The God of the Gongs

G. K. Chesterton

IT was one of those chilly and empty afternoons in early winter, when the daylight is silver rather than gold and pewter rather than silver. If it was dreary in a hundred bleak offices and yawning drawing-rooms, it was drearier still along the edges of the flat Essex coast, where the monotony was the more inhuman for being broken at very long intervals by a lamp-post that looked less civilized than a tree, or a tree that looked more ugly than a lamp-post. A light fall of snow had half-melted into a few strips, also looking leaden rather than silver, when it had been fixed again by the seal of frost; no fresh snow had fallen, but a ribbon of the old snow ran along the very margin of the coast, so as to parallel the pale ribbon of the foam.

The line of the sea looked frozen in the very vividness of its violet-blue, like the vein of a frozen finger. For miles and miles, forward and back, there was no breathing soul, save two pedestrians, walking at a brisk pace, though one had much longer legs and took much longer strides than the other.

It did not seem a very appropriate place or time for a holiday, but Father Brown had few holidays, and had to take them when he could, and he always preferred, if possible, to take them in company with his old friend Flambeau, ex-criminal and ex-detective. The priest had had a fancy for visiting his old parish at Cobhole, and was going north-eastward along the coast.

After walking a mile or two farther, they found that the shore was beginning to be formally embanked, so as to form something like a parade; the ugly lamp-posts became less few and far between and more ornamental, though quite equally ugly. Half a mile farther on Father Brown was puzzled first by little labyrinths of flowerless flower-pots, covered with the low, flat, quiet-coloured plants that look less like a garden than a tessellated pavement, between weak curly paths studded with seats with curly backs. He faintly sniffed the atmosphere of a certain sort of seaside town that he did not specially care about, and, looking ahead along the parade by the sea, he saw something that put the matter beyond a doubt. In the grey distance the big bandstand of a watering-place stood up like a giant mushroom with six legs.

“I suppose,” said Father Brown, turning up his coat-collar and drawing a woollen scarf rather closer round his neck, “that we are approaching a pleasure resort.”

“I fear,” answered Flambeau, “a pleasure resort to which few people just now have the pleasure of resorting. They try to revive these places in the winter, but it never succeeds except with Brighton and the old ones. This must be Seawood, I think—Lord Pooley’s experiment; he had the Sicilian Singers down at Christmas, and there’s talk about holding one of the great glove-fights here. But they’ll have to chuck the rotten place into the sea; it’s as dreary as a lost railway-

carriage."

They had come under the big bandstand, and the priest was looking up at it with a curiosity that had something rather odd about it, his head a little on one side, like a bird's. It was the conventional, rather tawdry kind of erection for its purpose: a flattened dome or canopy, gilt here and there, and lifted on six slender pillars of painted wood, the whole being raised about five feet above the parade on a round wooden platform like a drum. But there was something fantastic about the snow combined with something artificial about the gold that haunted Flambeau as well as his friend with some association he could not capture, but which he knew was at once artistic and alien.

"I've got it," he said at last. "It's Japanese. It's like those fanciful Japanese prints, where the snow on the mountain looks like sugar, and the gilt on the pagodas is like gilt on gingerbread. It looks just like a little pagan temple."

"Yes," said Father Brown. "Let's have a look at the god." And with an agility hardly to be expected of him, he hopped up on to the raised platform.

"Oh, very well," said Flambeau, laughing; and the next instant his own towering figure was visible on that quaint elevation.

Slight as was the difference of height, it gave in those level wastes a sense of seeing yet farther and farther across land and sea. Inland the little wintry gardens faded into a confused grey copse; beyond that, in the distance, were long low barns of a lonely farmhouse, and beyond that nothing but the long East Anglian plains. Seawards there was no sail or sign of life save a few seagulls: and even they looked like the last snowflakes, and seemed to float rather than fly.

