

Women of
MYSTERY

THE LIVES AND WORKS OF NOTABLE
WOMEN CRIME NOVELISTS

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DOROTHY L. SAYERS

THE PASSIONATE MIND

"I dramatised myself, and have at all periods of my life continued to dramatised myself . . . but at all times with a perfect realisation that I was the creator, not the subject, of these fantasies."

—*My Edwardian Childhood*

Dorothy L. Sayers requested that no biography be written of her life until at least fifty years after her passing. A half-century was enough time, she reasoned, to determine if her works were still valued and, by implication, if she would be worth remembering. By the early 1970s—a mere decade and a half after her death—it appeared that her caution had been prophetic: Dorothy L. Sayers seemed doomed to become one of the marginal names in detective fiction. The twelve novels that had made her one of the giants of the British Golden Age were in eclipse, and relatively few (though fiercely loyal) readers were acquainted with her masterful sleuth, the noble Lord Peter Wimsey.



Dorothy L. Sayers

But the fates conspired to save Sayers's name from limbo. Buoyed by the new wave of feminism, women looking for literary role models rediscovered her work and her life. Then, beginning in 1973, a television series produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation and adapted from the Wimsey books introduced a new generation to the charming and capricious Lord Peter and by extension, his creator.

One of the first to tackle Sayers as biographical subject was British

writer Janet Hitchman. In her research for *Such a Strange Lady*, Hitchman performed a feat of detection worthy of Lord Peter himself. Curious about the origins of Dorothy Sayers's "adopted" son, the biographer turned to Somerset House, England's archive of birth and death; there she uncovered a secret to which only a half-dozen or so people had been privy during Dorothy's life—the secret that in many ways shaped the course of her adult life, colored her work, and belied the public image of this most complex woman.

Those who had encountered the public Dorothy L. Sayers at the height of her career remembered a large, mannish, boisterous woman with a prodigious intellect, a love of intense argument, and a loud and often vulgar mouth. The public Dorothy Sayers of the 1930s and 1940s seemed confident to the point of combativeness. Undoubtedly those closest to her sensed the depths of her passions, uncertainties, and fears, though even her dearest friends were denied access to her secrets. But Dorothy deliberately manufactured her fiction out of personal experience, ideas, and beliefs—consciously and unconsciously littering her novels, plays, and even her nonfiction writings with a trail of clues to her life. Thanks to her published work, her private fragments, and most important, her extraordinary gift for letter-writing, we can now become acquainted with the real woman of mystery who was Dorothy L. Sayers.

*"I am a citizen of no mean city."**

Dorothy Leigh Sayers was born in a small, seventeenth-century house at 1 Brewer Street in the university city of Oxford on June 13, 1893. She was the one and only offspring of parents somewhat past their prime childbearing years and, consequently, was pampered and indulged from the start.

Her mother, Helen Mary Leigh Sayers—called Nell or Nellie—had come from the town of Shirley, near the southern coastal cities of Bournemouth and Southampton; she was the daughter of a lawyer and niece of the well-known literary humorist Percival Leigh. The Leighs traced their lineage to the reign of Henry III and had a history as landed gentry on the Isle of Wight. Nell was, according to her daughter, "a woman of exceptional intellect, which unfortunately never got the ed-

* This quotation of St. Paul (Acts 21:39) is the opening line of *My Edwardian Childhood*, an unpublished autobiographical fragment written in the 1930s. Unless otherwise noted, quotations are from Dorothy L. Sayers's letters and unpublished autobiographical writings. The reference to "no mean city" also appears in *Candy Night*, Dorothy's Oxford mystery.

ucation it deserved." A "vivacious and attractive woman," though by no means a beauty, Nell is most frequently described as lively and spirited with a well-developed sense of humor, though she also had a darker side that later manifested itself in frightening episodes of nervous prostration.

Dorothy's father, the Reverend Henry Sayers, was the more strait-laced of the pair: tall, bald, and properly subdued. The son of a minister of Irish descent, Henry had taken his degree in divinity at Magdalen College of Oxford University. Ordained a priest of the Church of England in 1880, Henry took a position as headmaster of a school for boys in Tenbury. Four years later, he returned to Oxford as headmaster of the Christ Church Choir School and chaplain of Christ Church Cathedral. This post neatly combined his musical talents (Henry was an accomplished singer, composer of hymns, and violinist) with his scholarly interests, especially in Latin studies, and he remained at the school for thirteen years.

Henry and Nell were married when he was thirty-nine and she was thirty-six, and Dorothy arrived a year later. With her coming, the Old Choir House in Brewer Street was jammed to its historic rafters with Henry, Nell, and their daughter, Dorothy's maiden aunts Mabel Leigh and Gertrude Sayers, her Grannie Sayers, a nursemaid, and sundry servants. Soon after Dorothy's birth, the whole kit and caboodle moved on to a newer, more spacious Choir House on the same street.

Although she spent only the first few years of her childhood in Oxford, Dorothy retained bright memories of the city of her birth. In her unpublished autobiographical fragment, *My Edwardian Childhood*, she vividly recalled excursions to the Christ Church meadow and games with her nurse among the elm trees of Oxford's Broad Walk; the mechanical false teeth that chattered in the window of a dentist's High Street office; the Choir School's English sheepdog, "Scruggs" (immortalized in *The Five Red Herrings*); the ringing of the Tom Tower clock, which struck 101 times every night at five minutes past nine. Dorothy was inordinately proud of her Oxford birth and her baptism in the Christ Church Cathedral (with her father officiating), and she returned to the great university center many times, both in body and in spirit.

A precocious child, she was blessed with a quick mind. Encouraged by her proud parents, she was totally at ease in the company of adults. She also possessed a quick temper, which would plague her later years. Her earliest memory, she claimed, was of throwing a tantrum that involved screaming at the top of her strong lungs and rolling about on the floor.

As a result of being frequently read to by her parents, she had taught herself to read by age four and was enchanted by the stories of Uncle

Remus and the Brothers Grimm and by Lewis Carroll's Alice tales. This early exposure nurtured a love of the magic of words and language that endured for a lifetime. She had few playmates, with the exception of her cousin Margaret Leigh, so her earliest imaginative adventures involved her favorite toys: two monkey dolls named Jacko and Jocko—the former “puckish, mischievous . . . always in disgrace”; the latter “utterly virtuous and amiable”—and a villainous rag doll named Frenchman.

In 1897, Henry Sayers took the offer of the rectorship at Bluntisham-cum-Earith in East Anglia. Bluntisham and Earith are neighboring villages in a Fen country farming community near Huntingdon (Cambridgeshire). Perhaps because of the isolation of the parish, the Church provided well for its rector; his living included a large house with two acres of gardens at Bluntisham. Dorothy later surmised that her father was tired of teaching and welcomed the change. For her mother, however, the relocation to Bluntisham meant abandoning the social life of Oxford and the close company of friends and relatives.

