THE GOSPEL IN DOROTHY L. SAYERS

Selections from Her Novels, Plays, Letters, and Essays

Edited by Carole Vanderhoof
With an Appreciation by C. S. Lewis

Dorothy Sayers, 1928

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Introduction

> . . . Please realise that words are not just "talky-talk" – they are real and vital; they can change the face of the world. They are a form of action – "in the beginning was the Word . . . by Whom all things were made." Even the spate of futile words that pours out from the ephemeral press and the commercial-fiction-mongers has a real and terrible power; it can become a dope as dangerous as drugs or drink; it can rot the mind, sap the reason, send the will to sleep; it can pull down empires and set the neck of the people under the heel of tyranny. "For every idle word that ye speak ye shall render account at the day of judgment." I do not think that means that we shall have to pay a fine in a few million years' time for every occasion on which we said "dash it all" or indulged in a bit of harmless frivol; but I do think it was meant as an urgent warning against abusing or under-rating the power of words, and that the judgment is eternal – that is, it is here and now.[1]

For almost a century, the murder mysteries of Dorothy L. Sayers have kept enthusiasts hungrily turning pages. Many of these readers never guess how seriously Sayers took the business of wielding words, or realize that she is also known for her acumen

1 Dorothy L. Sayers, "A Note on Creative Reading," in *Begin Here: A Statement of Faith* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1940).

as an essayist, playwright, apologist, theologian, and translator. This anthology brings together the best of both worlds; the selections uncover the gospel themes woven throughout Sayers's popular fiction alongside related readings from her plays, letters, talks, and essays.

It took a lifetime for Dorothy L. Sayers to explore the power of words; her passion for expression grew with age and experience. Already something of a celebrity for her detective stories, during the bombing of Britain in World War II she increasingly deployed her words to address more pressing social issues and matters of faith, which brought a deluge of demands on her time. But attempts to divert her from practicing her art as a writer were fruitless. As she once wrote, "To take novelists and playwrights away from doing good work in their own line . . . and collar them for the purpose of preaching sermons or opening Church bazaars is a spoiling of God's instrument and defeats its own aims in the end."[2]

Often the unbeliever responded with interest, much to her surprise. Perhaps this was because her approach was rarely didactic, as she wrote in an exchange of letters with C. S. Lewis:

> You must not look at them from above, or outside, and say: "Poor creatures; they would obviously be the better for so-and-so – I must try and make up a dose for them." You've got to come galloping out shouting excitedly: "Look here! Look what I've found! Come and have a bit of it – it's grand – you'll love it – I can't keep it to myself, and anyhow, I want to know what you think of it."[3]

---

2 Sayers to Count Michael de la Bedoyere, editor of the *Catholic Herald,* October 7, 1941, *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers: Volume Two: 1937–1943: From Novelist to Playwright,* ed. by Barbara Reynolds (Cambridge: Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1997), 308.

3 Sayers to Lewis, July 31, 1946, *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers: Volume Three: 1944–1950: A Noble Daring,* ed. by Barbara Reynolds (Cambridge: Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1998), 253.

Her undiplomatic passion earned her a crusty and brash reputation. Lewis called her "gleefully ogreish."[4] But in her personal correspondence she sometimes displays a humbler side, one that isn't quite as assured as she was in print. Before we survey her work it is worth reviewing the life of this engaging and forthright woman.

Sayers was born in Oxford in 1893. Her father was headmaster at the Christ Church Cathedral School there, but within a year the family moved to the fen country when he accepted a job as rector of an Anglican church in Huntingdonshire. She was an only child, educated by her parents and governesses at home and steeped in the atmosphere of the church. At sixteen she entered the Godolphin School in Salisbury, and reveled in the drama and music programs. In 1915 Sayers received a certificate of first class honors in medieval French literature from the all-women Somerville College at Oxford. Almost immediately she published two books of poetry: *Op. I* in 1916 and *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs* in 1918.

Sayers considered herself Anglo-Catholic, the High-Church branch of Anglicanism. She used the word "Catholic" in her writings to mean ecumenical, addressing her lectures and articles to Roman Catholics, Anglo-Catholics, and Greek Orthodox alike. "I make it a rule never to make an attack on any one of these three communions, and never, if I can help it, to exhibit their disagreements but to emphasise their agreement."[5]

4 C. S. Lewis, "A Panegyric for Dorothy L. Sayers," in *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature,* ed. Walter Hooper (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966).

5 As quoted in Laura K. Simmons, *Creed without Chaos: Exploring Theology in the Writings of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 16.

During the First World War women found more job opportunities open to them, although the *"Kinder, Küche, Kirche"*[6] debate over the role of women in the workplace raged. Sayers would address this conflict in essays and several of her later mystery novels. At the time, however, she was only able to secure short-lived jobs teaching, tutoring, and as an intern in a publishing house. It was only in 1920 that Oxford awarded degrees to women; she was one of the first to receive a retroactive master's degree. Eight years afterward, Parliament passed laws that gave women voting rights equal to those of men.

