



Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

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REGISTERED IN GREAT BRITAIN

WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



Maese Pérez, the Organist*

By GUSTAVO ADOLFO BECQUER

DO YOU see that man with the scarlet cloak and the white plume in his hat and the gold-embroidered vest? I mean the one just getting out of his litter and going to greet that lady — the one coming along after those four pages who are carrying torches? Well, that is the Marquis of Mascoso, lover of the widow, the Countess of Villapineda. They say that before he began paying court to her he had

*Translated from the Spanish.

sought the hand of a very wealthy man's daughter, but the girl's father, who they say is a trifle close-fisted — but hush! Speaking of the devil—do you see that man closely wrapped in his cloak coming on foot under the arch of San Felipe? Well, he is the father in question. Everybody in Seville knows him on account of his immense fortune.

"Look—look at that group of stately men! They are the twenty-four knights. Aha! there's that Fleming, too. They

say that the gentlemen of the green cross have not challenged him yet, thanks to his influence with the great ones at Madrid. All he comes to church for is to hear the music.

"Alas! neighbor, that looks bad. I fear there's going to be a scuffle. I shall take refuge in the church, for, according to my guess, there will be more blows than *Paternosters*. Look, look! the Duke of Alcalá's people are coming round the corner of Saint Peter's Square, and I think I see the Duke of Medinasidonia's men in Dueñas Alley. Didn't I tell you? There—there! The blows are beginning. Neighbor, neighbor, this way before they close the doors!

"But what's that? They've left off. What's that light? Torches! a litter! It's the Bishop himself! God preserve him in his office as many centuries as I desire to live myself! If it were not for him, half Seville would have been burned up by this time with these quarrels of the dukes. Look at them, look at them, the hypocrites, how they both press forward to kiss the Bishop's ring!

"But come, neighbor—come into the church before it is packed full. Some nights like this it is so crowded that you couldn't get in if you were no larger than a grain of wheat. The nuns have a prize in their organist. Other sisterhoods have made Maese Pérez magnificent offers; nothing strange about that, though, for the very Archbishop has offered him mountains of gold if he would go to the cathedral. But he would not listen to them. He would sooner die than give up his beloved organ. You don't know Maese Pérez? Oh, I forgot you had just come to the neighborhood. Well, he is a holy man; poor, to be sure, but as charitable as any man that ever lived. With no relative but a daughter, and no friend but his organ, he spends all his time in

caring for the one and repairing the other. The organ is an old affair, you must know; but that makes no difference to him. He handles it so that its tone is a wonder. How he does know it! and all by touch, too, for did I tell you that the poor man was born blind?

"Humble, too, as the very stones. He always says that he is only a poor convent organist, when the fact is he could give lessons in *sol fa* to the very chapel-master of the Primate. You see, he began before he had teeth. His father had the same position before him, and as the boy showed such talent, it was very natural that he should succeed his father when the latter died. And what a touch he has, God bless him! He always plays well, always; but on a night like this he is wonderful. He has the greatest devotion to this Christmas Eve mass, and when the host is elevated, precisely at twelve o'clock, which is the time that Our Lord came into the world, his organ sounds like the voices of angels.

"But why need I try to tell you about what you are going to hear tonight? It is enough for you to see that all the elegance of Seville, the very Archbishop included, comes to a humble convent to listen to him. And it is not only the learned people who can understand his skill that come; the common people, too, swarm to the church, and are as still as the dead when Maese Pérez puts his hands to the organ. And when the host is elevated, then you can hear a fly. Great tears fall from every eye, and when the music is over a long-drawn sigh is heard, showing how the people have been holding their breath all through.

"But come, come, the bells have stopped ringing, and the mass is going to begin. Hurry in. This is Christmas Eve for everybody, but for no one is it a greater occasion than for us."

So saying, the good woman who had been acting as cicerone for her neighbor pressed through the portico of the Convent of Santa Inés, and elbowing this one and pushing the other, succeeded in getting inside the church, forcing her way through the multitude that was crowding about the door.