Little “Dossie” was four and a half when the family moved, and she never forgot the golden winter aconites that lined the rectory's drive when she arrived, accompanied by her nurse and the family's parrot. The new rector brought a large entourage, including his mother, Aunt Mabel (Nell's sister), and the Oxford servants, all of whom had elected to remain with the family. Aunt Gertrude Sayers was also provided for; while not a permanent resident, she enjoyed frequent, extended stays at Bluntisham.

The Victorian manse—repaired and handsomely refurbished by a firm of Oxford decorators hired and directed by Nell—offered a wealth of possibilities for an imaginative child. There were spaces for everyone, including day and night nurseries for Dorothy, two drawing rooms, and her father's study with its American organ. The house lacked electricity and running water, and the servants were forever climbing the backstairs with pails of water for washing and bathing. For Dorothy, the grounds provided lawns and gardens where she could run and play, fruit trees and plantings from which she could gorge on fresh berries, peaches, and plums (saving her from the Leigh family curse of constipation), and a paddock for a pony named Jenny who carted the family from place to place before the acquisition of a Model T Ford. The flat, fertile countryside was wildly beautiful and ominously dangerous. The Fens—thirty square miles of peat marsh that had been drained and diked in the mid-seventeenth century—held the constant threat of flooding, and the man-made system of drainage canals and earthen dams required constant care. Even at the opening of the twentieth century, the farmers and villagers of Bluntisham and Earith were acutely mindful of the disastrous flood of 1713; Dorothy must have heard many accounts of this land-

mark event from which she drew inspiration for the climactic Fen flood in *The Nine Tailors*.

The whole Sayers family tended to the parish. Henry was a conscientious and caring shepherd to his conservative flock, and Nell was particularly attentive to the needs of the poor. But Grannie Sayers, herself a pastor's widow, often took too much interest in the affairs of others and was frequently present where she was not wanted. Though Dorothy was never very fond of her grandmother (or any of her Sayers relatives), she was to paint gentle portraits of dedicated country parsons and their wives in *The Nine Tailors* and also *Busman's Honeymoon*.

Dorothy's childhood was in many ways idyllic. She was educated at home by her parents and a series of governesses. Her day nursery was converted to a schoolroom, and the yearly calendar was divided into proper semesters and vacations. Her father began her Latin studies when she was six, and she was to learn excellent French and passable German from her governesses and au pairs. Dorothy's academic training concentrated on literature, languages, and music, with only passing attention to mathematics and science—a failing that was to cost her dearly when she was sent to boarding school. She had inherited her father's musical talents; he began her violin instruction when she was six or seven, and she also studied piano and singing. From time to time, other children joined her classroom, including Betty Osborne, who became one of Dorothy's few childhood friends, and a young boarder named Guy Cooke, of whom Dorothy, the pampered only child, was viciously jealous. (Even after his death in World War One, she maintained her petulant dislike of him.) Over the years, the Sayerses took in a number of male boarders, youngsters like Guy and older students who were tutored by Henry.

The whole family loved reading aloud, and Dorothy especially enjoyed her grandmother's renderings of the works of Sir Walter Scott and Aunt Mabel's vivid readings of Dickens. Dorothy's taste for literary blood and thunder translated into her role-playing. She was soon writing poetry and creating heroic plays in which she invariably was the hero and family and staff were enlisted as supporting cast members. Her parents stoked this love of drama by providing the costuming and props for her plays and serving as enthusiastic audience. Henry and Nell also took her to London at least once a year to see grown-up productions.

In the rough country environment of Bluntisham, Dorothy grew strong and tall. Through the indulgence of her parents and teachers, she was nurtured on the classics and the robust literature of epic adventure and romance. Her talents—poetry, music, love of learning and disputation—were nourished and encouraged. Perhaps too much encouraged.

"She was self-absorbed, egotistical, timid, priggish, and in a mild sort of way, disobedient."

—*Cat o' Mary*

In her late thirties, Dorothy wrote two autobiographical pieces: the memoir *My Edwardian Childhood* and the opening section of a novel titled *Cat o' Mary*. Both works were abandoned, and neither has ever been published. Dorothy's biographers, including James Brabazon, whose 1981 book was "authorized" by Dorothy's son, are generally agreed that these fragments from the 1930s were, in fact, psychological exorcisms. As Brabazon comments, "Dorothy, for some reason, seems to have needed to go back over [her childhood] and lay it bare in some detail. . . ." From the plateau of middle age, Dorothy looked down on the child she had been, and she did *not* like what she saw. When, in the character of Katherine Lammas—the heroine of *Cat o' Mary* and a thinly veiled incarnation of herself—Dorothy examined an only child raised with every whim indulged, learning to manipulate adults at an early age, convinced of her own intellectual superiority, ". . . it was with a hatred of anything so lacking in those common human virtues which were to be attained in after years at so much cost and with such desperate difficulty. . . . Strangers rightly considered her a prig."

Priggish she probably was. Naturally bright and clever, Dorothy was prompted by her elders to show off at every opportunity. In *Cat o' Mary* she told the story of a song that Katherine-Dorothy sang before bed every night. The last line of the ditty ran, "I must love dolly best," but the child learned to substitute for "dolly" the name of a family member, rewarding or punishing the adults as the mood struck her. The grown-ups played into this spiteful little game, waiting each evening to hear which of them had won the child's affection that day.

Dorothy's cousins Margaret Leigh and Gerald and Raymond Sayers occasionally came to stay at the rectory, but in a time of rigid adherence to class divisions, the communities of Bluntisham and Earith offered virtually no middle class from which to draw acceptable playmates for the rector's daughter. Although local children were sometimes included in her schoolroom, except for Betty Osborne, Dorothy had no consistent exposure to her peers until she was well into her teens. She was never forced to compete for attention, and outside of rigidly structured settings such as dancing class, she was rarely exposed to the rough-and-tumble of socialization. Spoiled by adults without the balancing competition with and companionship of other children, Dorothy learned to trust her own knowledge and judgment above those of all others. In modern parlance, she was steeped in self-esteem. In *Cat o' Mary*, she wrote of her alter ego, Katherine Lammas, "She liked correcting other people, but didn't like being corrected herself, and would argue a point with obsti-

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nacy. She had a great opinion of her own cleverness, and to be proved wrong was humiliating."

Dorothy, who always had a low tolerance for children, was perhaps excessively hard in her evaluation of her young self, for she doesn't appear to have been a particularly troublesome child. What discipline she required was "imposed from inside and not outside" as she was expected to learn and follow the moral proscriptions of "duty, self-control, contentment with one's lot, obedience,"* and so forth. But the manner of her upbringing had telling consequences.

As an adult, she complained bitterly about her "cosseted" childhood. Sheltered from real emotional trials, she instinctively turned to literature for her concepts of feelings, weighing her own responses against those in books, and often finding herself wanting. As James Brabazon points out, Dorothy did not confuse reality and fantasy, "but she did expect that the feelings and behaviour of people in books would correspond with those of real people—including herself. She was puzzled that she was unable to experience some of the emotions described so convincingly in books. . . ." So Dorothy's play-making was more than a clever child's fun. It was a means to experience the emotional array that was effectively denied to her by her carefully circumscribed existence and her own generally sanguine temperament.

