

FATHER BROWN \* by Ronald Knox

When you take to writing detective stories, the measure of your success depends on the amount of personality you can build up round your favorite detective. Why this should be so, is not immediately obvious; it might have been supposed that this kind of fiction had a merely mathematical appeal. But, whether because Sherlock Holmes has set the standard for all time, or because the public does not like to see plots unraveled by a mere thinking-machine, it is personality that counts. You are not bound to make your public like the Great Detective; many readers have found Lord Peter Wimsey too much of a good thing, and I have even heard of people who were unable to appreciate the flavors of Poirot. But he must be real; he must have idiosyncrasies, eccentricities; even if he is a professional policeman, like Hanaud, he must smoke those appalling cigarettes, and get his English idioms wrong. And if possible – perhaps that is where Lord Peter fails – he must appeal to us through weakness; when he appears on the scene of the tragedy, the general reaction must be “A man like that will never be able to get at the truth.” It is because he drops parcels and cannot roll his umbrella, because he blinks at us and has fits of absent-mindedness, that Father Brown is such a good publisher’s detective.

He was “based”, as we say, on Monsignor John O’Connor of Bradford; it was he who later received Chesterton into the Church. The occasion on which Father Brown came into being is well documented, both in Chesterton’s autobiography and in Msgr. O’Connor’s memoir of him; and it should serve for a specimen of what is meant when we are told that such and such a character in a book was “based” on such and such a figure in real life. Two young acquaintances of Chesterton’s, having been introduced by him to his new clerical friend, expressed surprise afterwards that a man trained in the seminary should possess such knowledge of the world, especially of the criminal world. Chesterton was delighted with their naïveté; was it not to be expected (he said to himself) that a man who spent three hours every Saturday listening to the tale of other people’s sins should have some acquaintance with the by-ways of human depravity? And this reflection was incorporated bodily in the first of the Father Brown stories, *The Blue Cross*:

“How in Tartarus,” cried Flambeau, “did you ever hear of the spiked bracelet?”

“Oh, one’s little flock, you know,” said Father Brown.

That was all, really; nobody who had met Msgr. O’Connor would have put him down as “a clerical simpleton”. He may have had difficulties about folding his umbrella; but instinctively you felt that this priest was a shrewd judge of men, with a reading of history and literature beyond the common. The owlish eyes blinked at you, the wooden indifference to appearances, the prosaic trudge in pursuit of his day-to-day tasks – all that was not Msgr. O’Connor as Chesterton saw him, but Father Brown as Chesterton invented him. He simply decided that for his own purposes – if I may put it that way – he wanted a detective as unlike Lord Peter Wimsey as possible.

There was to be nothing of the expert about Father Brown; he should have no knowledge of obscure poisons, or of the time required to let the rigor mortis set in; he was not to be the author of any treatise about the different kinds of cigarette ashes. All his knowledge was of the human heart; he explains, in *The Secret of Flambeau*, that he is only capable of detecting murder mysteries because he was a murderer himself. “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, and not under others; and not generally the obvious ones. And then, of course, I knew who really had done it; and he was not generally the obvious person.” He could put himself inside the other man’s skin. He could even put himself inside an animal’s skin – no, the dog did not know the murderer by instinct and spring at him, that was sentimental mythology. The important thing about the dog was that it howled when the sword-stick was thrown into the sea – howled because the sword-stick didn’t float.

The real secret of Father Brown is that there is nothing of the mystic about him. When he falls into a reverie the other people in the story think that he must be having an ecstasy, because he is a Catholic priest, and will proceed to

solve the mystery by some kind of heaven-sent intuition. And the reader, if he is not careful, will get carried away by the same miscalculation. Unconsciously, this adds to the feeling of suspense; you never imagine that Poirot will have an ecstasy, or that Albert Campion will receive enlightenment from the supernatural world. And all the time, Father Brown is doing just what Poirot does; he is using his little grey cells. He is noticing something which the reader hasn't noticed, and will kick himself later for not having noticed. The prophet who goes on chanting his litany from the balcony, when the crowd beneath is rushing to the aid of the murdered woman, gives himself away as the murderer; he was expecting it. We had all the data to go upon, only Father Brown saw the point and we didn't.

