Uncollected Stories of Father Brown

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By G. K. Chesterton.
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The Donnington Affair

In the October 1914 issue of the British magazine The Premier*, Sir Max Pemberton published the first part of this story, inviting a number of writers, including Chesterton, to use their talents to solve the mystery of the murder described. Chesterton's solution followed in the form of a Father Brown story in the November issue.*

It was natural, of course, that we should think of calling in expert opinion on the tragedy; or, at least, something subtler than the passing policeman. But I could think of few people or none whom it would be useful to consult thus privately. I remembered an investigator who had taken some interest in Southby's original trouble; merely because I remembered the curious surname of Shrike; but report told me that he had since grown rich and retired, and was now yachting inaccessibly among the Pacific Islands.

My old friend Brown, the Roman priest at Cobhole, who had often given me good advice in small problems, had wired that he feared he could not come down, even for an hour. He merely added—what, I confess, I thought inconsequent—that the key might be found in the sentence, that "Mester was the cheeriest soul possible."

Superintendent Matthews still carries weight with any considering person who has actually talked to him; but he is naturally in most cases officially reticent, and in some cases officially slow.

Sir Borrow seemed stricken rigid by this final tragedy; a thing pardonable enough in a very old man who, whatever his faults, had never had anything but tragedy upon tragedy out of his own blood and name.

Wellman can be trusted with anything up to the Crown jewels; but not with an idea. Harriet is far too good a woman to be a good detective. So I was left with my unsatisfied appetite for expert advice. I think the others shared it to

some extent; I think we wished a man different from all of us would walk into the room, a man of the world outside us, a man of wider experience, a man of experience so wide—if it were possible—that he should know even one case that was like our own. Certainly none of us had the wildest suspicion of who the man would be.

I have explained that when poor Evelyn's body was found it was clad in a dressing-gown, as if she had been suddenly summoned from her room, and the door of the Priest's Room stood open. Acting on I know not what impulse, I had closed it to; and, so far as I know, it was not opened again till it was opened from within. I confess that for me that opening was terrible.

Sir Borrow, Wellman, and I were alone in the chamber of slaughter. At least we were alone till a total stranger strolled into the room, without even pulling the peaked cap off his head. He was a sturdy man, stained with travel, especially as regards his leggings, which were loaded with clay and slime of innumerable ditches. But he was entirely unconcerned, which is more than I was. For, despite his extra dirt and his extra impudence, I recognised him as the fugitive convict, Mester, whose letter I had so foolishly passed on to his fellow convict. He entered the room with his hands in his pockets, and whistling. Then the whistling ceased, and he said:

"You seem to have shut the door again. I suppose you know it's not easy to open again on this side."

Through the broken window which gave upon the garden I could see Superintendent Matthews standing passively among the shrubs, with his broad back to the house. I walked to the window, and also whistled, but in a far more practical spirit. And yet, I know not why I should call it practical, for the superintendent, who must have heard me, did not turn his head, nor so much as shift a shoulder.

"I shouldn't worry poor old Matthews," said the man in the peaked cap in a friendly tone, "he is one of the best men in the service, and he must be awfully tired. I expect I can answer nearly all the questions that he could." And he relighted a cigarette.

"Mr. Mester," I replied with some heat, "I was sending for the superintendent

to arrest you!"

"Quite so," he answered, throwing his wax match out of the window. "Well, he won't!"

He was gazing at me with a grave stolidity. And yet I fancy that the gravity of his full face had less effect on me than the large, indifferent back of the policeman.

The man called Mester resumed.

"I mean that my position here may not be quite what you suppose. It's true enough I assisted the young fellow to escape; but I don't imagine you know why I did it. It is an old rule in our profession—"

Before he could finish I had uttered a cry.

"Stop!" I cried out. "Who is that behind the door?"

I could see, by the very movement of Mester's mouth, that he was just about to answer, "What door?" But before the lips could move he also was answered. And from behind the sealed door of the secret chamber came the noise of something that was alive, if it were not human, or was moving, if it were not alive.

"What is in the Priest's Room?" I cried, and looked round for something with which to break down the door. I had half lifted the piece of jagged iron bar for the purpose. And then the horrid part it had played in that night overwhelmed me, and I fell against the door and beat on it with feeble hands, only repeating, "What is in the Priest's Room?" It was the awful fact that a voice, obscure but human, answered from behind the closed door, "The Priest!"

The heavy door was opened very slowly, apparently pushed by a hand no stronger than my own. The same voice which had said "The Priest," said in rather simpler tones, "Whom else did you expect?" The door swung out slowly to the full compass of its hinges, and revealed the black silhouette of a stumpy, apologetic person, with a big hat and a bad umbrella. He was in

every way a very unromantic and inappropriate person to be in the Priest's Room, save in the accidental detail of being a priest.

He walked straight up to me before I could cry: "You have come, after all!"

He shook my hand, and, before he dropped it, looked at me with a steady and singular expression, sad, and yet rather serious than sad. I can only say it was the face we wear at the funeral of one dear as a friend, not that we wear by the deathbed of any directly dear to us.

"I can at least congratulate you," said Father Brown.

I think I put my hand wildly through my hair. I am sure I answered:

"And what is there in this nightmare on which I can be congratulated?"

He answered me with the same solid face:

"On the innocence of the woman who will be your wife."

"No one," I cried indignantly, "has attempted to connect her with the matter."

He nodded gravely, as if in assent.

"That was the danger, doubtless," he said with a slight sigh, "but she's all right now, thank God. Isn't she?" And as if to give the last touch to the topsy-turvydom, he turned to ask his question of the man in the peaked cap.

"Oh, she's safe enough!" said the man called Mester.

I cannot deny that there was suddenly lifted off my heart a load of doubt, which I had never known was there. But I was bound to pursue the problem.

"Do you mean, Father Brown," I asked, "that you know who was the guilty person?"

"In a sense, yes," he answered. "But you must remember that in a murder case the guiltiest person is not always the murderer."

"Well, the guiltiest person, then," I cried impatiently. "How are we to bring the guiltiest person to punishment?"

