The Innocence of Father Brown

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Between the silver ribbon of morning and the green glittering ribbon of

sea, the boat touched Harwich and let loose a swarm of folk like flies,

among whom the man we must follow was by no means conspicuous--nor

wished to be. There was nothing notable about him, except a slight

contrast between the holiday gaiety of his clothes and the official

gravity of his face. His clothes included a slight, pale grey jacket, a

white waistcoat, and a silver straw hat with a grey-blue ribbon. His

lean face was dark by contrast, and ended in a curt black beard that

looked Spanish and suggested an Elizabethan ruff. He was smoking a

cigarette with the seriousness of an idler. There was nothing about him

to indicate the fact that the grey jacket covered a loaded revolver,

that the white waistcoat covered a police card, or that the straw hat

covered one of the most powerful intellects in Europe. For this was

Valentin himself, the head of the Paris police and the most famous

investigator of the world; and he was coming from Brussels to London to

make the greatest arrest of the century.

Flambeau was in England. The police of three countries had tracked the

great criminal at last from Ghent to Brussels, from Brussels to the

Hook of Holland; and it was conjectured that he would take some

advantage of the unfamiliarity and confusion of the Eucharistic

Congress, then taking place in London. Probably he would travel as some

minor clerk or secretary connected with it; but, of course, Valentin

could not be certain; nobody could be certain about Flambeau.

It is many years now since this colossus of crime suddenly ceased

keeping the world in a turmoil; and when he ceased, as they said after

the death of Roland, there was a great quiet upon the earth. But in his

best days (I mean, of course, his worst) Flambeau was a figure as

statuesque and international as the Kaiser. Almost every morning the

daily paper announced that he had escaped the consequences of one

extraordinary crime by committing another. He was a Gascon of gigantic

stature and bodily daring; and the wildest tales were told of his

outbursts of athletic humour; how he turned the juge d'instruction

upside down and stood him on his head, "to clear his mind"; how he ran

down the Rue de Rivoli with a policeman under each arm. It is due to

him to say that his fantastic physical strength was generally employed

in such bloodless though undignified scenes; his real crimes were

chiefly those of ingenious and wholesale robbery. But each of his

thefts was almost a new sin, and would make a story by itself. It was

he who ran the great Tyrolean Dairy Company in London, with no dairies,

no cows, no carts, no milk, but with some thousand subscribers. These

he served by the simple operation of moving the little milk-cans

outside people's doors to the doors of his own customers. It was he who

had kept up an unaccountable and close correspondence with a young lady

whose whole letter-bag was intercepted, by the extraordinary trick of

photographing his messages infinitesimally small upon the slides of a

microscope. A sweeping simplicity, however, marked many of his

experiments. It is said that he once repainted all the numbers in a

street in the dead of night merely to divert one traveller into a trap.

It is quite certain that he invented a portable pillar-box, which he

put up at corners in quiet suburbs on the chance of strangers dropping

postal orders into it. Lastly, he was known to be a startling acrobat;

despite his huge figure, he could leap like a grasshopper and melt into

the tree-tops like a monkey. Hence the great Valentin, when he set out

to find Flambeau, was perfectly aware that his adventures would not end

when he had found him.

But how was he to find him? On this the great Valentin's ideas were

still in process of settlement.

There was one thing which Flambeau, with all his dexterity of disguise,

could not cover, and that was his singular height. If Valentin's quick

eye had caught a tall apple-woman, a tall grenadier, or even a

tolerably tall duchess, he might have arrested them on the spot. But

all along his train there was nobody that could be a disguised

Flambeau, any more than a cat could be a disguised giraffe. About the

people on the boat he had already satisfied himself; and the people

picked up at Harwich or on the journey limited themselves with

certainty to six. There was a short railway official travelling up to

the terminus, three fairly short market-gardeners picked up two

stations afterwards, one very short widow lady going up from a small

Essex town, and a very short Roman Catholic priest going up from a

small Essex village. When it came to the last case, Valentin gave it up

and almost laughed. The little priest was so much the essence of those

Eastern flats; he had a face as round and dull as a Norfolk dumpling;

he had eyes as empty as the North Sea; he had several brown-paper

parcels, which he was quite incapable of collecting. The Eucharistic

Congress had doubtless sucked out of their local stagnation many such

creatures, blind and helpless, like moles disinterred. Valentin was a

sceptic in the severe style of France, and could have no love for

priests. But he could have pity for them, and this one might have

provoked pity in anybody. He had a large, shabby umbrella, which

constantly fell on the floor. He did not seem to know which was the

right end of his return ticket. He explained with a moon-calf

simplicity to everybody in the carriage that he had to be careful,

because he had something made of real silver "with blue stones" in one

of his brown-paper parcels. His quaint blending of Essex flatness with

saintly simplicity continuously amused the Frenchman till the priest

arrived (somehow) at Tottenham with all his parcels, and came back for

his umbrella. When he did the last, Valentin even had the good nature

to warn him not to take care of the silver by telling everybody about

it. But to whomever he talked, Valentin kept his eye open for someone

else; he looked out steadily for anyone, rich or poor, male or female,

who was well up to six feet; for Flambeau was four inches above it.

He alighted at Liverpool Street, however, quite conscientiously secure

that he had not missed the criminal so far. He then went to Scotland

Yard to regularise his position and arrange for help in case of need;

he then lit another cigarette and went for a long stroll in the streets

of London. As he was walking in the streets and squares beyond

Victoria, he paused suddenly and stood. It was a quaint, quiet square,

very typical of London, full of an accidental stillness. The tall, flat

houses round looked at once prosperous and uninhabited; the square of

shrubbery in the centre looked as deserted as a green Pacific islet.

One of the four sides was much higher than the rest, like a dais; and

the line of this side was broken by one of London's admirable

accidents--a restaurant that looked as if it had strayed from Soho. It

was an unreasonably attractive object, with dwarf plants in pots and

long, striped blinds of lemon yellow and white. It stood specially high

above the street, and in the usual patchwork way of London, a flight of

steps from the street ran up to meet the front door almost as a

fire-escape might run up to a first-floor window. Valentin stood and

smoked in front of the yellow-white blinds and considered them long.

The most incredible thing about miracles is that they happen. A few

clouds in heaven do come together into the staring shape of one human

eye. A tree does stand up in the landscape of a doubtful journey in the

exact and elaborate shape of a note of interrogation. I have seen both

these things myself within the last few days. Nelson does die in the

instant of victory; and a man named Williams does quite accidentally

murder a man named Williamson; it sounds like a sort of infanticide. In

short, there is in life an element of elfin coincidence which people

reckoning on the prosaic may perpetually miss. As it has been well

expressed in the paradox of Poe, wisdom should reckon on the

unforeseen.

Aristide Valentin was unfathomably French; and the French intelligence

is intelligence specially and solely. He was not "a thinking machine";

for that is a brainless phrase of modern fatalism and materialism. A

machine only is a machine because it cannot think. But he was a

thinking man, and a plain man at the same time. All his wonderful

successes, that looked like conjuring, had been gained by plodding

logic, by clear and commonplace French thought. The French electrify

the world not by starting any paradox, they electrify it by carrying

out a truism. They carry a truism so far--as in the French Revolution.

But exactly because Valentin understood reason, he understood the

limits of reason. Only a man who knows nothing of motors talks of

motoring without petrol; only a man who knows nothing of reason talks

of reasoning without strong, undisputed first principles. Here he had

no strong first principles. Flambeau had been missed at Harwich; and if

he was in London at all, he might be anything from a tall tramp on

Wimbledon Common to a tall toast-master at the H�tel M�tropole. In such

a naked state of nescience, Valentin had a view and a method of his

own.

In such cases he reckoned on the unforeseen. In such cases, when he

could not follow the train of the reasonable, he coldly and carefully

followed the train of the unreasonable. Instead of going to the right

places--banks, police stations, rendezvous--he systematically went to

the wrong places; knocked at every empty house, turned down every cul

de sac, went up every lane blocked with rubbish, went round every

crescent that led him uselessly out of the way. He defended this crazy

course quite logically. He said that if one had a clue this was the

worst way; but if one had no clue at all it was the best, because there

was just the chance that any oddity that caught the eye of the pursuer

might be the same that had caught the eye of the pursued. Somewhere a

man must begin, and it had better be just where another man might stop.

Something about that flight of steps up to the shop, something about

the quietude and quaintness of the restaurant, roused all the

detective's rare romantic fancy and made him resolve to strike at

random. He went up the steps, and sitting down at a table by the

window, asked for a cup of black coffee.

It was half-way through the morning, and he had not breakfasted; the

slight litter of other breakfasts stood about on the table to remind

him of his hunger; and adding a poached egg to his order, he proceeded

musingly to shake some white sugar into his coffee, thinking all the

time about Flambeau. He remembered how Flambeau had escaped, once by a

pair of nail scissors, and once by a house on fire; once by having to

pay for an unstamped letter, and once by getting people to look through

a telescope at a comet that might destroy the world. He thought his

detective brain as good as the criminal's, which was true. But he fully

realised the disadvantage. "The criminal is the creative artist; the

detective only the critic," he said with a sour smile, and lifted his

coffee cup to his lips slowly, and put it down very quickly. He had put

salt in it.

He looked at the vessel from which the silvery powder had come; it was

certainly a sugar-basin; as unmistakably meant for sugar as a

champagne-bottle for champagne. He wondered why they should keep salt

in it. He looked to see if there were any more orthodox vessels. Yes;

there were two salt-cellars quite full. Perhaps there was some

speciality in the condiment in the salt-cellars. He tasted it; it was

sugar. Then he looked round at the restaurant with a refreshed air of

interest, to see if there were any other traces of that singular

artistic taste which puts the sugar in the salt-cellars and the salt in

the sugar-basin. Except for an odd splash of some dark fluid on one of

the white-papered walls, the whole place appeared neat, cheerful and

ordinary. He rang the bell for the waiter.

When that official hurried up, fuzzy-haired and somewhat blear-eyed at

that early hour, the detective (who was not without an appreciation of

the simpler forms of humour) asked him to taste the sugar and see if it

was up to the high reputation of the hotel. The result was that the

waiter yawned suddenly and woke up.

"Do you play this delicate joke on your customers every morning?"

inquired Valentin. "Does changing the salt and sugar never pall on you

as a jest?"

The waiter, when this irony grew clearer, stammeringly assured him that

the establishment had certainly no such intention; it must be a most

curious mistake. He picked up the sugar-basin and looked at it; he

picked up the salt-cellar and looked at that, his face growing more and

more bewildered. At last he abruptly excused himself, and hurrying

away, returned in a few seconds with the proprietor. The proprietor

also examined the sugar-basin and then the salt-cellar; the proprietor

also looked bewildered.

Suddenly the waiter seemed to grow inarticulate with a rush of words.

"I zink," he stuttered eagerly, "I zink it is those two clergy-men."

"What two clergymen?"

"The two clergymen," said the waiter, "that threw soup at the wall."

"Threw soup at the wall?" repeated Valentin, feeling sure this must be

some singular Italian metaphor.

"Yes, yes," said the attendant excitedly, and pointed at the dark

splash on the white paper; "threw it over there on the wall."

Valentin looked his query at the proprietor, who came to his rescue

with fuller reports.

"Yes, sir," he said, "it's quite true, though I don't suppose it has

anything to do with the sugar and salt. Two clergymen came in and drank

soup here very early, as soon as the shutters were taken down. They

were both very quiet, respectable people; one of them paid the bill and

went out; the other, who seemed a slower coach altogether, was some

minutes longer getting his things together. But he went at last. Only,

the instant before he stepped into the street he deliberately picked up

his cup, which he had only half emptied, and threw the soup slap on the

wall. I was in the back room myself, and so was the waiter; so I could

only rush out in time to find the wall splashed and the shop empty. It

don't do any particular damage, but it was confounded cheek; and I

tried to catch the men in the street. They were too far off though; I

only noticed they went round the next corner into Carstairs Street."

The detective was on his feet, hat settled and stick in hand. He had

already decided that in the universal darkness of his mind he could

only follow the first odd finger that pointed; and this finger was odd

enough. Paying his bill and clashing the glass doors behind him, he was

soon swinging round into the other street.

It was fortunate that even in such fevered moments his eye was cool and

quick. Something in a shop-front went by him like a mere flash; yet he

went back to look at it. The shop was a popular greengrocer and

fruiterer's, an array of goods set out in the open air and plainly

ticketed with their names and prices. In the two most prominent

compartments were two heaps, of oranges and of nuts respectively. On

the heap of nuts lay a scrap of cardboard, on which was written in

bold, blue chalk, "Best tangerine oranges, two a penny." On the oranges

was the equally clear and exact description, "Finest Brazil nuts, 4d. a

lb." M. Valentin looked at these two placards and fancied he had met

this highly subtle form of humour before, and that somewhat recently.

He drew the attention of the red-faced fruiterer, who was looking

rather sullenly up and down the street, to this inaccuracy in his

advertisements. The fruiterer said nothing, but sharply put each card

into its proper place. The detective, leaning elegantly on his

walking-cane, continued to scrutinise the shop. At last he said, "Pray

excuse my apparent irrelevance, my good sir, but I should like to ask

you a question in experimental psychology and the association of

ideas."

The red-faced shopman regarded him with an eye of menace; but he

continued gaily, swinging his cane, "Why," he pursued, "why are two

tickets wrongly placed in a greengrocer's shop like a shovel hat that

has come to London for a holiday? Or, in case I do not make myself

clear, what is the mystical association which connects the idea of nuts

marked as oranges with the idea of two clergymen, one tall and the

other short?"

The eyes of the tradesman stood out of his head like a snail's; he

really seemed for an instant likely to fling himself upon the stranger.

At last he stammered angrily: "I don't know what you 'ave to do with

it, but if you're one of their friends, you can tell 'em from me that

I'll knock their silly 'eads off, parsons or no parsons, if they upset

my apples again."

"Indeed?" asked the detective, with great sympathy. "Did they upset

your apples?"

"One of 'em did," said the heated shopman; "rolled 'em all over the

street. I'd 'ave caught the fool but for havin' to pick 'em up."

"Which way did these parsons go?" asked Valentin.

"Up that second road on the left-hand side, and then across the

square," said the other promptly.

"Thanks," replied Valentin, and vanished like a fairy. On the other

side of the second square he found a policeman, and said: "This is

urgent, constable; have you seen two clergymen in shovel hats?"

The policeman began to chuckle heavily. "I 'ave, sir; and if you arst

me, one of 'em was drunk. He stood in the middle of the road that

bewildered that--"

"Which way did they go?" snapped Valentin.

"They took one of them yellow buses over there," answered the man;

"them that go to Hampstead."

Valentin produced his official card and said very rapidly: "Call up two

of your men to come with me in pursuit," and crossed the road with such

contagious energy that the ponderous policeman was moved to almost

agile obedience. In a minute and a half the French detective was joined

on the opposite pavement by an inspector and a man in plain clothes.

"Well, sir," began the former, with smiling importance, "and what

may--?"

Valentin pointed suddenly with his cane. "I'll tell you on the top of

that omnibus," he said, and was darting and dodging across the tangle

of the traffic. When all three sank panting on the top seats of the

yellow vehicle, the inspector said: "We could go four times as quick in

a taxi."

"Quite true," replied their leader placidly, "if we only had an idea of

where we were going."

"Well, where are you going?" asked the other, staring.

Valentin smoked frowningly for a few seconds; then, removing his

cigarette, he said: "If you know what a man's doing, get in front of

him; but if you want to guess what he's doing, keep behind him. Stray

when he strays; stop when he stops; travel as slowly as he. Then you

may see what he saw and may act as he acted. All we can do is to keep

our eyes skinned for a queer thing."

"What sort of queer thing do you mean?" asked the inspector.

"Any sort of queer thing," answered Valentin, and relapsed into

obstinate silence.

The yellow omnibus crawled up the northern roads for what seemed like

hours on end; the great detective would not explain further, and

perhaps his assistants felt a silent and growing doubt of his errand.

Perhaps, also, they felt a silent and growing desire for lunch, for the

hours crept long past the normal luncheon hour, and the long roads of

the North London suburbs seemed to shoot out into length after length

like an infernal telescope. It was one of those journeys on which a man

perpetually feels that now at last he must have come to the end of the

universe, and then finds he has only come to the beginning of Tufnell

Park. London died away in draggled taverns and dreary scrubs, and then

was unaccountably born again in blazing high streets and blatant

hotels. It was like passing through thirteen separate vulgar cities all

just touching each other. But though the winter twilight was already

threatening the road ahead of them, the Parisian detective still sat

silent and watchful, eyeing the frontage of the streets that slid by on

either side. By the time they had left Camden Town behind, the

policemen were nearly asleep; at least, they gave something like a jump

as Valentin leapt erect, struck a hand on each man's shoulder, and

shouted to the driver to stop.

They tumbled down the steps into the road without realising why they

had been dislodged; when they looked round for enlightenment they found

Valentin triumphantly pointing his finger towards a window on the left

side of the road. It was a large window, forming part of the long

facade of a gilt and palatial public-house; it was the part reserved

for respectable dining, and labelled "Restaurant." This window, like

all the rest along the frontage of the hotel, was of frosted and

figured glass; but in the middle of it was a big, black smash, like a

star in the ice.

"Our cue at last," cried Valentin, waving his stick; "the place with

the broken window."

"What window? What cue?" asked his principal assistant. "Why, what

proof is there that this has anything to do with them?"

Valentin almost broke his bamboo stick with rage.

"Proof!" he cried. "Good God! the man is looking for proof! Why, of

course, the chances are twenty to one that it has nothing to do with

them. But what else can we do? Don't you see we must either follow one

wild possibility or else go home to bed?" He banged his way into the

restaurant, followed by his companions, and they were soon seated at a

late luncheon at a little table, and looked at the star of smashed

glass from the inside. Not that it was very informative to them even

then.

"Got your window broken, I see," said Valentin to the waiter as he paid

the bill.

"Yes, sir," answered the attendant, bending busily over the change, to

which Valentin silently added an enormous tip. The waiter straightened

himself with mild but unmistakable animation.

"Ah, yes, sir," he said. "Very odd thing, that, sir."

"Indeed?" Tell us about it," said the detective with careless

curiosity.

"Well, two gents in black came in," said the waiter; "two of those

foreign parsons that are running about. They had a cheap and quiet

little lunch, and one of them paid for it and went out. The other was

just going out to join him when I looked at my change again and found

he'd paid me more than three times too much. `Here,' I says to the chap

who was nearly out of the door, `you've paid too much.' `Oh,' he says,

very cool, `have we?' 'Yes,' I says, and picks up the bill to show him.

Well, that was a knock-out."

"What do you mean?" asked his interlocutor.

"Well, I'd have sworn on seven Bibles that I'd put 4s. on that bill.

But now I saw I'd put 14s., as plain as paint."

"Well?" cried Valentin, moving slowly, but with burning eyes, "and

then?"

"The parson at the door he says all serene, `Sorry to confuse your

accounts, but it'll pay for the window.' `What window?' I says. `The

one I'm going to break,' he says, and smashed that blessed pane with

his umbrella."

All three inquirers made an exclamation; and the inspector said under

his breath, "Are we after escaped lunatics?" The waiter went on with

some relish for the ridiculous story:

"I was so knocked silly for a second, I couldn't do anything. The man

marched out of the place and joined his friend just round the corner.

Then they went so quick up Bullock Street that I couldn't catch them,

though I ran round the bars to do it."

"Bullock Street," said the detective, and shot up that thoroughfare as

quickly as the strange couple he pursued.

Their journey now took them through bare brick ways like tunnels;

streets with few lights and even with few windows; streets that seemed

built out of the blank backs of everything and everywhere. Dusk was

deepening, and it was not easy even for the London policemen to guess

in what exact direction they were treading. The inspector, however, was

pretty certain that they would eventually strike some part of Hampstead

Heath. Abruptly one bulging gas-lit window broke the blue twilight like

a bull's-eye lantern; and Valentin stopped an instant before a little

garish sweet-stuff shop. After an instant's hesitation he went in; he

stood amid the gaudy colours of the confectionery with entire gravity

and bought thirteen chocolate cigars with a certain care. He was

clearly preparing an opening; but he did not need one.

An angular, elderly young woman in the shop had regarded his elegant

appearance with a merely automatic inquiry; but when she saw the door

behind him blocked with the blue uniform of the inspector, her eyes

seemed to wake up.

"Oh," she said, "if you've come about that parcel, I've sent it off

already."

"Parcel?" repeated Valentin; and it was his turn to look inquiring.

"I mean the parcel the gentleman left--the clergyman gentleman."

"For goodness' sake," said Valentin, leaning forward with his first

real confession of eagerness, "for Heaven's sake tell us what happened

exactly."

"Well," said the woman a little doubtfully, "the clergymen came in

about half an hour ago and bought some peppermints and talked a bit,

and then went off towards the Heath. But a second after, one of them

runs back into the shop and says, `Have I left a parcel?' Well, I

looked everywhere and couldn't see one; so he says, `Never mind; but if

it should turn up, please post it to this address,' and he left me the

address and a shilling for my trouble. And sure enough, though I

thought I'd looked everywhere, I found he'd left a brown paper parcel,

so I posted it to the place he said. I can't remember the address now;

it was somewhere in Westminster. But as the thing seemed so important,

I thought perhaps the police had come about it."

"So they have," said Valentin shortly. "Is Hampstead Heath near here?"

"Straight on for fifteen minutes," said the woman, "and you'll come

right out on the open." Valentin sprang out of the shop and began to

run. The other detectives followed him at a reluctant trot.

The street they threaded was so narrow and shut in by shadows that when

they came out unexpectedly into the void common and vast sky they were

startled to find the evening still so light and clear. A perfect dome

of peacock-green sank into gold amid the blackening trees and the dark

violet distances. The glowing green tint was just deep enough to pick

out in points of crystal one or two stars. All that was left of the

daylight lay in a golden glitter across the edge of Hampstead and that

popular hollow which is called the Vale of Health. The holiday-makers

who roam this region had not wholly dispersed; a few couples sat

shapelessly on benches; and here and there a distant girl still

shrieked in one of the swings. The glory of heaven deepened and

darkened around the sublime vulgarity of man; and standing on the slope

and looking across the valley, Valentin beheld the thing which he

sought.

Among the black and breaking groups in that distance was one especially

black which did not break--a group of two figures clerically clad.

Though they seemed as small as insects, Valentin could see that one of

them was much smaller than the other. Though the other had a student's

stoop and an inconspicuous manner, he could see that the man was well

over six feet high. He shut his teeth and went forward, whirling his

stick impatiently. By the time he had substantially diminished the

distance and magnified the two black figures as in a vast microscope,

he had perceived something else; something which startled him, and yet

which he had somehow expected. Whoever was the tall priest, there could

be no doubt about the identity of the short one. It was his friend of

the Harwich train, the stumpy little cur� of Essex whom he had warned

about his brown paper parcels.

Now, so far as this went, everything fitted in finally and rationally

enough. Valentin had learned by his inquiries that morning that a

Father Brown from Essex was bringing up a silver cross with sapphires,

a relic of considerable value, to show some of the foreign priests at

the congress. This undoubtedly was the "silver with blue stones"; and

Father Brown undoubtedly was the little greenhorn in the train. Now

there was nothing wonderful about the fact that what Valentin had found

out Flambeau had also found out; Flambeau found out everything. Also

there was nothing wonderful in the fact that when Flambeau heard of a

sapphire cross he should try to steal it; that was the most natural

thing in all natural history. And most certainly there was nothing

wonderful about the fact that Flambeau should have it all his own way

with such a silly sheep as the man with the umbrella and the parcels.

He was the sort of man whom anybody could lead on a string to the North

Pole; it was not surprising that an actor like Flambeau, dressed as

another priest, could lead him to Hampstead Heath. So far the crime

seemed clear enough; and while the detective pitied the priest for his

helplessness, he almost despised Flambeau for condescending to so

gullible a victim. But when Valentin thought of all that had happened

in between, of all that had led him to his triumph, he racked his

brains for the smallest rhyme or reason in it. What had the stealing of

a blue-and-silver cross from a priest from Essex to do with chucking

soup at wallpaper? What had it to do with calling nuts oranges, or with

paying for windows first and breaking them afterwards? He had come to

the end of his chase; yet somehow he had missed the middle of it. When

he failed (which was seldom), he had usually grasped the clue, but

nevertheless missed the criminal. Here he had grasped the criminal, but

still he could not grasp the clue.

The two figures that they followed were crawling like black flies

across the huge green contour of a hill. They were evidently sunk in

conversation, and perhaps did not notice where they were going; but

they were certainly going to the wilder and more silent heights of the

Heath. As their pursuers gained on them, the latter had to use the

undignified attitudes of the deer-stalker, to crouch behind clumps of

trees and even to crawl prostrate in deep grass. By these ungainly

ingenuities the hunters even came close enough to the quarry to hear

the murmur of the discussion, but no word could be distinguished except

the word "reason" recurring frequently in a high and almost childish

voice. Once over an abrupt dip of land and a dense tangle of thickets,

the detectives actually lost the two figures they were following. They

did not find the trail again for an agonising ten minutes, and then it

led round the brow of a great dome of hill overlooking an amphitheatre

of rich and desolate sunset scenery. Under a tree in this commanding

yet neglected spot was an old ramshackle wooden seat. On this seat sat

the two priests still in serious speech together. The gorgeous green

and gold still clung to the darkening horizon; but the dome above was

turning slowly from peacock-green to peacock-blue, and the stars

detached themselves more and more like solid jewels. Mutely motioning

to his followers, Valentin contrived to creep up behind the big

branching tree, and, standing there in deathly silence, heard the words

of the strange priests for the first time.

After he had listened for a minute and a half, he was gripped by a

devilish doubt. Perhaps he had dragged the two English policemen to the

wastes of a nocturnal heath on an errand no saner than seeking figs on

its thistles. For the two priests were talking exactly like priests,

piously, with learning and leisure, about the most aerial enigmas of

theology. The little Essex priest spoke the more simply, with his round

face turned to the strengthening stars; the other talked with his head

bowed, as if he were not even worthy to look at them. But no more

innocently clerical conversation could have been heard in any white

Italian cloister or black Spanish cathedral.

The first he heard was the tail of one of Father Brown's sentences,

which ended: "... what they really meant in the Middle Ages by the

heavens being incorruptible."

The taller priest nodded his bowed head and said:

"Ah, yes, these modern infidels appeal to their reason; but who can

look at those millions of worlds and not feel that there may well be

wonderful universes above us where reason is utterly unreasonable?"

"No," said the other priest; "reason is always reasonable, even in the

last limbo, in the lost borderland of things. I know that people charge

the Church with lowering reason, but it is just the other way. Alone on

earth, the Church makes reason really supreme. Alone on earth, the

Church affirms that God himself is bound by reason."

The other priest raised his austere face to the spangled sky and said:

"Yet who knows if in that infinite universe--?"

"Only infinite physically," said the little priest, turning sharply in

his seat, "not infinite in the sense of escaping from the laws of

truth."

Valentin behind his tree was tearing his fingernails with silent fury.

He seemed almost to hear the sniggers of the English detectives whom he

had brought so far on a fantastic guess only to listen to the

metaphysical gossip of two mild old parsons. In his impatience he lost

the equally elaborate answer of the tall cleric, and when he listened

again it was again Father Brown who was speaking:

"Reason and justice grip the remotest and the loneliest star. Look at

those stars. Don't they look as if they were single diamonds and

sapphires? Well, you can imagine any mad botany or geology you please.

Think of forests of adamant with leaves of brilliants. Think the moon

is a blue moon, a single elephantine sapphire. But don't fancy that all

that frantic astronomy would make the smallest difference to the reason

and justice of conduct. On plains of opal, under cliffs cut out of

pearl, you would still find a notice-board, `Thou shalt not steal.'"

Valentin was just in the act of rising from his rigid and crouching

attitude and creeping away as softly as might be, felled by the one

great folly of his life. But something in the very silence of the tall

priest made him stop until the latter spoke. When at last he did speak,

he said simply, his head bowed and his hands on his knees:

"Well, I think that other worlds may perhaps rise higher than our

reason. The mystery of heaven is unfathomable, and I for one can only

bow my head."

Then, with brow yet bent and without changing by the faintest shade his

attitude or voice, he added:

"Just hand over that sapphire cross of yours, will you? We're all alone

here, and I could pull you to pieces like a straw doll."

The utterly unaltered voice and attitude added a strange violence to

that shocking change of speech. But the guarder of the relic only

seemed to turn his head by the smallest section of the compass. He

seemed still to have a somewhat foolish face turned to the stars.

Perhaps he had not understood. Or, perhaps, he had understood and sat

rigid with terror.

"Yes," said the tall priest, in the same low voice and in the same

still posture, "yes, I am Flambeau."

Then, after a pause, he said:

"Come, will you give me that cross?"

"No," said the other, and the monosyllable had an odd sound.

Flambeau suddenly flung off all his pontifical pretensions. The great

robber leaned back in his seat and laughed low but long.

"No," he cried, "you won't give it me, you proud prelate. You won't

give it me, you little celibate simpleton. Shall I tell you why you

won't give it me? Because I've got it already in my own breast-pocket."

The small man from Essex turned what seemed to be a dazed face in the

dusk, and said, with the timid eagerness of "The Private Secretary":

"Are--are you sure?"

Flambeau yelled with delight.

"Really, you're as good as a three-act farce," he cried. "Yes, you

turnip, I am quite sure. I had the sense to make a duplicate of the

right parcel, and now, my friend, you've got the duplicate and I've got

the jewels. An old dodge, Father Brown--a very old dodge."

"Yes," said Father Brown, and passed his hand through his hair with the

same strange vagueness of manner. "Yes, I've heard of it before."

The colossus of crime leaned over to the little rustic priest with a

sort of sudden interest.

"You have heard of it?" he asked. "Where have you heard of it?"

"Well, I mustn't tell you his name, of course," said the little man

simply. "He was a penitent, you know. He had lived prosperously for

about twenty years entirely on duplicate brown-paper parcels. And so,

you see, when I began to suspect you, I thought of this poor chap's way

of doing it at once."

"Began to suspect me?" repeated the outlaw with increased intensity.

"Did you really have the gumption to suspect me just because I brought

you up to this bare part of the heath?"

"No, no," said Brown with an air of apology. "You see, I suspected you

when we first met. It's that little bulge up the sleeve where you

people have the spiked bracelet."

"How in Tartarus," cried Flambeau, "did you ever hear of the spiked

bracelet?"

"Oh, one's little flock, you know!" said Father Brown, arching his

eyebrows rather blankly. "When I was a curate in Hartlepool, there were

three of them with spiked bracelets. So, as I suspected you from the

first, don't you see, I made sure that the cross should go safe,

anyhow. I'm afraid I watched you, you know. So at last I saw you change

the parcels. Then, don't you see, I changed them back again. And then I

left the right one behind."

"Left it behind?" repeated Flambeau, and for the first time there was

another note in his voice beside his triumph.

"Well, it was like this," said the little priest, speaking in the same

unaffected way. "I went back to that sweet-shop and asked if I'd left a

parcel, and gave them a particular address if it turned up. Well, I

knew I hadn't; but when I went away again I did. So, instead of running

after me with that valuable parcel, they have sent it flying to a

friend of mine in Westminster." Then he added rather sadly: "I learnt

that, too, from a poor fellow in Hartlepool. He used to do it with

handbags he stole at railway stations, but he's in a monastery now. Oh,

one gets to know, you know," he added, rubbing his head again with the

same sort of desperate apology. "We can't help it, being priests.

People come and tell us these things."

Flambeau tore a brown-paper parcel out of his inner pocket and rent it

in pieces. There was nothing but paper and sticks of lead inside it. He

sprang to his feet with a gigantic gesture, and cried:

"I don't believe you. I don't believe a bumpkin like you could manage

all that. I believe you've still got the stuff on you, and if you don't

give it up--why, we're all alone, and I'll take it by force!"

"No," said Father Brown simply, and stood up also, "you won't take it

by force. First, because I really haven't still got it. And, second,

because we are not alone."

Flambeau stopped in his stride forward.

"Behind that tree," said Father Brown, pointing, "are two strong

policemen and the greatest detective alive. How did they come here, do

you ask? Why, I brought them, of course! How did I do it? Why, I'll

tell you if you like! Lord bless you, we have to know twenty such

things when we work among the criminal classes! Well, I wasn't sure you

were a thief, and it would never do to make a scandal against one of

our own clergy. So I just tested you to see if anything would make you

show yourself. A man generally makes a small scene if he finds salt in

his coffee; if he doesn't, he has some reason for keeping quiet. I

changed the salt and sugar, and you kept quiet. A man generally objects

if his bill is three times too big. If he pays it, he has some motive

for passing unnoticed. I altered your bill, and you paid it."

The world seemed waiting for Flambeau to leap like a tiger. But he was

held back as by a spell; he was stunned with the utmost curiosity.

"Well," went on Father Brown, with lumbering lucidity, "as you wouldn't

leave any tracks for the police, of course somebody had to. At every

place we went to, I took care to do something that would get us talked

about for the rest of the day. I didn't do much harm--a splashed wall,

spilt apples, a broken window; but I saved the cross, as the cross will

always be saved. It is at Westminster by now. I rather wonder you

didn't stop it with the Donkey's Whistle."

"With the what?" asked Flambeau.

"I'm glad you've never heard of it," said the priest, making a face.

"It's a foul thing. I'm sure you're too good a man for a Whistler. I

couldn't have countered it even with the Spots myself; I'm not strong

enough in the legs."

"What on earth are you talking about?" asked the other.

"Well, I did think you'd know the Spots," said Father Brown, agreeably

surprised. "Oh, you can't have gone so very wrong yet!"

"How in blazes do you know all these horrors?" cried Flambeau.

The shadow of a smile crossed the round, simple face of his clerical

opponent.

"Oh, by being a celibate simpleton, I suppose," he said. "Has it never

struck you that a man who does next to nothing but hear men's real sins

is not likely to be wholly unaware of human evil? But, as a matter of

fact, another part of my trade, too, made me sure you weren't a

priest."

"What?" asked the thief, almost gaping.

"You attacked reason," said Father Brown. "It's bad theology."

And even as he turned away to collect his property, the three policemen

came out from under the twilight trees. Flambeau was an artist and a

sportsman. He stepped back and swept Valentin a great bow.

"Do not bow to me, mon ami," said Valentin with silver clearness. "Let

us both bow to our master."

And they both stood an instant uncovered while the little Essex priest

blinked about for his umbrella.

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Aristide Valentin, Chief of the Paris Police, was late for his dinner,

and some of his guests began to arrive before him. These were, however,

reassured by his confidential servant, Ivan, the old man with a scar,

and a face almost as grey as his moustaches, who always sat at a table

in the entrance hall--a hall hung with weapons. Valentin's house was

perhaps as peculiar and celebrated as its master. It was an old house,

with high walls and tall poplars almost overhanging the Seine; but the

oddity--and perhaps the police value--of its architecture was this:

that there was no ultimate exit at all except through this front door,

which was guarded by Ivan and the armoury. The garden was large and

elaborate, and there were many exits from the house into the garden.

But there was no exit from the garden into the world outside; all round

it ran a tall, smooth, unscalable wall with special spikes at the top;

no bad garden, perhaps, for a man to reflect in whom some hundred

criminals had sworn to kill.

As Ivan explained to the guests, their host had telephoned that he was

detained for ten minutes. He was, in truth, making some last

arrangements about executions and such ugly things; and though these

duties were rootedly repulsive to him, he always performed them with

precision. Ruthless in the pursuit of criminals, he was very mild about

their punishment. Since he had been supreme over French--and largely

over European--policial methods, his great influence had been

honourably used for the mitigation of sentences and the purification of

prisons. He was one of the great humanitarian French freethinkers; and

the only thing wrong with them is that they make mercy even colder than

justice.

When Valentin arrived he was already dressed in black clothes and the

red rosette--an elegant figure, his dark beard already streaked with

grey. He went straight through his house to his study, which opened on

the grounds behind. The garden door of it was open, and after he had

carefully locked his box in its official place, he stood for a few

seconds at the open door looking out upon the garden. A sharp moon was

fighting with the flying rags and tatters of a storm, and Valentin

regarded it with a wistfulness unusual in such scientific natures as

his. Perhaps such scientific natures have some psychic prevision of the

most tremendous problem of their lives. From any such occult mood, at

least, he quickly recovered, for he knew he was late, and that his

guests had already begun to arrive. A glance at his drawing-room when

he entered it was enough to make certain that his principal guest was

not there, at any rate. He saw all the other pillars of the little

party; he saw Lord Galloway, the English Ambassador--a choleric old man

with a russet face like an apple, wearing the blue ribbon of the

Garter. He saw Lady Galloway, slim and threadlike, with silver hair and

a face sensitive and superior. He saw her daughter, Lady Margaret

Graham, a pale and pretty girl with an elfish face and copper-coloured

hair. He saw the Duchess of Mont St Michel, black-eyed and opulent, and

with her her two daughters, black-eyed and opulent also. He saw Dr

Simon, a typical French scientist, with glasses, a pointed brown beard,

and a forehead barred with those parallel wrinkles which are the

penalty of superciliousness, since they come through constantly

elevating the eyebrows. He saw Father Brown, of Cobhole, in Essex, whom

he had recently met in England. He saw--perhaps with more interest than

any of these--a tall man in uniform, who had bowed to the Galloways

without receiving any very hearty acknowledgment, and who now advanced

alone to pay his respects to his host. This was Commandant O'Brien, of

the French Foreign Legion. He was a slim yet somewhat swaggering

figure, clean-shaven, dark-haired, and blue-eyed, and, as seemed

natural in an officer of that famous regiment of victorious failures

and successful suicides, he had an air at once dashing and melancholy.

He was by birth an Irish gentleman, and in boyhood had known the

Galloways--especially Margaret Graham. He had left his country after

some crash of debts, and now expressed his complete freedom from

British etiquette by swinging about in uniform, sabre and spurs. When

he bowed to the Ambassador's family, Lord and Lady Galloway bent

stiffly, and Lady Margaret looked away.

But for whatever old causes such people might be interested in each

other, their distinguished host was not specially interested in them.

No one of them at least was in his eyes the guest of the evening.

Valentin was expecting, for special reasons, a man of world-wide fame,

whose friendship he had secured during some of his great detective

tours and triumphs in the United States. He was expecting Julius K.

Brayne, that multi-millionaire whose colossal and even crushing

endowments of small religions have occasioned so much easy sport and

easier solemnity for the American and English papers. Nobody could

quite make out whether Mr Brayne was an atheist or a Mormon or a

Christian Scientist; but he was ready to pour money into any

intellectual vessel, so long as it was an untried vessel. One of his

hobbies was to wait for the American Shakespeare--a hobby more patient

than angling. He admired Walt Whitman, but thought that Luke P. Tanner,

of Paris, Pa, was more "progressive" than Whitman any day. He liked

anything that he thought "progressive." He thought Valentin

"progressive," thereby doing him a grave injustice.

The solid appearance of Julius K. Brayne in the room was as decisive as

a dinner bell. He had this great quality, which very few of us can

claim, that his presence was as big as his absence. He was a huge

fellow, as fat as he was tall, clad in complete evening black, without

so much relief as a watch-chain or a ring. His hair was white and well

brushed back like a German's; his face was red, fierce and cherubic,

with one dark tuft under the lower lip that threw up that otherwise

infantile visage with an effect theatrical and even Mephistophelean.

Not long, however, did that salon merely stare at the celebrated

American; his lateness had already become a domestic problem, and he

was sent with all speed into the dining-room with Lady Galloway on his

arm.

Except on one point the Galloways were genial and casual enough. So

long as Lady Margaret did not take the arm of that adventurer O'Brien,

her father was quite satisfied; and she had not done so, she had

decorously gone in with Dr Simon. Nevertheless, old Lord Galloway was

restless and almost rude. He was diplomatic enough during dinner, but

when, over the cigars, three of the younger men--Simon the doctor,

Brown the priest, and the detrimental O'Brien, the exile in a foreign

uniform--all melted away to mix with the ladies or smoke in the

conservatory, then the English diplomatist grew very undiplomatic

indeed. He was stung every sixty seconds with the thought that the

scamp O'Brien might be signalling to Margaret somehow; he did not

attempt to imagine how. He was left over the coffee with Brayne, the

hoary Yankee who believed in all religions, and Valentin, the grizzled

Frenchman who believed in none. They could argue with each other, but

neither could appeal to him. After a time this "progressive" logomachy

had reached a crisis of tedium; Lord Galloway got up also and sought

the drawing-room. He lost his way in long passages for some six or

eight minutes: till he heard the high-pitched, didactic voice of the

doctor, and then the dull voice of the priest, followed by general

laughter. They also, he thought with a curse, were probably arguing

about "science and religion." But the instant he opened the salon door

he saw only one thing--he saw what was not there. He saw that

Commandant O'Brien was absent, and that Lady Margaret was absent too.

Rising impatiently from the drawing-room, as he had from the

dining-room, he stamped along the passage once more. His notion of

protecting his daughter from the Irish-Algerian n'er-do-weel had become

something central and even mad in his mind. As he went towards the back

of the house, where was Valentin's study, he was surprised to meet his

daughter, who swept past with a white, scornful face, which was a

second enigma. If she had been with O'Brien, where was O'Brien! If she

had not been with O'Brien, where had she been? With a sort of senile

and passionate suspicion he groped his way to the dark back parts of

the mansion, and eventually found a servants' entrance that opened on

to the garden. The moon with her scimitar had now ripped up and rolled

away all the storm-wrack. The argent light lit up all four corners of

the garden. A tall figure in blue was striding across the lawn towards

the study door; a glint of moonlit silver on his facings picked him out

as Commandant O'Brien.

He vanished through the French windows into the house, leaving Lord

Galloway in an indescribable temper, at once virulent and vague. The

blue-and-silver garden, like a scene in a theatre, seemed to taunt him

with all that tyrannic tenderness against which his worldly authority

was at war. The length and grace of the Irishman's stride enraged him

as if he were a rival instead of a father; the moonlight maddened him.

He was trapped as if by magic into a garden of troubadours, a Watteau

fairyland; and, willing to shake off such amorous imbecilities by

speech, he stepped briskly after his enemy. As he did so he tripped

over some tree or stone in the grass; looked down at it first with

irritation and then a second time with curiosity. The next instant the

moon and the tall poplars looked at an unusual sight--an elderly

English diplomatist running hard and crying or bellowing as he ran.

His hoarse shouts brought a pale face to the study door, the beaming

glasses and worried brow of Dr Simon, who heard the nobleman's first

clear words. Lord Galloway was crying: "A corpse in the grass--a

blood-stained corpse." O'Brien at last had gone utterly out of his

mind.

"We must tell Valentin at once," said the doctor, when the other had

brokenly described all that he had dared to examine. "It is fortunate

that he is here"; and even as he spoke the great detective entered the

study, attracted by the cry. It was almost amusing to note his typical

transformation; he had come with the common concern of a host and a

gentleman, fearing that some guest or servant was ill. When he was told

the gory fact, he turned with all his gravity instantly bright and

business-like; for this, however abrupt and awful, was his business.

"Strange, gentlemen," he said as they hurried out into the garden,

"that I should have hunted mysteries all over the earth, and now one

comes and settles in my own back-yard. But where is the place?" They

crossed the lawn less easily, as a slight mist had begun to rise from

the river; but under the guidance of the shaken Galloway they found the

body sunken in deep grass--the body of a very tall and broad-shouldered

man. He lay face downwards, so they could only see that his big

shoulders were clad in black cloth, and that his big head was bald,

except for a wisp or two of brown hair that clung to his skull like wet

seaweed. A scarlet serpent of blood crawled from under his fallen face.

"At least," said Simon, with a deep and singular intonation, "he is

none of our party."

"Examine him, doctor," cried Valentin rather sharply. "He may not be

dead."

The doctor bent down. "He is not quite cold, but I am afraid he is dead

enough," he answered. "Just help me to lift him up."

They lifted him carefully an inch from the ground, and all doubts as to

his being really dead were settled at once and frightfully. The head

fell away. It had been entirely sundered from the body; whoever had cut

his throat had managed to sever the neck as well. Even Valentin was

slightly shocked. "He must have been as strong as a gorilla," he

muttered.

Not without a shiver, though he was used to anatomical abortions, Dr

Simon lifted the head. It was slightly slashed about the neck and jaw,

but the face was substantially unhurt. It was a ponderous, yellow face,

at once sunken and swollen, with a hawk-like nose and heavy lids--a

face of a wicked Roman emperor, with, perhaps, a distant touch of a

Chinese emperor. All present seemed to look at it with the coldest eye

of ignorance. Nothing else could be noted about the man except that, as

they had lifted his body, they had seen underneath it the white gleam

of a shirt-front defaced with a red gleam of blood. As Dr Simon said,

the man had never been of their party. But he might very well have been

trying to join it, for he had come dressed for such an occasion.

Valentin went down on his hands and knees and examined with his closest

professional attention the grass and ground for some twenty yards round

the body, in which he was assisted less skillfully by the doctor, and

quite vaguely by the English lord. Nothing rewarded their grovellings

except a few twigs, snapped or chopped into very small lengths, which

Valentin lifted for an instant's examination and then tossed away.

