to your own towns and trades and the very roads you walk on—it has never occurred to you to know anything about them. I don't claim to know a lot myself; but I know enough to see that story is stuff and nonsense from beginning to end. It was illegal for a money-lender to distrain on a man's shop and tools. It's exceedingly unlikely that the Guild would not have saved a man from such utter ruin, especially if he were ruined by a Jew. Those people had vices and tragedies of their own; they sometimes tortured and burned people. But that idea of a man, without God or hope in the world, crawling away to die because nobody cared whether he lived—that isn't a mediæval idea. That's a product of our economic science and progress. The Jew wouldn't have been a vassal of the feudal lord. The Jews normally had a special position as servants of the King. Above all, the Jew couldn't possibly have been burned for his religion."

"The paradoxes are multiplying," observed Tarrant, "but surely you won't deny that Jews were persecuted in the Middle Ages?"

"It would be nearer the truth," said Father Brown, "to say they were the only people who weren't persecuted in the Middle Ages. If you want to satirise mediævalism, you could make a good case by saying that some poor Christian might be burned alive for making a mistake about the Homoousian, while a rich Jew might walk down the street openly sneering at Christ and the Mother of God. Well, that's what the story is like. It was

never a story of the Middle Ages; it was never even a legend about the Middle Ages. It was made up by somebody whose notions came from novels and newspapers; and probably made up on the spur of the moment."

The others seemed a little dazed by the historical digression, and seemed to wonder vaguely why the priest emphasised it and made it so important a part of the puzzle. But Tarrant, whose trade it was to pick the practical detail out of many tangles of digression, had suddenly become alert. His bearded chin was thrust forward farther than ever, but his sullen eyes were wide awake.

"Ah," he said; "made up on the spur of the moment!"

"Perhaps that is an exaggeration," admitted Father Brown calmly. "I should rather say made up much more casually and carelessly than the rest of an uncommonly careful plot. But the plotter did not think the details of mediæval history would matter much to anybody. And his calculation in a general way was pretty nearly right, like most of his other calculations."

"Whose calculations? Who was right?" demanded the lady with a sudden passion of impatience. "Who is this person you are talking about? Haven't we gone through enough, without your making our flesh creep with your hes and hims?"

"I am talking about the murderer," said Father Brown.

"What murderer?" she asked sharply. "Do you mean that the poor Professor was murdered?"

"Well," said the staring Tarrant gruffly into his beard, "we can't say 'murdered,' for we don't know he's killed."

"The murderer killed somebody else, who was not Professor Smaill," said the priest gravely.

"Why, whom else could he kill?" asked the other.

"He killed the Reverend John Walters, the Vicar of Dulham," replied Father Brown with precision. "He only wanted to kill those two, because they both had got hold of relics of one rare pattern. The murderer was a sort of monomaniac on the point."

"It all sounds very strange," muttered Tarrant. "Of course we can't swear that the Vicar's really dead either. We haven't seen his body."

"Oh yes, you have," said Father Brown.

There was a silence as sudden as the stroke of a gong; a silence in which that sub-conscious guess-work that was so active and accurate in the woman moved her almost to a shriek.

"That is exactly what you have seen," went on the priest. "You have seen his body. You haven't seen him, the real living man; but you have seen his body all right. You have stared at it hard by the light of four great candles; and it was not tossing suicidally in the sea, but lying in state like a Prince of the Church in a shrine built before the Crusades."

"In plain words," said Tarrant, "you actually ask us to believe that the embalmed body was really the corpse of a murdered man."

Father Brown was silent for a moment; then he said almost with an air of irrelevance:

"The first thing I noticed about it was the cross; or rather the string suspending the cross. Naturally, for most of you, it was only a string of beads and nothing else in particular, but, naturally also, it was rather more in my line than yours. You remember it lay close up to the chin, with only a few beads showing, as if the whole necklet were quite short. But the beads that showed were arranged in a special way, first one and then three, and so on; in fact, I knew at a glance that it was a rosary, an ordinary rosary with a cross at the end of it. But a rosary has at least five decades and additional beads as well; and I naturally wondered where all the rest of it was. It would go much more than once round the old man's neck. I couldn't understand it at the time; and it was only afterwards I guessed where the extra length had gone to. It was coiled round and round the foot of the wooden prop that was fixed in the corner of the coffin, holding up the lid. So that when poor Smaill merely plucked at the cross, it jerked the prop out of its place and the lid fell on his skull like a club of stone."

"By George!" said Tarrant, "I'm beginning to think there's something in what you say. This is a queer story if it's true."

"When I realised that," went on Father Brown, "I could manage more or less to guess the rest. Remember, first of all, that there never was any responsible archæological authority for anything more than investigation. Poor old Walters was an honest antiquary, who was engaged in opening the tomb to *find out* if there was any truth in the legend about embalmed bodies. The rest was all rumour, of the sort that often anticipates or exaggerates such finds. As a fact, he found the body had not been embalmed, but had fallen into dust long ago. Only while he was working there by the light of his lonely candle in that sunken chapel, the candlelight threw another shadow that was not his own."

"Ah!" cried Lady Diana with a catch in her breath; "and I know what you mean now. You mean to tell us we have met the murderer, talked and joked with the murderer, let him tell us a romantic tale, and let him depart untouched."

"Leaving his clerical disguise on a rock," assented Brown. "It is all dreadfully simple. This man got ahead of the Professor in the race to the churchyard and chapel, possibly while the Professor was talking to that lugubrious journalist. He came on the old clergyman beside the empty coffin and killed him. Then he dressed himself in the black clothes from the corpse, wrapped it in an old cope which had been among the real finds of the exploration, and put it in the coffin, arranging the rosary and the wooden support as I have described. Then, having thus set the trap for his second enemy, he

went up into the daylight and greeted us all with the most amiable politeness of a country clergyman."

"He ran a considerable risk," objected Tarrant, "of somebody knowing Walters by sight."

"I admit he was half-mad," agreed Father Brown; "and I think you will admit that the risk was worth taking, for he has got off, after all."

"I'll admit he was very lucky," growled Tarrant. "And who the devil was he?"

"As you say, he was very lucky," answered Father Brown, "and not least in that respect. For that is the one thing we may never know."

He frowned at the table for a moment and then went on: "This fellow has been hovering round and threatening for years, but the one thing he was careful of was to keep the secret of who he was; and he has kept it still. But if poor Smaill recovers, as I think he will, it is pretty safe to say that you will hear more of it."

"Why, what will Professor Smaill do, do you think?" asked Lady Diana.

"I should think the first thing he would do," said Tarrant, "would be to put the detectives on like dogs after this murdering devil. I should like to have a go at him myself."

"Well," said Father Brown, smiling suddenly after his long fit of frowning perplexity, "I think I know the very first thing he ought to do."

"And what is that?" asked Lady Diana with graceful eagerness.

"He ought to apologise to all of you," said Father Brown.

It was not upon this point, however, that Father Brown found himself talking to Professor Smaill as he sat by the bedside during the slow convalescence of that eminent archæologist. Nor indeed was it chiefly Father Brown who did the talking; for though the Professor was limited to small doses of the stimulant of conversation, he concentrated most of it upon these interviews with his clerical friend. Father Brown had a talent for being silent in an encouraging way. And Smaill was encouraged by it to talk about many strange things not always easy to talk about; such as the morbid phases of recovery and the monstrous dreams that often accompany delirium. It is often rather an unbalancing business to recover slowly from a bad knock on the head; and when the head is as interesting a head as that of Professor Smaill even its disturbances and distortions are apt to be original and curious. His dreams were like bold and big designs rather out of drawing, as they can be seen in the strong but stiff archaic arts that he had studied; they were full of strange saints with square and triangular haloes, of golden outstanding crowns and glories round dark and flattened faces, of eagles out of the east and the high head-dresses of bearded men with their hair bound like women. Only, as he told his friend, there was one much simpler and less entangled type that continually recurred to his imaginative memory. Again and again all these Byzantine pat-

terns would fade away like the fading gold on which they were traced as upon fire; and nothing remained but the dark bare wall of rock on which the shining shape of the fish was traced as with a finger dipped in the phosphorescence of fishes. For that was the sign which he once looked up and saw, in the moment when he first heard round the corner of the dark passage the voice of his enemy.

"And at last," he said, "I think I have seen a meaning in the picture and the voice; and one that I never understood before. Why should I worry because one madman among a million of sane men, leagued in a great society against him, chooses to brag of persecuting me or pursuing me to death? The man who drew in the dark catacomb the secret symbol of Christ was persecuted in a very different fashion. He was the solitary madman; the whole sane society was leagued together not to save but to slay him. I have sometimes fussed and fidgeted and wondered whether this or that man was my persecutor; whether it was Tarrant; whether it was Leonard Smyth; whether it was any one of them. Suppose it had been all of them! Suppose it had been all the men on the boat and the men on the train and the men in the village. Suppose, so far as I was concerned, they were all murderers. I thought I had a right to be alarmed because I was creeping through the bowels of the earth in the dark and there was a man who would destroy me. What would it have been like, if the destroyer had been up in the daylight and had owned all the earth and

commanded all the armies and the crowds? How if he had been able to stop all the earths or smoke me out of my hole or kill me the moment I put my nose out in the daylight? What was it like to deal with murder on that scale? The world has forgotten these things, as until a little while ago it had forgotten war."

"Yes," said Father Brown, "but the war came. The fish may be driven underground again, but it will come up into the daylight once more. As St. Antony of Padua humorously remarked, it is only fishes who survive the Deluge."

VI

THE DAGGER WITH WINGS

Father Brown, at one period of his life, found it difficult to hang his hat on a hat-peg without repressing a slight shudder. The origin of this idiosyncrasy was indeed a mere detail in much more complicated events; but it was perhaps the only detail that remained to him in his busy life to remind him of the whole business. Its remote origin was to be found in the facts which led Dr. Boyne, the medical officer attached to the police force, to send for the priest on a particular frosty morning in December.

Dr. Boyne was a big dark Irishman, one of those rather baffling Irishmen to be found all over the world, who will talk scientific scepticism, materialism and cynicism at length and at large, but who never dream of referring anything touching the ritual of religion to anything except the traditional religion of their native land. It would be hard to say whether their creed is a very superficial varnish or a very fundamental substratum; but most probably it is both, with a mass of materialism in between. Anyhow, when he thought that matters of that sort might be involved, he asked Father Brown to call, though he made no pretence of preference for that aspect of them.

"I'm not sure I want you, you know," was his greeting. "I'm not sure about anything yet. I'm hanged if I can make out whether it's a case for a doctor, or a policeman, or a priest."

"Well," said Father Brown with a smile, "as I suppose you're both a policeman and a doctor, I seem to be rather in a minority."

"I admit you're what politicians call an instructed minority," replied the doctor. "I mean I know you've had to do a little in our line as well as your own. But it's precious hard to say whether this business is in your line or ours, or merely in the line of the Commissioners in Lunacy. We've just had a message from a man living near here, in that white house on the hill, asking for protection against a murderous persecution. We've gone into the facts as far as we could, and perhaps I'd better tell you the story as it is supposed to have happened, from the beginning.