"What long talks we shall have together in the red fire-light . . . long talks, with nobody to be bored by our conversation. . . ."

—letter to Ivy Shrimpton, November 1908

Dorothy's first real friend was her cousin Ivy Shrimpton. Ivy, the daughter of one of Nell's sisters, was born in California but had moved back to Oxford with her parents. Eight years older than Dorothy, Ivy was gifted with an ability to deal with children and treat them with genuine respect. The friendship between the two girls blossomed during one of Ivy's frequent visits to Bluntisham, when she was sixteen and Dorothy was eight. The cousins shared a love of reading, and Ivy introduced Dorothy to *Little Women* and *Ingoldby's Legends*. Ivy was also ready to discuss ideas and debate seriously and to play active roles in her younger cousin's extravagant fantasies.

When she was thirteen, Dorothy read Alexandre Dumas's *The Three Musketeers* in French and was so taken with the romantic adventure that

* From a 1948 letter to Barbara Reynolds, quoted in Dr. Reynolds's 1993 biography, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul*.

she cast her entire household as characters from the novel. Her father became King Louis XIII, her mother was Cardinal Richelieu, and Aunt Gertrude became Madame de Bois-Tracy. Betty Osborne played Aramis; the French au pair of the moment was Porthos; and the governess, Miss Hamilton, was d'Artagnan. Ivy became the beautiful Duchess of Chevreuse, and Dorothy took the part of the lovesick hero Athos. Even the household and gardening staff were drafted into bit parts when Dorothy staged her re-creation of the swashbuckling novel in the schoolroom of the Bluntisham rectory, rechristened the Château de Bragelonne. She was to play at being Athos for years, and at least until she was seventeen, she continued to address family members by their fictional names and titles.

She wrote frequent, chatty letters to Ivy—addressed from “Bragelonne”—recounting family gossip and activities, discussing books and music, and revealing details of various crushes. One object of her affections was a dark-eyed visitor who was code-named “Dull Red” by the girls for his color choice when playing croquet. At Christmas in 1908, Dorothy’s parents took her to see a London production of *Henry V*, and Dorothy immediately wrote to Ivy (already expressing herself in the exuberant style that will be familiar to readers of the Wimsey mysteries), “. . . I have fallen madly, hopelessly, desperately in love. . . .” The object of this outpouring was a popular, middle-aged actor named Lewis Waller, and if Dorothy’s confession of love was histrionic, her grip on reality was secure: “Unfortunately I fear that my passion is totally unrequited.”

It was around this time that Dorothy experienced a kind of intellectual revelation that ignited her: she discovered that Ahasuerus, about whom she read in the Bible, was also Xerxes, whom she had studied in history. People, things, ideas suddenly connected, “like fitting together two pieces of a puzzle and hearing all the other pieces fall into place one after the other, locking and clicking.” Using geometry, she located an overgrown tennis court in the garden. Again she made the connection: “. . . the lovely satisfying unity of things—the wedding of the thing learnt and the thing done—the great intellectual fulfillment.” The quick child had, on her own, grasped the concept that centuries of good teachers have tried to pound into young minds, that learning is not an isolated endeavor and that “lessons . . . were part of everything else.” Whatever befell her, she knew that it was somehow part of a greater pattern.

*"She would be either the school star or the school butt.
Which? She had not imagined that it was perfectly
possible to be both."
—Cat o' Mary*

In June 1908, when she had just turned fifteen, Dorothy donned the mask of Athos to announce that she was to be sent to boarding school. "I am leaving the Court," she wrote to Ivy. "Out and alas! for our noble company. The grand bond will be broken forever after Christmas! for ever and ever. And now, no more shall the Four Musketeers walk side by side in the garden, or fight together for the King."

Her parents had determined that she was destined for university education, and they may also have finally realized how much she needed the company of peers. The decision to send her to boarding school may have been difficult, but given the poverty of advanced education in their area, Henry and Nell had no real choice. They settled on the Godolphin School, to the south in Salisbury, where Dorothy would join some two hundred other girls under the tutelage of Miss Alice Mary Douglas, her sister Lucy, and their staff of teachers. For some reason, Dorothy was to enter at midyear, so on January 17, 1909, she arrived at Godolphin for her first extended stay away from home and family and her first experience of competitive academics among girls of her own station.

Her biographers disagree about her reactions to boarding school. Her first days could not have been comfortable; Miss Douglas had mistakenly classified Dorothy as an eight-year-old entering student. Then, because of her poor mathematics skills, she was placed in the lower fifth form, behind most girls of her age. Certainly she was well-read and accomplished in languages, surprising her French mistress with her knowledge of Molière and her command of subjunctive forms. But she was an odd and gawky girl, "a fish out of water" in the company of social equals, physically awkward, argumentative, and bossy. She was not especially popular with her schoolmates;* nor, to her astonishment, with her teachers. Early on, the Godolphin staff judged her to be gifted but superficial and unable to accept criticism. At the beginning of her second term, Dorothy wrote her parents that "Fanny M. [Florence Mildred White, the French teacher for whom Dorothy had great respect] read me a little lecture on Friday, saying that I'd had wonderful advantages, and must not be too exalted!"

* Mystery writer Josephine Bell was almost thirteen when she was sent to board at Godolphin and met Dorothy, then eighteen. She remembered Dorothy as not pretty but "strikingly different." Bell recalled that Dorothy was lively and excessively talkative, but she "made little stir in the school." ("A Face-to-Face Encounter with Sayers" by Josephine Bell. In *Murderess Ink*, edited by Dilys Winn. 1979.)

Going strictly by Dorothy's letters home—letters that effervesce with excitement about activities and gossip about pupils and teachers—she would seem to have adjusted well to Godolphin. But her later comments and occasional off-key remarks in her letters paint another picture.

Dorothy certainly threw herself into activities at the school. She continued her violin and piano lessons and played first violin in the school orchestra. She attended and participated in theatricals, at one point considering a stage career for herself, though her teachers opined that she was better suited to be a dramatist than an actor. She excelled in the subjects she liked and continued to slough off those that bored her, notably history and mathematics. (She once wrote home in fury about a teacher who had accused her of "[s]pending] more time than I ought over my French and [slacking] over all my other work. . .") She participated in organized debates with faculty members (" . . . you can argufy with your revered form mistress till all's blue if you like, and pour out your sarcasm . . . with crushing force.")

She found a few friends, particularly Violet Christy, who shared her interests in playacting and literature, and Molly Edmondson, a girl whom Dorothy described as being, like herself, "considered a 'weird freak' by the conventional portion of this establishment." She continued to nourish her "pash" for the unattainable actor Lewis Waller. She developed other crushes, one on the handsome Antarctic explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton, whose lecture at Godolphin inspired Dorothy to write a sonnet in his honor. On more solid ground, she practiced her flirting on her cousin Raymond Sayers, who treated her to an evening in London on her sixteenth birthday. She also experienced the inevitable, chaste, girls' school crush on her favorite teacher, Miss White.