"Twigs," he said gravely; "twigs, and a total stranger with his head

cut off; that is all there is on this lawn."

There was an almost creepy stillness, and then the unnerved Galloway

called out sharply:

"Who's that! Who's that over there by the garden wall!"

A small figure with a foolishly large head drew waveringly near them in

the moonlit haze; looked for an instant like a goblin, but turned out

to be the harmless little priest whom they had left in the

drawing-room.

"I say," he said meekly, "there are no gates to this garden, do you

know."

Valentin's black brows had come together somewhat crossly, as they did

on principle at the sight of the cassock. But he was far too just a man

to deny the relevance of the remark. "You are right," he said. "Before

we find out how he came to be killed, we may have to find out how he

came to be here. Now listen to me, gentlemen. If it can be done without

prejudice to my position and duty, we shall all agree that certain

distinguished names might well be kept out of this. There are ladies,

gentlemen, and there is a foreign ambassador. If we must mark it down

as a crime, then it must be followed up as a crime. But till then I can

use my own discretion. I am the head of the police; I am so public that

I can afford to be private. Please Heaven, I will clear everyone of my

own guests before I call in my men to look for anybody else. Gentlemen,

upon your honour, you will none of you leave the house till tomorrow at

noon; there are bedrooms for all. Simon, I think you know where to find

my man, Ivan, in the front hall; he is a confidential man. Tell him to

leave another servant on guard and come to me at once. Lord Galloway,

you are certainly the best person to tell the ladies what has happened,

and prevent a panic. They also must stay. Father Brown and I will

remain with the body."

When this spirit of the captain spoke in Valentin he was obeyed like a

bugle. Dr Simon went through to the armoury and routed out Ivan, the

public detective's private detective. Galloway went to the drawing-room

and told the terrible news tactfully enough, so that by the time the

company assembled there the ladies were already startled and already

soothed. Meanwhile the good priest and the good atheist stood at the

head and foot of the dead man motionless in the moonlight, like

symbolic statues of their two philosophies of death.

Ivan, the confidential man with the scar and the moustaches, came out

of the house like a cannon ball, and came racing across the lawn to

Valentin like a dog to his master. His livid face was quite lively with

the glow of this domestic detective story, and it was with almost

unpleasant eagerness that he asked his master's permission to examine

the remains.

"Yes; look, if you like, Ivan," said Valentin, "but don't be long. We

must go in and thrash this out in the house."

Ivan lifted the head, and then almost let it drop.

"Why," he gasped, "it's--no, it isn't; it can't be. Do you know this

man, sir?"

"No," said Valentin indifferently; "we had better go inside."

Between them they carried the corpse to a sofa in the study, and then

all made their way to the drawing-room.

The detective sat down at a desk quietly, and even without hesitation;

but his eye was the iron eye of a judge at assize. He made a few rapid

notes upon paper in front of him, and then said shortly: "Is everybody

here?"

"Not Mr Brayne," said the Duchess of Mont St Michel, looking round.

"No," said Lord Galloway in a hoarse, harsh voice. "And not Mr Neil

O'Brien, I fancy. I saw that gentleman walking in the garden when the

corpse was still warm."

"Ivan," said the detective, "go and fetch Commandant O'Brien and Mr

Brayne. Mr Brayne, I know, is finishing a cigar in the dining-room;

Commandant O'Brien, I think, is walking up and down the conservatory. I

am not sure."

The faithful attendant flashed from the room, and before anyone could

stir or speak Valentin went on with the same soldierly swiftness of

exposition.

"Everyone here knows that a dead man has been found in the garden, his

head cut clean from his body. Dr Simon, you have examined it. Do you

think that to cut a man's throat like that would need great force? Or,

perhaps, only a very sharp knife?"

"I should say that it could not be done with a knife at all," said the

pale doctor.

"Have you any thought," resumed Valentin, "of a tool with which it

could be done?"

"Speaking within modern probabilities, I really haven't," said the

doctor, arching his painful brows. "It's not easy to hack a neck

through even clumsily, and this was a very clean cut. It could be done

with a battle-axe or an old headsman's axe, or an old two-handed

sword."

"But, good heavens!" cried the Duchess, almost in hysterics, "there

aren't any two-handed swords and battle-axes round here."

Valentin was still busy with the paper in front of him. "Tell me," he

said, still writing rapidly, "could it have been done with a long

French cavalry sabre?"

A low knocking came at the door, which, for some unreasonable reason,

curdled everyone's blood like the knocking in Macbeth. Amid that frozen

silence Dr Simon managed to say: "A sabre--yes, I suppose it could."

"Thank you," said Valentin. "Come in, Ivan."

The confidential Ivan opened the door and ushered in Commandant Neil

O'Brien, whom he had found at last pacing the garden again.

The Irish officer stood up disordered and defiant on the threshold.

"What do you want with me?" he cried.

"Please sit down," said Valentin in pleasant, level tones. "Why, you

aren't wearing your sword. Where is it?"

"I left it on the library table," said O'Brien, his brogue deepening in

his disturbed mood. "It was a nuisance, it was getting--"

"Ivan," said Valentin, "please go and get the Commandant's sword from

the library." Then, as the servant vanished, "Lord Galloway says he saw

you leaving the garden just before he found the corpse. What were you

doing in the garden?"

The Commandant flung himself recklessly into a chair. "Oh," he cried in

pure Irish, "admirin' the moon. Communing with Nature, me boy."

A heavy silence sank and endured, and at the end of it came again that

trivial and terrible knocking. Ivan reappeared, carrying an empty steel

scabbard. "This is all I can find," he said.

"Put it on the table," said Valentin, without looking up.

There was an inhuman silence in the room, like that sea of inhuman

silence round the dock of the condemned murderer. The Duchess's weak

exclamations had long ago died away. Lord Galloway's swollen hatred was

satisfied and even sobered. The voice that came was quite unexpected.

"I think I can tell you," cried Lady Margaret, in that clear, quivering

voice with which a courageous woman speaks publicly. "I can tell you

what Mr O'Brien was doing in the garden, since he is bound to silence.

He was asking me to marry him. I refused; I said in my family

circumstances I could give him nothing but my respect. He was a little

angry at that; he did not seem to think much of my respect. I wonder,"

she added, with rather a wan smile, "if he will care at all for it now.

For I offer it him now. I will swear anywhere that he never did a thing

like this."

Lord Galloway had edged up to his daughter, and was intimidating her in

what he imagined to be an undertone. "Hold your tongue, Maggie," he

said in a thunderous whisper. "Why should you shield the fellow?

Where's his sword? Where's his confounded cavalry--"

He stopped because of the singular stare with which his daughter was

regarding him, a look that was indeed a lurid magnet for the whole

group.

"You old fool!" she said in a low voice without pretence of piety,

"what do you suppose you are trying to prove? I tell you this man was

innocent while with me. But if he wasn't innocent, he was still with

me. If he murdered a man in the garden, who was it who must have

seen--who must at least have known? Do you hate Neil so much as to put

your own daughter--"

Lady Galloway screamed. Everyone else sat tingling at the touch of

those satanic tragedies that have been between lovers before now. They

saw the proud, white face of the Scotch aristocrat and her lover, the

Irish adventurer, like old portraits in a dark house. The long silence

was full of formless historical memories of murdered husbands and

poisonous paramours.

In the centre of this morbid silence an innocent voice said: "Was it a

very long cigar?"

The change of thought was so sharp that they had to look round to see

who had spoken.

"I mean," said little Father Brown, from the corner of the room, "I

mean that cigar Mr Brayne is finishing. It seems nearly as long as a

walking-stick."

Despite the irrelevance there was assent as well as irritation in

Valentin's face as he lifted his head.

"Quite right," he remarked sharply. "Ivan, go and see about Mr Brayne

again, and bring him here at once."

The instant the factotum had closed the door, Valentin addressed the

girl with an entirely new earnestness.

"Lady Margaret," he said, "we all feel, I am sure, both gratitude and

admiration for your act in rising above your lower dignity and

explaining the Commandant's conduct. But there is a hiatus still. Lord

Galloway, I understand, met you passing from the study to the

drawing-room, and it was only some minutes afterwards that he found the

garden and the Commandant still walking there."

"You have to remember," replied Margaret, with a faint irony in her

voice, "that I had just refused him, so we should scarcely have come

back arm in arm. He is a gentleman, anyhow; and he loitered behind--and

so got charged with murder."

"In those few moments," said Valentin gravely, "he might really--"

The knock came again, and Ivan put in his scarred face.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, "but Mr Brayne has left the house."

"Left!" cried Valentin, and rose for the first time to his feet.

"Gone. Scooted. Evaporated," replied Ivan in humorous French. "His hat

and coat are gone, too, and I'll tell you something to cap it all. I

ran outside the house to find any traces of him, and I found one, and a

big trace, too."

"What do you mean?" asked Valentin.

"I'll show you," said his servant, and reappeared with a flashing naked

cavalry sabre, streaked with blood about the point and edge. Everyone

in the room eyed it as if it were a thunderbolt; but the experienced

Ivan went on quite quietly:

"I found this," he said, "flung among the bushes fifty yards up the

road to Paris. In other words, I found it just where your respectable

Mr Brayne threw it when he ran away."

There was again a silence, but of a new sort. Valentin took the sabre,

examined it, reflected with unaffected concentration of thought, and

then turned a respectful face to O'Brien. "Commandant," he said, "we

trust you will always produce this weapon if it is wanted for police

examination. Meanwhile," he added, slapping the steel back in the

ringing scabbard, "let me return you your sword."

At the military symbolism of the action the audience could hardly

refrain from applause.

For Neil O'Brien, indeed, that gesture was the turning-point of

existence. By the time he was wandering in the mysterious garden again

in the colours of the morning the tragic futility of his ordinary mien

had fallen from him; he was a man with many reasons for happiness. Lord

Galloway was a gentleman, and had offered him an apology. Lady Margaret

was something better than a lady, a woman at least, and had perhaps

given him something better than an apology, as they drifted among the

old flowerbeds before breakfast. The whole company was more

lighthearted and humane, for though the riddle of the death remained,

the load of suspicion was lifted off them all, and sent flying off to

Paris with the strange millionaire--a man they hardly knew. The devil

was cast out of the house--he had cast himself out.

Still, the riddle remained; and when O'Brien threw himself on a garden

seat beside Dr Simon, that keenly scientific person at once resumed it.

He did not get much talk out of O'Brien, whose thoughts were on

pleasanter things.

"I can't say it interests me much," said the Irishman frankly,

"especially as it seems pretty plain now. Apparently Brayne hated this

stranger for some reason; lured him into the garden, and killed him

with my sword. Then he fled to the city, tossing the sword away as he

went. By the way, Ivan tells me the dead man had a Yankee dollar in his

pocket. So he was a countryman of Brayne's, and that seems to clinch

it. I don't see any difficulties about the business."

"There are five colossal difficulties," said the doctor quietly; "like

high walls within walls. Don't mistake me. I don't doubt that Brayne

did it; his flight, I fancy, proves that. But as to how he did it.

First difficulty: Why should a man kill another man with a great

hulking sabre, when he can almost kill him with a pocket knife and put

it back in his pocket? Second difficulty: Why was there no noise or

outcry? Does a man commonly see another come up waving a scimitar and

offer no remarks? Third difficulty: A servant watched the front door

all the evening; and a rat cannot get into Valentin's garden anywhere.

How did the dead man get into the garden? Fourth difficulty: Given the

same conditions, how did Brayne get out of the garden?"

"And the fifth," said Neil, with eyes fixed on the English priest who

was coming slowly up the path.

"Is a trifle, I suppose," said the doctor, "but I think an odd one.

When I first saw how the head had been slashed, I supposed the assassin

had struck more than once. But on examination I found many cuts across

the truncated section; in other words, they were struck after the head

was off. Did Brayne hate his foe so fiendishly that he stood sabring

his body in the moonlight?"

"Horrible!" said O'Brien, and shuddered.

The little priest, Brown, had arrived while they were talking, and had

waited, with characteristic shyness, till they had finished. Then he

said awkwardly:

"I say, I'm sorry to interrupt. But I was sent to tell you the news!"

"News?" repeated Simon, and stared at him rather painfully through his

glasses.

"Yes, I'm sorry," said Father Brown mildly. "There's been another

murder, you know."

Both men on the seat sprang up, leaving it rocking.

"And, what's stranger still," continued the priest, with his dull eye

on the rhododendrons, "it's the same disgusting sort; it's another

beheading. They found the second head actually bleeding into the river,

a few yards along Brayne's road to Paris; so they suppose that he--"

"Great Heaven!" cried O'Brien. "Is Brayne a monomaniac?"

"There are American vendettas," said the priest impassively. Then he

added: "They want you to come to the library and see it."

Commandant O'Brien followed the others towards the inquest, feeling

decidedly sick. As a soldier, he loathed all this secretive carnage;

where were these extravagant amputations going to stop? First one head

was hacked off, and then another; in this case (he told himself

bitterly) it was not true that two heads were better than one. As he

crossed the study he almost staggered at a shocking coincidence. Upon

Valentin's table lay the coloured picture of yet a third bleeding head;

and it was the head of Valentin himself. A second glance showed him it

was only a Nationalist paper, called The Guillotine, which every week

showed one of its political opponents with rolling eyes and writhing

features just after execution; for Valentin was an anti-clerical of

some note. But O'Brien was an Irishman, with a kind of chastity even in

his sins; and his gorge rose against that great brutality of the

intellect which belongs only to France. He felt Paris as a whole, from

the grotesques on the Gothic churches to the gross caricatures in the

newspapers. He remembered the gigantic jests of the Revolution. He saw

the whole city as one ugly energy, from the sanguinary sketch lying on

Valentin's table up to where, above a mountain and forest of gargoyles,

the great devil grins on Notre Dame.

The library was long, low, and dark; what light entered it shot from

under low blinds and had still some of the ruddy tinge of morning.

Valentin and his servant Ivan were waiting for them at the upper end of

a long, slightly-sloping desk, on which lay the mortal remains, looking

enormous in the twilight. The big black figure and yellow face of the

man found in the garden confronted them essentially unchanged. The

second head, which had been fished from among the river reeds that

morning, lay streaming and dripping beside it; Valentin's men were

still seeking to recover the rest of this second corpse, which was

supposed to be afloat. Father Brown, who did not seem to share

O'Brien's sensibilities in the least, went up to the second head and

examined it with his blinking care. It was little more than a mop of

wet white hair, fringed with silver fire in the red and level morning

light; the face, which seemed of an ugly, empurpled and perhaps

criminal type, had been much battered against trees or stones as it

tossed in the water.

"Good morning, Commandant O'Brien," said Valentin, with quiet

cordiality. "You have heard of Brayne's last experiment in butchery, I

suppose?"

Father Brown was still bending over the head with white hair, and he

said, without looking up:

"I suppose it is quite certain that Brayne cut off this head, too."

"Well, it seems common sense," said Valentin, with his hands in his

pockets. "Killed in the same way as the other. Found within a few yards

of the other. And sliced by the same weapon which we know he carried

away."

"Yes, yes; I know," replied Father Brown submissively. "Yet, you know,

I doubt whether Brayne could have cut off this head."

"Why not?" inquired Dr Simon, with a rational stare.

"Well, doctor," said the priest, looking up blinking, "can a man cut

off his own head? I don't know."

O'Brien felt an insane universe crashing about his ears; but the doctor

sprang forward with impetuous practicality and pushed back the wet

white hair.

"Oh, there's no doubt it's Brayne," said the priest quietly. "He had

exactly that chip in the left ear."

The detective, who had been regarding the priest with steady and

glittering eyes, opened his clenched mouth and said sharply: "You seem

to know a lot about him, Father Brown."

"I do," said the little man simply. "I've been about with him for some

weeks. He was thinking of joining our church."

The star of the fanatic sprang into Valentin's eyes; he strode towards

the priest with clenched hands. "And, perhaps," he cried, with a

blasting sneer, "perhaps he was also thinking of leaving all his money

to your church."

"Perhaps he was," said Brown stolidly; "it is possible."

"In that case," cried Valentin, with a dreadful smile, "you may indeed

know a great deal about him. About his life and about his--"

Commandant O'Brien laid a hand on Valentin's arm. "Drop that slanderous

rubbish, Valentin," he said, "or there may be more swords yet."

But Valentin (under the steady, humble gaze of the priest) had already

recovered himself. "Well," he said shortly, "people's private opinions

can wait. You gentlemen are still bound by your promise to stay; you

must enforce it on yourselves--and on each other. Ivan here will tell

you anything more you want to know; I must get to business and write to

the authorities. We can't keep this quiet any longer. I shall be

writing in my study if there is any more news."

"Is there any more news, Ivan?" asked Dr Simon, as the chief of police

strode out of the room.

"Only one more thing, I think, sir," said Ivan, wrinkling up his grey

old face, "but that's important, too, in its way. There's that old

buffer you found on the lawn," and he pointed without pretence of

reverence at the big black body with the yellow head. "We've found out

who he is, anyhow."

"Indeed!" cried the astonished doctor, "and who is he?"

"His name was Arnold Becker," said the under-detective, "though he went

by many aliases. He was a wandering sort of scamp, and is known to have

been in America; so that was where Brayne got his knife into him. We

didn't have much to do with him ourselves, for he worked mostly in

Germany. We've communicated, of course, with the German police. But,

oddly enough, there was a twin brother of his, named Louis Becker, whom

we had a great deal to do with. In fact, we found it necessary to

guillotine him only yesterday. Well, it's a rum thing, gentlemen, but

when I saw that fellow flat on the lawn I had the greatest jump of my

life. If I hadn't seen Louis Becker guillotined with my own eyes, I'd

have sworn it was Louis Becker lying there in the grass. Then, of

course, I remembered his twin brother in Germany, and following up the

clue--"

The explanatory Ivan stopped, for the excellent reason that nobody was

listening to him. The Commandant and the doctor were both staring at

Father Brown, who had sprung stiffly to his feet, and was holding his

temples tight like a man in sudden and violent pain.

"Stop, stop, stop!" he cried; "stop talking a minute, for I see half.

Will God give me strength? Will my brain make the one jump and see all?

Heaven help me! I used to be fairly good at thinking. I could

paraphrase any page in Aquinas once. Will my head split--or will it

see? I see half--I only see half."

He buried his head in his hands, and stood in a sort of rigid torture

of thought or prayer, while the other three could only go on staring at

this last prodigy of their wild twelve hours.

When Father Brown's hands fell they showed a face quite fresh and

serious, like a child's. He heaved a huge sigh, and said: "Let us get

this said and done with as quickly as possible. Look here, this will be

the quickest way to convince you all of the truth." He turned to the

doctor. "Dr Simon," he said, "you have a strong head-piece, and I heard

you this morning asking the five hardest questions about this business.

Well, if you will ask them again, I will answer them."

Simon's pince-nez dropped from his nose in his doubt and wonder, but he

answered at once. "Well, the first question, you know, is why a man

should kill another with a clumsy sabre at all when a man can kill with

a bodkin?"

"A man cannot behead with a bodkin," said Brown calmly, "and for this

murder beheading was absolutely necessary."

"Why?" asked O'Brien, with interest.

"And the next question?" asked Father Brown.

"Well, why didn't the man cry out or anything?" asked the doctor;

"sabres in gardens are certainly unusual."

"Twigs," said the priest gloomily, and turned to the window which

looked on the scene of death. "No one saw the point of the twigs. Why

should they lie on that lawn (look at it) so far from any tree? They

were not snapped off; they were chopped off. The murderer occupied his

enemy with some tricks with the sabre, showing how he could cut a

branch in mid-air, or what not. Then, while his enemy bent down to see

the result, a silent slash, and the head fell."

"Well," said the doctor slowly, "that seems plausible enough. But my

next two questions will stump anyone."

The priest still stood looking critically out of the window and waited.

"You know how all the garden was sealed up like an air-tight chamber,"

went on the doctor. "Well, how did the strange man get into the

garden?"

Without turning round, the little priest answered: "There never was any

strange man in the garden."

There was a silence, and then a sudden cackle of almost childish

laughter relieved the strain. The absurdity of Brown's remark moved

Ivan to open taunts.

"Oh!" he cried; "then we didn't lug a great fat corpse on to a sofa

last night? He hadn't got into the garden, I suppose?"

"Got into the garden?" repeated Brown reflectively. "No, not entirely."

"Hang it all," cried Simon, "a man gets into a garden, or he doesn't."

"Not necessarily," said the priest, with a faint smile. "What is the

nest question, doctor?"

"I fancy you're ill," exclaimed Dr Simon sharply; "but I'll ask the

next question if you like. How did Brayne get out of the garden?"

"He didn't get out of the garden," said the priest, still looking out

of the window.

"Didn't get out of the garden?" exploded Simon.

"Not completely," said Father Brown.

Simon shook his fists in a frenzy of French logic. "A man gets out of a

garden, or he doesn't," he cried.

"Not always," said Father Brown.

Dr Simon sprang to his feet impatiently. "I have no time to spare on

such senseless talk," he cried angrily. "If you can't understand a man

being on one side of a wall or the other, I won't trouble you further."

"Doctor," said the cleric very gently, "we have always got on very

pleasantly together. If only for the sake of old friendship, stop and

tell me your fifth question."

The impatient Simon sank into a chair by the door and said briefly:

"The head and shoulders were cut about in a queer way. It seemed to be

done after death."

"Yes," said the motionless priest, "it was done so as to make you

assume exactly the one simple falsehood that you did assume. It was

done to make you take for granted that the head belonged to the body."

The borderland of the brain, where all the monsters are made, moved

horribly in the Gaelic O'Brien. He felt the chaotic presence of all the

horse-men and fish-women that man's unnatural fancy has begotten. A

voice older than his first fathers seemed saying in his ear: "Keep out

of the monstrous garden where grows the tree with double fruit. Avoid

the evil garden where died the man with two heads." Yet, while these

shameful symbolic shapes passed across the ancient mirror of his Irish

soul, his Frenchified intellect was quite alert, and was watching the

odd priest as closely and incredulously as all the rest.

Father Brown had turned round at last, and stood against the window,

with his face in dense shadow; but even in that shadow they could see

it was pale as ashes. Nevertheless, he spoke quite sensibly, as if

there were no Gaelic souls on earth.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you did not find the strange body of Becker in

the garden. You did not find any strange body in the garden. In face of

Dr Simon's rationalism, I still affirm that Becker was only partly

present. Look here!" (pointing to the black bulk of the mysterious

corpse) "you never saw that man in your lives. Did you ever see this

man?"

He rapidly rolled away the bald-yellow head of the unknown, and put in

its place the white-maned head beside it. And there, complete, unified,

unmistakable, lay Julius K. Brayne.

"The murderer," went on Brown quietly, "hacked off his enemy's head and

flung the sword far over the wall. But he was too clever to fling the

sword only. He flung the head over the wall also. Then he had only to

clap on another head to the corpse, and (as he insisted on a private

inquest) you all imagined a totally new man."

"Clap on another head!" said O'Brien staring. "What other head? Heads

don't grow on garden bushes, do they?"

"No," said Father Brown huskily, and looking at his boots; "there is

only one place where they grow. They grow in the basket of the

guillotine, beside which the chief of police, Aristide Valentin, was

standing not an hour before the murder. Oh, my friends, hear me a

minute more before you tear me in pieces. Valentin is an honest man, if

being mad for an arguable cause is honesty. But did you never see in

that cold, grey eye of his that he is mad! He would do anything,

anything, to break what he calls the superstition of the Cross. He has

fought for it and starved for it, and now he has murdered for it.

Brayne's crazy millions had hitherto been scattered among so many sects

that they did little to alter the balance of things. But Valentin heard

a whisper that Brayne, like so many scatter-brained sceptics, was

drifting to us; and that was quite a different thing. Brayne would pour

supplies into the impoverished and pugnacious Church of France; he

would support six Nationalist newspapers like The Guillotine. The

battle was already balanced on a point, and the fanatic took flame at

the risk. He resolved to destroy the millionaire, and he did it as one

would expect the greatest of detectives to commit his only crime. He

abstracted the severed head of Becker on some criminological excuse,

and took it home in his official box. He had that last argument with

Brayne, that Lord Galloway did not hear the end of; that failing, he

led him out into the sealed garden, talked about swordsmanship, used

twigs and a sabre for illustration, and--"

Ivan of the Scar sprang up. "You lunatic," he yelled; "you'll go to my

master now, if I take you by--"

"Why, I was going there," said Brown heavily; "I must ask him to

confess, and all that."

Driving the unhappy Brown before them like a hostage or sacrifice, they

rushed together into the sudden stillness of Valentin's study.

The great detective sat at his desk apparently too occupied to hear

their turbulent entrance. They paused a moment, and then something in

the look of that upright and elegant back made the doctor run forward

suddenly. A touch and a glance showed him that there was a small box of

pills at Valentin's elbow, and that Valentin was dead in his chair; and

on the blind face of the suicide was more than the pride of Cato.

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If you meet a member of that select club, "The Twelve True Fishermen,"

entering the Vernon Hotel for the annual club dinner, you will observe,

as he takes off his overcoat, that his evening coat is green and not

black. If (supposing that you have the star-defying audacity to address

such a being) you ask him why, he will probably answer that he does it

to avoid being mistaken for a waiter. You will then retire crushed. But

you will leave behind you a mystery as yet unsolved and a tale worth

telling.

If (to pursue the same vein of improbable conjecture) you were to meet

a mild, hard-working little priest, named Father Brown, and were to ask

him what he thought was the most singular luck of his life, he would

probably reply that upon the whole his best stroke was at the Vernon

Hotel, where he had averted a crime and, perhaps, saved a soul, merely

by listening to a few footsteps in a passage. He is perhaps a little

proud of this wild and wonderful guess of his, and it is possible that

he might refer to it. But since it is immeasurably unlikely that you

will ever rise high enough in the social world to find "The Twelve True

Fishermen," or that you will ever sink low enough among slums and

criminals to find Father Brown, I fear you will never hear the story at

all unless you hear it from me.

The Vernon Hotel at which The Twelve True Fishermen held their annual

dinners was an institution such as can only exist in an oligarchical

society which has almost gone mad on good manners. It was that

topsy-turvy product--an "exclusive" commercial enterprise. That is, it

was a thing which paid not by attracting people, but actually by

turning people away. In the heart of a plutocracy tradesmen become

cunning enough to be more fastidious than their customers. They

positively create difficulties so that their wealthy and weary clients

may spend money and diplomacy in overcoming them. If there were a

fashionable hotel in London which no man could enter who was under six

foot, society would meekly make up parties of six-foot men to dine in

it. If there were an expensive restaurant which by a mere caprice of

its proprietor was only open on Thursday afternoon, it would be crowded

on Thursday afternoon. The Vernon Hotel stood, as if by accident, in

the corner of a square in Belgravia. It was a small hotel; and a very

inconvenient one. But its very inconveniences were considered as walls

protecting a particular class. One inconvenience, in particular, was

held to be of vital importance: the fact that practically only

twenty-four people could dine in the place at once. The only big dinner

table was the celebrated terrace table, which stood open to the air on

a sort of veranda overlooking one of the most exquisite old gardens in

London. Thus it happened that even the twenty-four seats at this table

could only be enjoyed in warm weather; and this making the enjoyment

yet more difficult made it yet more desired. The existing owner of the

hotel was a Jew named Lever; and he made nearly a million out of it, by

making it difficult to get into. Of course he combined with this

limitation in the scope of his enterprise the most careful polish in

its performance. The wines and cooking were really as good as any in

Europe, and the demeanour of the attendants exactly mirrored the fixed

mood of the English upper class. The proprietor knew all his waiters

like the fingers on his hand; there were only fifteen of them all told.

It was much easier to become a Member of Parliament than to become a

waiter in that hotel. Each waiter was trained in terrible silence and

smoothness, as if he were a gentleman's servant. And, indeed, there was

generally at least one waiter to every gentleman who dined.

The club of The Twelve True Fishermen would not have consented to dine

anywhere but in such a place, for it insisted on a luxurious privacy;

and would have been quite upset by the mere thought that any other club

was even dining in the same building. On the occasion of their annual

dinner the Fishermen were in the habit of exposing all their treasures,

as if they were in a private house, especially the celebrated set of

fish knives and forks which were, as it were, the insignia of the

society, each being exquisitely wrought in silver in the form of a

fish, and each loaded at the hilt with one large pearl. These were

always laid out for the fish course, and the fish course was always the

most magnificent in that magnificent repast. The society had a vast

number of ceremonies and observances, but it had no history and no

object; that was where it was so very aristocratic. You did not have to

be anything in order to be one of the Twelve Fishers; unless you were

already a certain sort of person, you never even heard of them. It had

been in existence twelve years. Its president was Mr Audley. Its

vice-president was the Duke of Chester.

If I have in any degree conveyed the atmosphere of this appalling

hotel, the reader may feel a natural wonder as to how I came to know

anything about it, and may even speculate as to how so ordinary a

person as my friend Father Brown came to find himself in that golden

galley. As far as that is concerned, my story is simple, or even

vulgar. There is in the world a very aged rioter and demagogue who

breaks into the most refined retreats with the dreadful information

that all men are brothers, and wherever this leveller went on his pale

horse it was Father Brown's trade to follow. One of the waiters, an

Italian, had been struck down with a paralytic stroke that afternoon;

and his Jewish employer, marvelling mildly at such superstitions, had

consented to send for the nearest Popish priest. With what the waiter

confessed to Father Brown we are not concerned, for the excellent

reason that that cleric kept it to himself; but apparently it involved

him in writing out a note or statement for the conveying of some

message or the righting of some wrong. Father Brown, therefore, with a

meek impudence which he would have shown equally in Buckingham Palace,

asked to be provided with a room and writing materials. Mr Lever was

torn in two. He was a kind man, and had also that bad imitation of

kindness, the dislike of any difficulty or scene. At the same time the

presence of one unusual stranger in his hotel that evening was like a

speck of dirt on something just cleaned. There was never any borderland

or anteroom in the Vernon Hotel, no people waiting in the hall, no

customers coming in on chance. There were fifteen waiters. There were

twelve guests. It would be as startling to find a new guest in the

hotel that night as to find a new brother taking breakfast or tea in

one's own family. Moreover, the priest's appearance was second-rate and

his clothes muddy; a mere glimpse of him afar off might precipitate a

crisis in the club. Mr Lever at last hit on a plan to cover, since he

might not obliterate, the disgrace. When you enter (as you never will)

the Vernon Hotel, you pass down a short passage decorated with a few

dingy but important pictures, and come to the main vestibule and lounge

which opens on your right into passages leading to the public rooms,

and on your left to a similar passage pointing to the kitchens and

offices of the hotel. Immediately on your left hand is the corner of a

glass office, which abuts upon the lounge--a house within a house, so

to speak, like the old hotel bar which probably once occupied its

place.

In this office sat the representative of the proprietor (nobody in this

place ever appeared in person if he could help it), and just beyond the

office, on the way to the servants' quarters, was the gentlemen's

cloak-room, the last boundary of the gentlemen's domain. But between

the office and the cloak room was a small private room without other

outlet, sometimes used by the proprietor for delicate and important

matters, such as lending a duke a thousand pounds or declining to lend

him sixpence. It is a mark of the magnificent tolerance of Mr Lever

that he permitted this holy place to be for about half an hour profaned

by a mere priest, scribbling away on a piece of paper. The story which

Father Brown was writing down was very likely a much better story than

this one, only it will never be known. I can merely state that it was

very nearly as long, and that the last two or three paragraphs of it

were the least exciting and absorbing.

For it was by the time that he had reached these that the priest began

a little to allow his thoughts to wander and his animal senses, which

were commonly keen, to awaken. The time of darkness and dinner was

drawing on; his own forgotten little room was without a light, and

perhaps the gathering gloom, as occasionally happens, sharpened the

sense of sound. As Father Brown wrote the last and least essential part

of his document, he caught himself writing to the rhythm of a recurrent

noise outside, just as one sometimes thinks to the tune of a railway

train. When he became conscious of the thing he found what it was: only

the ordinary patter of feet passing the door, which in an hotel was no

very unlikely matter. Nevertheless, he stared at the darkened ceiling,

and listened to the sound. After he had listened for a few seconds

dreamily, he got to his feet and listened intently, with his head a

little on one side. Then he sat down again and buried his brow in his

hands, now not merely listening, but listening and thinking also.

The footsteps outside at any given moment were such as one might hear

in any hotel; and yet, taken as a whole, there was something very

strange about them. There were no other footsteps. It was always a very

silent house, for the few familiar guests went at once to their own

apartments, and the well-trained waiters were told to be almost

invisible until they were wanted. One could not conceive any place

where there was less reason to apprehend anything irregular. But these

footsteps were so odd that one could not decide to call them regular or

irregular. Father Brown followed them with his finger on the edge of

the table, like a man trying to learn a tune on the piano.

First, there came a long rush of rapid little steps, such as a light

man might make in winning a walking race. At a certain point they

stopped and changed to a sort of slow, swinging stamp, numbering not a

quarter of the steps, but occupying about the same time. The moment the

last echoing stamp had died away would come again the run or ripple of

light, hurrying feet, and then again the thud of the heavier walking.

It was certainly the same pair of boots, partly because (as has been

said) there were no other boots about, and partly because they had a

small but unmistakable creak in them. Father Brown had the kind of head

that cannot help asking questions; and on this apparently trivial

question his head almost split. He had seen men run in order to jump.

He had seen men run in order to slide. But why on earth should a man

run in order to walk? Or, again, why should he walk in order to run?

Yet no other description would cover the antics of this invisible pair

of legs. The man was either walking very fast down one-half of the

corridor in order to walk very slow down the other half; or he was

walking very slow at one end to have the rapture of walking fast at the

other. Neither suggestion seemed to make much sense. His brain was

growing darker and darker, like his room.

Yet, as he began to think steadily, the very blackness of his cell

seemed to make his thoughts more vivid; he began to see as in a kind of

vision the fantastic feet capering along the corridor in unnatural or

symbolic attitudes. Was it a heathen religious dance? Or some entirely

new kind of scientific exercise? Father Brown began to ask himself with

more exactness what the steps suggested. Taking the slow step first: it

certainly was not the step of the proprietor. Men of his type walk with

a rapid waddle, or they sit still. It could not be any servant or

messenger waiting for directions. It did not sound like it. The poorer

orders (in an oligarchy) sometimes lurch about when they are slightly

drunk, but generally, and especially in such gorgeous scenes, they

stand or sit in constrained attitudes. No; that heavy yet springy step,

with a kind of careless emphasis, not specially noisy, yet not caring

what noise it made, belonged to only one of the animals of this earth.

It was a gentleman of western Europe, and probably one who had never

worked for his living.

Just as he came to this solid certainty, the step changed to the

quicker one, and ran past the door as feverishly as a rat. The listener

remarked that though this step was much swifter it was also much more

noiseless, almost as if the man were walking on tiptoe. Yet it was not

associated in his mind with secrecy, but with something else--something

that he could not remember. He was maddened by one of those

half-memories that make a man feel half-witted. Surely he had heard

that strange, swift walking somewhere. Suddenly he sprang to his feet

with a new idea in his head, and walked to the door. His room had no

direct outlet on the passage, but let on one side into the glass

office, and on the other into the cloak-room beyond. He tried the door

into the office, and found it locked. Then he looked at the window, now

a square pane full of purple cloud cleft by livid sunset, and for an

instant he smelt evil as a dog smells rats.

The rational part of him (whether the wiser or not) regained its

supremacy. He remembered that the proprietor had told him that he

should lock the door, and would come later to release him. He told

himself that twenty things he had not thought of might explain the

eccentric sounds outside; he reminded himself that there was just

enough light left to finish his own proper work. Bringing his paper to

the window so as to catch the last stormy evening light, he resolutely

plunged once more into the almost completed record. He had written for

about twenty minutes, bending closer and closer to his paper in the

lessening light; then suddenly he sat upright. He had heard the strange

feet once more.

This time they had a third oddity. Previously the unknown man had

walked, with levity indeed and lightning quickness, but he had walked.

This time he ran. One could hear the swift, soft, bounding steps coming

along the corridor, like the pads of a fleeing and leaping panther.

Whoever was coming was a very strong, active man, in still yet tearing

excitement. Yet, when the sound had swept up to the office like a sort

of whispering whirlwind, it suddenly changed again to the old slow,

swaggering stamp.

Father Brown flung down his paper, and, knowing the office door to be

locked, went at once into the cloak-room on the other side. The

attendant of this place was temporarily absent, probably because the

only guests were at dinner and his office was a sinecure. After groping

through a grey forest of overcoats, he found that the dim cloak-room

opened on the lighted corridor in the form of a sort of counter or

half-door, like most of the counters across which we have all handed

umbrellas and received tickets. There was a light immediately above the

semi-circular arch of this opening. It threw little illumination on

Father Brown himself, who seemed a mere dark outline against the dim

sunset window behind him. But it threw an almost theatrical light on

the man who stood outside the cloak-room in the corridor.

He was an elegant man in very plain evening-dress; tall, but with an

air of not taking up much room; one felt that he could have slid along

like a shadow where many smaller men would have been obvious and

obstructive. His face, now flung back in the lamplight, was swarthy and

vivacious, the face of a foreigner. His figure was good, his manners

good-humoured and confident; a critic could only say that his black

coat was a shade below his figure and manners, and even bulged and

bagged in an odd way. The moment he caught sight of Brown's black

silhouette against the sunset, he tossed down a scrap of paper with a

number and called out with amiable authority: "I want my hat and coat,

please; I find I have to go away at once."

Father Brown took the paper without a word, and obediently went to look

for the coat; it was not the first menial work he had done in his life.

He brought it and laid it on the counter; meanwhile, the strange

gentleman who had been feeling in his waistcoat pocket, said laughing:

"I haven't got any silver; you can keep this." And he threw down half a

sovereign, and caught up his coat.

Father Brown's figure remained quite dark and still; but in that

instant he had lost his head. His head was always most valuable when he

had lost it. In such moments he put two and two together and made four

million. Often the Catholic Church (which is wedded to common sense)

did not approve of it. Often he did not approve of it himself. But it

was real inspiration--important at rare crises--when whosoever shall

lose his head the same shall save it.

"I think, sir," he said civilly, "that you have some silver in your

pocket."

The tall gentleman stared. "Hang it," he cried, "if I choose to give

you gold, why should you complain?"

"Because silver is sometimes more valuable than gold," said the priest

mildly; "that is, in large quantities."

The stranger looked at him curiously. Then he looked still more

curiously up the passage towards the main entrance. Then he looked back

at Brown again, and then he looked very carefully at the window beyond

Brown's head, still coloured with the after-glow of the storm. Then he

seemed to make up his mind. He put one hand on the counter, vaulted

over as easily as an acrobat and towered above the priest, putting one

tremendous hand upon his collar.

"Stand still," he said, in a hacking whisper. "I don't want to threaten

you, but--"

"I do want to threaten you," said Father Brown, in a voice like a

rolling drum, "I want to threaten you with the worm that dieth not, and

the fire that is not quenched."

"You're a rum sort of cloak-room clerk," said the other.

"I am a priest, Monsieur Flambeau," said Brown, "and I am ready to hear

your confession."

The other stood gasping for a few moments, and then staggered back into

a chair.

The first two courses of the dinner of The Twelve True Fishermen had

proceeded with placid success. I do not possess a copy of the menu; and

if I did it would not convey anything to anybody. It was written in a

sort of super-French employed by cooks, but quite unintelligible to

Frenchmen. There was a tradition in the club that the hors d'oeuvres

should be various and manifold to the point of madness. They were taken

seriously because they were avowedly useless extras, like the whole

dinner and the whole club. There was also a tradition that the soup

course should be light and unpretending--a sort of simple and austere

vigil for the feast of fish that was to come. The talk was that

strange, slight talk which governs the British Empire, which governs it

in secret, and yet would scarcely enlighten an ordinary Englishman even

if he could overhear it. Cabinet ministers on both sides were alluded

to by their Christian names with a sort of bored benignity. The Radical

Chancellor of the Exchequer, whom the whole Tory party was supposed to

be cursing for his extortions, was praised for his minor poetry, or his

saddle in the hunting-field. The Tory leader, whom all Liberals were

supposed to hate as a tyrant, was discussed and, on the whole,

praised--as a Liberal. It seemed somehow that politicians were very

important. And yet, anything seemed important about them except their

politics. Mr Audley, the chairman, was an amiable, elderly man who

still wore Gladstone collars; he was a kind of symbol of all that

phantasmal and yet fixed society. He had never done anything--not even

anything wrong. He was not fast; he was not even particularly rich. He

was simply in the thing; and there was an end of it. No party could

ignore him, and if he had wished to be in the Cabinet he certainly

would have been put there. The Duke of Chester, the vice-president, was

a young and rising politician. That is to say, he was a pleasant youth,

with flat, fair hair and a freckled face, with moderate intelligence

and enormous estates. In public his appearances were always successful

and his principle was simple enough. When he thought of a joke he made

it, and was called brilliant. When he could not think of a joke he said

that this was no time for trifling, and was called able. In private, in

a club of his own class, he was simply quite pleasantly frank and

silly, like a schoolboy. Mr Audley, never having been in politics,

treated them a little more seriously. Sometimes he even embarrassed the

company by phrases suggesting that there was some difference between a

Liberal and a Conservative. He himself was a Conservative, even in

private life. He had a roll of grey hair over the back of his collar,

like certain old-fashioned statesmen, and seen from behind he looked

like the man the empire wants. Seen from the front he looked like a

mild, self-indulgent bachelor, with rooms in the Albany--which he was.

As has been remarked, there were twenty-four seats at the terrace

table, and only twelve members of the club. Thus they could occupy the

terrace in the most luxurious style of all, being ranged along the

inner side of the table, with no one opposite, commanding an

uninterrupted view of the garden, the colours of which were still

vivid, though evening was closing in somewhat luridly for the time of

year. The chairman sat in the centre of the line, and the

vice-president at the right-hand end of it. When the twelve guests

first trooped into their seats it was the custom (for some unknown

reason) for all the fifteen waiters to stand lining the wall like

troops presenting arms to the king, while the fat proprietor stood and

bowed to the club with radiant surprise, as if he had never heard of

them before. But before the first chink of knife and fork this army of

retainers had vanished, only the one or two required to collect and

distribute the plates darting about in deathly silence. Mr Lever, the

proprietor, of course had disappeared in convulsions of courtesy long

before. It would be exaggerative, indeed irreverent, to say that he

ever positively appeared again. But when the important course, the fish

course, was being brought on, there was--how shall I put it?--a vivid

shadow, a projection of his personality, which told that he was

hovering near. The sacred fish course consisted (to the eyes of the

vulgar) in a sort of monstrous pudding, about the size and shape of a

wedding cake, in which some considerable number of interesting fishes

had finally lost the shapes which God had given to them. The Twelve

True Fishermen took up their celebrated fish knives and fish forks, and

approached it as gravely as if every inch of the pudding cost as much

as the silver fork it was eaten with. So it did, for all I know. This

course was dealt with in eager and devouring silence; and it was only

when his plate was nearly empty that the young duke made the ritual

remark: "They can't do this anywhere but here."

"Nowhere," said Mr Audley, in a deep bass voice, turning to the speaker

and nodding his venerable head a number of times. "Nowhere, assuredly,

except here. It was represented to me that at the Caf� Anglais--"

Here he was interrupted and even agitated for a moment by the removal

of his plate, but he recaptured the valuable thread of his thoughts.

"It was represented to me that the same could be done at the Caf�

Anglais. Nothing like it, sir," he said, shaking his head ruthlessly,

like a hanging judge. "Nothing like it."

"Overrated place," said a certain Colonel Pound, speaking (by the look

of him) for the first time for some months.

"Oh, I don't know," said the Duke of Chester, who was an optimist,

"it's jolly good for some things. You can't beat it at--"

A waiter came swiftly along the room, and then stopped dead. His

stoppage was as silent as his tread; but all those vague and kindly

gentlemen were so used to the utter smoothness of the unseen machinery

which surrounded and supported their lives, that a waiter doing

anything unexpected was a start and a jar. They felt as you and I would

feel if the inanimate world disobeyed--if a chair ran away from us.

The waiter stood staring a few seconds, while there deepened on every

face at table a strange shame which is wholly the product of our time.

It is the combination of modern humanitarianism with the horrible

modern abyss between the souls of the rich and poor. A genuine historic

aristocrat would have thrown things at the waiter, beginning with empty

bottles, and very probably ending with money. A genuine democrat would

have asked him, with comrade-like clearness of speech, what the devil

he was doing. But these modern plutocrats could not bear a poor man

near to them, either as a slave or as a friend. That something had gone

wrong with the servants was merely a dull, hot embarrassment. They did

not want to be brutal, and they dreaded the need to be benevolent. They

wanted the thing, whatever it was, to be over. It was over. The waiter,

after standing for some seconds rigid, like a cataleptic, turned round

and ran madly out of the room.

When he reappeared in the room, or rather in the doorway, it was in

company with another waiter, with whom he whispered and gesticulated

with southern fierceness. Then the first waiter went away, leaving the

second waiter, and reappeared with a third waiter. By the time a fourth

waiter had joined this hurried synod, Mr Audley felt it necessary to

break the silence in the interests of Tact. He used a very loud cough,

instead of a presidential hammer, and said: "Splendid work young

Moocher's doing in Burmah. Now, no other nation in the world could

have--"

A fifth waiter had sped towards him like an arrow, and was whispering

in his ear: "So sorry. Important! Might the proprietor speak to you?"