2

THE church was profusely lighted. The flood of light which fell from the altars glanced from the rich jewels of the great ladies, who, kneeling upon velvet cushions placed before them by pages, and taking their prayer-books from the hands of female attendants, formed a brilliant circle around the chancel lattice. Standing next that lattice, wrapped in their richly colored and embroidered cloaks, letting their green and red orders be seen with studied carelessness, holding in one hand their hats, the plumes sweeping the floor, and letting the other rest upon the polished hilts of rapiers or jeweled handles of daggers, the twenty-four knights, and a large part of the highest nobility of Seville, seemed to be forming a wall for the purpose of keeping their wives and daughters from contact with the populace. The latter, swaying back and forth at the rear of the nave, with a noise like that of a rising surf, broke out into joyous acclamations as the Archbishop was seen to come in. That dignitary seated himself near the high altar under a scarlet canopy, surrounded by his attendants, and three times blessed the people.

It was time for the mass to begin.

Nevertheless, several minutes passed before the celebrant appeared. The multitude began to murmur impatiently; the knights exchanged words with one another in a low tone; and the Archbishop sent one of his attendants to the sacris-

tan to inquire why the ceremony did not begin.

"Maese Pérez has fallen sick, very sick, and it will be impossible for him to come to the midnight mass."

This was the word brought back by the attendant.

The news ran instantly through the crowd. The disturbance caused by it was so great that the chief judge rose to his feet, and the officers came into the church, to enforce silence.

Just then a man of unpleasant face, thin, bony, and cross-eyed too, pushed up to the place where the Archbishop was sitting.

"Maese Pérez is sick," he said; "the ceremony can not begin. If you see fit, I will play the organ in his absence. Maese Pérez is not the best organist in the world, nor need this instrument be left unused after his death for lack of anyone able to play it."

The Archbishop nodded his head in assent, although some of the faithful, who had already recognized in that strange person an envious rival of the organist of Santa Inés, were breaking out in cries of displeasure. Suddenly a surprising noise was heard in the portico.

"Maese Pérez is here! Maese Pérez is here!"

At this shout, coming from those jammed in by the door, everyone looked around.

Maese Pérez, pale and feeble, was in fact entering the church, brought in a chair which all were quarreling for the honor of carrying upon their shoulders.

The commands of the physicians, the tears of his daughter—nothing had been able to keep him in bed.

"No," he had said; "this is the last one, I know it. I know it, and I do not want to die without visiting my organ again, this night above all, this Christmas

Eve. Come, I desire it, I order it; come, to the church!"

His desire had been gratified. The people carried him in their arms to the organ-loft. The mass began.

Twelve struck on the cathedral clock.

The introit came, then the Gospel, then the offertory, and the moment arrived when the priest, after consecrating the sacred water, took it in his hands and began to elevate it. A cloud of incense filled the church in bluish undulations. The little bells rang out in vibrating peals, and Maese Pérez placed his aged fingers upon the organ keys.

The multitudinous voices of the metal tubes gave forth a prolonged and majestic chord, which died away little by little, as if a gentle breeze had borne away its last echoes.

To this opening burst, which seemed like a voice lifted up to heaven from earth, responded a sweet and distant note, which went on swelling and swelling in volume until it became a torrent of overpowering harmony. It was the voice of the angels, traversing space, and reaching the world.

Then distant hymns began to be heard, intoned by the hierarchies of seraphim; a thousand hymns at once, mingling to form a single one, though this one was only an accompaniment to a strange melody which seemed to float above that ocean of mysterious echoes, like a strip of fog above the waves of the sea.

One song after another died away. The movement grew simpler. Now only two voices were heard, whose echoes blended. Then but one remained, and alone sustained a note as brilliant as a thread of light. The priest bowed his face, and above his gray head appeared the host. At that moment the note which Maese Pérez was holding began to swell, and

swell, and an explosion of unspeakable joy filled the church.

From each of the notes forming that magnificent chord, a theme was developed; and some near, others far away, these brilliant, those muffled, one would have said that the waters and the birds, the breezes and the forests, men and angels, earth and heaven, were singing, each in its own language, a hymn in praise of the Savior's birth.

