

DETECTIVE FATHER BROWN

By Jon Jory

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ISBN: 978-1-61588-441-4

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DETECTIVE FATHER BROWN

An adaptation of G.K. Chesterton's classic stories

Adapted by Jon Jory

SYNOPSIS: Famous for his intuitive detective skills, Father Brown, a man of the cloth, is called to solve two crimes. Todhunter is found murdered, locked in his own room and Norman seems to have been killed by a person with inhuman strength. Narrated by his apprentice, Flambeau, together they weave their way through the lies to find the truth.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(4-7 females, 5-6 males, 2 either)

FLAMBEAU (f).....	(26 lines)
FATHER BROWN (m)	(66 lines)
DR. HOOD (f)	(28 lines)
MAGGIE (f).....	(12 lines)
MRS. MACNAB (f).....	(2 lines)
TODHUNTER (m)	(1 line)
NORMAN (m).....	(11 lines)
WILFRED (m).....	(44 lines)
MRS. GIBBS (f)	(19 lines)
DOCTOR (m/f).....	(25 lines)
POLICE INSPECTOR (m/f).....	(15 lines)
SIMEON BARNES (m).....	(19 lines)
MRS. SARAH BARNES (f).....	(3 lines)
THOMAS (m).....	(2 lines)
MRS. CAMBRIA (f).....	(2 lines)

DURATION: 30 minutes

TIME: 1920's, 1930's, or 1950's

SETTING: *The set consists of three levels each only eight inches above the other, used for different locales. Furniture should be only the necessary and can be moved on and off by the cast. The movement from one scene to another should be fluid. There is an ornate chair in place on level three, a small desk and two chairs on level two and the lowest level, closest to the audience is bare.*

AT START: *Lights up on FLAMBEAU, stylishly dressed, sits sipping a drink. She notices the audience.*

FLAMBEAU: Ah, you've come, and right on time too. Good evening, I am Marguerite Flambeau, the greatest jewel thief of my generation. I first met Father Brown when he tracked me down and saw to my arrest. It was in all the papers who were nice enough to tout me as "A Colossus of Crime." Before my criminal career, I was a circus acrobat and contortionist. I was astounded to be found out and jailed by, of all things, a little parish priest. It was embarrassing – what could I do but retire? Retirement, of course, is the most unsatisfactory of all professions. Thus, I retired from retirement, presented myself to that same Father Brown and asked him to teach me the detective's trade. For if I could learn to catch myself, as he caught me, what might I not accomplish? I cannot otherwise describe the good Father than as remarkable. Remarkably remarkable. And I have known remarkable men. Do come along.

FATHER BROWN enters struggling without success to close his umbrella, knocking off his own hat in the process.

FATHER BROWN: I fear my umbrella has gotten the better of me.

FLAMBEAU: Allow me.

FLAMBEAU closes the umbrella simply and easily, and hands it back to FATHER BROWN.

FATHER BROWN: Amazing. Umbrellas I think are emotional rather than rational.

FLAMBEAU: What a lovely idea.

FATHER BROWN: If you would care to accompany me, we might have an instructive bit of deductive fun.

FLAMBEAU: It would be my pleasure, Father.

The lights change and they move up to level two where a woman in business attire sits at a desk.

FATHER BROWN: *(Entering. He attempts to take off his hat and hits himself in the head with the umbrella.)* Drat.

FLAMBEAU takes the umbrella.

FATHER BROWN: Ok, thank you. *(To DR. HOOD.)* My name is Father Brown as you can see. I've come about that business of the MacNabs.

DR. HOOD: MacNabs?

FATHER BROWN: Yes. I've heard you often help people out of such problems. Pray excuse me if I am mistaken.

DR. HOOD: It is possible you mistake me. You dabble, I believe, in the criminal arts, Father, while my work is almost entirely literary and educational. I am sometimes consulted by the police on matters of importance but...

FATHER BROWN: Oh this is of the greatest importance. Her mother, you see, won't let them get engaged.

DR. HOOD: Won't let whom? Oh, do sit.

FATHER BROWN and FLAMBEAU do.