Following several years of unemployment, living on an allowance from her parents and doing odd translation jobs, she became an advertising copywriter for S. H. Benson's in London, a large and prosperous agency. By all accounts she was successful, coming up with jingles and tag lines for Coleman's Mustard and Guinness Beer (My goodness, My Guinness!). In her off hours she started working on her first mystery novel, *Whose Body?*, which was published in 1923.

After a series of unhappy relationships, Sayers bore a son out of wedlock in 1924. The father was a married man; he did not acknowledge the boy. A cousin who took in foster children provided a home for the child. For the rest of her life Sayers kept her son a secret from her parents and the public, although she was in constant contact with her cousin and provided the money for the boy's keep and education. Sayers knew that the situation would have shamed her father and caused gossip in his congregation. It is significant, in light of what must have been an unremitting guilt, that Sayers wrote with intensity of the role of the conscience, repentance, and salvation throughout her life, in her fiction and plays as well as her essays.

6 A German phrase translated "children, kitchen, church," the supposed sphere of women.

In 1926, Sayers married Captain Oswald Atherton "Mac" Fleming, a Scottish journalist and World War I veteran. Since he was divorced they could not have a church wedding; they were married in a registry office. Neighbors knew Sayers as Mrs. Fleming, although she continued to use "Dorothy L. Sayers" as a pen name. From her lively letters to her mother, it appears that hilarious jaunts in Sayers's old motorcycle and sidecar typified the early years of their marriage. Unfortunately, his health declined – perhaps due to being wounded and gassed in the war – and when he could no longer work, Mac drank heavily. Sayers continued to care for him until his death in 1950.

One of the founding members of the Detection Club, Sayers reigned as president from 1949 until her death. G.K. Chesterton preceded her, and Agatha Christie succeeded her in the role. When a new member joined, he or she had to take the club oath, with one hand on a skull: "Do you promise that your Detectives shall well and truly detect the Crimes presented to them, using those Wits which it shall please you to bestow upon them, and not placing reliance upon, nor making use of, Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition, Mumbo-Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, Coincidence, or the Act of God?"[7] The club sometimes even wrote books collaboratively, with each author contributing a chapter.

Those who know Dorothy L. Sayers as a writer of religious essays often wonder how she could also write popular fiction. Of course, at the beginning the books were a way to make a living, cashing in on the detective story craze of the twenties. Agatha Christie was writing her Miss Marple mysteries, and

7 Alzina Stone Dale, *Maker and Craftsman: The Story of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2003), 77.

G. K. Chesterton his Father Brown tales. Sayers, like Chesterton, found murder mysteries a vehicle to explore the choices characters make between good and evil. But she never let that get in the way of spinning a captivating yarn. In the introduction to a collection of short stories that she edited, she admits the widespread attraction of the genre:

> Some prefer the intellectual cheerfulness of the detective story; some the uneasy emotions of the ghost story; but in either case, the tale must be about dead bodies or very wicked people, preferably both, before the Tired Business Man can feel really happy and at peace with the world. . . . [Such stories] make you feel that it is good to be alive, and that, while alive, it is better, on the whole, for you to be good. (Detective authors, by the way, are nearly all as good as gold, because it is part of their job to believe and to maintain that Your Sin Will Find You Out. That is why Detective Fiction is, or should be, such a good influence in a degenerate world, and that, no doubt, is why so many bishops, school masters, eminent statesmen and others with reputations to support, read detective stories to improve their morals, and keep themselves out of mischief.)[8]

The public devoured Sayers's mysteries with enthusiasm and she was able to quit her job at Benson's to write full-time in 1931. Three years later, when her son was ten, Sayers announced to her friends that she had "adopted" him – a prevarication, since legally she was already his mother. The boy assumed the surname Fleming, although he still lived with the cousin when not at boarding school.

As Sayers matures with the characters in her fiction, her themes become more subtle and perceptive. *Gaudy Night* (1935) and *Busman's Honeymoon* (1936), her last two published

8 Dorothy L. Sayers, *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery, and Horror, Third Series* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1934), 11–12.

mysteries, are Sayers best-known works today. In these books her characters have developed realistic human complexity, and Sayers has clearly drifted from the intellectual puzzle detective story into the realm of the novel. Indeed, *Busman's Honeymoon,* which was originally a stage play, is subtitled *A Love Story with Detective Interruptions.* In it, the formerly happy-go-lucky Lord Peter Wimsey agonizes over sending a criminal to face the death penalty. Wimsey visits the condemned man to ask his forgiveness on the night before the execution, and is met with curses. It takes hours of painful brooding before he returns to Harriet. Will he open himself to his new wife and admit his weakness? She knows she cannot force him, but waits to see if he will turn to her for comfort. In the pre-dawn hours he finally ascends the stairs. These scenes are more reminiscent of Jane Austen than Arthur Conan Doyle. Sayers has pushed the murder mystery as far as she could toward the tense interpersonal exploration of the modern novel.

