

# The Vampire of the Village

G. K. Chesterton

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*from*

THE  
COMPLETE  
FATHER BROWN

by  
G. K. Chesterton

*With a Preface by Auberon Waugh*

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## THE VAMPIRE OF THE VILLAGE

AT the twist of a path in the hills, where two poplars stood up like pyramids dwarfing the tiny village of Potter's Pond, a mere huddle of houses, there once walked a man in a costume of a very conspicuous cut and colour, wearing a vivid magenta coat and a white hat tilted upon black ambrosial curls, which ended with a sort of Byronic flourish of whisker.

The riddle of why he was wearing clothes of such fantastic antiquity, yet wearing them with an air of fashion and even swagger, was but one of the many riddles that were eventually solved in solving the mystery of his fate. The point here is that when he had passed the poplars he seemed to have vanished; as if he had faded into the wan and widening dawn or been blown away upon the wind of morning.

It was only about a week afterwards that his body was found a quarter of a mile away, broken upon the steep rockeries of a terraced garden leading up to a gaunt and shuttered house called The Grange. Just before he had vanished, he had been accidentally overheard apparently quarrelling with some bystanders, and especially abusing their village as "a wretched little hamlet"; and it was supposed that he had aroused some extreme passions of local patriotism and eventually been their victim. At least the local doctor testified that the skull had suffered a crushing blow that might have caused death, though probably only inflicted with some sort of club or cudgel. This fitted in well enough with the notion of an attack by rather savage yokels. But nobody ever found any means of tracing any particular yokel; and the inquest returned a verdict of murder by some persons unknown.

A year or two afterwards the question was re-opened in a curious way; a series of events which led a certain Dr. Mulborough, called by his intimates Mulberry in apt allusion to something rich and fruity about his dark rotundity and rather empurpled visage, travelling by train down to Potter's Pond, with a friend whom he had often consulted upon problems of the kind. In spite of the somewhat port-winy and ponderous exterior of the doctor, he had a shrewd eye and was really a man of very remarkable sense; which he considered that he showed in consulting a little priest named Brown, whose acquaintance he had made over a poisoning case long ago. The little priest was sitting opposite to him, with the air of a patient baby absorbing instruction; and the doctor was explaining at length the real reasons for the journey.

“I cannot agree with the gentleman in the magenta coat that Potter’s Pond is only a wretched little hamlet. But it is certainly a very remote and secluded village; so that it seems quite outlandish, like a village of a hundred years ago. The spinsters are really spinsters—damn it, you could almost imagine you saw them spin. The ladies are not just ladies. They are gentlewomen; and their chemist is not a chemist, but an apothecary; pronounced potecary. They do just admit the existence of an ordinary doctor like myself to assist the apothecary. But I am considered rather a juvenile innovation, because I am only fifty-seven years old and have only been in the county for twenty-eight years. The solicitor looks as if he had known it for twenty-eight thousand years. Then there is the old Admiral, who is just like a Dickens illustration; with a house full of cutlasses and cuttle-fish and equipped with a telescope.”

“I suppose,” said Father Brown, “there are always a certain number of Admirals washed up on the shore. But I never understood why they get stranded so far inland.”

“Certainly no dead-alive place in the depths of the country is complete without one of these little creatures,” said the doctor. “And then, of course, there is the proper sort of clergyman; Tory and High Church in a dusty fashion dating from Archbishop Laud; more of an old woman than any of the old women. He’s a white-haired studious old bird, more easily shocked than the spinsters. Indeed, the gentlewomen, though Puritan in their principles, are sometimes pretty plain in their speech; as the real Puritans were. Once or twice I have known old Miss Carstairs-Carew use expressions as lively as anything in the Bible. The dear old clergyman is assiduous in reading the Bible; but I almost fancy he shuts his eyes when he comes to those words. Well, you know I’m not particularly modern. I don’t enjoy this jazzing and joy-riding of the Bright Young Things—”

“The Bright Young Things don’t enjoy it,” said Father Brown. “That is the real tragedy.”