FATHER BROWN: Maggie MacNab and young Todhunter and they want to be married, now what could be more important than that?

FLAMBEAU: *(Almost comically wide-eyed.)* Well, nothing of course.

DR. HOOD: *(Chuckling.)* It has been, Father, fourteen years since I dealt with a marital problem.

FLAMBEAU: And I, never.

DR. HOOD: So, you bring me the crucial question of whether someone called Maggie is a suitable fiancée for someone called Todhunter?

FATHER BROWN: You grasp the situation perfectly. Would you care for a caramel drop?

DR. HOOD: I would. I can't say I have much to do this afternoon, plunge on.

FATHER BROWN: Good show.

FLAMBEAU: Good show.

FATHER BROWN: I am the priest of a small Catholic church. My parishioner is the widow, MacNab. She has one daughter and one lodger and her daughter wants to marry him. An awful complication.

FLAMBEAU: A hideous enigma.

FATHER BROWN: Todhunter seems a decent fellow, but no one knows what his trade is. Mrs. MacNab, a pessimist, feels it's probably connected to dynamite. He shuts himself up and studies something or other hours a day behind a locked door. Two voices are heard talking in the room but when the door is opened, Todhunter is always alone.

DR. HOOD: The plot thickens.

FATHER BROWN: There are tales of a mysterious man appearing out of the mist and arguing with Todhunter through a window 'til it was slammed shut. This seems out of character as he is a mild fellow.

DR. HOOD: Father, you see only the gothic possibilities of the tale, while I, a scientist, see it as dropping a little morbid adventure into the teacups of Mrs. MacNabs' friends to pass the time.

MAGGIE, a young girl, red-hot with haste, barges in.

MAGGIE: Beg pardon, but I followed Father Brown, as it's nothing less than life or death. Father, my James Todhunter has been murdered, for all I can make out. That man Glass has been with him, I heard them talking through the door.

FATHER BROWN: "Glass"? Who is Glass?

MAGGIE: I heard it: "No, Mr. Glass," "Yes, Mr. Glass," "Two or three, Mr. Glass." You must come. There may still be time.

FLAMBEAU: We ought to, don't you think, Father?

MAGGIE: I tried to break down the door. No luck. I ran to the backyard, looked in the window and saw James lying on the floor as if drugged or strangled.

FATHER BROWN: Good heavens. Come!

FATHER BROWN and DR. HOOD exit. FLAMBEAU moves down to speak to the audience. Stagehands remove DR. HOOD'S furniture and set up TODHUNTER'S room while FLAMBEAU speaks. Playing cards litter a small table. Two wine glasses on it, a third lies on the floor. A few feet away, a long knife. Nearby a gentleman's top hat. TODHUNTER, lies there, a scarf around his mouth, ropes tie his hands and feet.

FLAMBEAU: Father, Maggie, Dr. Hood and I were met by a distraught Mrs. MacNab, in a very bad state indeed who told us Mr. Todhunter had been brutally murdered.

While the stagehands work on level two, MAGGIE, DR. HOOD, FATHER BROWN and MRS. MACNAB enter to FLAMBEAU.

MRS. MACNAB: It's that Mr. Glass, I knew it would be that dreadful man. You cannot imagine the horror. Poor James has been tied up and done in with a knife. Oh, horrible, horrible beyond imagining.

They all enter. FATHER BROWN goes immediately to TODHUNTER.

FATHER BROWN: Stay back, please. Wait. Yes. Quite alive I'm glad to say.

DR. HOOD: This must, in the absence of Glass, be Glass' hat.

MAGGIE: Untie him, Father.

FATHER BROWN: Without a doubt, but one moment.

DR. HOOD: *(Examining the hat.)* Human hair is always falling out, but here are many hairs so we may assume Glass is bald and of advanced years.

FLAMBEAU: Smashed wine glass.

FATHER BROWN: But one splinter on the mantelpiece. Too high to have been done by a man of Todhunter's height.

MRS. MACNAB: Horror, all horror. *(Falls to the floor in a faint.)*

MAGGIE: We must get mother up.