The people listened, amazed and breathless. The officiating priest felt his hands trembling; for it seemed as if he had seen the heavens opened and the host transfigured.

The organ kept on, but its voice sank away gradually, like a tone going from echo to echo, and dying as it goes. Suddenly a cry was heard in the organ-loft—a piercing, shrill cry, the cry of a woman.

The organ gave a strange, discordant sound, like a sob, and then was silent.

The multitude flocked to the stairs leading up to the organ-loft, toward which the anxious gaze of the faithful was turned.

"What has happened? What is the matter?" one asked another, and no one knew what to reply. The confusion increased. The excitement threatened to disturb the good order and decorum fitting within a church.

"What was that?" asked the great ladies of the chief judge. He had been one of the first to ascend to the organ-loft. Now, pale and displaying signs of deep grief, he was going to the Archbishop, who was anxious, like everybody else, to know the cause of the disturbance.

"What's the matter?"

"Maese Pérez has just expired."

In fact, when the first of the faithful rushed up the stairway and reached the

organ-loft, they saw the poor organist fallen face down upon the keys of his old instrument, which was still vibrating, while his daughter, kneeling at his feet, was vainly calling to him with tears and sobs.

3

"GOOD evening, my dear Doña Baltasara. Are you also going tonight to the Christmas Eve mass? For my part, I was intending to go to the parish church to hear it, but what has happened—where is Vicente going, do you ask? Why, where the crowd goes. And, I must say, to tell the truth, that ever since Maese Pérez died it seems as if a marble slab was on my heart whenever I go to Santa Inés. Poor dear man! He was a saint! I know one thing—I keep a piece of his cloak as a relic, and he deserves it. I solemnly believe that if the Archbishop would stir in the matter, our grandchildren would see his image among the saints on the altars. But, of course, he won't do that. The dead and absent have no friends, as they say. It's all the latest thing, nowadays; you understand me. What? You do not know what has happened? Well, it's true you are not exactly in our situation. From our house to the church, and from the church to our house—a word here and another one there—on the wing—without any curiosity whatever—I easily find out all the news.

"Well, then, it's a settled thing that the organist of San Roman—that squint-eye, who is always slandering other organists—that great blunderer, who seems more like a butcher than a master of *sol fa*—is going to play this Christmas Eve in Maese Pérez's old place. Of course, you know, for everybody knows it, and it is a public matter in all Seville, that no one dared to try it. His daughter herself would not, though she is a profes-

sor of music herself. After her father's death she went into the convent as a novice. Her unwillingness to play was the most natural thing in the world; accustomed as she was to those marvelous performances, any other playing must have appeared bad to her, not to speak of her desire to avoid comparisons. But when the sisterhood had already decided that in honor of the dead organist, and as a token of respect to his memory, the organ should not be played tonight, here comes this fellow along, and says that he is ready to play it.

"Ignorance is the boldest of all things. It is true, the fault is not his, so much as theirs who have consented to this profanation, but that is the way of the world. But, I say, there's no small bit of people coming. Anyone would say that nothing had changed since last year. The same distinguished persons, the same elegant costumes, the crowding at the door, the same excitement in the portico, the same throng in the church. Alas! if the dead man were to rise, he would feel like dying again to hear his organ played by inferior hands. The fact is, if what the people of the neighborhood tell me is true, they are getting a fine reception ready for the intruder. When the time comes for him to touch the keys, there is going to break out a racket made by timbrels, drums, and horse-fiddles, so that you can't hear anything else. But hush! there's the hero of the occasion going into the church. Goodness! what gaudy clothes, what a neck-cloth, what a high and mighty air! Come, hurry up, the Archbishop came only a moment ago, and the mass is going to begin. Come on; I guess this night will give us something to talk about for many a day!"

Saying this, the worthy woman, whom the reader recognizes by her abrupt talkativeness, went into the Church of Santa

Inés, opening for herself a path, in her usual way, by shoving and elbowing through the crowd.

THE ceremony had already begun. The church was as brilliant as the year before.