“But I am naturally rather more in touch with the world than the people in this prehistoric village,” pursued the doctor. “And I had reached a point when I almost welcomed the Great Scandal.”

“Don’t say the Bright Young Things have found Potter’s Pond after all,” observed the priest, smiling.

“Oh, even our scandal is on old-established melodramatic lines. Need I say that the clergyman’s son promises to be our problem? It would be almost irregular, if the clergyman’s son were quite regular. So far as I can see, he is very mildly and almost feebly irregular. He was first seen drinking ale

outside the Blue Lion. Only it seems he is a poet, which in those parts is next door to being a poacher.”

“Surely,” said Father Brown, “even in Potter’s Pond that cannot be the Great Scandal.”

“No,” replied the doctor gravely. “The Great Scandal began thus. In the house called The Grange, situated at the extreme end of The Grove, there lives a lady. A Lonely Lady. She calls herself Mrs. Maltravers (that is how we put it); but she only came a year or two ago and nobody knows anything about her. ‘I can’t think why she wants to live here,’ said Miss Carstairs-Carew; ‘we do not visit her.’”

“Perhaps that’s why she wants to live there,” said Father Brown.

“Well, her seclusion is considered suspicious. She annoys them by being good-looking and even what is called good style. And all the young men are warned against her as a vamp.”

“People who lose all their charity generally lose all their logic,” remarked Father Brown. “It’s rather ridiculous to complain that she keeps herself to herself; and then accuse her of vamping the whole male population.”

“That is true,” said the doctor. “And yet she is really rather a puzzling person. I saw her and found her intriguing; one of those brown women, long and elegant and beautifully ugly, if you know what I mean. She is rather witty, and though young enough certainly gives me an impression of what they call—well, experience. What the old ladies call a Past.”

“All the old ladies having been born this very minute,” observed Father Brown. “I think I can assume she is supposed to have vamped the parson’s son.”

“Yes, and it seems to be a very awful problem to the poor old parson. She is supposed to be a widow.”

Father Brown’s face had a flash and spasm of his rare irritation. “She is supposed to be a widow as the parson’s son is supposed to be the parson’s son, and the solicitor is supposed to be a solicitor and you are supposed to be a doctor. Why in thunder shouldn’t she be a widow? Have they one speck of *prima facie* evidence for doubting that she is what she says she is?”

Dr. Mulborough abruptly squared his broad shoulders and sat up.

“Of course you’re right again,” he said. “But we haven’t come to the scandal yet. Well, the scandal is that she is a widow.”

“Oh,” said Father Brown; and his face altered and he said something soft and faint, that might almost have been “My God!”

“First of all,” said the doctor, “they have made one discovery about Mrs. Maltravers. She is an actress.”

“I fancied so,” said Father Brown. “Never mind why. I had another fancy about her, that would seem even more irrelevant.”

“Well, at that instant it was scandal enough that she was an actress. The dear old clergyman of course is heartbroken, to think that his white hairs should be brought in sorrow to the grave by an actress and adventuress. The spinsters shriek in chorus. The Admiral admits he has sometimes been to a theatre in town; but objects to such things in what he calls ‘our midst.’ Well, of course I’ve no particular objections of that kind. This actress is certainly a lady, if a bit of a Dark Lady, in the manner of the Sonnets; the young man is very much in love with her; and I am no doubt a sentimental old fool in having a sneaking sympathy with the misguided youth who is sneaking round the Moated Grange; and I was getting into quite a pastoral frame of mind about this idyll, when suddenly the thunderbolt fell. And I, who am the only person who ever had any sympathy with these people, am sent down to be the messenger of doom.”

“Yes,” said Father Brown, “and why *were* you sent down?”

The doctor answered with a sort of groan:

“Mrs. Maltravers is not only a widow, but she is the widow of Mr. Maltravers.”

“It sounds a shocking revelation, as you state it,” acknowledged the priest seriously.

