

## 'THE MAN BORN TO BE KING'<sup>1</sup>

During the industrial depression of the early Thirties a certain man faced, through no fault of his own, bankruptcy. One of his acquaintances, until then not a particularly close friend, wrote to him saying: 'Count upon my assistance to the full extent of my bank-balance.'

Until 1937 Miss Dorothy Sayers was known to the English-speaking world as one of the most brilliant of its writers of detective stories, that new form of the novel which will excite the interest of future literary commentators. They were extremely interesting novels as well as most ingenious detective problems that Miss Sayers wrote. The mysteries were really absorbing, the clues were fair game, the characterisation was realistic and covered a very wide range of human types, while the literature of the hemispheres was laid in tribute to add piquancy to the plot. A deeper strain was also present. Like the great majority of detective-stories, those by Miss Sayers were strongly moralistic; they proclaimed the necessity of a moral order and depicted in friendly terms the activities of those who maintain it. *Clouds of Witness* showed the devastating despair induced by a *grande passion*; *The Documents in the Case* was a fearful indictment of adultery; *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* revealed the appalling effects upon the soul of great scientific intelligence which does not bow down before the Creator of that which science investigates; *Murder must Advertise* was concerned with the drug traffic; *Busman's Honeymoon* revealed the sordid effects of avarice, *Strong Poison* and *Unnatural Death* the corruption of the human character by sheer selfishness. The moral effect was the stronger because no one could be aware that it was being inculcated as they pursued the fascinating course of the detective story.

Since *Busman's Honeymoon* Miss Sayers has published no more detective novels but has devoted her vast talents as a writer to works designed directly to support the moral order of society and the Christian Church and its teachings. She has done this partly by plays, like *The Zeal of thy House*, partly by tracts like *Begin Here* or *The Mind of the Maker*. To the support of Christianity and the

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<sup>1</sup> By Dorothy M. Sayers (Gollancz; 10s. 6d.)

theology of the Church Miss Sayers has brought the same sinewy reasoning and felicity of illustration with which she adorned her long list of novels. On one occasion, desiring to raise funds for the production of a Church play, she wrote a series of advertisements and was reproached for lending her talents to commerce. In a witty letter to *The Times*, setting forth her motives for such an activity, she ended by saying: *Et laudavit Dominus villicum iniquitatis*. But it is not the Unjust Steward of whom Miss Sayers reminds us: 'but a certain Samaritan, being on his journey, came near. . . .'

In 1940 Miss Sayers was commissioned by the B.B.C. to write a series of twelve plays for broadcasting to cover the whole Gospel story, and this she consented to do, insisting that the Person of our Lord should be introduced and that the plays should be in modern speech. The plays have been given now in their entirety twice, after much opposition had been offered by Protestant societies and much controversy aroused, with, in all probability, the result that a far greater radio audience listened in to them than would have otherwise been the case. In her introduction Miss Sayers pays a well-deserved tribute to the B.B.C. Religious Advisory Committee which gave her full support in going ahead with the plays against uninstructed popular clamour. Both Miss Sayers's introduction and that by Dr. Welch, the Director of Religious Broadcasting, and the note by Mr. Val Gielgud, who produced the plays, form interesting reading concerning the problem of putting over on the air the entire Gospel story in all its essentials, and the extraordinary spirit in which the actors, all, save one, anonymous at the time of production, confronted their very difficult task. It should be noted that this is the drama reduced to its barest skeleton, disembodied voices, with a few sound effects, being all that the audience has to convey it over a total of nine hours of diffusion, and a story embracing the whole cycle of man's redemption. Perhaps it will be found that it has only been in the few short years before television becomes widespread that such a technique would be necessary. 'A certain amount of crowd back-ground on the grams,' says Miss Sayers, 'should, I think, accompany us the whole way up the road.' The road is that which leads from Bethlehem to Calvary and the Empty Tomb, and the enormous volume of praise which Miss Sayers has received, and the deep impression made on every type of listener, is a measure of her success in leading us along this road, and her command over the essentials of the Gospel story and its exegetic intricacies. As her microphone swings from the Garden of Gethsemani to Pilate's