"It seems that a man named Aylmer, who was a wealthy landowner in the West Country, married rather late in life and had three sons, Philip, Stephen and Arnold. But in his bachelor days, when he thought he would have no heir, he had adopted a boy whom he thought very brilliant and promising, who went by the name of John Strake. His origin seems to be vague; they say he was a foundling; some say he was a gipsy. I think the last notion is mixed up with the fact that Aylmer in his old age dabbled in all sorts of dingy occultism, including palmistry and astrology, and his three sons

say that Strake encouraged him in it. But they said a great many other things besides that. They said Strake was an amazing scoundrel, and especially an amazing liar; a genius in inventing lies on the spur of the moment and telling them so as to deceive a detective. But that might very well be a natural prejudice, in the light of what happened. Perhaps you can more or less imagine what happened. The old man left practically everything to the adopted son; and when he died the three real sons disputed the will. They said their father had been frightened into surrender and, not to put too fine a point on it, into gibbering idiocy. They said Strake had the strangest and most cunning ways of getting at him, in spite of the nurses and the family, and terrorising him on his death-bed. Anyhow, they seemed to have proved something about the dead man's mental condition, for the courts set aside the will and the sons inherited. Strake is said to have broken out in the most dreadful fashion, and sworn he would kill all three of them, one after another, and that nothing could hide them from his vengeance. It is the third or last of the brothers, Arnold Aylmer, who is asking for police protection.

"Third and last," said the priest, looking at him gravely.

"Yes," said Boyne. "The other two are dead."

There was a silence before he continued. "That is where the doubt comes in. There is no proof they were murdered, but they might possibly have been. The eldest, who took up his position as

squire, was supposed to have committed suicide in his garden. The second, who went into trade as a manufacturer, was knocked on the head by the machinery in his factory; he might very well have taken a false step and fallen. But if Strake did kill them, he is certainly very cunning in his way of getting to work and getting away. On the other hand, it's more than likely that the whole thing is a mania of conspiracy founded on a coincidence. Look here, what I want is this: I want somebody of sense, who isn't an official, to go up and have a talk to this Mr. Arnold Aylmer, and form an impression of him. You know what a man with a delusion is like, and how a man looks when he is telling the truth. I want you to be the advance guard, before we take the matter up."

"It seems rather odd," said Father Brown, "that you haven't had to take it up before. If there is anything in this business, it seems to have been going on for a good time. Is there any particular reason why he should send for you just now, any more than any other time?"

"That had occurred to me, as you may imagine," answered Dr. Boyne. "He does give a reason, but I confess it is one of the things that make me wonder whether the whole thing isn't only the whim of some half-witted crank. He declares that all his servants have suddenly gone on strike and left him, so that he is obliged to call on the police to look after his house. And on making inquiries, I certainly do find that there has been a general

exodus of servants from that house on the hill; and of course the town is full of tales, very one-sided tales I daresay. Their account of it seems to be that their employer had become quite impossible in his fidgets and fears and exactions; that he wanted them to guard the house like sentries or sit up like night nurses in a hospital; that they could never be left alone because he must never be left alone. So they all announced in a loud voice that he was a lunatic, and left. Of course that does not prove he is a lunatic; but it seems rather rum nowadays for a man to expect his valet or his parlour-maid to act as an armed guard."

"And so," said the priest with a smile, "he wants a policeman to act as his parlour-maid because his parlour-maid won't act as a policeman."

"I thought that rather thick, too," agreed the doctor, "but I can't take the responsibility of a flat refusal till I've tried a compromise. You are the compromise."

"Very well," said Father Brown simply, "I'll go and call on him now if you like."

The rolling country round the little town was sealed and bound with frost, and the sky was as clear and cold as steel, except in the north-east, where clouds with lurid haloes were beginning to climb up the sky. It was against these darker and more sinister colours that the house on the hill gleamed with a row of pale pillars, forming a short colonnade of the classical sort. A winding road led

up to it across the curve of the down, and plunged into a mass of dark bushes. Just before it reached the bushes the air seemed to grow colder and colder, as if he were approaching an ice-house or the North Pole. But he was a highly practical person, never entertaining such fancies except as fancies. And he merely cocked his eye at the great livid cloud crawling up over the house, and remarked cheerfully:

"It's going to snow."

Through a low ornamental iron gateway of the Italianate pattern he entered a garden having something of that desolation which only belongs to the disorder of orderly things. Deep-green growths were grey with the faint powder of the frost, large weeds had fringed the fading pattern of the flower-beds as if in a ragged frame; and the house stood as if waist-high in a stunted forest of shrubs and bushes. The vegetation consisted largely of ever-greens or very hardy plants; and though it was thus thick and heavy, it was too northern to be called luxuriant. It might be described as an Arctic jungle. So it was in some sense with the house itself, which had a row of columns and a classical façade, which might have looked out on the Mediterranean; but which seemed now to be withering in the wind of the North Sea. Classical ornament here and there accentuated the contrast; caryatides and carved masks of comedy or tragedy looked down from corners of the building upon the grey confusion of the garden paths; but the faces seemed to be frost-

bitten. The very volutes of the capitals might have curled up with the cold.

Father Brown went up the grassy steps to a square porch flanked by big pillars and knocked at the door. About four minutes afterwards he knocked again. Then he stood still patiently waiting with his back to the door and looked out on the slowly darkening landscape. It was darkening under the shadow of that one great continent of cloud that had come flying out of the north; and even as he looked out beyond the pillars of the porch, which seemed huge and black above him in the twilight, he saw the opalescent crawling rim of the great cloud as it sailed over the roof and bowed over the porch like a canopy. The grey canopy with its faintly coloured fringes seemed to sink lower and lower upon the garden beyond, until what had recently been a clear and pale-hued winter sky was left in a few silver ribbons and rags like a sickly sunset. Father Brown waited; and there was no sound within.

Then he betook himself briskly down the steps and round the house to look for another entrance. He eventually found one, a side door in the flat wall; and on this also he hammered and outside this also he waited. Then he tried the handle and found the door apparently bolted or fastened in some fashion; and then he moved along that side of the house, musing on the possibilities of the position, and wondering whether the eccentric Mr. Aylmer had barricaded himself too deep in the house to

hear any kind of summons; or whether perhaps he would barricade himself all the more, on the assumption that any summons must be the challenge of the avenging Strake. It might be that the decamping servants had only unlocked one door when they left in the morning, and that their master had locked that; but whatever he might have done it was unlikely that they, in the mood of that moment, had looked so carefully to the defences. He continued his prowl round the place; it was not really a large place, though perhaps a little pretentious; and in a few moments he found he had made the complete circuit. A moment after he found what he suspected and sought. The French window of one room, curtained and shadowed with creeper, stood open by a crack, doubtless accidentally left ajar, and he found himself in a central room, comfortably upholstered in a rather old-fashioned way, with a staircase leading up from it on one side and a door leading out of it on the other. Immediately opposite him was another door, with red glass let into it, a little gaudily for later tastes; something that looked like a red-robed figure in cheap stained glass. On a round table to the right stood a sort of aquarium—a great bowl full of greenish water, in which fishes and similar things moved about as in a tank; and just opposite it a plant of the palm variety with very large green leaves. All this looked so very dusty and Early Victorian that the telephone, visible in the curtained alcove, was almost a surprise.

"Who is that?" a voice called out sharply and rather suspiciously from behind the stained-glass door.

"Could I see Mr. Aylmer?" asked the priest apologetically.

The door opened and a gentleman in a peacock green dressing-gown came out with an inquiring look. His hair was rather rough and untidy, as if he had been in bed or lived in a state of slowly getting up, but his eyes were not only awake but alert, and some would have said alarmed. Father Brown knew that the contradiction was likely enough in a man who had rather run to seed, under the shadow either of a delusion or a danger. He had a fine aquiline face when seen in profile, but when seen full face the first impression was of the untidiness and even the wilderness of his loose brown beard.

"I am Mr. Aylmer," he said, "but I have got out of the way of expecting visitors."

Something about Mr. Aylmer's unrestful eye prompted the priest to go straight to the point. If the man's persecution was only a monomania, he would be the less likely to resent it.

"I was wondering," said Father Brown softly, "whether it is quite true that you never expect visitors."

"You are right," replied his host steadily, "I always expect one visitor. And he may be the last."

"I hope not," said Father Brown, "but at least

I am relieved to infer that I do not look very like him."

Mr. Aylmer shook himself with a sort of savage laugh. "You certainly do not," he said.

"Mr. Aylmer," said Father Brown frankly, "I apologise for the liberty, but some friends of mine have told me about your trouble, and asked me to see if I could do anything for you. The truth is, I have some little experience in affairs like this."

"There are no affairs like this," said Aylmer.

"You mean," observed Father Brown, "that the tragedies in your unfortunate family were not normal deaths?"

"I mean they were not even normal murders," answered the other. "The man who is hounding us all to death is a hell-hound, and his power is from hell."

"All evil has one origin," said the priest gravely. "But how do you know they were not normal murders?"

Aylmer answered with a gesture which offered his guest a chair; then he seated himself slowly in another, frowning, with his hands on his knees; but when he looked up his expression had grown milder and more thoughtful, and his voice was quite cordial and composed.

"Sir," he said, "I don't want you to imagine that I'm in the least an unreasonable person. I have come to these conclusions by reason, because unfortunately reason really leads there. I have read a great deal on these subjects; for I was the only

one who inherited my father's scholarship in somewhat obscure matters, and I have since inherited his library. But what I tell you does not rest on what I have read but on what I have seen."

Father Brown nodded, and the other proceeded, as if picking his words:

"In my elder brother's case I was not certain at first. There were no marks or footprints where he was found shot, and the pistol was left beside him. But he had just received a threatening letter, certainly from our enemy, for it was marked with a sign like a winged dagger, which was one of his infernal cabalistic tricks. And a servant said she had seen something moving along the garden wall in the twilight that was much too large to be a cat. I leave it there; all I can say is that if the murderer came, he managed to leave no traces of his coming. But when my brother Stephen died it was different; and since then I have known. A machine was working in an open scaffolding under the factory tower; I scaled the platform a moment after he had fallen under the iron hammer that struck him; I did not see anything else strike him, but I saw what I saw.

"A great drift of factory smoke was rolling between me and the factory tower; but through a rift of it I saw on the top of it a dark human figure wrapped in what looked like a black cloak. Then the sulphurous smoke drove between us again; and when it cleared I looked up at the distant chimney—there was nobody there. I am a rational

man, and I will ask all rational men how he had reached that dizzy unapproachable turret, and how he left it."

He stared across at the priest with a sphinx-like challenge; then after a silence he said abruptly:

"My brother's brains were knocked out, but his body was not much damaged. And in his pocket we found one of those warning messages dated the day before and stamped with the flying dagger."

"I am sure," he went on gravely, "that the symbol of the winged dagger is not merely arbitrary or accidental. Nothing about that abominable man is accidental. He is all design; though it is indeed a most dark and intricate design. His mind is woven not only out of elaborate schemes but out of all sorts of secret languages and signs and dumb signals and wordless pictures which are the names of nameless things. He is the worst sort of man that the world knows; he is the wicked mystic. Now, I don't pretend to penetrate all that is conveyed by this symbol; but it seems surely that it must have a relation to all that was most remarkable, or even incredible, in his movements as he had hovered round my unfortunate family. Is there no connexion between the idea of a winged weapon and the mystery by which Philip was struck dead on his own lawn without the lightest touch of any footprint having disturbed the dust or grass? Is there no connexion between the plumed poignard flying like a feathered arrow and that figure which hung

on the far top of the toppling chimney, clad in a cloak for pinions?"

"You mean," said Father Brown thoughtfully, "that he is in a perpetual state of levitation."

"Simon Magus did it," replied Aylmer, "and it was one of the commonest predictions of the Dark Ages that Antichrist would be able to fly. Anyhow, there was the flying dagger on the document; and whether or no it could fly, it could certainly strike."