“And Mr. Maltravers,” continued his medical friend, “was the man who was apparently murdered in this very village a year or two ago; supposed to have been bashed on the head by one of the simple villagers.”

“I remember you told me,” said Father Brown. “The doctor, or some doctor, said he had probably died of being clubbed on the head with a cudgel.”

Dr. Mulborough was silent for a moment in frowning embarrassment, and then said curtly,

“Dog doesn’t eat dog, and doctors don’t bite doctors, not even when they are mad doctors. I shouldn’t care to cast any reflection on my eminent predecessor in Potter’s Pond, if I could avoid it; but I know you are really safe for secrets. And, speaking in confidence, my eminent predecessor at Potter’s Pond was a blasted fool; a drunken old humbug and absolutely



incompetent. I was asked, originally by the Chief Constable of the County (for I've lived a long time in the county, though only recently in the village) to look into the whole business; the depositions and reports of the inquest and so on. And there simply isn't any question about it. Maltravers may have been hit on the head; he was a strolling actor passing through the place; and Potter's Pond probably thinks it is all in the natural order that such people should be hit on the head. But whoever hit him on the head did not kill him; it is simply impossible for the injury, as described, to do more than knock him out for a few hours. But lately I have managed to turn up some other facts bearing on the matter; and the result of it is pretty grim."

He sat louring at the landscape as it slid past the window, and then said more curtly:

"I am coming down here, and asking your help, because there's going to be an exhumation. There is very strong suspicion of poison."

"And here we are at the station," said Father Brown cheerfully. "I suppose your idea is that poisoning the poor man would naturally fall among the household duties of his wife."

"Well, there never seems to have been anyone else here who had any particular connection with him," replied Mulborough, as they alighted from the train. "At least there is one queer old crony of his, a brokendown actor, hanging around; but the police and the local solicitor seem convinced he is an unbalanced busybody; with some *idée fixe* about a quarrel with an actor who was his enemy; but who certainly wasn't Maltravers. A wandering accident, I should say, and certainly nothing to do with the problem of the poison."

Father Brown had heard the story. But he knew that he never knew a story until he knew the characters in the story. He spent the next two or three days in going the rounds, on one polite excuse or another, to visit the chief actors of the drama. His first interview with the mysterious widow was brief but bright. He brought away from it at least two facts; one that Mrs. Maltravers sometimes talked in a way which the Victorian village would call cynical; and, second, that like not a few actresses, she happened to belong to his own religious communion.

He was not so illogical (nor so unorthodox) as to infer from this alone that she was innocent of the alleged crime. He was well aware that his old religious communion could boast of several distinguished poisoners. But he had no difficulty in understanding its connection, in this sort of case, with a certain intellectual liberty which these Puritans would call laxity; and which would certainly seem to this parochial patch of an older England to be

almost cosmopolitan. Anyhow, he was sure she could count for a great deal, whether for good or evil. Her brown eyes were brave to the point of battle, and her enigmatic mouth, humorous and rather large, suggested that her purposes touching the parson's poetical son, whatever they might be, were planted pretty deep.

The parson's poetical son himself, interviewed amid vast village scandal on a bench outside the Blue Lion, gave an impression of pure sulks. Hurrell Horner, son of the Rev. Samuel Horner, was a square-built young man in a pale grey suit with a touch of something arty in a pale green tie, otherwise mainly notable for a mane of auburn hair and a permanent scowl. But Father Brown had a way with him in getting people to explain at considerable length why they refused to say a single word. About the general scandalmongering in the village, the young man began to curse freely. He even added a little scandalmongering of his own. He referred bitterly to alleged past flirtations between the Puritan Miss Carstairs-Carew and Mr. Carver the solicitor. He even accused that legal character of having attempted to force himself upon the acquaintance of Mrs. Maltravers. But when he came to speak of his own father, whether out of an acid decency or piety, or because his anger was too deep for speech, he snapped out only a few words.