It is not difficult to find gospel themes in Sayers's fiction. Wimsey never calls himself a Christian, but Sayers uses his ambivalence to present subtle questions of faith to the reader. At the end of this last book it is Lord Peter's conscience, heightened to excruciating sensitivity by tragic experiences as an officer in World War I, that turn his thoughts toward eternity as he waits for the hour of the criminal's execution. He asks Harriet:

> "If there *is* a God or a judgment – what next? What have we done?"
>
> "I don't know. But I don't suppose anything we could do would prejudice the defence."
>
> "I suppose not. I wish we knew more about it."[9]

9 Dorothy L. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon: A Love Story with Detective Interruptions* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1937), 378–379.

Although Sayers would write and publish a few more detective short stories in the next years, she had come to the end of what she wanted to express in the genre. Instead she turned to writing plays with Christian themes, like *The Zeal of Thy House,* performed at the Canterbury Festival in 1937. An account of an architect who rebuilt part of Canterbury Cathedral after a twelfth-century fire forms the kernel of the play. His arrogance leads to his literal downfall – he injures himself falling from a lift that he had designed. Human fallibility destroys, but out of our weakness God can bring good – another gospel theme – as the architect learns humility and turns to repentance at the close of the scene.

As part of play's promotion Sayers wrote several pieces for newspapers insisting that the gospel is an exciting story. The most outstanding is "The Dogma Is the Drama," an article published in April 1938 in *St. Martin's Review.* It begins with the startling statement: "'Any stigma,' said a witty tongue, 'will do to beat a dogma'; and the flails of ridicule have been brandished with such energy of late on the threshing-floor of controversy that the true seed of the Word has become well-nigh lost amid the whirling of chaff." Her reputation as an apologist and theologian flourished, much to her chagrin. She called herself a playwright.

Reluctantly, Sayers agreed to radio broadcasts and lectures. She compiled the essays and articles into books such as *Unpopular Opinions* and *Creed or Chaos?* Another theologically innovative book-length essay, *The Mind of the Maker,* illuminates the nature of the Trinity using the analogy of the creative process. In her introduction to a 1979 edition, Madeleine L'Engle asserts that "the joy of this book is the vitality of the writer's mind, and her luminous understanding of human creativity."

In 1941 the BBC commissioned Sayers to write a series of radio plays on the life of Christ. Broadcast between Christmas 1941 and October 1942, they stirred up a storm of controversy. It was perhaps the first time that an actor had played the voice of Christ on the radio. In addition to that scandal, Sayers's characters spoke contemporary English, not the words of the King James Version of the Bible. She worked directly from the Greek sources, and this gave the broadcasts an immediacy that brought the gospel, in all its raw violence and beauty, into two million living rooms.[10] *The Man Born to Be King: A Play-Cycle on the Life of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* was then published in book form in 1943.

The director of religious broadcasting at the BBC, Dr. James Welch, wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, regarding Sayers's dramas, "My serious judgment is that these plays have done more for the preaching of the Gospel to the unconverted than any other single effort of the churches or religious broadcasting since the last war – that is a big statement, but my experience forces me to make it."[11] In August 1943, Archbishop Temple nominated Sayers for a Lambeth Doctorate in Divinity, which she declined. Her reply to the archbishop is surprisingly humble:

> Thank you very much for the great honour you do me. I find it very difficult to reply as I ought, because I am extremely conscious that I don't deserve it. A Doctorate of Letters – yes; I have served Letters as faithfully as I knew how. But I have only served Divinity, as it were, accidentally, coming to it as a writer rather than as a Christian person. A Degree in Divinity is not, I suppose, intended as a certificate of sanctity, exactly; but I should feel better

10 Foreword by J. W. Welch to *The Man Born to Be King,* 12.

11 Welch to William Temple, June 1943, *Letters,* 2:429.

> about it if I were a more convincing kind of Christian. I am never quite sure whether I really am one, or whether I have only fallen in love with an intellectual pattern.[12]

She goes on to say that her future output will not be on the "austere level" of the recent radio plays. "I can't promise not to break out into something thoroughly secular, frivolous or unbecoming. . . . I shouldn't like your first woman D. D. to create scandal, or give reviewers cause to blaspheme."

Perhaps she was protecting her privacy against notoriety that might have resulted in the exposure of her son. But this reply is also typical of her policy not to set forth her own personal beliefs, or promote herself, but explain the gospel as contained in the creeds of the church. Fan letters made her irritable. She enclosed this dry retort in a letter to a friend, "Why do you want a letter from me telling you about God? You will never bother to check up on it and find out whether I am giving you a personal opinion or the Church's doctrine, and your minds are so confused that you would rather hear the former than the latter. Go away and do some work, and let me get on with mine."[13]

One of the best examples of Sayers's humorous letters is the earliest extant from her long correspondence with C. S. Lewis. Writing as though she is one of the devils in Lewis's book, *The Screwtape Letters,* which had just come out the previous year, she enclosed an advance copy of *The Man Born to Be King.* In the letter she writes as "Sluckdrib," the devil personally responsible for Dorothy L. Sayers:

> The effect of writing these plays upon the character of my patient is wholly satisfactory. I have already had the honour to report

12 Sayers to Temple, September 7, 1943, *Letters,* 2:430.

13 Satiric letter written by Sayers to Eric Fenn of the BBC, who had passed on to her a request for a letter "setting forth the Christian Faith and the Christian Way of Life." This "Letter Addressed to 'Average People'" was published in a church paper, *The City Temple Tidings,* July 1946.