FATHER BROWN: Absolutely, but just a moment.

MAGGIE: You must untie poor James.

FATHER BROWN: Oh definitely, but one moment.

DR. HOOD: Here we see a card game with wine.

FATHER BROWN: Wineglasses but no wine.

MAGGIE: If you do not untie him, I'll go outside and scream for the police.

FLAMBEAU: Excellent. But wait one moment.

DR. HOOD: What are the chief facts known of Todhunter? He is economical, has money and a secret. These are the facts of the kind of man who is blackmailed. Glass, a man of cheap fiery, profligate habits and bad temper has the marks of a blackmailer.

FATHER BROWN: I see how you see it.

MAGGIE: (*Sternly.*) Are you going to take those ropes off?

DR. HOOD: The ropes will do very well 'til your friends the police bring the handcuffs.

FLAMBEAU: I'm not sure I follow you.

DR. HOOD: Because you find Mr. Todhunter tied up you feel Glass did it and then escaped. First, why did Glass leave his hat behind? Second, the only exit is the window and it is locked on the inside. Third, this blade has a tiny touch of blood on the point, but there's no wound on Todhunter. Fourth, it is much more likely that the blackmailed person would try to kill his tormentor than the blackmailer would kill his golden goose.

FATHER BROWN: But the ropes?

FLAMBEAU: Ah, the ropes...

MAGGIE: Yes, the ropes!

DR. HOOD: The reason I do not release him is because Mr. Todhunter can set himself free at any moment.

FLAMBEAU: Fascinating.

DR. HOOD: Every one of those knots, Todhunter made himself. No one who wished to constrain him would have used them.

FATHER BROWN: Just imagine.

DR. HOOD: It is fakery to make him appear the victim of the struggle instead of Glass who might have been stuffed up the chimney.

FATHER BROWN: Jerusalem! Might that be it? (*Peers closely at the captive.*) Just look at his face? Look at the eyes!

MAGGIE: Because the ropes are hurting him, you brutes!

DR. HOOD: The eyes show a psychological abnormality.

FLAMBEAU: Nonsense. Can't you see he's laughing?

DR. HOOD: Laughing? What could he be laughing at?

FATHER BROWN: Well, not to put too fine a point on it, I think he's laughing at you. In fact, I'm quite inclined to laugh at myself, now I know about it.

DR. HOOD: (*A bit exasperated.*) Now you know about what?

FATHER BROWN: Now I know the profession of Mr. Todhunter. (*Enthusiastic.*) Dr. Hood, you are a great poet! You have called an uncreated person out of the void. How much more godlike is that than merely presenting the facts.

DR. HOOD: I have no notion what you are talking about. My facts are all inevitable though necessarily incomplete in the absence of Mr. Glass.

FATHER BROWN: Ah, Mr. Glass. He is so extremely absent that there was never anybody so absent as Mr. Glass.

FLAMBEAU: Do you mean absent from the town?

FATHER BROWN: I mean he is absent from everywhere. He is absent from the nature of things, so to speak.

DR. HOOD: Are you surmising there is no such person?

FATHER BROWN: I'm afraid so, though it does seem a pity.

DR. HOOD: If there is no Mr. Glass, whose hat is this?

FATHER BROWN: It is Mr. Todhunter's.

DR. HOOD: But it doesn't fit him. He couldn't possibly wear it.

FATHER BROWN: I never said he could wear it. I said it was his hat.

DR. HOOD: What can Todhunter get out of a hat he can't wear?

FATHER BROWN: Rabbits.

FLAMBEAU: What?

FATHER BROWN: Rabbits, ribbons, licorice sticks, goldfish, and rolls of colored paper. Did you not see it when you found out the faked ropes? It's just the same with the long knife.

DR. HOOD: And?

MAGGIE: And?

FLAMBEAU: And?

