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WEIRD STORY REPRINTS

No. 1. *The Three Low Masses**

A Ghost-Tale of Old Provence

By ALPHONSE DAUDET

Translated by Farnsworth Wright]

"TWO stuffed turkeys, Garrigou!"

"Yes, Reverend, two magnificent turkeys stuffed with truffles. And I ought to know, too, for I helped stuff them myself. One would think their skins would crack while they were roasting, they are stretched so tight."

"Jesus and Mary! I who love truffles so much! . . . Quick, Garrigou, give me my surplice. . . And besides the turkeys, what else did you see in the kitchens?"

"Oh, all sorts of good things! Ever since noon we have been plucking pheasants, hoopoes, hazel-hens and heath-cocks. The feathers filled the air. And then from the pond they brought eels, goldfish, trout, and—"

"How big were the trout, Garrigou?"

"So big, Reverend! Enormous!"

"Oh, good Lord! I can fairly see them. . . Did you put the wine in the vases?"

"Yes, Reverend, I put the wine in the vases. But heavens! it's nothing like the wine you will have later, when you come from the midnight mass. Oh, if you could only see the dining hall, all the decanters blazing with wines of all colors! And the silverware, the chased centerpieces, the flowers, the candelabra! Never was

there seen such a Christmas supper! The marquis has invited all the lords of the neighboring estates. There will be at least forty of you at the table, without counting the bailiff or the notary. Ah! you are fortunate in being one of them, Reverend! Only from sniffing those wonderful turkeys, the odor of truffles follows me everywhere. Mmmm!"

"Come, come, my boy! Heaven preserve us from the sin of gluttony, above all on this night of the Nativity! . . . Hurry off, now, and light the tapers and ring the first call for mass, for it will soon be midnight and we mustn't be late."

THIS conversation took place one Christmas night in the year of grace sixteen hundred and something, between the Reverend Dom Balaguère, former prior of the Barnabites and present chaplain of the Sires of Trinquelage, and his little clerk Garrigou—or at least him whom he believed to be the little clerk Garrigou, for let me tell you that the devil, that evening, had assumed the round face and uncertain features of the young sacristan, the better to lead the reverend father into temptation and make him commit the frightful sin of gluttony. So while the so-called Garrigou (hm! hm!) rang out the chimes from the seigniorial chapel, the reverend father slipped on his chasuble

* From "Lettres de Mon Moulin", by Alphonse Daudet.

in the little vestry of the castle, and, his imagination already excited by Garrigou's gastronomical descriptions, he kept muttering to himself as he got into his vestments:

"Roast turkeys . . . goldfish . . . trout, so big!"

Outside, the night wind blew and spread abroad the music of the bells. Lights began to appear in the darkness on the sides of Mount Ventoux, on whose summit the old towers of Trinquelage upreared their heads. The neighboring farmers and their families were on their way to the castle to hear midnight mass. They climbed the mountain singing gayly, in groups of five or six, the father leading the way with his lantern, the women following, wrapped in great dark coats, under which the children snuggled to keep warm. In spite of the cold and the late hour of the night, all these good people walked along merrily, cheered by the thought that on coming from the mass they would find, as usual, a great supper awaiting them down-stairs in the castle kitchen. From time to time, on the rough ascent, the carriage of some lord, preceded by torch-bearers, showed its glimmering windowpanes in the moonlight; or a mule trotted along shaking its bells; or again, by the gleam of the great lanterns wrapped in mist, the farmers recognized their bailiff and hailed him as he passed:

"Good evening, good evening, Master Arnoton!"

"Good evening, good evening, my children!"

The night was clear; the stars seemed brightened by the frost; the northeast wind was nipping; and a fine sleet powdered all these cloaks without wetting them, preserving faithfully the tradition of a Christmas white with snow. On the very crest of the mountain the castle appeared as the goal, with its huge mass of towers and gables, the chapel

steeple rising straight into the blue-black sky, and a crowd of little lights moving rapidly hither and thither, winking at all the windows, and looking, against the intense black of that lordly pile, like the little sparks that run through the ashes of burnt paper.

After passing the drawbridge and the postern, in order to get to the chapel one had to cross the first court, full of coaches, footmen and sedan-chairs silhouetted against the flare of the torches and the glare from the kitchens. One could hear the creaking of the turning spits, the clatter of pots, the tinkling of glassware and silver, as they were laid out for the banquet; and above it all floated a warm vapor smelling of roasted meats and the pungent herbs of elaborate sauces, which made the farmers, as well as the chaplain, the bailiff, and everybody say:

"What a wonderful midnight supper we are going to have after the mass!"

