

The Fairy Tale of Father Brown

G. K. Chesterton

The picturesque city and state of Heiligwaldenstein was one of those toy kingdoms of which certain parts of the German Empire still consist. It had come under the Prussian hegemony quite late in history—hardly fifty years before the fine summer day when Flambeau and Father Brown found themselves sitting in its gardens and drinking its beer. There had been not a little of war and wild justice there within living memory, as soon will be shown. But in merely looking at it one could not dismiss that impression of childishness which is the most charming side of Germany—those little pantomime, paternal monarchies in which a king seems as domestic as a cook. The German soldiers by the innumerable sentry-boxes looked strangely like German toys, and the clean-cut battlements of the castle, gilded by the sunshine, looked the more like the gilt gingerbread. For it was brilliant weather. The sky was as Prussian a blue as Potsdam itself could require, but it was yet more like that lavish and glowing use of the colour which a child extracts from a shilling paint-box. Even the grey-ribbed trees looked young, for the pointed buds on them were still pink, and in a pattern against the strong blue looked like innumerable childish figures.

Despite his prosaic appearance and generally practical walk of life, Father Brown was not without a certain streak of romance in his composition, though he generally kept his daydreams to himself, as many children do. Amid the brisk, bright colours of such a day, and in the heraldic framework of such a town, he did feel rather as if he had entered a fairy tale. He took a childish pleasure, as a younger brother might, in the formidable sword-stick which Flambeau always flung as he walked, and which now stood upright beside his tall mug of Munich. Nay, in his sleepy irresponsibility, he even found himself eyeing the knobbed and clumsy head of his own shabby umbrella, with some faint memories of the ogre's club in a coloured toy-book. But he never composed anything in the form of fiction, unless it be the tale that follows:

"I wonder," he said, "whether one would have real adventures in a place like this, if one put oneself in the way? It's a splendid back-scene for them, but I always have a kind of feeling that they would fight you with pasteboard sabres more than real, horrible swords."

"You are mistaken," said his friend. "In this place they not only fight with swords, but kill without swords. And there's worse than that."

"Why, what do you mean?" asked Father Brown.

"Why," replied the other, "I should say this was the only place in Europe where a man was ever shot without firearms."

“Do you mean a bow and arrow?” asked Brown in some wonder.

“I mean a bullet in the brain,” replied Flambeau. “Don’t you know the story of the late Prince of this place? It was one of the great police mysteries about twenty years ago. You remember, of course, that this place was forcibly annexed at the time of Bismarck’s very earliest schemes of consolidation—forcibly, that is, but not at all easily. The empire (or what wanted to be one) sent Prince Otto of Grossenmark to rule the place in the Imperial interests. We saw his portrait in the gallery there—a handsome old gentleman if he’d had any hair or eyebrows, and hadn’t been wrinkled all over like a vulture; but he had things to harass him, as I’ll explain in a minute. He was a soldier of distinguished skill and success, but he didn’t have altogether an easy job with this little place. He was defeated in several battles by the celebrated Arnhold brothers—the three guerrilla patriots to whom Swinburne wrote a poem, you remember:

Wolves with the hair of the ermine,

Crows that are crowned and kings—

These things be many as vermin,

Yet Three shall abide these things.

Or something of that kind. Indeed, it is by no means certain that the occupation would ever have been successful had not one of the three brothers, Paul, despicably, but very decisively declined to abide these things any longer, and, by surrendering all the secrets of the insurrection, ensured its overthrow and his own ultimate promotion to the post of chamberlain to Prince Otto. After this, Ludwig, the one genuine hero among Mr Swinburne’s heroes, was killed, sword in hand, in the capture of the city; and the third, Heinrich, who, though not a traitor, had always been tame and even timid compared with his active brothers, retired into something like a hermitage, became converted to a Christian quietism which was almost Quakerish, and never mixed with men except to give nearly all he had to the poor. They tell me that not long ago he could still be seen about the neighbourhood occasionally, a man in a black cloak, nearly blind, with very wild, white hair, but a face of astonishing softness.”

