

The Adventure of Merlin's Tomb

Dramatized by Frank J. Morlock

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THE ADVENTURE OF MERLIN'S TOMB

A Sherlock Holmes/Father Brown Mystery

Dramatized by Frank J. Morlock
C 1985

From an original story by Frank J. Morlock

Etext transcribed by Dagny

Characters:

Holmes
Watson
Mrs. Hudson
Father Brown
Father Sebastian
Dr. Abell
Mrs. Carbury
Nurse (Abigail Lang)
Old Woman (Mary Good)
A Gypsy
An infant in swaddling clothes

Six men, three women

Time around 1896 in a small Cathedral town somewhere in Essex.

The set should be very abstract. No effort should be made to actually change scenes. In particular, the Rectory and the interior of the Cathedral should be joined. If possible, part of the stage should represent Baker Street. Center stage the Cathedral and stage right Dr. Abell's home/surgery.

Baker Street The Rectory Cathedral Dr. Abell's

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Those areas of the stage not being used should be darkened.

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Scene I. 221A Baker Street.

Holmes and Watson are involved in a heated discussion. Watson is very upset. Holmes, as usual, imperturbable.

Watson (heatedly)

Holmes, my dear fellow, you are endangering your reputation.

Holmes

What is reputation to the advancement of science, Watson? (snapping his fingers) I don't give that for my reputation.

Watson

But, what are you about, Holmes?

Holmes

I am trying to perfect a method of reconstructing the human face from the skeleton alone.

Watson

And that is why you've been going to Bart's and measuring the faces of corpses with calipers?

Holmes

Precisely. Before and after dissection.

Watson

All the doctors are commenting on it.

Holmes (lighting his pipe, amused)

Not favorably?

Watson (dejectedly)

Not favorably.

Holmes

But, don't you see how important this discovery is? To Criminalistics?

Watson

But I've read several studies that say it is not possible.

Holmes

True, Watson. I read those studies, too. And I became convinced they are based on certain false premises—not to mention an inattention to detail. Now, do as I do. Pinch the skin on your cheeks and pull the skin away from the bone as far as you can. (doing so)

Watson (imitating Holmes rather clumsily)

Very well.

Holmes

Now, here. (moving the site of the pinch)

Watson (imitating Holmes)

All right.

Holmes

Do you observe the skin is thicker in some places than others?

Watson

Well, yes, but what of it? Everyone knows that—

Holmes

No, everyone does not know that. Now, if you will observe, when I pinch—

(Enter Mrs. Hudson with a small, rotund young man in the habit of a Catholic priest.)

Mrs. Hudson A visitor for you, Mr. Holmes. Ha, ha, ha. You both look so funny.

Holmes (not embarrassed)

All in the interests of science, my dear Mrs. Hudson.

Mrs. Hudson Whoop! A scientific undertaking. Making faces at each other like children. Ha, ha, ha—you are

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too droll, Mr. Holmes, ha, ha, ha.

Watson (irritated and terribly embarrassed)

What is the name of our visitor, Mrs. Hudson?

Mrs. Hudson

A Romish priest, I believe. And his name is Brown. (whispering to Watson) But, I don't believe it, not one word. And in my house. A papist.

(Exit Mrs. Hudson, laughing and muttering.)

Brown

Mr. Holmes, I believe? My name is Brown.

Holmes

I am pleased to meet you, Father Brown. This is my colleague Dr. Watson.

Watson

Delighted. I think we should explain to Dr. Brown that the situation in which he found us is subject to misconstruction and that—

Holmes (lightly)

I'm sure Father Brown understands—

Watson

And, that we are not in the habit of—

Brown

Oh, there's no need for explanations.

Watson

Of making fools of ourselves—and, that—

Holmes

How can we be of service to you, Father Brown?

Brown

Well, I'm not sure I ought to have come here, but, frankly, I'm at my wits' end, and I can't see the bottom of it.

Holmes

Please, tell us what has happened.

Watson

And, that we were, in fact—

Brown

It's my lack of experience, I'm sure. Otherwise, I should have known what to do. You see, I was only recently ordained, and my first assignment was to a small and quite ancient parish in Essex. I was ordered by my superiors to examine and report on the archives of the Church. They go back to the time of the Conquest. The only point of interest is that they refer to the existence of an ancient tomb located somewhere in the Church.

