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The Donnington Affair

by

G.K. Chesterton & Max Pemberton

A FATHER BROWN STORY

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 topsyturvydom, 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 cypher. 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 cypher! 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 cypher; 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 END

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