In 1910, Henry and Nell determined that their daughter should be confirmed with other Godolphin girls in a mass ceremony at Salisbury Cathedral. To a letter describing the ceremony to her parents—the setting, her dress and white veil, her first communion, the sermon—she added a poignant postscript: "I never can write about my *feelings*—that's why I haven't." But years later, she recalled, "Being baptized without one's will is certainly not so harmful as being confirmed against one's will, which is what happened to me and gave me a resentment against religion in general which lasted a long time. . . ." What Dorothy resented was the lack of an intellectual underpinning to this great rite of passage in her church; she wanted religion to be an adventure of the mind, not a set of time-encrusted rituals. She must also have felt keenly the absence of her parents, who stayed at home for the dedication of a new set of church bells.

In her schoolgirl letters to her parents and to Ivy, Dorothy proved herself to be a capable dissembler. Her unhappiness was buried like tiny

nuggets in these letters—the “weird freak” comment, for instance. Another time she lamented, “One gets sick of school sometimes and being ‘Dorothy’ to everyone, and blown up by everybody, from Miss Douglas to one’s Games Representative.” At the opening of her spring 1911 semester, she reported, “The people who usually scowl at me or ignore me received me with open arms and wreathed smiles . . .” possibly because everyone loves a winner and Dorothy had just come first in the nation in the Cambridge Higher Local Examinations, with distinctions in French and spoken German.

That semester she nearly died when a measles epidemic swept the school and she developed double pneumonia accompanied by dangerously high fever and delirium. The crisis passed, but her recovery was slow—first in a nursing home near Salisbury, then back at the rectory in Bluntisham—and James Brabazon speculates that it was during her convalescence that Dorothy finally confided her misery to her parents. She also experienced a humiliation that would have prostrated weaker women: her hair fell out as the result of her illness. Her thin, lank, straight hair was never her crowning glory, but to lose it—just when she was about to turn eighteen—was surely devastating. It is a mark of her strength in genuine crisis (seen again and again in her life) that she returned to Godolphin in the fall of 1911, sporting a wig and her usual jolly facade.

In her last letter from Godolphin, she mentions a “scarlet-fever scare” at the school, which possibly prompted her parents to keep her at home the following semester. Some have suggested that she suffered a nervous breakdown, but that seems unlikely in view of her continued academic performance during this hiatus. Tutored by mail, she prepared for the Gilchrist Scholarship competition to Somerville College, one of the two women’s colleges at Oxford University. She won her scholarship, and by the summer of 1912 she was happily assembling a new wardrobe for her first term.

There’s little doubt that, for all her academic success, Godolphin had been a painful experience and one that shaped her responses to other people and other difficulties. She learned, like Athos, to mask her unwavering conviction of intellectual superiority behind a jovial, boisterous, and often buffoonish facade. She learned to reveal and make fun of her own enthusiasms before anyone else had the chance, to play the clown who was the butt of her own jokes. She learned to keep her secrets close and let the rest of the world be damned.

In *The Nine Tailors*, written in 1933, Dorothy included a character strongly reminiscent of her own adolescent self—Hilary Thorpe, a precocious fifteen-year-old who gains the attention of Lord Peter Wimsey. Discovering Hilary’s ambition to be a writer, Wimsey explains that she

has "the creative imagination, which works outwards, till finally you will be able to stand outside your own experience and see it as something you have made, existing independently of yourself. You're lucky. . . . but your luck will come more at the end of life than at the beginning, because the other sort of people won't understand the way your mind works. They will start by thinking you dreamy and romantic, and then they'll be surprised to discover that you are really hard and heartless. They'll be quite wrong both times—but they won't ever know it, and *you* won't know it at first, and it'll worry you."

It did worry Dorothy. At Godolphin, she discovered that not only was she unlike other girls of her class; she was not especially liked by them. She was smarter than most, but certainly not all, of her schoolmates, but neither teachers nor students appreciated her self-possessed assertiveness. In two years at Godolphin, she cemented her ability to compartmentalize her life—crafting a public self that accounted well enough for her brash and often boorish behavior; maintaining her intellectual integrity; hiding her fear and secrets from all but herself; and learning, in Wimsey's words, "to stand outside [her] own experience."

*"Dear old Oxford! . . . I wonder why I love it so—I
always feel when I go there as if I were going
home. . . ."*

Dorothy entered Somerville College in the fall of 1912, going joyfully back to Oxford, the place of her birth. There were relatives and family friends who took a not-always-welcome interest in her welfare. There were famous thinkers and dedicated scholars to fire her mind, as well as young men who enjoyed flirtation as much as she. And as she quickly discovered inside the walls of Somerville, there were young women like herself: bright, intellectual, creative, curious, and odd in their own ways.

Her experience at Godolphin seems not to have diminished Dorothy's instinctive sociability, and she threw herself into university life with her usual enthusiasm. One of the first things she did was to audition for the Oxford Bach Choir. A strong contralto, she had been taking singing lessons at home in Bluntisham, and membership in the choir provided a deeply satisfying aesthetic outlet for her. It also brought her into close contact with Dr. Hugh Percy Allen, organist at Christ Church and conductor of the Bach Choir. Now she could expend her passion, not on a distant actor or adventurer, but on a living, breathing, and receptive presence. Dr. Allen (later to be Oxford Professor of Music and Director of the Royal College of Music) was the perfect object for one of Dorothy's exuberant crushes. Fortyish and married, he apparently made

flirtation with female students something of an avocation; as Dorothy wrote with stunning openness to her parents, she was but one of "a long procession of little tame cats who have adorned his organ loft in succession. . . ." In Dorothy's case, the trips into the organ loft seem to have been harmless enough—a testing, perhaps, of her ability to vamp an older and more sophisticated man.

Dorothy had no illusions about her physical appeal. She was tall and thin with lovely arms and hands, and a long neck that had earned her the nickname "Swanny" at Godolphin. She had her father's clear blue eyes, smallish and often hidden behind spectacles for reading, and her mother's turned-up nose, narrow mouth accented with dimples, and long upper lip. She often wore her sparse dark hair with an old-maidish middle part (her Mona Lisa pose). Hardly the kind of looks to launch a thousand ships, but a face with "character," as she described Katherine Lammas in *Cat o'Mary*: "It could not help being an interesting face—could it?—when it belonged to such an interesting person." In fact, in the rare photographs that picture her smiling open-mouthed, Dorothy has an almost gamine attractiveness.

Shrewdly she chose to dress for dramatic effect, and she loved striking outfits: bold colors, dashing cloaks and hats, scooped necklines and shallow sleeves that displayed her shoulders and arms, exotic dangling earrings to accentuate her graceful neck. Though hardly extreme, her Bohemian style at Somerville echoed her childhood love of swashbuckling costuming.