"Did you notice what sort of paper it was on?" asked Father Brown. "Common paper?"

The sphinx-like face broke abruptly into a harsh laugh.

"You can see what they're like," said Aylmer grimly, "for I got one myself this morning."

He was leaning back in his chair now, with his long legs thrust out from under the green dressing-gown, which was a little short for him, and his bearded chin pillowed on his chest. Without moving otherwise, he thrust his hand deep in the dressing-gown pocket and held out a fluttering scrap of paper at the end of a rigid arm. His whole attitude was suggestive of a sort of paralysis, that was both rigidity and collapse. But the next remark of the priest had a curious effect of rousing him.

Father Brown was blinking in his short-sighted way at the paper presented to him. It was a singular sort of paper, rough without being common, as from an artist's sketch-book; and on it was drawn boldly in red ink a dagger decorated with wings like the

rod of Hermes, with the written words, "Death comes the day after this, as it came to your brothers."

Father Brown tossed the paper on the floor and sat bolt upright in his chair.

"You mustn't let that sort of stuff stupefy you," he said sharply. "These devils always try to make us helpless by making us hopeless."

Rather to his surprise, an awakening wave went over the prostrate figure, which sprang from its chair as if startled out of a dream.

"You're right, you're right!" cried Aylmer with a rather uncanny animation, "and the devils shall find I'm not so hopeless after all, nor so helpless either. Perhaps I have more hope and better help than you fancy."

He stood with his hands in his pockets, frowning down at the priest, who had a momentary doubt, during that strained silence, about whether the man's long peril had not touched the man's brain. But when he spoke it was quite soberly.

"I believe my unfortunate brothers failed because they used the wrong weapons. Philip carried a revolver, and that was how his death came to be called suicide. Stephen had police protection, but he also had a sense of what made him ridiculous; and he could not allow a policeman to climb up a ladder after him to a scaffolding where he stood only a moment. They were both scoffers, reacting into scepticism from the strange mysticism of my father's last days. But I always knew there was

more in my father than they understood. It is true that by studying magic he fell at last under the blight of black magic; the black magic of this scoundrel Strake. But my brothers were wrong about the antidote. The antidote to black magic is not brute materialism or worldly wisdom. The antidote to black magic is white magic."

"It rather depends," said Father Brown, "what you mean by white magic."

"I mean silver magic," said the other, in a low voice, like one speaking of a secret revelation. Then after a silence he said, "Do you know what I mean by silver magic? Excuse me a moment."

He turned and opened the central door with the red glass and went into a passage beyond it. The house had less depth than Brown had supposed; instead of the door opening into interior rooms, the corridor it revealed ended in another door on the garden. The door of one room was on one side of the passage; doubtless, the priest told himself, the proprietor's bedroom whence he had rushed out in his dressing-gown. There was nothing else on that side but an ordinary hat-stand with the ordinary dingy cluster of old hats and overcoats; but on the other side was something more interesting; a very dark old oak sideboard laid out with some old silver, and overhung by a trophy or ornament of old weapons. It was by this that Arnold Aylmer halted, looking up at a long antiquated pistol with a bell-shaped mouth.

The door at the end of the passage was barely

open; and through the crack came a streak of white daylight. The priest had very quick instincts about natural things; and something in the unusual brilliancy of that white line told him what had happened outside. It was indeed what he had prophesied when he was approaching the house. He ran past his rather startled host and opened the door; to face something that was at once a blank and a blaze. What he had seen shining through the crack was not only the more negative whiteness of daylight but the positive whiteness of snow. All round, the sweeping fall of the country was covered with that shining pallor that seems at once hoary and innocent.

"Here is white magic anyhow," said Father Brown in his cheerful voice. Then as he turned back into the hall he murmured, "And silver magic too, I suppose," for the white lustre touched the silver with splendour and lit up the old steel here and there in the darkling armoury. The shaggy head of the brooding Aylmer seemed to have a halo of silver fire, as he turned with his face in shadow and the outlandish pistol in his hand.

"Do you know why I choose this sort of old blunderbuss?" he asked. "Because I can load it with this sort of bullet."

He had picked up a small apostle spoon from the sideboard, and by sheer violence broke off the small figure at the top. "Let us go back into the other room," he added.

"Did you ever read about the death of Dun-

dee?" he asked when they had reseated themselves. He had recovered from his momentary annoyance at the priest's restlessness. "Graham of Claverhouse, you know, who persecuted the Covenanters and had a black horse that could ride straight up a precipice. Don't you know he could only be shot with a silver bullet, because he had sold himself to the Devil? That's one comfort about you; at least you know enough to believe in the Devil."

"Oh, yes," replied Father Brown, "I believe in the Devil. What I don't believe in is the Dundee. I mean the Dundee of Covenanting legends, with his nightmare of a horse. John Graham was simply a seventeenth century professional soldier, rather better than most. If he dragooned them it was because he was a dragoon, but not a dragon. Now my experience is that it's not that sort of swaggering blade who sells himself to the Devil. The devil-worshippers I've known were quite different. Not to mention names, which might cause a social flutter, I'll take a man in Dundee's own day. Have you ever heard of Dalrymple of Stair?"

"No," replied the other gruffly.

"You've heard of what he did," said Father Brown, "and it was worse than anything Dundee ever did; yet he escapes the infamy by oblivion. He was the man who made the Massacre of Glencoe. He was a very learned man and lucid lawyer, a statesman with very serious and enlarged ideas of statesmanship, a quiet man with a very refined and

intellectual face. That's the sort of man who sells himself to the Devil."

Aylmer half started from his chair with an enthusiasm of eager assent.

"By God! you are right," he cried. "A refined intellectual face! That is the face of John Strake."

Then he raised himself and stood looking at the priest with a curious concentration. "If you will wait here a little while," he said, "I will show you something."

He went back through the central door, closing it after him; going, the priest presumed, to the old sideboard or possibly to his bedroom. Father Brown remained seated, gazing abstractedly at the carpet, where a faint red glimmer shone from the glass in the doorway. Once it seemed to brighten like a ruby and then darkened again, as if the sun of that stormy day had passed from cloud to cloud. Nothing moved except the aquatic creatures which floated to and fro in the dim green bowl. Father Brown was thinking hard.

A minute or two afterwards he got up and slipped quietly to the alcove of the telephone, where he rang up his friend Dr. Boyne, at the official headquarters. "I wanted to tell you about Aylmer and his affairs," he said quietly. "It's a queer story, but I rather think there's something in it. If I were you I'd send some men up here straight away; four or five men, I think, and surround the house. If anything does happen there'll probably be something startling in the way of an escape."

Then he went back and sat down again, staring at the dark carpet, which again glowed blood-red with the light from the glass door. Something in that filtered light set his mind drifting on certain borderlands of thought, with the first white day-break before the coming of colour, and all that mystery which is alternately veiled and revealed in the symbol of windows and of doors.

An inhuman howl in a human voice came from beyond the closed doors; almost simultaneously with the noise of firing. Before the echoes of the shot had died away the door was violently flung open and his host staggered into the room, the dressing-gown half torn from his shoulder and the long pistol smoking in his hand. He seemed to be shaking in every limb, yet he was shaken in part with an unnatural laughter.

"Glory be to the White Magic!" he cried, "Glory be to the silver bullet! The hell-hound has hunted once too often, and my brothers are avenged at last."

He sank into a chair and the pistol slid from his hand and fell on the floor. Father Brown darted past him, slipped through the glass door and went down the passage. As he did so he put his hand on the handle of the bedroom door, as if half intending to enter; then he stooped a moment, as if examining something; and then he ran to the outer door and opened it.

On the field of snow, which had been so blank a little while before, lay one black object. At the

first glance it looked a little like an enormous bat. A second glance showed that it was, after all, a human figure; fallen on its face, the whole head covered by a broad black hat having something of a Latin-American look; while the appearance of black wings came from the two flaps or loose sleeves of a very vast black cloak spread out, perhaps by accident, to their utmost length on either side. Both the hands were hidden, though Father Brown thought he could detect the position of one of them, and saw close to it, under the edge of the cloak, the glimmer of some metallic weapon. The main effect, however, was curiously like that of the simple extravagances of heraldry; like a black eagle displayed on a white ground. But by walking round it and peering under the hat the priest got a glimpse of the face, which was indeed what his host had called refined and intellectual; even sceptical and austere: the face of John Strake.

"Well, I'm jiggered," muttered Father Brown. "It really does look like some vast vampire, that has swooped down like a bird."

"How else could he have come?" came a voice from the doorway; and Father Brown looked up to see Aylmer once more standing there.

"Couldn't he have walked?" replied Father Brown evasively.

Aylmer stretched out his arm and swept the white landscape with a gesture.

"Look at the snow," he said in a deep voice that had a sort of roll and thrill in it. "Is not the

snow unspotted—pure as the white magic you yourself called it? Is there a speck on it for miles, save that one foul black blot that has fallen there? There are no footprints, but a few of yours and mine; there are none approaching the house from anywhere."

Then he looked at the little priest for a moment with a concentrated and curious expression, and said:

"I will tell you something else. That cloak he flies with is too long to walk with. He was not a very tall man; and it would trail behind him like a royal train. Stretch it out over his body, if you like, and see."

"What happened to you both?" asked Father Brown abruptly.

"It was too swift to describe," answered Aylmer. "I had looked out of the door and was turning back when there came a kind of rushing of wind all around me, as if I were being buffeted by a wheel revolving in mid-air. I spun round somehow and fired blindly; and then I saw nothing but what you see now. But I am mortally certain you wouldn't see it, if I had not had a silver shot in my gun. It would have been a different body lying there in the snow."

"By the way," remarked Father Brown, "shall we leave it lying there in the snow? Or would you like it taken into your room—I suppose that's your bedroom in the passage?"

"No, no," replied Aylmer hastily, "we must

leave it there till the police have seen it. Besides, I've had as much of such things as I can stand for the moment. Whatever else happens, I'm going to have a drink. After that, they can hang me if they like."

Inside the central apartment, between the palm plant and the bowl of fishes, Aylmer tumbled into a chair. He had nearly knocked the bowl over as he lurched into the room, but he had managed to find the decanter of brandy after plunging his hand rather blindly into several cupboards and corners. He did not at any time look like a methodical person; but at this moment his distraction must have been extreme. He drank with a long gulp and began to talk rather feverishly, as if to fill up a silence.

"I see you are still doubtful," he said, "though you have seen the thing with your own eyes. Believe me, there was something more behind the quarrel between the spirit of Strake and the spirit of the house of Aylmer. Besides, you have no business to be an unbeliever. You ought to stand for all the things these stupid people call superstitions. Come now, don't you think there's a lot in those old wives' tales about luck and charms and so on, silver bullets included? What do you say about them as a Catholic?"

"I say I'm an agnostic," replied Father Brown, smiling.

"Nonsense," said Aylmer impatiently. "It's your business to believe things."

"Well, I do believe some things, of course," conceded Father Brown; "and therefore, of course, I don't believe other things."

Aylmer was leaning forward, and looking at him with a strange intensity that was almost like that of a mesmerist.

"You do believe it," he said. "You do believe everything. We all believe everything, even when we deny everything. The deniers believe. The unbelievers believe. Don't you feel in your heart that these contradictions do not really contradict; that there is a cosmos that contains them all? The soul goes round upon a wheel of stars and all things return; perhaps Strake and I have striven in many shapes, beast against beast and bird against bird; and perhaps we shall strive for ever. But since we seek and need each other, even that eternal hatred is an eternal love. Good and evil go round in a wheel that is one thing and not many. Do you not realise in your heart, do you not believe behind all your beliefs, that there is but one reality and we are its shadows; and that all things are but aspects of one thing: a centre where men melt into Man and Man into God?"