"The guiltiest person is punished," said Father Brown.

There was a long silence in the twilight turret, and my mind laboured with doubts that were too large for it. At last Mester said gruffly, but not without a kind of good-nature:

"I think you two reverend gentlemen had better go and have a talk somewhere. About Hades, say, or hassocks, or whatever you do talk about. I shall have to look into this by myself. My name is Stephen Shrike; you may have heard of me."

Even before such fancies had been swallowed up in my sudden fear at the movements in the secret room, I had faced the startling possibility that this escaped convict was really a detective. But I had not dreamed of his being so famous a one. The man who had been concerned for Southby, and since gained colossal prestige, had some claim in the case; and I followed Brown, who had already strolled down towards the entrance of the garden.

"The distinction between Hades and hassocks—" began Father Brown.

"Don't play the fool!" I said, roughly enough.

"Was not without some philosophical value," continued the little priest, with unruffled good temper. "Human troubles are mostly of two kinds. There is an accidental kind, that you can't see because they are so close you fall over as you do over a hassock. And there is the other kind of evil, the real kind. And that a man will go to seek however far off it is—down, down, into the lost abyss." And he unconsciously pointed his stumpy finger downward towards the grass, which was sprinkled with daisies.

"It was good of you to come, after all," I said; "but I wish I could make more sense of the things you say."

"Well," he replied patiently, "have you made sense of the one thing I did say before I came down?"

"Why, you made some wild statement," I replied, "that the key of the story was in Mester's being cheerful, but—why, bless my soul, and so it is the key, in a way!"

"Only the key, so far," said my companion, "but my first guess seems to have been right. It is not very common to find such sparkling gaiety in people undergoing penal servitude, especially when ruined on a false charge. And it seemed to me that Mester's optimism was a little overdone. I also suspected that his aviation, and all the rest of it, true or false, were simply meant to make Southby think the escape feasible. But if Mester was such a demon for escaping, why didn't he escape by himself? Why was he so anxious to lug along a young gentleman who does not seem to have been much use to him? As I was wondering, my eye fell on another sentence in your manuscript."

"What was that?" I asked.

He took out a scrap of paper on which there were some scribbles in pencil, and read out:

" 'They then crossed an enclosure in which other prisoners were at work.' "

After another pause, he resumed:

"That, of course, was plain enough. What kind of convict prison is it where prisoners work without any warders overseeing or walking about? What sort of warders are they to allow two convicts to climb two walls and go off as if for a picnic? All that is plain. And the conclusion is plainer from many other sentences. 'It seemed such an impossible thing that he could evade the hue and cry that must attend this flight.' It would have been impossible if there had been any hue and cry. 'Evelyn and Harriet heard me eagerly, and the former, I began to suspect, was already in possession of the story.' How could she be in possession of it so early as that, unless the police cars and telephones helped to send word from Southby? Could the convicts catch a camel or an ostrich? And look at the motor-boat. Do motor-boats grow on trees? No, that's all simple. Not only was the companion in the escape a police detective, but the whole scheme of the escape was a police scheme, engineered by the highest authorities of the prison."

"But why?" I asked, staring. "And what has Southby to do with it?"

"Southby had nothing to do with it," he answered. "I believe he is now hiding in some ditch or wood in the sincere belief that he is a hunted fugitive. But they won't trouble him any more. He has done their work for them. He is innocent. It was essential that he should be innocent."

"Oh, I don't understand all this!" I cried impatiently.

"I don't understand half of this," said Father Brown. "There are all sorts of difficulties I will ask you about later. You knew the family. I only say that the sentence about cheerfulness did turn out to be a key-sentence, after all. Now, I want you to concentrate your attention on another key-sentence. 'We decided that Harriet should go to Bath without loss of time, in case she should be of any assistance there.' Note that this comes soon after your expression of surprise that someone should have communicated with Evelyn so early. Well, I suppose we none of us think the governor of the prison wired to her: 'Have connived at escape of your brother, Convict 99.' The message must have come in Southby's name, at any rate."

I ruminated, looking at the roll of the downs as it rose and repeated itself through every gap in the garden trees; then I said, "Kennington?"

My old friend looked at me for a moment with a look which, this time, I could not analyse.

"Captain Kennigton's part in the business is unique in my experience," he said, "and I think we had better return to him later. It is enough that, by your own account, Southby did not give him his confidence."

I looked again at the glimpses of the downs, and they looked grander but greyer, as my companion went on, like one who can only put things in their proper order.

"I mean the argument here is close, but clear. If she had any secret message from her brother about his escaping, why shouldn't she have a message about where he was escaping to? Why should she send off her sister to Bath, when she might just as well have been told that her brother wasn't going

there? Surely a young gentleman might more safely say, in a private letter, that he was going to Bath than that he was escaping from prison? Somebody or something must have influenced Southby to leave his destination uncertain. And who could influence Southby except the companion of his flight?"

"Who was acting for the police, on your theory."

"No. On his confession." After a sort of snorting silence, Brown said, with an emphasis I have never seen in him, throwing himself on a garden-seat: "I tell you this whole business of the two cities of refuge—this whole business of Harriet Donnington going to Bath—was a suggestion that came through Southby, but from Mester, or Shrike, or whatever his name is, and is the key of the police plot." He had settled himself on a seat facing me, clasping his hands over the huge head of his umbrella in a more truculent manner than was typical of him. But an evening moon was brightening above the little plantation under which he sat, and when I saw his plain face again, I saw it was as mild as the moon.

"But why," I asked, "should they want such a plot?"

"To separate the sisters," he said. "That is the key."

I answered quickly: "The sisters could not really be separated."

"Yes, they could," said Father Brown, "quite simply, and that is why—" Here his simplicity failed, and he hesitated.

"That is why?" I insisted.

"That is why I can congratulate you," he said at last.

Silence sank again for a little, and I could not define the irritation with which I answered:

"Oh, I suppose you know all about it?"