Dr. Allen continued to fascinate even after she left Somerville, but he was not the only object of her attentions. She flirted with her German teacher and had a relationship that bordered on serious with Giles Dixey, an Oxford student and the son of family friends. She enjoyed the company of another Bach Choir member, Arthur Forrest, and when he was killed in World War One, she wrote a poem in his honor for publication in a university magazine. But far more important than these flutterings after the men of Oxford were the friendships she established with a group of gifted Somerville women—the girls of the Mutual Admiration Society.

At Godolphin, Dorothy had been the bumptious pariah, but at Somerville, she found her place. Actually, she made her first friend, Dorothy Rowe, when both were at Somerville to take the scholarship exam. As the two girls sat together in a waiting room, Dorothy Sayers ostentatiously began to recite a passage from *Cyrano de Bergerac* in French, and Dorothy Rowe quickly took up the quote. It was the beginning of the kind of friendship Dorothy Sayers had longed for.

Just a month into her first term at Somerville, Dorothy and another first-year student named Amphy Middlemore started an informal

group—the Mutual Admiration Society, or M.A.S.—for a small group of girls who shared their interests in writing and creative scholarship. The girls supported and encouraged one another's efforts and provided what Dorothy craved, the companionship of like minds. Other M.A.S. members were Muriel Jaeger, called "Jim" (to whom Dorothy was to dedicate her first novel, *Whose Body?*); Catherine Godfrey, known as "Tony"; Charis Barnett; and Dorothy Rowe. Muriel St. Clare Byrne, two years younger than the original M.A.S. six, submitted the requisite example of original writing and was admitted into the chosen circle in 1914. The friendships forged among these girls were to be both lasting and productive.

In the cloistered world of a women's college, Dorothy had found friends who enjoyed her outgoing nature and shared her love of literature, music, poetry, and the power of words and ideas—young women who could debate the relative merits of G. K. Chesterton and George Bernard Shaw (both of whom had spoken at Oxford) in one breath and the latest fashions in the next. Despite her emotional reserve, with the M.A.S. girls Dorothy could share her ideas, her interests, even her anxieties about the future, and expect to be taken seriously.

She could freely indulge her intellectual fascination with classical and medieval languages in tutorials with Miss Mildred Pope, who would later become the model for the charmingly diffuse character of Miss Lydgate in *Gaudy Night*. As at Godolphin, some of the faculty at Somerville initially complained that Dorothy sloughed off what did not interest her, and in one report, a professor noted that she was "still lacking in self restraint."* Dorothy herself recalled doing little actual academic work, but the work somehow got done, and she completed her baccalaureate program with First Class honors in medieval French in 1915. (For reasons of history rather than individual performance, Dorothy was not to receive her diploma until 1920, when Oxford at last chose to legitimate degrees for women, some forty-one years after the founding of Somerville.)

World War One began in August 1914, when Dorothy was on holiday in France with a school friend and a chaperon. The three women returned home safely, but even this firsthand experience of the war had little impact on Dorothy. Returning to Oxford in the fall, she initially involved herself as a volunteer helping to find housing for the influx of Belgian refugees, but she seems not to have felt the war's effects in any deeper sense. Though she must have worried about the young Oxford men fighting and often dying at the Front, her prayers were reserved for

* Quoted by James Brabazon in *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Biography*.

Oxford itself, that the ancient city that had so captured her heart would be saved from the German bombs.

Her father offered to pay for a year of postgraduate study at Somerville, but Dorothy refused. She was concerned about the additional financial burden on her parents, but it seems likely that she was also tired of the academic rigor. She had long since determined to become a professional poet, and she probably felt the time had come to get on with it. Nevertheless, it wasn't easy to separate from her beloved Oxford and her coterie of friends.

The summer she "went down" (completed her studies), she returned to Bluntisham and toyed with the idea of becoming a Red Cross nurse in France. Nothing came of that plan, but she continued working at her poetry. A lay, comprising twelve poems celebrating Oxford and mostly composed while she was in college, was published in December of 1915, and a year later, her first solo volume, *Op. I*, was put out in an edition of 350 copies. *Op. I* was part of the *Adventurers All* series, the brainchild of Oxford publisher Basil Blackwell, who envisioned the books as launching pads for young poets. (Blackwell succeeded too well and eventually had to abandon the series when many of his young finds, including Aldous Huxley and the Sitwell brothers, moved on to more lucrative publishing contracts.) Other poems were accepted by other publications, but if Dorothy was to live somewhere other than her parents' home, she had to find a more profitable occupation. After some foot-dragging, she finally got on with the business of hunting for a job and secured a teaching position at a girls' high school in Hull, a port city in England's industrial north.

Apart from the ever-present grime of industry, Hull was better than Dorothy had expected, with cinemas and several nice shops and eating places. Dorothy enjoyed the company of her fellow teachers and sharpened her flirting skills on a local curate. She proved to be an energetic and inspiring teacher who not only taught her girls French but also organized a school choir and reluctantly took on a German class. But she learned in Hull that she did not enjoy teaching. In Hull she also discovered the reality of warfare as she had never imagined it in sacrosanct Oxford.

When the Germans began their zeppelin raids on England, Hull's port was a prime target, and Dorothy frequently found herself huddled in damp cellars as the bombs dropped. Here, her intellect was helpless, and her joking and high spirits were pointless. All around she saw genuine physical fear—"brutal, bestial and utterly degrading"—and she didn't like it. For a twenty-two-year-old girl with little more experience of the primal emotions than could be gleaned from novels and poetry, war was hell. Though she attributed cringing fear to others, she was far

from immune, and once again she began to lose her hair. (Dorothy was admittedly a physical coward, notoriously so in later years, preferring battles that could be waged with mind and mouth.)

She taught at Hull for two terms, until her father intervened. Henry Sayers had been offered a new position as rector of Christchurch on the Isle of Ely (Cambridgeshire). The parish was even more isolated than Bluntisham-cum-Earith, but the annual stipend was larger, so Henry and Nell prepared to move. The extra money also allowed Henry to approach Basil Blackwell with an offer: if Blackwell would take Dorothy on as a publisher's apprentice, Henry would pay £100 for her support. Blackwell, who met Dorothy for the first time in February 1917, agreed, and Dorothy must have been ecstatic; the new job rescued her from teaching and from Hull and brought her back to Oxford.

By May, she was settled into rooms at 17 Long Wall Street and busily learning the publishing trade. Her M.A.S. buddies Muriel "Jim" Jaeger and Muriel St. Clare Byrne were still at Somerville, and others of the old society were in and out of Oxford. There were new friends, including Doreen Wallace, who remembered Dorothy in those days: "long and slim . . . small head alert on slender neck, she loped round Oxford looking for fun."*

Dorothy was in her twenties and full of juice. Her letters show a kind of giddiness that is charming in its way but clearly wore thin on some of her acquaintances. Her emotional remoteness could be infuriating, and her insensitivity shocking. When the 1918 pandemic outbreak of Spanish influenza (which claimed more lives than the war before it ran its deadly course) swept Oxford, Dorothy caught a mild case and quickly recovered. Her chief complaint, expressed in a letter to her mother, was that she had been forced to cancel her Halloween soiree: ". . . one can't give hilarious parties with people dropping dead all round one!" Apparently, her primary interest in the killer flu was its resemblance to the medieval Black Plague.