What is the right length for a mystery story? Anybody who has tried to write one will tell you, I think, that it should be about a third of the length of a novel. Conan Doyle uses that formula in *A Study in Scarlet*, and in *The Valley of Fear*, filling up the rest of the book with a long story which does not really affect the plot. Father Brown began life as short stories in the *Saturday Evening Post*, and short stories he remained; for an author so fertile in ideas, perhaps this was the simplest arrangement. But it must be confessed that this enforced brevity produces a rather breathless atmosphere; the more so, because Chesterton was an artist before he became an author, and occupies a good deal of his space with scene-painting. And the scene-painting takes up room – valuable room, the pedantic reader would tell us.

What scene-painting it is! The atmosphere of that dreadful hotel in *The Queer Feet*; the atmosphere of a winter-bound summer resort in *The God of the Gongs*; the (quite irrelevant) effect of bitter cold in *The Sign of the Broken Sword* – what a setting they give to the story! Flambeau explains, at the beginning of *The Flying Stars*, that in his criminal days he was something of an artist; “I had always attempted to provide crimes suitable to the special seasons or landscapes in which I found myself, choosing this or that terrace or garden for a catastrophe”; and if the criminal, so limited in his choice of means, can be expected to provide a suitable décor, how much more the writer of stories! Yet it is only Chesterton who gives us these effects, the “topsy-turvydom of stone in mid-air” as the two men look down from the tower of a Gothic church; the “seas beyond seas of pines, now all aslope one way under the wind” on the hill-side of Glengyle; the “green velvet pocket in the long, green, trailing garments of the hills” on to which Mr. Harrogate's coach overturns, ready for the coming of the brigands. Did Chesterton pick out these landscapes with his artist's eye, and then, like Flambeau, invent crimes to suit them?

But it does take up room. And, if only because the canvas is so overcrowded, you must not expect in these stories the mass of details which you would expect of Freeman Wills Crofts; the extracts from Bradshaw, the plan of the study with a cross to show where the body was found. Hence the severely orthodox readers of detective stories, who love to check and to challenge every detail, must be prepared for a disappointment; Chesterton will not be at pains to tell us whether the windows were fastened; how many housemaids were kept, and which of them dusted the room last; whether it is the next morning, or a week later, or what. Consequently, you never quite feel “Here am I, with all the same data at my disposal as Father Brown had; why is it that his little grey cells work, and mine don't?” Not that there is any deliberate concealment of clues, but the whole picture is blurred; the very wealth of detail confuses you. All you can do is to set about eliminating the impossible characters in the hope of finding, by a process of exhaustion, the villain. Women can be ruled out; there is only one female villain in the whole series – it is part of Chesterton's obstinate chivalry that he hardly ever introduces you to a woman you are meant to dislike. People with Irish names (how unlike Sherlock Holmes!) are fairly certain to be innocent.

For Chesterton (as for Father Brown) the characters were the really important thing. The little priest could see, not as a psychologist, but as a moralist, into the dark places of the human heart; could guess, therefore, at what point envy, or fear, or resentment would pass the bounds of the normal, and the cords of convention would snap, so that a man was hurried into crime. Into crime, not necessarily into murder; the Father Brown stories are not bloodthirsty, as detective stories go; a full third of them deal neither with murder nor with attempted murder, which is an unusual average nowadays; most readers demand a corpse. The motives which made it necessary for Hypatia Hard to elope with her husband, the motives which induced the Master of the Mountain to pretend that he had stolen the ruby

when he hadn't – the reader may find them unimpressive, because there is no black cap and no drop at the end of them. But, unless he is a man of unusual perspicacity, he will have to admit that he also found them unexpected.