Holmes

Most interesting. And the Church is very ancient, too?

Brown

Parts of it probably date from Roman times. It has been rebuilt several times. Most recently, about thirty years ago.

Watson

And the tomb has never been discovered?

Brown

It was discovered about a month ago. Some alterations were being done to repair damage caused by a small fire that occurred before I was posted there. It was then that all the trouble started.

Holmes

What trouble?

Brown

Within a week of the discovery of the tomb, the Verger hanged himself—at least the coroner's jury thought it was a suicide. A mortal sin for a Catholic, and almost unheard of in the clergy.

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Holmes

To be sure. Is this all?

Brown

Last week, the Dean apparently went out of his mind. He was found in—I believe the medical term is a catatonic state.

Watson

Dear me. This is strange.

Holmes

Pooh! A coincidence. What connection can there be?

Brown

We have no idea—except that there is some. If this were not enough to fan the flames of superstition, yesterday, the wife of one of our oldest parishioners began manifesting signs of demonic possession.

Holmes

Come, come. In the 19th century?

Brown

The woman is nearly eighty, and I find it difficult to describe what she was doing—she was soliciting men to sexual intercourse, amidst the most shocking blasphemies.

Holmes

Needless to say, rumors have begun to fly about a curse on the tomb. The usual drivel.

Brown

Exactly. Merlin has been seen at night. The usual nonsense. An exorcist has been sent for.

Watson

Please, I don't understand—what has Merlin got to do with all this?

Brown

There's a local tradition that Merlin was buried hereabouts.

Watson

Is there really? Most extraordinary.

Brown

Part of the reconstruction involved removing the pulpit to give a clearer view of the altar. When this was done, the sarcophagus was found. It bears the image of a rather fierce-looking old man. There is nothing to suggest from the scant ornamentation that he was a Christian. I have tried to put a name to him, but I cannot.

Watson

Could it really be Merlin? I've always been fascinated by Merlin, since I read Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. This is indeed exciting, Father Brown.

Holmes

But, however extraordinary these events are, Father Brown, they appear to stem from natural phenomena.

Brown

You do not believe in demons—demonic possession, Mr. Holmes?

Holmes

Certainly not. Although some silly people may think themselves possessed and act accordingly.

Brown

And, the demons themselves?

Holmes

Not at all.

Brown

As a Catholic, I am obliged to believe in demonic possession as a fact.

Holmes

Then, undoubtedly, you have made the correct choice in seeing assistance from an exorcist.

Brown (decisively)

Not in this case, Mr. Holmes. Fiends are at work, but they are human fiends.

Holmes

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Then, you attribute it to human—

Brown

To human sinfulness, Mr. Holmes. I have certain suspicions about the person or persons behind these events—but I am too inexperienced to trust my own judgement.

Holmes

In that case, you seek the type of assistance I can offer?

Brown

Most definitely, Mr. Holmes.

Holmes

Well, then, tell us exactly why you think these events are related.

Brown

First of all, they happened within a short period of time.

Holmes

Pooh! Coincidence.

Brown

Secondly, they have all happened to people who are quite aged. The youngest person was seventy—two.

Holmes

Inconclusive. And thirdly?

Brown

Thirdly, there are certain elements of witchcraft connected with each of the incidents.

Holmes

Witchcraft! Really, Father Brown. I thought we had dismissed that sort of explanation.

Brown

Oh, no, no, Mr. Holmes. I never said witches weren't involved—I only said demons weren't involved. These witches are quite human and have been practicing their loathsome rites for upwards of fifty years.

Watson

What, in the 19th century? In England? Not fifty miles from London? Impossible!

Brown (unruffled)

I have the most unshakeable proofs. After the Dean became incapacitated, it fell to me to arrange his belongings. It was while doing this, that I found a cache of hosts.

Watson

Hosts, Father Brown?

Brown

Consecrated wafers. You understand their function in Catholic ritual, Dr. Watson?

Watson

I believe I do, but what is so strange—?

Brown

An orthodox Catholic priest does not keep them wrapped in a purple cloth, hidden in a chest with his private belongings.