Flambeau turned abruptly at an exclamation behind him. It seemed to come from lower down than might have been expected, and to be addressed to his heels rather than his head. He instantly held out his hand, but he could hardly help laughing at what he saw. For some reason or other the platform had given way under Father Brown, and the unfortunate little man had dropped through to the level of the parade. He was just tall enough, or short enough, for his head alone to stick out of the hole in the broken wood, looking like St John the Baptist's head on a charger. The face wore a disconcerted expression, as did, perhaps, that of St John the Baptist.

In a moment he began to laugh a little. "This wood must be rotten," said Flambeau. "Though it seems odd it should bear me, and you go through the weak place. Let me help you out."

But the little priest was looking rather curiously at the corners and edges of the wood

alleged to be rotten, and there was a sort of trouble on his brow.

“Come along,” cried Flambeau impatiently, still with his big brown hand extended. “Don’t you want to get out?”

The priest was holding a splinter of the broken wood between his finger and thumb, and did not immediately reply. At last he said thoughtfully: “Want to get out? Why, no. I rather think I want to get in.” And he dived into the darkness under the wooden floor so abruptly as to knock off his big curved clerical hat and leave it lying on the boards above, without any clerical head in it.

Flambeau looked once more inland and out to sea, and once more could see nothing but seas as wintry as the snow, and snows as level as the sea.

There came a scurrying noise behind him, and the little priest came scrambling out of the hole faster than he had fallen in. His face was no longer disconcerted, but rather resolute, and, perhaps only through the reflections of the snow, a trifle paler than usual.

“Well?” asked his tall friend. “Have you found the god of the temple?”

“No,” answered Father Brown. “I have found what was sometimes more important. The Sacrifice.”

“What the devil do you mean?” cried Flambeau, quite alarmed.

Father Brown did not answer. He was staring, with a knot in his forehead, at the landscape; and he suddenly pointed at it. “What’s that house over there?” he asked.

Following his finger, Flambeau saw for the first time the corners of a building nearer than the farmhouse, but screened for the most part with a fringe of trees. It was not a large building, and stood well back from the shore—, but a glint of ornament on it suggested that it was part of the same watering-place scheme of decoration as the bandstand, the little gardens and the curly-backed iron seats.

Father Brown jumped off the bandstand, his friend following; and as they walked in the direction indicated the trees fell away to right and left, and they saw a small, rather flashy hotel, such as is common in resorts—the hotel of the Saloon Bar rather than the Bar Parlour. Almost the whole frontage was of gilt plaster and figured glass, and between that grey seascape and the grey, witch-like trees, its gimcrack quality had something spectral in its melancholy. They both felt vaguely that if any food or drink were offered at such a hostelry, it would be the paste-board ham and empty mug of the pantomime.

In this, however, they were not altogether confirmed. As they drew nearer and nearer to the place they saw in front of the buffet, which was apparently closed, one of the iron garden-seats with curly backs that had adorned the gardens, but much longer, running almost the whole length of the frontage. Presumably, it was placed so that visitors might sit there and look at the sea, but one hardly expected to find anyone doing it in such weather.

Nevertheless, just in front of the extreme end of the iron seat stood a small round restaurant table, and on this stood a small bottle of Chablis and a plate of almonds and raisins. Behind the table and on the seat sat a dark-haired young man, bareheaded, and gazing at the sea in a state of almost astonishing immobility.

But though he might have been a waxwork when they were within four yards of him, he jumped up like a jack-in-the-box when they came within three, and said in a deferential, though not undignified, manner: “Will you step inside, gentlemen? I have no staff at present, but I can get you anything simple myself.”

“Much obliged,” said Flambeau. “So you are the proprietor?”

“Yes,” said the dark man, dropping back a little into his motionless manner. “My waiters are all Italians, you see, and I thought it only fair they should see their countryman beat the black, if he really can do it. You know the great fight between Malvoli and Nigger Ned is coming off after all?”