> intellectual and spiritual pride, vainglory, self-opinionated dogmatism, irreverence, blasphemous frivolity, frequentation of the company of theatricals, captiousness, impatience of correction, polemical fury, shortness of temper, neglect of domestic affairs, lack of charity, egotism, nostalgia for secular occupations, and a growing tendency to consider the Bible as Literature. . . .[but] the capture of one fifth-rate soul (which was already thoroughly worm-eaten and shaky owing to my assiduous attention) scarcely compensates for the fact that numbers of stout young souls in brand-new condition are opening up negotiations with the Enemy and receiving reinforcement of faith. *We* knew, of course, that the author is as corrupt as a rotten cheese; why has no care been taken to see that this corruption (which must, surely, permeate the whole work) has its proper effect upon the listeners? . . . Either the Enemy is really able to turn thorns into grapes and thistles into figs, or (as I prefer to believe) there is mismanagement somewhere.[14]

Not long afterward, hearing the missile attack siren, Sayers grabbed a handy book on her way to the air raid shelter in her backyard. This was the beginning of her last great love affair with words. The book was Dante's *Inferno.* This epic saga of sin, repentance, and salvation lit her imagination. She wrote, "I feel it is, as Tennyson observed, 'one clear call for me.'"[15] In a blaze of enthusiasm, she taught herself to read medieval Italian so that she could make her own translation of the *Divine Comedy.*

It is no wonder that her play *The Just Vengeance,* performed a year after the cataclysmic end of World War II, broods on Dantean themes of original sin, inherited guilt, and shared responsibility. Barbara Reynolds, Sayers's good friend and biographer, holds that it is in this play that Sayers moves beyond just an intellectual assent to the creeds. The Christ figure's final

14 Sayers to Lewis, May 13, 1943, *Letters, 2:*410–411.

15 Sayers to the Dean of Chichester, March 7, 1947, *Letters,* 3:299.

speech, which Reynolds calls "one of the most moving things [Sayers] ever wrote," is "a profession of her own faith and hope."[16]

> Come then, and take again your own sweet will
> That once was buried in the spicy grave
> With Me, and now is risen with Me, more sweet
> Than myrrh and cassia; come, receive again
> All your desires, but better than your dreams,
> All your lost loves, but lovelier than you knew,
> All your fond hopes, but higher than your hearts
> Could dare to frame them; all your City of God
> Built by your faith, but nobler than you planned.[17]

As she worked on Dante's epic, Sayers's admiration for medieval scholarship grew, which resulted in a lecture given at an Oxford summer school for teachers. "The Lost Tools of Learning," like a pebble thrown into a pond, spawned a "classical education" movement that continues to cite Sayers as an inspiration. In the United States alone, the Association of Classical Christian Schools now boasts over two hundred member schools.

Sayers's goal is familiar: "For the sole true end of education is simply this: to teach men how to learn for themselves." But her surprising proposition is to call for a return to teaching grammar, logic, and rhetoric as the primary tools for achieving this purpose.

> For we let our young men and women go out unarmed, in a day when armour was never so necessary. By teaching them all to read, we have left them at the mercy of the printed word. By the invention of the film and the radio, we have made certain that no aversion to reading shall secure them from the incessant battery

16 *Letters*, 2:299.

17 Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Just Vengeance," *Four Sacred Plays* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1948).

> of words, words, words. They do not know what the words mean; they do not know how to ward them off or blunt their edge or fling them back; they are a prey to words in their emotions instead of being the masters of them in their intellects.[18]

Sayers finished the first book of her *Divine Comedy* translation, *Hell*, in 1949, surprising reviewers with fearless poetry that used the original rhyme scheme and meter, a feat hitherto considered impossible. The second volume, *Purgatory,* was published in 1955, along with *Introductory Papers on Dante,* a collection of her lectures. These books, with her introductions and notes, are still in print today; more than a million readers have benefited from her work. Reynolds calls them "a literary and cultural phenomenon unprecedented in Dante studies."[19]

At this point Sayers took a break from Dante and reworked her translation of *The Song of Roland,* which she had begun forty years before. Of this epic poem she said, "It is not merely Christian in subject; it is Christian to its very bones. . . . And it is a Christianity as naïve and uncomplicated as might be found at any time in the simplest village church. These violent men of action are called on to do their valiant duty to the Faith and to the Emperor; and when they die, they will be taken to lie on beds of flowers among – strangely but somehow appropriately – the Holy Innocents, in a Paradise inhabited by God and His angels."[20]

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18 Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Lost Tools of Learning* (London: Methuen, 1948).

19 *Letters,* 3:xiv.