Holmes

Interesting. Why would he keep them, then?

Brown

They are sometimes used in performing a Black Mass, and other abominations. After I found them, I examined the Dean's personal effects much more closely.

Holmes

And you found?

Brown

A Satanic Bible, also wrapped in purple silk—together with a kind of diary.

Holmes

Have you examined the diary?

Brown

Scene I. 221A Baker Street.

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Carefully. It suggests a motive for the events—or, at least a connection—although there's still a mystery to it.

Holmes

I will need to see the diary.

Brown

I brought it with me. (giving the diary to Holmes) You see it contains a careful record of Black Masses and other abominations going back nearly fifty years.

Watson

I find that incredible. Surely, it is some sort of hoax.

Brown

I wish it were. The Black Masses have been recorded in exquisite detail. Every abomination and sacrilege that is conceivable has been practiced. Even human sacrifices.

Watson

Human sacrifices! It must be a hoax.

Brown

Human sacrifices have taken place in Derbyshire—on the very altar of our beautiful Cathedral.

Holmes

There can be no mistake in interpreting these passages, Father Brown. It appears quite authentic.

Watson

Good Heavens, Holmes. Human sacrifices! How awful!

Holmes

The rituals were repeated as often as twice a year, it would appear. The participants in these orgies are identified by what appear to be code names. The leader of the cult is called Merlin. Have you any idea who is intended?

Brown

No. I think, however, we can be sure the Verger, the Dean, and Mrs. Carbury—the old woman who is propositioning old and young alike—are clearly members.

Holmes

Some elements of conclusive proof are lacking, but I believe your supposition is correct.

Brown

From what I have been able to puzzle out from the diary, the Dean was admitted to the cult soon after he became a priest. He was not, however, the leader. All of the cult members are local people, I believe. And they have been practicing their wickedness for over fifty years.

Holmes

Then, they must all be quite aged.

Brown

These are not just parlor Satanists, Mr. Holmes. They are not just engaging in the thrill of attending a Black Mass and rubbing shoulders with the Devil. Oh, no, they are very scrupulous, almost pious in their satanic devotions.

Holmes

Are all the members of the cult alive except the Verger?

Brown

The diary never records a death, but eventually some names cease to appear and never recur—as has happened several times in recent years.

Watson

But, what is the connection between these events and the discovery of the tomb?

Holmes

Ah, there, my dear Watson, lies the key to the mystery. Well, a strange game is afoot. What do you say to a journey to Derbyshire, my dear fellow?

BLACKOUT

Scene II. The interior of the Cathedral in Derbyshire.

The reconstruction is evident. In the center, near the altar, is a tomb. The features of a rather ferocious-looking old man are carved on the tomb. Holmes, Watson, Father Brown and Father Sebastian enter, in conversation.

Holmes

A most beautiful little town.

Watson

Impossible that such a lovely English town could be the site of such unholy goings-on.

Sebastian

That's exactly what I think. I refuse to believe that any of my parishioners could be guilty of such a thing. Right under my nose. No, it is, as you say, impossible. There's some other explanation.

Watson (to Holmes, in a whisper)

About the right age for Merlin, don't you think?

Sebastian (a little deaf)

Merlin—yes. They say it's his tomb.

(They all go to the tomb.)

Brown

A more unchristian countenance I have never beheld. There is evil about this tomb.

Sebastian

I think we should cover it up again.

Holmes (examining the tomb)

The lid could hardly be lifted with less than three or four men, without heavy machinery. There is no sign that it has been disturbed in decades past. (pacing up and down) Frankly, I'm puzzled.

Brown

There is a connection, Mr. Holmes. I'm certain of it.

Holmes

And, I am, too. But, for the life of me, it eludes me what it may be.

Abell (emerging from the shadows)

Perhaps, you believe in ghosts, Mr. Holmes? That would no doubt solve the mystery.

Brown

Ah, Dr. Abell. How are your patients?

Abell

Well, I am not too concerned about the Dean. But, Mrs. Carbury is failing. I have put her under heavy sedation.

Sebastian

Dr. Abell is our leading physician—and my brother.

