



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Three Christmas Masses

Alphonse Daudet

I.

"Two truffled turkeys, Garrigou?"

"Yes, reverend Father, two magnificent turkeys stuffed with truffles. There's no mistake, for I helped to stuff them myself. The flesh almost cracked as they roasted, it was so tight—so——"

"Holy Virgin! and I, who love truffles as——Hurry; give me my surplice, Garrigou. And what else besides the turkeys; what else did you see in the kitchen?"

"Oh! all sorts of good things. Since noon we've done nothing but pluck pheasants, pewits, wood-hens, and heath-cocks. Feathers are scattered thick. Then from the pond they've brought eels and golden carp and trout, and——"

"What size are the trout, Garrigou?"

"Oh, as big as that! reverend Father. Enormous!"

"Heavens, I seem to see them! Have you put the wine in the flasks?"

"Yes, reverend Father, I've put the wine in the flasks. But what's a mouthful or two as you go to midnight Mass! You should see the dining-hall in the château, full of decanters that sparkle with wine of every color. And the silver dishes, above all the ornamented ones; the flowers; the candlesticks! I never saw anything to equal it. Monsieur the Marquis has invited all the nobility of the neighborhood. You will be at least forty at table, without counting either the bailiff or the notary. Ah! it will make you very happy to be there, reverend Father. Why, only to smell the delicious turkeys—the odor of truffles pursues me even yet. Muh!"

"Come, come, Garrigou, you must guard against the sin of greediness, and especially on the night of the Nativity. Quickly, now, light the candles and sound the first bell for Mass; midnight is very near, and we must not be late."

This conversation was held on Christmas night, in the year of grace sixteen hundred and sixteen, between the reverend Dom Balaguère, formerly prior of Barnabites, now chaplain in the service of the Sires de Trinquelague, and his clerk Garrigou; or at least what he supposed was his clerk Garrigou, because you will learn that the devil had that night taken on the round face and wavering

traits of the young sacristan, the better to tempt the reverend Father to commit the dreadful sin of gluttony. Now, while the supposed Garrigou (hum! hum!) rung, with all his might, the bells of the seignorial chapel, the reverend Father put on his chasuble in the little sacristy of the château; and, his mind already becoming troubled by the gastronomic descriptions he had heard, he repeated to himself:

"Roasted turkeys; golden carp; trout as large as that!"

Outside, the night wind blew, scattering the music of the bells, and one by one lights began to appear in the shadows about the flanks of Mont Ventoux, upon the summit of which rose the ancient towers of Trinquelague. These lights were carried by the farmers on their way to attend midnight Mass at the château. They climbed the paths in groups of five or six, the father leading, lantern in hand, the women enveloped in their big brown mantles, where their infants nestled for shelter. In spite of the hour and the cold all these honest people marched cheerfully on, sustained by the thought that when they came out from the Mass they would find, as they did each year, tables spread for them below in the kitchens. Now and again on the rough ascent, the coach of some seigneur, preceded by torch-bearing porters, reflected in its glasses the cold moonlight; or, maybe, a mule trotted along shaking his bells, and in the light of the lanterns covered with frost, the farmers recognized their bailiff and saluted him as he passed:

"Good-evening, good-evening, Master Arnoton."

"Good-evening, good-evening, my children."

The night was clear, the stars were polished with cold, the wind stung, and a fine sleet, which glistened on the clothes without wetting them, kept faithfully the tradition of Christmases white with snow. Raised there aloft, the château appeared like the goal of all things, with its enormous mass of towers and gables, the belfry of its chapel mounting into the blue-black sky, and a crowd of small lights that winked, went and came, twinkled at all the windows, and seemed, on the sombre background of the building, like sparks running through the cinders of burnt paper. Once past the drawbridge and the postern, it was necessary, in order to gain the chapel, to traverse the first courtyard, full of coaches, of valets, of sedan-chairs, and bright with the flare of torches and the fires of the kitchens. There was the click of the turnspits, the crash of stewpans, the noises of glass and silver preparing for the dinner. From below, a warm vapor, which smelt of roasting meat and the strong herbs of curious sauces, whispered to the farmers, to the chaplain, to the bailiff—to all the world:

"What a revel we are going to have after Mass!"

II.

Drelindin din! Drelindin din! Midnight Mass is about to begin. In the chapel of the château, a miniature cathedral with arches intercrossed and a wainscot of oak mounting as high as the walls, all the hangings have been arranged, all the candles lit.



