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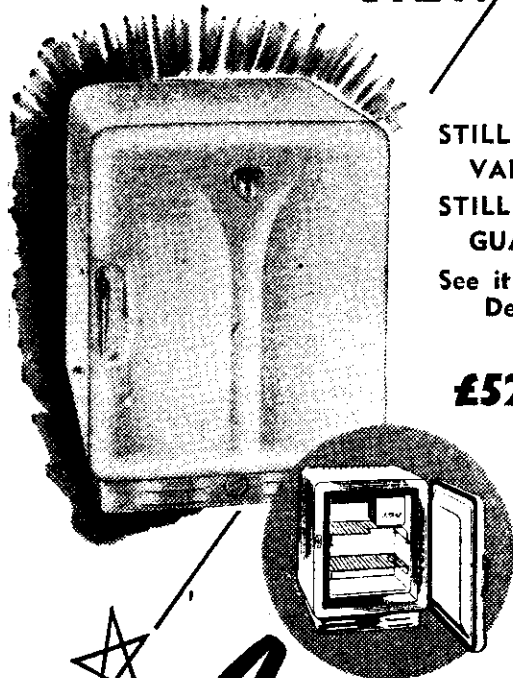
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FILM REVIEWS, BY F.A.J.

Guinness Comes Again

FATHER BROWN, DETECTIVE

(Columbia-Facet)

FATHER BROWN is not, I suspect, as well known even to devotees of the detective story as he used to be and, no devotee myself, I can't say that he's very well known to me. Nearly 20 years ago I read a small group of the celebrated stories in my first encounter with the work of Chesterton. I enjoyed them then without being excited by them, and that was my reaction again when I re-read the same group over the weekend that I saw the film. Father Brown—for the benefit of those who don't know him at all—is a very short Roman Catholic priest, with a face as round and dull as a dumpling and eyes as empty as the North Sea, who against all appearances has considerable success as an amateur detective. Actually, his original was Monsignor John O'Connor, a great friend of Chesterton, who received G.K. into the Catholic Church and wrote a book about him a year or two after he died.

I've described Father Brown as he first appeared to the great free-thinking detective Valentin (he came to a bad end) in *The Blue Cross*, which is fitting enough because in a very general way *Father Brown, Detective*, is based on that story. This describes the attempt of a celebrated criminal named Flambeau to steal a cross which Father Brown is taking to a Eucharistic Congress. That's about as far as story and film go together, for in the film there's no arrest and indeed the priest is cheated rather than cheating, loses the cross and spends the rest of the time trying to get it back—and with it the soul of Flambeau. Whether there's sanction for this in Father Brown stories which I haven't read I can't, of course, say.

Father Brown, Detective, was made by one of Britain's abler directors, Robert Hamer, for an American company, and I think it won't be denied that he has done a workmanlike job. Mr. Hamer also had a hand in the script, though the actual adaptation was the work of his colleague in this department, Thelma Schnee. It's what she has done that may bring complaint from those who know Father Brown best. My



ALEC GUINNESS
Mild, odd, likeable

BAROMETER

FAIR TO FINE: "Father Brown, Detective."

FAIR: "Turn the Key Softly."

own feeling is that while the detail of the little priest's behaviour is pretty right, or at any rate, typical, she has him, in the interests of his spiritual crusade, taking rather more liberties than one would expect with the things that are Caesar's. I'm quite ready to be put right about this, however, for all things considered it might have been safer for me to look at the film as an original creation. On those terms I could say I found it agreeably entertaining and amusing in a quiet way, and here and there lively and even exciting. Unwilling to go further than that about the production as a whole, I retain the unhappy feeling which I took into the theatre that this time certainly the wrong person is reviewing the film.

I have kept to the last my comment on the playing of the principal part, and here with delight I can give unqualified praise. Alec Guinness may not fit the physical specifications for Father Brown (there was, for a start, never an eye less empty), but from his first cherubic blink at the camera when he is caught uncommitting a burglary by one of his flock, he wears the cloth of the mild, odd, likeable priest as though it had been specially cut for him—which, of course, is what he has been doing with so many other parts ever since he played Herbert Pocket in *Great Expectations*. And while Mr. Guinness is adequately supported by a cast which includes Cecil Parker, Joan Greenwood and Peter Finch, *Father Brown* would still be worth seeing for his performance if all these others had failed miserably.

TURN THE KEY SOFTLY

(Rank)

TO traipse three sections out of town for a mildly sociological thriller may seem an odd sort of way to round off a weekend well, or well enough begun with *Father Brown*. The fact is I missed this one on its first run in Wellington a month or two ago, and reappearing in the suburbs it seemed a more likely piece than anything else on Main Street. It turns out not a first-rate film, but good in parts and interesting to the end. It's about the first day of freedom of three women—a gentle, pathetic old shoplifter (Kathleen Harrison), a good-time girl (Joan Collins) and a young woman (Yvonne Mitchell) who'd helped an unworthy lover with a burglary—who have just spent a year in jail. The point of the story, by John Brophy, seems to be that people tend to be what they are and that life can be a pretty sad and unsympathetic affair—which are propositions I don't quarrel with for a moment. The interesting thing from my point of view is what the director (Jack Lee) and his photographer (Geoffrey Unsworth) have done with this material; for there are more than a few quite memorable sequences, and a dramatic climax in which the unworthy lover (Terence Morgan) is hunted on and about a rooftop is as tense as anything of the kind I've seen for some time. Some of the acting is worth watching, too.

N.Z. LISTENER, FEBRUARY 18, 1955.