The new organist, after passing between the rows of the faithful in the nave, and going to kiss the Archbishop's ring, had gone up to the organ-loft, where he was trying one stop of the organ after another, with an affected and ridiculous gravity.

A low, confused noise was heard coming from the common people clustered at the rear of the church, a sure augury of the coming storm, which would not be long in breaking.

"He is a mere clown," said some, "who does not know how to do anything, not even look straight."

"He is an ignoramus," said others, "who, after having made a perfect rattle out of the organ in his own church, comes here to profane Maese Pérez's."

And while one was taking off his cloak so as to be ready to beat his drum to good advantage, and another was testing his timbrel, and all were more and more buzzing out in talk, only here and there could one be found to defend even feebly that curious person, whose proud and pedantic bearing so strongly contrasted with the modest appearance and kind affability of Maese Pérez.

At last the looked-for moment arrived, when the priest, after bowing low and murmuring the sacred words, took the host in his hands. The bells gave forth a peal, like a rain of crystal notes; the transparent waves of incense rose, and the organ sounded.

But its first chord was drowned by a horrible clamor which filled the whole church. Bagpipes, horns, timbrels, drums,

every instrument known to the populace, lifted up their discordant voices all at once.

The confusion and clangor lasted but a few seconds. As the noises began, so they ended, all together.

The second chord, full, bold, magnificent, sustained itself, pouring from the organ's metal tubes like a cascade of inexhaustible and sonorous harmony.

Celestial songs like those that caress the ear in moments of ecstasy; songs which the soul perceives, but which the lips can not repeat; single notes of a distant melody, which sound at intervals, borne on the breeze; the rustle of leaves kissing each other on the trees with a murmur like rain; trills of larks which rise with quivering songs from among the flowers like a flight of arrows to the sky; nameless sounds, overwhelming as the roar of a tempest; fluttering hymns, which seemed to be mounting to the throne of the Lord like a mixture of light and sound—all were expressed by the organ's hundred voices, with more vigor, more subtle poetry, more weird coloring, than had ever been known before.

WHEN the organist came down from the loft the crowd which pressed up to the stairway was so great, and their eagerness to see and greet him so intense, that the chief judge, fearing, and not without reason, that he would be suffocated among them all, ordered some of the officers to open a path for the organist with their staves of office, so that he could reach the high altar, where the prelate was waiting for him.

"You perceive," said the Archbishop, "that I have come all the way from my palace to hear you. Now, are you going to be as cruel as Maese Pérez? He would never save me the journey, by going to play the Christmas Eve mass in the cathedral."

"Next year," replied the organist, "I promise to give you the pleasure; since, for all the gold in the world, I would never play this organ again."

"But why not?" interrupted the prelate.

"Because," returned the organist, endeavoring to repress the agitation which revealed itself in the pallor of his face—"because it is so old and poor; one can not express one's self on it satisfactorily."

The Archbishop withdrew, followed by his attendants. One after another the litters of the great folk disappeared in the windings of the neighboring streets. The group in the portico scattered.

The sexton was locking up the doors, when two women were perceived, who had stopped to cross themselves and mutter a prayer, and who were now going on their way into Dueñas Alley.

"What would you have, my dear Doña Baltasara?" one was saying. "That's the way I am. Every crazy person with his whim. The barefooted Capuchins might assure me that it was so, and I would not believe it. That man never played what we have heard. Why, I have heard him a thousand times in San Bartolomé, his parish church; the priest had to send him away, he was so poor a player. You felt like plugging your ears with cotton. Why, all you need is to look at his face, and that is the mirror of the soul, they say. I remember, as if I was seeing him now, poor man—I remember Maese Pérez's face, nights like this, when he came down from the organ-loft, after having entranced the audience with his splendors. What a gracious smile! What a happy glow on his face! Old as he was, he seemed like an angel. But this creature came plunging down as if a dog were barking at him on the landing, and all the color of a dead man, while his—come, dear Doña Baltasara, believe me,

and believe what I say: there is some great mystery about this."

Thus conversing, the two women turned the corner of the alley, and disappeared. There is no need of saying who one of them was.