20 Dorothy L. Sayers, introduction to *The Song of Roland,* trans. by Dorothy L. Sayers (New York: Penguin, 1957), 19.

As she began to translate Dante's *Paradise,*[21] Dorothy L. Sayers died of a sudden heart attack on December 17, 1957, at the age of sixty-four. She had completed twenty of the thirty-four cantos of Dante's allegory of the soul's ascent to God. It is difficult to imagine Sayers spending eternity lying on a bed of flowers, however. She sketched her idea of a blissful life after death in a letter to her producer during rehearsals for *The Man Born to Be King.* All she requests is uninterrupted time to revel in her God-given vocation: "When we go to heaven all I ask is that we shall be given some interesting job and allowed to get on with it. No management; no box-office; no dramatic critics; and an audience of cheerful angels who don't mind laughing."[22]

Carole Vanderhoof

21 Barbara Reynolds, a friend and fellow scholar, finished Sayers's translation of *Paradise* in 1962.

22 Sayers to Val Gielgud, January 13, 1942, *Letters,* 2:342.

I

Whose Body?

Conscience

Published in 1923, Whose Body? *is Dorothy L. Sayers's first foray into the writing of detective novels. The memory of the First World War is still fresh, especially to Lord Peter Wimsey, the protagonist of what will become twelve novels and many short stories. Some critics have objected to Wimsey's lighthearted babble, seeing nothing in it but a poor imitation of Bertie Wooster, a creation of Sayers's contemporary P. G. Wodehouse. But already in this first installment, Lord Peter's offhand remarks hint at a young author not only adept at religious and literary allusion but also taken with underlying themes of free will, responsibility, and the role of the conscience. For instance, in this fast-paced book full of slapstick humor there are at least thirteen references to Dante. Appropriately, the first words in the book are: "Oh, damn!"*

In this scene, Lord Peter Wimsey is in conversation with Detective Parker, who has asked his help with a case.

"D'you like your job?"

The detective considered the question, and replied:

"Yes – yes, I do. I know it to be useful, and I am fitted to it. I do it quite well – not with inspiration, perhaps, but sufficiently well to take a pride in it. It is full of variety and it forces one to keep up to the mark and not get slack. And there's a future to it. Yes, I like it. Why?"

"Oh, nothing," said Peter. "It's a hobby to me, you see. I took it up when the bottom of things was rather knocked out for me, because it was so damned exciting, and the worst of it is, I enjoy it – up to a point. If it was all on paper I'd enjoy every bit of it. I love the beginning of a job – when one doesn't know any of the people and it's just exciting and amusing. But if it comes to really running down a live person and getting him hanged, or even quodded, poor devil, there don't seem as if there was any excuse for me buttin' in, since I don't have to make my livin' by it. And I feel as if I oughtn't ever to find it amusin'. But I do."

Parker gave this speech his careful attention.

"I see what you mean," he said.

"There's old Milligan, f'r instance," said Lord Peter. "On paper, nothin' would be funnier than to catch old Milligan out. But he's rather a decent old bird to talk to. Mother likes him. He's taken a fancy to me. It's awfully entertainin' goin' and pumpin' him with stuff about a bazaar for church expenses, but when he's so jolly pleased about it and that, I feel a worm. S'pose old Milligan has cut Levy's throat and plugged him into the Thames. It ain't my business."

"It's as much yours as anybody's," said Parker; "it's no better to do it for money than to do it for nothing."

"Yes, it is," said Peter stubbornly. "Havin' to live is the only excuse there is for doin' that kind of thing."

"Well, but look here!" said Parker. "If Milligan has cut poor old Levy's throat for no reason except to make himself richer,

I don't see why he should buy himself off by giving £1,000 to Duke's Denver church roof, or why he should be forgiven just because he's childishly vain, or childishly snobbish."

"That's a nasty one," said Lord Peter.

"Well, if you like, even because he has taken a fancy to you."

"No, but – "

"Look here, Wimsey – do you think he *has* murdered Levy?"

"Well, he may have."

"But do you think he has?"

"I don't want to think so."

"Because he has taken a fancy to you?"

"Well, that biases me, of course – "

"I daresay it's quite a legitimate bias. You don't think a callous murderer would be likely to take a fancy to you?"

"Well – besides, I've taken rather a fancy to him."

"I daresay that's quite legitimate, too. You've observed him and made a subconscious deduction from your observations, and the result is, you don't think he did it. Well, why not? You're entitled to take that into account."

"But perhaps I'm wrong and he did do it."

"Then why let your vainglorious conceit in your own power of estimating character stand in the way of unmasking the singularly cold-blooded murder of an innocent and lovable man?"

"I know – but I don't feel I'm playing the game somehow."

"Look here, Peter," said the other with some earnestness, "suppose you get this playing-fields-of-Eton complex out of your system once and for all. There doesn't seem to be much doubt that something unpleasant has happened to Sir Reuben Levy. Call it murder, to strengthen the argument. If Sir Reuben has been murdered, is it a game? And is it fair to treat it as a game?"

"That's what I'm ashamed of, really," said Lord Peter. "It *is* a game to me, to begin with, and I go on cheerfully, and then I suddenly see that somebody is going to be hurt, and I want to get out of it."

