The Salad of Colonel Cray

G. K. Chesterton

Father Brown was walking home from Mass on a white weird morning when the mists were slowly lifting—one of those mornings when the very element of light appears as something mysterious and new. The scattered trees outlined themselves more and more out of the vapour, as if they were first drawn in grey chalk and then in charcoal. At yet more distant intervals appeared the houses upon the broken fringe of the suburb; their outlines became clearer and clearer until he recognized many in which he had chance acquaintances, and many more the names of whose owners he knew. But all the windows and doors were sealed; none of the people were of the sort that would be up at such a time, or still less on such an errand. But as he passed under the shadow of one handsome villa with verandas and wide ornate gardens, he heard a noise that made him almost involuntarily stop. It was the unmistakable noise of a pistol or carbine or some light firearm discharged; but it was not this that puzzled him most. The first full noise was immediately followed by a series of fainter noises—as he counted them, about six. He supposed it must be the echo; but the odd thing was that the echo was not in the least like the original sound. It was not like anything else that he could think of; the three things nearest to it seemed to be the noise made by siphons of soda-water, one of the many noises made by an animal, and the noise made by a person attempting to conceal laughter. None of which seemed to make much sense.

Father Brown was made of two men. There was a man of action, who was as modest as a primrose and as punctual as a clock; who went his small round of duties and never dreamed of altering it. There was also a man of reflection, who was much simpler but much stronger, who could not easily be stopped; whose thought was always (in the only intelligent sense of the words) free thought. He could not help, even unconsciously, asking himself all the questions that there were to be asked, and answering as many of them as he could; all that went on like his breathing or circulation. But he never consciously carried his actions outside the sphere of his own duty; and in this case the two attitudes were aptly tested. He was just about to resume his trudge in the twilight, telling himself it was no affair of his, but instinctively twisting and untwisting twenty theories about what the odd noises might mean. Then the grey sky-line brightened into silver, and in the broadening light he realized that he had been to the house which belonged to an Anglo-Indian Major named Putnam; and that the Major had a native cook from Malta who was of his communion. He also began to remember that pistol-shots are sometimes serious things; accompanied with consequences with which he was legitimately concerned. He turned back and went in at the garden gate, making for the front door.

Half-way down one side of the house stood out a projection like a very low shed; it was, as he afterwards discovered, a large dustbin. Round the corner of this came a figure, at first a mere shadow in the haze, apparently bending and peering about. Then, coming nearer, it solidified

into a figure that was, indeed, rather unusually solid. Major Putnam was a bald-headed, bull-necked man, short and very broad, with one of those rather apoplectic faces that are produced by a prolonged attempt to combine the oriental climate with the occidental luxuries. But the face was a good-humoured one, and even now, though evidently puzzled and inquisitive, wore a kind of innocent grin. He had a large palm-leaf hat on the back of his head (suggesting a halo that was by no means appropriate to the face), but otherwise he was clad only in a very vivid suit of striped scarlet and yellow pyjamas; which, though glowing enough to behold, must have been, on a fresh morning, pretty chilly to wear. He had evidently come out of his house in a hurry, and the priest was not surprised when he called out without further ceremony: “Did you hear that noise?”

“Yes,” answered Father Brown; “I thought I had better look in, in case anything was the matter.”

The Major looked at him rather queerly with his good-humoured gooseberry eyes. “What do you think the noise was?” he asked.

“It sounded like a gun or something,” replied the other, with some hesitation; “but it seemed to have a singular sort of echo.”

The Major was still looking at him quietly, but with protruding eyes, when the front door was flung open, releasing a flood of gaslight on the face of the fading mist; and another figure in pyjamas sprang or tumbled out into the garden. The figure was much longer, leaner, and more athletic; the pyjamas, though equally tropical, were comparatively tasteful, being of white with a light lemon-yellow stripe. The man was haggard, but handsome, more sunburned than the other; he had an aquiline profile and rather deep-sunken eyes, and a slight air of oddity arising from the combination of coal-black hair with a much lighter moustache. All this Father Brown absorbed in detail more at leisure. For the moment he only saw one thing about the man; which was the revolver in his hand.