study, from Gallilee to Bethany, picking up here the voice of our Lord, here the disciples squabbling, here Martha in the cook-house, or Caiaphas steering the Sanhedrin through an intrigue, we recollect in the directness of the modern speech that this was actually how it happened, these were the words and tones of voice used, just so was the Gospel preached among the noises of the courtyard, the quayside, the street; and also, just so was the Gospel first passed on to people sitting in villas, in kitchens, or looking upon the sea. The imagination is lively in lending to these disembodied voices body and colour, while the cool directness of the everyday idiom strikes home the significance of words heard a thousand times and not realized. 'For God will not make any man virtuous by force, so the good and evil must grow together until the harvest. . . . but in the last day, when the Son of Man comes in glory to judge the world, he will sort them out.' And again, 'The mission of John the Baptist—was it of God? or was it—bogus?'

In this published version of the plays, some of the ideas of Miss Sayers in writing them become apparent. She has prefaced to each play her complete instructions to the producer, consisting of the general line taken in each play and very copious sketches of the development of each principal character. In this way we become aware of the historical background she envisages, and her psychological pre-occupations. As it would be only proper to expect, her approach to the Gospel story is strongly intellectual and she elaborates most carefully, as we should expect, the description of the predominantly intellectual characters, Herod the Great, Caiaphas, Judas, all of them bad men. Her reconstruction of the character of the last named and the motives that led him to his betrayal of our Lord is the main plot behind the majority of the plays. The Petainist reactions of Caiaphas to Pilate and Rome, the standpoint of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathæa, the legal niceties of the trial, are all excellently suggested. Above all, Miss Sayers' presentation of our Lord is superbly intelligent and strong. 'If we did not know all his retorts by heart,' she says, 'if we had not taken the sting out of them by incessant repetition in the accents of the pulpit, and if we had not somehow got it into our heads that brains were rather reprehensible we should reckon him among the greatest wits of all time. Nobody else, in three brief years, has achieved such an output of epigram.'

Miss Sayers's most difficult task has been, as she clearly foresaw, to harmonize the human and the divine in her rendering of the central figure of our Lord, especially the interaction of the divine and human

knowledge. Concerning this it is interesting to note that in her preface she writes: 'There is no more searching test of a theology than to submit it to a dramatic handling; nothing so glaringly exposes inconsistencies in a character, a story, or a philosophy as to put it upon the stage and allow it to speak for itself. Any theology that will stand the rigorous pulling and hauling of the dramatist is pretty tough in its texture. Having submitted Catholic theology to this treatment, I am bound to bear witness that it is very tough indeed.' Conversely, the theologian must testify that Miss Sayers is almost without exception orthodox.

The published volume reveals the headwork that has gone to produce this massive dramatic tapestry, with its many cunningly interwoven strands of thought. The listener will not have failed to notice as well the generous intuitions of the heart, especially in the two wonderful characters of Mary Magdalen and St. John the Evangelist. This is especially so in the great moments at the dawn of Easter Day. It is a far cry from:—

*James*: Master, shall we call down fire from heaven?

*John*: And burn their d-d-disgusting village to the ground?  
(Play VI.)

to:—

*Matthew*: You was his best friend. And God knows, when they killed him, it must have hit you 'arder than any of us. And if he was here alive, the very first thing he'd say would be: 'Where's John?'

*John*: He knows I'm here whenever he wants me.

*Matthew*: Yes, but it's not kind. It's not like him. Why should Mary and Peter come before you? . . . .

*John*: Peter's more important. The Church was to be founded upon Peter. (Play XIII.)

The head and the heart, the human and the divine, Miss Sayers has wrought well with her magnificent though daunting material and she has produced a series of plays, with a commentary thereto, which may well outlast the mode of their presentation, and which have already earned the popular title of 'the English Oberammergau.'

PAUL URBAN FOSTER, O.P.