



THE
BLUE
CROSS

The man who got off the boat at Harwich had a short black beard. There was nothing to show that he had a gun in his coat pocket, and nothing to show that he was one of the cleverest men in Europe. He was Valentin, the chief of the Paris police, and the most famous detective in the world. He was coming from Brussels to London to make the most important arrest of the century. Flambeau was in England, and the police of three countries were trying to catch this famous thief.

In London there was a big meeting of priests from all over the world, and Valentin was guessing that Flambeau would use this meeting for some criminal plan or other. Flambeau was strong and clever, and he enjoyed a joke.

Once, he ran down the Rue de Rivoli with a policeman under one arm.

But how was Valentin to find Flambeau? There was one thing to help him. Flambeau could put on other clothes, or change the way he looked, but he was a very tall man and could not hide it. Because of this, Valentin was sure that Flambeau was not on the boat.

He was also sure that Flambeau did not get on the train going from Harwich to London. Only six other people got on during the journey. One short railwayman, three short farmers, one very short woman, and a very short priest going up to London from an Essex village.

When Valentin saw this last person, he almost laughed. The little priest had a round, simple face. He had several parcels which he found difficult to keep together, and a large umbrella which often fell to the floor. Many priests would be coming to London that day, Valentin thought. Coming from their quiet little towns and villages. This one was explaining to everyone that he must be careful because he was carrying something made of real silver 'with blue stones' in one of the parcels.

He got off the train at Stratford in east London with all his parcels, and came back for his umbrella. When he did, Valentin warned him not to tell everyone about his silver 'with blue stones'.

The detective was looking for people who were at least two metres tall, because Flambeau was several centimetres taller than this. He got off the train in central London and went to the London police to ask for help if he needed it. Then he went for a long walk.

He stopped suddenly in a quiet square. On one side the buildings were higher than the rest, and there was a small restaurant between the tall houses. It stood high above the street, with steps going up to the front door. Valentin stood looking at it, smoking a cigarette. When he was looking for a criminal, if he had a clue, he followed it. If he had no clue at all, he followed his own feelings. A man must begin somewhere. And something about the quiet little restaurant made Valentin want to start there. He went up the steps, sat down by the window, and asked for a cup of coffee.

A few minutes later, Valentin was lifting the cup to his lips. But he put it down quickly. 'I've put salt in it,' he said, and he looked at the bowl of silvery powder. It was a sugar bowl. So why did they keep salt in it? There were two full salt-cellars on his table. What was in them? He tasted it. It was sugar.

He looked around. Except for one or two dark wet stains on the white wall, there was nothing at all strange in that place. Valentin called the waiter and asked him to taste the sugar. The waiter was half-asleep, but he woke up when he tasted the sugar.

'Do you play this joke on your customers every morning?' asked Valentin.

The waiter did not know what to say. Then, suddenly, he said, 'It was the two priests.'

'What two priests?' said Valentin.

'The two priests who threw soup at the wall over there,' replied the waiter.

Valentin looked again at the dark wet stains.

'The two of them came in and drank soup here very early this morning,' the waiter explained. 'They were both very quiet. One of them paid the bill and went out. The other took several more minutes to get his things together. Then he picked up his cup, which was only half empty, and threw it at the wall. I was in the back room, but I ran out to find the restaurant empty. I tried to catch them in the street, but they were too far away. They went round the corner into Carstairs Street.'

The detective jumped to his feet, put on his hat, and paid his bill. A moment later, he was outside.

He walked round into the next street. Although he was excited and in a hurry, Valentin saw something in the front of a shop that made him stop. The shop sold fruit, and there were some oranges and some nuts at the front. They each had cards with writing on them. The card on the nuts said: 'Best oranges, two for a penny.' The card on the oranges said: 'Best nuts, four pence for a bag.'

Valentin looked at the two cards. 'I've seen this kind of joke before,' he thought.

He told the man in the shop about the cards. The man said nothing, but he put the cards in the right places.

'Can I ask you a question?' said Valentin. 'If two cards in a shop are in the wrong places, how are they like a priest's hat that has come to London for a holiday? Or, why do nuts that are said to be oranges make me think of two priests, one tall and the other short?'

The man in the shop looked angry. 'Are you a friend of theirs?' he said. 'If you are, you can tell them that I'll bang their stupid heads together if they knock over my apples again!'

'Did they knock over your apples?' asked the detective.

'One of them did,' said the man.