2

DING-A-LING-LING! Ding-a-ling-ling! The midnight mass has begun. In the chapel of the castle, which is a miniature cathedral with its inter-crossed arches and oaken wainscoting up to the ceiling, all the tapestries are hung, all the tapers lighted. What a crowd of people! And what sumptuous costumes! Here, in one of the carven stalls that surround the choir, is the Sire of Trinquelage, clad in salmon-colored silk; and around him all the noble lords, his guests. Opposite them, on velvet fall-stools, kneel the old dowager marchioness, in a gown of flame-colored brocade, and the young lady of Trinquelage, wearing on her head a great tower of lace puffed and quilled according to the latest fashion of the French court. Farther down the aisle, all dressed in black, with vast pointed wigs and clean-shaven chins, sit Thomas Arno-

ton the bailiff and Master Ambroy the notary, two somber spots among these gaudy silks and figured damasks. Then come the fat majordomos, the pages, the outriders, the stewards, and Dame Barbe, with all her keys dangling at her side on a great key-ring of fine silver. On the benches in the rear is the lower service—the butlers and maids, the farmers and their families; and last of all, back by the doors, which they half open and discreetly close again, come the cooks to take a little nip of the mass between two saucers, and bring an odor of the Christmas supper into the be-decked church, which is warm with the light of so many tapers.

Can it be the sight of these little white caps that diverts the reverend father's attention? Is it not rather Garrigou's bell?—that fiendish little bell that tinkles away at the foot of the altar with such infernal haste and seems to say all the time:

"Hurry up! Hurry up! The sooner we've finished, the sooner we shall be at supper."

The fact is that every time this devilish little bell peals out, the chaplain forgets his mass, and his mind wanders to the Christmas supper. Visions rise before him of the cooks running busily hither and thither, the ovens glowing like furnaces, warm vapors rising from under half-lifted lids, and through these vapors two magnificent turkeys, stuffed, crammed, mottled with truffles . . . Or then again, he sees long files of little pages carrying great dishes wrapped in their tempting fumes, and he is about to enter the dining hall with them for the feast. What ecstasy! Here stands the immense table, laden and dazzling, with peacocks dressed in their feathers, pheasants spreading their bronzed wings, ruby-colored flagons, pyramids of luscious fruit amid the green foliage, and those wonderful fish that Garrigou spoke of (Garrigou, forsooth!)

reclining on a bed of fennel, their pearly scales looking as if they were just from the pond, and a bunch of pungent herbs in their monsterlike nostrils. So vivid is the vision of these marvels that Dom Balaguère actually fancies all these glorious dishes are being served before him, on the very embroideries of the altar-cloth, and two or three times, instead of *Dominus vobiscum* he catches himself saying the *Benedicite*. But except for these slight mistakes the worthy man rattled off the service conscientiously, without skipping a line or omitting a genuflection; and all went well to the end of the first mass. For you must know that on Christmas the same officiating priest is obliged to say three masses consecutively.

"And that's one!" said the chaplain to himself with a sigh of relief; then, without losing a second, he mentioned to his clerk, or him whom he believed to be his clerk, and—

Ding-a-ling-ling! Ding-a-ling-ling!
The second mass has begun, and with it Dom Balaguère's sin.

"Quick, quick! let us hurry!" says Garrigou's bell in its shrill, devilish voice, and this time the unfortunate priest, possessed by the demon of gluttony, pounces upon the missal and devours its pages with the avidity of his over-excited appetite. He kneels and rises frantically, barely sketches the sign of the cross and the genuflections, and shortens all his gestures in order to get through sooner. He scarcely extends his arms at the Gospel, or strikes his breast at the *Confiteor*. Between him and the clerk it is hard to tell who mumbles the faster. Verses and responses leap out and jostle each other. The words, half uttered between their teeth—for it would take too long to open their lips every time,—die out into unintelligible murmurs.

"Oremus . . . ps . . . ps . . ."

"*Mea culpa . . . pa . . . pa . . .*"

Likewise hurried vintagers crushing the grapes in the vats, they both splashed about in the Latin of the service, spattering it in every direction.

"*Dom . . . scum!*" says Balaguère.

"*. . . Stutuo!*" replies Garrigou; and all the time the accursed little bell jingles in their ears like the sleigh-bells that are put on stage-horses to make them gallop faster. You may well believe that at such speed a low mass is soon hurried out of the way.

"And that's two," says the chaplain, all out of breath; then, red in the face, perspiring freely, without taking time to breathe he goes tumbling down the altar steps and—

Ding-a-ling-ling! Ding-a-ling-ling!

The third mass has begun. There are only a few steps between him and the dining hall; but alas! as the time approaches, the unfortunate Dom Balaguère's fever of impatience and greediness grows. His imagination waxes more vivid; the fish, the roasted turkeys, are there before him . . . he touches them . . . he—good heavens!—he breathes the perfume of the wines and the savory fumes of the dishes, and the infernal little bell calls out frantically to him:

"Hurry, hurry! Faster, faster!"