Though some of her biographers tend to skirt this issue, she was also, in the language of the times, man-crazy. However emotionally blocked she may have been, Dorothy was a physically passionate woman, strongly curious about, yet frightened by, sex. Flirting and crushes on unattainables such as Hugh Allen brought her close to the dangerous edge, but when she received her first marriage proposal, from Leonard Hodgson, "a perfectly delightful padre" and Vice-Principal of St. Edmund Hall, she bolted like a frightened rabbit. When Hodgson contin-

* Doreen Wallace later became a novelist. She is quoted by Barbara Reynolds in *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul*.

ued to pursue her, even joining the Bach Choir though he was not much of a singer, Dorothy was appalled. She wrote home, "To have someone devoted to me arouses all my worst feelings. I loathe being deferred to. I ABOMINATE being waited on. It infuriates me to feel that my words are numbered and my actions watched. I want somebody to fight with!" The unfortunately besotted Hodgson, who went on to have a distinguished career as a theologian, was too much the compliant lap-dog. He also represented actual sexual as well as emotional commitment, and Dorothy was worried that she might be afraid of the physical side of marriage. With Hodgson firmly denied, she continued to enjoy her flirtations, one with the surgeon who removed her appendix in the summer of 1917.

Somehow, betwixt work and friends and countless activities, she continued to write seriously, and her second volume of poems, *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs*, was published by Basil Blackwell in the fall of 1918. To promote interest in her work, which was much influenced by both the style and theological ideas of G. K. Chesterton, Dorothy and a friend connived at a publicity scheme that they called "the Maynard controversy." When well-known Catholic poet Theodore Maynard reviewed *Catholic Tales* unfavorably in Chesterton's magazine, *The New Witness*, "Jim" Jaeger began a spirited correspondence, writing under various pseudonyms to the magazine. Other, genuine writers soon joined the fray, and the verbal sparring continued for several months, until Dorothy tired of it.

Her mind was on other things. Tossed out of her flat because the landlady preferred renting to young men, Dorothy moved into an apartment in a house on Bath Place, where she planned to launch a Thursday night "salon" in her sitting room. There were musical evenings and gatherings of the Rhyme Club (Dorothy, Doreen Wallace, and Eleanor Geitch) attended at least once by the poetic Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell and Siegfried Sassoon.

In May 1918, Dorothy left Blackwell's (Basil Blackwell was converting from poetry to textbook publication and possibly let her go), and was supporting herself with freelance editing, some journalism, and tutoring. Money was tight, but Dorothy had no intention of moving on, not when Captain Eric Whelpton lived in the same house. Tall and handsome, Whelpton had been invalided out of the Army after contracting polio, which left him weak and subject to fainting attacks. He returned to his studies at Oxford and was soon a frequent presence at Dorothy's gatherings. Though Doreen Wallace had spotted him first, Dorothy quickly moved in. Part smitten schoolgirl, part teacher, and part mother, she devoted herself to his needs.

In fact, Whelpton had a romantic interest elsewhere, but he enjoyed

Dorothy's company, and they had a good deal in common, especially French language and literature. Raised in France, he was a sophisticate in her eyes, though, he readily admitted, her intellectual inferior. When he moved to France to take a teaching job at a private boys' school in 1919, Dorothy boldly wrote him to ask about a possible position there. It turned out that Whelpton needed an assistant. In addition to teaching English at L'Ecole des Roches at Verneuil in Normandy, he was establishing an exchange program for British and French students. He needed help, someone fluent in French and English, and he offered the post to Dorothy. Whelpton even agreed to present himself for inspection by Dorothy's parents and enjoyed a pleasant visit at the Christchurch rectory.

So Dorothy, her bicycle in tow, arrived in Verneuil by train to begin working for the man she had nicknamed "Snark." She was efficiency itself, tending to the exchange bureau's office affairs and occasionally shepherding groups of young scholars to and from England. She was also on hand to nurse Whelpton through his attacks, teaching his classes when he was ill and pampering him at all times.

She involved herself in school activities and enjoyed the company of the teachers and staff—excepting an Englishman named Charles Crichton, an Eton graduate and ex-cavalry officer who had lost his money during the war. Though down on his luck, Crichton could still tell spirited tales of the good old days when he maintained a bachelor flat in Jermyn Street (one street away from Peter Wimsey's fictional flat on Piccadilly), frequented his London clubs, partied lavishly in town and country, and was served by an eccentric valet named Bates who became his military batman. Though Dorothy and Crichton shared a mutual dislike, biographer Barbara Reynolds makes a good case that Crichton's stories supplied the details of life in the upper reaches of British society that later surfaced in Lord Peter Wimsey, and that Wimsey's man Bunter was modeled on Bates the batman. Eric Whelpton later contended, probably correctly, that Lord Peter's distinctive characteristics were an amalgam of his own and Crichton's.

Dorothy had detection on her mind in Verneuil. She was reading detective stories. With several of her friends back in Oxford (including G. D. H. Cole and his wife, Margaret, who were to become a successful mystery-writing team), Dorothy had discussed a plan to form a writing syndicate that would produce profitable detective books. The idea was obviously based on the extremely popular Sexton Blake series—formula mysteries cranked out by dozens of writers and published in magazines and as penny-dreadful novels. When she contracted mumps, which required three weeks' isolation, Dorothy requested that "Jim" Jaeger send as many Sexton Blake books as she could discreetly mail. Dorothy and

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"Jim" then entered into one of their intellectual games, creating a satirical analysis of Sexton Blake that connected the hack detective to ancient myths and legends. This Sexton Blake escapade may have helped her turn her mind away from her failure with Eric Whelpton.

Oddly for a man of the world, Whelpton hadn't grasped the true nature of Dorothy's feelings for him until well into their tenure at Verneuil. Then they were caught up in the affairs of a young staff member named Adele. The unmarried Adele found herself pregnant and abandoned. When Dorothy discovered that the girl planned to have an abortion, she jumped into the situation, pulling Whelpton with her. Dorothy first convinced the girl that abortion would be an irredeemable sin. She and Eric then arranged for Adele to go to Paris, and he used his family connections to secure employment and shelter for the mother-to-be. Hard as it is to imagine today, the situation was extremely difficult and emotional, demanding both delicacy and secrecy. As Dorothy and Eric worked closely to rescue Adele, he finally realized that his flirtatious assistant was in love with him.

Eric was already in love with someone else, a married woman whom he had met during a recent visit to London. When he told Dorothy, she was torn with jealousy, and the atmosphere in their small office became tense and uncomfortable for both. But Whelpton was already job-hunting and also thinking about a move to Italy, and he was anxious to leave the school as soon as possible. He offered to sell Dorothy his interest in the student exchange venture so she could stay on in France.

Dorothy must have been distraught. She admitted to occasional "black times," and after her bout of mumps, she suffered another round of hair loss. She seriously considered buying the business but finally decided against it. She would fulfill her responsibilities in France, taking over Whelpton's teaching duties and the running of the bureau when he left. She wrote her parents the happy news of the birth of Adele's baby boy in June 1920, and by the end of September, she was ready to return home. But this time it was London, not Oxford, that called her.

