consolation of the Afflicted, thanks be to you.

Boufaréo: They all turned around. The Blind Man fell to his knees. He seemed to be in ecstasy.

Mary: You thank me, you who have never seen the heavens or the stars?

The Blind Man: I give you my gratitude, I sing your praises!

Mary: You give me gratitude, you who live in the night? You sing my praises, you who are shut up in the darkest of prisons?

The Blind Man: The heavens, you have given me. The light is within me. I feel as free as a bird!

Joseph: Mary my beautiful one, something must be done for this man. You have but to say the word.

Mary: My God who this night has granted all my desires...

The Blind Man: Oh, no, no, Good Mother, no, it's not worth the trouble. Don't bother Him. I know that the world is beautiful, because it is He who made it, and I'm certain that the heavens are even more beautiful because it is there that He dwells. No, ask Him only that He does not make me wait a long time; that I shall open my eyes on the day of my death; that I shall see when it will truly be worthwhile to see. (*instrumental music: flute*)

Boufaréo: Someone came in while everybody was singing. No one noticed he was there. It was the heartless Roustido. He was the only rich man in Bethlehem. He had

olive orchards, almond orchards, and acres and acres of tomatoes. And the more money he got, the more hard-hearted he became. You won't read about it in the Gospels, because they didn't want to make him feel bad, but he's the one who slammed the door of the inn on Saint Joseph and the Holy Virgin, calling them beggars and good-for-nothings. That's how Roustido was. He had seen the Tramp with his strangled turkey and he almost interrupted the singing so he could lay hold of him. But instead he stayed quietly in his corner and, little by little, a feeling of gentleness, of kindness, of goodness came over him. And he continued to repeat to himself:

Roustido: What's happening to you, Roustido, that you aren't angry? You're completely out of your mind! Come on, get angry, will you!

Boufaréo: But he continued to stay very still, and he felt better and better each moment. And when he saw the Tramp timidly approach the baby Jesus with his swinging turkey, he didn't even bat an eye. And the Tramp said:

The Tramp: Little Jesus, You with the skin so white and the hair so blond. Don't be scared by my hair so dark and my skin so somber. I've brought you this turkey.

The Constable: You are shameless! You stole that turkey!

Mary: Let him speak, won't you, Constable?

The Tramp: First, about the turkeys, I won't steal any more of them. This one here, I stole from Roustido. He has so many he doesn't know what to do with them. While you, poor child, are in need. So, I thought that instead of keeping it myself, it would be better to bring it to you. If you don't want it, you can always sell it.

Mary: You have spoken very well, Tramp.

The Constable: Well, I don't want to start a dispute, but that turkey doesn't belong to him. He's trying to break the law. Article 19: fencing and collusion!

Mary: We cannot accept this turkey.

The Tramp: But...

Mary: What we can accept is the kindness with which you have offered it. Do you promise to never steal turkeys again?

The Tramp: Neither turkeys, nor chickens, nor guinea birds large or small. Even though little guinea birds are very good when cooked till they're tender.

Mary: Tramp!

The Tramp: It's a promise, I won't steal them any more.

Mary: Then take your turkey and give it back to the one you stole it from.

Boufaréo: And then there was a scene you've never seen before in your life. Roustido gently pushed his way forward through the crowd and told him:

Roustido: You can keep it. I give it to you.

Boufaréo: It was the first time Roustido had ever given a gift to someone. People couldn't get over it. The Dreamer was even more in ecstasy than usual.

The Dreamer: Oh, Roustido, what you have done is so beautiful. I've seen beautiful things in my life, but never anything more beautiful than this beautiful thing.

Boufaréo: Roustido knelt down and smote his breaSaint

Roustido: Baby Jesus, I'm a vicious man. When your father and mother came knocking at my door, I left them in the street. I can never forgive myself. I'm a criminal.

Joseph: Oh, don't get yourself all upset. You see, everything turned out just fine.

Roustido: I am going to prepare a lovely covered carriage for you, with a gentle horse. And I'm going to drive you to my house and put you in the most beautiful and well-heated bedroom. In *my* bedroom, I mean. And you will stay as long as you like—until the end of your days, if you wish. And your worries will be over.

Joseph: Ah, you are very kind. What do you say, Mary?

Mary: My son and I, we thank you, but we cannot accept your offer. We must stay here to fulfill the will of God.

Boufaréo: And then, everyone posed themselves, just like they do at the photographer's, but it was a pose for eternity. The Holy Virgin and Saint Joseph who looked at baby Jesus sleeping and worshiped Him—they had their heads leaning on their shoulders and folded hands. And they will stay that way until the end of the world—the Dreamer, his arms in the air; the Blind Man, leaning on his cane; Pistachié, leaning on his rifle; the Fish Woman, a basket of fish on each side of her big hips; and the shepherd, with his sheep sleeping around his neck and his dog sleeping between his legs; and the Tramp, who put his hand on the shoulder of the Constable in a friendly way; and the Constable, who is smoothing his mustache; and Roustido, with joy on his face for the first time in his life; and the ox and the ass who have fallen asleep, overcome with joy. And no one of them will say anything anymore, and they will not

budge an inch until the end of time. That's the lot of santons.

There you have it. I've told you everything I wanted to say. Forgive me for gabbing on, it's my nature, but I swear that everything I've told you is the honest truth. So, farewell. I'm going back up to heaven. Be happy, and peace on earth to men of good will. (*music, church bells*).