FATHER BROWN: Mr. Todhunter is learning to be a professional magician, as well as a juggler, ventriloquist and expert in the rope trick. His conjuring explains the hat. The juggling explains the three glasses which Todhunter was teaching himself to throw up and catch in rotation. As a beginner he smashed one glass against the ceiling. The long knife was there for him to swallow, and he mistakenly pricked his throat explaining the blood. Cards for card tricks. They are on the floor because he was causing them to fly into the air. When some idler in a top hat curiously looked in the window, he drove him away and made us imagine the silk-hatted specter of Mr. Glass.

MAGGIE: But what about the two voices?

FATHER BROWN: Ventriloquism. They speak first in their own voice and reply in a made up one.

DR. HOOD: You are certainly a very ingenious person.

FLAMBEAU: To say the least.

DR. HOOD: It could not been better done in a book. But why the name Mr. Glass?

FATHER BROWN: *(Laughing.)* When our juggling friend juggled the three glasses in turn, he counted them aloud as he caught them and commented when he failed to catch them. What he really said was, "One, two, three – missed a glass, one, two, missed a glass" and so on.

They erupt in laughter. TODHUNTER uncoils all the ropes and lets them fall with a flourish. Smiling he takes a deep bow and addresses them all.

TODHUNTER: Zaladin, the world's greatest conjurer, contortionist, ventriloquist and sword swallower will be ready with an entirely new series of illusions on Monday next at eight o'clock precisely!

A sweeping bow. Blackout. Single spot up downstage. FLAMBEAU moves into it. The others actors exit. The stage is cleared during Flambeau's speech and a single bench placed on level two.

FLAMBEAU: What an insightful question. You're quite right, Father Brown was seldom attracted to murder. Ill put. I don't mean that he might have committed one. Though that is an amusing thought. I mean he seldom involved himself as detective. He found them... well... overly simple. Not calling for sufficient mental rigor or creativity. It is always a family matter and you never have to look further for the perpetrator. I do remember that such a case in the small village of Bohun Beacon though. Simple proximity really, the good Father's church just a good morning's brisk walk away. I personally call the case, "The Hammer of God," but that didn't sit well with the Father. He would prefer it be simply, "The Hammer." It will show you, I think, that it is not only Father Brown's prowess as a detective that defined him, but the profound humanity beneath it.

Lights change. A light on the bench as well as on FLAMBEAU. NORMAN, a touch tipsy, wearing evening dress and, oddly, an old green helmet enters carrying a mug of beer. He sings as he stretches, finally sitting on the bench.

NORMAN: Who is knocking at my door
Said the fair young maiden
Who is knocking at my door
Said the fair young maiden
Open the door and let me in
Said Ballochty Bill the Sailor
(*Sits on a bench.*) Et cetera and so forth.

FLAMBEAU: The little village of Bohun Beacon was perched on a hill so steep that going to the church below was rather like a descent from Mount Everest. Beside the church was, naturally, an ale house. Thus one could sin in the one and in a few steps, be forgiven in the other. On the other side a blacksmith's shop and an attached house. Therein abided the ferocious blacksmith and his all too attractive wife. (*As she exits.*) There might be a moral in this one, though I profoundly doubt it.

WILFRED, NORMAN'S brother, enters.

NORMAN: Well, well, well, good morning, Wilfred. What a pleasure dearest brother. You may drink the rest of my beer if you'd care to.

WILFRED: I am not in the habit, Norman, of drinking beer directly after sunrise.

NORMAN: And seldom at any other hour, I've noticed. You notice, I am sure, that I have been ceaselessly and sleeplessly watching over my people.

WILFRED: Rather, you have been drinking beer and have been up all night pursuing women.

NORMAN: You have a keen and unforgiving eye, Wilfred. Now, unless you have prepared a lecture, I am going to call on the blacksmith.

WILFRED: The blacksmith it out. He is over at Greenford.

NORMAN: I know. That is why I am calling on him.

WILFRED: Or his wife.

NORMAN: You have found me out.

WILFRED: Norman, are you ever afraid of thunderbolts?

NORMAN: Is your new hobby meteorology?

WILFRED: I mean, do you ever think that God might strike you in the street?

NORMAN: Oh, I see, brother, that your hobby is folklore.