There was, however, one stop in Oxford that she could not miss. On October 14, 1920, the great university at last formalized the education of its women by granting them degrees. It was an historic occasion, and Dorothy wouldn't have missed it for the world. Twice within a matter of minutes, she passed through the ceremonial line, first to receive her bachelor's degree and then her master of arts. The immediate problem was that her grand new degrees did very little to help her find a job. She might have returned to Somerville as a postgraduate student, but that would have required her parents to pay her fees, and besides, she always said she never wanted an academic career. She definitely didn't want to teach. When an offer came along to write a screenplay for a movie pro-

ducer she had once met in London, she jumped at it. The screenplay, on which she collaborated with Dorothy Rowe, was accepted by the producer but apparently never paid for. This was the last time Dorothy was to be conned by a glittering financial promise. But her short-lived vision of a career in the cinema had at least provided the incentive she needed to pack up and head for London.

Relying on a monthly allowance from her father and what little else she could scrape together, she took an unfurnished room at 36 St. George's Square in Pimlico (where she would later house Peter Wimsey's spinster investigator, Miss Climpson). Reverend Sayers also found work for her, translating French documents for a Polish employer. She applied, unsuccessfully, for a series of full-time jobs and was eventually forced to take a temporary post teaching English. Students at Clapham High School were astonished by her teaching methods and her intense personality. No longer the bright, bustling mistress she had been at Hull, she nevertheless made a lasting impression on her Clapham pupils.

She had moved to a new room at 44 Mecklenburg Square (later to become Harriet Vane's address in *Gaudy Night*), and since the rent did not include board, Dorothy was teaching herself to cook. In the Bohemian circles of Bloomsbury, she enjoyed the company of a number of young men who would sometimes treat her to a good meal. Her most frequent escort was Norman Davey, a writer who encouraged Dorothy's ambitions. Davey's first novel, *The Pilgrim of a Smile*, was published in 1921. (Dorothy admired the book, which included a character named Major Bunter.)

She continued her translation work, took on more substitute teaching, and on Saturdays hied herself off to the Reading Room of the British Museum, where she had embarked on a study of criminology. In January 1921, she informed her mother of her latest activity: "My detective story begins brightly, with a fat lady found dead in her bath with nothing on but her pince-nez."

That fat lady never got to sing, but readers of Dorothy's first novel, *Whose Body?*, will easily recognize the fundamentals of its plot: The idea of the body in the bathtub had originated during an evening of intellectual party games played several years before in Oxford. She worked at the book throughout the spring, pushed on by Muriel Jaeger, and finished it during a visit with her parents at Christchurch in the summer of 1921. Lord Peter Wimsey had been born, though it would be three more years before he was presented to the world at large. Dorothy struggled to create her fictional detective and his first case, but he was no trouble at all when compared to the real man in her life. She was in love again, and the object of her passion was no noble gentleman.

"If I could have found a man to my measure, I could have put a torch to the world."

—letter to John Cournos, October 1924

When Dorothy was preparing for her summer visit home, she wrote to her parents that she would like to bring a friend along. He didn't make the trip after all, but Dorothy told her family about him and even induced them to read one of his books.

His name was John Cournos, born Johann Gregorievitch Korshoon in Kiev, Russia, in 1881. His parents had divorced, and when John was five, his mother married a man named Cournos, a member of the strict Jewish Hasid sect. Faced with the turbulent anti-Semitism of czarist Russia, they immigrated to the United States when John was ten, and settled in Philadelphia. The family was poor, and at age twelve, Cournos quit school to work in a factory. Two years later, he approached the publisher of the *Philadelphia Record* and so impressed the man that he was immediately hired as an office boy. Cournos had risen through the newspaper's ranks in classic journalistic tradition before he decided, in 1912, to move to England and freelance his writing. He proved to be an adept interviewer, tackling the likes of G. K. Chesterton, H. G. Wells, D. H. Lawrence, and poets John Masefield and William Butler Yeats. When the war came, Cournos went to work as a translator for the Russians, and in 1917 he joined a group of foreign correspondents on a mission to Petrograd. Returning to London, he worked for the British Foreign Office and the Ministry of Information.

He was, Dorothy said, the kind of man who "spells Art with a capital A." His art was Imagist poetry and dense fiction. His first novel, the one read by Reverend and Mrs. Sayers, was *The Mask*. Published in 1919, the book was well received in literary circles and picked up a major writing prize. When Dorothy met Cournos, he was one of the loftier members of the Bloomsbury crowd that so attracted her romantic soul. He was working on his second novel and a volume of poetry. She was struggling to support herself, hammering out her second "Lord Peter" novel and trying to sell the first, and facing the not-too-distant prospect of turning thirty still unwed and a virgin. She fell like a bag of bricks for the dark Jewish intellectual with the distinctive Slavic handsomeness and Russian-tinted voice.

Their affair—reconstructed from a set of Dorothy's letters that Cournos gave to Harvard University and from the later public writings of both—was passionate, volatile, and all but consummated. As she had done with Eric Whelpton, Dorothy turned earth mother, pampering Cournos's physical and emotional needs, nursing his inflated ego, en-

during his moods and constant demeaning of her own literary ambitions, dreaming of wedding her hero and bearing his children, preferably peasant style in a field. When his second book, *The Wall*, failed to do well, she was sympathetic. She lent him her flat when she was away from London. When she at last landed a permanent job as a copywriter with the S. H. Benson advertising and publicity agency and then sold her "Lord Peter," she celebrated her success by preparing a sumptuous meal for Cournos. She also mentioned him frequently in her letters home.

Cournos's one generosity to her seems to have been an introduction to literary agent Andrew Dakers. Dakers took on her first novel, and by July of 1922 he had placed it with an American publisher, Boni and Live-right, which had also published a book of Cournos's poems. The Americans gave Dorothy's novel its title, *Whose Body?*

Then on September 18, 1922, Dorothy wrote to her parents that Cournos was returning to the United States. Though they had quarreled, she clearly expected to hear from him again, but by November, there had been not so much as a postcard. She had no idea that Cournos would soon marry someone else.

When all the excuses and rationalizations are cleared away, the catalyst that doomed the relationship was sex. Cournos, predictably, was dedicated to the new religion of free love. He did not believe in marriage; he did not want children. Dorothy was a peasant at heart, but a rector's daughter in her soul. She wanted sex that led naturally to marriage and children. She and Cournos disagreed mightily about contraception: he believed in it and she didn't. She refused to accept sexual intercourse that came with the "taint of the 'rubber-shop,'" and though they apparently did everything but, they did not have intercourse.