“I’m afraid we can’t wait to trouble your hospitality seriously,” said Father Brown. “But my friend would be glad of a glass of sherry, I’m sure, to keep out the cold and drink success to the Latin champion.”

Flambeau did not understand the sherry, but he did not object to it in the least. He could only say amiably: “Oh, thank you very much.”

“Sherry, sir—certainly,” said their host, turning to his hostel. “Excuse me if I detain you a few minutes. As I told you, I have no staff—” And he went towards the black windows of his shuttered and unlighted inn.

“Oh, it doesn’t really matter,” began Flambeau, but the man turned to reassure him.

“I have the keys,” he said. “I could find my way in the dark.”

“I didn’t mean—” began Father Brown.

He was interrupted by a bellowing human voice that came out of the bowels of the uninhabited hotel. It thundered some foreign name loudly but inaudibly, and the hotel

proprietor moved more sharply towards it than he had done for Flambeau's sherry. As instant evidence proved, the proprietor had told, then and after, nothing but the literal truth. But both Flambeau and Father Brown have often confessed that, in all their (often outrageous) adventures, nothing had so chilled their blood as that voice of an ogre, sounding suddenly out of a silent and empty inn.

"My cook!" cried the proprietor hastily. "I had forgotten my cook. He will be starting presently. Sherry, sir?"

And, sure enough, there appeared in the doorway a big white bulk with white cap and white apron, as befits a cook, but with the needless emphasis of a black face. Flambeau had often heard that negroes made good cooks. But somehow something in the contrast of colour and caste increased his surprise that the hotel proprietor should answer the call of the cook, and not the cook the call of the proprietor. But he reflected that head cooks are proverbially arrogant; and, besides, the host had come back with the sherry, and that was the great thing.

"I rather wonder," said Father Brown, "that there are so few people about the beach, when this big fight is coming on after all. We only met one man for miles."

The hotel proprietor shrugged his shoulders. "They come from the other end of the town, you see—from the station, three miles from here. They are only interested in the sport, and will stop in hotels for the night only. After all, it is hardly weather for basking on the shore."

"Or on the seat," said Flambeau, and pointed to the little table.

"I have to keep a look-out," said the man with the motionless face. He was a quiet, well-featured fellow, rather sallow; his dark clothes had nothing distinctive about them, except that his black necktie was worn rather high, like a stock, and secured by a gold pin with some grotesque head to it. Nor was there anything notable in the face, except something that was probably a mere nervous trick—a habit of opening one eye more narrowly than the other, giving the impression that the other was larger, or was, perhaps, artificial.

The silence that ensued was broken by their host saying quietly: "Whereabouts did you meet the one man on your march?"

"Curiously enough," answered the priest, "close by here—just by that bandstand."

Flambeau, who had sat on the long iron seat to finish his sherry, put it down and rose to his feet, staring at his friend in amazement. He opened his mouth to speak, and then shut it again.

“Curious,” said the dark-haired man thoughtfully. “What was he like?”

“It was rather dark when I saw him,” began Father Brown, “but he was—”

As has been said, the hotel-keeper can be proved to have told the precise truth. His phrase that the cook was starting presently was fulfilled to the letter, for the cook came out, pulling his gloves on, even as they spoke.

But he was a very different figure from the confused mass of white and black that had appeared for an instant in the doorway. He was buttoned and buckled up to his bursting eyeballs in the most brilliant fashion. A tall black hat was tilted on his broad black head—a hat of the sort that the French wit has compared to eight mirrors. But somehow the black man was like the black hat. He also was black, and yet his glossy skin flung back the light at eight angles or more. It is needless to say that he wore white spats and a white slip inside his waistcoat. The red flower stood up in his buttonhole aggressively, as if it had suddenly grown there. And in the way he carried his cane in one hand and his cigar in the other there was a certain attitude—an attitude we must always remember when we talk of racial prejudices: something innocent and insolent—the cake walk.