The chairman turned in disorder, and with a dazed stare saw Mr Lever

coming towards them with his lumbering quickness. The gait of the good

proprietor was indeed his usual gait, but his face was by no means

usual. Generally it was a genial copper-brown; now it was a sickly

yellow.

"You will pardon me, Mr Audley," he said, with asthmatic

breathlessness. "I have great apprehensions. Your fish-plates, they are

cleared away with the knife and fork on them!"

"Well, I hope so," said the chairman, with some warmth.

"You see him?" panted the excited hotel keeper; "you see the waiter who

took them away? You know him?"

"Know the waiter?" answered Mr Audley indignantly. "Certainly not!"

Mr Lever opened his hands with a gesture of agony. "I never send him,"

he said. "I know not when or why he come. I send my waiter to take away

the plates, and he find them already away."

Mr Audley still looked rather too bewildered to be really the man the

empire wants; none of the company could say anything except the man of

wood--Colonel Pound--who seemed galvanised into an unnatural life. He

rose rigidly from his chair, leaving all the rest sitting, screwed his

eyeglass into his eye, and spoke in a raucous undertone as if he had

half-forgotten how to speak. "Do you mean," he said, "that somebody has

stolen our silver fish service?"

The proprietor repeated the open-handed gesture with even greater

helplessness and in a flash all the men at the table were on their

feet.

"Are all your waiters here?" demanded the colonel, in his low, harsh

accent.

"Yes; they're all here. I noticed it myself," cried the young duke,

pushing his boyish face into the inmost ring. "Always count 'em as I

come in; they look so queer standing up against the wall."

"But surely one cannot exactly remember," began Mr Audley, with heavy

hesitation.

"I remember exactly, I tell you," cried the duke excitedly. "There

never have been more than fifteen waiters at this place, and there were

no more than fifteen tonight, I'll swear; no more and no less."

The proprietor turned upon him, quaking in a kind of palsy of surprise.

"You say--you say," he stammered, "that you see all my fifteen

waiters?"

"As usual," assented the duke. "What is the matter with that!"

"Nothing," said Lever, with a deepening accent, "only you did not. For

one of zem is dead upstairs."

There was a shocking stillness for an instant in that room. It may be

(so supernatural is the word death) that each of those idle men looked

for a second at his soul, and saw it as a small dried pea. One of

them--the duke, I think--even said with the idiotic kindness of wealth:

"Is there anything we can do?"

"He has had a priest," said the Jew, not untouched.

Then, as to the clang of doom, they awoke to their own position. For a

few weird seconds they had really felt as if the fifteenth waiter might

be the ghost of the dead man upstairs. They had been dumb under that

oppression, for ghosts were to them an embarrassment, like beggars. But

the remembrance of the silver broke the spell of the miraculous; broke

it abruptly and with a brutal reaction. The colonel flung over his

chair and strode to the door. "If there was a fifteenth man here,

friends," he said, "that fifteenth fellow was a thief. Down at once to

the front and back doors and secure everything; then we'll talk. The

twenty-four pearls of the club are worth recovering."

Mr Audley seemed at first to hesitate about whether it was gentlemanly

to be in such a hurry about anything; but, seeing the duke dash down

the stairs with youthful energy, he followed with a more mature motion.

At the same instant a sixth waiter ran into the room, and declared that

he had found the pile of fish plates on a sideboard, with no trace of

the silver.

The crowd of diners and attendants that tumbled helter-skelter down the

passages divided into two groups. Most of the Fishermen followed the

proprietor to the front room to demand news of any exit. Colonel Pound,

with the chairman, the vice-president, and one or two others darted

down the corridor leading to the servants' quarters, as the more likely

line of escape. As they did so they passed the dim alcove or cavern of

the cloak-room, and saw a short, black-coated figure, presumably an

attendant, standing a little way back in the shadow of it.

"Hallo, there!" called out the duke. "Have you seen anyone pass?"

The short figure did not answer the question directly, but merely said:

"Perhaps I have got what you are looking for, gentlemen."

They paused, wavering and wondering, while he quietly went to the back

of the cloak-room, and came back with both hands full of shining

silver, which he laid out on the counter as calmly as a salesman. It

took the form of a dozen quaintly shaped forks and knives.

"You--you--" began the colonel, quite thrown off his balance at last.

Then he peered into the dim little room and saw two things: first, that

the short, black-clad man was dressed like a clergyman; and, second,

that the window of the room behind him was burst, as if someone had

passed violently through. "Valuable things to deposit in a cloak-room,

aren't they?" remarked the clergyman, with cheerful composure.

"Did--did you steal those things?" stammered Mr Audley, with staring

eyes.

"If I did," said the cleric pleasantly, "at least I am bringing them

back again."

"But you didn't," said Colonel Pound, still staring at the broken

window.

"To make a clean breast of it, I didn't," said the other, with some

humour. And he seated himself quite gravely on a stool. "But you know

who did," said the, colonel.

"I don't know his real name," said the priest placidly, "but I know

something of his fighting weight, and a great deal about his spiritual

difficulties. I formed the physical estimate when he was trying to

throttle me, and the moral estimate when he repented."

"Oh, I say--repented!" cried young Chester, with a sort of crow of

laughter.

Father Brown got to his feet, putting his hands behind him. "Odd, isn't

it," he said, "that a thief and a vagabond should repent, when so many

who are rich and secure remain hard and frivolous, and without fruit

for God or man? But there, if you will excuse me, you trespass a little

upon my province. If you doubt the penitence as a practical fact, there

are your knives and forks. You are The Twelve True Fishers, and there

are all your silver fish. But He has made me a fisher of men."

"Did you catch this man?" asked the colonel, frowning.

Father Brown looked him full in his frowning face. "Yes," he said, "I

caught him, with an unseen hook and an invisible line which is long

enough to let him wander to the ends of the world, and still to bring

him back with a twitch upon the thread."

There was a long silence. All the other men present drifted away to

carry the recovered silver to their comrades, or to consult the

proprietor about the queer condition of affairs. But the grim-faced

colonel still sat sideways on the counter, swinging his long, lank legs

and biting his dark moustache.

At last he said quietly to the priest: "He must have been a clever

fellow, but I think I know a cleverer."

"He was a clever fellow," answered the other, "but I am not quite sure

of what other you mean."

"I mean you," said the colonel, with a short laugh. "I don't want to

get the fellow jailed; make yourself easy about that. But I'd give a

good many silver forks to know exactly how you fell into this affair,

and how you got the stuff out of him. I reckon you're the most

up-to-date devil of the present company."

Father Brown seemed rather to like the saturnine candour of the

soldier. "Well," he said, smiling, "I mustn't tell you anything of the

man's identity, or his own story, of course; but there's no particular

reason why I shouldn't tell you of the mere outside facts which I found

out for myself."

He hopped over the barrier with unexpected activity, and sat beside

Colonel Pound, kicking his short legs like a little boy on a gate. He

began to tell the story as easily as if he were telling it to an old

friend by a Christmas fire.

"You see, colonel," he said, "I was shut up in that small room there

doing some writing, when I heard a pair of feet in this passage doing a

dance that was as queer as the dance of death. First came quick, funny

little steps, like a man walking on tiptoe for a wager; then came slow,

careless, creaking steps, as of a big man walking about with a cigar.

But they were both made by the same feet, I swear, and they came in

rotation; first the run and then the walk, and then the run again. I

wondered at first idly and then wildly why a man should act these two

parts at once. One walk I knew; it was just like yours, colonel. It was

the walk of a well-fed gentleman waiting for something, who strolls

about rather because he is physically alert than because he is mentally

impatient. I knew that I knew the other walk, too, but I could not

remember what it was. What wild creature had I met on my travels that

tore along on tiptoe in that extraordinary style? Then I heard a clink

of plates somewhere; and the answer stood up as plain as St Peter's. It

was the walk of a waiter--that walk with the body slanted forward, the

eyes looking down, the ball of the toe spurning away the ground, the

coat tails and napkin flying. Then I thought for a minute and a half

more. And I believe I saw the manner of the crime, as clearly as if I

were going to commit it."

Colonel Pound looked at him keenly, but the speaker's mild grey eyes

were fixed upon the ceiling with almost empty wistfulness.

"A crime," he said slowly, "is like any other work of art. Don't look

surprised; crimes are by no means the only works of art that come from

an infernal workshop. But every work of art, divine or diabolic, has

one indispensable mark--I mean, that the centre of it is simple,

however much the fulfilment may be complicated. Thus, in Hamlet, let us

say, the grotesqueness of the grave-digger, the flowers of the mad

girl, the fantastic finery of Osric, the pallor of the ghost and the

grin of the skull are all oddities in a sort of tangled wreath round

one plain tragic figure of a man in black. Well, this also," he said,

getting slowly down from his seat with a smile, "this also is the plain

tragedy of a man in black. Yes," he went on, seeing the colonel look up

in some wonder, "the whole of this tale turns on a black coat. In this,

as in Hamlet, there are the rococo excrescences--yourselves, let us

say. There is the dead waiter, who was there when he could not be

there. There is the invisible hand that swept your table clear of

silver and melted into air. But every clever crime is founded

ultimately on some one quite simple fact--some fact that is not itself

mysterious. The mystification comes in covering it up, in leading men's

thoughts away from it. This large and subtle and (in the ordinary

course) most profitable crime, was built on the plain fact that a

gentleman's evening dress is the same as a waiter's. All the rest was

acting, and thundering good acting, too."

"Still," said the colonel, getting up and frowning at his boots, "I am

not sure that I understand."

"Colonel," said Father Brown, "I tell you that this archangel of

impudence who stole your forks walked up and down this passage twenty

times in the blaze of all the lamps, in the glare of all the eyes. He

did not go and hide in dim corners where suspicion might have searched

for him. He kept constantly on the move in the lighted corridors, and

everywhere that he went he seemed to be there by right. Don't ask me

what he was like; you have seen him yourself six or seven times

tonight. You were waiting with all the other grand people in the

reception room at the end of the passage there, with the terrace just

beyond. Whenever he came among you gentlemen, he came in the lightning

style of a waiter, with bent head, flapping napkin and flying feet. He

shot out on to the terrace, did something to the table-cloth, and shot

back again towards the office and the waiters' quarters. By the time he

had come under the eye of the office clerk and the waiters he had

become another man in every inch of his body, in every instinctive

gesture. He strolled among the servants with the absent-minded

insolence which they have all seen in their patrons. It was no new

thing to them that a swell from the dinner party should pace all parts

of the house like an animal at the Zoo; they know that nothing marks

the Smart Set more than a habit of walking where one chooses. When he

was magnificently weary of walking down that particular passage he

would wheel round and pace back past the office; in the shadow of the

arch just beyond he was altered as by a blast of magic, and went

hurrying forward again among the Twelve Fishermen, an obsequious

attendant. Why should the gentlemen look at a chance waiter? Why should

the waiters suspect a first-rate walking gentleman? Once or twice he

played the coolest tricks. In the proprietor's private quarters he

called out breezily for a syphon of soda water, saying he was thirsty.

He said genially that he would carry it himself, and he did; he carried

it quickly and correctly through the thick of you, a waiter with an

obvious errand. Of course, it could not have been kept up long, but it

only had to be kept up till the end of the fish course.

"His worst moment was when the waiters stood in a row; but even then he

contrived to lean against the wall just round the corner in such a way

that for that important instant the waiters thought him a gentleman,

while the gentlemen thought him a waiter. The rest went like winking.

If any waiter caught him away from the table, that waiter caught a

languid aristocrat. He had only to time himself two minutes before the

fish was cleared, become a swift servant, and clear it himself. He put

the plates down on a sideboard, stuffed the silver in his breast

pocket, giving it a bulgy look, and ran like a hare (I heard him

coming) till he came to the cloak-room. There he had only to be a

plutocrat again--a plutocrat called away suddenly on business. He had

only to give his ticket to the cloak-room attendant, and go out again

elegantly as he had come in. Only--only I happened to be the cloak-room

attendant."

"What did you do to him?" cried the colonel, with unusual intensity.

"What did he tell you?"

"I beg your pardon," said the priest immovably, "that is where the

story ends."

"And the interesting story begins," muttered Pound. "I think I

understand his professional trick. But I don't seem to have got hold of

yours."

"I must be going," said Father Brown.

They walked together along the passage to the entrance hall, where they

saw the fresh, freckled face of the Duke of Chester, who was bounding

buoyantly along towards them.

"Come along, Pound," he cried breathlessly. "I've been looking for you

everywhere. The dinner's going again in spanking style, and old Audley

has got to make a speech in honour of the forks being saved. We want to

start some new ceremony, don't you know, to commemorate the occasion. I

say, you really got the goods back, what do you suggest?"

"Why," said the colonel, eyeing him with a certain sardonic approval,

"I should suggest that henceforward we wear green coats, instead of

black. One never knows what mistakes may arise when one looks so like a

waiter."

"Oh, hang it all!" said the young man, "a gentleman never looks like a

waiter."

"Nor a waiter like a gentleman, I suppose," said Colonel Pound, with

the same lowering laughter on his face. "Reverend sir, your friend must

have been very smart to act the gentleman."

Father Brown buttoned up his commonplace overcoat to the neck, for the

night was stormy, and took his commonplace umbrella from the stand.

"Yes," he said; "it must be very hard work to be a gentleman; but, do

you know, I have sometimes thought that it may be almost as laborious

to be a waiter."

And saying "Good evening," he pushed open the heavy doors of that

palace of pleasures. The golden gates closed behind him, and he went at

a brisk walk through the damp, dark streets in search of a penny

omnibus.

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"The most beautiful crime I ever committed," Flambeau would say in his

highly moral old age, "was also, by a singular coincidence, my last. It

was committed at Christmas. As an artist I had always attempted to

provide crimes suitable to the special season or landscapes in which I

found myself, choosing this or that terrace or garden for a

catastrophe, as if for a statuary group. Thus squires should be

swindled in long rooms panelled with oak; while Jews, on the other

hand, should rather find themselves unexpectedly penniless among the

lights and screens of the Caf� Riche. Thus, in England, if I wished to

relieve a dean of his riches (which is not so easy as you might

suppose), I wished to frame him, if I make myself clear, in the green

lawns and grey towers of some cathedral town. Similarly, in France,

when I had got money out of a rich and wicked peasant (which is almost

impossible), it gratified me to get his indignant head relieved against

a grey line of clipped poplars, and those solemn plains of Gaul over

which broods the mighty spirit of Millet.

"Well, my last crime was a Christmas crime, a cheery, cosy, English

middle-class crime; a crime of Charles Dickens. I did it in a good old

middle-class house near Putney, a house with a crescent of carriage

drive, a house with a stable by the side of it, a house with the name

on the two outer gates, a house with a monkey tree. Enough, you know

the species. I really think my imitation of Dickens's style was

dexterous and literary. It seems almost a pity I repented the same

evening."

Flambeau would then proceed to tell the story from the inside; and even

from the inside it was odd. Seen from the outside it was perfectly

incomprehensible, and it is from the outside that the stranger must

study it. From this standpoint the drama may be said to have begun when

the front doors of the house with the stable opened on the garden with

the monkey tree, and a young girl came out with bread to feed the birds

on the afternoon of Boxing Day. She had a pretty face, with brave brown

eyes; but her figure was beyond conjecture, for she was so wrapped up

in brown furs that it was hard to say which was hair and which was fur.

But for the attractive face she might have been a small toddling bear.

The winter afternoon was reddening towards evening, and already a ruby

light was rolled over the bloomless beds, filling them, as it were,

with the ghosts of the dead roses. On one side of the house stood the

stable, on the other an alley or cloister of laurels led to the larger

garden behind. The young lady, having scattered bread for the birds

(for the fourth or fifth time that day, because the dog ate it), passed

unobutrusively down the lane of laurels and into a glimmering

plantation of evergreens behind. Here she gave an exclamation of

wonder, real or ritual, and looking up at the high garden wall above

her, beheld it fantastically bestridden by a somewhat fantastic figure.

"Oh, don't jump, Mr Crook," she called out in some alarm; "it's much

too high."

The individual riding the party wall like an aerial horse was a tall,

angular young man, with dark hair sticking up like a hair brush,

intelligent and even distinguished lineaments, but a sallow and almost

alien complexion. This showed the more plainly because he wore an

aggressive red tie, the only part of his costume of which he seemed to

take any care. Perhaps it was a symbol. He took no notice of the girl's

alarmed adjuration, but leapt like a grasshopper to the ground beside

her, where he might very well have broken his legs.

"I think I was meant to be a burglar," he said placidly, "and I have no

doubt I should have been if I hadn't happened to be born in that nice

house next door. I can't see any harm in it, anyhow."

"How can you say such things!" she remonstrated.

"Well," said the young man, "if you're born on the wrong side of the

wall, I can't see that it's wrong to climb over it."

"I never know what you will say or do next," she said.

"I don't often know myself," replied Mr Crook; "but then I am on the

right side of the wall now."

"And which is the right side of the wall?" asked the young lady,

smiling.

"Whichever side you are on," said the young man named Crook.

As they went together through the laurels towards the front garden a

motor horn sounded thrice, coming nearer and nearer, and a car of

splendid speed, great elegance, and a pale green colour swept up to the

front doors like a bird and stood throbbing.

"Hullo, hullo!" said the young man with the red tie, "here's somebody

born on the right side, anyhow. I didn't know, Miss Adams, that your

Santa Claus was so modern as this."

"Oh, that's my godfather, Sir Leopold Fischer. He always comes on

Boxing Day."

Then, after an innocent pause, which unconsciously betrayed some lack

of enthusiasm, Ruby Adams added:

"He is very kind."

John Crook, journalist, had heard of that eminent City magnate; and it

was not his fault if the City magnate had not heard of him; for in

certain articles in The Clarion or The New Age Sir Leopold had been

dealt with austerely. But he said nothing and grimly watched the

unloading of the motor-car, which was rather a long process. A large,

neat chauffeur in green got out from the front, and a small, neat

manservant in grey got out from the back, and between them they

deposited Sir Leopold on the doorstep and began to unpack him, like

some very carefully protected parcel. Rugs enough to stock a bazaar,

furs of all the beasts of the forest, and scarves of all the colours of

the rainbow were unwrapped one by one, till they revealed something

resembling the human form; the form of a friendly, but foreign-looking

old gentleman, with a grey goat-like beard and a beaming smile, who

rubbed his big fur gloves together.

Long before this revelation was complete the two big doors of the porch

had opened in the middle, and Colonel Adams (father of the furry young

lady) had come out himself to invite his eminent guest inside. He was a

tall, sunburnt, and very silent man, who wore a red smoking-cap like a

fez, making him look like one of the English Sirdars or Pashas in

Egypt. With him was his brother-in-law, lately come from Canada, a big

and rather boisterous young gentleman-farmer, with a yellow beard, by

name James Blount. With him also was the more insignificant figure of

the priest from the neighbouring Roman Church; for the colonel's late

wife had been a Catholic, and the children, as is common in such cases,

had been trained to follow her. Everything seemed undistinguished about

the priest, even down to his name, which was Brown; yet the colonel had

always found something companionable about him, and frequently asked

him to such family gatherings.

In the large entrance hall of the house there was ample room even for

Sir Leopold and the removal of his wraps. Porch and vestibule, indeed,

were unduly large in proportion to the house, and formed, as it were, a

big room with the front door at one end, and the bottom of the

staircase at the other. In front of the large hall fire, over which

hung the colonel's sword, the process was completed and the company,

including the saturnine Crook, presented to Sir Leopold Fischer. That

venerable financier, however, still seemed struggling with portions of

his well-lined attire, and at length produced from a very interior

tail-coat pocket, a black oval case which he radiantly explained to be

his Christmas present for his god-daughter. With an unaffected

vainglory that had something disarming about it he held out the case

before them all; it flew open at a touch and half-blinded them. It was

just as if a crystal fountain had spurted in their eyes. In a nest of

orange velvet lay like three eggs, three white and vivid diamonds that

seemed to set the very air on fire all round them. Fischer stood

beaming benevolently and drinking deep of the astonishment and ecstasy

of the girl, the grim admiration and gruff thanks of the colonel, the

wonder of the whole group.

"I'll put 'em back now, my dear," said Fischer, returning the case to

the tails of his coat. "I had to be careful of 'em coming down. They're

the three great African diamonds called `The Flying Stars,' because

they've been stolen so often. All the big criminals are on the track;

but even the rough men about in the streets and hotels could hardly

have kept their hands off them. I might have lost them on the road

here. It was quite possible."

"Quite natural, I should say," growled the man in the red tie. "I

shouldn't blame 'em if they had taken 'em. When they ask for bread, and

you don't even give them a stone, I think they might take the stone for

themselves."

"I won't have you talking like that," cried the girl, who was in a

curious glow. "You've only talked like that since you became a horrid

what's-his-name. You know what I mean. What do you call a man who wants

to embrace the chimney-sweep?"

"A saint," said Father Brown.

"I think," said Sir Leopold, with a supercilious smile, "that Ruby

means a Socialist."

"A radical does not mean a man who lives on radishes," remarked Crook,

with some impatience; and a Conservative does not mean a man who

preserves jam. Neither, I assure you, does a Socialist mean a man who

desires a social evening with the chimney-sweep. A Socialist means a

man who wants all the chimneys swept and all the chimney-sweeps paid

for it."

"But who won't allow you," put in the priest in a low voice, "to own

your own soot."

Crook looked at him with an eye of interest and even respect. "Does one

want to own soot?" he asked.

"One might," answered Brown, with speculation in his eye. "I've heard

that gardeners use it. And I once made six children happy at Christmas

when the conjuror didn't come, entirely with soot--applied externally."

"Oh, splendid," cried Ruby. "Oh, I wish you'd do it to this company."

The boisterous Canadian, Mr Blount, was lifting his loud voice in

applause, and the astonished financier his (in some considerable

deprecation), when a knock sounded at the double front doors. The

priest opened them, and they showed again the front garden of

evergreens, monkey-tree and all, now gathering gloom against a gorgeous

violet sunset. The scene thus framed was so coloured and quaint, like a

back scene in a play, that they forgot a moment the insignificant

figure standing in the door. He was dusty-looking and in a frayed coat,

evidently a common messenger. "Any of you gentlemen Mr Blount?" he

asked, and held forward a letter doubtfully. Mr Blount started, and

stopped in his shout of assent. Ripping up the envelope with evident

astonishment he read it; his face clouded a little, and then cleared,

and he turned to his brother-in-law and host.

"I'm sick at being such a nuisance, colonel," he said, with the cheery

colonial conventions; "but would it upset you if an old acquaintance

called on me here tonight on business? In point of fact it's Florian,

that famous French acrobat and comic actor; I knew him years ago out

West (he was a French-Canadian by birth), and he seems to have business

for me, though I hardly guess what."

"Of course, of course," replied the colonel carelessly. "My dear chap,

any friend of yours. No doubt he will prove an acquisition."

"He'll black his face, if that's what you mean," cried Blount,

laughing. "I don't doubt he'd black everyone else's eyes. I don't care;

I'm not refined. I like the jolly old pantomime where a man sits on his

top hat."

"Not on mine, please," said Sir Leopold Fischer, with dignity.

"Well, well," observed Crook, airily, "don't let's quarrel. There are

lower jokes than sitting on a top hat."

Dislike of the red-tied youth, born of his predatory opinions and

evident intimacy with the pretty god-child, led Fischer to say, in his

most sarcastic, magisterial manner: "No doubt you have found something

much lower than sitting on a top hat. What is it, pray?"

"Letting a top hat sit on you, for instance," said the Socialist.

"Now, now, now," cried the Canadian farmer with his barbarian

benevolence, "don't let's spoil a jolly evening. What I say is, let's

do something for the company tonight. Not blacking faces or sitting on

hats, if you don't like those--but something of the sort. Why couldn't

we have a proper old English pantomime--clown, columbine, and so on. I

saw one when I left England at twelve years old, and it's blazed in my

brain like a bonfire ever since. I came back to the old country only

last year, and I find the thing's extinct. Nothing but a lot of

snivelling fairy plays. I want a hot poker and a policeman made into

sausages, and they give me princesses moralising by moonlight, Blue

Birds, or something. Blue Beard's more in my line, and him I like best

when he turned into the pantaloon."

"I'm all for making a policeman into sausages," said John Crook. "It's

a better definition of Socialism than some recently given. But surely

the get-up would be too big a business."

"Not a scrap," cried Blount, quite carried away. "A harlequinade's the

quickest thing we can do, for two reasons. First, one can gag to any

degree; and, second, all the objects are household things--tables and

towel-horses and washing baskets, and things like that."

"That's true," admitted Crook, nodding eagerly and walking about. "But

I'm afraid I can't have my policeman's uniform! Haven't killed a

policeman lately."

Blount frowned thoughtfully a space, and then smote his thigh. "Yes, we

can!" he cried. "I've got Florian's address here, and he knows every

costumier in London. I'll phone him to bring a police dress when he

comes." And he went bounding away to the telephone.

"Oh, it's glorious, godfather," cried Ruby, almost dancing. "I'll be

columbine and you shall be pantaloon."

The millionaire held himself stiff with a sort of heathen solemnity. "I

think, my dear," he said, "you must get someone else for pantaloon."

"I will be pantaloon, if you like," said Colonel Adams, taking his

cigar out of his mouth, and speaking for the first and last time.

"You ought to have a statue," cried the Canadian, as he came back,

radiant, from the telephone. "There, we are all fitted. Mr Crook shall

be clown; he's a journalist and knows all the oldest jokes. I can be

harlequin, that only wants long legs and jumping about. My friend

Florian 'phones he's bringing the police costume; he's changing on the

way. We can act it in this very hall, the audience sitting on those

broad stairs opposite, one row above another. These front doors can be

the back scene, either open or shut. Shut, you see an English interior.

Open, a moonlit garden. It all goes by magic." And snatching a chance

piece of billiard chalk from his pocket, he ran it across the hall

floor, half-way between the front door and the staircase, to mark the

line of the footlights.

How even such a banquet of bosh was got ready in the time remained a

riddle. But they went at it with that mixture of recklessness and

industry that lives when youth is in a house; and youth was in that

house that night, though not all may have isolated the two faces and

hearts from which it flamed. As always happens, the invention grew

wilder and wilder through the very tameness of the bourgeois

conventions from which it had to create. The columbine looked charming

in an outstanding skirt that strangely resembled the large lamp-shade

in the drawing-room. The clown and pantaloon made themselves white with

flour from the cook, and red with rouge from some other domestic, who

remained (like all true Christian benefactors) anonymous. The

harlequin, already clad in silver paper out of cigar boxes, was, with

difficulty, prevented from smashing the old Victorian lustre

chandeliers, that he might cover himself with resplendent crystals. In

fact he would certainly have done so, had not Ruby unearthed some old

pantomime paste jewels she had worn at a fancy-dress party as the Queen

of Diamonds. Indeed, her uncle, James Blount, was getting almost out of

hand in his excitement; he was like a schoolboy. He put a paper

donkey's head unexpectedly on Father Brown, who bore it patiently, and

even found some private manner of moving his ears. He even essayed to

put the paper donkey's tail to the coat-tails of Sir Leopold Fischer.

This, however, was frowned down. "Uncle is too absurd," cried Ruby to

Crook, round whose shoulders she had seriously placed a string of

sausages. "Why is he so wild?"

"He is harlequin to your columbine," said Crook. "I am only the clown

who makes the old jokes."

"I wish you were the harlequin," she said, and left the string of

sausages swinging.

Father Brown, though he knew every detail done behind the scenes, and

had even evoked applause by his transformation of a pillow into a

pantomime baby, went round to the front and sat among the audience with

all the solemn expectation of a child at his first matin�e. The

spectators were few, relations, one or two local friends, and the

servants; Sir Leopold sat in the front seat, his full and still

fur-collared figure largely obscuring the view of the little cleric

behind him; but it has never been settled by artistic authorities

whether the cleric lost much. The pantomime was utterly chaotic, yet

not contemptible; there ran through it a rage of improvisation which

came chiefly from Crook the clown. Commonly he was a clever man, and he

was inspired tonight with a wild omniscience, a folly wiser than the

world, that which comes to a young man who has seen for an instant a

particular expression on a particular face. He was supposed to be the

clown, but he was really almost everything else, the author (so far as

there was an author), the prompter, the scene-painter, the

scene-shifter, and, above all, the orchestra. At abrupt intervals in

the outrageous performance he would hurl himself in full costume at the

piano and bang out some popular music equally absurd and appropriate.

The climax of this, as of all else, was the moment when the two front

doors at the back of the scene flew open, showing the lovely moonlit

garden, but showing more prominently the famous professional guest; the

great Florian, dressed up as a policeman. The clown at the piano played

the constabulary chorus in the Pirates of Penzance, but it was drowned

in the deafening applause, for every gesture of the great comic actor

was an admirable though restrained version of the carriage and manner

of the police. The harlequin leapt upon him and hit him over the

helmet; the pianist playing "Where did you get that hat?" he faced

about in admirably simulated astonishment, and then the leaping

harlequin hit him again (the pianist suggesting a few bars of "Then we

had another one"). Then the harlequin rushed right into the arms of the

policeman and fell on top of him, amid a roar of applause. Then it was

that the strange actor gave that celebrated imitation of a dead man, of

which the fame still lingers round Putney. It was almost impossible to

believe that a living person could appear so limp.

The athletic harlequin swung him about like a sack or twisted or tossed

him like an Indian club; all the time to the most maddeningly ludicrous

tunes from the piano. When the harlequin heaved the comic constable

heavily off the floor the clown played "I arise from dreams of thee."

When he shuffled him across his back, "With my bundle on my shoulder,"

and when the harlequin finally let fall the policeman with a most

convincing thud, the lunatic at the instrument struck into a jingling

measure with some words which are still believed to have been, "I sent

a letter to my love and on the way I dropped it."

At about this limit of mental anarchy Father Brown's view was obscured

altogether; for the City magnate in front of him rose to his full

height and thrust his hands savagely into all his pockets. Then he sat

down nervously, still fumbling, and then stood up again. For an instant

it seemed seriously likely that he would stride across the footlights;

then he turned a glare at the clown playing the piano; and then he

burst in silence out of the room.

The priest had only watched for a few more minutes the absurd but not

inelegant dance of the amateur harlequin over his splendidly

unconscious foe. With real though rude art, the harlequin danced slowly

backwards out of the door into the garden, which was full of moonlight

and stillness. The vamped dress of silver paper and paste, which had

been too glaring in the footlights, looked more and more magical and

silvery as it danced away under a brilliant moon. The audience was

closing in with a cataract of applause, when Brown felt his arm

abruptly touched, and he was asked in a whisper to come into the

colonel's study.

He followed his summoner with increasing doubt, which was not dispelled

by a solemn comicality in the scene of the study. There sat Colonel

Adams, still unaffectedly dressed as a pantaloon, with the knobbed

whale-bone nodding above his brow, but with his poor old eyes sad

enough to have sobered a Saturnalia. Sir Leopold Fischer was leaning

against the mantelpiece and heaving with all the importance of panic.

"This is a very painful matter, Father Brown," said Adams. "The truth

is, those diamonds we all saw this afternoon seem to have vanished from

my friend's tail-coat pocket. And as you--"

"As I," supplemented Father Brown, with a broad grin, "was sitting just

behind him--"

"Nothing of the sort shall be suggested," said Colonel Adams, with a

firm look at Fischer, which rather implied that some such thing had

been suggested. "I only ask you to give me the assistance that any

gentleman might give."

"Which is turning out his pockets," said Father Brown, and proceeded to

do so, displaying seven and sixpence, a return ticket, a small silver

crucifix, a small breviary, and a stick of chocolate.

The colonel looked at him long, and then said, "Do you know, I should

like to see the inside of your head more than the inside of your

pockets. My daughter is one of your people, I know; well, she has

lately--" and he stopped.

"She has lately," cried out old Fischer, "opened her father's house to

a cut-throat Socialist, who says openly he would steal anything from a

richer man. This is the end of it. Here is the richer man--and none the

richer."

"If you want the inside of my head you can have it," said Brown rather

wearily. "What it's worth you can say afterwards. But the first thing I

find in that disused pocket is this: that men who mean to steal

diamonds don't talk Socialism. They are more likely," he added

demurely, "to denounce it."

Both the others shifted sharply and the priest went on:

"You see, we know these people, more or less. That Socialist would no

more steal a diamond than a Pyramid. We ought to look at once to the

one man we don't know. The fellow acting the policeman--Florian. Where

is he exactly at this minute, I wonder."

The pantaloon sprang erect and strode out of the room. An interlude

ensued, during which the millionaire stared at the priest, and the

priest at his breviary; then the pantaloon returned and said, with

staccato gravity, "The policeman is still lying on the stage. The

curtain has gone up and down six times; he is still lying there."

Father Brown dropped his book and stood staring with a look of blank

mental ruin. Very slowly a light began to creep in his grey eyes, and

then he made the scarcely obvious answer.

"Please forgive me, colonel, but when did your wife die?"

"Wife!" replied the staring soldier, "she died this year two months.

Her brother James arrived just a week too late to see her."

The little priest bounded like a rabbit shot. "Come on!" he cried in

quite unusual excitement. "Come on! We've got to go and look at that

policeman!"

They rushed on to the now curtained stage, breaking rudely past the

columbine and clown (who seemed whispering quite contentedly), and

Father Brown bent over the prostrate comic policeman.

"Chloroform," he said as he rose; "I only guessed it just now."

There was a startled stillness, and then the colonel said slowly,

"Please say seriously what all this means."

Father Brown suddenly shouted with laughter, then stopped, and only

struggled with it for instants during the rest of his speech.

"Gentlemen," he gasped, "there's not much time to talk. I must run

after the criminal. But this great French actor who played the

policeman--this clever corpse the harlequin waltzed with and dandled

and threw about--he was--" His voice again failed him, and he turned

his back to run.

"He was?" called Fischer inquiringly.

"A real policeman," said Father Brown, and ran away into the dark.

There were hollows and bowers at the extreme end of that leafy garden,

in which the laurels and other immortal shrubs showed against sapphire

sky and silver moon, even in that midwinter, warm colours as of the

south. The green gaiety of the waving laurels, the rich purple indigo

of the night, the moon like a monstrous crystal, make an almost

irresponsible romantic picture; and among the top branches of the

garden trees a strange figure is climbing, who looks not so much

romantic as impossible. He sparkles from head to heel, as if clad in

ten million moons; the real moon catches him at every movement and sets

a new inch of him on fire. But he swings, flashing and successful, from

the short tree in this garden to the tall, rambling tree in the other,

and only stops there because a shade has slid under the smaller tree

and has unmistakably called up to him.

"Well, Flambeau," says the voice, "you really look like a Flying Star;

but that always means a Falling Star at last."

The silver, sparkling figure above seems to lean forward in the laurels

and, confident of escape, listens to the little figure below.

"You never did anything better, Flambeau. It was clever to come from

Canada (with a Paris ticket, I suppose) just a week after Mrs Adams

died, when no one was in a mood to ask questions. It was cleverer to

have marked down the Flying Stars and the very day of Fischer's coming.

But there's no cleverness, but mere genius, in what followed. Stealing

the stones, I suppose, was nothing to you. You could have done it by

sleight of hand in a hundred other ways besides that pretence of

putting a paper donkey's tail to Fischer's coat. But in the rest you

eclipsed yourself."

The silvery figure among the green leaves seems to linger as if

hypnotised, though his escape is easy behind him; he is staring at the

man below.

"Oh, yes," says the man below, "I know all about it. I know you not

only forced the pantomime, but put it to a double use. You were going

to steal the stones quietly; news came by an accomplice that you were

already suspected, and a capable police-officer was coming to rout you

up that very night. A common thief would have been thankful for the

warning and fled; but you are a poet. You already had the clever notion

of hiding the jewels in a blaze of false stage jewellery. Now, you saw

that if the dress were a harlequin's the appearance of a policeman

would be quite in keeping. The worthy officer started from Putney

police-station to find you, and walked into the queerest trap ever set

in this world. When the front door opened he walked straight on to the

stage of a Christmas pantomime, where he could be kicked, clubbed,

stunned and drugged by the dancing harlequin, amid roars of laughter

from all the most respectable people in Putney. Oh, you will never do

anything better. And now, by the way, you might give me back those

diamonds."

The green branch on which the glittering figure swung, rustled as if in

astonishment; but the voice went on:

"I want you to give them back, Flambeau, and I want you to give up this

life. There is still youth and honour and humour in you; don't fancy

they will last in that trade. Men may keep a sort of level of good, but

no man has ever been able to keep on one level of evil. That road goes

down and down. The kind man drinks and turns cruel; the frank man kills

and lies about it. Many a man I've known started like you to be an

honest outlaw, a merry robber of the rich, and ended stamped into

slime. Maurice Blum started out as an anarchist of principle, a father

of the poor; he ended a greasy spy and tale-bearer that both sides used

and despised. Harry Burke started his free money movement sincerely

enough; now he's sponging on a half-starved sister for endless brandies

and sodas. Lord Amber went into wild society in a sort of chivalry; now

he's paying blackmail to the lowest vultures in London. Captain

Barillon was the great gentleman-apache before your time; he died in a

madhouse, screaming with fear of the "narks" and receivers that had

betrayed him and hunted him down. I know the woods look very free

behind you, Flambeau; I know that in a flash you could melt into them

like a monkey. But some day you will be an old grey monkey, Flambeau.

You will sit up in your free forest cold at heart and close to death,

and the tree-tops will be very bare."

Everything continued still, as if the small man below held the other in

the tree in some long invisible leash; and he went on:

"Your downward steps have begun. You used to boast of doing nothing

mean, but you are doing something mean tonight. You are leaving

suspicion on an honest boy with a good deal against him already; you

are separating him from the woman he loves and who loves him. But you

will do meaner things than that before you die."

Three flashing diamonds fell from the tree to the turf. The small man

stooped to pick them up, and when he looked up again the green cage of

the tree was emptied of its silver bird.

The restoration of the gems (accidentally picked up by Father Brown, of

all people) ended the evening in uproarious triumph; and Sir Leopold,

in his height of good humour, even told the priest that though he

himself had broader views, he could respect those whose creed required

them to be cloistered and ignorant of this world.

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In the cool blue twilight of two steep streets in Camden Town, the shop

at the corner, a confectioner's, glowed like the butt of a cigar. One

should rather say, perhaps, like the butt of a firework, for the light

was of many colours and some complexity, broken up by many mirrors and

dancing on many gilt and gaily-coloured cakes and sweetmeats. Against

this one fiery glass were glued the noses of many gutter-snipes, for

the chocolates were all wrapped in those red and gold and green

metallic colours which are almost better than chocolate itself; and the

huge white wedding-cake in the window was somehow at once remote and

satisfying, just as if the whole North Pole were good to eat. Such

rainbow provocations could naturally collect the youth of the

neighbourhood up to the ages of ten or twelve. But this corner was also

attractive to youth at a later stage; and a young man, not less than

twenty-four, was staring into the same shop window. To him, also, the

shop was of fiery charm, but this attraction was not wholly to be

explained by chocolates; which, however, he was far from despising.

He was a tall, burly, red-haired young man, with a resolute face but a

listless manner. He carried under his arm a flat, grey portfolio of

black-and-white sketches, which he had sold with more or less success

to publishers ever since his uncle (who was an admiral) had

disinherited him for Socialism, because of a lecture which he had

delivered against that economic theory. His name was John Turnbull

Angus.

Entering at last, he walked through the confectioner's shop to the back

room, which was a sort of pastry-cook restaurant, merely raising his

hat to the young lady who was serving there. She was a dark, elegant,

alert girl in black, with a high colour and very quick, dark eyes; and

after the ordinary interval she followed him into the inner room to

take his order.

His order was evidently a usual one. "I want, please," he said with

precision, "one halfpenny bun and a small cup of black coffee." An

instant before the girl could turn away he added, "Also, I want you to

marry me."

The young lady of the shop stiffened suddenly and said, "Those are

jokes I don't allow."

The red-haired young man lifted grey eyes of an unexpected gravity.

"Really and truly," he said, "it's as serious--as serious as the

halfpenny bun. It is expensive, like the bun; one pays for it. It is

indigestible, like the bun. It hurts."

The dark young lady had never taken her dark eyes off him, but seemed

to be studying him with almost tragic exactitude. At the end of her

scrutiny she had something like the shadow of a smile, and she sat down

in a chair.

"Don't you think," observed Angus, absently, "that it's rather cruel to

eat these halfpenny buns? They might grow up into penny buns. I shall

give up these brutal sports when we are married."

The dark young lady rose from her chair and walked to the window,

evidently in a state of strong but not unsympathetic cogitation. When

at last she swung round again with an air of resolution she was

bewildered to observe that the young man was carefully laying out on

the table various objects from the shop-window. They included a pyramid

of highly coloured sweets, several plates of sandwiches, and the two

decanters containing that mysterious port and sherry which are peculiar

to pastry-cooks. In the middle of this neat arrangement he had

carefully let down the enormous load of white sugared cake which had

been the huge ornament of the window.

"What on earth are you doing?" she asked.

"Duty, my dear Laura," he began.

"Oh, for the Lord's sake, stop a minute," she cried, "and don't talk to

me in that way. I mean, what is all that?"

"A ceremonial meal, Miss Hope."

"And what is that?" she asked impatiently, pointing to the mountain of

sugar.

"The wedding-cake, Mrs Angus," he said.

The girl marched to that article, removed it with some clatter, and put

it back in the shop window; she then returned, and, putting her elegant

elbows on the table, regarded the young man not unfavourably but with

considerable exasperation.

"You don't give me any time to think," she said.

"I'm not such a fool," he answered; "that's my Christian humility."

She was still looking at him; but she had grown considerably graver

behind the smile.

"Mr Angus," she said steadily, "before there is a minute more of this

nonsense I must tell you something about myself as shortly as I can."

"Delighted," replied Angus gravely. "You might tell me something about

myself, too, while you are about it."

"Oh, do hold your tongue and listen," she said. "It's nothing that I'm

ashamed of, and it isn't even anything that I'm specially sorry about.

But what would you say if there were something that is no business of

mine and yet is my nightmare?"

"In that case," said the man seriously, "I should suggest that you

bring back the cake."

"Well, you must listen to the story first," said Laura, persistently.

"To begin with, I must tell you that my father owned the inn called the

`Red Fish' at Ludbury, and I used to serve people in the bar."

"I have often wondered," he said, "why there was a kind of a Christian

air about this one confectioner's shop."

"Ludbury is a sleepy, grassy little hole in the Eastern Counties, and

the only kind of people who ever came to the `Red Fish' were occasional

commercial travellers, and for the rest, the most awful people you can

see, only you've never seen them. I mean little, loungy men, who had

just enough to live on and had nothing to do but lean about in

bar-rooms and bet on horses, in bad clothes that were just too good for

them. Even these wretched young rotters were not very common at our

house; but there were two of them that were a lot too common--common in

every sort of way. They both lived on money of their own, and were

wearisomely idle and over-dressed. But yet I was a bit sorry for them,

because I half believe they slunk into our little empty bar because

each of them had a slight deformity; the sort of thing that some yokels

laugh at. It wasn't exactly a deformity either; it was more an oddity.

One of them was a surprisingly small man, something like a dwarf, or at

least like a jockey. He was not at all jockeyish to look at, though; he

had a round black head and a well-trimmed black beard, bright eyes like

a bird's; he jingled money in his pockets; he jangled a great gold

watch chain; and he never turned up except dressed just too much like a

gentleman to be one. He was no fool though, though a futile idler; he

was curiously clever at all kinds of things that couldn't be the

slightest use; a sort of impromptu conjuring; making fifteen matches

set fire to each other like a regular firework; or cutting a banana or

some such thing into a dancing doll. His name was Isidore Smythe; and I

can see him still, with his little dark face, just coming up to the

counter, making a jumping kangaroo out of five cigars.

"The other fellow was more silent and more ordinary; but somehow he

alarmed me much more than poor little Smythe. He was very tall and

slight, and light-haired; his nose had a high bridge, and he might

almost have been handsome in a spectral sort of way; but he had one of

the most appalling squints I have ever seen or heard of. When he looked

straight at you, you didn't know where you were yourself, let alone

what he was looking at. I fancy this sort of disfigurement embittered

the poor chap a little; for while Smythe was ready to show off his

monkey tricks anywhere, James Welkin (that was the squinting man's

name) never did anything except soak in our bar parlour, and go for

great walks by himself in the flat, grey country all round. All the

same, I think Smythe, too, was a little sensitive about being so small,

though he carried it off more smartly. And so it was that I was really

puzzled, as well as startled, and very sorry, when they both offered to

marry me in the same week.

"Well, I did what I've since thought was perhaps a silly thing. But,

after all, these freaks were my friends in a way; and I had a horror of

their thinking I refused them for the real reason, which was that they

were so impossibly ugly. So I made up some gas of another sort, about

never meaning to marry anyone who hadn't carved his way in the world. I

said it was a point of principle with me not to live on money that was

just inherited like theirs. Two days after I had talked in this

well-meaning sort of way, the whole trouble began. The first thing I

heard was that both of them had gone off to seek their fortunes, as if

they were in some silly fairy tale.

