



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Maese Pérez, the Organist

Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer

I.

"Do you see the one with the scarlet cloak and the white plume in his hat — the one whose doublet seems to glitter with all the gold of the Indian galleys? He is stepping from his litter; he gives his hand to that lady, see her! She is coming this way now, preceded by four pages bearing torches. Well, that is the Marquis of Moscoso, the lover of the widowed Countess of Villapiñeda. They say that before he thought of paying his addresses to her he had sought the hand of an opulent gentleman's daughter. But the lady's father, whom people say is something of a miser — but hush! Speaking of the Devil. Do you see that man coming through the arch of San Felipe, on foot, muffled in a dark cloak, accompanied by a single servant carrying a lantern? Now he is in front of the street shrine.

"As he unmuffled to bow before the image, did you notice the decoration that shone on his breast? But for that noble insignia anyone would mistake him for a shopkeeper of the Culebras. Well, that is the father in question. See how the people make way for him and greet him as he goes by!

"Everybody knows him in Seville on account of his great fortune. Why, he has more ducats in his coffers than there are soldiers in King Philip's armies, and his galleys would form a fleet mighty enough to oppose the Sultan himself. Look, look at that stately group of men! They are the Twenty-four, the gentlemen of the Aldermanry. Aha, and we have the great Fleming among us too! They say the gentlemen of the green cross have not challenged him, thanks to his influence among the magnates of Madrid. He only comes to church to hear the music; and if Maese Pérez does not bring tears as big as one's fist to his eyes, it will no doubt be because his soul, instead of being where it belongs, is frying somewhere in the Devil's caldron.

"Ah, neighbor, but this looks bad. I greatly fear there is going to be trouble. I shall take refuge in the church, for I judge there will be more broadswords than Pater-nosters in the air tonight. Look! The Duke of Alcalá's people have turned the corner of the Plaza San Pedro, and I fancy I see the Duke of Medina-Sidonia's men emerging from the Alley of the Dueñas. What did I tell you? They have caught sight of one another; they stop; the groups are breaking up; and the

minstrels — who on these occasions are generally beaten by friends and foes alike — are running. The officer of justice himself, with the emblem of authority and all, has taken refuge under the portico. And then people speak of justice! Justice — yes, for the poor.

"Come! The shields are beginning to glitter. Lord of the great power, assist us! The blows are falling thick and fast. Neighbor, neighbor, this way before they close the doors! But wait, what do I see? They have stopped before they had really begun. What is that light? A litter, torches! It is the bishop, on my soul!

"Our Most Holy Lady of Protection, whom I was just invoking inwardly, has sent him to our rescue. Ah, nobody will ever know what the great lady has done for me! With what interest am I repaid for the tapers I burn before her every Saturday!

"See him, how handsome he is in his purple robes and his scarlet cap! God keep him in his episcopal chair as many centuries as I would like to live myself! Were it not for him, half Seville would be ablaze with these dissensions of the dukes. Look at them, the great hypocrites; see how they all press around the prelate's litter to kiss his ring. They all accompany him now, confounding themselves with his servants. Who would believe that those two, who seem so friendly in his presence, would — if they came together in a half-hour from now in some dark street — that is — who knows? I would not accuse them of cowardice; God forbid! They have given proof of their valor fighting the enemies of the Lord. Still, to speak the truth, it seems to me that if they were really determined to settle their differences — you understand me, *really* determined — it would be no difficult matter, and they would thus put an end to these continuous quarrels where the only ones who give and take the blows are their kinsmen, their allies, and their servants.

"But come, neighbor, come into the church before the crowd fills it from end to end; for on nights like this it is sometimes packed so full you could not squeeze in a grain of wheat. The nuns have a prize in their organist. When was the convent ever as favored as it is now? Other sisterhoods have made Maese Pérez magnificent offers — which is not at all to be wondered at, for the archbishop himself offered him mountains of gold if he would go to the cathedral. But it was all of no use. He would sooner give up his life than his beloved organ. Do you not know Maese Pérez? To be sure, you have not been long in the neighborhood. Well, he is a saintly man, poor enough, but a man who never wearies of giving. With no relative but his daughter, and no friend but his organ, he spends his life caring for the one and repairing the other.