“Sometimes,” said Flambeau, looking after him, “I’m not surprised that they lynch them.”

“I am never surprised,” said Father Brown, “at any work of hell. But as I was saying,” he resumed, as the negro, still ostentatiously pulling on his yellow gloves, betook himself briskly towards the watering-place, a queer music-hall figure against that grey and frosty scene—“as I was saying, I couldn’t describe the man very minutely, but he had a flourish and old-fashioned whiskers and moustachios, dark or dyed, as in the pictures of foreign financiers, round his neck was wrapped a long purple scarf that thrashed out in the wind as he walked. It was fixed at the throat rather in the way that nurses fix children’s comforters with a safety-pin. Only this,” added the priest, gazing placidly out to sea, “was not a safety-pin.”

The man sitting on the long iron bench was also gazing placidly out to sea. Now he was once more in repose. Flambeau felt quite certain that one of his eyes was naturally larger than the other. Both were now well opened, and he could almost fancy the left eye grew larger as he gazed.

“It was a very long gold pin, and had the carved head of a monkey or some such thing,” continued the cleric; “and it was fixed in a rather odd way—he wore pince-nez and a broad black—”

The motionless man continued to gaze at the sea, and the eyes in his head might have

belonged to two different men. Then he made a movement of blinding swiftness.

Father Brown had his back to him, and in that flash might have fallen dead on his face. Flambeau had no weapon, but his large brown hands were resting on the end of the long iron seat. His shoulders abruptly altered their shape, and he heaved the whole huge thing high over his head, like a headsman's axe about to fall. The mere height of the thing, as he held it vertical, looked like a long iron ladder by which he was inviting men to climb towards the stars. But the long shadow, in the level evening light, looked like a giant brandishing the Eiffel Tower. It was the shock of that shadow, before the shock of the iron crash, that made the stranger quail and dodge, and then dart into his inn, leaving the flat and shining dagger he had dropped exactly where it had fallen.

"We must get away from here instantly," cried Flambeau, flinging the huge seat away with furious indifference on the beach. He caught the little priest by the elbow and ran him down a grey perspective of barren back garden, at the end of which there was a closed back garden door. Flambeau bent over it an instant in violent silence, and then said: "The door is locked."

As he spoke a black feather from one of the ornamental firs fell, brushing the brim of his hat. It startled him more than the small and distant detonation that had come just before. Then came another distant detonation, and the door he was trying to open shook under the bullet buried in it. Flambeau's shoulders again filled out and altered suddenly. Three hinges and a lock burst at the same instant, and he went out into the empty path behind, carrying the great garden door with him, as Samson carried the gates of Gaza.

Then he flung the garden door over the garden wall, just as a third shot picked up a spurt of snow and dust behind his heel. Without ceremony he snatched up the little priest, slung him astraddle on his shoulders, and went racing towards Seawood as fast as his long legs could carry him. It was not until nearly two miles farther on that he set his small companion down. It had hardly been a dignified escape, in spite of the classic model of Anchises, but Father Brown's face only wore a broad grin.

"Well," said Flambeau, after an impatient silence, as they resumed their more conventional tramp through the streets on the edge of the town, where no outrage need be feared, "I don't know what all this means, but I take it I may trust my own eyes that you never met the man you have so accurately described."

"I did meet him in a way," Brown said, biting his finger rather nervously—"I did really. And it was too dark to see him properly, because it was under that bandstand affair. But I'm afraid I didn't describe him so very accurately after all, for his pince-nez was broken under him, and the long gold pin wasn't stuck through his purple scarf but through his heart."

“And I suppose,” said the other in a lower voice, “that glass-eyed guy had something to do with it.”

“I had hoped he had only a little,” answered Brown in a rather troubled voice, “and I may have been wrong in what I did. I acted on impulse. But I fear this business has deep roots and dark.”