Abell

The only physician—and, therefore, the leading physician, Mr. Holmes. I've practiced here for nearly fifty years. Unless, Dr. Watson is planning to set up as my rival—

Watson

My dear sir, I assure you— But, how do you know my name?

Abell

Oh, my brother keeps me well informed.

Holmes

I should like to visit your patients, Dr. Abell.

Abell

Very well. Come after dinner. They are at my home, which serves as a sort of hospital. I won't give them any more sedation. I will prepare them— (goes out)

Watson

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A very impressive man.

Sebastian

I wish he weren't such a misanthrope. But, he is really very kind. He has practiced here all his life, when he could have done well in London. He is attached to Derbyshire—as I am, for that matter.

Brown

He is a very capable doctor.

Holmes

May we see where the Verger hanged himself?

Sebastian

I suppose you may as well. But, on reflection, I think, perhaps, better not. There is no reason to involve you in this matter. It is a Church matter.

Brown

But, you object even to summoning an exorcist.

Sebastian

It's all a mistake, a misunderstanding. The Dean is of a literary turn. I am sure when he regains his reason, there will be a satisfactory explanation. Probably writing a novel.

Brown

It is a Satanic Bible—

Sebastian

Nonetheless—

Holmes

Perhaps, we should eliminate the possibility that a crime has been committed. Where did the Verger hang himself?

Sebastian

He hung himself from the Cross behind the altar.

(Holmes goes to the altar and looks around.)

Holmes

Well, the Verger was definitely murdered.

Sebastian

But, how can you tell that? The coroner's jury said it was suicide.

Holmes

There's a good deal of dust back here from the reconstruction. There are the footprints of three men, coming in from the side near the rectory. They stopped here. Two of them carried the third man to the Cross, and left the way they came. One of the men was very tall.

Brown

But, how do you tell that?

Holmes

From the length of the stride.

Sebastian

But, why couldn't those be the footprints of the men who rescued him?

Holmes

The footprints of the rescuers are apparent, too. They come from in front of the altar. They cut him down, and laid the body here, to the right.

Brown

That's so, Mr. Holmes. I was one of the persons who found him. It happened exactly as you say.

Sebastian

Dreadful, dreadful. I withdraw my objection. Murder must be investigated by the civil authorities. It is not simply a Church matter.

BLACKOUT

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Scene III. Dr. Abell's residence–hospital.

Holmes, Watson and Father Brown enter.

Watson

Wasn't that a gypsy woman we saw as we came in?

Brown

Yes. I wonder what she wanted with Dr. Abell?

Watson

Probably begging.

Brown

Oh, no, these gypsies never beg. They come here once or twice a year, around Christmas or Easter—for no apparent reason. But, they never beg, or cause any trouble. But, for all their good behavior, somehow, I don't like the looks of them.

Holmes

Beautiful flower garden. It appears to be much better taken care of than the rest of the grounds.

Brown

Yes. A rather odd flower garden.

(Enter the Nurse, an old woman with a peasant accent.)

Watson

We've come to see Dr. Abell. He's expecting us.

Nurse

He is with the Dean. The poor man be failing fast.

Holmes

We must hurry, then.

(Enter Dr. Abell, wringing his hands.)

Abell

I'm afraid it's no use, Mr. Holmes. The Dean is dead. His last words were, "Merlin. Beware Merlin." Surely this Merlin nonsense is catching.

Holmes

I thought you said there was no need to worry about the Dean, Dr. Abell?

Abell

So I did. He'd been improving, though his reason was sadly gone. About an hour ago, he went into convulsions. I administered several drugs, but to no avail. It happens that way sometimes.

Watson

I've seen it often enough myself. The patient will progress well for some time, and then suddenly, for no apparent reason, he's gone.

Holmes

And he spoke of Merlin? He wanted to communicate something?

Abell

Which proves conclusively his delirium. What would he know about a man who, if he ever lived, has been dead a thousand years?

Brown

It may have been important.

Abell (laughing)

Oh, that it must. We all want to know about Merlin. Perhaps, you care to see my other patient? Maybe she can inform you about Morgan le Fay, and King Arthur, too.

Holmes

Yes, I'd like to see her. At all events, there is nothing more to be learned from the Dean.

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Brown

I must administer the last rites to the Dean.