“I know,” said Father Brown. “I saw him once.”

His friend looked at him in some surprise. “I didn’t know you’d been here before,” he said.

“Perhaps you know as much about it as I do. Anyhow, that’s the story of the Arnholds, and he was the last survivor of them. Yes, and of all the men who played parts in that drama.”

“You mean that the Prince, too, died long before?”

“Died,” repeated Flambeau, “and that’s about as much as we can say. You must understand that towards the end of his life he began to have those tricks of the nerves not uncommon with tyrants. He multiplied the ordinary daily and nightly guard round his castle till there seemed to be more sentry-boxes than houses in the town, and doubtful characters were shot without mercy. He lived almost entirely in a little room that was in the very centre of the enormous labyrinth of all the other rooms, and even in this he erected another sort of central cabin or cupboard, lined with steel, like a safe or a battleship. Some say that under the floor of this again was a secret hole in the earth, no more than large enough to hold him, so that, in his anxiety to avoid the grave, he was willing to go into a place pretty much like it. But he went further yet. The populace had been supposed to be disarmed ever since the suppression of the revolt, but Otto now insisted, as governments very seldom insist, on an absolute and literal disarmament. It was carried out, with extraordinary thoroughness and severity, by very well-organized officials over a small and familiar area, and, so far as human strength and science can be absolutely certain of anything, Prince Otto was absolutely certain that nobody could introduce so much as a toy pistol into Heiligwaldenstein.”

“Human science can never be quite certain of things like that,” said Father Brown, still looking at the red budding of the branches over his head, “if only because of the difficulty about definition and connotation. What is a weapon? People have been murdered with the mildest domestic comforts; certainly with tea-kettles, probably with tea-cosies. On the other hand, if you showed an Ancient Briton a revolver, I doubt if he would know it was a weapon—until it was fired into him, of course. Perhaps somebody introduced a firearm so new that it didn’t even look like a firearm. Perhaps it looked like a thimble or something. Was the bullet at all peculiar?”

“Not that I ever heard of,” answered Flambeau; “but my information is fragmentary, and only comes from my old friend Grimm. He was a very able detective in the German service, and he tried to arrest me; I arrested him instead, and we had many interesting chats. He was in charge here of the inquiry about Prince Otto, but I forgot to ask him anything about the bullet. According to Grimm, what happened was this.” He paused a moment to drain the greater part of his dark lager at a draught, and then resumed:

“On the evening in question, it seems, the Prince was expected to appear in one of the outer rooms, because he had to receive certain visitors whom he really wished to meet. They were geological experts sent to investigate the old question of the alleged supply of gold from the rocks round here, upon which (as it was said) the small city-state had so long maintained its

credit and been able to negotiate with its neighbours even under the ceaseless bombardment of bigger armies. Hitherto it had never been found by the most exacting inquiry which could—”

“Which could be quite certain of discovering a toy pistol,” said Father Brown with a smile. “But what about the brother who ratted? Hadn’t he anything to tell the Prince?”

“He always asseverated that he did not know,” replied Flambeau; “that this was the one secret his brothers had not told him. It is only right to say that it received some support from fragmentary words—spoken by the great Ludwig in the hour of death, when he looked at Heinrich but pointed at Paul, and said, ‘You have not told him...’ and was soon afterwards incapable of speech. Anyhow, the deputation of distinguished geologists and mineralogists from Paris and Berlin were there in the most magnificent and appropriate dress, for there are no men who like wearing their decorations so much as the men of science—as anybody knows who has ever been to a soiree of the Royal Society. It was a brilliant gathering, but very late, and gradually the Chamberlain—you saw his portrait, too: a man with black eyebrows, serious eyes, and a meaningless sort of smile underneath—the Chamberlain, I say, discovered there was everything there except the Prince himself. He searched all the outer salons; then, remembering the man’s mad fits of fear, hurried to the inmost chamber. That also was empty, but the steel turret or cabin erected in the middle of it took some time to open. When it did open it was empty, too. He went and looked into the hole in the ground, which seemed deeper and somehow all the more like a grave—that is his account, of course. And even as he did so he heard a burst of cries and tumult in the long rooms and corridors without.