They walked on through some streets in silence. The yellow lamps were beginning to be lit in the cold blue twilight, and they were evidently approaching the more central parts of the town. Highly coloured bills announcing the glove-fight between Nigger Ned and Malvoli were slapped about the walls.

“Well,” said Flambeau, “I never murdered anyone, even in my criminal days, but I can almost sympathize with anyone doing it in such a dreary place. Of all God-forsaken dustbins of Nature, I think the most heart-breaking are places like that bandstand, that were meant to be festive and are forlorn. I can fancy a morbid man feeling he must kill his rival in the solitude and irony of such a scene. I remember once taking a tramp in your glorious Surrey hills, thinking of nothing but gorse and skylarks, when I came out on a vast circle of land, and over me lifted a vast, voiceless structure, tier above tier of seats, as huge as a Roman amphitheatre and as empty as a new letter-rack. A bird sailed in heaven over it. It was the Grand Stand at Epsom. And I felt that no one would ever be happy there again.”

“It’s odd you should mention Epsom,” said the priest. “Do you remember what was called the Sutton Mystery, because two suspected men—ice-cream men, I think—happened to live at Sutton? They were eventually released. A man was found strangled, it was said, on the Downs round that part. As a fact, I know (from an Irish policeman who is a friend of mine) that he was found close up to the Epsom Grand Stand—in fact, only hidden by one of the lower doors being pushed back.”

“That is queer,” assented Flambeau. “But it rather confirms my view that such pleasure places look awfully lonely out of season, or the man wouldn’t have been murdered there.”

“I’m not so sure he—” began Brown, and stopped.

“Not so sure he was murdered?” queried his companion.

“Not so sure he was murdered out of the season,” answered the little priest, with simplicity. “Don’t you think there’s something rather tricky about this solitude, Flambeau? Do you feel sure a wise murderer would always want the spot to be lonely? It’s very, very seldom a man is quite alone. And, short of that, the more alone he is, the more certain he is to be seen. No; I think there must be some other—Why, here we are at the Pavilion or Palace, or whatever they call it.”

They had emerged on a small square, brilliantly lighted, of which the principal building was gay with gilding, gaudy with posters, and flanked with two giant photographs of Malvoli and Nigger Ned.

“Hallo!” cried Flambeau in great surprise, as his clerical friend stumped straight up the broad steps. “I didn’t know pugilism was your latest hobby. Are you going to see the fight?”

“I don’t think there will be any fight,” replied Father Brown.

They passed rapidly through ante-rooms and inner rooms; they passed through the hall of combat itself, raised, roped, and padded with innumerable seats and boxes, and still the cleric did not look round or pause till he came to a clerk at a desk outside a door marked “Committee”. There he stopped and asked to see Lord Pooley.

The attendant observed that his lordship was very busy, as the fight was coming on soon, but Father Brown had a good-tempered tedium of reiteration for which the official mind is generally not prepared. In a few moments the rather baffled Flambeau found himself in the presence of a man who was still shouting directions to another man going out of the room. “Be careful, you know, about the ropes after the fourth—Well, and what do you want, I wonder!”

Lord Pooley was a gentleman, and, like most of the few remaining to our race, was worried—especially about money. He was half grey and half flaxen, and he had the eyes of fever and a high-bridged, frost-bitten nose.

“Only a word,” said Father Brown. “I have come to prevent a man being killed.”

Lord Pooley bounded off his chair as if a spring had flung him from it. “I’m damned if I’ll stand any more of this!” he cried. “You and your committees and parsons and petitions! Weren’t there parsons in the old days, when they fought without gloves? Now they’re fighting with the regulation gloves, and there’s not the rag of a possibility of either of the boxers being killed.”

“I didn’t mean either of the boxers,” said the little priest.

“Well, well, well!” said the nobleman, with a touch of frosty humour. “Who’s going to be killed? The referee?”