"No, no really!" he said, leaning forward as if to deny an accusation of injustice. "I am puzzled about the whole business. Why didn't the warders

find it sooner? Why did they find it at all? Was it slipped in the lining? Or is the handwriting so bad as that? I know about the thing being gentlemanly; but surely they took his clothes! How could the message come? It must be the lining."

His face was turned up as honestly as a flat and floating fish, and I could say with corresponding mildness:

"I really do not know what you are talking about, you and your linings. But if you mean how could Southby get his message safely to his sister without the risks of interception, I should say there were no people more likely to do it successfully. The boy and girl were always great friends from childhood, and had, to my knowledge, one of those secret languages that children often have, which may easily have been turned afterwards into some sort of cipher. And now I come to think of it—"

The heavy-knobbed umbrella slipped from the seat and slammed on the gravel, and the priest stood upright.

"What an idiot I am!" he said. "Why, anybody might have thought of a cipher! That was a score for you, my friend. I suppose you know all about it now?"

I am certain he did not realise that he was repeating in sincerity what I had said in irony.

"No," I answered, with real seriousness; "I do not know all about it, but I think it quite possible that you do. Tell me the story."

"It is not a good story," he said, in a rather stony way—"at least, the good thing about it is that it is over. But first let me say what I least like saying—that you knew well. I have thought a good deal about a certain kind of intellectual English lady, especially when she is at once aristocratic and provincial. I think she is judged much too easily. Or, perhaps, I should say, judged much too hardly; since she is supposed to be incapable of mortal passions and temptations. Let her decline champagne at dinner, let her be beautiful and know what is meant by dignity in dress, let her read a great many books and talk about high ideals, and you all assume that she alone of

her kind cannot covet or lie; that her ideas are always simple, and her ideals always fulfilled. But, really and truly, my friend, by your account of it, the character was more mixed than that. Evelyn feigned an indisposition very cleverly. Assuming her to be blameless, I cannot see why she needed to feign anything. But, anyhow, it is scarcely one of the powers given to the saints. You 'began to suspect' that Evelyn already knew about the escape. Why didn't she tell you she already knew about it? You were astonished that Superintendent Matthews had called, and she had been silent about it; but you supposed it was difficult to send. Why should it be difficult to send? You seem to have been sent for whenever you were really wanted. No; I will try to speak of this woman as of one for whose soul I will pray, and whose true defence I shall never hear. But while there are living people whose honour is in cruel danger undeservedly, I simply refuse to start with the assumption that Evelyn Donnington could do no wrong."

The noble hills of Sussex looked as dreary as Yorkshire moors as he went on heavily, prodding the earth with his umbrella.

"The first facts in her defence, if she needed one, are that her father is a miser, that he has a violent temper combined with a rather Puritanic sort of family pride; and, above all, that she was afraid of him. Now, suppose she really wanted money, perhaps for a good purpose; or, again, perhaps not. She and her brother, you told me, had always had secret languages and plots; they are common among cowed and terrorised children. I firmly believe myself that she went a step further in some desperate strait, and that she was really and criminally responsible for the false document with which her brother seemed to be seeking financial help. We know there is often a family resemblance in handwritings almost amounting to facsimile. I cannot see, therefore, why there should not be a similar family resemblance in the flaws by which experts detect a forgery. Anyhow, the brother had a bad record, which goes for a great deal more than it ought with the police; and he was sent to gaol. I think you will agree that he has a very good record now."

"You mean," I said, curiously thrilled by the very restraint of his expression, "that Southby suffered all that time rather than speak?"

"Rejoice not against me, Satan, mine enemy," said Father Brown, "for when I

fall I shall arise. This part of the story really is good.”

After a silence he continued:

“When he was arrested, I am now almost certain, he had on him some letter or message from his sister. I hope and believe that it was some sort of penitent message. But whatever it was, it must have contained two things—some admission or allusion that made her own guilt clear, and some urgent request that her brother should come straight to her as soon as he was free to do so. Most important of all, it was not signed with a Christian name, but only ‘Your unhappy sister.’ ”

“But, my good man,” I cried, “you talk as if you had seen the letter!”

“I see it in its consequences,” he answered. “The friendship with Mester, the quarrel with Kennington, the sister in Bath and the brother in the Priest’s Room, came from that letter, and no other letter.

“The letter, however, was in cipher; and one very hard to follow, having been invented by children. Does that strike you as paradoxical? Don’t you know that the hardest signs to read are arbitrary ones? And if two children agree that ‘grunk’ means bedtime and ‘splosh’ means Uncle William, it would take an expert much longer to learn this than to expose any system of substituted letters or numbers. Consequently, though the police found the paper, of course, it took them half-way through Southby’s term to make head or tail of it. Then they knew that one of Southby’s sisters were guilty, that he was innocent; and by this time they had the sense to see that he would never betray the truth. The rest, as I said, was simple and logical. The only other thing they could do was to take advantage of Southby being asked to go straight to his guilty correspondent. He was given every facility for escaping and communicating as quickly as possible, so long as the police could secure the separation of the sisters, by Mester getting the other one to Bath. Given that, the sister Southby went for must be the guilty one. And when, through those awful nights, the police gathered round you thick as wolves and still as ghosts—it was not for Southby they were waiting.”

“But why did they wait for anyone?” I asked suddenly, after a silence. “If they were sure, why didn’t they arrest?”

He nodded and sighed:

"Perhaps you're right. Perhaps it's best to take the Kennington case here. Well, of course, he knew all about it from the inside. You yourself noticed that he had privileges in that prison. It will grieve you, as a law-abiding person, to learn that he used his power to intercept what had been decided. A good deal can be done by missing appointments. A good deal more can be done by not missing people—vulgarly known as hitting them. He used every chance, right or wrong, to delay the arrest. One of the thousand small, desperate delays was 'feigning illness.' "

"Why did Southby call him a traitor?" I said suspiciously.

"On exceedingly good grounds," said my friend. "Suppose you had broken prison in all innocence, and your friend sent his car for you and it took you back there? Suppose your friend offered to get you away in his yacht, and it took the wrong course, till overtaken by a motor-boat? Suppose Southby was trying to get to Sussex, and Kennington always headed him off towards Cornwall or Ireland or Normandy, what would you expect Southby to call him?"