"Well, I've never seen either of them from that day to this. But I've

had two letters from the little man called Smythe, and really they were

rather exciting."

"Ever heard of the other man?" asked Angus.

"No, he never wrote," said the girl, after an instant's hesitation.

"Smythe's first letter was simply to say that he had started out

walking with Welkin to London; but Welkin was such a good walker that

the little man dropped out of it, and took a rest by the roadside. He

happened to be picked up by some travelling show, and, partly because

he was nearly a dwarf, and partly because he was really a clever little

wretch, he got on quite well in the show business, and was soon sent up

to the Aquarium, to do some tricks that I forget. That was his first

letter. His second was much more of a startler, and I only got it last

week."

The man called Angus emptied his coffee-cup and regarded her with mild

and patient eyes. Her own mouth took a slight twist of laughter as she

resumed, "I suppose you've seen on the hoardings all about this

`Smythe's Silent Service'? Or you must be the only person that hasn't.

Oh, I don't know much about it, it's some clockwork invention for doing

all the housework by machinery. You know the sort of thing: `Press a

Button--A Butler who Never Drinks.' `Turn a Handle--Ten Housemaids who

Never Flirt.' You must have seen the advertisements. Well, whatever

these machines are, they are making pots of money; and they are making

it all for that little imp whom I knew down in Ludbury. I can't help

feeling pleased the poor little chap has fallen on his feet; but the

plain fact is, I'm in terror of his turning up any minute and telling

me he's carved his way in the world--as he certainly has."

"And the other man?" repeated Angus with a sort of obstinate quietude.

Laura Hope got to her feet suddenly. "My friend," she said, "I think

you are a witch. Yes, you are quite right. I have not seen a line of

the other man's writing; and I have no more notion than the dead of

what or where he is. But it is of him that I am frightened. It is he

who is all about my path. It is he who has half driven me mad. Indeed,

I think he has driven me mad; for I have felt him where he could not

have been, and I have heard his voice when he could not have spoken."

"Well, my dear," said the young man, cheerfully, "if he were Satan

himself, he is done for now you have told somebody. One goes mad all

alone, old girl. But when was it you fancied you felt and heard our

squinting friend?"

"I heard James Welkin laugh as plainly as I hear you speak," said the

girl, steadily. "There was nobody there, for I stood just outside the

shop at the corner, and could see down both streets at once. I had

forgotten how he laughed, though his laugh was as odd as his squint. I

had not thought of him for nearly a year. But it's a solemn truth that

a few seconds later the first letter came from his rival."

"Did you ever make the spectre speak or squeak, or anything?" asked

Angus, with some interest.

Laura suddenly shuddered, and then said, with an unshaken voice, "Yes.

Just when I had finished reading the second letter from Isidore Smythe

announcing his success. Just then, I heard Welkin say, `He shan't have

you, though.' It was quite plain, as if he were in the room. It is

awful, I think I must be mad."

"If you really were mad," said the young man, "you would think you must

be sane. But certainly there seems to me to be something a little rum

about this unseen gentleman. Two heads are better than one--I spare you

allusions to any other organs and really, if you would allow me, as a

sturdy, practical man, to bring back the wedding-cake out of the

window--"

Even as he spoke, there was a sort of steely shriek in the street

outside, and a small motor, driven at devilish speed, shot up to the

door of the shop and stuck there. In the same flash of time a small man

in a shiny top hat stood stamping in the outer room.

Angus, who had hitherto maintained hilarious ease from motives of

mental hygiene, revealed the strain of his soul by striding abruptly

out of the inner room and confronting the new-comer. A glance at him

was quite sufficient to confirm the savage guesswork of a man in love.

This very dapper but dwarfish figure, with the spike of black beard

carried insolently forward, the clever unrestful eyes, the neat but

very nervous fingers, could be none other than the man just described

to him: Isidore Smythe, who made dolls out of banana skins and

match-boxes; Isidore Smythe, who made millions out of undrinking

butlers and unflirting housemaids of metal. For a moment the two men,

instinctively understanding each other's air of possession, looked at

each other with that curious cold generosity which is the soul of

rivalry.

Mr Smythe, however, made no allusion to the ultimate ground of their

antagonism, but said simply and explosively, "Has Miss Hope seen that

thing on the window?"

"On the window?" repeated the staring Angus.

"There's no time to explain other things," said the small millionaire

shortly. "There's some tomfoolery going on here that has to be

investigated."

He pointed his polished walking-stick at the window, recently depleted

by the bridal preparations of Mr Angus; and that gentleman was

astonished to see along the front of the glass a long strip of paper

pasted, which had certainly not been on the window when he looked

through it some time before. Following the energetic Smythe outside

into the street, he found that some yard and a half of stamp paper had

been carefully gummed along the glass outside, and on this was written

in straggly characters, "If you marry Smythe, he will die."

"Laura," said Angus, putting his big red head into the shop, "you're

not mad."

"It's the writing of that fellow Welkin," said Smythe gruffly. "I

haven't seen him for years, but he's always bothering me. Five times in

the last fortnight he's had threatening letters left at my flat, and I

can't even find out who leaves them, let alone if it is Welkin himself.

The porter of the flats swears that no suspicious characters have been

seen, and here he has pasted up a sort of dado on a public shop window,

while the people in the shop--"

"Quite so," said Angus modestly, "while the people in the shop were

having tea. Well, sir, I can assure you I appreciate your common sense

in dealing so directly with the matter. We can talk about other things

afterwards. The fellow cannot be very far off yet, for I swear there

was no paper there when I went last to the window, ten or fifteen

minutes ago. On the other hand, he's too far off to be chased, as we

don't even know the direction. If you'll take my advice, Mr Smythe,

you'll put this at once in the hands of some energetic inquiry man,

private rather than public. I know an extremely clever fellow, who has

set up in business five minutes from here in your car. His name's

Flambeau, and though his youth was a bit stormy, he's a strictly honest

man now, and his brains are worth money. He lives in Lucknow Mansions,

Hampstead."

"That is odd," said the little man, arching his black eyebrows. "I

live, myself, in Himylaya Mansions, round the corner. Perhaps you might

care to come with me; I can go to my rooms and sort out these queer

Welkin documents, while you run round and get your friend the

detective."

"You are very good," said Angus politely. "Well, the sooner we act the

better."

Both men, with a queer kind of impromptu fairness, took the same sort

of formal farewell of the lady, and both jumped into the brisk little

car. As Smythe took the handles and they turned the great corner of the

street, Angus was amused to see a gigantesque poster of "Smythe's

Silent Service," with a picture of a huge headless iron doll, carrying

a saucepan with the legend, "A Cook Who is Never Cross."

"I use them in my own flat," said the little black-bearded man,

laughing, "partly for advertisements, and partly for real convenience.

Honestly, and all above board, those big clockwork dolls of mine do

bring your coals or claret or a time-table quicker than any live

servants I've ever known, if you know which knob to press. But I'll

never deny, between ourselves, that such servants have their

disadvantages, too.

"Indeed?" said Angus; "is there something they can't do?"

"Yes," replied Smythe coolly; "they can't tell me who left those

threatening letters at my flat."

The man's motor was small and swift like himself; in fact, like his

domestic service, it was of his own invention. If he was an advertising

quack, he was one who believed in his own wares. The sense of something

tiny and flying was accentuated as they swept up long white curves of

road in the dead but open daylight of evening. Soon the white curves

came sharper and dizzier; they were upon ascending spirals, as they say

in the modern religions. For, indeed, they were cresting a corner of

London which is almost as precipitous as Edinburgh, if not quite so

picturesque. Terrace rose above terrace, and the special tower of flats

they sought, rose above them all to almost Egyptian height, gilt by the

level sunset. The change, as they turned the corner and entered the

crescent known as Himylaya Mansions, was as abrupt as the opening of a

window; for they found that pile of flats sitting above London as above

a green sea of slate. Opposite to the mansions, on the other side of

the gravel crescent, was a bushy enclosure more like a steep hedge or

dyke than a garden, and some way below that ran a strip of artificial

water, a sort of canal, like the moat of that embowered fortress. As

the car swept round the crescent it passed, at one corner, the stray

stall of a man selling chestnuts; and right away at the other end of

the curve, Angus could see a dim blue policeman walking slowly. These

were the only human shapes in that high suburban solitude; but he had

an irrational sense that they expressed the speechless poetry of

London. He felt as if they were figures in a story.

The little car shot up to the right house like a bullet, and shot out

its owner like a bomb shell. He was immediately inquiring of a tall

commissionaire in shining braid, and a short porter in shirt sleeves,

whether anybody or anything had been seeking his apartments. He was

assured that nobody and nothing had passed these officials since his

last inquiries; whereupon he and the slightly bewildered Angus were

shot up in the lift like a rocket, till they reached the top floor.

"Just come in for a minute," said the breathless Smythe. "I want to

show you those Welkin letters. Then you might run round the corner and

fetch your friend." He pressed a button concealed in the wall, and the

door opened of itself.

It opened on a long, commodious ante-room, of which the only arresting

features, ordinarily speaking, were the rows of tall half-human

mechanical figures that stood up on both sides like tailors' dummies.

Like tailors' dummies they were headless; and like tailors' dummies

they had a handsome unnecessary humpiness in the shoulders, and a

pigeon-breasted protuberance of chest; but barring this, they were not

much more like a human figure than any automatic machine at a station

that is about the human height. They had two great hooks like arms, for

carrying trays; and they were painted pea-green, or vermilion, or black

for convenience of distinction; in every other way they were only

automatic machines and nobody would have looked twice at them. On this

occasion, at least, nobody did. For between the two rows of these

domestic dummies lay something more interesting than most of the

mechanics of the world. It was a white, tattered scrap of paper

scrawled with red ink; and the agile inventor had snatched it up almost

as soon as the door flew open. He handed it to Angus without a word.

The red ink on it actually was not dry, and the message ran, "If you

have been to see her today, I shall kill you."

There was a short silence, and then Isidore Smythe said quietly, "Would

you like a little whiskey? I rather feel as if I should."

"Thank you; I should like a little Flambeau," said Angus, gloomily.

"This business seems to me to be getting rather grave. I'm going round

at once to fetch him."

"Right you are," said the other, with admirable cheerfulness. "Bring

him round here as quick as you can."

But as Angus closed the front door behind him he saw Smythe push back a

button, and one of the clockwork images glided from its place and slid

along a groove in the floor carrying a tray with syphon and decanter.

There did seem something a trifle weird about leaving the little man

alone among those dead servants, who were coming to life as the door

closed.

Six steps down from Smythe's landing the man in shirt sleeves was doing

something with a pail. Angus stopped to extract a promise, fortified

with a prospective bribe, that he would remain in that place until the

return with the detective, and would keep count of any kind of stranger

coming up those stairs. Dashing down to the front hall he then laid

similar charges of vigilance on the commissionaire at the front door,

from whom he learned the simplifying circumstances that there was no

back door. Not content with this, he captured the floating policeman

and induced him to stand opposite the entrance and watch it; and

finally paused an instant for a pennyworth of chestnuts, and an inquiry

as to the probable length of the merchant's stay in the neighbourhood.

The chestnut seller, turning up the collar of his coat, told him he

should probably be moving shortly, as he thought it was going to snow.

Indeed, the evening was growing grey and bitter, but Angus, with all

his eloquence, proceeded to nail the chestnut man to his post.

"Keep yourself warm on your own chestnuts," he said earnestly. "Eat up

your whole stock; I'll make it worth your while. I'll give you a

sovereign if you'll wait here till I come back, and then tell me

whether any man, woman, or child has gone into that house where the

commissionaire is standing."

He then walked away smartly, with a last look at the besieged tower.

"I've made a ring round that room, anyhow," he said. "They can't all

four of them be Mr Welkin's accomplices."

Lucknow Mansions were, so to speak, on a lower platform of that hill of

houses, of which Himylaya Mansions might be called the peak. Mr

Flambeau's semi-official flat was on the ground floor, and presented in

every way a marked contrast to the American machinery and cold

hotel-like luxury of the flat of the Silent Service. Flambeau, who was

a friend of Angus, received him in a rococo artistic den behind his

office, of which the ornaments were sabres, harquebuses, Eastern

curiosities, flasks of Italian wine, savage cooking-pots, a plumy

Persian cat, and a small dusty-looking Roman Catholic priest, who

looked particularly out of place.

"This is my friend Father Brown," said Flambeau. "I've often wanted you

to meet him. Splendid weather, this; a little cold for Southerners like

me."

"Yes, I think it will keep clear," said Angus, sitting down on a

violet-striped Eastern ottoman.

"No," said the priest quietly, "it has begun to snow."

And, indeed, as he spoke, the first few flakes, foreseen by the man of

chestnuts, began to drift across the darkening windowpane.

"Well," said Angus heavily. "I'm afraid I've come on business, and

rather jumpy business at that. The fact is, Flambeau, within a stone's

throw of your house is a fellow who badly wants your help; he's

perpetually being haunted and threatened by an invisible enemy--a

scoundrel whom nobody has even seen." As Angus proceeded to tell the

whole tale of Smythe and Welkin, beginning with Laura's story, and

going on with his own, the supernatural laugh at the corner of two

empty streets, the strange distinct words spoken in an empty room,

Flambeau grew more and more vividly concerned, and the little priest

seemed to be left out of it, like a piece of furniture. When it came to

the scribbled stamp-paper pasted on the window, Flambeau rose, seeming

to fill the room with his huge shoulders.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I think you had better tell me the rest

on the nearest road to this man's house. It strikes me, somehow, that

there is no time to be lost."

"Delighted," said Angus, rising also, "though he's safe enough for the

present, for I've set four men to watch the only hole to his burrow."

They turned out into the street, the small priest trundling after them

with the docility of a small dog. He merely said, in a cheerful way,

like one making conversation, "How quick the snow gets thick on the

ground."

As they threaded the steep side streets already powdered with silver,

Angus finished his story; and by the time they reached the crescent

with the towering flats, he had leisure to turn his attention to the

four sentinels. The chestnut seller, both before and after receiving a

sovereign, swore stubbornly that he had watched the door and seen no

visitor enter. The policeman was even more emphatic. He said he had had

experience of crooks of all kinds, in top hats and in rags; he wasn't

so green as to expect suspicious characters to look suspicious; he

looked out for anybody, and, so help him, there had been nobody. And

when all three men gathered round the gilded commissionaire, who still

stood smiling astride of the porch, the verdict was more final still.

"I've got a right to ask any man, duke or dustman, what he wants in

these flats," said the genial and gold-laced giant, "and I'll swear

there's been nobody to ask since this gentleman went away."

The unimportant Father Brown, who stood back, looking modestly at the

pavement, here ventured to say meekly, "Has nobody been up and down

stairs, then, since the snow began to fall? It began while we were all

round at Flambeau's."

"Nobody's been in here, sir, you can take it from me," said the

official, with beaming authority.

"Then I wonder what that is?" said the priest, and stared at the ground

blankly like a fish.

The others all looked down also; and Flambeau used a fierce exclamation

and a French gesture. For it was unquestionably true that down the

middle of the entrance guarded by the man in gold lace, actually

between the arrogant, stretched legs of that colossus, ran a stringy

pattern of grey footprints stamped upon the white snow.

"God!" cried Angus involuntarily, "the Invisible Man!"

Without another word he turned and dashed up the stairs, with Flambeau

following; but Father Brown still stood looking about him in the

snow-clad street as if he had lost interest in his query.

Flambeau was plainly in a mood to break down the door with his big

shoulders; but the Scotchman, with more reason, if less intuition,

fumbled about on the frame of the door till he found the invisible

button; and the door swung slowly open.

It showed substantially the same serried interior; the hall had grown

darker, though it was still struck here and there with the last crimson

shafts of sunset, and one or two of the headless machines had been

moved from their places for this or that purpose, and stood here and

there about the twilit place. The green and red of their coats were all

darkened in the dusk; and their likeness to human shapes slightly

increased by their very shapelessness. But in the middle of them all,

exactly where the paper with the red ink had lain, there lay something

that looked like red ink spilt out of its bottle. But it was not red

ink.

With a French combination of reason and violence Flambeau simply said

"Murder!" and, plunging into the flat, had explored, every corner and

cupboard of it in five minutes. But if he expected to find a corpse he

found none. Isidore Smythe was not in the place, either dead or alive.

After the most tearing search the two men met each other in the outer

hall, with streaming faces and staring eyes. "My friend," said

Flambeau, talking French in his excitement, "not only is your murderer

invisible, but he makes invisible also the murdered man."

Angus looked round at the dim room full of dummies, and in some Celtic

corner of his Scotch soul a shudder started. One of the life-size dolls

stood immediately overshadowing the blood stain, summoned, perhaps, by

the slain man an instant before he fell. One of the high-shouldered

hooks that served the thing for arms, was a little lifted, and Angus

had suddenly the horrid fancy that poor Smythe's own iron child had

struck him down. Matter had rebelled, and these machines had killed

their master. But even so, what had they done with him?

"Eaten him?" said the nightmare at his ear; and he sickened for an

instant at the idea of rent, human remains absorbed and crushed into

all that acephalous clockwork.

He recovered his mental health by an emphatic effort, and said to

Flambeau, "Well, there it is. The poor fellow has evaporated like a

cloud and left a red streak on the floor. The tale does not belong to

this world."

"There is only one thing to be done," said Flambeau, "whether it

belongs to this world or the other. I must go down and talk to my

friend."

They descended, passing the man with the pail, who again asseverated

that he had let no intruder pass, down to the commissionaire and the

hovering chestnut man, who rigidly reasserted their own watchfulness.

But when Angus looked round for his fourth confirmation he could not

see it, and called out with some nervousness, "Where is the policeman?"

"I beg your pardon," said Father Brown; "that is my fault. I just sent

him down the road to investigate something--that I just thought worth

investigating."

"Well, we want him back pretty soon," said Angus abruptly, "for the

wretched man upstairs has not only been murdered, but wiped out."

"How?" asked the priest.

"Father," said Flambeau, after a pause, "upon my soul I believe it is

more in your department than mine. No friend or foe has entered the

house, but Smythe is gone, as if stolen by the fairies. If that is not

supernatural, I--"

As he spoke they were all checked by an unusual sight; the big blue

policeman came round the corner of the crescent, running. He came

straight up to Brown.

"You're right, sir," he panted, "they've just found poor Mr Smythe's

body in the canal down below."

Angus put his hand wildly to his head. "Did he run down and drown

himself?" he asked.

"He never came down, I'll swear," said the constable, "and he wasn't

drowned either, for he died of a great stab over the heart."

"And yet you saw no one enter?" said Flambeau in a grave voice.

"Let us walk down the road a little," said the priest.

As they reached the other end of the crescent he observed abruptly,

"Stupid of me! I forgot to ask the policeman something. I wonder if

they found a light brown sack."

"Why a light brown sack?" asked Angus, astonished.

"Because if it was any other coloured sack, the case must begin over

again," said Father Brown; "but if it was a light brown sack, why, the

case is finished."

"I am pleased to hear it," said Angus with hearty irony. "It hasn't

begun, so far as I am concerned."

"You must tell us all about it," said Flambeau with a strange heavy

simplicity, like a child.

Unconsciously they were walking with quickening steps down the long

sweep of road on the other side of the high crescent, Father Brown

leading briskly, though in silence. At last he said with an almost

touching vagueness, "Well, I'm afraid you'll think it so prosy. We

always begin at the abstract end of things, and you can't begin this

story anywhere else.

"Have you ever noticed this--that people never answer what you say?

They answer what you mean--or what they think you mean. Suppose one

lady says to another in a country house, `Is anybody staying with you?'

the lady doesn't answer `Yes; the butler, the three footmen, the

parlourmaid, and so on,' though the parlourmaid may be in the room, or

the butler behind her chair. She says `There is nobody staying with

us,' meaning nobody of the sort you mean. But suppose a doctor

inquiring into an epidemic asks, `Who is staying in the house?' then

the lady will remember the butler, the parlour-maid, and the rest. All

language is used like that; you never get a question answered

literally, even when you get it answered truly. When those four quite

honest men said that no man had gone into the Mansions, they did not

really mean that no man had gone into them. They meant no man whom they

could suspect of being your man. A man did go into the house, and did

come out of it, but they never noticed him."

"An invisible man?" inquired Angus, raising his red eyebrows. "A

mentally invisible man," said Father Brown.

A minute or two after he resumed in the same unassuming voice, like a

man thinking his way. "Of course you can't think of such a man, until

you do think of him. That's where his cleverness comes in. But I came

to think of him through two or three little things in the tale Mr Angus

told us. First, there was the fact that this Welkin went for long

walks. And then there was the vast lot of stamp paper on the window.

And then, most of all, there were the two things the young lady

said--things that couldn't be true. Don't get annoyed," he added

hastily, noting a sudden movement of the Scotchman's head; "she thought

they were true. A person can't be quite alone in a street a second

before she receives a letter. She can't be quite alone in a street when

she starts reading a letter just received. There must be somebody

pretty near her; he must be mentally invisible."

"Why must there be somebody near her?" asked Angus.

"Because," said Father Brown, "barring carrier-pigeons, somebody must

have brought her the letter."

"Do you really mean to say," asked Flambeau, with energy, "that Welkin

carried his rival's letters to his lady?"

"Yes," said the priest. "Welkin carried his rival's letters to his

lady. You see, he had to."

"Oh, I can't stand much more of this," exploded Flambeau. "Who is this

fellow? What does he look like? What is the usual get-up of a mentally

invisible man?"

"He is dressed rather handsomely in red, blue and gold," replied the

priest promptly with precision, "and in this striking, and even showy,

costume he entered Himylaya Mansions under eight human eyes; he killed

Smythe in cold blood, and came down into the street again carrying the

dead body in his arms--"

"Reverend sir," cried Angus, standing still, "are you raving mad, or am

I?"

"You are not mad," said Brown, "only a little unobservant. You have not

noticed such a man as this, for example."

He took three quick strides forward, and put his hand on the shoulder

of an ordinary passing postman who had bustled by them unnoticed under

the shade of the trees.

"Nobody ever notices postmen somehow," he said thoughtfully; "yet they

have passions like other men, and even carry large bags where a small

corpse can be stowed quite easily."

The postman, instead of turning naturally, had ducked and tumbled

against the garden fence. He was a lean fair-bearded man of very

ordinary appearance, but as he turned an alarmed face over his

shoulder, all three men were fixed with an almost fiendish squint.

Flambeau went back to his sabres, purple rugs and Persian cat, having

many things to attend to. John Turnbull Angus went back to the lady at

the shop, with whom that imprudent young man contrives to be extremely

comfortable. But Father Brown walked those snow-covered hills under the

stars for many hours with a murderer, and what they said to each other

will never be known.

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A stormy evening of olive and silver was closing in, as Father Brown,

wrapped in a grey Scotch plaid, came to the end of a grey Scotch valley

and beheld the strange castle of Glengyle. It stopped one end of the

glen or hollow like a blind alley; and it looked like the end of the

world. Rising in steep roofs and spires of seagreen slate in the manner

of the old French-Scotch ch�teaux, it reminded an Englishman of the

sinister steeple-hats of witches in fairy tales; and the pine woods

that rocked round the green turrets looked, by comparison, as black as

numberless flocks of ravens. This note of a dreamy, almost a sleepy

devilry, was no mere fancy from the landscape. For there did rest on

the place one of those clouds of pride and madness and mysterious

sorrow which lie more heavily on the noble houses of Scotland than on

any other of the children of men. For Scotland has a double dose of the

poison called heredity; the sense of blood in the aristocrat, and the

sense of doom in the Calvinist.

The priest had snatched a day from his business at Glasgow to meet his

friend Flambeau, the amateur detective, who was at Glengyle Castle with

another more formal officer investigating the life and death of the

late Earl of Glengyle. That mysterious person was the last

representative of a race whose valour, insanity, and violent cunning

had made them terrible even among the sinister nobility of their nation

in the sixteenth century. None were deeper in that labyrinthine

ambition, in chamber within chamber of that palace of lies that was

built up around Mary Queen of Scots.

The rhyme in the country-side attested the motive and the result of

their machinations candidly:

As green sap to the simmer trees

Is red gold to the Ogilvies.

For many centuries there had never been a decent lord in Glengyle

Castle; and with the Victorian era one would have thought that all

eccentricities were exhausted. The last Glengyle, however, satisfied

his tribal tradition by doing the only thing that was left for him to

do; he disappeared. I do not mean that he went abroad; by all accounts

he was still in the castle, if he was anywhere. But though his name was

in the church register and the big red Peerage, nobody ever saw him

under the sun.

If anyone saw him it was a solitary man-servant, something between a

groom and a gardener. He was so deaf that the more business-like

assumed him to be dumb; while the more penetrating declared him to be

half-witted. A gaunt, red-haired labourer, with a dogged jaw and chin,

but quite black-blue eyes, he went by the name of Israel Gow, and was

the one silent servant on that deserted estate. But the energy with

which he dug potatoes, and the regularity with which he disappeared

into the kitchen gave people an impression that he was providing for

the meals of a superior, and that the strange earl was still concealed

in the castle. If society needed any further proof that he was there,

the servant persistently asserted that he was not at home. One morning

the provost and the minister (for the Glengyles were Presbyterian) were

summoned to the castle. There they found that the gardener, groom and

cook had added to his many professions that of an undertaker, and had

nailed up his noble master in a coffin. With how much or how little

further inquiry this odd fact was passed, did not as yet very plainly

appear; for the thing had never been legally investigated till Flambeau

had gone north two or three days before. By then the body of Lord

Glengyle (if it was the body) had lain for some time in the little

churchyard on the hill.

As Father Brown passed through the dim garden and came under the shadow

of the ch�teau, the clouds were thick and the whole air damp and

thundery. Against the last stripe of the green-gold sunset he saw a

black human silhouette; a man in a chimney-pot hat, with a big spade

over his shoulder. The combination was queerly suggestive of a sexton;

but when Brown remembered the deaf servant who dug potatoes, he thought

it natural enough. He knew something of the Scotch peasant; he knew the

respectability which might well feel it necessary to wear "blacks" for

an official inquiry; he knew also the economy that would not lose an

hour's digging for that. Even the man's start and suspicious stare as

the priest went by were consonant enough with the vigilance and

jealousy of such a type.

The great door was opened by Flambeau himself, who had with him a lean

man with iron-grey hair and papers in his hand: Inspector Craven from

Scotland Yard. The entrance hall was mostly stripped and empty; but the

pale, sneering faces of one or two of the wicked Ogilvies looked down

out of black periwigs and blackening canvas.

Following them into an inner room, Father Brown found that the allies

had been seated at a long oak table, of which their end was covered

with scribbled papers, flanked with whisky and cigars. Through the

whole of its remaining length it was occupied by detached objects

arranged at intervals; objects about as inexplicable as any objects

could be. One looked like a small heap of glittering broken glass.

Another looked like a high heap of brown dust. A third appeared to be a

plain stick of wood.

"You seem to have a sort of geological museum here," he said, as he sat

down, jerking his head briefly in the direction of the brown dust and

the crystalline fragments.

"Not a geological museum," replied Flambeau; "say a psychological

museum."

"Oh, for the Lord's sake," cried the police detective laughing, "don't

let's begin with such long words."

"Don't you know what psychology means?" asked Flambeau with friendly

surprise. "Psychology means being off your chump."

"Still I hardly follow," replied the official.

"Well," said Flambeau, with decision, "I mean that we've only found out

one thing about Lord Glengyle. He was a maniac."

The black silhouette of Gow with his top hat and spade passed the

window, dimly outlined against the darkening sky. Father Brown stared

passively at it and answered:

"I can understand there must have been something odd about the man, or

he wouldn't have buried himself alive--nor been in such a hurry to bury

himself dead. But what makes you think it was lunacy?"

"Well," said Flambeau, "you just listen to the list of things Mr Craven

has found in the house."

"We must get a candle," said Craven, suddenly. "A storm is getting up,

and it's too dark to read."

"Have you found any candles," asked Brown smiling, "among your

oddities?"

Flambeau raised a grave face, and fixed his dark eyes on his friend.

"That is curious, too," he said. "Twenty-five candles, and not a trace

of a candlestick."

In the rapidly darkening room and rapidly rising wind, Brown went along

the table to where a bundle of wax candles lay among the other scrappy

exhibits. As he did so he bent accidentally over the heap of red-brown

dust; and a sharp sneeze cracked the silence.

"Hullo!" he said, "snuff!"

He took one of the candles, lit it carefully, came back and stuck it in

the neck of the whisky bottle. The unrestful night air, blowing through

the crazy window, waved the long flame like a banner. And on every side

of the castle they could hear the miles and miles of black pine wood

seething like a black sea around a rock.

"I will read the inventory," began Craven gravely, picking up one of

the papers, "the inventory of what we found loose and unexplained in

the castle. You are to understand that the place generally was

dismantled and neglected; but one or two rooms had plainly been

inhabited in a simple but not squalid style by somebody; somebody who

was not the servant Gow. The list is as follows:

"First item. A very considerable hoard of precious stones, nearly all

diamonds, and all of them loose, without any setting whatever. Of

course, it is natural that the Ogilvies should have family jewels; but

those are exactly the jewels that are almost always set in particular

articles of ornament. The Ogilvies would seem to have kept theirs loose

in their pockets, like coppers.

"Second item. Heaps and heaps of loose snuff, not kept in a horn, or

even a pouch, but lying in heaps on the mantelpieces, on the sideboard,

on the piano, anywhere. It looks as if the old gentleman would not take

the trouble to look in a pocket or lift a lid.

"Third item. Here and there about the house curious little heaps of

minute pieces of metal, some like steel springs and some in the form of

microscopic wheels. As if they had gutted some mechanical toy.

"Fourth item. The wax candles, which have to be stuck in bottle necks

because there is nothing else to stick them in. Now I wish you to note

how very much queerer all this is than anything we anticipated. For the

central riddle we are prepared; we have all seen at a glance that there

was something wrong about the last earl. We have come here to find out

whether he really lived here, whether he really died here, whether that

red-haired scarecrow who did his burying had anything to do with his

dying. But suppose the worst in all this, the most lurid or

melodramatic solution you like. Suppose the servant really killed the

master, or suppose the master isn't really dead, or suppose the master

is dressed up as the servant, or suppose the servant is buried for the

master; invent what Wilkie Collins' tragedy you like, and you still

have not explained a candle without a candlestick, or why an elderly

gentleman of good family should habitually spill snuff on the piano.

The core of the tale we could imagine; it is the fringes that are

mysterious. By no stretch of fancy can the human mind connect together

snuff and diamonds and wax and loose clockwork."

"I think I see the connection," said the priest. "This Glengyle was mad

against the French Revolution. He was an enthusiast for the ancien

r�gime, and was trying to re-enact literally the family life of the

last Bourbons. He had snuff because it was the eighteenth century

luxury; wax candles, because they were the eighteenth century lighting;

the mechanical bits of iron represent the locksmith hobby of Louis XVI;

the diamonds are for the Diamond Necklace of Marie Antoinette."

Both the other men were staring at him with round eyes. "What a

perfectly extraordinary notion!" cried Flambeau. "Do you really think

that is the truth?"

"I am perfectly sure it isn't," answered Father Brown, "only you said

that nobody could connect snuff and diamonds and clockwork and candles.

I give you that connection off-hand. The real truth, I am very sure,

lies deeper."

He paused a moment and listened to the wailing of the wind in the

turrets. Then he said, "The late Earl of Glengyle was a thief. He lived

a second and darker life as a desperate house-breaker. He did not have

any candlesticks because he only used these candles cut short in the

little lantern he carried. The snuff he employed as the fiercest French

criminals have used pepper: to fling it suddenly in dense masses in the

face of a captor or pursuer. But the final proof is in the curious

coincidence of the diamonds and the small steel wheels. Surely that

makes everything plain to you? Diamonds and small steel wheels are the

only two instruments with which you can cut out a pane of glass."

The bough of a broken pine tree lashed heavily in the blast against the

window-pane behind them, as if in parody of a burglar, but they did not

turn round. Their eyes were fastened on Father Brown.

"Diamonds and small wheels," repeated Craven ruminating. "Is that all

that makes you think it the true explanation?"

"I don't think it the true explanation," replied the priest placidly;

"but you said that nobody could connect the four things. The true tale,

of course, is something much more humdrum. Glengyle had found, or

thought he had found, precious stones on his estate. Somebody had

bamboozled him with those loose brilliants, saying they were found in

the castle caverns. The little wheels are some diamond-cutting affair.

He had to do the thing very roughly and in a small way, with the help

of a few shepherds or rude fellows on these hills. Snuff is the one

great luxury of such Scotch shepherds; it's the one thing with which

you can bribe them. They didn't have candlesticks because they didn't

want them; they held the candles in their hands when they explored the

caves."

"Is that all?" asked Flambeau after a long pause. "Have we got to the

dull truth at last?"

"Oh, no," said Father Brown.

As the wind died in the most distant pine woods with a long hoot as of

mockery Father Brown, with an utterly impassive face, went on:

"I only suggested that because you said one could not plausibly connect

snuff with clockwork or candles with bright stones. Ten false

philosophies will fit the universe; ten false theories will fit

Glengyle Castle. But we want the real explanation of the castle and the

universe. But are there no other exhibits?"

Craven laughed, and Flambeau rose smiling to his feet and strolled down

the long table.

"Items five, six, seven, etc.," he said, "and certainly more varied

than instructive. A curious collection, not of lead pencils, but of the

lead out of lead pencils. A senseless stick of bamboo, with the top

rather splintered. It might be the instrument of the crime. Only, there

isn't any crime. The only other things are a few old missals and little

Catholic pictures, which the Ogilvies kept, I suppose, from the Middle

Ages--their family pride being stronger than their Puritanism. We only

put them in the museum because they seem curiously cut about and

defaced."

The heady tempest without drove a dreadful wrack of clouds across

Glengyle and threw the long room into darkness as Father Brown picked

up the little illuminated pages to examine them. He spoke before the

drift of darkness had passed; but it was the voice of an utterly new

man.

"Mr Craven," said he, talking like a man ten years younger, "you have

got a legal warrant, haven't you, to go up and examine that grave? The

sooner we do it the better, and get to the bottom of this horrible

affair. If I were you I should start now."

"Now," repeated the astonished detective, "and why now?"

"Because this is serious," answered Brown; "this is not spilt snuff or

loose pebbles, that might be there for a hundred reasons. There is only

one reason I know of for this being done; and the reason goes down to

the roots of the world. These religious pictures are not just dirtied

or torn or scrawled over, which might be done in idleness or bigotry,

by children or by Protestants. These have been treated very

carefully--and very queerly. In every place where the great ornamented

name of God comes in the old illuminations it has been elaborately

taken out. The only other thing that has been removed is the halo round

the head of the Child Jesus. Therefore, I say, let us get our warrant

and our spade and our hatchet, and go up and break open that coffin."

"What do you mean?" demanded the London officer.

"I mean," answered the little priest, and his voice seemed to rise

slightly in the roar of the gale. "I mean that the great devil of the

universe may be sitting on the top tower of this castle at this moment,

as big as a hundred elephants, and roaring like the Apocalypse. There

is black magic somewhere at the bottom of this."

"Black magic," repeated Flambeau in a low voice, for he was too

enlightened a man not to know of such things; "but what can these other

things mean?"

"Oh, something damnable, I suppose," replied Brown impatiently. "How

should I know? How can I guess all their mazes down below? Perhaps you

can make a torture out of snuff and bamboo. Perhaps lunatics lust after

wax and steel filings. Perhaps there is a maddening drug made of lead

pencils! Our shortest cut to the mystery is up the hill to the grave."

His comrades hardly knew that they had obeyed and followed him till a

blast of the night wind nearly flung them on their faces in the garden.

Nevertheless they had obeyed him like automata; for Craven found a

hatchet in his hand, and the warrant in his pocket; Flambeau was

carrying the heavy spade of the strange gardener; Father Brown was

carrying the little gilt book from which had been torn the name of God

The path up the hill to the churchyard was crooked but short; only

under that stress of wind it seemed laborious and long. Far as the eye

could see, farther and farther as they mounted the slope, were seas

beyond seas of pines, now all aslope one way under the wind. And that

universal gesture seemed as vain as it was vast, as vain as if that

wind were whistling about some unpeopled and purposeless planet.

Through all that infinite growth of grey-blue forests sang, shrill and

high, that ancient sorrow that is in the heart of all heathen things.

One could fancy that the voices from the under world of unfathomable

foliage were cries of the lost and wandering pagan gods: gods who had

gone roaming in that irrational forest, and who will never find their

way back to heaven.

"You see," said Father Brown in low but easy tone, "Scotch people

before Scotland existed were a curious lot. In fact, they're a curious

lot still. But in the prehistoric times I fancy they really worshipped

demons. That," he added genially, "is why they jumped at the Puritan

theology."

"My friend," said Flambeau, turning in a kind of fury, "what does all

that snuff mean?"

"My friend," replied Brown, with equal seriousness, "there is one mark

of all genuine religions: materialism. Now, devil-worship is a

perfectly genuine religion."

They had come up on the grassy scalp of the hill, one of the few bald

spots that stood clear of the crashing and roaring pine forest. A mean

enclosure, partly timber and partly wire, rattled in the tempest to

tell them the border of the graveyard. But by the time Inspector Craven

had come to the corner of the grave, and Flambeau had planted his spade

point downwards and leaned on it, they were both almost as shaken as

the shaky wood and wire. At the foot of the grave grew great tall

thistles, grey and silver in their decay. Once or twice, when a ball of

thistle-down broke under the breeze and flew past him, Craven jumped

slightly as if it had been an arrow.

Flambeau drove the blade of his spade through the whistling grass into

the wet clay below. Then he seemed to stop and lean on it as on a

staff.

"Go on," said the priest very gently. "We are only trying to find the

truth. What are you afraid of?"

"I am afraid of finding it," said Flambeau.

The London detective spoke suddenly in a high crowing voice that was

meant to be conversational and cheery. "I wonder why he really did hide

himself like that. Something nasty, I suppose; was he a leper?"

"Something worse than that," said Flambeau.

"And what do you imagine," asked the other, "would be worse than a

leper?"

"I don't imagine it," said Flambeau.

He dug for some dreadful minutes in silence, and then said in a choked

voice, "I'm afraid of his not being the right shape."

"Nor was that piece of paper, you know," said Father Brown quietly,

"and we survived even that piece of paper."

Flambeau dug on with a blind energy. But the tempest had shouldered

away the choking grey clouds that clung to the hills like smoke and

revealed grey fields of faint starlight before he cleared the shape of

a rude timber coffin, and somehow tipped it up upon the turf. Craven

stepped forward with his axe; a thistle-top touched him, and he

flinched. Then he took a firmer stride, and hacked and wrenched with an

energy like Flambeau's till the lid was torn off, and all that was

there lay glimmering in the grey starlight.

"Bones," said Craven; and then he added, "but it is a man," as if that

were something unexpected.

"Is he," asked Flambeau in a voice that went oddly up and down, "is he

all right?"

"Seems so," said the officer huskily, bending over the obscure and

decaying skeleton in the box. "Wait a minute."

A vast heave went over Flambeau's huge figure. "And now I come to think

of it," he cried, "why in the name of madness shouldn't he be all

right? What is it gets hold of a man on these cursed cold mountains? I

think it's the black, brainless repetition; all these forests, and over

all an ancient horror of unconsciousness. It's like the dream of an

atheist. Pine-trees and more pine-trees and millions more pine-trees--"

"God!" cried the man by the coffin, "but he hasn't got a head."

While the others stood rigid the priest, for the first time, showed a

leap of startled concern.

"No head!" he repeated. " No head?" as if he had almost expected some

other deficiency.

Half-witted visions of a headless baby born to Glengyle, of a headless

youth hiding himself in the castle, of a headless man pacing those

ancient halls or that gorgeous garden, passed in panorama through their

minds. But even in that stiffened instant the tale took no root in them

and seemed to have no reason in it. They stood listening to the loud

woods and the shrieking sky quite foolishly, like exhausted animals.

Thought seemed to be something enormous that had suddenly slipped out

of their grasp.

"There are three headless men," said Father Brown, "standing round this

open grave."

The pale detective from London opened his mouth to speak, and left it

open like a yokel, while a long scream of wind tore the sky; then he

looked at the axe in his hands as if it did not belong to him, and

dropped it.

"Father," said Flambeau in that infantile and heavy voice he used very

seldom, "what are we to do?"

His friend's reply came with the pent promptitude of a gun going off.

"Sleep!" cried Father Brown. "Sleep. We have come to the end of the

ways. Do you know what sleep is? Do you know that every man who sleeps

believes in God? It is a sacrament; for it is an act of faith and it is

a food. And we need a sacrament, if only a natural one. Something has

fallen on us that falls very seldom on men; perhaps the worst thing

that can fall on them."

Craven's parted lips came together to say, "What do you mean?"

The priest had turned his face to the castle as he answered: "We have

found the truth; and the truth makes no sense."

He went down the path in front of them with a plunging and reckless

step very rare with him, and when they reached the castle again he

threw himself upon sleep with the simplicity of a dog.

Despite his mystic praise of slumber, Father Brown was up earlier than

anyone else except the silent gardener; and was found smoking a big

pipe and watching that expert at his speechless labours in the kitchen

garden. Towards daybreak the rocking storm had ended in roaring rains,

and the day came with a curious freshness. The gardener seemed even to

have been conversing, but at sight of the detectives he planted his

spade sullenly in a bed and, saying something about his breakfast,

shifted along the lines of cabbages and shut himself in the kitchen.

"He's a valuable man, that," said Father Brown. "He does the potatoes

amazingly. Still," he added, with a dispassionate charity, "he has his

faults; which of us hasn't? He doesn't dig this bank quite regularly.

There, for instance," and he stamped suddenly on one spot. "I'm really

very doubtful about that potato."

"And why?" asked Craven, amused with the little man's hobby.

"I'm doubtful about it," said the other, "because old Gow was doubtful

about it himself. He put his spade in methodically in every place but

just this. There must be a mighty fine potato just here."

Flambeau pulled up the spade and impetuously drove it into the place.

He turned up, under a load of soil, something that did not look like a

potato, but rather like a monstrous, over-domed mushroom. But it struck

the spade with a cold click; it rolled over like a ball, and grinned up

at them.

"The Earl of Glengyle," said Brown sadly, and looked down heavily at

the skull.

Then, after a momentary meditation, he plucked the spade from Flambeau,

and, saying "We must hide it again," clamped the skull down in the

earth. Then he leaned his little body and huge head on the great handle

of the spade, that stood up stiffly in the earth, and his eyes were

empty and his forehead full of wrinkles. "If one could only conceive,"

he muttered, "the meaning of this last monstrosity." And leaning on the

large spade handle, he buried his brows in his hands, as men do in

church.

All the corners of the sky were brightening into blue and silver; the

birds were chattering in the tiny garden trees; so loud it seemed as if

the trees themselves were talking. But the three men were silent

enough.

"Well, I give it all up," said Flambeau at last boisterously. "My brain

and this world don't fit each other; and there's an end of it. Snuff,

spoilt Prayer Books, and the insides of musical boxes--what--"

Brown threw up his bothered brow and rapped on the spade handle with an

intolerance quite unusual with him. "Oh, tut, tut, tut, tut!" he cried.

"All that is as plain as a pikestaff. I understood the snuff and

clockwork, and so on, when I first opened my eyes this morning. And

since then I've had it out with old Gow, the gardener, who is neither

so deaf nor so stupid as he pretends. There's nothing amiss about the

loose items. I was wrong about the torn mass-book, too; there's no harm

in that. But it's this last business. Desecrating graves and stealing

dead men's heads--surely there's harm in that? Surely there's black

magic still in that? That doesn't fit in to the quite simple story of

the snuff and the candles." And, striding about again, he smoked

moodily.

"My friend," said Flambeau, with a grim humour, "you must be careful

with me and remember I was once a criminal. The great advantage of that

estate was that I always made up the story myself, and acted it as

quick as I chose. This detective business of waiting about is too much

for my French impatience. All my life, for good or evil, I have done

things at the instant; I always fought duels the next morning; I always

paid bills on the nail; I never even put off a visit to the dentist--"

Father Brown's pipe fell out of his mouth and broke into three pieces

on the gravel path. He stood rolling his eyes, the exact picture of an

idiot. "Lord, what a turnip I am!" he kept saying. "Lord, what a

turnip!" Then, in a somewhat groggy kind of way, he began to laugh.

"The dentist!" he repeated. "Six hours in the spiritual abyss, and all

because I never thought of the dentist! Such a simple, such a beautiful

and peaceful thought! Friends, we have passed a night in hell; but now

the sun is risen, the birds are singing, and the radiant form of the

dentist consoles the world."

"I will get some sense out of this," cried Flambeau, striding forward,

"if I use the tortures of the Inquisition."

Father Brown repressed what appeared to be a momentary disposition to

dance on the now sunlit lawn and cried quite piteously, like a child,

"Oh, let me be silly a little. You don't know how unhappy I have been.

And now I know that there has been no deep sin in this business at all.

Only a little lunacy, perhaps--and who minds that?"

He spun round once more, then faced them with gravity.

