TARTARIN OF TARASCON; TARTARIN ON THE ALPS

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ALPHONSE DAUDET

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FICTION

Everyman, I will go with thee, and be thy guide,
In thy most need to go by thy side

ALPHONSE DAUDET, born at Nimes on 13th May 1840. Settled down in Paris and devoted himself entirely to authorship after 1866. Health gave way in 1890 and he died in Paris in December 1897.

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TARTARIN ON THE ALPS

INTRODUCTION BY
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INTRODUCTION

TARTARIN's creator was born under southern skies: Alphonse Daudet first saw the light at Nimes on 13th May 1840. After completing his secondary education at Lyons grammar school he took a post as usher in a school at Alès, an episode of his life which he afterwards described in *Le Petit Chose*. Later he moved to Paris and there published his book, a collection of verse entitled *Les Amoureuses*. From 1860 to 1865 he was secretary to the Duc de Morny.

Daudet was now launched upon the world, and his youthful charm, his ardour, his friendliness made success inevitable. He embarked on a literary career and, under the powerful influence of Musset and Murger, threw in his lot with the Fantasist group. But the war of 1870 and his marriage soon developed his talent. He read Dickens and enjoyed the company of writers like Zola and, above all, Edmond de Goncourt; his understanding deepened, and he gained much in sincerity and authenticity. Though never deserving of the epithet "naturalistic," he devoted a great deal of attention to accuracy and documentation; so that his best novels (*Le Nabab, Numa Roumestan, Sapho*) are notable for their felicitous combination of historical fact with poetry. This, together with the fact that Daudet never succumbed to the lure of sentimentality or hypersensitiveness, renders those works both interesting documents of the period and evidences of a rare personal sensibility. It is probably this admixture of opposites which has assured his popularity with a large and faithful public both in France and elsewhere. He died on 16th December 1897.

Amid Daudet's vast and varied output the story of Tartarin occupies a unique place. Fundamentally, of course, it is akin to his other "southern" works (*Lettres de mon Moulin, Numa Roumestan*), but its roots are to be found neither in the *conte* nor in the *roman des mœurs*: it is more like a kind of lyric farce or some huge heroi-comic fresco, which does not quite manage to sustain the warmth of imagination and impetuosity of its opening (*Adventures of Tartarin of Tarascon*) in the later episodes (*Port-Tarascon*, 1890; and even *Tartarin on the Alps*, 1885). The three parts of the story

centre upon a single hero; but as one proceeds from one to the other one receives an impression that Tartarin is growing old and dull, that he is becoming a mere automaton, that the mirth is forced, and the caricature no more than a grimace. In short, it appears that Tartarin himself cannot resist that rising tide of sadness which is really the dominant characteristic of Daudet's internal world.

The true Tartarin, then, is the Tartarin of 1872: a complex personality who, in spite of his claim to represent a genuine human type, is not without literary ancestors. One can detect his resemblance to the great boasters of comic tradition, from the *Miles gloriosus* to *Matamore*. Daudet, however, reveals also his descent from Don Quixote out of Sancho Panza. Tartarin reminds one no less of Marius, a hero who still lives in every Marseillaise story-book: he is boastful, imaginative, impulsive, yet prudent and always ready to go one better. His physique—that fat belly, those large eyes, that little goatee beard, those "double muscles"—makes him a comic figure; but his craving for excitement, his love of the heroic, his horror of humdrum reality link him with the far nobler line of romanticism.

One might almost describe Tartarin as the brother of Emma Bovary. Like her, he struggles in the stifling atmosphere of provincial life, dreams of flight that is in fact impossible, and knows the intoxication of books. But the books which he devours concern not love but hunting: that is the sole difference between him and Mme Bovary. In *Tartarin* Daudet pokes fun not so much at the romanticism of sentiment as at that of adventure and the exotic, a romanticism which he understands so well from having experienced its appeal. He wished, in short to satirize in the person of Tartarin his own youthful illusions, the dreams he dreamed when twenty years of age.

Tartarin of Tarascon is written as it were in a minor key: it is one of those tales of youthful striving and disillusionment which is an essential type of French novel in the nineteenth century. Its lightness and gaiety forbid comparison with *Illusions perdues* or *Éducation sentimentale*; but if one can manage to forget the predominantly comic element and the constant gentleness of the narrative, one is impressed by the sadness of the tale and by the pessimism of its conclusions.

Tartarin is a somewhat cruel picture of French provincial life, a brutal description of Africa—dishonest, starving, immoral, artificial as the scenery of an operetta—where a candid soul can neither believe nor trust in anything. The hero's undoing is his serious outlook: towards the end of the story he discovers that the world is but a farce, that no faith is possible, and that wisdom consists in recognizing the universal imposture. Tartarin, then, is the king of clowns: perched up there on the mosque at Algiers, he joyously recites a whole rosary of Provençal curses; after which, events prove irresistible—all he can do is to return home and accept things as they are.

Yet this return proves no defeat: Tartarin is welcomed as a conqueror by his fellow countrymen, and soon forgets his misfortune. Deaf to the lessons of reality, unaffected by the education of life, the happy victim of his own imagination, he eludes classification as romantic or anti-romantic, and escapes into the realms of fantasy. He is joyous, incorrigible, unshakable, invulnerable, indomitable, supple, and resilient as a hero of Swift or of Voltaire. It is right, therefore, that his adventures are related on a good-humoured note, behind which one can hear the voice of the story-teller: Tartarin thus represents the supreme achievement of a literature that is "lived, spoken, and gesticulated," a literature that is closely akin to the Langue d'Oc which some of Daudet's enthusiastic friends were at that time endeavouring to revive. This "oral" quality lends the narrative its warmth of imagination, its humour, its rapidity. It brings us closer to Daudet himself: laying aside for a while the spirit of sarcasm, he devotes himself to what is, perhaps, his true vocation as a writer—to the joy of experience and description. Daudet used to describe himself as a "machine for feeling"; he spoke of himself as "porous and penetrable, full of impressions and sensations that would fill a heap of books." *Tartarin*, at any rate, is full of such sensations. They enable him to paint his hero's adventures against a delightful background of experience, of landscape—the Provençal countryside, the port of Marseilles, Africa—which, by their vitality and freshness, constitute one of the principal charms of his book. There is a delicate equilibrium between memory and fantasy, between the imaginary and the real.