"Well," I said, "what would you call him?"

"Oh," said Father Brown, "I call him a hero."

I peered at his rather featureless face through the moony twilight; and then he suddenly rose and paced the path with the impatience of a schoolboy.

"If I could put pen to paper, I would write the best adventure story ever written about this. Was there ever such a situation? Southby was kicked backwards and forwards, as unconscious as a football, between two very able and vigorous men, one of whom wanted to make the footprints point towards the guilty sister, while the other wanted to twist the feet away at every turn. And Southby thought the friend of his house was his enemy, and the destroyer of his house his friend. The two that knew must fight in silence, for Mester could not speak without warning Southby, and Kennington could not speak without denouncing Evelyn. It is clear from Southby's words, about false friends and the sea, that Kennington eventually kidnapped

Southby in a yacht, but lord knows in how many tangled woods, or river islands, or lanes leading nowhere, the same fight was fought; the fugitive and detective trying to keep the trail, the traitor and true lover trying to confuse it. When Mester won, and his men gathered round this house, the captain could do no more than come here and offer his help, but Evelyn would not open the door to him."

"But why not?"

"Because she had the fine side of fear as well as the bad side," said Father Brown. " 'Not a little afraid of life,' you said, with great penetration. She was afraid to go to prison; but, to her honour, she was afraid to get married, too. It is a type produced by all this refinement. My friend, I want to tell you and all your modern world a secret. You will never get to the good in people till you have been through the bad in them."

After a moment he added that we ought to be returning to the house, and walked yet more briskly in that direction.

"Of course," he remarked, as he did so, "the packet of banknotes you took through to Southby was only to help him away and spare him Evelyn's arrest. Mester's not a bad fellow for a 'tec. But she realised her danger, and was trying to get into the Priest's Room."

I was still brooding on the queer case of Kennington.

"Was not the glove found?" I asked.

"Was not the window broken?" he asked in return. "A man's glove twisted properly and loaded with nine pounds in gold, and probably a letter as well, will break most windows if it is slung by a man who has been a bowler. Of course, there was a note. And, of course, the note was imprudent. It left money for escape, and left the proofs of what she was escaping from."

"And then what happened to her?" I asked dully.

"Something of what happened to you," he said. "You also found the secret door difficult to open from outside. You also caught up that crooked

curtain-rod or window-bar to beat on it. You also saw the door opening slowly from within. But you did not see what she saw."

"And what did she see?" I said at last.

"She saw the man she had wronged most," said Father Brown.

"Do you mean Southby?"

"No," he said, "Southby has shown heroic virtue, and he is happy. The man she wronged most was a man who had never had, or tried to have, more than one virtue—a kind of acrid justice. And she had made him unjust all his life—made him pamper the wicked woman and ruin the righteous man. You told me in your notes that he often hid in the Priest's Room, to discover who was faithful or unfaithful. This time he came out holding a sword left in that room in the days when men hunted my religion. He found the letter, but, of course, he destroyed it after he had done—what he did. Yes, old friend, I can feel the horror on your face without seeing it. But, indeed, you modern people do not know how many kinds of men there are in the world. I am not talking of approval, but of sympathy—the sort of sympathy I give to Evelyn Donnington. Have you no sympathy with cold, barbaric justice, or with the awful appeasements of such an intellectual appetite? Have you no sympathy with the Brutus who killed his friend? Have you no sympathy with the monarch who killed his son? Have you no sympathy with Virginius, who killed— But I think we must go in now."

We mounted the stairs in silence, but my surging soul expected some scene surpassing all the scenes of that tower. And in a sense I had it. The room was empty, save for Wellman, who stood behind an empty chair as impassively as if there had been a thousand guests.

"They have sent for Dr. Browning, sir," he said in colourless tones.

"What do you mean?" I cried. "There was no question about the death?"

"No, sir," he said, with a slight cough; "Dr. Browning required another doctor to be sent from Chichester, and they took Sir Borrow away."

The Mask of Midas

A man was standing outside a small shop, as rigidly as a wooden Highlander outside an old-fashioned tobacconist's. It was hard to believe that anyone would stand so steadily outside the shop unless he were the shopkeeper; but there was an almost grotesque incongruity between the shopkeeper and the shop. For the shop was one of those delightful dens of rubbish which children and the very wise explore with their eyes like a fairyland; but which many of a tidier and tamer taste are unable to distinguish from a dustbin. In short, it called itself in its prouder moments a curiosity shop; but was more generally called a junk shop; especially by the hard-headed and hustling commercial population of the industrial seaport in one of whose meaner streets it stood. Those who have a taste for such things will not need to have unrolled the tale of its treasures, of which the most precious were difficult to connect with any purpose whatever. Tiny models of fully-rigged ships sealed in bubbles of glass or glue or some queer Oriental gum; crystal balls in which snowstorms descended on very stolid human figures; enormous eggs that might have been laid by prehistoric birds; misshapen gourds that might have been swollen with poison rather than wine; queer weapons; queer musical instruments, and all the rest; and all sinking deeper and deeper in dust and disorder. The guardian standing outside such a shop might well be some decrepit Jew, with something of the dignity and long dress of the Arab; or some gypsy of a brazen and tropical beauty, hung with hoops of gold or brass. But the sentinel was something quite startlingly different. He was a lean, alert young man, in neat clothes of American cut, with the long, rather hard face so often seen in the Irish-American. He had a Stetson cocked over one eye and a stinking Pittsburgh cigar sticking out at a sharp angle from one corner of his mouth. If he had also had an automatic in his hip-pocket, those then gazing at him would not have been very much surprised. The name dimly printed above his shop was "Denis Hara".