(Exit Brown with the Nurse.)

Abell

By all means. But, I do not care to observe. Mr. Holmes, I will escort you to see Mrs. Carbury. She is, I fear, hopelessly mad.

(Enter Mrs. Carbury, in a disheveled condition.)

Mrs. Carbury

Someone to see me. I like visitors.

Abell

You should have remained in bed, Maria. But since you are up, so be it. This is Mr. Holmes and Dr. Watson. They wish to ask you some questions.

Mrs. Carbury (winking coyly)

I like questions.

Holmes

Who is Merlin, Mrs. Carbury?

Mrs. Carbury

Merlin—why, he's a devil.

Abell

You'll get nothing out of her.

Holmes

When was the last time you saw Merlin?

Mrs. Carbury

Why, I see him now.

Holmes

Why did the Verger hang himself?

Carbury

Hang him—hang him—good for him, he deserved it!

Abell

Perfectly useless.

Mrs. Carbury

Come closer, Dr. Watson, and I'll tell you about Merlin and John the Baptist, too. (Watson approaches and as she seems about to whisper in his ear, she grabs him by his privates and kisses him!) Fuck me! Fuck me! Quick, Watson! Be a man to me.

Watson (pushing her off with disgust)

Be off, woman!

Carbury

Don't be shy, Dr. Watson. I like shy men. Fuck me!

Abell

That's enough, Maria. (holding her and forcing a sedative on her)

Mrs. Carbury

I'll show you the best time you ever had.

Abell

Be a good girl.

Carbury (the sedative taking effect, beginning to weep)

Ahhh, ahhh, ahhh!

Abell

That's better. First Merlin, now John the Baptist. Saint Peter next, ha, ha! I'm afraid, Mr. Holmes, you'll learn

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nothing from either of my patients.

Holmes

I fancy we have already learned a good deal.

BLACKOUT

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Scene IV. The Rectory.

Watson

Brr! I can still feel her lips on mine. it was like embracing a corpse.

Brown

Another brandy, Dr. Watson?

Watson

Please. (drinking it off quickly) What do you make of it, Holmes?

Holmes

I think we have confirmed that both the Dean and Mrs. Carbury were part of the witch cult.

Watson

How so, Holmes?

Holmes

Both talked of Merlin. In Mrs. Carbury's case, she also referred to John the Baptist.

Brown

And John the Baptist is a name used in the diary to refer to one of the warlocks.

Holmes

In the original coven, there were six witches and six warlocks, as the diary shows. (hands around a list) I've made up a list of the names and indicated on what pages of the diary they are mentioned.

Brown

The names themselves are an affront to God.

Watson

What do the dates mean?

Holmes

If I am correct, the date indicates the last date at which the named person was present at a meeting of the coven.

Brown

If so, then not more than six were alive at the date of the last entry.

Holmes

That seems likely. Have you noticed anything else that seems suggestive?

Brown

Yes. The witch Ishtar stopped coming to meetings long before the rest. About thirty years ago. The rest died off within the last five years.

Holmes

Exactly, Father Brown.

Watson

But, of what use is such information?

Holmes

Derbyshire is a small parish. If all the members of the coven are local residents, we ought to be able to determine the names of some of the deceased members of the coven, simply by checking the parish register. That, in turn, may give us some clue as to the names of the living members.

Brown

There is another point, Mr. Holmes. The early death of the witch Ishtar may be significant, too.

Holmes

You are very perceptive, Father Brown. What made you notice that, and what significance do you ascribe to it?

Brown

The diary hinted in aesopian language of human sacrifices. They appear to occur around the dates of significant Christian rituals. Easter, for example. Usually it would seem that children are intended.

Watson

Children! How abominable.

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Brown

But, an entry for the year 1866 suggests an adult female was sacrificed. That was also the year in which we hear the last of Ishtar.

Holmes

And you think Ishtar was the victim?

Brown

Undoubtedly.

Holmes

If you could check the parish register for 1866.

Brown

I already have.

Holmes

Splendid! And, what have you found?

Brown

Absolutely nothing. No woman over the age of ten died in 1866 or 1867.

Watson

Perhaps the death was not reported.

Holmes

Yes, of course. We must try to determine if any one was reported missing. If our theory is not in error, something must turn up for that year.