"Yes, yes, I know," said the detective, "but that's because you're thinking about your attitude. You want to be consistent, you want to look pretty, you want to swagger debonairly through a comedy of puppets or else to stalk magnificently through a tragedy of human sorrows and things. But that's childish. If you've any duty to society in the way of finding out the truth about murders, you must do it in any attitude that comes handy. You want to be elegant and detached? That's all right, if you find the truth out that way, but it hasn't any value in itself, you know. You want to look dignified and consistent – what's that got to do with it? You want to hunt down a murderer for the sport of the thing and then shake hands with him and say, 'Well played – hard luck – you shall have your revenge tomorrow!' Well, you can't do it like that. Life's not a football match. You want to be a sportsman. You can't be a sportsman. You're a responsible person."

"I don't think you ought to read so much theology," said Lord Peter. "It has a brutalizing influence."

Lord Peter reached home about midnight, feeling extraordinarily wakeful and alert. Something was jigging and worrying in his brain; it felt like a hive of bees, stirred up by a stick. He felt as though he were looking at a complicated riddle, of which he had once been told the answer but had forgotten it and was always on the point of remembering. . . .

He roused himself, threw a log on the fire, and picked up a book which the indefatigable Bunter, carrying on his daily fatigues amid the excitements of special duty, had brought from the Times Book Club. It happened to be Sir Julian Freke's "Physiological Bases of the Conscience," which he had seen reviewed two days before.

"This ought to send one to sleep," said Lord Peter; "if I can't leave these problems to my subconscious I'll be as limp as a rag tomorrow. . . ."

Mind and matter were one thing, that was the theme of the physiologist. Matter could erupt, as it were, into ideas. You could carve passions in the brain with a knife. You could get rid of imagination with drugs and cure an outworn convention like a disease. "The knowledge of good and evil is an observed phenomenon, attendant upon a certain condition of the brain-cells, which is removable." That was one phrase; and again:

"Conscience in man may, in fact, be compared to the sting of a hive-bee, which, so far from conducing to the welfare of its possessor, cannot function, even in a single instance, without occasioning its death. The survival-value in each case is thus purely social; and if humanity ever passes from its present phase of social development into that of a higher individualism, as some of our philosophers have ventured to speculate, we may suppose that this interesting mental phenomenon may gradually cease to appear; just as the nerves and muscles which once controlled the movements of our ears and scalps have, in all save a few backward individuals, become atrophied and of interest only to the physiologist."

"By Jove!" thought Lord Peter, idly, "that's an ideal doctrine for the criminal. A man who believed that would never – "

And then it happened – the thing he had been half-unconsciously expecting. It happened suddenly, surely, as unmistakably as sunrise. He remembered – not one thing, nor another thing, nor a logical succession of things, but everything – the whole thing, perfect, complete, in all its dimensions as it were and instantaneously; as if he stood outside the world and saw it suspended in infinitely dimensional space. He no longer needed to reason about it, or even to think about it. He knew it. . . .

"He called on me, sir, with an anti-vivisectionist pamphlet" – all these things and many others rang together and made one sound, they swung together like bells in a steeple, with the deep tenor booming through the clamour:

"The knowledge of good and evil is a phenomenon of the brain, and is removable, removable, removable. The knowledge of good and evil is removable."

Lord Peter Wimsey was not a young man who habitually took himself very seriously, but this time he was frankly appalled. "It's impossible," said his reason, feebly; *"credo quia impossibile,"*[1] said his interior certainty with impervious self-satisfaction. "All right," said conscience, instantly allying itself with blind faith, "what are you going to do about it?"

Lord Peter realizes that the doctor must have perpetrated the crime, but the horror of the deed and the duty that now rests on his shoulders trigger a flashback – memories of tragedy and heavy responsibility from the war. It is only after a few days of rest that he is able to return to his work and pass on his intuition to Inspector Sugg of Scotland Yard. The amoral doctor, who at one time was

1 *"Credo quia impossibile"* (I believe it because it is impossible) attributed to Tertullian, *De Carne Christi.*

in love with the wife of Sir Reuben Levy, must have switched the murdered body of the financier with that of a medical cadaver.

Parker and Lord Peter were at 110 Piccadilly. Lord Peter was playing Bach and Parker was reading Origen when Sugg was announced.

"We've got our man, sir," said he.

"Good God!" said Peter. "Alive?"

"We were just in time, my lord. We rang the bell and marched straight up past his man to the library. He was sitting there doing some writing. When we came in, he made a grab for his hypodermic, but we were too quick for him, my lord. We didn't mean to let him slip through our hands, having got so far. We searched him thoroughly and marched him off." . . .

"He was writing a full confession when we got hold of him, addressed to your lordship. The police will have to have it, of course, but seeing it's written for you, I brought it along for you to see first. Here it is."

He handed Lord Peter a bulky document.

"Thanks," said Peter. "Like to hear it, Charles?"

"Rather."

Accordingly Lord Peter read it aloud.

Dear Lord Peter – When I was a young man I used to play chess with an old friend of my father's. He was a very bad, and a very slow, player, and he could never see when a checkmate was inevitable, but insisted on playing every move out. I never had any patience with that kind of attitude, and I will freely admit now that the game is yours. I must either stay at home and be hanged or escape abroad and live in an idle and insecure obscurity. I prefer to acknowledge defeat.