When Dorothy fictionalized Cournos as Philip Boyes in her 1930 novel *Strong Poison*, she presented a man who used sex as a test of a woman's willingness to submit to his control. Philip Boyes, the character whose death lands Harriet Vane in the Old Bailey on trial for her life, is described by the trial judge as an author of "literary works . . . of what is sometimes called an 'advanced' type. They preached doctrines which may seem to some of us immoral or seditious, such as atheism, and anarchy, and what is known as free love. His private life appears to have been conducted, for some time at least, in accordance with these doctrines." It is in that little aside—"for some time at least"—that Dorothy demonstrates Boyes-Cournos's ultimate betrayal.

Cournos's sin was not that he believed in "advanced" ideas; Dorothy was relatively advanced herself and certainly more than ready for pre-marital sex. Cournos failed her (as Philip Boyes fails Harriet Vane) by *not*

believing in the ideas he professed. He wanted Dorothy to submit to sex without consequences to himself. When she wouldn't, he left, and within two years, he had married a twice-divorced American detective story writer, Helen Kestner Satterthwaite (pen name, Sybil Norton). Later he confessed to Dorothy that he would have willingly married her and settled down if she had submitted to him first.

Despite her acidic portrait of Cournos as Boyes in *Strong Poison*, Dorothy did not fictionalize intimate details of the affair. Cournos did, in his 1932 novel *The Devil Is an English Gentleman*, even lifting bits of dialog from Dorothy's letters to him. A cad to the end.

Emotionally battered and sexually frustrated when Cournos left, Dorothy did the obvious thing. She found an agreeable man and rebounded. Bill White was as unlike Cournos as day to night. Though well educated, he was a sometime car salesman, a mechanic, and a motorcycle enthusiast without a trace of literary pretension. A man's man, he provided Dorothy the natural, healthy masculine sexuality so lacking in John Cournos. They were not in love, but they had wonderful times together, and she took Bill to Christchurch for Christmas in 1922, arriving on his motorcycle. She had written to her mother that "he's the last person you'd expect me to bring home, but he's really quite amiable, and will be desperately grateful for a roof over his head."

Dorothy was doing very well at her job with Benson's; her boss told her that she had "every quality which makes for success in advertising. . ." *Whose Body?* had been sold in England to Fisher Unwin, and *People's Magazine* had bought the American serial rights. She was still working on her second "Lord Peter" (as she referred to her Wimsey novels) and beginning to sample the financial fruits of her own labor.

With Bill White, Dorothy could let her hair down and get her hands dirty. He taught her about motorcycle mechanics and helped her with improvements to her apartment. They went to pubs and movies and dance halls; he told her dirty jokes, which she loved, and they made up obscene limericks together. It was a comfortable, no-demands relationship, and at some point Dorothy finally lost her virginity, ironically agreeing to use contraception. In fact, this interlude with Bill White might have been the perfect transition for her—except that, just two months before her thirtieth birthday, the contraceptives failed and Dorothy became pregnant. What she did next may be regarded as an act of supreme self-sacrifice or as sheer pigheaded stupidity, but for a woman of her genteel parentage and Victorian upbringing, it was nothing short of remarkable.

*"To carry it through one needs two things: a) guts,
b) iron health."*

By June 1923, Dorothy knew she was in a fix. She consulted a friend from Oxford, Dr. Alice Chance, who confirmed the pregnancy and discussed Dorothy's options, including abortion. Whether Dorothy seriously considered ending the pregnancy is unknown, but given her religious scruples, it is unlikely. She took a two-week holiday from Benson's near the end of the month and retreated to a country cottage at Bovingdon in Hertfordshire, telling her parents that she wanted a place to write in solitude. What she really did there was to think through her situation.

Today, we can only begin to imagine the agonies of conscience she must have suffered. England after the war was a profoundly changed place; moral standards and behavioral rules had shifted dramatically in a relatively short time. In London, just as in New York and Chicago, the 1920s roared with sex, drugs, and jazz. But some things remained verboten, and for women of Dorothy's class and religion, unwed pregnancy was still at the top of the forbidden list. For Dorothy to have her baby openly and without a husband would have caused repercussions much more profound than the two-day sensation we might expect now. It would have meant lifelong shame for herself, her child, and her entire family. Her parents, in their seventies, would be humiliated. Dorothy would likely lose her job and all hope of financial independence. Her child would be a bastard, and she would be branded a sinner in the eyes of man as well as God.

What she decided, in that cottage in Bovingdon, was to stick it out on her own, hide the pregnancy, and tell no one. More than anything, she wanted to keep the secret from her parents, and that meant telling no one who might, by the remotest chance, let the story out. None of her closest friends from Oxford, no one at Benson's, no family member. (Biographer Barbara Reynolds has uncovered evidence that Dorothy received assistance from an unexpected source: Bill White's wife. Dorothy apparently didn't know of White's marriage until she told him about the pregnancy.)

There was, however, one possible avenue out. Her cousin Ivy Shrimpton and Ivy's recently widowed mother, Amy, were supporting themselves by raising foster children in their Cowley home near Oxford. Dorothy had grown away from Ivy, but they were still friends, and Dorothy had received glowing reports from her own mother of Ivy's excellent care of the children. Here was a ray of hope for the child. Although Dorothy delayed writing to Ivy until the last possible moment,

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the knowledge that she could place her baby in a loving home must have helped her through the long months ahead.

Bill White greeted the news with "helpless rage and misery." He drifted in and out of Dorothy's life until several months after the child's birth, when she finally told him to "go to hell." Dorothy may have considered marriage to White as an option, but the discovery that he was already married *and* a philanderer quickly closed that door.

Having decided to go it alone, Dorothy returned to Benson's, apparently her old lively self, and no one suspected what was happening beneath her billowing clothes. Thanks to her improved finances and her excellent cooking, she had been gaining weight for awhile before becoming pregnant, and her height also helped her carry the baby unobtrusively. She remained in good health throughout and experienced none of the typical symptoms that might have revealed her condition. Dorothy managed to hold off visits with her parents during the fall of 1923 and begged off Christmas by claiming that she was too busy with her new book: she told her parents to expect to see her at Easter. She remained at Benson's until her seventh month, then took two months' sick leave.

She had arranged to enter Tuckton Lodge, a maternity home in Southbourne, where Bill White's wife and young daughter lived. There on January 3, 1924, after a long and difficult labor, she gave birth to John Anthony. She registered her son in her own name, leaving the father's name officially blank although the baby was known by the surname White. She stayed at the hospital for three weeks, finally writing to Ivy two days before the baby's arrival. In this first letter, she pretended that the child was a friend's, but by the end of January, after Ivy had agreed to take the baby, Dorothy finally wrote the whole truth, asking Ivy to honor her confidence and leaving it up to her cousin whether or not to tell Aunt Anny.*

* It is eerie to read a letter that fourteen-year-old Dorothy wrote to Ivy Shrimpton in February 1908. Dorothy hesitantly but strongly criticized her cousin for judging others too harshly. She feared that people would become afraid of Ivy. She wrote, "I shouldn't like to feel, Ivy, that supposing sometime I sinned a great sin that I should be afraid to come to you for help, only, unless you would try to make allowances for me, I'm afraid I should." Ivy, however, was more than willing to make allowances when the time of need arrived.