

Pompeu Gener

«The Theological Palace»

Introduction, Translation and Notes
by Todd Mack

Pompeu Gener i Babot (also known at times as Peius) (Barcelona, 1848 - Barcelona, 1920), was a well-known and well-connected modernist *homme de lettres*. While probably best known today for his strong Catalanism, Gener was at times a journalist, essayist, playwright, bohemian and politician who participated in both the Federalist Revolution of 1868 and Almirall's First Catalanist Congress in 1880. Despite Peius' love for Catalonia, he spent much of his life outside of his mother land, living for long periods of time in Paris and traveling through Europe — even making his way to Asia and Africa in 1874.

Originally written in Catalan and compiled in *Pensant, sentint i rient* (1910), Gener translated this short story into Castilian and included it in another collection of his short stories entitled *Del presente, del pasado y del futuro* (1911). “The Theological Palace” can be broken into two parts. In the first, we find ourselves having traveled in Verne's time machine to New York City in the year 2011 — a world in which religion, technology, and commerce have been unified in a great Trust of All of the Monotheist Religions. The headquarters of this cult/company is the Theological Palace, and Gener gives the reader a series of hilarious descriptions

of devices designed to extract money while making spirituality more convenient.

In the second part, we read of “the beautiful widow of Major of the Scottish Guard Sir Harry Mac-Crooll.” This young woman — still grieving after having lost her husband to a tiger attack in India — upon hearing that in the Theological Palace she can actually call her husband on the other side, flies immediately from London to New York in hopes of contacting the dead Major. After being led through the Palace, and being instructed on the use of the telephone, she is left to make the call.

In this short story, Gener demonstrates with cutting humor his razor-sharp criticism of both deified capitalism and monetized religion. In the Theological Palace money is spent for the sake of money — as in the case of the bottles of concentrated Lourdes water which will produce the miracle of generating a receipt for any bill submerged in them, or the water from Jordan that will induce conversion by lining the users' pockets with gold. Money is also spent for the purpose of convenience. Thus we have people buying compressed canned masses, or purchasing miracles, or prayers in the form of pills. With the story of the widow, Gener points directly at the vacuity of this monetized religion. There is no feeling, no *meaning* behind any of the Palace's contraptions. There is none of the sense of *community* either with fellow worshipers or with God that is so essential to religion. No, in the Theological



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Palace worshipers are very much alone — except in the case of the telephone, which is why it is such an interesting addition. Here clients/worshipers are able to (for a price) communicate with their deceased loved ones. It is through the conversation between the widow and her husband that Gener delivers the great punchline of the story, but also his commentary on happiness and where it can (or cannot) be found.

For this translation of “The Theological Palace,” I have used both the original text from Gener’s *Pensant, sentint i rient* as well as the reedition in *Futurs imperfectes: Antologia de ciencia-ficció catalana* edited by Antoni Munné-Jordà. I have made a few small changes in syntax and lexicon for the sake of modern English readers. ●



Traducción de Todd Mack

Pompeu Gener
The Theological Palace

Anecdote of the Future

Riding in Wells' machine for exploring time, we have traveled to the year 2011, and embarking immediately on the airship *Nord-Express - Transatlantich*, we find ourselves in New York in one of the best hotels of that great city, which now numbers twenty two million inhabitants.

The world has changed beyond that. Everything is trusts, everything has been unified, even the churches and their respective cults.

Thanks to a very stylish Pope, the great trust of all of the monotheist religions has been made. Catholicism, Protestantism, the Greek schism, Mormonism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and even more *isms*, have been forged into one single religion that reigns over all the earth, even over the land of *escudellas*;¹ because the question of *escudella* and religion, when closely examined, has many points of contact for the clergy.

All of the modern inventions have been applied to the cult, especially in New York, where they have just inaugurated the *Theological Palace*, which is a marvel. It has one hundred thirty floors, four smaller towers and a central tower. The building occupies an entire island.

On the bottom floor, there is a pile of spiritual inventions for the believers, such as machines for saying mass, which if you put in twenty dollars always extract the soul. They have the form of the latest model of cannon. An artillery clergyman points them right at Purgatory, and as the twenty dollars fall they shoot, always hitting the target, except when the spirit belongs to a black person.