Those thus gazing at him happened to be persons of some importance; and even perhaps of some importance to him. But nobody could have guessed it from his flinty features and his angular repose. The most prominent of these

was Colonel Grimes, the Chief Constable of that county. A loose-built man with long legs and a long head; trusted by those who knew him well, but not very popular even with his own class, because he showed distinct signs of wanting to be a policeman rather than a country gentleman. In short, the Constable had committed the subtle sin of preferring the Constabulary to the County. This eccentricity had encouraged his natural taciturnity; and he was, even for a capable detective, unusually silent and secretive about his plans and discoveries. His two companions, who knew him well, were all the more surprised when he stopped in front of the man with the cigar and spoke in a loud clear voice, very seldom heard from him in public.

"It is only fair to tell you, Mr. Hara, that my men have received information which justifies my obtaining a search-warrant to examine your premises. It may turn out, as I hope, that it will be unnecessary to incommode you further. But I must warn you that a watch is being kept on any movements of departure from this place."

"Are you all out to get one of my nice little toy ships done up in gum?" enquired Mr. Hara with calm. "Well, Colonel, I wouldn't like to set any limits to your free and glorious British Constitution; or I would rather doubt whether you can burgle my little grey home like that."

"You will find I am right," replied the Colonel; "in fact I am going straight to two of the magistrates, whose signatures are needed for the search-warrant."

The two men standing behind the Chief Constable exhibited fine though different shades of a faint mystification. Inspector Beltane, a big dark heavy man, reliable in his work if not very rapid in it, looked a little dazed as his superior turned sharply away. The third man was stumpy and sturdy, with a round black clerical hat and a round black clerical figure, as well as a round face which had looked up to that moment a little sleepy; but a sharper gleam shone between his screwed eyelids; and he also was looking at the Chief Constable; but with something a little more than mere bewilderment; rather as if a new notion had suddenly come into his head.

"Look here," said Colonel Grimes, "you fellows will be wanting your lunch; it's a shame to trail you about like this after three o'clock. Fortunately, the first man I want to see is in the bank we are just passing; and there's quite a

decent restaurant next door. I'll dash round to the other man who is only in the next street, when I've settled you down to some grub. They are the only two J.P.s in this part of the town; and it's lucky they live so near together. The banker will do what I want straight away; so we'll just go in and settle that first."

An array of doors decorated with glass and gilding led them through a labyrinth of passages in the Casterville and County Bank; and the Chief Constable went straight to the inner sanctum, with which he seemed to be fairly familiar. There he found Sir Archer Anderson, the famous financial writer and organiser, and the head of this and many other highly respectable banking enterprises; a grave and graceful old gentleman with grey curly hair and a grey pointed beard of a rather old-fashioned cut; but dressed otherwise in a sober but exact version of the current fashion. A glance at him would suggest that he was quite at home with the County as well as the Constable; but he seemed to share something of the Constable's preference for work rather than play. He pushed a formidable block of documents on one side; and said a word of welcome, pointing to a chair and suggesting a readiness to do banking business at any moment.

"I'm afraid this isn't banking business," said Grimes, "but anyhow, my business won't interrupt yours for more than a minute or two. You're a magistrate, aren't you; well, the law requires me to have the signatures of two magistrates, for a search-warrant on premises I have reason to believe are very suspicious."

"Indeed," said Sir Archer politely. "What sort of suspicion?"

"Well," said Grimes, "it's rather a queer case, and quite new, I should say, in these parts. Of course we have our own little criminal population, you may say; and, what is quite different and much more natural, the ordinary disposition of down-and-outs to hang together, even a little outside the law. But it looks to me as if that man Hara, who's certainly an American, is also an American gangster. A gangster on a large scale and with a whole machinery of crime practically unknown in this country. To begin with, I don't know whether you know the very latest news of this neighbourhood?"

"Very possibly not," replied the banker, with a rather frosty smile. "I am not

very well instructed in the police news; and I only came here recently to look over the affairs of the branch. Till then I was in London."

"A convict escaped yesterday," said the Colonel gravely. "You know there is a large penal settlement on the moors, a mile or two from this town. There are a good many men doing time there; but there is one less than there was the day before yesterday."

"Surely that is not so very unheard of," said the other. "Prisoners do sometimes break prison, don't they?"

"True," assented the Chief Constable. "Perhaps that would not be so extraordinary in itself. What is extraordinary is that he has not only escaped but disappeared. Prisoners break prison; but they almost always go back to prison; or at least we get some notion of how they managed to get away. This man seems to have simply and suddenly vanished, like a ghost or a fairy, a few hundred yards from the prison gates. Now as I have sceptical doubts myself about whether he really is a ghost or a fairy, I must fall back on the only possible natural explanation. And that is that he was spirited away instantly in a car, almost certainly part of a whole organisation of cars, to say nothing of spies and conspirators working out a completed plan. Now I take it as certain that his own friends and neighbours, however much they might sympathise, could not possibly organise anything like that. He is quite a poor man, accused of being a poacher; all his friends are poor and probably most of them poachers; and there is no doubt that he killed a game keeper. It's only fair to say that some thought it ought to have been called manslaughter and not murder; indeed they had to commute the sentence to a long imprisonment; and since then, perhaps on a fairer reconsideration, they have reduced it to a comparatively short sentence. But somebody has shortened it very much more than that. And in a way which means money and petrol and practical experience in such raids; he certainly could not have done it for himself and none of his companions in the common way could have done it for him. Now I won't bother you with the details of our discoveries; but I'm quite certain that the headquarters of the organisation is in that little junk-shop round the corner; and our best chance is to get a warrant to search it at once. You will understand, Sir Archer, that this does not commit you to anything beyond the preliminary search; if the man in the shop is innocent,

we are all quite free to testify to it; but I'm certain a preliminary search ought to be made, and for that I must have the signatures of two magistrates. That is why I am wasting your time with the police news; when it is so valuable in the financial news. If you feel you can sign such a document, I have it here ready for you; and there will be no excuse for my interrupting your own financial duties any further."

He laid a paper in front of Sir Archer Anderson; and, after reading it rapidly, but with a frown of habitual responsibility, the banker picked up his pen and signed it.

The Chief Constable rose with rapid but warm expressions of obligation, and passed towards the door, merely remarking at random, as a man might talk about the weather, "I don't suppose a business of your standing is affected by slumps or modern complications. But I'm told these are anxious days, sometimes, even for the most solid of the smaller corporations."