“First it was a distant din and thrill of something unthinkable on the horizon of the crowd, even beyond the castle. Next it was a wordless clamour startlingly close, and loud enough to be distinct if each word had not killed the other. Next came words of a terrible clearness, coming nearer, and next one man, rushing into the room and telling the news as briefly as such news is told.

“Otto, Prince of Heiligwaldenstein and Grossenmark, was lying in the dews of the darkening twilight in the woods beyond the castle, with his arms flung out and his face flung up to the moon. The blood still pulsed from his shattered temple and jaw, but it was the only part of him that moved like a living thing. He was clad in his full white and yellow uniform, as to receive his guests within, except that the sash or scarf had been unbound and lay rather crumpled by his side. Before he could be lifted he was dead. But, dead or alive, he was a riddle—he who had always hidden in the inmost chamber out there in the wet woods, unarmed and alone.”

“Who found his body?” asked Father Brown.

“Some girl attached to the Court named Hedwig von something or other,” replied his friend, “who had been out in the wood picking wild flowers.”

“Had she picked any?” asked the priest, staring rather vacantly at the veil of the branches above him.

“Yes,” replied Flambeau. “I particularly remember that the Chamberlain, or old Grimm or somebody, said how horrible it was, when they came up at her call, to see a girl holding spring flowers and bending over that—that bloody collapse. However, the main point is that before help arrived he was dead, and the news, of course, had to be carried back to the castle. The consternation it created was something beyond even that natural in a Court at the fall of a potentate. The foreign visitors, especially the mining experts, were in the wildest doubt and excitement, as well as many important Prussian officials, and it soon began to be clear that the scheme for finding the treasure bulked much bigger in the business than people had supposed. Experts and officials had been promised great prizes or international advantages, and some even said that the Prince’s secret apartments and strong military protection were due less to fear of the populace than to the pursuit of some private investigation of—”

“Had the flowers got long stalks?” asked Father Brown.

Flambeau stared at him. “What an odd person you are!” he said. “That’s exactly what old Grimm said. He said the ugliest part of it, he thought—uglier than the blood and bullet—was that the flowers were quite short, plucked close under the head.”

“Of course,” said the priest, “when a grown up girl is really picking flowers, she picks them with plenty of stalk. If she just pulled their heads off, as a child does, it looks as if—” And he hesitated.

“Well?” inquired the other.

“Well, it looks rather as if she had snatched them nervously, to make an excuse for being there after—well, after she was there.”

“I know what you’re driving at,” said Flambeau rather gloomily. “But that and every other suspicion breaks down on the one point—the want of a weapon. He could have been killed, as you say, with lots of other things—even with his own military sash; but we have to explain not how he was killed, but how he was shot. And the fact is we can’t. They had the girl most ruthlessly searched; for, to tell the truth, she was a little suspect, though the niece and ward of the wicked old Chamberlain, Paul Arnhold. But she was very romantic, and was suspected of sympathy with the old revolutionary enthusiasm in her family. All the same, however romantic you are, you can’t imagine a big bullet into a man’s jaw or brain without

using a gun or pistol. And there was no pistol, though there were two pistol shots. I leave it to you, my friend.”

“How do you know there were two shots?” asked the little priest.

“There was only one in his head,” said his companion, “but there was another bullet-hole in the sash.”

Father Brown’s smooth brow became suddenly constricted. “Was the other bullet found?” he demanded.

Flambeau started a little. “I don’t think I remember,” he said.

“Hold on! Hold on! Hold on!” cried Brown, frowning more and more, with a quite unusual concentration of curiosity. “Don’t think me rude. Let me think this out for a moment.”