And what a host of people! And what toilettes! First, seated in the sculptured stall which surrounds the choir, behold the Sire de Trinquelague in a suit of salmon-colored taffeta; and next to him all the invited nobles. Facing these, on a prie-dieu trimmed with velvet, is the old dowager Marquise in her robe of fire-colored brocade, and the young Dame de Trinquelague, surmounted by a huge head-dress of lace, made in the latest fashion of the French court. Further down, dressed in black, with vast pointed perukes and shaven faces, are the bailiff, Thomas Arnoton, and the notary, Master Ambroy, two grave objects among the flowing silks and figured damasks. Then come the fat majordomos, the pages, the grooms, the attendants; dame Barbe, all her keys suspended at her side on a ring of thin silver. At the bottom of the hall, on the benches, are the Servants, the yeomen with their families; and lastly, beyond, all about the doors as they open and shut discretely, are the scullions, who steal in, between two sauces, to get a little of the Mass, carrying an odor of the revelry into the church, all in its gay attire and warm with so many burning candles.

Is it a glimpse of their little white caps that distracts the celebrant of the Mass? Or, it may be the clangor made by Garrigou's bells, that pulsating sound which shakes the altar with an infernal vibration and seems to say all the time:

"Hurry up, hurry up. We'll soon be done; we'll soon be at table!"

The fact is, that each time it sounds—that peal of the devil—the chaplain forgets his Mass and thinks of nothing but the coming revel. He pictures to himself the uproar of the kitchens; the furnace heated like a blacksmith's forge; the vapor of opening trenchers, and in that vapor two magnificent turkeys, buttered, tender, bursting with truffles.

Or, perhaps he saw pass the files of little pages bearing dishes enveloped in tempting steam, and, with them, entered the grand saloon already prepared for the feast. O deliciousness! behold the immense table all set and sparkling; the peacocks in their plumes; the pheasants with their open wings of reddish-brown; the ruby-colored flagons; the pyramids of fruit peeping from green branches; and those marvellous fish of which Garrigou told (ah! well, yes, Garrigou!) held aloft on a bed of fennel, the mother-of-pearl scales as bright as when they came from the water, with a bouquet of odorous herbs in their monster-like nostrils. So

distinct is the vision of these marvels, that it seems to Dom Balaguère as if all the wonderful dishes are served before him on the embroideries of the altar-cloth; and two or three times, in place of *Dominus vobiscum*, he is surprised to find himself repeating the *Benedicite*. Saving these slight mistakes, the holy man does his office very conscientiously, without skipping a line, without omitting a genuflexion; and all goes well enough as far as the end of the first Mass; because, you know, on Christmas night the same celebrant must repeat three consecutive Masses.

"One!" said the chaplain, with a sigh of relief; then, without losing a minute, he made a sign to his clerk—or the person he believed to be his clerk, and——

Drelindin din! Drelindin din!

The second Mass begins, and with it begins also the sin of Dom Balaguère.

"Hurry, hurry, let's get done," cries the thin voice of Garrigou's bell, and this time the unlucky priest, abandoning himself to the demon of gluttony, rushes through the missal, devouring its pages with all the avidity of an overcharged appetite. Frantically he bows; arises; makes the signs of the cross, goes through the genuflexions, abbreviates all his gestures, the sooner to be finished. Scarcely does he extend his arms to the Gospel, or strike his breast where it is required. Between the clerk and him it is a race which shall jabber the faster. Verse and response hurry each other, tumble over each other. The words, hardly pronounced, because it takes too much time to open the mouth, become incomprehensible murmurs.

Oremus ps—ps—ps—
Meâ culpâ—pâ—pâ—.

Like hard-working vintagers pressing grapes in a vat, both wade through the Latin of the Mass, splashing it on all sides.

"*Dom—scum!*" says Balaguère.

"*Stutuo!*" responds Garrigou, and all the while the damnable chime sounds in their ears, like those little bells put on the post-horses to make them gallop more swiftly. Believe me, under such conditions a low Mass is vastly expedited!

"Two!" said the chaplain, all out of breath; then without taking time to breathe, red, perspiring, he tumbled down the stairs of the altar.

Drelindin din! Drelindin din! The third Mass begins.

Only a step or so and then the dining-hall! but, alas, the nearer the revel approaches, the more the unfortunate Balaguère is seized with the very folly of impatience and greediness. His vision accentuates it; the golden carp, the roast turkeys are there. He may touch them—he may—Oh, Holy Virgin! the dishes

steam; the wines send forth sweet odors; and shaking out its reckless song, the bell cries to him:

"Hurry up, hurry up; still faster, still faster!"

But how can he go any faster? He scarcely moves his lips, he pronounces fully not a single word. He tries to cheat the good God altogether of His Mass, and that is what brings his ruin. By temptation upon temptation, he begins to jump one verse, then two. Then the epistle is too long—he does not finish it; skims the Gospel, passes by the creed without even entering, skips the pater, salutes from afar the preface, and by bounds and jumps precipitates himself into eternal damnation, always following the infamous Garrigou (*vade retro, Satanas*), who seconds him with marvellous skill; tucks up his chasuble, turns the leaves two by two, disarranges the music-desk, reverses the flagons, and unceasingly rings the bell more and more vigorously, more and more quickly.