Sir Archer Anderson rose at once swiftly and stiffly, with a certain air of indignation at being even momentarily associated with small corporations.

"If you know anything of the Casterville and County Bank," he said, not without a faint touch of fire, "you will know it is not likely to be affected by anything or anybody."

Colonel Grimes shepherded his friends out of the Bank and, with a certain benevolent despotism, deposited them in the restaurant next door; while he himself darted on to complete his task by pouncing on the other local magistrate; an old lawyer who was also an old friend, one Wicks by name, who had sometimes assisted him in details of legal theory. Inspector Beltane and Father Brown were left facing each other somewhat solemnly in the restaurant, to await his return.

"Am I wrong," asked Father Brown with a friendly smile, "if I suspect that you are a little puzzled by something?"

"I wouldn't say puzzled," said the Inspector. "All that business with the banker was simple enough; but when you know a man very well, there is always a funny feeling when he doesn't act quite like himself. Now the

Colonel is the most silent and secret worker I've ever known in the police. Often he never tells the colleagues nearest to him what's in his mind at the moment. Why did he stand talking at the top of his voice in a public street to a public enemy: to tell him he was going to raid his shop? Other people, let alone ourselves, were beginning to gather and listen. Why the devil should he tell this godforsaken gunman that he was going to raid his shop? Why didn't he simply raid it?"

"The answer is," said Father Brown, "that he wasn't going to raid his shop."

"Then why did he shout to the whole town that he was going to?"

"Well, I think," said Father Brown, "so that the whole town might talk about his visit to the gangster and not notice his visit to the banker. The only words he really wanted to say were those last few words he said to the banker; watching for the reaction. But if there are any rumours about the bank, the town would have been all up in the air about his going straight to the bank. He had to have a good ordinary reason for going there; and he could hardly have had a better one than asking two ordinary magistrates to sign an ordinary document. Quite a flight of imagination."

Inspector Beltane was gaping at him across the table.

"What on earth do you mean?" he demanded at last.

"I mean," replied the priest, "that perhaps Colonel Grimes was not so far out in talking of the poacher as a fairy. Or shall we say a ghost?"

"You can't possibly mean," said the Inspector incredulously, "that Grimes invented the murdered gamekeeper and the escaped convict out of his own head? Why, he told me about them himself beforehand, as a bit of ordinary police-business."

"I wouldn't go quite so far as that," said Father Brown indifferently. "There may be some such local story; but it's got nothing to do with the story Grimes is after just now. I wish it had."

"Why do you say that?" asked the other.

Father Brown looked him full in the face with grey eyes of unmistakable gravity and candour.

“Because I am out of my depth,” he said. “Oh, I know well enough when I’m out of my depth; and I knew I should be, when I found we were hunting a fraudulent financier instead of an ordinary human murderer. You see, I don’t quite know how I came to take a hand originally in this sort of detective business; but almost all my experience was with ordinary human murderers. Now murder’s almost always human and personal; but modern theft has been allowed to become quite impersonal. It isn’t only secret; it’s anonymous; almost avowedly anonymous. Even if you die, you may catch a glimpse of the face of the man who stabbed you. But however long you live, you may never get even a glimpse of the name of the man who robbed you. My first case was just a small private affair about a man’s head being cut off and another head put on instead; I wish I were back among quiet homely little idylls like that. I wasn’t out of my depth with them.”

“A very idyllic incident indeed,” said the Inspector.

“A very individual incident, anyhow,” replied the priest. “Not like all this irresponsible officialism in finance. They can’t cut off heads as they cut off hot water, by the decision of a Board or a Committee; but they can cut off dues or dividends in that way. Or again, although two heads could be put on one man, we all know that one man hasn’t really got two heads. But one firm can have two heads; or two faces, or half-a-hundred faces. No, I wish you could lead me back to my murderous poacher and my murdered gamekeeper. I should understand all about them; but for the unfortunate fact that they possibly never existed.”

“Oh this is all nonsense,” cried the Inspector, trying to throw off an atmosphere. “I tell you Grimes did talk about it before. I rather fancy the poacher would have been released soon anyhow, though he did kill the other man pretty savagely, bashing him again and again with the butt of his gun. But he’d found the gamekeeper pretty indefensibly occupied on his own premises. In fact, the gamekeeper was poaching this time. He hadn’t a good character in the neighbourhood; and there was certainly what’s called provocation. Sort of Unwritten Law business.”

"That's just what I mean," said Father Brown. "Modern murder still, very often, has some remote and perverted connection with an unwritten law. But modern robbery takes the form of littering the world with paper and parchment, covered merely with written lawlessness."

"Well, I can't make head or tail of all this," said the Inspector. "There is the poacher who is a prisoner, or an escaped prisoner; there is, or was the gamekeeper; and there is, to all mortal appearance, the gangster. What you mean by starting all this wild stuff about the bank next door is more than I can imagine."

"That's what troubles me," said Father Brown in a sobered and humbled tone. "The Bank next door is beyond my imagination."

At this moment, the restaurant door swung open and the Colonel returned with a swing of triumph; trailing behind him a little lively figure with white hair and a face wrinkled with smiles. It was the other magistrate, whose signature was so essential to the required document.

"Mr. Wicks," said the Colonel, with an introductory gesture, "is the best modern expert in all matters of financial fraud. It is sheer luck that he happens to be a J.P. in this district."

Inspector Beltane gave a gulp and then gasped. "You don't mean to say Father Brown was right."

"I have known it happen," said Colonel Grimes, with moderation.

"If Father Brown said that Sir Archer Anderson is a colossal swindler, he was most certainly right," said Mr. Wicks. "I needn't give you all the steps of the proof here; in fact it will be wiser to give only the earlier stages of it even to the police—and the swindler. We must watch him carefully; and see that he takes no advantage of any mistake of ours. But I think we'd better go round and have a rather more candid interview with him than you seem to have had; an interview in which the poacher and the junk-shop will not perhaps be so exclusively prominent. I think I can let him know enough of what we know to wake him up, without running any risk of libel or damages. And there is always the chance he will let something out, in the very attempt to

keep it in. Come, we have heard very disquieting rumours about the business, and want this or that explained on the spot. That is our official position at present." And he sprang up, as if with the mere alertness or restlessness of youth.