There are electric mills for saying the Rosary. Suggestive Virgins and Saints that perform miracles for a fixed price. There is also a religious bar, served by well-dressed monks, where they sell bottles of intensified Lourdes water that works such wonders that it will even give you a receipt for any bill that is submerged in it. They also sell compressed masses in

cans, for those who are going on a journey. Extract of water from the Jordan that produces the efficient instantaneous conversion of the most unbelieving, aided by some good injections of gold into the vest, or by a good cataplasm of bank notes. One can also buy pills of a concentrated essence of select prayers, jaculatories in dosimetric globules, and attend a theater where they show movies about different heavens, natural prey, etc., etc.

But the most astounding is the *trans-world telephone*, which thanks to some new wave-lengths that have been discovered, puts the earth in communication with different heavens of each of the conglomerated religions.

The day after the opening of said Theological Palace, there came from London on a private luxury airplane, the young and beautiful widow of Major of the Scottish Guard Sir Harry's Mac-Crooll, who having been sent to India with a special commission from the English diplomacy, had been eaten for lunch by Bengal tiger one morning on which he had gone out for some fresh air.

It had not been a year since they were married; she was still in love with her defunct spouse, and upon learning that in the great Palace of the monotheist religions she could call her husband on the telephone, wherever he was, in the other world, she ordered a letter of recommendation from the Bishop of Canterbury, and as quickly as possible she made her way to New York, arriving there in just twenty-three minutes. She immediately went to the offices of the Theological Palace asking for the Director. A young clergyman, very elegant and attentive, came out to receive her, and as she showed him the letter he said:

"The director is very busy with a commission proceeding from Buddhism of the sect of the *Pispa-mitras*, but he has charged me with receiving you and showing you around the house. We already know why

1 Traditional Catalan dish.



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you have come and who you are, because it has been more than a quarter of an hour since the Lord Bishop of Canterbury transmitted that information. Therefore, do me the favor of giving me your arm and I will accompany you to elevator 21, which is the one that will take us all the way to the top of the tower that crowns the Palace, room 125." And giving her a *bombonière* filled with little mystic chocolates aromatized with the essence of Seraph, he offered her gallantly his arm, which the beautiful English widow accepted joyously.

Once they were in the elevator, barely had they sat on the sumptuous divan when the young clergyman touched the button and in one tenth of a second she found herself before an ample corridor, at the end of which there was a room with special devices that looked telephonic. The young clergyman indicated one of them, with a separate booth, to the widow, and he said to her:

"Place this on your ear" handing her an ivory trumpet "and speak very softly over that small drum, putting in first ten dollars, or two sterling pounds in the crack on the right. When the communication has been established you will hear a celestial music and when it stops you may begin to ask what you like. Of what communion was your deceased husband?"

"Reformed evangelical," she replied.

Then the young clergyman pressed some buttons, turned a knob three times, a somewhat distant music began to be heard, a very soft music, and retiring to an honest distance, he told her:

"There it is! Now you can insert the two sterling pounds when you want."

Just like that, the widow did it, the music stopped, and she began to call.

"I would like to be connected with Lord Mac-Crooll — Yes ... who died in India devoured by a tiger the 6th of September of last year at seven in the morning — Yes, ... I am his widow."

The archangel who was on the call did not hesitate to answer:

"Here you have him. You can speak to him," and suddenly the two spouses engaged in the following dialogue:

Widow: "Is it you, Harris my love?"

Lord: "Yes, my Nelly, it is I."

Widow: "And how are you? How are things in that other world?"

Lord: "Very well, my girl, very well. Things could not be better."

Widow: "Better than when you were with me and you always said you could never be happier, more joyful?"

Lord: "Of course, woman; much more. Much! Much, much more!"

Widow: "And what do you do? Do you eat well?"

Lord: "Much better than eating."

Widow: "And you drink?"

Lord: "Much better than drinking?"

Widow: "And do you love?"

Lord: "Much more and much better than love."

Widow: "Oh, oh! Tell me, tell me everything!"

Lord: "Oh! There are no word in English nor in French nor in any known language, that can express what we do here, nor our state ... It is so good, so ... so intense ... that ... well, I do not know how to tell you."

Widow: "In other words you are happy?"

Lord: "Much more than happy, much more!"

Widow: "Then at least explain to me what Heaven is like."

Lord: "But I am not in Heaven! ..."

Here the line went snap!, and the communication was interrupted, ending the dialogue to which two sterling pounds gave a right, leaving the young widow stupefied!