'Which way did they go?' asked Valentin.

'Up that second road on the left-hand side, and then across the square,' answered the man.

'Thanks,' said Valentin, and hurried away. On the other side of the second square, he found a policeman. 'Have you seen two priests?' he asked.

The policeman laughed. 'I have, sir. One of them stood in the middle of the road, dropping parcels everywhere.'

'Which way did they go?' asked Valentin.

'They went on one of those yellow buses over there,' answered the policeman. 'Those that go to Hampstead.' Valentin told the policeman who he was, then said, 'Call two of your men to come with me.'

In two minutes, an inspector and another detective arrived. 'Well, sir,' began the inspector. 'How-?'

'I'll tell you on the top of that bus,' said Valentin.

When the three of them were sitting on the top seats, the inspector said, 'A taxi is quicker.'

'True,' said Valentin. 'But we don't know where we're going. All we can do is look for some strange thing.'

'What kind of strange thing?' asked the inspector.

'Any kind of strange thing,' replied Valentin.

The yellow bus went slowly up the roads to the north of the city. The French detective became quiet. Lunch-time came and went, and the long roads seemed to go on forever. Valentin sat silently and watched everything that went by.

The two other detectives were almost asleep when he suddenly shouted. They quickly followed Valentin off the bus without knowing why.

'Over there!' said Valentin. 'The place with the broken window!' He was looking at a restaurant. It had a large window with a hole in the middle of the glass.

'How do we know that the window has anything to do with them?' asked the inspector.

Valentin became angry. 'Know?' he said. 'We can't know. But don't you understand? We must either follow one wild chance, or go home to bed.'

They followed him into the restaurant where the three of them ate a meal at a small table. Valentin looked at the little star of broken glass, but learned nothing from it.

'Your window is broken,' he said, paying his bill.

'Yes, sir,' replied the waiter. 'It was very strange how it happened.'

'Tell me,' said Valentin.

'Two of those priests came in,' said the waiter. 'Those foreign priests who are in the city at the moment. They had a cheap and quiet little lunch, and one of them paid for it and went out. The other was just going to follow him when I realized something. "Wait!" I said to the one who was nearly out of the door. "You've paid too much." And I picked up the bill to show him. But I got a surprise.'

'What do you mean?' asked Valentin.

'I was sure that I'd put four shillings on that bill, said the waiter. 'But now I saw that it was fourteen.'

'Then what happened?' said Valentin.

'The priest at the door said, "That will pay for the window."

"What window?" I asked. "The one that I'm going to break," he said. And he broke the window with his umbrella! I went after him, but I wasn't quick enough. They went up Bullock Street so fast, I couldn't catch them.

'Bullock Street!' said Valentin, and he ran up that road as quickly as the strange pair that he was following.

Their journey took them through dark, narrow streets, and the inspector guessed that they would finally reach some part of Hampstead Heath. Suddenly, Valentin stopped in front of a small, brightly lit sweetshop. After a moment, he went inside and bought some chocolate. He began to ask the shop woman a question, but she spoke first.

She saw the inspector behind him and immediately said, 'If you're the police and you've come about that parcel, I've already sent it off.'

'Parcel!' repeated Valentin.

'I mean the parcel that the priest left,' said the woman. 'Quickly!' said Valentin. 'Tell us what happened!'

'They came in half an hour ago,' said the woman. 'They bought some sweets, and then went off towards the Heath. Then one ran back into the shop and said, "Did I leave a parcel?" I looked around but couldn't see one. He said, Never mind. But if you do find it, please send it to this address.' He left the address, and a shilling for me. But after he went, I looked again and found that there was a parcel, so I posted it. I can't remember the address now, but it was somewhere in Westminster.'

'Is Hampstead Heath near here?' asked Valentin.

'Straight on for fifteen minutes,' said the woman.

Valentin hurried out and began to run. The others followed him. The street they went through

was full of evening shadows. Then they were out on the open Heath, and Valentin saw the two black shapes that he was looking for.

They were a long way away, but Valentin saw that one was smaller than the other, and that the bigger man was over two meters tall. He hurried on. As he got closer, he saw something surprising, but something which he had already guessed. The small man was the priest from the Harwich train, the one who had talked about his parcels.