"No," said Father Brown.

Outside, twilight had begun to fall, in that phase of such a snow-laden evening when the land looks brighter than the sky. In the porch of the main-entrance visible through a half-curtained window, Father Brown could dimly see a bulky figure standing. He glanced casually at the French windows

through which he had originally entered, and saw they were darkened with two equally motionless figures. The inner door with the coloured glass stood slightly ajar; and he could see in the short corridor beyond, the ends of two long shadows, exaggerated and distorted by the level light of evening, but still like grey caricatures of the figures of men. Dr. Boyne had already obeyed his telephone message. The house was surrounded.

"What is the good of saying no," insisted his host, still with the same hypnotic stare. "You have seen part of that eternal drama with your own eyes. You have seen the threat of John Strake to slay Arnold Aylmer by black magic. You have seen Arnold Aylmer slay John Strake by white magic. You see Arnold Aylmer alive and talking to you now. And yet you do not believe it."

"No, I do not believe it," said Father Brown, and rose from his chair like one terminating a visit.

"Why not?" asked the other.

The priest only lifted his voice a little, but it sounded in every corner of the room like a bell.

"Because you are not Arnold Aylmer," he said. "I know who you are. Your name is John Strake; and you have murdered the last of the brothers, who is lying outside in the snow."

A ring of white showed round the iris of the other man's eyes; he seemed to be making, with bursting eyeballs, a last effort to mesmerise and

master his companion. Then he made a sudden movement sideways; and even as he did so the door behind him opened and a big detective in plain clothes put one hand quietly on his shoulder. The other hand hung down, but it held a revolver. The man looked wildly round, and saw plain-clothes men in all corners of the quiet room.

That evening Father Brown had another and longer conversation with Dr. Boyne about the tragedy of the Aylmer family. By that time there was no longer any doubt of the central fact of the case, for John Strake had confessed his identity and even confessed his crimes; only it would be truer to say that he boasted of his victories. Compared to the fact that he had rounded off his life's work with the last Aylmer lying dead, everything else, including existence itself, seemed to be indifferent to him.

"The man is a sort of monomaniac," said Father Brown. "He is not interested in any other matter; not even in any other murder. I owe him something for that; for I had to comfort myself with the reflection a good many times this afternoon. As has doubtless occurred to you, instead of weaving all that wild but ingenious romance about winged vampires and silver bullets, he might have put an ordinary leaden bullet into me, and walked out of the house. I assure you it occurred quite frequently to me."

"I wonder why he didn't," observed Boyne. "I don't understand it; but I don't understand anything

yet. How on earth did you discover it, and what in the world did you discover?"

"Oh, you provided me with very valuable information," replied Father Brown modestly, "especially the one piece of information that really counted. I mean the statement that Strake was a very inventive and imaginative liar, with great presence of mind in producing his lies. This afternoon he needed it; but he rose to the occasion. Perhaps his only mistake was in choosing a preternatural story; he had the notion that because I am a clergyman I should believe anything. Many people have little notions of that kind."

"But I can't make head or tail of it," said the doctor. "You must really begin at the beginning."

"The beginning of it was a dressing-gown," said Father Brown simply. "It was the one really good disguise I've ever known. When you meet a man in a house with a dressing-gown on, you assume quite automatically that he's in his own house. I assumed it myself; but afterwards queer little things began to happen. When he took the pistol down he clicked it at arm's length, as a man does to make sure a strange weapon isn't loaded; of course he would know whether the pistols in his own hall were loaded or not. I didn't like the way he looked for the brandy, or the way he nearly barged into the bowl of fishes. For a man who has a fragile thing of that sort as a fixture in his rooms gets a quite mechanical habit of avoiding it. But these things might possibly

have been fancies; the first real point was this. He came out from the little passage between the two doors; and in that passage there's only one other door leading to a room; so I assumed it was the bedroom he had just come from. I tried the handle; but it was locked. I thought this odd; and looked through the key-hole. It was an utterly bare room, obviously deserted; no bed, no anything. Therefore he had not come from inside any room, but from outside the house. And when I saw that, I think I saw the whole picture.

"Poor Arnold Aylmer doubtless slept and perhaps lived upstairs, and came down in his dressing-gown and passed through the red glass door. At the end of the passage, black against the winter daylight, he saw the enemy of his house. He saw a tall bearded man in a broad-brimmed black hat and a large flapping black cloak. He did not see much more in this world. Strake sprang on him, throttling or stabbing him; we cannot be sure till the inquest. Then Strake, standing in the narrow passage between the hat-stand and the old sideboard, and looking down in triumph on the last of his foes, heard something he had not expected. He heard footsteps in the parlour beyond. It was myself entering by the French windows.

"His masquerade was a miracle of promptitude. It involved not only a disguise but a romance; an impromptu romance. He took off his big black hat and cloak and put on the dead man's dressing-gown. Then he did a rather grisly thing; at least a thing

that affects my fancy as more grisly than the rest. He hung the corpse like a coat on one of the hat-pegs. He draped it in his own long cloak, and found it hung well below the heels; he covered the head entirely with his own wide hat. It was the only possible way of hiding it in that little passage with the locked door; but it was really a very clever one. I myself walked past the hat-stand once without knowing it was anything but a hat-stand. I think that unconsciousness of mine will always give me a shiver.

"He might perhaps have left it at that; but I might have discovered the corpse at any minute; and, hung where it was, it was a corpse calling for what you might call an explanation. He adopted the bolder stroke of discovering it himself and explaining it himself.

"Then there dawned on this strange and frightfully fertile mind the conception of a story of substitution; the reversal of the parts. He had already assumed the part of Arnold Aylmer. Why should not his dead enemy assume the part of John Strake? There must have been something in that topsy turveydom to take the fancy of that darkly fanciful man. It was like some frightful fancy dress ball to which the two mortal enemies were to go dressed up as each other. Only, the fancy dress ball was to be a dance of death; and one of the dancers would be dead. That is why I can imagine that man putting it in his own mind; and I can imagine him smiling."

Father Brown was gazing into vacancy with his large grey eyes, which, when not blurred by his trick of blinking, were the one notable thing in his face. He went on speaking simply and seriously.

"All things are from God; and above all reason and imagination and the great gifts of the mind. They are good in themselves; and we must not altogether forget their origin even in their perversion. Now this man had in him a very noble power to be perverted; the power of telling stories. He was a great novelist; only he had twisted his fictive power to practical and to evil ends; to deceiving men with false fact instead of with true fiction. It began with his deceiving old Aylmer with elaborate excuses and ingeniously detailed lies; but even that may have been, at the beginning, little more than the tall stories and tarradiddles of the child who may say equally he has seen the King of England or the King of the Fairies. It grew strong in him through the vice that perpetuates all vices, pride; he grew more and more vain of his promptitude in producing stories, of his originality and subtlety in developing them. That is what the young Aylmers meant by saying that he could always cast a spell over their father; and it was true. It was the sort of spell that the story-teller cast over the tyrant in the Arabian Nights. And to the last he walked the world with the pride of a poet; and with the false yet unfathomable courage of a great liar. He could always produce more Arabian Nights if ever his neck was in danger. And to-day his neck was in danger.

"But I am sure, as I say, that he enjoyed it as a fantasy as well as a conspiracy. He set about the task of telling the true story the wrong way round; of treating the dead man as living and the live man as dead. He had already got into Aylmer's dressing-gown; he proceeded to get into Aylmer's body and soul. He looked at the corpse as if it were his own corpse lying cold in the snow. Then he spread-eagled it in that strange fashion to suggest the sweeping descent of a bird of prey, and decked it out not only in his own dark and flying garments but in a whole dark fairy-tale about the black bird that could only fall by the silver bullet. I do not know whether it was the silver glittering on the side-board or the snow shining beyond the door that suggested to his intensely artistic temperament the theme of white magic and the white metal used against magicians. But whatever its origin, he made it his own like a poet; and did it very promptly, like a practical man. He completed the exchange and reversal of parts by flinging the corpse out on to the snow as the corpse of Strake. He did his best to work up a creepy conception of Strake as something hovering in the air everywhere, a harpy with wings of speed and claws of death; to explain the absence of footprints and other things. For one piece of artistic impudence I hugely admire him. He actually turned one of the contradictions in his case into an argument for it; and said that the man's cloak being too long for him proved that he never walked on the ground like an ordinary mortal.

But he looked at me very hard while he said that; and something told me that he was at that moment trying a very big bluff."

Dr. Boyne looked thoughtful. "Had you discovered the truth by then?" he asked. "There is something very queer and close to the nerves, I think, about notions affecting identity. I don't know whether it would be more weird to get a guess like that swiftly or slowly. I wonder when you suspected and when you were sure."

"I think I really suspected when I telephoned to you," replied his friend. "And it was nothing more than the red light from the closed door brightening and darkening on the carpet. It looked like a splash of blood that grew vivid as it cried for vengeance. Why should it change like that? I knew the sun had not come out; it could only be because the second door behind it had been opened and shut on the garden. But if he had gone out and seen his enemy then, he would have raised the alarm then; and it was some time afterwards that the fracas occurred. I began to feel he had gone out to do something . . . to prepare something . . . but as to when I was certain, that is a different matter. I knew that right at the end he was trying to hypnotise me, to master me by the black art of eyes like talismans and a voice like an incantation. That's what he used to do with old Aylmer, no doubt. But it wasn't only the way he said it, it was what he said. It was the religion and philosophy of it."

"I'm afraid I'm a practical man," said the doctor with gruff humour, "and I don't bother much about religion and philosophy."

"You'll never be a practical man till you do," said Father Brown. "Look here, doctor; you know me pretty well; I think you know I'm not a bigot. You know I know there are all sorts in all religions; good men in bad ones and bad men in good ones. But there's just one little fact I've learned simply as a practical man, an entirely practical point, that I've picked up by experience, like the tricks of an animal or the trademark of a good wine. I've scarcely ever met a criminal who philosophised at all, who didn't philosophise along those lines of orientalism and recurrence and reincarnation, and the wheel of destiny and the serpent biting its own tail. I have found merely in practice that there is a curse on the servants of that serpent; on their belly shall they go and the dust shall they eat; and there was never a blackguard or a profligate born who could not talk that sort of spirituality. It may not be like that in its real religious origins; but here in our working world it is the religion of rascals; and I knew it was a rascal who was speaking."

"Why," said Boyne, "I should have thought that a rascal could pretty well profess any religion he chose."

"Yes," assented the other, "he could profess any religion; that is he could pretend to any religion, if it was all a pretence. If it was mere mechanical

hypocrisy and nothing else, no doubt it could be done by a mere mechanical hypocrite. Any sort of mask can be put on any sort of face. Anybody can learn certain phrases or state verbally that he holds certain views. I can go out into the street and state that I am a Wesleyan Methodist or a Sandemanian, though I fear in no very convincing accent. But we are talking about an artist; and for the enjoyment of the artist the mask must be to some extent moulded on the face. What he makes outside him must correspond to something inside him; he can only make his effects out of some of the materials of his soul. I suppose he could have said he was a Wesleyan Methodist; but he could never be an eloquent Methodist as he can be an eloquent mystic and fatalist. I am talking of the sort of ideal such a man thinks of if he really tries to be idealistic. It was his whole game with me to be as idealistic as possible; and whenever that is attempted by that sort of man, you will generally find it is that sort of ideal. That sort of man may be dripping with gore; but he will always be able to tell you quite sincerely that Buddhism is better than Christianity. Nay, he will tell you quite sincerely that Buddhism is more Christian than Christianity. That alone is enough to throw a hideous and ghastly ray of light on his notion of Christianity."