“Cray!” exclaimed the Major, staring at him; “did you fire that shot?”

“Yes, I did,” retorted the black-haired gentleman hotly; “and so would you in my place. If you were chased everywhere by devils and nearly—”

The Major seemed to intervene rather hurriedly. “This is my friend Father Brown,” he said. And then to Brown: “I don’t know whether you’ve met Colonel Cray of the Royal Artillery.”

“I have heard of him, of course,” said the priest innocently. “Did you—did you hit anything?”

“I thought so,” answered Cray with gravity.

“Did he—” asked Major Putnam in a lowered voice, “did he fall or cry out, or anything?”

Colonel Cray was regarding his host with a strange and steady stare. “I’ll tell you exactly what he did,” he said. “He sneezed.”

Father Brown’s hand went half-way to his head, with the gesture of a man remembering somebody’s name. He knew now what it was that was neither soda-water nor the snorting of a dog.

“Well,” ejaculated the staring Major, “I never heard before that a service revolver was a thing to be sneezed at.”

“Nor I,” said Father Brown faintly. “It’s lucky you didn’t turn your artillery on him or you might have given him quite a bad cold.” Then, after a bewildered pause, he said: “Was it a burglar?”

“Let us go inside,” said Major Putnam, rather sharply, and led the way into his house.

The interior exhibited a paradox often to be marked in such morning hours: that the rooms seemed brighter than the sky outside; even after the Major had turned out the one gaslight in the front hall. Father Brown was surprised to see the whole dining-table set out as for a festive meal, with napkins in their rings, and wine-glasses of some six unnecessary shapes set beside every plate. It was common enough, at that time of the morning, to find the remains of a banquet over-night; but to find it freshly spread so early was unusual.

While he stood wavering in the hall Major Putnam rushed past him and sent a raging eye over the whole oblong of the tablecloth. At last he spoke, spluttering: “All the silver gone!” he gasped. “Fish-knives and forks gone. Old cruet-stand gone. Even the old silver cream-jug gone. And now, Father Brown, I am ready to answer your question of whether it was a burglar.”

“They’re simply a blind,” said Cray stubbornly. “I know better than you why people persecute this house; I know better than you why—”

The Major patted him on the shoulder with a gesture almost peculiar to the soothing of a sick child, and said: “It was a burglar. Obviously it was a burglar.”

“A burglar with a bad cold,” observed Father Brown, “that might assist you to trace him in the neighbourhood.”

The Major shook his head in a sombre manner. “He must be far beyond trace now, I fear,”

he said.

Then, as the restless man with the revolver turned again towards the door in the garden, he added in a husky, confidential voice: “I doubt whether I should send for the police, for fear my friend here has been a little too free with his bullets, and got on the wrong side of the law. He’s lived in very wild places; and, to be frank with you, I think he sometimes fancies things.”

“I think you once told me,” said Brown, “that he believes some Indian secret society is pursuing him.”

Major Putnam nodded, but at the same time shrugged his shoulders. “I suppose we’d better follow him outside,” he said. “I don’t want any more—shall we say, sneezing?”

They passed out into the morning light, which was now even tinged with sunshine, and saw Colonel Cray’s tall figure bent almost double, minutely examining the condition of gravel and grass. While the Major strolled unobtrusively towards him, the priest took an equally indolent turn, which took him round the next corner of the house to within a yard or two of the projecting dustbin.

He stood regarding this dismal object for some minute and a half—, then he stepped towards it, lifted the lid and put his head inside. Dust and other discolouring matter shook upwards as he did so; but Father Brown never observed his own appearance, whatever else he observed. He remained thus for a measurable period, as if engaged in some mysterious prayers. Then he came out again, with some ashes on his hair, and walked unconcernedly away.