"Well, there it is. He denounces her day and night as a painted adventuress; a sort of barmaid with gilt hair. I tell him she's not; you've met her yourself, and you know she's not. But he won't even meet her. He won't even see her in the street or look at her out of a window. An actress would pollute his house and even his holy presence. If he is called a Puritan he says he's proud to be a Puritan."

"Your father," said Father Brown, "is entitled to have his views respected, whatever they are; they are not views I understand very well myself. But I agree he is not entitled to lay down the law about a lady he has never seen and then refuse even to look at her, to see if he is right. That is illogical."

"That's his very stiffest point," replied the youth. "Not even one momentary meeting. Of course, he thunders against my other theatrical tastes as well."

Father Brown swiftly followed up the new opening, and learnt much that he wanted to know. The alleged poetry, which was such a blot on the young man's character, was almost entirely dramatic poetry. He had written tragedies in verse which had been admired by good judges. He was no mere stage-struck fool; indeed he was no fool of any kind. He had some really

original ideas about acting Shakespeare; it was easy to understand his having been dazzled and delighted by finding the brilliant lady at the Grange. And even the priest's intellectual sympathy so far mellowed the rebel of Potter's Pond that at their parting he actually smiled.

It was that smile which suddenly revealed to Father Brown that the young man was really miserable. So long as he frowned, it might well have been only sulks; but when he smiled it was somehow a more real revelation of sorrow.

Something continued to haunt the priest about that interview with the poet. An inner instinct certified that the sturdy young man was eaten from within, by some grief greater even than the conventional story of conventional parents being obstacles to the course of true love. It was all the more so, because there were not any obvious alternative causes. The boy was already rather a literary and dramatic success; his books might be said to be booming. Nor did he drink or dissipate his well-earned wealth. His notorious revels at the Blue Lion reduced themselves to one glass of light ale; and he seemed to be rather careful with his money. Father Brown thought of another possible complication in connection with Hurrel's large resources and small expenditure; and his brow darkened.

The conversation of Miss Carstairs-Carew, on whom he called next, was certainly calculated to paint the parson's son in the darkest colours. But as it was devoted to blasting him with all the special vices which Father Brown was quite certain the young man did not exhibit, he put it down to a common combination of Puritanism and gossip. The lady, though lofty, was quite gracious, however, and offered the visitor a small glass of port-wine and a slice of seed-cake, in the manner of everybody's most ancient great-aunts, before he managed to escape from a sermon on the general decay of morals and manners.

His next port of call was very much of a contrast; for he disappeared down a dark and dirty alley, where Miss Carstairs-Carew would have refused to follow him even in thought; and then into a narrow tenement made noisier by a high and declamatory voice in an attic. . . . From this he re-emerged, with a rather dazed expression, pursued on to the pavement by a very excited man with a blue chin and a black frock-coat faded to bottle-green, who was shouting argumentatively:

"He did not disappear! Maltravers never disappeared! He appeared; he appeared dead and I've appeared alive. But where's all the rest of the company? Where's that man, that monster, who deliberately stole my lines, crabbed my best scenes and ruined my career? I was the finest Tubal that

ever trod the boards. He acted Shylock—he didn't need to act much for that! And so with the greatest opportunity of my whole career. I could show you press-cuttings on my rendering of Fortinbras—”

“I'm quite sure they were splendid and very well-deserved,” gasped the little priest. “I understood the company had left the village before Maltravers died. But it's all right. It's quite all right.” And he began to hurry down the street again.

“He was to act Polonius,” continued the unquenchable orator behind him. Father Brown suddenly stopped dead.

“Oh,” he said very slowly, “he was to act Polonius.”

“That villain Hankin!” shrieked the actor. “Follow his trail. Follow him to the ends of the earth! Of course he'd left the village; trust him for that. Follow him—find him; and may the curses—” But the priest was again hurrying away down the street.