"Upon my soul," said the doctor, laughing, "I can't make out whether you're denouncing or defending him."

"It isn't defending a man to say he is a genius," said Father Brown. "Far from it. And it is simply a psychological fact that an artist will betray himself by some sort of sincerity. Leonardo da Vinci cannot draw as if he couldn't draw. Even if he tried, it will always be a strong parody of a weak thing. This man would have made something much too fearful and wonderful out of the Wesleyan Methodist."

When the priest went forth again and set his face homeward, the cold had grown more intense and yet was somehow intoxicating. The trees stood up like silver candelabra of some incredible cold candlemas of purification. It was a piercing cold, like that silver sword of pure pain that once pierced the very heart of purity. But it was not a killing cold, save in the sense of seeming to kill all the mortal obstructions to our immortal and immeasurable vitality. The pale green sky of twilight, with one star like the star of Bethlehem, seemed by some strange contradiction to be a cavern of clarity. It was as if there could be a green furnace of cold which wakened all things to life like warmth, and that the deeper they went into those cold crystalline colours the more were they light like winged creatures and clear like coloured glass. It tingled with truth and it divided truth from error with a blade like ice; but all that was left had never felt so much alive. It was as if all joy were a jewel in the heart of an iceberg. The priest hardly understood his own mood as he advanced deeper and deeper into

the green gloaming, drinking deeper and deeper draughts of that virginal vivacity of the air. Some forgotten muddle and morbidity seemed to be left behind, or wiped out as the snow had painted out the footprints of the man of blood. As he shuffled homewards through the snow, he muttered to himself, "And yet he is right enough about there being a white magic, if he only knows where to look for it."

VII

THE DOOM OF THE DARNAWAYS

Two landscape-painters stood looking at one landscape, which was also a seascape, and both were curiously impressed by it, though their impressions were not exactly the same. To one of them, who was a rising artist from London, it was new as well as strange. To the other, who was a local artist, but with something more than a local celebrity, it was better known; but perhaps all the more strange for what he knew of it.

In terms of tone and form, as these men saw it, it was a stretch of sands against a stretch of sunset, the whole scene lying in strips of sombre colour, dead green and bronze and brown and a drab that was not merely dull but in that gloaming in some way more mysterious than gold. All that broke these level lines was a long building which ran out from the fields into the sands of the sea, so that its fringe of dreary weeds and rushes seemed almost to meet the seaweed. But its most singular feature was that the upper part of it had the ragged outlines of a ruin, pierced by so many wide windows and large rents as to be a mere dark skeleton against the dying light; while the lower bulk of the building had hardly any windows at all, most of them being

blind and bricked up and their outlines only faintly traceable in the twilight. But one window at least was still a window; and it seemed strangest of all that it showed a light.

"Who on earth can live in that old shell?" exclaimed the Londoner, who was a big, bohemian-looking man, young but with a shaggy red beard that made him look older; Chelsea knew him familiarly as Harry Payne.

"Ghosts, you might suppose," replied his friend Martin Wood. "Well, the people who live there really are rather like ghosts."

It was perhaps rather a paradox that the London artist seemed almost bucolic in his boisterous freshness and wonder, while the local artist seemed a more shrewd and experienced person, regarding him with mature and amiable amusement; indeed, the latter was altogether a quieter and more conventional figure, wearing darker clothes and with his square and stolid face clean-shaven.

"It is only a sign of the times, of course," he went on, "or of the passing of old times and old families with them. The last of the great Darnaways live in that house; and not many of the new poor are as poor as they are. They can't even afford to make their own top-story habitable; but have to live in the lower rooms of a ruin, like bats and owls. Yet they have family portraits that go back to the Wars of the Roses and the first portrait-painting in England, and very fine some of them are; I happen to know, because they asked for my professional

advice in overhauling them. There's one of them especially, and one of the earliest, but it's so good that it gives you the creeps."

"The whole place gives you the creeps, I should think by the look of it," replied Payne.

"Well," said his friend, "to tell you the truth it does."

The silence that followed was stirred by a faint rustle among the rushes by the moat; and it gave them, rationally enough, a slight nervous start when a dark figure brushed along the bank, moving rapidly and almost like a startled bird. But it was only a man walking briskly with a black bag in his hand; a man with a long sallow face and sharp eyes that glanced at the London stranger in a slightly darkling and suspicious manner.

"It's only Dr. Barnet," said Wood with a sort of relief. "Good evening, Doctor. Are you going up to the house? I hope nobody's ill."

"Everybody's always ill in a place like that," growled the doctor, "only sometimes they're too ill to know it. The very air of the place is a blight and a pestilence. I don't envy the young man from Australia."

"And who," asked Payne abruptly and rather absently, "may the young man from Australia be?"

"Ah!" snorted the doctor, "hasn't your friend told you about him? As a matter of fact I believe he is arriving to-day. Quite a romance in the old style of melodrama: the heir coming back from the colonies to his ruined castle, all complete even down

to an old family compact for his marrying the lady watching in the ivied tower. Queer old stuff, isn't it? but it really happens sometimes. He's even got a little money, which is the only bright spot there ever was in this business."

"What does Miss Darnaway herself, in her ivied tower, think of the business?" asked Martin Wood drily.

"What she thinks of everything else by this time," replied the doctor. "They don't think in this weedy old den of superstitions; they only dream and drift. I think she accepts the family contract and the colonial husband as part of the Doom of the Darnaways, don't you know. I really think that if he turned out to be a hump-backed negro with one eye and a homicidal mania, she would only think it added a finishing touch and fitted in with the twilight scenery."

"You're not giving my friend from London a very lively picture of my friends in the country," said Wood, laughing. "I had intended taking him there to call; no artist ought to miss those Darnaway portraits if he gets the chance. But perhaps I'd better postpone it if they're in the middle of the Australian invasion."

"Oh, do go in and see them, for the Lord's sake," said Dr. Barnet warmly. "Anything that will brighten their blighted lives will make my task easier. It will need a good many colonial cousins to cheer things up, I should think; and the more the merrier. Come, I'll take you in myself."

As they drew nearer to the house it was seen to be isolated like an island in a moat of brackish water which they crossed by a bridge. On the other side spread a fairly wide stony floor or embankment with great cracks across it, in which little tufts of weed and thorn sprouted here and there. This rock platform looked large and bare in the grey twilight; and Payne could hardly have believed that such a corner of space could have contained so much of the soul of a wilderness. This platform only jutted out on one side, like a giant door-step, and beyond it was the door; a very low-browed Tudor archway standing open but dark, like a cave.

When the brisk doctor led them inside without ceremony, Payne had, as it were, another shock of depression. He could have expected to find himself mounting to a very ruinous tower, by very narrow winding staircases; but in this case the first steps into the house were actually steps downwards. They went down several short and broken stairways into large twilit rooms which, but for their lines of dark pictures and dusty book-shelves, might have been the traditional dungeons beneath the castle moat. Here and there a candle in an old candlestick lit up some dusty accidental detail of a dead elegance; but the visitor was not so much impressed, or depressed, by this artificial light as by the one pale gleam of natural light. As he passed down the long room he saw the only window in that wall, a curious low oval window of a late-seventeenth century fashion. But the strange thing about it was that it did not look out directly

on any space of sky but only on a reflection of sky; a pale strip of daylight merely mirrored in the moat, under the hanging shadow of the bank. Payne had a memory of the Lady of Shallot who never saw the world outside except in a mirror. The lady of this Shallot not only in some sense saw the world in a mirror, but even saw the world upside-down.

"It's as if the house of Darnaway were falling literally as well as metaphorically," said Wood in a low voice, "as if it were sinking slowly into a swamp or a quicksand; until the sea goes over it like a green roof."

Even the sturdy Dr. Barnet started a little at the silent approach of the figure that came to receive them. Indeed, the room was so silent that they were all startled to realise that it was not empty. There were three people in it when they entered; three dim figures motionless in the dim room; all three dressed in black and looking like dark shadows. As the foremost figure drew nearer the grey light from the window, he showed a face that looked almost as grey as its frame of hair. This was old Vine, the steward, long left *in loco parentis* since the death of that eccentric parent, the last Lord Darnaway. He would have been a handsome old man if he had had no teeth. As it was he had one, which showed every now and then and gave him a rather sinister appearance. He received the doctor and his friends with a fine courtesy and escorted them to where the other two figures in black were

seated. One of them seemed to Payne to give another appropriate touch of gloomy antiquity to the castle by the mere fact of being a Roman Catholic priest, who might have come out of a priest's hole in the dark old days. Payne could imagine him muttering prayers or telling beads or tolling bells or doing a number of indistinct and melancholy things in that melancholy place. Just then he might be supposed to have been giving religious consolation to the lady; but it could hardly be supposed that the consolation was very consoling, or at any rate that it was very cheering. For the rest, the priest was personally insignificant enough, with plain and rather expressionless features; but the lady was a very different matter. Her face was very far from being plain or insignificant; it stood out from the darkness of her dress and hair and background with a pallor that was almost awful, but a beauty that was almost awfully alive. Payne looked at it as long as he dared; and he was to look at it a good deal longer before he died.

Wood merely exchanged with his friends such pleasant and polite phrases as would lead up to his purpose of revisiting the portraits. He apologised for calling on the day which he heard was to be one of family welcome; but he was soon convinced that the family was rather mildly relieved to have visitors to distract them or break the shock. He did not hesitate, therefore, to lead Payne through the central reception-room into the library beyond, where hung the portrait, for there was one which he was especi-

ally bent on showing, not only as a picture but almost as a puzzle. The little priest trudged along with them; he seemed to know something about old pictures as well as about old prayers.

"I'm rather proud of having spotted this," said Wood. "I believe it's a Holbein. If it isn't, there was somebody living in Holbein's time who was as great as Holbein."

It was a portrait in the hard but sincere and living fashion of the period, representing a man clad in black trimmed with gold and fur, with a heavy, full, rather pale face but watchful eyes.

"What a pity art couldn't have stopped for ever at just that transition stage," cried Wood, "and never transitioned any more. Don't you see it's just realistic enough to be real? Don't you see the face speaks all the more because it stands out from a rather stiffer framework of less essential things? And the eyes are even more real than the face. On my soul, I think the eyes are too real for the face! It's just as if those sly, quick eyeballs were protruding out of a great pale mask."

"The stiffness extends to the figure a little, I think," said Payne. "They hadn't quite mastered anatomy when mediævalism ended, at least in the north. That left leg looks to me a good deal out of drawing."

"I'm not so sure," replied Wood quietly. "Those fellows who painted just when realism began to be done, and before it began to be overdone, were often more realistic than we think. They put real details

of portraiture into things that are thought merely conventional. You might say this fellow's eyebrows or eye-sockets are a little lop-sided; but I bet if you knew him you'd find that one of his eyebrows did really stick up more than the other. And I shouldn't wonder if he was lame or something, and that black leg was meant to be crooked."

"What an old devil he looks!" burst out Payne suddenly. "I trust his reverence will excuse my language."

"I believe in the devil, thank you," said the priest with an inscrutable face. "Curiously enough there was a legend that the devil was lame."

"I say," protested Payne, "you can't really mean that he was the devil; but who the devil was he?"

