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*The Secret
of Father Brown*



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THE SECRET OF FLAMBEAU

“**T**he sort of murders in which I played the part of the murderer,” said Father Brown, putting down the wineglass. The row of red pictures of crime had passed before him in that moment.

“It is true,” he resumed, after a momentary pause, “that somebody else had played the part of the murderer before me and done me out of the actual experience. I was a sort of understudy; always in a state of being ready to act the assassin. I always made it my business, at least, to know the part thoroughly. What I mean is that, when I tried to imagine the state of mind in which such a thing would be done, I always realized that I might have done it myself under certain mental conditions, but not under others; and not generally under the obvious ones. And then, of course, I knew who really had done it; and he was not generally the obvious person.

“For instance, it seemed obvious to say that the revolutionary poet had killed the old judge who saw red about red revolutionaries. But that isn’t really a reason for the revolutionary poet killing him. It isn’t, if you think what it would really be like to be a revolutionary poet. Now I set myself conscientiously down to be a revolutionary poet. I mean that particular sort of pessimistic anarchial lover of revolt, not as reform, but rather as destruction. I tried to clear my mind of such elements of sanity and constructive common sense as I have had the luck to learn or inherit. I shut down and darkened all the skylights through which comes the good daylight out of heaven; I imagined a mind lit only by a red light from below; a fire rending rocks and cleaving abysses upwards. And even with the vision at its wildest and worst, I could not see why such a visionary should cut short his own

career by colliding with a common policeman, for killing one out of a million conventional old fools, as he would have called them. He wouldn't do it; however much he wrote songs of violence. He wouldn't do it, because he wrote songs of violence. A man who can express himself in song need not express himself in suicide. A poem was an event to him; and he would want to have more of them. Then I thought of another sort of heathen; the sort that is not destroying the world but entirely depending on the world. I thought that, save for the grace of God, I might have been a man for whom the world was a blaze of electric lights, with nothing but utter darkness beyond and around it. The worldly man, who really lives only for this world and believes in no other, whose worldly success and pleasure are all he can ever snatch out of nothingness—that is the man who will really do anything, when he is in danger of losing the whole world and saving nothing. It is not the revolutionary man but the respectable man who would commit any crime—to save his respectability. Think what exposure would mean to a man like that fashionable barrister; and exposure of the one crime still really hated by his fashionable world—treason against patriotism. If I had been in his position, and had nothing better than his philosophy, heaven alone knows what I might have done. That is just where this little religious exercise is so wholesome.”

“Some people would think it was rather morbid,” said Grandison Chace dubiously.

“Some people,” said Father Brown gravely, “undoubtedly do think that charity and humility are morbid. Our friend the poet probably would. But I'm not arguing those questions; I'm only trying to answer your question about how I generally go to work. Some of your countrymen have apparently done me the honour to ask how I managed to frustrate a few miscarriages of justice. Well, you can go back and tell them that I do it by morbidity. But I most certainly don't want them to think I do it by magic.”

Chace continued to look at him with a reflective frown; he was too intelligent not to understand the idea; he would also have said that he was too healthy-minded to like it. He felt as if he were talking to one man and yet to a hundred murderers. There was something uncanny about that very small figure, perched like a goblin

beside the goblin stove; and the sense that its round head had held such a universe of wild unreason and imaginative injustice. It was as if the vast void of dark behind it were a throng of dark gigantic figures, the ghosts of great criminals held at bay by the magic circle of the red stove, but ready to tear their master in pieces.

“Well, I’m afraid I do think it’s morbid,” he said frankly. “And I’m not sure it isn’t almost as morbid as magic. But morbidity or no, there’s one thing to be said; it must be an interesting experience.” Then he added, after reflection: “I don’t know whether you would make a really good criminal. But you ought to make a rattling good novelist.”

“I only have to deal with real events,” said Father Brown. “But it’s sometimes harder to imagine real things than unreal ones.”

“Especially,” said the other, “when they are the great crimes of the world.”

“It’s not the great crimes but the small crimes that are really hard to imagine,” replied the priest.

“I don’t quite know what you mean by that,” said Chace.

“I mean commonplace crimes like stealing jewels,” said Father Brown; “like that affair of the emerald necklace or the Ruby of Meru or the artificial goldfish. The difficulty in those cases is that you’ve got to make your mind small. High and mighty humbugs, who deal in big ideas, don’t do those obvious things. I was sure the Prophet hadn’t taken the ruby; or the Count the goldfish; though a man like Bankes might easily take the emeralds. For them, a jewel is a piece of glass: and they can see through the glass. But the little, literal people take it at its market value.

“For that you’ve got to have a small mind. It’s awfully hard to get; like focusing smaller and sharper in a wobbling camera. But some things helped; and they threw a lot of light on the mystery, too. For instance, the sort of man who brags about having ‘shown up’ sham magicians or poor quacks of any sort—he’s always got a small mind. He is the sort of man who ‘sees through’ tramps and trips them up in telling lies. I dare say it might sometimes be a painful duty. It’s an uncommonly base pleasure. The moment I realized what a small mind meant, I knew where to look for it—in the man who wanted to expose the Prophet—and it was he that

THE QUEER FEET

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

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