"And the organ is an old one, let me tell you; but that makes no difference to him. He takes such pains with it and keeps it in such good order that its tone is a perfect wonder. He knows it so well that he can tell its condition merely by the

touch — I do not know whether I told you that the poor man was born blind. And how patiently he bears his misfortune! When anyone asks him how much he would give to be able to see, he answers, 'A great deal, but not as much as you might think, for I have hope.' 'Hope of seeing?' 'Yes, and very soon,' he adds, smiling like an angel. 'I am seventy-six years old, and however long the life allotted to me, I must soon see God.' Poor man! Yes, he will see God, for he is as humble as the stones of the street that allow everybody to tread upon them. He always says that he is nothing but a poor convent organist, while he might teach solfeggio to the chapel master of the cathedral himself. Of course he could; he cut his teeth in the trade. His father before him had the same position. I did not know him, but my mother — may she rest in glory! — used to say that he always brought the child with him to pump the organ. Later on, the boy showed great talent; and when his father died, he naturally fell heir to his position. And what hands he has, God bless them! They are worthy of being set in pure gold. He always plays well, always; but on a night like this he is a perfect wonder. He professes the greatest devotion to this ceremony of midnight Mass, and at the elevation of the Sacred Form, precisely at twelve o'clock — the hour when our Lord came into the world — the voices of his organ are the real voices of angels.

"But what is the use of telling you about what you will hear for yourself in a few moments? Just notice the people who are here tonight, and you will form some idea of what he is. Here is all the elegance of Seville, and the archbishop himself — all come to this humble convent to hear him play. It is not only the learned people, those who know music, who understand his merit; not so — the very rabble appreciate him. This great crowd you see coming this way with torches, singing carols with all the might of their lungs to the accompaniment of their tambourines and drums — they are the kind of people to create a disturbance in a church; but just wait, they will be as still as the dead when Maese Pérez lays his hands on the organ. At the elevation of the Host, not a fly makes itself heard. There are great tears in every eye; and when the music stops, you hear something like a deep sigh, which proves that the people have been holding their breath in ecstasy all the while. But come, come! The bells have stopped ringing, and Mass will soon begin. Let us go in. This is the good night of the world, but for none will it be a better night than for us."

And saying this, the good woman pressed through the portico of the convent of Santa Inés, elbowing here, pushing there, and made her way into the interior of the temple, there losing herself in the surging crowd.

II.

The church was profusely illumined. The torrent of light from the altars sparkled

on the rich jewels of the great ladies, who knelt on velvet cushions their pages had laid at their feet, taking their missals from the hands of their duennas, forming a brilliant circle around the chancel grating. Behind them, in bright gold-embroidered cloaks thrown back with studied carelessness to display glittering orders of green and red, their broad-brimmed hats in one hand and plumes sweeping the floor, stood the Twenty-four — who with a great part of the best nobility of Seville seemed to form a wall around their wives and daughters. The people, moving about in the rear of the nave with a murmur like that of a stormy sea, burst into a jubilant acclamation — accompanied by the discord of timbrels and tambourines — at the appearance of the bishop. The prelate took his seat under a crimson canopy beside the high altar and blessed the people three times.

It was time for Mass to begin. Several minutes elapsed, however, and the celebrant did not appear. The crowd began to show impatience; the knights exchanged whispers; and the bishop sent one of his attendants to the sacristy to inquire into the cause of the delay.

"Maese Pérez has been taken ill, very ill; and it will be impossible for him to attend Mass tonight."

This was the word that the attendant brought back.

The news spread through the church in an instant. The noise in the temple was such that the chief officer of justice rose to his feet, and the constables entered to enforce silence.

At that moment an ill-looking man — ungainly, bony, and cross-eyed to boot — stepped up to where the prelate sat.

"Maese Pérez is ill," said he. "The ceremony cannot begin. If you see fit, I will play the organ in his absence, for Maese Pérez is not the greatest organist in the world, nor will the instrument fall into disuse after his death for the lack of a musician to take his place."

The archbishop made a movement of assent; and already some of the faithful, who knew this individual to be an envious rival of the organist of Santa Inés, were breaking into exclamations of disgust when suddenly a great noise was heard in the portico.

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

All heads were turned toward the crowded doorways from which the shouts came.

In truth, Maese Pérez — pale and disfigured — was entering the church, carried in an armchair that everybody claimed the honor of bearing upon his shoulders.

Neither the doctor's commands nor his daughter's tears had been able to keep him in bed.

"No," he had said. "This is the last — the last — I know it. I will not die without hearing the voice of my organ again, on this solemn night, this good-night. Come, I implore you, I command you — let us go to the church!"

His desire was gratified. The people carried him in their arms to the organ-loft. Mass began.