“I don’t know who’s going to be killed,” replied Father Brown, with a reflective stare. “If I did I shouldn’t have to spoil your pleasure. I could simply get him to escape. I never could

see anything wrong about prize-fights. As it is, I must ask you to announce that the fight is off for the present."

"Anything else?" jeered the gentleman with feverish eyes. "And what do you say to the two thousand people who have come to see it?"

"I say there will be one thousand nine-hundred and ninety-nine of them left alive when they have seen it," said Father Brown.

Lord Pooley looked at Flambeau. "Is your friend mad?" he asked.

"Far from it," was the reply.

"And look here," resumed Pooley in his restless way, "it's worse than that. A whole pack of Italians have turned up to back Malvoli—swarthy, savage fellows of some country, anyhow. You know what these Mediterranean races are like. If I send out word that it's off we shall have Malvoli storming in here at the head of a whole Corsican clan."

"My lord, it is a matter of life and death," said the priest. "Ring your bell. Give your message. And see whether it is Malvoli who answers."

The nobleman struck the bell on the table with an odd air of new curiosity. He said to the clerk who appeared almost instantly in the doorway: "I have a serious announcement to make to the audience shortly. Meanwhile, would you kindly tell the two champions that the fight will have to be put off."

The clerk stared for some seconds as if at a demon and vanished.

"What authority have you for what you say?" asked Lord Pooley abruptly. "Whom did you consult?"

"I consulted a bandstand," said Father Brown, scratching his head. "But, no, I'm wrong; I consulted a book, too. I picked it up on a bookstall in London—very cheap, too."

He had taken out of his pocket a small, stout, leather-bound volume, and Flambeau, looking over his shoulder, could see that it was some book of old travels, and had a leaf turned down for reference.

"'The only form in which Voodoo—'" began Father Brown, reading aloud.

"In which what?" inquired his lordship.

"'In which Voodoo,'" repeated the reader, almost with relish, "'is widely organized outside Jamaica itself is in the form known as the Monkey, or the God of the Gongs, which is powerful in many parts of the two American continents, especially among half-breeds, many of whom look exactly like white men. It differs from most other forms of devil-worship and human sacrifice in the fact that the blood is not shed formally on the altar, but by a sort of assassination among the crowd. The gongs beat with a deafening din as the doors of the shrine open and the monkey-god is revealed; almost the whole congregation rivet ecstatic eyes on him. But after—'"

The door of the room was flung open, and the fashionable negro stood framed in it, his eyeballs rolling, his silk hat still insolently tilted on his head. "Huh!" he cried, showing his apish teeth. "What this? Huh! Huh! You steal a coloured gentleman's prize—prize his already—yo' think yo' jes' save that white 'Talian trash—"

"The matter is only deferred," said the nobleman quietly. "I will be with you to explain in a minute or two."

"Who you to—" shouted Nigger Ned, beginning to storm.

"My name is Pooley," replied the other, with a creditable coolness. "I am the organizing secretary, and I advise you just now to leave the room."

"Who this fellow?" demanded the dark champion, pointing to the priest disdainfully.

"My name is Brown," was the reply. "And I advise you just now to leave the country."

The prize-fighter stood glaring for a few seconds, and then, rather to the surprise of Flambeau and the others, strode out, sending the door to with a crash behind him.

"Well," asked Father Brown rubbing his dusty hair up, "what do you think of Leonardo da Vinci? A beautiful Italian head."

"Look here," said Lord Pooley, "I've taken a considerable responsibility, on your bare word. I think you ought to tell me more about this."

"You are quite right, my lord," answered Brown. "And it won't take long to tell." He put the little leather book in his overcoat pocket. "I think we know all that this can tell us, but you shall look at it to see if I'm right. That negro who has just swaggered out is one of the most dangerous men on earth, for he has the brains of a European, with the instincts of a cannibal. He has turned what was clean, common-sense butchery among his fellow-barbarians into a very modern and scientific secret society of assassins. He doesn't know I know it, nor, for the matter of that, that I can't prove it."