4

ANOTHER year had gone by. The abbess of the Convent of Santa Inés and Maese Pérez's daughter were talking in a low voice, half hidden in the shadows of the church choir. The penetrating voice of the bell was summoning the faithful. A very few people were passing through the portico, silent and deserted, this year, and after taking holy water at the door, were choosing seats in a corner of the nave, where a handful of residents of the neighborhood were quietly waiting for the Christmas Eve mass to begin.

"There, you see," the mother superior was saying, "your fear is entirely childish; there is no one in the church. All Seville is trooping to the cathedral to-night. Play the organ, and do it without any distrust whatever. We are only a sisterhood here. But why don't you speak? What has happened? What is the matter with you?"

"I am afraid," replied the girl, in a tone of the deepest agitation.

"Afraid! Of what?"

"I do not know—something supernatural. Listen to what happened last night. I had heard you say that you were anxious for me to play the organ for the mass. I was proud of the honor, and I thought I would arrange the stops and get the organ in good tune so as to give you a surprize today. Alone I went into the choir and opened the door leading to the organ-loft. The cathedral clock was striking just then, I do not know what hour; but the strokes of the bell were

very mournful, and they were very numerous, sounding on for a century, as it seemed to me, while I stood as if nailed to the threshold.

"The church was empty and dark. Far away there gleamed a feeble light, like a faint star in the sky; it was the lamp burning on the high altar. By its flickering light, which only helped to make the deep horror of the shadows the more intense, I saw—I saw—mother, do not disbelieve it—a man. In perfect silence, and with his back toward me, he was running over the organ-keys with one hand while managing the stops with the other. And the organ sounded, but in an indescribable manner. It seemed as if each note were a sob smothered in the metal tube, which vibrated under the pressure of the air compressed within it, and gave forth a low, almost imperceptible tone, yet exact and true.

"The cathedral clock kept on striking, and that man kept on running over the keys. I could hear his very breathing.

"Fright had frozen the blood in my veins. My body was as cold as ice, except my head, and that was burning. I tried to cry out, but I could not. That man turned his face and looked at me—no, he did not look at me, for he was blind. It was my father!"

"Nonsense, sister! Banish these fancies with which the devil endeavors to overturn weak imaginations. Address a *Paternoster* and an *Ave Maria* to the archangel, Saint Michael, the captain of the celestial hosts, that he may aid you in opposing evil spirits. Wear on your neck a scapulary which has been pressed to the relics of Saint Pacomio, the counsellor against temptations, and go, go quickly, and sit at the organ. The mass is going to begin, and the faithful are growing impatient. Your father is in heaven, and thence, instead of giving you a fright, will

descend to inspire his daughter in the solemn service."

The prioress went to occupy her seat in the choir in the midst of the sisterhood. Maese Pérez's daughter opened the door of the organ-loft with trembling hand, and sat down at the organ.

The mass began, and went on without anything unusual happening until the time of consecration came. Then the organ sounded. At the same time came a scream from Maese Pérez's daughter.

The mother superior, the nuns, and some of the faithful rushed up to the organ-loft.

"Look at him!—look at him!" cried the girl, fixing her eyes, staring from their sockets, upon the seat, from which she had risen in terror. She was clinging with convulsed hands to the railing of the organ-loft.

Everybody looked intently at the spot to which she directed her gaze. No one was at the organ, yet it went on sounding—sounding like the songs of the archangels in their bursts of mystic ecstasy.

5

"DIDN'T I tell you a thousand times, if I did once, dear Doña Baltasara—didn't I tell you? What! didn't you go last night to the Christmas Eve mass? Well, you must know, anyhow, what happened. Nothing else is talked about in the whole city. The Archbishop is furious, and no wonder. Not to have gone to Santa Inés, not to have been present at the miracle—and all to hear a wretched clatter! That's all the inspired organist of San Bartolomé made in the cathedral, so persons who heard him tell me. Yes, I said so all the time. The squint-eye never could have played that. It was all a lie. There is some great mystery here. What do I think it was? Why, it was the soul of Maese Pérez."