The cathedral clock struck twelve. After the introit came the Gospel, the offertory, then the solemn moment when the priest, after consecrating the bread, takes the Sacred Form between his fingers and begins to elevate it. A cloud of incense in bluish waves floated through the church. The little altar-bells began to ring in vibrating peals, and Maese Pérez laid his aged fingers upon the keys of the organ.

The multitudinous voices of its metal pipes resounded in a prolonged and majestic chord, which grew gradually fainter, as though the breath of the wind had borne away its last echoes.

The first chord — which seemed like a voice from the earth calling out to heaven — was answered by another that seemed to come from a great distance, soft at first, then swelling until it became a torrent of thundering harmony.

It was the voice of the angels, which had traversed space and reached the earth.

Then followed what seemed like canticles sung far away by the hierarchies of seraphim, a thousand hymns at once blending into one — which itself was no more than an accompaniment for a strange melody that floated upon that ocean of mysterious echoes as a mist floats over the waves of the sea.

Then various chants dropped out of the harmony, leaving two voices which finally melted into each other; and this last isolated voice lingered long, sustaining a note as brilliant as a thread of light. The priest bent his brow, and above his white head, through the blue gauze of the incense, he held up the Host to the eyes of the faithful. At that moment the tremulous note that Maese Pérez held swelled and swelled until an immense explosion of joyous harmony filled the church. In the far-off corners of the temple the air seemed to buzz, and the jewel-windows quivered in their tight frames. Each one of the notes which formed that mighty chord developed a theme of its own — some near, some far, some brilliant, some muffled. It seemed as though the waters and the birds, the breezes and the forests, heaven and earth, were each in its own tongue singing the birth of the Saviour.

The crowd held its breath and listened, amazed. There were tears in every eye, and every heart was swelled with emotion. The priest at the altar felt his hands

tremble, for that which he held in them — that before which men and archangels bowed — was his God; and he thought he saw the heavens opened and the Host transfigured. After that the voices of the organ gradually grew fainter, like a sound that dies as it is blown from echo to echo.

Suddenly, a cry was heard in the organ-loft — a piercing, heart-rending cry. The organ exhaled a strange discord, something like a sob, and was silent. The people rushed to the stairs. Everywhere heads turned.

"What has happened? What is it?" they whispered; but nobody knew what to answer, and the confusion increased.

"What has happened?" inquired the great ladies of the officer of justice, who — preceded by the beadles — had first penetrated into the organ-loft, and who now, pale and deeply distressed, was making his way to where the bishop awaited him.

"What has happened?"

"Maese Pérez is dead."

And so it was. Those who first reached the organ-loft, jostling one another up the stairs, had found the poor organist fallen face-downward on the keys of the old instrument, which was still vibrating — while his daughter, kneeling at his feet, was calling to him in vain with sobs and cries.

III.

"Good-evening, my Señora Doña Baltasara; are you here too for midnight Mass? For my part I had intended going to the parish, but you see how it is — one goes where everybody goes. And yet, to tell you the truth, since Maese Pérez's death I feel as though there were a tombstone on my heart every time I enter Santa Inés. Poor dear man! Truly he was a saint. I have a little scrap of his doublet which I preserve like a relic, and which surely deserves it; for I believe, by my soul, that if the archbishop would only take a hand in the matter, our grandchildren would see him canonized. But why expect it? The dead and the absent have no friends. Novelty is what is in favor now — you understand me, of course. What! You do not know what is going on? True, we are alike in that respect — from our house to church, and from church back again, without inquiring into what is said or what is not said. However, on the wing, catching a word here and a word there, I sometimes happen to know the news.

"Well, yes, it seems to be a settled thing that the organist of San Ramón — that squint-eye who is always abusing other organists, and who looks more like a

butcher from the Puerta de la Carne than like a musician — is going to play this Christmas Eve on Maese Pérez's organ. You know, of course — for everybody knows it in Seville — that no musician would accept the undertaking. Not even his daughter, who is a professor of music herself. After her father's death she entered the convent as a novice. Her refusal was natural enough. Accustomed as we were to hearing such marvels, anything else would seem poor, no matter how desirous we might be to avoid comparisons; and so the sisterhood had determined that in honor of the dead musician, and in token of respect to his memory, the organ should remain dumb tonight — when here comes our man and declares that he is willing to play it.