The second interview with Sir Archer Anderson was certainly very different in its tone, and especially in its termination. They had gone there without any final determination to challenge the great banker; but they soon found that it was he who was already determined to challenge them. His white moustaches were curled like silver sabres; his white pointed beard was thrust forward like a spike of steel. Before any of them had said more than a few sentences, he stood up and struck the table.

"This is the first time that the Casterville and County Bank has been referred to in this fashion; and I promise you it shall be the last. If my own reputation did not already stand too high for such grotesque calumnies, the credit of the institution itself would alone have made them ludicrous. Leave this place, gentlemen, and go away and amuse yourselves with exposing the High Court of Chancery or inventing naughty stories about the Archbishop of Canterbury."

"That is all very well," said Wicks, with his head at an angle of pertinacity and pugnacity like a bulldog, "but I have a few facts here, Sir Archer, which you will be bound sooner or later to explain."

"To say the least of it," said the Colonel in a milder tone, "there are a good many things that we want to know rather more about."

The voice of Father Brown came in like something curiously cool and distant, as if it came from another room, or from the street outside, or at least from a long way off.

"Don't you think, Colonel, that we know now all that we want to know?"

"No," said the Colonel shortly, "I am a policeman. I may think a great deal and think I am right. But I don't know it."

"Oh," said Father Brown, opening his eyes wide for a moment. "I don't mean

what you think you know."

"Well, I suppose it's the same as what you think you know," said Grimes rather gruffly.

"I'm awfully sorry," said Father Brown penitently, "but what I know is quite different."

The air of doubt and difference, in which the small group moved off, leaving the haughty financier apparently master of the field after all, led them to drift once more to the restaurant, for an early tea, a smoke and some attempt at an explanation all round.

"I always knew you were an exasperating person," said the policeman to the priest, "but I have generally had some sort of wild guess about what you meant. My impression at this moment is that you have gone mad."

"It's odd you should say that," said Father Brown; "because I've tried to discover my own deficiencies in a good many directions, and the only thing I think I really know about myself is that I am not mad. I pay the penalty, of course, in being dull. But I have never to my knowledge lost touch with reality; and it seems queer to me that men so brilliant as you are can lose it so quickly."

"What do you mean—reality?" demanded Grimes after a bristling silence.

"I mean common sense," said Father Brown, with one of the explosions so rare in him that it sounded like a gun. "I've said already that I'm out of my depth, about all this financial complexity and corruption. But, hang it all, there is a way of testing things by human beings. I don't know anything about finance; but I have known financiers. In a general way, I've known fraudulent financiers. But you must know much more about them than I do. And yet you can swallow an impossibility like that."

"An impossibility like what?" enquired the staring Colonel.

Father Brown had suddenly leaned across the table, with piercing eyes fixed on Wicks, with an intensity he rarely showed.

"Mr. Wicks, you ought to know better. I'm only a poor parson, and of course I know no better. After all, our friends the police do not often meet bankers; except when a casual cashier cuts his throat. But you must have been perpetually interviewing bankers; and especially bankrupt bankers. Haven't you been in this precise position twenty times before? Haven't you again and again had the pluck to throw the first suspicions on very solid persons, as you did this afternoon? Haven't you talked to twenty or thirty financiers who were crashing, just about a month or two before they crashed?"

"Well, yes," said Mr. Wicks slowly and carefully, "I suppose I have."

"Well," asked Father Brown, "did any single one of the others ever talk like that?"

The little figure of the lawyer gave the faintest imperceptible start; so that one could say no more than that he was sitting up a shade straighter than before.

"Did you ever in your born days," asked the priest with all his new thrusting emphasis, "know a handler of hanky-panky finance who got on the high horse at the first flash of suspicion; and told the police not to dare to meddle with the secrets of his sacred bank? Why, it was like asking the Chief Constable to raid his bank and arrest him on the spot. Well, you know about these things and I don't. But I'd risk a long bet that every single dubious financier you have ever known has done exactly the opposite. Your first queries would have been received not with anger but amusement; if it ever went so far, it would have ended in a bland and complete answer to every one of the nine hundred and ninety-nine questions you had to ask. Explanations! They swim in explanations! Do you suppose a slippery financier has never been asked questions before?"

"But hang it all, you generalise too much," said Grimes. "You seem to be quite captivated with your vision of the perfect swindler. But after all even swindlers are not perfect. It doesn't prove much that one bankrupt banker broke down and lost his nerve."

"Father Brown is right," said Wicks, interceding suddenly after a period of digestive silence. "It's quite true that all that swagger and flamboyant defiance couldn't be the very first line of defence for a swindle. But what else

could it be? Respectable bankers don't throw out the banner and blow the trumpet and draw the sword, at a moment's notice, any more than disreputable bankers."

"Besides," said Grimes, "why should he get on the high horse at all? Why should he order us all out of the bank, if he has nothing to hide?"

"Well," said Father Brown very slowly, "I never said he had nothing to hide."

The meeting broke up in a silent, dazed disorder, in which the pertinacious Beltane hooked the priest by the arm for an instant and held him.

"Do you or do you not mean," he asked harshly, "that the banker is not a suspect?"

"No," said Father Brown, "I mean that the suspect is not a banker."

As they filed out of the restaurant, with movements much more vague and groping than were normal to any of them, they were brought up short by a shock and noise in the street outside. It first gave the impression of people breaking windows all along the street; but an instant of nervous recovery enabled them to localise it. It was the gilt glass-doors and windows of the pompous building they had entered that morning; the sacred enclosure of the Casterville and County Bank, that was shaken from within by a din like a dynamite explosion, but proving to be in fact only the direct dynamic destructiveness of man. The Chief Constable and the Inspector darted through the shattered glass doorways to the dark interior, and returned with faces fixed in astonishment; even more assured and stolid for being astonished.