By the time he came round to the garden door again he found a group there which seemed to roll away morbidities as the sunlight had already rolled away the mists. It was in no way rationally reassuring; it was simply broadly comic, like a cluster of Dickens’s characters. Major Putnam had managed to slip inside and plunge into a proper shirt and trousers, with a crimson cummerbund, and a light square jacket over all; thus normally set off, his red festive face seemed bursting with a commonplace cordiality. He was indeed emphatic, but then he was talking to his cook—the swarthy son of Malta, whose lean, yellow and rather careworn face contrasted quaintly with his snow-white cap and costume. The cook might well be careworn, for cookery was the Major’s hobby. He was one of those amateurs who always know more than the professional. The only other person he even admitted to be a judge of an omelette was his friend Cray—and as Brown remembered this, he turned to look for the other officer. In the new presence of daylight and people clothed and in their right mind, the sight of him was rather a shock. The taller and more elegant man was still in his night-garb, with tousled black hair, and now crawling about the garden on his hands and knees, still looking for traces of the burglar; and now and again, to all appearance, striking

the ground with his hand in anger at not finding him. Seeing him thus quadrupedal in the grass, the priest raised his eyebrows rather sadly; and for the first time guessed that “fancies things” might be an euphemism.

The third item in the group of the cook and the epicure was also known to Father Brown; it was Audrey Watson, the Major’s ward and housekeeper; and at this moment, to judge by her apron, tucked-up sleeves and resolute manner, much more the housekeeper than the ward.

“It serves you right,” she was saying: “I always told you not to have that old-fashioned cruet-stand.”

“I prefer it,” said Putnam, placably. “I’m old-fashioned myself; and the things keep together.”

“And vanish together, as you see,” she retorted. “Well, if you are not going to bother about the burglar, I shouldn’t bother about the lunch. It’s Sunday, and we can’t send for vinegar and all that in the town; and you Indian gentlemen can’t enjoy what you call a dinner without a lot of hot things. I wish to goodness now you hadn’t asked Cousin Oliver to take me to the musical service. It isn’t over till half-past twelve, and the Colonel has to leave by then. I don’t believe you men can manage alone.”

“Oh yes, we can, my dear,” said the Major, looking at her very amiably. “Marco has all the sauces, and we’ve often done ourselves well in very rough places, as you might know by now. And it’s time you had a treat, Audrey; you mustn’t be a housekeeper every hour of the day; and I know you want to hear the music.”

“I want to go to church,” she said, with rather severe eyes.

She was one of those handsome women who will always be handsome, because the beauty is not in an air or a tint, but in the very structure of the head and features. But though she was not yet middle-aged and her auburn hair was of a Titianesque fullness in form and colour, there was a look in her mouth and around her eyes which suggested that some sorrows wasted her, as winds waste at last the edges of a Greek temple. For indeed the little domestic difficulty of which she was now speaking so decisively was rather comic than tragic. Father Brown gathered, from the course of the conversation, that Cray, the other gourmet, had to leave before the usual lunch-time; but that Putnam, his host, not to be done out of a final feast with an old crony, had arranged for a special dejeuner to be set out and consumed in the course of the morning, while Audrey and other graver persons were at morning service. She was going there under the escort of a relative and old friend of hers, Dr Oliver Oman, who, though a scientific man of a somewhat bitter type, was enthusiastic for music, and would go even to church to get it. There was nothing in all this that could

conceivably concern the tragedy in Miss Watson's face; and by a half conscious instinct, Father Brown turned again to the seeming lunatic grubbing about in the grass.

When he strolled across to him, the black, unbrushed head was lifted abruptly, as if in some surprise at his continued presence. And indeed, Father Brown, for reasons best known to himself, had lingered much longer than politeness required; or even, in the ordinary sense, permitted.

"Well!" cried Cray, with wild eyes. "I suppose you think I'm mad, like the rest?"

"I have considered the thesis," answered the little man, composedly. "And I incline to think you are not."

"What do you mean?" snapped Cray quite savagely.

"Real madmen," explained Father Brown, "always encourage their own morbidity. They never strive against it. But you are trying to find traces of the burglar; even when there aren't any. You are struggling against it. You want what no madman ever wants."

"And what is that?"

"You want to be proved wrong," said Brown.