Earlier that day, Valentin had discovered that a Father Brown from Essex was bringing a very old silver cross, with valuable blue jewels, to show to some of the foreign priests who were meeting in London. Valentin was sure that if he was able to find out about this, then Flambeau was able to find out, too. He was also sure that Flambeau planned to steal the cross. And it was not surprising that Flambeau, looking and talking like a priest, had been able to make the simple little man come to Hampstead Heath. What Valentin could not understand were the strange clues that had brought him there too. Soup on a wall, nuts called oranges, and broken windows.

The detectives followed the two across the wilder part of the Heath, then lost them for a few minutes. When they saw them again, the two priests were sitting on a seat, having a serious conversation. Valentin and his friends hid behind a tree and listened to them talking.

It was then that Valentin began to wonder if he was right. The two men on the seat were talking calmly about the ideas of their church. Valentin could almost hear the other two detectives laughing at him. They had come all this way, only to listen to the talk of two gentle old priests!

Father Brown was speaking. 'Look at the stars, like jewels in the sky. But even in those other worlds, there must be some laws of reason and goodness.' Valentin was about to move away, but the words of the tall priest stopped him.

'Who can understand the mystery of the stars?' Then he added calmly, 'Just give me the silver cross, will you? We're all alone here, and I could pull you to pieces easily.'

The small priest did not move. He continued to look up at the stars. Perhaps he had not understood. Or perhaps he was too afraid to move.

'Yes,' said the tall priest, in the same low voice. 'I am Flambeau. Now, give me that cross.'

'No,' replied the other priest.

Flambeau suddenly laughed. 'No, you won't give it to me, you simple little priest,' he said, 'because I already have it in my pocket!'

The small man looked at him. 'Are you sure?'

Flambeau laughed again. 'Yes, you stupid man. I knew which of your parcels contained the jeweled cross, so I made a careful copy of the parcel. And now you, my friend, have that copy parcel and I have the jewels. It's easily done, Father Brown, easily done!'

Father Brown did not look worried. 'Yes, very easily. I remember another man who used copy parcels for many years,' he said. 'I remembered him when I began to wonder about you.'

'Wonder about me?' said Flambeau. 'When did you begin to wonder about me? When I brought you up to the Heath?'

'No, no,' said Father Brown. 'When we first met. I saw that little shape under the arm of your coat, where you keep your knife.'

'How did you know that?' cried Flambeau.

'When I was a priest in Hartlepool,' said Father Brown, 'there were three men who hid their knives in the same way. So I watched you. I saw you change the parcels... and I changed them back. Then I left the right one behind.'

'Left it behind?' repeated Flambeau.

'I went back to the sweet-shop,' explained Father Brown, 'and asked the woman if she saw me leave a parcel. Then I gave her an address if it was found. I knew I hadn't left a parcel, but when I went away again, I did leave one. She has posted it to a friend of mine in Westminster.' He went on sadly, 'I learnt that from a man in Hartlepool, too. He did it with handbags which he stole at railway stations, but he's a good man now. People tell priests things, you see.'

Flambeau pulled a parcel from his pocket and opened it. There was only paper and stones inside it. He jumped up angrily and shouted, 'I don't believe you. You've got the silver cross on you, and I'm going to take it from you!'

'No,' said Father Brown, and he stood up. 'You won't take it from me. First, because I really haven't got it. And second, because we are not alone. Behind that tree are two strong policemen and the cleverest detective alive. How did they come here? I'll tell you. I wasn't sure if you were a thief, so I tried several things. A man usually says if he finds salt in his coffee. If he doesn't, he has a reason for keeping quiet. I changed the salt and sugar, and you kept quiet. A man usually says if his bill is too big. If he doesn't, he has a reason for saying nothing. I changed your bill, and you paid it.' Flambeau did not seem to be able to move.

'I wanted to be sure the police could follow us,' Father Brown went on. 'At every place we went to, I did something which people would talk about. Only little things - a soup stain on a wall, some apples that were knocked over, a broken window. But I saved the cross.'

'How do you know all these things?' cried Flambeau.

The shadow of a smile went across the round face of Father Brown. 'By being a simple little priest, I suppose,' he said. 'If you listen to enough men telling you about their crimes, you are sure to learn something.'

The three policemen moved out from behind the tree. Flambeau knew when he had lost a battle,

and he was famous for his politeness. He took off his hat to Valentin and smiled.

'Do not take your hat off to me, my friend,' said Valentin. 'Let us both take them off to Father Brown.'

And they both stood with their hats off while the little Essex priest looked around for his umbrella.

- THE END -

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