"This is not a story of crime," he said; "rather it is the story of a

strange and crooked honesty. We are dealing with the one man on earth,

perhaps, who has taken no more than his due. It is a study in the

savage living logic that has been the religion of this race.

"That old local rhyme about the house of Glengyle--

As green sap to the simmer trees

Is red gold to the Ogilvies--

was literal as well as metaphorical. It did not merely mean that the

Glengyles sought for wealth; it was also true that they literally

gathered gold; they had a huge collection of ornaments and utensils in

that metal. They were, in fact, misers whose mania took that turn. In

the light of that fact, run through all the things we found in the

castle. Diamonds without their gold rings; candles without their gold

candlesticks; snuff without the gold snuff-boxes; pencil-leads without

the gold pencil-cases; a walking-stick without its gold top; clockwork

without the gold clocks--or rather watches. And, mad as it sounds,

because the halos and the name of God in the old missals were of real

gold; these also were taken away."

The garden seemed to brighten, the grass to grow gayer in the

strengthening sun, as the crazy truth was told. Flambeau lit a

cigarette as his friend went on.

"Were taken away," continued Father Brown; "were taken away--but not

stolen. Thieves would never have left this mystery. Thieves would have

taken the gold snuff-boxes, snuff and all; the gold pencil-cases, lead

and all. We have to deal with a man with a peculiar conscience, but

certainly a conscience. I found that mad moralist this morning in the

kitchen garden yonder, and I heard the whole story.

"The late Archibald Ogilvie was the nearest approach to a good man ever

born at Glengyle. But his bitter virtue took the turn of the

misanthrope; he moped over the dishonesty of his ancestors, from which,

somehow, he generalised a dishonesty of all men. More especially he

distrusted philanthropy or free-giving; and he swore if he could find

one man who took his exact rights he should have all the gold of

Glengyle. Having delivered this defiance to humanity he shut himself

up, without the smallest expectation of its being answered. One day,

however, a deaf and seemingly senseless lad from a distant village

brought him a belated telegram; and Glengyle, in his acrid pleasantry,

gave him a new farthing. At least he thought he had done so, but when

he turned over his change he found the new farthing still there and a

sovereign gone. The accident offered him vistas of sneering

speculation. Either way, the boy would show the greasy greed of the

species. Either he would vanish, a thief stealing a coin; or he would

sneak back with it virtuously, a snob seeking a reward. In the middle

of that night Lord Glengyle was knocked up out of his bed--for he lived

alone--and forced to open the door to the deaf idiot. The idiot brought

with him, not the sovereign, but exactly nineteen shillings and

eleven-pence three-farthings in change.

"Then the wild exactitude of this action took hold of the mad lord's

brain like fire. He swore he was Diogenes, that had long sought an

honest man, and at last had found one. He made a new will, which I have

seen. He took the literal youth into his huge, neglected house, and

trained him up as his solitary servant and--after an odd manner--his

heir. And whatever that queer creature understands, he understood

absolutely his lord's two fixed ideas: first, that the letter of right

is everything; and second, that he himself was to have the gold of

Glengyle. So far, that is all; and that is simple. He has stripped the

house of gold, and taken not a grain that was not gold; not so much as

a grain of snuff. He lifted the gold leaf off an old illumination,

fully satisfied that he left the rest unspoilt. All that I understood;

but I could not understand this skull business. I was really uneasy

about that human head buried among the potatoes. It distressed me--till

Flambeau said the word.

"It will be all right. He will put the skull back in the grave, when he

has taken the gold out of the tooth."

And, indeed, when Flambeau crossed the hill that morning, he saw that

strange being, the just miser, digging at the desecrated grave, the

plaid round his throat thrashing out in the mountain wind; the sober

top hat on his head.

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Certain of the great roads going north out of London continue far into

the country a sort of attenuated and interrupted spectre of a street,

with great gaps in the building, but preserving the line. Here will be

a group of shops, followed by a fenced field or paddock, and then a

famous public-house, and then perhaps a market garden or a nursery

garden, and then one large private house, and then another field and

another inn, and so on. If anyone walks along one of these roads he

will pass a house which will probably catch his eye, though he may not

be able to explain its attraction. It is a long, low house, running

parallel with the road, painted mostly white and pale green, with a

veranda and sun-blinds, and porches capped with those quaint sort of

cupolas like wooden umbrellas that one sees in some old-fashioned

houses. In fact, it is an old-fashioned house, very English and very

suburban in the good old wealthy Clapham sense. And yet the house has a

look of having been built chiefly for the hot weather. Looking at its

white paint and sun-blinds one thinks vaguely of pugarees and even of

palm trees. I cannot trace the feeling to its root; perhaps the place

was built by an Anglo-Indian.

Anyone passing this house, I say, would be namelessly fascinated by it;

would feel that it was a place about which some story was to be told.

And he would have been right, as you shall shortly hear. For this is

the story--the story of the strange things that did really happen in it

in the Whitsuntide of the year 18--.

Anyone passing the house on the Thursday before Whit-Sunday at about

half-past four p.m. would have seen the front door open, and Father

Brown, of the small church of St Mungo, come out smoking a large pipe

in company with a very tall French friend of his called Flambeau, who

was smoking a very small cigarette. These persons may or may not be of

interest to the reader, but the truth is that they were not the only

interesting things that were displayed when the front door of the

white-and-green house was opened. There are further peculiarities about

this house, which must be described to start with, not only that the

reader may understand this tragic tale, but also that he may realise

what it was that the opening of the door revealed.

The whole house was built upon the plan of a T, but a T with a very

long cross piece and a very short tail piece. The long cross piece was

the frontage that ran along in face of the street, with the front door

in the middle; it was two stories high, and contained nearly all the

important rooms. The short tail piece, which ran out at the back

immediately opposite the front door, was one story high, and consisted

only of two long rooms, the one leading into the other. The first of

these two rooms was the study in which the celebrated Mr Quinton wrote

his wild Oriental poems and romances. The farther room was a glass

conservatory full of tropical blossoms of quite unique and almost

monstrous beauty, and on such afternoons as these glowing with gorgeous

sunlight. Thus when the hall door was open, many a passer-by literally

stopped to stare and gasp; for he looked down a perspective of rich

apartments to something really like a transformation scene in a fairy

play: purple clouds and golden suns and crimson stars that were at once

scorchingly vivid and yet transparent and far away.

Leonard Quinton, the poet, had himself most carefully arranged this

effect; and it is doubtful whether he so perfectly expressed his

personality in any of his poems. For he was a man who drank and bathed

in colours, who indulged his lust for colour somewhat to the neglect of

form--even of good form. This it was that had turned his genius so

wholly to eastern art and imagery; to those bewildering carpets or

blinding embroideries in which all the colours seem fallen into a

fortunate chaos, having nothing to typify or to teach. He had

attempted, not perhaps with complete artistic success, but with

acknowledged imagination and invention, to compose epics and love

stories reflecting the riot of violent and even cruel colour; tales of

tropical heavens of burning gold or blood-red copper; of eastern heroes

who rode with twelve-turbaned mitres upon elephants painted purple or

peacock green; of gigantic jewels that a hundred negroes could not

carry, but which burned with ancient and strange-hued fires.

In short (to put the matter from the more common point of view), he

dealt much in eastern heavens, rather worse than most western hells; in

eastern monarchs, whom we might possibly call maniacs; and in eastern

jewels which a Bond Street jeweller (if the hundred staggering negroes

brought them into his shop) might possibly not regard as genuine.

Quinton was a genius, if a morbid one; and even his morbidity appeared

more in his life than in his work. In temperament he was weak and

waspish, and his health had suffered heavily from oriental experiments

with opium. His wife--a handsome, hard-working, and, indeed,

over-worked woman objected to the opium, but objected much more to a

live Indian hermit in white and yellow robes, whom her husband insisted

on entertaining for months together, a Virgil to guide his spirit

through the heavens and the hells of the east.

It was out of this artistic household that Father Brown and his friend

stepped on to the door-step; and to judge from their faces, they

stepped out of it with much relief. Flambeau had known Quinton in wild

student days in Paris, and they had renewed the acquaintance for a

week-end; but apart from Flambeau's more responsible developments of

late, he did not get on well with the poet now. Choking oneself with

opium and writing little erotic verses on vellum was not his notion of

how a gentleman should go to the devil. As the two paused on the

door-step, before taking a turn in the garden, the front garden gate

was thrown open with violence, and a young man with a billycock hat on

the back of his head tumbled up the steps in his eagerness. He was a

dissipated-looking youth with a gorgeous red necktie all awry, as if he

had slept in it, and he kept fidgeting and lashing about with one of

those little jointed canes.

"I say," he said breathlessly, "I want to see old Quinton. I must see

him. Has he gone?"

"Mr Quinton is in, I believe," said Father Brown, cleaning his pipe,

"but I do not know if you can see him. The doctor is with him at

present."

The young man, who seemed not to be perfectly sober, stumbled into the

hall; and at the same moment the doctor came out of Quinton's study,

shutting the door and beginning to put on his gloves.

"See Mr Quinton?" said the doctor coolly. "No, I'm afraid you can't. In

fact, you mustn't on any account. Nobody must see him; I've just given

him his sleeping draught."

"No, but look here, old chap," said the youth in the red tie, trying

affectionately to capture the doctor by the lapels of his coat. "Look

here. I'm simply sewn up, I tell you. I--"

"It's no good, Mr Atkinson," said the doctor, forcing him to fall back;

"when you can alter the effects of a drug I'll alter my decision," and,

settling on his hat, he stepped out into the sunlight with the other

two. He was a bull-necked, good-tempered little man with a small

moustache, inexpressibly ordinary, yet giving an impression of

capacity.

The young man in the billycock, who did not seem to be gifted with any

tact in dealing with people beyond the general idea of clutching hold

of their coats, stood outside the door, as dazed as if he had been

thrown out bodily, and silently watched the other three walk away

together through the garden.

"That was a sound, spanking lie I told just now," remarked the medical

man, laughing. "In point of fact, poor Quinton doesn't have his

sleeping draught for nearly half an hour. But I'm not going to have him

bothered with that little beast, who only wants to borrow money that he

wouldn't pay back if he could. He's a dirty little scamp, though he is

Mrs Quinton's brother, and she's as fine a woman as ever walked."

"Yes," said Father Brown. "She's a good woman."

"So I propose to hang about the garden till the creature has cleared

off," went on the doctor, "and then I'll go in to Quinton with the

medicine. Atkinson can't get in, because I locked the door."

"In that case, Dr Harris," said Flambeau, "we might as well walk round

at the back by the end of the conservatory. There's no entrance to it

that way, but it's worth seeing, even from the outside."

"Yes, and I might get a squint at my patient," laughed the doctor, "for

he prefers to lie on an ottoman right at the end of the conservatory

amid all those blood-red poinsettias; it would give me the creeps. But

what are you doing?"

Father Brown had stopped for a moment, and picked up out of the long

grass, where it had almost been wholly hidden, a queer, crooked

Oriental knife, inlaid exquisitely in coloured stones and metals.

"What is this?" asked Father Brown, regarding it with some disfavour.

"Oh, Quinton's, I suppose," said Dr Harris carelessly; "he has all

sorts of Chinese knickknacks about the place. Or perhaps it belongs to

that mild Hindoo of his whom he keeps on a string."

"What Hindoo?" asked Father Brown, still staring at the dagger in his

hand.

"Oh, some Indian conjuror," said the doctor lightly; "a fraud, of

course."

"You don't believe in magic?" asked Father Brown, without looking up.

"Oh crickey! magic!" said the doctor.

"It's very beautiful," said the priest in a low, dreaming voice; "the

colours are very beautiful. But it's the wrong shape."

"What for?" asked Flambeau, staring.

"For anything. It's the wrong shape in the abstract. Don't you ever

feel that about Eastern art? The colours are intoxicatingly lovely; but

the shapes are mean and bad--deliberately mean and bad. I have seen

wicked things in a Turkey carpet."

" Mon Dieu!" cried Flambeau, laughing.

"They are letters and symbols in a language I don't know; but I know

they stand for evil words," went on the priest, his voice growing lower

and lower. "The lines go wrong on purpose--like serpents doubling to

escape."

"What the devil are you talking about?" said the doctor with a loud

laugh.

Flambeau spoke quietly to him in answer. "The Father sometimes gets

this mystic's cloud on him," he said; "but I give you fair warning that

I have never known him to have it except when there was some evil quite

near."

"Oh, rats!" said the scientist.

"Why, look at it," cried Father Brown, holding out the crooked knife at

arm's length, as if it were some glittering snake. "Don't you see it is

the wrong shape? Don't you see that it has no hearty and plain purpose?

It does not point like a spear. It does not sweep like a scythe. It

does not look like a weapon. It looks like an instrument of torture."

"Well, as you don't seem to like it," said the jolly Harris, "it had

better be taken back to its owner. Haven't we come to the end of this

confounded conservatory yet? This house is the wrong shape, if you

like."

"You don't understand," said Father Brown, shaking his head. "The shape

of this house is quaint--it is even laughable. But there is nothing

wrong about it."

As they spoke they came round the curve of glass that ended the

conservatory, an uninterrupted curve, for there was neither door nor

window by which to enter at that end. The glass, however, was clear,

and the sun still bright, though beginning to set; and they could see

not only the flamboyant blossoms inside, but the frail figure of the

poet in a brown velvet coat lying languidly on the sofa, having,

apparently, fallen half asleep over a book. He was a pale, slight man,

with loose, chestnut hair and a fringe of beard that was the paradox of

his face, for the beard made him look less manly. These traits were

well known to all three of them; but even had it not been so, it may be

doubted whether they would have looked at Quinton just then. Their eyes

were riveted on another object.

Exactly in their path, immediately outside the round end of the glass

building, was standing a tall man, whose drapery fell to his feet in

faultless white, and whose bare, brown skull, face, and neck gleamed in

the setting sun like splendid bronze. He was looking through the glass

at the sleeper, and he was more motionless than a mountain.

"Who is that?" cried Father Brown, stepping back with a hissing intake

of his breath.

"Oh, it is only that Hindoo humbug," growled Harris; "but I don't know

what the deuce he's doing here."

"It looks like hypnotism," said Flambeau, biting his black moustache.

"Why are you unmedical fellows always talking bosh about hypnotism?"

cried the doctor. "It looks a deal more like burglary."

"Well, we will speak to it, at any rate," said Flambeau, who was always

for action. One long stride took him to the place where the Indian

stood. Bowing from his great height, which overtopped even the

Oriental's, he said with placid impudence:

"Good evening, sir. Do you want anything?"

Quite slowly, like a great ship turning into a harbour, the great

yellow face turned, and looked at last over its white shoulder. They

were startled to see that its yellow eyelids were quite sealed, as in

sleep. "Thank you," said the face in excellent English. "I want

nothing." Then, half opening the lids, so as to show a slit of

opalescent eyeball, he repeated, "I want nothing." Then he opened his

eyes wide with a startling stare, said, "I want nothing," and went

rustling away into the rapidly darkening garden.

"The Christian is more modest," muttered Father Brown; "he wants

something."

"What on earth was he doing?" asked Flambeau, knitting his black brows

and lowering his voice.

"I should like to talk to you later," said Father Brown.

The sunlight was still a reality, but it was the red light of evening,

and the bulk of the garden trees and bushes grew blacker and blacker

against it. They turned round the end of the conservatory, and walked

in silence down the other side to get round to the front door. As they

went they seemed to wake something, as one startles a bird, in the

deeper corner between the study and the main building; and again they

saw the white-robed fakir slide out of the shadow, and slip round

towards the front door. To their surprise, however, he had not been

alone. They found themselves abruptly pulled up and forced to banish

their bewilderment by the appearance of Mrs Quinton, with her heavy

golden hair and square pale face, advancing on them out of the

twilight. She looked a little stern, but was entirely courteous.

"Good evening, Dr Harris," was all she said.

"Good evening, Mrs Quinton," said the little doctor heartily. "I am

just going to give your husband his sleeping draught."

"Yes," she said in a clear voice. "I think it is quite time." And she

smiled at them, and went sweeping into the house.

"That woman's over-driven," said Father Brown; "that's the kind of

woman that does her duty for twenty years, and then does something

dreadful."

The little doctor looked at him for the first time with an eye of

interest. "Did you ever study medicine?" he asked.

"You have to know something of the mind as well as the body," answered

the priest; "we have to know something of the body as well as the

mind."

"Well," said the doctor, "I think I'll go and give Quinton his stuff."

They had turned the corner of the front fa�ade, and were approaching

the front doorway. As they turned into it they saw the man in the white

robe for the third time. He came so straight towards the front door

that it seemed quite incredible that he had not just come out of the

study opposite to it. Yet they knew that the study door was locked.

Father Brown and Flambeau, however, kept this weird contradiction to

themselves, and Dr Harris was not a man to waste his thoughts on the

impossible. He permitted the omnipresent Asiatic to make his exit, and

then stepped briskly into the hall. There he found a figure which he

had already forgotten. The inane Atkinson was still hanging about,

humming and poking things with his knobby cane. The doctor's face had a

spasm of disgust and decision, and he whispered rapidly to his

companion: "I must lock the door again, or this rat will get in. But I

shall be out again in two minutes."

He rapidly unlocked the door and locked it again behind him, just

balking a blundering charge from the young man in the billycock. The

young man threw himself impatiently on a hall chair. Flambeau looked at

a Persian illumination on the wall; Father Brown, who seemed in a sort

of daze, dully eyed the door. In about four minutes the door was opened

again. Atkinson was quicker this time. He sprang forward, held the door

open for an instant, and called out: "Oh, I say, Quinton, I want--"

From the other end of the study came the clear voice of Quinton, in

something between a yawn and a yell of weary laughter.

"Oh, I know what you want. Take it, and leave me in peace. I'm writing

a song about peacocks."

Before the door closed half a sovereign came flying through the

aperture; and Atkinson, stumbling forward, caught it with singular

dexterity.

"So that's settled," said the doctor, and, locking the door savagely,

he led the way out into the garden.

"Poor Leonard can get a little peace now," he added to Father Brown;

"he's locked in all by himself for an hour or two."

"Yes," answered the priest; "and his voice sounded jolly enough when we

left him." Then he looked gravely round the garden, and saw the loose

figure of Atkinson standing and jingling the half-sovereign in his

pocket, and beyond, in the purple twilight, the figure of the Indian

sitting bolt upright upon a bank of grass with his face turned towards

the setting sun. Then he said abruptly: "Where is Mrs Quinton!"

"She has gone up to her room," said the doctor. "That is her shadow on

the blind."

Father Brown looked up, and frowningly scrutinised a dark outline at

the gas-lit window.

"Yes," he said, "that is her shadow," and he walked a yard or two and

threw himself upon a garden seat.

Flambeau sat down beside him; but the doctor was one of those energetic

people who live naturally on their legs. He walked away, smoking, into

the twilight, and the two friends were left together.

"My father," said Flambeau in French, "what is the matter with you?"

Father Brown was silent and motionless for half a minute, then he said:

"Superstition is irreligious, but there is something in the air of this

place. I think it's that Indian--at least, partly."

He sank into silence, and watched the distant outline of the Indian,

who still sat rigid as if in prayer. At first sight he seemed

motionless, but as Father Brown watched him he saw that the man swayed

ever so slightly with a rhythmic movement, just as the dark tree-tops

swayed ever so slightly in the wind that was creeping up the dim garden

paths and shuffling the fallen leaves a little.

The landscape was growing rapidly dark, as if for a storm, but they

could still see all the figures in their various places. Atkinson was

leaning against a tree with a listless face; Quinton's wife was still

at her window; the doctor had gone strolling round the end of the

conservatory; they could see his cigar like a will-o'-the-wisp; and the

fakir still sat rigid and yet rocking, while the trees above him began

to rock and almost to roar. Storm was certainly coming.

"When that Indian spoke to us," went on Brown in a conversational

undertone, "I had a sort of vision, a vision of him and all his

universe. Yet he only said the same thing three times. When first he

said `I want nothing,' it meant only that he was impenetrable, that

Asia does not give itself away. Then he said again, `I want nothing,'

and I knew that he meant that he was sufficient to himself, like a

cosmos, that he needed no God, neither admitted any sins. And when he

said the third time, `I want nothing,' he said it with blazing eyes.

And I knew that he meant literally what he said; that nothing was his

desire and his home; that he was weary for nothing as for wine; that

annihilation, the mere destruction of everything or anything--"

Two drops of rain fell; and for some reason Flambeau started and looked

up, as if they had stung him. And the same instant the doctor down by

the end of the conservatory began running towards them, calling out

something as he ran.

As he came among them like a bombshell the restless Atkinson happened

to be taking a turn nearer to the house front; and the doctor clutched

him by the collar in a convulsive grip. "Foul play!" he cried; "what

have you been doing to him, you dog?"

The priest had sprung erect, and had the voice of steel of a soldier in

command.

"No fighting," he cried coolly; "we are enough to hold anyone we want

to. What is the matter, doctor?"

"Things are not right with Quinton," said the doctor, quite white. "I

could just see him through the glass, and I don't like the way he's

lying. It's not as I left him, anyhow."

"Let us go in to him," said Father Brown shortly. "You can leave Mr

Atkinson alone. I have had him in sight since we heard Quinton's

voice."

"I will stop here and watch him," said Flambeau hurriedly. "You go in

and see."

The doctor and the priest flew to the study door, unlocked it, and fell

into the room. In doing so they nearly fell over the large mahogany

table in the centre at which the poet usually wrote; for the place was

lit only by a small fire kept for the invalid. In the middle of this

table lay a single sheet of paper, evidently left there on purpose. The

doctor snatched it up, glanced at it, handed it to Father Brown, and

crying, "Good God, look at that!" plunged toward the glass room beyond,

where the terrible tropic flowers still seemed to keep a crimson memory

of the sunset.

Father Brown read the words three times before he put down the paper.

The words were: "I die by my own hand; yet I die murdered!" They were

in the quite inimitable, not to say illegible, handwriting of Leonard

Quinton.

Then Father Brown, still keeping the paper in his hand, strode towards

the conservatory, only to meet his medical friend coming back with a

face of assurance and collapse. "He's done it," said Harris.

They went together through the gorgeous unnatural beauty of cactus and

azalea and found Leonard Quinton, poet and romancer, with his head

hanging downward off his ottoman and his red curls sweeping the ground.

Into his left side was thrust the queer dagger that they had picked up

in the garden, and his limp hand still rested on the hilt.

Outside the storm had come at one stride, like the night in Coleridge,

and garden and glass roof were darkened with driving rain. Father Brown

seemed to be studying the paper more than the corpse; he held it close

to his eyes; and seemed trying to read it in the twilight. Then he held

it up against the faint light, and, as he did so, lightning stared at

them for an instant so white that the paper looked black against it.

Darkness full of thunder followed, and after the thunder Father Brown's

voice said out of the dark: "Doctor, this paper is the wrong shape."

"What do you mean?" asked Doctor Harris, with a frowning stare.

"It isn't square," answered Brown. "It has a sort of edge snipped off

at the corner. What does it mean?"

"How the deuce should I know?" growled the doctor. "Shall we move this

poor chap, do you think? He's quite dead."

"No," answered the priest; "we must leave him as he lies and send for

the police." But he was still scrutinising the paper.

As they went back through the study he stopped by the table and picked

up a small pair of nail scissors. "Ah," he said, with a sort of relief,

"this is what he did it with. But yet--" And he knitted his brows.

"Oh, stop fooling with that scrap of paper," said the doctor

emphatically. "It was a fad of his. He had hundreds of them. He cut all

his paper like that," as he pointed to a stack of sermon paper still

unused on another and smaller table. Father Brown went up to it and

held up a sheet. It was the same irregular shape.

"Quite so," he said. "And here I see the corners that were snipped

off." And to the indignation of his colleague he began to count them.

"That's all right," he said, with an apologetic smile. "Twenty-three

sheets cut and twenty-two corners cut off them. And as I see you are

impatient we will rejoin the others."

"Who is to tell his wife?" asked Dr Harris. "Will you go and tell her

now, while I send a servant for the police?"

"As you will," said Father Brown indifferently. And he went out to the

hall door.

Here also he found a drama, though of a more grotesque sort. It showed

nothing less than his big friend Flambeau in an attitude to which he

had long been unaccustomed, while upon the pathway at the bottom of the

steps was sprawling with his boots in the air the amiable Atkinson, his

billycock hat and walking-cane sent flying in opposite directions along

the path. Atkinson had at length wearied of Flambeau's almost paternal

custody, and had endeavoured to knock him down, which was by no means a

smooth game to play with the Roi des Apaches, even after that monarch's

abdication.

Flambeau was about to leap upon his enemy and secure him once more,

when the priest patted him easily on the shoulder.

"Make it up with Mr Atkinson, my friend," he said. "Beg a mutual pardon

and say `Good night.' We need not detain him any longer." Then, as

Atkinson rose somewhat doubtfully and gathered his hat and stick and

went towards the garden gate, Father Brown said in a more serious

voice: "Where is that Indian?"

They all three (for the doctor had joined them) turned involuntarily

towards the dim grassy bank amid the tossing trees purple with

twilight, where they had last seen the brown man swaying in his strange

prayers. The Indian was gone.

"Confound him," cried the doctor, stamping furiously. "Now I know that

it was that nigger that did it."

"I thought you didn't believe in magic," said Father Brown quietly.

"No more I did," said the doctor, rolling his eyes. "I only know that I

loathed that yellow devil when I thought he was a sham wizard. And I

shall loathe him more if I come to think he was a real one."

"Well, his having escaped is nothing," said Flambeau. "For we could

have proved nothing and done nothing against him. One hardly goes to

the parish constable with a story of suicide imposed by witchcraft or

auto-suggestion."

Meanwhile Father Brown had made his way into the house, and now went to

break the news to the wife of the dead man.

When he came out again he looked a little pale and tragic, but what

passed between them in that interview was never known, even when all

was known.

Flambeau, who was talking quietly with the doctor, was surprised to see

his friend reappear so soon at his elbow; but Brown took no notice, and

merely drew the doctor apart. "You have sent for the police, haven't

you?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Harris. "They ought to be here in ten minutes."

"Will you do me a favour?" said the priest quietly. "The truth is, I

make a collection of these curious stories, which often contain, as in

the case of our Hindoo friend, elements which can hardly be put into a

police report. Now, I want you to write out a report of this case for

my private use. Yours is a clever trade," he said, looking the doctor

gravely and steadily in the face. "I sometimes think that you know some

details of this matter which you have not thought fit to mention. Mine

is a confidential trade like yours, and I will treat anything you write

for me in strict confidence. But write the whole."

The doctor, who had been listening thoughtfully with his head a little

on one side, looked the priest in the face for an instant, and said:

"All right," and went into the study, closing the door behind him.

"Flambeau," said Father Brown, "there is a long seat there under the

veranda, where we can smoke out of the rain. You are my only friend in

the world, and I want to talk to you. Or, perhaps, be silent with you."

They established themselves comfortably in the veranda seat; Father

Brown, against his common habit, accepted a good cigar and smoked it

steadily in silence, while the rain shrieked and rattled on the roof of

the veranda.

"My friend," he said at length, "this is a very queer case. A very

queer case."

"I should think it was," said Flambeau, with something like a shudder.

"You call it queer, and I call it queer," said the other, "and yet we

mean quite opposite things. The modern mind always mixes up two

different ideas: mystery in the sense of what is marvellous, and

mystery in the sense of what is complicated. That is half its

difficulty about miracles. A miracle is startling; but it is simple. It

is simple because it is a miracle. It is power coming directly from God

(or the devil) instead of indirectly through nature or human wills.

Now, you mean that this business is marvellous because it is

miraculous, because it is witchcraft worked by a wicked Indian.

Understand, I do not say that it was not spiritual or diabolic. Heaven

and hell only know by what surrounding influences strange sins come

into the lives of men. But for the present my point is this: If it was

pure magic, as you think, then it is marvellous; but it is not

mysterious--that is, it is not complicated. The quality of a miracle is

mysterious, but its manner is simple. Now, the manner of this business

has been the reverse of simple."

The storm that had slackened for a little seemed to be swelling again,

and there came heavy movements as of faint thunder. Father Brown let

fall the ash of his cigar and went on:

"There has been in this incident," he said, "a twisted, ugly, complex

quality that does not belong to the straight bolts either of heaven or

hell. As one knows the crooked track of a snail, I know the crooked

track of a man."

The white lightning opened its enormous eye in one wink, the sky shut

up again, and the priest went on:

"Of all these crooked things, the crookedest was the shape of that

piece of paper. It was crookeder than the dagger that killed him."

"You mean the paper on which Quinton confessed his suicide," said

Flambeau.

"I mean the paper on which Quinton wrote, `I die by my own hand',"

answered Father Brown. "The shape of that paper, my friend, was the

wrong shape; the wrong shape, if ever I have seen it in this wicked

world."

"It only had a corner snipped off," said Flambeau, "and I understand

that all Quinton's paper was cut that way."

"It was a very odd way," said the other, "and a very bad way, to my

taste and fancy. Look here, Flambeau, this Quinton--God receive his

soul!--was perhaps a bit of a cur in some ways, but he really was an

artist, with the pencil as well as the pen. His handwriting, though

hard to read, was bold and beautiful. I can't prove what I say; I can't

prove anything. But I tell you with the full force of conviction that

he could never have cut that mean little piece off a sheet of paper. If

he had wanted to cut down paper for some purpose of fitting in, or

binding up, or what not, he would have made quite a different slash

with the scissors. Do you remember the shape? It was a mean shape. It

was a wrong shape. Like this. Don't you remember?"

And he waved his burning cigar before him in the darkness, making

irregular squares so rapidly that Flambeau really seemed to see them as

fiery hieroglyphics upon the darkness--hieroglyphics such as his friend

had spoken of, which are undecipherable, yet can have no good meaning.

"But," said Flambeau, as the priest put his cigar in his mouth again

and leaned back, staring at the roof, "suppose somebody else did use

the scissors. Why should somebody else, cutting pieces off his sermon

paper, make Quinton commit suicide?"

Father Brown was still leaning back and staring at the roof, but he

took his cigar out of his mouth and said: "Quinton never did commit

suicide."

Flambeau stared at him. "Why, confound it all," he cried, "then why did

he confess to suicide?"

The priest leant forward again, settled his elbows on his knees, looked

at the ground, and said, in a low, distinct voice: "He never did

confess to suicide."

Flambeau laid his cigar down. "You mean," he said, "that the writing

was forged?"

"No," said Father Brown. "Quinton wrote it all right."

"Well, there you are," said the aggravated Flambeau; "Quinton wrote, `I

die by my own hand,' with his own hand on a plain piece of paper."

"Of the wrong shape," said the priest calmly.

"Oh, the shape be damned!" cried Flambeau. "What has the shape to do

with it?"

"There were twenty-three snipped papers," resumed Brown unmoved, "and

only twenty-two pieces snipped off. Therefore one of the pieces had

been destroyed, probably that from the written paper. Does that suggest

anything to you?"

A light dawned on Flambeau's face, and he said: "There was something

else written by Quinton, some other words. `They will tell you I die by

my own hand,' or `Do not believe that--'"

"Hotter, as the children say," said his friend. "But the piece was

hardly half an inch across; there was no room for one word, let alone

five. Can you think of anything hardly bigger than a comma which the

man with hell in his heart had to tear away as a testimony against

him?"

"I can think of nothing," said Flambeau at last.

"What about quotation marks?" said the priest, and flung his cigar far

into the darkness like a shooting star.

All words had left the other man's mouth, and Father Brown said, like

one going back to fundamentals:

"Leonard Quinton was a romancer, and was writing an Oriental romance

about wizardry and hypnotism. He--"

At this moment the door opened briskly behind them, and the doctor came

out with his hat on. He put a long envelope into the priest's hands.

"That's the document you wanted," he said, "and I must be getting home.

Good night."

"Good night," said Father Brown, as the doctor walked briskly to the

gate. He had left the front door open, so that a shaft of gaslight fell

upon them. In the light of this Brown opened the envelope and read the

following words:

Dear Father Brown,-- Vicisti, Galil�e! Otherwise, damn your eyes,

which are very penetrating ones. Can it be possible that there is

something in all that stuff of yours after all?

I am a man who has ever since boyhood believed in Nature and in all

natural functions and instincts, whether men called them moral or

immoral. Long before I became a doctor, when I was a schoolboy

keeping mice and spiders, I believed that to be a good animal is the

best thing in the world. But just now I am shaken; I have believed

in Nature; but it seems as if Nature could betray a man. Can there

be anything in your bosh? I am really getting morbid.

I loved Quinton's wife. What was there wrong in that? Nature told me

to, and it's love that makes the world go round. I also thought

quite sincerely that she would be happier with a clean animal like

me than with that tormenting little lunatic. What was there wrong in

that? I was only facing facts, like a man of science. She would have

been happier.

According to my own creed I was quite free to kill Quinton, which

was the best thing for everybody, even himself. But as a healthy

animal I had no notion of killing myself. I resolved, therefore,

that I would never do it until I saw a chance that would leave me

scot free. I saw that chance this morning.

I have been three times, all told, into Quinton's study today. The

first time I went in he would talk about nothing but the weird tale,

called "The Cure of a Saint," which he was writing, which was all

about how some Indian hermit made an English colonel kill himself by

thinking about him. He showed me the last sheets, and even read me

the last paragraph, which was something like this: "The conqueror of

the Punjab, a mere yellow skeleton, but still gigantic, managed to

lift himself on his elbow and gasp in his nephew's ear: `I die by my

own hand, yet I die murdered!'" It so happened by one chance out of

a hundred, that those last words were written at the top of a new

sheet of paper. I left the room, and went out into the garden

intoxicated with a frightful opportunity.

We walked round the house; and two more things happened in my

favour. You suspected an Indian, and you found a dagger which the

Indian might most probably use. Taking the opportunity to stuff it

in my pocket I went back to Quinton's study, locked the door, and

gave him his sleeping draught. He was against answering Atkinson at

all, but I urged him to call out and quiet the fellow, because I

wanted a clear proof that Quinton was alive when I left the room for

the second time. Quinton lay down in the conservatory, and I came

through the study. I am a quick man with my hands, and in a minute

and a half I had done what I wanted to do. I had emptied all the

first part of Quinton's romance into the fireplace, where it burnt

to ashes. Then I saw that the quotation marks wouldn't do, so I

snipped them off, and to make it seem likelier, snipped the whole

quire to match. Then I came out with the knowledge that Quinton's

confession of suicide lay on the front table, while Quinton lay

alive but asleep in the conservatory beyond.

The last act was a desperate one; you can guess it: I pretended to

have seen Quinton dead and rushed to his room. I delayed you with

the paper, and, being a quick man with my hands, killed Quinton

while you were looking at his confession of suicide. He was

half-asleep, being drugged, and I put his own hand on the knife and

drove it into his body. The knife was of so queer a shape that no

one but an operator could have calculated the angle that would reach

his heart. I wonder if you noticed this.

When I had done it, the extraordinary thing happened. Nature

deserted me. I felt ill. I felt just as if I had done something

wrong. I think my brain is breaking up; I feel some sort of

desperate pleasure in thinking I have told the thing to somebody;

that I shall not have to be alone with it if I marry and have

children. What is the matter with me? ... Madness ... or can one

have remorse, just as if one were in Byron's poems! I cannot write

any more.

James Erskine Harris.

Father Brown carefully folded up the letter, and put it in his breast

pocket just as there came a loud peal at the gate bell, and the wet

waterproofs of several policemen gleamed in the road outside.

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When Flambeau took his month's holiday from his office in Westminster

he took it in a small sailing-boat, so small that it passed much of its

time as a rowing-boat. He took it, moreover, in little rivers in the

Eastern counties, rivers so small that the boat looked like a magic

boat, sailing on land through meadows and cornfields. The vessel was

just comfortable for two people; there was room only for necessities,

and Flambeau had stocked it with such things as his special philosophy

considered necessary. They reduced themselves, apparently, to four

essentials: tins of salmon, if he should want to eat; loaded revolvers,

if he should want to fight; a bottle of brandy, presumably in case he

should faint; and a priest, presumably in case he should die. With this

light luggage he crawled down the little Norfolk rivers, intending to

reach the Broads at last, but meanwhile delighting in the over-hanging

gardens and meadows, the mirrored mansions or villages, lingering to

fish in the pools and corners, and in some sense hugging the shore.

Like a true philosopher, Flambeau had no aim in his holiday; but, like

a true philosopher, he had an excuse. He had a sort of half purpose,

which he took just so seriously that its success would crown the

holiday, but just so lightly that its failure would not spoil it. Years

ago, when he had been a king of thieves and the most famous figure in

Paris, he had often received wild communications of approval,

denunciation, or even love; but one had, somehow, stuck in his memory.

It consisted simply of a visiting-card, in an envelope with an English

postmark. On the back of the card was written in French and in green

ink: "If you ever retire and become respectable, come and see me. I

want to meet you, for I have met all the other great men of my time.

That trick of yours of getting one detective to arrest the other was

the most splendid scene in French history." On the front of the card

was engraved in the formal fashion, "Prince Saradine, Reed House, Reed

Island, Norfolk."

He had not troubled much about the prince then, beyond ascertaining

that he had been a brilliant and fashionable figure in southern Italy.

In his youth, it was said, he had eloped with a married woman of high

rank; the escapade was scarcely startling in his social world, but it

had clung to men's minds because of an additional tragedy: the alleged

suicide of the insulted husband, who appeared to have flung himself

over a precipice in Sicily. The prince then lived in Vienna for a time,

but his more recent years seemed to have been passed in perpetual and

restless travel. But when Flambeau, like the prince himself, had left

European celebrity and settled in England, it occurred to him that he

might pay a surprise visit to this eminent exile in the Norfolk Broads.

Whether he should find the place he had no idea; and, indeed, it was

sufficiently small and forgotten. But, as things fell out, he found it

much sooner than he expected.

They had moored their boat one night under a bank veiled in high

grasses and short pollarded trees. Sleep, after heavy sculling, had

come to them early, and by a corresponding accident they awoke before

it was light. To speak more strictly, they awoke before it was

daylight; for a large lemon moon was only just setting in the forest of

high grass above their heads, and the sky was of a vivid violet-blue,

nocturnal but bright. Both men had simultaneously a reminiscence of

childhood, of the elfin and adventurous time when tall weeds close over

us like woods. Standing up thus against the large low moon, the daisies

really seemed to be giant daisies, the dandelions to be giant

dandelions. Somehow it reminded them of the dado of a nursery

wall-paper. The drop of the river-bed sufficed to sink them under the

roots of all shrubs and flowers and make them gaze upwards at the

grass. "By Jove!" said Flambeau, "it's like being in fairyland."

Father Brown sat bolt upright in the boat and crossed himself. His

movement was so abrupt that his friend asked him, with a mild stare,

what was the matter.

"The people who wrote the medi�val ballads," answered the priest, "knew

more about fairies than you do. It isn't only nice things that happen

in fairyland."

"Oh, bosh!" said Flambeau. "Only nice things could happen under such an

innocent moon. I am for pushing on now and seeing what does really

come. We may die and rot before we ever see again such a moon or such a

mood."

"All right," said Father Brown. "I never said it was always wrong to

enter fairyland. I only said it was always dangerous."

They pushed slowly up the brightening river; the glowing violet of the

sky and the pale gold of the moon grew fainter and fainter, amd faded

into that vast colourless cosmos that precedes the colours of the dawn.

When the first faint stripes of red and gold and grey split the horizon

from end to end they were broken by the black bulk of a town or village

which sat on the river just ahead of them. It was already an easy

twilight, in which all things were visible, when they came under the

hanging roofs and bridges of this riverside hamlet. The houses, with

their long, low, stooping roofs, seemed to come down to drink at the

river, like huge grey and red cattle. The broadening and whitening dawn

had already turned to working daylight before they saw any living

creature on the wharves and bridges of that silent town. Eventually

they saw a very placid and prosperous man in his shirt sleeves, with a

face as round as the recently sunken moon, and rays of red whisker

around the low arc of it, who was leaning on a post above the sluggish

tide. By an impulse not to be analysed, Flambeau rose to his full

height in the swaying boat and shouted at the man to ask if he knew

Reed Island or Reed House. The prosperous man's smile grew slightly

more expansive, and he simply pointed up the river towards the next

bend of it. Flambeau went ahead without further speech.

The boat took many such grassy corners and followed many such reedy and

silent reaches of river; but before the search had become monotonous

they had swung round a specially sharp angle and come into the silence

of a sort of pool or lake, the sight of which instinctively arrested

them. For in the middle of this wider piece of water, fringed on every

side with rushes, lay a long, low islet, along which ran a long, low

house or bungalow built of bamboo or some kind of tough tropic cane.

The upstanding rods of bamboo which made the walls were pale yellow,

the sloping rods that made the roof were of darker red or brown,

otherwise the long house was a thing of repetition and monotony. The

early morning breeze rustled the reeds round the island and sang in the

strange ribbed house as in a giant pan-pipe.

"By George!" cried Flambeau; "here is the place, after all! Here is

Reed Island, if ever there was one. Here is Reed House, if it is

anywhere. I believe that fat man with whiskers was a fairy."

"Perhaps," remarked Father Brown impartially. "If he was, he was a bad

fairy."

But even as he spoke the impetuous Flambeau had run his boat ashore in

the rattling reeds, and they stood in the long, quaint islet beside the

odd and silent house.

The house stood with its back, as it were, to the river and the only

landing-stage; the main entrance was on the other side, and looked down

the long island garden. The visitors approached it, therefore, by a

small path running round nearly three sides of the house, close under

the low eaves. Through three different windows on three different sides

they looked in on the same long, well-lit room, panelled in light wood,

with a large number of looking-glasses, and laid out as for an elegant

lunch. The front door, when they came round to it at last, was flanked

by two turquoise-blue flower-pots. It was opened by a butler of the

drearier type--long, lean, grey and listless--who murmured that Prince

Saradine was from home at present, but was expected hourly; the house

being kept ready for him and his guests. The exhibition of the card

with the scrawl of green ink awoke a flicker of life in the parchment

face of the depressed retainer, and it was with a certain shaky

courtesy that he suggested that the strangers should remain. "His

Highness may be here any minute," he said, "and would be distressed to

have just missed any gentleman he had invited. We have orders always to

keep a little cold lunch for him and his friends, and I am sure he

would wish it to be offered."

Moved with curiosity to this minor adventure, Flambeau assented

gracefully, and followed the old man, who ushered him ceremoniously

into the long, lightly panelled room. There was nothing very notable

about it, except the rather unusual alternation of many long, low

windows with many long, low oblongs of looking-glass, which gave a

singular air of lightness and unsubstantialness to the place. It was

somehow like lunching out of doors. One or two pictures of a quiet kind

hung in the corners, one a large grey photograph of a very young man in

uniform, another a red chalk sketch of two long-haired boys. Asked by

Flambeau whether the soldierly person was the prince, the butler

answered shortly in the negative; it was the prince's younger brother,

Captain Stephen Saradine, he said. And with that the old man seemed to

dry up suddenly and lose all taste for conversation.

After lunch had tailed off with exquisite coffee and liqueurs, the

guests were introduced to the garden, the library, and the

housekeeper--a dark, handsome lady, of no little majesty, and rather

like a plutonic Madonna. It appeared that she and the butler were the

only survivors of the prince's original foreign m�nage, all the other

servants now in the house being new and collected in Norfolk by the

housekeeper. This latter lady went by the name of Mrs Anthony, but she

spoke with a slight Italian accent, and Flambeau did not doubt that

Anthony was a Norfolk version of some more Latin name. Mr Paul, the

butler, also had a faintly foreign air, but he was in tongue and

training English, as are many of the most polished men-servants of the

cosmopolitan nobility.

Pretty and unique as it was, the place had about it a curious luminous

sadness. Hours passed in it like days. The long, well-windowed rooms

were full of daylight, but it seemed a dead daylight. And through all

other incidental noises, the sound of talk, the clink of glasses, or

the passing feet of servants, they could hear on all sides of the house

the melancholy noise of the river.

"We have taken a wrong turning, and come to a wrong place," said Father

Brown, looking out of the window at the grey-green sedges and the

silver flood. "Never mind; one can sometimes do good by being the right

person in the wrong place."

Father Brown, though commonly a silent, was an oddly sympathetic little

man, and in those few but endless hours he unconsciously sank deeper

into the secrets of Reed House than his professional friend. He had

that knack of friendly silence which is so essential to gossip; and

saying scarcely a word, he probably obtained from his new acquaintances

all that in any case they would have told. The butler indeed was

naturally uncommunicative. He betrayed a sullen and almost animal

affection for his master; who, he said, had been very badly treated.

The chief offender seemed to be his highness's brother, whose name

alone would lengthen the old man's lantern jaws and pucker his parrot

nose into a sneer. Captain Stephen was a ne'er-do-well, apparently, and

had drained his benevolent brother of hundreds and thousands; forced

him to fly from fashionable life and live quietly in this retreat. That

was all Paul, the butler, would say, and Paul was obviously a partisan.

