

# The Three Low Masses

*A Christmas Story*

By Alphonse Daudet

## I

“Two truffled turkeys, Garrigou?”

“Yes, your reverence, two magnificent turkeys, stuffed with truffles. I should know something about it, for I myself helped to fill them. One would have said their skin would crack as they were roasting, it is that stretched. . . .”

“Jesu-Maria! I who like truffles so much! . . . Quick, give me my surplice, Garrigou. . . And have you seen anything else in the kitchen besides the turkeys?”

“Yes, all kinds of good things. . . . Since noon, we have done nothing but pluck pheasants, hoopoes, barn-fowls, and woodcocks. Feathers were flying about all over. . . . Then they have brought eels, gold carp, and trout out of the pond, besides. . . .”

“What size were the trout, Garrigou?”

“As big as that, your reverence. . . . Enormous!”

“Oh heavens! I think I see them. . . . Have you put the wine in the vessels?”

“Yes, your reverence, I have put the wine in the vessels. But la! it is not to be compared to what you will drink presently, when the midnight mass is over. If you only saw that in the dining hall of the château! The decanters are all full of wines glowing with every colour! . . . And the silver plate, the chased *epergnes*, the flowers, the lustres! . . . Never will such another midnight repast be seen. The noble marquis has invited all the lords of the neighbourhood. At least forty of you will sit down to table, without reckoning the farm bailiff and the notary Oh, how lucky is your reverence to be one of diem! . . . After a mere sniff of those fine turkeys, the scent of truffles follows me everywhere. . . . Yum!”

“Come now, come now, my child. Let us keep from the sin of gluttony, on the night of the Nativity especially. . . . Be quick and light the wax-tapers and ring the first bell for the mass; for it’s nearly midnight and we must not be behind time.”

This conversation took place on a Christmas night in the year of grace one thousand six hundred and something, between the Reverend Dom Balaguère (formerly Prior of the Barnabites, now paid chaplain of the Lords of Trinquelague), and his little clerk Garrigou, or at least him whom he took for his little clerk Garrigou, for you must know that the devil had on that night assumed the round face and soft features of die young sacristan, in order the more effectually to lead the reverend father into temptation, and make him commit the dreadful sin of gluttony. Well then, while the supposed Garrigou (hum!) was with all his might making the bells of the baronial chapel chime out, his reverence was putting on his chasuble in the little sacristy of the château; and with his mind already agitated by all these gastronomic descriptions, he kept saying to himself as he was robing:

“Roasted turkeys, . . . golden carp, . . . trout as big as that! . . .”

Out of doors, the souging night wind was carrying abroad the music of the bells, and with this, lights began to make their appearance on the dark sides of Mount Ventoux, on the summit of which rose the ancient towers of Trinquelague. The lights were borne by the families of the tenant farmers, who were coming to hear the midnight mass at the

château. They were scaling the hill in groups of five or six together, and singing; the father in front carrying a lantern, and the women wrapped up in large brown cloaks, beneath which their little children snuggled and sheltered. In spite of the cold and the lateness of the hour these good folks were marching blithely along, cheered by the thought that after the mass was over there would be, as always in former years, tables set for them down in the kitchens. Occasionally the glass windows in some lord's carriage, preceded by torch-bearers, would glisten in the moonlight on the rough ascent; or perhaps a mule would jog by with tinkling bells, and by the light of the misty lanterns the tenants would recognize their bailiff and would salute him as he passed with:

“Good evening, Master Arnoton.”

“Good evening. Good evening, my friend.”

The night was clear, and the stars were twinkling with frost; the north wind was nipping, and at times a fine small hail, that slipped off one's garments without wetting them, faithfully maintained the tradition of Christmas being white with snow. On the summit of the hill, as the goal towards which all were wending, gleamed the château, with its enormous mass of towers and gables, and its chapel steeple rising into the blue-black sky. A multitude of little lights were twinkling, coming, going, and moving about at all the windows; they looked like the sparks one sees running about in the ashes of burnt paper.

After you had passed the drawbridge and the postern gate, it was necessary, in order to reach the chapel, to cross the first court, which was full of carriages, footmen and sedan chairs, and was quite illuminated by the blaze of torches and the glare of the kitchen fires. Here were heard the click of turnspits, the rattle of saucepans, the clash of glasses and silver plate in the commotion attending the preparation of the feast; while over all rose a warm vapour smelling pleasantly of roast meat, piquant herbs, and complex sauces, and which seemed to say to the farmers, as well as to the chaplain and to the bailiff, and to everybody:

“What a good midnight repast we are going to have after the mass!”

## II

Ting-a-ring!—a—ring!