Watson

Why place so much emphasis on discovering the identity of someone who died thirty years ago?

Holmes

Morbid curiosity, perhaps, dear fellow. But, in fact, her death is a key to the mystery confronting us.

Watson

I should think it would be more important to locate living members of the cult.

Holmes

All in due time. Is it not very suggestive that the recent events should all occur after the discovery of the sarcophagus a few weeks ago?

Watson

Yes, but I'm not sure what it suggests, unless you give credence to some supernatural power or curse.

Brown

Evil will out.

Holmes

Yes, it will. Even after thirty years. Apparently, in 1866, a member of the witch cult was sacrificed. If the death of Ishtar raised no questions in the community, then for some reason the disappearance must not have been noted. Did you not say the Church was remodeled in 1866 or 1867?

Brown

Yes, indeed. According to the records, the pulpit was rebuilt, and extensive changes were made in the interior.

Holmes

Who supervised the rebuilding?

Brown

The Dean, I believe.

Holmes

And,, who is superintending the present remodeling?

Brown

That task was given to me. In fact, the Dean was quite upset about so junior a person as myself being placed in charge. But, Father Sebastian was adamant.

Holmes

We must open that tomb. There is more than archeological evidence to be found. I'm certain of it.

Brown

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I think the three of us could lift that slab.

BLACKOUT

Scene V. The Rectory, later that night.

Holmes, Watson and Father Brown enter. Holmes removes a skull from a sack and places it on the table. The skull has several clumps of long blond hair clinging to it.

Holmes

I think we were able to replace everything.

Watson

There's no doubt the woman in the tomb was murdered. She had a jeweled dagger in her ribs.

Brown (examining the dagger)

I think the dagger explains why the Dean was so nervous. It has his initials on it.

Watson

What shall we do now, Holmes? Call the police?

Holmes

This is too serious a matter to confide to the police. I fear we are no closer to discovering Merlin. If the Dean murdered Ishtar—or performed the sacrifice, if you will, there seems nothing in the way of physical evidence to connect the murder to Merlin, or to help us in identifying him.

Watson

But, why did the Verger commit suicide?

Holmes

He didn't. Remember? The Verger was murdered. I think the Dean became nervous and communicated his fear to the Verger. The Verger was then silenced, perhaps by the Dean, but more likely by Merlin. Disposing of the Verger was a temporary solution. The Dean knew the tomb would eventually be opened and remained fearful he would be called to account.

Brown

And suffered a breakdown.

Watson

But, how does that account for Mrs. Carbury?

Holmes

Mrs. Carbury was probably close to the Verger or the Dean. What happened to them unhinged her.

Brown

But, Merlin and the others are alive and well—and believe that nothing can connect them, with either the tomb or the fate of the Verger.

Holmes

And rightly so, Father Brown, for unless new evidence comes to light, we are at an impasse.

Brown

That is dreadful, Mr. Holmes. Because Easter is approaching.

Holmes

At the rate things are going, I doubt we shall solve the puzzle before then.

Brown

But we must, Mr. Holmes, we must.

Holmes

There is no urgency. Religion will not suffer if the solution is put off beyond that date.

Brown

But a male child will.

Holmes

What do you mean?

Brown

Is it not apparent that child sacrifices have been performed by these witches in the past? Is it not likely that they will kill again, as is their custom?

Watson

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Good Heavens, Holmes! We must do something.

Holmes

I don't know what we can do. My powers only carry me so far.

Brown

I think we must resort to a stratagem.

BLACKOUT

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Scene VI. The Rectory.

Watson

What a sermon Father Brown gave! If that doesn't smoke the witches out, nothing will. Why, I almost believed he knew everything, and I know he knows no more than we do.

Holmes

Father Brown is a remarkable man. I suspect the other witches don't know that the Dean kept a diary, or what was in it.

(Enter Father Brown.)

Brown

Now, we shall see what effect that will have.

Holmes

I think we may expect an attempt on your life, as soon as Merlin can decently arrange it.

Brown

Yes. I expect that.

Holmes

Watson and I will give you what protection we can.

Brown

I trust God.

(Enter Father Sebastian.)