There was a silence, and the little man went on.

“But if I want to murder somebody, will it really be the best plan to make sure I’m alone with him?”

Lord Pooley’s eyes recovered their frosty twinkle as he looked at the little clergyman. He only said: “If you want to murder somebody, I should advise it.”

Father Brown shook his head, like a murderer of much riper experience. “So Flambeau said,” he replied, with a sigh. “But consider. The more a man feels lonely the less he can be sure he is alone. It must mean empty spaces round him, and they are just what make him obvious. Have you never seen one ploughman from the heights, or one shepherd from the valleys? Have you never walked along a cliff, and seen one man walking along the sands? Didn’t you know when he’s killed a crab, and wouldn’t you have known if it had been a creditor? No! No! No! For an intelligent murderer, such as you or I might be, it is an impossible plan to make sure that nobody is looking at you.”

“But what other plan is there?”

“There is only one,” said the priest. “To make sure that everybody is looking at something else. A man is throttled close by the big stand at Epsom. Anybody might have seen it done while the stand stood empty—any tramp under the hedges or motorist among the hills. But nobody would have seen it when the stand was crowded and the whole ring roaring, when the favourite was coming in first—or wasn’t. The twisting of a neck-cloth, the thrusting of a body behind a door could be done in an instant—so long as it was that instant. It was the same, of course,” he continued turning to Flambeau, “with that poor fellow under the bandstand. He was dropped through the hole (it wasn’t an accidental hole) just at some very dramatic moment of the entertainment, when the bow of some great violinist or the voice of some great singer opened or came to its climax. And here, of course, when the knock-out blow came—it would not be the only one. That is the little trick Nigger Ned has adopted from his old God of Gongs.”

“By the way, Malvoli—” Pooley began.

“Malvoli,” said the priest, “has nothing to do with it. I dare say he has some Italians with him, but our amiable friends are not Italians. They are octoroons and African half-bloods of various shades, but I fear we English think all foreigners are much the same so long as they are dark and dirty. Also,” he added, with a smile, “I fear the English decline to draw any fine distinction between the moral character produced by my religion and that which blooms out of Voodoo.”

The blaze of the spring season had burst upon Seawood, littering its foreshore with famines and bathing-machines, with nomadic preachers and nigger minstrels, before the two friends saw it again, and long before the storm of pursuit after the strange secret society had died away. Almost on every hand the secret of their purpose perished with them. The man of the hotel was found drifting dead on the sea like so much seaweed; his right eye was closed in peace, but his left eye was wide open, and glistened like glass in the moon. Nigger Ned had been overtaken a mile or two away, and murdered three policemen with his closed left hand. The remaining officer was surprised—nay, pained—and the negro got away. But this was enough to set all the English papers in a flame, and for a month or two the main purpose of the British Empire was to prevent the buck nigger (who was so in both senses) escaping by any English port. Persons of a figure remotely reconcilable with his were subjected to quite extraordinary inquisitions, made to scrub their faces before going on board ship, as if each white complexion were made up like a mask, of greasepaint. Every negro in England was put under special regulations and made to report himself; the outgoing ships would no more have taken a nigger than a basilisk. For people had found out how fearful and vast and silent was the force of the savage secret society, and by the time Flambeau and Father Brown were leaning on the parade parapet in April, the Black Man meant in England almost what he once meant in Scotland.

“He must be still in England,” observed Flambeau, “and horridly well hidden, too. They must have found him at the ports if he had only whitened his face.”

“You see, he is really a clever man,” said Father Brown apologetically. “And I’m sure he wouldn’t whiten his face.”

“Well, but what would he do?”

“I think,” said Father Brown, “he would blacken his face.”

Flambeau, leaning motionless on the parapet, laughed and said: “My dear fellow!”

Father Brown, also leaning motionless on the parapet, moved one finger for an instant into the direction of the soot-masked niggers singing on the sands.

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