"There is nothing so bold as ignorance. To be sure, the fault is not his, but theirs who permit such a profanation. But that is the way of the world. And yet, I say, it is no small crowd that has flocked here tonight. One might think that nothing had changed from last year to this — the same fine people, the same splendor, the same crush at the door, the same excitement under the portico, the same throng in the temple. Ah, if the dead man were to rise, he would die a second death rather than witness the profanation of his organ. But the best of it is that if what the neighbors have told me is true, the intruder is going to meet with a fine reception. When the time comes for him to lay his hands on the keys, there are those who mean to make a hubbub with tambourines, timbrels, and drums. But hold! There is the hero of the occasion going into the church now. Holy saints! How gaudily he has arrayed himself! What a ruff, and what grand airs he assumes! Come, come — the archbishop arrived some time ago, and Mass will soon begin. Come! For I fancy this night will give us food for talk."

And saying this, the good woman penetrated into the church, opening a way for herself through the crowd, according to her habit, by dint of pushing and elbowing.

The ceremony had already begun.

The temple was as brilliant as it had been the year before. The new organist pushed through the crowd filling the naves, went up to kiss the bishop's ring, then made his way to the organ-loft, where he took his seat and began to try the stops one after another with much affectation of gravity. From the compact mass of people in the rear of the church rose a muffled, confused sound — a sure sign that the storm was brewing.

"He is an impostor who cannot do anything straight, not even look straight," said some.

"He is an ignorant lout who has turned the organ of his own parish into a rattle, and comes here now to profane Maese Pérez's," said others.

And while one relieved himself of his cloak the better to thump his tambourine,

and another took hold of his timbrels, and all made ready to greet the first notes with a deafening clamor, there were but very few who ventured mildly to defend the stranger — whose proud and pedantic bearing was so strongly in contrast with the modest appearance and affable kindness of the former organist.

The longed-for moment came at last: the solemn moment when the priest, after bowing his brow and murmuring the sacred words, took the wafer between his fingers. The little bells rang at the foot of the altar, shaking out a shower of crystal notes. The waves of incense rose in the air and the organ burst into sound.

A terrible uproar filled the church and drowned its first chords. Horns, bagpipes, timbrels, tambourines — all the instruments of the populace lifted their discordant voices at once. But the clamor only lasted a minute. It all stopped simultaneously, just as it had begun.

The second chord — full, bold, magnificent — sustained itself. A torrent of sonorous harmony gushed from the metal pipes of the organ.

There were celestial chants like those which caress the ear in moments of ecstasy; chants which the soul perceives but which the lip cannot repeat; single notes of a distant melody sounding at intervals, brought by a gust of wind; the sound of leaves that kiss each other on the limbs of trees with a murmur like rain; trills of the lark that rises singing from the flower-covered land like an arrow shot into the clouds; terrible bursts of sound imposing like the roaring of a tempest; choruses of seraphim without cadence or rhythm, unknown music of another world; winged canticles that seemed to rise to the throne of the Almighty in a whirl of light and sound — all these things were expressed by the thousand voices of the organ, with a power and poetry more intense, more mystic than had ever been heard before.

When the organist came down, such was the crowd that pushed toward the stairway, and such was the desire to see and admire him, that the officer of justice sent his beadles to open a way for him to the high altar, where the bishop awaited him.

"You see," said the prelate when the musician was presented, "I came all the way from my palace to hear you. Will you be as cruel as Maese Pérez, who would never once spare me the journey by consenting to play on Christmas Eve for midnight Mass at the Cathedral?"

"Next year," answered the organist, "I will give you that pleasure, for I would not touch this organ again for all the gold in the world."

"Why not?" interrupted the prelate.

"Because," said the organist — trying to control the emotion revealed by the pallor of his countenance — "because it is old and poor, and with such an instrument one cannot express all that one would like."

The archbishop retired, followed by his attendants. One by one the litters of the noblemen disappeared in the curves of the neighboring streets. The crowd around the portico dissolved. The church was about to be locked when two women, who had lingered to murmur a prayer before the altar of San Felipe, crossed themselves and went their way, turning into the Alley of the Dueñas.

"You may say what you choose, my dear Doña Baltasara," said one of them, "but that is my opinion. I would not believe it if I heard it from the lips of a barefooted Capuchin. It is not possible for this man to have played what we have just heard. I tell you, I heard him a thousand times at San Bartolomé, which was his parish, and from which he was turned out by the priest because his music was so poor — my dear, it made you feel like stopping your ears with cotton. And then you have only to look at his face. The face, they say, is the mirror of the soul. Think of Maese Pérez. Poor dear man! On a night like this, when he came down from the organ-loft after holding the congregation spellbound, what a kind smile he wore! What a happy flush on his countenance! He was old, and yet he looked like an angel! As for this fellow, he came stumbling down the stairs as though a dog were barking at him from the landing, and with a face as pale as that of a corpse. Believe me, my dear — in all truth, there is some mystery here."