"There's no doubt about it now," said the Inspector, "he's clubbed the man we left to watch to the ground with a poker; and hurled a cash-box so as to catch in the waistcoat the first man who came in to find out the trouble. He must be a wild beast."

Amid all the grotesque bewilderment, Mr. Wicks the lawyer turned with a gesture of apology and compliment and said to Father Brown, "Well, sir, you have completely convinced me. He is certainly an entirely new rendering of

the absconding banker."

"Well, you must send our men in to hold him at once," said the Constable to the Inspector; "or he'll break up the whole town."

"Yes," said Father Brown, "he's a pretty violent fellow; it's his great temptation. Think how he used his gun blindly as a club on the game-keeper, bringing it down again and again; but never having even the sense to fire. Of course, that is the sort of man who mismanages most things, even murders. But he does generally manage to break prison."

His companions gazed on him with faces that seemed to grow rounder and rounder with wonder; but they got no enlightenment out of his own round and commonplace countenance, before he turned away and went slowly down the street.

"And so," said Father Brown, beaming round at the company over a very mild lager in the restaurant, and looking rather like Mr. Pickwick in a village club; "and so we come back again to our dear old rustic tale of the poacher and the gamekeeper after all. It does so inexpressibly raise my spirits dealing with a cosy fireside crime instead of all this blank bewildering fog of finance; a fog really full of ghosts and shadows. Well, of course you all know the old, old story. At your mothers' knees you have heard it; but it is so important, my friends, to keep those old stories clear in our minds as they were told to us. This little rural tale has been told often enough. A man is imprisoned for a crime of passion, shows a similar violence in captivity, knocks down a warder and escapes in a mist on the moor. He has a stroke of luck; for he meets a gentleman who is well-dressed and presentable, and he forces him to change clothes."

"Yes, I've heard that story often," said Grimes frowning. "You say it is important to remember the story?"

"It is important to remember the story," said Father Brown, "because it is a very clear and correct account of what did not happen."

"And what did happen?" demanded the Inspector.

"Only the flat contrary," said Father Brown. "A small but neat emendation. It was not the convict who set out looking for a well-dressed gentleman, that he might disguise himself in his clothes. It was the gentleman who set out on the moor looking for a convict; that he might enjoy the ecstasy of wearing a convict's clothes. He knew there was a convict loose on the moor; and he ardently wanted his clothes. He probably knew also that there was a well-organised scheme for picking up the convict and rushing him rapidly off the moor. It is not quite certain what part Denis Hara and his gang played in this business; or whether they were cognisant only of the first plot or of the second. But I think it probable they were working for the poacher's friends, and merely in the interest of the poacher, who had very wide public sympathy among the poorer population. I prefer to think that our friend the well-dressed gentleman effected his own little transformation scene by his own native talents. He was a very well-dressed gentleman, being clad in very fashionable gents' suitings, as the tailors say; also with beautiful white hair and moustaches etc. which he owed rather to the barber than the tailor. He had found this very complete costume useful at many times of his life; and you must remember he had only appeared for a very short time as yet, in this particular town and bank. On hailing at last the figure of the convict whose clothes he coveted, he verified his information that he was a man of much the same general figure as himself; and the rest consisted merely of covering the convict with the hat, the wig, the whiskers, the splendid raiment, until the warder he knocked on the head would hardly have known him. Then our brilliant financier put on the convict's clothes; and felt, for the first time for months and perhaps years, that he had escaped and was free.

"For he had no band of poor sympathisers who would help or hide him if they knew the truth. He had no movement in his favour, among the more decent lawyers and governors, suggesting that he had suffered enough or that his liberation might soon be allowable. He had no friends even in the underworld; for he had always been an ornament of the upper world; the world of our conquerors and our masters, whom we allow so easily to have the upper hand. He was one of the modern magicians; he had a genius for finance; and his thefts were thefts from thousands of the poor. When he did cross a line (a pretty faint line, in modern law), when the world did find him out, then the whole world would be against him. I fancy he did subconsciously look towards the prison as a home. We don't know exactly

what his plans were; even if the prison authorities captured him and took the trouble to prove by prints and so on that he was not the escaped convict, it's not easy to see what else they could prove against him, at this stage. But I think it more likely that he knew Hara's organisation would help him, and hurry him out of the country without a moment's delay. He may have had dealings with Hara, neither perhaps telling the whole truth; such compromises are common in America between the big business man and the racketeer; because they are both really in the same business.

"Nor was there much trouble in persuading the convict, I imagine. It would seem to him at sight a scheme very hopeful for himself; perhaps he thought it was part of Hara's scheme. Anyhow, the convict got rid of the clothes of conviction, and stepped in first class clothes into a first class position where he might be socially acceptable and at least consider his next move in peace. But, heavens, what an irony! What a trap; what a trick of inverted doom! A man breaking jail nearly at the end of his sentence, for an obscure half-forgiven crime, delighting to dress himself up like a dandy in the costume of the world's greatest criminal, to be hunted tomorrow by searchlights round the whole earth. Sir Archer Anderson has entrapped a good many people in his time; but he never entrapped a man in such a tragedy as the man he benevolently clothed with his best clothes on the moor."

"Well," said Grimes good-humouredly, "now you have given us the tip, we can probably prove it all right; because the convict anyhow will have had his finger-prints taken."

Father Brown bowed his head with a vague gesture as of awe and reverence. "Of course," he said, "Sir Archer Anderson has never had his prints taken. My dear sir! A man in that position."

"The truth is," said Wicks, "that nobody seems to know very much about him; prints or anything else. When I started studying his ways, I had to start with a blank map that only afterwards turned into a labyrinth. I do happen to know something about such labyrinths; but this was more labyrinthine than the others."

"It's all a labyrinth to me," said the priest with a sigh. "I said I was out of my depth in all this financial business. The one and only thing I was quite sure of

was the sort of man who sat opposite me. And I was certain he was much too jumpy and nervy to be a swindler."

The End