The Italian housekeeper was somewhat more communicative, being, as

Brown fancied, somewhat less content. Her tone about her master was

faintly acid; though not without a certain awe. Flambeau and his friend

were standing in the room of the looking-glasses examining the red

sketch of the two boys, when the housekeeper swept in swiftly on some

domestic errand. It was a peculiarity of this glittering,

glass-panelled place that anyone entering was reflected in four or five

mirrors at once; and Father Brown, without turning round, stopped in

the middle of a sentence of family criticism. But Flambeau, who had his

face close up to the picture, was already saying in a loud voice, "The

brothers Saradine, I suppose. They both look innocent enough. It would

be hard to say which is the good brother and which the bad." Then,

realising the lady's presence, he turned the conversation with some

triviality, and strolled out into the garden. But Father Brown still

gazed steadily at the red crayon sketch; and Mrs Anthony still gazed

steadily at Father Brown.

She had large and tragic brown eyes, and her olive face glowed darkly

with a curious and painful wonder--as of one doubtful of a stranger's

identity or purpose. Whether the little priest's coat and creed touched

some southern memories of confession, or whether she fancied he knew

more than he did, she said to him in a low voice as to a fellow

plotter, "He is right enough in one way, your friend. He says it would

be hard to pick out the good and bad brothers. Oh, it would be hard, it

would be mighty hard, to pick out the good one."

"I don't understand you," said Father Brown, and began to move away.

The woman took a step nearer to him, with thunderous brows and a sort

of savage stoop, like a bull lowering his horns.

"There isn't a good one," she hissed. "There was badness enough in the

captain taking all that money, but I don't think there was much

goodness in the prince giving it. The captain's not the only one with

something against him."

A light dawned on the cleric's averted face, and his mouth formed

silently the word "blackmail." Even as he did so the woman turned an

abrupt white face over her shoulder and almost fell. The door had

opened soundlessly and the pale Paul stood like a ghost in the doorway.

By the weird trick of the reflecting walls, it seemed as if five Pauls

had entered by five doors simultaneously.

"His Highness," he said, "has just arrived."

In the same flash the figure of a man had passed outside the first

window, crossing the sunlit pane like a lighted stage. An instant later

he passed at the second window and the many mirrors repainted in

successive frames the same eagle profile and marching figure. He was

erect and alert, but his hair was white and his complexion of an odd

ivory yellow. He had that short, curved Roman nose which generally goes

with long, lean cheeks and chin, but these were partly masked by

moustache and imperial. The moustache was much darker than the beard,

giving an effect slightly theatrical, and he was dressed up to the same

dashing part, having a white top hat, an orchid in his coat, a yellow

waistcoat and yellow gloves which he flapped and swung as he walked.

When he came round to the front door they heard the stiff Paul open it,

and heard the new arrival say cheerfully, "Well, you see I have come."

The stiff Mr Paul bowed and answered in his inaudible manner; for a few

minutes their conversation could not be heard. Then the butler said,

"Everything is at your disposal"; and the glove-flapping Prince

Saradine came gaily into the room to greet them. They beheld once more

that spectral scene--five princes entering a room with five doors.

The prince put the white hat and yellow gloves on the table and offered

his hand quite cordially.

"Delighted to see you here, Mr Flambeau," he said. "Knowing you very

well by reputation, if that's not an indiscreet remark."

"Not at all," answered Flambeau, laughing. "I am not sensitive. Very

few reputations are gained by unsullied virtue."

The prince flashed a sharp look at him to see if the retort had any

personal point; then he laughed also and offered chairs to everyone,

including himself.

"Pleasant little place, this, I think," he said with a detached air.

"Not much to do, I fear; but the fishing is really good."

The priest, who was staring at him with the grave stare of a baby, was

haunted by some fancy that escaped definition. He looked at the grey,

carefully curled hair, yellow-white visage, and slim, somewhat foppish

figure. These were not unnatural, though perhaps a shade prononc�, like

the outfit of a figure behind the footlights. The nameless interest lay

in something else, in the very framework of the face; Brown was

tormented with a half memory of having seen it somewhere before. The

man looked like some old friend of his dressed up. Then he suddenly

remembered the mirrors, and put his fancy down to some psychological

effect of that multiplication of human masks.

Prince Saradine distributed his social attentions between his guests

with great gaiety and tact. Finding the detective of a sporting turn

and eager to employ his holiday, he guided Flambeau and Flambeau's boat

down to the best fishing spot in the stream, and was back in his own

canoe in twenty minutes to join Father Brown in the library and plunge

equally politely into the priest's more philosophic pleasures. He

seemed to know a great deal both about the fishing and the books,

though of these not the most edifying; he spoke five or six languages,

though chiefly the slang of each. He had evidently lived in varied

cities and very motley societies, for some of his cheerfullest stories

were about gambling hells and opium dens, Australian bushrangers or

Italian brigands. Father Brown knew that the once-celebrated Saradine

had spent his last few years in almost ceaseless travel, but he had not

guessed that the travels were so disreputable or so amusing.

Indeed, with all his dignity of a man of the world, Prince Saradine

radiated to such sensitive observers as the priest, a certain

atmosphere of the restless and even the unreliable. His face was

fastidious, but his eye was wild; he had little nervous tricks, like a

man shaken by drink or drugs, and he neither had, nor professed to

have, his hand on the helm of household affairs. All these were left to

the two old servants, especially to the butler, who was plainly the

central pillar of the house. Mr Paul, indeed, was not so much a butler

as a sort of steward or, even, chamberlain; he dined privately, but

with almost as much pomp as his master; he was feared by all the

servants; and he consulted with the prince decorously, but somewhat

unbendingly--rather as if he were the prince's solicitor. The sombre

housekeeper was a mere shadow in comparison; indeed, she seemed to

efface herself and wait only on the butler, and Brown heard no more of

those volcanic whispers which had half told him of the younger brother

who blackmailed the elder. Whether the prince was really being thus

bled by the absent captain, he could not be certain, but there was

something insecure and secretive about Saradine that made the tale by

no means incredible.

When they went once more into the long hall with the windows and the

mirrors, yellow evening was dropping over the waters and the willowy

banks; and a bittern sounded in the distance like an elf upon his

dwarfish drum. The same singular sentiment of some sad and evil

fairyland crossed the priest's mind again like a little grey cloud. "I

wish Flambeau were back," he muttered.

"Do you believe in doom?" asked the restless Prince Saradine suddenly.

"No," answered his guest. "I believe in Doomsday."

The prince turned from the window and stared at him in a singular

manner, his face in shadow against the sunset. "What do you mean?" he

asked.

"I mean that we here are on the wrong side of the tapestry," answered

Father Brown. "The things that happen here do not seem to mean

anything; they mean something somewhere else. Somewhere else

retribution will come on the real offender. Here it often seems to fall

on the wrong person."

The prince made an inexplicable noise like an animal; in his shadowed

face the eyes were shining queerly. A new and shrewd thought exploded

silently in the other's mind. Was there another meaning in Saradine's

blend of brilliancy and abruptness? Was the prince--Was he perfectly

sane? He was repeating, "The wrong person--the wrong person," many more

times than was natural in a social exclamation.

Then Father Brown awoke tardily to a second truth. In the mirrors

before him he could see the silent door standing open, and the silent

Mr Paul standing in it, with his usual pallid impassiveness.

"I thought it better to announce at once," he said, with the same stiff

respectfulness as of an old family lawyer, "a boat rowed by six men has

come to the landing-stage, and there's a gentleman sitting in the

stern."

"A boat!" repeated the prince; "a gentleman?" and he rose to his feet.

There was a startled silence punctuated only by the odd noise of the

bird in the sedge; and then, before anyone could speak again, a new

face and figure passed in profile round the three sunlit windows, as

the prince had passed an hour or two before. But except for the

accident that both outlines were aquiline, they had little in common.

Instead of the new white topper of Saradine, was a black one of

antiquated or foreign shape; under it was a young and very solemn face,

clean shaven, blue about its resolute chin, and carrying a faint

suggestion of the young Napoleon. The association was assisted by

something old and odd about the whole get-up, as of a man who had never

troubled to change the fashions of his fathers. He had a shabby blue

frock coat, a red, soldierly-looking waistcoat, and a kind of coarse

white trousers common among the early Victorians, but strangely

incongruous today. From all this old-clothes shop his olive face stood

out strangely young and monstrously sincere.

"The deuce!" said Prince Saradine, and clapping on his white hat he

went to the front door himself, flinging it open on the sunset garden.

By that time the new-comer and his followers were drawn up on the lawn

like a small stage army. The six boatmen had pulled the boat well up on

shore, and were guarding it almost menacingly, holding their oars erect

like spears. They were swarthy men, and some of them wore earrings. But

one of them stood forward beside the olive-faced young man in the red

waistcoat, and carried a large black case of unfamiliar form.

"Your name," said the young man, "is Saradine?"

Saradine assented rather negligently.

The new-comer had dull, dog-like brown eyes, as different as possible

from the restless and glittering grey eyes of the prince. But once

again Father Brown was tortured with a sense of having seen somewhere a

replica of the face; and once again he remembered the repetitions of

the glass-panelled room, and put down the coincidence to that.

"Confound this crystal palace!" he muttered. "One sees everything too

many times. It's like a dream."

"If you are Prince Saradine," said the young man, "I may tell you that

my name is Antonelli."

"Antonelli," repeated the prince languidly. "Somehow I remember the

name."

"Permit me to present myself," said the young Italian.

With his left hand he politely took off his old-fashioned top-hat; with

his right he caught Prince Saradine so ringing a crack across the face

that the white top hat rolled down the steps and one of the blue

flower-pots rocked upon its pedestal.

The prince, whatever he was, was evidently not a coward; he sprang at

his enemy's throat and almost bore him backwards to the grass. But his

enemy extricated himself with a singularly inappropriate air of hurried

politeness.

"That is all right," he said, panting and in halting English. "I have

insulted. I will give satisfaction. Marco, open the case."

The man beside him with the earrings and the big black case proceeded

to unlock it. He took out of it two long Italian rapiers, with splendid

steel hilts and blades, which he planted point downwards in the lawn.

The strange young man standing facing the entrance with his yellow and

vindictive face, the two swords standing up in the turf like two

crosses in a cemetery, and the line of the ranked towers behind, gave

it all an odd appearance of being some barbaric court of justice. But

everything else was unchanged, so sudden had been the interruption. The

sunset gold still glowed on the lawn, and the bittern still boomed as

announcing some small but dreadful destiny.

"Prince Saradine," said the man called Antonelli, "when I was an infant

in the cradle you killed my father and stole my mother; my father was

the more fortunate. You did not kill him fairly, as I am going to kill

you. You and my wicked mother took him driving to a lonely pass in

Sicily, flung him down a cliff, and went on your way. I could imitate

you if I chose, but imitating you is too vile. I have followed you all

over the world, and you have always fled from me. But this is the end

of the world--and of you. I have you now, and I give you the chance you

never gave my father. Choose one of those swords."

Prince Saradine, with contracted brows, seemed to hesitate a moment,

but his ears were still singing with the blow, and he sprang forward

and snatched at one of the hilts. Father Brown had also sprung forward,

striving to compose the dispute; but he soon found his personal

presence made matters worse. Saradine was a French freemason and a

fierce atheist, and a priest moved him by the law of contraries. And

for the other man neither priest nor layman moved him at all. This

young man with the Bonaparte face and the brown eyes was something far

sterner than a puritan--a pagan. He was a simple slayer from the

morning of the earth; a man of the stone age--a man of stone.

One hope remained, the summoning of the household; and Father Brown ran

back into the house. He found, however, that all the under servants had

been given a holiday ashore by the autocrat Paul, and that only the

sombre Mrs Anthony moved uneasily about the long rooms. But the moment

she turned a ghastly face upon him, he resolved one of the riddles of

the house of mirrors. The heavy brown eyes of Antonelli were the heavy

brown eyes of Mrs Anthony; and in a flash he saw half the story.

"Your son is outside," he said without wasting words; "either he or the

prince will be killed. Where is Mr Paul?"

"He is at the landing-stage," said the woman faintly. "He is--he

is--signalling for help."

"Mrs Anthony," said Father Brown seriously, "there is no time for

nonsense. My friend has his boat down the river fishing. Your son's

boat is guarded by your son's men. There is only this one canoe; what

is Mr Paul doing with it?"

"Santa Maria! I do not know," she said; and swooned all her length on

the matted floor.

Father Brown lifted her to a sofa, flung a pot of water over her,

shouted for help, and then rushed down to the landing-stage of the

little island. But the canoe was already in mid-stream, and old Paul

was pulling and pushing it up the river with an energy incredible at

his years.

"I will save my master," he cried, his eyes blazing maniacally. "I will

save him yet!"

Father Brown could do nothing but gaze after the boat as it struggled

up-stream and pray that the old man might waken the little town in

time.

"A duel is bad enough," he muttered, rubbing up his rough dust-coloured

hair, "but there's something wrong about this duel, even as a duel. I

feel it in my bones. But what can it be?"

As he stood staring at the water, a wavering mirror of sunset, he heard

from the other end of the island garden a small but unmistakable

sound--the cold concussion of steel. He turned his head.

Away on the farthest cape or headland of the long islet, on a strip of

turf beyond the last rank of roses, the duellists had already crossed

swords. Evening above them was a dome of virgin gold, and, distant as

they were, every detail was picked out. They had cast off their coats,

but the yellow waistcoat and white hair of Saradine, the red waistcoat

and white trousers of Antonelli, glittered in the level light like the

colours of the dancing clockwork dolls. The two swords sparkled from

point to pommel like two diamond pins. There was something frightful in

the two figures appearing so little and so gay. They looked like two

butterflies trying to pin each other to a cork.

Father Brown ran as hard as he could, his little legs going like a

wheel. But when he came to the field of combat he found he was born too

late and too early--too late to stop the strife, under the shadow of

the grim Sicilians leaning on their oars, and too early to anticipate

any disastrous issue of it. For the two men were singularly well

matched, the prince using his skill with a sort of cynical confidence,

the Sicilian using his with a murderous care. Few finer fencing matches

can ever have been seen in crowded amphitheatres than that which

tinkled and sparkled on that forgotten island in the reedy river. The

dizzy fight was balanced so long that hope began to revive in the

protesting priest; by all common probability Paul must soon come back

with the police. It would be some comfort even if Flambeau came back

from his fishing, for Flambeau, physically speaking, was worth four

other men. But there was no sign of Flambeau, and, what was much

queerer, no sign of Paul or the police. No other raft or stick was left

to float on; in that lost island in that vast nameless pool, they were

cut off as on a rock in the Pacific.

Almost as he had the thought the ringing of the rapiers quickened to a

rattle, the prince's arms flew up, and the point shot out behind

between his shoulder-blades. He went over with a great whirling

movement, almost like one throwing the half of a boy's cart-wheel. The

sword flew from his hand like a shooting star, and dived into the

distant river. And he himself sank with so earth-shaking a subsidence

that he broke a big rose-tree with his body and shook up into the sky a

cloud of red earth--like the smoke of some heathen sacrifice. The

Sicilian had made blood-offering to the ghost of his father.

The priest was instantly on his knees by the corpse; but only to make

too sure that it was a corpse. As he was still trying some last

hopeless tests he heard for the first time voices from farther up the

river, and saw a police-boat shoot up to the landing-stage, with

constables and other important people, including the excited Paul. The

little priest rose with a distinctly dubious grimace.

"Now, why on earth," he muttered, "why on earth couldn't he have come

before?"

Some seven minutes later the island was occupied by an invasion of

townsfolk and police, and the latter had put their hands on the

victorious duellist, ritually reminding him that anything he said might

be used against him.

"I shall not say anything," said the monomaniac, with a wonderful and

peaceful face. "I shall never say anything more. I am very happy, and I

only want to be hanged."

Then he shut his mouth as they led him away, and it is the strange but

certain truth that he never opened it again in this world, except to

say "Guilty" at his trial.

Father Brown had stared at the suddenly crowded garden, the arrest of

the man of blood, the carrying away of the corpse after its examination

by the doctor, rather as one watches the break-up of some ugly dream;

he was motionless, like a man in a nightmare. He gave his name and

address as a witness, but declined their offer of a boat to the shore,

and remained alone in the island garden, gazing at the broken rose bush

and the whole green theatre of that swift and inexplicable tragedy. The

light died along the river; mist rose in the marshy banks; a few

belated birds flitted fitfully across.

Stuck stubbornly in his sub-consciousness (which was an unusually

lively one) was an unspeakable certainty that there was something still

unexplained. This sense that had clung to him all day could not be

fully explained by his fancy about "looking-glass land." Somehow he had

not seen the real story, but some game or masque. And yet people do not

get hanged or run through the body for the sake of a charade.

As he sat on the steps of the landing-stage ruminating he grew

conscious of the tall, dark streak of a sail coming silently down the

shining river, and sprang to his feet with such a back-rush of feeling

that he almost wept.

"Flambeau!" he cried, and shook his friend by both hands again and

again, much to the astonishment of that sportsman, as he came on shore

with his fishing tackle. "Flambeau," he said, "so you're not killed?"

"Killed!" repeated the angler in great astonishment. "And why should I

be killed?"

"Oh, because nearly everybody else is," said his companion rather

wildly. "Saradine got murdered, and Antonelli wants to be hanged, and

his mother's fainted, and I, for one, don't know whether I'm in this

world or the next. But, thank God, you're in the same one." And he took

the bewildered Flambeau's arm.

As they turned from the landing-stage they came under the eaves of the

low bamboo house, and looked in through one of the windows, as they had

done on their first arrival. They beheld a lamp-lit interior well

calculated to arrest their eyes. The table in the long dining-room had

been laid for dinner when Saradine's destroyer had fallen like a

storm-bolt on the island. And the dinner was now in placid progress,

for Mrs Anthony sat somewhat sullenly at the foot of the table, while

at the head of it was Mr Paul, the major domo, eating and drinking of

the best, his bleared, bluish eyes standing queerly out of his face,

his gaunt countenance inscrutable, but by no means devoid of

satisfaction.

With a gesture of powerful impatience, Flambeau rattled at the window,

wrenched it open, and put an indignant head into the lamp-lit room.

"Well," he cried. "I can understand you may need some refreshment, but

really to steal your master's dinner while he lies murdered in the

garden--"

"I have stolen a great many things in a long and pleasant life,"

replied the strange old gentleman placidly; "this dinner is one of the

few things I have not stolen. This dinner and this house and garden

happen to belong to me."

A thought flashed across Flambeau's face. "You mean to say," he began,

"that the will of Prince Saradine--"

"I am Prince Saradine," said the old man, munching a salted almond.

Father Brown, who was looking at the birds outside, jumped as if he

were shot, and put in at the window a pale face like a turnip.

"You are what?" he repeated in a shrill voice.

"Paul, Prince Saradine, � vos ordres," said the venerable person

politely, lifting a glass of sherry. "I live here very quietly, being a

domestic kind of fellow; and for the sake of modesty I am called Mr

Paul, to distinguish me from my unfortunate brother Mr Stephen. He

died, I hear, recently--in the garden. Of course, it is not my fault if

enemies pursue him to this place. It is owing to the regrettable

irregularity of his life. He was not a domestic character."

He relapsed into silence, and continued to gaze at the opposite wall

just above the bowed and sombre head of the woman. They saw plainly the

family likeness that had haunted them in the dead man. Then his old

shoulders began to heave and shake a little, as if he were choking, but

his face did not alter.

"My God!" cried Flambeau after a pause, "he's laughing!"

"Come away," said Father Brown, who was quite white. "Come away from

this house of hell. Let us get into an honest boat again."

Night had sunk on rushes and river by the time they had pushed off from

the island, and they went down-stream in the dark, warming themselves

with two big cigars that glowed like crimson ships' lanterns. Father

Brown took his cigar out of his mouth and said:

"I suppose you can guess the whole story now? After all, it's a

primitive story. A man had two enemies. He was a wise man. And so he

discovered that two enemies are better than one."

"I do not follow that," answered Flambeau.

"Oh, it's really simple," rejoined his friend. "Simple, though anything

but innocent. Both the Saradines were scamps, but the prince, the

elder, was the sort of scamp that gets to the top, and the younger, the

captain, was the sort that sinks to the bottom. This squalid officer

fell from beggar to blackmailer, and one ugly day he got his hold upon

his brother, the prince. Obviously it was for no light matter, for

Prince Paul Saradine was frankly `fast,' and had no reputation to lose

as to the mere sins of society. In plain fact, it was a hanging matter,

and Stephen literally had a rope round his brother's neck. He had

somehow discovered the truth about the Sicilian affair, and could prove

that Paul murdered old Antonelli in the mountains. The captain raked in

the hush money heavily for ten years, until even the prince's splendid

fortune began to look a little foolish.

"But Prince Saradine bore another burden besides his blood-sucking

brother. He knew that the son of Antonelli, a mere child at the time of

the murder, had been trained in savage Sicilian loyalty, and lived only

to avenge his father, not with the gibbet (for he lacked Stephen's

legal proof), but with the old weapons of vendetta. The boy had

practised arms with a deadly perfection, and about the time that he was

old enough to use them Prince Saradine began, as the society papers

said, to travel. The fact is that he began to flee for his life,

passing from place to place like a hunted criminal; but with one

relentless man upon his trail. That was Prince Paul's position, and by

no means a pretty one. The more money he spent on eluding Antonelli the

less he had to silence Stephen. The more he gave to silence Stephen the

less chance there was of finally escaping Antonelli. Then it was that

he showed himself a great man--a genius like Napoleon.

"Instead of resisting his two antagonists, he surrendered suddenly to

both of them. He gave way like a Japanese wrestler, and his foes fell

prostrate before him. He gave up the race round the world, and he gave

up his address to young Antonelli; then he gave up everything to his

brother. He sent Stephen money enough for smart clothes and easy

travel, with a letter saying roughly: `This is all I have left. You

have cleaned me out. I still have a little house in Norfolk, with

servants and a cellar, and if you want more from me you must take that.

Come and take possession if you like, and I will live there quietly as

your friend or agent or anything.' He knew that the Sicilian had never

seen the Saradine brothers save, perhaps, in pictures; he knew they

were somewhat alike, both having grey, pointed beards. Then he shaved

his own face and waited. The trap worked. The unhappy captain, in his

new clothes, entered the house in triumph as a prince, and walked upon

the Sicilian's sword.

"There was one hitch, and it is to the honour of human nature. Evil

spirits like Saradine often blunder by never expecting the virtues of

mankind. He took it for granted that the Italian's blow, when it came,

would be dark, violent and nameless, like the blow it avenged; that the

victim would be knifed at night, or shot from behind a hedge, and so

die without speech. It was a bad minute for Prince Paul when

Antonelli's chivalry proposed a formal duel, with all its possible

explanations. It was then that I found him putting off in his boat with

wild eyes. He was fleeing, bareheaded, in an open boat before Antonelli

should learn who he was.

"But, however agitated, he was not hopeless. He knew the adventurer and

he knew the fanatic. It was quite probable that Stephen, the

adventurer, would hold his tongue, through his mere histrionic pleasure

in playing a part, his lust for clinging to his new cosy quarters, his

rascal's trust in luck, and his fine fencing. It was certain that

Antonelli, the fanatic, would hold his tongue, and be hanged without

telling tales of his family. Paul hung about on the river till he knew

the fight was over. Then he roused the town, brought the police, saw

his two vanquished enemies taken away forever, and sat down smiling to

his dinner."

"Laughing, God help us!" said Flambeau with a strong shudder. "Do they

get such ideas from Satan?"

"He got that idea from you," answered the priest.

"God forbid!" ejaculated Flambeau. "From me! What do you mean!"

The priest pulled a visiting-card from his pocket and held it up in the

faint glow of his cigar; it was scrawled with green ink.

"Don't you remember his original invitation to you?" he asked, "and the

compliment to your criminal exploit? `That trick of yours,' he says,

`of getting one detective to arrest the other'? He has just copied your

trick. With an enemy on each side of him, he slipped swiftly out of the

way and let them collide and kill each other."

Flambeau tore Prince Saradine's card from the priest's hands and rent

it savagely in small pieces.

"There's the last of that old skull and crossbones," he said as he

scattered the pieces upon the dark and disappearing waves of the

stream; "but I should think it would poison the fishes."

The last gleam of white card and green ink was drowned and darkened; a

faint and vibrant colour as of morning changed the sky, and the moon

behind the grasses grew paler. They drifted in silence.

"Father," said Flambeau suddenly, "do you think it was all a dream?"

The priest shook his head, whether in dissent or agnosticism, but

remained mute. A smell of hawthorn and of orchards came to them through

the darkness, telling them that a wind was awake; the next moment it

swayed their little boat and swelled their sail, and carried them

onward down the winding river to happier places and the homes of

harmless men.

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The little village of Bohun Beacon was perched on a hill so steep that

the tall spire of its church seemed only like the peak of a small

mountain. At the foot of the church stood a smithy, generally red with

fires and always littered with hammers and scraps of iron; opposite to

this, over a rude cross of cobbled paths, was "The Blue Boar," the only

inn of the place. It was upon this crossway, in the lifting of a leaden

and silver daybreak, that two brothers met in the street and spoke;

though one was beginning the day and the other finishing it. The Rev.

and Hon. Wilfred Bohun was very devout, and was making his way to some

austere exercises of prayer or contemplation at dawn. Colonel the Hon.

Norman Bohun, his elder brother, was by no means devout, and was

sitting in evening-dress on the bench outside "The Blue Boar," drinking

what the philosophic observer was free to regard either as his last

glass on Tuesday or his first on Wednesday. The colonel was not

particular.

The Bohuns were one of the very few aristocratic families really dating

from the Middle Ages, and their pennon had actually seen Palestine. But

it is a great mistake to suppose that such houses stand high in

chivalric tradition. Few except the poor preserve traditions.

Aristocrats live not in traditions but in fashions. The Bohuns had been

Mohocks under Queen Anne and Mashers under Queen Victoria. But like

more than one of the really ancient houses, they had rotted in the last

two centuries into mere drunkards and dandy degenerates, till there had

even come a whisper of insanity. Certainly there was something hardly

human about the colonel's wolfish pursuit of pleasure, and his chronic

resolution not to go home till morning had a touch of the hideous

clarity of insomnia. He was a tall, fine animal, elderly, but with hair

still startlingly yellow. He would have looked merely blonde and

leonine, but his blue eyes were sunk so deep in his face that they

looked black. They were a little too close together. He had very long

yellow moustaches; on each side of them a fold or furrow from nostril

to jaw, so that a sneer seemed cut into his face. Over his evening

clothes he wore a curious pale yellow coat that looked more like a very

light dressing-gown than an overcoat, and on the back of his head was

stuck an extraordinary broad-brimmed hat of a bright green colour,

evidently some oriental curiosity caught up at random. He was proud of

appearing in such incongruous attires--proud of the fact that he always

made them look congruous.

His brother the curate had also the yellow hair and the elegance, but

he was buttoned up to the chin in black, and his face was clean-shaven,

cultivated, and a little nervous. He seemed to live for nothing but his

religion; but there were some who said (notably the blacksmith, who was

a Presbyterian) that it was a love of Gothic architecture rather than

of God, and that his haunting of the church like a ghost was only

another and purer turn of the almost morbid thirst for beauty which

sent his brother raging after women and wine. This charge was doubtful,

while the man's practical piety was indubitable. Indeed, the charge was

mostly an ignorant misunderstanding of the love of solitude and secret

prayer, and was founded on his being often found kneeling, not before

the altar, but in peculiar places, in the crypts or gallery, or even in

the belfry. He was at the moment about to enter the church through the

yard of the smithy, but stopped and frowned a little as he saw his

brother's cavernous eyes staring in the same direction. On the

hypothesis that the colonel was interested in the church he did not

waste any speculations. There only remained the blacksmith's shop, and

though the blacksmith was a Puritan and none of his people, Wilfred

Bohun had heard some scandals about a beautiful and rather celebrated

wife. He flung a suspicious look across the shed, and the colonel stood

up laughing to speak to him.

"Good morning, Wilfred," he said. "Like a good landlord I am watching

sleeplessly over my people. I am going to call on the blacksmith."

Wilfred looked at the ground, and said: "The blacksmith is out. He is

over at Greenford."

"I know," answered the other with silent laughter; "that is why I am

calling on him."

"Norman," said the cleric, with his eye on a pebble in the road, "are

you ever afraid of thunderbolts?"

"What do you mean?" asked the colonel. "Is your hobby meteorology?"

"I mean," said Wilfred, without looking up, "do you ever think that God

might strike you in the street?"

"I beg your pardon," said the colonel; "I see your hobby is folklore."

"I know your hobby is blasphemy," retorted the religious man, stung in

the one live place of his nature. "But if you do not fear God, you have

good reason to fear man."

The elder raised his eyebrows politely. "Fear man?" he said.

"Barnes the blacksmith is the biggest and strongest man for forty miles

round," said the clergyman sternly. "I know you are no coward or

weakling, but he could throw you over the wall."

This struck home, being true, and the lowering line by mouth and

nostril darkened and deepened. For a moment he stood with the heavy

sneer on his face. But in an instant Colonel Bohun had recovered his

own cruel good humour and laughed, showing two dog-like front teeth

under his yellow moustache. "In that case, my dear Wilfred," he said

quite carelessly, "it was wise for the last of the Bohuns to come out

partially in armour."

And he took off the queer round hat covered with green, showing that it

was lined within with steel. Wilfred recognised it indeed as a light

Japanese or Chinese helmet torn down from a trophy that hung in the old

family hall.

"It was the first hat to hand," explained his brother airily; "always

the nearest hat--and the nearest woman."

"The blacksmith is away at Greenford," said Wilfred quietly; "the time

of his return is unsettled."

And with that he turned and went into the church with bowed head,

crossing himself like one who wishes to be quit of an unclean spirit.

He was anxious to forget such grossness in the cool twilight of his

tall Gothic cloisters; but on that morning it was fated that his still

round of religious exercises should be everywhere arrested by small

shocks. As he entered the church, hitherto always empty at that hour, a

kneeling figure rose hastily to its feet and came towards the full

daylight of the doorway. When the curate saw it he stood still with

surprise. For the early worshipper was none other than the village

idiot, a nephew of the blacksmith, one who neither would nor could care

for the church or for anything else. He was always called "Mad Joe,"

and seemed to have no other name; he was a dark, strong, slouching lad,

with a heavy white face, dark straight hair, and a mouth always open.

As he passed the priest, his moon-calf countenance gave no hint of what

he had been doing or thinking of. He had never been known to pray

before. What sort of prayers was he saying now? Extraordinary prayers

surely.

Wilfred Bohun stood rooted to the spot long enough to see the idiot go

out into the sunshine, and even to see his dissolute brother hail him

with a sort of avuncular jocularity. The last thing he saw was the

colonel throwing pennies at the open mouth of Joe, with the serious

appearance of trying to hit it.

This ugly sunlit picture of the stupidity and cruelty of the earth sent

the ascetic finally to his prayers for purification and new thoughts.

He went up to a pew in the gallery, which brought him under a coloured

window which he loved and always quieted his spirit; a blue window with

an angel carrying lilies. There he began to think less about the

half-wit, with his livid face and mouth like a fish. He began to think

less of his evil brother, pacing like a lean lion in his horrible

hunger. He sank deeper and deeper into those cold and sweet colours of

silver blossoms and sapphire sky.

In this place half an hour afterwards he was found by Gibbs, the

village cobbler, who had been sent for him in some haste. He got to his

feet with promptitude, for he knew that no small matter would have

brought Gibbs into such a place at all. The cobbler was, as in many

villages, an atheist, and his appearance in church was a shade more

extraordinary than Mad Joe's. It was a morning of theological enigmas.

"What is it?" asked Wilfred Bohun rather stiffly, but putting out a

trembling hand for his hat.

The atheist spoke in a tone that, coming from him, was quite

startlingly respectful, and even, as it were, huskily sympathetic.

"You must excuse me, sir," he said in a hoarse whisper, "but we didn't

think it right not to let you know at once. I'm afraid a rather

dreadful thing has happened, sir. I'm afraid your brother--"

Wilfred clenched his frail hands. "What devilry has he done now?" he

cried in voluntary passion.

"Why, sir," said the cobbler, coughing, "I'm afraid he's done nothing,

and won't do anything. I'm afraid he's done for. You had really better

come down, sir."

The curate followed the cobbler down a short winding stair which

brought them out at an entrance rather higher than the street. Bohun

saw the tragedy in one glance, flat underneath him like a plan. In the

yard of the smithy were standing five or six men mostly in black, one

in an inspector's uniform. They included the doctor, the Presbyterian

minister, and the priest from the Roman Catholic chapel, to which the

blacksmith's wife belonged. The latter was speaking to her, indeed,

very rapidly, in an undertone, as she, a magnificent woman with

red-gold hair, was sobbing blindly on a bench. Between these two

groups, and just clear of the main heap of hammers, lay a man in

evening dress, spread-eagled and flat on his face. From the height

above Wilfred could have sworn to every item of his costume and

appearance, down to the Bohun rings upon his fingers; but the skull was

only a hideous splash, like a star of blackness and blood.

Wilfred Bohun gave but one glance, and ran down the steps into the

yard. The doctor, who was the family physician, saluted him, but he

scarcely took any notice. He could only stammer out: "My brother is

dead. What does it mean? What is this horrible mystery?" There was an

unhappy silence; and then the cobbler, the most outspoken man present,

answered: "Plenty of horror, sir," he said; "but not much mystery."

"What do you mean?" asked Wilfred, with a white face.

"It's plain enough," answered Gibbs. "There is only one man for forty

miles round that could have struck such a blow as that, and he's the

man that had most reason to."

"We must not prejudge anything," put in the doctor, a tall,

black-bearded man, rather nervously; "but it is competent for me to

corroborate what Mr Gibbs says about the nature of the blow, sir; it is

an incredible blow. Mr Gibbs says that only one man in this district

could have done it. I should have said myself that nobody could have

done it."

A shudder of superstition went through the slight figure of the curate.

"I can hardly understand," he said.

"Mr Bohun," said the doctor in a low voice, "metaphors literally fail

me. It is inadequate to say that the skull was smashed to bits like an

egg-shell. Fragments of bone were driven into the body and the ground

like bullets into a mud wall. It was the hand of a giant."

He was silent a moment, looking grimly through his glasses; then he

added: "The thing has one advantage--that it clears most people of

suspicion at one stroke. If you or I or any normally made man in the

country were accused of this crime, we should be acquitted as an infant

would be acquitted of stealing the Nelson column."

"That's what I say," repeated the cobbler obstinately; "there's only

one man that could have done it, and he's the man that would have done

it. Where's Simeon Barnes, the blacksmith?"

"He's over at Greenford," faltered the curate.

"More likely over in France," muttered the cobbler.

"No; he is in neither of those places," said a small and colourless

voice, which came from the little Roman priest who had joined the

group. "As a matter of fact, he is coming up the road at this moment."

The little priest was not an interesting man to look at, having stubbly

brown hair and a round and stolid face. But if he had been as splendid

as Apollo no one would have looked at him at that moment. Everyone

turned round and peered at the pathway which wound across the plain

below, along which was indeed walking, at his own huge stride and with

a hammer on his shoulder, Simeon the smith. He was a bony and gigantic

man, with deep, dark, sinister eyes and a dark chin beard. He was

walking and talking quietly with two other men; and though he was never

specially cheerful, he seemed quite at his ease.

"My God!" cried the atheistic cobbler, "and there's the hammer he did

it with."

"No," said the inspector, a sensible-looking man with a sandy

moustache, speaking for the first time. "There's the hammer he did it

with over there by the church wall. We have left it and the body

exactly as they are."

All glanced round and the short priest went across and looked down in

silence at the tool where it lay. It was one of the smallest and the

lightest of the hammers, and would not have caught the eye among the

rest; but on the iron edge of it were blood and yellow hair.

After a silence the short priest spoke without looking up, and there

was a new note in his dull voice. "Mr Gibbs was hardly right," he said,

"in saying that there is no mystery. There is at least the mystery of

why so big a man should attempt so big a blow with so little a hammer."

"Oh, never mind that," cried Gibbs, in a fever. "What are we to do with

Simeon Barnes?"

"Leave him alone," said the priest quietly. "He is coming here of

himself. I know those two men with him. They are very good fellows from

Greenford, and they have come over about the Presbyterian chapel."

Even as he spoke the tall smith swung round the corner of the church,

and strode into his own yard. Then he stood there quite still, and the

hammer fell from his hand. The inspector, who had preserved

impenetrable propriety, immediately went up to him.

"I won't ask you, Mr Barnes," he said, "whether you know anything about

what has happened here. You are not bound to say. I hope you don't

know, and that you will be able to prove it. But I must go through the

form of arresting you in the King's name for the murder of Colonel

Norman Bohun."

"You are not bound to say anything," said the cobbler in officious

excitement. "They've got to prove everything. They haven't proved yet

that it is Colonel Bohun, with the head all smashed up like that."

"That won't wash," said the doctor aside to the priest. "That's out of

the detective stories. I was the colonel's medical man, and I knew his

body better than he did. He had very fine hands, but quite peculiar

ones. The second and third fingers were the same length. Oh, that's the

colonel right enough."

As he glanced at the brained corpse upon the ground the iron eyes of

the motionless blacksmith followed them and rested there also.

"Is Colonel Bohun dead?" said the smith quite calmly. "Then he's

damned."

"Don't say anything! Oh, don't say anything," cried the atheist

cobbler, dancing about in an ecstasy of admiration of the English legal

system. For no man is such a legalist as the good Secularist.

The blacksmith turned on him over his shoulder the august face of a

fanatic.

"It's well for you infidels to dodge like foxes because the world's law

favours you," he said; "but God guards His own in His pocket, as you

shall see this day."

Then he pointed to the colonel and said: "When did this dog die in his

sins?"

"Moderate your language," said the doctor.

"Moderate the Bible's language, and I'll moderate mine. When did he

die?"

"I saw him alive at six o'clock this morning," stammered Wilfred Bohun.

"God is good," said the smith. "Mr Inspector, I have not the slightest

objection to being arrested. It is you who may object to arresting me.

I don't mind leaving the court without a stain on my character. You do

mind perhaps leaving the court with a bad set-back in your career."

The solid inspector for the first time looked at the blacksmith with a

lively eye; as did everybody else, except the short, strange priest,

who was still looking down at the little hammer that had dealt the

dreadful blow.

"There are two men standing outside this shop," went on the blacksmith

with ponderous lucidity, "good tradesmen in Greenford whom you all

know, who will swear that they saw me from before midnight till

daybreak and long after in the committee-room of our Revival Mission,

which sits all night, we save souls so fast. In Greenford itself twenty

people could swear to me for all that time. If I were a heathen, Mr

Inspector, I would let you walk on to your downfall. But as a Christian

man I feel bound to give you your chance, and ask you whether you will

hear my alibi now or in court."

The inspector seemed for the first time disturbed, and said, "Of course

I should be glad to clear you altogether now."

The smith walked out of his yard with the same long and easy stride,

and returned to his two friends from Greenford, who were indeed friends

of nearly everyone present. Each of them said a few words which no one

ever thought of disbelieving. When they had spoken, the innocence of

Simeon stood up as solid as the great church above them.

One of those silences struck the group which are more strange and

insufferable than any speech. Madly, in order to make conversation, the

curate said to the Catholic priest:

"You seem very much interested in that hammer, Father Brown."

"Yes, I am," said Father Brown; "why is it such a small hammer?"

The doctor swung round on him.

"By George, that's true," he cried; "who would use a little hammer with

ten larger hammers lying about?"

Then he lowered his voice in the curate's ear and said: "Only the kind

of person that can't lift a large hammer. It is not a question of force

or courage between the sexes. It's a question of lifting power in the

shoulders. A bold woman could commit ten murders with a light hammer

and never turn a hair. She could not kill a beetle with a heavy one."

Wilfred Bohun was staring at him with a sort of hypnotised horror,

while Father Brown listened with his head a little on one side, really

interested and attentive. The doctor went on with more hissing

emphasis:

"Why do these idiots always assume that the only person who hates the

wife's lover is the wife's husband? Nine times out of ten the person

who most hates the wife's lover is the wife. Who knows what insolence

or treachery he had shown her--look there!"

He made a momentary gesture towards the red-haired woman on the bench.

She had lifted her head at last and the tears were drying on her

splendid face. But the eyes were fixed on the corpse with an electric

glare that had in it something of idiocy.

The Rev. Wilfred Bohun made a limp gesture as if waving away all desire

to know; but Father Brown, dusting off his sleeve some ashes blown from

the furnace, spoke in his indifferent way.

"You are like so many doctors," he said; "your mental science is really

suggestive. It is your physical science that is utterly impossible. I

agree that the woman wants to kill the co-respondent much more than the

petitioner does. And I agree that a woman will always pick up a small

hammer instead of a big one. But the difficulty is one of physical

impossibility. No woman ever born could have smashed a man's skull out

flat like that." Then he added reflectively, after a pause: "These

people haven't grasped the whole of it. The man was actually wearing an

iron helmet, and the blow scattered it like broken glass. Look at that

woman. Look at her arms."

Silence held them all up again, and then the doctor said rather

sulkily: "Well, I may be wrong; there are objections to everything. But

I stick to the main point. No man but an idiot would pick up that

little hammer if he could use a big hammer."

With that the lean and quivering hands of Wilfred Bohun went up to his

head and seemed to clutch his scanty yellow hair. After an instant they

dropped, and he cried: "That was the word I wanted; you have said the

word."

Then he continued, mastering his discomposure: "The words you said

were, `No man but an idiot would pick up the small hammer.'"

"Yes," said the doctor. "Well?"

"Well," said the curate, "no man but an idiot did." The rest stared at

him with eyes arrested and riveted, and he went on in a febrile and

feminine agitation.

"I am a priest," he cried unsteadily, "and a priest should be no

shedder of blood. I--I mean that he should bring no one to the gallows.

And I thank God that I see the criminal clearly now--because he is a

criminal who cannot be brought to the gallows."

"You will not denounce him?" inquired the doctor.

"He would not be hanged if I did denounce him," answered Wilfred with a

wild but curiously happy smile. "When I went into the church this

morning I found a madman praying there --that poor Joe, who has been

wrong all his life. God knows what he prayed; but with such strange

folk it is not incredible to suppose that their prayers are all upside

down. Very likely a lunatic would pray before killing a man. When I

last saw poor Joe he was with my brother. My brother was mocking him."

"By Jove!" cried the doctor, "this is talking at last. But how do you

explain--"

The Rev. Wilfred was almost trembling with the excitement of his own

glimpse of the truth. "Don't you see; don't you see," he cried

feverishly; "that is the only theory that covers both the queer things,

that answers both the riddles. The two riddles are the little hammer

and the big blow. The smith might have struck the big blow, but would

not have chosen the little hammer. His wife would have chosen the

little hammer, but she could not have struck the big blow. But the

madman might have done both. As for the little hammer--why, he was mad

and might have picked up anything. And for the big blow, have you never

heard, doctor, that a maniac in his paroxysm may have the strength of

ten men?"

The doctor drew a deep breath and then said, "By golly, I believe

you've got it."

Father Brown had fixed his eyes on the speaker so long and steadily as

to prove that his large grey, ox-like eyes were not quite so

insignificant as the rest of his face. When silence had fallen he said

with marked respect: "Mr Bohun, yours is the only theory yet propounded

which holds water every way and is essentially unassailable. I think,

therefore, that you deserve to be told, on my positive knowledge, that

it is not the true one." And with that the old little man walked away

and stared again at the hammer.

"That fellow seems to know more than he ought to," whispered the doctor

peevishly to Wilfred. "Those popish priests are deucedly sly."

"No, no," said Bohun, with a sort of wild fatigue. "It was the lunatic.

It was the lunatic."

The group of the two clerics and the doctor had fallen away from the

more official group containing the inspector and the man he had

arrested. Now, however, that their own party had broken up, they heard

voices from the others. The priest looked up quietly and then looked

down again as he heard the blacksmith say in a loud voice:

"I hope I've convinced you, Mr Inspector. I'm a strong man, as you say,

but I couldn't have flung my hammer bang here from Greenford. My hammer

hasn't got wings that it should come flying half a mile over hedges and

fields."

The inspector laughed amicably and said: "No, I think you can be

considered out of it, though it's one of the rummiest coincidences I

ever saw. I can only ask you to give us all the assistance you can in

finding a man as big and strong as yourself. By George! you might be

useful, if only to hold him! I suppose you yourself have no guess at

the man?"

"I may have a guess," said the pale smith, "but it is not at a man."

Then, seeing the scared eyes turn towards his wife on the bench, he put

his huge hand on her shoulder and said: "Nor a woman either."

"What do you mean?" asked the inspector jocularly. "You don't think

cows use hammers, do you?"

"I think no thing of flesh held that hammer," said the blacksmith in a

stifled voice; "mortally speaking, I think the man died alone."

Wilfred made a sudden forward movement and peered at him with burning

eyes.

"Do you mean to say, Barnes," came the sharp voice of the cobbler,

"that the hammer jumped up of itself and knocked the man down?"

"Oh, you gentlemen may stare and snigger," cried Simeon; "you clergymen

who tell us on Sunday in what a stillness the Lord smote Sennacherib. I

believe that One who walks invisible in every house defended the honour

of mine, and laid the defiler dead before the door of it. I believe the

force in that blow was just the force there is in earthquakes, and no

force less."

Wilfred said, with a voice utterly undescribable: "I told Norman myself

to beware of the thunderbolt."

"That agent is outside my jurisdiction," said the inspector with a

slight smile.