“All right,” said Flambeau, laughing, and finished his beer. A slight breeze stirred the budding trees and blew up into the sky cloudlets of white and pink that seemed to make the sky bluer and the whole coloured scene more quaint. They might have been cherubs flying home to the casements of a sort of celestial nursery. The oldest tower of the castle, the Dragon Tower, stood up as grotesque as the ale-mug, but as homely. Only beyond the tower glimmered the wood in which the man had lain dead.

“What became of this Hedwig eventually?” asked the priest at last.

“She is married to General Schwartz,” said Flambeau. “No doubt you’ve heard of his career, which was rather romantic. He had distinguished himself even, before his exploits at Sadowa and Gravelotte; in fact, he rose from the ranks, which is very unusual even in the smallest of the German...”

Father Brown sat up suddenly.

“Rose from the ranks!” he cried, and made a mouth as if to whistle. “Well, well, what a queer story! What a queer way of killing a man; but I suppose it was the only one possible. But to think of hate so patient—”

“What do you mean?” demanded the other. “In what way did they kill the man?”

“They killed him with the sash,” said Brown carefully; and then, as Flambeau protested: “Yes, yes, I know about the bullet. Perhaps I ought to say he died of having a sash. I know it doesn’t sound like having a disease.”

“I suppose,” said Flambeau, “that you’ve got some notion in your head, but it won’t easily get the bullet out of his. As I explained before, he might easily have been strangled. But he was shot. By whom? By what?”

“He was shot by his own orders,” said the priest.

“You mean he committed suicide?”

“I didn’t say by his own wish,” replied Father Brown. “I said by his own orders.”

“Well, anyhow, what is your theory?”

Father Brown laughed. “I am only on my holiday,” he said. “I haven’t got any theories. Only this place reminds me of fairy stories, and, if you like, I’ll tell you a story.”

The little pink clouds, that looked rather like sweet-stuff, had floated up to crown the turrets of the gilt gingerbread castle, and the pink baby fingers of the budding trees seemed spreading and stretching to reach them; the blue sky began to take a bright violet of evening, when Father Brown suddenly spoke again:

“It was on a dismal night, with rain still dropping from the trees and dew already clustering, that Prince Otto of Grossenmark stepped hurriedly out of a side door of the castle and walked swiftly into the wood. One of the innumerable sentries saluted him, but he did not notice it. He had no wish to be specially noticed himself. He was glad when the great trees, grey and already greasy with rain, swallowed him up like a swamp. He had deliberately chosen the least frequented side of his palace, but even that was more frequented than he liked. But there was no particular chance of officious or diplomatic pursuit, for his exit had been a sudden impulse. All the full-dressed diplomatists he left behind were unimportant. He had realized suddenly that he could do without them.

“His great passion was not the much nobler dread of death, but the strange desire of gold. For this legend of the gold he had left Grossenmark and invaded Heiligwaldenstein. For this and only this he had bought the traitor and butchered the hero, for this he had long questioned and cross-questioned the false Chamberlain, until he had come to the conclusion that, touching his ignorance, the renegade really told the truth. For this he had, somewhat reluctantly, paid and promised money on the chance of gaining the larger amount; and for this he had stolen out of his palace like a thief in the rain, for he had thought of another way to get the desire of his eyes, and to get it cheap.

“Away at the upper end of a rambling mountain path to which he was making his way, among the pillared rocks along the ridge that hangs above the town, stood the hermitage, hardly more than a cavern fenced with thorn, in which the third of the great brethren had

long hidden himself from the world. He, thought Prince Otto, could have no real reason for refusing to give up the gold. He had known its place for years, and made no effort to find it, even before his new ascetic creed had cut him off from property or pleasures. True, he had been an enemy, but he now professed a duty of having no enemies. Some concession to his cause, some appeal to his principles, would probably get the mere money secret out of him. Otto was no coward, in spite of his network of military precautions, and, in any case, his avarice was stronger than his fears. Nor was there much cause for fear. Since he was certain there were no private arms in the whole principality, he was a hundred times more certain there were none in the Quaker's little hermitage on the hill, where he lived on herbs, with two old rustic servants, and with no other voice of man for year after year. Prince Otto looked down with something of a grim smile at the bright, square labyrinths of the lamp-lit city below him. For as far as the eye could see there ran the rifles of his friends, and not one pinch of powder for his enemies. Rifles ranked so close even to that mountain path that a cry from him would bring the soldiers rushing up the hill, to say nothing of the fact that the wood and ridge were patrolled at regular intervals; rifles so far away, in the dim woods, dwarfed by distance, beyond the river, that an enemy could not slink into the town by any detour. And round the palace rifles at the west door and the east door, at the north door and the south, and all along the four facades linking them. He was safe.