If you have read my book on "Criminal Lunacy," you will remember that I wrote: "In the majority of cases, the criminal betrays himself by some abnormality attendant upon this pathological condition of the nervous tissues. His mental instability shows itself in various forms: an overweening vanity, leading him to brag of his achievement; a disproportionate sense of the importance of the offence, resulting from the hallucination of religion, and driving him to confession; egomania, producing the sense of horror or conviction of sin, and driving him to headlong flight without covering his tracks; a reckless confidence, resulting in the neglect of the most ordinary precautions, as in the case of Henry Wainwright, who left a boy in charge of the murdered woman's remains while he went to call a cab, or on the other hand, a nervous distrust of apperceptions in the past, causing him to revisit the scene of the crime to assure himself that all traces have been as safely removed as *his own judgment knows them to be*." I will not hesitate to assert that a perfectly sane man, not intimidated by religious or other delusions, could always render himself perfectly secure from detection, provided, that is, that the crime were sufficiently premeditated and that he were not pressed for time or thrown out in his calculations by purely fortuitous coincidence. . . .

Of all human emotions, except perhaps those of hunger and fear, the sexual appetite produces the most violent and, under some circumstances, the most persistent reactions; I think, however, I am right in saying that at the time when I wrote my book, my original sensual impulse to kill Sir Reuben Levy had already become profoundly modified by my habits of thought. To the animal lust to slay and the primitive human desire for revenge, there was added the rational intention of substantiating my own theories for the satisfaction of myself and the world.

If all had turned out as I had planned, I should have deposited a sealed account of my experiment with the Bank of England, instructing my executors to publish it after my death. Now that accident has spoiled the completeness of my demonstration, I entrust the account to you, whom it cannot fail to interest, with the request that you will make it known among scientific men, in justice to my professional reputation. . . .

Meanwhile, I carefully studied criminology in fiction and fact – my work on "Criminal Lunacy" was a side-product of this activity – and saw how, in every murder, the real crux of the problem was the disposal of the body. As a doctor, the means of death were always ready to my hand, and I was not likely to make any error in that connection. Nor was I likely to betray myself on account of any illusory sense of wrongdoing. The sole difficulty would be that of destroying all connection between my personality and that of the corpse. You will remember that Michael Finsbury, in Stevenson's entertaining romance, observes: "What hangs people is the unfortunate circumstance of guilt." It became clear to me that the mere leaving about of a superfluous corpse could convict nobody, provided that nobody was guilty in connection *with that particular corpse.* Thus the idea of substituting the one body for the other was early arrived at, though it was not till I obtained the practical direction of St. Luke's Hospital that I found myself perfectly unfettered in the choice and handling of dead bodies. From this period on, I kept a careful watch on all the material brought in for dissection.

My opportunity did not present itself until the week before Sir Reuben's disappearance, when the medical officer at the Chelsea workhouse sent word to me that an unknown vagrant had been injured that morning by the fall of a piece of scaffolding, and was exhibiting some very interesting nervous and cerebral reactions.

I went round and saw the case, and was immediately struck by the man's strong superficial resemblance to Sir Reuben. He had been heavily struck on the back of the neck, dislocating the fourth and fifth cervical vertebræ and heavily bruising the spinal cord. It seemed highly unlikely that he could ever recover, either mentally or physically, and in any case there appeared to me to be no object in indefinitely prolonging so unprofitable an existence. He had obviously been able to support life until recently, as he was fairly well nourished, but the state of his feet and clothing showed that he was unemployed, and under present conditions he was likely to remain so. I decided that he would suit my purpose very well, and immediately put in train certain transactions in the City which I had already sketched out in my own mind. In the meantime, the reactions mentioned by the workhouse doctor were interesting, and I made careful studies of them, and arranged for the delivery of the body to the hospital when I should have completed my preparations. . . .

The rest was simple. I carried my pauper along the flat roofs, intending to leave him, like the hunchback in the story, on someone's staircase or down a chimney. I had got about half way along when I suddenly thought, "Why, this must be about little Thipps's place," and I remembered his silly face, and his silly chatter about vivisection. It occurred to me pleasantly how delightful it would be to deposit my parcel with him and see what he made of it. I lay down and peered over the parapet at the back. It was pitch-dark and pouring with rain again by this time, and I risked using my torch. That was the only incautious thing I did, and the odds against being seen from the houses opposite were long enough. One second's flash showed me what I had hardly dared to hope – an open window just below me.

I knew those flats well enough to be sure it was either the bathroom or the kitchen. I made a noose in a third bandage that I had brought with me, and made it fast under the arms of the corpse. I twisted it into a double rope, and secured the end to the iron stanchion of a chimney-stack. Then I dangled our friend over. I went down after him myself with the aid of a drain-pipe and was soon hauling him in by Thipps's bathroom window. . . .