"You are not outside His," answered the smith; "see you to it," and,

turning his broad back, he went into the house.

The shaken Wilfred was led away by Father Brown, who had an easy and

friendly way with him. "Let us get out of this horrid place, Mr Bohun,"

he said. "May I look inside your church? I hear it's one of the oldest

in England. We take some interest, you know," he added with a comical

grimace, "in old English churches."

Wilfred Bohun did not smile, for humour was never his strong point. But

he nodded rather eagerly, being only too ready to explain the Gothic

splendours to someone more likely to be sympathetic than the

Presbyterian blacksmith or the atheist cobbler.

"By all means," he said; "let us go in at this side." And he led the

way into the high side entrance at the top of the flight of steps.

Father Brown was mounting the first step to follow him when he felt a

hand on his shoulder, and turned to behold the dark, thin figure of the

doctor, his face darker yet with suspicion.

"Sir," said the physician harshly, "you appear to know some secrets in

this black business. May I ask if you are going to keep them to

yourself?"

"Why, doctor," answered the priest, smiling quite pleasantly, "there is

one very good reason why a man of my trade should keep things to

himself when he is not sure of them, and that is that it is so

constantly his duty to keep them to himself when he is sure of them.

But if you think I have been discourteously reticent with you or

anyone, I will go to the extreme limit of my custom. I will give you

two very large hints."

"Well, sir?" said the doctor gloomily.

"First," said Father Brown quietly, "the thing is quite in your own

province. It is a matter of physical science. The blacksmith is

mistaken, not perhaps in saying that the blow was divine, but certainly

in saying that it came by a miracle. It was no miracle, doctor, except

in so far as man is himself a miracle, with his strange and wicked and

yet half-heroic heart. The force that smashed that skull was a force

well known to scientists--one of the most frequently debated of the

laws of nature."

The doctor, who was looking at him with frowning intentness, only said:

"And the other hint?"

"The other hint is this," said the priest. "Do you remember the

blacksmith, though he believes in miracles, talking scornfully of the

impossible fairy tale that his hammer had wings and flew half a mile

across country?"

"Yes," said the doctor, "I remember that."

"Well," added Father Brown, with a broad smile, "that fairy tale was

the nearest thing to the real truth that has been said today." And with

that he turned his back and stumped up the steps after the curate.

The Reverend Wilfred, who had been waiting for him, pale and impatient,

as if this little delay were the last straw for his nerves, led him

immediately to his favourite corner of the church, that part of the

gallery closest to the carved roof and lit by the wonderful window with

the angel. The little Latin priest explored and admired everything

exhaustively, talking cheerfully but in a low voice all the time. When

in the course of his investigation he found the side exit and the

winding stair down which Wilfred had rushed to find his brother dead,

Father Brown ran not down but up, with the agility of a monkey, and his

clear voice came from an outer platform above.

"Come up here, Mr Bohun," he called. "The air will do you good."

Bohun followed him, and came out on a kind of stone gallery or balcony

outside the building, from which one could see the illimitable plain in

which their small hill stood, wooded away to the purple horizon and

dotted with villages and farms. Clear and square, but quite small

beneath them, was the blacksmith's yard, where the inspector still

stood taking notes and the corpse still lay like a smashed fly.

"Might be the map of the world, mightn't it?" said Father Brown.

"Yes," said Bohun very gravely, and nodded his head.

Immediately beneath and about them the lines of the Gothic building

plunged outwards into the void with a sickening swiftness akin to

suicide. There is that element of Titan energy in the architecture of

the Middle Ages that, from whatever aspect it be seen, it always seems

to be rushing away, like the strong back of some maddened horse. This

church was hewn out of ancient and silent stone, bearded with old

fungoids and stained with the nests of birds. And yet, when they saw it

from below, it sprang like a fountain at the stars; and when they saw

it, as now, from above, it poured like a cataract into a voiceless pit.

For these two men on the tower were left alone with the most terrible

aspect of the Gothic; the monstrous foreshortening and disproportion,

the dizzy perspectives, the glimpses of great things small and small

things great; a topsy-turvydom of stone in the mid-air. Details of

stone, enormous by their proximity, were relieved against a pattern of

fields and farms, pygmy in their distance. A carved bird or beast at a

corner seemed like some vast walking or flying dragon wasting the

pastures and villages below. The whole atmosphere was dizzy and

dangerous, as if men were upheld in air amid the gyrating wings of

colossal genii; and the whole of that old church, as tall and rich as a

cathedral, seemed to sit upon the sunlit country like a cloudburst.

"I think there is something rather dangerous about standing on these

high places even to pray," said Father Brown. "Heights were made to be

looked at, not to be looked from."

"Do you mean that one may fall over," asked Wilfred.

"I mean that one's soul may fall if one's body doesn't," said the other

priest.

"I scarcely understand you," remarked Bohun indistinctly.

"Look at that blacksmith, for instance," went on Father Brown calmly;

"a good man, but not a Christian--hard, imperious, unforgiving. Well,

his Scotch religion was made up by men who prayed on hills and high

crags, and learnt to look down on the world more than to look up at

heaven. Humility is the mother of giants. One sees great things from

the valley; only small things from the peak."

"But he--he didn't do it," said Bohun tremulously.

"No," said the other in an odd voice; "we know he didn't do it."

After a moment he resumed, looking tranquilly out over the plain with

his pale grey eyes. "I knew a man," he said, "who began by worshipping

with others before the altar, but who grew fond of high and lonely

places to pray from, corners or niches in the belfry or the spire. And

once in one of those dizzy places, where the whole world seemed to turn

under him like a wheel, his brain turned also, and he fancied he was

God. So that, though he was a good man, he committed a great crime."

Wilfred's face was turned away, but his bony hands turned blue and

white as they tightened on the parapet of stone.

"He thought it was given to him to judge the world and strike down the

sinner. He would never have had such a thought if he had been kneeling

with other men upon a floor. But he saw all men walking about like

insects. He saw one especially strutting just below him, insolent and

evident by a bright green hat--a poisonous insect."

Rooks cawed round the corners of the belfry; but there was no other

sound till Father Brown went on.

"This also tempted him, that he had in his hand one of the most awful

engines of nature; I mean gravitation, that mad and quickening rush by

which all earth's creatures fly back to her heart when released. See,

the inspector is strutting just below us in the smithy. If I were to

toss a pebble over this parapet it would be something like a bullet by

the time it struck him. If I were to drop a hammer--even a small

hammer--"

Wilfred Bohun threw one leg over the parapet, and Father Brown had him

in a minute by the collar.

"Not by that door," he said quite gently; "that door leads to hell."

Bohun staggered back against the wall, and stared at him with frightful

eyes.

"How do you know all this?" he cried. "Are you a devil?"

"I am a man," answered Father Brown gravely; "and therefore have all

devils in my heart. Listen to me," he said after a short pause. "I know

what you did--at least, I can guess the great part of it. When you left

your brother you were racked with no unrighteous rage, to the extent

even that you snatched up a small hammer, half inclined to kill him

with his foulness on his mouth. Recoiling, you thrust it under your

buttoned coat instead, and rushed into the church. You pray wildly in

many places, under the angel window, upon the platform above, and a

higher platform still, from which you could see the colonel's Eastern

hat like the back of a green beetle crawling about. Then something

snapped in your soul, and you let God's thunderbolt fall."

Wilfred put a weak hand to his head, and asked in a low voice: "How did

you know that his hat looked like a green beetle?"

"Oh, that," said the other with the shadow of a smile, "that was common

sense. But hear me further. I say I know all this; but no one else

shall know it. The next step is for you; I shall take no more steps; I

will seal this with the seal of confession. If you ask me why, there

are many reasons, and only one that concerns you. I leave things to you

because you have not yet gone very far wrong, as assassins go. You did

not help to fix the crime on the smith when it was easy; or on his

wife, when that was easy. You tried to fix it on the imbecile because

you knew that he could not suffer. That was one of the gleams that it

is my business to find in assassins. And now come down into the

village, and go your own way as free as the wind; for I have said my

last word."

They went down the winding stairs in utter silence, and came out into

the sunlight by the smithy. Wilfred Bohun carefully unlatched the

wooden gate of the yard, and going up to the inspector, said: "I wish

to give myself up; I have killed my brother."

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That singular smoky sparkle, at once a confusion and a transparency,

which is the strange secret of the Thames, was changing more and more

from its grey to its glittering extreme as the sun climbed to the

zenith over Westminster, and two men crossed Westminster Bridge. One

man was very tall and the other very short; they might even have been

fantastically compared to the arrogant clock-tower of Parliament and

the humbler humped shoulders of the Abbey, for the short man was in

clerical dress. The official description of the tall man was M. Hercule

Flambeau, private detective, and he was going to his new offices in a

new pile of flats facing the Abbey entrance. The official description

of the short man was the Rev. J. Brown, attached to St Francis Xavier's

Church, Camberwell, and he was coming from a Camberwell death-bed to

see the new offices of his friend.

The building was American in its sky-scraping altitude, and American

also in the oiled elaboration of its machinery of telephones and lifts.

But it was barely finished and still understaffed; only three tenants

had moved in; the office just above Flambeau was occupied, as also was

the office just below him; the two floors above that and the three

floors below were entirely bare. But the first glance at the new tower

of flats caught something much more arresting. Save for a few relics of

scaffolding, the one glaring object was erected outside the office just

above Flambeau's. It was an enormous gilt effigy of the human eye,

surrounded with rays of gold, and taking up as much room as two or

three of the office windows.

"What on earth is that?" asked Father Brown, and stood still. "Oh, a

new religion," said Flambeau, laughing; "one of those new religions

that forgive your sins by saying you never had any. Rather like

Christian Science, I should think. The fact is that a fellow calling

himself Kalon (I don't know what his name is, except that it can't be

that) has taken the flat just above me. I have two lady typewriters

underneath me, and this enthusiastic old humbug on top. He calls

himself the New Priest of Apollo, and he worships the sun."

"Let him look out," said Father Brown. "The sun was the cruellest of

all the gods. But what does that monstrous eye mean?"

"As I understand it, it is a theory of theirs," answered Flambeau,

"that a man can endure anything if his mind is quite steady. Their two

great symbols are the sun and the open eye; for they say that if a man

were really healthy he could stare at the sun."

"If a man were really healthy," said Father Brown, "he would not bother

to stare at it."

"Well, that's all I can tell you about the new religion," went on

Flambeau carelessly. "It claims, of course, that it can cure all

physical diseases."

"Can it cure the one spiritual disease?" asked Father Brown, with a

serious curiosity.

"And what is the one spiritual disease?" asked Flambeau, smiling.

"Oh, thinking one is quite well," said his friend.

Flambeau was more interested in the quiet little office below him than

in the flamboyant temple above. He was a lucid Southerner, incapable of

conceiving himself as anything but a Catholic or an atheist; and new

religions of a bright and pallid sort were not much in his line. But

humanity was always in his line, especially when it was good-looking;

moreover, the ladies downstairs were characters in their way. The

office was kept by two sisters, both slight and dark, one of them tall

and striking. She had a dark, eager and aquiline profile, and was one

of those women whom one always thinks of in profile, as of the

clean-cut edge of some weapon. She seemed to cleave her way through

life. She had eyes of startling brilliancy, but it was the brilliancy

of steel rather than of diamonds; and her straight, slim figure was a

shade too stiff for its grace. Her younger sister was like her

shortened shadow, a little greyer, paler, and more insignificant. They

both wore a business-like black, with little masculine cuffs and

collars. There are thousands of such curt, strenuous ladies in the

offices of London, but the interest of these lay rather in their real

than their apparent position.

For Pauline Stacey, the elder, was actually the heiress of a crest and

half a county, as well as great wealth; she had been brought up in

castles and gardens, before a frigid fierceness (peculiar to the modern

woman) had driven her to what she considered a harsher and a higher

existence. She had not, indeed, surrendered her money; in that there

would have been a romantic or monkish abandon quite alien to her

masterful utilitarianism. She held her wealth, she would say, for use

upon practical social objects. Part of it she had put into her

business, the nucleus of a model typewriting emporium; part of it was

distributed in various leagues and causes for the advancement of such

work among women. How far Joan, her sister and partner, shared this

slightly prosaic idealism no one could be very sure. But she followed

her leader with a dog-like affection which was somehow more attractive,

with its touch of tragedy, than the hard, high spirits of the elder.

For Pauline Stacey had nothing to say to tragedy; she was understood to

deny its existence.

Her rigid rapidity and cold impatience had amused Flambeau very much on

the first occasion of his entering the flats. He had lingered outside

the lift in the entrance-hall waiting for the lift-boy, who generally

conducts strangers to the various floors. But this bright-eyed falcon

of a girl had openly refused to endure such official delay. She said

sharply that she knew all about the lift, and was not dependent on

boys--or men either. Though her flat was only three floors above, she

managed in the few seconds of ascent to give Flambeau a great many of

her fundamental views in an off-hand manner; they were to the general

effect that she was a modern working woman and loved modern working

machinery. Her bright black eyes blazed with abstract anger against

those who rebuke mechanic science and ask for the return of romance.

Everyone, she said, ought to be able to manage machines, just as she

could manage the lift. She seemed almost to resent the fact of Flambeau

opening the lift-door for her; and that gentleman went up to his own

apartments smiling with somewhat mingled feelings at the memory of such

spit-fire self-dependence.

She certainly had a temper, of a snappy, practical sort; the gestures

of her thin, elegant hands were abrupt or even destructive. Once

Flambeau entered her office on some typewriting business, and found she

had just flung a pair of spectacles belonging to her sister into the

middle of the floor and stamped on them. She was already in the rapids

of an ethical tirade about the "sickly medical notions" and the morbid

admission of weakness implied in such an apparatus. She dared her

sister to bring such artificial, unhealthy rubbish into the place

again. She asked if she was expected to wear wooden legs or false hair

or glass eyes; and as she spoke her eyes sparkled like the terrible

crystal.

Flambeau, quite bewildered with this fanaticism, could not refrain from

asking Miss Pauline (with direct French logic) why a pair of spectacles

was a more morbid sign of weakness than a lift, and why, if science

might help us in the one effort, it might not help us in the other.

"That is so different," said Pauline Stacey, loftily. "Batteries and

motors and all those things are marks of the force of man--yes, Mr

Flambeau, and the force of woman, too! We shall take our turn at these

great engines that devour distance and defy time. That is high and

splendid--that is really science. But these nasty props and plasters

the doctors sell--why, they are just badges of poltroonery. Doctors

stick on legs and arms as if we were born cripples and sick slaves. But

I was free-born, Mr Flambeau! People only think they need these things

because they have been trained in fear instead of being trained in

power and courage, just as the silly nurses tell children not to stare

at the sun, and so they can't do it without blinking. But why among the

stars should there be one star I may not see? The sun is not my master,

and I will open my eyes and stare at him whenever I choose."

"Your eyes," said Flambeau, with a foreign bow, "will dazzle the sun."

He took pleasure in complimenting this strange stiff beauty, partly

because it threw her a little off her balance. But as he went upstairs

to his floor he drew a deep breath and whistled, saying to himself: "So

she has got into the hands of that conjurer upstairs with his golden

eye." For, little as he knew or cared about the new religion of Kalon,

he had heard of his special notion about sun-gazing.

He soon discovered that the spiritual bond between the floors above and

below him was close and increasing. The man who called himself Kalon

was a magnificent creature, worthy, in a physical sense, to be the

pontiff of Apollo. He was nearly as tall even as Flambeau, and very

much better looking, with a golden beard, strong blue eyes, and a mane

flung back like a lion's. In structure he was the blonde beast of

Nietzsche, but all this animal beauty was heightened, brightened and

softened by genuine intellect and spirituality. If he looked like one

of the great Saxon kings, he looked like one of the kings that were

also saints. And this despite the cockney incongruity of his

surroundings; the fact that he had an office half-way up a building in

Victoria Street; that the clerk (a commonplace youth in cuffs and

collars) sat in the outer room, between him and the corridor; that his

name was on a brass plate, and the gilt emblem of his creed hung above

his street, like the advertisement of an oculist. All this vulgarity

could not take away from the man called Kalon the vivid oppression and

inspiration that came from his soul and body. When all was said, a man

in the presence of this quack did feel in the presence of a great man.

Even in the loose jacket-suit of linen that he wore as a workshop dress

in his office he was a fascinating and formidable figure; and when

robed in the white vestments and crowned with the golden circlet, in

which he daily saluted the sun, he really looked so splendid that the

laughter of the street people sometimes died suddenly on their lips.

For three times in the day the new sun-worshipper went out on his

little balcony, in the face of all Westminster, to say some litany to

his shining lord: once at daybreak, once at sunset, and once at the

shock of noon. And it was while the shock of noon still shook faintly

from the towers of Parliament and parish church that Father Brown, the

friend of Flambeau, first looked up and saw the white priest of Apollo.

Flambeau had seen quite enough of these daily salutations of Phoebus,

and plunged into the porch of the tall building without even looking

for his clerical friend to follow. But Father Brown, whether from a

professional interest in ritual or a strong individual interest in

tomfoolery, stopped and stared up at the balcony of the sun-worshipper,

just as he might have stopped and stared up at a Punch and Judy. Kalon

the Prophet was already erect, with argent garments and uplifted hands,

and the sound of his strangely penetrating voice could be heard all the

way down the busy street uttering his solar litany. He was already in

the middle of it; his eyes were fixed upon the flaming disc. It is

doubtful if he saw anything or anyone on this earth; it is

substantially certain that he did not see a stunted, round-faced priest

who, in the crowd below, looked up at him with blinking eyes. That was

perhaps the most startling difference between even these two

far-divided men. Father Brown could not look at anything without

blinking; but the priest of Apollo could look on the blaze at noon

without a quiver of the eyelid.

"O sun," cried the prophet, "O star that art too great to be allowed

among the stars! O fountain that flowest quietly in that secret spot

that is called space. White Father of all white unwearied things, white

flames and white flowers and white peaks. Father, who art more innocent

than all thy most innocent and quiet children; primal purity, into the

peace of which--"

A rush and crash like the reversed rush of a rocket was cloven with a

strident and incessant yelling. Five people rushed into the gate of the

mansions as three people rushed out, and for an instant they all

deafened each other. The sense of some utterly abrupt horror seemed for

a moment to fill half the street with bad news--bad news that was all

the worse because no one knew what it was. Two figures remained still

after the crash of commotion: the fair priest of Apollo on the balcony

above, and the ugly priest of Christ below him.

At last the tall figure and titanic energy of Flambeau appeared in the

doorway of the mansions and dominated the little mob. Talking at the

top of his voice like a fog-horn, he told somebody or anybody to go for

a surgeon; and as he turned back into the dark and thronged entrance

his friend Father Brown dipped in insignificantly after him. Even as he

ducked and dived through the crowd he could still hear the magnificent

melody and monotony of the solar priest still calling on the happy god

who is the friend of fountains and flowers.

Father Brown found Flambeau and some six other people standing round

the enclosed space into which the lift commonly descended. But the lift

had not descended. Something else had descended; something that ought

to have come by a lift.

For the last four minutes Flambeau had looked down on it; had seen the

brained and bleeding figure of that beautiful woman who denied the

existence of tragedy. He had never had the slightest doubt that it was

Pauline Stacey; and, though he had sent for a doctor, he had not the

slightest doubt that she was dead.

He could not remember for certain whether he had liked her or disliked

her; there was so much both to like and dislike. But she had been a

person to him, and the unbearable pathos of details and habit stabbed

him with all the small daggers of bereavement. He remembered her pretty

face and priggish speeches with a sudden secret vividness which is all

the bitterness of death. In an instant like a bolt from the blue, like

a thunderbolt from nowhere, that beautiful and defiant body had been

dashed down the open well of the lift to death at the bottom. Was it

suicide? With so insolent an optimist it seemed impossible. Was it

murder? But who was there in those hardly-inhabited flats to murder

anybody? In a rush of raucous words, which he meant to be strong and

suddenly found weak, he asked where was that fellow Kalon. A voice,

habitually heavy, quiet and full, assured him that Kalon for the last

fifteen minutes had been away up on his balcony worshipping his god.

When Flambeau heard the voice, and felt the hand of Father Brown, he

turned his swarthy face and said abruptly:

"Then, if he has been up there all the time, who can have done it?"

"Perhaps," said the other, "we might go upstairs and find out. We have

half an hour before the police will move."

Leaving the body of the slain heiress in charge of the surgeons,

Flambeau dashed up the stairs to the typewriting office, found it

utterly empty, and then dashed up to his own. Having entered that, he

abruptly returned with a new and white face to his friend.

"Her sister," he said, with an unpleasant seriousness, "her sister

seems to have gone out for a walk."

Father Brown nodded. "Or, she may have gone up to the office of that

sun man," he said. "If I were you I should just verify that, and then

let us all talk it over in your office. No," he added suddenly, as if

remembering something, "shall I ever get over that stupidity of mine?

Of course, in their office downstairs."

Flambeau stared; but he followed the little father downstairs to the

empty flat of the Staceys, where that impenetrable pastor took a large

red-leather chair in the very entrance, from which he could see the

stairs and landings, and waited. He did not wait very long. In about

four minutes three figures descended the stairs, alike only in their

solemnity. The first was Joan Stacey, the sister of the dead

woman--evidently she had been upstairs in the temporary temple of

Apollo; the second was the priest of Apollo himself, his litany

finished, sweeping down the empty stairs in utter

magnificence--something in his white robes, beard and parted hair had

the look of Dor�'s Christ leaving the Pretorium; the third was

Flambeau, black browed and somewhat bewildered.

Miss Joan Stacey, dark, with a drawn face and hair prematurely touched

with grey, walked straight to her own desk and set out her papers with

a practical flap. The mere action rallied everyone else to sanity. If

Miss Joan Stacey was a criminal, she was a cool one. Father Brown

regarded her for some time with an odd little smile, and then, without

taking his eyes off her, addressed himself to somebody else.

"Prophet," he said, presumably addressing Kalon, "I wish you would tell

me a lot about your religion."

"I shall be proud to do it," said Kalon, inclining his still crowned

head, "but I am not sure that I understand."

"Why, it's like this," said Father Brown, in his frankly doubtful way:

"We are taught that if a man has really bad first principles, that must

be partly his fault. But, for all that, we can make some difference

between a man who insults his quite clear conscience and a man with a

conscience more or less clouded with sophistries. Now, do you really

think that murder is wrong at all?"

"Is this an accusation?" asked Kalon very quietly.

"No," answered Brown, equally gently, "it is the speech for the

defence."

In the long and startled stillness of the room the prophet of Apollo

slowly rose; and really it was like the rising of the sun. He filled

that room with his light and life in such a manner that a man felt he

could as easily have filled Salisbury Plain. His robed form seemed to

hang the whole room with classic draperies; his epic gesture seemed to

extend it into grander perspectives, till the little black figure of

the modern cleric seemed to be a fault and an intrusion, a round, black

blot upon some splendour of Hellas.

"We meet at last, Caiaphas," said the prophet. "Your church and mine

are the only realities on this earth. I adore the sun, and you the

darkening of the sun; you are the priest of the dying and I of the

living God. Your present work of suspicion and slander is worthy of

your coat and creed. All your church is but a black police; you are

only spies and detectives seeking to tear from men confessions of

guilt, whether by treachery or torture. You would convict men of crime,

I would convict them of innocence. You would convince them of sin, I

would convince them of virtue.

"Reader of the books of evil, one more word before I blow away your

baseless nightmares for ever. Not even faintly could you understand how

little I care whether you can convict me or no. The things you call

disgrace and horrible hanging are to me no more than an ogre in a

child's toybook to a man once grown up. You said you were offering the

speech for the defence. I care so little for the cloud-land of this

life that I will offer you the speech for the prosecution. There is but

one thing that can be said against me in this matter, and I will say it

myself. The woman that is dead was my love and my bride; not after such

manner as your tin chapels call lawful, but by a law purer and sterner

than you will ever understand. She and I walked another world from

yours, and trod palaces of crystal while you were plodding through

tunnels and corridors of brick. Well, I know that policemen,

theological and otherwise, always fancy that where there has been love

there must soon be hatred; so there you have the first point made for

the prosecution. But the second point is stronger; I do not grudge it

you. Not only is it true that Pauline loved me, but it is also true

that this very morning, before she died, she wrote at that table a will

leaving me and my new church half a million. Come, where are the

handcuffs? Do you suppose I care what foolish things you do with me?

Penal servitude will only be like waiting for her at a wayside station.

The gallows will only be going to her in a headlong car."

He spoke with the brain-shaking authority of an orator, and Flambeau

and Joan Stacey stared at him in amazed admiration. Father Brown's face

seemed to express nothing but extreme distress; he looked at the ground

with one wrinkle of pain across his forehead. The prophet of the sun

leaned easily against the mantelpiece and resumed:

"In a few words I have put before you the whole case against me--the

only possible case against me. In fewer words still I will blow it to

pieces, so that not a trace of it remains. As to whether I have

committed this crime, the truth is in one sentence: I could not have

committed this crime. Pauline Stacey fell from this floor to the ground

at five minutes past twelve. A hundred people will go into the

witness-box and say that I was standing out upon the balcony of my own

rooms above from just before the stroke of noon to a quarter-past--the

usual period of my public prayers. My clerk (a respectable youth from

Clapham, with no sort of connection with me) will swear that he sat in

my outer office all the morning, and that no communication passed

through. He will swear that I arrived a full ten minutes before the

hour, fifteen minutes before any whisper of the accident, and that I

did not leave the office or the balcony all that time. No one ever had

so complete an alibi; I could subpoena half Westminster. I think you

had better put the handcuffs away again. The case is at an end.

"But last of all, that no breath of this idiotic suspicion remain in

the air, I will tell you all you want to know. I believe I do know how

my unhappy friend came by her death. You can, if you choose, blame me

for it, or my faith and philosophy at least; but you certainly cannot

lock me up. It is well known to all students of the higher truths that

certain adepts and illuminati have in history attained the power of

levitation--that is, of being self-sustained upon the empty air. It is

but a part of that general conquest of matter which is the main element

in our occult wisdom. Poor Pauline was of an impulsive and ambitious

temper. I think, to tell the truth, she thought herself somewhat deeper

in the mysteries than she was; and she has often said to me, as we went

down in the lift together, that if one's will were strong enough, one

could float down as harmlessly as a feather. I solemnly believe that in

some ecstasy of noble thoughts she attempted the miracle. Her will, or

faith, must have failed her at the crucial instant, and the lower law

of matter had its horrible revenge. There is the whole story,

gentlemen, very sad and, as you think, very presumptuous and wicked,

but certainly not criminal or in any way connected with me. In the

short-hand of the police-courts, you had better call it suicide. I

shall always call it heroic failure for the advance of science and the

slow scaling of heaven."

It was the first time Flambeau had ever seen Father Brown vanquished.

He still sat looking at the ground, with a painful and corrugated brow,

as if in shame. It was impossible to avoid the feeling which the

prophet's winged words had fanned, that here was a sullen, professional

suspecter of men overwhelmed by a prouder and purer spirit of natural

liberty and health. At last he said, blinking as if in bodily distress:

"Well, if that is so, sir, you need do no more than take the

testamentary paper you spoke of and go. I wonder where the poor lady

left it."

"It will be over there on her desk by the door, I think," said Kalon,

with that massive innocence of manner that seemed to acquit him wholly.

"She told me specially she would write it this morning, and I actually

saw her writing as I went up in the lift to my own room."

"Was her door open then?" asked the priest, with his eye on the corner

of the matting.

"Yes," said Kalon calmly.

"Ah! it has been open ever since," said the other, and resumed his

silent study of the mat.

"There is a paper over here," said the grim Miss Joan, in a somewhat

singular voice. She had passed over to her sister's desk by the

doorway, and was holding a sheet of blue foolscap in her hand. There

was a sour smile on her face that seemed unfit for such a scene or

occasion, and Flambeau looked at her with a darkening brow.

Kalon the prophet stood away from the paper with that loyal

unconsciousness that had carried him through. But Flambeau took it out

of the lady's hand, and read it with the utmost amazement. It did,

indeed, begin in the formal manner of a will, but after the words "I

give and bequeath all of which I die possessed" the writing abruptly

stopped with a set of scratches, and there was no trace of the name of

any legatee. Flambeau, in wonder, handed this truncated testament to

his clerical friend, who glanced at it and silently gave it to the

priest of the sun.

An instant afterwards that pontiff, in his splendid sweeping draperies,

had crossed the room in two great strides, and was towering over Joan

Stacey, his blue eyes standing from his head.

"What monkey tricks have you been playing here?" he cried. "That's not

all Pauline wrote."

They were startled to hear him speak in quite a new voice, with a

Yankee shrillness in it; all his grandeur and good English had fallen

from him like a cloak.

"That is the only thing on her desk," said Joan, and confronted him

steadily with the same smile of evil favour.

Of a sudden the man broke out into blasphemies and cataracts of

incredulous words. There was something shocking about the dropping of

his mask; it was like a man's real face falling off.

"See here!" he cried in broad American, when he was breathless with

cursing, "I may be an adventurer, but I guess you're a murderess. Yes,

gentlemen, here's your death explained, and without any levitation. The

poor girl is writing a will in my favour; her cursed sister comes in,

struggles for the pen, drags her to the well, and throws her down

before she can finish it. Sakes! I reckon we want the handcuffs after

all."

"As you have truly remarked," replied Joan, with ugly calm, "your clerk

is a very respectable young man, who knows the nature of an oath; and

he will swear in any court that I was up in your office arranging some

typewriting work for five minutes before and five minutes after my

sister fell. Mr Flambeau will tell you that he found me there."

There was a silence.

"Why, then," cried Flambeau, "Pauline was alone when she fell, and it

was suicide!"

"She was alone when she fell," said Father Brown, "but it was not

suicide."

"Then how did she die?" asked Flambeau impatiently.

"She was murdered."

"But she was alone," objected the detective.

"She was murdered when she was all alone," answered the priest.

All the rest stared at him, but he remained sitting in the same old

dejected attitude, with a wrinkle in his round forehead and an

appearance of impersonal shame and sorrow; his voice was colourless and

sad.

"What I want to know," cried Kalon, with an oath, "is when the police

are coming for this bloody and wicked sister. She's killed her flesh

and blood; she's robbed me of half a million that was just as sacredly

mine as--"

"Come, come, prophet," interrupted Flambeau, with a kind of sneer;

"remember that all this world is a cloudbank."

The hierophant of the sun-god made an effort to climb back on his

pedestal. "It is not the mere money," he cried, "though that would

equip the cause throughout the world. It is also my beloved one's

wishes. To Pauline all this was holy. In Pauline's eyes--"

Father Brown suddenly sprang erect, so that his chair fell over flat

behind him. He was deathly pale, yet he seemed fired with a hope; his

eyes shone.

"That's it!" he cried in a clear voice. "That's the way to begin. In

Pauline's eyes--"

The tall prophet retreated before the tiny priest in an almost mad

disorder. "What do you mean? How dare you?" he cried repeatedly.

"In Pauline's eyes," repeated the priest, his own shining more and

more. "Go on--in God's name, go on. The foulest crime the fiends ever

prompted feels lighter after confession; and I implore you to confess.

Go on, go on--in Pauline's eyes--"

"Let me go, you devil!" thundered Kalon, struggling like a giant in

bonds. "Who are you, you cursed spy, to weave your spiders' webs round

me, and peep and peer? Let me go."

"Shall I stop him?" asked Flambeau, bounding towards the exit, for

Kalon had already thrown the door wide open.

"No; let him pass," said Father Brown, with a strange deep sigh that

seemed to come from the depths of the universe. "Let Cain pass by, for

he belongs to God"

There was a long-drawn silence in the room when he had left it, which

was to Flambeau's fierce wits one long agony of interrogation. Miss

Joan Stacey very coolly tidied up the papers on her desk.

"Father," said Flambeau at last, "it is my duty, not my curiosity

only--it is my duty to find out, if I can, who committed the crime."

"Which crime?" asked Father Brown.

"The one we are dealing with, of course," replied his impatient friend.

"We are dealing with two crimes," said Brown, "crimes of very different

weight--and by very different criminals."

Miss Joan Stacey, having collected and put away her papers, proceeded

to lock up her drawer. Father Brown went on, noticing her as little as

she noticed him.

"The two crimes," he observed, "were committed against the same

weakness of the same person, in a struggle for her money. The author of

the larger crime found himself thwarted by the smaller crime; the

author of the smaller crime got the money."

"Oh, don't go on like a lecturer," groaned Flambeau; "put it in a few

words."

"I can put it in one word," answered his friend.

Miss Joan Stacey skewered her business-like black hat on to her head

with a business-like black frown before a little mirror, and, as the

conversation proceeded, took her handbag and umbrella in an unhurried

style, and left the room.

"The truth is one word, and a short one," said Father Brown. "Pauline

Stacey was blind."

"Blind!" repeated Flambeau, and rose slowly to his whole huge stature.

"She was subject to it by blood," Brown proceeded. "Her sister would

have started eyeglasses if Pauline would have let her; but it was her

special philosophy or fad that one must not encourage such diseases by

yielding to them. She would not admit the cloud; or she tried to dispel

it by will. So her eyes got worse and worse with straining; but the

worst strain was to come. It came with this precious prophet, or

whatever he calls himself, who taught her to stare at the hot sun with

the naked eye. It was called accepting Apollo. Oh, if these new pagans

would only be old pagans, they would be a little wiser! The old pagans

knew that mere naked Nature-worship must have a cruel side. They knew

that the eye of Apollo can blast and blind."

There was a pause, and the priest went on in a gentle and even broken

voice. "Whether or no that devil deliberately made her blind, there is

no doubt that he deliberately killed her through her blindness. The

very simplicity of the crime is sickening. You know he and she went up

and down in those lifts without official help; you know also how

smoothly and silently the lifts slide. Kalon brought the lift to the

girl's landing, and saw her, through the open door, writing in her

slow, sightless way the will she had promised him. He called out to her

cheerily that he had the lift ready for her, and she was to come out

when she was ready. Then he pressed a button and shot soundlessly up to

his own floor, walked through his own office, out on to his own

balcony, and was safely praying before the crowded street when the poor

girl, having finished her work, ran gaily out to where lover and lift

were to receive her, and stepped--"

"Don't!" cried Flambeau.

"He ought to have got half a million by pressing that button,"

continued the little father, in the colourless voice in which he talked

of such horrors. "But that went smash. It went smash because there

happened to be another person who also wanted the money, and who also

knew the secret about poor Pauline's sight. There was one thing about

that will that I think nobody noticed: although it was unfinished and

without signature, the other Miss Stacey and some servant of hers had

already signed it as witnesses. Joan had signed first, saying Pauline

could finish it later, with a typical feminine contempt for legal

forms. Therefore, Joan wanted her sister to sign the will without real

witnesses. Why? I thought of the blindness, and felt sure she had

wanted Pauline to sign in solitude because she had wanted her not to

sign at all.

"People like the Staceys always use fountain pens; but this was

specially natural to Pauline. By habit and her strong will and memory

she could still write almost as well as if she saw; but she could not

tell when her pen needed dipping. Therefore, her fountain pens were

carefully filled by her sister--all except this fountain pen. This was

carefully not filled by her sister; the remains of the ink held out for

a few lines and then failed altogether. And the prophet lost five

hundred thousand pounds and committed one of the most brutal and

brilliant murders in human history for nothing."

Flambeau went to the open door and heard the official police ascending

the stairs. He turned and said: "You must have followed everything

devilish close to have traced the crime to Kalon in ten minutes."

Father Brown gave a sort of start.

"Oh! to him," he said. "No; I had to follow rather close to find out

about Miss Joan and the fountain pen. But I knew Kalon was the criminal

before I came into the front door."

"You must be joking!" cried Flambeau.

"I'm quite serious," answered the priest. "I tell you I knew he had

done it, even before I knew what he had done."

"But why?"

"These pagan stoics," said Brown reflectively, "always fail by their

strength. There came a crash and a scream down the street, and the

priest of Apollo did not start or look round. I did not know what it

was. But I knew that he was expecting it."

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The thousand arms of the forest were grey, and its million fingers

silver. In a sky of dark green-blue like slate the stars were bleak and

brilliant like splintered ice. All that thickly wooded and sparsely

tenanted countryside was stiff with a bitter and brittle frost. The

black hollows between the trunks of the trees looked like bottomless,

black caverns of that Scandinavian hell, a hell of incalculable cold.

Even the square stone tower of the church looked northern to the point

of heathenry, as if it were some barbaric tower among the sea rocks of

Iceland. It was a queer night for anyone to explore a churchyard. But,

on the other hand, perhaps it was worth exploring.

It rose abruptly out of the ashen wastes of forest in a sort of hump or

shoulder of green turf that looked grey in the starlight. Most of the

graves were on a slant, and the path leading up to the church was as

steep as a staircase. On the top of the hill, in the one flat and

prominent place, was the monument for which the place was famous. It

contrasted strangely with the featureless graves all round, for it was

the work of one of the greatest sculptors of modern Europe; and yet his

fame was at once forgotten in the fame of the man whose image he had

made. It showed, by touches of the small silver pencil of starlight,

the massive metal figure of a soldier recumbent, the strong hands

sealed in an everlasting worship, the great head pillowed upon a gun.

The venerable face was bearded, or rather whiskered, in the old, heavy

Colonel Newcome fashion. The uniform, though suggested with the few

strokes of simplicity, was that of modern war. By his right side lay a

sword, of which the tip was broken off; on the left side lay a Bible.

On glowing summer afternoons wagonettes came full of Americans and

cultured suburbans to see the sepulchre; but even then they felt the

vast forest land with its one dumpy dome of churchyard and church as a

place oddly dumb and neglected. In this freezing darkness of mid-winter

one would think he might be left alone with the stars. Nevertheless, in

the stillness of those stiff woods a wooden gate creaked, and two dim

figures dressed in black climbed up the little path to the tomb.

So faint was that frigid starlight that nothing could have been traced

about them except that while they both wore black, one man was

enormously big, and the other (perhaps by contrast) almost startlingly

small. They went up to the great graven tomb of the historic warrior,

and stood for a few minutes staring at it. There was no human, perhaps

no living, thing for a wide circle; and a morbid fancy might well have

wondered if they were human themselves. In any case, the beginning of

their conversation might have seemed strange. After the first silence

the small man said to the other:

"Where does a wise man hide a pebble?"

And the tall man answered in a low voice: "On the beach."

The small man nodded, and after a short silence said: "Where does a

wise man hide a leaf?"

And the other answered: "In the forest."

There was another stillness, and then the tall man resumed: "Do you

mean that when a wise man has to hide a real diamond he has been known

to hide it among sham ones?"

"No, no," said the little man with a laugh, "we will let bygones be

bygones."

He stamped his cold feet for a second or two, and then said: "I'm not

thinking of that at all, but of something else; something rather

peculiar. Just strike a match, will you?"

The big man fumbled in his pocket, and soon a scratch and a flare

painted gold the whole flat side of the monument. On it was cut in

black letters the well-known words which so many Americans had

reverently read: "Sacred to the Memory of General Sir Arthur St Clare,

Hero and Martyr, who Always Vanquished his Enemies and Always Spared

Them, and Was Treacherously Slain by Them at Last. May God in Whom he

Trusted both Reward and Revenge him."

The match burnt the big man's fingers, blackened, and dropped. He was

about to strike another, but his small companion stopped him. "That's

all right, Flambeau, old man; I saw what I wanted. Or, rather, I didn't

see what I didn't want. And now we must walk a mile and a half along

the road to the next inn, and I will try to tell you all about it. For

Heaven knows a man should have a fire and ale when he dares tell such a

story."

They descended the precipitous path, they re-latched the rusty gate,

and set off at a stamping, ringing walk down the frozen forest road.

They had gone a full quarter of a mile before the smaller man spoke

again. He said: "Yes; the wise man hides a pebble on the beach. But

what does he do if there is no beach? Do you know anything of that

great St Clare trouble?"

"I know nothing about English generals, Father Brown," answered the

large man, laughing, "though a little about English policemen. I only

know that you have dragged me a precious long dance to all the shrines

of this fellow, whoever he is. One would think he got buried in six

different places. I've seen a memorial to General St Clare in

Westminster Abbey. I've seen a ramping equestrian statue of General St

Clare on the Embankment. I've seen a medallion of St Clare in the

street he was born in, and another in the street he lived in; and now

you drag me after dark to his coffin in the village churchyard. I am

beginning to be a bit tired of his magnificent personality, especially

as I don't in the least know who he was. What are you hunting for in

all these crypts and effigies?"

"I am only looking for one word," said Father Brown. "A word that isn't

there."

"Well," asked Flambeau; "are you going to tell me anything about it?"

"I must divide it into two parts," remarked the priest. "First there is

what everybody knows; and then there is what I know. Now, what

everybody knows is short and plain enough. It is also entirely wrong."

"Right you are," said the big man called Flambeau cheerfully. "Let's

begin at the wrong end. Let's begin with what everybody knows, which

isn't true."

"If not wholly untrue, it is at least very inadequate," continued

Brown; "for in point of fact, all that the public knows amounts

precisely to this: The public knows that Arthur St Clare was a great

and successful English general. It knows that after splendid yet

careful campaigns both in India and Africa he was in command against

Brazil when the great Brazilian patriot Olivier issued his ultimatum.

It knows that on that occasion St Clare with a very small force

attacked Olivier with a very large one, and was captured after heroic

resistance. And it knows that after his capture, and to the abhorrence

of the civilised world, St Clare was hanged on the nearest tree. He was

found swinging there after the Brazilians had retired, with his broken

sword hung round his neck."

"And that popular story is untrue?" suggested Flambeau.

"No," said his friend quietly, "that story is quite true, so far as it

goes."

"Well, I think it goes far enough!" said Flambeau; "but if the popular

story is true, what is the mystery?"

They had passed many hundreds of grey and ghostly trees before the

little priest answered. Then he bit his finger reflectively and said:

"Why, the mystery is a mystery of psychology. Or, rather, it is a

mystery of two psychologies. In that Brazilian business two of the most

famous men of modern history acted flat against their characters. Mind

you, Olivier and St Clare were both heroes--the old thing, and no

mistake; it was like the fight between Hector and Achilles. Now, what

would you say to an affair in which Achilles was timid and Hector was

treacherous?"

"Go on," said the large man impatiently as the other bit his finger

again.

"Sir Arthur St Clare was a soldier of the old religious type--the type

that saved us during the Mutiny," continued Brown. "He was always more

for duty than for dash; and with all his personal courage was decidedly

a prudent commander, particularly indignant at any needless waste of

soldiers. Yet in this last battle he attempted something that a baby

could see was absurd. One need not be a strategist to see it was as

wild as wind; just as one need not be a strategist to keep out of the

way of a motor-bus. Well, that is the first mystery; what had become of

the English general's head? The second riddle is, what had become of

the Brazilian general's heart? President Olivier might be called a

visionary or a nuisance; but even his enemies admitted that he was

magnanimous to the point of knight errantry. Almost every other

prisoner he had ever captured had been set free or even loaded with

benefits. Men who had really wronged him came away touched by his

simplicity and sweetness. Why the deuce should he diabolically revenge

himself only once in his life; and that for the one particular blow

that could not have hurt him? Well, there you have it. One of the

wisest men in the world acted like an idiot for no reason. One of the

best men in the world acted like a fiend for no reason. That's the long

and the short of it; and I leave it to you, my boy."

"No, you don't," said the other with a snort. "I leave it to you; and

you jolly well tell me all about it."

"Well," resumed Father Brown, "it's not fair to say that the public

impression is just what I've said, without adding that two things have

happened since. I can't say they threw a new light; for nobody can make

sense of them. But they threw a new kind of darkness; they threw the

darkness in new directions. The first was this. The family physician of

the St Clares quarrelled with that family, and began publishing a

violent series of articles, in which he said that the late general was

a religious maniac; but as far as the tale went, this seemed to mean

little more than a religious man. Anyhow, the story fizzled out.

Everyone knew, of course, that St Clare had some of the eccentricities

of puritan piety. The second incident was much more arresting. In the

luckless and unsupported regiment which made that rash attempt at the

Black River there was a certain Captain Keith, who was at that time

engaged to St Clare's daughter, and who afterwards married her. He was

one of those who were captured by Olivier, and, like all the rest

except the general, appears to have been bounteously treated and

promptly set free. Some twenty years afterwards this man, then

Lieutenant-Colonel Keith, published a sort of autobiography called A

British Officer in Burmah and Brazil. In the place where the reader

looks eagerly for some account of the mystery of St Clare's disaster

may be found the following words: `Everywhere else in this book I have

narrated things exactly as they occurred, holding as I do the

old-fashioned opinion that the glory of England is old enough to take

care of itself. The exception I shall make is in this matter of the

defeat by the Black River; and my reasons, though private, are

honourable and compelling. I will, however, add this in justice to the

memories of two distinguished men. General St Clare has been accused of

incapacity on this occasion; I can at least testify that this action,

properly understood, was one of the most brilliant and sagacious of his

life. President Olivier by similar report is charged with savage

injustice. I think it due to the honour of an enemy to say that he

acted on this occasion with even more than his characteristic good

feeling. To put the matter popularly, I can assure my countrymen that

St Clare was by no means such a fool nor Olivier such a brute as he

looked. This is all I have to say; nor shall any earthly consideration

induce me to add a word.'"