“It was all the more clear when he had crested the ridge and found how naked was the nest of his old enemy. He found himself on a small platform of rock, broken abruptly by the three corners of precipice. Behind was the black cave, masked with green thorn, so low that it was hard to believe that a man could enter it. In front was the fall of the cliffs and the vast but cloudy vision of the valley. On the small rock platform stood an old bronze lectern or reading-stand, groaning under a great German Bible. The bronze or copper of it had grown green with the eating airs of that exalted place, and Otto had instantly the thought, ‘Even if they had arms, they must be rusted by now.’ Moonrise had already made a deathly dawn behind the crests and crags, and the rain had ceased.

“Behind the lectern, and looking across the valley, stood a very old man in a black robe that fell as straight as the cliffs around him, but whose white hair and weak voice seemed alike to waver in the wind. He was evidently reading some daily lesson as part of his religious exercises. ‘They trust in their horses...’

“‘Sir,’ said the Prince of Heiligwaldenstein, with quite unusual courtesy, ‘I should like only one word with you.’

“‘...and in their chariots,’ went on the old man weakly, ‘but we will trust in the name of the Lord of Hosts....’ His last words were inaudible, but he closed the book reverently and, being nearly blind, made a groping movement and gripped the reading-stand. Instantly his two servants slipped out of the low-browed cavern and supported him. They wore dull-black gowns like his own, but they had not the frosty silver on the hair, nor the frost-bitten

refinement of the features. They were peasants, Croat or Magyar, with broad, blunt visages and blinking eyes. For the first time something troubled the Prince, but his courage and diplomatic sense stood firm.

“I fear we have not met,’ he said, ‘since that awful cannonade in which your poor brother died.’

“All my brothers died,’ said the old man, still looking across the valley. Then, for one instant turning on Otto his drooping, delicate features, and the wintry hair that seemed to drip over his eyebrows like icicles, he added: ‘You see, I am dead, too.’

“I hope you’ll understand,’ said the Prince, controlling himself almost to a point of conciliation, ‘that I do not come here to haunt you, as a mere ghost of those great quarrels. We will not talk about who was right or wrong in that, but at least there was one point on which we were never wrong, because you were always right. Whatever is to be said of the policy of your family, no one for one moment imagines that you were moved by the mere gold; you have proved yourself above the suspicion that...’

“The old man in the black gown had hitherto continued to gaze at him with watery blue eyes and a sort of weak wisdom in his face. But when the word ‘gold’ was said he held out his hand as if in arrest of something, and turned away his face to the mountains.

“He has spoken of gold,’ he said. ‘He has spoken of things not lawful. Let him cease to speak.’

“Otto had the vice of his Prussian type and tradition, which is to regard success not as an incident but as a quality. He conceived himself and his like as perpetually conquering peoples who were perpetually being conquered. Consequently, he was ill acquainted with the emotion of surprise, and ill prepared for the next movement, which startled and stiffened him. He had opened his mouth to answer the hermit, when the mouth was stopped and the voice strangled by a strong, soft gag suddenly twisted round his head like a tourniquet. It was fully forty seconds before he even realized that the two Hungarian servants had done it, and that they had done it with his own military scarf.