Sebastian

There you are, Father Brown. I must reprimand you. I may have to suspend you.

Brown

What is wrong, Father Sebastian?

Sebastian

You know very well what is wrong. Did you not, in your sermon, imply that things had been revealed to you in confession about witchcraft?

Brown

I did just that.

Sebastian

Need I remind you of your duty as a priest? Confessions must never be revealed. I will have to suspend you, and report matters to the Archbishop for his decision.

Brown

That's unnecessary, Father Sebastian.

Sebastian

Why? That's the correct procedure.

Brown

I didn't receive the information in confession. I lied.

Sebastian

You lied about a thing like that?

Brown

It was necessary. We hope it will frighten the witches into taking some precipitous action. Nothing that I said in my sermon was revealed in confession.

Sebastian

Oh, in that case, I can absolve you myself. A hundred Hail Marys!

Brown

I would never reveal anything I learned in confession.

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Sebastian

I should hope not. Oh, I almost forgot to tell you, I was so upset. Dr. Abell says that Mrs. Carbury is dying. He thought you would want to administer the last rites.

Brown

I do. I'll go at once.

Holmes

Before you go, perhaps you would like to look at Ishtar as she once was. (unveiling the head)

Sebastian (gasping)

Why—why, it's Jennie McPherson!

Holmes

You know this woman, Father Sebastian?

Sebastian

Why, yes. Jennie McPherson was a seamstress. She eloped some thirty years ago, and no one has ever seen her since. She was from Scotland, of course, and had no relatives here.

Holmes

She never left Derbyshire.

Sebastian

How can that be, Mr. Holmes?

Holmes

You are looking at the real Jennie McPherson, or I should say, her reconstructed face. Her skull was removed by me from the Merlin tomb last night. She was a member of the witch cult, and herself a human sacrifice to Satan.

Sebastian

She was a member of the choir when I was choirmaster. She was a good girl, even if she was a little wild. I feel very sick, Mr. Holmes. (exits)

Holmes

I wonder if there was something between Jennie McPherson and Father Sebastian?

Brown

It's not uncommon for a celibate priest to have strong feelings for a pretty parishioner. Now I recollect, he once told me that he fell in love with a woman, but God intervened, and she went away. Well, I had best go see Mrs. Carbury.

BLACKOUT

Scene VII. Dr. Abell's residence–hospital.

Holmes, Watson, Father Brown and Dr. Abell are talking.

Brown

Thank you, Mr. Holmes. I fear they might have been too much for me, if you had not come along.

Holmes

Were you able to get a good look at them?

Brown

Unfortunately not. But, they were young men, Mr. Holmes, neither was over thirty.

Watson

I found this.

Holmes

A gypsy bandana.

Brown

Gypsies must have attacked me.

Abell

Those gypsies are up to no good. First thing in the morning, I'm going to the police, and have them notified to be gone. They've moved altogether too close to home for comfort. They should be on their way immediately. You've had a narrow escape, Father Brown. Pray be more careful. I don't want to lose all my patients.

Brown

I'll be all right. If we hurry back, I'll be in time to hear confession.

BLACKOUT

Scene VIII. The Rectory. Late night.

Watson is snoozing in a chair. Pebbles are thrown against the window. Watson starts, takes his revolver, opens the window. A tall angular gypsy enters through the window.

Holmes

No, no, Watson.

Watson

Holmes, I almost didn't recognize you.

Holmes

Where is Father Brown?

Watson

I don't know. He left suddenly, without a word to anyone. I think he's a bit daft. He kept muttering about Dr. Abell's garden—said it was unnatural, evil. Catholicism does strange things to people.

Holmes

He's gone. Hmm. That's not good. But, we don't have time to concern ourselves with him. The witches mean to hold a Sabbath tonight in the Church. We must conceal ourselves immediately.

Watson

Is it possible? But, how do you know? And, why are you disguised as a gypsy?

Holmes

All in good time, Watson. We must hurry before the witches get here. Shh—get down.

(Enter Father Sebastian. He lights a candle and places it before the altar. After praying briefly, he goes out. Holmes makes no move. The street door opens and two old women come in. They carry bags. As soon as they are in, they quickly remove quantities of black crepe and cover the windows with it. Then, they drape the altar in black and position the Cross upside down. They begin to dance around the altar.)