The midnight mass is beginning in the chapel of the château, which is a cathedral in miniature, with groined and vaulted roofs, oak wood-work as high as the walls, expanded draperies, and tapers all aglow. And what a lot of people! What grand dresses! First of all, seated in the carved stalls that line the choir, is the Lord of Trinquelague in a coat of salmon-coloured silk, about him are ranged all the noble lords who have invited.

On the opposite side, on velvet-covered praying-stools, the old dowager marchioness in flame-coloured brocade, and the youthful Lady of Trinquelague wearing a lofty head-dress of plaited lace in the newest fashion of the French court, have taken their places. Lower down, dressed in black, with punctilious wigs, and shaven faces, like two grave notes among the gay silks and the figured damasks, are seen the bailiff, Thomas Arnoton, and the notary Master Ambrov. Then come the stout major-domos, the pages, the horsemen, the stewards, Dame Barbara, with all her keys hanging at her side on a real silver ring. At the end, on the forms, are the lower class, the female servants, the cotter farmers and their families; and lastly, down there, near the door, which they open and

shut very carefully, are messieurs the scullions, who enter in the interval between two sauces, to take a little whiff of mass; and these bring the smell of the repast with them into the church, which now is in high festival and warm from the number of lighted tapers.

Is it the sight of their little white caps that so distracts the celebrant? Is it not rather Garrigou's bell? that mad little bell which is shaken at the altar foot with an infernal impetuosity that seems all the time to be saying: "Come, let us make haste, make haste. . . The sooner we shall have finished, the sooner shall we be at table." The fact is that every time this devil's bell tinkles the chaplain forgets his mass, and thinks of nothing but the midnight repast. He fancies he sees the cooks bustling about, the stoves glowing with forge-like fires, the two magnificent turkeys, filled, crammed, marbled with truffles. . . .

Then again he sees, passing along, files of little pages carrying dishes enveloped in tempting vapours, and with them he enters the great hall now prepared for the feast. Oh delight! there is the immense table all laden and luminous, peacocks adorned with their feathers, pheasants spreading out their reddish-brown wings, ruby-coloured decanters, pyramids of fruit glowing amid green boughs, and those wonderful fish Garrigou (ah well, yes, Garrigou!) had mentioned, laid on a couch of fennel, with their pearly scales gleaming as if they had just come out of the water, and bunches of sweet-smelling herbs in their monstrous snouts. So clear is the vision of these marvels that it seems to Dom Balaguère that all these wondrous dishes are served before him on the embroidered altar-cloth, and two or three times instead of the *Dominus vobiscum*, he finds himself saying the *Benedicite*. Except these slight mistakes, the worthy man pronounces the service very conscientiously, without skipping a line, without omitting a genuflexion; and all goes tolerably well until the end of the first mass; for you know that on Christmas Day the same officiating priest must celebrate three consecutive masses.

"That's one done!" says the chaplain to himself with a sigh of relief; then, without losing a moment, he motioned to his clerk, or to him whom he supposed to be his clerk, and . . .

"Ting-a-ring . . . Ting-a-ring, a-ring!"

Now the second mass is beginning, and with it begins also Dom Balaguère's sin. "Quick, quick, let us make baste," Garrigou's bell cries out to him in its shrill little voice, and this time the unhappy celebrant, completely given over to the demon of gluttony, fastens upon the missal and devours its pages with the eagerness of his over-excited appetite. Frantically he bows down, rises up, merely indicates the sign of the cross and the genuflexions, and curtails all his gestures in order to get sooner finished. Scarcely has he stretched out his arms at the gospel, before he is striking his breast at the *Confiteor*. It is a contest between himself and the clerk as to who shall mumble the faster. Versicles and responses are hurried over and run one into another. The words, half pronounced, without opening the mouth, which would take up too much time, terminate in unmeaning murmurs.

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

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

Like vintagers in a hurry pressing grapes in the vat, these two paddle in the mass Latin, sending splashes in every direction.

"*Dom . . . scum! . . .*" says Balaguère.

“. . . *Stutuo!* . . .” replies Garrigou; and all the time the cursed little bell is tinkling there in their ears, like the jingles they put on post-horses to make them gallop fast. You may imagine at that speed a low mass is quickly disposed of.

“That makes two,” says the chaplain quite panting; then without taking time to breathe, red and perspiring, he descends the altar steps and . . .

“Ting-a-ring! . . . Ting-a-ring! . . .”

Now the third mass is beginning. There are but a few more steps to be taken to reach the dining-hall; but, alas! the nearer the midnight repast approaches the more does the unfortunate Balaguère feel himself possessed by mad impatience and gluttony. The vision becomes more distinct; the golden carps, the roasted turkeys are there, there! . . . He touches them, . . . he . . . oh heavens! The dishes are smoking, the wines perfume the air; and with furiously agitated clapper, the little bell is crying out to him:

“Quick, quick, quicker yet!”