But how on earth can he go faster?—his lips barely move; he no longer pronounces his words—unless, forsooth, he chooses to cheat the good Lord and swindle him out of His mass. And that is just what he does, the wretched man! Yielding to temptation after temptation, he begins by skipping one verse, then two; then he finds the Epistle too long, so he leaves it unfinished; he skims over the Gospel; passes the *Credo* without entering; jumps the *Pater*; salutes the preface from afar; and by leaps and bounds he plunges into eternal damnation, followed by that infamous Garrigou (*Vade retro, Satan!*), who seconds him with marvelous sym-

pathy, holds up his chasuble, turns the pages two at a time, jostles the lecturn, upsets the vases, and constantly rings the little bell faster and louder.

It would be impossible to describe the bewildered expression of the congregation. Compelled to follow, mimicking the priest, through this mass of which they cannot make out a single word, some get up while others kneel, some sit while others stand; and all the phases of this singular service are jumbled together along the benches in a confusion of varied postures. The Christmas star on its celestial road, journeying toward the little manger yonder, grows pale at seeing such a frightful confusion.

"The abbé reads too fast; one can't follow him," murmurs the old dowager marchioness, her voluminous head-dress shaking wildly. Master Arnoton, with his great steel spectacles on his nose, hunts desperately in his prayerbook to find where on earth is the place. But at heart, all these good people, whose minds are equally bent upon the Christmas supper, are not at all disturbed at the idea of following mass at such break-neck speed; and when Dom Balaguère, his face shining, faces them and cries out in a thundering voice, "*Ite, missa est,*" the congregation answers with a "*Deo gratias*" so joyous, so enthusiastic, that one might believe they were already at the table for the first toast of the Christmas supper.

3

FIVE minutes later, the assembled lords, with the chaplain in their midst, had taken their seats in the great hall. The castle, brilliantly illumined from top to bottom, echoed with songs and laughter; and the venerable Dom Balaguère planted his fork in a capon's wing, drowning the remorse for his sin in floods of old wine and the savory juice of meats.

He ate and drank so heartily, this poor holy man, that he died in the night of a terrible attack of indigestion, without even having time to repent. By morning he reached heaven, his head still swimming from the odors of the supper; and I leave you to imagine how he was received.

"Get thee gone from my sight, thou wretched Christian!" said the Sovereign Judge, the Master of us all. "Thy sin is great enough to wipe out the virtues of a lifetime! Ah, thou hast stolen from me a midnight mass! Very well, then: thou shalt pay me three hundred masses in its place, and thou shalt not enter into paradise until three hundred Christmas masses have been celebrated in thine own chapel, in the presence of all those who sinned with thee and through thee."

And this is the true legend of Dom Balaguère, as it is told in the land of the olive-tree. The castle of Trinquelage has long ceased to exist; but the chapel stands erect on the crest of Mount Ventoux, in a clump of ever-green oaks. The wind sways its un-hinged door, the grass grows over the threshold; there are nests in the angles of the altar and on the sills of the high ogive windows, whose jeweled panes have long ago disappeared. Still, it seems that every year, on Christmas night, a supernatural light wanders among the ruins; and the peasants, on their way to midnight mass and the Christmas supper, see this specter of a chapel lighted by invisible tapers which burn in the open air, even in the wind and under the snow. You may laugh if you will, but a vine-dresser of the district, named Garrigue, no doubt a descendant of Garrigou, has told me that on one particular Christmas night, being somewhat in liquor, he lost his way on the mountain somewhere near Trinquelage, and this is what he saw. . . . Until 11 o'clock, nothing. Every-

thing was silent and dark. Suddenly, toward midnight, the chimes rang out from the old steeple—old, old chimes that seemed to be ringing ten leagues away. Soon lights began to tremble along the road that climbs to the castle, and vague shadows moved about. Under the portal of the chapel there were faint footsteps, and muffled voices:

"Good evening, Master Arnoton!"

"Good evening, good evening, my children!"

When they had all gone in, the vine-dresser, who was very brave, softly approached, and, looking through the broken door, beheld a singular spectacle. All those shadows that he had seen pass were now seated around the choir in the ruined nave, just as if the old benches were still there. There were fine ladies in brocades and lace head-dresses, gayly bedecked lords, peasants in flowered coats like those our grandfathers wore; all of them old, dusty, faded, weary. Every now and then some night-bird, a habitual lodger in the chapel, awakened by all these lights, would flutter about the tapers, of which the flame rose erect and vague as if it were burning behind a strip of gauze. And what amused Garrigue most was a certain gentleman with great steel spectacles, who constantly shook his huge black wig, on which perched one of those birds, its claws entangled and its wings beating wildly.

A little old man with a childlike figure knelt in the center of the choir and frantically shook a tiny bell that had lost its clapper and its voice, while a priest clad in vestments of old gold moved hither and thither before the altar repeating orisons of which not a single syllable could be heard.

Without doubt, this was Dom Balaguère in the act of saying his third low mass.