Two much more prosaic and perhaps more practical interviews followed this melodramatic scene. First the priest went into the bank, where he was closeted for ten minutes with the manager; and then paid a very proper call on the aged and amiable clergyman. Here again all seemed very much as described, unaltered and seemingly unalterable; a touch or two of devotion from more austere traditions, in the narrow crucifix on the wall, the big Bible on the bookstand and the old gentleman's opening lament over the increasing disregard of Sunday; but all with a flavour of gentility that was not without its little refinements and faded luxuries.

The clergyman also gave his guest a glass of port; but accompanied by an ancient British biscuit instead of seed-cake. The priest had again the weird feeling that everything was almost too perfect, and that he was living a century before his time. Only on one point the amiable old parson refused to melt into any further amiability; he meekly but firmly maintained that his conscience would not allow him to meet a stage player. However, Father Brown put down his glass of port with expressions of appreciation and thanks; and went off to meet his friend the doctor by appointment at the corner of the street; whence they were to go together to the offices of Mr. Carver, the solicitor.

“I suppose you've gone the dreary round,” began the doctor, “and found it a very dull village.”

Father Brown's reply was sharp and almost shrill.

“Don't call your village dull. I assure you it's a very extraordinary village indeed.”

“I’ve been dealing with the only extraordinary thing that ever happened here, I should think,” observed Dr. Mulborough. “And even that happened to somebody from outside. I may tell you they managed the exhumation quietly last night; and I did the autopsy this morning. In plain words we’ve been digging up a corpse that’s simply stuffed with poison.”

“A corpse stuffed with poison,” repeated Father Brown rather absently. “Believe me, your village contains something much more extraordinary than that.”

There was abrupt silence, followed by the equally abrupt pulling of the antiquated bell-pull in the porch of the solicitor’s house; and they were soon brought into the presence of that legal gentleman, who presented them in turn to a white-haired, yellow-faced gentleman with a scar, who appeared to be the Admiral.

By this time the atmosphere of the village had sunk almost into the subconsciousness of the little priest; but he was conscious that the lawyer was indeed the sort of lawyer to be the adviser of people like Miss Carstairs-Carew. But though he was an archaic old bird, he seemed something more than a fossil. Perhaps it was the uniformity of the background; but the priest had again the curious feeling that he himself was transplanted back into the early nineteenth century, rather than that the solicitor had survived into the early twentieth. His collar and cravat contrived to look almost like a stock as he settled his long chin into them; but they were clean as well as clean-cut; and there was even something about him of a very dry old dandy. In short, he was what is called well-preserved, even if partly by being petrified.

The lawyer and the Admiral, and even the doctor, showed some surprise on finding that Father Brown was rather disposed to defend the parson’s son against the local lamentations on behalf of the parson.

“I thought our young friend rather attractive, myself,” he said. “He’s a good talker and I should guess a good poet; and Mrs. Maltravers, who is serious about that at least, says he’s quite a good actor.”

“Indeed,” said the lawyer, “Porter’s Pond, outside Mrs. Maltravers, is rather more inclined to ask if he is a good son.”

“He is a good son,” said Father Brown. “That’s the extraordinary thing.”

“Damn it all,” said the Admiral. “Do you mean he’s really fond of his father?”

The priest hesitated. Then he said, “I’m not quite so sure about that. That’s the other extraordinary thing.”

“What the devil do you mean?” demanded the sailor with nautical profanity.

“I mean,” said Father Brown, “that the son still speaks of his father in a hard unforgiving way; but he seems after all to have done more than his duty by him. I had a talk with the bank manager, and as we were inquiring in confidence into a serious crime, under authority from the police, he told me the facts. The old clergyman has retired from parish work; indeed, this was never actually his parish. Such of the populace, which is pretty pagan, as goes to church at all, goes to Dutton Abbot, not a mile away. The old man has no private means, but the son is earning good money; and the old man is well looked after. He gave me some port of absolutely first-class vintage; I saw rows of dusty old bottles of it; and I left him sitting down to a little lunch quite *recherché* in an old-fashioned style. It must be done on the young man’s money.”