WILFRED: While your hobby is blasphemy. But if you do not fear God, you have good reason to fear man.

NORMAN: Every man fears man.

WILFRED: Barnes the blacksmith is the strongest man for forty miles round and perhaps the quickest to anger, he could throw you over that wall.

NORMAN: In that case drinking beer all night has been necessary to soften the fall.

WILFRED: Wit does not excuse sin, brother.

NORMAN: And sin is perhaps in the eye of the beholder. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll be off to commit what you call sins of the flesh.

WILFRED: (As *NORMAN* exits.) What is bought must be paid for.
(*Kneels.*)

FLAMBEAU steps into a single light and speaks to us.

FLAMBEAU: Wilfred, the pastor, saw "Mad Joe," unkindly called the village idiot by the unthoughtful.

WILFRED: I have never seen him in the church before.

WILFRED, kneeling, rises and sees MAD JOE. MAD JOE points at WILFRED and shakes his finger at him. Then MAD JOE moves to WILFRED and snaps his fingers in his face. Then MAD JOE exits.

FLAMBEAU: The curate looked after him and saw Mad Joe approach his brother and do a hopping sort of dance around him... (*Should the director wish this could be seen.*) while his brother laughed and tossed pennies at his feet. (*WILFRED kneels.*) He thought of this picture of pain and cruelty in the bright sunlight. A half hour later, Mrs. Gibbs, the village gossip, found him there, having been sent in haste.

MRS. GIBBS enters to WILFRED.

MRS. GIBBS: Pardon, sir, terrible sorry to interrupt.

WILFRED: Not at all. It's a pleasure to see you finally at church, Mrs. Gibbs.

MRS. GIBBS: Yes, sir.

WILFRED: What is it?

MRS. GIBBS: Yes, sir. You must excuse me, sir, but we didn't think it right not to let you know at once. I'm afraid a rather dreadful thing – has happened, sir.

WILFRED: Yes?

MRS. GIBBS: I'm afraid your brother...

WILFRED: What devilry has he done now?

MRS. GIBBS: Not devilry, no, he... (*Pauses.*)

WILFRED: Please, Mrs. Gibbs.

MRS. GIBBS: Why, sir, I'm afraid he has done nothing and won't do anything. I'm afraid he's done for.

WILFRED: Done for?

MRS. GIBBS: You had really better come, sir.

WILFRED: All right.

MRS. GIBBS: This way, sir.

MRS. GIBBS leads WILFRED offstage. Lights change. NORMAN'S body is dragged on. MRS. BARNES, the blacksmith's wife, kneels by NORMAN'S body. DOCTOR and POLICE INSPECTOR stand above it. FATHER BROWN stands several feet away. WILFRED and MRS. GIBBS re-enter. FLAMBEAU steps down to us.

FLAMBEAU: Father Brown, of course, had been sent for. His reputation was well known in the village. *(Steps away.)*

WILFRED: Is my brother dead?

DOCTOR: He is.

WILFRED: What does it mean? How could this horrible mystery come to be?

MRS. GIBBS: Plenty of horror, sir, but not much mystery.

WILFRED: What do you mean?

MRS. GIBBS: I think you know something of it.

MRS. BARNES moves away from NORMAN'S body.

MRS. GIBBS: As to your brother, there is only one man for forty miles round that could have struck such a blow as that to his head and he's the man who has most reason to.

WILFRED: Doctor?

DOCTOR: We must not prejudge, but I can corroborate what Mrs. Gibbs says about the blow, sir. It was incredibly powerful. Mrs. Gibbs says only one man could have done it. I should have said myself that nobody could do it.

WILFRED: I don't understand.

DOCTOR: Should I speak here, sir?

WILFRED: Of course.

DOCTOR: *(Moving WILFRED a little away from the others.)* It is inadequate to say the skull was smashed to bits like an eggshell. Fragments of the bone were driven into the body and ground like bullets into a mud wall. It was the hand of a giant.

WILFRED: *(Putting up a hand to deflect this horrible news.)* Yes, yes.

DOCTOR: Sorry, sir.

WILFRED: Go on.

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