First, however, I had to go over to the hospital and make all safe there. I took off Levy's head, and started to open up the face. In twenty minutes his own wife could not have recognized him. I returned, leaving my wet galoshes and mackintosh by the garden door. My trousers I dried by the gas stove in my bedroom, and brushed away all traces of mud and brick-dust. My pauper's beard I burned in the library.

I got a good two hours' sleep from five to seven, when my man called me as usual. I apologized for having kept the water running so long and so late, and added that I thought I would have the cistern seen to.

I was interested to note that I was rather extra hungry at breakfast, showing that my night's work had caused a certain wear-and-tear of tissue. I went over afterwards to continue my dissection. During the morning a peculiarly thickheaded police inspector came to inquire whether a body had escaped from the hospital. I had him brought to me where I was, and had the pleasure of showing him the work I was doing on Sir Reuben Levy's head. Afterwards I went round with him to Thipps's and was able to satisfy myself that my pauper looked very convincing.

As soon as the Stock Exchange opened I telephoned my various brokers, and by exercising a little care, was able to sell out the greater part of my Peruvian stock on a rising market.

Towards the end of the day, however, buyers became rather unsettled as a result of Levy's death, and in the end I did not make more than a few hundreds by the transaction.

Trusting I have now made clear to you any point which you may have found obscure, and with congratulations on the good fortune and perspicacity which have enabled you to defeat me, I remain, with kind remembrances to your mother,

Yours very truly,

Julian Freke

Post-Scriptum: My will is made, leaving my money to St. Luke's Hospital, and bequeathing my body to the same institution for dissection. I feel sure that my brain will be of interest to the scientific world. As I shall die by my own hand, I imagine that there may be a little difficulty about this. Will you do me the favour, if you can, of seeing the persons concerned in the inquest, and obtaining that the brain is not damaged by an unskillful practitioner at the post-mortem, and that the body is disposed of according to my wish?[2]

From an address Sayers delivered in May 1940 titled "Creed or Chaos?":

The final tendency of the modern philosophies – hailed in their day as a release from the burden of sinfulness – has been to bind man hard and fast in the chains of an iron determinism. The influences of heredity and environment, of glandular make-up and the control exercised by the unconscious, of economic necessity and the mechanics of biological development, have all been invoked to assure man that he is not responsible for his

2 Dorothy L. Sayers, *Whose Body?* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1923), ch. 7–8.

misfortunes and therefore not to be held guilty. Evil has been represented as something imposed upon him from without, not made by him from within.

The dreadful conclusion follows inevitably, that as he is not responsible for evil, he cannot alter it; even though evolution and progress may offer some alleviation in the future, there is no hope for you and me, here and now. I well remember how an aunt of mine, brought up in an old-fashioned liberalism, protested angrily against having continually to call herself a "miserable sinner" when reciting the Litany. To-day, if we could really be persuaded that we are miserable sinners – that the trouble is not outside us but inside us, and that therefore, by the grace of God, we can do something to put it right – we should receive that message as the most hopeful and heartening thing that can be imagined.[3]

Here Sayers tries her hand at satire, with a parody of liberal religious thought:

Creed of St. Euthanasia

I believe in Man, Maker of himself and inventor of all Science. And in Myself, his Manifestation, and Captain of my Psyche; and that I should not suffer anything painful or unpleasant.

And in a vague Evolving Deity, the future-begotten Child of Man; conceived by the Spirit of Progress, born of Emergent Variants: who shall kick down the ladder by which he rose, and tell history to go to hell;

3 "Creed or Chaos?," an address delivered at the Biennial Festival of the Church Tutorial Classes Association in Derby, May 4, 1940, published in Dorothy L. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* (London: Methuen, 1947).

Who shall some day take off from earth and be jet-propelled into the heavens; and sit exalted above all worlds, Man the Master Almighty.

And I believe in the Spirit of Progress, who spake by Shaw and the Fabians; and in a modern, administrative, ethical and social Organization; in the Isolation of Saints, the Treatment of Complexes, Joy through Health, the Destruction of the Body by Cremation (with music while it burns), and then I've had it.[4]

From the introduction to her translation of Dante:

Whether in Hell or in Purgatory, you get what you want – if that is what you really do want. If you insist on having your own way, you will get it: Hell is the enjoyment of your own way for ever. If you really want God's way for you, you will get it in Heaven, and the pains of Purgatory will not deter you, they will be welcomed as the means to that end. It must always be remembered that for Dante, as for all Catholic Christians, man is a responsible being. The dishonouring notion that he is the helpless puppet of circumstance or temperament, and therefore not justly liable to punishment or reward, is one which the poet over and over again goes out of his way to refute. That is why so many of the "sermons" in the *Purgatory* deal with the subject of Free Will. When every allowance is made (and Dante makes generous allowance), when mercy and pity and grace have done all they can, the consequences of sin are the sinner's – to be borne, at his own choice, in a spirit of sullen rebellion or of ready acquiescence.[5]

4 "More Pantheon Papers," originally published in *Punch,* January 13, 1954, 84.

5 Dorothy L. Sayers, introduction to Dante Alighieri, *Purgatory,* trans. by Dorothy L. Sayers (London: Penguin, 1955), 16–17.