But how could he go quicker? His lips scarcely move. He no longer pronounces the words; . . . unless he were to impose upon Heaven outright and trick it out of its mass. . . . And that is precisely what he does, the unfortunate man! . . . From temptation to temptation; he begins by skipping a verse, then two. Then the epistle is too long—he does not finish it, skims over the gospel, passes before the *Credo* without going into it, skips the *Pater*, salutes the *Preface* from a distance, and by leaps and bounds thus hurls himself into eternal damnation, constantly followed by the vile Garrigou (*vade retro, Satanas!*), who seconds him with wonderful skill, sustains his chasuble, turns over the leaves two at a time, elbows the reading-desks, upsets the vessels, and is continually sounding the little bell louder and louder, quicker and quicker.

You should have seen the scared faces of all who were present, as they were obliged to follow this mass by mere mimicry of the priest, without hearing a word; some rise when others kneel, and sit down when the others are standing up, and all the phases of this singular service are mixed up together in the multitude of different attitudes presented by the worshippers on the benches. . . .

“The *abbé* goes too fast. . . . One can’t follow him,” murmured the old dowager, shaking her head-dress in confusion. Master Arnoton with great steel spectacles on his nose is searching in his prayer-book to find where the dickens they are. But at heart all these good folks, who themselves are thinking about feasting, are not sorry that the mass is going on at this post haste; and when Dom Balaguère with radiant face turns towards those present and cries with all his might: “*Ite, missa est,*” they all respond to him a “*Deo gratias*” in but one voice, and that as joyous and enthusiastic, as if they thought themselves already seated at the midnight repast and drinking the first toast.

### III

Five minutes afterwards the crowd of nobles were sitting down in the great hall, with the chaplain in the midst of them. The château, illuminated from top to bottom, was resounding with songs, with shouts, with laughter, with uproar; and the venerable Dom Balaguère was thrusting his fork into the wing of a fowl, and drowning all remorse for his sin in streams of regal wine and the luscious juices of the viands. He ate and drank so much, the dear, holy man, that he died during the night of a terrible attack, without even

having had time to repent; and then in the morning when he got to heaven, I leave you to imagine how he was received.

He was told to withdraw on account of his wickedness. His fault was so grievous that it effaced a whole lifetime of virtue. . . . He had robbed them of a midnight mass. . . . He should have to pay for it with three hundred, and he should not enter into Paradise until he had celebrated in his own chapel these three hundred Christmas masses in the presence of all those who had sinned with him and by his fault. . . .

. . . And now this is the true legend of Dom Balaguère as it is related in the olive country. At the present time the château of Trinquelague no longer exists, but the chapel still stands on the top of Mount Ventoux, amid a cluster of green oaks. Its decayed door rattles in the wind, and its threshold is choked up with vegetation; there are birds' nests at the corners of the altar, and in the recesses of the lofty windows, from which the stained glass has long ago disappeared. It seems, however, that every year at Christmas, a supernatural light wanders amid these ruins, and the peasants, in going to the masses and to the midnight repasts, see this phantom of a chapel illuminated by invisible tapers that burn in the open air, even in snow and wind. You may laugh at it if you like, but a vine-dresser of the place, named Garrigue, doubtless a descendant of Garrigou, declared to me that one Christmas night, when he was a little tipsy, he lost his way on the hill of Trinquelague; and this is what he saw. . . . Till eleven o'clock, nothing. All was silent, motionless, inanimate. Suddenly, about midnight, a chime sounded from the top of the steeple, an old, old chime, which seemed as if it were ten leagues off. Very soon Garrigue saw lights flitting about, and uncertain shadows moving in the road that climbs the hill. They passed on beneath the chapel porch, and murmured:

“Good evening, Master Arnoton!”

“Good evening, good evening, my friends!” . . .

When all had entered, my vine-dresser, who was very courageous, silently approached, and when he looked through the broken door, a singular spectacle met his gaze. All those he had seen pass were seated round the choir, and in the ruined nave, just as if the old seats still existed. Fine ladies in brocade, with lace head-dresses; lords adorned from head to foot; peasants in flowered jackets such as our grandfathers had; all with an old, faded, dusty, tired look. From time to time the night birds, the usual inhabitants of the chapel, who were aroused by all these lights, would come and flit round the tapers, the flames of which rose straight and ill-defined, as if they were burning behind a veil; and what amused Garrigue very much was a certain personage with large steel spectacles, who was ever shaking his tall black wig, in which one of these birds was quite entangled, and kept itself upright by noiselessly flapping its wings. . . .

At the farther end, a little old man of childish figure was on his knees in the middle of the choir, desperately shaking a clapperless and soundless bell, whilst a priest, clad in ancient gold, was coming and going before the altar, reciting prayers of which not a word was heard. . . . Most certainly this was Dom Balaguère in the act of saying his third low mass.