During the last words Cray had sprung or staggered to his feet and was regarding the cleric with agitated eyes. "By hell, but that is a true word!" he cried. "They are all at me here that the fellow was only after the silver—as if I shouldn't be only too pleased to think so! She's been at me," and he tossed his tousled black head towards Audrey, but the other had no need of the direction, "she's been at me today about how cruel I was to shoot a poor harmless house-breaker, and how I have the devil in me against poor harmless natives. But I was a good-natured man once—as good-natured as Putnam."

After a pause he said: "Look here, I've never seen you before; but you shall judge of the whole story. Old Putnam and I were friends in the same mess; but, owing to some accidents on the Afghan border, I got my command much sooner than most men; only we were both invalided home for a bit. I was engaged to Audrey out there; and we all travelled back together. But on the journey back things happened. Curious things. The result of them was that Putnam wants it broken off, and even Audrey keeps it hanging on—and I know what they mean. I know what they think I am. So do you.

"Well, these are the facts. The last day we were in an Indian city I asked Putnam if I could get some Trichinopoli cigars, he directed me to a little place opposite his lodgings. I have since found he was quite right; but 'opposite' is a dangerous word when one decent house

stands opposite five or six squalid ones; and I must have mistaken the door. It opened with difficulty, and then only on darkness; but as I turned back, the door behind me sank back and settled into its place with a noise as of innumerable bolts. There was nothing to do but to walk forward; which I did through passage after passage, pitch-dark. Then I came to a flight of steps, and then to a blind door, secured by a latch of elaborate Eastern ironwork, which I could only trace by touch, but which I loosened at last. I came out again upon gloom, which was half turned into a greenish twilight by a multitude of small but steady lamps below. They showed merely the feet or fringes of some huge and empty architecture. Just in front of me was something that looked like a mountain. I confess I nearly fell on the great stone platform on which I had emerged, to realize that it was an idol. And worst of all, an idol with its back to me.

"It was hardly half human, I guessed; to judge by the small squat head, and still more by a thing like a tail or extra limb turned up behind and pointing, like a loathsome large finger, at some symbol graven in the centre of the vast stone back. I had begun, in the dim light, to guess at the hieroglyphic, not without horror, when a more horrible thing happened. A door opened silently in the temple wall behind me and a man came out, with a brown face and a black coat. He had a carved smile on his face, of copper flesh and ivory teeth; but I think the most hateful thing about him was that he was in European dress. I was prepared, I think, for shrouded priests or naked fakirs. But this seemed to say that the devilry was over all the earth. As indeed I found it to be.

"'If you had only seen the Monkey's Feet,' he said, smiling steadily, and without other preface, 'we should have been very gentle—you would only be tortured and die. If you had seen the Monkey's Face, still we should be very moderate, very tolerant—you would only be tortured and live. But as you have seen the Monkey's Tail, we must pronounce the worst sentence, which is—Go Free.'

"When he said the words I heard the elaborate iron latch with which I had struggled, automatically unlock itself: and then, far down the dark passages I had passed, I heard the heavy street-door shifting its own bolts backwards.

"'It is vain to ask for mercy; you must go free,' said the smiling man. 'Henceforth a hair shall slay you like a sword, and a breath shall bite you like an adder; weapons shall come against you out of nowhere; and you shall die many times.' And with that he was swallowed once more in the wall behind; and I went out into the street."

Cray paused; and Father Brown unaffectedly sat down on the lawn and began to pick daisies.

Then the soldier continued: "Putnam, of course, with his jolly common sense, pooh-poohed all my fears; and from that time dates his doubt of my mental balance. Well, I'll simply tell

you, in the fewest words, the three things that have happened since; and you shall judge which of us is right.

“The first happened in an Indian village on the edge of the jungle, but hundreds of miles from the temple, or town, or type of tribes and customs where the curse had been put on me. I woke in black midnight, and lay thinking of nothing in particular, when I felt a faint tickling thing, like a thread or a hair, trailed across my throat. I shrank back out of its way, and could not help thinking of the words in the temple. But when I got up and sought lights and a mirror, the line across my neck was a line of blood.