IV.

A year had elapsed. The abbess of the convent of Santa Inés and the daughter of Maese Pérez were speaking in a whisper, only half visible in the shadows of the choir. The bells with loud voices were calling the faithful from the height of the steeple. Every now and then one or two persons crossed the now silent and

deserted portico; and after taking holy water, they chose their place in a corner of the nave, where a few neighbors were quietly waiting for midnight Mass to begin.

"Do you see," the abbess was saying, "your fears are supremely childish. There is scarcely a soul in the church. You should have more self-confidence. All Seville is at the cathedral tonight. Play for us, my child — it is just as though we were alone. Why do you sigh? What is the matter with you? Speak."

"I am afraid!" exclaimed the girl, in a shaken voice.

"Afraid? What do you mean? Afraid of what?"

"I do not know — of something supernatural. Last night — listen. I had heard you say that you were anxious to have me play for midnight Mass this Christmas Eve; and, proud of the distinction, I thought I would first try the registers and practise a little, that I might surprise you and do you honor today. I came to the choir alone; I opened the door which leads to the organ-loft. The cathedral clock just then was striking the hour — I do not know what hour, but the strokes were many, and so sad! The bells went on ringing during all the time that I stood petrified on the threshold. It seemed an age to me! The church was empty and dark. Far away, yonder, a little light glimmered like a star lost in the night of the sky. It was the dying light of the lamp which burns before the high altar. By its faint reflection — which only added to the profound horror of the darkness — I saw, yes, I saw it, Mother; do not doubt me — I saw a man, who, sitting with his back to where I stood, was running one hand along the keys of the organ while he touched the stops with the other. And the organ sounded, but in the most indescribable manner. Every note was like a sob stifled within the metal pipes, which vibrated, reproducing the tone, muffled, almost imperceptible, but with wonderful accuracy.

"The clock was still striking, and the man was still trying the keys. I could even hear his breathing.

"The blood in my veins was frozen with horror. I felt a chill run through my body; my head was hot; I tried to scream, but I could not — for the man sitting there had turned his face and was looking at me. No; I do not mean that; he was not looking, for he was blind. It was my father!"

"Come, come, Sister, you must try and banish these foolish fancies with which the arch-enemy tries to disturb our weak imaginations. Say a Pater-noster and an Ave-Maria to the archangel Saint Michael, captain of the celestial hosts, that he may succour you from evil spirits. Wear on your neck a scapular touched by the relics of San Pacomio, the counsellor against temptations; and go, my child, go and take your place at the organ. Mass is about to begin, and the faithful are waiting with impatience. Your father is in heaven; and it is far more likely that

from the home of the blessed he will inspire you on this holy night, rather than appear to you to give you a fright."

The abbess went to take her seat in the choir in the midst of the sisterhood. The daughter of Maese Pérez opened the door of the organ-loft with trembling hand, and sat on the stool before the organ. Mass began.

Mass began, and nothing unusual occurred until the time of the consecration. At that moment the organ sounded — and with the first sound came a shriek from the organ-loft.

The abbess, the nuns, and some of the faithful ran to the organ.

"Look at him! Look at him!" cried the girl, whose eyes, starting from their sockets, were fixed upon the stool from which she had just risen in terror. She stood clinging with convulsed hands to the railing of the loft.

All eyes were turned upon the point she indicated. There was no one at the organ, and still it went on sounding — like the voices of archangels, in a burst of mystic joy.

"Did I not tell you so, one and a thousand times, my good Doña Baltasara — did I not tell you so? There is some mystery in all this. Listen. What! Did you not attend Mass last night? Anyway, I presume you know what occurred. Why, it is the talk of Seville today. The archbishop is furious, and with good reason. Think of his having missed the Mass at Santa Inés, of his not having witnessed the miracle; and all for what, pray? That he might sit and listen to a perfect charivari; for according to those who were present and told me of it, the new organist's playing was nothing else. But I said so all the time. That squint-eye never could have played the music we heard together last Christmas Eve at Santa Inés. It was a lie! That music came from another soul. There is a mystery in all this, my dear — a mystery, believe me."

Yes, and so there was. A deep mystery. A beautiful mystery — which was the soul of Maese Pérez.

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