“Quite a model son,” said Carver with a slight sneer.

Father Brown nodded, frowning, as if revolving a riddle of his own; and then said:

“A model son. But rather a mechanical model.”

At this moment a clerk brought in an unstamped letter for the lawyer; a letter which the lawyer tore impatiently across after a single glance. As it fell apart, the priest saw a spidery, crazy crowded sort of handwriting and the signature of “Phoenix Fitzgerald”; and made a guess which the other curtly confirmed.

“It’s that melodramatic actor that’s always pestering us,” he said. “He’s got some fixed feud with some dead and gone fellow mummer of his, which can’t have anything to do with the case. We all refuse to see him, except the doctor, who did see him; and the doctor says he’s mad.”

“Yes,” said Father Brown, pursing his lips thoughtfully. “I should say he’s mad. But of course there can’t be any doubt that he’s right.”

“Right?” cried Carver sharply. “Right about what?”

“About this being connected with the old theatrical company,” said Father Brown. “Do you know the first thing that stumped me about this story? It was that notion that Maltravers was killed by villagers because he insulted their village. It’s extraordinary what coroners can get jurymen to believe; and journalists, of course, are quite incredibly credulous. They can’t know much about English rustics. I’m an English rustic myself; at least I was grown, with other turnips, in Essex. Can you imagine an English agricultural labourer idealising and personifying his village, like the citizen

of an old Greek city state; drawing the sword for its sacred banner, like a man in the tiny mediaeval republic of an Italian town? Can you hear a jolly old gaffer saying, 'Blood alone can wipe out one spot on the escutcheon of Potter's Pond.' By St. George and the Dragon, I only wish they would! But, as a matter of fact, I have a more practical argument for the other notion."

He paused for a moment, as if collecting his thoughts, and then went on:

"They misunderstood the meaning of those few last words poor Maltravers was heard to say. He wasn't telling the villagers that the village was only a hamlet. He was talking to an actor; they were going to put on a performance in which Fitzgerald was to be Fortinbras, the unknown Hankin to be Polonius, and Maltravers, no doubt, the Prince of Denmark. Perhaps somebody else wanted the part or had views on the part; and Maltravers said angrily, 'You'd be a miserable little hamlet'; that's all."

Dr. Mulborough was staring; he seemed to be digesting the suggestion slowly but without difficulty. At last he said, before the others could speak:

"And what do you suggest that we should do now?"

Father Brown arose rather abruptly; but he spoke civilly enough. "If these gentlemen will excuse us for a moment, I propose that you and I, doctor, should go round at once to the Horners. I know the parson and his son will both be there just now. And what I want to do, doctor, is this. Nobody in the village knows yet, I think, about your autopsy and its result. I want you simply to tell both the clergyman and his son, while they are there together, the exact fact of the case; that Maltravers died by poison and not by a blow."

Dr. Mulborough had reason to reconsider his incredulity when told that it was an extraordinary village. The scene which ensued, when he actually carried out the priest's programme, was certainly of the sort in which a man, as the saying is, can hardly believe his eyes.

The Rev. Samuel Horner was standing in his black cassock, which threw up the silver of his venerable head; his hand rested at the moment on the lectern at which he often stood to study the Scriptures, now possibly by accident only; but it gave him a greater look of authority. And opposite to him his mutinous son was sitting asprawl in a chair, smoking a cheap cigarette with an exceptionally heavy scowl; a lively picture of youthful impiety.

The old man courteously waved Father Brown to a seat, which he took and sat there silent, staring blandly at the ceiling. But something made

Mulborough feel that he could deliver his important news more impressively standing up.

“I feel,” he said, “that you ought to be informed, as in some sense the spiritual father of this community, that one terrible tragedy in its record has taken on a new significance; possibly even more terrible. You will recall the sad business of the death of Maltravers; who was adjudged to have been killed with the blow of a stick, probably wielded by some rustic enemy.”

