



Good St. James, and the Merry Barber of Compostella

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Portuguese

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Just close to the cathedral of Compostella lived a barber whose real name was Pedro Moreno, but who was better known by that of El Macho, “the mule,” because he was so stubborn that if he happened to be playing the guitar, he would not leave off though a dozen customers were waiting to be shaved. But in Spain a barber also applies leeches, draws teeth, and extracts corns, so that it was very annoying for a man who was suffering from tooth-ache, and wanted his tooth taken out or stopped, to have to wait until the barber had finished playing on the guitar.

He was also a soothsayer, and could repeat the whole of the prophetic Buena Dicha by heart. He was, in fact, the most useful man in Compostella, and had cultivated the art of shaving the face and head from the commencement which consists in watching the flies when standing close to the master who is showing off his skill on a customer, to being able to play the guitar with such proficiency that, holding the neck in his left hand and pressing the cords with the fingers, he shall, by thumping the instrument on the big toe of his left foot, cause it to vibrate the air of the immortal Cachucha or the Bolero, while with his right hand he plays the castanets.

A barber may have his brass chin-basins, which hang outside the door, burnished every day; his fly-catcher renovated every month; his bottles containing leeches nice and clean; and he may know all the scandal of the

town, which is decidedly a part of his duty; but if he cannot play the guitar and the castanets at the same time—which he can only do by calling the big toe of his left foot into requisition—he must not be considered a barber of the first class. He may do for shaving poor priests and water-carriers; but he may not shave an abbot, nor an archbishop, still less a grandee of Spain, who may sit before the king with his hat on.

In other countries the position of a barber is somewhat less important than it used to be when cleanliness required of a man that he should appear at early mass on the Sunday well shaved; but in Spain, cleanliness of the face is a great recommendation, for a rough chin never earned kisses. Therefore is a barber still held in great respect in the land of the Cid; and although Don Pedro Moreno was known by the name of “El Macho,” no one would have dared address him thus.

One day the archbishop called on El Macho to request of him to come and look at the image of St. James in the cathedral, to whom the edifice is dedicated, because this miraculous figure, who had wrought so many miracles, had, strange to say, commenced letting his beard grow, much to the astonishment of all the priesthood and of the common people, and to the dismay of several knights who had been knighted at the altar of St. James, because in those days knights did not use beards.

The barber, seeing the archbishop enter his house, advanced, knelt, and kissed his ring; and, knowing on what errand he was come, he was so solicitous of securing the archbishop’s favour, that he put aside his guitar, and respectfully awaited the prelate’s commands.

The archbishop having informed Pedro of the state of St. James’s chin, proceeded to inform him that it had been decided, at a meeting of the clergy, to entrust the shaving of the saint to him, Pedro Moreno; but that, as this growth of hair was most exceptional, seeing that the image was of wood, it was probable that the usual process of shaving might not be sufficient.

“And you are quite right, most excellent sir, in your supposition,” exclaimed the barber; “for unless I obtain some of the holy water in which the good saint was baptized, and a piece of the soap with which Judas Iscariot greased the rope with which he hanged himself, it will be useless to try and shave him, for the hair will grow as fast as it is taken off.”

“But that is impossible,” answered the archbishop; “for we do not even know where the good saint was

baptized; and as for the soap last used by the arch-traitor, I should not be astonished to hear that Satan had taken it away with him when he came to fetch Judas. No, good Pedro; you must help me out of this difficulty in some other manner.”

“Then we must do with St. James of Compostella what the men of Burgos did with their alcaide, who persisted in getting drunk when he ought to have been getting sober. They got another alcaide as much like the other as possible, excepting that he was not a borracho. We must get another St. James like this one, but without a beard, and the people will be none the wiser.”

“But,” whispered the venerable archbishop, “what are we to do without our real, own, good, sweet St. James, whose miracles have been the means of restoring so many erring ones to the fold, and bringing in so much money to the Church? How can we replace him? And then, again, where can we hide him?”

“All this can be arranged very easily,” answered El Macho. “Any St. James will perform the same miracles, for the people have faith in him. It is the same with me; the hidalgos have faith in me, and therefore believe I am the only man in Compostella that can shave them, although there are many other barbers. It is the people’s faith that performs the miracles. As for hiding the saint, I will put him in a box I have got, and lock him up safely.”

“Fair sir, I leave the matter in your hands,” continued the archbishop; “but beware lest the people get to hear of it.”

And having said this he mounted his mule and rode off.

