

# WILLIAMSPORT SUN-GAZETTE

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## The Mass of the Shepherds of Provence By Dewing Woodward



IMAGE PROVIDED An illustration by Katherine Anderson shows Dewing Woodward, Louise Johnson, Gris Gris the donkey and Dandelion, their dog, on their way to the Cathedral at Arles in Provence, France, for Christmas midnight Mass.

Edited by Mary Sieminski

[Note from the Editor: Williamsport artist Dewing Woodward (1856-1950) and her partner, Louise Johnson (1863-1947), spent five years living in Provence, in the south of France, during the late 1800s. Woodward wrote up the story of their Christmas visit to the ancient Arles Chapel. The story was printed by Maverick Press in Woodstock, New York, in 1911, and Woodward used it as a Christmas card. At least one copy survives, and I was able to read it in the Special Collections Room

of the New York Public Library. It is reproduced here, slightly shortened, with a few annotations for clarity.]

Go, little book,

Go wish to all

Joy in the heart,

A feast in the hall

## CHRISTMAS

he white ribbon of road which winds through the Crau [a region in Provence] among vineyards submerged for winter and olive orchards stripped of all but their little gray leaves was almost gay. As far as one could see, groups of people were following its devious way through the plain, all in one direction, giving an air of festivity to the region, usually deserted, of Les Baux.

The larger number of the travelers were shepherds, handsome fellows; looking like priests of some strange cult, staff in hand, wrapped in long brown cloaks falling in heavy folds quite to their feet.

Here and there a cart from some Mas [traditional farmhouse] was seen, and one tiny turn-out was noticeable in the front. A beautiful mouse-colored donkey, marked with the blackest of crosses, decorated with the reddest of pompons and the shiniest of brass-trimmed harness trotted along merrily playing with a small brown spaniel who leaped at his nose every other step, drew a yellow cart containing two women.

We were going. “We” being my house-mate [Louise Johnson], our dog Dandelion, Gris-Gris the donkey, and myself—going with the shepherds and the farmers to the Christmas Mass in the Chapel of Les Baux.

.... As we neared the hill out of whose crest the hamlet and chateau of Les Baux are carved, the violet twilight began to veil the land and the road looked very steep and long, winding, winding up into the sky, the crenellated buildings frowning over at us from above.

Gris-Gris grew disheartened as he caught sight of the ascent, waved his ears in polite protest and stepped, looking around at us appealingly. After a few moments urging, we decided to walk, knowing it was useless to argue with Gris-Gris—*“even with a stick.”*

Those superb shepherds must have been vastly amused at the spectacle we then presented. A driverless donkey-cart pushed from behind by one foreign lunatic while another led the unwilling beast by his velvet nose, and a small liver colored Clumber Spaniel throned triumphantly in his mistress' place.

We were received at the inn—literally with open arms, although our host was visibly embarrassed as to how he should dispose of us. The donkey he could easily house, but we were the first foreigners who had demanded from him hospitality for the night. We assured ourselves first of Gris-Gris' comfort, then followed the inn-keeper into a lovely, low shadowy room; the vaulted roof supported by five great pillars cut out of the rock, a huge fire-place filling one entire side, with several fowl turning on a spit before the fire . . . .

The room was evidently formerly the refectory of a convent, an almost effaced fresco on the wall facing the fire-place had once been the Lord's Supper, the heavy table underneath it was supported by fat sculptured angels—in guise of legs—and flanked by benches that resembled choir stalls. On the table were ranged plates and spoons of olive wood, and porringers [low bowls] of green pottery for many guests.

Beside the fire in a sculptured chair with hood and wings sat a beautiful old priest, who gave us his benediction as we saluted him, then consulted with the inn-keeper in the tongue of Provence. A conclusion was reached at his suggestion, and the host lighted a candle and led us by many turns around many corners, up and down many little flights of stairs through a subterranean passage into a room almost as large and quite as imposing as the one we had left . . . .

With much difficulty and many blunders, we retraced the way to the refectory, although from afar the savory odors and cheery voices served as guides. Many of our neighbors from Raphèle-les-Arles were there and we gathered with them about the fire-place and were served by [a] pretty girl with dried figs, grey bread and porringers of hot spiced wine to stay us until the hour for Mass. Many were the legends told by those dark-faced golden-throated men and women.

At eleven o'clock, each shepherd wrapped himself in his mantle of rust-colored homespun, lighted a torch at the blaze in chimney and we all walked together to the little chapel hard by. It is a bare, poor little chapel, carvings eaten away by exposure; statuettes broken or missing entirely, but in the clear starlight of the southern night it was very lovely. The shepherds ranged themselves in a double line on each side of the long flight of steps leading to the entrance, the dancing light of the torches gilding every jutting fragment of stone, and sang cantiques [hymns] of Noel while awaiting the officiating priest. . . .

We were given the high carved stalls belonging to the Chatelaines [the mistresses of the chateaus], a point of vantage. Seven times around the little chapel went the Processional, filling it with a golden glory of color and sound, then crowded the choir to overflowing and stood in double line from the channel steps to this door.

The singing—it cannot be described—the Mass was Gounod's; but the sonority and magnetism of those male voices, the silver flute in the throat of the beautiful lad who sang soli, my own throat closes as I recall it.

The mass concluded, the officiant with his acolytes descended the altar steps, and chanting, the Recessional, wound, overlapping seven times around the little chapel, passed still chanting, along the street under the shining stars to the inn where on the steps the torches were reversed and extinguished and stored carefully in the hall against the need of another Christmas.

The fowl we had seen roasting on the spits were being swiftly dismembered, we were each served with a generous trencher full, and we ate and drank hot spiced wine from the green ecuelles [soup bowls], told stories and sang songs until the rosy dawn looked between the mullions to warn us that the Mass and Reveillon of Les Baux were but another memory.

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