“The second happened in a lodging in Port Said, later, on our journey home together. It was a jumble of tavern and curiosity-shop; and though there was nothing there remotely suggesting the cult of the Monkey, it is, of course, possible that some of its images or talismans were in such a place. Its curse was there, anyhow. I woke again in the dark with a sensation that could not be put in colder or more literal words than that a breath bit like an adder. Existence was an agony of extinction; I dashed my head against walls until I dashed it against a window; and fell rather than jumped into the garden below. Putnam, poor fellow, who had called the other thing a chance scratch, was bound to take seriously the fact of finding me half insensible on the grass at dawn. But I fear it was my mental state he took seriously; and not my story.

“The third happened in Malta. We were in a fortress there; and as it happened our bedrooms overlooked the open sea, which almost came up to our window-sills, save for a flat white outer wall as bare as the sea. I woke up again; but it was not dark. There was a full moon, as I walked to the window; I could have seen a bird on the bare battlement, or a sail on the horizon. What I did see was a sort of stick or branch circling, self-supported, in the empty sky. It flew straight in at my window and smashed the lamp beside the pillow I had just quitted. It was one of those queer-shaped war-clubs some Eastern tribes use. But it had come from no human hand.”

Father Brown threw away a daisy-chain he was making, and rose with a wistful look. “Has Major Putnam,” he asked, “got any Eastern curios, idols, weapons and so on, from which one might get a hint?”

“Plenty of those, though not much use, I fear,” replied Cray; “but by all means come into his study.”

As they entered they passed Miss Watson buttoning her gloves for church, and heard the voice of Putnam downstairs still giving a lecture on cookery to the cook. In the Major’s study and den of curios they came suddenly on a third party, silk-hatted and dressed for the street, who was poring over an open book on the smoking-table—a book which he dropped rather guiltily, and turned.

Cray introduced him civilly enough, as Dr Oman, but he showed such disfavour in his very face that Brown guessed the two men, whether Audrey knew it or not, were rivals. Nor was the priest wholly unsympathetic with the prejudice. Dr Oman was a very well-dressed gentleman indeed; well-featured, though almost dark enough for an Asiatic. But Father Brown had to tell himself sharply that one should be in charity even with those who wax their pointed beards, who have small gloved hands, and who speak with perfectly modulated voices.

Cray seemed to find something specially irritating in the small prayer-book in Oman's dark-gloved hand. "I didn't know that was in your line," he said rather rudely.

Oman laughed mildly, but without offence. "This is more so, I know," he said, laying his hand on the big book he had dropped, "a dictionary of drugs and such things. But it's rather too large to take to church." Then he closed the larger book, and there seemed again the faintest touch of hurry and embarrassment.

"I suppose," said the priest, who seemed anxious to change the subject, "all these spears and things are from India?"

"From everywhere," answered the doctor. "Putnam is an old soldier, and has been in Mexico and Australia, and the Cannibal Islands for all I know."

"I hope it was not in the Cannibal Islands," said Brown, "that he learnt the art of cookery." And he ran his eyes over the stew-pots or other strange utensils on the wall.

At this moment the jolly subject of their conversation thrust his laughing, lobsterish face into the room. "Come along, Cray," he cried. "Your lunch is just coming in. And the bells are ringing for those who want to go to church."

Cray slipped upstairs to change; Dr Oman and Miss Watson betook themselves solemnly down the street, with a string of other churchgoers; but Father Brown noticed that the doctor twice looked back and scrutinized the house; and even came back to the corner of the street to look at it again.

The priest looked puzzled. "He can't have been at the dustbin," he muttered. "Not in those clothes. Or was he there earlier today?"

Father Brown, touching other people, was as sensitive as a barometer; but today he seemed about as sensitive as a rhinoceros. By no social law, rigid or implied, could he be supposed to linger round the lunch of the Anglo-Indian friends; but he lingered, covering his position with torrents of amusing but quite needless conversation. He was the more puzzling

because he did not seem to want any lunch. As one after another of the most exquisitely balanced kedgerees of curries, accompanied with their appropriate vintages, were laid before the other two, he only repeated that it was one of his fast-days, and munched a piece of bread and sipped and then left untasted a tumbler of cold water. His talk, however, was exuberant.