You should have seen what a figure all the assistants cut. Obligated to follow, like mimics, a Mass of which they did not understand a word, some rose when others kneeled, or seated themselves when others stood, and all the actors in this singular office mixed themselves on the benches in numberless contrary attitudes.

The star of Christmas, on its journey through the heavens yonder by the little manger, paled with astonishment at the confusion.

"The Abbe's in a dreadful hurry: I can't follow him at all," said the aged dowager, shaking her head-dress with bewilderment. Master Arnoton, his great steel spectacles on his nose, searched in his prayer-book where the deuce the words could be. But, after all, that gallant host, which itself was thinking only of the feast, was far from being vexed because the Mass rode post; and when Balaguère, with beaming countenance, turned toward the assembly crying with all his might, *Ite missa est*, with a single voice they returned, *Deo gratias*, so joyously, so fervently, that one might have thought them already at table responding to the first toast of the night.

III.

Five minutes later the crowd of seigneurs was seated in the grand dining-hall, the chaplain in the midst of them. The château, illuminated from top to bottom, echoed with songs, cries, laughter, uproar, and the venerable Dom Balaguère planted his fork in the wing of a wood-hen, drowning the remorse of his sin under floods of wine of the Pope and the sweet juices of the meats.

So much did he eat and drink, that the poor holy man died in the night of a terrible attack of sickness, without having even time to repent. Then near the morning he arrived in heaven with all the savor of the feast still about him and I

leave you to imagine how he was received:

"Retire from my sight, evil Christian!" said the Sovereign Judge, "thy fault is dark enough to efface a whole life of virtue. Ah, thou hast robbed me of a Mass to-night. Thou shalt pay me back three hundred in its place, and thou shalt not enter into Paradise unless thou shalt have celebrated in thy proper chapel these three hundred Christmas Masses in the presence of all those who have sinned by thy fault and with thee."

This, then, is the true legend of Dom Balaguère as they tell it in the land of olives. To-day the château of Trinquelague is no more, but the chapel still stands erect on the summit of Mont Ventoux, in a grove of green oaks. The wind beats its disjointed portal; the grass creeps across its threshold; the birds have built in the angles of the altar and in the embrasures of the high windows, whence the colored panes have long ago vanished. But it appears that every year at Christmas, a supernatural light runs about these ruins, and that, in going to Mass or feast, the peasants see the chapel illuminated by invisible candles which burn brightly even through the wind and snow.

You may laugh if you will, but a vine-dresser of the neighborhood named Garrigue, without doubt a descendant of Garrigou, has assured me that one Christmas night, finding himself a little so-so-ish, he became lost on the mountain beside Trinquelague, and behold what he saw! At eleven o'clock, nothing. All was silent, dark, lifeless. Suddenly, toward midnight, a chime sounded up above from a clock, an old, old chime which seemed six leagues away. Pretty soon, on the ascending road, Garrigue saw lights trembling in the uncertain shadows. Under the porch of the chapel somebody walked, somebody whispered:

"Good-evening, Master Arnoton."

"Good-evening, good-evening, my children."

When the whole company was entered, my vine-dresser, who was exceedingly brave, approached stealthily, and peeping through the broken door saw a strange spectacle. All those who had passed him were ranged about the choir, in the ruined nave, as if the ancient benches still existed. Beautiful dames in brocade with coifs of lace; seigneurs bedizzened from top to toe; peasants in flowered jackets like those of our grandfathers,—everything with an ancient air, faded, dusty, worn-out. Now and then the night-birds, habitual dwellers in the chapel, awakened by all these lights, winged about the candles, whose flames mounted straight and vague as if they burnt behind gauze. And what amused Garrigue most was a certain personage with great steel spectacles, who shook at each instant his high black peruke, on which one of the birds had alighted and entangled itself, silently beating its wings.

At the farthest end, a little old man of boyish size, on his knees in the midst of the choir, pulled desperately at the chimeless and silent bell; while a priest attired in ancient gold, went and came before the altar reciting orisons of which one heard not a single word. Surely, that was Dom Balaguère in the act of saying his third low Mass.

Stories help us explore cultures, learn moral lessons, connect with nature — or simply have fun. That's why ririro.com offers 3,000+ free stories — fairy tales, fables, bedtime stories, myths and more — for every age, in 13 languages, with free printable PDFs and often audio. Reading should be a right, not a privilege. Share ririro.com and spread the joy of reading.

Instagram: @ririro_reading · Pinterest: pinterest.com/ririrocom