The clergyman made a gesture with a wavering hand. “God forbid,” he said, “that I should say anything that might seem to palliate murderous violence in any case. But when an actor brings his wickedness into this innocent village, he is challenging the judgment of God.”

“Perhaps,” said the doctor gravely. “But anyhow it was not so that the judgment fell. I have just been commissioned to conduct a post mortem on the body; and I can assure you, first, that the blow on the head could not conceivably have caused the death; and, second, that the body was full of poison, which undoubtedly caused death.”

Young Hurrel Horner sent his cigarette flying and was on his feet with the lightness and swiftness of a cat. His leap landed him within a yard or so of the reading-desk.

“Are you certain of this?” he gasped. “Are you absolutely certain that that blow could not cause death?”

“Absolutely certain,” said the doctor.

“Well,” said Hurrel, “I almost wish this one could.”

In a flash, before anyone could move a finger, he had struck the parson a stunning crack on the mouth, dashing him backwards like a disjointed black doll against the door.

“What are you doing?” cried Mulborough, shaken from head to foot with the shock and mere sound of the blow. “Father Brown, what is this madman doing?”

But Father Brown had not stirred; he was still staring serenely at the ceiling.

“I was waiting for him to do that,” said the priest placidly. “I rather wonder he hasn’t done it before.”

“Good God,” cried the doctor. “I know we thought he was wronged in some ways; but to strike his father; to strike a clergyman and a non-combatant—”



“He has not struck his father; and he has not struck a clergyman,” said Father Brown. “He has struck a blackmailing blackguard of an actor dressed up as a clergyman, who has lived on him like a leech for years. Now he knows he is free of the blackmail, he lets fly; and I can’t say I blame him much. More especially as I have very strong suspicions that the blackmailer is a poisoner as well. I think, Mulborough, you had better ring up the police.”

They passed out of the room uninterrupted by the two others, the one dazed and staggered, the other still blind and snorting and panting with passions of relief and rage. But as they passed, Father Brown once turned his face to the young man; and the young man was one of the very few human beings who have seen that face implacable.

“He was right there,” said Father Brown. “When an actor brings his wickedness into this innocent village, he challenges the judgment of God.”

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“Well,” said Father Brown, as he and the doctor again settled themselves in a railway carriage standing in the station of Potter’s Pond. “As you say, it’s a strange story; but I don’t think it’s any longer a mystery story. Anyhow, the story seems to me to have been roughly this. Maltravers came here, with part of his touring company; some of them went straight to Dutton Abbot, where they were all presenting some melodrama about the early nineteenth century; he himself happened to be hanging about in his stage dress, the very distinctive dress of a dandy of that time. Another character was an old-fashioned parson, whose dark dress was less distinctive and might pass as being merely old-fashioned. This part was taken by a man who mostly acted old men; had acted Shylock and was afterwards going to act Polonius.

“A third figure in the drama was our dramatic poet, who was also a dramatic performer, and quarrelled with Maltravers about how to present Hamlet, but more about personal things, too. I think it likely that he was in love with Mrs. Maltravers even then; I don’t believe there was anything wrong with them; and I hope it may now be all right with them. But he may very well have resented Maltravers in his conjugal capacity; for Maltravers was a bully and likely to raise rows. In some such row they fought with sticks, and the poet hit Maltravers very hard on the head, and, in the light of the inquest, had every reason to suppose he had killed him.

“A third person was present or privy to the incident, the man acting the old parson; and he proceeded to blackmail the alleged murderer, forcing from him the cost of his upkeep in some luxury as a retired clergyman. It was the obvious masquerade for such a man in such a place, simply to go on

wearing his stage clothes as a retired clergyman. But he had his own reason for being a very retired clergyman. For the true story of Maltravers' death was that he rolled into a deep undergrowth of bracken, gradually recovered, tried to walk towards a house, and was eventually overcome, not by the blow, but by the fact that the benevolent clergyman had given him poison an hour before, probably in a glass of port. I was beginning to think so, when I drank a glass of the parson's port. It made me a little nervous. The police are working on that theory now; but whether they will be able to prove that part of the story, I don't know. They will have to find the exact motive; but it's obvious that this bunch of actors was buzzing with quarrels and Maltravers was very much hated."