“The old man went again weakly to his great brazen-supported Bible, turned over the leaves, with a patience that had something horrible about it, till he came to the Epistle of St James, and then began to read: ‘The tongue is a little member, but—’

“Something in the very voice made the Prince turn suddenly and plunge down the mountain-path he had climbed. He was half-way towards the gardens of the palace before he even tried to tear the strangling scarf from his neck and jaws. He tried again and again, and it was impossible; the men who had knotted that gag knew the difference between what

a man can do with his hands in front of him and what he can do with his hands behind his head. His legs were free to leap like an antelope on the mountains, his arms were free to use any gesture or wave any signal, but he could not speak. A dumb devil was in him.

“He had come close to the woods that walled in the castle before he had quite realized what his wordless state meant and was meant to mean. Once more he looked down grimly at the bright, square labyrinths of the lamp-lit city below him, and he smiled no more. He felt himself repeating the phrases of his former mood with a murderous irony. Far as the eye could see ran the rifles of his friends, every one of whom would shoot him dead if he could not answer the challenge. Rifles were so near that the wood and ridge could be patrolled at regular intervals; therefore it was useless to hide in the wood till morning. Rifles were ranked so far away that an enemy could not slink into the town by any detour; therefore it was vain to return to the city by any remote course. A cry from him would bring his soldiers rushing up the hill. But from him no cry would come.

“The moon had risen in strengthening silver, and the sky showed in stripes of bright, nocturnal blue between the black stripes of the pines about the castle. Flowers of some wide and feathery sort—for he had never noticed such things before—were at once luminous and discoloured by the moonshine, and seemed indescribably fantastic as they clustered, as if crawling about the roots of the trees. Perhaps his reason had been suddenly unseated by the unnatural captivity he carried with him, but in that wood he felt something unfathomably German—the fairy tale. He knew with half his mind that he was drawing near to the castle of an ogre—he had forgotten that he was the ogre. He remembered asking his mother if bears lived in the old park at home. He stooped to pick a flower, as if it were a charm against enchantment. The stalk was stronger than he expected, and broke with a slight snap. Carefully trying to place it in his scarf, he heard the halloo, ‘Who goes there?’ Then he remembered the scarf was not in its usual place.

“He tried to scream and was silent. The second challenge came; and then a shot that shrieked as it came and then was stilled suddenly by impact. Otto of Grossenmark lay very peacefully among the fairy trees, and would do no more harm either with gold or steel; only the silver pencil of the moon would pick out and trace here and there the intricate ornament of his uniform, or the old wrinkles on his brow. May God have mercy on his soul.

“The sentry who had fired, according to the strict orders of the garrison, naturally ran forward to find some trace of his quarry. He was a private named Schwartz, since not unknown in his profession, and what he found was a bald man in uniform, but with his face so bandaged by a kind of mask made of his own military scarf that nothing but open, dead eyes could be seen, glittering stonily in the moonlight. The bullet had gone through the gag into the jaw; that is why there was a shot-hole in the scarf, but only one shot. Naturally, if not correctly, young Schwartz tore off the mysterious silken mask and cast it on the grass; and then he saw whom he had slain.

“We cannot be certain of the next phase. But I incline to believe that there was a fairy tale, after all, in that little wood, horrible as was its occasion. Whether the young lady named Hedwig had any previous knowledge of the soldier she saved and eventually married, or whether she came accidentally upon the accident and their intimacy began that night, we shall probably never know. But we can know, I fancy, that this Hedwig was a heroine, and deserved to marry a man who became something of a hero. She did the bold and the wise thing. She persuaded the sentry to go back to his post, in which place there was nothing to connect him with the disaster; he was but one of the most loyal and orderly of fifty such sentries within call. She remained by the body and gave the alarm; and there was nothing to connect her with the disaster either, since she had not got, and could not have, any firearms.

“Well,” said Father Brown rising cheerfully “I hope they’re happy.”

“Where are you going?” asked his friend.

“I’m going to have another look at that portrait of the Chamberlain, the Arnhold who betrayed his brethren,” answered the priest. “I wonder what part—I wonder if a man is less a traitor when he is twice a traitor?”

And he ruminated long before the portrait of a white-haired man with black eyebrows and a pink, painted sort of smile that seemed to contradict the black warning in his eyes.

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