El Macho went in search of a sculptor, a friend of his, and told him that he wanted an image made exactly like that of St. Iago’s in the cathedral, because he had made a vow that should he live single up to the age of fifty, he would endow his parish church in Cordova with a St. James. He pressed his friend to make haste, and told him he would pay him well for his trouble.

At the end of ten days the image was finished and handed over to the barber, who, in the middle of the night, with the assistance of the archbishop, entered the cathedral, took down good St. James, disrobed him of his armour, and having put it on the new St. James, placed him on the altar, and then carried the old image home.

Having locked the door, he proceeded to place the saint in the wooden box, but found out that his legs were too long; so he cut two holes in the side, through which he allowed them to project, and, putting down the lid, locked it.

Next morning, after the first mass was over, the people gave vent to their pleasure at seeing that St. James had a shaven face as formerly; and the barber, who was at the door, gained great praise by informing them that he had been the unworthy means of shaving their saintly patron.

Now, the saint, who heard this from his box, commenced to hit about him, and shouted out—

“Good people, I am St. James with the beard. El Macho is a villain!”

But the people laughed, thinking it was the apprentice who was in the alcova, or inner room, and had not got over the previous night’s drinking. So they went their way, laughing at the idea of a beardless boy thinking he was good St. James with the beard.

Matters went on very well with regard to the new St. James, who was not deficient in working such miracles as the people liked to ascribe to him and to believe of him. The belted knights were pleased to find out that the growing of a beard was only a passing fancy of their patron; and as all were satisfied, and the revenues increased, the priests were also well pleased.

Good St. James had been confined within his box for about three months when the day for his annual procession came round, and great preparations had been made for the occasion. Each knight had sent his war-horse fully caparisoned, led by two servants in the livery of the family, and followed by his shield and spear-bearers. There were about one hundred and fifty such chargers which preceded the horse bearing the image of St. James, who was kept secure in the saddle by a knight walking on each side, holding his legs, while another one followed bearing his banner. Then came the standard-bearers of the knights, each with a page richly dressed, and then came the archbishop under the pallio, surrounded by the dignitaries of the cathedral and minor priests of the neighbouring villages. All the holy brotherhoods presented themselves in their different coloured robes, with their gold and silver crosses, their richly emblazoned banners; and in their midst walked little girls dressed up to imitate angels, while the little boys swung censers of burning incense. In the rear came twelve squadrons of cavalry, four batteries of artillery, and five brigades of infantry, which had arrived from

different garrison towns to take part in the procession. From every window scarlet damask drapery hung, as well as from the balconies where the lovely daughters of Spain in all their holiday grandeur appeared, fanning themselves gracefully—which art they have cultivated to the detriment of conversation, which to them is still an art little attended to.

The streets through which the procession had to pass were strewn with flowers, especially fleurs-de-lis, and crowds had congregated on the pavements.

El Macho had given his apprentice a half-holiday, and was standing outside his house, speaking to some customers, when he suddenly heard a great noise, and turning round he saw that good St. James in the box was running towards the cathedral from which the procession was emerging. Peals of laughter and shouts of “El cajon” (“The box”) were taken up by the multitude; but, fortunately for El Macho, they did not see from which house the box on legs had come.

Not waiting for admittance, and knocking over the sentries at the door, the saint in the box made straight for the archbishop, who, knowing what it was, quietly walked into the vestry, followed by St. James, and locked the door.

Then he undid the box, and beheld good St. James with a three months’ beard on his chin, who shouted—

“Have me shaved, good archbishop! Let me take my place in this grand cavalcade, and I promise not to grow a beard again.”

The archbishop enjoined silence; and calling for one of his acolytes, he ordered him to stop the procession for half an hour, to have the horse carrying the other St. James led into the enclosed yard, and send for the barber, El Macho. This having been done, the barber was ordered to shave the saint and put on his armour, which the other one was wearing. This did not take long; but even so the people wondered at what had happened, which, however, they were never to know—not even the mystery of this box on legs—because the archbishop issued a pastoral granting plenary absolution to all such as should not ask him any questions, and excommunication to all such as should find out.

Once again on horseback, and surrounded by his faithful knights, St. James received the homage of the vulgar crowds and of the lovely ladies, and returned to his old place on the altar.

That he did not relish being locked up in the box for three months is proved by the fact that when, on three or four occasions, his vanity got the better of him, and the archbishop thought he saw signs of letting his beard grow, it was quite sufficient to show him the big box for him to withdraw the obnoxious bristles.

The new St. James was presented to the parish church at Cordova by El Macho, and his vow having been thus accomplished, he married the archbishop's niece, gave up business, and died shortly after.

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