"The police may prove something now they have got the suspicion," said Dr. Mulborough. "What I don't understand is why you ever began to suspect. Why in the world should you suspect that very blameless black-coated gentleman?"

Father Brown smiled faintly. "I suppose in one sense," he said, "it was a matter of special knowledge; almost a professional matter, but in a peculiar sense. You know our controversialists often complain that there is a great deal of ignorance about what our religion is really like. But it is really more curious than that. It is true, and it is not at all unnatural, that England does not know much about the Church of Rome. But England does not know much about the Church of England. Not even as much as I do. You would be astonished at how little the average public grasps about the Anglican controversies; lots of them don't really know what is meant by a High Churchman or a Low Churchman, even on the particular points of practice, let alone the two theories of history and philosophy behind them. You can see this ignorance in any newspaper; in any merely popular novel or play.

"Now the first thing that struck me was that this venerable cleric had got the whole thing incredibly mixed up. No Anglican parson could be so wrong about every Anglican problem. He was supposed to be an old Tory High Churchman; and then he boasted of being a Puritan. A man like that might personally be rather Puritanical; but he would never call it being a Puritan. He professed a horror of the stage; he didn't know that High Churchmen generally don't have that special horror, though Low Churchmen do. He talked like a Puritan about the Sabbath; and then he had a crucifix in his room. He evidently had no notion of what a very pious parson ought to be, except that he ought to be very solemn and venerable and frown upon the pleasures of the world.

“All this time there was a subconscious notion running in my head; something I couldn’t fix in my memory; and then it came to me suddenly. This is a Stage Parson. That is exactly the vague venerable old fool who would be the nearest notion a popular playwright or play-actor of the old school had of anything so odd as a religious man.”

“To say nothing of a physician of the old school,” said Mulborough good-humouredly, “who does not set up to know much about being a religious man.”

“As a matter of fact,” went on Father Brown, “there was a plainer and more glaring cause for suspicion. It concerned the Dark Lady of the Grange, who was supposed to be the Vampire of the Village. I very early formed the impression that this black blot was rather the bright spot of the village. She was treated as a mystery; but there was really nothing mysterious about her. She had come down here quite recently, quite openly, under her own name, to help the new inquiries to be made about her own husband. He hadn’t treated her too well; but she had principles, suggesting that something was due to her married name and to common justice. For the same reason, she went to live in the house outside which her husband had been found dead. The other innocent and straightforward case, besides the Vampire of the Village, was the Scandal of the Village, the parson’s profligate son. He also made no disguise of his profession or past connection with the acting world. That’s why I didn’t suspect him as I did the parson. But you’ll already have guessed a real and relevant reason for suspecting the parson.”

“Yes, I think I see,” said the doctor, “that’s why you bring in the name of the actress.”

“Yes, I mean his fanatical fixity about not seeing the actress,” remarked the priest. “But he didn’t really object to seeing her. He objected to her seeing him.”

“Yes, I see that,” assented the other.

“If she had seen the Rev. Samuel Horner, she would instantly have recognised the very unreverend actor Hankin, disguised as a sham parson with a pretty bad character behind the disguise. Well, that is the whole of this simple village idyll, I think. But you will admit I kept my promise; I have shown you something in the village considerably more creepy than a corpse; even a corpse stuffed with poison. The black coat of a parson stuffed with a blackmailer is at least worth noticing and my live man is much deadlier than your dead one.”

“Yes,” said the doctor, settling himself back comfortably in the cushions. “If it comes to a little cosy company on a railway journey, I should prefer

the corpse.”

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Vampire of the Village* by G. K. Chesterton]