A large frozen moon like a lustrous snowball began to show through the

tangle of twigs in front of them, and by its light the narrator had

been able to refresh his memory of Captain Keith's text from a scrap of

printed paper. As he folded it up and put it back in his pocket

Flambeau threw up his hand with a French gesture.

"Wait a bit, wait a bit," he cried excitedly. "I believe I can guess it

at the first go."

He strode on, breathing hard, his black head and bull neck forward,

like a man winning a walking race. The little priest, amused and

interested, had some trouble in trotting beside him. Just before them

the trees fell back a little to left and right, and the road swept

downwards across a clear, moonlit valley, till it dived again like a

rabbit into the wall of another wood. The entrance to the farther

forest looked small and round, like the black hole of a remote railway

tunnel. But it was within some hundred yards, and gaped like a cavern

before Flambeau spoke again.

"I've got it," he cried at last, slapping his thigh with his great

hand. "Four minutes' thinking, and I can tell your whole story myself."

"All right," assented his friend. "You tell it."

Flambeau lifted his head, but lowered his voice. "General Sir Arthur St

Clare," he said, "came of a family in which madness was hereditary; and

his whole aim was to keep this from his daughter, and even, if

possible, from his future son-in-law. Rightly or wrongly, he thought

the final collapse was close, and resolved on suicide. Yet ordinary

suicide would blazon the very idea he dreaded. As the campaign

approached the clouds came thicker on his brain; and at last in a mad

moment he sacrificed his public duty to his private. He rushed rashly

into battle, hoping to fall by the first shot. When he found that he

had only attained capture and discredit, the sealed bomb in his brain

burst, and he broke his own sword and hanged himself."

He stared firmly at the grey fa�ade of forest in front of him, with the

one black gap in it, like the mouth of the grave, into which their path

plunged. Perhaps something menacing in the road thus suddenly swallowed

reinforced his vivid vision of the tragedy, for he shuddered.

"A horrid story," he said.

"A horrid story," repeated the priest with bent head. "But not the real

story."

Then he threw back his head with a sort of despair and cried: "Oh, I

wish it had been."

The tall Flambeau faced round and stared at him.

"Yours is a clean story," cried Father Brown, deeply moved. "A sweet,

pure, honest story, as open and white as that moon. Madness and despair

are innocent enough. There are worse things, Flambeau."

Flambeau looked up wildly at the moon thus invoked; and from where he

stood one black tree-bough curved across it exactly like a devil's

horn.

"Father--father," cried Flambeau with the French gesture and stepping

yet more rapidly forward, "do you mean it was worse than that?"

"Worse than that," said the other like a grave echo. And they plunged

into the black cloister of the woodland, which ran by them in a dim

tapestry of trunks, like one of the dark corridors in a dream.

They were soon in the most secret entrails of the wood, and felt close

about them foliage that they could not see, when the priest said again:

"Where does a wise man hide a leaf? In the forest. But what does he do

if there is no forest?"

"Well, well," cried Flambeau irritably, "what does he do?"

"He grows a forest to hide it in," said the priest in an obscure voice.

"A fearful sin."

"Look here," cried his friend impatiently, for the dark wood and the

dark saying got a little on his nerves; will you tell me this story or

not? What other evidence is there to go on?"

"There are three more bits of evidence," said the other, "that I have

dug up in holes and corners; and I will give them in logical rather

than chronological order. First of all, of course, our authority for

the issue and event of the battle is in Olivier's own dispatches, which

are lucid enough. He was entrenched with two or three regiments on the

heights that swept down to the Black River, on the other side of which

was lower and more marshy ground. Beyond this again was gently rising

country, on which was the first English outpost, supported by others

which lay, however, considerably in its rear. The British forces as a

whole were greatly superior in numbers; but this particular regiment

was just far enough from its base to make Olivier consider the project

of crossing the river to cut it off. By sunset, however, he had decided

to retain his own position, which was a specially strong one. At

daybreak next morning he was thunderstruck to see that this stray

handful of English, entirely unsupported from their rear, had flung

themselves across the river, half by a bridge to the right, and the

other half by a ford higher up, and were massed upon the marshy bank

below him.

"That they should attempt an attack with such numbers against such a

position was incredible enough; but Olivier noticed something yet more

extraordinary. For instead of attempting to seize more solid ground,

this mad regiment, having put the river in its rear by one wild charge,

did nothing more, but stuck there in the mire like flies in treacle.

Needless to say, the Brazilians blew great gaps in them with artillery,

which they could only return with spirited but lessening rifle fire.

Yet they never broke; and Olivier's curt account ends with a strong

tribute of admiration for the mystic valour of these imbeciles. `Our

line then advanced finally,' writes Olivier, `and drove them into the

river; we captured General St Clare himself and several other officers.

The colonel and the major had both fallen in the battle. I cannot

resist saying that few finer sights can have been seen in history than

the last stand of this extraordinary regiment; wounded officers picking

up the rifles of dead soldiers, and the general himself facing us on

horseback bare-headed and with a broken sword.' On what happened to the

general afterwards Olivier is as silent as Captain Keith."

"Well," grunted Flambeau, "get on to the next bit of evidence."

"The next evidence," said Father Brown, "took some time to find, but it

will not take long to tell. I found at last in an almshouse down in the

Lincolnshire Fens, an old soldier who not only was wounded at the Black

River, but had actually knelt beside the colonel of the regiment when

he died. This latter was a certain Colonel Clancy, a big bull of an

Irishman; and it would seem that he died almost as much of rage as of

bullets. He, at any rate, was not responsible for that ridiculous raid;

it must have been imposed on him by the general. His last edifying

words, according to my informant, were these: `And there goes the

damned old donkey with the end of his sword knocked off. I wish it was

his head.' You will remark that everyone seems to have noticed this

detail about the broken sword blade, though most people regard it

somewhat more reverently than did the late Colonel Clancy. And now for

the third fragment."

Their path through the woodland began to go upward, and the speaker

paused a little for breath before he went on. Then he continued in the

same business-like tone:

"Only a month or two ago a certain Brazilian official died in England,

having quarrelled with Olivier and left his country. He was a

well-known figure both here and on the Continent, a Spaniard named

Espado; I knew him myself, a yellow-faced old dandy, with a hooked

nose. For various private reasons I had permission to see the documents

he had left; he was a Catholic, of course, and I had been with him

towards the end. There was nothing of his that lit up any corner of the

black St Clare business, except five or six common exercise books

filled with the diary of some English soldier. I can only suppose that

it was found by the Brazilians on one of those that fell. Anyhow, it

stopped abruptly the night before the battle.

"But the account of that last day in the poor fellow's life was

certainly worth reading. I have it on me; but it's too dark to read it

here, and I will give you a r�sum�. The first part of that entry is

full of jokes, evidently flung about among the men, about somebody

called the Vulture. It does not seem as if this person, whoever he was,

was one of themselves, nor even an Englishman; neither is he exactly

spoken of as one of the enemy. It sounds rather as if he were some

local go-between and non-combatant; perhaps a guide or a journalist. He

has been closeted with old Colonel Clancy; but is more often seen

talking to the major. Indeed, the major is somewhat prominent in this

soldier's narrative; a lean, dark-haired man, apparently, of the name

of Murray--a north of Ireland man and a Puritan. There are continual

jests about the contrast between this Ulsterman's austerity and the

conviviality of Colonel Clancy. There is also some joke about the

Vulture wearing bright-coloured clothes.

"But all these levities are scattered by what may well be called the

note of a bugle. Behind the English camp and almost parallel to the

river ran one of the few great roads of that district. Westward the

road curved round towards the river, which it crossed by the bridge

before mentioned. To the east the road swept backwards into the wilds,

and some two miles along it was the next English outpost. From this

direction there came along the road that evening a glitter and clatter

of light cavalry, in which even the simple diarist could recognise with

astonishment the general with his staff. He rode the great white horse

which you have seen so often in illustrated papers and Academy

pictures; and you may be sure that the salute they gave him was not

merely ceremonial. He, at least, wasted no time on ceremony, but,

springing from the saddle immediately, mixed with the group of

officers, and fell into emphatic though confidential speech. What

struck our friend the diarist most was his special disposition to

discuss matters with Major Murray; but, indeed, such a selection, so

long as it was not marked, was in no way unnatural. The two men were

made for sympathy; they were men who `read their Bibles'; they were

both the old Evangelical type of officer. However this may be, it is

certain that when the general mounted again he was still talking

earnestly to Murray; and that as he walked his horse slowly down the

road towards the river, the tall Ulsterman still walked by his

bridle-rein in earnest debate. The soldiers watched the two until they

vanished behind a clump of trees where the road turned towards the

river. The colonel had gone back to his tent, and the men to their

pickets; the man with the diary lingered for another four minutes, and

saw a marvellous sight.

"The great white horse which had marched slowly down the road, as it

had marched in so many processions, flew back, galloping up the road

towards them as if it were mad to win a race. At first they thought it

had run away with the man on its back; but they soon saw that the

general, a fine rider, was himself urging it to full speed. Horse and

man swept up to them like a whirlwind; and then, reining up the reeling

charger, the general turned on them a face like flame, and called for

the colonel like the trumpet that wakes the dead.

"I conceive that all the earthquake events of that catastrophe tumbled

on top of each other rather like lumber in the minds of men such as our

friend with the diary. With the dazed excitement of a dream, they found

themselves falling--literally falling--into their ranks, and learned

that an attack was to be led at once across the river. The general and

the major, it was said, had found out something at the bridge, and

there was only just time to strike for life. The major had gone back at

once to call up the reserve along the road behind; it was doubtful if

even with that prompt appeal help could reach them in time. But they

must pass the stream that night, and seize the heights by morning. It

is with the very stir and throb of that romantic nocturnal march that

the diary suddenly ends."

Father Brown had mounted ahead; for the woodland path grew smaller,

steeper, and more twisted, till they felt as if they were ascending a

winding staircase. The priest's voice came from above out of the

darkness.

"There was one other little and enormous thing. When the general urged

them to their chivalric charge he half drew his sword from the

scabbard; and then, as if ashamed of such melodrama, thrust it back

again. The sword again, you see."

A half-light broke through the network of boughs above them, flinging

the ghost of a net about their feet; for they were mounting again to

the faint luminosity of the naked night. Flambeau felt truth all round

him as an atmosphere, but not as an idea. He answered with bewildered

brain: "Well, what's the matter with the sword? Officers generally have

swords, don't they?"

"They are not often mentioned in modern war," said the other

dispassionately; "but in this affair one falls over the blessed sword

everywhere."

"Well, what is there in that?" growled Flambeau; "it was a

twopence-coloured sort of incident; the old man's blade breaking in his

last battle. Anyone might bet the papers would get hold of it, as they

have. On all these tombs and things it's shown broken at the point. I

hope you haven't dragged me through this Polar expedition merely

because two men with an eye for a picture saw St Clare's broken sword."

"No," cried Father Brown, with a sharp voice like a pistol shot; "but

who saw his unbroken sword?"

"What do you mean?" cried the other, and stood still under the stars.

They had come abruptly out of the grey gates of the wood.

"I say, who saw his unbroken sword?" repeated Father Brown obstinately.

"Not the writer of the diary, anyhow; the general sheathed it in time."

Flambeau looked about him in the moonlight, as a man struck blind might

look in the sun; and his friend went on, for the first time with

eagerness:

"Flambeau," he cried, "I cannot prove it, even after hunting through

the tombs. But I am sure of it. Let me add just one more tiny fact that

tips the whole thing over. The colonel, by a strange chance, was one of

the first struck by a bullet. He was struck long before the troops came

to close quarters. But he saw St Clare's sword broken. Why was it

broken? How was it broken? My friend, it was broken before the battle."

"Oh!" said his friend, with a sort of forlorn jocularity; "and pray

where is the other piece?"

"I can tell you," said the priest promptly. "In the northeast corner of

the cemetery of the Protestant Cathedral at Belfast."

"Indeed?" inquired the other. "Have you looked for it?"

"I couldn't," replied Brown, with frank regret. "There's a great marble

monument on top of it; a monument to the heroic Major Murray, who fell

fighting gloriously at the famous Battle of the Black River."

Flambeau seemed suddenly galvanised into existence. "You mean," he

cried hoarsely, "that General St Clare hated Murray, and murdered him

on the field of battle because--"

"You are still full of good and pure thoughts," said the other. "It was

worse than that."

"Well," said the large man, "my stock of evil imagination is used up."

The priest seemed really doubtful where to begin, and at last he said

again:

"Where would a wise man hide a leaf? In the forest."

The other did not answer.

"If there were no forest, he would make a forest. And if he wished to

hide a dead leaf, he would make a dead forest."

There was still no reply, and the priest added still more mildly and

quietly:

"And if a man had to hide a dead body, he would make a field of dead

bodies to hide it in."

Flambeau began to stamp forward with an intolerance of delay in time or

space; but Father Brown went on as if he were continuing the last

sentence:

"Sir Arthur St Clare, as I have already said, was a man who read his

Bible. That was what was the matter with him. When will people

understand that it is useless for a man to read his Bible unless he

also reads everybody else's Bible? A printer reads a Bible for

misprints. A Mormon reads his Bible, and finds polygamy; a Christian

Scientist reads his, and finds we have no arms and legs. St Clare was

an old Anglo-Indian Protestant soldier. Now, just think what that might

mean; and, for Heaven's sake, don't cant about it. It might mean a man

physically formidable living under a tropic sun in an Oriental society,

and soaking himself without sense or guidance in an Oriental Book. Of

course, he read the Old Testament rather than the New. Of course, he

found in the Old Testament anything that he wanted--lust, tyranny,

treason. Oh, I dare say he was honest, as you call it. But what is the

good of a man being honest in his worship of dishonesty?

"In each of the hot and secret countries to which the man went he kept

a harem, he tortured witnesses, he amassed shameful gold; but certainly

he would have said with steady eyes that he did it to the glory of the

Lord. My own theology is sufficiently expressed by asking which Lord?

Anyhow, there is this about such evil, that it opens door after door in

hell, and always into smaller and smaller chambers. This is the real

case against crime, that a man does not become wilder and wilder, but

only meaner and meaner. St Clare was soon suffocated by difficulties of

bribery and blackmail; and needed more and more cash. And by the time

of the Battle of the Black River he had fallen from world to world to

that place which Dante makes the lowest floor of the universe."

"What do you mean?" asked his friend again.

"I mean that," retorted the cleric, and suddenly pointed at a puddle

sealed with ice that shone in the moon. "Do you remember whom Dante put

in the last circle of ice?"

"The traitors," said Flambeau, and shuddered. As he looked around at

the inhuman landscape of trees, with taunting and almost obscene

outlines, he could almost fancy he was Dante, and the priest with the

rivulet of a voice was, indeed, a Virgil leading him through a land of

eternal sins.

The voice went on: "Olivier, as you know, was quixotic, and would not

permit a secret service and spies. The thing, however, was done, like

many other things, behind his back. It was managed by my old friend

Espado; he was the bright-clad fop, whose hook nose got him called the

Vulture. Posing as a sort of philanthropist at the front, he felt his

way through the English Army, and at last got his fingers on its one

corrupt man--please God!--and that man at the top. St Clare was in foul

need of money, and mountains of it. The discredited family doctor was

threatening those extraordinary exposures that afterwards began and

were broken off; tales of monstrous and prehistoric things in Park

Lane; things done by an English Evangelist that smelt like human

sacrifice and hordes of slaves. Money was wanted, too, for his

daughter's dowry; for to him the fame of wealth was as sweet as wealth

itself. He snapped the last thread, whispered the word to Brazil, and

wealth poured in from the enemies of England. But another man had

talked to Espado the Vulture as well as he. Somehow the dark, grim

young major from Ulster had guessed the hideous truth; and when they

walked slowly together down that road towards the bridge Murray was

telling the general that he must resign instantly, or be

court-martialled and shot. The general temporised with him till they

came to the fringe of tropic trees by the bridge; and there by the

singing river and the sunlit palms (for I can see the picture) the

general drew his sabre and plunged it through the body of the major."

The wintry road curved over a ridge in cutting frost, with cruel black

shapes of bush and thicket; but Flambeau fancied that he saw beyond it

faintly the edge of an aureole that was not starlight and moonlight,

but some fire such as is made by men. He watched it as the tale drew to

its close.

"St Clare was a hell-hound, but he was a hound of breed. Never, I'll

swear, was he so lucid and so strong as when poor Murray lay a cold

lump at his feet. Never in all his triumphs, as Captain Keith said

truly, was the great man so great as he was in this last world-despised

defeat. He looked coolly at his weapon to wipe off the blood; he saw

the point he had planted between his victim's shoulders had broken off

in the body. He saw quite calmly, as through a club window-pane, all

that must follow. He saw that men must find the unaccountable corpse;

must extract the unaccountable sword-point; must notice the

unaccountable broken sword--or absence of sword. He had killed, but not

silenced. But his imperious intellect rose against the facer--there was

one way yet. He could make the corpse less unaccountable. He could

create a hill of corpses to cover this one. In twenty minutes eight

hundred English soldiers were marching down to their death."

The warmer glow behind the black winter wood grew richer and brighter,

and Flambeau strode on to reach it. Father Brown also quickened his

stride; but he seemed merely absorbed in his tale.

"Such was the valour of that English thousand, and such the genius of

their commander, that if they had at once attacked the hill, even their

mad march might have met some luck. But the evil mind that played with

them like pawns had other aims and reasons. They must remain in the

marshes by the bridge at least till British corpses should be a common

sight there. Then for the last grand scene; the silver-haired

soldier-saint would give up his shattered sword to save further

slaughter. Oh, it was well organised for an impromptu. But I think (I

cannot prove), I think that it was while they stuck there in the bloody

mire that someone doubted--and someone guessed."

He was mute a moment, and then said: "There is a voice from nowhere

that tells me the man who guessed was the lover ... the man to wed the

old man's child."

"But what about Olivier and the hanging?" asked Flambeau.

"Olivier, partly from chivalry, partly from policy, seldom encumbered

his march with captives," explained the narrator. "He released

everybody in most cases. He released everybody in this case.

"Everybody but the general," said the tall man.

"Everybody," said the priest.

Flambeau knit his black brows. "I don't grasp it all yet," he said.

"There is another picture, Flambeau," said Brown in his more mystical

undertone. "I can't prove it; but I can do more--I can see it. There is

a camp breaking up on the bare, torrid hills at morning, and Brazilian

uniforms massed in blocks and columns to march. There is the red shirt

and long black beard of Olivier, which blows as he stands, his

broad-brimmed hat in his hand. He is saying farewell to the great enemy

he is setting free--the simple, snow-headed English veteran, who thanks

him in the name of his men. The English remnant stand behind at

attention; beside them are stores and vehicles for the retreat. The

drums roll; the Brazilians are moving; the English are still like

statues. So they abide till the last hum and flash of the enemy have

faded from the tropic horizon. Then they alter their postures all at

once, like dead men coming to life; they turn their fifty faces upon

the general--faces not to be forgotten."

Flambeau gave a great jump. "Ah," he cried, "you don't mean--"

"Yes," said Father Brown in a deep, moving voice. "It was an English

hand that put the rope round St Clare's neck; I believe the hand that

put the ring on his daughter's finger. They were English hands that

dragged him up to the tree of shame; the hands of men that had adored

him and followed him to victory. And they were English souls (God

pardon and endure us all!) who stared at him swinging in that foreign

sun on the green gallows of palm, and prayed in their hatred that he

might drop off it into hell."

As the two topped the ridge there burst on them the strong scarlet

light of a red-curtained English inn. It stood sideways in the road, as

if standing aside in the amplitude of hospitality. Its three doors

stood open with invitation; and even where they stood they could hear

the hum and laughter of humanity happy for a night.

"I need not tell you more," said Father Brown. "They tried him in the

wilderness and destroyed him; and then, for the honour of England and

of his daughter, they took an oath to seal up for ever the story of the

traitor's purse and the assassin's sword blade. Perhaps--Heaven help

them--they tried to forget it. Let us try to forget it, anyhow; here is

our inn."

"With all my heart," said Flambeau, and was just striding into the

bright, noisy bar when he stepped back and almost fell on the road.

"Look there, in the devil's name!" he cried, and pointed rigidly at the

square wooden sign that overhung the road. It showed dimly the crude

shape of a sabre hilt and a shortened blade; and was inscribed in false

archaic lettering, "The Sign of the Broken Sword."

"Were you not prepared?" asked Father Brown gently. "He is the god of

this country; half the inns and parks and streets are named after him

and his story."

"I thought we had done with the leper," cried Flambeau, and spat on the

road.

"You will never have done with him in England," said the priest,

looking down, "while brass is strong and stone abides. His marble

statues will erect the souls of proud, innocent boys for centuries, his

village tomb will smell of loyalty as of lilies. Millions who never

knew him shall love him like a father--this man whom the last few that

knew him dealt with like dung. He shall be a saint; and the truth shall

never be told of him, because I have made up my mind at last. There is

so much good and evil in breaking secrets, that I put my conduct to a

test. All these newspapers will perish; the anti-Brazil boom is already

over; Olivier is already honoured everywhere. But I told myself that if

anywhere, by name, in metal or marble that will endure like the

pyramids, Colonel Clancy, or Captain Keith, or President Olivier, or

any innocent man was wrongly blamed, then I would speak. If it were

only that St Clare was wrongly praised, I would be silent. And I will."

They plunged into the red-curtained tavern, which was not only cosy,

but even luxurious inside. On a table stood a silver model of the tomb

of St Clare, the silver head bowed, the silver sword broken. On the

walls were coloured photographs of the same scene, and of the system of

wagonettes that took tourists to see it. They sat down on the

comfortable padded benches.

"Come, it's cold," cried Father Brown; "let's have some wine or beer."

"Or brandy," said Flambeau.

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Both by calling and conviction Father Brown knew better than most of

us, that every man is dignified when he is dead. But even he felt a

pang of incongruity when he was knocked up at daybreak and told that

Sir Aaron Armstrong had been murdered. There was something absurd and

unseemly about secret violence in connection with so entirely

entertaining and popular a figure. For Sir Aaron Armstrong was

entertaining to the point of being comic; and popular in such a manner

as to be almost legendary. It was like hearing that Sunny Jim had

hanged himself; or that Mr Pickwick had died in Hanwell. For though Sir

Aaron was a philanthropist, and thus dealt with the darker side of our

society, he prided himself on dealing with it in the brightest possible

style. His political and social speeches were cataracts of anecdotes

and "loud laughter"; his bodily health was of a bursting sort; his

ethics were all optimism; and he dealt with the Drink problem (his

favourite topic) with that immortal or even monotonous gaiety which is

so often a mark of the prosperous total abstainer.

The established story of his conversion was familiar on the more

puritanic platforms and pulpits, how he had been, when only a boy,

drawn away from Scotch theology to Scotch whisky, and how he had risen

out of both and become (as he modestly put it) what he was. Yet his

wide white beard, cherubic face, and sparkling spectacles, at the

numberless dinners and congresses where they appeared, made it hard to

believe, somehow, that he had ever been anything so morbid as either a

dram-drinker or a Calvinist. He was, one felt, the most seriously merry

of all the sons of men.

He had lived on the rural skirt of Hampstead in a handsome house, high

but not broad, a modern and prosaic tower. The narrowest of its narrow

sides overhung the steep green bank of a railway, and was shaken by

passing trains. Sir Aaron Armstrong, as he boisterously explained, had

no nerves. But if the train had often given a shock to the house, that

morning the tables were turned, and it was the house that gave a shock

to the train.

The engine slowed down and stopped just beyond that point where an

angle of the house impinged upon the sharp slope of turf. The arrest of

most mechanical things must be slow; but the living cause of this had

been very rapid. A man clad completely in black, even (it was

remembered) to the dreadful detail of black gloves, appeared on the

ridge above the engine, and waved his black hands like some sable

windmill. This in itself would hardly have stopped even a lingering

train. But there came out of him a cry which was talked of afterwards

as something utterly unnatural and new. It was one of those shouts that

are horridly distinct even when we cannot hear what is shouted. The

word in this case was "Murder!"

But the engine-driver swears he would have pulled up just the same if

he had heard only the dreadful and definite accent and not the word.

The train once arrested, the most superficial stare could take in many

features of the tragedy. The man in black on the green bank was Sir

Aaron Armstrong's man-servant Magnus. The baronet in his optimism had

often laughed at the black gloves of this dismal attendant; but no one

was likely to laugh at him just now.

So soon as an inquirer or two had stepped off the line and across the

smoky hedge, they saw, rolled down almost to the bottom of the bank,

the body of an old man in a yellow dressing-gown with a very vivid

scarlet lining. A scrap of rope seemed caught about his leg, entangled

presumably in a struggle. There was a smear or so of blood, though very

little; but the body was bent or broken into a posture impossible to

any living thing. It was Sir Aaron Armstrong. A few more bewildered

moments brought out a big fair-bearded man, whom some travellers could

salute as the dead man's secretary, Patrick Royce, once well known in

Bohemian society and even famous in the Bohemian arts. In a manner more

vague, but even more convincing, he echoed the agony of the servant. By

the time the third figure of that household, Alice Armstrong, daughter

of the dead man, had come already tottering and waving into the garden,

the engine-driver had put a stop to his stoppage. The whistle had blown

and the train had panted on to get help from the next station.

Father Brown had been thus rapidly summoned at the request of Patrick

Royce, the big ex-Bohemian secretary. Royce was an Irishman by birth;

and that casual kind of Catholic that never remembers his religion

until he is really in a hole. But Royce's request might have been less

promptly complied with if one of the official detectives had not been a

friend and admirer of the unofficial Flambeau; and it was impossible to

be a friend of Flambeau without hearing numberless stories about Father

Brown. Hence, while the young detective (whose name was Merton) led the

little priest across the fields to the railway, their talk was more

confidential than could be expected between two total strangers.

"As far as I can see," said Mr Merton candidly, "there is no sense to

be made of it at all. There is nobody one can suspect. Magnus is a

solemn old fool; far too much of a fool to be an assassin. Royce has

been the baronet's best friend for years; and his daughter undoubtedly

adored him. Besides, it's all too absurd. Who would kill such a cheery

old chap as Armstrong? Who could dip his hands in the gore of an

after-dinner speaker? It would be like killing Father Christmas."

"Yes, it was a cheery house," assented Father Brown. "It was a cheery

house while he was alive. Do you think it will be cheery now he is

dead?"

Merton started a little and regarded his companion with an enlivened

eye. "Now he is dead?" he repeated.

"Yes," continued the priest stolidly, " he was cheerful. But did he

communicate his cheerfulness? Frankly, was anyone else in the house

cheerful but he?"

A window in Merton's mind let in that strange light of surprise in

which we see for the first time things we have known all along. He had

often been to the Armstrongs', on little police jobs of the

philanthropist; and, now he came to think of it, it was in itself a

depressing house. The rooms were very high and very cold; the

decoration mean and provincial; the draughty corridors were lit by

electricity that was bleaker than moonlight. And though the old man's

scarlet face and silver beard had blazed like a bonfire in each room or

passage in turn, it did not leave any warmth behind it. Doubtless this

spectral discomfort in the place was partly due to the very vitality

and exuberance of its owner; he needed no stoves or lamps, he would

say, but carried his own warmth with him. But when Merton recalled the

other inmates, he was compelled to confess that they also were as

shadows of their lord. The moody man-servant, with his monstrous black

gloves, was almost a nightmare; Royce, the secretary, was solid enough,

a big bull of a man, in tweeds, with a short beard; but the

straw-coloured beard was startlingly salted with grey like the tweeds,

and the broad forehead was barred with premature wrinkles. He was

good-natured enough also, but it was a sad sort of good-nature, almost

a heart-broken sort--he had the general air of being some sort of

failure in life. As for Armstrong's daughter, it was almost incredible

that she was his daughter; she was so pallid in colour and sensitive in

outline. She was graceful, but there was a quiver in the very shape of

her that was like the lines of an aspen. Merton had sometimes wondered

if she had learnt to quail at the crash of the passing trains.

"You see," said Father Brown, blinking modestly, "I'm not sure that the

Armstrong cheerfulness is so very cheerful--for other people. You say

that nobody could kill such a happy old man, but I'm not sure; ne nos

inducas in tentationem. If ever I murdered somebody," he added quite

simply, "I dare say it might be an Optimist."

"Why?" cried Merton amused. "Do you think people dislike cheerfulness?"

"People like frequent laughter," answered Father Brown, "but I don't

think they like a permanent smile. Cheerfulness without humour is a

very trying thing."

They walked some way in silence along the windy grassy bank by the

rail, and just as they came under the far-flung shadow of the tall

Armstrong house, Father Brown said suddenly, like a man throwing away a

troublesome thought rather than offering it seriously: "Of course,

drink is neither good nor bad in itself. But I can't help sometimes

feeling that men like Armstrong want an occasional glass of wine to

sadden them."

Merton's official superior, a grizzled and capable detective named

Gilder, was standing on the green bank waiting for the coroner, talking

to Patrick Royce, whose big shoulders and bristly beard and hair

towered above him. This was the more noticeable because Royce walked

always with a sort of powerful stoop, and seemed to be going about his

small clerical and domestic duties in a heavy and humbled style, like a

buffalo drawing a go-cart.

He raised his head with unusual pleasure at the sight of the priest,

and took him a few paces apart. Meanwhile Merton was addressing the

older detective respectfully indeed, but not without a certain boyish

impatience.

"Well, Mr Gilder, have you got much farther with the mystery?"

"There is no mystery," replied Gilder, as he looked under dreamy

eyelids at the rooks.

"Well, there is for me, at any rate," said Merton, smiling.

"It is simple enough, my boy," observed the senior investigator,

stroking his grey, pointed beard. "Three minutes after you'd gone for

Mr Royce's parson the whole thing came out. You know that pasty-faced

servant in the black gloves who stopped the train?"

"I should know him anywhere. Somehow he rather gave me the creeps."

"Well," drawled Gilder, "when the train had gone on again, that man had

gone too. Rather a cool criminal, don't you think, to escape by the

very train that went off for the police?"

"You're pretty sure, I suppose," remarked the young man, "that he

really did kill his master?"

"Yes, my son, I'm pretty sure," replied Gilder drily, "for the trifling

reason that he has gone off with twenty thousand pounds in papers that

were in his master's desk. No, the only thing worth calling a

difficulty is how he killed him. The skull seems broken as with some

big weapon, but there's no weapon at all lying about, and the murderer

would have found it awkward to carry it away, unless the weapon was too

small to be noticed."

"Perhaps the weapon was too big to be noticed," said the priest, with

an odd little giggle.

Gilder looked round at this wild remark, and rather sternly asked Brown

what he meant.

"Silly way of putting it, I know," said Father Brown apologetically.

"Sounds like a fairy tale. But poor Armstrong was killed with a giant's

club, a great green club, too big to be seen, and which we call the

earth. He was broken against this green bank we are standing on."

"How do you mean?" asked the detective quickly.

Father Brown turned his moon face up to the narrow fa�ade of the house

and blinked hopelessly up. Following his eyes, they saw that right at

the top of this otherwise blind back quarter of the building, an attic

window stood open.

"Don't you see," he explained, pointing a little awkwardly like a

child, "he was thrown down from there?"

Gilder frowningly scrutinised the window, and then said: "Well, it is

certainly possible. But I don't see why you are so sure about it."

Brown opened his grey eyes wide. "Why," he said, "there's a bit of rope

round the dead man's leg. Don't you see that other bit of rope up there

caught at the corner of the window?"

At that height the thing looked like the faintest particle of dust or

hair, but the shrewd old investigator was satisfied. "You're quite

right, sir," he said to Father Brown; "that is certainly one to you."

Almost as he spoke a special train with one carriage took the curve of

the line on their left, and, stopping, disgorged another group of

policemen, in whose midst was the hangdog visage of Magnus, the

absconded servant.

"By Jove! they've got him," cried Gilder, and stepped forward with

quite a new alertness.

"Have you got the money!" he cried to the first policeman.

The man looked him in the face with a rather curious expression and

said: "No" Then he added: "At least, not here."

"Which is the inspector, please?" asked the man called Magnus.

When he spoke everyone instantly understood how this voice had stopped

a train. He was a dull-looking man with flat black hair, a colourless

face, and a faint suggestion of the East in the level slits in his eyes

and mouth. His blood and name, indeed, had remained dubious, ever since

Sir Aaron had "rescued" him from a waitership in a London restaurant,

and (as some said) from more infamous things. But his voice was as

vivid as his face was dead. Whether through exactitude in a foreign

language, or in deference to his master (who had been somewhat deaf),

Magnus's tones had a peculiarly ringing and piercing quality, and the

whole group quite jumped when he spoke.

"I always knew this would happen," he said aloud with brazen blandness.

"My poor old master made game of me for wearing black; but I always

said I should be ready for his funeral."

And he made a momentary movement with his two dark-gloved hands.

"Sergeant," said Inspector Gilder, eyeing the black hands with wrath,

"aren't you putting the bracelets on this fellow; he looks pretty

dangerous."

"Well, sir," said the sergeant, with the same odd look of wonder, "I

don't know that we can."

"What do you mean?" asked the other sharply. "Haven't you arrested

him?"

A faint scorn widened the slit-like mouth, and the whistle of an

approaching train seemed oddly to echo the mockery.

"We arrested him," replied the sergeant gravely, "just as he was coming

out of the police-station at Highgate, where he had deposited all his

master's money in the care of Inspector Robinson."

Gilder looked at the man-servant in utter amazement. "Why on earth did

you do that?" he asked of Magnus.

"To keep it safe from the criminal, of course," replied that person

placidly.

"Surely," said Gilder, "Sir Aaron's money might have been safely left

with Sir Aaron's family."

The tail of his sentence was drowned in the roar of the train as it

went rocking and clanking; but through all the hell of noises to which

that unhappy house was periodically subject, they could hear the

syllables of Magnus's answer, in all their bell-like distinctness: "I

have no reason to feel confidence in Sir Aaron's family."

All the motionless men had the ghostly sensation of the presence of

some new person; and Merton was scarcely surprised when he looked up

and saw the pale face of Armstrong's daughter over Father Brown's

shoulder. She was still young and beautiful in a silvery style, but her

hair was of so dusty and hueless a brown that in some shadows it seemed

to have turned totally grey.

"Be careful what you say," said Royce gruffly, "you'll frighten Miss

Armstrong."

"I hope so," said the man with the clear voice.

As the woman winced and everyone else wondered, he went on: "I am

somewhat used to Miss Armstrong's tremors. I have seen her trembling

off and on for years. And some said she was shaking with cold and some

she was shaking with fear, but I know she was shaking with hate and

wicked anger--fiends that have had their feast this morning. She would

have been away by now with her lover and all the money but for me. Ever

since my poor old master prevented her from marrying that tipsy

blackguard--"

"Stop," said Gilder very sternly. "We have nothing to do with your

family fancies or suspicions. Unless you have some practical evidence,

your mere opinions--"

"Oh! I'll give you practical evidence," cut in Magnus, in his hacking

accent. "You'll have to subpoena me, Mr Inspector, and I shall have to

tell the truth. And the truth is this: An instant after the old man was

pitched bleeding out of the window, I ran into the attic, and found his

daughter swooning on the floor with a red dagger still in her hand.

Allow me to hand that also to the proper authorities." He took from his

tail-pocket a long horn-hilted knife with a red smear on it, and handed

it politely to the sergeant. Then he stood back again, and his slits of

eyes almost faded from his face in one fat Chinese sneer.

Merton felt an almost bodily sickness at the sight of him; and he

muttered to Gilder: "Surely you would take Miss Armstrong's word

against his?"

Father Brown suddenly lifted a face so absurdly fresh that it looked

somehow as if he had just washed it. "Yes," he said, radiating

innocence, "but is Miss Armstrong's word against his?"

The girl uttered a startled, singular little cry; everyone looked at

her. Her figure was rigid as if paralysed; only her face within its

frame of faint brown hair was alive with an appalling surprise. She

stood like one of a sudden lassooed and throttled.

"This man," said Mr Gilder gravely, "actually says that you were found

grasping a knife, insensible, after the murder."

"He says the truth," answered Alice.

The next fact of which they were conscious was that Patrick Royce

strode with his great stooping head into their ring and uttered the

singular words: "Well, if I've got to go, I'll have a bit of pleasure

first."

His huge shoulder heaved and he sent an iron fist smash into Magnus's

bland Mongolian visage, laying him on the lawn as flat as a starfish.

Two or three of the police instantly put their hands on Royce; but to

the rest it seemed as if all reason had broken up and the universe were

turning into a brainless harlequinade.

"None of that, Mr Royce," Gilder had called out authoritatively. "I

shall arrest you for assault."

"No, you won't," answered the secretary in a voice like an iron gong,

"you will arrest me for murder."

Gilder threw an alarmed glance at the man knocked down; but since that

outraged person was already sitting up and wiping a little blood off a

substantially uninjured face, he only said shortly: "What do you mean?"

"It is quite true, as this fellow says," explained Royce, "that Miss

Armstrong fainted with a knife in her hand. But she had not snatched

the knife to attack her father, but to defend him."

"To defend him," repeated Gilder gravely. "Against whom?"

"Against me," answered the secretary.

Alice looked at him with a complex and baffling face; then she said in

a low voice: "After it all, I am still glad you are brave."

"Come upstairs," said Patrick Royce heavily, "and I will show you the

whole cursed thing."

The attic, which was the secretary's private place (and rather a small

cell for so large a hermit), had indeed all the vestiges of a violent

drama. Near the centre of the floor lay a large revolver as if flung

away; nearer to the left was rolled a whisky bottle, open but not quite

empty. The cloth of the little table lay dragged and trampled, and a

length of cord, like that found on the corpse, was cast wildly across

the windowsill. Two vases were smashed on the mantelpiece and one on

the carpet.

"I was drunk," said Royce; and this simplicity in the prematurely

battered man somehow had the pathos of the first sin of a baby.

"You all know about me," he continued huskily; "everybody knows how my

story began, and it may as well end like that too. I was called a

clever man once, and might have been a happy one; Armstrong saved the

remains of a brain and body from the taverns, and was always kind to me

in his own way, poor fellow! Only he wouldn't let me marry Alice here;

and it will always be said that he was right enough. Well, you can form

your own conclusions, and you won't want me to go into details. That is

my whisky bottle half emptied in the corner; that is my revolver quite

emptied on the carpet. It was the rope from my box that was found on

the corpse, and it was from my window the corpse was thrown. You need

not set detectives to grub up my tragedy; it is a common enough weed in

this world. I give myself to the gallows; and, by God, that is enough!"

At a sufficiently delicate sign, the police gathered round the large

man to lead him away; but their unobtrusiveness was somewhat staggered

by the remarkable appearance of Father Brown, who was on his hands and

knees on the carpet in the doorway, as if engaged in some kind of

undignified prayers. Being a person utterly insensible to the social

figure he cut, he remained in this posture, but turned a bright round

face up at the company, presenting the appearance of a quadruped with a

very comic human head.

"I say," he said good-naturedly, "this really won't do at all, you

know. At the beginning you said we'd found no weapon. But now we're

finding too many; there's the knife to stab, and the rope to strangle,

and the pistol to shoot; and after all he broke his neck by falling out

of a window! It won't do. It's not economical." And he shook his head

at the ground as a horse does grazing.

Inspector Gilder had opened his mouth with serious intentions, but

before he could speak the grotesque figure on the floor had gone on

quite volubly.

"And now three quite impossible things. First, these holes in the

carpet, where the six bullets have gone in. Why on earth should anybody

fire at the carpet? A drunken man lets fly at his enemy's head, the

thing that's grinning at him. He doesn't pick a quarrel with his feet,

or lay siege to his slippers. And then there's the rope"--and having

done with the carpet the speaker lifted his hands and put them in his

pocket, but continued unaffectedly on his knees--"in what conceivable

intoxication would anybody try to put a rope round a man's neck and

finally put it round his leg? Royce, anyhow, was not so drunk as that,

or he would be sleeping like a log by now. And, plainest of all, the

whisky bottle. You suggest a dipsomaniac fought for the whisky bottle,

and then having won, rolled it away in a corner, spilling one half and

leaving the other. That is the very last thing a dipsomaniac would do."

He scrambled awkwardly to his feet, and said to the self-accused

murderer in tones of limpid penitence: "I'm awfully sorry, my dear sir,

but your tale is really rubbish."

"Sir," said Alice Armstrong in a low tone to the priest, "can I speak

to you alone for a moment?"

This request forced the communicative cleric out of the gangway, and

before he could speak in the next room, the girl was talking with

strange incisiveness.

"You are a clever man," she said, "and you are trying to save Patrick,

I know. But it's no use. The core of all this is black, and the more

things you find out the more there will be against the miserable man I

love."

"Why?" asked Brown, looking at her steadily.

"Because," she answered equally steadily, "I saw him commit the crime

myself."

"Ah!" said the unmoved Brown, "and what did he do?"

"I was in this room next to them," she explained; "both doors were

closed, but I suddenly heard a voice, such as I had never heard on

earth, roaring `Hell, hell, hell', again and again, and then the two

doors shook with the first explosion of the revolver. Thrice again the

thing banged before I got the two doors open and found the room full of

smoke; but the pistol was smoking in my poor, mad Patrick's hand; and I

saw him fire the last murderous volley with my own eyes. Then he leapt

on my father, who was clinging in terror to the window-sill, and,

grappling, tried to strangle him with the rope, which he threw over his

head, but which slipped over his struggling shoulders to his feet. Then

it tightened round one leg and Patrick dragged him along like a maniac.

I snatched a knife from the mat, and, rushing between them, managed to

cut the rope before I fainted."

"I see," said Father Brown, with the same wooden civility. "Thank you."

As the girl collapsed under her memories, the priest passed stiffly

into the next room, where he found Gilder and Merton alone with Patrick

Royce, who sat in a chair, handcuffed. There he said to the Inspector

submissively:

"Might I say a word to the prisoner in your presence; and might he take

off those funny cuffs for a minute?"

"He is a very powerful man," said Merton in an undertone. "Why do you

want them taken off?"

"Why, I thought," replied the priest humbly, "that perhaps I might have

the very great honour of shaking hands with him."

Both detectives stared, and Father Brown added: "Won't you tell them

about it, sir?"

The man on the chair shook his tousled head, and the priest turned

impatiently.

"Then I will," he said. "Private lives are more important than public

reputations. I am going to save the living, and let the dead bury their

dead."

He went to the fatal window, and blinked out of it as he went on

talking.

"I told you that in this case there were too many weapons and only one

death. I tell you now that they were not weapons, and were not used to

cause death. All those grisly tools, the noose, the bloody knife, the

exploding pistol, were instruments of a curious mercy. They were not

used to kill Sir Aaron, but to save him."

"To save him!" repeated Gilder. "And from what?"

"From himself," said Father Brown. "He was a suicidal maniac."

" What?" cried Merton in an incredulous tone. "And the Religion of

Cheerfulness--"

"It is a cruel religion," said the priest, looking out of the window.

"Why couldn't they let him weep a little, like his fathers before him?

His plans stiffened, his views grew cold; behind that merry mask was

the empty mind of the atheist. At last, to keep up his hilarious public

level, he fell back on that dram-drinking he had abandoned long ago.

But there is this horror about alcoholism in a sincere teetotaler: that

he pictures and expects that psychological inferno from which he has

warned others. It leapt upon poor Armstrong prematurely, and by this

morning he was in such a case that he sat here and cried he was in

hell, in so crazy a voice that his daughter did not know it. He was mad

for death, and with the monkey tricks of the mad he had scattered round

him death in many shapes--a running noose and his friend's revolver and

a knife. Royce entered accidentally and acted in a flash. He flung the

knife on the mat behind him, snatched up the revolver, and having no

time to unload it, emptied it shot after shot all over the floor. The

suicide saw a fourth shape of death, and made a dash for the window.

The rescuer did the only thing he could--ran after him with the rope

and tried to tie him hand and foot. Then it was that the unlucky girl

ran in, and misunderstanding the struggle, strove to slash her father

free. At first she only slashed poor Royce's knuckles, from which has

come all the little blood in this affair. But, of course, you noticed

that he left blood, but no wound, on that servant's face? Only before

the poor woman swooned, she did hack her father loose, so that he went

crashing through that window into eternity."

There was a long stillness slowly broken by the metallic noises of

Gilder unlocking the handcuffs of Patrick Royce, to whom he said: "I

think I should have told the truth, sir. You and the young lady are

worth more than Armstrong's obituary notices."

"Confound Armstrong's notices," cried Royce roughly. "Don't you see it

was because she mustn't know?"

"Mustn't know what?" asked Merton.

"Why, that she killed her father, you fool!" roared the other. "He'd

have been alive now but for her. It might craze her to know that."

"No, I don't think it would," remarked Father Brown, as he picked up

his hat. "I rather think I should tell her. Even the most murderous

blunders don't poison life like sins; anyhow, I think you may both be

the happier now. I've got to go back to the Deaf School."

As he went out on to the gusty grass an acquaintance from Highgate

stopped him and said:

"The Coroner has arrived. The inquiry is just going to begin."

"I've got to get back to the Deaf School," said Father Brown. "I'm

sorry I can't stop for the inquiry."

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