



Father Brown's Tale

THOUGH NOW IN HIS NINETIES, FATHER BROWN WAS STILL IN GOOD health and full of vigor, and he always enjoyed his quiet chats with his friend Sheriff Dirks. At his age, Father Brown much preferred talking about criminals to his older hobby of chasing them.

The sheriff was comfortably seated in an overstuffed chair, and he looked with pleasure at the large tumbler full of cold diet cola that Mrs. James, the housekeeper, kept on hand especially for him—for neither of the two resident priests cared for that sort of beverage.

“This is about two brothers, Gabriel and Ben Garland,” he began. “They own a downtown drugstore together, or at least they did before Gabriel was found dead in his office. A druggist, you know, has no trouble getting hold of lethal doses of fast-acting poison, and the hypodermic needle that did the job on Gabriel was found clasped in his hand. But my problem is that some evidence points to suicide and other evidence points to murder. And it’s either suicide or murder,” Dirks said. “It can’t be both.”

“Oh?” said Father Brown. He stared at the carpet for several minutes before he spoke again. “May I tell you a story, Sheriff?” he asked. “It’s a kind of cautionary tale about a curious problem in logic. I can’t promise it will help you, but it might.”

“I’m all ears,” said Dirks.

“My tale is set some time ago in the Canadian Rocky Mountains,” said Father Brown. “It happened one night in the midst of a winter ice storm. A man was killed when his motorcar plunged over the edge of a mountain road. The police investigation found that the motorcar had skidded out of control while rounding a curve, and the tire marks showed how the driver had tried valiantly to right the vehicle and how he had failed. It was

clearly an accident, although—as with many accidents—this one sprang from reckless behavior and might have been avoided.

“It later came to light that the police had been on the verge of arresting this man for embezzlement. It was said that he would have been convicted easily on the evidence. Then the police found a suicide note in which the man stated that life was no longer worth living. His friends testified that he had been terribly despondent. So you see, Sheriff, his death was clearly a suicide, although he chose to end his life by driving carelessly over a treacherous road.”

“Yes, I see,” Dirks said.

“Ah, but there is more,” said Father Brown. “After several years it was revealed—never mind how—that this man had not really been guilty of embezzlement. In truth, the evidence against him had been manufactured by his ruthless business partner. The threats of the partner had driven him to the brink of suicide.

“But although the man was desperate to die, he was not capable of deliberately ending his own life, and so the evil partner suggested he take that fatal automobile ride through the storm over the dangerous mountain roads.”

“Why it was a form of murder then,” Dirks said with surprise.

“Yes, *murder*,” the priest answered, “though the murderer’s method was to drive the victim to commit *suicide* though the agency of a motoring *accident*.”

“Wow,” said Dirks. “So, it doesn’t have to be one thing or another after all.”

“Have you time for another glass of fizzy soda?” the priest asked.

“Thanks, no,” Dirks said. “Obviously, I’ve got work to do, and I better get hopping.”



A month passed before Sheriff Dirks stopped at the rectory for another visit with Father Brown. He was again seated in the comfortable study, and Mrs. James was not tardy in serving them refreshments.

“To your good health,” said Father Brown.

“And yours,” said Dirks. “Look, I wanted to tell you how the business about the death of that druggist was resolved.” Father Brown merely nodded.

“We had just arrested Gabriel’s brother Ben on suspicion of murder,” said Dirks. “But then Gabriel’s widow and her lawyer came to see us. She

told us that she and her husband had been conspiring to poison his brother. You see, things were set up so that if one brother died, the other brother would own the whole drugstore business. The store profits had been in a slow decline for some years, and the motive that pushed Gabriel and his wife to plan the murder of his brother was plain and simple greed.

"Well, Father, the best laid plans, and so on. Gabriel carelessly stabbed himself with the hypodermic he was readying for his brother, and the fast-acting poison did the rest. When I said it was either murder or suicide, I was wrong. The truth is, the possibility of an accident had never crossed my mind." The priest said nothing.

"Still, Father," Dirks continued, "that tale you told me about the accident in the Canadian mountains shows that *you* had it all figured out; and for once, I know how you knew it without you giving me the explanation. Gabriel's widow belongs to St. Dominic's parish, and she told us that she confessed to you, Father Brown; she says you warned her that if an innocent man was ever falsely accused of Gabriel's murder, she would be morally obliged to come to us with the truth. That's what she did, and so the case is wrapped up and put to bed.

"You tried to tip me off with that tale of yours, Father. But you couldn't be direct because you priests can't reveal the secrets of confession." The sheriff's grin showed he was proud of this deduction.

"Sheriff," said Father Brown, "the day you told me about this drugstore poisoning case was the first time I had ever heard a word about it."

"But—but then," the Sheriff sputtered, "if you didn't have the facts, how did you know enough to concoct that tale of yours?"

"The tale had nothing to do with facts," answered Father Brown. "It had to do with logic."

"At least," said the sheriff, "you'll have to admit Mrs. Garland came to you later and confessed how she and her husband had planned the murder of his brother. I guess that must have been sometime after we had our discussion about the case. She did confess it to you, didn't she?"

The priest's expression was unreadable. "Did I ever tell you about my first murder?" he asked. "It was just a small private affair in the city of Paris. The killer cut off the head of one of his dinner guests with a soldier's saber. Have another glass of fizzy soda, Sheriff, and I'll tell you all about it. It makes quite a tale."