Witches (keening)

Merlin, Satan, Lover. Come to me.

(The street door opens, and a man enters. He changes clothes briefly in the shadows. He wears a purple robe with a golden sash. On his head, a goat mask. He holds a golden chalice and advances towards the altar.)

Merlin

Great Master Satan, we, your worshippers, will offer you sacrifices this night.

Witches

Reward your servants.

(A knock at the street door. Merlin opens the door, and receives a little child from a man dressed like a gypsy. He takes the child to the witches, who make cooing noises over it.)

Witches

What a pretty baby. Such a good little thing. Soon, you will be with Father Satan.

Merlin

Lead the sacrifice to the altar. (raising the knife over the child) Master Satan, receive this sacrifice from your humble servants.

Holmes (leaping forward)

Now, Watson!

(Holmes rushes at Merlin, and a furious struggle ensues, counterpointed by a more comic match between Watson and the Witches. Merlin is getting the better of Holmes, while Watson subdues first one, then the second witch.)

Merlin

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Now, Sherlock Holmes, I will sacrifice you to my master.

(Father Brown enters from behind, and strikes Merlin a terrific blow on the head with a shovel. Merlin collapses.)

Holmes

Your assistance is very welcome, Father Brown. But, how did you get here?

Brown

I was at Dr. Abell's house, investigating his garden. I saw him leave, and I followed him here. I entered from the Rectory.

Holmes (regarding the prostrate masked Merlin)

So, it is Dr. Abell.

(One of the Witches gets up and starts to flee, but Watson grabs her, and soon ties her up with some crepe.)

Watson

Ah, would you?

Holmes

Do you know these women? Abigail Lang, Dr. Abell's housekeeper, and Mary Good, a woman with a reputation for great piety and devotion.

Holmes (removing Dr. Abell's mask)

I believe Dr. Abell is dead.

Watson (examining him)

Yes. Stone dead.

Brown

A shovel is a handy weapon against the devil.

Holmes

What made you suspect him?

Brown

I didn't suspect him. I suspected his garden. The place reminded me of a cemetery. There was something wrong about it. I went digging there tonight. Someone had already dug a shallow trench on one side. One doesn't do that in a flower garden.

Holmes

The trench was probably intended to receive the remains of tonight's sacrifice.

Brown

It looked like a grave, but it was too small for a man. It looked more as if it were for a child. Then, I thought of the child sacrifices. I dug around a little bit, and it wasn't long before I found an infant's skull. When I saw the Nurse and Mrs. Good leave the house, followed shortly by Dr. Abell, I concealed myself and followed them here. But, how is it that you came to be here, Mr. Holmes?

Holmes

Why, it was the gypsies, Father Brown. I remembered your saying they always show up in the vicinity around Easter and Christmas. If the witches were sacrificing children, they had to get them somewhere. Obviously, they were not taking local children, or people around here would have been aroused. They must be getting them somewhere else.

Brown

Yes, of course, I should have realized that myself.

Holmes

It was very suggestive that the gypsies caused no trouble and soon left. Obviously, they were on their best behaviour, and trying to make themselves inconspicuous. They must have some reason to do that, because most places they go, they either beg or panhandle. Then, of course, they figured in the attack on you. The deduction was elementary that the gypsies were stealing the children from afar off and selling them to the witches here.

Watson

But, why are you dressed like a gypsy, Holmes?

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Holmes

I went to the gypsy camp earlier tonight. Keeping in the shadows, I was able to mingle and overhear enough to learn they intended to deliver the child to the Church this very night—and break camp at dawn. When I learned the exchange was to take place at the Church, I reasoned a Black Mass was scheduled.

Watson

I shall never feel the same about burning witches again. They most richly deserve it.

Holmes (looking at the tomb)

I wonder if this really is Merlin's tomb?

Brown

We shall probably never know, but one thing is certain. Merlin was no more dreadful than his latter day namesake.

Watson

We had better see about getting these witches to the police.

(Suddenly the baby that has been lying on the altar cries.)

Holmes

Well, we seem to have nearly forgotten the child. Will you play Nanny, or shall I?

CURTAIN