"He was the Lord Darnaway under Henry VII and Henry VIII," replied his companion. "But there are curious legends about him too; one of them is referred to in that inscription round the frame, and further developed in some notes left by somebody in a book I found here. They are both rather curious reading."

Payne leaned forward, craning his head so as to follow the archaic inscription round the frame. Leaving out the antiquated lettering and spelling, it seemed to be a sort of rhyme running somewhat thus:

In the seventh heir I shall return,
In the seventh hour I shall depart,
None in that hour shall hold my hand,
And woe to her that holds my heart.

"It sounds creepy somehow," said Payne, "but that may be partly because I don't understand a word of it."

"It's pretty creepy even when you do," said Wood in a low voice. "The record made at a later date, in the old book I found, is all about how this beauty deliberately killed himself in such a way that his wife was executed for his murder. Another note commemorates a later tragedy, seven successions later, under the Georges, in which another Darnaway committed suicide, having first thoughtfully left poison in his wife's wine. It's said that both suicides took place at seven in the evening. I suppose the inference is that he does really return with every seventh inheritor and makes things pleasant, as the rhyme suggests, for any lady unwise enough to marry him."

"On that argument," replied Payne, "it would be a trifle uncomfortable for the next seventh gentleman."

Wood's voice was lower still as he said:

"The new heir will be the seventh."

Harry Payne suddenly heaved up his great chest and shoulders like a man flinging off a burden.

"What crazy stuff are we all talking?" he cried. "We're all educated men in an enlightened age, I suppose. Before I came into this damned dank atmosphere I'd never have believed I should be talking of such things, except to laugh at them."

"You are right," said Wood. "If you lived

long enough in this underground palace you'd begin to feel differently about things. I've begun to feel very curiously about that picture, having had so much to do with handling and hanging it. It sometimes seems to me that the painted face is more alive than the dead faces of the people living here; that it is a sort of talisman or magnet: that it commands the elements and draws out the destinies of men and things. I suppose you would call it very fanciful."

"What is that noise?" cried Payne suddenly.

They all listened, and there seemed to be no noise except the dull boom of the distant sea; then they began to have the sense of something mingling with it; something like a voice calling through the sound of the surf, dulled by it at first, but coming nearer and nearer. The next moment they were certain; someone was shouting outside in the dusk.

Payne turned to the low window behind him and bent to look out. It was the window from which nothing could be seen except the moat with its reflection of bank and sky. But that inverted vision was not the same that he had seen before. From the hanging shadow of the bank in the water depended two dark shadows reflected from the feet and legs of a figure standing above upon the bank. Through that limited aperture they could see nothing but the two legs black against the reflection of a pale and livid sunset. But somehow that very fact of the head being invisible, as if in the clouds, gave something dreadful to the sound that followed;

the voice of a man crying aloud what they could not properly hear or understand. Payne especially was peering out of the little window with an altered face, and he spoke with an altered voice:

"How queerly he's standing!"

"No, no," said Wood, in a sort of soothing whisper. "Things often look like that in reflection. It's the wavering of the water that makes you think that."

"Think what?" asked the priest shortly.

"That his left leg is crooked," said Wood.

Payne had thought of the oval window as a sort of mystical mirror; and it seemed to him that there were in it other inscrutable images of doom. There was something else beside the figure that he did not understand; three thinner legs showing in dark lines against the light, as if some monstrous three-legged spider or bird were standing beside the stranger. Then he had the less crazy thought of a tripod like that of the heather oracles; and the next moment the thing had vanished and the legs of the human figure passed out of the picture.

He turned to meet the pale face of old Vine the steward, with his mouth open, eager to speak, and his single tooth showing.

"He has come," he said. "The boat arrived from Australia this morning."

Even as they went back out of the library into the central salon, they heard the footsteps of the newcomer clattering down the entrance steps, with various items of light luggage trailed behind him.

When Payne saw one of them, he laughed with a reaction of relief. His tripod was nothing but the telescopic legs of a portable camera, easily packed and unpacked; and the man who was carrying it seemed so far to take on equally solid and normal qualities. He was dressed in dark clothes, but of a careless and holiday sort; his shirt was of grey flannel, and his boots echoed uncompromisingly enough in those still chambers. As he strode forward to greet his new circle his stride had scarcely more than the suggestion of a limp. But Payne and his companions were looking at his face, and could scarcely take their eyes from it.

He evidently felt there was something curious and uncomfortable about his reception; but they could have sworn that he did not himself know the cause of it. The lady supposed to be in some sense already betrothed to him was certainly beautiful enough to attract him; but she evidently also frightened him. The old steward brought him a sort of feudal homage, yet treated him as if he were the family ghost. The priest still looked at him with a face which was quite indecipherable, and therefore perhaps all the more unnerving. A new sort of irony, more like the Greek irony, began to pass over Payne's mind. He had dreamed of the stranger as a devil, but it seemed almost worse that he was an unconscious destiny. He seemed to march towards crime with the monstrous innocence of Œdipus. He had approached the family mansion in so blindly buoyant a spirit as to have set up his camera to

photograph his first sight of it; and even the camera had taken on the semblance of the tripod of a tragic pythoness.

Payne was surprised, when taking his leave a little while after, at something which showed that the Australian was already less unconscious of his surroundings. He said in a low voice:

"Don't go . . . or come again soon. You look like a human being. This place fairly gives me the jumps."

When Payne emerged out of those almost subterranean halls and came into the night air and the smell of the sea, he felt as if he had come out of that underworld of dreams in which events tumble on top of each other in a way at once unrestful and unreal. The arrival of the strange relative had been somehow unsatisfying and as it were unconvincing. The doubling of the same face in the old portrait and the new arrival troubled him like a two-headed monster. And yet it was not altogether a nightmare; nor was it that face, perhaps, that he saw most vividly.

"Did you say?" he asked of the doctor, as they strode together across the striped dark sands by the darkening sea, "Did you say that young man was betrothed to Miss Darnaway by a family compact or something? Sounds rather like a novel."

"But an historical novel," answered Dr. Barnet. "The Darnaways all went to sleep a few centuries ago, when things were really done that we only read

of in romances. Yes, I believe there's some family tradition by which second or third cousins always marry when they stand in a certain relation of age, in order to unite the property. A damned silly tradition, I should say; and if they often married in and in, in that fashion, it may account on principles of heredity for their having gone so rotten."

"I should hardly say," answered Payne a little stiffly, "that they had all gone rotten."

"Well," replied the doctor, "the young man doesn't *look* rotten, of course, though he's certainly lame."

"The young man!" cried Payne, who was suddenly and unreasonably angry. "Well, if you think the young lady looks rotten, I think it's you who have rotten taste."

The doctor's face grew dark and bitter. "I fancy I know more about it than you do," he snapped.

They completed the walk in silence, each feeling that he had been irrationally rude and had suffered equally irrational rudeness; and Payne was left to brood alone on the matter, for his friend Wood had remained behind to attend to some of his business in connexion with the pictures.

Payne took very full advantage of the invitation extended by the colonial cousin, who wanted somebody to cheer him up. During the next few weeks he saw a good deal of the dark interior of the Darn-

away home; though it might be said that he did not confine himself entirely to cheering up the colonial cousin. The lady's melancholy was of longer standing and perhaps needed more lifting; anyhow, he showed a laborious readiness to lift it. He was not without a conscience, however, and the situation made him doubtful and uncomfortable. Weeks went by and nobody could discover from the demeanour of the new Darnaway whether he considered himself engaged according to the old compact or no. He went mooning about the dark galleries and stood staring vacantly at the dark and sinister picture. The shades of that prison-house were certainly beginning to close on him, and there was little of his Australian assurance left. But Payne could discover nothing upon the point that concerned him most. Once he attempted to confide in his friend Martin Wood, as he was pottering about in his capacity of picture-hanger; but even out of him he got very little satisfaction.

"It seems to me you can't butt in," said Wood shortly, "because of the engagement."

"Of course I shan't butt in if there is an engagement," retorted his friend; "but is there? I haven't said a word to her, of course; but I've seen enough of her to be pretty certain she doesn't think there is, even if she thinks there may be. He doesn't say there is, or even hint that there ought to be. It seems to me this shilly-shallying is rather unfair on everybody."

"Especially on you, I suppose," said Wood a

little harshly. "But if you ask me, I'll tell you what I think—I think he's afraid."

"Afraid of being refused?" asked Payne.

"No, afraid of being accepted," answered the other. "Don't bite my head off—I don't mean afraid of the lady. I mean afraid of the picture."

"Afraid of the picture!" repeated Payne.

"I mean afraid of the curse," said Wood. "Don't you remember the rhyme about the Darnaway doom falling on him and her."

"Yes, but look here," cried Payne. "Even the Darnaway doom can't have it both ways. You tell me first that I mustn't have my own way because of the compact, and then that the compact mustn't have its own way because of the curse. But if the curse can destroy the compact, why should she be tied to the compact? If they're frightened of marrying each other, they're free to marry anybody else, and there's an end of it. Why should I suffer for the observance of something they don't propose to observe? It seems to me your position is very unreasonable."

"Of course it's all a tangle," said Wood rather crossly, and went on hammering at the frame of a canvas.

Suddenly, one morning, the new heir broke his long and baffling silence. He did it in a curious fashion, a little crude, as was his way, but with an obvious anxiety to do the right thing. He asked frankly for advice, not of this or that individual as

Payne had done, but collectively as of a crowd. When he did speak, he threw himself on the whole company, like a statesman going to the country. He called it "a show-down." Fortunately the lady was not included in this large gesture; and Payne shuddered when he thought of her feelings. But the Australian was quite honest; he thought the natural thing was to ask for help and for information, calling a sort of family council at which he put his cards on the table. It might be said that he flung down his cards on the table, for he did it with a rather desperate air, like one who had been harrassed for days and nights by the increasing pressure of a problem. In that short time the shadows of that place of low windows and sinking pavements had curiously changed him and increased a certain resemblance that crept through all their memories.

The five men, including the doctor, were sitting round a table; and Payne was idly reflecting that his own light tweeds and red hair must be the only colours in the room, for the priest and the steward were in black and Wood and Darnaway habitually wore dark grey suits that looked almost like black. Perhaps this incongruity had been what the young man had meant by calling him a human being. At that moment the young man himself turned abruptly in his chair and began to talk. A moment after the dazed artist knew that he was talking about the most tremendous thing in the world.

"Is there anything in it?" he was saying. "That

is what I've come to asking myself till I'm nearly crazy. I'd never have believed I should come to thinking of such things; but I think of the portrait and the rhyme and the coincidences or whatever you call them, and I go cold. Is there anything in it? Is there any Doom of the Darnaways or only a damned queer accident? Have I got a right to marry, or shall I bring something big and black out of the sky, that I know nothing about, on myself and somebody else?"

His rolling eye had roamed round the table and rested on the plain face of the priest, to whom he now seemed to be speaking. Payne's submerged practicality rose in protest against the problem of superstition being brought before that supremely superstitious tribunal. He was sitting next to Darnaway and struck in before the priest could answer.

"Well, the coincidences are curious, I admit," he said, rather forcing a note of cheerfulness; "but surely we——" and then he stopped as if he had been struck by lightning. For Darnaway had turned his head sharply over his shoulder at the interruption, and with the movement his left eyebrow jerked up far above its fellow and for an instant the face of the portrait glared at him with a ghastly exaggeration of exactitude. The rest saw it; and all had the air of having been dazzled by an instant of light. The old steward gave a hollow groan.

"It is no good," he said hoarsely; "we are dealing with something too terrible."