The truth is that what we demand of a detective story is neither sensations, nor horrors, but ingenuity. And Chesterton was a man of limitless ingenuity. What really contents us is when we see at last, and kick ourselves for not having seen before, that the man who was murdered in the Turkish bath without any trace of a weapon was stabbed with an icicle; that the time of a particular incident was given wrongly, not because the witness was in bad faith, but because she saw, not the clock, but the reflection of the clock in the looking-glass. All those brilliant twists which a Mason and an Agatha Christie give to their stories, Chesterton, when he was in the mood for it, could give to his. How to dispose of the body? If it was only for a short time, you could hang it up on the hat-stand in a dark passage; if you wanted to get rid of it altogether, you could bury it in the concrete floor of a new set of flats. A ship could be lured to its doom by lighting a bonfire which would confuse the appearance of the lights in the tideway; you could gag a ruler so securely that he would be unable to answer the challenge of his own sentries, and would be shot. They are all ideas we might have thought of, and didn't.

Whether such expedients would be likely to be adopted in real life is perhaps more questionable. But then, how far is the writer of mystery stories bound by the laws of probability? Nothing could be more improbable than Father Brown's habit of always being on the spot when a crime is committed; but he shares this curious trick of ubiquity with Hercule Poirot. The thing is a literary convention; it may not be a good one, but it is well worn. No, when we open a detective story we leave the world of strict probability behind us; we must be prepared for three or four quite independent pieces of shady business happening to happen in the same country house on the same evening. And Chesterton's imagination was flamboyant; he was like a schoolboy on holiday, and could sit as light to realism as P.G. Wodehouse. If you meet him on his own ground – that is, halfway to fairyland – you will have to admit that for sheer ingenuity he can rival Miss Sayers herself.

No, if we are to judge the Father Brown cycle by the canons of its own art, we shall not be disposed to complain that these are something less than detective stories; rather, that they are something more. Like everything else Chesterton wrote, they are a Chestertonian manifesto. And it may be reasonably maintained that a detective story is meant to be read in bed, by way of courting sleep; it ought not to make us think – or rather, it ought to be a kind of catharsis, taking our minds off the ethical, political, theological problems which exercise our waking hours by giving us artificial problems to solve instead. If this is so, have we not good reason to complain of an author who smuggles into our minds, under the disguise of a police mystery, the very solicitudes he was under contract to banish?

I am inclined to think that the complaint, for what it is worth, lies against a good many of the Father Brown stories, but not all, and perhaps not the best. Where the moral which Chesterton introduces is vital to the narrative, belongs to the very stuff of the problem, the author has a right, if he will, to mystify us on this higher level. In the over-civilized world we live in, there are certain anomalies which we take for granted; and he may be excused if he gently mocks at us for being unable, because we took them for granted, to read his riddle. There is something artificial in a convention which allows us to say that nobody has entered a house when in fact a postman has entered it, as if the postman, being a State official, were not a man. But it must be confessed that in some of the stories, especially the later ones, the didactic purpose tends to overshadow, and even to crowd out, the detective interest: such stories as *The Arrow of Heaven*, and *The Chief Mourner of Marne*. If we read these with interest, it is not because they are good detective stories, but because they are good Chesterton. When he wrote *The Incredulity* and *The Secret* (of Father Brown), Chesterton had perhaps rather written himself out, and publishers pressed him for copy faster than even he could supply it. At the end of this life, he seemed to get a second wind, and *The Scandal of Father Brown* contains some of his most ingenious plots. But how seldom does an author manage to spin out a formula indefinitely; how signally Conan Doyle failed to do it! But – those first six stories Chesterton contributed to the *Saturday Evening Post*! How could that level have been maintained?

\* condensed from a lecture given by Ronald Knox, *Literary Distractions*, 1958 Sheed & Ward