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do for you,” he cried—, “I’ll mix you a salad! I can’t eat it, but I’ll mix it like an angel! You’ve got a lettuce there.”

“Unfortunately it’s the only thing we have got,” answered the good-humoured Major. “You must remember that mustard, vinegar, oil and so on vanished with the cruet and the burglar.”

“I know,” replied Brown, rather vaguely. “That’s what I’ve always been afraid would happen. That’s why I always carry a cruet-stand about with me. I’m so fond of salads.”

And to the amazement of the two men he took a pepper-pot out of his waistcoat pocket and put it on the table.

“I wonder why the burglar wanted mustard, too,” he went on, taking a mustard-pot from another pocket. “A mustard plaster, I suppose. And vinegar”—and producing that condiment —“haven’t I heard something about vinegar and brown paper? As for oil, which I think I put in my left—”

His garrulity was an instant arrested; for lifting his eyes, he saw what no one else saw—the black figure of Dr Oman standing on the sunlit lawn and looking steadily into the room. Before he could quite recover himself Cray had cloven in.

“You’re an astounding card,” he said, staring. “I shall come and hear your sermons, if they’re as amusing as your manners.” His voice changed a little, and he leaned back in his chair.

“Oh, there are sermons in a cruet-stand, too,” said Father Brown, quite gravely. “Have you heard of faith like a grain of mustard-seed; or charity that anoints with oil? And as for vinegar, can any soldiers forget that solitary soldier, who, when the sun was darkened—”

Colonel Cray leaned forward a little and clutched the tablecloth.

Father Brown, who was making the salad, tipped two spoonfuls of the mustard into the tumbler of water beside him; stood up and said in a new, loud and sudden voice—“Drink that!”

At the same moment the motionless doctor in the garden came running, and bursting open a window cried: “Am I wanted? Has he been poisoned?”

“Pretty near,” said Brown, with the shadow of a smile; for the emetic had very suddenly taken effect. And Cray lay in a deck-chair, gasping as for life, but alive.

Major Putnam had sprung up, his purple face mottled. “A crime!” he cried hoarsely. “I will go for the police!”

The priest could hear him dragging down his palm-leaf hat from the peg and tumbling out of the front door; he heard the garden gate slam. But he only stood looking at Cray; and after a silence said quietly:

“I shall not talk to you much; but I will tell you what you want to know. There is no curse on you. The Temple of the Monkey was either a coincidence or a part of the trick; the trick was the trick of a white man. There is only one weapon that will bring blood with that mere feathery touch: a razor held by a white man. There is one way of making a common room full of invisible, overpowering poison: turning on the gas—the crime of a white man. And there is only one kind of club that can be thrown out of a window, turn in mid-air and come back to the window next to it: the Australian boomerang. You’ll see some of them in the Major’s study.”

With that he went outside and spoke for a moment to the doctor. The moment after, Audrey Watson came rushing into the house and fell on her knees beside Cray’s chair. He could not hear what they said to each other; but their faces moved with amazement, not unhappiness. The doctor and the priest walked slowly towards the garden gate.

“I suppose the Major was in love with her, too,” he said with a sigh; and when the other nodded, observed: “You were very generous, doctor. You did a fine thing. But what made you suspect?”

“A very small thing,” said Oman; “but it kept me restless in church till I came back to see that all was well. That book on his table was a work on poisons; and was put down open at the place where it stated that a certain Indian poison, though deadly and difficult to trace, was particularly easily reversible by the use of the commonest emetics. I suppose he read that at the last moment—”

“And remembered that there were emetics in the cruet-stand,” said Father Brown. “Exactly. He threw the cruet in the dustbin—where I found it, along with other silver—for the sake of a burglary blind. But if you look at that pepper-pot I put on the table, you’ll see a small hole. That’s where Cray’s bullet struck, shaking up the pepper and making the criminal sneeze.”

There was a silence. Then Dr Oman said grimly: “The Major is a long time looking for the police.”

“Or the police in looking for the Major?” said the priest. “Well, good-bye.”

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