"Yes," assented the priest in a low voice, "we are dealing with something terrible; with the most terrible thing I know; and the name of it is nonsense."

"What did you say?" said Darnaway, still looking towards him.

"I said nonsense," repeated the priest. "I have not said anything in particular up to now, for it was none of my business; I was only taking temporary duty in the neighbourhood and Miss Darnaway wanted to see me. But since you're asking me personally and point-blank, why, it's easy enough to answer. Of course there's no Doom of the Darnaways to prevent your marrying anybody you have any decent reason for marrying. A man isn't fated to fall into the smallest venial sin, let alone into crimes like suicide and murder. You can't be made to do wicked things against your will because your name is Darnaway, any more than I can because my name is Brown. The Doom of the Browns," he added with relish—"the Weird of the Browns would sound even better."

"And you of all people," repeated the Australian, staring, "tell me to think like that about it."

"I tell you to think about something else," replied the priest cheerfully. "What has become of the rising art of photography? How is the camera getting on? I know it's rather dark downstairs, but those hollow arches on the floor above could easily be turned into a first-rate photographic studio. A few workmen could fit it out with a glass roof in no time."

"Really," protested Martin Wood, "I do think you should be the last man in the world to tinker about with those beautiful Gothic arches, which are about the best work your own religion has ever done in the world. I should have thought you'd have had some feeling for that sort of art; but I can't see why you should be so uncommonly keen on photography."

"I'm uncommonly keen on daylight," answered Father Brown, "especially in this dingy business; and photography has the virtue of depending on daylight. And if you don't know that I would grind all the Gothic arches in the world to powder to save the sanity of a single human soul, you don't know so much about my religion as you think you do."

The young Australian had sprung to his feet like a man rejuvenated. "By George! that's the talk," he cried, "though I never thought to hear it from that quarter. I'll tell you what, reverend sir, I'll do something that will show I haven't lost my courage after all."

The old steward was still looking at him with quaking watchfulness, as if he felt something fey about the young man's defiance. "Oh," he cried, "what are you going to do now?"

"I am going to photograph the portrait," replied Darnaway.

Yet it was barely a week afterwards that the storm of the catastrophe seemed to stoop out of the sky, darkening that sun of sanity to which the priest

had appealed in vain, and plunging the mansion once more in the darkness of the Darnaway doom. It had been easy enough to fit up the new studio; and seen from inside it looked very like any other such studio, empty except for the fullness of the white light. A man coming from the gloomy rooms below had more than normally the sense of stepping into a more than modern brilliancy, as blank as the future. At the suggestion of Wood, who knew the castle well and had got over his first æsthetic grumblings, a small room remaining intact in the upper ruins was easily turned into a dark room, into which Darnaway went out of the white daylight to grope by the crimson gleams of a red lamp. Wood said, laughing, that the red lamp had reconciled him to the vandalism; as that blood-shot darkness was as romantic as an alchemist's cave.

Darnaway had risen at daybreak on the day that he meant to photograph the mysterious portrait; and had it carried up from the library by the single corkscrew staircase that connected the two floors. There he had set it up in the wide white daylight on a sort of easel and planted his photographic tripod in front of it. He said he was anxious to send a reproduction of it to a great antiquary who had written on the antiquities of the house; but the others knew that this was an excuse covering much deeper things. It was, if not exactly a spiritual duel between Darnaway and the demoniac picture, at least a duel between Darnaway and his

own doubts. He wanted to bring the daylight of photography face to face with that dark masterpiece of painting; and to see whether the sunshine of the new art would not drive out the shadows of the old.

Perhaps this was why he preferred to do it by himself, even if some of the details seemed to take longer and involve more than normal delay. Anyhow, he rather discouraged the few who visited his studio during the day of the experiment, and who found him focusing and fussing about in a very isolated and impenetrable fashion. The steward had left a meal for him, as he refused to come down; the old gentleman also returned some hours afterwards and found the meal more or less normally disposed of; but when he brought it he got no more gratitude than a grunt. Payne went up once to see how he was getting on, but finding the photographer disinclined for conversation came down again. Father Brown had wandered that way in an unobtrusive style, to take Darnaway a letter from the expert to whom the photograph was to be sent. But he left the letter in a tray, and whatever he thought of that great glass-house full of daylight and devotion to a hobby, a world he had himself in some sense created, he kept it to himself and came down. He had reason to remember very soon that he was the last to come down the solitary staircase connecting the floors, leaving a lonely man and an empty room behind him. The others were standing in the salon that led into the library; just under the

great black ebony clock that looked like a titanic coffin.

"How was Darnaway getting on," asked Payne, a little later, "when you last went up?"

The priest passed a hand over his forehead. "Don't tell me I'm getting psychic," he said with a sad smile. "I believe I'm quite dazzled with daylight up in that room and couldn't see things straight. Honestly, I felt for a flash as if there were something uncanny about Darnaway's figure standing before that portrait."

"Oh, that's the lame leg," said Barnet promptly. "We know all about that."

"Do you know," said Payne abruptly, but lowering his voice, "I don't think we do know all about it or anything about it. What's the matter with his leg? What was the matter with his ancestor's leg?"

"Oh, there's something about that in the book I was reading, in there, in the family archives," said Wood; "I'll fetch it for you." And he stepped into the library just beyond.

"I think," said Father Brown quietly, "Mr. Payne must have some particular reason for asking that."

"I may as well blurt it out once and for all," said Payne, but in a yet lower voice. "After all, there is a rational explanation. A man from anywhere might have made up to look like the portrait. What do we know about Darnaway? He is behaving rather oddly——"

The others were staring at him in a rather startled fashion; but the priest seemed to take it very calmly.

"I don't think the old portrait's ever been photographed," he said. "That's why he wants to do it. I don't think there's anything odd about that."

"Quite an ordinary state of things, in fact," said Wood with a smile; he had just returned with the book in his hand. And even as he spoke there was a stir in the clockwork of the great dark clock behind him and successive strokes thrilled through the room up to the number of seven. With the last stroke there came a crash from the floor above that shook the house like a thunderbolt; and Father Brown was already two steps up the winding staircase before the sound had ceased.

"My God!" cried Payne involuntarily, "he is alone up there."

"Yes," said Father Brown without turning as he vanished up the stairway. "We shall find him alone."

When the rest recovered from their first paralysis and ran helter-skelter up the stone steps and found their way to the new studio, it was true in that sense that they found him alone. They found him lying in a wreck of his tall camera, with its long splintered legs standing out grotesquely at three different angles; and Darnaway had fallen on top of it with one black crooked leg lying at a fourth angle along the floor. For the moment

the dark heap looked as if he were entangled with some huge and horrible spider. Little more than a glance and a touch were needed to tell them that he was dead. Only the portrait stood untouched upon the easel, and one could fancy the smiling eyes shone.

An hour afterwards Father Brown, in helping to calm the confusion of the stricken household, came upon the old steward muttering almost as mechanically as the clock had ticked and struck the terrible hour. Almost without hearing them, he knew what the muttered words must be.

In the seventh heir I shall return,
In the seventh hour I shall depart.

As he was about to say something soothing, the old man seemed suddenly to start awake and stiffen into anger; his mutterings changed to a fierce cry.

"You!" he cried, "you and your daylight! Even you won't say now there is no doom for the Darnaways."

"My opinion about that is unchanged," said Father Brown mildly.

Then after a pause he added, "I hope you will observe poor Darnaway's last wish, and see the photograph is sent off."

"The photograph!" cried the doctor sharply. "What's the good of that? As a matter of fact, it's rather curious; but there isn't any photograph. It

seems he never took it after all, after pottering about all day."

Father Brown swung round sharply. "Then take it yourselves," he said. "Poor Darnaway was perfectly right. It's most important that the photograph should be taken."

As all the visitors, the doctor, the priest and the two artists trailed away in a black and dismal procession across the brown and yellow sands, they were at first more or less silent, rather as if they had been stunned. And certainly there had been something like a crack of thunder in a clear sky about the fulfilment of that forgotten superstition at the very time when they had most forgotten it; when the doctor and the priest had both filled their minds with rationalism as the photographer had filled his rooms with daylight. They might be as rationalistic as they liked; but in broad daylight the seventh heir had returned, and in broad daylight at the seventh hour he had perished.

"I'm afraid everybody will always believe in the Darnaway superstition now," said Martin Wood.

"I know one who won't," said the doctor sharply. "Why should I indulge in superstition because somebody else indulges in suicide?"

"You think poor Mr. Darnaway committed suicide?" asked the priest.

"I'm sure he committed suicide," replied the doctor.

"It is possible," agreed the other.

"He was quite alone up there, and he had

a whole drug-store of poisons in the dark room. Besides, it's just the sort of thing that Darnaways do."

"You don't think there's anything in the fulfilment of the family curse?"

"Yes," said the doctor, "I believe in one family curse, and that is the family constitution. I told you it was heredity, and they are all half mad. If you stagnate and breed in and brood in your own swamp like that, you're bound to degenerate whether you like it or not. The laws of heredity can't be dodged; the truths of science can't be denied. The minds of the Darnaways are falling to pieces as their blighted old sticks and stones are falling to pieces, eaten away by the sea and the salt air. Suicide—of course he committed suicide; I daresay all the rest will commit suicide. Perhaps the best thing they could do."

As the man of science spoke there sprang suddenly and with startling clearness into Payne's memory the face of the daughter of the Darnaways, a tragic mask pale against an unfathomable blackness, but itself of a blinding and more than mortal beauty. He opened his mouth to speak and found himself speechless.

"I see," said Father Brown to the doctor. "So you do believe in the superstition after all?"

"What do you mean—believe in the superstition? I believe in the suicide as a matter of scientific necessity."

"Well," replied the priest, "I don't see a pin to

choose between your scientific superstition and the other magical superstition. They both seem to end in turning people into paralytics, who can't move their own legs or arms or save their own lives or souls. The rhyme said it was the doom of the Darnaways to be killed, and the scientific textbook says it is the doom of the Darnaways to kill themselves. Both ways they seem to be slaves."

"But I thought you said you believed in rational views of these things," said Dr. Barnet. "Don't you believe in heredity?"

"I said I believed in daylight," replied the priest in a loud and clear voice, "and I won't choose between two tunnels of subterranean superstition that both end in the dark. And the proof of it is this; that you are all entirely in the dark about what really happened in that house."

"Do you mean about the suicide?" asked Payne.

"I mean about the murder," said Father Brown; and his voice, though only slightly lifted to a louder note, seemed somehow to resound over the whole shore. "It was murder: but murder is of the will, which God made free."

What the others said at the moment in answer to it Payne never knew. For the word had a rather curious effect on him; stirring him like the blast of a trumpet and yet bringing him to a halt. He stood still in the middle of the sandy waste and let the others go on in front of him; he felt the blood crawling through all his veins and the sensation that

is called the hair standing on end; and yet he felt a new and unnatural happiness. A psychological process too quick and too complicated for himself to follow had already reached a conclusion that he could not analyse; but the conclusion was one of relief. After standing still for a moment he turned and went back slowly across the sands to the house of the Darnaways.

He crossed the moat with a stride that shook the bridge, descended the stairs and traversed the long rooms with a resounding tread, till he came to the place where Adelaide Darnaway sat haloed with the low light of the oval window, almost like some forgotten saint left behind in the land of death. She looked up, and an expression of wonder made her face yet more wonderful.

"What is it?" she said. "Why have you come back?"

"I have come for the Sleeping Beauty," he said in a tone that had the resonance of a laugh. "This old house went to sleep long ago, as the doctor said; but it is silly for you to pretend to be old. Come up into the daylight and hear the truth. I have brought you a word; it is a terrible word, but it breaks the spell of your captivity."

She did not understand a word he said; but something made her rise and let him lead her down the long hall and up the stairs and out under the evening sky. The ruins of a dead garden stretched towards the sea; and an old fountain with the figure of a triton, green with rust, remained poised there,

pouring nothing out of a dried horn into an empty basin. He had often seen that desolate outline against the evening sky as he passed, and it had seemed to him a type of fallen fortunes in more ways than one. Before long, doubtless, those hollow fonts would be filled, but it would be with the pale green bitter waters of the sea and the flowers would be drowned and strangled in seaweed. So, he had told himself, the daughter of the Darnaways might indeed be wedded, but she would be wedded to death and a doom as deaf and ruthless as the sea. But now he laid a hand on the bronze triton that was like the hand of a giant, and shook it as if he meant to hurl it over like an idol or an evil god of the garden.

"What do you mean?" she asked steadily. "What is this word that will set us free?"

"The word is murder," he said, "and the freedom it brings is as fresh as the flowers of spring. No; I do not mean I have murdered anybody. But the fact that anybody can be murdered is itself good news, after the evil dreams you have been living in. Don't you understand? In that dream of yours everything that happened to you came from inside you; the doom of the Darnaways was stored up in the Darnaways; it unfolded itself like a horrible flower. There was no escape even by happy accident; it was all inevitable; whether it was Vine and his old-wives' tales or Barnet and his new-fangled heredity. But this man who died was not the victim of a magic curse or an inherited madness. He was murdered;

and for us that murder is simply an accident; yes, *requiescat in pace,* but a happy accident. It is a ray of daylight, because it comes from outside."

She suddenly smiled. "Yes, I believe I understand. I suppose you are talking like a lunatic; but I understand. But who murdered him?"

"I do not know," he answered calmly, "but Father Brown knows. And as Father Brown says, murder is at least done by the will, free as that wind from the sea."

"Father Brown is a wonderful person," she said after a pause; "he was the only person who ever brightened my existence in any way at all until——"

"Until what?" asked Payne, and made a movement almost impetuous, leaning towards her and thrusting away the bronze monster so that it seemed to rock on its pedestal.

"Well, until you did," she said and smiled again.

So was the sleeping palace awakened, and it is no part of this story to describe the stages of its awakening, though much of it had come to pass before the dark of that evening had fallen upon the shore. As Harry Payne strode homewards once more, across those dark sands that he had crossed in so many moods, he was at the highest turn of happiness that is given in this mortal life, and the whole red sea within him was at the top of its tide. He would have had no difficulty in picturing all that place again in flower, and the bronze

triton bright as a golden god and the fountain flowing with water or with wine. But all this brightness and blossoming had been unfolded for him by the one word "murder," and it was still a word that he did not understand. He had taken it on trust, and he was not unwise; for he was one of those who have a sense of the sound of truth.

It was more than a month later that Payne returned to his London house to keep an appointment with Father Brown, taking the required photograph with him. His personal romance had prospered as well as was fitting under the shadow of such a tragedy, and the shadow itself therefore lay rather more lightly on him; but it was hard to view it as anything but the shadow of a family fatality. In many ways he had been much occupied, and it was not until the Darnaway household had resumed its somewhat stern routine and the portrait had long been restored to its place in the library that he had managed to photograph it with a magnesium flare. Before sending it to the antiquary, as originally arranged, he brought it to the priest who had so pressingly demanded it.

"I can't understand your attitude about all this, Father Brown," he said. "You act as if you had already solved the problem in some way of your own."

The priest shook his head mournfully. "Not a bit of it," he answered. "I must be very stupid but I'm quite stuck; stuck about the most practical point of all. It's a queer business; so simple up to a point,

and then—— Let me have a look at that photograph, will you?"

He held it close to his screwed, short-sighted eyes for a moment, and then said, "Have you got a magnifying glass?"

Payne produced one, and the priest looked through it intently for some time and then said, "Look at the title of that book at the edge of the bookshelf beside the frame; it's *The History of Pope Joan*. Now, I wonder . . . yes, by George; and the one above is something or other of Iceland. Lord! what a queer way to find it out! What a dolt and donkey I was not to notice it when I was there!"

"But what have you found out?" asked Payne impatiently.

"The last link," said Father Brown, "and I'm not stuck any longer. Yes, I think I know how that unhappy story went from first to last now."

"But why?" insisted the other.

"Why, because," said the priest with a smile, "the Darnaway library contained books about Pope Joan and Iceland, not to mention another I see with the title beginning *The Religion of Frederick*, which is not so very hard to fill up." Then, seeing the other's annoyance, his smile faded and he said more earnestly:

"As a matter of fact, this last point, though it is the last link, is not the main business. There were much more curious things in the case than that. One of them is rather a curiosity of evidence. Let

me begin by saying something that may surprise you. Darnaway did not die at seven o'clock that evening. He had been already dead for a whole day."

"Surprise is rather a mild word," said Payne grimly, "since you and I both saw him walking about afterwards."

"No, we did not," replied Father Brown quietly. "I think we both saw him, or thought we saw him, fussing about with the focusing of his camera. Wasn't his head under that black cloak when you passed through the room? It was when I did. And that's why I felt there was something queer about the room and the figure. It wasn't that the leg was crooked, but rather that it wasn't crooked. It was dressed in the same sort of dark clothes; but if you see what you believe to be one man standing in the way that another man stands, you will think he's in a strange and strained attitude."

"Do you really mean," cried Payne with something like a shudder, "that it was some unknown man?"

"It was the murderer," said Father Brown. "He had already killed Darnaway at daybreak and hid the corpse and himself in the dark room—an excellent hiding-place, because nobody normally goes into it or can see much if he does. But he let it fall out on the floor at seven o'clock, of course, that the whole thing might be explained by the curse."

"But I don't understand," observed Payne.

"Why didn't he kill him at seven o'clock, then, instead of loading himself with a corpse for fourteen hours?"

"Let me ask you another question," said the priest. "Why was there no photograph taken? Because the murderer made sure of killing him when he first got up, and before he could take it. It was essential to the murderer to prevent that photograph reaching the expert on the Darnaway antiquities."

There was a sudden silence for a moment, and then the priest went on in a lower tone:

"Don't you see how simple it is? Why, you yourself saw one side of the possibility; but it's simpler even than you thought. You said a man might be faked to resemble an old picture. Surely it's simpler that a picture should be faked to resemble a man. In plain words, it's true in a rather special way that there was no doom of the Darnaways. There was no old picture; there was no old rhyme; there was no legend of a man who caused his wife's death. But there was a very wicked and a very clever man who was willing to cause another man's death in order to rob him of his promised wife."

The priest suddenly gave Payne a sad smile, as if in reassurance. "For the moment I believe you thought I meant you," he said, "but you were not the only person who haunted that house for sentimental reasons. You know the man, or rather you think you do. But there were depths in the man

called Martin Wood, artist and antiquary, which none of his mere artistic acquaintances were likely to guess. Remember that he was called in to criticise and catalogue the pictures; in an aristocratic dust-bin of that sort that practically means simply to tell the Darnaways what art treasures they had got. They would not be surprised at things turning up they had never noticed before. It had to be done well, and it was; perhaps he was right when he said that if it wasn't Holbein it was somebody of the same genius."

"I feel rather stunned," said Payne, "and there are twenty things I don't see yet. How did he know what Darnaway looked like? How did he actually kill him; the doctors seem rather puzzled at present."

"I saw a photograph the lady had which the Australian sent on before him," said the priest, "and there are several ways in which he could have learned things when the new heir was once recognised. We may not know these details; but they are not difficulties. You remember he used to help in the dark room; it seems to me an ideal place, say, to prick a man with a poisoned pin, with the poisons all handy. No, I say these were not difficulties. The difficulty that stumped me was how Wood could be in two places at once. How could he take the corpse from the dark-room and prop it against the camera so that it would fall in a few seconds, without coming downstairs, when he was in the library looking out a book? And I was such a fool

that I never looked at the books in the library; and it was only in this photograph, by very undeserved good luck, that I saw the simple fact of a book about Pope Joan."

"You've kept your best riddle for the end," said Payne grimly. "What on earth can Pope Joan have to do with it?"

"Don't forget the book about the Something of Iceland," advised the priest, "or the religion of somebody called Frederick. It only remains to ask what sort of a man was the late Lord Darnaway."

"Oh, does it?" observed Payne heavily.

"He was a cultivated, humorous sort of eccentric, I believe," went on Father Brown. "Being cultivated, he knew there was no such person as Pope Joan. Being humorous, he was very likely to have thought of the title of 'The Snakes of Iceland' or something else that didn't exist. I venture to reconstruct the third title as *The Religion of Frederick the Great*—which also didn't exist. Now, doesn't it strike you that those would be just the titles to put on the backs of books that didn't exist; or in other words on a book-case that wasn't a book-case?"

"Ah," cried Payne, "I see what you mean now. There was some hidden staircase——"

"Up to the room Wood himself selected as a dark room," said the priest nodding. "I'm sorry. It couldn't be helped. It's dreadfully banal and stupid, as stupid as I have been on this pretty banal

case. But we were mixed up in a real musty old romance of decayed gentility and a fallen family mansion; and it was too much to hope that we could escape having a secret passage. It was a priest's hole; and I deserve to be put in it."

VIII

THE GHOST OF GIDEON WISE

FATHER BROWN always regarded the case as the queerest example of the theory of an alibi; the theory by which it is maintained, in defiance of the mythological Irish bird, that it is impossible for anybody to be in two places at once. To begin with, James Byrne, being an Irish journalist, was perhaps the nearest approximation to the Irish bird. He came as near as anybody could to being in two places at once; for he was in two places at the opposite extremes of the social and political world within the space of twenty minutes. The first was in the Babylonian halls of the big hotel, which was the meeting place of the three commercial magnates concerned with arranging for a coal lock-out and denouncing it as a coal strike; the second was in a curious tavern, having the façade of a grocery store, where met the more subterranean triumvirate of those who would have been very glad to turn the lock-out into a strike—and the strike into a revolution. The reporter passed to and fro between the three millionaires and the three Bolshevist leaders with the immunity of the modern herald or the new ambassador.

He found the three mining magnates hidden

in a jungle of flowering plants and a forest of fluted and florid columns of gilded plaster; gilded bird-cages hung high under the painted domes amid the highest leaves of the palms; and in them were birds of motley colours and varied cries. No bird in the wilderness ever sang more unheeded and no flower ever wasted its sweetness on the desert air more completely than the blossoms of those tall plants wasted theirs upon the brisk and breathless business men, mostly American, who talked and ran to and fro in that place. And there, amid a riot of rococo ornament that nobody ever looked at, and a chatter of expensive foreign birds that nobody ever heard, and a mass of gorgeous upholstery and a labyrinth of luxurious architecture, the three men sat and talked of how success was founded on thought and thrift and a vigilance of economy and self-control. One of them indeed did not talk so much as the others; but he watched with very bright and motionless eyes, which seemed to be pinched together by his pince-nez, and the permanent smile under his small black moustache was rather like a permanent sneer. This was the famous Jacob P. Stein, and he did not speak till he had something to say. But his companion, old Gallup the Pennsylvanian, a huge fat fellow with reverend grey hair but a face like a pugilist, talked a great deal. He was in a jovial mood and was half rallying, half bullying the third millionaire, Gideon Wise, a hard, dried, angular old bird of the type that his countrymen compare to hickory, with a stiff grey